

i can barely take care of myself

TALES FROM A HAPPY LIFE
WITHOUT KIDS

Jen Kirkman



"VERY
FUNNY."
—Chelsea
Handler

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Tales from a Happy Life Without Kids

JEN KIRKMAN

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CONTENTS

Introduction

1. Welcome Back, Kirkman
2. Misadventures in Babysitting
3. Toddlers Without Borders
4. Married . . . Without Children
5. “You’ll Change Your Mind”
6. Jesus Never Changed Diapers
7. I Don’t Have the Mom Jeans Gene
8. Faking It for George Clooney
9. “But You’d Be Such a Good Mom!”
10. I’m Gonna Die Alone (and I Feel Fine)
11. It’s None of Your Business, but Since You Asked . . .
12. Becoming Miriam

Acknowledgments

About Jen Kirkman

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO MY PARENTS.

I love you both and thank you for never getting in the way of my dreams. To my dad, for always saying that women are funny and anyone who doesn't agree can go pound sand. To my mom who reminded me, "Just think, if we didn't decide to have kids, you wouldn't be here living a full life and writing this book." Thank you both for having me. Ew, I don't want to think about how I was made.

P.S. Also, thank you for being so overprotective that I never got pregnant as a teenager.

THIS BOOK IS NOT DEDICATED TO . . .

one of my schoolteachers. When I told you I wanted to be a writer someday, you patted my head and told me to sit down. When I wrote an original short story about a zombie who wore “Calvin Klein jeans,” you told me to write something more serious and that writing funny things isn’t good writing. When I wrote a poem and chose to read it in front of the class and then got made fun of for it—you took me aside and said, “When other people don’t like what we’re doing—it’s best to not keep getting up and doing it.”* You were wrong.

*True story.

INTRODUCTION

I'm sitting on my couch in just a bra and sweatpants. For some reason I also have a cocktail ring on my right finger and a feather headband atop my head. I'm too embarrassed to wear the feather-band outside of the house—although I guess not too embarrassed to commit to print the book I'm wearing it *and* knee-high pom-pom slippers late at night. When I'm on a writing procrastination binge I start playing dress-up, and I just got bored and quit halfway through, so now I'm procrastinating my game of dress-up by finishing writing the introduction to this book. This is just one example of what it is to be me. Besides the usual distractions from life—friends calling in tears because they're heartbroken, flat tires, deaths in the family, leaks in the ceiling, work—I pretty much have the ability to do whatever I want, whenever I want because I don't have children. That's not the only reason why I don't want children—it's just one perk.

And yes, I don't *want* children. As far as I know, I *can* have children. But I'm not great with kids and the thought of raising them scares me—it's more terrifying to me than an empty house in the woods or a clown doll sitting in a chair. You're just so screwed if you find yourself in any of these situations! There's no way out!

Most people assume that "doing whatever I want" includes partying all night and enjoying my hangover without a toddler sitting on my head. But I'm actually pretty mild. I got nervous one time after taking Benadryl three nights in a row to fall asleep. I fantasized about whether I would have to call my loved ones *before* checking in to Betty Ford or would someone from the rehab center go through my iPhone for me?

I remember asking my mom when I was little if I could go live at this place in Boston called "The Home for Little Wanderers." I didn't realize that it was a facility for orphans. It sounded to me more like a place for free spirits who knew that even if they loved where they were one moment, that could change tomorrow. One thing I know about myself is that everywhere I go I find my new favorite place. And I'm not a cold, heartless vagabond either. If in my wandering I end up reading to children at a zoo in Madagascar—wonderful! I don't hate kids. I just hate the idea of dragging a kid around with me as he or she is forced to adapt to my lifestyle. I also don't want to have to carry animal crackers around in my purse.

I have a picture of my cat from childhood, Mittens, on my living room wall. He's been dead for twenty-four years. When friends ask me why I don't just get another tuxedo cat, I say, "I love Mittens because my mother changed his cat litter. Not me." I do have a small collection of stuffed-animal tuxedo cats given to me as gifts by people who, I assume, assumed that I needed *something* to care for. But those kitties are smashed down facefirst in a wicker basket in the bedroom. I'm afraid to look. I think they might be dead.

The way most people feel about loving being a parent is exactly how I feel about *not* being a parent. I love it. And I can't imagine my life any other way. I'm one of those people in an ever-growing movement called childfree by choice. I think it's a clinical and defensive name for what sounds like an otherwise fun group of people. I've never actually seen members of this movement

all in one place. I guess we're not as organized or fabulous or as into riding floats as gay people. ~~We live in pockets of cities and suburbs all across America and the world and we may not have anything else in common with one another except that none of us right now has a toddler saying, "Mommy, please put a shirt on. It's inappropriate to sit around the house in a bra and why is there a peacock on your head?"~~

So while I sit here on my couch at home dressed like someone halfway to senility, I'm remembering the time that I was sitting on a couch in my psychologist's office, wondering whether it was weird that I still had my sunglasses on my head during our session. I wondered whether I was too accessorized for sitting around figuring out my problems and analyzing my patterns. It feels like I should treat therapy like going through airport security (which I do a few times a month as a traveling stand-up comedian)—I should have nothing in my pockets, no shoes and no jewelry around my neck, nothing on my outside that can distract the person in front of me from seeing what I look like on the inside.

That day I said to my shrink, "I feel like an outsider in the world because I never want to have children. When people ask me if I want children and I say no—they always say things like 'You change your mind.' I'm sick of it and I feel like I don't fit in." I don't know what I expected my therapist to say—probably her usual: "Was there a time in childhood when you felt like an outsider? Is this pushing any old buttons? You know if it's hysterical, it's historical." What I didn't expect was that she'd say, "You don't want kids? Why not? What's up with that?" *What's up with that?*

"Oh no," I said. "Not you too! You're going to tell me I'm weird for not wanting children." She explained that it's my reaction to those people that we need to work on—and that we don't need to attach any jumper cables to my biological clock. She suggested that instead of answering "I don't want kids," that I should simply say, "It's not in my plans right now." Oh boy. She has no idea what I was up against at every cocktail hour/wedding/shower/holiday party I've been to since I started to ovulate. I'm convinced that people who want kids and people who have kids have secret meetings where they come up with their talking points. There's not one response to "I'm not having kids" that I haven't heard and I've heard the same questions and comments approximately one bazillion times:

- If you don't have kids, who is going to take care of you when you're old? (*Servants?*)
- Men have to spread their seed. It's in their DNA. (*He can spread his seed all he wants. I have a magic pill that prevents it from growing.*)
- But it's the most natural thing you can do as a woman. (*So is getting my period every month.*)
- That's selfish. You can't be immature forever. (*And spending your days watching Dora the Explorer with a kid is mature?*)
- You have to replace yourself on earth. What will you leave behind? (*There are a few plastic bags that I never recycled . . .*)

Random people who want me to have children are the same type of people who won't let up on me because I haven't watched *The Wire* and I never plan to. I just never got into *The Wire*. Is *The Wire* brilliant and life altering and does it make you feel less alone at night? Yes! That doesn't mean I have to like the show. I have no opinion on *The Wire*. It is just not a part of my life. I'm not trying to be cool or different. A Non-*Wire* Lover is not my identity. I just don't even think about *The Wire*. And yet people continue, "It's available on Netflix!" "I understand that it's easy

to get." "You'll love it." "I won't. I might. I don't care." "How can you not watch it? Well, what kind of shows *do you watch?*" What will happen to these people if I never see *The Wire*? Are they at home feeling a phantom pain in their abdomens and thinking, *If Jen would only watch The Wire, this bad feeling would go away.* And in the same way my Netflix queue remains *Wire-free*—people seem really agitated that my womb remains baby-free.

I took my therapist's advice and started getting cagey with my answer. But once I started saying, "It's not in my plans right now," it was taken as, "Yes, I plan to have kids someday." And then just to avoid arguments, I went through a phase of lying. "Yes. I want to have kids someday. I want to have kids right now. Anybody have a turkey baster? Let's kick this party up a notch. I'm ovulating!" But I'm not going to lie anymore.

I've always been a little different. I was called a "freak" in high school because I wanted to be on a stage instead of on a lacrosse field. I went to a job interview at an office straight out of college wearing black tights, green nail polish, and clear jelly shoes. I got the job but my new boss took me aside to explain the office dress code. She asked me, "What were you trying to prove with that outfit? Why do you want to look weird?" I had honestly thought that this was a good outfit to wear. I wouldn't even know how to try to be weird. It seems like too much effort. Just like trying to be normal—whatever that looks like—often seems more trouble than it's worth. I mean, who really wants to wash her car in the driveway every Sunday (or even have a driveway)?

My favorite TV show when I was six was *The Lawrence Welk Show*. I wanted to grow up and live in a world of bubbles and polka music someday. I went to the most popular girl in school slumber party in the sixth grade dressed as Groucho Marx. (It didn't go well—you'll read about it.)

It may not be filled with bubbles and polka (actually thank God for that, my aesthetic and musical tastes have changed), but I've found a community of weirdos in the comedy world. I moved by myself to New York City and Los Angeles. All of my family and my childhood friends live on the East Coast. I decided to wander the country in search of a career as a stand-up comedian. Fifteen years later and two comedy albums in, I'm doing just that for a living, in addition to writing and appearing on *Chelsea Lately* and playing the part of myself in the *Chelsea Lately* spin-off *After Lately*. My days consist of writing comedy and the occasional phone call to my sister to explain that the e-mail she just received from me saying "I'm pregnant, please call Mom" was really from Chelsea Handler, after she'd had her way with my computer.

My twelfth-grade teacher Mr. Bergen would be proud of me. He wrote me a card when I graduated from high school that said in big black letters, **GET OUT OF THIS TOWN. GET OUT WHILE YOU CAN**, and a lovely note on the inside that encouraged me to follow my dream because he could tell that I wouldn't be happy trying to conform on any level. Now, I don't think having a child makes you a conformist and I don't think that not having a child makes you a nonconformist—but I do think that following your heart no matter what other people have to say takes a real sense of self. My friend Shannon, who has two children, says that the judgment never ends. She had children—she did the supposed "normal" thing—and still people chastise her for not having six kids or for the fact that she doesn't abide by the latest parenting trend. "What? You breast-feed before sunrise? Oh no. You'll end up with a *vampire*."

The bottom line is that the choices we make often make sense to us but can confuse others. Somebody is always going to be disappointed with your life choice, and my rule of thumb is that as long as *I'm* not the one who is disappointed, I can live with that. If you've ever been thought of as selfish and immature or told "you'll change your mind" about anything, I hope this book can

be your card from Mr. Bergen. "Get out while you can"—get out of that mentality that there is a "right" way to live. (Well, technically there is, I believe it's called the Golden Rule, and you can find it either in the Bible or on a coffee mug, I forget.)

I know some people think that not wanting kids means I'm cold, but I'm not totally without baby urges. I felt something when I saw my friend Grace's baby all swaddled in a blanket on the couch. She looked like a yawning peanut. She was just a content little lump, drooling and going in and out of sleep. And I got that feeling deep down inside that almost brought tears to my eyes. I got an urge and I thought, *Oh my God. I want to . . . be a baby.*

1. Welcome Back, Kirkman

After graduating from Boston's Emerson College in June 1996 with a bachelor of fine arts in "theater arts," I moved back into my parents' house. (There are few to no well-paying jobs available to a girl who minored in rolling around on the floor collecting dust bunnies on her sweatpants—otherwise known as "modern dance.") I wish I'd had a really good reason for moving back home, like my friend Jayson from freshman year in college. It was rumored that Jayson took too much acid and also became possessed by the devil on the same night—the rumor started because he dropped two tabs while doing a séance around a pentagram that Michael, his practicing Satanist roommate, had burned into their dorm room rug. After the devil possessed him and/or the bad trip never wore off, folklore has it that Jayson was forever unable to speak but couldn't stop laughing—like some kind of demonic hyena. Jayson left school during his first semester and moved into his mom's basement, where he sat staring at the wall and listening to Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* most of the day, except for the time he spent at his part-time job at his hometown library. I know that story sounds implausible—what library would employ a loud laugher?

Anyway, I didn't have an excuse for moving back home that I could pin on my mom and dad, either, such as: it turned out that my mom wasn't just a hypochondriac and she actually did have a fatal heart murmur and it was her dying wish for me to move back into my childhood bedroom that was still covered with floral psychedelic wallpaper from the 1970s. That would have been a good one (except for the fatal heart murmur part).

It's not like I hadn't made plans for my postcollege life. I had. My plan was to become a famous television actress, the type who could play younger, because as a twenty-one-year-old, I still looked sixteen, just like everyone on *Beverly Hills 90210* (well, except for Andrea). Always a realist, I also had a backup plan and that was to become a famous actress on Broadway. I certainly put in some semiquality time training to be an actress. I spent every morning in acting class, putting my hand on my solar plexus to find my emotion and then breathing from my diaphragm. I usually found only a cough when I breathed deeply from my diaphragm because I'd developed a pack-a-day habit of smoking Camel Lights. I inhaled the acting class air like a young, hopeful girl, then hacked and wheezed out phlegm like a longshoreman who has emphysema gets exacerbated by his seasonal pneumonia.

I was convinced that simply because I attended college and majored in acting, I would walk out of the not-a-serious-acting-conservatory Emerson College and straight into my own trailer in Hollywood or some backstage door on Forty-second Street. The details were not mine to worry about! That's what acting professors were for! This was before I realized that my acting professors were themselves actors who also thought at one point in their misguided youth that they'd be famous. I don't think any of them ever got offered a role in *The Godfather* and told Coppola, "Thanks for thinking of me, but I'm going to have to turn this role down. My real passion is to wake up every morning and teach a bunch of hungover college kids the concept of sen-

memory."

~~In all my years of college, I never really sat down and got to thinking, Okay, so how do I take this class where I do monologues from Equus and turn it into a career?~~ I was usually busy thinking about the cute Kurt Cobain look-alike who was always sitting alone in the cafeteria near the cereal. (Turns out that the reason he looked so much like Kurt Cobain was that he was also a heroin addict. I recently looked him up on Facebook and now he's a chubby, short-haired, button-up-shirt-wearing computer programmer—married, with two kids. I mourn this outcome more than if he had OD'd.)

In the back of my mind I just assumed that there existed a special red phone in the dean's office at Emerson. In my limited knowledge of how the world actually worked, I decided that the phone I made up in my head existed solely for placing and receiving calls to and from Hollywood. I pictured a kingmaker with a Santa Claus-esque workshop running Hollywood who kept a master list. Instead of who's naughty and who's nice, his list had names of who was talented and who's not. I pictured my acting teacher calling this Hollywood Santa and saying something like, "Hi. This is Judith Renner. I'd like to report that Jen Kirkman just made herself cry in my Acting 101 class. Yes, she was doing a monologue about being a single mother but she used the image of her favorite dead pet as a catalyst for the tears. She was also speaking from her diaphragm and not mumbling. Oh, and she also nailed this really difficult Fosse dance move that involves crooking her pinky finger and sitting on a chair. Can we move her up on the 'talented' list? Great. We'll be in touch once she nails a Scottish accent—specifically the Shetland Isles."

A FEW WEEKS before I graduated from college, in lieu of a realistic life plan, I decided I'd get a life-altering haircut. I didn't even plan the haircut. It just came to me as I walked by a Supercuts. I went in, plopped into an empty chair, and told some girl to give me the "Mia Farrow in *Rosemary's Baby*" pixie cut. What I really wanted was the "Winona Ryder in *Reality Bites*" pixie cut, but I was too self-conscious to ask for that one. I'd always been told that I resembled Winona and I didn't want people to think that I was aware of that fact and trying to be like her. Of course, all I wanted was to be like her—mainly because she was dating Johnny Depp at the time and she always got to play characters in movies that smoked cigarettes. Two things that thrilled me about the possibility of becoming an actor were (1) having an excuse to smoke if "my character" called for it and (2) doing love scenes with hot guys.

Within three minutes of walking into Supercuts, my hair was on the floor like a slut's thong and what was left of it was sticking straight up off the top of my head. The woman with the scissors said, "Whoops." Who knows whether she was even an actual employee. She could have been a sociopath off the street who carried scissors and wore a red-stained apron that she swore was just "hair dye." I looked stupid but I felt strangely liberated. I'd just done a real spontaneous thing that I could not take back or correct for a long time—sort of like getting pregnant or having an abortion. It gave me an immediate Zen acceptance of who I was.

Nevertheless, the haircut looked like shit, so I went down the street to a real salon where I had to confess to an about-to-combust gay guy that I'd been careless enough to trust Supercuts to give me the *Rosemary's Baby/Reality Bites* pixie cut correct. He did a dramatic pinwheel with his arms and brought his fist to his chin like the statue *The Thinker*, then took a deep breath and placed his hands on my shoulders. He cried up to the ceiling, "Hon. What *are* we going to do?" Then he

moved back and, with tears in his eyes, waved his hand in front of his face like a lady about faint on her porch from either humidity or a sexy gentleman caller.

He took another deep breath.

"Hon, I have no choice but to nearly shave your head and leave a few pieces of bangs in the front. And you're going to have to act like you meant to do this. It's going to be very runway and you just have to promise me that you'll never wear this hairstyle without product or . . . a attitude."

I agreed—anything to get him to stop grabbing me so hard and behaving like he was a character from a Tennessee Williams play.

I went to a college party that night and when I climbed out the window onto the fire escape to smoke a cigarette, my favorite acting teacher was already sitting on the steps about to rip a bonnet off my head. She exhaled a cloud of smoke in my face and said to me, "The hair. I like it. You're not hiding anymore. You're really you now, aren't ya, Jen? Aren't ya?" I had no idea what she meant, but she was still under the impression that she was going to pick up that red phone as soon as she was done getting high with a bunch of twenty-one-year-olds, to let Hollywood know that I was no longer hiding. I held out hope that something would save me from my credit card debt. I'd just added another couple of hundred bucks to my MasterCard to have that queen at the chichi salon shave my head.

I'D PASSED MY college years spending money on important things like tapestries for my bedroom walls and cigarettes for my lungs and now it was time to tighten my belt buckle—or at least to get a belt. The good thing about moving back home with my parents was that they weren't the type to try to teach me a lesson by charging me rent. They probably had more fun just silently judging me.

My original life plan had been to graduate and then move in with my boyfriend, Jamie. The only problem with that was that Jamie had dumped me a few months before graduation. (That also could have been a catalyst for the haircut, now that I think about it.) Jamie lived with his friends Adam and John, in the closet of Adam's bedroom. We'd lay in his single bed, watching his shirts hang above our heads, listening to Adam snore through the closet door and making plans for the day when Adam would move out and Jamie and I could take his room. When we weren't fumbling to get each other's pants off on a thin mattress on the floor of his closet, we were in the same college sketch comedy troupe called This Is Pathetic, which actually would have been a great label for our relationship.

Jamie and I were opposites. The only thing we had in common was our comedy troupe. Jamie was a beer-drinking, sports-loving fraternity guy. When I wanted to go see the Ramones play at a rock club in Boston on Valentine's Day, that was the beginning of our end. He didn't like the same music I did, yet he didn't want me running around to concerts by myself on such a Hallmark holiday. He said it "embarrassed him" that his woman attended a show alone. I never got the chance to ask him before he died, but I don't think Joey Ramone gave a shit that I went unaccompanied to see his band play.

Jamie always told me that I reminded him of his best friend from high school, Paula, for whom he'd always had unresolved feelings. He and I would take long, romantic walks through the Boston Common and he'd just stop and smile at me. He had a fantastic smile. He was like a shorter, greasier-faced Robert Downey Jr. I'd say, "Yes, Jamie?" waiting to hear him profess his

love for me. And he'd say, "Sorry, you're just so . . . Paula right now," and then hug me tightly. ~~was too young to realize that if your boyfriend has feelings for his unrequited high school love~~ and high school was only four years prior, you're not just a pleasant reminder of his youth; you're a Second-Place Paula.

Jamie dumped me after running into Paula when he went home for a weekend to visit his mother. He said they fell in love that weekend and it just "happened." As I type this I realize that he probably didn't "run into her" but had been talking to her all along, and his visit with his mother was really just his planned rendezvous with Paula. Oh my God, I was so stupid back then. But at least today I don't have lopsided boobs after two kids, like Paula does. Oh, and she didn't end up with Jamie. He was just a detour on her way to marrying a *different* guy from high school.

I'd just assumed that Jamie and I would be together all summer and our love would be my backup plan in case the getting-famous thing didn't happen right after graduation. I definitely didn't want to have kids with him—we were both professionally undiagnosed but in my opinion clinically depressed. Any offspring of ours would probably fight to stay in my womb because they would be too despondent and tormented to want to be born. I didn't necessarily want to get married to Jamie either; I just wanted to continue to be distracted by him. When he broke my heart, it felt like he stole my future or, alternatively, was making me face it. I was devastated and unable to get out of bed, like a mom, somewhat ironically, with an unfortunate case of postpartum depression.

I swore I would never love again until a few weeks later, when I went to a party and met a junior at Emerson named Blake. I know his name makes him sound like a rich kid from *Pretty Pink* but he was actually the son of a single mom from a working-class town in Massachusetts which is way more hot—it's like getting the dude from a John Cougar Mellencamp song who's going to make out with you in the back of his truck.

Blake was an actor (still is) and a damn good one. He was skinny and small with a slight underbite and watery blue eyes, and he dressed like he was wearing someone's hand-me-downs from the Partridge Family. One of my friends once told me that she thought that he looked like a mouse, but when Blake was onstage—he was a man. He touched off something in my DNA that craves and lusts after very skinny guys in bell-bottoms with 1970s-inspired shaggy haircuts. I probably has something to do with all of those full-color booklets inside the Led Zeppelin albums that my sister had in our bedroom. I love outgoing and gregarious men who want as much attention as I do. I've always had a thing for guys who make a living doing something in public (with the exception of someone who hands out sandwich shop flyers or dresses up like Pluto at Disney World).

Blake was the opposite of what I was faced with in my real life. He was a free spirit who stole cans of tuna fish from the grocery store while I was saddled with student loans, credit card debt, and the reality of moving back in with my parents. Blake spent his days wearing essential oils like Egyptian musk, reading books about the Stanislavsky acting method, and playing the drums while I was gearing up to take a nine-to-five job in the sales department of the Boston Ballet.

Once I moved back in with my parents, I just assumed that it was tacitly understood that as a grown woman, I'd sleep over at Blake's apartment sometimes. It's not like he could come over and sleep with me. I had a single bed with wheels. One thrust and my bed would be on the other side of my room and my mom would probably yell, "You're scratching the floor up when you scrape the wheels against it like that, Jennifah!"

I'd assumed that four years of college had matured both my parents and me. I'd assumed that since I was twenty-one, there was no way they could think that I was still a virgin. (I mean, not that I think they sat around thinking about it. That would be creepy. Although I imagine if I were married and raising a teenage kid, their sex life would in fact be all I'd be able to think about. If I had a boy, I'd stop walking in his room unannounced once he turned eleven for fear that I'd catch him masturbating. If I had a teenage daughter, I imagine I'd sit there trying to watch TV all night but instead be wondering, *Is she out having sex right now?* Do husbands and wives have quiet nights at home when their teenagers aren't around and casually throw down, "How was your day, honey? Hey, do you think Susie has lost her virginity?")

My parents were very strict with me growing up. I wasn't allowed to have a telephone or a boombox in my bedroom. If a boy happened to call me, I had to talk on the kitchen phone. My only hope for privacy was dragging the cord around the corner from the kitchen to crouch and whisper underneath our upright piano in the dining room. Sometimes I had to sneak into my parents' bedroom to use their phone. That was even worse because the line would get staticky once my mom picked up the downstairs extension to eavesdrop. I don't know what she thought she was going to hear. When I was in high school, I had no idea what talking dirty was. The only earful my mom got was overhearing me nervously ask Adam the cute skateboarder, "Um, so, what's your favorite Cure song?"

During my senior year of college, I had lived in an off-campus apartment with two boys, Tim and David. It was like a reverse *Three's Company*, except unlike Jack Tripper, I didn't have to pretend to be gay in front of the landlord and I had no interest in seeing Tim or David naked. They were like brothers to me. (I never had a brother, but I'm assuming it feels like having a male friend whom you don't want to bone.) When I told my very Catholic mother that I'd found somewhere to live . . . and it was with *two guys*, she said no right away. Actually she said more than no. What she said was, "Jennifah, the boys will rape you."

I don't think my mom quite understood the difference between a rapist and a male roommate. It's hard enough to share an apartment with a friend, because things can get pretty awkward if you owe him rent money. I can't imagine how delicate a situation it would be in the kitchen the morning after your roommate has forced himself on you.

Tim and David drove out to my parents' house in the suburbs to meet them, so that my mom could put faces to her daughter's future rapists' names. Their goofy demeanor and general innocent vibe won her over. She agreed to cosign the lease and let me move in with the guys who were such sweethafts—and I'm happy to say they never sexually violated me.

EVEN THOUGH I didn't think I had to ask permission to sleep at Blake's house now that I was a college graduate, it wasn't really a one-on-one, eye-contact-filled conversation that I wanted to have with my mom. I knew it would be awkward enough for her to see me leaving the house with an overnight bag. On my first night back, I finished unpacking and setting up my childhood bedroom to my liking and then turned right around to head into Boston to spend the night with Blake. I left a note on the kitchen table for my mom and dad—*Staying at Blake's tonight*—and hopped in my dad's spare Oldsmobile.

Blake and I were tangled up in his paisley sheets while Nag Champa incense burned in swirls around our heads, and my parents didn't know where Blake lived and had no way of contacting me. I think cell phones existed in 1996 but nobody I knew had one yet—if they did, it was in the

form of a car phone with a long cord connected to the cigarette lighter. My folks never crossed my mind once. ~~Why would I go home for the night? I'm an adult in the city and there's no need to drive home at two in the morning—and I have an irrational fear of getting in my car in the middle of the night and forgetting to check the backseat, only to be stuck on the road with a monster behind me, ready to strangle away.~~ The next day, I walked in the front door and saw my mom sitting at the kitchen table. It was unusual for her to still be in her bathrobe at noon. That was her physical signal for "I'm so upset that I can't even get dressed." My mom sat there and flipped the pages of her newspaper very quickly, staring at me instead of the articles. I got the same feeling I used to get in my stomach when I was a little kid and I was in trouble. (Not that I, as a kid I ever got in trouble for sneaking out to sleep with my stoner boyfriend, but you know what I mean.) My mom said, "You didn't come home last night." I said, "I left a note." She said, "I know you did. Your father and I found it to be very bold." I said, "I have a boyfriend!"

And she said, "If you live under this roof, you live under my rules, and we do not allow sleeping over at a boyfriend's. If you want to be a trash bag, then you get your own house and behave like a trash bag there."

I'd never heard of being called a "trash bag" before, as opposed to just "trash." My mom was really throwing down. If we were the Real Housewives of Massachusetts, she would have ripped the crucifix off her neck and stabbed a hole in my Red Sox T-shirt. When I think about it, it's actually a kind of a compliment, because my mom was implying that I'm strong, durable, and can be relied upon for clean up after a house party. I decided to respond like an adult, and since I didn't know how to be an adult, I got hysterical and stamped my feet. I slammed my fists on the creaky kitchen table and took a stand against living for free with my parents and driving their car. I screamed a few things about being in love and how they couldn't keep us apart. I grabbed the suitcase that I'd just unpacked the day before and started repacking. Had they not assumed I'd shared my bed with boys in college? Maybe they hadn't. When your daughter is in a sketch comedy troupe, maybe all you assume is that she isn't getting any.

At the last minute, I realized the Oldsmobile wasn't really *my* car and I'd have to walk with my stuffed suitcase to the commuter rail train that came once every three hours. *Fuck it*, I thought, and like a grown-up, I dragged my suitcase sans wheels down the street and a few flights of platform stairs, where I pouted and waited for a train heading to the city limits.

Blake lived in a part of Boston called Brookline Village, with three other guys. I figured what was one more person? When I arrived with my suitcase, his roommates were happy to see me and went into Blake's room and immediately unpacked my things and hung them in his closet. While he was at class, I got all domestic, cleaned up his incense ashes, rinsed out his bong, and put his dirty clothes in the hamper. Later that night as we lay entwined on his futon, Blake asked, "So, have you thought about where you want to get an apartment?"

"Oh," I said, trying to conceal my disappointment, but it was hard to play it cool with a quivering lip and a bridal magazine in my hand.

Blake said, "I'm sorry, baby, but I can't have a live-in girlfriend my senior year in college." I ignored the fact that him calling me "baby" made me cringe. Sometimes Blake really thought he was a member of Earth, Wind & Fire. I told him that he needed to grow up. He came back at me with, "I'm not supposed to be grown up yet. You're twenty-one years old and a college graduate. You're the one who needs to grow up."

The next day, after Blake let me know that our committed relationship couldn't handle the extra commitment of permanently sharing his bed and his stolen cans of tuna, I went by myself

to a party. My friend Zoey had just come back from New York City and was carrying around a copy of their free weekly newspaper the *Village Voice*. There was an article about a new alternative comedy show on the Lower East Side called *Eating It* at a bar called the Luna Lounge. Although it wasn't a normal "comedy club," it was highly respected and a place where all of the coolest comedians went to try out new material. Getting up in front of people and just sort of talking had been something I'd wanted to explore ever since I was fifteen and I saw that episode of *Beverly Hills 90210* where Brenda Walsh started hanging out at a spoken-word open mic night at a coffee shop. She called herself a "hippie witch," moved out of her parents' house for a short stint, and sat on a stool, telling stories about high school.

I never went apartment hunting in Boston. After that party, I decided that becoming a stand-up comedian and getting my start in Manhattan was my destiny. If Blake thought that I should grow up and my parents thought that I wasn't adult enough to sleep at my boyfriend's house, I would show everyone. I'd move to the toughest city in the world. I'd wanted to live in New York City ever since I saw my first black-and-white photo of James Dean smoking in a Manhattan diner. Sadly, I can't say that I've grown out of my urges to do things because I think that technically, if I were photographed doing them, it would make a really cool and iconic picture.

Even though the "plan" was to be a serious actress, I had always secretly wanted to be a stand-up comedian. It's safe to say I had about as much ambition and understanding of how to actually become a stand-up comedian as my mom had of how to become a high-priced call girl. But that article in the *Village Voice* seemed like it was written specifically for me to see. The closest I had come to doing comedy since This Is Pathetic was becoming a member of a local Boston improv group. (Improvisation—that fine art where a group of people stand onstage with nothing prepared and one of them asks the audience for a suggestion like an occupation or a location and someone inevitably shouts out, "Rectal exam!") I enjoyed messing around onstage and making people laugh, but I wasn't great at playing with others. It's not that I don't enjoy sharing the spotlight—I just don't like having to be responsible for other people. Improv is all about supporting your teammates. (By the way, I hate when anything other than a professional sports team refers to itself as a "team." It has this air of forced camaraderie that has always made me uncomfortable, along with people who talk in baby voices to babies and to adults during sex.) Improv is similar to war in that you're expected to do anything to save the life of your partner. And as with war, people don't really understand what improv is "good for."

Improv requires one thing I lack that I think all mothers need—that basic instinct to put someone else first. I can barely forgive myself for the time when I negged Billy from my improv troupe onstage. He said, "I have a gift for you," and my first instinct was to say, "No you don't." The scene died right then and there. See what happens when I try to nurture something? I know it seems dramatic to relate destroying an improv scene to possibly destroying a child's life, but improv and child rearing are not so different. Both are jobs that people volunteer for and complain about endlessly, and they bore everyone around them as they talk about the process.

I broke the news to Blake that I was moving. He was surprised, since only twenty-four hours earlier I'd wanted to settle down and play house. I explained to him that if I wanted to do something as drastic as become a stand-up comedian, I had to really make a bold move and change cities. I couldn't become a new person in my old hometown. Blake agreed. He always agreed with me when I spoke excitedly and loudly about something—even if I was talking out of my ass.

My parents had changed the locks on me after I decided to leave them and attempt to move .

with Blake. I never understood their reasoning for that move. Wouldn't that only ensure that I spend even more nights having patchouli-scented sex with my boyfriend at his off-campus apartment? I had to arrange a time so they could let me into my own bedroom to get the rest of my things. Blake was in the driveway, hiding from my folks and manning the small U-Haul truck that I'd rented to get me to Brooklyn, where I was going to live with my old college friend Amy and Ed. I didn't even have any furniture, just a couple of lamps and a wicker nightstand. The inside of our U-Haul looked like a Pier 1 had been renovated by a crackhead.

As ballsy as it may have been to move to Brooklyn without knowing anything about it—except what I'd seen in the opening credits of *Welcome Back, Kotter* as a kid—I was still a wimp in a lot of ways. I knew I had my parents' love but I wanted their approval. I couldn't bring myself to tell my mom and dad that my reason for moving to New York City was that I wanted to be a stand-up comedian. They never said point-blank, "Don't become a stand-up comedian," but I think that's an implied desire that parents have for their child from the moment he or she is born. That and "Don't become a stripper or a junkie, or a musician."

Being a comic is even harder than being in a band. A stand-up comedian wanders cities alone saying dirty things into germ-ridden microphones to drunk people, whereas a musician sings things into a germ-ridden microphone to drunk people who at least want to give them free drugs and sleep with them after. So for the time being, I just told them that I was moving to New York City to get another job in some kind of box office and to start going on auditions as an actress—really put that BFA in theater arts to work.

In the front seat of the U-Haul Blake and I discussed our relationship. We wanted to remain a couple and try to do the long-distance thing. We agreed that we were only a four-hour train ride apart and it would be even more exciting when we saw each other. Right outside of the Bronx, I had to pee really badly, but the highway was basically a parking lot. The traffic wasn't going to move for a while, so I took a Snapple bottle, pulled my pants down, and squatted. I missed and peed on the floor of the van and on Blake's sneaker. Jewish people step on a glass after they take a vow, and in our fucked-up way, we sealed a long-distance relationship deal with my urine on Blake's foot.

Blake helped me carry my suitcases up the narrow staircase to my new third-floor walk-up in Brooklyn. My roommates weren't home but they'd left a key under the mat and a welcome note. When I saw my bedroom for the first time, it felt more like a giant fuck-you note. The room was so small that there was only space for a single bed and a small nighttable—which had to sit on the other side of the room if I ever wanted the door to open. I moved from living under my parents' restrictions to a room that physically restricted me from having any space to invite a boy to sleep over unless I moved my bedside table into the living room.

Blake had to get back to Boston to return the U-Haul before we were charged for an extra day. Before he left, he sat on my bed with me. He held me and we cried. The mutual tears seemed romantic, but the truth was that I was mourning my jail-cell-size bedroom and Blake was probably coming to grips with the fact that he had a four-hour drive in a van that reeked of fresh urine.

That night, I went by myself to a comedy show at a swanky club called Fez. I already had an intellectual inkling of becoming a comedian, but watching it live onstage—I got what can only be called an urge. I couldn't just sit there like a normal audience member. I wanted to get out of my seat and run up on the stage and just start talking. I wanted to wave to the audience members and say, "I'm one of them! Not you!" The pull was strong. I had to do this comedy thing and

wanted to do it at the expense of everything else and I wanted to start right away. This was my proverbial moment of ovulation and I wanted to lie down on the ground with a pillow under my butt and let comedy just come inside me, and one day it would blossom and grow into a carefree baby.

I was disturbed from my sleep later that night by the loud noise. Yes, I lived over the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, but the screeching that roused me wasn't the cars; it was my roommate having a fight. Did I mention that Amy and Ed were a couple? It was like living with my parents all over again. Amy had always been volatile in college, but I couldn't understand what there was to yell about once you'd moved in with a guy. So far, in my limited life experience, the yelling happened because the guy *wouldn't* move in with you. But now Amy was upset at Ed because she wanted marriage and kids and was wondering why their cohabitation hadn't brought out the urge in him yet.

I understood her urge—not to get married and have kids but to have the life you envisioned for yourself. To fill up that pit in the gut that just says, "Gimme, gimme what I want. I promise I'll be good if you just gimme what I want!" That's how I felt about stand-up comedy. And if anyone had told me that I couldn't have it, I would've been yelling too. Although I related to Amy's feelings of longing, falling asleep to them was not soothing. I opened my window so that the sounds of the Mack trucks would drown out the sounds of the train wreck in their bedroom.

The next morning, I got on the Manhattan-bound F train after being laughed at by Amy for asking whether it was safe to carry a purse into New York City. I got off at Second Avenue and found my way to my mecca—the Luna Lounge. It was empty and I went up and confidently said to the bartender, "I want to perform at the alternative comedy show I read about in the *Village Voice*."

He shrugged. "I don't book it. You have to send a tape."

I was confused. "A tape of what?"

"A tape of you doing stand-up."

Now I was indignant. "But I have never done stand-up. I don't have a tape yet. I'm trying to start so I want to start here."

We went back and forth for a while—as I tried to convince him that I just knew I was funny and he tried to convince me that he had no power to get me on that stage. Imagine going to a job interview, refusing to bring a résumé or any references, and wanting to get hired on the promise that you'll do a really, really good job if they'd just hire you. I sat down at the bar, defeated. But then I realized, *Hey, I'm an adult. In New York City. I can have a drink in the daytime if I want and smoke a cigarette.* I ordered a beer and bummed a Merit Ultra Light off the bartender. I posed for the imaginary camera that was taking my James Dean-esque photo. I'd gotten what I wanted out of New York City and after only four days, I knew it was time to go home.

BACK IN BOSTON, things felt weird with Blake. I couldn't believe that four whole days spent in a long-distance relationship hadn't made him change his mind about not wanting to live with me. He said I could stay with him until I found an apartment. I did find an apartment. He found an apartment. And like a lost puppy, I stayed for almost a year. I got my old job back at the Boston Ballet and my old position back on the "team" at Improv Boston. I was disheartened at the thought of starting a stand-up career because it seemed like you couldn't start until you had already started and put it on tape. So I postponed that dream and focused on being Blake's clingy

girlfriend.

~~As the months passed, the only thing tangled up in Blake's sheets was Blake. I was on the other side of the futon, shivering, struggling to get under the covers with him. Blake had made a new friend in his acting class, a female friend. She was starring in the college production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Blake lit up when he talked about her, and he talked about her a lot. He also talked to her a lot, on the phone, in his room, while I sat on his bed, watching. I got drunk one night at a party and confronted him in front of God and a kitchenful of his peers and screamed, "Are you fucking her?" He wasn't fucking her—until his girlfriend got drunk and crazy and screamed, "Are you fucking her?" And then that night, I'm pretty sure he fucked her, because he didn't come home. The next day we broke up.~~

I know it's wrong, and if I end up going to hell and meeting Adolf Hitler, I promise that I will kill him with my bare hands, but to this day when someone brings up *The Diary of Anne Frank*, I can't help but think to myself, *That little whore*.

My relationship with my parents had improved over that year. Somehow living with Blake wasn't as abhorrent to my folks as spending the night with Blake and then coming home the next morning in the same clothes in which I'd left their house—to see my boyfriend, who was planning to take those clothes right off. My mom and I sat at the kitchen table, where she had referred to me as a "trash bag" just a year before. We were having our first frank discussion about sex, without actually talking about sex. Actually, we'd talked about sex once—in 1985.

In fifth-grade sex ed class, my teacher taught us what happens when sperm enters a woman's fallopian tubes. Our homework assignment was to draw a picture of the opposite sex—or whoever we thought the opposite sex looked like naked. Then we were to write a paragraph underneath from our best understanding, of what intercourse was and how babies were made. I told my mom about the homework assignment and she teased me by chasing me around the kitchen table, asking to see what I'd drawn. I remember feeling disappointed in sex ed class. I'd had a vague inkling that sex was something that people did for fun, but the way it was being taught, seemed like the teacher was dismissing that notion and instead presenting sex as something that two people do only when they want to make a baby. I half-listened to the teacher explain how sperm meets egg, figuring, *I don't need to know this. I don't think I'm having kids anytime soon*.

I think about raising kids now and how they'd have access to Facebook and actual real pictures of naked people on the Internet. I think about how my ten-year-old daughter would be nothing like me. I had no idea what a penis looked like, so that picture I had to draw in fifth grade of a naked man looked like a Ken doll—just legs with no anatomy in between. My ten-year-old daughter probably would already have had a dick-pic sent to her cell phone by some little shit in her class. Would my ten-year-old daughter have to have a cell phone? I guess I could forbid her from having one—just like my mom forbade me from watching MTV because she thought music videos were too sexually explicit and directed by the devil. But then again, what if my daughter had to make an emergency call? There aren't pay phones on every corner these days. If some creep in a van were to abduct her outside of school, my daughter wouldn't be able to speed-dial 911 or text me. I can't send a ten-year-old girl to school with no viable means of communication. And what if my ten-year-old girl was an early bloomer and had her period already? Would I have to teach her about safe sex or secretly slip a birth control pill into her oatmeal every morning? I know that when I was ten I was terribly horny for Bruce Willis and Michael J. Fox. Luckily, the boys at school whom I liked didn't like me back, so my lust remained only a fantasy reserved for the hours that *Moonlighting* and *Family Ties* aired. But what about me

imaginary daughter? What if the boys liked her back? Then they'd be screwing at my house after school while I was on tour doing comedy, and before you know it, I'd have a pregnant ten-year-old daughter and I'd be a grandmother *and* a mother to two people before one of them even turned eleven.

I don't understand what's so great about having kids when I'm faced with the fact that at some point my kids would disappoint me—just like I disappointed my parents. It's the vicious cycle of life. It's an absolute certainty that the babies that I'm not having would become horny teens who send pictures of their genitalia to one another on cell phones that I'm paying for.

Eleven years later, I sat around that same kitchen table with my mom as she gave her version of a mea culpa. "Jennifah, I'm reading a biography on Lauren Bacall. She had a lot of men in her life but she loved them deeply because she was passionate . . . about everything she did. She was a wond-ah-ful woman who was very talented."

That was my mom's way of telling me that I was forgiven and that even though she'd never slept with a man before marriage, it was something that "the kids" and Hollywood legends were doing and maybe it wasn't so abnormal or trash bag-like after all.

She'll never admit it, but I believe that my Catholic-but-starstruck mom gives a free pass to people in Hollywood on certain moral issues. The affair between JFK and Marilyn Monroe was blessed by my mom in ways that Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton's affair wasn't—and they only had oral/cigar sex! But Bill Clinton's saxophone-playing appearance on Arsenio Hall was not enough for my mother to consider him Hollywood royalty. My mom doesn't condone abusing prescription drugs, but to her, Judy Garland is a saint and a victim. She'll forever blame the movie studios for handing Judy the pills. And I remember when her best friend called to say that John Lennon had been shot—my mom said over the phone, "Oh Ruthie. It's just not fair. Beatle shouldn't be allowed to die."

As long as my mom and I were having a heart-to-heart, I summoned up the rest of my gumption and told her that I wanted to be a stand-up comedian. I knew I was killing her dream of my owning my own little local dance studio or becoming a Broadway actress. Her response was, "Are you even funny? You are very dramatic, Jennifah." I reminded her of how I'd always wanted to be voted class clown in the Pollard Middle School yearbook. (By the way, "class clown" seemed to be the moniker given to the most humorless and bullying jocks. What class clown really means is "most popular"; the kids who grow up to be truly funny are shoved into lockers.)

AGAINST MY MOM'S wishes, I continued the pursuit of stand-up comedy, but I did live in my childhood bedroom, with no male visitors, like a good, celibate twenty-two-year-old girl. Every night I clicked and clacked on the Kirkman family word processor, attempting to write jokes.

One of my first jokes was about Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign from the 1980s. I have no idea why that was still on my mind in the 1990s. The joke was horrible. It wasn't even a joke. It wasn't even a complete thought. It went something like this: "Nancy Reagan says to 'just say no'—well, I say that's not realistic. I think you should 'just say maybe,' and then try to walk away from the drugs. It doesn't make you look like a dork who says no. It just looks like you have something else to do."

I thought that joke would immediately cement me in the pantheon of great edgy political comedians who also comment on the sociology of humanity—like Richard Pryor or George

Carlin. I started to read it to my mom and she just looked at me. She put her head in her hands ~~much like that gay hairdresser who'd had to shave my head.~~ "Oh, Jennifah. That just isn't funny." I rolled my eyes and said, "Mom, you just don't get it." I stormed out of the house and got in the trusty white Oldsmobile and struck out for Cambridge, Massachusetts, and my first open mic in the back of a bar at the Green Street Grill. I was headed for my Brenda Walls moment.

I swilled a few cheap glasses of merlot before I sat down on the stool onstage at the open mic. I drew a breath and got ready to tell my Nancy Reagan joke. I looked out at a bunch of people my age, waiting expectantly, actually listening before I'd even said anything. I could hear my mom's voice: "Jennifah, that just isn't funny." I made myself laugh as I thought about my poor mom sitting in her recliner, tens of thousands of dollars poorer because she'd spent her life buying food, faux designer clothes, and cassette tapes for my two sisters and me, and this was how I was repaying her.

It made me laugh out loud. So I skipped my Nancy Reagan joke and I just told the audience that I was a college graduate who lived with my parents and my mother did not think it was funny. And then I started to impersonate my mom. I'd been imitating her since I was a kid around the house—but until now it never dawned on me to impersonate my mom in front of strangers. It was always more of an in-joke with my family.

I killed. I'm not bragging. All comedians do really well the first time they do stand-up comedy. I don't know what it is—some cosmic/karmic free pass because what you're doing is hard enough. But when you're just starting out, you don't know that all comics kill their first time—that's why we stay comics. We think we're special.

A few months later, my parents came to see me perform. Let's just say there was another kitchen-table discussion—this time with my mom in tears. She didn't understand why I was humiliating her in public and revealing family secrets. I tried to convince my mom that making jokes about how she pretends she's not home when the annoying neighbor knocks on the door was not a "family secret." My parents didn't come back to see me perform and things were definitely strained until my mother saw the Margaret Cho movie *I'm the One That I Want*. Margaret had proven herself to be a successful and famous comedian who also imitated her mother. Just like she came to accept Lauren Bacall's sex life, she saw via Margaret's documentary that comedians are actually honoring the ones they love when they make fun of them in their act. My mother not only gave me her seal of approval but also started to come to see me perform regularly so that she could watch the audiences laugh at . . . *her*. And just like Margaret's mom, mine stuck around after the show to get attention from the crowds.

MY MOM HAS a really good singing voice. She's part of a singing group—you may have heard of them, they're called the Musettes. Oh, you haven't heard of them? That's probably because you don't live in a senior citizens' home. That's where they tour. My mom plays piano and sings with three other women and leads them in a rousing (for those settled-down seniors) rendition of "Oh, We Ain't Got a Barrel of Money."

One of my mom's favorite stories is that when she was a teenager she met Patti Page. I'll spare anyone under forty who is reading this book the trip to Wikipedia. Patti Page is one of the biggest-selling female recording artists in history. She's famous for songs like "Old Cape Cod" and "Mockin' Bird Hill." When my mom met Patti Page she told her that she wanted to be

singer like her someday, and Patti said to her, "You can be anything you want to be."

~~That story always depressed me because by the time my mom relayed Patti's words to me,~~ knew how it ended. Sure, my mom could have been anything she wanted to be, but she didn't become a professional, Grammy-winning, popular American singer. Instead, she had three kids and raised them in a time when you couldn't really just strap your kid into a stroller and pursue your dream of becoming a singer. *American Idol* hadn't been invented yet.

I can't imagine dreaming of wanting to be a singer, meeting my idol, and getting her words of encouragement—and then getting married, having kids, and touring the blue-hair circuit. Luckily, my mom raised me using Patti Page's insight "You can be anything you want to be," and not "You can be anything you want to be but it probably won't work out that way" or "You can be anything you want to be but also please still make time to be a mother and wife."

Some of her friends have accused her of living vicariously through my show business life. I don't see it that way. She's definitely not a stage mother. My mom just always knew how much my career meant to me and she's a realist. She doesn't just blindly say, "You can have it all!"

Life is like a closet full of clothes—you *can* have it all, but it doesn't mean that you should. I *can* wear four cardigan sweaters all at once with a pair of sweatpants over my jeans—but it doesn't mean that I *should*.

I credit my mom with giving me the delusional level of confidence I needed to think that I could actually make a living in show business. For example, she resented that in order to get accepted as a theater major at Emerson, I had to audition. She walked into the dean's office, VHS tape in hand, and said, "Here is a tape of Jennifah. She played Bonnie in *Anything Goes* in the high school musical. She can tap-dance, act, and sing and you want her to do two contrasting monologues for you to get into this college?"

To be fair, I don't think my mom's unrealized dreams of becoming a singer plagued her the way that I have to assume I'd be plagued if I weren't earning a living and continuing to pursue my life in the world of comedy. Back in my mom's world, in Massachusetts in 1950-something, you could have a dream but you understood your reality, which was that the nice guy named Ronnie from high school wanted to marry you and your father approved of him and so you went to secretarial school during the engagement. Once married, it was time to start making those babies. It's amazing to me that my parents have been married for over fifty years. They were high school sweethearts. I was raised by two people who, because they were getting along so well in their homeroom, decided to get married and make other people.

If I'd married my high school sweetheart—well, there was more than one—but if I'd married the one who inspired me to write poems in my diary, I'd now be living with him in his mom's basement. (Before you judge, he does have a job and he pays his mom rent. So he's got one foot in the real world and he's now bald—which gives him the appearance of being very wise.)

Anyway, pretty soon someone else besides my mom started to sneak around my comedy shows. Blake was back. I think he was mostly curious that I hadn't called him in months, begging him to leave Anne in her attic and come back to me. We had one last one-night stand after one of my gigs. He was a college graduate at this point and he was even paying for his own tuna fish. He told me he wanted to move somewhere like Los Angeles to become an actor but he also wanted to retire young, move back to Boston to live near his family, be a sports announcer for the Red Sox, and . . . have kids. I felt uncomfortable in Blake's bed after he said that—and that wasn't just because his worn-out futon mattress made me feel like I was sleeping on the bench at a dry sauna. Some instinct was rolling around inside of me—I didn't want to be the woman

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