

Sara IRL

By John Caedan

Season 1: October 4, 2016 through December 12, 2016

SaraIRL.com

for slides optimized for phones,
and other digital devices, images of Sara,
extras, contact, and additional seasons.

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Thank you



Sara IRL

Introduction: About Sara and IRL

Sara is 15-almost-16 living near L.A. in the town of Sky Valley, California. She writes in a notebook every day, and I post it to you.

The irony: On one hand, this is a work of my imagination. On the other, the title implies Sara's existence unfolds IRL – In Real Life.

I hope to delight you by holding both truths aloft, blending them to see the events of 2016/2017 through the eyes of someone honest, young, smart, and passionate.

Sara sees the bad/sad in the news and friends, and gets furious with Boomers, X, and Y over certain things ... yet, she is happy. There's no sick secret in her past, and I promise she won't get cancer.

Deeper in irony, this is my punchline: Sara's visionary ways include major grit for actualizing her dreams IHRL.

In her real life.

John Caedan

The Sonoran Desert, California

Winter, 2017

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01 Tuesday, October 4, 2016

Sometimes, I walk in the desert at night. I wear tall boots to be safe from ground-level predators. Quiet – that’s what I want. If there’s no wind, the silence gets huge. Not a creek. Not a cricket. In a book, you’d say “the silence became a tangible presence.”

I want to dim out the mind-grind of Sky Valley, of Los Angeles, of the USA, so I never bring my iPhone out there with me. One tap and the grind screams alive and yanks me down into the circuits.

If I stay out long enough, standing still with eyes closed, the silence wraps around. The tangible presence of Nothing fills my belly and my breath. It’s thrilling to feel Nothing. I hang with it as long as possible.

Then, I see a last lonely star in the dark of my imagination. I reach my hand to it. The existence of reality blossoms in my soul, leaving a lovely ache in my chest where I chose it.

A boot shifts, half-buried in the sandy desert dirt, and a tear falls next to it with a tiny explosion in the dust.

It’s me, Sara, weeping from the beauty of life.

02 Wednesday, October 5, 2016

I had to correct one of the new teachers on my name, first day of sophomore year a few weeks ago. After that, word got around and the other new teachers said it right. Sara: you say it “Sah r~d ah” with a Spanish roll in the middle.

Never mind that I am Sara Tillinghast. My last name is from my Father, Thomas Tillinghast. (Feels like you should say “the third” right?) Mother took his name and they gave it down to me.

So, after confirming to Mrs. Aquino (Spanish) that that I don’t want “Serah” or “Saaaahra”, but “Sara, and you roll the ‘r’ a little,

and you can't tell if it's an 'r' or a 'd' in the middle," the new teachers have it right now.

I like my tricky name. It kicks up the confusion of people trying to figure me out. Put me in a category, I mean.

It's so lame how many people try to box me. I see it coming a mile away. My first name, with that rolled 'r', plus Spanish black hair and eyes, I got from my Mom's mother side. My 'black person' facial features came from my Mom's father side. I got my light skin from my Dad's both sides.

Sometimes, I try to guess people's vector. I learned that word in math, and now I use it everywhere. It means the amount of force plus the direction. Some try to vector in from the black side. I'm so glad I have "black person" in my face. Lots of times, though, the thing is: 'with that name she must be Mexican, right?' None of them are too sure. That's because of the light skin. I have a lot of white, I'm half white.

The worst fight on it I got into was once at a party. Theresa Ann Crandall, aka Tessa, my African-American best friend, warned me this one guy was bad news. He was out to put me down. When my usual smarty comebacks had no effect, I just said – I have it rehearsed and ready for these people – "I'm the vanilla ice cream cone you'll never lick, the chocolate blackout cake you'll never eat, and the bittersweet caramel on the flan you'll never taste."

It is so cool I am all those delicious things.

03 Thursday, October 6, 2016

Tessa says I should get a boyfriend.

I don't know how.

"Go by tingle," she said.

"What?"

“By tingle. You’re walking down the hall. Shut off that damn brainiac brain of yours. Let boys see you’re not looking at them, but actually, you are. That’s a skill.”

“A skill?”

“Sara, just listen. You are looking at each guy from your ... hmm ... what are we going to call it, Miss Fifteen-Year-Old-Virgin?”

“Call what? And you know I’m sixteen. Nearly.”

“We have to call it something you can handle. Let’s see ... your girl-garden. You’re checking out each guy from your girl-garden. To see if there’s a tingle. In your geegee. We’re calling it ‘gg’ for short.”

“That’s not a thing.”

“Oh, yes, Sara sweet. It’s not exactly sex, the gg is more than just your vagina. It’s deeper in, the garden where a woman feels everything. I have a tingle right in my gg for T’aye. That’s how I chose him and how I know he’s my one true love forevermore.”

Tessa jokes about love and puts it down so bad. She covers her feelings about it with that sarcasm, and if you bring up love she’ll bring up sex and talk crude.

Normally, Tessa is open, positive, and generous. A happy extrovert. But not when it comes to the affections my friends and I call “boygirl.” On this subject, I see through tough-Tessa, down to the soft core, because we’ve lived close, like true sisters, for years. To the world, we parade our persona as the Brain Twins, waltzing down the halls together, our white and black faces happy and fearless. In private, however, we are vulnerable girls who share, so I know why my normally sweet BFF shoves romantic affection behind a concrete wall, and defends her heart with the nuclear option.

In slow motion, Tessa watched a magnificent love die.

04 Friday, October 7, 2016

I have two friends who don't want to hear this, two parents who'd fly to the sky if they did, and one boy I'd like to tell because I pretend he gets me, but he doesn't know I like him.

So ... I'm keeping it inside.

I've fallen in love with school. I mean, I'm wide-eyed and breathless. I read that expression in a book and now that's how it is. In love with school. One or two classes are boring, but the others are keeping me on the edge of my seat.

"Yes, Sara?" asked Miss Corcoran. (English.)

"I didn't understand what you just said."

"About?"

"About the irony in the money, that scene in the film version."

"I know you understand this, Sara, because we touched on it already."

"Could you say it again, Miss Corcoran?"

"When they get in the open coach outside the church, everyone at the wedding is shouting for the traditional throwing of coins. Colonel Brandon stands up and starts tossing money into the air. Everyone is happy."

"Oh."

She said, "So, you tell me. What is the irony?"

I got it now.

"Jane Austen is mad –"

"Angry."

"–Austen is angry about women being subjugated over money, but you told us she gives a happy ending with marriage anyway, in every book. It's her way of making both delightful humor and dark humor over it. In this one, *Sense and Sensibility*, she's pushing the ironic joke with Brandon throwing money to the wind because he got Miss Marianne, and his money didn't do it."

“Yes.”

“He has so much money and tries to use it for good and to get things his way, but that didn’t work with her. He had to win her by sneaking into her heart.”

“How does she feel?”

“She finally fell in love with Brandon, and got money anyway. Without trying.”

“Yes. The coin-toss scene is not in the book, but I suspect Austen would like it. Emma Thompson wrote it in. She’s extremely smart and understands Jane Austen. I suspect you’ll read this book many times in the next one-hundred years, Sara. Many scenes have irony. You’ll find them.”

“Yes, Miss Corcoran.”

05 Saturday, October 8, 2016

Outside the movie theater Saturday evening, Tessa and I were near tears.

“You heard,” said Tessa.

“Yes.”

We were both sick. Heartbroken.

“Sara, I know one of his grandkids.”

“Oh no.”

“This boy, Hector. He was at Cathedral High.”

Hector’s grandfather, Gil Vega, an officer in the Palm Springs police department, died just after noon today, along with another officer, Lesley Zerebny, a mother of a 4-month old baby girl. They were assassinated. It was faked as a domestic disturbance call. It was an ambush. With an assault weapon. So sick.

Tessa shook, reading the story on her phone. “They had body armor on. Oh my God. Oh my God. They must have been shot in the head.”

For an instant, I could not avoid seeing that in my mind's eye. I nearly hurled against the wall.

I want to melt down all the guns. Guns kill people.

I can't shake the images of Gil Vega and Lesley Zerebny, just plain shot dead, by some random felon with an assault weapon and armor-piercing bullets. He is a career criminal, but officially on the loose.

Then, that video last July of Philando Castile dying in his car, shot by police when he "made a false move." His girlfriend live-streamed him dying. Then 14 people shot dead in San Bernardino a year ago, a mile from my Aunt Ann's house, by two radical jihadists. Then, five officers killed by a sniper in Dallas, some guy activated because of police shootings of black people. Then, four or five other instances of "a bad shoot." Over-reacting cops killing suspects, including unarmed African-Americans. That's what they call it in police jargon, a bad shoot.

We know a police officer, Lieutenant Tony, a friend of the family. I have been around him quite a few times. He's on a softball team with Father. I've also been around other police officers, at a picnic twice and at fund-raisers several times. Basically, "cops don't scare me." I'm saying that sardonically, what I mean is, I am accustomed to being around them as people. I don't think the ones I met are racist. My opinion is not just on the surface. I tried to poke in a few times, to see if I could make them react.

I need to understand.

06 Sunday, October 9, 2016

"I need to ask some questions." This was after Sunday dinner.

"Okay," said Mom.

"Can Ben and Maria go out and play?"

"Hey!" shouted Ben, age 13. Maria, age 10, groaned.

It took a while, but I ended up in the living room alone with my parents.

“Are the police racist?”

“We have friends who are officers,” said Father.

“Are they racist?”

Momma looked serious. “How many generations back, Sara?” This was a signal sentence between us. We had discussed it many times.

“Five.”

“That’s right. You are the five-generation daughter of slaves.”

“I know that, Momma, but these racist white cops ...”

“Do you know any, personally?”

“No.”

“Just because an officer shoots a black kid, it does not mean he’s a bigot, or even that he’s filled with institutional racism.”

“But he could be. He could shoot an un-armed African-American seven times through the open window of a car, but not a white person.”

“Yes, he could be,” said Momma. “If he’s a bigot, that’s racism, and if he shoots someone just because of their skin, that’s a major crime.” She is very objective, my Mom, but she’s half black by genes. She knows bigotry, and confronts it bravely.

“I know one,” Father said.

“You do?”

“He never shot anyone, never has been officially guilty of misconduct. He’s in the Sky Valley force, and Tony knows all about him.” Tony is our friend who comes for dinner with his girlfriend, sometimes. “One time I encountered this bad officer, Don Henderson, and without any prompting at all, he made a racist comment about brown people.”

“You never told me about this,” said Mother.

“No. This officer assumed I would be fine with it, because I am so white. That is bigotry, right there! For Latinos and black Americans, he uses terms like ‘those people’ and ‘they,’ even when he is dealing with just one person. He hates Asian people, too. Officer Henderson groups people, profiles them, by the color of their skin. And he does not hide it when he issues White Privilege. He is famous as a bigot in the force in Sky Valley.”

“That is so sick, Father.”

“A while back, we were outside on the ballfield. Henderson is not on the team, but he was there. I pointed out our new right-fielder, ‘Javier Campos, there in right field, the fellow wearing the white tee shirt.’ ‘Don’t they all,’ he said, and snorted, like he was disgusted.”

That was horrifying.

“Did you punch him in the nose?”

“No, but I did show him some family pictures, and said that Elena was my ‘sweet African-American lady, except when she’s cooking and her Chicano blood comes out.’ He looked at me with disgust. I am not making that up.”

“Holy crap.”

Momma laughed like crazy. Momma can pass for either Hispanic or black.

“How many generations?” she asked again.

“Five.”

“Why do I keep bringing that up?”

“To remind me that during all that time since slavery ended, bigotry and racism stuck, even if laws changed. It’s a long time ago, and a short time ago.”

“Yes, Sara. It’s difficult to kill, because bigots teach their children.”

That made me so angry. I mean, my brain went red behind my eyes. I stood up, and I know I was breathing hard and nearly spitting with rage. I wanted to hit.

“We won’t stand for it. My people (bitter sarcasm) won’t stand for it. Gen-Z won’t learn bigotry or teach it, I swear, if I have to indoctrinate every one of us. Why didn’t you boomers and X-Y-ers wipe it out? Why? Why? And why did you let everyone have assault rifles with armor-piercing bullets? Why? Why?” I was screaming and crying.

They didn’t get all disapproving of me. They let me rant. Which I did for another ten minutes. They hate it as much as I.

But to face the truth, they did not wipe it out.

07 Monday, October 10, 2016

So yes, I’m in love with school. Like that conversation about Jane Austen last week in English, it’s also like that in Biology, History, and even in Spanish class! The teachers want you to see the ripe places inside, not just the surface. Sorry, Algebra, you need a better teacher than Mr. Rapino. Health, twice a week, I’m waiting to see if it gets good.

How did this happen? Teenagers are not supposed to even like school, let alone start drooling over it. Well, IB happened, that’s what. International Baccalaureate. It’s a program all over the world, injected into normal high schools, to turn them into top college preparatory without the giant tuition.

Over the summer, Sky Valley High became Desert Academy at Sky Valley and they got all these new teachers. I like that they didn’t get all new students, they just put all regular-school freshmen from last year as sophomores on the IB-prep track, including me. The actual IB curriculum is for juniors and seniors, but all us others take tougher than normal courses to get us ready for the challenge of IB. It’s way different.

This International Baccalaureate program has no entrance exam or whatever, at least at our school. So, it’s not too hard to get into,

but you will exit out rápido unless you work really hard. That's okay with me. As a bonus, interesting and ambitious kids from all over the place are commuting here now, to get the IB.

I won't tell my parents or Tessa and Skyler about loving school. That one boy? I'd tell him. He gets me.

08:00	homeroom	
08:10	1 English	Miss Corcoran
09:00	2 Spanish	Mrs. Aquino
09:50	3 Algebra2	Mr. Rapino
10:40	4 Phy/Health	
11:30	5 Lunch	
12:20	6 Study hall	
01:10	7 Biology	Mr. Moran
02:00	8 History	Mr. Atler
02:50	dismissed	

Friday, right at the end of Biology, Mr. Moran wrote a question on the blackboard. It shocked me, because I have asked myself this very thing many times, thinking about the origin of the universe.

“If everything was in the singularity, including time, what is the meaning of ‘before the Big Bang?’” It took him forever to write it. He finished right as the bell went off. I wrote it in my notebook. I walked out of class, stunned.

It sounds like I'm making this up, but I woke up in the middle of the night and sat up straight in bed. I couldn't breathe. It was so thrilling, actual goosebumps, I saw them when I turned on my flashlight. The fact that my teacher put that exact sentence on the board, after me thinking about it for years, scared the shit out of me. Here's the implication: reality had no beginning, the “One Big Bang From Nothing” has to be understood as “Not The One and

Only Time It Banged.” No ending, either! And you don’t need the concept “God” at all. Just reality.

So, I have a question. Questions.

Today, he wouldn’t let me ask. Said he had to push on and would pick it up another day. Wanted us to stew in it.

“Sara, write your question and hand it to me after class.” I slipped it to him on the way out.

08 Tuesday, October 11, 2016

I take it back: I’ll tell Tessa I’m in love with school. She won’t laugh. We’ll have a great topic for jabbering. And anyway, I suspect she likes it a lot, too.

I gained two sisters at the same time in 2006. Momma gave birth to Maria, and Tessa began coming home with me after school on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday afternoons each week, often staying through dinner, and sometimes overnight on weekends. Right away, Tess and I started challenging and kidding, a girl-girl instant friendship. When it began, we were both six, although she was a half-year older.

Tessa’s mom, Joyce Crandall, asked for this arrangement, so she could focus on her art, and it worked for my mom because Tess and I engaged each other, and it made helping with the new baby fun – she got two good workers out of it. Joyce or her husband picked up Tessa each evening, and contributed food for dinners. Sometimes Joyce would eat with us when Tessa’s dad worked late.

Our two families had gradually meshed through the common point of my father, Thomas, and Tessa’s dad, Warren. The two men were thrown together on an engineering project at the windfarm research laboratories where they worked. Father talked Warren onto the company softball team, and quite soon our families were having dinners, picnics and a few outings.

All the Crandalls are very black-skinned. Tessa the most. She looks like an African princess, whom no other person in her nation is allowed to be darker than.

What bound Tessa and me together was reading and chattering. In this sharp girl, I met my match in talk. Since we burned through books, we had plenty to say. As sheltered adolescents prior to middle school, with no one mocking us for love of learning, we pushed each other fast and far in everything: history, science, singing, novels, math, puzzles, music, and art. We did a lot of dancing, too. My mom, Elena, saw how we thrived in this rich milieu (a cool word I learned recently), and fed it. She often danced with us.

Tessa needed to accept a reality in the Tillinghast household completely alien to her life at home: tasks, structure, and routines of practical life.

“I think I’m not a guest,” she said one day, six years old, while we did the dishes standing on stools. We were precociously reading a most challenging book as second-graders at the time, “The Hobbit.”

“I thought I only dreamed twelve dwarves crashing that meal,” Tessa said, “but the washing up makes it all too real.” That’s right out of the book.

“Yes.”

“What else?”

“We have to help Momma in the garden, we have to keep my room neat, and I’m starting to wash clothes, just the towels, I learned how to fold them. Momma says I have to wash all my own clothes by fourth grade.”

“Holy cow.”

“I still feel like a kid, anyway.”

“Do we get paid?” Tessa asked.

“No. I get allowance, but chores and allowance are different. Oh, I have to keep the second bathroom clean and all stocked up and everything, too. You can help.”

“I want to go home.”

I saw she was kidding, but still it must have been odd. I don't think her mom, Joyce, made her do anything.

All through our elementary school years, ages six through eleven, it was Tessa and Sara, the brainy twins, causing scenes as a tag team. We learned to take it in stride when people's eyes got big over the black/white skin of the two smartest students in fifth grade holding forth on high school subjects, finishing each other's sentences, outdoing each other on facts and theories, quoting poetry and brilliant lines from books. In fifth grade, we walked down the halls arm in arm, or even hand in hand, just to provoke. I admit, Tessa was the leader in our eleven-year-old impudence. While we both remained optimistic and happy-hearted, Tessa was beginning to stand up to prejudice against skin, dissing of girls on the uppity, and contempt of intelligence. Tessa likes poking a stick in all such garbage.

Per Tessa, I've been trying to get a tingle from a boy. How do you pull in the signal if you can't look at them? After 6th period, I noticed something about using my peripheral. You can't size up boys with it, but you can at least detect if they are looking away. That's when you take a quick peek.

She and I walked the long way to class deliberately so I could practice.

“Anything?” asked Tessa.

“Nothing.”

“Not a ting?”

“Ha ha ha.”

“Don’t give up on it, Sara.”

“They all look the same to me.”

09 Wednesday, October 12, 2016

I said yes to Skyler’s Halloween party. Maybe I’ll go as Hazel Grace, the girl from *The Fault in Our Stars*. I’ll get her haircut and pull an oxygen tank around.

She got a boyfriend.

What a joke, to go as a teenager dying any minute. Supposed to be scary, right?

Nothing matters, though. Since, apparently, there was no beginning and there won’t be any end, the existence of the very moment I’m writing this is dubious. Same with the supposed date of the party. Time could stop itself two seconds from now.

“Come on,” said Dada. “Come out.”

“Coming, Father.” I never call Father “Dada” out loud. “Dada” has a private joke in it, and my private affection. Right now I’m using ‘father’ for fun. ‘All right, all right,’ he said when I started that, ‘it is better than Thomas, you are not to call me Thomas, young lady.’

That’s how he talks, with no contractions and sort of formal. His father is from Britain. I’ve never called him Thomas yet.

We have to deal with the garage today. Mama said to not stop until two cars can park in it. I’ve got the number for a haul-away on my phone. That is inevitable.

“Father, there’s a problem with this plan.”

“What?” He was standing with hands on hips, staring at the left half, piled up with stuff.

“Nowhere to just move things.”

“Oh.” He grunted.

“It would be so much better. Easier. Like a shed, or in the cellar. This way we are going to have to make actual decisions, like to throw things away. Do you really want that?”

I know I didn’t.

“What cellar, Sara?”

“Well, anyway.”

We made Plan B. Yep, a haul-away pile, but nope, not everything. We started a pile of Good Things. This was a conspiracy now. We put some things Mama would hate to throw away near the front. We started rehearsing our pitch for a shed. I logged on and found some prices and delivery. Strictly ‘no assembly required.’

“It appears this is much easier,” said Dada, with a dance move in his step. “Daughter knows best.”

“Why, thank you, Father.”

10 Thursday, October 13 , 2016

International Baccalaureate has a special class. Course. It’s called “Theory of Knowledge.” It’s got a nickname, “TOK.” There is a more formal name for it, epistemology. My sophomore English and Biology teachers warned us about it, and they are supposed to challenge us with deeper thinking, to prepare us for TOK when we take it as juniors.

It all boils down to ‘how do we know what is true.’ Right away, it seems obvious, but then someone throws in “what does ‘true’ mean?” Other people attack the word “know.” They’ll go all the way to the top of the mountain to have ‘believe’ be the same thing as ‘know.’ Sheesh.

“If you believe it, it’s true for you. What’s true for you might not be true for me.”

Mr. Moran (Biology) challenged us on that thing. I hate it. How arrogant, to think that a random person can just stop with what they believe, and that’s all you need in the search for truth. Do they think

they invented the Universe? What if they were scared into believing it? What if their parents told them what to believe? What if they believe it to be popular? What if they read it online? What if someone told them they would be in heaven with God forever if they believed certain things?

“It’s crap, Mr. Moran.”

“Sara, you throw away all respect when you speak like that.”

“It’s lame.”

“Try again.”

“I’ve met a few people who are running around with that idea right out front. Like they’re saying, ‘don’t insult me with what you think are facts, they won’t touch my beliefs, and that’s what makes a person strong, their beliefs. I have a right to believe what I believe.’ They say that with a lot of arrogance.”

“Do you think it’s better to not believe in anything?” asked Mr. Moran.

“I believe there’s reality, and it’s outside all our heads, and people should find out facts about it. Those facts are true for everyone.”

I got mixed reviews on that. Tessa and Skyler are in a different Biology-TOK-prep class, so I didn’t have that cheering section. There were two quiet girls I didn’t know very well, new to this school, who I suspect agreed. And one or two boys. I got some booing, though.

The bell rang and everyone hurried out. Mr. Moran stopped me.

“That’s called objectivity, Sara.”

“Shouldn’t everyone have it?”

“I wish,” he said.

11 Friday, October 14, 2016

Sex.

Mom was all over it way before I got my first period. The big talk happened when I was nine and asked her ‘what is sex?’ Some fifth-grade girls were talking about sex and I heard.

“You probably know some things.”

“Yes, Momma.”

“What?”

“Girls get their period.”

“What is it?”

“Bleeding.”

“But what is it? It’s not an injury or anything.”

“No.”

I was not exactly a happy nine-year-old girl talking about this.

“I’m going to explain the whole thing, now.”

And she did. That day, I learned what ‘sex’ was. All the way from getting breasts to the penis in the vagina with some squirting. Momma wanted to tell me, not someone on the street. Even though it helped having it come from her, I was shook up. It was not what I thought the world would be. I thought it was about learning and caring and doing things in the world, where people were their souls, not their bodies. This animal behavior, no, that can’t be The True Facts of Life. I hid my upset from my beautiful mother, so embarrassed.

The next day, I looked at my dad with new eyes. Knowing.

Mother saw it.

“Sara,” my mom said.

“What?”

“Remember, there’s love in it.”

“There is?”

“Never forget it. When you love the person, it is so beautiful you cry and thank God for giving it. It’s like heaven on earth.”

“I’m scared.”

“Lean on me. You don’t have to talk about it. Trust me, dear one, you don’t understand now, but there is love in it. When you become older, you will know.”

“Okay, Mamma.”

I was mad at God for quite a while after that.

12 Saturday, October 15, 2016

Can a chicken lay an egg in the desert?

This was Mom’s idea. She wanted great eggs, for baking and such. We have the land for it, six acres of desert. We have the water. But it is so hot. I think you can fry an egg in the desert pretty easily.

“It’s only that hot in the summer, Sara.”

“They’ll die.”

“No, we’ll give them a big swamp cooler.”

“What the hell is that?”

“Sara!”

“What is that, for Pete’s sake.”

Dada laughed.

They made me do the research. I delegated it! This is a family, right? So, I said to Ben, (13 yrs old) “We’re going to build a swamp cooler.”

“What the hell is that?”

I corrected his swearing, which, apparently, is part of this project. Ben wanted to go back to his game, but I drafted him right in. He found out a lot, but I had to take his links and go further.

Today, two days later, a meeting outside. October is the best month in the Sonoran Desert, and it was only 81 at ten a.m., with a fine dry breeze blowing for the meeting.

“Okay, well, how many chickens?”

“Two dozen, to start,” said Mother.

“Seems like a lot.”

“There is a relief valve,” said Dada.

“What?”

“We can sell the overage.”

“Can we give them names, Momma?” asked Maria. She was antsy with excitement over chickens.

“So, a farm stand and collecting money and health inspection and sales tax and all, that’s more grief, right?” I guess I’m what you’d call ‘the devil’s advocate’ on this thing.

“How are you going to pay for your prom dress?”

“Oh, for crying out loud.” A phrase I’m using to try to cut down on swearing.

When I found out in the next ten minutes that we were going to build the chicken house from the ground up, including pouring a concrete floor, that’s when I really wanted to use my swear words. However, it made me really take in Father’s motto.

“It is not about the economics of it. It is to do together with excellence and give Elena great eggs, better than store eggs.”

All right already.

13 Sunday, October 16, 2016

We had Lieutenant Tony Marca over for dinner at 4:00. I didn’t ask if this was a deliberate parental strategy in response to my epic eruption last Sunday. I liked not knowing, because that is irony. I’m into irony. However, all these deaths are taking some of the power out of it. Things are almost not funny anymore.

Bro and Sis are at Aunt Ann’s house today.

“Do you want more potatoes?”

“No, thank you,” said Tony’s girlfriend Christina. “They are so good, though.”

“Lieutenant?”

“No thanks, Sara, and how long are you going to call me ‘lieutenant?’ I’d like you to call me Tony.”

“I don’t want to yet, sir, until I find out a few things.”

“Go ahead.”

“Are you racist?”

The adults didn’t flinch. Not a one of the four of ‘em. Dead quiet in the dining room. So, I know this was a setup. That’s okay.

“It’s a fair question.”

“Yes, it is, Sara,” said Lieutenant Tony.

“It would be rude, but people are dying from it, so we have to know.”

“Yes.”

He did not take his eyes away from mine. Even if he knew it was coming, it’s impressive the way he’s looking straight into my eyes over this.

“Am I a black man?” Tony asked.

“No.”

“How do you know?”

“You are white.”

“How do you know?”

“You are.”

“Are you a black person, Sara?”

“Yes.”

He got more intense. I intensified back. My half-black Mother and white Father stayed quiet.

“How would I know?” he asked.

“I look white?”

“Yes. No. Yes. No. Yes.”

It broke the tension. Momma laughed loud and I put on a fake disgusted look. The adults let me ask questions for an hour. No kidding, an hour. We ended up in the living room, and it kept going. I asked specifically about the Officers in the Sky Valley force. I

came back to challenging Tony, two more times, on his personal prejudices.

There are two cops in the small force here that are bigoted. One is Hispanic. The other is the white guy Dada encountered, Don Henderson, who hates everyone. They have a policy to not hire any more bigots. They have a newly invented personality test to weed it out. The two bad cops have been removed from patrol duty, although they each still have their guns. Over the past 14 years Tony has been on the Sky Valley force, there have been three “bad shoots,” in the entire Coachella Valley, only one of which was a black person ten years ago, and no bad shoots from a bigot. They were just plain bad. Only one of the suspects died.

“Are you in favor of banning all guns?”

“Only if the police can keep theirs,” Tony said.

That’s not what I wanted to hear. I hate guns.

When I ducked into the kitchen for more coffee, I looked back and spotted Tony with Christina’s arms around his neck. She pulled him close.

Later, after apple pie, when they were leaving, the lieutenant shook my hand.

“You are very smart,” he said.

“Why, thank you, Tony.”

14 Monday, October 17, 2016

I woke up ten minutes before midnight. That was about an hour of sleep. Wide awake. So much so, I knew I couldn’t go right back, I’d just toss and turn. So, boots, sweatshirt with hood, jeans, desert.

I like the wind very much. But now, tonight, no wind, and that’s perfect for my mood. The silence. Just perfect to contemplate “no beginning.”

Mr. Moran returned to his zen-ish koan today. That's what I call his challenge, "If everything was in the singularity, including time, what is the meaning of before the big bang?"

I walked out east of the house, downwind, to my choice for the future location of the chickens.

"Who wants to say something about it?" asked Mr. Moran. A few hands went up. Mine. He called on Sam, a boy across the room next to the windows.

"Only God can be outside of everything. God made it bang, and here we are."

Two others gave it over to God. One said there never was a big bang, God just created everything ten thousand years ago, the way it is now.

A car rolled by out on Dillon Road, heading toward Desert Hot Springs, disturbing the peace. I paced in the night.

Let's see. There can't be "nothing" without something existing. Nothing is not "a thing" itself, it's No-Thing, the absence in one place of any things. There can't be a "place" without things, either. So, "things" are in existence, for sure. That's an absolute.

I stood there in the quiet desert night for another fifteen minutes. No creek, no cricket. No tears in the dust, either. Eventually, I went back in the house, got naked, and pulled the covers up to my neck. What I said in class today, I'm sticking by it.

When Mr. Moran finally called on me, I said,

"The universe means everything that exists, all time and space, all matter and energy. So, there is no such thing as 'outside' or 'above' the universe. It's not fair to have a concept "everything" but then talk about a thing, a force, a being, that's outside. The idea "outside" and "before" is fake. I read this phrase: there is no alternative to existence."

"What about the supernatural?" asked Mr. Moran.

“Well, ‘supernatural’ means ‘above,’ something above or outside of everything. If the universe is everything, there can’t be something outside it, or above it, or whatever.”

“Sara, aren’t you bringing God down to the practical level? God is on a different level, and shouldn’t have to have materialist characteristics. God is not limited. Not finite,” he said.

“No. Reality is reality, we have been checking it out with science and philosophy, but religions push God up on it! They construct him from nothing and invent His characteristics. He is infinite, perfect, and all powerful. They say God does miracles, goes right past contradictions, and overcomes death. He made reality. He’s above it. He can be outside of reality, and doesn’t have to go by its rules.”

“But that’s true,” said a boy sitting next to me.

“It’s all emotional on faith. People get in awe. They are certain God could put them in hell and torture them with fire forever, but if they believe God is good, like the Christians’ good news, then they have bliss, love, and joy with God in heaven for eternity. That is heavy fucking drama.”

“Sara!”

“I think it’s a belief system to avoid reality. Especially the reality of death and oblivion.”

Honestly, this is how I’ve thought for years and years. Now, I’m cinching it down as an almost-adult. I lay there in my bed looking out my window at the stars. Comfort in a deepening of my certainty filled up my bedroom.

I am without God. An atheist.

Oh, Momma.

15 Tuesday, October 18, 2016

When I got home after detention for yesterday's f-bomb (Mr. Moran had no choice) and watching a rehearsal of the upcoming school musical, *Kiss Me Kate*, Momma was pitching a fit. Ha ha, another idiom I got from books. I like using it with baseball trouble.

"We still don't know who we're playing. The Indians, or Toronto Blue Jays."

"What happened?"

"Cleveland didn't do the deed this afternoon, to sweep Toronto right out. So, I'm leaving both these Indians and Jays right in my sights. Soon they will both be dead. *Muerte*."

This is how a stirred-up Cubs fan talks, apparently.

"Mom?"

"I wish the Cleveland pitching wasn't so good."

"Mom?"

"What, honey, I know, I'm a little bit wound up."

"Mom, are the Cubs actually in the World Series already?"

She was moving around the living room, and now she assumed the stance of a batter and took a swipe at a high hard one.

"Well ..."

"They're not?"

"Well, it's just a matter of time. Those Dodgers."

I get it. Nerves. "When's the next Cubs game?"

"In about thirty minutes."

Mom/Elena and Dad/Thomas met in Chicago, in 1997. It was because of jazz. Jazz was in Elena's home from her parents, and in Dad's heart from his dad, my grandpa Alfred, from England, who loved jazz with a passion, first in England, then in Chicago.

It happened one summer day at an outdoor concert. Apparently, Thomas, attending with his father, Alfred, spotted Elena, attending with her father, Joe Johnston. She was happy and gay, dancing on

the grass in a swirly skirt with bare feet. That caused me to pop out three and a half years later.

So, with Grandpa Alfred an immigrant, and my dad born in Chicago, I am second-generation from the male side of that side. On the other hand, I am a million-gen from both sides of Momma's side because they are American way way back, but one side black, one side Latin. That's a little complicated. Let's just say that I am a smoothie with many good fruits blended in.

And here in the Coachella Valley, an hour and a half from Dodger Stadium, I am treading water in a sea of Chicago Cub fanaticism. Dada has it bad, too.

"But one thing really annoyed the crap out of me with that American League game."

"Momma!" I get my swearing from her.

"Sorry, but I'm very angry about this."

Seeing her all stirred up and nervous about the Dodgers, it was fun hearing her using filthy language and going off. Pitching a fit.

"Five minutes before the first pitch in Toronto, I see them taking off their hats on the field, and the announcers are going on, blah blah blah, and suddenly, they launch off into commercials, for five minutes, right up to the first pitch. No Anthem. Again. They never show the National Anthem on TBS."

"I thought you said they showed Izak someone last week."

"Yeah, Itzak Perlman on violin, very cool, that was in New York, on Fox. But TBS does not show us the *Star-Spangled Banner*, and that ticks me off." Mom never says the f-word, but I thought she came close to using it as an adverb just then.

Yes, it's true, I get my swearing from my beautiful mamma.

16 Wednesday, October 19, 2016

I thought about the Star-Spangled Banner. I keep hearing kids dumping on it.

“It’s about guns and stuff.”

“It’s too hard to sing.”

“What does ramparts still gleaming have to do with the twenty-first century?”

And then lately,

“It’s racist.”

Hmmm.

No. No. Something’s not right. There’s something dubious about how they slam it.

So now I’m investigating the ripe inside of the United States of America. With Father, today.

“You know the facts, right, about the War of 1812 and where this came from?” he asked.

“Yes, it was a battle in Baltimore harbor, right?”

“Yes. Basically, this war was the confirmation of the American Revolution. The British tried to get their colonies back, but we stopped them.”

I like how Dada is first generation on the male side, but he’s so American with the “*we* stopped them.” His father, Alfred, from England, is okay with it, but they fake fight over it sometimes. His mother, and her people going way back, are Americans mostly from the Upper Mid-West.

“So, this song is about one battle?”

“No, Sara.”

I stood there, stupid, waiting for him to tell me.

He said, “Go write out the words of the Anthem on paper. Slowly. Think about them, like you would some assignment in English class with Miss ...”

“Corcoran.”

“... Miss Corcoran.”

So, I’m sitting there looking at the words. Then, I realize, I have to put in a question mark. Then another one, right at the end. Maybe I have to put in some periods. But then no. I decide no. I use two semi-colons, we learned how to use them. The first part is one long sentence with many clauses and “ands.” It’s poetic, they used to write long sentences like that. You’ll find them in *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen.

“Oh say can you see, by the dawn’s early light,
 What so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleaming;
 Whose broad stripes and bright stars, through the perilous fight,
 O’er the ramparts we watched, were so gallantly streaming;
 And the rocket’s red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
 Gave proof though the night that our flag was still there?
 Oh say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave,
 O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?”

“Father, this song is just two questions.”

“That’s right.”

“It doesn’t tell you anything, it asks you things in two sentences. How awesome is that? I never realized.”

“I can guarantee you, no other anthem of any country consists of a question. Or two questions. And nothing else.”

“It’s like a two-banger. This, and then wham-oh, this.”

“Yes.”

“The second question is getting more serious by the second in my head.”

“It is?”

“Yeah, it’s not calm. It’s a threat.”

“No, Sara, not a threat. It is an extremely serious challenge. A life and death challenge for a nation. The Star-Spangled Banner is not about wheat in a field or foam on the waves. It’s about an idea. The most crucial idea of America. Freedom.”

“Just like people in Baltimore harbor being asked if the flag could be seen in the morning, the second sentence asks the future Americans, if the flag is still there.”

“That’s a start, Sara, but not just ‘is the country there,’ and ‘is the flag there’.”

“What, then?”

“The Anthem wants to know, were you able to keep the country free?”

In other news, the Cubs lost their game to the Dodgers, setting off gloom galore in our house just before I went to bed. And earlier, they had the last presidential debate. Mom and Dad watched the entire thing. I couldn’t. It was so rude I nearly hurled against the wall.

17 Thursday, October 20, 2016

We marched for the fallen officers. For Gil Vega and Lesley Zerebny, assassinated twelve days ago, a few miles from here.

This is me, still trying to understand random assassination of police. During the glow walk in Desert Hot Springs, I kept looking at everyone, to try feeling their feelings. There was much more sad than mad, I think.

“No one hates the police.”

“No,” said Father. “No one here.”

“It’s so bad for the officers,” said Maria.

I didn’t know Tessa planned to be there, but she was, along with someone.

“Hi girl, hey, this is Hector. Gil Vega is his grandfather.”

Oh. Oh. I shook his hand and stayed grim. The “is his grandfather” is now “was.”

“Thanks for coming,” Hector said. He was about nineteen, just under six feet tall, with an inquisitive round face and buzz-cut hair.

“Does all this help?”

“Yeah, it does,” Hector said. “It shows support of emotions for the police. A lot, all gathered in one place, with glowing candles.”

Tessa, standing next to Hector, nodded as he spoke. Her eyes were wet. She and I felt pain, but tiny compared to the horror of what Hector was enduring. Imagine if your grandfather was assassinated by armor-piercing bullets. We were careful to not let our rage well up and come out, which would have been disrespectful to him.

That doesn’t mean we had no rage. Oh, we had it.

Feeling his feelings, clearly it helped Hector. Pulled him up one step from sorrow. A tiny step up, and that’s all.

So, I went back to Dada for another round on the U.S. of A.

“How can Americans turn to hating the police, who are supposed to be thanked for protecting us? To hate so much they kill normal officers? I mean, sure, if a racist cop shoots an unarmed person, but where does the general acrimony come from?” (Acrimony. Word of the day discovered in English class.)

“Things began to go wrong back in the sixties,” Dada said. The police were in the middle, supposed to keep law and order, which is completely legitimate and honorable, but that made them the bad guys when the protests and marches against racism began, because racial segregation was legal.”

“Oh.”

“It is polarizing when something so wrong, so hideously wrong, is legal, and good people who are policemen have to defend the right to discriminate, to segregate by skin color.”

“That tremendously sucks.”

“And then, the confusion over the war.”

“Viet Nam war?”

“Yes,” he said.

“What was the confusion?”

“When you are eighteen and get forced into it, and sent to some country 12,000 miles away that is no threat to us, and fight for a government propped up as an artificial thing, with the wrong religion for the people, and the people are not all against the enemy, and you see your buddies killed by sneak attacks and snipers, you start thinking, ‘is this the way the U.S. government is supposed to defend freedom and individual rights for its citizens?’”

“Oh.”

“That disrespect for authority got transferred to normal policemen. And certain agitators stirred up the hatred.”

“My gen does not get Viet Nam.”

He looked at me with mist in his eyes. He waited.

“My father, your grandfather Alfred, emigrated from England to the U.S. in 1959 as a teen, and became a citizen five years later. They drafted him. He was over there. He made it out alive.”

“Oh my God.”

He waited again. Then he hit me with it. “Fifty thousand Americans died.”

In other news, the Chicago Cubs defeated the Los Angeles Dodgers, 12-1, setting off jubilation galore just before I went to bed. As I closed my bedroom door, I smiled. Momma was singing in the living room.

18 Friday, October 21, 2016

We have all new teachers and courses at school, but we kept the athletics. We are the Desert Academy Scorpions. I went to football with my two-girl posse, Tessa Crandall and Skyler Anderson.

They don't know it, but I have my nicknames for them inside. No, not salt and pepper. Ink and WhiteOut. Since I'm into irony these days, it tickles, because it works for skin color, but also for personality. Black Tessa tells it big and bold, and white Skyler is ready to blot out anything unkind. It's a miracle we are all friends.

"Go Scorpions," shouted Skyler. She's small, with short brown hair and glasses. Hetero. I think she's pretty, but boys don't see her. "We could win."

"No, we can't," Tessa said.

"Could."

We sat way high up, last row, on purpose. Part of our detachment. I admit we are not all-in on football, but it's fun to be in the swirl of the school.

And watch boys.

Skyler joins in on the chants from the cheerleaders, while Tess and I ruminate and gossip.

"Still sick over Hector. A grandfather shot dead," Tessa said. "I can't shake it. I want to rage out, but the pain. It's bigger than the anger."

"And Lesley, that woman officer. Her husband and baby, oh crap."

"Did you see Hector crying, at one point during the glow walk?"

"Yes."

"I have this thought," said Tessa.

"What?"

“I want to cry for a whole day for them,” Tessa said. “And their families, oh my God. But it’s awful, because that would not be enough. It would be nothing. There would be more pain.”

We sat there for a good ten minutes, not saying a word, while the football went up and down the field.

“Taye might join us,” Ink said.

“No basketball game tonight?”

“No. It’s some weird scheduling thing. They had practice, though.”

“I saw him down the hall when I came out of play practice,” said WhiteOut. “He didn’t see me.” Skyler can sing, and she’s Kate in *Kiss Me Kate*. We kid her she’s only in it for the kisses.

Just then the impossible happened, a pass in the flat from our QB to Marcus Bond, and he got free, plus one guy from Indio fell down, and Marcus squirmed all the way down the field, about sixty yards, and scored an actual touchdown. Bedlam. I myself stood there screaming. It made the score 17-6, not so humiliating in the third quarter. We even kicked the extra point.

“You missed it,” said Tessa when Taye found us.

“Nope, I was down on the field, I saw it. Marcus will be strutting around with an attitude tonight.”

Taye and Marcus are friends. They are black. Very black. Taye sat on the end in the spot we’d saved for him, next to Tessa. They touched and kissed. I have them as GF/BF exclusive, with sex. Tessa doesn’t hide it from me, but they don’t flaunt it around school. It’s even possible, I actually believe it, that he doesn’t ‘kiss’ her and tell his buddies. He’s seventeen and she’s sixteen. All nice and illegal and legal at the same time. The sweetest possible black on black crime.

“Hi Sara,” he said, pronouncing it perfectly.

“Hi Taye.”

He leaned forward and said hello to Skyler, too.

Some renegade physicists say Albert Einstein was wrong, that the speed of light might have been faster in the past than now. I held my breath and timed the light inside me. Tessa might have to slow down to catch up to me.

19 Saturday, October 22, 2016

I woke up at three-thirty in the morning. Wide awake. Staring into space. I knew only one thing: Tessa and Taye had sex tonight after the game. My stomach churned.

She's going to get pregnant.

It's wrong, bad, a sin with God.

They don't actually love each other.

They are too young.

He's going to break her heart.

People will think Tessa is a slut.

She's going to get pregnant.

Then, after ejecting that fear and shame storm:

How beautiful.

How brave.

How good.

The house was dead quiet, and this was my small private bedroom, as the oldest. I tossed off the covers. I felt everything waiting in the warm night.

My hands went under the waistband of my jamas. They knew how. They knew where. Where it was soft and wet with me. Where the best thing in the world is waiting. I let my legs separate, slowly, and when you do that, you let your heart open too. It feels clean and innocent. My breathing filled up with wanting to. I wanted to. So much.

The fingertips of one hand touched the little bud, the tips of the other found the opening between lips. I have given fingers permission, since a year ago, to go in.

When you touch inside and outside, the pleasure goes from your pelvis into your chest, and your breath fills up with it. I fired it up with caressing, there, there, there, the ride up and over so hot, so fine, then the spilling, the overflowing, at the end, the gripping by birthing muscles which clench and release over and over.

They call it ‘coming,’ and I arrived, that’s for sure.

I was careful not to scream. This was my private joy. I just stroked and soothed and squeezed, all the way down, every minute delicious and satisfying, like quenching thirst with rain in the desert.

20 Sunday, October 23, 2016

Chickens.

“Let’s stake it out today, and have a planning session,” said Father.

“How can we stake it out if we don’t know exactly what we’re building?”

“She’s right, Thomas,” said Mother.

He said, “Well, we shall call it locating the coop and seeing what brush clearing will be needed.”

Both Mother and Father floated along, light and happy. Last night, the Cubs eliminated the Dodgers and won the National League Pennant. The World Series, with Cleveland, starts Tuesday.

The main thing with the location of a chicken coop is, not too close to the house, and not too far. Downwind. All five of us walked around and gabbed about the situation, throwing in various opinions, like a brainstorming session. We picked the spot. It was the one I wanted all along.

Back in the house, clearly today's work on it was not finished. Mom put a pitcher of iced tea on the kitchen table, and we sat around.

"Where do we get the chickens?" asked Maria. "Do we buy eggs at Von's and keep them out of the fridge and let them hatch?"

Ben scoffed at her, typical brother. "No, dummy, those eggs don't have chicks in them."

"Benjamin!" Momma looked fierce. "Mouth. Soap. You. Me."

He didn't look too scared. She never actually washed his mouth with soap, but I wish she would.

"Maria, I'm sorry, you are not a dummy." He had a smidgen of remorse in it.

"You are a mean boy. I don't like boys."

"I'm sorry."

Things settled down. I reached over and held Maria's hand. I could see the bruise behind her eyes.

"This cannot go further, and no questions can be answered, until we settle the big one." We all waited. "Who is responsible for this project?"

"Why does one person? Can't we just all do it?" asked Ben.

"No," said Momma. "One person must be the boss and leader."

Everyone looked at everyone. Eventually, like in a dumb movie, they all swiveled their eyes around and ended up looking right at me. Oh crap.

"Oh no no no no no."

"This is your project, Sara," said Father.

"No. No. No. I have been transferred from old high school to an international academy, and they are not kidding about it, Father. You have no idea how hard they make it. I am unable to accept this assignment." I was on a high horse, with no contractions in my speech. I even put a hint of British accent in.

"This is just as important."

“What!?”

Right then I wanted to use the word ‘chickenshit’ to describe the project, but stopped myself just in time. So far Mamma has not washed out my mouth.

21 Monday, October 24, 2016

At lunch, everyone watched the sky. And listened to it. A thunder and rainstorm in October, in the desert. How weird. Flashes of lightning jumped from clouds into the mountains. Each time a rumble of thunder rolled by, we all cheered it, along with a few screeches accompanying big lightning strikes. It rained all period. Not only is this rare – rain in October in the Sonoran Desert – it already happened three weeks ago, and it rained all night, then.

The story of a bizarre fatal event ran through the room. A bus filled with resort people plowed into the back of a twelve-wheeler on I-10 last night and thirteen people died, including the driver, who never slowed down or put on the brakes. It seemed unreal – not one of us heard the crash, and this horrendous thing happened only five miles away across the valley. Mass death, thirteen dead people, yet ‘school goes on.’ Unreal.

I had my own subplot going. That one boy. He’s not in my lunch period. Normally. Today I saw him five tables away. Oh, for Pete’s sake, he’s talking to a girl. Who the hell is she? Wait. That girl has a boyfriend, I’m sure of it.

“What are you looking at,” asked Skyler.

“Nothing.”

“Pay attention.”

“Yeah, dude, pay attention,” said Tessa, with a little too much negatory in it. “First, two cops shot dead, now bodies everywhere on the highway. This is Death Valley.”

“Are you still alive?”

“No,” Tessa said.

“Why not?”

“Better off dead.”

“I’ll hold the taxicab.”

That bizarre exchange is a ritual for Tessa and me. We often talk by twisted shorthand. This is one of our favorite probes, and it means “tell me why you are acting dark.” I want her to explain, so I just stare at her. My neutral stare. She stared back. I put up my index finger to signal Sky to not say anything. We waited Tessa out. My gaze wandered. The boy almost caught me glancing over.

Tessa had this little sigh, almost invisible to anyone but me.

“That bastard, Taye,” she said.

“Guessed it.”

“Aren’t we the most important thing in their life?”

“No,” said Skyler and I at the same time.

“How can that happen? I’m stylin’ and smart and hot. Not to mention willing, if you know what I mean.”

“We know.”

“At least you have a boyfriend,” said WhiteOut. “I’d be willing.”

“That’s not enough, is it Tessa?”

“Guess not,” Tessa said.

It kept thundering and raining. We let Tessa rant for five minutes. It seemed longer. Apparently, Taye started to bail out of their short time together yesterday afternoon. After some degree of sex, almost immediately after, he started to leave, and Tessa pitched a fit. Huge fight. He bailed.

“I have some girlfriend rights,” Tessa said, angry.

Sometimes I’m grateful Mother insisted no sex until I’m older. And I’m glad I committed to it. This grownup married business with Taye and Tessa makes me queasy. Yuck.

Yes, I like being a teen and nearly driving and getting a checking account, but I’m still looking back as a kid, a little bit.

I have a teddy bear in my bed, not a man.

However, I like that Momma told me about masturbation, and gave me the green light.

Right before the end of lunch, this boy did catch me. A lot can happen in one flash. I felt myself blushing inside. That's a heat stroke under the skin of your face and chest, while you put on fake normal behavior and conversation. You're trying to make the other person believe what just happened didn't happen.

I know his name. It's Rian.

22 Tuesday, October 25, 2016

To avoid admitting how nervous they were about the first game of the World Series, Mom and Dad had a fight about the election. Mom is a Dem and Dad is a Repub. Normally, this does not lead to acrimony (use a word five times and it is yours), let alone damage, but they are really on edge about this baseball. Their Cubs have not won the world series in over a century. Apparently.

I stood in the background in the living room, watching it develop.

"Please, please, tell me you won't vote for that person," said Momma.

"Don't vote for that lying liar, then," said Dada.

"No, Thomas, you have to first look me right in the eye and tell me if you are voting for Trump. I'm serious."

"I have to, Elena. I have to."

Momma nearly cried. She didn't know what to do with her anger. I could tell she didn't want to know why he 'had to,' either.

"You sleep on the couch."

"On no, oh no, oh no you don't," he said. "You promised you would never say that again, after our fight over moving away from Chicago. I will never sleep on the couch. You will never tell me to again, or you sleep on the couch."

“I have to, Thomas, I have to.” Momma sing-songed it, with spite.

“Take it back, Elena.”

“I have to kick you on the couch. This is serious shit.”

“There are children listening.”

“Really serious shit,” she said.

They could not stay sitting. For at least ten minutes, they stalked around each other, spitting out mean sentences, gesturing with hands, sneaking glances over at the muted TV broadcast of the pregame, and ignoring me.

I get it. Mom sees Trump for the buffoon he is, how stupid he is, how crude in the heart. Dad cannot abide the thought of another socialist for four years. It occurred to me that there were many homes in America filled with this very grief, a few weeks before the election.

Four hours later, the living room felt like the dismal after-mess of a sad clown party (I’m practicing descriptive similes). The Cubbies lost the game, and Cleveland looked damn strong. I didn’t get to hear how – or if – M and D made up and how they handled it in their bedroom. In their bed. Can broken hearts over disaster on the baseball field heal a politically mixed marriage?

[23 Wednesday, October 26, 2016](#)

There’s joy in Mudville. I think that’s how the saying goes. Anyway, joy. Huge. Cubs five, Indians one. Dada kept waving a flag with a big “W” on it, and Momma’s eyes were glistening, glowing, blinking, and bulging out, all at the same time. And this is only game two of seven in the World Series. Of course, they were kissing and hugging. In the moment, they didn’t care who the next president would be.

So, this election. I can’t vote, right? K.

The older people keep saying that this is not normal, the intensity of hostility and recriminations (synonyms for acrimony.) I tried watching the debates. They just keep looking for a crack in the other guy and shoving a knife in. And they sure twist it. I would say they even pour salt on it. Very ugly. And it's all lying, exaggeration, and insults.

In history, Mr. Adler had us watch debates from yesteryear, like Kennedy and Nixon. Stone cold boring, but civilized. Wait, I'll take back boring. If you let yourself think about the points they're making, you see they are discussing big-time issues in a complicated way. It's only boring if you have a short attention span, which, I admit, I've got it sometimes.

"Hey, Miss short attention span," said Skyler. At that moment, in the lunchroom, it was so short I couldn't even remember the subject. It was because of that girl – the one Rian kept talking to the other day. I still don't know her name, but I see her eating lunch with a bevy across the room.

I haven't seen Rian since. That will not do, would it be too much to ask for me to have at least one damn class with him in it? Or to pass him in the hall at least once a day, for the love of Mike? I want to test the tingle.

"We're going to have a woman president," Skyler said. "Don't you care?"

Oh. That's the subject. "She's socialist, right?"

"She's a Democrat," said Skyler.

My concern is due to that girl's boyfriend nowhere in sight, and that Rian will walk in and start flirting with her. Her boyfriend's not in this lunch period, true, and neither is Rian.

Okay, wait. Wait. What am I, some teenage giggly girly all giddy and jealous over some stupid boy I've never even spoken to? I won't say yes or no, but I'm knocking it off. I'm putting on my smart teenager pre-IB student hat.

“What’s the difference between a democrat and a socialist?”

“America is a democracy,” said Skyler, “and Hillary Clinton is a democrat. It’s normal.”

I remembered something Dada told me. “This country was not set up as a democracy.”

“What?” said Skyler, shocked.

“Democracy means ‘ruled by the majority of the people,’ whatever they say.”

“Well, yes. That’s the best.”

“Is that freedom?”

“It means no rulers. The people rule themselves.”

“Skyler, if a majority can just make up laws, and it takes freedom away from individuals, how is that any different from one guy taking it away?”

“Democracy is the best form, even if it has a few problems.”

“The country was set up as a republic of free sovereign individual citizens. That’s what I learned. That form of government means no rulers, yeah, but also a majority can’t take away your property and freedom either, just by the majority voting to take it.”

“This is a society, a community, we hang together,” she said.

“And now we’re going to have a woman president. I am so fucking excited.”

I had never heard Skyler use that word before. Never. She’s WhiteOut and a quiet cool girl who does not swear. I decided to let her have her thrills. She’s my true friend, and I’m happy for her.

Even though I am not a socialist.

24 Thursday, October 27, 2016

Tessa gave Skyler and I the stupidest update ever in the history of boygirl.

“Oh, that? We didn’t have a fight.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” said Skyler.

“We are fine. T’aye and T’essa, sittin’ in a tree,” Ink said.

Right away I decided to use “Can’t See Ya” on T’essa.

“Skyler, that fight T and T had last Sunday?”

“Yeah?”

“I heard they broke up and T’essa threw his car keys down a storm drain.”

“Wow.”

“She demanded her virginity back.”

“Can you do that?”

“Oh, yes. The boy has to sign a note that he never did it with her and she is pure and innocent, and hand it to her father. If he does that, she’ll keep quiet about his size.”

“What?”

“You know, size.”

Skyler’s eyes got huge. She is not dumb, I swear she’s not. “So, what happened?”

“T’aye laughed in her face and started to count their number of times, out loud, adding them up. He picked up his cell phone when he got the total, and asked T’essa for her father’s number. She screamed at him and ran outside and threw his keys down the storm drain.”

T’essa stood up, lifted her lunch tray, posed dramatically, and said, “Everything’s fine.” She spun in place and flounced away.

“You’re kidding, about the take-back, right?” asked Skyler.

“I don’t know, Sky. I haven’t given it away, so I can’t even think about what it would take to get it back.”

Then, it suddenly occurred to me to ask. I hadn’t in months. Since way last school year. “Are you still a virgin?”

“Yes,” Skyler said.

Tessa's trying to keep her sex life as "exclusive, but nothing more." I'd call it "hooking up, plus." She's losing that game. A happy person, optimistic, with positive warrior spirit, trying to not have feelings for her sex partner? Yikes! She's too beautiful underneath, so love won't leave her alone. This makes her weak as a "player," and Taye can coast along, getting his way.

I am the only person on earth who knows the deep story. She spilled everything, all those afternoons we spent for years and years, in my room and out in the desert walking around, talking. And crying.

Tessa's little girl days were beautiful. Her parents were young and happy. They cherished her and Shawn, her brother, three years older. I know for a fact they got peacefulness, verbal richness, outdoor stimulation, and love shown by hugs and praise. Tessa developed into a free-spirit, a curious and optimistic achiever. And whip smart.

Troubles began later, when she was about six, just as she started first grade and began staying at my house so much. Her Momma, Joyce, got depressed. It was connected to the setup in the marriage, the burden of two small children, which she had underestimated, and the fact she was not following her true calling, art. I heard my Mom say Joyce never fully got over post-partum depression after Tessa's birth.

Tessa is sensitive and hyper-aware: she tracked the slow dying of her parents' marriage, including the lessening of touches and whispers, the absence of eyes lit up during glances, the disappearance of grown-up laughter heard through the walls of the house. Near the end, Tessa witnessed stinging exchanges at the dinner table, bad. It put the pain deep.

In July, 2011, three months after Tessa's eleventh birthday, just as the elementary school years ended, her Momma left.

25 Friday, October 28, 2016

Dada was sad, but the emergency of keeping his wife from having a cataleptic fit distracted him from his grief. He was on baseball rage alert. Apparently, one of the Cubs hit a ball that seemed foul, but it was really windy, and ended up fair. In right field. Meanwhile, the batter didn't run, then trotted a little, then stopped, looking down there, and only took off when the ball hit the ground. He coasted into third, but every painful Cub fan in the entire world knows he would have scored if only he had run like crazy right away.

The Cubs lost the game, 1-0.

"It is the worst mortal sin in baseball, to not run everything out," said Father. "You could have people hating you for eternity."

"God will hate him for eternity," my dear mother said, through clenched teeth.

"Uh-oh. Now you have to go to confession, Momma."

"Maybe he was resentful he's only making three million this year, so why run?" she said. Her eyes were dry, but her chest was heaving. Dada watched her carefully.

"I swear if I had been at the game, I'd have jumped out of the stands and put a fist upside his head," she said, jaw tight.

"It is only a game," Father said.

Even I knew that was the wrong thing to say.

"Thomas," she screamed. "I can't believe you said that. Dios en Cielo. One-hundred and eight years we've waited, and this idiot slacker throws the game away. Muerte!"

We let her rocket around the earth a few times. Her exit from planetary orbit took a while. At one point, Dad gave me a sign I could go, he would take care. It was all I could do, when departing the room, to not say "sorry for your loss."

26 Saturday, October 29, 2016

Momma had an Empire gown in a trunk. It's a long cream-colored dress, with the cinching in the middle well above the actual waist. In fact, it's called "high-waisted." She'd worn it dancing years ago, on one of her first dates in Chicago with Thomas/Dad. I borrowed the gown, which fit pretty well. It did not smell of captivity, but we washed it anyway, and ironed it. We found long gloves in the bottom of the trunk. We put my hair up with a white ribbon. I had a small book of Shakespeare sonnets to carry.

I went as a Jane Austen girl. 1809 or thereabouts. We stopped short of a bonnet. It's Halloween, but that hat would have been too scary.

Right away, some dude said, "Hey, this ain't the prom. Who're you supposed to be?"

"The vision most unlikely to show up in your fondest dream."

I loved trying to talk like an Austen girl. I said hello to several sophomore girls who needed my outfit explained, but who then went with it, no problem. They let me work on my Jane-talk before I tried it on any boys who mattered. One, dressed as Madonna from the eighties, said 'wish I had your imagination,' etc.

Damn, I should have said "manifest" instead of "show up."

All this before finding the host, Skyler, or spotting Tessa. Then I saw Taye in a crazy outfit, and hoped she would be near him. Yep, someone moved, and there's Tessa in a crazy outfit too, right at Taye's side, laughing.

And right next to them?

Mr. Darcy.

... it's later now, just after midnight, and I'm a Jane girl, dancing.

~Find you're great,
don't you hide your face,
let it shine~

I always loved that line.

Mr. Darcy is not dancing, but we are due to rebump in a few, I can tell.

What are the qualities of a “Mr. Darcy?” Tall, manly, quiet, aloof, intense, proud, and alert. Not smiling. This Darcy is not dressed like Fitzwilliam Darcy in Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice*. Nope. Tonight, he is Beethoven, the exact hair and frowning eyebrows. I recognized the Darcy in him anyway. And I knew what to do soon as I walked over. A variant of “Can’t See Ya.”

“Girl!”

“Yo, Sara,” Tessa said, “wow, what is this, an explosion in a prom store?”

She and Taye had come as two quarters of a watermelon slice, so when they went hip to hip, it made a half. Taye carried a huge red-stained plastic knife, and used it to cut them apart once or twice. Thus, they were Halloween-scary. And just daring anyone to make a racist comment.

Taye said, “How did your waist get right below your boobs?”

“Taye!” Tessa slapped him on the arm. Their watermelon rinds bumped.

“To what do you refer, sir Taye? I shall restrain umbrage, for surely the overt reference could never be the intent, in polite company, and with your impeccable character.”

“Huh?” said Taye.

Meanwhile, D. is watching and listening, but I don't give him a glance.

"Begin again, sir."

"Sheesh." Taya is still not getting it.

"What ..." said Tessa, "you're talking like ..." She paused for me to fill in.

"The vision most unlikely to manifest in the fondest dream of any man."

"Okay, I get it, Jane Eyre," Tessa said.

"An acquaintance."

"Well, it's perfect, you belong back there in seventeen-twenty-one," said Tessa.

"I am enjoying my stay in this vicinity. The roads are excellent."

Suddenly Darcy spoke.

"Perhaps you underestimate the power of the dreamer."

I turned my eyes to him for the first time. He held steady. Not smiling. We locked.

Looking from me to D and back, the light went on in Tessa's eyes. She took Taya by the arm and they scooted away.

"They made no introduction."

"No," he said. "Quite rude."

Suddenly, Skyler skidded to a halt at my side. We kissed cheeks! She was dressed as Cruella de Vil, with a shaggy black/white wig and a cigarette holder.

"The party is a success, even without drinking," she said. "Oh, that's some dress."

"The punch is innocent?"

"Yeah, had to promise the parentals no booze to get the house. They are 'trusting' me. I had to reject Donald Trump at the door. Half-drunk already, and packin'." Skyler was blooming with un-Cruella-like joy.

“This gentleman and I require the sagacity and grace of a third, and you are suitable, assuredly.”

“Huh?” said Skyler. She stopped smiling.

“We are already far along in conversation, and the lack of formal introduction is proving awkward. Might you facilitate full propriety in our intercourse?” I was getting really good at Jane-talk.

“Can’t you just say your names?”

I looked at Darcy. We shrugged.

“Mademoiselle, may I introduce myself, a humble artist from Germany, Ludwig von Beethoven.”

“Sincerely honored, sir. I am Elizabeth Bennet, a troublemaker from Hertfordshire.”

Skyler ran off as fast as she could.

27 Sunday, October 30, 2016

I’m floating. The party won’t end in me. It was lovely.

I swooned and sighed all day. Even in church. Even during Sunday dinner. I know it’s not love. I’m not in love. But it’s a very cool girlish crush. I’m indulging it.

Darcy-Beethoven is Kevin Sprague. He’s a senior, and therefore not in any of my classes, nor my lunch, nor was he at our school last year. Otherwise I would have crushed on him across the room, I’m sure of it. He’s four inches taller than me, with light brown hair and an interesting face with dark brown eyes in it. A small nose that’s not straight. Light brown eyes. He’s white. His mouth is wide, and it does not smile often, but it’s not depressed. He wears black jeans and a black or white layered look on top.

After that cool self-introduction at the party, we stood there for about fifteen minutes practicing 200-years-ago talk. I was much better than he, but hey, give the man some proper recognition for

trying. He was ashamed he didn't know any German, except "gesundheit." That was endearing, his cute fake shame.

However. However. However. He can *perform* Beethoven. I found this out at 12:15 a.m., just before curfew.

"Herr Beethoven, I am acquainted with some of your work."

"How amusing."

"I consider my appreciation and approval of it a serious matter, and will not be reproached for praising it."

"My apologies."

"To think it is on your own work."

"Which?" he asked.

"Pardonne moi?"

"Which pieces?"

"Moonlight Sonata."

Most of the other people had earlier curfews, and only The Dark Knight, Sweeney Todd, Steve Jobs, Hillary Clinton and Cruella de Vil remained. The watermelon was gone.

Without another word, but with a meaningful look, Kevin took my hand and drew me into Skyler's father's study.

"Oh, a pianoforte."

He sat. He paused. The music came forth.

I am not in love. It's a crush.

Elena Tillinghast left everything on the living room floor.

Last night, while I was at the party, the mighty Cubs pretty much failed final. The Cleveland Indians annihilated them 7-2, thus leading the World Series three games to one. You only need four wins to be the champ. The cubs were hanging by their fingernails. One step from the grave. Gloom on the brink of doom.

Tonight, Mom and Dad moved up a notch or two, because the Cubs won. They are still dismal, trailing 3 games to 2, with the last two games to be played in Cleveland. It was painful to watch my

parents try to take pleasure out of it. The game was excruciating, apparently, the score 3-2. Helping Cubs not die was what made Momma empty everything out. She had to “will” the victory with her entire body and soul.

28 Monday, October 31, 2016

Worried about Tessa.

So middle school ... Tessa’s broken home ... her hostility toward romantic love ... her mission as a homo sapiens ... I need to write this today, to see it, to wake myself up, even if it takes 80 pages.

Summer 2011, when Tessa was eleven years old, Joyce Crandall served a petition for divorce on Warren Crandall. He was shocked, because he still had hopes. Joyce did not seek custody of the children, who were eleven and fourteen; she surrendered without a fight, asking only for modest visitation rights, a normal division of property, and to trade her “half” of the house for cash, leaving the building and land for Warren and the children. And the dog. She was moving to San Francisco.

Warren accepted this settlement quickly, because it would provide best possible stability for the two children, under the circumstances. Joyce was under aggressive medication for depression, but it was not very effective. She struggled with an artist’s demons. She was in no shape for primary care of teens, and admitted that openly.

Warren, with broken heart, knew he had to make his case so strong it would close off Joyce “changing her mind” later, during some fleeting manic phase, which could destabilize what was left of home and family normalcy. He had his lawyers word things in harshest possible terms for lockout.

I found out later that my parents and Warren held a meeting with his lawyer present. As part of Warren’s proof of care, my parents

agreed to formalize the after-school situation for the next three years.

It had been confirmed Tess and I would be in the same middle school in the fall. She would be coming home with me as my true sister. Not just three days, five. Warren would pick her up every day, often after dinner.

Tessa's mother had abandoned her. No medical, artistic, or love-lost-with-mate explanation could take the pain of that away. My family and Warren saw the damage from the outside, but she was alone with it, a horror in the night.

My mom and Tessa liked each other. Elena did not want to 'become' Tessa's mother. She was basically "Aunty Mom." One factor: Tessa never criticized her mother, and she would occasionally expose her love for Joyce, even if visitations did not go very well. Once, Tessa returned from San Francisco full of frustration.

"She has a boyfriend."

All of us stayed away from that subject.

If anything, Tess and I grew closer over her sorrow. We needed each other, because middle school was not pretty. We circled our wagons.

Three times in the first semester of sixth grade, Tessa came to my rescue. She is coal black. I have some features that make me seem black, but with white skin. The snipes were actually sharper on me than on her. She had the advantage that her brother, a jock, had already passed through, and had forged street cred for her. He could drain the J. I learned that term from Tess.

She taught me how to not get my feelings hurt, how to snark back, how to avoid – if it's a better idea at the moment – and even how to throw a punch. Dada forgot to teach me boxing.

If I contributed anything, it was to convince her to not turn hard-hearted. We were honest and risking with each other, laughing and

crying like girls, using our big brains to battle the mean kids in the school corridors with elaborate, brilliant insults, to combat the absurdities of gossip, cliques, and jealousies, for three years while at that wretched school. We shared our amazement that adolescent boys – and especially girls – could be so cruel. Not most of them, who were okay, but many.

What did their mothers fail to teach those savages at our school? Tessa could not ask her own mother to explain cruelty, obviously. Nor about sex, nor about becoming a woman, nor about the plans and hopes for Tessa's future. No mamma.

Near the end of eighth grade, when I was fourteen, one incident escalated to the authorities' level. I mean, the school administration became involved. This one girl had gone too far with me, starting rumors, stealing things, and slamming up against me. This time, she injured me. Not only was Tessa a witness, she helped me decide to go to the school administration after the two of us failed to talk the girl down. It was either that, or injure back.

Tessa and I had unusual traits in common, making us easy targets. We were damn smart and proud of it, we didn't hide our love for each other, which was visible, but not sexual, and we flaunted our racial contrast like bold soldiers of humanitarianism. To honor Martin Luther King in eighth grade, I went to school in blackface and she in whiteface, and we stayed side by side all day.

Tessa and I didn't hide our rebellions. We high-fived them.

But crushing on boys? Tessa was against. A few times, I let a guy-related feeling leak to her, and regretted. Tess poured cold water over my head. I gave her hell. She got on top of that by dousing boygirl with acid. When I tried to punch back on her pitch, she escalated from acid to nuclear fallout.

“It leads to death of the soul, and the happier you are at the beginning, the worse the knife hurts when it cuts your heart out.”

“Did Charlotte Brontë believe that?” We had both recently read *Jane Eyre*.

“Charlotte died young, before love could wreck her. And you know Jane got bored with Rochester two chapters after the end of that book.”

After a few episodes like that, I decided to keep my boy-flutters private.

Writing this, I laughed out loud, remembering Tessa’s watermelon costume from the party. So typical, she loves to ridicule stereotypes with a kind of silliness that drains the hate right out. It’s genius: neither racists nor radical social justice warriors are able to hate on her.

It’s a skill Tessa invented near the end of middle school, for dealing with crap and “being part of the solution.” She calls it “WorldPeace,” all one word, accent on ‘world.’

She encounters people of all ages and races, and approaches as “a person who has black skin” in their presence. She engages in conversation in public, or briefly joins a project, or simply goes over to a table in a coffeehouse and borrows the sugar. She approaches all races, sexes, and ages. It’s a deliberate, proactive act.

She interacts as if not a drop of bigotry inhabits the cohort. Then, she says and acts out a positive message of normalcy, caring, helping, and clean humor. Fun. She’s full of goodness. At the same time, she flaunts the fact that she’s a black woman in America. She usually makes an innocent funny comment about being black. She once explained it to Skyler and me. I’ll never forget this conversation, it’s Tessa in my mind.

“First, I feel myself as a homo sapiens girl with zero agenda. Second, I face being Negroid. I say out loud ‘a few thousand years ago, everyone was Negroid.’ Then, I invoke a beautiful blue-green bubble around me. When I enter their space, I’m simply a very

black human. No shred of race as shame, or as a 'Node of Power' in my bubble. It's way beyond color blind."

"Are you acting 'as if?'" asked Skyler, "or are you really real in there?"

"Sky, homo sapiens girl is normal for me. It's my normal. I'm being as honest as I can right now. As much as I despise being profiled by skin color, I will not be drafted into the army of critical racialists shaking their fists. Like Zhivago said to Strelnikov, 'someone has to do the living even during civil war'."

"I believe you," said Skyler with admiration in her eyes.

"Me too."

"It's not easy to do, black as I am. I'm always getting the incoming, either racial hostility or a draft letter from the Black Panthers. Might be easier if I were a blended smoothy like you, Sara."

"Yeah, that's true."

"Anyway, any animosity in them is all them, not me, so it sticks out. Mostly, their humanity comes out. Hopefully, this makes them ashamed of their bigotry."

"Gandhi."

"Sort of," Tessa said.

"Why did you say 'Negroid' instead of 'black'?" asked Skyler.

"This is about race. 'Black' is not a race. Caucasian, Mongoloid, Negroid, Australoid, these are the four races by taxonomic hierarchy."

"Whaaa?"

"Taxonomy. Get with it Sara, you should know that term. What are you, slow?"

"Mongoloid?"

"Asia."

"Australoid?"

"The aboriginals in Australia, obviously."

“Oh.”

“I’m lookin’ way smarter than you. It’s embarrassing. Catch up.”

“Okay, sister. How long ago was everyone Negroid?”

“Science is still working on that, but between sixty and a hundred thousand years. That’s, like, yesterday. And, everyone on earth has the same Negroid 500-gen-grandmother. One single woman. Mitochondrial Eve.”

“Wow.”

“When I put out WorldPeace, I try to maintain fun, and my mantra is “when people flaunt their humanity, the color of their skin is trivial,” but sometimes it sets somebody off, from either side, and they try to yank me out of the bubble. They get very aggressive. It’s scary how some people react when a pure homo sapiens sits at a table with them. I am slightly disturbed every time.”

“Both sides?”

“Racists think I am pulling a fake one on them, slyly ridiculing them or sneak-attacking, and it kicks up their fear, they project onto me every stereotype and prejudice they have about black. Another thing they do is close their hearts. I hear them slam shut. To protect their core.”

“And the other side?”

“Social justice warriors go berserk, sometimes. They use up all their usual names, like ‘Negro,’ and ‘Uncle Tom’ and ‘Oreo.’ I know they are losing it when they start calling me ‘White Girl.’ If they are hateful, they might call me ‘nigger.’ But not in the so-called permitted way between blacks. Nope. Like the KKKers say it.”

“Do they get to you?”

“I’ve gotten my feelings hurt a few times. I’ve lost friends, too.”

“Wow.”

“Do you remember that girl, Senna?”

“Oh yeah,” said Skyler, “what happened to her? I thought she was going to be in our gang, at one point.”

“I told her about WorldPeace, and she saw me do it one day at a football ball game. Neither one of you were there. I was the only black person in the section. There was hostility all around, not about me. White/Hispanic racial tension, plus economic class friction, because of the two schools. One was a private prep. School pride in the team was breaking down into bigotry pride. That can happen.”

“Yes.”

“So, I breathed into the bubble and became the delightful and effervescent Negroid girl healer of section 104 behind the forty-yard line.”

We laughed.

“Senna got cold. Said I was fake, and arrogant with being better than everyone. I tried to help her see, but she got colder. That was that.”

“She dissed on you for being a goody?”

“Right. It’s shocking, but some people simply have a stake in the polarization. Just that. They are invested in antagonism, and they think healing is fake. They automatically react if they encounter someone trying to step out of the ruts.”

“That makes me nauseous. How would we ever heal it, then?”

“Normally, I can’t be dismissed as a naïve goody-goody, because below the bubble, my base is a solid concrete blockhouse filled up with rage. People have seen it, they know my rep. You’ve seen my rage.”

“Yes. Like the fearsome righteousness of the Lord blazing up!”

“Yes. I hate bigotry and moralizing. I fucking hate it. My anger is all there, in the base, if I need it. The presence of it helps my detachment when I go into the bubble, because I know I could call on it if I needed to. The people involved can sense the rage, they know I’m smart and aware, so they know I’m not a naïve goody, but they also sense the deliberate healing act of putting it into abeyance.

“MLK.”

“Yes, this is what I learned from Martin.”

“It’s your true self, Tessa. Rage and love.”

“You are beautiful.”

“You.”

“You.”

29 Tuesday, November 1, 2016

More joyous mud! The Chicago Cubs won Game 6 tonight, 9-3, setting off a celebration that seemed to run through the house. Maria and Ben were asleep long before the game ended, but actually, the game ended long before the game ended. The Cub’s cool young shortstop, Addison Russell, crushed a grand slam over the wall in the third inning, which added four runs to three earlier ones, and turned the game into a non-contest. Confidence was so high, Dada took time to read Maria a bedtime story, missing the sixth inning altogether. I was so proud of him.

“I’m happy,” said Momma, an un-needed report. Her face was red and she could not stop smiling. At the end, they sang the Cub’s victory song, unembarrassed, in the living room with the windows open.

Tomorrow is it. Game seven. Do or die, in one game.

In English, Miss Corcoran laid down a challenging assignment. To write an essay of about 1000 words supporting something you know to be unpopular at this school. We have a week.

The instant I heard this, my dark side told me to go for “We should all carry guns and shoot everyone in hoodies.”

After a few minutes of letting that vibrate, it changed to “Protect the second amendment, guns don’t kill people, haters kill people.”

That would certainly be unpopular. Most students here are against guns. But I can’t write that. I can’t. I hate guns too much and want

to melt them all down, the hell with the second amendment. No way I will water down my rage by writing the opposite.

Just before falling asleep, it occurred to me I am using the word “hate” a lot. I don’t want to be part of the problem, I don’t want to have hate in my heart, so I changed it to “Respect the right to carry guns, the second amendment must be upheld.”

But that is still no good. It’s too painful to write in favor of guns. I have something else in mind.

30 Wednesday, November 2, 2016

I am not a true fan of baseball. I’m detached, same as with football. But I have my nose in it, because of the ardent devotion of Thomas and Elena Tillinghast, my dear parents, to the Chicago Cubs. Their fandom is passionate, knowledgeable, loyal, and patient. By honoring that, and wanting to share their thrills, my detachment sets off irony. I’m ‘with them’ over the Cubs, even though I am not ‘of them.’

The Cubs did it. They won the World Series tonight. Something they had not accomplished in one-hundred and eight years. The game was a classic, apparently. It seemed the Cubbies were well on their way early, but the Indians tied it up late, and the game went into extra innings. A brilliant 2-run rally in the top of the 10th inning stood up in the bottom, when the exhausted Cubs closer got the last out, having given up a run. The final score of the final game, giving the Cubs the Championship, finally, was 8-7.

It is difficult for me to describe the effect this had on Thomas and Elena. They know ‘it’s just a game.’ They are not enmeshed in an unhealthy way. They are not avoiding the world of troubles. They are not neglecting their children, or their marriage. But for this instant, they allow themselves a helping of happiness, a filling of the

heart and soul with warm goodness of a purity that was a joy to watch.

31 Thursday, November 3, 2016

Yesterday, two officers were assassinated in Des Moines, Iowa, by a white man. Sergeant Anthony Beminio and Police Officer Justin Martin were shot and killed in two separate ambushes while sitting in their patrol cars shortly after 1:00 am. This was a pure “assassination of the uniform,” with no provocation or connection between the officers and the murderer.

And while such things as this continue, with very scary frequency, life goes on at school. I am deep in the assignment. The essay in support of something unpopular in the school. Last time I wrote this long, I learned to shoot for a true first draft with plenty of time before the deadline, so it can “rest and rise.” I am aiming for tomorrow night.

I went back to Dada.

“What about Francis Scott Key being a slaveholder, and putting racism in the poem?”

“When I heard about that recently, I investigated it. As you probably know, the alleged racism is in the third verse. However, the charge is weak. It has been misunderstood.”

He and I drilled down and read the words, then surfed a lot of websites to get the scoop. At one time Mamma looked over our shoulder and contributed, a woman four generations removed from slavery. I see Father’s point, but that phrasing in the third verse smells bad. I’m going to dwell.

But for me, the excitement is the first verse, the one we all know. It asks two questions. Did we win the battle last night, in 1814, and did we keep the nation free, in 2016?

I don't think we are free when racist cops kill people because they are hyper-paranoid of "the other." I don't think we are free when a bad person of any race can purchase an assault rifle and armor-piercing bullets and randomly assassinate police officers because of hate. I don't think we are free when young people driven mad by religion blow up cafes and sky scrapers, killing people to get into heaven. I don't think we are free when teens shoot each other in the head over athletic shoes.

But still.

The freedom is sitting right there. Our nation, The United States of America, is about freedom. It is glorious. I feel it. I seriously feel the thrill of freedom. In my girl-garden, where a woman knows everything.

32 Friday, November 4, 2016

I have a new friend, a freshman, who's "a boy on the other side." That's one way he likes to say it. He's Winston Brevard, a singer and actor. We joked about his gay ways being too much on the nose. He's into hair styling (b and g), Broadway showtunes, fashion, and obscure out-friendly singers like Jane Oliver. It's too obvious. Way gay. I suggested he try to get boy's boxing started as a sport at school to throw everything akilter.

Anyway, Win is in *Kiss Me Kate*, a small part, and that's where I met him. I'm a groupie of the play. Now, after school, I'm waiting for the star of the show, Skyler Anderson, near the drama club room, prior to another football Friday night in America. Winston and I are talking about various.

"This is certainly a twisted version of *Kiss Me Kate*."

"Way twisted. But true twisted," Win said.

"Is it true to Cole Porter?"

“He was a homosexual, you know.” Winston likes to blaze out that word, to shout his pride, and scare people.

“Yes, I know. If Cole Porter were alive now, in our current culture, would he agree with what you people have done with his Tony-Award-Winning masterpiece?”

“You people?”

“I did that on purpose.”

“Cole would be cool.”

This version is not actually a “gay” version. It’s a twist on boygirl dynamics.

Switching subjects ... “You know that song ‘On the Street Where You Live?’”

“Of course, are you kidding, girl?” he asked.

“What’s it from?”

“I can’t believe you know that song. Sara. Obscure.”

“What’s it from?”

“My Fair Lady.” We laughed over the name. “Wow, we could twist that.”

“Yeah. My Fairy Lady.”

“My Boy Lady,” he said.

“My Maybe Lady.”

Suddenly, I regretted mentioning that song. Cancel. Cancel. Avert.

“What about that song?” Winston asked.

“Nothing, just randomly got stuck in my head. Does that happen to you?”

“Oh yes, it does. Um-hmm.”

“Like?”

“‘Singin’ in the Rain.’ ‘America, from West Side Story. ‘Send in the Clowns’.”

“You are the only human teen in this school who has ever heard of any of those. Obscure.”

“Sara, why don’t you try out for plays?”

“No talent, no time, no tolerance for show tunes.” I showed him my top play list on my phone.

“Wow.”

Skyler came around the corner.

“I can’t go to the game,” she said immediately, sad.

“Aw, man.”

“Family thing. I forgot about it. Have to.”

“How soon?”

“It’s fatal already.” She turned and walked down the hall.

“Later,” she said over her shoulder. “Tomorrow?”

“Okay.”

Winston had never been to football.

“Wanna go?”

“Are you kidding? They’ll use me as a crash dummy tackle or something.”

We talked for a while. He’s fourteen, a good person, a boy, a man, a lady maybe, but a person who would not harm, would not hate.

Win scooted, but suddenly he peeked back around the corner.

“That song is about someone with a gigantic crush on someone. Madly, completely, over the rainbow.”

I looked away. He didn’t move.

Then, his parting shot. “Just remember, Sara, Freddie did not get the girl.”

Then I was alone. I know Kevin will be at the game. I headed home for some vittles with the vitals, before kickoff.

Thing is, I know where he lives. I have often walked past his house. The pavement always stayed beneath my feet before. Now, I’m several stories high.

33 Saturday, November 5, 2016

I am so proud of myself. Today, with no prod from parents, despite the intensity of the essay writing, with my heart aching to do nothing but sigh for Kevin, I took a firm grip of the chicken thing.

I made lists. I measured things outside. I made phone calls to The Home Depot. I surfed the net. I even stumbled over the most ridiculously over-adored, over-built, elegantly sweet, chicken coup in a video by Martha Stewart. It was probably in *Architectural Digest*. I bet she fed her chicks with a silver spoon.

Last night, it was Tessa and I on the bleachers. Taye had a basketball game and Skyler that family event.

“I don’t know why you aren’t at his game.”

“An hour and a half away.”

“Hmm. Wasn’t there a fan bus going?”

“No. Not enough fans.”

“Wait, we can’t fill one bus with basketball support?”

“Not on a football Friday.”

On the field, the Desert Academy Scorpions were exhibiting very little sting. The score was 21-0 near halftime.

“Why didn’t you drive?”

“Sara, I’m here.”

“Why didn’t you drive?”

She kept her eyes on the playing field. I felt her feelings. I backed off.

Just then, a fancy long pass intended for Marcus Bond almost worked, sending the fans into hopeful jubilation, then sorrow as the ball bounced around on the ground.

We sat down. Tessa continued to stare outward. “I wonder if Marcus still has that one girlfriend,” she said.

Before I fell asleep, I prayed to God. For Tessa. For Skyler. For the families of all the dead policemen and innocent ‘suspects.’ And for my family, all of us.

And for me, for what I have to do tomorrow.

I sent the prayer off into the universe as my honest best try to find Him. If God exists, He is in the Universe which has no beginning, ending, or outside. I’d like him to ping back that he got my text.

34 Sunday, November 6, 2016

“Momma?”

“Did you eat something?” she said.

“Mom, before we go, can we talk for a few minutes?” This was going to take place in the kitchen, a room of happiness between us for sixteen years. She sat down across from me at the table.

“What is it, honey?”

“I promised you I would be honest about church.”

“Oh.”

“We can’t lie about God, right?”

“No, we can’t.” She snapped alert. I saw her take a deep breath. This conversation will be a continuation. She already knows her daughter is not baptized in her heart.

“I don’t have faith, Momma.”

She nodded slowly. “God loves you.”

“I won’t put up a wall against that, Mom, but I don’t have faith about talking to God and praying. And I can’t take Communion.”

Can a woman cry in sorrow, be angry, and pour out love all at the same time? I have a magnificent mother.

“It would be wrong for me to take Communion, and that’s why I had to have this talk with you this morning.”

“Will you come to Mass today?”

“Yes, I will. Today. I’ll be right at your side. We can talk more, if you want.”

“God loves you, Sara.”









Kevin is a good listener. He stayed on me. I gave him the facts, including all the prior talks between Momma and me about God. I told him she held my hand all the way down the aisle and out of the church, this morning.

“She knew it might be the last time.”

Then I began to cry.

“I wish I did believe, Kev.” Sobbing. “I had to break her heart.”

“If God were watching, He’d say both of you were blessed today. And beautiful.”

“It hurts so bad.”

“You have a beautiful heart, Sara.”

I cried for another minute or two, with that sentence hanging in the air. Neither of us said another word. Kevin let me feel my sorrow for hurting my mother, as long as I needed.

Then we said good night, and hung up the telephone.

35 Monday, November 7, 2016

On top of it all, now I have a student. Might as well get used to it, Miss Corcoran said, with the International Baccalaureate you are expected to “give back and help.” Well, she “helped” me find Isabella, a Freshman girl determined to make it into IB, but challenged by slow reading. She commutes twenty-five miles, one way, to Desert Academy at Sky Valley, to get ready for IB.

I’ve been instructed to keep it simple, read to her for thirty minutes once a week. That instruction sounds bizarre to me, to “read to” a fourteen-year-old girl. Others are also helping her. I guess I can spare half an hour.

There’s quite a frenzy and buzz in school about tomorrow’s election.

“Isn’t it just spectacular,” said Skyler at lunch. Her eyes were glowing. “I can barely breathe.”

“It’s not the thought of Hillary in the White House that hurts. It’s the thought of Bill Clinton in the White House. He’s going to try that intern under the Oval Office desk thing again, when Hillary is away, you just know it.”

“Oh shush, Sara. Don’t be a sore loser.”

“I think we are all about to lose.”

Everyone hates how crude the campaign got, except a few immature slobs who like everything gross; they thought all the “mud” slinging was hilarious, and want it to get disgusting today and tomorrow. I don’t expect to see those cretins in Theory of Knowledge in junior year.

We had a poll. In a school of 423 students, It’s 201/55 in favor of Hillary Clinton. The rest either avoided voting, or marked “neither.” I voted neither. I know that’s chicken, but I am proactively shouting “get someone good to run.” They didn’t provide a place to write in, knowing that would result in Donald Duck, Beyoncé, and Eric Theodore Cartman getting more votes than The Donald. GenZ is so infantile, sometimes.

In any case, everyone in school and around the country, apparently, expects Hillary to win tomorrow. However, I glanced at Dada’s print copy of the Los Angeles Times this morning. The L.A. Times is saying Trump! Now that is something unpopular. They must be taking major flak from every other newspaper and poll in America.

I wish I could vote. There is a proposition on the ballot to strengthen gun laws. I read all six points in it very carefully. I am for every one of them. I penciled in point number seven: “make everyone turn in their guns and melt them down.”

36 Tuesday, November 8, 2016

I wish I had another week for my essay, “The National Anthem – A Trueheart Challenge.” I got to a true first draft Friday after the football game, and I didn’t touch it over the weekend. I let it gel. While it sat in my computer silently, my subconscious thrashed it around. What came out of my brain was a take on the assignment itself. The thing I’m saying is unpopular at school? It’s not the

anthem. Not the supposed racism in it. It's the thing everyone of course says they love, but they really don't. Not really really.

Freedom.

It's freedom that's unpopular.

Last night I took it to ~~absolute~~ final. ~~Many cool~~ adjectives and adverbs died. I know I have a problem with adjective overload, and I ~~really~~ hate deleting them. But the thing reads ~~much~~ stronger after I slim it ~~way~~ down.

Also, I punched it up. I'm calling everyone out for not ~~really~~ understanding freedom, passing ~~dubious~~ laws that damage freedom, and saying things that ~~cast aspersions insult wreck~~ diminish freedom.

At 8:10 a.m. I turned it in to Miss Corcoran.

I figured out how to see Kevin during school. You can get an exemption from part of study hall – which I have 6th period at 12:20 – if you come up with a good reason and can prove it later.

Kevin petitioned to change his gym for his study, so now we both have study hall at 12:20. We cooked up a project that got us out of study at 12:45, and that gives us 17 minutes every day to huddle in the library.

We promised each other we'd actually do some work. Plus, the librarians see us there every day and have to sign our passes, so we show them we are working on a real project. You are not allowed to text or talk in there. So, we write on paper and pass notes!

So far, not one note I passed to Kevin Sprague had little hearts on it anywhere.

I got home by 4:30. Tension was high. Election returns from the East Coast were just starting to arrive.

Within two hours, a full-scale shock was unfolding, and Elena Tillinghast, my Mom, was devastated. I sat next to her all evening.

Dada absolutely refrained from showing celebration, and certainly did not gloat. He would never.

By the time I went to my room, my mom was crying, and Donald Trump had been elected President of the United States of America.

37 Wednesday, November 9, 2016

The first thing I checked to see: Did Skyler Anderson come to school this morning? Yes.

Second: did anyone vandalize the school overnight. No.

Third: are kids mad? Oh, yes, they are angry and very upset.

I took an informal poll, just by listening to the hubbub in the halls.

“That guy brought up the email thing right before the election.”
14%

“It’s because she has a vagina.” 19%

“Something’s physically wrong with Hillary. She’s sick.” 7%

“She was so boring even her base did not come out to vote.” 24%

“Racists want to make America white again” 52%

“They hate us Hispanics. Build the wall, build the wall.” 47%

“Kill Obamacare” 41%

I know that adds up to over 100%, but some had several opinions why.

Tessa and I made sure to race to Spanish class at 9:00 and wait outside. All three of us have it together. Here came Skyler, trudging down the hall. Her eyes were red and her face looked as if someone had poured rotten slime inside her shirt and some of it was sliding down into her trousers.

“I want a recount,” she mumbled.

We touched her arm and whispered nice things. Tessa hugged. I could see she was pouring buckets of feeling onto Skyler. It didn’t reach inside the shock zone.

Halfway through class, Skyler raised her hand.

“Puedo ser excusado, tengo que ir al baño a vomitar.”

Mrs. Aquino gave her props for fine pronunciation, and permission to go hurl.

I asked Kevin.

“There was a backlog of people unhappy with the way the Establishment has destroyed prosperity. Both parties. Trump gave voice to it. He flew that flag. He implied that illegal immigration would be stopped and a lot of them deported. They came out in droves to vote for him.”

“He is so crude.”

“They didn’t care. And then Hillary said Red State Americans are ‘deplorable,’ and that made an extra million come out to vote against her, and against the DC snobs.”

“His mistreatment of women, don’t tell me that’s not real. He wants to put women back down.”

“We’ll see. He has always had women in important positions in his companies. He might have been dropping those misogynist hints to fire up true misogyny in the hinterland. To get elected.”

“He’s disgusting, Kevin. I am not happy.”

“Me either. It’s scary sick.”

“My mother is in shock, big time.”

“What about the gun proposition?”

“It passed. It is now a crime to not report a lost or stolen gun, among other things.”

“Okay.”

We paused. Kevin held my eyes with his.

“I don’t want to put women back down,” he said.

“I know.”

38 Thursday, November 10, 2016

Oh, Momma.

First, her daughter walks away from God.

Two days later, her country walks away from Hillary.

“This is hard for your mother,” Father said.

“Is it because she wanted a woman president?”

“No, Sara. It’s because she is a Progressive, deep inside. She believes the government must make laws and enforce them, to assure social justice and fairness. She thinks a lot of Americans are bigoted.”

“They are.”

“Well, Hillary was the flag-carrier for the Progressives, and to you mother it is like the entire idea of goodness in it has been rejected, and nasty people given the power to reverse all the gains.”

“Will they take away a woman’s right to choose?”

“Yes,” said Momma, who had been walking into the kitchen and overheard the question. “They will overturn Roe versus Wade.”

I tried to feel if my next question was appropriate. Mother’s mourning space should be respected. However, all the stuff is up, way up, so this might be the time to ask it, which I’ve always needed to.

“Mom, you are Catholic and against abortion. But you are for Roe versus Wade. To have abortion be legal. It confuses me.”

“Abortion is wrong. Life begins at conception, life that has a soul in it from God. So, what can justify killing? Justify it so it is not a sin? Self-defense. If the mother is in danger of dying because of being pregnant.”

“That can’t be often. Really really for real in danger of dying.”

“No, Sara. Not often.”

“What about if it’s from rape, or some other forced sex like incest on a young girl?”

“The baby should live, and justice done to provide it with true parents.”

“Momma, that is so intense, I can’t understand why you don’t want abortion to be illegal. The fetus or baby in the womb can’t fight off the abortion, or speak for itself, and give self-defense. Why should abortion be legal? To kill the baby?”

She turned her eyes on me, and I saw a woman I’d never known. “It has to be between the woman and God. Not the government and a woman. Roe versus Wade does not order women or doctors to do anything, one way or another. It prevents government from making abortion a crime prior to viability. The baby is inside the woman. It is part of her body. It is not legally a citizen. I know for a fact it is a human life with a soul from God, even at four weeks with no heart and barely visible to the human eye, but many do not believe it, and the state cannot defend the fetus as if it were a person, until it is viable.”

“Oh, Momma.”

“This is the hardest thing. To believe as I do, but let murder be legal anyway. That hurts deep inside. But I stand by it.

“Why?”

“Not everything that is morally wrong should be fixed by a law, when the law itself takes rights away from people. Women.”

“Do you know any other women who believe as you? Don’t people who believe life begins at conception want to make abortion illegal?”

“There are others who believe as I believe. On both aspects.”

“Courage.”

“You believe your generation will defeat bigotry?”

“Yes.”

“By making your people aware it is wrong?”

“Yes.”

“So it must be. We have to believe abortion is wrong, and stop unwanted pregnancy. Unwanted pregnancy is a sin. The child will either be born and mistreated because it is unwanted, or it will be killed in the womb.”

Without another word, she continued through the kitchen, out into the yard. It was mild, and Momma spent the day outside. My feelings and thoughts reached out to her all evening. I made dinner for the family, and cleaned up, so she didn't have to.

I looked at Father. Here is a man who believes in freedom with every breath and every bone and every cell of his blood. Yet ... yet ... he might believe the government has the right to take away the freedom of a woman to chose.

I am too worn out to stir that up. For the moment.

Officer down in Pittsburg today. Officer Scott Bashioum fatally wounded. He responded to a domestic nightmare at an address known for frequent trouble and violence. He was shot to death with a high-powered rifle before he reached the door. The suspect then killed his pregnant wife, then himself.

God, please respond to my text quickly. There is trouble here. You are letting women make horrific decisions, and allowing good men to be assassinated. Hello? Hello?

That is not irony. It is dark anger.

39 Friday, November 11, 2016

I couldn't decide about going to the football game. Skyler is already a 'no' and Tessa is in some sort of blackout. It would require a trip across the Coachella Valley on the bus. I don't have a license or a car. While standing in the hall near the auditorium, Taye came

around the corner. He stopped right in front of me. I pulled out my earbuds.

“What the hell is going on?” he asked.

“What?”

“Tessa is not answering my texts. Or vm.”

“I don’t know, Taye.”

“I think you do. She tells you everything.”

“Yes. So, I don’t know.”

He took one step back and struck a pose. It did not seem like a retreat. We waited each other out.

“I’m starting at point guard tonight. Home game. She’d better be here.” Taye is fast on the court, and he, too, can drain the J.

“She supports you.”

He stepped around me and moved fast toward the locker rooms.

Something bothered me all day. I woke up with it, and could not shake it during class. If Mother believes the government must not make a law that abortion is illegal, even though it is morally wrong, why is she a Progressive? Why is she in favor of the government making all kinds of laws to address unfairness, income inequality, bigotry, discrimination and hate? Yes, these are morally wrong, or at least shameful. But making laws to “fix” them takes away freedoms. Aren’t Progressives turning bad character and hate thought into actual crimes?







40 Saturday, November 12, 2016

Wed/Thr/Fri seemed drab. I am having post-creation depression from turning in that essay. All the kids around me are glum over Trump. Skyler is only now returning to neutral, and her spritely self is still bruised and hiding. I doubt she was much fun to kiss during rehearsal for *Kiss Me Kate* yesterday afternoon. My Mom probably thinks she got herself caught in a reality warp. The meals she made were drab.

And other drab events, like more officers shot point blank by random hot heads, left-anarchist students rioting over the election and being paid to do it (Dada says George Soros is paying them) and the world heaving over some of the choices Trump is making for his entourage.

Whoops. I guess it only seemed drab.

And I can't break through to Tessa. I saw her daily in the three classes we have together, Spanish, Algebra and History, and at lunch. She's fending off any deep dish. I am not a person who pries the lid off people to thrash around inside. However, I have boundary passes with her. She knows that, and is avoiding me. I can't break through.

Last night I didn't dance 'til dawn, but Kevin took me to a popup thing coming out of someone's garage in Desert Hot Springs. A girl name Lisa, my age, my taste in bands, had actually gone up and down her street and gotten clearance to have a little music party half out of her house until 10:30. She promised no vandalism from her vandal friends. Kevin knew this girl, and sure enough she was digi-spinning from eight to ten. She had two mailed tapes of mixes from friends in New York City. She served a cool collection of tea and juices, as if to flaunt a non-alcohol ability to have fun. I drank a lot of raspberry-tangerine iced tea. I boogied bad, with Kevin and with

two Zs of ambiguous gender, Hispanic, rhythmic, and dressed very cool.

We didn't need to name it, but both Kevin and I constructed this was not a date. I mean, hanging out is not a date. Right?

"That texting was fun, Sara."

"Cool drool."

"You won't forget Jane-talk, though, will you?"

"The gentleman may well expect it shall remain an essential element of my personage, indeterminately and pleurably."

That caused a moment of silence standing by his car in front of my house ... I made a boy quiet with awe.

"You are the smartest girl I've ever known."

"Why, thank you, Herr Beethoven."

Today, I didn't see/text/IM Kevin, Skyler, or Tessa. I stayed home, helped Momma in her tomato patch, briefed Dada on my chicken coop investigation and plans, and read a book. Maria and I sang two songs she learned in school this week.

Tonight, just before sleep, two things.

One: hey, my birthday is only five days away. Sixteen!

Two: I don't want to hang out with Kevin any more. I want to kiss him like a girlfriend.

41 Sunday, November 13, 2016

If anything, this was more squinchy than telling Mother I didn't have faith – telling her I wouldn't go to Mass any longer. She's had that one joyous moment, the Cubs, but then my truth about God and the loss of the election. Brutal times.

I could just "go."

Both of us would know that would not be honest.

"Maria and Ben will still go."

“Yes, Sara. They have to. They are not of age yet, to say no.”

“Father?”

“Father is not Catholic. War between the Anglicans and Catholics. That’s mostly healed, in modern times. You know Thomas comes to Mass with us most times. And we all go to his services, too, sometimes. It’s all God.”

“That’s good.”

“Sara?”

“Yes?”

“I think it is your responsibility to speak to Ben and Maria.”

“Oh.”

She’s right. She didn’t tell me God loved me again, but I heard it anyway. Looking in her eyes, I fear I’ve lost something precious, paying for my freedom today.

“Why?” asked Maria.

“Maria, I don’t hate God, but I am growing up into my own life and beliefs and thoughts. Every person does that when they get to my age.”

“You are still a kid.”

“No,” said Ben. “She’s getting way old.”

“I’m sixteen in four days. But what really matters is deciding on my own.”

“You can decide to love God with us.”

“I have to see, Maria. I have to think and look at the world. It’s important.”

She started to cry. I held her close. She let me, which is a good sign. Ben stood next to us, awkward and unhappy. He did not exactly like church, but he knew this was an important moment, an important shift in the family.

“It’s selfish,” he said. He had a right to say it, and I did not resent it one bit.

“Yes, Ben. It’s selfish. But there is good selfish, when a young person has to act and think for herself, so she can grow, but it makes things change in a family.”

“Is Momma mad?” asked Maria, between tears.

“I don’t think so, Maria. Are you mad at me?”

“I love you and I love God.”

“That’s what matters. I love you very much.”

I fully understood that Father and Mother could force me to go to church, although without Communion. I am underage, not emancipated, living under their roof. Frankly, that would be their right. I will never forget their courage in not forcing me. Thank you, I will tell them some day.

Father went with them to Mass twenty minutes later. Maria, holding Mom’s hand, turned to look back to the house as they went out to the car. She could not see me, but I was looking at her.

If God can heal, he needs to make a visitation here in the desert.

42 Monday, November 14, 2016

Today I met Isabella Lopez, age fourteen, a freshman. She is receiving help for reading difficulty. The first thing I found out is that English is her primary language.

“I’m used to needing help, but anyway it’s embarrassing, so don’t tell anyone, okay?”

She’s a California girl. An L.A. girl. The family moved to Cathedral City two years ago from Simi Valley, for her Dad’s job. They had to move, because that would be an insane commute.

Both parents are naturalized U.S. citizens from the small town of Santa Cruz, Mexico. So, Isabella is first generation American. She speaks Spanish, but it is not her first language. To bring her up with English as a primary was a family decision.

“I’m supposed to read to you.”

“Yeah,” Isabella said.

“How about the newspaper?”

“Huh?”

“You should be able to read the newspaper, so I should read it to you.”

I picked out an article in the L.A. Times about problems with illegal parking around Staples Center. Then, common sense struck.

“Isabella, you read it to me.”

She immediately became nervous, slowly taking the paper from my hand. Her eyes shifted from mine to the story.

“Just the first sentence.”

She looked at it for a long moment.

“Parking.”

“Yes. It’s about parking.”

“I see ‘Center’ with a capital letter, and an ‘S’ word, so that means Staples Center.”

“Right.”

“What’s this word?” she asked, pointing.

“That’s ‘citation.’ Do you know what a citation is?”

“That’s a parking ticket, right?”

“Isabella, please read me the first sentence.”

She stumbled over it. She could recognize about 40% of the words, just barely enough to construct a vague sense of what the story said. I read the first few paragraphs to her, and we discussed it. Comprehension, but not from her “reading,” from our discussion.

It just did not make any sense to me to read to her. She spoke English, period, with a little Valley Girl in it, and had a good vocabulary. She was not stupid or brain damaged. Reading to her would do exactly zero.

At the end of 1st period, Miss Corcoran handed out the essays “supporting something not popular at this school.”

For her essay “The National Anthem – A Trueheart Challenge,” Sara Tillinghast received an A+. My third “A” she has given me this year. That made me glow inside. No – burst inside!

There were red marks in places and a note at the bottom, but no time to read it, the bell rang and we all had to scoot.

She stopped me at the front of the room. She waited until everyone left, and closed the door.

“Sara?”

“Yes?”

“You are a writer.”

We held eyes. I could not speak. She did not waver. That’s all. She let the next class pour in, and I had to run out to be on time.

Walking along, each step set something in. The essay was real. The spiritual act of bringing it into existence – this was a thing that happened. It happened. I could do it again. Suddenly, a thrill, a goose-bump flash. This was more than a high school assignment gone good. I could dream a life as a writer. I could make it real. Be a writer, IRL. My three “A” papers this year were the tangible presence of a dream I didn’t know I was dreaming.

I floated down the hall, several stories high.

43 Tuesday, November 15, 2016

“Hamburger or hot dog?”

“When is it again?” asked Tessa.

“Thursday afternoon. November Seventeenth. Five o’clock. Outdoor grill dinner. Girl turns sixteen. You know her. At her house off Dillon Road. You’ve been there.”

“Hamburger.”

“Hamburger,” added Skyler.

We were partaking of tuna salad with no bread at lunch. Diet soda. A banana each.

“What do you want for your birthday?” asked Skyler.

“Either a new phone or melt all the guns in the world.”

“You need a new phone?” asked Tessa. “What’s wrong with this one.”

I showed her my storage stats. Zilch left, and there’s nothing I want to delete. Plus, it is two generations back. Slow. I need fast. I’m movin’ fast.

“Father already said I don’t need one, since this thing is not ‘broken.’ I’m working on an answer to that.”

“Tell him it’s unsafe, being so slow.”

Skyler had to leave quickly. Some crisis in costumes for the play, and she got a text to run down to the drama room.

Something’s wrong with Tessa. I stared her down. Another variant, called “Scare It Out With Eyes.” She immediately understood the smoke signal, but began to peel her banana, stoic. I remained perfectly still. We contested for over thirty seconds.

“That bastard T’aye.”

“Guessed it.” Sarcasm.

“He thinks he owns me.”

“No, he doesn’t think that.”

“Huh, girl? You don’t know nothin’, he thinks he owns me, damn it.”

“He’s perfect. Let’s a girl be free.”

“Sara.” She was fuming. I was on the right track.

“Innocent of all boy sins.”

“Fuck you.”

“If you don’t want him, I’ll take him. He’s perfect.”

Tessa jerked up, threw the banana peel onto her tray, and then the banana itself, and gave me a truly evil look. She spun and stomped off.

This is about their relationship, but it's not on him. My jolly testimony of his virtues caused Tess to go maniac trying to blame him, instead of laughing it off. This is her stuff.

"To be continued," said the writer.

Next, Kevin.

I texted him, but only to ask for, OMG, a phone conversation. Kevin called immediately.

"Can you hang out Thursday after school?"

"Hmm."

"Kevin, I made a mistake. I should have brought this up earlier. It's my birthday."

"Thursday is your birthday?"

"Yep. Sixteen candles."

"O-M-G."

I laughed at that. He's got a wit.

"Anyway, I'm having a grill dinner and dance-it-out party at my house starting at 5:00. Done before 8:00. I want you to come to that."

"Okay. Yes. Got it. I'm there. Happy Birthday!"

"Not yet, have to suffer as a lowly 15 a few more days. Hamburger or hot dog? Over charcoal."

"Burger."

"I got an A+ in English today."

"Holy shit."

"And she wrote this incredible note on the bottom of the last page. I'll read it to you some time."

"I want to hear it. This is that essay on the Anthem, right?"

"Yes."

"Sara. Send me the essay. Seriously."

I have his email, so of course I sent it.

I glowed inside all the way through the rest of the day and evening, reading the paper out loud to Thomas and Elena, who began shouting and clapping before I finished.

The glow went along with me right into bed under the covers of my childhood. I decided to keep my childhood echoes alive, to savor them, for two more days.

They are lovely.

44 Wednesday, November 16, 2016

Headlines everywhere today:

“Minnesota officer charged with manslaughter for shooting Philando Castile.”

The policeman is being charged with a crime today, but the shooting took place last July. It was awful. Castile got pulled over, he advised the policeman he legally had a gun in the glove compartment. The officer, Jeronimo Yanez, says that even though he shouted warnings, Castile reached into his clothing, and fearing for his life, the officer shot him. Seven times. The man was sitting in his car, seat belted on, acting calm, and the cop shot him seven times.

Racially: Philando Castile is black, Yanez is Hispanic.

Protestors in Minnesota kept up the pressure for weeks, helping force the DA to look deep into the incident. Today they indicted Yanez with manslaughter and two other charges.

The prosecutor said “No reasonable officer, knowing, seeing and hearing what officer Yanez did at the time, would’ve used deadly force under these circumstances.”

I read up on this. Either Philando Castile stupidly reached into his clothing, despite being shouted at to “not reach,” or he didn’t reach, and Yanez panicked and started blazing away for no good reason –

except irrational fear of a black man. He pulled the trigger seven times.

There's not much room in between for another explanation.

I know I am using hyperbole (writer's word for exaggeration) when I say we should confiscate every gun in the world and melt them down, but actually ... without the two guns being involved, Philando would not be dead, and this officer would not be facing jail.

What the hell seriously are we going to do?

I called a quick meeting of the family before dinner to give a progress report on my chicken plans. On my laptop, I showed a wireframe 3D model I had whipped up on SketchUp. There were questions, and a few constructive suggestions. Dada told me to work up a budget, after everyone at the table, including Maria, approved my plan.

Ben was allowed to make annoying chicken sounds for about two minutes during the meeting. I ignored him, but eventually Momma whacked him on the side of the head with a rolled-up piece of paper. Ben laughed.

After dinner, I announced my guest list for tomorrow's party. Ben and Maria were not on it.

"No fair!" Maria shouted. She had the cutest pout on her mouth.

"It's for teens," I said. "Let's have a family celebration Sunday."

That was Mom's idea, which I now announced. She said she'd make my favorite enchiladas and roasted tomato salsa with her wonderful garden heirloom tomatoes. And from-scratch tortillas baked over the charcoal. I requested a beer with this fantastic spicy dinner, and didn't wait for confirmation.

45 Thursday, November 17, 2016

When I got home, I found Momma had put her heart into the party prep. Our patio area and the fenced yard looked great. She'd brought out some special pottery and platters, and the food looked damn beautiful. Father was going to grill.

My usual unusual friends, a dozen of them, rolled up or biked up. Teens are hungry people. The food thing was brilliant, and hilariously run by Momma, Dad, and Skyler. Only a few hot dogs, plenty of burgers. A gallon of potato salad.

Taye and Tessa had made up. They did it on their own, making me pouty that I didn't get a chance to fix them, after all my poking and trying to barge in! The healing was obvious in their body language. And smiles. And hot dancing.

Marcus Bond brought his girlfriend. I'd okayed both of them. They were friends' friends, and close enough to being mine too.

Skyler brought her leading man in the play, Ron Zymanski. They are close, emotionally, I'm happy to say, but it's not spicy.

Winston, and two more thespians I'd come to know, rolled up together. I think I like actors and dancers. I've been practice-dancing in a long blue-green-colored skirt over a pale green leotard, lately, in private. That's what I wore at this party.

Then two new girls to the school, who seemed to gel with me in my rebellions, Veta and Alicia, strolled in. They'd both given me thumbs-up on my 'objectivity' speech in Mr. Moran's class the other day.

Last to arrive, Kevin Sprague. He knew almost no one, so I had fun introducing him around. He mixed at once. I saw Alicia get activated. She went right up to him with glowing eyes, and I marked that down for rapid deterrence.

Kevin was the only guest to ignore my “no presents” edict. He gave me a hardcover edition of poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, with a bookmark at Sonnet 22.

“I won’t tell anyone you gave a girl a book.”

“Okay,” he said. “I won’t tell anyone you didn’t get weirded out from getting a book for your sixteenth birthday.”

“What’s this Sonnet 22 about?”

“Lovers who don’t want God or eternity.”

“Oh.”

We smiled good ones at each other. I was very happy Kevin was at this party.

We had the races, ethnics, origins, genders, un-genders, religions, economic classes, and sexual orientations covered. Any bigot looking for targets would be stunned by the profusion (vocab) of targets. All without trying. It’s pretty damn easy in Southern California.

Besides food, we danced. And danced. Everyone with everyone. That’s how we roll in GenZ. You couldn’t spot any couples, of which there were actually only two anyway, my four black friends.

Tessa and Skyler orchestrated a cake and singing of that dumb song. I had to make a speech, which consisted of goodbye to my teddy bear and hello to my checking account, plus a wish for all the guns to be confiscated. Everyone saw that pitch coming, and smiled.

Mom and Dad discretely departed with their other offspring after the first hour, so it was teens-only for the second. I won’t lie, some alcohol and MaryJane suddenly appeared when that occurred, but I saw it was not crazy, and just chilled with it.

Absolutely everyone was dancing. My happy friends. Let them.

I drifted off the patio and slipped around the south side of the house. We have a stand of six tamarisk trees there, with an arbor

under the spread of their boughs. In my hand, the book of poems. I opened to Sonnet 22. It's a dense poem. I could see I'd have to read it a few times to get it.

I felt a presence emerge from the trees. I didn't move, standing upright, the book open in my hands. I lifted my eyes to him. Our gaze did not waver as he approached, slowly, not smiling. He stopped. He took the book from my hands, replaced the bookmark, and set it on the seat of the arbor. His eyes returned to mine. A breeze passed through the trees, like a sigh.

Our arms did not rise, nor bodies press, just the tilt of my head matching his, opposite. The space between us closed.

As if holding a small fruit, our mouths curved 'round so we could cling to its soft skin, taste and scent blooming tenderly, careful not to bruise the flesh and make juice flow.

His lips opened mine, so gentle, with one, two, three small urgings. My willingness lay there. I swayed under his mouth as he sought it. Then, like magic, I let him slip back and shifted to surround his lips with mine, so it was I, kissing him. We each asked and answered, in turn. Once, I held still to offer only. To let him.

There, in un-flowing time, the small sweet fruit burst open and melted into a luscious liquor.

We never touched but with lips. If Venus watched, she might have thought it chaste. Not if she felt my limbs shuddering so, and fire quickening in my core.

When he lifted from the kiss, we stayed joined by the glow of glistening eyes. The last glance pierced deep.

I heard the tamarisks whispering again.

He turned and walked away through the trees.

By pre-agreement, my family returned at around seven-thirty. Half the guests had left, and the rest departed over the next half hour.

The last to leave were Tessa and Taye. I looked into her eyes, which promised she had not lied when we went off into a corner during the party to talk: she had not cheated on Taye during their “break,” not even a flirt or emotional cheat. She believes neither did Taye. She revealed he had been patient and right, and she controlling and wrong. She let go last night, and they made up. She bashfully admitted that – without her asking – Taye conceded an agreement to not break away immediately after sex or other intimacy, at least not without good closure energy first. I scolded her for fixing it herself, without me. We hugged.

“What happened to Kevin,” Tessa asked. “I didn’t see him leave.”

I blushed. I admit it. I gave myself my own silent treatment, with a silly smile at the corner of my mouth. My BFF saw it.

“Oh. My. God.”

I blushed more.

“Oh, girl, if you are still a virgin, treasure it. Its days are numbered.”

I didn’t say a word, I just gave Tessa a shove towards Taye, and she trotted over to him, laughing like mad.

Later, my parents hugged me. A few sentimentals happened. Dada looked proud, with a tear in it. I thanked Momma deeply for the rockin’ party, and for being my mom for sixteen years. I am very aware that most teen girls have a dysfunctional relationship with mother, a hatred, or a null. What she and I have is unusual. A treasure. Elena and I don’t agree on everything, and I have to push against her sometimes. However, I love her dearly, with gratitude that she is a fine human, woman, dancer, wife, and wow, she’s my Momma too! Fantastic.

Before bed, I looked at myself in the mirror, naked.

I saw the female who stood up erect and strong for her first kiss, accepting it, kissing back, absorbing the heart-piercing, visiting it equally on the other. I am she.

I have the body of a woman, with rounding hips and breasts. With a smile, I admit some of the childish girl lingers in it.

I think I'm good to go. Not too fast. But not timid, either.

Just perfect, for sixteen.

46 Friday, November 18, 2016

My daily library encounter with Kevin did not take place today. He is not in school. He's on a trip for an absent-excused out-of-town mission until Tuesday. I have to be satisfied with the lingering hum from last night. It's very strong. I think I can make it last five days. Then I'll need twenty kisses.

Tessa showed up at my house an hour after school. She rolled up in her dad's car. By law, she's allowed to drive alone, but not with another teen in the vehicle. She only lives two miles away.

I don't see her at my house as often after school any more. Today we have some catching up to do, so that's why she's here. I made us a snack, chips, avocados, and Momma's salsa. We ate outside.

"The play ..."

"No."

"I'm building a chicken house ..."

"No."

"You should stop smoking weed ..."

"NO," she screamed.

I waited a moment until her blood pressure eased up.

"Kevin Sprague."

"Yeah, girl."

"Kevin."

“What’s up with that?” she asked.

“One kiss that sent me into orbit.”

“When?”

“At the party, last night, just before he left.”

“Are you going to have sex with him?”

I paused and ate a chip with the fantastic salsa all over it. A swallow of iced tea. A sigh.

“I’m not going to say.”

“Come on.”

“It’s not that I’m holding back from you, Tess. It’s two things. First, I haven’t decided. Second, I want to have it all warm and private, just for me, between now and then, if there is a then.”

“The usual Sara, ridiculously romantic, but so mature and careful. Are you sure you’re only sixteen?”

I loved hearing that number. OMG, what will eighteen be like?

“There’s no way to give your virginity carefully.”

Tessa’s eyes sparkled. She likes it when I nail it like that.

I wanted to discuss the ideas in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s sonnet, but the uneasy prospect of exposing feelings about love with Tessa made me pull back. Yet the tease ... why not try with someone from the direct enemy camp. To test the defenses around the town.

“Do we live forever with the love of our life after we die?”

Tessa’s eyes grew enormous.

“Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa.”

“Do we?”

“Are you on drugs?”

“I’m on a kiss.”

“Right. One kiss and she’s Juliette after the balcony scene.”

“I’m a lost cause on love, Tessa. I believe in it.”

“After you have sex with lots of guys, have bad sex, get damaged, see how ugly boygirl can be, and look at the world with steely cold

eyes, in about ten years you'll be really embarrassed thinking about this conversation."

"What if you could make a bargain. Instead of heaven, you stay rather on earth. You trade immortality with God in the afterlife for a brilliant passion with another human on earth. Like, so gigantic it lights up your brain and body like a supernova. Your days make you weep with the gift of peace and contentment, and your nights are filled with bliss orgasms, you lie next to each other in awe, and your heart is bursting with feeling. Not for a short time, either. For years and years. Then, you die, and pay the bargain with ... oblivion."

This sent her silent. Not the expected ridiculing laughter or snide attack. After a moment, she spoke.

"I'd take it."

I'm stunned.

Tessa began to cry. Not the kind of crying that tries to ease the pain out carefully. No. The kind that doesn't care how much damage it does as its jagged edges rip your guts on the way out.

"Damn you."

"I'm not sorry."

"Damn you."

"I'm not sorry, Tessa."

"I didn't say you could sucker punch me like that."

"That picture was strictly meant for me, to look at it after it came out as words, to see if I wanted to jump in. I wasn't trying to attack you."

"Right."

"You are just the injured innocent bystander to my shooting stars."

"Right."

"I'm going to say things like that. I know a woman can't keep her love that hot every second of every day, but still, I believe it exists. Whether there's an afterlife or not."

“Right.”

“So, don’t stand so close to me.”

“I can’t quit you.”

“I’m already way deep in that belief, and I’ll never come out.”

Her tears had stopped. She shook her head like a dog shedding water. She held her breath and looked up at me, then let it all explode out.

“Sara, there’s no such thing.”

47 Saturday, November 19, 2016

Tessa wrangled a ride for us. She has a provisional license, and Skyler and I have permits. By law, we are irresponsible teens, not to be trusted to avoid giggling and texting our way into trouble while driving. So, the DMV says we need some old dude to “supervise us” in the car. It’s her brother, Shawn, age 19.

Goodness knows what Tessa had to trade off to get him to escort us around the mountains to the north in his Honda and pick us up later at a certain time. Forty miles, one way. He actually let Tessa drive, too.

It’s the girl posse headed to Joshua Tree National Park. We’d been there before together, and today we are determined to climb this one rock formation spotted, but not attempted, six weeks ago.

With the cool clean air of November, a strong sun and breeze, wow, what a great day. Shawn dropped us at the entrance to the park, and we started to walk down into the Jumbo Rocks area.

We immediately got a hitch from two Hispanic dudes in a pickup truck. What a cool cliché! We didn’t have to stick out a thumb or a bare leg to get the ride, the boys just pulled over on their own testosterone.

Every female in the world knows about this effect, and we soon discover ways to exploit it. Also, it’s fun.

WorldPeace started up brightly with Dude2 through the open sliding window. She wouldn't say her name and it didn't feel like a flirt. She just kept extolling the place and the beautiful day.

"Every time I see these odd trees, I feel happy deep inside, they are so weird. Don't you love them?" she asked.

"What trees?"

"Why, this magnificent species, all around us."

"I bet you love to party," said the dude. "What's your name?"

"I just love to be alive and healthy on a day that God made so gorgeous, and not afraid to turn blacker than I already am. This sun is nearly winter."

D2 frowned with perplexity and swung his brown eyes on me.

"Aw, come on, tell me her name."

"Her name's Tessa. She's married."

Tessa slapped me on the arm.

"I don't see no ring," he said.

"It's a spiritual marriage, and she's faithful."

"Hey, Sara girl, don't go weddin' me off."

"Sara, that's my sister's name," said the dude, suddenly interested in me. "She says it that way too. You look white, but you have to be mestizo. What's your mix?"

"I'm from Barcelona."

"Huh?"

I put some Spanish lisp into it.

"Barthelona."

An obscure reply erects a barrier against flirts from boys. Girls learn this too, but they want the boy to try busting through. D2 resumed hitting on the effervescent but unassailable Tessa, leaving me holding the irony. D1 drove on, oblivious.

I had this weird vague feeling Winston had sung me a showtune with the title 'Barcelona.' It's about lying that you want something you really don't, then you stupidly get it and it's irritating.

Skyler just observed. Her spirits have been lifting over time, although we all know there's permanent damage. She so wanted to be saying "Female President-Elect, Hillary Clinton, A Woman" all the time.

The guys in the truck dumped us. I mean, they took us to the Jumbo Rocks, but charged off the second we hopped out of their F-100.

"They didn't try for me at all," said WhiteOut.

"They had another agenda, I can tell," said Ink. The dust was settling from their wild acceleration. "Plus, Sara threw cold water all over them."

The rocks are amazing. We are accustomed to desert, dirt, sand, rocks, weird trees and bushes, but at Joshua Tree National Park, everything seems like a museum of the best of it. It's breathtaking.

Some of the formations are too dangerous for casual climbers like we three girls, but others you can get to the top, maybe a hundred feet up, then explore in and around the jumble. We were dressed for hard surfaces. I even brought gloves, so I could grip and thrust off rough rocks. And knee pads.

At the top of our intended climb, we found a little ledge with an overhang for shade, and broke out lunch from backpacks. A lot of cellphone camera clicks, selfies, girl buddies, and rock shots. And of course, snaps of the Joshua Trees themselves, so bizarre and cool.

"I counted your kisses."

"What?" Skyler stopped chewing.

"In the play. Last rehearsal, I counted. You have three kisses."

"Yeah."

"In rehearsal, do you kiss him?"

"No. We talked that out. We kissed once, that was the time you were there, but then we agreed, no."

"Is Ron gay?"

"Nope."

“Well, this seems dull.”

“Just you watch. Opening night, just you watch. I’m going to make the whole audience squirm in their seats.”

Tessa had some weed. She knows I don’t. And Skyler doesn’t. I asked her to smoke downwind and on the next ledge over.

Interesting. Wonder what “grass/no-grass” means to a teen’s reputation. I could see how you could flaunt it for pride, either way, or be lame, either way. That’s a four-vector flare-up. It wouldn’t affect my decision, but it might be a culture meme for me to write about.

I like sensing the sun move over the sky. In this magical place, it changes the fantastic shadows in the rock dells. After exploring this formation for half an hour, we decided to try another one about three hundred feet to the south, and chattered all the way there about school, clothes, and music. I grabbed two fine tunes from Tessa’s phone.

At the base of the next rocks, a text arrived. I stepped aside. In a moment, my eyes rose to the blue sky. It was really, really blue.

The new rock formation was lower, but intriguing, with many vertical-thrust and cracked boulders. It was so disturbed and chaotic, it was easy to scramble up. We stopped again, near the top, for refreshments.

“You sure?” asked Tessa when she got ready to smoke again, gesturing an offer to me. I gave her a new variant of my silent treatment, “WTF Ya Doin?”

She shrugged and maneuvered away to another boulder, untouched by my challenge. Apparently.

48 Sunday, November 20, 2016

Momma outdid herself today. Honestly, that’s the best meal I’ve ever had in my life. Both she and I are happy. Happiness. In spite of

a lot of crap coming down, we are both happy women, and that counts. It must count. Happiness goes in the food.

That's right, I am a woman, a young woman of sixteen. To dinner I wore my new trend: long long skirt to the ground, blue-green, and a white camisole top that definitely admits I am a woman.

The enchiladas of roasted marinated pork with cilantro and green chilies, the grilled-charred flour and corn tortillas from scratch, the salsa from roasted Roma and heirloom tomatoes from her garden picked ripe, mashed up with garlic, onion, fresh and smoked chilies, and more cilantro, in the eighty-year-old black stone molcajete she inherited from her mom's mom, rice and black beans cooked just the way I like them, and a bowl of pickled vegetables – I like the carrots – plus a spectacular flan at the end ... I only have one word for this meal:

OhMyGod!

And one beer.

In my pocket, a \$500 check, made out to Sara Tillinghast. Five. Hundred. Dollars. It's not signed, yet.

"There are conditions," said Dada.

"Okay."

"You can't just spend it," said Momma. "That would be a different kind of gift. Probably for a lot less."

I laughed. My eyes were glowing.

Father said, "It must be spent for technology that will help you go faster. That is what you requested, right?"

"Yes, Father. I so need to go faster."

"What is your target?"

"It's an iPhone 7 Plus, with a lot of storage. That's what I need." How much is it?"

"About \$1200."

"*Madre de Dios*," said Mom.

“For a phone.”

“Yes, Dad, for a phone. But it’s way more than a phone.”

“Can you write a great novel on it?”

“Yes.”

They laughed, thinking I was kidding. I have a Bluetooth keyboard and mouse, and Microsoft Word mobile. The iPhone7 Plus screen is huge, so I ain’t kiddin’. But actually, it’s not for writing, this phone. It’s for Snapping, chatting, email, directions, look-ups, curiosity surfing, and contact with everyone in the world. And of course, for music. And for witnessing reality with video. I might even speak with someone on it, with the included telephone. All of that is the foundation of writing for me.

They said I have to come up with the rest of the money on my own before they’ll officially release the \$500 check. I am going to try getting the phone for way less than \$1200, with a 2-year talk/text/data plan, but I don’t have credit, so that might require parental tappable. I’ve heard that you can get the phone with a plan by paying off half the device at the start, even with little credit on file.

At the end of the party, it was lovely. About loving, I mean. Even Ben admitted he loved me! It came out of the little devil reluctantly, but without me coaxing it. That was absolutely cool. Maria gushed it three times and she kept asking me what sixteen as a girl feels like. After they went to bed, Thomas, Elena, and I spent a short sentimental time remembering things, laughing, and having another go-round of that flan.

It was scrumptious, creamy, and smooth, with bittersweet burnt sugar syrup on top.

Likewise ... the flan.

49 Monday, November 21, 2016

There is no God.

Not only do I mean it, but I'm mean. Mad Angry Mean.

Okay, okay, okay, I never say "there is no God," and I can't prove there is no God, and I'm screaming to the walls I don't believe in God, but I don't care. I'm dialing up theoretical God, dragging him across the carpet to do some explaining, and then annihilating his existence, because I am angry. Again.

Yesterday, Sunday, in four different incidents, four Law Enforcement Officers were shot, with one of them killed. Killed dead. Shot dead. Deliberately assassinated in cold blood. Just like the two officers in Des Moines were murdered in cold blood at the beginning of November.

Since Gil Vega and Lesley Zerebny were killed a few miles from here on October 8th, fourteen law enforcement agents have been killed by gunfire in this nation. That's over one per day on average. The total for all of 2016 is 59. It's accelerating.

What the fuck.

I am being kind to God by only refusing his existence. If I really were mean, I'd make him be real, then beat him down for allowing this insanity.

Sara: shut up about God. Enough. Let the theists deal with "God and The Problem of Evil." If you don't believe in Him, you have no right to blame Him.

The fault, dear girl, is not in God, but in ourselves.

1) San Antonio, Texas

Officer Benjamin Marconi deliberately killed. Assassinated.

After pulling a car over for a traffic infraction, Officer Marconi was in his vehicle writing a ticket when a third vehicle pulled up behind him. The suspect got out of his car, approached the

passenger side window and shot the officer in the head. He then reached into the vehicle and shot the officer a second time. Police Chief William McManus said the “uniform was the target” in the murder.

2) Gladstone, Missouri

Officer stopped a vehicle for a traffic violation. A passenger ran from the vehicle. Officers pursued. During the struggle, the suspect, later identified by police as 18-year-old Jacob C. Stevens, brandished a handgun, shots were fired and Stevens was killed.

The injured officer underwent surgery and is expected to make a full recovery following rehab.

3) South St. Louis, Missouri

Police sergeant shot. Around 7:30 p.m. Sunday suspect pulled alongside the officer's marked car and fired, hitting him twice in his face. He will recover from his wounds. St. Louis city officers will have two officers per squad car for the time being.

Later, investigators tracked down the suspect as he was riding in a friend's car, which officers attempted to pull over, according to police. The gunman darted from the car, firing once at police, before officers returned fire, killing the suspect. A pistol with a high-capacity magazine was recovered from the scene.

Authorities did not identify the suspect, but St. Louis Police Chief Sam Dotson said the man was implicated in multiple robberies, a carjacking and a potential homicide. It's likely, Dotson said, that the suspect fired at the police officer Sunday night out of fear of being recognized as a suspect in the string of crimes.

"This officer was not trying to pull this car over," Dotson said. "He was driving down the road and was ambushed."

The wounded officer's gun was in his holster during the shooting, and the veteran sergeant and married father of three told police he

saw a muzzle flash to his left and felt the glass window shatter against him.

The officer is in critical but stable condition.

4) Sanibel, Florida

Officer shot during a traffic stop, not fatal. Suspect taken into custody. Just before 8 p.m. Sunday, an officer was working a traffic stop when a man drove by and opened fire, according to a police statement.

The suspect then drove to his home in The Dunes on Sanibel Island, a country club community, where he engaged police in a shootout before being taken into custody, police said. This is yet another unprovoked ambush of a law enforcement officer, with no provocation.

50 Tuesday, November 22, 2016

Kevin came in through the library door. I'd already been there a minute, set up my laptop and pretended to work, scribbling on a yellow pad. I had not seen him in five days. Since.

I almost stood up. That might have been the start of an incident in public. The library was jammed. Someday, I might regret I didn't, looking back.

We didn't even say hi. Except we said it with eyes across the table. He looked so fine to me. His hair has grown slightly, his brown hair that matches his eyes. His quirky nose and wide mouth.

I had difficulty not staring at his mouth.

He's just so ... boy. I am girl, thirsty for boy.

"I read Sonnet 22."

"Really," he said.

"Can you guess my attitude?"

“You agree with Miss Browning.”

I nodded slowly three times.

“Even with ‘With darkness and the death-hour rounding it?’”

I nodded again. “There’s death all around.”

“You’re not going goth on me, Sara, are you?”

I love how he says my name. “I bought some black nail polish.”

“Whoa.”

“Evanescence.” I pushed my phone towards him across the table.

“Whoa.”

I was bursting to either tell Kevin to ‘go slow’ or ‘go faster’ and to set up rules and boundaries and then to break them. Not to mention barely able to not jump over the table onto his lovely self. Barely, I shut it down.

James, our favorite librarian, appeared at the side of the table. He didn’t have to say a word, signaling his disapproval of our vocals with a hand on hip and a cold stare. I grabbed my yellow pad.

“Ask me on a date,” I scribbled.

He took the pen out of my hand.

“I was going to. You’ve ruined my moment.”

“Shit,” I wrote.

51 Wednesday, November 23, 2016

Okay, so last week Mike Pence goes to see the play *Hamilton*. He is booed by the crowd even before the play begins. The rap music and the drama unfold. The cast is purposefully diverse, racially, and ethnically. The music is a mix of gospel, rock, pop, showtunes, and especially rap. My opinion is, you think it’s about Hamilton and Burr and the Founding of America, but the take-away from the actual staging is: a hurrah for modern social justice.

At the end, as the audience is filing out, Mike Pence reaches the back of the theater, and one of the cast members, Brandon Victor

Dixon, addresses him from the stage, with a “hope” that Pence will show sensitivity and inclusion as Vice President “of all of us.” To many it seemed a fair, justified, proud challenge, with cheering in the audience and around the world when it went viral. To others in America it feels preachy and superior, even if cloaked in politeness, as if translated as: “Mr. Pence, we’ve got you nailed as an absolutely vile racist, sexist, and homophobic person, and you should shut that down as Vice-President. We’re watching you.”

Skyler, Winston, and I had a fight over it at Starbucks after play practice. *Kiss Me Kate* opens Saturday. I had stayed late to do some research on cell phone plans on the library computer.

Skyler and Win are all thumbs up for Lin-Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton*’s creator, and the overall thrust of the show itself. I am the dubious one.

“I don’t think *Hamilton* is entertainment at all. There’s no way a theater play about the actual concepts of the Founding would become a gigantic smash hit by entertaining tourists and the theater crowd in New York City.”

“There was a musical about it, back in the 1960s, called *1776*,” said Winston.

“Really?”

“We checked it out. Boring. It was just about Adams convincing all the states to vote for Independence. Can you imagine a musical about that?”

“It wasn’t dark sarcasm?”

“No.”

“And you think that subject is boring? I’m going to look that up that play.”

Win is my friend, but that’s another down-vote on the thrust of the Revolution.

“You’re wrong about *Hamilton*,” said Skyler, “it’s entertainment. Just not the way shows usually entertain.”

“What do you mean?”

Skyler smiled, not innocently. “The entertainment is the fun of dancing in the aisles with comrades, everyone full of Progressive righteousness. It’s party-time for our tribe. We’re Occupying Broadway.” It shocked me that WhiteOut understands this, and has no problem admitting it. She’s proud of it. She has the album on her phone, and the lyrics.

Winston saw the show over the summer in New York City. “It’s true. Everyone was filled up with holy goodness. We were high on social justice. Anything that can change America is good.”

“The message is in the racial makeup of the cast?”

“Yes,” he said, “it is glaring. It’s in your face, dude. A bitter, bold brown or black man stealing the show as the enemy of one of the Founders ...” Winston looked at both of us, slowly. “Then he kills him.”

“It’s a slap in the face to people who love America, and Jefferson and the other Founders?”

“Yes,” he said. “A giant slap. Washington, Jefferson, and Madison were slaveholders and elites. Alexander Hamilton was not an elite. He’s the underdog, the ghetto kid, the uppity street gangsta.”

“Hamilton owned slaves, Winston.” Got him!

“No.”

“Yes, he did. And he cheated on his wife.”

“All’s fair. With anything that can change America.”

“Even massive spin and outright propaganda?”

“All’s fair.”

Hmm. The self-congratulatory hubris in the show, the wallowing in anti-Jefferson/Madison memes, and the ride-along of my two friends, should throw off a ton of rage in me, since I am a big fan of the Founders and the original idea of America, and I don’t like the

hectoring of an audience that came for entertainment, even if some welcome the hectoring. But, nope. No rage. Anything that makes America better about race is good. And my Founder heroes did own slaves, after all. I am crawling reluctantly on board with my friends. One more shot, though ...

“I read where there is a lot of spin to make Madison and Jefferson look evil and corrupt. Not just spin, but lies.”

“They are the symbols for the old white ways, so fair game,” said Win.

“But you admit the spin about them is not factual, that it’s fake?”

“Hey,” said Winston, “I’m waiting for it to be twisted. Alexander Hamilton was probably bi, you know.”

I had never heard that, ever. Dubious. He had sixteen or twenty-eight kids, or whatever.

“I’ll play Burr and turn the whole thing into a love spat between two closet boys. Back then you could be put to death, you know.”

“So, you both give the show thumbs up for calling out Mike Pence like that?”

“Yes,” they said, together.

Today, Donald Trump phoned the Marconi family in Texas to express condolences for their son, the police officer deliberately assassinated Sunday. Trump did not stage the call as a publicity stunt. The event was posted by a member of the family in San Antonio. Trump’s camp won’t even confirm the call.

I allow a smidgen of hope to grow in my heart. Not for the man, Donald Trump, but for the general possibility that the goodness in America will ooze out of the walls and smother the sickness.

52 Thursday, November 24, 2016

Yesterday's 'smidgen of hope' is gone. Thanksgiving? It will be a challenge to stay thankful today.

- 1) In Detroit, Wayne State University Police K9 Officer Collin Rose was shot and killed yesterday afternoon, attempting to interact with a homeless man on the streets just outside the school. This was not an assassination of the uniform, but rather a killing of authority by a resisting person who should not have possession of a firearm.
- 2) In Chicago, a 19-year-old black man, Kajuan Raye, was shot and killed by a police officer during a three-block chase on foot near an ongoing crime scene. It is not clear if Raye was involved in that crime. The officer claims Raye pointed a gun at him twice during the pursuit, but no gun has been found. Two sides of character are claimed for Kajuan, a "fun-loving and happy kid who had a bright future," his family said, 'someone immersed in guns and gangs,' said others.
- 3) In Texas, after a 30-hour manhunt, police arrested Otis Tyrone McKane, 31, who is accused of killing Officer Benjamin Marconi in San Antonio, Texas. He told reporters he "lashed out at somebody who didn't deserve it" due to an ongoing custody battle for his son. "I've been through several custody battles, and I was upset at the situation I was in, and I lashed out at someone who didn't deserve it," McKane said. This excuse does not help Officer Benjamin Marconi; he is still dead.

Good things happened today, too. Turkey with family at Aunt Ann's in Riverside. Certain texts. Etcetera. I don't want to talk about them.

53 Friday, November 25, 2016

After the final full-dress rehearsal for *Kiss Me Kate*, Kevin and I waited outside the auditorium stage door room like two groupies. We have it clear: this is not a date. We are hanging. The date is elsewhere. Else-when.

Also, Tessa is elsewhere tonight, at a place where basketballs are bouncing.

Skyler and Winston came racing around the corner, all lit up. Their faces were red from removal of heavy stage makeup. All of us started talking at once, and hugging. The post-show adrenaline rush is infectious. Skyler and I were screeching like girls.

"That is some complicated play," said Kevin.

"Yes," said Win and WhiteOut together.

"Kev and I are wondering about the ending."

"Oh cripe," said Win, "everyone wants to talk about that song." The song is Lilli/Kate scolding all other women for not surrendering to their husbands. Holy shit. (I mean: Yikes!)

Skyler stuck out her chest and grew an inch taller. That was dramatic, like a diva.

"I am all over it. I am in control of that song. I've got it twisted and spun, I'm loyal to men, Shakespeare, Cole Porter, and Lilli. And I am a warrior for all my sisters on the planet."

We went to dinner together at Casa Blanca in Desert Hot Springs, thrashing out the play, with the tides of sex vs sex washing over each other.

“What’s your favorite line in one of the songs?”

“You know the song, ‘I Hate Men?’”

“Yes, you were hilarious, Sky.”

“The line is mocking the athletic type he-man. ‘He may have hair upon his chest, but sister so does Lassie’,” she sang in full voice.

Winston laughed the loudest. When it died down, we all saw him tug at the collar of his tee shirt and look down inside.

“Not a one.”

Bedlam.

“You don’t hate us men, do you?” asked Kevin when our laughter subsided.

Skyler took a long pull on her Diet Coke. She took her time.

“I’m a virgin who does not want to be one too much longer.”

“Wow.”

“I like men. I see boys, who can be so gross and infantile, and men with their stupid faults, but not all of them are idiots. So, okay, I sure like men. In my ... what do you call it?”

“Your geegee.”

She sighed deeply. “That’s why I couldn’t twist the song all the way into feminist ball-breaking, which could be done, you could turn *Kiss Me Kate* upside-down. So, I put irony in.”

“How would you paraphrase the irony?”

“Women do want to surrender, but from on top. And on bottom. We want to surrender, while not surrendering, while surrendering. It’s okay that men know that we know they are not dominant. And that they are. We want them to think both.”

Kevin was clearly impressed. “For a virgin, you know a lot.”

“Miss Branigan, Cole Porter and William Shakespeare taught me all that. I admit it, it’s all theoretical for me, because of never having gone to the mattresses with a guy, literally and metaphorically.”

Miss Branigan is the faculty person overseeing the production. She's a feminist. It's no secret that while she does not necessarily hate men, her dates are not them.

I raised my eyebrows at Skyler.

"The other ending."

She knew what I meant. She smiled.

"Didn't I tell you I'd make the whole audience tingle and squirm in their seats? Did you feel that kiss at the end?"

"Yes," said Kevin and I at the same time. Just a tiny bit too strong.

The other two stopped breathing. Their eyes went from Kev to me and back. Three times.

"Oh," said Winston, quietly.

Kevin and I were so determined that this evening at the *Kiss Me* dress rehearsal was not a date, the impulse to end it like one could not arise. It was cute we didn't have to actually say "this isn't a date," we just acted like we were only hanging out. We jabbered all the way to my driveway, I jumped out of the car and ran into the house.

Dada was awake. I gave him a short description of the play and the friends. He asked if I wanted anything to eat.

No thanks, Father. Your daughter is full.

I took a shortcut from the living room to my bedroom, out onto the patio and around to the back door. The tamarisk trees were sighing again.

I didn't bother with pajamas. I slipped under the sheets, full of giggles, my legs thrashing the covers in excitement. Then, in the dark, my smile faded. I wasn't giggling any more. One thing filled my imagination the entire time touching, even at the scrumptious, splendid, shuddering end of it.

He kissing me. Just that.

54 Saturday, November 26, 2016

Mike Pence is about to become the Vice President. I browsed through about six websites, making a list of his positions.

Spence is a Conservative. He calls himself that, specifically, and according to both my history teacher and my dad, that's what he is, a Conservative.

He thinks marriage must be between a man and a woman, morally and legally, and supports laws and amendments for that. He wants to stop funding for Planned Parenthood because it promotes abortion, but supports taxpayer funding for conversion therapy to shock the gay out of gays.

He opposed President Obama's transgender bathroom directive, which allowed us to choose public bathrooms according to how we identify, not what's on our birth certificate. My birth certificate says I am a girl. I didn't sign it, and it doesn't guarantee I'll always be a girl. Things change!

He wants to see Roe vs Wade tossed on "the ash heap of history."

He wants to allow businesses and individuals to legally discriminate against anyone who offends their religious sensibilities.

He is on a mission to put these personal beliefs, his Christian-formed beliefs, into law. He is a person in government, involved in making laws, carrying them out, defending their implementation.

Mike Pence is comfortable with a moral belief system hostile to homosexuals, hostile to women owning their bodies, and only feels at home when the songs in the background are about God and Jesus, by bands that sing it the way he sings it. He wishes this background music were the tune of the land. He'll work to make it the law of the land.

Not one of my friends would dance to his tune. Nor I.

Here's what gets me furious. Conservatives have these strong moral stances. They are not comfortable with "the other." Yet they don't want to persuade people to have the same values as them, they want to force it, by passing laws to legalize Conservative beliefs. They don't care if doing so violates the freedom of individuals to believe as they wish to believe, and to interact as they want.

How is that not "thought control?"

Progressives do the same thing. They have strong moral stances about equality and fairness. Do they want to persuade? No, they want to pass laws to force their beliefs on others. And to penalize interactions they do not approve of.

Both sides would say "No, it's not that I want to put my personal beliefs into law. I want to put 'what's right' into law. I want to put 'the truth' into law."

Neither side operates out of the core idea of America. The idea in the Anthem.

Freedom.

I was messing around out by the future chicken coup, planning the next move. Dada had approved my budget, but then immediately insisted I immediately draw up a construction and occupancy timeline. Immediately.

Immediately? "Give me a break!"

"No, dear. No letup. Someone fully committed would not say that. What is your mindset?"

Sheesh. My favorite frustration swearword for this chicken-zit project reached the tip of my tongue. I held it in, barely.

"I'm all in, Father."

"Excellent." He turned and walked away.

55 Sunday, November 27, 2016

Last night. Oh. Oh.

At 7:00, Kevin got out of the car, went around and opened the passenger side. That is a date thing. I walked to him. I was wearing a floor-length decorated rose skirt, a white top with spaghetti straps, and my mom's diamond stud earrings. I had my hair behind my ears. I carried something called "a wrap," in case my shoulders got cold.

I didn't get in the car. I wanted to kiss.

"Sara, are your parents here? I don't see a car."

"No. The rest of the family all went to Riverside for a celebration. My uncle has his birthday that close to Thanksgiving, we always make sure to celebrate on the Saturday night right after."

"I wanted you to introduce me as your date.

"What?"

"How did you get out of it?"

"Kevin, don't worry."

He stared at me. Then, unbelievably ...

"Let's go there."

"Kevin ..."

"Just an appearance. So I can show your father who you are dating. And you can apologize to your Mom. Is it your mother's brother?"

I nodded, the horror of unreality freezing my tongue.

"Did it cause trouble, you staying here for this date?"

"I had a huge argument with my Mother. They almost made me cancel with you, because they wouldn't be here when you came. I had to play all my cards to get them to trust me."

"They're probably unhappy right now."

I shuddered, and nodded.

“We’re going there.”

Shocked. And thrilled. This boy just wrecked all my schemes. I was literally shaking in my shoes from the brilliance of it.

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Kevin Sprague, yes, we can make an appearance.”

“What are we getting him for his birthday?”

“Oh, for the love of Mike.”

I could not make conversation all the way out of the valley. I just gave him directions. On 60, I finally regained my wits.

“I’m going to call ahead.”

“No.”

“Kevin!”

“No.”

I began to cry. I didn’t hide it from him. I wanted him to see it. I deliberately sobbed. It was another ten miles before I tried again.

“How old are you?”

He took his eyes off the road just a split second to give me a piercing glance and a smile.

“I’m almost nineteen, Sara. How else do you think I can drive with you in the car at night?”

“That’s why I’m asking.”

“Nineteen in January. My year of provisional driving is over.”

“You’ve been that old the whole time we’ve been library-dating, and I didn’t ask?”

“Yes. And during that kiss.”

“I am an idiot.”

“I can’t believe you cry on the first date.”

We broke up, laughing. Really big laughing. Release. He clicked his phone, and his list began to play through the car’s sound. It was loud and rockin’, including a few tunes totally new to me. We seat-danced all the way to Riverside.

Kevin was in the living room, conversing with Father and talking sports with Ben. Freakin' bizarre. I was afraid Sir Thomas Tillinghast The Third was going to ask Kevin 'what are your intentions toward my daughter?' What's weirder, I'm terrified Kevin wouldn't blink, would deliver some horrifying line from a book, like a gentleman caller asking permission to woo. What a nightmare.

Momma got me alone in Aunt Ann's kitchen. No one could hear us.

"How old is he?"

"Eighteen. He's a senior."

"He looks older than that, Sara."

"Nineteen in January."

"Three years older than you. This is the moment when your mother looks right in your eye and wants the truth. Have you had sex with him?"

"No."

"Are you about to have sex with him?"

"Momma..."

"Sara?"

"Let me decide. I have to, Mother, I have to decide."

"You'll do that anyway. I am not going to forbid it. Just like I didn't forbid you to stop going to Mass with us, *Madre de Dios*, even though you are only sixteen years old.

"I've come of age."

"You read that phrase in a book. These choices for giving your virginity – no, you haven't come of age. Sex is not how you grow up."

"Oh cripe."

"Commit to not having sex now. Say it."

Can't I dream this up another way? Where Elena doesn't get wind of my plan, nothing stops me from going all the way, and only later

I tell her. ‘Oh gee, momma, we can’t lie about sex, can we, oh well, there’s no easy way to tell you this, but I am not a virgin anymore.’ Like that. Yes, you’re supposed to tell your mother after, not before!

“I have to keep this private, Mother. This is for me. At some point, I don’t tell you everything. Most girls wouldn’t put up with this conversation.”

She ignored that like her ears were damaged.

“I did wrong tonight, Sara. I should never have let you win that argument, let you stay home alone to be picked up by a man. Thomas and I should have been there to go eye to eye with him. But you manipulated the situation, knowing we would never be late for my brother’s birthday party. Ok, so, surprise, you came here. Okay. So. Are you ready for sex?”

I stopped breathing. Elena closed in.

“Are you ready to fuck this man tonight?”

A scream froze in my throat.

“Because he’s about to fuck you.”

“Momma!”

No No No. No way. She didn’t say that. She didn’t. No way.

Her gaze held me fast with rock-solid pride she’d put that picture on me. It flash-froze my heart. I knew she’d say it again if I tried to escape.

My momma conceived me in her body, pushed me out of her womb, fed me by her breasts, my beautiful mother, who just went Ice Queen to save her wild daughter. I am puny compared to that. A child.

Then my heart broke – I still have to defy her.

I tore my eyes from hers, went in Aunt Ann’s refrig and pulled out a peach Snapple. That is so bizarre, that she has Snapple.

I can’t believe my Momma said that. A mother said that to a daughter. I glanced over at her. Elena had not moved a muscle. Her

face said ‘yes, I said it.’ Despite the city-wide devastation from her giant f-bomb, she was not done, apparently.

“How did you find out his character? What do you know, other than your sex drive is all lit up by him? How many girls has he –”

“–Fucked?”

“Yes, Sara, how many? Is he going to share some random girl’s vagina biology with you? Are you on the pill? No, you’re not.”

“Stop.”

“Is this your mate? Is he in love with you?”

I gritted my teeth from the cruel speeches she’s putting on me. I can’t believe she said “random.” More than ever, I vowed to have sex as soon as I could get away from her. Even though, to my utter horror, there was a faint chance she was right.

“How old were you, Momma?”

She didn’t even blink.

“Does he love you?” she asked, almost a whisper.

Damn her, knowing my weak spot like that, and her fucking voice of reason shoving a knife in my raging libido. I felt the lust drain out. All my scrumptious girly heat, drained away, wasted. What an ugly cold world. Dull, with the dirty snow from ashes.

I stupidly respect Elena too much to charge out of the room, or to lie to her face, plus my stupid Momma is too smart.

“No, he’s not my mate forevermore, and maybe he doesn’t love me.”

“And you are underage and he is three years older and your hormones are raging. Sara, send him away now. You’ll go home with us. Next date, don’t be screaming hot when he picks you up. You didn’t flame out the fire, like I advised, before a date, did you?”

“No.”

“Call him in this kitchen and send him away.”

And get me to a nunnery. Where I can’t breed. I never believed in that line from Shakespeare until now.

Elena waited for me to end the drama, but she asked one more thing. “Why did you make him come here, if you just wanted to be alone with him and have sex tonight?”

“He made us drive here.”

“What?”

“He made me do it.”

“Sara, what’s wrong with that? It’s too nice. I’m reading the signs in Kevin, and believe me, he can read the signs in a girl. Something’s not right.”

My lower chakras began to warm up again. My scheming brain thawed out. Okay, the dreamy boy is sitting in the next room, and now my body is aching for him again, even in the middle of this epic fight, now if we could just escape this house ...

... but she’s right, there’s something wrong. Kevin must have seen my state, a girl with zero resistance, yet instead of making a move, he’s playing a game. He’s in the living room right now, faking.

I need to take over from all these fools.

“Mother. Really, this is the first date of my life. He’s acting like a gentleman. I can’t ruin my first date by going home in the middle of it with my mommy and little sister in the family car. You let me wear your earrings, you know.”

Elena’s eyes simmered. She was that close to ending persuasion and simply breaking my will over her knee. It would be her right, and, pathetically, I would not run away from home if she did.

Time to go big.

“Trust me, Momma.”

We stared at each other. Then she let go.

Kevin took me to La La Land. I don’t mean we went to the movies. He took me to where, in the movie, Mia and Sebastian sing and float and dance up into the stars, but IRL, at the Planetarium in

Griffith Park. We just made it to the last show, *Light of the Valkyries*, which was a guided discovery of the Northern Lights. I swear to God, we held hands in the movie show when all the lights were low.

“Next date, let’s go see *La La Land* at the movies,” he said. “It’s still playing around L.A.”

“No, I want to go scream my brains out with you, with that band Silverstein.”

I can’t remember anything else about that, because of the things that happened next. As latecomers, we had parked at the very back edge of the lot, where a row of trees arched over the blacktop, but now we’d lingered so long walking around the grounds of Griffith Observatory, looking at the lights of Los Angeles, his car sat lonely and dark under a eucalyptus tree as we walked to it. He held the door for me.

As he was about to put his key in the ignition, I stopped his hand. Instantly, oh, oh, oh, kissing, kissing, tender for three seconds and then both of us so hungry we kissed one kiss right into the next, with more and more rushing in, all of them hot and deep and wet, with me moaning from the thrill of a boy’s fingers in my hair at last.

Kevin climbed into my seat, spun me with his strength, pulling me on top of him. I melted into his arms, kissing, kissing, kissing. My heart exploded.

For a minute, two minutes, an hour, who knows, I let Kevin go wild with his mouth on mine, then arched my neck to make him kiss there. That is spectacular. I don’t know why. ‘Your wet mouth right there, along my neck, oh, just turn me into a giant puddle.’

Then his hand fit below my breast and moved over it to possess, and my hand slipped onto the front of his pants.

The next thing I remember was standing at the base of the eucalyptus tree. Its leaves were all over the ground and the hood of the car, and its strange canopy loomed over me.

“Sara ...”

I was breathing heavy. Heaving.

“Zero to sixty in four seconds.”

“You deserve to go fast,” he said.

“Why did you go so slow for a month, then?”

“It was worth it.”

“But now you want to go fast.”

“Yes. We have to. Right now.”

He took two steps and came right up close. If I threw my arms around his neck and we embraced, my breasts would truly be given to him, and his organ to me, against my skirt.

I turned away and danced aside. I put one hand on the tree to steady my electrified being. I closed my eyes. The hard thing I'd felt in my hand ... I saw us naked, saw it penetrating me, splitting me open. In slow motion, I imagined it pushing into my vagina.

With my face turned away from Kevin, I chose. I'll fear it, lust for it, let the delicious terror of it torment me, and take it in my body when I see love in the eyes of my partner. I want his heart to penetrate me.

As opposed to being a horny sixteen-year-old adolescent virgin squished in somewhere with a man whose true self I don't know, dubious birth control, and the seat belt buckles poking my ass.

I walked to the car, lifted the garment laying on the seat, and wrapped it around myself. I am not afraid. And I'm not that girl who goes numb and gets it over to get it over with. I'm a strong person who wants more.

I turned to Kevin to let him see the “no” in my eyes.

“Take me back to the desert now.”

56 Monday, November 28, 2016

I thanked Miss Corcoran this morning. Not for giving me the high mark, but for the note she wrote on my paper. She is urging me to go for it.

“I am angry about a lot of things.”

“Yes.”

“I’m not happy that I have to be angry all the time. It’s exhausting. I don’t want to be that girl, you know, a raging bitch. But it seems like being angry against things is my assignment. I hate guns and bigotry the most. I could get worn out, don’t you think?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Under your anger is something life-giving. If it were toxic or nihilistic, you wouldn’t write so positive. The positive about life and ideas is there in your essay, under the rage. That’s what got me on your side, Sara. Many fine writers are cynical. It is common. Cynical, jaded, nihilistic, *and* raging bitches. You aren’t cynical.”

“Well, right now the anger seems pretty dominant. Meanwhile, I just want to go swimming and read a funny book, and dance.”

“Instead, you have to be angry?”

“Yes.”

“You are angry about having to be angry?”

“Yes.”

“Write about that.”

Isabella showed up on time for our reading. I had a plan, but it was off-reg. I mean, I didn’t get permission.

“Isabella, did you ever learn how to sound out a word?”

“My teachers said that wasn’t the right way, and I didn’t need it.”

“So, when you see a word you don’t recognize, how do you learn it?”

“I can figure it out sometimes by context, by clues, especially the first letter. But if I look it up, sometimes I can’t read the definition. Usually I ask someone.”

“That’s getting embarrassing.”

She nodded.

“And the embarrassment keeps you from reading.”

She nodded.

“That won’t get you through International Baccalaureate.”

She shook her head, no.

Isabella’s first language is English. She’s completely at home in it, no accent, quite articulate. Her parents barely knew English when she reached the prime time to acquire reading. They did not want to let her grow up with Spanish only – they wanted her to Americanize. But they couldn’t help her learn to decode English. And at that point, the “whole language” philosophy of reading educators failed her.

“Getting a clue from the first letter is a tiny start at sounding out a word, but it’s not enough. You have to learn the whole skill.”

“That sounds too hard.”

“How much do you want to be able to read? You have a verbal vocabulary of thousands and thousands of words.”

“Yes.”

“So how much do you want to read, I mean really read, every one of those words, and not be dependent on other people.”

She asked some questions, and I made sure to not pressure her. I told her she didn’t have to give me an answer immediately.

However, Isabella got her grit going.

She promised to not tell anyone. I promised to teach her to read. Together, we went rogue.

57 Tuesday, November 29, 2016

We had discussion in History over the choices Donald Trump was making for his advisors. Most students were totally ignorant of it, until Mr. Adler made them look it up.

Cries of “racist” arose right away. Here we go, more contention over race. With such a large majority of Hispanic in this school, about 71%, the implication of “Trumpism” being built on anti-Latino, anti-immigration hate, was not subtle.

I said that “building the wall” was only a campaign flare, not a feasible or desirable project. In my opinion.

“So what,” said one guy in history class. “His people hate us, and he’ll go overboard. What’s he going to do, send out citizenship squads?”

“Yes,” said another dude.

That set off a verbal rumble.

Mr. Adler was eventually able to get the class to focus on one aspect of immigration, possibly the hottest one. The Dreamers. These are non-citizen, longtime residents up to age 30, with at least a high school diploma, or studying for one. They were brought in by undocumented parents, not born here, not citizens. Most were brought in as young children, and all they know is the U.S.A. and the English language is primary. Because of an executive order in 2012 by President Obama, they attend public school, have social security cards, work permits and driver’s licenses. They pay taxes on wages.

Once that was laid out for the class, there was a unanimous agreement by show of hands that these people should be given a track to citizenship.

“They are better citizens than people born into it,” said someone. “They don’t take it for granted, like born-citizens.”

“Some born citizens.” I wasn’t going to let that comment go total. “And they might or might not be good citizens and love this country. Individual Dreamers might be great, or they might be scum. Just like everywhere.”

A Trump supporter, Gina, repeated that Mr. Trump now says he’s only going after non-dreamer criminals, drug dealers, and unestablished fully illegal adults.

For Dreamers, two things prevent the fear from receding. First, the parents of these dreamers are not protected. Most do not have a diploma, and are not under the protection of the 2012 order. So, a dreamer might be given safety, only to see their parents deported. Second, President Trump and/or Congress would have to take proactive action on the dreamers, because the program has automatic expiration dates. And ... it could be deleted with an eraser, just as easily as it was enacted with a stroke of a pencil.

Hmm. 71% of our students at this school are of Hispanic lineage. Most are many-generation U.S. citizens, children of families living for a long time in the Coachella Valley. A few are here on temporary legal status, under their parent’s green cards. But you have to believe, a certain number of guys and girls in this very history class are registered Dreamers, or completely illegal.

“Mr. Atler,” said one frightened Hispanic boy, “isn’t anyone who got protection, and documentation, under the 2012 thing, aren’t they in a database now?”

“Yes. They are out of the shadow, and fully exposed.”

This sent a shudder through the room.

One girl sobbed.

58 Wednesday, November 30, 2016

At 12:45, Kevin and I walked into the library together. We are continuing our daily “project time.” In truth, we’ve been simply

reading, doing homework, and interacting occasionally through notes. There's no project.

We are friends without benefits. Monday, we agreed to that, clearly and specifically. I'm not mad at him for trying to go zero to sixty with me. He put his right foot on the gas pedal, but I slammed his shoe down with my left. I feel bad for him, because his "respect move" with my parents didn't get me to give in. Well ... I feel a tiny tiny bit bad for him.

Kevin is too old for me. I'm not a spotlight girl, a sophomore who attaches to a senior boy, and they are trophies for each other, and their grown-up sex life is proof of status and possession. And power.

More important than the three-year age gap, he's too far ahead of me. He's sexually active and fast, and I'm not ready. Saturday night, I found that out. And no, I'm not in love with him.

Kevin is about to attend UCLA for engineering and run track under scholarship, while I'm riding my bike around the dirt roads of Sky Valley. I found out why he's nineteen in high school. He was seriously ill for two years and could not attend. His chronology fell a year back.

He's so fine. I'll give myself to a boy, a man, as fine as or better than Kevin Sprague, but a person with whom I am equal. When I'm ready.

And I will forever hold close to my heart that supreme, epic, romantic, throbbing, first kiss of my life under the tamarisk trees.

"No!" Tessa's mouth dropped open.

"Yep."

"Because he's too old?"

"Well, yeah. And it's not right. I'm not ready."

"It's just sex. No big deal. What are you afraid of?"

Once more, I give my best friend the silent treatment. She must be disoriented, to say that to me. Whacked.

“Okay, okay. At least *I’m* having fun.”

I hardened my silent stance. We stared at each other for ten seconds.

“Sara, shut up with the lecture.”

I reduced the tension by opening a baggie with a cut-up apple in it. I paused to be sure ... yes, I’m certain of it: I’m not being morally judgmental on Tessa. I just didn’t like what she said and the way she said it, knowing my values.

“That wasn’t a lecture. I don’t go judgmental on you, Theresa Ann. Never, in ten years. I love you.”

She paused a moment. I could see her inside flow change direction.

“Okay. Sorry.”

“I’ve never shamed you for your choices.”

“What was that stare, then?”

“You miss out on a lot, Tessa, when you trivialize things that are important to me.”

“Your virginity?”

“I was ready to lose my virginity, but for me it’s not ‘just sex, no big deal.’ You absolutely know that. Seriously, we’ve talked about it so many times, how can you go totally blind to my morals?”

“Well, sex *is* no big deal. You make it some sacred act. You should have sex with Kevin, he’s older, yes. He probably knows what he’s doing. He’ll be your teacher, to initiate you, you should be grateful to get him. Don’t fall in love, marry him, or be his girlfriend. Don’t do it. Just hang out with him, and everyone, and have sex with him. And with whomever. Welcome to the real world.”

I felt cold right down into my belly. This is the harsh rant of ‘there’s-no-such-love-bargain’ Tessa, but worse, she is judging me.

Not only did she make me wrong, she slapped me with a giant ‘should’ against my values.

I don’t have a moral judgement on teens who have casual sex. I don’t say “it’s wrong.” But I want more than hooking up. I want lovemaking. I don’t care if that makes me seem weird.

I love Tessa for her big heart and kickin’ brains. She has been loyal to me, like a warrior. I love her in spite of some things others would not forgive.

But she’s putting her world on me.

For the first time since the day we met, over ten years ago, in this instant, I felt something break between Tessa and me. It hurt.

59 Thursday, December 1, 2016

Thursday, a brigade of us went to the movies to see *Edge of Seventeen*. Eight girls and five guys. There were only three other people in the theater for the 4:30 showing, so we took over the place. At one point during the pre-pre-show, nearly everyone was Snapping. We kept getting each other’s snaps, re-snaps of our own, and an influx of snaps from a bunch of other teens who couldn’t join the party. When the request to shut off cell phones came on the screen, thirteen teens sent Snaps of that.

I imagined for a split second we’d break Snapchat, but considering the flow is nine thousand snaps per second, and eight billion video clips per day, my worry receded into the absurd.

So, this poor girl, Nadine. She’s already in trouble at age four, at the effect of her type-A personality brother, and not properly treasured by her nerved-out Mother. Her dad died.

Fast forward to junior year. Now she’s Hailee Steinfeld. It’s like I could see the character they were trying to construct, but they couldn’t quite get Hailee into her. They couldn’t get Haley Lu

Richardson into her character either. I don't think it's bad acting. Something was wrong with the writing and direction.

There's a lot of good will stored up for Hailee Steinfeld from "True Grit" and "Begin Again," so you are rooting for her, you know her character must surely be good deep down, but this film did not bring that home. They didn't give Nadine some non-self-absorbed transformative action which was damn difficult and painful, but which proved her goodness.

We had a howlin' time anyway. Luckily, the other kids in the theater were just as disrespectful of the rules, so the whole thing got vocal. Nadine made so many mistakes, it got ridiculous, and we all started to chant "Don't do it, girl, don't do it, girl."

When she got in the car with her dreamboat, after sexting him, we really screamed. Naturally, it went way wrong. Every one of us knew she wouldn't go through with it. I loved the cute dress she wore. That was spectacular, but so so so short. Wow.

My heart caught in my throat, though. She nearly had virgin sex with an older guy in the front seat of a car. With the seat belt buckle poking her ass. This is art getting too close to my personal reality!

Nadine is way damaged. You can't fault a damaged girl for acting damaged. Someone did it to her. So our hearts went out to her, at least from us girls. The guys with us just snickered the whole time.

Naturally, our colorful group of 5 Latin, 2 black, and 2 white, and four mongrels including me, noticed that, except for one token Asian, the film was completely white. That received our scorn.

'Someone did it to you.' I'm not sure why, but that phrase keeps cropping up.

In my loquacious inner discourse. In my febrile purple blathering. Oh, man, I'm leaking brain matter. I need to go home and write. Hopefully something better than this film.

60 Friday, December 2, 2016

Reading about one of the young black men shot dead recently by police, I got an insight.

Police approach a youth of any race. The car is suspicious, or there is a manhunt going on and the youth fits the description, or the officer sees the boy acting out or acting drugged.

The officer determines that an order to “stop and stand” is needed. The youth takes off running. Sometimes they make a gesture that could be construed as going for a gun. Sometimes they have a weapon, sometimes not.

Given valid probable cause, the officer had responsibility and authority to issue the “stand” order. Now, he has responsibility to stop the flight, because the flight itself escalates the probable cause. The officer is supposed to make all attempts to force a halt short of gunshots, but sometimes fails with a Taser or other deterrence. Then, shots, and sometimes, death.

Here’s the insight: The boy I read about today died because he ran from authority. Period. This boy’s mom says he was afraid of the police. He’s never been in trouble, no record. He didn’t commit a crime, he didn’t have a weapon. Yet, where normal respect for due authority should have kicked in, fear and loathing of authority overwhelmed him. He ran. The police could not know if he was innocent or not. He acted like a guilty person. They were duty-bound to chase and apprehend him.

We could probably heal this problem by training young people to respect proper authority. There ought to be proactive, specific, high-sensitive training for the civic duty to stand and obey when so ordered by law enforcement. Parents should get their children around police in non-critical moments, for familiarization and to defuse the fear.

However, two obstacles:

- 1) Many social justice warriors are teaching youth that the police are agents of oppression, fascist brutes, and the front for institutional racism which props up hate-worthy capitalism. If this infects a young person, he is not exactly eager to perform his 'civic duty' to stop and stand.
- 2) Police over-react. They anticipate the person not obeying. They issue their commands too harshly. They put power and contempt in it. The person feels it and hears it.

The worst is if the officer is a bigot, because his hate and power lust are obvious in his voice and manner. He is corrupt because he has the hate in the first place, and corrupt because he exercises no restraint in projecting it. He's issuing hate from the barrel of a gun. No wonder some innocent young men run.

Just as we should develop a citizen training to halt when a stop is issued, we should develop tests and protocols to drive all bigots out of law enforcement, and never hire new ones, plus training for officers to issue the halt fairly and without contempt.

Open issues:

Where are the parents? How did they allow their son to carry such fear? Why did they not teach him to instinctively stop, no matter what? Especially the father.

Body-worn video. It's not just for collection of data. I read a study that body-cameras actually prevent escalation during police-public interactions, whether abusive behavior *toward* police or unnecessary use-of-force *by* police. Maybe there should be a button right next to the camera, which the officer presses if the encounter escalates, that electronically and loudly broadcasts "Camera on. Halt and cease resistance." Automatically turns on the camera when the officers draws a weapon.

Better tools. There must be a better way to forcibly stop a fleeing suspect without shooting him in the back. Figure it out, for Pete's sake.

Review of all stops. With the assistance of body camera footage, all stops ought to be reviewed. Not just lethal stops, all stops. This will aid in detecting and deterring bad police behavior, and on the other hand reinforce proper protocol.

61 Saturday, December 3, 2016

Uh-oh.

I watched a replay of the entire Cincinnati victory-tour speech of Donald Trump. Dada sat right next to me. Momma floated in and out of the room, never sitting down. The thing that's making me say uh-oh, is that I didn't get revolted. I didn't run away. I was all-in on more than half of his positions.

At one point, Mom made a rapid-fire rant in Spanish. Every day I pick up more and more, but I'll never talk that fast. I believe she said "take away women's rights and I'll grab your crotch with Habañero pepper on my hands."

I see this guy, this rude, small-vocabulary, outlandish-looking, misogynist person, who ridicules his enemies when they are bleeding, and the verdict for Miss Sara Tillinghast has to be thumbs way way down. Right?

But what if he manages to do some things right, by luck?

"End illegal immigration forever." Yes!

If that means also strengthening our valuation of incoming people from all over the world, I am for it. Blast away the log-jam currently holding back legal immigration. Create a powerful guest worker program, yes. Abundant green cards for the citizenship-bound, yes. That's what "open borders" should actually mean.

And it should not mean ruthlessly deporting all who are already here. Mr. Trump, make good on your promise to go after the criminals please, put in place huge deterrence for new illegal entry, then strike a deal for the dreamers and others.

Create generous legal immigration, and destroy illegal immigration forever.

The prospect of this taking place soon gives me freedom goosebumps.

62 Sunday, December 4, 2016

“Will coyotes get them?” asked Maria.

“We’re making the chickens’ fenced yard strong, Maria. They need to walk around, so they need this yard. It’s called ‘a run’.”

She and I were marking the places in the desert ground for the others to drill for fence posts. She was learning to measure distances.

I based the design of everything on much internet research, plus a visit to another family two miles down Dillion Road who have chickens. That was an interesting encounter.

“When they can go outside and peck the ground, that’s called free range.”

“Oh. Why do they peck?”

“They get tiny tiny insects and plant parts, and they need a little sand to help grind.”

We’re getting very close to pouring the concrete slab. I have a contractor for the stuff, and a price, and advice. We don’t need to worry about frost heave, but we’re putting down gravel, and digging an 8-inch deep and wide trench all the way around. The pour will go down in there, to create a footing for a cement block wall.

There was a raucous argument over whether to build the swamp cooler or buy one. We don’t have to decide now, because it’s winter.

We still have a long way to go to build the walls, nest-boxes, and perches.

Anyway, chickens.

We had a lovely Sunday dinner outside on the patio, Dada grilling steak, and a salad with spectacular tomatoes. Momma and I sat in a corner later, and I took her rant. She is angrier and sadder than ever about Donald Trump. I am with her on much of it, but not all.

Ben got in trouble at school. That's 7th grade, in the same middle school that tormented me. He's been skipping out before last period. I was in the dark when this boiled up, so I watched with fascination, praying it was not drugs or something.

"Where do you go?" asked Mother.

"Nowhere."

"Where do you go?"

She wore him down, not with terror, just with firmness, until Ben figured out that, A, he could not bullshit his way out of it, and B, he might live if he confessed.

"I hate that math teacher. I hate math, too. No adult cares about that, so I just get out of it. I know I'm going to fail math."

"Where do you go?"

"Nowhere."

It took a few more rounds of Momma applying tough-love, with Dada in reserve with a dark look on his face. Then Ben gave in. He has a house to go to on the edge of Sky Valley, with no parents home during the afternoon, where kids gathered for music. He said, "for music."

"Drugs?"

"No."

"Grass?"

"Not me. But I tried it once."

"Are you getting drunk?"

Ben paused. A look of defiance. “Yes, Mother, I got drunk once there, on beer. I vomited all over someone. It was not cool. Did you know that some guys think hurling is a sign of manhood? Don’t worry, I hated it.”

“Cigarettes?”

“No. They suck. I hate smoking.”

“A girl.”

Ben went silent, and no matter what Momma said, he would not tell us her name.

Ben is thirteen. I’m thinking of conning him into general discussion on sex, to make sure he does not get into serious physical trouble, or break a girl’s heart. Or vice versa, more likely. Ben is not cruel. I see that Father is now doubling down on Ben, with the talk. That’s crucial. But maybe I need to triple-down, as a girl and near-peer. Benjamin, oh man, only thirteen and activated on girls.

Then, a helpless feeling. Me? What can I tell him? A girl who makes it all the way to sixteen, never been kissed. I will not say I’m a “late bloomer.” I hate that scale, namely ridicule that you are not a real person if you aren’t sucking face with various at every party and you stay a virgin during teen years. Pressure. Pressure. Hey, I’ll fucking bloom when I am good and ready, so shut up.

And guess what, I already have a good sex life now! I’m thinking of printing up tee-shirts “Teens Need Orgasms” with the subtitle “ask me about masturbation.” I’d wear that shirt down the halls of Desert Academy at Sky Valley. Maybe.

I’m not saying Ben is having sex, or trying to have sex, at thirteen, but for a fact, at that middle school, with everyone age twelve to fourteen, sex happens. Anywhere from five to twenty percent of middle school students have had sexual intercourse, and just use your imagination what percentage are conducting ‘fooling around’ short of full intercourse. All the bases except home plate. Various “jobs.” I consider advanced fooling around and ‘jobs’ to be sex.

There is a high school in Los Angeles for pregnant/parenting teens, and in every district, school-based teen programs, including resources for middle schoolers.

This is reality around the world. Nature fires up reproduction early. It supplies the fever, with potent chemicals coursing through the brain and body, to make babies. Even if, by a miracle, thirteen-year-olds forestall conception or disease, this does not lessen the nitro to find pleasure. By the time they are high school seniors, in the USA, somewhere around 65% have had sexual intercourse.

63 Monday, December 5, 2016

Isabella and I met outside, away from everyone, past the far end of the soccer pitch. We went vocal.

“I’ve got a short story here, I’m reading it to you, but stopping often. To drill down on a word.”

“Okay.”

I handed her a large-print laminated sheet with most of the important vowel sounds and consonant blends.

“Don’t look at this card until I tell you.”

“Okay.”

I began to read, but stopped almost at once on the word “slide.” I made her go conscious on the sound of it.

“Say it again, slower.”

“Sul..I..d.”

“Just the first sound.”

“Sul.”

“Take out the ‘ul’, Isabella. Take the vowel out.”

She kept at it until the blend sound for ‘sl’ grew giant in her mind. It’s actually difficult to say it without having the vowel, so we rotated the SL through the vowel list, long and short. We even

focused on how the sound felt in the mouth, where her tongue rested, how her jaw felt. Then we found other words with it.

“Slip. Slave. Slacker. Sloppy. Slanted.”

“Those are all ‘s’ words,” she said.

“But the blend sound is stronger than the ‘s’ sound. It rings out as it leads right into the vowel. You’ve been taught to focus on the first letter sound, but a tremendous number of words have blends at the beginning. We’re going to bring the sound of the blends to your awareness.”

“Okay.”

“You’ve got the sound. Do you know what letters make it? Don’t look at the card.”

“I think it’s S. L.”

“Yes. Find it on the card.”

She did it easily.

“Anytime you hear a word starting with slay-slee-sleye-slow-slew, what will the first two letters be?”

“S.L.”

“Anytime you see a word on the page that begins with S.L., what will the sound be?”

She made the sound. We went around a few more times. Repetition is our friend.

“Do I have to do this with every sound on this card?”

“Yes.”

“Shit.”

“Okay, what is the blend sound that begins that word?”

Isabella laughed and shook her head.

“Trust me.”

She nodded.

Then we began to attack ‘sh’ using her chosen example word. It was hilarious.

64 Tuesday, December 6, 2016

Kevin sat down at our favorite table in the library. I gave him a vicious stare, 'IHateYou.'

"Oh."

"That's right, 'Oh'."

"Me and Alicia," he said.

"Yes." I wanted to correct his grammar with a stiletto.

"How did you find out?" he asked.

"Since you met her at my birthday party, right? Not just since we broke up last week."

"How did you find out?"

"I saw you smile at her an hour ago, then you touched her before she ducked into class. It wasn't Platonic. It was thanks-for-sex-last-night and see-ya-for-sex-again-later."

"How did you know last night was not our first time?"

"Kevin, answer me, you've been hooking up with Alicia since the night of my birthday party, after you kissed me, right?"

"I can't believe you're attacking me with Plato."

Bastard is denying nothing.

We got shushed by the librarian. I gathered up my things, gave Kevin a wicked glance, and stomped out.

I didn't stop stomping until out the back door, past a designated smoking area, and behind a couple trees, but I stayed viewable from the school door. No other students there.

Apparently that one meme was malfunctioning, 'when a woman is angry and marches out on you, you are supposed to follow her and apologize.'

So, Kevin is fucking Alicia.

That's right, I'm saying that word. I only unleash it during drama-worthy moments, so yes, Kevin is fucking Alicia. She's went after him at my birthday party, November 17th, and probably got him that

night. With a thud, I constructed that Kevin put me right out of his mind at the party. Not during the kiss, but right after. He and Alicia probably left my party and headed straight to bed somewhere, while I went all dreamy and swoony for him in the moonlight.

I wonder if she tasted my kiss on his lips.

Then, ten days after my birthday, he took me on a romantic date while hooking up with her in the background unbeknownst to me, (yes, that is my friggin' vocab amping up my rage) and tried to seal the deal with me in a parking lot. That planetarium date with me, with the parental-respect gambit, was just straight sexual seduction, because that's how you get into a virgin girl's pants. Kevin's error on his SaraConquest was that he has no experience being a respectful, good, one-girl boyfriend, and he messed up by trying too hard. And the Tillinghasts saw through him.

This could be my anger distorting reality, I admit. But probably not.

But what if Kevin's regular game is normal GenZ behavior, and I'm a fool for getting my feelings hurt over his girl-running. Could Tessa be right about sex, no big deal, welcome to the real world? Your mate is "whomever?"

Well, I am not going to be the one to end our daily time together in the library. Let him do it. But I am proud and haughty, and won't play the "hurt, bitter, angry" card. I'm going with "I don't care very much."

It occurred to my dark irony to start passing him notes with little hearts on it. Just to mess with his mind. He'd better watch out if he says he's disappointed I'm not happy for him over Alicia. That will not go over well with Sara Tillinghast.

Up until today, I was okay with my decision "no benefits, not a boyfriend" with Kevin. I felt my heat for him turn into nostalgia and recede into the background the instant I decided, under that eucalyptus tree. He and I turned into "just friends" during the drive

from the planetarium back to Sky Valley. Just library buddies. I visualized going to his track meets at UCLA next year. As a friend. My geegee was no longer on the make for Kevin Sprague.

Sheesh, considering how randy I'd been, like a crazed, voracious girl-tiger in heat, it's amazing how I tamed it just by facing reality under that tree. Momma's Ice Queen confrontation helped. Standing with my hand on that tree, visualizing, Elena's epic raw word for what was about to happen slammed into my brain. Thank you, Momma.

Kevin and I were not BF/GF, and I am not into casual sex. I would have been okay if he found a girl to get serious with. But the reality? Kevin is a player. He was having sex with some girly – probably more than one – when we met, then starting hooking up with Alicia the night of my birthday party, right through to last night, but continued seducing me all during November.

OMG, what if I did have my first time with him? Then to find out he was fucking x-number of others at the same time.

65 Wednesday, December 7, 2016







He drove to my house, parked, and strolled out onto the desert in back, seeing me standing there waiting. It was warm enough, even though it was December, to have this showdown outside.

“I’m surprised you showed up.”

“I care about our friendship.”

“Kevin, we don’t have a friendship. You broke the rules.”

“Really? We didn’t have any rules or agreement, just an attraction, a friendship, fun, and one kiss.”

“And nearly sex in your car.”

“Not quite.”

“You don’t think we had a relationship?”

“No.”

“And you didn’t think I wanted you as a boyfriend?”

“No.”

“I did. We had a four-week relationship. From Halloween until the planetarium. You were seducing me. Then I dumped you.”

“You didn’t dump me, because we didn’t have a relationship.”

“It was a girlfriend-boyfriend relationship on the way to sex exclusive.”

“You imagined that. You invented it. You assumed it.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Even so, it was real anyway, even if we didn’t say it out loud, because you went along with it. It got defaulted in.”

“No.”

“Yes. Right from the Halloween party, we had chemistry as Elizabeth Bennet meeting Beethoven, we spent time together in the library every day passing notes back and forth, we talked about important things. You played Moonlight Sonata for me. You comforted me and told me I had a beautiful heart, we shared music and went dancing, you went deep on my writing with me. Plus, that kiss on my birthday. Don’t tell me that was not a relationship, on the way to becoming lovers.”

“Lovers?”

“Yes, Kevin. Lovers. The default for human beings isn’t hooking up with this one and that one, with no feelings. We have souls we create. Souls for loving. The default is not sport fucking, or trophy, or drunken humping. It’s that we have attraction for a person, fall in love, have sex, and get mated, maybe married. We care and respect. We are lovers.”

“At sixteen?”

“When it starts, it starts, even if you are thirteen. It doesn’t mean you go all the way to sex, or married. Somewhere along the line. No matter, you always owe the person respect and honesty. You owe the truth.”

“I never lied to you, Sara.”

“While we were flirting and warming up, getting closer to sex every day, to my first time, meanwhile, you were having sex with someone else. That’s a lie.”

“How do you know what I was doing?”

“Weren’t you? Having sex with some dolly, even before you met Alicia at my birthday party? Going back, I even believe you were having sex with someone at the time of the Halloween party five weeks ago, even if she wasn’t there that night? Right? Weren’t you? Yet you started seducing me at that party, with your dreamy Beethoven?”

Kevin took a moment. He walked two steps closer.

“Actually, it *was* Alicia. You only think we met at your birthday party. We didn’t. She and I started two days before the Halloween party. It was fast that night. And another girl that week, too. And another since.”

“*What!?*”

“Alicia and I were dating before the Halloween party and your birthday party. All the way to now. You never asked me, and you were blind to it.”

“*What the fuck!*”

I stomped away. Possibly some ground-level predators died from my fierce march. This time, Kevin did chase me. We went another fifty feet out into the desert. I stopped and turned, ready to punch him.

“Don’t call that dating, Kevin. You are just fucking girls.”

“Here I am, taking your anger and crap, when I didn’t do anything wrong. This is the way it is. I don’t go steady. Alicia is one of the girls I have sex with.”

“Okay Kevin, the game you played on me makes me sick, it’s so fucked-up, I could hurl all over your shoes. Here’s my last speech to you, don’t interrupt.”

I took a deep breath, to bunch up my rage and control tears from bursting out.

“You are so street-wise? Then you knew I wasn’t a hook-up girl. You could easily have been honest and put me in the picture that you only hook up. You deliberately withheld, to string me out. To get me in bed as a naïve virgin who thinks she is getting a true boyfriend. You let me believe. Meanwhile, you are fucking all the girls in the school.”

I know my face was turning red. I needed to get to the end, fast.

“It’s humiliating. What a fool that makes me, Kevin. Manipulating an adolescent virgin for throw-away sex like that is not just disrespectful, it’s abusive. It’s one inch away from rape. Our friendship is over. Don’t meet me in the library. Don’t ever even say ‘hello’ to me. Ever.”

“Really. Drama.”

“Get out of here.” I pointed my dismissive fingers toward his car.

I saw a vile look come over him. He must have given up trying to still get me, because his mask of goodness faded away. Now his face said, ‘Game over, she wasted my time.’ Seeing that look put ice in my heart. He started away.

“Kevin.” He stopped and turned. “How many girls have you fucked who were virgins?”

I expected him to tell the truth. I don’t know why.

“Five.”

“How many did you have sex with after the first time?”

“Two.”

“I’m proud I smelled your act before you could get me.”

He spun and departed my vicinity. I watched him all the way to his car, strolling calm and collected. In two seconds, he roared away with attitude.

I stood there, out in my desert, absorbing the shock. How could I misjudge like that? Am I stupid? I can’t believe I didn’t check out Kevin’s reputation around school, or ask him directly. I must be a total idiot. I went blind and fell for a player, someone who pours the charm on a virgin, hides his agenda, plucks her in the night, and waltzes out to the next party looking for the next conquest. A tale as old as time.

In my mind’s eye, I’ll forever have the look of him, the tenderness of his Beethoven, and the melting melting melting of his mouth on mine. Oh Kevin, so beautiful. I see how far I let you infect me, because that’s where it hurts, scary far inside, I’m admitting for the first time.

And now, I have to hate you.

66 Thursday, December 8, 2016

Lunch with posse. Skyler looks happy, Tessa looks worried. I’m not positive, but I think I look older and wiser from the closure on my first failed love affair. I’m not telling them about it, yet. The adrenaline rush from yesterday’s confrontation has been flashing through me now and again, all day today, every time I think of it. I feel like a fool one minute, a heroine the next. And like I dodged a major fail.

Skyler laughed. It has been a week since her play closed. The reviews are in.

“I’m getting slammed by both sides. And Miss Branigan is taking more heat than I am. We expected it.”

“I saw the post on the school feminist blog.”

Yes, there is a feminist blog at this school.

“They are so stupid,” said Skyler. “There’s plenty of femme power in our interpretation. Would have been more, Miss Branigan would have pushed *Kiss Me Kate* all the way over into a bitch rant against men, but I calmed her down.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, she deliberately chose this musical, because of the war between the sexes in it, with the idea of a twisting the ending, so that Kate is faking surrender, in reality plotting to control him until he is dazed and confused, not knowing what hit him. A feminist deconstruction and revenge play. I said to her one day ‘stay calm and don’t totalize’.”

I laughed.

Tessa snorted. “That lesbian bitch.”

I gave her a look.

“That nice lady,” she said.

Tessa is dark today. She’s issuing the ugly on a hair-trigger basis. I don’t get it; sniping and acrimony are not like her. She’s pro-gay, so that snide remark about Miss Branigan is off kilter. It’s not T/T trouble. I saw her laughing and touching with Taye in the hall earlier today. They kissed when they parted. This must be something else coming up, since then.

Skyler ignored her snarking, and continued about the reviews.

“That feminist post said the final song, with Kate shaming women for not surrendering to men, that I reinforced the shame by playing it literally, flat, that I was on board with the Shrew getting Tamed by the rightness of male domination. That I supported unconditional surrender.”

“Which you didn’t”

“Which I didn’t. They chose to be blind to my tongue in cheek. So, I get no proper recognition from the feminists for wrecking the Hollywood slant.”

“Okay, yeah,” said Tessa, “I got the sarcasm. You put two or three levels of subtext in that song, right?”

“Yep,” said Skyler.

“Ladies, I know that you know I don’t mean you should surrender, but actually you should, but not really, only metaphorically, but surrender anyway, go for it, and let your man think he’s dominating so you get that thrill of being taken and obeying, but in reality you are always in control. Maybe.”

“Yes,” said WhiteOut, obviously impressed by Ink’s paraphrase. It was almost exactly the way Skyler had voiced it a while back.

“That sounds sly.” I am on the warpath about “sly.”

Tessa looked in my eyes with her darkness. “Survival.” We exchanged some non-verbal rhetoric. Then she turned to Skyler. “What about the other side.”

“One conservative woman I know was so disappointed in me, she scolded me right to my face, because I ruined the happy ending, mutilated the nice story, by cynically mocking wholesome female surrender.”

We all laughed.

“She caught the ambiguity I put in. Actually she said ‘the wholesome female surrender God intended’.”

“OhMyGod,” blurted Tessa.

“I wonder, did Shakespeare, Cole Porter, and Elizabeth Taylor all see that speech as literal, as straight, as girl should submit to boy? For real?”

“Only the Hollywood version of *Taming the Shrew*, with Liz Taylor,” said Skyler. “The others ... there’s an undercurrent of sarcasm. Kathryn Grayson, playing it in the film musical – she had a

strong streak of ‘not really’ in her smile at the end of the song, in my opinion. As if Kate is winking at everyone.”

“I don’t know,” said Tessa, “I’m ready to accuse Bill Shakespeare of wishful thinking that women will shut up, and male chauvinism that they should. For real.”

“Yikes. I wish we had Cole Porter here at this table.”

“Me too,” said Skyler. I want to know exactly how he interpreted this one line in that song, ‘may my hand do him ease’.”

“Wow.”

“That’s right from Shakespeare, and I wonder exactly what Bill meant by it, too.”

“...may my hand do him ease?”

“Yes,” said Skyler.

“Well,” said Tessa, “so here we are, three heterosexual women. What’s the real deal? Who’s on top?”

Tessa gave Skyler and me a moment to respond, but we didn’t. Then she put her cards on the table.

“On top in bed is one thing, you know, the sex position. On top in power? That’s a whole different story. Who’s in control of the relationship. Who wins. Wins arguments, and wins choices, all the way down to if sex will happen or not at a given moment. It’s a power struggle, with only one winner.

“Can’t it be equal?”

“No, Sara. Not really.”

“Can’t it be, sometimes me, sometimes you?”

“It can look like that for show, but not really.”

“Tess, I hate that you think boygirl is a struggle for power.”

“Reality.”

“Chickenshit.” I have not stopped believing in love, obviously. Even if cupid’s arrow is stuck between my shoulder blades at a bad angle, and there’s an infection.

“The real world,” she said.

“What about you and T'aye?”

“T'aye wears the pants.”

“Really.”

“I tried to put them on, but I want him as a boyfriend more than he wants me as a girlfriend.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Yes.”

“You mean he holds the threat of dumping you over your head, so he gets his way?”

Tessa went quiet for a moment.

“That makes it sound pretty bad.”

“I guess so!”

Tessa paused again. Her gaze seemed far away, her eyes squinted.

“Once it goes beyond hooking up, and you make it exclusive, the power game kicks in. A lot of teens are scared of the power game, that's why they just hook up and ditch. Not to mention, they've seen so much divorce and cheating, they are definitely negative on love and marriage.”

Tessa brought her gaze back to the table, then to me. “T'aye and I never say ‘I love you.’ We don't go on “date dates.” We are barely boyfriend/girlfriend. The only condition we have is sex-exclusive, so it's just one notch above hooking up. If one of us cheats, oh well, a lot of screaming, and that's the end of us. So, it's safe. It's emotional safe sex.”

“Because nothing's at stake.”

“Because nothing's at stake,” she said, slower than I.

Tess and Sky split the lunchroom early. I lingered, pulling up the school newspaper on my phone to check tomorrow's sports schedule. Something else in it caught my eye.

“What? What? What?”

Sara Tillinghast began to boil. Then she went running down the hall toward the office of the school newspaper.

67 Friday, December 9, 2016

A phone call at 6:41 a.m.

Tessa's dad, Warren Crandall.

"Sara?"

"Oh, Mr. Crandall."

"Sara, I have to talk fast. Tessa's in trouble here."

"Oh no. What is it?"

"She's not going to school. I have a critical meeting in L.A., and I've got to leave right now. I'll come back as soon as the meeting's over. Is your mother there?"

"Is she okay? What is it?"

"She'll be okay. She's not injured or anything. Can I speak to your mother?"

Two minutes later, with me wide-eyed with fear, Momma hung up from Warren after only listening.

"You and I are going there."

"Momma, what happened?"

She looked at me with so much compassion.

"Tessa's mother died."

I felt my heart break instantly for my friend.

"Oh no no no."

"Put your bike in the trunk of my car. We're going there."

I ran. Father was in the kitchen. I gave him the short version. I threw my bike in the trunk of Mother's car.

We found Tessa alone in the house, huddled in fetal position on her bed. Her face was raw from crying. All around, on the covers, were pictures of her mom.

"Dead dead dead dead dead."

"Oh no, Tessa, oh no, oh no no no no no. What happened?"

“Dead.”

I got on the bed and held her. She went through a shuddering, sobbing few minutes. Elena left us alone and went in the kitchen. When Tessa’s pitiful weeping relented, she looked at me with sorrow so deep.

“My mother is dead.”

“What happened?”

“I got a bizarre voice mail from her yesterday morning, just before lunch when we had that discussion about *Kiss Me*. It was a mess, I didn’t understand her words, I just heard pain. That made me sick all day. I called her twice later, after school, nothing.

“She was exhibiting her paintings in a three-day art show in San Francisco. She didn’t show up, on day two, yesterday. Her friend had a key and went in her apartment two hours ago. There was a note ranting on her depression medications, and why she had gone off them, they were ruining her art. Someone said something mean to her at the show the first day. There was an empty bottle for 18 pills of Dilaudid. Sara, my momma killed herself.”

68 Sat, December 10, 2016

Yesterday, it was my honor to support the grieving of my best friend in life. She let me.

Tessa and I lay on her bed for many minutes after I arrived, then a little food, then she went in the shower and got dressed. Elena and I did not initiate any talk, only responding when she needed it. That was not often; she had to physically and emotionally brace for waves of anguish that arrived. It was all she could do to let them wash over. I was not afraid when the pain bent her in half and she fell to her knees, once or twice, even if it rumbled through me, too.

There was also a jagged rage episode. Tessa broke a few things in her bedroom. She went ferocious with fury. Mother and I were not

afraid. We had witnessed the Joyce Crandall troubles for years, and in a way, we were not surprised. We both knew the magnitude of love Tessa carried for her mother, regardless of anything. Anything.

Warren, her dad, arrived back at the house around noon. He was making the decisions and plans. I kept looking in his face. He was hurting bad. Tessa did not have to do anything except pack for a day or two. They were booked on a 5:30 flight to San Francisco.

Warren said yes when I asked to stay with Tessa right up to their drive-away. Elena hugged Warren and poured her empathy over him, but she had to leave right after.

At one point, Tess fell asleep, and Warren and I talked.

“How much do you know?” he asked.

“Mostly, I’ve been shocked for six years that Tessa can love a mother who abandoned her like that.”

“Okay, Sara, that’s intense.”

“Tessa and I are intense. We are sisters. You might not have any idea how intense. Do you know how much it costs an eleven-year-old girl to be abandoned by her mother, yet still love her? I witnessed her bravery. She started telling me things when we were seven, and we weren’t afraid to say the truth, and feel it together.”

“What did you see?”

“You’re sure you want to hear this from a sixteen-year-old girl?”

He nodded.

“That the love was dying between you and Joyce, little by little, and what that was doing to Tessa. The day her momma left, when you were at work, she cried for hours, then froze rigid, then cried more. All I could do is say small things and hold her once in a while.”

Warren looked grim. We heard Tessa stirring in the next room.

“Sara, between Joyce and I, the love wasn’t small. It was big. We brought two babies into it. That made more. So, that’s what’s inside Tessa deep down, a joy and a love of love, a happy family. She grew

up with happiness all around. I couldn't stop Joyce from leaving, Sara. I couldn't. She left mentally and spiritually over six years, and when Tessa was eleven, she left us physically and moved to another city. When she left, my heart broke twice, once for my marriage, another for my children."

"You're right, Tessa has love about love. But there's a concrete wall around it."

"Does she know that you know that?"

I nodded.

"Can you do anything?"

"No. Except be there when it hurts and tempt her to heal. Maybe someday to risk it."

Warren could not speak after that. His pain had reached the surface. His daughter was damaged and the love of his life was dead.

In her room with the door closed, Tessa sat on the edge of the bed next to me. Her eyes were not as red, but the bones in her face seemed to be pressing from under, making her features stronger, daring the world. She launched our favorite existential salvo.

"Am I still alive?" Tessa asked.

"Yes."

"Better off dead?"

"No. Not."

"Why?"

I looked deep in her sad eyes.

"You love and fight. You bear the pain. We need you awake and alive, so alive. You are a warrior for the beautiful world God promised."

"You don't believe in God, Sara. What if there's no God?"

"We'll invent Him, hold his feet to the fire of hell until he makes good on that promise. Then let Him go."

"Okay," she said.

69 Sunday, December 11, 2016

Christmas is approaching. We do it up in the Tillinghast Sonoran Desert casa. Where the chance of snow is dubious. During dinner, discussion and plans about it. There will be a tree. And lights.

I promised that the floor of the chicken house would be poured before Christmas day.

“How long to chicks?” Maria keeps asking.

“Depends, Maria. Ask me on the first day of 2017. It won’t be before then.”

“I am afraid of snakes and scorpions.”

“Chickens can take care of scorpions. They eat them.”

“They do?”

“Crunch crunch crunch.”

“What about snakes getting the eggs.”

I answered a chain of at least five more Maria-upsets. I love her obsessing and battling.

Ben, serving jail time for bailing on math, has become laconic (cool new word, but I’m not going to mark my vocab feats anymore in this journal. I am a word-hound, period. It’s normal.) Ben feels once-removed from the family. I know he’s plotting to construct a new escape, to get to that girl, this time with more street-smarts. She’s not in his middle school. I haven’t spoken to him about girl respect and girl danger yet.

Tessa is in San Francisco, the capital city of the “other” California. My sympathetic heart is connected to her suffering, as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly knotted to a similar string in her. I’ve gotten one text so far, just a simple “I’m okay. Thank you, my sister.” That’s a lot, actually.

My mom and dad are like Adam and Amanda in that film. You never saw two people with opposing views of the world, not afraid

to fierce-fight each other, yet they are never cruel, and soon return to the affectionate. I see them kissing sometimes, and laughing all the time. Hey, forget about race, I am the child of a marriage mixed with a lot deeper challenges than race. They face those challenges. They are in love.

70 Monday, December 12, 2016

Oh. I forgot to write ... the film with Adam and Amanda is *Adam's Rib*. How do I know about this movie from thirty-seven generations back? Someone challenged me to screen it with him, because of a huge argument we got into about The National Anthem, which lead to a worse one, about the battle of the sexes, after lunch Thursday in the office of the school newspaper.

It is Rian.