

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

Like aDog

TARA JEPSEN



CITY LIGHTS

Sister Spit

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Cover photo by Tara Jepsen

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Jepsen, Tara, author.

Title: Like a dog / Tara Jepsen.

Description: San Francisco : City Lights Publishers, [2017] | Series: City Lights/sister spit

Identifiers: LCCN 2017022443 (print) | LCCN 2017032370 (ebook) | ISBN

9780872867352 | ISBN 9780872867345 (softcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Self-actualization (Psychology) in women—Fiction. |

Self-realization in women—Fiction. | Brothers and sisters—Fiction. |

Drug addicts—Fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Literary. | FICTION /

Contemporary Women. | FICTION / Coming of Age. | FICTION /

Family Life. |

GSAFD: Humorous fiction.

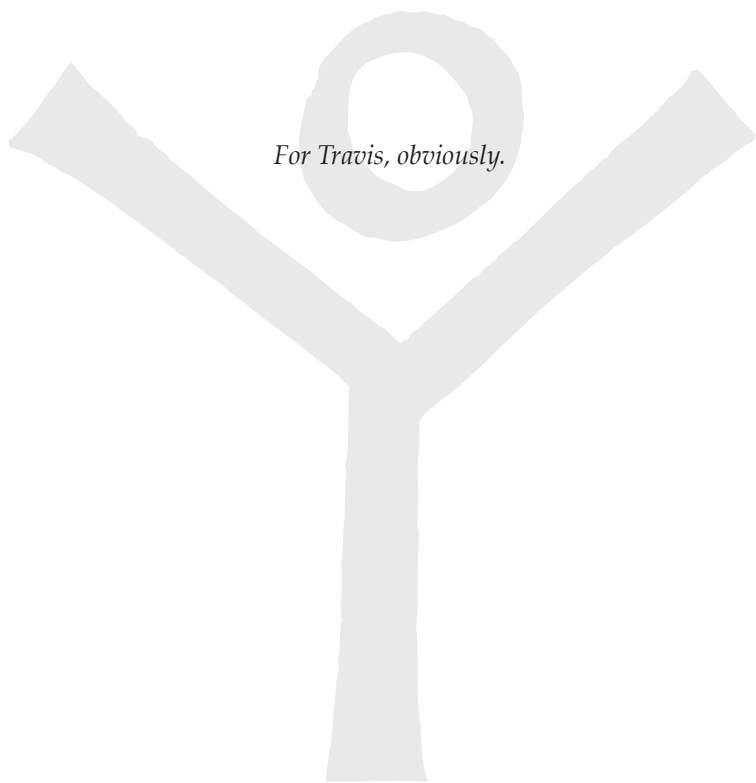
Classification: LCC PS3610.E675 (ebook) | LCC PS3610.E675 L55 2017 (print) |

DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017022443>

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For Travis, obviously.

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I sit on a dirty, flat rock, wearing a hot pink sports bra and boxer shorts, staring into a small fire. I am an arboreal flower with two idiot pistils, my arms. My brother Peter and I are in Idyllwild camping. The San Bernardino forest is a panoply of pine pleasures, the stuff potpourris are named after. The olfactory environs a certain segment of plug-in air fresheners and cleaning products aim to evoke. You are cleaning, but you are also planting a grove of evergreens.

I can eat anything for breakfast. Canned ravioli, pizza, ice cream, it's all fine with my road-dog iron stomach. Right now, I'm roasting two wieners on a long fork for breakfast and after I eat those, I plan to toast some marshmallows. Main dish, dessert. That's proper meal structure.

I hear the quick whistle of the zipper on my brother's tent. He emerges with his long hair in a wild golden snarl around his head. What a beautiful dude. He pats it down, and draws on his menthol. He picked up that habit in prison, the dummy. My mom is not a fan. She's been teaching smoking cessation classes for thirty years so this is probably an accurate place to say, "That's ironic."

"Hi," I say. I approach Peter like he's a feral cat. Slowly, intuitively. Neither of us likes surprises or changes in course.

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We like gentle tones. You might perceive a level of chaos looking at us, owing to the tattoos and well-worn clothing, but we're more like high-strung pacifists. Tense buddhas.

"Good morning, Paloma," he says with mock formality. "Is the coffee stuff still out?" I point him to the Jetboil, which gets water ready in mere moments. There is so much rad innovation in camping gear. I bet if you told REI that curing breast cancer would be a great camping accessory, there would be funding and a cure in an instant.

"You want a hot dog?"

"Not yet. Coffee first." Peter sits on a low chair we brought. He smokes, looking at the sky through some towering pines. A hawk or vulture or something flies over us, a singular tear in the cloudless blue.

We're going to Yucca Valley to skate a pool today, someone's backyard spot that won't be around much longer because the house was bought, and the renters are being kicked out. We drove down from San Francisco to ride it, after a heads-up from a friend down here.

I consider cracking open a beer, just the crappy kind that's mostly water, like a Pabst. A breakfast beer. But I have to consider Peter, who has only been clean and sober for two months. The whole family is hoping that this round sticks. Realistically, he will be around people who drink, so I keep telling him he has to get ready for that. He says it's no problem, but I can tell he's doubtful, or annoyed, or something. Regardless, I decide to wait to have a beer. I can always run out to the car and slam one while he skates. Peter is such a jerk when he's on dope, I want to do everything I can to support his sobriety.

I decide I can't wait and take a walk around the campground. I grab a beer from my stash in the truck and slide it

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into a spongy coozie. The camping spots around us are about half full (note my optimism). I can tell some people have been here a really long time, probably years. I pass a guy sitting at a picnic table, a long white beard hanging from his pillowy, pink face. He is a large gentleman, his body the shape of an upended boulder. His thick feet are crossed under the table, shod in water sandals. If the psychic vibe around him were a perfume, I would describe it as acrid, stormy, and suicidal. Disenfranchised: the new scent from Calvin Klein. His eyes slowly rise up and I move on quickly, looking away. I try not to lock eyes with the violently discomfited, unless a friend introduces us.

I see a lady hanging laundry on a rope tied between two trees. She wears crisp, pink shorts creased down the front of each leg, and a pastel plaid blouse. She's focused. I'm trying to get my beer down quickly so I can toss the can and get through my burps before returning to Peter. I wave to the lady, but she doesn't look up.

We pull up to an inauspicious ranch-style house in Yucca Valley. There's a Toyota pickup backed into the driveway, and the front door is open. There's a small pink plastic Jeep next to the front door, and a couple other playthings evidencing a child. The Toyota starts out of the driveway, and I jump out to catch them.

"Hey, my friend Kevin gave me your address, is it cool if we skate?"

"Hell yeah, he told me you were coming. He didn't tell me there would be a chick skater, that's rad!"

"Yep. Thank you!" The choice not to say something bitchy in response to "chick skater" makes me feel wild and free, a genius of picking my battles.

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We grab our boards and shuffle down the driveway through some dusty desert weeds. Inside, there's a sunken living room with a large drum kit set up, and lots of U-Haul moving boxes. A couple huge, black speakers are clustered near the door with some mic stands. A dude with a red mohawk says hello and we show ourselves out to the backyard, where some concrete steps lead down to a small, empty right-hand kidney. There's a red anarchy symbol graffitied on one side, and a bunch of random other tags. All the vegetation in the yard is dead except for a persistent light blue wallflower straggling out from the fence near us. Peter immediately gets in the pool and rides a backside line over the light, ollies over the hip, then grabs his board and stares at the deep end. He lines up a frontside double-double, then stops and pulls his hair back.

"Get in here!" he yells. So I do. We skate hard for an hour or so, then sit on the side panting, wiping sweat, drinking water. We let our legs dangle into the shallow end, like kids at a birthday party.

"This is the best shit," Peter says.

"It's fucking rad that we get to do this again."

"Yeah, that was stupid. I'm stupid."

"Does it feel crazy to skate sober?" I ask, hoping he won't get mad.

"It's weird. For sure." He pauses. "I'm trying to think, was I always high when I skated? Because it feels like I'm kind of learning again."

"Your version of 'learning' is most people's 'years of work,'" I say.

I try to imagine what he looks like to someone who didn't grow up with him. What he looked like to people in prison. I guess one of the guards called him "Babyface" because he has

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good skin. He should look like Keith Richards but instead, he looks like a Gerber baby. His eyes look like they've changed shape subtly. When he was using, they were cloudier, harder to read. As I say that, I realize it's pretty pedantic. An easy interpretation. Maybe it's muscular. Maybe different choices or ways of living can affect your face's layout. Something your eye measures instinctively: distances between features, proportion.

"Was there another spot around here?"

"Kevin told me about another one in Landers."

"Let's go."

We arrive in a cul-de-sac, and park down the street from the house. My brother waits in the car and I go to the front door. I knock, and hear someone shuffling around inside. A lady cracks the door open, probably in her fifties. A teenage boy stands behind her, trying to get a look at me.

"Hola," I say. "Hay una piscina vacía aquí?"

"Sí," she says.

"Nos permitiría patinarla?" I ask. My Spanish is rough, but close enough. This pool has been going for years, so I know it's an easy get. I take out twenty dollars and hand it to her.

"Sí, pase, pase," she says. I signal to my brother, and she closes the door. We go to the gate at the side of the house. The wood is jagged and weather-worn. I pull on the handle and the gate scrapes heavily across the pavement. I open it just far enough to enter, and my brother follows, closing the gate behind him. We walk down an alley strewn with broken toys, random sun-bleached kitchen appliances, and weeds. We find an egg-shaped pool. It's white with two rows of square, cerulean blue tile at the top. Just past the pool, the ocean of garbage continues. Broken bicycles, garbage cans, broken grills,

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a stroller, a couple vacuum cleaners, some faded cardboard boxes, a wheelchair, and much more abandoned miscellany. I walk around the perimeter of the empty pool and look down the sides at the transition, which is fairly generous. Peter tries out a scum line. I feel in more harmony with him than I have in years. When he's using, he's so awful to be around.

I don't know when exactly Peter started messing around with drugs, and I doubt I would have found it notable at the time. I did all the teenage lite recreational ding-dongery a person can do: smoking weed, the occasional acid, blackout drinking. I don't think it was abnormal for our age. I remember finding Peter on the floor in our upstairs bathroom one time, shivering. He had on red soccer shorts and no shirt. He looked like your average teen novel character who would have dated a popular girl. I asked him what was going on and he said to call an ambulance, so I did. I remember feeling very scared. It's one of the only memories I have of not paving over my feelings and staying removed from him. It feels raw and embarrassing to think of caring about him so openly. Like that kind of feeling would isolate me, because who would join me on my soft island or even acknowledge that it's on the map? No one in my home.

I didn't find out what the EMTs said about Peter that time. Maybe they just said he was dehydrated? I don't think it was too long after that that he went camping with my parents and I stayed behind in the house. I was supposed to go with them but he was always more of a team player than me and I felt grossed out by whatever trashy car camping we would do, and the false gestures of familial connection. I woke up in the middle of the night and heard a chair scrape in the kitchen, and then some kind of movement down the hallway in Peter's bedroom. I was terrified. But I also had to pee. Which

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I would think would have been overruled by fear. But my ability to compartmentalize was at dissociative, mafia levels. So I walked to the bathroom. The noises stopped. I peed. I went back to bed and willed myself back to sleep with all of my powers of denial. A crushing fist to the heightened animal response within me.

The next morning, I remember feeling uncertain if anything had happened, or if I had dreamt it. This was my go-to mental state for any experience. A self-imposed, cloudy stoner policy that was easier than truth and clarity. I looked around and couldn't find anything that stood out, until I found the broken handle of the back door. When Peter got home with my parents on Sunday night I told them, and Peter ran to his room. They had stolen his video game console, some cash he had lying around, and anything else they could find with a modicum of value. They did not touch the rest of the house. I asked him who the people were and he just said they were dudes in a motorcycle club. He didn't tell me why they broke in, or how they knew what room to target, but later, I found out he was selling dope for them, and owed them money.

That same year I knew a guy who tried to commit suicide. He was also in a motorcycle club, which used to be called a gang, but is now a club, because maybe Yacht Club people are Yacht Gang people. He developed a big crush on me. I met him through a friend, and we visited him a few times. He was in his 20s, and he wanted to take me to my prom. It made me uncomfortable, and we stopped visiting him.

Peter didn't become an addict in his own right until a couple years later, after we had both moved to San Francisco. I think I noticed it when he was in his early twenties. That's when he became a real creep. At holiday dinners he would criticize the food in an angry, low voice. A voice you would

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use to confront your abuser if you were drunk and saw them alone in a park at midnight. He would do the same thing whenever music or TV was on. There was nothing he couldn't hate with the force of a radicalized suburban kid building bombs for a terrorist operation. My parents would never ask him to leave, never insist he stop, just shake their heads and keep eating. There were three okay people at the table and one big, dark, hairy anus person. We were supposed to eat with that sharp, hostile energy shooting off of him. I could never do it. If I dated someone, Peter hated them. I don't miss that time.

Peter skips through the shallow end, then lines up a backside line over the death box. I am so amped from his run that I juice it a little harder than I had been before, and go frontside over the light, but come out farther than I expected, and clip my front wheel on the bottom step of the ladder. I fly off my board and land really hard on my left hip, whacking my head quickly. I lie on the bottom of the pool for a minute and groan. Once he can tell I'm truly hurt, Peter walks down to help me. He grabs my hand and helps me pull myself upright. He puts his arm around my back and walks me to the stairs. I sit down.

"Do we need to go?" Peter asks.

"Just give me a few minutes," I say, with my head in my hands.

"Did you hit your head?"

"Yeah."

"You should ice it," he says. "I'm sure I can find a plastic bag around here and dig some ice out of the cooler."

Peter puts a bunch of ice into a dirty plastic grocery bag, and I sit holding it to the left side of my head. At least I didn't hit my frontal lobe. Years ago, I saw an episode of Oprah and

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this girl was the passenger in a car her boyfriend was driving. She wasn't wearing her seatbelt, and when they were rear-ended she flew out the front windshield and landed on the pavement, absorbing the impact with her forehead. She sustained significant damage to her frontal lobe, and then spent her life trying to have sex with her family members. They got her into playing guitar, which I'm sure was just to distract her from doing the number one best grossest thing of all time: trying to get in your parents' pants. That story is the only thing that makes me even slightly consider wearing a helmet. But I don't want to. I like the feeling of the air in my hair. That's it. I don't have a reason beyond that, and all evidence points to the fact that I should wear one. But I don't.

That night, Peter and I sit around our fire and he cooks dinner. We have a small wireless speaker playing a book on tape from my phone. We're listening to *The Lovely Bones* again. It's our third time. He really loves this book. He gave it to my mom last Christmas. You would never guess this was Peter's favorite book just by looking at him. You might think he's more likely to have a favorite bong (which he did) (but now it's mine). I really like *The Lovely Bones* too, but I like the movie even more.

I want a beer but Peter says it's a bad idea since I probably have a concussion. He wants me to set my alarm for every two hours to be sure I'm alive. Alarm goes off, I yell, "I'm alive," and we go back to sleep again. It's sweet that he's so concerned, I'm not used to him acting like he cares about anything at all.

We have to haul ass back to San Francisco because Peter is mandated by the court to attend three Narcotics Anonymous meetings a week. He's had to do this before, so I'm not

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convinced it's a fool-proof cure. But it's probably good, regardless. He found a meeting that's all men who were super fucked up on drugs, and one doesn't even have his left arm anymore because he ruined it shooting up. Peter's not supposed to tell me this stuff, but it makes him really giggly and he doesn't tell me names.

We make it back in time, and I drop him off at the meeting on 24th Street in the Mission. I go home to my place and drink three beers in a row, hungrily, like I've been deprived. I watch *Pretty Woman*, one of the best movies ever. I fall asleep without brushing my teeth, a beer propped on my stomach. I wake up two hours later and it's spilled all over my shirt and bed, sticky and annoying. I dump a glass of water on my bed to dilute the beer and then put a towel over it and fall back asleep.

"What up?" I text my friend Irma.

"Dude come out with me," she says, "I'll pick you up in two hours."

"Where are we going?"

"These writer kids are having a fundraiser at a sex club."

"Oh god."

"It'll be funny. Come on. It's an all-gender play party!"

"You have to buy my ticket."

"Done."

A couple hours later, Irma and I park on Market Street two blocks down from Sensations, a gay men's sex club. Normally they wouldn't let women in, but they've programmed a special night for all genders to raise money for a group of queer writers to go on tour. When we arrive, there's a registration table in the lobby. There's a heavy black curtain shielding the entrance to the club. Irma pays fifty dollars for the two of

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us, and then we push into the back. She's wearing black leather pants and has a ball gag tied to her belt. She's six feet tall, and unapologetically still deep in '90s sex fetishes. Her face could be read as any gender, and she half-forms the words that slop out of her mouth. She's one of those people that loves dogs so passionately that you know there is a psychic wound inside her that will never heal. We've been friends since we were seventeen, which means for about sixteen years now. There are a few guys sitting on the couches in the lobby, wearing little towels around their waists and chatting. The room could just as easily be a down-to-earth hang-out room for Lutheran teens to discuss volleyball tournaments. But the cooler of protein-heavy bodybuilding drinks, the minimal attire, and the cock drawings by a novice local artist mounted and priced on the wall tell a different story. We find stairs leading to a second floor. We walk into a glory hole maze made of thin red plywood. A few people are standing nearby. One couple is making out, while one gives the other a handjob. Another guy is using the glory holes the way god intended: to let his dong wait for a willing and anonymous sucker. I see a guy stop, appraise the dick, and decide to be of service. To our left, there are two rooms which each have a leather swing. In one, Irma's ex-girlfriend Mystique is being fisted by a butch in boxer shorts and a sports bra. She cries out loudly. We walk down a hallway to another room that set up like a fake hospital. It feels like a soap opera set from the seventies. There is a woman lying on an exam table completely naked, with a fully shaved beaver. She has several labia piercings, and it gives me a sharp shot of pain through my vagina to look at. Actually, anything painful that I see on another person's body makes pain shoot through my vagina. Especially gnarly scabs. When my grandma was alive and would get big bruises on

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her paper-thin skin, it would feel like a gymnast was doing a floor routine on my pelvic muscles. Anyway, a very serious masculine person attends to her with a vast menu of piercing needles. The serious needler wears a black leather vest with nothing underneath and black leather pants, and whenever she moves, there is a jingle from her waist, which is laden with chains. The room is very quiet, in great deference to this act of gravity: piercing.

I lean over to Irma and whisper, "Lifestyles." She snorts. The butch's head whips in our direction.

"Shush," they say. I get shame-faced and unable to stifle giggles. Irma grabs my arm and pulls me away.

"There's a steam room downstairs," Irma tells me.

"Is it the blowingest blow job church of all time?" I ask.

"Probably."

"Hot. Let's go."

We get downstairs and notice little cubbies where people can stash their clothes. We both decide to get naked and go in, sitting on white towels so as to protect the gateways to our interiors.

"So who's the crush who drew you to this party?" I ask Irma.

"What!"

"I know how you work."

"This girl Lila. She didn't say she's coming for sure, though. I want to hang out with you!"

"Dude, I don't care, just do your thing."

"Are you like boning anybody right now?"

"Nah. Not feeling like it."

"You're always feeling like it! You love limerence!"

"I got burned out on that a while ago."

We lean back and inhale the steam. I notice a dude let

another dude's hand slide under his towel and commence jacking him off. I inhale deeply, feeling the steam lightly burn the inside of my nose.

My brother and I are driving up to our parents' house in Calistoga for their anniversary. Weaving along Mark West Springs Road into town, I watch the manzanita branches twist around the hillside with their dark green leaves, draped with the beautiful Spanish moss that's killing the trees. The grasses and weeds are burned dark yellow, and deer graze up the embankment of one of the curves we round past the Petrified Forest. Our parents live right in town, a couple blocks off Lincoln, the main street. It is a community-theater-level suburban setting. Ranch house after ranch house flanked by lawns and rose bushes. A clear and present lack of innovation. We park in the driveway and go in through the garage, which has long been too cluttered to hold an actual car. Instead, there are bicycles, tools, cases of soda and stacks of old magazines filling the void. Inside my dad and mom are both asleep on the couch in front of the TV, which murmurs the narration to a game of golf. I find these games absurdly soothing, in a tranquil, pastoral way. A green expanse so stupid you need cacophonous abuse from the outside world to make you crave its stillness.

I sit down on the couch between my mom and dad and put my arms around them. Peter takes a photo with his phone. My mom's eyes flutter open and she hugs me. Despite our movement, my dad remains asleep. His cocktail glass is empty on the table next to him.

"Let me put dinner on," my mom says. "Or do you want to do it?" She giggles and walks away, the big joke being that we all know I'm a terrible cook.

My brother hugs my mom, then goes into the next room, which is an auxiliary family room next to the family room. He turns on another TV kinda loud. I can't tell what he's watching but there's a lot of gunfire and booming noises. I'm annoyed that he has separated himself already. I stand in the doorway and look at him while he watches the screen. He doesn't even look at me.

"You don't want to hang out with us?" I ask. He doesn't answer. To some degree, I think I've always been afraid of him. He is a tangle of mood swings and quick rage. He looks up at me, then back to the TV.

"Come sit down," he says. I walk over and sit next to him. "You *are* a tense little wombat," he says. I sit quietly and absorb the weirdness of our functioning relationship. He takes my hand and holds it. We watch violent TV until my mom calls us to eat.

I shake my dad by the shoulder to wake up and eat with us. He rips a loud snore and turns his head away from me. I shake harder until his eyes crack open and he looks around. He registers my face. He gets up and makes himself another drink.

At the dinner table we start out weirdly quiet. "So! Happy anniversary, you guys," I say. I feel like I drove a red Mini Cooper into a white brick wall at 60 mph.

"Thank you, Loma," my mom says. She sips her scotch and saws off a slice of pork chop. She's still a pretty big drinker, though not like she used to be. My parents were both big partiers when we were little, having people over most nights of the week and playing their records loudly in the living room. I hated it at the time, but in retrospect it seems cool that they didn't let kids change their lives too much.

One of their friends, a neighbor, molested my brother for

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years. Peter started wetting his bed and having nightmares. It went on for two years before the guy's wife caught him. She kicked him out, and told my parents but it didn't make anything better. Peter went into counseling at a local church that we didn't even attend. I never understood how that happened. My dad just started drinking more. He was sullen and spent a lot of time in the garage watching TV, not talking to any of us. My mom pulled back on her drinking and stopped having people over all the time. Peter seemed so sad and alone. I wanted to make him feel better but didn't know how. He got angry easily and threw fits all the time, and that made me uncomfortable. Hating my wounded brother made me feel like a monster, but I didn't like how everything would stop the moment he got upset. If we were going out for pizza and he didn't like his shoes, it would take half an hour of him yelling and crying, and my mom struggling with him while my dad stayed silent until she would finally let him wear his slippers out and we could get pizza, which had lost a lot of its shine by then.

I make myself ask my dad how he's doing. He answers in his customarily brief manner: "Good." I feel like I'm part of a procedure. Arrive, greet, sit down, eat one bite at a time. I thought this shit was supposed to be about human connection. I know there are families out there who talk to each other and play board games. I saw Glenn Close on Letterman one time talking about her boyfriend's family, and how they wore sumo suits and wrestled each other at Thanksgiving. She said they were really fun people. I wanted a playful family of my own.

Peter's phone rings.

"Pete," my dad starts.

"One second," Peter says, holding his finger up and backing up his chair. He disappears into the bathroom.

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BOOKS

"So, how's your job hunt?" My mom asks me.

"I'm doing some babysitting here and there," I say. "I was thinking I should look into trade school, maybe like plumbing or electrical. Something that pays well, and eventually I can start my own business and make my own schedule."

"You want to spend your time in other people's shit?" my dad asks.

"I already do psychically, so why not?"

"Well, you're being funny, but it's tough work. You wouldn't believe how some people live."

"There's a chance I would believe it."

"Can you afford trade school, honey?" my mom asks.

"I don't know. It's probably a few thousand dollars or something."

"I was talking to Sylvia Hernandez last week and she said her daughter Jenny was shocked at the cost of beauty school. It sounded like it was over ten thousand dollars."

"Gonna be a tough climb for you, Paloma," my dad says. "You're aimless, and you have a problem with authority."

"Thanks for the fucking support, Dad," I say. I drop my fork on my plate and it clatters loudly.

"Am I wrong?"

"Are you confusing this commentary with parenting?" I shout and push my chair back. Peter comes back in and tries to assess what's going on.

"Hey, do you mind if we head back to San Francisco kinda soon?"

"Not at all," I blurt angrily. I look at my mom, who looks down at her lap. My brother walks over to her and gives her a hug from behind, as she sits. He walks over and shakes my dad's hand. I squeeze my mom's shoulder, and walk out.

When we're back on the road, driving through the inky

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dark, I blink back a few waves of tears. "So who was on the phone?" I ask Peter.

"Oliver. He's in the Shitty," he says.

"Good one," I say. Peter loves calling The City the "Shitty."

"We're going to hook up when we get back."

"Where is he living now?"

"Humboldt County. He's couch surfing."

"He still shooting dope?"

My brother doesn't answer for a while. He stares at the road, and I unreasonably want to scold him severely for making me wait for the answer.

"Probably," he says finally.

I'm lying in bed back in San Francisco, grumpy as fuck after dealing with my family. My neck hurts and it feels like my left hip is tight. I don't even know why, though probably from a skateboarding fall. I need to snap out of it, so I try to remember if I've ever thought anything was funny. Everything feels so powerfully stupid right now. I know I've seen some funny things on TV. I remember watching a Gallagher comedy special over and over when I was a kid. It must have been on HBO or something, and I thought it was the funniest thing of all time. I've watched it since, and of course it's all outrageously sexist, childish humor. But man, the guy was clearly enjoying himself. So what difference did it make to him?

What if I went through life as a truly mediocre stand-up comedian? I start giggling to myself. I mean, what if I had no idea that I was bad at it and found easy satisfaction attending open mics and delivering flat jokes to lukewarm reception? It sounds glorious to have no shame or standards.

I start thinking about what I would do onstage. Maybe

I could market myself as a gardener/comedian, the dumbest combo ever. I could wear white Dickies and a white T-shirt with dirt smudges all over them. Maybe some grass stains. A belt full of gardening tools. Maybe a ball cap with the bill pushed up.

“Good evening, I’m Paloma, thanks everybody for coming. I have a question for you. Why is it I can pull weeds out of the ground all day but I can’t *weed* the jerks out of my life? Maybe I should *smoke* some *grass* and figure it out.”

A couple small titters from the crowd.

“I’m just another jerk with a weed whip. I’ll come trim your hedges but if we really get down to business and I mean like fucking, you’ll notice I’m gardener in the streets, hair farmer in the sheets. Full bush on my downstairs! Pubes without borders!”

That one might be hard for people to believe because actually, I am largely hairless. But I think it’s funny.

“I know this isn’t going to be a popular idea but I want to cultivate a secondary full bush out of my butt. I want a giant burst of wiry, filthy hair tufting out of my buns. I then want to trim it into a flat top. Straight buzz cut of the butt. It will look like I have a paintbrush wedged in there or a Dolph Lundgren doll whose feet are wreaking havoc on my tender anal interior.” Because this material directs so much attention to my ass I would have to decide if it’s better to wear flattering white pants or dumpy ones. Does my self-deception also include delusions about my appearance?

“Why is it that so many women who sport a full bush have shaved heads? Isn’t there some kind of policy regarding even distribution of hair?” I wonder if I should find a way to use the word “hirsute” here. It’s such a good word. “I know there is a public idea of Lesbian Hairstyle Choices. Short up

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on your head, unruly on the V, is clearly a staple of gay lady hair. This is what I have learned from pantsing lesbians. I'd like to see the day that hairstyles are fully disconnected from gender. But more than that, I think I'd just like the idea of a gender binary abolished." Zing them with an unexpected deep and/or political thought!!

"Why the hell do so many people plant roses? You can get the biggest weirdo, the person who has to research obscure music and thrift bizarre clothes and get novelty coffee mugs, but when you do their garden, they will invariably pick the most generic plants in the whole world, and want them placed in an artless and rudimentary manner. It will be roses and boxwood all the way." Too niche? Impossible. Do you think Gallagher ever felt like he needed to get less specific? I don't.

"Why do the richest people take the longest time to pay their bills? And why do they fight their charges more than anyone else?" Wait what is the joke here. "Do you think they just can't see their bills through all the caviar, Bentleys, ivory figurines, Manolos, Pepperidge Farm Mint Milano cookies, pet jaguars, orchids, vacation home horse farms in Argentina, private jets and blowhards? I wonder if bills for rich people are like human turds in my driveway are for me? Ignore them at first, then hose them down half-heartedly trying not to splash in my face, do an okay job, move on.

"The key is to live like you mean to. Be the hoe you want to dig in the dirt. Keep the raccoons away and call everything that thrives in spite of you what it is: a weed."

Good night! A career is born. I walk offstage, victorious. I drive home in a beige Toyota Camry. I drink a glass of water and eat a day-old blueberry muffin. Life is mellow and I'm content.

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My brother and I are meeting for coffee at a place at Alabama and 21st. He says he has “a proposition” he wants to run by me. I can’t imagine what that could mean. It sounds like the kind of meeting ladies have where they decide to lose weight together. I come in and see him sitting on the back patio with a coffee. I grab one and walk out into the bright, overcast day.

“Loma!” He says, cheery as can be. “I was going to buy you coffee.”

“Beat you to it.”

“So, how’s it going?”

“What? Normal. Why?”

“Have you found a job?”

“Are you serious? Did Mom tell you to ask me that?”

“I have some really cool shit happening right now,” he says with uncharacteristic excitement. “Oliver is helping a couple guys I know start a trim house in Mendo. I’m gonna run it. I mean I’m one of the people running it.”

“Oh. Okay,” I say, as flat as I can. What a stupid piece of news.

“This isn’t just a farm, we’re specifically being commissioned by some famous people whose names I can’t say here. It’s a big deal. We’re going to be growing the best product in California, probably the country.”

“Weed is legal. Why don’t they have an assistant get a card and buy their shit like everyone else does?”

“Tabloids. They don’t want the attention.”

“Snoop Dogg and Seth Rogen don’t seem to have an issue.”

“Yeah but it’s their image and their management is down with that.”

“I thought you hated celebrities.”

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“If they want to pay me, no judgment. Especially if they want to back up the money truck like they’re doing now. Oliver and Rigo have been planning this out for the last six months. It’s gonna be tight.”

Rigo is one of Pete’s best friends who he met in jail a few years ago. I’m not entirely clear on why Pete was in there. Seems like it was probably a minor possession bust for heroin or something. I’m the only one in our family who has any enthusiasm for details. I asked my mom and dad what happened this time and they just waved me off, fatigued about the whole thing. Who can blame them? My brother and I are such embarrassments. They would never, ever say that but I know we are. Their friends’ kids did the old-fashioned stuff like getting married young, having kids, and working anachronistic jobs like banker and real estate agent. Things that still pay well and carry a level of stability and prestige with people my parents’ age. Then there’s me and Peter, just dicking around and trying to be “happy.” My great-grandfather worked on the railroad laying ties and busted his body to raise a huge litter of kids alone and give his descendants a new life in this country. If we’re building on that, then it’s in a real lateral way. Maybe more of a spiritually seeking, downwardly mobile way. Which is hard to value when I think about the brutal physical labor of the railroad. We’re just the privileged douches of our generation. Comfortably useless, desperate to be high, terrified to feel anything yet hoping to bond with another human being, valuing animals over people, recycling. I don’t buy organic anything though, I think that stuff is baloney. I think of my dad, languishing in his permanent divot in the couch, napping next to a fleet of pills meant to deal with supposed chronic pain. He was laid off in his early fifties by Sundial, a small software company he helped build that

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couldn't afford him because the CEO was supporting a few not-so-secret (except from his wife) boyfriends he had scattered through Silicon Valley. I dare anyone to see my dad's ongoing emotional k-hole and still think a straight job is any kind of guarantee, or that hard work pays off.

Rigo was in the clink for beating his girlfriend. I hold this against him. I know he's a repository of secrets about my brother, most of which I'm sure I'm glad I don't know. Dudes really bond in a special way over their abject shittiness. I suppose life's donkey moments deserve companionship. I like that Peter has Rigo because he needs a friend who is close to him. But I don't think they get into the best shit together.

"Hey have you ever thought about what you would do if you died?" Peter abruptly asks. "If I died I would cold kick it with Grandpa Kai all the time. We would go bass fishing in Canada, like in remote lakes where no one visits. Wildlife of all kinds wandering around and not scared of us. Blue skies, clouds, whatever, I wouldn't care."

"I would sit next to a waterfall with Joni Mitchell and sing all day and then eat nachos and skate a pool."

"I'll skate the pool with you."

"Cool."

"But let's wait a long time until we die," he says.

"But not too long, because I don't want to ever feel trapped in my body and just waiting to die. I don't want to live past seventy-five, eighty tops."

"Me neither."

"So why am I here with you talking about your big awesome trim job?"

"I almost forgot! We need someone who can be an actual liaison. Take product to Los Angeles and present to our clients. You'd have to trim for a month first though, just to get to

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know the plants. Actually, I should just let Rigo tell you about the job."

"What's the pay?"

"More than you've ever made. Like four hundred a day to trim, more to transport and sell."

"This is so fucking cool!" I yell, and reach out to high-five him, like the dork I am. A warm wash rolls over my body. I imagine using a machete to lop the top off a giant bottle of champagne. I have no particular passion for or against marijuana but if it means good money, I am fully onboard to be the new pothead in town.

There's a knock at my bedroom door and Pete pokes his head in. He stayed over last night so we could watch movies.

"How are you doing, my dude?" I wipe my eyes and pull my comforter up. "Come sit." He climbs on my bed and leans against the wall.

"I'm good."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Your couch is amazing. It's like sleeping in a pile of creamed corn."

"Yummy."

"I'm so stoked we're going to work together."

"Me too. Do any women work there?"

"Trim crew is all women. They're better at it and easier to work with.

"You'll get no arguments from me on that," I say.

"I've heard a couple bad stories though."

"What do you mean?"

"I heard a place north of us was robbed and the guys kidnapped one of the trimmers. Kept her hostage, did fucked-up shit. Cops found her dead."

“Ew, ew, don’t tell me shit like that! I won’t be able to get it out of my head until the day I die peacefully in my sleep. Do you guys have security?”

“It’s not necessary, we’re super remote. There’s not even really a driveway up to the farm. You have to have an off-road vehicle to get up there.”

“I see,” I say, fighting off images of the kidnapped lady.

“So what are we doing tonight?” he asks.

“I don’t know, let me think about it.”

“Cool if I use your computer?”

“Yeah. Put on some coffee, okay?”

That night we drive to a bar. We’re both silent, staring off into the foggy night and thinking.

“Wait, how was seeing Oliver?” I ask.

“So good.”

“How did he seem? Like, drug-wise?”

“He’s trying to get it under control, especially with this big opportunity. He had to tell the crew he was going to quit. Which has to be pronto if we’re heading up next week.”

“Do you think he can swing that?”

“Hope so.”

We’re going to meet Irma and Oliver at this bar called The Wreck Room where our friend’s soft rock cover band is playing. I park on Mission Street, and we walk up to the bar. There’s a guy with a very pronounced brow, kind of troglodyte-looking, checking IDs. He stares at my picture, then up at me, then back down, like I would want to scam my way into this crappy bar.

“This you?”

“Yes.”

“How old are you?”

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"Thirty-two."

"This isn't you, this looks like your older sister."

"I don't even have a sister. Can I go in?"

"This isn't your sister?" He points at Irma.

"I think you're just detecting a general gayness among us."

He waves us inside.

We walk into the bar, which is long and narrow, and impossibly dark. As we get near the back, I see there's a slightly wider area with tables and chairs, and a small stage. The people in Smooth Nites always look like the '80s spilled all over them from a giant paint can. I see Donna, the lead singer, who has huge, black crimped hair and a black dress with a billowing white ruffle extending from her right shoulder to her left hip. She looks unstable in the best way. Then there's Bob, who sings with Donna. He's in faded pegged jeans and a turquoise tank top with big armholes and a cartoon of a surfer on the front. It says "Totally Tubular!" which I like a lot. The best is how the people of Smooth Nites always give 110% when they're performing. There is the visual goofballery of their clothes but the music is well played.

I see Irma down the bar, drinking a pint of beer and talking with an older guy in a fedora and a Grateful Dead T-shirt. Not super-old, maybe like mid-fifties. It seems kind of random, but what do I know about her life, really? She's one of those people who will mention to me that she's been seeing a girl for six months and it will be the first I've heard of it, even though she calls me her best friend and we see each all the time. I don't mind.

Wait, maybe the fedora guy is the hot tub guy. She told me there's a man who she meets at The Wreck Room for drinks then goes back to his house to sit in his hot tub. He always has

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piles of coke and speed sitting out on a table. Anyone is welcome to the hot tub and the drugs, provided they are naked and female. Any kind of female can plop down on his leather couch and have at it. He also has various vintage guitars that Irma can play. He says he loves seeing her small woman fingers on them. What is the feeling when he sees them? Small fingers strumming, little digits pushing the strings down. Woman. Sex. Orgasm. Wanting. Distance. Rejection. Irma told me about this guy a couple months ago, casually, over giant hamburgers made from pure organic beef at Joe Grinds His Own. I had a huge iced tea in front of me and a pile of seemingly never-ending French fries.

"He's cool," she said.

"What's his name?"

"Jared."

"Oh."

"He never tries anything with me."

"Oh. I guess that's good."

"Yeah. It's really good. Because who knows what I would do, I might just do it with him."

"Really?"

"Sure."

"What would you get out of it?"

She shrugs her shoulders. "Coke."

"Why do you keep this stuff secret from me?"

"I'm telling you right now."

"Yeah, but you've been doing it for months."

"So?"

"How come you never invite me?" I asked this even though I'm so glad I've never been part of these nights.

"Really? Why don't I bring you on my gross drug adventures? God, how horrifying. I never want you to see me that

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way. I'm an ugly person at four in the morning when there's not enough cocaine to go around. God. I will never bring you with me."

I felt satisfied with her explanation, and then kinda lonely. How stupid. How can I feel left out of something I don't want to be part of?

Peter orders us drinks and pays for them. This seems wildly generous. We walk down to the end of the bar, sliding past people in the narrow space between the barstools and the wall. Irma and Peter hug. Irma is kind of a sister to Pete too. She's been coming to our family functions and hanging out with Pete the whole time we've known each other.

"What up," I hear behind me, and turn to see Oliver clapping hands with Peter. He turns to me and smiles. "Paloma, what up girl, it's been a minute." His eyes are pinpoints in toilet water. High as hell. I wonder if he's going full speed on dope since he knows he has to quit soon. My uncle used to be like this.

Smooth Nites is about to start, so we stand at the back of the small crowd. Bob and Donna launch into "Always," that old duet by Atlantic Starr, which I love. I sing with them at the top of my lungs. I'm not the best singer in the world, kind of perpetually flat, but you have to admit that anyone who loves to sing makes up for lack of skill with enthusiasm. It's the whole principle behind karaoke. I look over at Pete and he has a small smile on his lips, and his arm around Irma. He looks happy. That makes me happy. Something inside me relaxes.

Next they sing the theme song from the movie *The Never-Ending Story*. Now people all over the room are singing as loud as possible and I run to the front of the stage, popping veins in my face from singing so hard (just saying that

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for drama, no veins actually burst). After a few exhilarating minutes I walk back to Irma and Peter. Oliver is missing. My tiny bladder kicks in and I head for the bathroom, which miraculously has no line, probably because the band is playing. Just as I'm pushing the door open I notice Oliver in the corner, leaning against the wall and nodding out. I walk over and touch his arm.

"Oliver." No answer. I shake him lightly. "Ollie, you should probably go home." His eyes open the smallest bit. He shifts his weight.

"I don't really have a place right now," he says.

"Where've you been staying?"

"Got kicked out."

Through a heavy panel of dread I say, "Do you want to stay at my house? You can take my keys and we'll meet you back there later." I feel intense panic, but swallow it, and hand him my keys. It would be wrong not to help someone without a place to stay. Especially a sad idiot like this. He pats my shoulder in a totally stupid way, and leaves.

I walk back out onto the floor where they're playing "Hard Habit to Break" by Chicago. Everyone is singing along loudly and swaying together. After the song ends, Irma and I get more drinks. We end up closing the bar. I dance so hard I think I break my little toe from ramming into some guy.

We tumble outside and hang around talking and smoking until Peter wants to go. I can't believe he's put up with all the drinking and idiocy while sober. It has to be powerfully annoying. We say goodnight to Irma and walk down the street to my car. I puff on a wet-dirty-sweat-sock-tasting cigarette.

"Can you drive us?" Peter asks, then gets a mischievous smile. "Just kidding, ya drunkard!"

“Will you stay over again? Oliver is there and I’m a little freaked out by that.”

“What do you mean, he’s there?”

“He didn’t have a place to stay so I said he could go hang out. He was nodding out at the bar.”

“He’s been at the Eula, why didn’t he just go there?” The Eula is a residential hotel on 16th Street.

“He told me he was kicked out of wherever he was.”

“Really? Okay.”

A few minutes later we walk up to my front door and knock. No answer. Peter doesn’t have a key to my place and Oliver has mine so we’re locked out. I hit the doorbell several times, no answer. Peter calls Oliver’s Tracfone, or whatever those phones are called that you pay as you go. No answer. My landlord lives upstairs, and I would rather not bug him at two in the morning, so Peter and I go to his place and crash.

I wake up on Peter’s old olive green couch at five in the morning, booze sweaty and disgusting, my clothes from the night before twisted around my body. I’m obscenely dehydrated. I get a glass of water and stare at the filthy sink full of dishes. Half an hour later my brother wakes up.

“What the hell are you doing up?”

“Can’t sleep lately. Anxiety.”

“Probably the whole being sober thing, right?”

“Guess so.”

“I hope Oliver is okay.”

“Want to go over? Is your landlord up?”

“I’ll text him. I tried Oliver but no answer.”

We meet my landlord at my house and he lets us in. I check my bedroom and no Oliver. We get to the living room and there he is, on the couch. His face is a greyish-blue, and his rig lies next to him on top of his backpack.

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“Fuck, call 911!” I holler at my brother, who is right next to me.

“Calm down, I’m on it.”

“I’m not going to fucking calm down! This isn’t a time for calm! Don’t tell me to see a dead person and mellow out!” I start yelling and Peter walks out of the room, giving an address to the operator. I try to find a pulse in Oliver’s neck, even though I think he’s gone. We wait. I feel like throwing up. I go into the bathroom and sit on the tub next to the toilet trying to throw up. A little bit comes out but nothing much. Just searing nausea in my abdomen. We leave the front door open so when the ambulance arrives they walk right in and to Oliver. They attempt CPR, but to no avail. He’s gone. He’s in my house. We’re just bodies in space.

Peter deals with the steps of calling Oliver’s mom, a sad alcoholic lady in Virginia with violent boyfriends and a smattering of other kids from volatile men. Oliver had a raw deal the whole way. I start walking through the Mission. I go all the way down Capp Street, then up 16th Street to Valencia and over to Market. I keep a good pace. People hang out, play chess, pee on the sidewalk. I cut up Hyde Street, jog over on Pine, taking on some punishing hills. I finally arrive in Chinatown and land at a vegetarian restaurant on Washington Street called The Lucky Creation. I order a plate of noodles with fake chicken. I decide to try to be in the restaurant purely as an observer, receiving information without judgment. Watching, feeling. The fluorescent lights make it feel like an office, like there should be a bunch of people talking about a TV show around a fax machine. A couple eats across from me, not speaking to each other, slurping. There are Germans at another table mulling over the menu. A lady sits at the cash

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