

Here. She places the offering at their feet, all trembly and agog. Agog! What a word. Meaning: on tender hooks. The perfect way of putting it. Relax, she knows it's tenderhooks. But what does that even mean. A big part of this work is making the aesthetic choice. Tender hooks-- that's good.

The judges are named Cordelia. She stares at their feet. They all wear the sandals of the future. Strappy, pink and feathered with thick, black rubber soles. A playful exploration of power and delicacy, these sandals. They answer questions like: *What is a sandal?* In two years, you'll be able to buy derivatives in baby sizes. The Cordelias will be in the next future by then.

The Cordelias' toes are organized by size in descending order. Each one just slightly shorter than the last, a perfect stairway of toes. If it helped anything, she would gladly shrink herself to the size of a booger and climb them, starting at the delicate Pinky, heroically ascending to the Big, then starting all over on the next foot. When she got tired she could sleep in the fuzzy canyons in between. She would be happy to do that. It would be her honor-- her privilege!

They look at her in complete stillness. Although they are wearing sunglasses and it is possible they are not looking at her at all.

I desperately hope you like this, she says to the shag carpet. I've never worked harder on anything in my life.

They pick up her offering and give it a shake, like a present or a tambourine. They turn it over several times in their hands. Their fingernails are painted the rich, iridescent green of ducks' necks and filed to surgical points. They hold it up to their noses and take long sniffs. Finally, they say: Not bad.

Her heart does a huge kapow thing. Total diarrhea explosion, is what her boys would call it. Yes, maybe an explosion, she might explain, but not a diarrhea explosion. Hearts are not filled with feces, boys. At least ours aren't.

But, the Cordelias say.

Oh.

It's not The Best One. Good luck!

They smile and their teeth are encrusted with rubies and sapphires. No, she hallucinates that. It's just the lights.

Well, thank so much for your consi--

Bye-bye, they say.

The kitchen counter is coated in orange dust when she gets home.

Boys? she calls, to appease some slow-dripping mothering hormone.

She opens the refrigerator and looks inside with a deep soulfulness, the way a younger, stupider version of herself once looked into Greg's eyes. The feeling is the same; empty, chilly, lacking poetry. She takes out a package of salami and pops the grainy discs into her mouth like crackers over the orange-dusted counter. This goes on until she chokes on a chunk of black pepper. She coughs and coughs and coughs. She falls to the floor and writhes all over the linoleum.

Whatchu doin,' Mamadoo, the boys say when they find her a few minutes later.

Acting, she says.

Oh, ha. Like playing dead!

Just trying it on for size.

How's it fit?

It's nice to indulge in your theatricality sometimes.

The boys cannot be proximal to any kind of pleasure without shoving themselves into it.

When they were small the sight of another child with a sweet threw them into violent hysterics.

They drop to the floor and sprawl out.

Feels okay, they say. Like snoozing on Kraft single.

Speaking of, they say, we did a spectacular recipe for dinner. First we cooked mac and cheese. Then we said: Boingo-- why not add more cheese packets?

That's very nice, boys. You're talented at so many things.

One scoots up to her shoulder. His head smells like vinegar.

Did you shower this morning, she says. The line between Raising Creative Children and Negligence has gotten blurry. She feels drunk whenever she tries to look at it.

Oh yeah, Mamarama. Gave the body an invigorating scrub bright and early.

How was your metaphor, the other says.

A transparent deflection for his brother. But it's nice to be asked.

It was okay, she says. Not great.

They pat her neck.

What went wrong? they say.

It wasn't quite as good as it needed to be.

Why not?

The answer is: Early success in academic settings instilled a deep compulsion to please, making it very hard (impossible?) to scrimp up the courage to produce something sufficiently interesting.

What she says is: A matter of taste.

What IS a METAPHOR, anyway? one says.

Something you're too scared to say regular, the other tells him.

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You know, Zadie Smith did this. She wrote a story and she told you it was a metaphor. The story is called *The Lazy River*. It ran in the December 18 & 25 2017 issue of The New Yorker. There were kids in that story, too. It was about a family on vacation at an all-inclusive resort in the southern Spain. The resort has a lazy river-- *a real body of artificial water*. The lazy river is a metaphor for the way people seek oblivion to cope with the horror and stupidity of our modern times. Or maybe how the search for oblivion has allowed and propagated the horror and stupidity of our modern times.

This story is not like that. For one thing, Smith sticks with it-- she keeps the reader toggling between following the events of a family vacation and understanding that all of those events are charged with additional meaning about the rising populism of our warmed globe.

This story is going to stop being a metaphor now. I'm going to explain everything, and then we'll move on to the real story, which is about how my fictive cipher Masha went to Madison, Wisconsin to think about Lorrie Moore. I know, I named this story *Where Are You*

Lorrie Moore? I Just Love You, and then I spent all this time talking about Zadie Smith. There's no telling what station you'll catch when you have your ear tuned to the muses. That's what this story is about, kind of. More, um, the private dialogues with our idols which shape creative work. No, Art. Our private dialogues with idols and how they inform our Art.

I'm 29 years old. I look the way you expect me to look. My hair is uncombed and brown, I wear large soft things, glasses. My periods are irregular; I don't think I'll be able to conceive. I have a boyfriend named Davide. We don't have enough money for kids. Maybe I'll strike it rich with this story-- we'll get a premium Nespresso machine and IVF treatments. The boys lend gravitas to a character like this. She's not just an anxious woman with a bleak and humorous outlook on the world. She's *a mother*. Plus, I'm a teacher. Those images are always ready in my head, of funny, grubby children and the psychedelic cavern of their need.

The Cordelias are a conglomeration of traits that terrify me in other people. I based the description loosely on someone I met at a party last year. She worked at The New York Review of Books. Everything she said sounded cruel, even if it was just: I think the bathroom is next to the kitchen. Even if it was just: You're welcome. Every word oozed out of her mouth like a poisonous slug. When Davide and I got home, I wailed on the couch.

Why are you crying, Davide asked me.

Because I teach elementary school, I shrieked.

Davide is not Greg. And I didn't really shriek at him. It was more like a moan. But they teach you in writing workshops not use words like *moaned*. You're not supposed to use *shrieked*, either. But Lorrie Moore has. It's in one of her stories from *Self-Help*. I made a note when I read it, but I couldn't find the line to reproduce here.

That last thing is: if we do get the money to make my dry, irregular insides soft and fertile, I hope I have a daughter. I'd name her Sloane or Theodosia and teach her to be genius and unafraid. She will play the electric guitar and know about poetry. One day I will watch her from an anonymous seat in a school auditorium realize I am terrified of her and feel my body fill with pride.

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Masha took it as a good sign that her cab driver was a reader. A nut, actually. A nut about reading. In fact, the grocery bag in the front seat was filled with all kinds of great books. He drove with one hand to prove it to her.

"See?" he said, holding up a biography of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. "Now there's a successful woman from Brooklyn."

"Great pick," Masha said, "I didn't realize that one was out yet." She hoped a compliment might return his hand to the wheel. He kept swerving into the bike lane.

"You have to buy hardcovers if you want to get the good stuff right away," he said, producing a coffee table history of the Beastie Boys. "They named a park after the dead one, you know?"

"Adam Yauch."

"See? Writers always know things. That's exactly it. Adam Yauch. So if you write anything good, I might read it."

He smiled reassuringly in the rearview mirror. His teeth were scraggly and gray like the fur of an old demented lady's teacup poodle. Or maybe not like that.

Masha was trying to see things better, to animate the readily observable facts about someone's teeth with a better, more astonishing image of something totally different and yet also the very essence of teeth. That's why, as she'd explained to the driver, she was on her way to Madison, Wisconsin to think about Lorrie Moore. Lorrie did this better than anyone.

About ears: a sea creature with the wind of her kiss trapped inside.

About God: a large fortune cookie in a beard and a robe, flowing, flowing.

About teeth: gray in the grain, like old wood.

That was just from the first story of her second collection, *Like Life*, which was not even Masha's favorite. Even so, the pages shrieked with her enthusiastic highlighting-- wobbly highway lines, driving through tears on a dark interstate toward a doomed love... she was really trying.

The guy hadn't heard of Lorrie, nor had the notion of flying to a city to just to think about a famous writer struck him as crazy or even odd. He'd thought it was great. His brother was an accountant in Chicago. Maybe he threw pages of alternative weeklies on soda spills in the center console and kept a huge battery generator in the trunk, but he was more supportive than Greg, who had first laughed at the idea, then, realizing she was serious, expressed concern about how late she'd been staying up recently.

"Be careful," the driver said when he dropped her off, jabbing at the airport doors with both pointer fingers. "They don't report everything."

The security line was short and she arrived at her gate with an hour to spare. She found a seat in front of the window and watched safety-jacketed men run around with luggage carts. She took her phone out.

“At the airport. Ralph Nader saw all of this coming a long time ago. Cab driver explained,” she texted Greg.

“You’re already developing material,” he replied. “Have fun.”

Greg worked for a company that invented products for computer engineers-- sweaters with USB ports and scented candles with USB ports and vegan leather wallets with USB ports. He designed their advertisements. She thought she probably loved him despite his website, where he described himself as *design fanatic, space nerd, urban swimming enthusiast*.

You think it’s some kind of alchemy, he told her last night, but all you need to do is park yourself in front of the screen and tap,tap, tap. One drawback of having a modern, we’re-all-equal-here relationship was the fresh paint honesty. Masha longed, sometimes, to be humored.

She was proud of herself for doing this weird, impulsive thing. It was a testament to her artistic commitment. Tapping only got you so far. Masha believed in romantic notions of inspired derangement. As in, people being so inspired they became deranged. She was willing to go a little insane. She’d been sane for a long time. It only made her tired and disappointed.

So she was excited. Her leg shook. She did hope the trip would generate material, even though admitting it seemed gauche. But she was only talking to herself, after all, in the free and indirect style. She tried to think of the calm waters of Lake Monona. She tried to think of how soft and fluffy Lorrie’s hair was in her author photo, like Masha’s own. It didn’t help. She looked

around. No one seemed to be in a big rush to get to Madison. The boarding area was half empty and the check-in desk remained unattended. Everything was indifferent to the game show bonanza in her chest. She wanted time to go fast, like in the clipped directives of Lorrie's widely imitated first collection, *Self-Help*.

(Be early to the airport. Feel restless. Stand in several lines for coffee. Give up and buy a bag of Bugles at the Hudson News. Ask yourself: What is America's #2 finger hat? Ask yourself: Would a serious writer think such a thing? Make eye contact with every other person at Gate 11 and wonder why they're going to Wisconsin. Struggle to keep track of a podcast about bail reform in Michigan. Imagine winning the National Book Award. Look charming and contrite when you ask the flight attendant for the whole can. Imagine wearing a red dress while you thank your mother at the ceremony. Tear up about how the so-called justice system undermines the very fabric of democracy. Note difference between people like you, who reverberate with the possibilities of human experience and people like Greg, who might not.)

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I wrote this in the bathtub:

K (affable, matter-of-fact, bearded): I found the changing-point-of-view conceit distracting. Why not just tell the story of an obsessed woman who goes to Wisconsin to think about her idol? We can talk later about whether "thinking" is a sufficient stake for this story.

N (wise, empathetic, in a cowl neck sweater): There's a sense of deep insecurity, of yearning for acceptance, egomania, even-- but those concerns are not realized in the scenes we get. As in your other work, it's unclear what, precisely, is blocking this person.

H (bored, writes about wars of the future): I enjoyed the first section about the Cordelias and the toes and the cheese powder. I thought maybe we were in some kind of alien universe. But when it was just the metaphor writing thing, I was like-- how many times do we need to hear this story?

Deborah Treisman (breathy, otherworldly, a god): Tell us about the choice to tell the story in this way. Was the changing of point of view something you had in mind when you began or did the writing move in that direction on its own?

C (authoritative, clever, my friend): You know, it's funny, the story tells us the idol here is Lorrie Moore, but I found the performative quirkiness closer to Sheila Heti.

G (encouraging, gentle, clean): What is being advanced by the Greg relationship? It's not quite clear how that line crosses with the primary tensions about writing.

First I drowned a spider crawling around the drain. The force of the water sent it jerking around in heartbreaking modern dance. I thought, as I watched, that Lorrie Moore might've coaxed it onto a napkin and set it outside a window. You get the feeling she's kind to animals. Then I sat in the tub thinking about what Masha would do once she got to Madison. Maybe fall briefly in love with an unlikely man. But why would she do that? This story isn't about falling in love. It's about already being in love with someone you'll never know. Or, with her work. No, her intelligence. I sat in the tub for hours and hours. A pile of ripped nails grew on the ledge next

to my computer. I tracked wet fingerprints all across *Birds of America*. No answers occurred to me. The bathroom started to smell sour. I'd been sweating in a puddle for too long. So I reported the voices instead. When I got up to rinse off, I heard the water running through the pipes in the wall. A neighbor taking a shower. I waited my turn, goosefleshed, feet lost in the cloudy runoff of dust and sweat. I was a little drunk. I thought of my mom. We were always running out of hot water in our house-- no simultaneous water usage, very strict. I thought I was being considerate to the neighbor. I'm very considerate. I'm always considering others.

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Masha had hoped for a little attic room on the isthmus, lake views from the top floor of a faded dame, a wrought iron bed choked in farm fresh linens, a creaky desk in which she might find love letters or antique bobby pins. But there hadn't been so many options left by the time she booked. She'd ended up in a basement in the Far East neighborhood.

"All the privacy in the world," her host Gloria said happily, stretching her arms out to Masha's bounty-- a futon and a television and a coffee table.

Everything matched. The futon pillows and the curtains on the small, unreachable windows-- maroon taffeta, like a child's Christmas dress. The white wicker TV stand and the baskets displayed behind its glass windows. The coffee table and the bathroom floor.

"Did you make that table?" she asked Gloria.

“Oh, isn’t that awesome?” she said. “My son did, Caleb. We had extra tile from the renovation. Me and his dad are trying to talk him out of art school.” Her voice skittered with pride.

“Yeah,” Masha said. “It really matches well.”

There were various amenities -- an electric kettle, a hair dryer, several slim boxes related to the television -- which Gloria showed her to how to use, emphasizing the important points with sound effects.

“If you want to make some tea, just boop,” she said as she plugged in the kettle. “When the light turns red, just boop,” she said as she unplugged it.

After she’d finished showing Masha how to boop all of the appliances, she went upstairs.

It wasn’t very Lorrie-like, this place. But that wasn’t the point. The point was just to be here and think. Like a holy pilgrimage. Maybe this was even good. A different lens. She could be more -- lowbrow -- with her images. This was a different America than the one Lorrie had flourished in; no one wanted the sad and elite anymore. “I have never been an East Coast sophisticate and can’t say I write about them much either,” she’d once said in an interview. Maybe if you’d always been a certain kind of person you didn’t know most of the world never listened to opera. Even the degenerates in Lorrie’s stories were in love with Maria Callas.

She was poking around the bathroom drawers, thinking about a story in which an Airbnb host named Gloria (newly divorced) finds unexpected comfort in playing a (gay) guest’s opera records while he’s out (stalking a lover who moved to Madison, Wisconsin to be with his dying father) when she heard footsteps on the stairs again.

“Sorry,” said the guy who appeared, “My mom told me to get my stuff before you settle in.”

The artistic son. He looked older than she’d expected. Like maybe he’d already tried a few different kinds of schools where he discovered he preferred arranging materials into collages than making them conduct electricity or carry water. He wasn’t unhandsome, though everything was a little too close together on his face. Like all his features had run for high ground in the middle.

“No problem,” she said. “I like your jacket.”

This was a tic, some lingering deficiency of her early childhood socialization-- the compulsion to pay uncreative and insincere compliments. The jacket was bad. Brown leather, boxy and collared. It was the jacket worn by murderous henchmen with light-wash jeans and white sneakers in eighties mob movies.

“Thanks,” he said, “Got it for a song at the antiques mall.”

He crouched in front of the wicker TV stand and pulled several notebooks from the bottom drawer.

“Hey, let me know if you need any recs,” he said, turning to her. “We’re probably into the same scene. My mom told me you’re a writer.”

She only said this to people with whom she made minor transactions and would never see again. Each time was a liquid thrill.

“That would be great, actually,” she said. “I don’t have much of an itinerary yet.”

Maybe he’d send her to places bubbling with lowbrow images-- places Lorrie had never been to.

He ripped a page from a notebook and squatted next to the coffee table scribbling things. Then he stood next to her and explained about each thing-- the modern taqueria, the brewery, the antiques mall, the waterfront park, the coffee shop with live music on Thursdays and Saturdays. He went into detail about what to order and look at, what times things closed and opened. He smelled floral and vaguely savory, like a poorly washed cutting board. It felt like a long time she was standing making affirmative noises as he explained. Her leg started to ache, then her heart. It was a little depressing, this. This basement and this young man and his coffee table and how they were into the same scene. She wanted to be having a different conversation-- one rippling with *the careful ironies of daydream and the marshy ideas upon which intimate life was built* (People Like That Are the Only People Here, 1997). It was possible that there was another truth about this trip, one she hadn't wanted to admit even to her cab driver. That it wasn't so much about stewing in the atmosphere of a beloved idol, but something much simpler and dumber. Something so simple and dumb only a very simple and dumb person like herself would be able to understand it.

"I'm actually here to meet a famous writer," she told Caleb when he'd finished about street parking at the contemporary art museum. "Lorrie Moore."

"Oh yeah," he said. "I saw her once at the college. Is she doing a reading or something?"

"I wish. She moved to Nashville recently. I thought it would be instructive to just be in the place she worked in, commune with her spirit," she said. "But now I'm realizing I just want to meet her. Be friends."

"Artists," he said, and laughed like his mother. "We go where we're called."

She sat in the coffee shop Caleb had recommended with a cappuccino and a glass of champagne and tried to be serious and celebratory at once. Here she was, being deranged! Deranged and alone at a very nice coffee shop feeling like a wet balloon. It was just like New York. A chalkboard sign above the pastry case advertised the evening event: *Tonight's Question-- What is your favorite question and why? 7pm.*

She took out the folded the pages Caleb had given her. A story he'd written recently. He was more into visual mediums, but he was thinking about turning this into a graphic novel.

Her body arched and collapsed, like the a sheet when you're making the bed, it began.

We're all trying so hard, Masha thought.

"There's a part where the woman becomes so 'slick' he's reminded of a dream he had about kayaking," she told Greg on the phone. "He goes on to describe the dream for several pages."

She was watching the sun set over the lake at the park.

"Yuck," Greg said, "I thought the point was to read good stuff. Or the writer's stuff? So you can do it like her?"

"This is part of it," she said. "Meeting unlikely characters."

He was right; she had come for those things, to do it like that. But so far she'd only managed to drink five cups of coffee and lap the university campus until the sun started to set. She looked at the sky, at the lake, at the ducks, at the bench, at her shoes, and saw only exactly what they were. No images. No astonishing images. Where are you, Lorrie, she moaned to the ducks.

Her pocket buzzed. She thought maybe it was Greg with some redemptive encouragement. See, she told herself. You do love him. But it was Caleb. He wanted to know if she wanted to meet him for karaoke.

On the walk over she thought of nice ways to tell him that the language of lubrication was excessive and, at times, disturbing. But when she got to the bar, he was already on stage.

It was crowded and dark with many leather jackets like his own. She wondered if the squawk of bending elbows messed with the acoustics. Caleb had detached the microphone from its stand was pacing around. He'd changed into shorts since their conversation.

She sat in a booth, tucked her chin into one hand and waited for the first notes of Hotel California or Ice, Ice, Baby. Maybe he'd dedicate Billy Joel song to her. Or Frank Sinatra. *This next one is for Masha.* She'd started the day intending to embody the spirit of a genius and finished it hoping a milky-calved stranger sang Billy Joel in her honor at Nam's Noodle and Karaoke Bar. She lacked even the capacity to become properly deranged. If Lorrie's spirit was ever here, she'd chased it away with her basement smell. She wanted real Lorrie anyway, in the flesh, to drink with in some Fabulous Old New York Place, and ask about all those images, how she got her brain to work like the world's most intelligent metaphor machine and how Masha could get hers like that. She'd do anything Lorrie told her! She'd watch all her favorite movies, if only she knew what they were! *How do you get your brain to function like the world's most intelligent metaphor machine?* she'd ask. *Mine is like a bathroom wall in a college bar-- sweaty and grasping for jokes about sex and capitalism,* she'd say like she'd just come up with it and Lorrie would laugh, laugh, laugh. *You're so funny, Masha! We are just alike!* Another stupid

fantasy. She had learn to think about the right things. Things that would be productive for her tap, tap, tap.

“That’s like a six-minute instrumental, man!” someone called. Caleb closed his eyes.

It was possible not even Lorrie could make the next nine minutes bend to language-- the voice, the air piano, the air guitar, the air drums, the hips. The hips! Like flicking a cigarette. His hips flicked a thousand cigarettes into the audience. He hopped and jittered and each movement cracked the floor a little more until he was floating away from the rest of them on his own island of sound and ecstasy, rubbing his noses in it, howling, and Masha was moving backwards, backwards not to her tiny walk-up with the dusty bars on the windows, but to the big, green lawn of childhood, the splintery deck, the tacky top of the dining room table, all of the places she’d made her stages, her parents clapping and whistling. *You’re such a talented girl, so smart.* The big, great feeling that there was a lot time for everything, a lot of time to be somebody. How her father danced her around the living room to songs like this. How now he had diabetes and a bad heart and limped sometimes. How one day in the imaginable future he’d be dead and she’d still know all the words to the songs he’d taught her.

It was a thing to see. You couldn’t explain what an opera sounded like. You could only say: Maria Callas. Masha found herself crying. She would break up with Greg, she decided.

He came off the stage sweaty and happy.

“I can’t believe--” she began, but didn’t know how to finish.

“Thanks,” he said. “I’ve practiced that one a bunch.”

“You weren’t afraid to do the instrumental?”

“Axl Rose is from Indiana, you know.”

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Mom? the boys call. We want you to know that it's okay about how long you spend in the bathtub. We know you're trying to do something important and we hope it works out.

Oh, it's not important, boys. I'm not mixing up a cure for cancer with my bath salts in there.

Mom? We want you to stop diminishing your work like that. It is important. It's important because otherwise you'd just be crumbly on the outside and holy in the middle.

Hole-y, she corrects.

No doughnut people! shrieks one.

No doughnut people! shrieks the other.

Well, she says. If I have anything to be proud of, it's raising two good boys like you.

Mom? What's the song he sings at the end?

It's a very long song by Guns N' Roses called November Rain.

Cool name. Guns N' Roses, they growl and pretend to shoot each other.

Why? says one.

Does he sing it, clarifies the other.

I think I was trying to get at the exuberance and unselfconsciousness with which some people move through the world. It has a very long instrumental portion.

Did you? says one.

Get at it, the other clarifies.

I'm not sure, she says. What do you think?

Maybe. We're only children. Yes.

She pats them on the head. She smooshes them together and hugs them at once.

We want to sing the song, they say into her armpits.

Okay, she says. It can be our bedtime song for tonight.

Can we open the windows wide so the animals can hear? The birds and the squirrels? The bears and the wolves? The snakes and the evil Cordelias?

As long as you put your hearts into it.

Mom? Will you sing with us?

Only if you love me, she says.

Just so much, they tell her.