

Shopping

The prospect of getting up was unappealing. She could think of no pressing reason to get out of bed, to get dressed, to do, well, whatever.

There was no point.

On the other hand, there is only so much daytime TV one can watch, only so many commercials geared toward the elderly (need diabetic testing supplies? need a wheelchair that moves on its own? need help with either the passing or the softening of stool?), and only so many talking heads that one can stand before a not altogether unpleasant madness sets in.

It had been four days, and she had made no attempts to get out of bed. In fact, aside from a trip to the kitchen to get a huge bag of Doritos and to fill the enormous water bottle, there had been no real movement of any kind. Lying on her stomach with her head at the foot of the bed and her feet facing the headboard, she stared at the TV, inert.

The water ran out after three days, and she had gone ninety-six hours without sleep. Also, she was sick of Doritos. Her hands and fingers were covered in artificial cheese dust. Her teeth were caked in crumbs. Brushing them, like getting out of bed, was not a particularly rewarding proposition.

She held out going to the bathroom as long as possible. The real problem was that she was brewing The Big One. Composed almost entirely of crunchy, cheesy tortilla chips, it heralded its coming with a series of room saturating farts so frequent and pungent that the smell interwove with the fabric of the bedsheets, wound itself around her hair, enmeshed the pile of clothes strewn about the bedroom floor and generally became a part of the room and everything in it.

Reluctantly, she freed herself from the bed through a series of rolls. On her feet for the first time in days, her legs were surprisingly up to the task of carrying her to the bathroom. Having done nothing to sully it since her last cleaning frenzy, which had ended just a day before her committal to the king size bed, the bathroom was spotless and still smelled vaguely of the vinegar solution she used to clean and disinfect when the mood struck her (one part vinegar to two parts water for mirrors, one part vinegar to three parts water for surfaces). She sat on the toilet and did not get up for forty minutes, reading an article about celebrity baby names in a gossip magazine while she divested herself of The Big One. When all was said and done, she found herself pawing absentmindedly at the cardboard tube that signaled the end of a roll of toilet paper.

She did not see any replacements.

“I can slug some Imodium and not drink so much water,” she said to herself, “and not have to worry about it for a while,” and in that way convinced herself a trip to the store was unnecessary.

The smell coming from her body was an interesting and powerful one (thick and aggressive with a hint of femininity), so she decided she may as well wash herself. She sat on the floor of the shower stall with the water turned to near scalding—if it did not burn, than she wasn’t really getting clean, she thought. She normally held a bar of soap over her head and let the water run over it and on to her. Gravity, she felt, should

do all the hard work. The soap bar in this case failed her, though, as it was worn and was nothing more than the suggestion of what a bar of soap should be. It bent slightly in the middle and had become discolored and cracked; it had the appearance of the sole of a child's shoe. Worn out and useless, it broke apart in her hand.

"I can use hand soap in the shower," she said to herself, "and not have to worry about it for a while," and in that way convinced herself a trip to the store was unnecessary.

She ran a hand over her bushy leg growth as she reached for her razor and shave gel. The bristly, coarse hair had come in strong—a forest of black fibers erupting from the skin. The can of shave gel spit and sputtered until she realized it contained nothing more than perfumed air. The razor was rusted and menacing; it looked like a farmhand's old plow, ready to gouge her skin in furrows and sow seeds of tetanus and septicemia.

There were no replacement razor heads.

"I can wear jeans all week," she said to herself, "and not have to worry about it for a while," and in that way convinced herself a trip to the store was unnecessary.

She got out of the shower and towed herself off. She flossed her teeth and impressed herself with the amount of decaying food dislodged in the process. She brushed her teeth for three and a half minutes until her gums were raw and bleeding, and she swished mouthwash for the full thirty seconds recommended on the bottle.

Rules, after all, were rules, and normal people followed the rules.

Opening the medicine cabinet without looking at the mirror, she saw the bottle of Imodium was empty. This presented a problem that, coupled with the lack of toilet paper, conspired against her to make the prospect of the next few days rather difficult. She also saw that the box of condoms, in contrast to the state of everything else, was quite full. Did they have expiration dates, she wondered? These had at one point been lubricated—she wondered if they had dried up and would crack and shatter if handled. Jim had been what, three years ago? Before his career took off, before he got sick of living with her, before he just couldn't "do this shit anymore," whatever that meant. She asked him toward the end (much closer to the end than she realized, although *he* knew very well how close it had been) what he would do if they broke up.

"What?" he said.

"What would you do, you know, if we broke up?"

"What do you mean, 'what would I do?' I don't get the question."

"How would you respond, then?"

"How would I *respond*?"

"I'm just curious."

"You want to break up?"

"No, I was just...."

"Just *what*?"

"Making conversation, I guess."

“That’s a hell of a topic, you know that? Jesus Christ, I don’t get you. You wanna know what I would do? How I’d respond? I’d forget about you completely,” he said.

“What does that mean? How would that work?”

“I wouldn’t call you or text you, or send you an e-mail, or write you a letter, or even *think* about you. At all, for any reason.”

“Why?” she asked.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Why would you just cut me out of your life? What would make you do that?”

“Because you had your chance, didn’t you?”

“You wouldn’t be upset?”

“What for? What would be the point? Is me being upset going to change *anything*?”

“No, but it’s normal to be upset.”

“Since when the fuck did you ever concern yourself with what’s *normal*?”

And so forth, which explains the abundance of condoms, seemingly the one thing in the house she had plenty of.

She stared at the underwear on the floor and wondered if she should put them on again. After reflection, she came to the conclusion that since she had already gone to the trouble of cleaning herself, it only made sense to put on clean clothes. That was the normal thing to do, after all.

Yep, that was her—one hundred percent normal.

In the dresser drawers, all of her clothes sat folded not just neatly, but precisely, maximizing the available space while at the same time establishing a clear delineation between garments. Everything had a somewhere, a someplace to which it belonged. Whenever possible, she avoided having garments touch each other, which was normal. Lots of people did that. Lots of normal people do lots of normal things just like that. She took out a pair of flannel pajama pants and put them on. The sheer unnecessaryness of putting on a bra nearly broke her spirit entirely, so she decided to forgo it; she would not strap herself in. She wasn’t going to leave the house, anyway. There was no reason to go anywhere, she had everything she needed.

The kitchen, like the bathroom, was spotless as it had not seen much activity for the majority of the week. She opened the fridge and saw there was nothing she felt like eating. It seemed strange that she should have even bought what was there in the first place: plain, unflavored low-fat yogurt, two pint size bottles of blended vegetable and fruit “smoothies” that, contrary to what their name suggested, had the thickness and consistency of chunky vomit, two packages of turkey breast, and bizarrely, a jar of salted dried beef. This last item was the only one that had been opened.

“I can just eat turkey slices for the week,” she said to herself, “and I won’t have to worry about it for a while,” and in that way almost convinced herself a trip to the store was unnecessary.

“But I need razors, too. And soap. And toilet paper. And Imodium. Shit,” she said, and in that way convinced herself a trip to the store, unpleasant and frustrating though it may be, was actually necessary.

Today would be a light shopping day. She had time for a longer trip (because when you've firmly committed yourself to doing as little as possible during the day, you suddenly find the hours stretching out to what seemed like infinity), but she saw all endeavors that did not include getting what she needed and returning to bed as quickly as possible to be wastes of time. The lot was full, so she parked in the back near the Chinese buffet and the free clinic, whose own parking lots were full to capacity.

She walked toward the front door of the grocery store, which was one of those chain-retailers that loom large and spread wide. The store was, for all intents and purposes, a Walmart with looser morals, as it had a decent selection of mid range to bottom shelf alcohol, mostly whiskeys and vodkas, with a smattering of gins.

In front of the entrances and exits were three people in uniforms soliciting financial assistance for different causes. Each of the three solicitors took a turn harassing the customers walking into the building.

"Excuse me, young lady, may the good Lord shine his blessings on you! Have you heard of Jesus Christ?"

Not stopping, she said, "Sorry."

"Would you like to make a donation to Boy Scouts of America?"

Not slowing, she said, "Sorry."

"Would you like to try three subscriptions to any magazines of your choice for a low rate for a whole year?"

Not staying, she said, "Sorry."

A very fat man hustled his bulk in front of her and (apparently satisfied at having impeded the progress of someone else) settled into a pattern of slow, ambling waddle-steps as he made his way through the automatic doors. She followed behind, but the automatic door closed on her. She tried to pry it open, but one of her hands was in the store and one was out, so she had to drop her purse inside and then push until she was finally able to squeeze her body through the door. She picked up her purse as a store clerk walked toward her with a look of concern on his face.

"Are you ok, ma'am?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

This second question was designed to make sure she had no plans to sue the store.

"I'm fine."

"I don't know what's wrong with that door—that's the first time that's happened."

The fact that this was the first and only time such a thing had happened was of very little comfort to her, but before she could say anything else, movement at the periphery of her vision brought her attention back to the store entrance. A tall man wearing what looked like a denim bodysuit approached the automatic door; his voice could be heard through the glass as he talked on his cell phone. The door opened for him at least ten feet away. It was then she realized automatic doors do not operate by proximity trigger or weight

recognition, but instead gauge the size of the approaching ego and open accordingly. Lacking self-esteem, the convenience of automatic doors was to be forever denied her, but having successfully made it into the store with only a bruised arm and a slightly more bruised ego, she decided to forget that for now and made her way to the Health and Beauty Aids section.

Near the hairdryers, which were on the aisle before the razors, she saw two frazzled employees standing near a Hispanic woman, trying their hardest to be understood.

“You want a hairdryer, right? HAIR-DRYER?” one of them asked, in the same slow way one would speak to a dog.

“You know,” said the other as she fanned her fingers above her head and pointed them down, “a *hairdryer*, for your HAIR?”

The woman, who had a child in the front of the cart absentmindedly sucking his fingers, was lightly cursing under her breath in Spanish.

Moving to the aisle with the razors, she saw that it was completely packed with other people (or other shoppers, as she had joined their ranks upon entering the store). There was no chance of making it down the aisle and retrieving a box of her brand of razors without bumping into someone. The physical sensation she felt when touched by strangers made her flesh creep; she could feel it for hours afterward, her skin crawling away from the epicenter of the person’s touch, refusing to resettle. Deciding she didn’t quite need the razors *that* badly, she moved on to the next aisle in search of soap. Her brand was nowhere to be seen—any other left her skin dry and scaly and sucked the moisture out; her skin would flake off for the rest of the day. Deciding she didn’t need to be clean *that* badly, she walked over to the medicine aisle and found a large bottle of Imodium. She said “fuck” as she looked at the price tag. Realizing she didn’t want to pay *that* much to chemically obstruct her bowels just for the sake of indulging her own laziness, she moved on once more.

Rather than going through the trouble of finding and paying for her own toilet paper, she came to the conclusion that, since she had been a loyal and paying customer for years, the store owed her something in return. Without mutual reciprocation, after all, no relationship could survive. In the women’s bathroom, she took the rolls from every stall except the very last one and stuffed them into her purse. Happy at having finally crossed an item off her list and filled with an almost overwhelming feeling of accomplishment, she smiled and hurried to the cereal aisle. There was a fat man blocking the entrance. His stomach hung past his shirt and rested three inches below his hipbone and was visible just beyond the southern border of his extra, extra, extra large collared shirt. The white, fleshy bulge was sprinkled with fibrous black hairs. The guy was laughing heartily, causing his fat belly to jiggle, and when it shook, gentle ripples spread out in concentric circles as if someone had tossed a large rock into a stagnant, foul-smelling pond.

“Ok so, this is a really good one, ok?” the fat guy said. He could have been talking to himself, but there was another distinct voice in the conversation, someone hidden. “This guy who, like, plays tennis all the time, one day he gets tennis elbow, and his buddy tells him at the drugstore there’s this new machine that can tell what’s wrong if you piss in a cup and put it in.”

“You pour the piss in the machine?”

“No. You piss in the cup, then you put the cup of piss in the machine.”

“You dump it in?”

“What? What the fuck—what does it matter? You put the cup with the piss in the machine.”

“I’m just trying to figure out how it works.”

“It’s a joke—you’re not gonna need to know how to use the thing. It’s not like anyone’s gonna test you on this.”

“Well, whatever—just tell the joke.”

“I’m trying to, but you keep fuckin’ me up. Wait, let me start again—oh yeah, the guy’s arm hurts, and he tells his buddy, and then the buddy tells the guy about the machine.”

There are fewer things sadder than someone trying to tell a joke and failing, but she still wanted the cereal, so she walked around to the other side to get to the back entrance. When she turned the corner, she saw a tallish guy with waxy yellow hair, previously hidden by the girth of his companion, at whom he was staring in rapt attention.

“...so the machine says, ‘Your dog has worms, your daughter’s pregnant, your wife is cheating on you with your best friend, he gave her the clap, and if you don’t stop jacking off, you’re never gonna get rid of that tennis elbow!’”

Where her favorite cereal normally resided there was an empty space, and all around were boxes of Special K. At least eight different varieties: Regular, Red Berries, Vanilla Yogurt, Chocolatey Delight, Cinnamon Swirl, Powdered Yak, Grapefruit Seed Extract with Linseed Oil, and Broken Whiskey Bottle, all of them lined up like gawkers at a traffic accident, casting their big, hideous Ks on her in mocking judgment. The aisle was filled with choices, none of which seemed very appealing, so she decided to cut her losses. She planned on leaving the store with the purloined toilet paper, but something in the meat bunker caught her attention. The perfectly circular packages of beef bologna excited her, so she grabbed two of them. *These* she was perfectly willing to pay for, so she marched toward the registers with a smile on her face as she tore one open and started rolling the meat into tight tubes and chewing loudly. Her mouth full of bologna and her face shiny with grease and meat water, she took her place among her fellow shoppers. She felt a kinship with them she could not define. She belonged, though, and she was happy.

A wiry little man with a thin Dali mustache cut in front of her before she made it to one of the registers. Among the more mundane items in the basket where a child would normally sit, Dali had a green rubber garden hose, two home enema kits, a jar of Vaseline, a pack of condoms, three packets of grape Kool-Aid and two pinwheels. Dali was waited on by an ancient cashier whose nametag, nearly hidden in the billowy sweater she wore, read Esther, an old lady’s and *only* an old lady’s name, the name of a woman who sends ten dollars on birthdays regardless of how old the birthday boy or girl is. Esther wore a heavy, cloying perfume—the same one, so it seemed, all old ladies wore. It reminded her of funeral bouquets, and she supposed they both were used in the same way: to try and cover up the smell of death.

Dali didn't have enough money to pay for everything, so he had Esther take off the milk, bread, eggs, and children's Tylenol. After she was done ringing up the new total, Dali asked, "Can I get two Marlboro 100s in the soft pack?" He then shuffled off, after rolling one pack of cigarettes into the sleeve of his shirt and tearing the foil off the other. He walked toward the main entrance, and the doors opened with a loud, pneumatic *whoosh* as he passed through them and tossed the foil on the sidewalk.

Now it was her turn. She placed both the full and the opened package of bologna on the conveyor belt. Esther rang up her items slowly. The screen eventually said seven seventy-five, so she reached in her purse, accidentally knocking out two of the rolls of stolen toilet paper. Thinking it would be best to pretend nothing had actually happened, she continued searching and eventually found a five and three ones and handed them to Esther, who did not make eye contact.

"Your total is seven seventy-five."

Apparently, Esther's switch had not yet been flipped.

"Here you go."

"Out of..." Esther said, trying to buy herself some time until her feeble old eyes could process the denominations of the four bills she held in her hand, "eight?"

"Yes, out of eight."

"So that's twenty-five cents to you. I don't have nothin' but pennies, hon."

"That's ok—you can keep the change."

"I'm not allowed to, dearie. One, two, three, four, five, s-six...sevun—"

The good will engendered by the bologna was holding strong. She wiped her arm over her mouth, reached into the white plastic bag and ripped open the second package, stuffing several meat sheets into her mouth. She chewed loudly, with an obscene smacking noise. She grinned horribly at Esther, the corners of her mouth leaking saliva and chewed meat.

"Esther, I don't want the fucking pennies, ok? I want to give them away. If five people need five pennies, or if anyone needs just one penny—if twenty five people each need a penny or anything like that—there'll be a little something for them, won't there?" Most of her speech was muffled by the bologna. "I want to be a giver, Esther. That's what I want. Will you help me? Let's consider this a personal kindness I'm doing."

"A random act of kindness?" Esther said.

"Yes, exactly. Because I'm a good person. Because I'm a *normal* person and that's what normal people do," she said before shoving three more slices of bologna into her mouth, coughing up partially chewed flecks of meat all over the register as she did.

"I guess that would be ok, I guess. God bless you, honeypie."

"And may the good Lord shine His blessings on you, as well."

Esther said something in way of response, something that did not come through clearly (something, maybe, along the lines of "you dropped your TP, dearie"), but she did not stop to listen. She walked to the

automatic door, stumbling a little. The doors would not open, and she had to wait until someone with more self-confidence approached. The man who would bring about her deliverance wore a shirt that said, “You Can Agree With Me, or You Can Go Fuck Yourself.” He had a beard like Moses, and he strode forth as if he knew nothing would dare stand in his way; he could have told a mountain to move, and it would have. She let him go through and followed closely on his heels, like a frightened sheep behind its shepherd. The automatic door closed behind her, coming very near to again catching her already bruised arm. The door was angry, she decided, but not evil. It was simply hungry. She grabbed a handful of bologna and slapped it onto the glass to feed the hungry door. The bits that were left when she took her hand away she scooped into the palm of her hand and blew them toward the door as if she were blowing a kiss. She was halfway down the sidewalk before someone caught up with her. It was the same kid from before that told her the automatic doors were not normally in the habit of closing on shoppers.

“Hey, lady, you can’t just slam bologna on the doors like that!”

Turning around, she greeted him with a beatific smile, long, delicate threads of drool lacing down her face and shirt. She grabbed his face in both hands and brought it to her own, kissing his lips and sharing with him the gift of her bologna. The kid pulled away and fell to his knees, retching. He did not see her as she wandered into the street, oblivious to the cars rushing past. Things were finally looking up for her. Everything was coming up roses. A swelling of generous feeling washed over her, and she turned around back toward the store, nearly getting run over by a pickup truck in the process.

“Crazy bitch! Get outta the road!” the driver shouted.

She stood in front of the truck with generous heart and kind, giving spirit. She smiled as she walked to the driver’s side door. She reached into her purse and grabbed a roll of toilet paper, shoving it through the open window, her smile huge and her drool constant.

“You look like you could use this,” she said and dropped the roll into the driver’s lap. She made her way to the front of the store and stood before the first of the three solicitors asking for money.

“Have you heard the good news, ma’am?”

“No, but I’d love to! What’s the good news?”

It was a rare thing for anyone to stop and listen to the man soliciting cash for Christ, and he was taken aback by the enthusiasm of her reply.

“Well, um. You know, the good news about Jesus? How he died for your sins?”

“No! I hadn’t heard! He died for me? Why?”

“So your soul could be redeemed, ma’am.”

She began crying, amazed that someone she had never met could be so thoughtful and selfless to do something like that for her. She wanted to return the favor, to be a good person like that. She gave the proselytizer a roll of toilet paper and moved on to the next solicitor with tears in her eyes. A pudgy middle aged man wearing a scout master’s uniform stood behind a folding table on which a plate of brownies sat.

“Do you need help?” she asked. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Uh, no. I’m fine—can I do anything for you, though? You seem like you could use some help.”

She was disturbed by this; she was supposed to be the one to give help, not to receive it.

“No, no. I’m here to help, don’t you get it? I’m here to *help*. You *must* need help, don’t you?

Otherwise you wouldn’t be here! What can I do for you?”

“A brownie, I guess. You can buy a brownie.”

She reached into her purse and grabbed the first bill she found and handed it over without looking at it. She took two brownies from the plate and walked over to the final solicitor, a small man with dark eyes selling magazine subscriptions.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“No way lady. Help yourself, don’t help me.”

This confused her, as this was the second stumbling block she had encountered on her journey as a compassionate giver.

“Need brownies?” she asked, shoving them toward the man, but he turned away in disgust. What could she do for him? If he didn’t need brownies, what else could she give? She thought of the toilet paper, but that seemed inefficient somehow. It occurred to her, then, that she did indeed have something else to give. She ran into the street and stood dead in the center, shouting to the small man with the dark eyes “This is for you! So your soul can be redeemed!”

The driver, the man wearing the denim bodysuit, assumed the crazy screaming lady would see him as he sped down the street and would do the right thing by moving her plump ass out of the way. Of the first part of his assumption, he was correct. She saw him and saw his light blue Humvee roaring toward her. She would not move, though, not now.

“This is my chance to do something really special,” she said to herself, smiling broadly for the first time she could remember, and in that way convinced herself that martyrdom was necessary.

She closed her eyes and waited for the impact, all the time shouting to the man selling magazine subscriptions “This is so your soul can be redeemed!”

The Humvee glided past her, mounting the grassy walkway and destroying a handicapped parking sign. She opened her eyes and realized she was still in the street, unharmed, and that her chance at martyrdom had come and past.

“I never should have come here in the first place,” she said, and lay down in the street, staring up at the sky. The three solicitors ran over to her.

“Are you ok?” the proselytizer said.

“Can I help you up?” the overgrown boy scout said.

“Ya wanna get outta the fuckin’ street, lady, before you get yourself run over?” the small man with dark eyes said.

She briefly considered this last one.

The prospect of getting up was unappealing. She could think of no pressing reason to get up and off the street, to go home and get back in bed, to do, well, whatever.

There was no point.