

This this all started with Andrew, the night manager. Andrew was hired after Russel was fired for stealing from the register. He was older, maybe twenty-eight and looked like a stoner. He had long hair, slightly greasy with lots of split ends. His teeth were yellow like he smoked a lot though I never saw him smoke. And he always wore black tee-shirts with some rock band on the front. All the other managers wore wrinkly dress shirts. But, he wasn't a stoner and the tee-shirts were Christian rock bands. Neon Cross, Nazareth.

Rebekah, the bookkeeper, told me he'd tried to give her some religious pamphlet called *The Choice!* "He'll try to proselytize you," she said, counting bills. "Forty, sixty, eighty...that's what they do." Proselytize. The word rang a bell. But not very loudly.

The cooks called him Jesus. *Jesus, we need more pepperonis. Jesus, we're out of shrooms.* "Tell me you're not breaking the employee pizza rule, Joey," he'd say to the busboy as he carried two fully cooked pizzas out the front door at the end of his shift. "Tell me, you're not doing that, Joey, because you know that would be against the rules. You know that Joey, right?" But Joey would just say, "Later Jesus," and walk right past him.

One night as I was rushing to get out of work, Andrew came over and leaned up against the salad bar sneeze-shield. I should have been rotating the salad crocks – taking out the old stuff, putting the new stuff on the bottom, which no one ever did because it took forever – but I wasn't. If I found mold on the kidney beans or the chickpeas, I just covered them up with fresh stuff.

"Can I ask you a question?" he asked.

"Okay," I said, wiping the cracks between the crock pots, where the sunflower seeds always fell, "If this is about God and religion, I'm really not convertible. I don't believe in angels and all that."

He smiled and waved his hand in the air between us, "No, just a question." I noticed his eyelashes curled at the tips.

"Do you worry about your everlasting soul, Emily?"

I paused, unsettled by the weird question. "Why, should I?"

"Can I give you something to read?" he asked. "It's just a little thing, only this thick," he said holding his fingers apart slightly.

"I don't know. I've still got to vacuum and there's the parmesan and chili shakers," I told him.

He rushed off and reappeared with a small pamphlet, like the one he'd give to Rebekah. "Only ten pages," he flipped to the last page, "you can read it later."

When I took the pamphlet, he said "You've made me very happy."

I'm sure he said the same thing to Rebekah, but it felt kind of good. I couldn't think of the last time anyone said I'd made them very happy. I could never please dickhead Russel. He'd curl his finger at me from across the restaurant dining room and point to a salt shaker that was empty. I thought, okay so Andrew's a religious freak, but he wasn't all bad.

When I left for the night and walked across the empty parking lot, I wondered if maybe he was watching me, making sure I got to my car safely. I was tempted to look, but I liked imagining him watching instead.

I put the pamphlet on the passenger seat along with my grease-stained apron and my Pizza Hut bandana. At that time of night, only Taco Bell, 7-11 and the Shell station were open. They blazed bright and shiny against the black sky. As I sat at stoplight, I watched a lady filling up her gas tank. It was like we were the only people left on Earth. I looked over at the pamphlet. On the cover was a lady looking up to the sky with her hand stretched upward. Red question marks floated around her head. At her feet was a little girl. I picked it up and flipped the pages until the light turned green.

My mother's bedroom light was on when I pulled into the driveway. By the time I opened the front door, she stood at the top of the hallway stairs, her eyes puffy and red, a wad of toilet paper in her hand.

"I think he's left me for good this time," she sniffled. I climbed the stairs to my bedroom, dumped my backpack and the pamphlet on the bed that was my sister Debbie's bed, before my mother kicked her out three months ago.

"No goodbyes. Gone, just like that," my mother said. This new boyfriend of hers, Arpit, vanished every few weeks. Didn't call her. And when she called him, no answer. Then he would come back like he'd never left. Of course, she liked to put him through the wringer his first day back. She'd be short with him, just generally keeping him at a distance. But then by day two, she'd be back to cooking him whatever he wanted, making him tea the way he liked it, boiled on the stove with lots of milk.

His absence, this time, I had to admit, had been abnormally long. I knew from experience there was nothing I could say to console her. She just wanted to get it all out, to share all the ridiculous, worrisome thoughts that raced through her mind. I understood that, so I always let her spill her guts. She followed me into my bedroom, shifted some of my junk on the bed to the side and dabbed her tears. I got out of my smelly uniform, tossed it into the corner and climbed under the covers.

"You're not going to take a shower?" she asked.

"Nope," I said. "I'm going to bed stinky." I knew this was a bad decision, as I also knew that leaving my dirty waitressing uniform in the corner to bake in the morning sunshine was bad idea.

"I could never do that," she said.

"Well, I can." I often defended bad decisions, just to annoy her.

Finally, when nothing made sense, she resorted to her Indian excuse. "It's just his culture. Indian men are that way."

I reminded her that Mr. Katchuria down the street wasn't that way. I used to babysit for the Katchuria's before they moved last year. I said Mr. Katchuria would always help Mrs. Katchuria put on her jacket when they got ready to leave, and he always drove me home at night even when I was fine walking the one block between our houses. It was the cushiest babysitting job ever. The baby was always asleep when I got there. All I had to do was sit and watch TV and eat the

snacks Mrs. Katchuria left out for me. The few times the baby did cry, I would lower the volume and wait for it to stop. I never even saw the baby.

“Maybe it’s not a cultural thing. Maybe it is just an Arpit thing,” I suggested. She didn’t like to hear that. She pulled her robe tight and left the room.

I regretted saying it. Arpit had always been nice to me. He was twenty-nine, eleven years younger than my mother, but I liked him okay. He would always help me with geometry homework when I couldn’t figure out a problem. “Okay, let me try to explain this another way...” he’d say clicking to release more lead from his retractable pencil.

“This, right here,” he’d guide me with his long brown fingers, pointing to the page. “Circles C1 and C2 have equal radii and are tangent to that same line. You need to know that,” he’d say and return the book to me. His certainty gave me hope that I would find the solution, though rarely I did, and turned in the assignment late and incomplete. And he gave me driving lessons in the court outside the house.

I’d watch his feet as he operated the clutch and explained how to push the clutch then shift the gears. We’d go around and around in circles for half an hour or so, our bodies lurching forward like crash test dummies whenever I forgot to press the clutch. His car was immaculate, unlike my mother’s that smelled like an ashtray and had a dried pieces of orange pulp on the vinyl from an exploded juice container. There were no waded up grocery receipts or crumbs on the carpet. The interior was immaculate as if he never drove it. The only personal item was a picture of a woman all gold with four arms and a purple flower in each hand. It dangled from the rear-view mirror.

The golden image made me wonder if Arpit was religious like Andrew. Was everybody religious? My family was pure anti-religion. *Hogwash, bloody hogwash*, my mother would say whenever anything having to do with God or religion came on the TV or the radio. And my dad always said science could prove that God didn’t exist, because he was a scientist. But the last time I visited him, after the divorce, he’d seemed to have changed his tune somewhat. He’d been writing poems. One was written to God, which made me see that maybe he wasn’t so certain about everything as I had thought.

Rebekah told me Indians believed in Karma and reincarnation and that if anyone knew about everlasting souls, it would be Arpit.

“Do believe in Karma?” I asked. He’d been staring out the window with his arm braced against the dashboard. Immediately he turned and looked at me. “Why do you ask me that?”

“Well, aren’t you Hindu?”

“Yes -- please not so close to the curb.”

“I just wondered if you ever worried about your Karma. My manager at work asked if I worried about my everlasting soul. It just got me thinking.”

Usually we'd drive around in circles for a good half hour, but that day, he cut the lesson short and headed back into the house. He was the only person I knew who wore polyester dress pants with flip-flops.

At night, I liked to listen to my small portable radio underneath my pillow. I would spin the dial searching for my favorite songs, "Song Bird" by Barbra Streisand or "Sailing" by Christopher Cross.

*Don't touch that Dial there's KOME on it!...*

*At Denny's you get three eggs...*

*In all, 918 people died in the Jonestown Massacre, nearly a third of whom were children.*

If Debbie hadn't been kicked out of the house, I'd sit up and ask her what she thought about all those people drinking poison out there in the jungle, lining up with their kids in their arms. I pictured my mother in the jungle, me in her arms, Debbie at her side. What might she have done? Would she have following some crazy man into the jungle especially if he was sort of good looking? She was so easily manipulated. Arpit would say he wanted Kentucky Fried Chicken for dinner and she'd drop the spoon she was stirring the spaghetti sauce with and off they went. There were all levels of craziness in this world.

My sister Debbie lived across town in a bedroom in some lady's house on a boring street with lots of cars and spindly trees. To get there, I had to walk about a mile along Almaden Expressway past all the car dealerships with their gigantic American flags. They flapped above my head like giant birds.

The woman answered the door with a phone in her hand. She cradled the mouthpiece between her shoulder and her ear, one hand holding a cigarette the other a small glass that she flicked her cigarette ashes into. A long cord trailed behind her, twisted and knotted. The hallway was decorated with photos of people sitting on beaches, skiing down snowy mountains, holding glasses of wine up to the camera. She nodded toward the end of the hallway, then disappeared around a corner where laughter from a television filled the air.

"Shut the door," Debbie said as soon as I entered the room. She was seated crossed legged on the bed, a pad of drawing paper on her lap, wads of rolled up paper on the carpet surrounding the bed.

I could still hear the woman's voice in the hallway. "Roy, will you please just shut up and listen to me?"

"I've got to get out of here," Debbie said.

"Can't you just come back home?" I said.

She looked past me, her lips pursed like how she got when she was angry at home.

"She threw out my chili. Can you believe that?"

"Just come back. She won't care. She is so depressed about Arpit, she wouldn't put up any kind of stink. I'm sure of it," I said. Though I really wasn't so sure.

“I was looking forward to it, too.”

“What?”

“The chili.”

“Your bed is still there.”

“Can’t,” she said.

“Why not?” I thought she could easily just remove her posters from the wall, put everything in one box and drive back home with me.

“I just can’t.”

It seemed like everyone had become like bubbles. At any moment, they would just float off, disappearing into the wide blue yonder, gone for good. Pop. Pop. Pop. First my dad, then my sister. Even Arpit. Debbie picked her forehead and inspected the skin beneath fingernail. If only she just hadn’t raised her eyebrows at my mother so often, or stayed out later than she was supposed to, or dropped my mother’s teapot. She wadded up the Pat Benatar drawing she was working on and tossed it across the room into the small plastic garbage can in the corner. It was just that kind of behavior that drove me crazy.

She got off the bed and opened up the ballerina box on her desk that she’d had since she was a kid and took out a roll of dollar bills. She went to the closet and reached into an apron with TGIF! embroidered on the front and pulled out another wad of bills.

“Fuck it, let’s go shopping,” she said.

We drove Debbie’s VW Beetle along Capitol Expressway to Eastridge Mall and took the downtown exit through the old part of San Jose. The houses needed new paint. Lawns were dry and weedy. I had one year of high school left. I figured I’d probably end up living in a place like that, or else in some unhinged woman’s house like Debbie’s.

“I want new shoes, a pair of jeans and maybe a jacket. That’s what I want,” Debbie announced as she pulled into the parking lot and yanked up the parking brake up. The mall stood out like a huge fortress with a sea of cars surrounding it. Oakridge was our local mall where all the kids from school would hang out, but Eastridge was nicer. It had fountains and escalators. It was spacious and airy with skylights in the ceiling. We knew all the stores and on which floor they were located.

“We’ll go to Foxmoor first for jeans, then hit the Wild Pair after for shoes,” Debbie said. “Then maybe you can get your hair cut. What did you do to it?”

I had thought she hadn’t noticed. I put my hand to my hair where I’d cut it with my mother’s plastic Bic razor. I wanted it to look like the popular girls in school. But I’d cut too much.

“It looked better when it was wet.”

“Yeah, it always does.”

We started off slowly, running our fingers over blouses, holding them up in front of mirrors. The longer we shopped, the more we felt free. There was no one to tell us we couldn’t have what we wanted. When I held up a pair of jeans in one hand and sweater in the other, Debbie said “Get both!” I had my own money but when I went to pay at the register, Debbie plunked down a stack of ones. “Tips. It’s like free money.”

We were in Miller's Outpost flipping through the sales rack, hangers clacking repetitively, when Debbie looked up and nudged me, "Hey, isn't that Arpit?"

The store window was plastered in For Sale signs, so it was hard to see anything at first. But there about fifty feet away was Arpit next to the central fountain. His long thin fingers were wrapped around the handle of a stroller. A little girl looked up at him, kicked her feet and pointed excitedly at the fountain.

"Maybe it's not his," I said immediately.

Arpit reached inside his pocket for a tissue and wiped the girl's mouth. Debbie made a face in my direction.

"It could be his niece," I said. "A friend's kid."

"We should go over there now. Find out what's going on."

"He's already not around anymore," I said. It had been about a month since I'd last seen him.

"Don't you want to chew him out a little, make him squirm? It's not right."

I looked over at the two of them. He had crouched down next to the girl and was pointing toward the fountain. Was he explaining how the water circled around and around? She dipped her finger in the water and smiled. I thought of all the things that confronting him would do. He would definitely never come to the house anymore. I would have to tell my mother in case some how she found out that I knew. She would surely blame me for ruining her illusion of a relationship.

"I think we should just leave, now." I said.

But Debbie had already picked up our shopping bags and was headed his direction.

I watched from inside the store. I wished then we'd never come to Eastridge. I wished we had stayed local and gone to Oakridge. It occurred to me that perhaps Arpit had felt safer here too.

Debbie confronted him, her arms folded across her chest just like when she fought with my mother. Arpit put his hand out toward her, his pink palm up, as he did when my mother chewed him out.

It was then that I noticed a woman about Arpit's age wearing a green sari headed toward the fountain. Arpit glanced in her direction. My heart pounded at the thought of all three of them meeting. What the hell was I supposed to do? If I did nothing, the woman would reach Arpit and Debbie. Did she already know Arpit was a cheater? Surely, she wouldn't go shopping with him if she knew. Or maybe she was she completely clueless too, like my mother. Or maybe they both knew, and only she and Debbie didn't know.

Debbie put her hands on her hips while Arpit picked up the girl and put her in the stroller. I could hear her shouting at him. Stop, stop I said to myself. Will you please just stop. But I knew Debbie wouldn't stop. If there had been something she could reach and throw at him, I figured she just might, like the time she threw a peach at my mother, that missed and splattered pink pulp across the wall. People started staring.

I rushed over and grabbed the bags and Debbie's arm and led her away. Arpit seized the opportunity to disappear into the crowd.

"What the fuck?" Debbie said when we were across the aisle. "Don't you care?"

"I don't see why do you care so much."

"It's the principle of the thing," she said and grabbed her purchases from me.

We headed for the exit, storming through Sears, cutting through the china section. We were surrounded by stacks of china plates, cups and bowls. They all looked so impossibly fragile. I wondered why wouldn't the store protect them better.

"That's so like you," she turned and snapped at me. "You never once stood up for me. Nobody ever did." I felt all the air sucked out of me. I saw my mother pounding up the stairs, a hairbrush in her hand. I heard the repeated thud of bodies banging against walls. You grow up with that kind of shit, you think it's just normal after a while. I always told myself Debbie should have been better. She should not have been so messy, so late, so forgetful. She should just have been a better kid.

"I was just a kid too," I said feebly, but she wasn't paying attention. She picked up a plate and examined it. Was she going to throw it? But I realized she was just sizing it up for its artistic value. I saw her floating away from me, tumbling across some vast emptiness.

On the drive home, we didn't talk. She turned the radio up loud but she didn't tap her hands on the steering wheel like she usually did to a good song. The window blew her hair and strands got caught in the corner of her mouth. I wanted to reach up and pull them away.

"Want me to drop you off?" she asked.

"Sure," I said.

When we pulled into the driveway of our house, we both sat there for a bit not saying anything. She glanced toward the front window, at the flicker of light from the television.

"Will you'll tell her?" she asked.

"I kind of have to, don't I?"

Debbie shrugged. "She'll believe what she wants to. She always does."

I thought of that religious comic book Andrew gave me. I saw the lady reaching up to the sky for help. The baby at her feet. What had she done, I wondered? Could you make just one wrong move in life and end up paying for it for all eternity. And what if you just stood by and did nothing?

"Hey," Debbie called out as I stepped out of the car. "don't forget your purchases."

As she drove off, she waved from the car window.

