

The Anxiety Girls Club

The Anxiety Girls Club, which is what I call the four of us, walks before dawn every morning that weather permits. It's that hour while the world is sleeping, silent as a held breath, so we can think straight. After the ravages of hot flashes, demanding marriages, wayward adult children, and the accumulated weight of life itself, who really sleeps past five-thirty?

With only two of us available that morning, Leona and I got an early start. Her house is the farthest south and we walk north, so I should be meeting her on the way up. But Leona is a self-made businesswoman. When she sold her business up north and retired to Florida, she was solvent for life. Her car is a vintage convertible, and my whole house would fit in her living room. And therefore the tacit rule is that I should come to her place, and we should double back north together, passing right by my house.

That morning even the newspaper delivery cars had yet to appear. The streetlights glinted moon-white on the asphalt, and owls swooped and hooted overhead. That walk to her house is my own private cave, so I can stitch myself together first, even if it is only Leona, because sometimes Leona is a lot to take.

Leona's house sits behind a gate, for which she pays a hefty annual fee, but I'm such a daily fixture that the night shift guard, a sweetly bookish young man, always raises the bar for me and waves enthusiastically. Leona's house is a sprawling terracotta Mediterranean that appeals to her Sicilian heritage. She goes back to visit relatives every year and returns with the most charming hand-painted tiles that her handyman epoxies to the columns of her front porch. As usual, that morning her windows glowed golden with light that bounced off the gilded icons that hang on every interior wall: flat-faced Marys, rimmed with gold, their heads inclined in contemplation. As usual, she was waiting for me draped across the red velvet chaise in her den, where the television flickered with the Fox News channel, which she leaves on twenty-four seven on all four televisions in her house. "And now I can't get to sleep without it," she insists.

I rapped my signature rat-a-tat on her den window, which made her jump up startled, as little eight-pound Maddy Rose leaped up on the chaise and yelped her heart out at me.

"Com-ing!" Leona sang through the window, trilling her fingertips at me. Meanwhile, the Fox News commentators mouthed silently like gulping fish, and the blue tickertape of daily horrors slid by across the bottom of the tv screen.

Leona is the lone single girl in our club, and therefore is in charge of keeping us less stylish types up on fashion trends, occasionally appearing for our walks in full make-up and new tennis whites, or a smart name-brand athletic suit with matching gold chains, or even once a silver lamé cocktail dress. She's our bright spot, our colorful one. But that morning, maybe because it was just the two of us, she wore her simple lycra DKNY-printed leggings with matching tunic. As I waited on the front porch, she fluttered about on the other side of the huge windows, flung Maddy Rose's baby sling over her shoulder, crouched to click the dog's leash to her little pink chest harness, and pirouetted out the door.

"And how are *you* this morning?" she chirped.

I had long ago learned not to answer that question because soon after it came the inevitable shriek.

“Grrrahh!” Leona rumbled. “Can you believe it? It happened again! The trash didn’t come yesterday!” At the curb, her outdoor trashcan gaped open with what looked like a giant piece of popcorn in its mouth—a stuffed white trash bag speckled with the tiny rips characteristic of our local vandalizing crows. “And now look what I have to clean up!”

I love Leona’s flat, nasal Chicagoan vowels. They fit her style—loud, inflective and honest, never bothering to think before speaking. More than the clothes, it’s where her real color is.

A white bucket overflowing with faucet parts hugged up to the trashcan. “What’s all that for?” I asked.

“Oh, didn’t I mention it? Brushed nickel is out and brass is *back in!*” she gushed, as if she’d been waiting decades for such a thing to happen. She staggered forward dramatically and raised her arms to the heavens, the movement jerking Maddy Rose a foot off the ground. “Thank God!” she yelled.

I jutted my chin at the trashcan in an offer to help, not mentioning that she’d got her trash days mixed up again and had put it out a day too early. Together we pressed the torn bag deeper into the can. Odors of Bolognese, basil and red wine wafted up towards us, reminding me that she’d had a houseguest over the weekend.

We rinsed our hands in her fountain and set about our usual walk, waving in tandem to the friendly guard as we passed under the raised gate.

“How was Georgette’s visit?” I asked, knowing that she would give me a good report. Whenever Leona had no guest, she was lonely and depressed, and when she had a guest, she was run ragged and put upon. But the days on which guests arrived and left were always good.

She looked at me pointedly. “Spooky.”

We turned from the velveteen night of her dim street onto the empty main road, and began passing under pools of street light. The screech of a far-off owl echoed in the darkness. “Spooky?”

“Yeah!” Her voice is always a punch—loud and guttural—which she chalks up to hailing taxis in the city for decades. “Hey, you have one of those Echo Dot things?”

“Sure.”

“What do you do with it?” Leona always interrogates rather than ask a question, no matter how innocent the subject matter might be.

“Mostly listen to music. The news. You know.”

“Yeah, me too. But hey, remember the other day when I told you about that thing that happened to me in Publix?”

I searched my mental files. All sorts of things had happened to her in Publix. Every time she goes there, something wild happens. She’s just that sort of person.

Leona looked at me squarely and flared her eyes in exasperation.

“Oh, the restroom thing.”

“Exaaactly,” she said.

They’d run out of her favorite brand of pecorino, and she’d spent so much time searching for it and waiting for the manager to look in the back for it that she’d realized far too late that her bladder was full to bursting. For the first time in her adult life, she’d peed her pants in public.

But this is what I love about her. This was just another daily event for her, leaving her cart in the middle of the deli and sliding butt-first out the door, her purse pressed to her crotch. She never holds back, not like the rest of us, but throws herself out bravely. She’s raw that way, which I find fresh and sweet.

Well, most of the time.

“There we were on the couch, Georgette and me, and I was telling her all about what happened, and later that night the Echo Dot suddenly asked us, loudly mind you, if I wanted to order some pelvic incontinence pads.”

“Incontinence pads, like for peeing?”

“Exaaactly.” She stopped suddenly and threw her arms out to the sides, which she does a lot while talking, but it always seems to take Maddy Rose by surprise, jerking her back from her sniffing adventures. “Can you *believe* it?”

I shook my head. “That’s crazy.”

“Yeah, and then—*and then!* You won’t believe this one! The next day Georgette was telling me how you could take off age spots with wart remover—”

“With wart remover?”

“Yeah. She says it really works. See here?” She stopped and tilted the side of her face to the streetlight to display a flaky spot on the middle of her cheek, poking her tongue from the inside to show me the exact location.

I nodded and she continued.

“So we did it that night. We put on the wart remover. And then guess what? *Guess what!* The next morning that Echo Dot asked if I wanted to order some wart remover. Grrahh! I just want to throw it out the window. It’s scaring the hell out of me!”

“Wow, that’s nuts,” I said. “Mine doesn’t do that. But I think they’re programmed to do that, and Eddie turned off that function on ours when we got it.”

I heard myself and bit my tongue against the slip. Leona was always complaining that as a lifelong single girl—she’d never been married, except for that one time for two months in college, which she always waved off as an indiscretion—she had to fix every little broken thing herself. This, of course, was untrue. She had carpenters, plumbers, mechanics, and landscapers at her disposal every day, and even a lady who tended her vegetable garden, which seemed to be more of a social thing, but I could feel her sense of unfairness at having to manage it all. Eddie and I could divide and conquer life’s little obstructions, but she had to keep her antennae up all the time. Maybe this is what makes her set her jaw whenever the rest of us mention our husbands.

“It’s like they’re listening in through the Echo Dot, you know? I feel sick about it.”

I nodded sympathetically as we walked on, Leona shaking her head more and more as she thought about it. She clamped her jaw shut and elongated her steps. Maddy Rose fell back and struggled to keep up. Then Leona fisted her hands and muttered under her breath, “Damn Democrats!”

Now it was my turn to stop, sending Maddy Rose crashing into Leona’s heels. “What?” I snapped. “What did you say?”

“Listening in on us.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “You know. Like they do.”

Maddy Rose went on a sit-down strike and whined, and Leona scooped her up and thrust her into the baby sling rather roughly.

“No, they don’t. And the Republicans don’t either, Leona. It’s just a bunch of businesses trying to make a buck off us. They build these things with listening functions so they can sell us stuff. It’s the free market.”

“Isn’t that against the law?”

I blinked. “I don’t think so. Not yet anyway.”

She folded her arms around Maddy Rose protectively. “Hmmpf.”

We walked on quietly, but bent forward into our thoughts and more briskly than usual. I thought of our many walks over the years, of her off-color jokes that I eventually put a stop to, of her assumption that her Colombian housekeeper must be a drug runner, and her dismissal of

her slim, well-mannered night shift guard as “a little light in the loafers, if you know what I mean.” I caught my breath puffing through my nose in bursts and blurted that I’d forgotten about a dental appointment and had to rush home. Before she could answer, I fled at a pace I knew Leona couldn’t sustain while hauling Maddy Rose in her baby sling.

For the next few mornings I lay awake, staring at the ceiling in the pre-dawn hours, and texting a concocted tale about a stubborn root canal that defied repair. I knew when Leona and the others passed by, because she would scold my house in her cab-hailing roar, “Hey! Come on!” Because of course she knew what I was doing.

A few days later I texted the club that, inexplicably, the toothache was ebbing of its own accord and I was ready to walk again. Because without them I was alone. Alone and anxious at five-thirty in the morning.