



My First Marriage

I got married when I was seven years old. I remember it like it was yesterday. I married my next-door neighbor Todd Beckett. Typically male (though atypically unaware of the delights of conjugal benefits, as that wasn't in our second grade curriculum), Todd was against the whole affair – totally commitmentphobic – but he went along with it since we had nothing better to do that day. My best friend, Catherine Parker, presided over the ceremony.

It was the middle of July, but it was perfect wedding weather: breezy, seventy-five degrees, and a clear blue sky. I felt lucky that I could wear my best outfit – cutoff Jordache jeans shorts and a rainbow-striped bathing-suit top. Cat wore her favorite color-patched Dolphin shorts and a hand-me-down Van Halen T-shirt that wasn't handed down as much as appropriated from her older brother, and Todd wore a Hang Ten shirt and cords. The ideal weather was lost on him; Todd always wore corduroy pants and Vans no matter what the outside temperature was.

The ceremony was set up in my parents' backyard right under the swing set, where we stood before Cat, who eyed us gravely and began: 'And do you, Jordan "Jordy Belly" Landau, take Todd Beckett to be your awfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, till death do you part?' I forgave Cat for invoking the jelly bean-inspired nickname my stepfather had given me – I knew

she was mad that she had to play justice of the peace rather than bride.

‘I do,’ we each said.

‘I now pronounce you man and wife. You may now kiss the bride. And you have to hold it for three Mississippi seconds.’

And then we kissed. Well, our lips touched, and we didn’t move a muscle as Catherine counted out one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi. And that was that. Me, barefoot with flowers in my hair. A simple ceremony. No family arguments. No stressing over having invited too many people. No registry nightmares. No problems. But there *was* cake. We’d always seen couples in movies smearing cake all over each other’s faces, and we thought that was an integral part of getting married.

‘Time for the cake!’ Cat shouted, and we geared up to get messy. I had taken two chocolate Sara Lee cakes from the freezer and set them out to thaw about an hour before our ceremony. I’d placed one right on top of the other in an attempt to create the tiered effect of wedding cakes I’d seen in movies. I surreptitiously swiped at my confection’s double-decker side and popped a sugar-coated finger in my mouth. They were thawed and ready. So I took a handful of cake and smeared it all over Todd. Then he took a fistful and smeared it back on me, careful not to get any in my hair. At first. Until he noticed how much I appreciated his keeping my carefully feathered bangs icing free. Good-bye, feathers, hello, frosting. Cat dared to laugh, so we both smeared a few handfuls over her. Partly for revenge but mostly so she wouldn’t feel left out.

I remember that we’d recently seen *The Karate Kid Part II*, and there was some kind of ceremonial bonding ritual in the movie where a Japanese couple drank tea from each other’s cups, so we thought that maybe we should have a bonding ritual too. It was too hot for tea, so Todd and I each chewed a piece of grape Hubba Bubba bubble gum, blew a bubble, and then moved in close to each other so that our

bubbles would touch and stick together – thus bonding the two of us for life. And as a wedding present Todd gave me a whole unopened pack of Watermelon Wave Bubblicious.

It was a hell of a day. What I remember most is how simple it all was. It probably took two minutes from my hatching the day's activity to 'I do'. That was before I had the chance to be scared I may have gotten pregnant from our three-second kiss. The more I thought about it, the more nervous I got, so I grabbed Todd and tugged at his arm.

'Do you think I could have just gotten pregnant from that kiss?' I whispered.

'I don't know. *Do you?*' he asked.

'If I *knew*, I wouldn't be asking.' And we stood there and looked at each other for a moment, Todd's eyes blinking, eyebrows raised.

Then he shrugged. 'Well, we *did* just get married, so if you are pregnant, I guess it's okay. I think it would be worse if we weren't already married.'

'I think so too,' I said.

Problem solved. The celebration resumed, and we consummated our marriage with a game of tag.

My marriage to Todd was perhaps my way of trying to create a union more perfect, or at least less disastrous, than my own parents' marriage. I remember the day my first dad sat me down and put a hand on each of my shoulders. He looked me square in the eye and said, 'Jordan, I want you to know that I love you very much, and I want you to always remember that.' I remember feeling a sense of dread, although I didn't know what the feeling was exactly – I just knew it didn't feel good, so I distracted myself by studying the hairs that were growing just a teensy bit too far out of his nose. 'Do you know that, Jordan? Do you know that I love you as much as I'm capable of?' he asked. I blinked and watched the one gray hair that was peeking out of his left nostril like a little mouse amid the other black ones, checking to see if the coast was clear. 'Jordan?'

‘Yes, Daddy.’

‘You understand that?’

‘Uh-huh . . . ?’ I said, with less certainty than he’d probably have liked.

‘I may not see you for a while,’ he continued, ‘but that doesn’t mean I won’t be out there somewhere . . .’ His words then drifted off with a theatrical pause. His nose hairs whistled slightly in the silence. I was mesmerized. Then he snapped back, ready to make his final point. ‘I just want to make sure you know that you are loved by your father, so that you don’t grow up to be a man-hating lesbian.’

I was barely *five*. A million thoughts raced through my head – a million questions that I wanted to ask him – but I felt paralyzed. Why are you telling me this? Where are you going? When will you be back? What is a lesbian? And most important, are you ever going to cut your nose hairs?

Nothing came out of my mouth. Well, none of the eleventy-million questions that whirled through my brain like a meteor shower, blasting through my mind until they’d exhausted their energy and faded away. The only thing I uttered was ‘Okay’.

And he nodded, said, ‘Good girl,’ and then he was gone.

When my mom came in from the backyard a few minutes later, she didn’t believe me when I told her that I didn’t think Daddy was coming home. She got angry at me for saying such a terrible thing and asked me if I ‘thought I was a psychic.’ I told her no. I told her that I wasn’t a psychic and I wasn’t a lesbian – because even though I didn’t know what either thing was, it just seemed like the right thing to say and I could tell my mom needed some reassurance.

‘WHAT?’ she yelled. And then I explained – told her everything he’d said, as nearly as I could recall it – and I must have captured the sense of it pretty well because afterward she went into the bathroom and cried for three and a half hours.

When she finally came downstairs, her face was dry and her head held high. She’d obviously spent some time in her

fancy clothing closet; she wore a black dress I'd never seen with a double strand of pearls around her neck. The effect was classy with just a hint of sexy – and frankly this moment destroyed the little black dress for me forever. She took me into my room, put my fancy velvet party dress on me, and combed and fastened my hair with two ribbon barrettes. She then sat me down and told me that we were starting over. And that was exactly what we did.

Three years later I had a brand-new life, complete with a new house, a new dad, and a new baby sister. You'd think I'd be scarred from all this, and maybe I am, but at the time I really didn't suffer. Walter Landau quickly came into our lives, married my mom, and told me to call him Dad. My mom called him my 'new and improved dad', but I didn't really see what had been so bad about the old one. He gave me Mrs Butterworth, a brown mixed-breed mutt of a dog, who had a white stripe on her head that looked like nougat. Mrs B. was my best friend in the world. She sat under my feet at the dinner table, followed me everywhere – even if I was just going to the bathroom, where she'd wait outside the door – and slept with me every night. I had a happy family, my best friend, Cat, and my new husband, Todd.

Cat, Todd, and I were the three musketeers. We did everything together. Cat and I were polar opposites, looks-wise. I had long brown hair, and she was blonde. I was fair with freckles all across my nose, and she was perpetually tan. We were both about the same height, but she was always thinner than I was. We became blood sisters by pricking our fingers and holding them together. We were too young to know about AIDS and how that sort of contact might not be the best idea, but that was a simpler time when the first grade was considered early to be having unprotected sex and shooting heroin, so everything turned out okay.

My wedding had taken place a month before my birthday, and I remember that for that particular birthday I desperately wanted a metallic-blue Schwinn bicycle with a

banana seat and a white wicker basket with neon flowers on it. I wanted that bike more than anything in the world, and when my dad told me to go outside to get the newspaper that fateful morning, I caught my first glimpse of my dream bike – the coveted Schwinn. I shrieked a joyous victory scream so loud it set off a river of tears from my baby half-sister, kicking off a bitter rivalry that would last for two decades.

My memories of childhood are mostly pleasant up to that time, and I half suspect it's because they're not memories at all but stories built up around photographs and home movies I've seen. Because the truth is that after my father walked out on my mom and me, she cultivated a deep-seated fear of abandonment and destitution. She responded by becoming an abject materialist in every aspect of her life, and my new family would essentially become an uneasy alliance between a man who made a lot of money and two women who liked to spend it – those women being Mom and my sister, Samantha, who would grow into a carbon copy of my mother. And then there was me. I was in the mix with them, but more like a leftover ingredient from the failed family than a perfectly blended addition to the new one. Maybe that was all just in my head. Like the time Samantha told me that my father must have had some seriously powerful *ugly* going on for me not to have gotten *any* of Mom's good genes. Maybe that was just sisterly ribbing. If the issuing of *cracked* ribs is normal between sisters.

If our memories were true records of everything we've seen and felt, a lot of us would probably be overwhelmed or even horrified by what was going on. But I arrived at my eighth birthday in good spirits. Though I already had my first set of wheels, my first day of school, and first marriage . . . my first car, first job, and first sexual indiscretion were still years away.

Life was good. I *loved* being me.



Gutter Chic

By the time I'd turned twenty-five years old I *hated* being me. I loathed every single thing about my life. I'd long ago traded in my Schwinn for a ten-speed Cannondale and I hated that bike, probably as much as I'd loved my Schwinn. It wasn't the bike I hated so much as the experience of riding that bike in city traffic. Making it to twenty-five was no small feat considering the fact that I lived in New York City and narrowly escaped death by yellow taxi and MTA bus daily.

Navigating New York City streets on two wheels is a tricky affair, made even trickier by the fact that I was usually riding to work, so I had to keep the overall effort level at minimum to avoid sweating in my work clothes. With a salary that put me in the economic company of migrant farmworkers, I was bicycling not because of some noble impulse to save the world from global warming or love of the outdoors but because a cab ride to work was about as affordable as a European vacation and both the bus and subway would have meant a long walk and a transfer. When I was little, bike riding was all chasing around after nothing, going to someone's house or the little store four blocks away for candy. Now that it had the purpose of getting me to my job at Splash Direct Media – the midsized advertising firm I'd hung my hopes on, which was nearly as rewarding as cleaning toilets at Grand

Central – it was turning into a royal pain in the ass. Even so, weather permitting, I was pedaling. And dodging.

My latest pet peeve was the on-your-left riders – the people who passed me as I was trying to remain sweat free and yelled ‘on your left’ as they zoomed by and glared at me. I heard the words ‘on your left’ so often that sometimes I felt as though I was becoming a conservative by default.

Technically, I was not supposed to say anything back when they passed. They’d told me they were passing, and I was just supposed to be aware. But I got bored, so occasionally after they’d said ‘on your left’, I’d reply ‘on your right’. And if I was feeling really ornery, I’d shout back a non sequitur, mostly to entertain myself. ‘Follow your dream!’ I once told a sleek spandex-clad bicyclist who I could have *sworn* was Lance Armstrong. Two blocks later, he wiped out into a garbage truck, still looking back at me with newly discovered angst.

Sometimes I’d find myself at a stoplight next to a bike messenger, and we’d do the nod. I was always tempted to race when the light turned green; and more often than not that scene from *Better Off Dead* would come to mind, and I’d have the soundtrack of a teenaged Asian Howard Cosell egging me on in my head. Most of the time I ignored it.

But the worst part about riding my bike was getting doused with a mud milkshake, which seemed to happen about once a month. Some yuppie princess would be in her Range Rover, applying her lipstick, barking into her cell phone, and would barely miss running me over but succeed in soaking me in muddy water, usually when I was a block or less from work. Typically, I would pedal away from this scenario, sporting a dark ring from the calves down, whether I wore pants or a skirt with bike shorts underneath, and higher up, dark smudges would dot my thighs and occasionally my blouse and sleeves. I say ‘muddy water’ because to anyone outside of New York, that’s what it would be; but the truth is, the water that pools on the streets of

New York is often a toxic fluorescent-green muck, so gross that you *wish* it was good old-fashioned mud.

Those days were less rare than I'd have liked. So much so that it was like God was playing a cruel joke on me, and all the random extras in my life were in on it. I wondered if one of God's assistants had communicated my schedule to him on a day that he had a cold, so he interpreted every third Monday as Mud Day.

When this happened, it usually left me no time to go home and change my clothes. And as I trudged through the halls at my office, I got curious looks from coworkers and upper management, who were wondering what was wrong with me and why I kept coming to work looking like a Jackson Pollock.

Of course, on a day when I got splashed I'd also inevitably run into Mr Billingsly, the president of the agency. And that day, I did.

I saw him coming from all the way down the hall and tried to keep my head down so he wouldn't recognize me, but, as fate would have it, we were walking straight into each other so he was bound to see me. It's ironic, because most of the time I felt like I was invisible at work, and the one time I *wanted* to be, it was like I was dressed in neon. Billingsly was completely intimidating, but you'd never think so at first glance because he resembled an overfed grade school principal, someone who might dress up like Santa Claus at Christmastime – white hair, red face, plump, dimples. But the minute he opened his mouth, the facade was ruined: his withering comments would have made Rudolph's nose shrivel up and fall off rather than light his way. Luckily, Billingsly was always in a hurry so any interaction was usually over as soon as it began. *But not that day.*

'Is everything okay, Jordan?' Mr Billingsly asked me.

'Me? Yeah! Great!' I said until I realized that he was referring to my current state of dishevelment. 'Oh, you mean *this*? It's the new thing. Gutter chic,' I said, trying to make the best of things.

‘Leave it in the gutter next time.’

Since that didn’t work, I decided I’d try another tactic. ‘I got splashed. I’m making a statement. Maybe I could be the company mascot. Kind of like “Splash”,’ I said, as I bent forward and did jazz hands.

Mr Billingsly stared for a second, not amused, then decided the interaction wasn’t worth his time and walked briskly away. And I was reduced to a mud-soaked loser.

The quick and dirty rundown of Splash Media was this: We were totally dysfunctional. The account people’s job was to make sure all client issues were handled, and in a good agency, they generally do a good job of keeping just about everyone happy. But *our* account people were mostly sniveling sycophants who went around pissing off their colleagues and might just as well have worked for the clients instead of Splash. They’d go to creative and ‘gently’ give them client direction, like this: ‘I’m totally with you guys on this, and I think they’re nuts, but let’s just go along with it for now.’ Then they’d take the reworked creative to the client and present it like this: ‘I’m totally with you guys on this, and I think it needs work, but the ideas are all there.’ Deviously working both angles, they essentially acted like weather vanes going in whatever direction the hot air was blowing.

Our creative people were mostly prima donnas who thought that everything they shit out was gold. You’d change a word or shrink a graphic, and they’d scream like you had just taken their bottle away from them. Of course, my resentment was intensified by the fact that I desperately wanted to *be* one of them.

Our production staff consisted largely of well-meaning, friendly people who were under the despotic rule of Marilyn Mason. She was a master of the form of psychological manipulation known as active aggression. This differs from passive aggression in that she was always trying to get her way – and didn’t give a *damn* who knew it. As a result, our production department was always in a sort of

angry panic. Because her name was so close to Marilyn Manson – and because from there it was just a hop, skip, and a jump to ‘Charles’ – we called the production team the Family. They had a similar messianic sense of purpose, believing that without them nothing could be done – and if they were so inclined on any given day, we’d all be dead. Figuratively. We hoped.

I worked in traffic and had done so for two and a half years. Traffic was the eyes and ears of every department in the company. We saw the underbelly, we saw everybody’s skeletons, and *most* of us used it for good. There was a pretty high turnover in traffic, but the people who stayed and wanted a career in advertising usually made the leap to production. Some went to account management or jumped ship and went to work for the clients. None of those routes interested me in the least, and my career misdirection had given me a very bad case of bad attitude, despite my normally sweet and pliant disposition. Splash tried to gloss over our shit jobs by adopting a new P.C. title for us – project managers – but no matter the title, I knew we were simply corporate gophers. We put all the meetings together, shuttled jobs from department to department, and, in my humble opinion, basically ran the joint.

Most of my days involved juggling a dozen streams of contradictory input, placing a hundred calls, trying to retain consciousness through meeting after excruciating meeting, checking the proofreaders for comments, battling with creative on deadlines, dealing with some condescending hack at a studio, taking a set of mechanicals on what is called a ‘round,’ and then getting it all back to each department to make sure their changes or issues were addressed. As much as it aggravated me, this allowed me to keep my finger on the pulse of the entire agency, and it was my best source of cardiovascular activity because it was no secret that I loathed the gym.

I took the job because I wanted to get my foot in the door of an oversaturated market. Ask a waiter in New York what

they really want to be and odds are about 90 percent that you'll get, 'An actor.' Ask the dishwashers, and odds are about the same that you'll get, 'A copywriter.' I also believed that working in traffic would give me access to all the ad campaigns. The creative director I worked for more than anyone else was Lydia Bedford – the most respected creative director in the entire shop, but she was also known for putting the 'pain' in *campaign*.

Nowhere in my job description did it ask me to write, proofread, or edit headlines, tag lines, or ad copy – but occasionally I'd be handed something, get a better idea, suggest it quietly and as though I were joking, and almost every time, my little tweak would ferret its way into the comps – and sometimes into a campaign. Lydia loved to take advantage of my creative zeal and my willingness to be exploited. And I didn't mind. Especially the time Lydia was having personal problems and pretty much abandoned work for two weeks. She was there but she wasn't *there*. So I developed a print and direct mail campaign for an online IKEA competitor and from the ground up did *everything* myself. The client loved it. The agency loved it. And the consumers loved it. Small detail: I got zero credit, but that was okay because I figured it was only a matter of time before Lydia acknowledged my contributions and I moved up.

I wasn't the only one looking to move up. Kurt Wyatt, another guy in traffic – a guy who started seven months *after* me – seemed to be angling for my promotion. I could just tell the guy was looking for a payout, but he wasn't doing anything to earn it.

That's actually not true. He was doing the *schmooze*, which was the part that I hated. But creatively speaking – he did zip. I didn't like to go out every night with my coworkers. Most of them weren't people I'd spend time with if I wasn't *paid* to do so.

The agency had developed an after-work drink schedule that had certain days as occasions. The only problem was,

with Monster Mondays, Terrible Tuesdays, Wicked Wednesdays, Thirsty Thursdays, and Fucked-up Fridays *every single day* was an occasion. In order to partake in the after-work schmoozing, not only did you have to have a completely empty social calendar, you had to be an alcoholic. Kurt went every single night, played the game, and kissed ass. Sometimes I went to just keep up with Kurt, and it was always awkward. I'm just not good at small talk. I hate it.

I hate after-work small talk almost as much as I hate being asked 'How was your weekend?' by someone who couldn't care less every single Monday morning. On an elevator. Or in the kitchen area when I just want my much-needed coffee. Or as I'm running past trying to get proofread copy back to creative only so they can decide to change something at the last minute and get it rushed to the studio, but certainly not before I tell How-Was-Your-Weekend Harry how my weekend was, only to have him glaze over when I answer him or, worse, just walk away mid-sentence.

I was gainfully employed, and I suppose I should have been thankful. But my job felt like a trap. Every time I tried to get out, I got slapped by some blockheaded business school washout or some self-important, A/X black mock-turtleneck-wearing frustrated artist or a ponytailed, crimson-lipped harpy raging about a hairline placed too far left of the column to meet PowerPlace Gym's new graphics standards and now the client is going to throw a fucking *fit* and can't we get even a simple goddamn graphic fix right in this fucking place?! (end quote).

Of course, you may look at my life and say, Count your blessings and quit grouching. In which case, you'd have been welcome to it. With so much talk about identity theft, I sure wasn't losing any sleep. Mine was there for the taking.

So after my humiliating Billingsly moment, I settled in to my cubicle in the pit, a shared area with all of the traffic people. My desk wasn't as littered with personal items as

most people's because it was such an open space that I felt like anything I *did* display would be scrutinized and judged. Therefore, the only items that I'd decorated it with were a self-consciously ironic poster of David Hasselhoff, meant to amuse, and a picture of Johnny Cash flipping the bird, meant to ward off post-weekend discussions or technically *any* discussions.

I opened my in-box to a barrage of e-mails from my mom and dad. This was a constant, major annoyance that I'd brought on myself. One day, a few years earlier, I had an uncharacteristic fit of pique at my mother's blatant disregard for my feelings/opinions/etc., and my sweet-natured stepfather came up with this solution (which was simply awful, but I felt too embarrassed by my childish display to call it off): They would copy me on every single e-mail they wrote to each other. Most of the time the e-mails had nothing to do with me and ranged from the mundane to the ridiculous to the 'Oh my God, that's none of my business, why oh *why* would you want me to read this?'

I decided for the fiftieth time that I was going to put a stop to it. I picked up the phone and called my mom, only to have her put me on hold while she spoke in bastardized Spanish for about six minutes to the housekeeper, who has stayed in that house over ten years with only one possible explanation: a devout Catholic, she must be angling for canonization.

When my mom finally directed her attention back to the phone she asked me if Dirk, my boyfriend, was going to be coming for Thanksgiving. For the record, I never thought I'd date a guy named Dirk (or Kip or Chet for that matter), but Dirk wasn't his actual first name. His name was Michael Dirkston, and there were a few Michaels at the school he went to, so they shortened his last name to Dirks, then Dirk, and it stuck. Dirk wasn't too pleased with this forced nickname at first, but when he found out Dirk was actually a Scottish word for a long dagger, he decided it was fitting.

'No, Mom,' I said. 'I told you already. Dirk can't make it that night. He's busy.'

‘Too busy for you?’ she asked, and I could hear her eyebrows rising over the phone.

‘Yes, too busy for me.’ It wasn’t worth arguing.

‘Well, I don’t understand that.’

‘He has his *own* family, Mom.’

‘The men in my life *always* made me their top priority.’ Which was why she had to hear that her first husband had left her from her five-year-old. I somehow managed to keep this nugget to myself, so she bulldozed on. ‘And Dirk is a wonderful boy, Jordan. Have you done something wrong?’

‘No, I haven’t done anything *wrong*. Unless not being related to him is wrong. He’s going to be with his *family*.’ It was always suggested that something was my fault if it wasn’t going according to the ideal plan. Plus, Dirk majorly kissed my mom’s ass, always stroked her ego by referring to her as my other sister, *and* was a lawyer – fitting in perfectly with every mother’s doctor/lawyer dream for her daughter – so she thought he could do *no* wrong.

My mother is five foot two and weighs about a hundred pounds. She is sheer physical perfection. She has the Sally Hershberger shag and is always dressed a decade too young, but manages to pull it off. I am five foot seven and what you would call normal. My mother likes to bring to my attention that she is very small boned and so is her carbon copy, my sister, Samantha. The two of them share clothing I couldn’t even hold up to me without crippling anxiety that the seams might rip in fear, and neither of them understands how I became so big boned. Their gleeful repetition of this conversational gem does wonders for my ego.

I wasn’t really unhappy Dirk would be skipping the family meal. *Last* Thanksgiving, Aunt Sally and her third husband, Stewart, were play fencing with the carving knife and in one deft turn, Stewart accidentally stabbed Walter in his right forearm. Walter, being the easygoing guy that he is, joked that it wasn’t Thanksgiving until someone got

stabbed. The Thanksgiving before, my mom was on a fanatical (read: psychotic) nut craze, due to the wealth of news items on their health benefits, and insisted that every dish include nuts. Green beans with almonds? Fine. Sweet potatoes with toasted walnut topping? Fantastic. Pecan pie? Of course. But cashews in the gravy? Just. Plain. Wrong. And then there was the Thanksgiving before that, when my cousin Jeff had a few too many Sam Adamses while watching football, waiting for dinner to be served. Just as the spread was finally laid out, Jeff threw up *right* next to the stuffing and the visual similarity put me off stuffing for life. No, I can't say I minded Dirk's taking a pass.

I was in the middle of trying to change the subject when Lydia walked by. The best way to describe Lydia would be to say she looked like a macaw. She had a really angular face that was always bright red from using too much Retin-A. She looked like she went to the dermatologist for a chemical peel every morning before work. She had a pointy nose and tiny beady eyes. Her dyed red hair was naturally curly, but she blew it out to make it straight nearly every day. This was *supposed* to achieve a put-together look, but the damage to her hair from the constant coloring and blow-drying unfortunately created the look of a before model in a Frizz-Ease commercial. If I were her, I'd have left the natural curls. It certainly would have softened her up a bit, but she insisted on making it look like she'd been electrocuted.

'Uh, Jordan, could you put a hold on the personal phone calls until you've solved my KidCo dilemma?' Lydia said in that too-tightly-wound, falsely sympathetic way she had, as if I'd spent the better part of the morning on the phone. I mean, I *had*, but it was only five minutes into that morning and my coffee hadn't even kicked in yet.

'Mom, I have to go,' I said, and hung up the phone. Art, the mail guy, high-fived me as he walked past without making any eye contact and without any change in facial

expression. That was our thing, the unacknowledged high five. Art and I had the ideal acquaintance relationship. We had more than a nod but less than the bullshit pleasantries that come along with most acquaintances. I'd notice if he was gone, but I wouldn't feel the need, or even have the number, to call him up and find out why. It was the perfect office relationship.

I opened up the KidCo document in my in-box and understood why Lydia was in a frenzy. Her ideas sucked. Maybe *sucked* is too strong a word, but they weren't inspired. They certainly weren't the kinds of ideas that got her where she was today.

Before I could wrap my head around any concrete thoughts to help her, I heard the ding of my in-box and opened it to find an e-mail from my father to my mother, which I had been cc:'d on.

From: wallygator317@hotmail.com

To: judypatootie521@hotmail.com

Subject: Chicken tonight . . . or fowl overload?

Patoots – Chicken tonight? Or is it too soon, since we just did chicken Wednesday? Also need to know if you're into fava beans, because I'll get those too. Nice side dish.

I wondered how two people could be married for twenty years and not know if their spouse liked fava beans. And marveled once again at why my stepdad felt compelled to copy me on this.

Bicycling home after work, I got cut off several more times and yelled at by a mustachioed cabdriver talking on his cell phone.

'Watch out, motherfuck!' he called out, after he ran me off the road.

'*Er!* Motherfucker!' I corrected.

'Motherfuck you too!' he replied. God Bless New York.

*

I got off my bike downstairs in front of my building and was preparing to haul it up the front steps when I saw my friendly neighborhood homeless lady.

She stepped up close to me, then gave me a serious sidelong glance. Her voice carried a sense of desperation as she sang about fearing the long arm of the law.

I looked side to side for a minute, then directly at her when I got it. ‘*Renegade* by Styx,’ I said triumphantly, and she nodded her trademark long-necked nod and went on her way. She and I had been trading song lyrics for almost as long as I’d lived in this apartment. Most of the stuff she throws out would scare the bejesus out of you if you didn’t know she was quoting songs. I saw her approach a man in a long overcoat once and practically reduce him to tears with *Borderline*.

When I walked into my apartment building, I got on the elevator at the same time as the creepy flattop guy who lived three doors down from me. He was one of those extreme muscle-bound guys who always wore spandex shorts and some variation of workout gym shirts, usually of the Tiger Schulmann variety. He smiled a toothy grin, and I pressed our floor button a few extra times. This is not a man that I would ever be attracted to. I need to clarify that before explaining that he also had the most massive penis I had ever seen, amplified every day, no matter the weather, in his black spandex shorts. It was proudly on display for all the world to see, garish and out of place as the Washington Monument, and it was always an effort not to look at it. I’d lived in the same building for four years (that includes four freezing New York winters) and had never seen him in anything but those shorts.

‘Hi, Jordan,’ he said, all teeth. I’d never told him my name, but he’d been using it for the past three years.

‘Hi,’ I replied, content in not knowing his.

‘When are you going to take me up on that street ka-ra-tay lesson?’

‘Oh . . . I don’t know,’ I said politely. Meaning, *never*.

‘New York is a dangerous place,’ he said as the elevator doors opened, facing me, his gargantuan penis taunting me. ‘Anytime you want, you should come over to 5B and let me show you some moves.’

‘Ha, ha,’ I said back, which was again, me saying that I was not interested in him, or his penis, showing me any moves at any time, in any apartment, in this lifetime, ever.

I ducked into my apartment and started rifling through my mail. Nothing good. A Citibank bill. Overdue. My rent bill. Also overdue. A Williams-Sonoma catalog. An offer from Capital One, devilishly tempting me to transfer funds from my *other* overdue credit cards. An envelope of ValPak coupons. A solicitation from one cable TV company to transfer from my current one, whose bill, had it been among the day’s catch, also would have been overdue. And a handwritten note from my landlord: *Still haven’t seen your rent check for last month. This pattern of lateness is going to leave me with no choice. Please remit forewith with all due haste.*

Worse than the simple scolding for my tardiness was the trumped-up legal overtone of the note. ‘Forewith?’ Obviously he’d miscopied the missive out of a bad landlords’ handbook, but the implication was clear: improve my cash flow or I’d be out on my ass. The first homeless Landau. Soon I’d be out quoting song lyrics with my friend full-time.

I was thinking of making an indie film about myself. I was going to call it, *It’s a Miserable Life*. It was going to be about a woman who thinks things would be better off if she’d never been born, and, after spending a day with her, her guardian angel actually *agrees*.