

It's Not Me, It's You

Subjective Recollections from a
Terminally Optimistic, Chronically Sarcastic,
and Occasionally Inebriated Woman

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Simon Spotlight Entertainment
New York London Toronto Sydney

**It's Not Me,
It's You**



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Certain names and identifying characteristics have been changed and some events compressed, reordered, and expanded.

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For Jon, obviously.

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**It's Not Me,
It's You**

Nam Myo Ho Renge Kyo

I'll admit it. I can *on occasion* be a bit of a sucker: I once accidentally owned an aggressive dog that was half pit bull because he just looked so darn sweet at the pound. I also once or *twice* spent more than a hundred dollars on an antiwrinkle cream because the salesgirl looked so horrified by my “laugh lines,” and I did take fen-phen for about three months when it was all the rage but I stopped not *too* long after I found out it could cause irreparable damage to my heart valves. But I'm definitely not a sucker across the board: I do not find Lance Armstrong inspirational—yes, I know he won the Tour de France like a hundred times with only one ball, but he also divorced his wife who stood by him through the cancer ordeal, broke up with Sheryl Crow, and seems to have topped off his douchery by allegedly screwing an Olsen twin. So no, Lance, you're not fooling me no matter how many damned bracelets you've sold. I've also never joined a pyramid scheme, bought anything from a TV infomercial with the word “miracle” in its name, or truly believed I'd come home ahead from a trip to Vegas. So it may come as a surprise that I once came a little too close for comfort to joining a cult.

I've never been approached by so many “culty” people than when I first moved to Los Angeles. It's almost like cult members can sniff out a recent arrival's feelings of displacement, need for direction, and lack of housing like those drug-sniffing dogs at the airport. I'd already fended off offers from Lifespring and the Forum for weekend “seminars” to improve my life. I'd turned down a “free personality test,” the results of which would definitely tell me that I have a strong need to join the Church of Scientology. And then there was the time I deflected a Hare Krishna who tried to startle me into shaving my head, selling flowers, and living on lentil soup by popping out from behind a bush to talk to me about the healing grace of Krishna. I might have even stopped to chat, but, unlike Natalie Portman or Sinead O'Connor, bald is not a hairstyle that's at all flattering on me.

On this particular day, my defenses were down. I'd arrived in Los Angeles from Massachusetts a week prior with my friend Beth Moskowitz. Our original plan was to stay with one of my childhood friends, Tanya, at her aunt's apartment in Hollywood. Tanya made it sound like we were totally set up with a place to stay for at least a week or two while we looked for our own pad. What Tanya failed to mention was that she was flat broke, unemployed, a hot mess, and not getting along with her aunt, who wanted her out as soon as possible. Tanya's aunt begrudgingly let us stay there since her niece had promised, but she didn't trust Tanya, who'd been freeloading off of her for months. Apparently, Tanya had been making long-distance phone calls and not paying the bill, so her aunt had taken to unplugging the phone and bringing it to work

with her during the day. We were desperately trying to find an apartment of our own but had to make all of our classified section inquiry calls from a pay phone in front of the nearby Mayfair Market and then stand around waiting for apartment managers to call back. We had thought of buying a cheap phone and hooking it up while her aunt was at work, but Tanya's aunt was one step ahead of us and locked us all out of the apartment during the day.

So we set up a makeshift headquarters in front of the bay of pay phones, making calls from one and waiting for call-backs from the other one, which entailed a strict enforcement of not letting anyone else use the phone. If a random passerby tried to pick up the receiver, we'd intercept immediately: "Is it an emergency?" one of us would ask, placing a palm over the coin slot. One man approached the phone quickly. He had a Dalmatian with him on a leash and he made a lunge for the receiver. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Sorry, sir, we're using this one."

"But you're not on it."

"We're waiting for an important call."

"Yeah, well I need to call my wife and tell her I found our dog. I've been searching for Bingo for two hours and my wife's worried sick," the guy said as he made another attempt to reach for the phone. But we stood firm.

"I understand your dilemma, but if we let you use the phone it sets a precedent. Then we'd have to let everyone use it. And then where would we be? Not in a two-bedroom apartment with wall-to-wall carpeting, a stove, and refrigerator. That's for sure," I explained, rationally. Bingo's owner gave us a nasty look and shook his head but dragged his dog farther down the block to the corner deli.

Now, since Tanya's aunt's house was not working out, the situation was quite dire. Between the three of us, we weren't the best credit risk. Unfortunately, we hadn't thought of that. Just like it hadn't occurred to us that when you live on your own you have to buy things like sponges and toilet paper. I somehow thought these items just appeared in the cabinets. Sure, I'd seen them in stores, but I had very few recollections of cash transactions taking place.

This particular morning it was above a hundred degrees in the shade and we were all awaiting death by sunstroke when two well-dressed ladies in their forties or fifties approached us. The more outgoing of the two stepped forward and introduced herself as Marcie Walters. Then, nice as can be, Marcie asked if we'd like to join them at a meeting that was being held right around the corner. I was immediately suspicious. I'd seen enough horror movies to know that you just don't trust superfriendly strangers; they are scary and probably want something from you. Like your unborn baby. On the other hand, the other woman was Asian and in my experience it's rare to find an Asian woman who's up to no good.

"What kind of *meeting*?" I asked, carefully emphasizing the word "meeting" for all I was worth to show that I'm not gullible. "It's not AA, is it?" I wasn't going to fall for that again.

"No, no, nothing like that. We belong to a group called Soka Gakkai International. We're Buddhists."

"Buddhists? Are you the ones who can't drink coffee?" Tanya interjected.

"No, that's Mormons." Still, it didn't sound good. I looked at my friends, who were staring at me like I was engaging in small talk with the Menendez brothers, so I

turned back to the women.

“Sorry...I don’t think so,” I said sternly.

“There’s air-conditioning.”

Five minutes later, Tanya, Beth, and I found ourselves in the back of a climate-controlled living room seated on giant Oriental floor pillows, sipping Crystal Light lemonade and watching various people chant “Nam Myo Ho Renge Kyo” over and over in front of a big shrine that had an apple in it. Every so often someone would ring a bell.

Marcie sat next to me and explained what we were seeing—apparently in code. “The workings of the universe are an expression of a single principle, which is the essence of the Lotus Sutra. By putting our lives in rhythm with this law, we can unlock our hidden potential—and achieve creative harmony with the environment.” I had no clue what she was talking about, but I nodded my head like I was simply taking in a recipe for BBQ chicken.

“Mmmhmm.” I wondered if there was any sort of stronger refreshment option.

“We say the words while thinking of things we want. We can actually manifest these things into our lives just by repeating our mantra ‘Nam Myo Ho Renge Kyo.’”

“You mean, like chanting for world peace or ending hunger in Third World countries?” I asked, pretty sure I knew where she was going with this New Agey business.

“No. Like a Gucci bag or a career in radio broadcasting.”

“Interesting.”

This actually made more sense, because her acrylic manicure with one gold pinky nail wasn’t really throwing off a spiritual vibe. Chanting for material things sounded wrong somehow, kind of antispiritual—who knew if I’d only repackaged the idea and called it *The Secret* I could be living in a solid-gold castle, with four entire rooms dedicated just to hats, eating caviar by the fistful and enjoying newly released movies in my giant screening room every night.

“Why don’t you give it a try?” Marcie nudged. At this point, Tanya and Beth had fled to the kitchen, where I have no doubt they were rummaging for cookies. But I felt it would be rude not to at least try to get into the spirit of the thing since I was in no great hurry to get back outside. I took a seat on the floor and chanted along with the rest of the group. I felt a little self-conscious, but everyone else was doing it. *Please let me find a new apartment*, I thought over and over in my head. Since Tanya and Beth refused to have anything to do with this, it was obvious I would have to do all the heavy lifting. What was wrong with them? Did they think a new apartment was just going to magically appear? No, you have to work for things in life—which is exactly what I was doing.

When the meeting broke up, a few members, led by Marcie, surrounded us to ask for our information and see how we liked the meeting and to invite us to chant with them again. For some reason, I dutifully gave them Tanya’s aunt’s address and phone number just to get them off our backs but told them that although we enjoyed ourselves and appreciated their hospitality, we were in a period of transition and would just like to go ahead and chant on our own.

“Well, you’re going to need a gohonzon, which is the sacred scroll, and you’ll need a cabinet to build your shrine and a bell and special incense,” a guy named Atlas

said way too intensely. “You can’t just use any old incense.” Since there was no mention of the shrine’s apple, I supposed it was okay to get one at the grocery store, but I had a sneaking suspicion it would need a special forty-dollar blessing at the very least. Then they told us about a meeting that was happening that very Sunday at their corporate headquarters, where we could get all the supplies we needed to be part of the SGI organization.

“No, thanks,” I said, shifting my weight back and forth. I had to pee like crazy, but I was starting to have a creepy feeling they weren’t going to let us leave.

“You have to come to the meeting. We won’t take no for an answer,” Atlas said.

“Okay,” Tanya replied. “We’ll think about it. But we have to run.”

Atlas followed us out. “I’d really like to talk to you more about Soka Gakkai International and what it can bring into your life...” We broke into a run.

“What the fuck was that about?” Beth wanted to know on our way back to the Mayfair Market. “I can’t believe you were chanting. Those people were batshit crazy!”

Three days later, it was the weekend and we were hanging out at Tanya’s aunt’s house, enduring her glares, when the phone rang—a sound we rarely got to hear during the week so it was a bit startling. Tanya’s aunt answered it. “It’s for you guys. It’s the intercom. There are some people here to take you to a meeting?”

“Oh my God, they’re *here*? This is insane. We’d never agreed to go to the meeting,” Beth said, panicking.

“Just ignore them,” Tanya’s aunt said sensibly, although she was probably secretly disappointed that we wouldn’t be leaving the house for the afternoon and more likely helping ourselves to her sandwich supplies.

“Yeah, no shit. We’re not *going*,” Tanya added. “Hang up the phone!”

It immediately rang again.

And again. And again. And again. Like out of a horror movie. I almost expected someone to scream, “Oh my God! It’s coming from inside the house!” Finally, I picked up the receiver. “We’re not going to the meeting so please leave, okay?” and with that I hung up. We nervously peeked out the window of the apartment building. From our vantage on the twelfth floor, we had a clear view of the driveway. There, pulled up to the phone used to call up to the tenants’ residences was a carload of people. A couple of them had gotten out and were walking toward the building—of course, Atlas was in the mix.

“Holy shit, they’re going to try and get in!” I yelled. We all stayed quiet, praying that no one was going to randomly open the front security door for a couple of seemingly well-dressed psychotics. I think at this exact point in my life I became completely jaded. *Man, I thought, if you can’t wander into someone’s living room and chant for a while without being afraid of repercussions, what can you do?*

Twenty seconds later there was pounding on the door. We stayed stock-still and waited for the terror to end. But it didn’t. The Buddhist zombies were now yelling outside the door about how we promised and that we should at least come out and talk with them. Finally, I yelled, “We are calling the police if you don’t leave right now! I mean it. The phone is in my hand.”

It got quiet. And then, slowly, we heard footsteps retreating from the doorway.

“I swear to God you need to find another place to go or I am changing the locks tomorrow,” Tanya’s aunt said.

The next day was Monday and from our spot at the Mayfair Market, we got the news that we'd been approved for an apartment *with a stove and refrigerator* and it was ready for us to move in. It was a huge stroke of luck—or was it? Just in case, I chanted, “Nam Myo Ho Renge Kyo” all the way back to Tanya's aunt's.

Hollywood Square

My first car was a banana yellow Mazda GLC. Clearly it was not my first choice. It had already logged about 95,000 miles when I snagged it for the low, low price of one thousand dollars, which I financed at over twenty percent interest since I had worse credit than most homeless people. “*But hey, I’d have this bad boy all paid off within three years!*” I thought smugly. I acquired the car out of necessity when I lost all family car privileges.

Close to the day I turned seventeen, having obtained a learner’s permit months before and *almost* mastering the three-point turn, I took the road test and much to everyone’s surprise, most especially my own, got my driver’s license. Three months later, I promptly totaled my parents’ thirdhand gold Toyota Corolla—although I’m thinking the good people at Toyota called it gold because it sounded more palatable than bile, which would actually be a more accurate description of the color. So, in retrospect, I probably did them a favor. And not just because of the color but because the car had seen better days—most of which were before I was born. In fact, most of my parents’ used cars had the life span of a goldfish. One day the car would be making a strange rattling noise and the next day it would be tires up, only to be replaced by another one just like it with even more miles. Many of my most vivid childhood memories are of being stranded on the side of the road due to a broken water pump, leaky engine gasket, or some other terminal car malady, enduring pitying looks from people driving by in cars manufactured in a more recent decade.

There were four of us girls in the car the night of the crash, coming home from a keg party, singing loudly along to Grandmaster Flash’s “White Lines,” when I pulled out of an intersection and out of nowhere—or at least out of the direction I wasn’t looking—a van smashed into us. The Corolla spun around a few times and came to rest on top of a median. The van kept right on going. Obviously the driver had been drinking even more than we had and had no interest in sticking around and coming face-to-face with anyone in possession of a Breathalyzer test. I kind of understood, but maybe a quick, “Yo, anyone dead back there?” or “Sorry to hit and run!” would’ve taken the sting out a little.

Sitting on the curb with my friends who were all unscathed but shaken, I contemplated the real harm that would come to me when my parents found out.

As soon as I was dropped off at home by my friend Beth’s parents sans Corolla (which had to be towed to the nearest junkyard), I told my parents what happened. Shockingly, they reacted like they were in some kind of black-and-white sitcom where the parents were polite and slept in separate twin beds.

“Oh, honey, thank goodness you’re okay!” my mom said, throwing her arms

around me in a startlingly uncharacteristic manner. I was momentarily taken aback.

“But, the car—it’s...it’s totaled,” I sobbed, waiting for a weighty object to be hurled in my direction. My mother had been known to throw things in anger and unfortunately she was in the midst of a “pressure-canning her own preserves” phase so she had ready access to those heavy glass jars—which, trust me, are pretty scary coming at you like a fastball pitch from across the room.

At the very *least* I imagined I would get a lecture on how irresponsible I was, how they knew this would happen, how I would have to pay them back for the damage. How none of this would’ve happened if I’d gotten my goddamn bangs cut so they wouldn’t be hanging in my eyes.

“As long as no one was hurt. Cars can be replaced; people can’t.” *Yeah, sure, Mom.* I’d seen *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. This pod person wasn’t fooling me. I braced myself for the punishment I knew would come. It took a week.

Following a fairly minor infraction, where I missed my curfew by about five minutes, my mother flew into a rage. “If you’re not responsible enough to get home at the time I’ve designated for you, then you are not responsible enough to drive the family car—ever again.” To the outside eye, this would seem like an overreaction—I’d seen it coming a mile away.

“How am I going to get around? Go to work?”

“I guess you’ll have to buy your own car.”

Enter the only car I could afford: the banana yellow Mazda.

A year later, I slapped a “gas, grass, or ass: no one rides for free” sticker on its bumper and took off to make a new life for myself in Los Angeles. I could smell the freedom of the open road—I could also *see* it due to a gaping hole in the driver’s side floor of the car, where it had rusted clean through. The GLC’s health was declining quickly. Besides the rust holes, the engine sounded louder than a leaf blower; it puffed out huge clouds of white smoke when it started up, and the poor thing could only go 45 mph on the freeway, much to the aggravation of other drivers. Although I don’t see why they needed to honk and give me the finger. Did they think I *wanted* to drive that slowly in the fast lane?

By the time I got settled in my new home and realized the mandatory amount of driving a person does in a place like LA, I started to worry. The cross-country trip had taken its toll and the GLC was on its last spark plug. I couldn’t even take it on the freeway anymore, seeing as it wouldn’t go fast enough to merge and in LA people didn’t just give you the finger, they pulled out heavy artillery. I needed a new car desperately.

The little transportation available wasn’t an option. I certainly wouldn’t be caught dead taking the bus. That was for poor people—not women like me who had over two hundred dollars between her checking and savings accounts. But, by this point, I had even worse credit than ever. I hadn’t paid a bill since I’d moved, including a credit card my mom had cosigned for me, which I quickly ran up to the tune of two grand. Turns out these credit card companies don’t care what your financial situation is; they want a payment *every* month, and I was under a constant barrage of calls from collection agencies. Because caller ID had yet to be invented, I was often forced to pick up the phone and say hello, only to hear a telltale pause and then an unfamiliar voice mispronounce my name.

“May I please speak to Stefanie Willer?” That would be my cue to fake my voice like I was suddenly an elderly Hispanic woman.

“Uh...*hola?*” I’d say, trying to sound like I’d also just been roused from a sound sleep at two in the afternoon to add to the confusion.

“I’m looking for Stefanie Widler? Wil-dair?”

“Ooo...*no habla ingles.*”

That would usually hold them off for a good hour. But then they’d call again. I wondered if this approach from bill collectors actually worked on anyone. Did they think they could simply annoy you into making a payment? If I didn’t have money on Tuesday afternoon, there was a *very* strong possibility I wouldn’t be rolling in piles of hundreds by Wednesday morning. Also, the mere fact that I’m *home* on a Tuesday afternoon should be a tip-off that I’m *not working*—and therefore have no money.

As a last resort, I called my mother to see if there was a slim chance she could help me out. I knew she wouldn’t cosign a car loan seeing as how she was still a bit miffed about the “credit card incident,” which she’d ended up paying off so I didn’t ruin her credit as well. I had to ask for the money straight-out. I explained how bad I needed a car so that I could get to work to earn money for necessities, like groceries, and possibly a few luxuries, like going to the dentist. Otherwise, I’d be forced to do something drastic, like...go to college.

She told me that she’d think about it.

A week later, she came up with the following plan: I would work and save up a decent amount of money, a few thousand dollars maybe, and she would match whatever funds I raised so that I could buy myself a car, which would seem like a very sensible solution—provided I wasn’t looking to purchase a car in *this century*. I couldn’t understand her logic. Did she think I was moonlighting as Donald Trump? I was working a part-time minimum-wage job, barely surviving on Top Ramen and bologna sandwiches. By the time I had saved up enough money to buy *half* a car, I wouldn’t need one because our society would most likely be using jet packs to buzz around the sky as their sole means of personal transportation. I needed a car *now*. I tried to reiterate this to my mother, but all I remember from her response was “blah blah, time to learn responsibility, blah blah, cars aren’t free...blah.” Obviously, this plan was not going to work.

My mother had to be wrong. Hell, I lived in Los Angeles—land of opportunity! And that’s when it hit me. It was so obvious it may as well have been tattooed on my face: Go on a game show. It was so brilliant, I almost laughed out loud. Why hadn’t I thought of this sooner? From my youngest days I’ve had a borderline obsessive love of game shows. It was just a matter of picking which one. This was a stressful decision. It was one thing to lie on my couch eating dry salami and saltines, screaming “dumbass” at the lady in the Christmas tree sweater vest on *The Price Is Right* who couldn’t decide if two bars of Dove soap cost more than a box of Rice-A-Roni, but quite another to be on national television doing it yourself. Whatever show I chose would have to be easy. *Wheel of Fortune* was definitely out. As much as I liked watching the show, I was usually the very last person on the planet to figure out the puzzle. The board could literally be missing the A from “Jack and Jill” and I’d be completely stumped. Surely I would’ve eaten up any winnings I made from solving the puzzle just buying vowels alone. Had to rule out *Family Feud*; could not risk the off-chance they

might randomly drug test, a huge red flag for key team members.

After a few more days of research done from the comfort of my bed, I hit upon a perfect show: *Hollywood Squares*. It fit all my criteria. Big prizes? Check. Almost indiscernible skill level required? Check. Basic understanding of tic-tac-toe strategy? Uh, check. From the looks of things, all I had to do was agree or disagree with the celebrities' answers to random questions; the possible looking like an asshole factor was up to them. New car, here I come!

Seated on bleachers in an ice-cold studio with about sixty other *Squares* hopefuls, I felt slightly less confident. We were supposed to stand, say our name, and tell one interesting fact about ourselves. From the way everyone was overly enthusiastically whooping it up, being a game show contestant required a lot of undignified clapping and jumping up and down as well as a lack of sanity. One guy with psycho eyes, a huge mustache, and cowboy attire popped up out of turn and yelled so loudly you would've thought the entire group of us was hearing impaired.

"My name's Robert, but my friends call me Crazy Red. I collect Barbie dolls and I'm a proud poppa to ten children! I just know I'm perfect for your show!" In my mind, the only thing Crazy Red seemed perfect for was a vasectomy—but the casting director was practically salivating. I didn't feel good about my chances. The only thing I could think of to say about myself was that I had an unnatural love affair with chimps and I'd always wanted to keep one as a pet. So no one was more shocked than I was when the call came in a week later that I was picked for the show.

That's how I found myself in a holding room backstage with a handful of other chosen people waiting for a competing contestant to be knocked out or win a car, giving one of us a chance to get out there. In the meantime, we were being run through tic-tac-toe strategy drills like new recruits in game show boot camp.

"Lisa, if George goes to the left upper corner with his X, and the middle is already taken, what should be your next move?" barked Tom, the nineteen-year-old tyrant in charge of our group, which, naturally, included Big Red.

"Um, I'll take Jim J. Bullock?" Lisa said, growing unsure of herself. It was understandable. We'd been coming to the studio all day for three days straight waiting for our chance to get on the show. Three eight-hour days with nothing to eat but old triangles of American cheese sandwiches, lukewarm honeydew melon slices, and a pot of burnt Folgers coffee was starting to take its toll.

"You can't just say, 'I'll take Jim J. Bullock.' You need to say, 'I'll take Jim J. Bullock to *block!*'" Duh.

"Okay, you're gonna need to bring your energy way up!" Tom scolded us. I bet this type of pep talk worked like a charm in the bedroom. Personally, I thought my energy was way up, considering I normally have less energy than a house-plant. I felt I should be given props for even attempting to feign interest in a roomful of future scrapbookers. The whole situation was getting irritating to me because I didn't need their boot camp. I was ready for battle. While these yahoos had been home beefing up their tic-tac-toe game, I'd been watching the show every night preparing for Operation Win a New Car. Like a spy studying the enemy, I'd learned that Joan Rivers, the center square at the time, was always right. It wasn't clear if the producers slipped her the correct answers or if she was just some sort of game show savant, and it really didn't matter—disagree with Joan at your own peril. The rest was even simpler: With any

multiple choice question, the least obvious answer was always right; true/false questions, no matter how ridiculous they sounded, were always true. “True or false: In Virginia it’s illegal to take a nap with a camel?” Absolutely true. I have no idea why the writers at the time never mixed it up more, but I thank them for it.

When it was finally my turn at the podium, I was ready. Too bad I hadn’t put as much thought into my style choice. True, it was the eighties, but it would have been helpful if someone had sent me a letter from the future warning me that wearing huge shoulder pads would prove to be a regrettable idea. So since I will never let anyone watch the VHS tape of the show, people just have to trust me when I tell them that I kicked game show ass like some sort of *Hollywood Squares* ninja. Sticking to my training, I sailed through the first round, taking the game and five hundred dollars barely breaking a sweat. I felt unstoppable, adrenaline flowing like blood through my veins—I could practically smell my new leather interior—until, suddenly, without warning, Super Dave Osborne tried to screw me.

We were deep in the second game when I went to Super Dave to win. The host, John Davidson, read the question: “What causes the most household accidents: doors, stairs, or bicycles?” While Super Dave showed a pretaped bit where he performed a stunt he’s known for, like getting shot out of a cannon or signing an autograph at an auto trade show, I tried to imagine exactly how a bicycle could cause a household accident. Were there people showing up in the ER because they’d been tooling around the master bedroom on a ten-speed and accidentally crashed into an armoire? This seemed like the least likely answer, so I was pretty sure it was either that or doors. I never once met a door I considered a troublemaker. But then Super Dave said *stairs* and he sounded so positive about it that I went temporarily insane and agreed, even though it went against all my training.

Of course, the answer was doors. Bastard.

That square that didn’t get the O left me open for a block, but luckily, my opponent didn’t have my special ops training and lost the next question, leaving it wide open for me to take the square back. This time I did not fall for any Super Dave trickery, and I won the second game by sticking to my guns and not agreeing that as a child actor Shirley Temple made more money than Jackie Coogan or Mickey Rooney. That had to be false since who’d ever heard of Jackie Coogan? Sure enough, I was right.

Finally, the moment I’d been dreaming about for weeks was almost upon me. I was told to grab a key and choose one of five brand-spanking-new shiny Buicks positioned on the stage almost like a pyramid, which I would then get to try to start—right after the commercial break.

I went with my gut and chose the bright red Buick Skyhawk right out in front like the first pin in a bowling triangle. The producers placed me behind the wheel of the car with my “good luck” celebrities. From watching the show, I was led to believe that the contestant got to choose which celebrities would come with her or him for moral support, but this was not the case. Garry Marshall was standing next to me, leaning against the car, which I had nothing against—I loved *Happy Days* as much as the next girl. But, somebody named Andrea Evans was perched on top of *my* car like she was posing for a girlie calendar in a mechanic’s garage. This didn’t sit well with me, but I didn’t have time to get truly riled up about how I would explain to my friends

watching that I'm not gay or a soap opera fan and I had nothing to do with picking her because just then I noticed that the key I had in my hand wasn't even an actual car key. It was a skeleton key. I felt all the color drain from my face. This fake key clearly wasn't going to start the car which meant *I didn't win*. I'd already lost and now to add insult to injury I was supposed to sit there glowing like an expectant mother knowing I would not be leaving with my Skyhawk? It was almost too much to bear.

I didn't know what to do with the key, so I rolled down the window to ask Garry what he thought.

"Um, hey, Gar?"

"Yeah?" he answered in his heavy New York accent, clearly surprised at being addressed by a contestant.

"Look." I showed him the key. "This isn't even a real key. Do you know what I'm supposed to do with it?" Garry looked at the key, intently assessing the situation. The poor guy had no idea. He was just there to promote *Pretty Woman*, not to figure out the ins and outs of the game show business.

"Just fake it," was all he could come up with.

Fucking directors.

We came back from commercial and John Davidson boomed, "We're back with Stefanie and she's about to see if she won a brand-new Buick Skyhawk." Ha.

"Stefanie, start the car!" So I looked down at the ignition and did my best impression of someone starting a car. I figured if nothing else I should really try to sell my performance since Garry Marshall was watching and could possibly put me in his next movie. Then I sat waiting for a *wah wah waaah* noise. Instead, I heard some sort of sound effect that vaguely mimicked an engine turning over. But that was impossible. I was in the car and knew it definitely hadn't started. This was followed by balloons dropping from the ceiling and the audience cheering like they were in the front row of a Madonna concert. What was wrong with these people? Hadn't they ever seen someone lose on a game show before? That's when my new best friend Garry leaned in through the window.

"You won the car." And that's when I screamed. This was unbelievable! I'd really done it.

I vaguely recall filling out a bunch of legal paperwork with my name, address, Social Security number, and other information, presumably to get the "getting my new car" ball rolling. I was smiling so hard my face hurt, loving everyone like I was on ecstasy—"Good luck, cowboy!" I shouted when I saw that Big Red was making his way to the podium. "Go easy on Lisa!" I shouted to Tom who was sitting on a crate near the coffee table for the crew. Tom gave me the thumbs-up as if to say, "You done good, kid." I couldn't wait to get home and tell my mom she was off the hook.

Mom was nonplussed by my coup.

"Huh." It wasn't a question. "You simply won a car." Again, not a question.

"Yes, Mom. I won it. Isn't it exciting? Now you don't have to give me any money. I did this myself."

"What about the taxes? Does the show pay for that, too?" Had my mother always been this big a buzz kill? I wondered to myself. Come on, taxes? Taxes were for grown-ups. Adults with decent jobs and houses and things like that. The government was interested in people with money. They weren't wasting their time on twenty-one-

year-old kids who went on game shows and won a car they sorely needed. My mom was so naïve.

A few weeks later, I took possession of my Skyhawk. It had no mileage! It also had no leather interior and no air-conditioning, because air-conditioning was three thousand dollars extra. “Yeah, no thanks. Just the car, please,” I told the dealership when they called with the news about how much the additional things would cost. Who needed a cassette player anyway when there were perfectly fine FM/AM radio stations?

Now there was just the question of what to do with my yellow Mazda. At this point it was barely drivable. It also had about twenty unpaid parking tickets on it, which meant that if I just left it parked on the street it would eventually get towed away—a bit anticlimactic for a car that had been with me through so much. But I had no other choice. So I said my good-byes and within two days the car was gone.

The following year, I did receive a form from the government stating that I’d won around fourteen thousand dollars in cash and prizes. I round-filed it along with the letters I started receiving a few years later from the IRS. About five years later, the phone rang on a random afternoon.

“Hello?” Pause.

“I’m looking for a Stefanie Wimmer? This is the Internal Revenue Service calling about your outstanding bill of eight thousand dollars, which includes interest from the last five years.”

“*Hola?*”

Chubz

When I saw the ad in the classified section of the paper, I knew it was for me:

“Would you like to make easy money in a relaxed environment with room for advancement?”

Um, let me think...yeah!

“Imagine a fun, creative job that offers flexibility and a weekly paycheck between \$500–\$1,200.”

I think I’m in love! But not so fast. There’s probably a catch.

“Great pay, great incentives in the exciting world of telemarketing!”

Perfect! I didn’t know what telemarketing was *exactly*, but it sounded right up my alley. I loved talking on the phone and I loved marketing.

“Start tomorrow—have a check by Friday!”

Sold! The phone was in my hand in seconds and a few minutes later I’d secured an interview for later that same day. I was optimistic. Seeing as I’d just put down stakes in a rundown apartment just off of Hollywood Boulevard with my best friend, Beth, solely on her dime, I needed a job fast. I’d started my cross-country trek from Massachusetts to my new life with nine hundred dollars cash—a lot of money to me at eighteen. But my funds went quickly on 7-Eleven Slim Jims and Motel Six stays. We’d started the trip with lofty plans to camp out in order to save money, but that strategy flew out the window after the very first time we spent two hours in a campground unsuccessfully trying to pitch our tent. We eventually ended up partially dozing in our car on the side of the road at 2 a.m., paranoid that we’d be raped by the truck drivers we’d brazenly been flashing for hundreds of miles. By the time a down payment was needed for the apartment, I was flat broke and it was up to Beth’s Bat Mitzvah savings account to finance our new place and budding marijuana addiction.

When I told Beth about my golden opportunity, all she said was, “Be careful. Better make sure this thing is on the level.” What was she even talking about? I might’ve only been living in Los Angeles for a week, and I might’ve, much to my consternation, still been a virgin, but I wasn’t dumb. I’d seen a few movies of the week in my time. I knew about *Dawn: Portrait of a Teenage Runaway*. I’d heard about these young girls straight off the bus in Hollywood, immediately getting preyed upon by some pimp who wants them to pose for “modeling pictures” and BAM they’re sucked into the seedy world of prostitution or pornography never to be heard from again.

“Très jolie, Coco. Très jolie.” Obviously, I was too smart to fall into that trap.

“It’s a phone job. Telemarketing. I’m sure it’s cool.”

“I’m just saying, it might be a scam,” Beth said just before sucking in a huge hit through a blue glass bong we’d received as a “welcome neighbor” gift from the guy in

the apartment next door.

“I’ll tell you the real scam: *Bat Mitzvahs*. Chant a little Hebrew for two hundred of your closest friends and family and everyone gives you so much money you never have to sling Whoppers at a Burger King for three months until you finally get moved up to cashier where you are eventually fired for routinely shorting customers a few cents on their change in a noble attempt to help raise your minimum wage.”

Okay, perhaps I was a little bitter. Despite the fact that I was Jewish, my parents didn’t seem to notice, celebrating Christmas every year until I was about twelve. Suddenly, out of nowhere, my mother remembered our heritage, joined a temple and forced me to attend Hebrew school, even though at this point there was no chance I’d be studying enough to have a Bat Mitzvah. She also put the kibosh on Christmas, leaving me irritated and broke at thirteen. But at least I knew the value of a dollar.

Later that day, a pleasant blond woman of about thirty who introduced herself as “Genie with a G” looked me up and down, and then asked me to read from a script to see how well I articulated over the phone. I never had a big interest in acting, but I *had* been chosen to play Dorothy in the local community center’s production of *The Wizard of Oz* when I was in the second grade, so I knew it wouldn’t be a problem. The script itself was one I’d know by heart within a few weeks.

“Hi, this is (insert your name here) from General Business Warehouse. You’re on our preferred customer list, so I’m paying you a courtesy call to tell you about the huge savings I’m able to offer you *today only* on your office-supply needs. Am I speaking to the person who makes the purchasing decisions at your company?”

To no one’s surprise, I was told I could start the next day.

But before leaving, I was led to a back office to be introduced to the owner of the company. I wished that Genie with a G had warned me of what I was about to see. Even just a minimal, “Hope you’re not scared of a little chest hair” comment would’ve been helpful. But I never saw it coming. The door swung open and standing there was a humongous Hungarian version of Brando in his bloated final days. For a second I thought, *How cute, someone dressed up a bear in people clothes!* The bottom of the man’s shirt was fiercely trying to fight free from the waistband of his pants and the buttons on his shirt were pulled so tightly I was afraid if one popped off someone could lose an eye—well, the few buttons that he’d actually buttoned. His shirt was purposely opened almost to his navel, exposing mounds of chest hair. It was a truly horrifying sight. But I didn’t say anything.

First off, we were still a good twenty years away from it being acceptable for a man to get his chest waxed—this was the eighties, call-waiting had yet to be invented, and many people were still under the impression that Kajagoogoo would have another hit. Second, he seemed downright proud to be hairier than a Cro-Magnon, and since this was the man who would be signing my weekly paycheck of \$500–\$1,200, I figured it best to keep my thoughts to myself. I smiled widely and tried to maintain eye contact despite the bowl haircut, gold tooth, and huge medallion, which were all equally battling it out for my attention. He stuck out a big meatloaf hand.

“I’m Chubz. Eez veddy, veddy nice doo meet you,” he said in the thickest Hungarian accent since Zsa Zsa Gabor. “I hope doo be zeeing much more of you.”

I hoped not.

The large room where I worked was lined wall to wall with cubicles. Genie with a