

OPEN

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I must have been easy to find.

Once he learned my name, he could type it into his favorite web search engine and details would pop up. A conference here or there. A press release from the women's studies center in Podunk, Utah, where I'd been a visiting scholar for one week. An indexing of my dissertation, *Adolescence in the Work of Women Writers, 1970-1980*. A review of the resultant book, renamed by the publisher to be more "scintillating."

But most importantly, for his purposes, must have been the university website listing my name, status, office number, academic interests, and courses taught. A brief bio which doesn't mention him, of course. There's even a photograph, which he would have patiently allowed to download, perhaps thinking, at first, that it might be enough.

Funny, what a person thinks at first. At first I thought he was a former student. He looked vaguely familiar, in that sat-in-the-seventh-row-in-a-large-introductory-class kind of way. I teach hundreds of students each year; I can't be expected to know each of them. Which is one of the reasons I always keep my office door open.

"This open-door policy is the biggest mistake of your life," a senior colleague advised me during my first year, thrusting his head across the threshold. I recognized him as the statistics professor, though I would have thought his expertise would have endowed him with a better conception of "biggest."

"That would be a great life," I chirped. Like many women, my growls and snarls often sound positively bird-like.

"Really," he continued. "An open door is an invitation to the hordes. Everyone will be clamoring for your attention. You'll never get anything done. These students are like babes who see their professors as big tits. They'll suck you dry."

"Thank you for the warning." I realized he must be the one my congenial colleague, Senda Moran, had been referring to yesterday when she spoke about the "problem" with the three sexual harassment complaints filed against him.

"I'm serious. You don't have a clue. This university is the most uncivilized place on earth."

"Nature, red in tooth and claw?" I laughed, hoping a literary allusion might interject some perspective.

"Don't laugh, young lady. Hobbes had it right."

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“Actually, the line is from Tennyson.” I knew I’d corrected my colleague too quickly; forgetting that he’d be among those who would vote on whether to tenure me or terminate me when the time came. The fruit of universities run by corporate managers. A literature professor evaluated by numbers.

“Of course, of course.” His nod was brusque. Perhaps the sweet tweet-tweets of older men simply sound like barking.

“I’ve always thought it sounded like Hobbes, though.” I’d evolved into a house pet, hear me purr.

“Too poetic for Hobbes,” he withdrew his head from my office, as if he were rebuking me for a mistake I had made. As if I didn’t know the whole damn poem by heart, “In Memoriam, A.H.H.,” by Lord Alfred Tennyson. I once had had the time to commit every syllable to memory.

But whether wolves or parakeets in red raw nature, the statistics professor and I live lovely lives as people for whom academic protocol was among our greatest concerns. Door open or closed? Open or closed book exams? Open show of hands at the faculty meeting or a closed vote by secret ballot? We debated in the halls and over coffees. Significance inhered in every decision, no matter how mundane.

I thrive in this life.

It’s deliciously risk-free. The things we pretend are so important are actually trivial, banal, and often silly. Interestingly, except for the office door issue, I often agree with my colleague the sex harasser statistician more often than my colleague Senda Moran, whose feminist work on constructions of motherhood I so admire. Oh, the passionate arguments Senda and I have had about a hiring decision or two. Yes, a momentous decision for someone, but still . . . It’s only an academic job. There are other ways to make a living. And most of our dramas aren’t so portentous.

Although at times, I admit, I suspect that others aren’t faking their anger or terror. Senda had this disconcerting habit of crying during every faculty meeting. The tears would blotch her face as she proposed that the faculty adopt a monthly open forum with students. It seemed a simple yes/no vote, so I dismissed her reaction as hormones, as much as I detest biological explanations. But the only other rationale that ever occurred to me was that she’d had a life so different from mine that she really thought that a monthly open forum with students was a life-or-death matter. I knew both her parents were professors—at an institution more prestigious than our own—which meant she hadn’t clawed her way to academia. I assumed this also meant she’d never been kicked from one end of the house to the other by a mother screaming “harlot” at her; it meant she’d never thought that her vomiting might mean that the

pregnancy would hurtle through her throat to be harmlessly flushed down the toilet and into the river.

As the blood basted my tongue and my forehead rested on the front porch step, I did not think of my mother's unfairness in forcing me to go to that New Year's Eve party, on the other side of the river, with people I hardly knew, just because I'd been invited and I was "getting too old" to spend New Year's Eve alone. I did not wonder about the source of my mother's previous preoccupation with my lack of dates and how it had transformed itself into this rage. I did not contemplate the atonality of her voice, even as she screeched beyond any soprano's range. I did not even imagine how badly I was hurt. It seemed my future was decided then: I would not be a lawyer, a psychologist, a musician, or a nurse. I would be whatever profession allowed one to focus on a single word—a word such as "harlot," for example, as distinct from the more obvious choices such as "whore" and "slut." A certain Biblical majesty did inhere in the word, as it echoed and re-echoed in my otherwise empty mind. Deflecting all attention from the troublesome body.

Door open, door closed. Irrelevant.

Certainly not the biggest mistake of my life.

Even if my door had been closed, he would have knocked.

The open door has the advantage of a view of the hall. I can see him lurking. He looks tentative, as if he'd not gotten the grade he thought he'd deserved (an "A," of course, but at least an "A-"). He probably needed something now—permission of the instructor for an advanced seminar, or a recommendation for law school (it was always law school). Though he appears old enough to be attending law school already. Maybe he graduated. Or maybe he dropped out. And after working a few years in the Sears Portrait Studio telling bickering families and fussy babies to smile, he'd decided that school wasn't so difficult after all.

Even from this distance, he glows with a shiny patina of privilege.

Funny, what a person thinks at first.

It's not so different when people learn I'm from Oregon. A place outsiders envision as the land of evergreens fed by sparkling streams and granola eaten in misshapen pottery bowls. My colleagues let me know they imagine I grew up on a land co-op, in a pristine valley embraced by gentle mists, in a hand hewn house with a magic bus in the front yard and tie-dyed natural cotton shirts on the clothesline. I don't disabuse them of their fantasies. I don't substitute rivers clotted with mud that had slid down the clear-cut mountainsides, loggers mean with being out of work, totem poles made of beer bottles, and not enough insulation to keep out the monsters of damp and mold. No counter-culture where I come from; no culture at all. Five books in the whole

soggy county, counting the Bible and the phone book. Or-eee-gone, my colleagues say, with the emphasis on the gone. Gone. Gone. Gone. How I stay.

He knocks on the door, although it's open.

Manners. His parents taught him well.

"Can I shut the door?"

"No. Just leave it open."

His hand is on the door. Reluctant.

"Sit down," I invite; I order.

His name is Timothy and he's a graduate student in sociology doing his dissertation and he'd heard I'd be helpful.

Do I ask him who told him that?

No.

Do I ask him the name of his dissertation advisor?

No.

Do I ask him to explain *Stigma* by Erving Goffman? Or to discuss Talcott Parsons' functionalist views as applicable to the family? Or briefly describe how Max Weber treated Marxist notions of class?

No, I do not.

Perhaps he would have been prepared with the answers.

Instead, I ask him how I could help him.

He's looking for background readings on feminist conceptions of motherhood.

I tell him that's not my area.

Flicker of a something on his upper lip. Too confused and raw to be a smile. Too vulnerable to be a sneer. Perhaps he's recalling something I once said in class. Probably in Introduction to Women's Studies, which does have a unit on motherhood. Though I usually recall the men in those classes—they tend to talk a lot. Or maybe he's thinking of his own mother. These students have their own lives outside of the classroom, which can be difficult for a professor to remember.

My statistician colleague thrusts his head across the doorway. Nods to the student in my room as if he recognizes him, asks me if I'm going to the presentation later this afternoon.

I'll see him there.

Will even sit next to him, most likely. Funny, how I've grown to like him, as obnoxious as he is. At least he doesn't cry during the meetings.

And we share a penchant for Bob Dylan. Agreeing that after a score of mediocre years, the bard is back in fine form with his new offerings, which we still call albums never mind that we purchase and play them as CDs.

My only problem is when he talks about being in the military.

Nam. Nam. Nam.

I know he's drunk when that becomes his refrain.
Well, at least he doesn't drink beer.

Its smell was everywhere, more pungent than the cloud of marijuana and cigarette smoke, mixed with scotch and piss. I was 15 and I didn't want to be there, tumbled in the strange small house, far across the river, at the party my mother had insisted I'd enjoy. They called themselves boys, but they were men, home from the war, home from some place they called hell, but with a certain pride, as if they'd survived something, as if they'd escaped these backwoods and weathered the jungle. Wearing their camouflage.

I was wearing a purple sweater with celebratory sparkles. And blue jeans. A bra I didn't really need and clean underwear. Socks with a hole where my toenail poked through. Sneakers that my brother had outgrown.

I was not small. Not slight. Not slender. Not skinny. I was a strong girl, used to climbing trees and lifting logs to help out when there was timber work. I was a big girl, fattened by the starchy over-sweetened food of the poor in America, still flush with what my mother called my baby fat cheeks.

But his hand was as big as my face.

He pushed my head against the bathroom door. We were inside, together, when a moment before I'd been alone. A moment before I'd been closing the door against the noise and the smells and the smoke, wondering if my mother would be too awfully angry if I showed up home before magical midnight.

I screamed. Into his ear. Into the beery bathroom. Into the world. But the music, probably the Rolling Stones, definitely not Bob Dylan, was deafeningly loud—no one could hear. I refuse to think, even now, that no one cared.

His forearm was wider than my thigh. I tried to kick him. To knee him in the crotch. Bite him. Scratch him with my poor excuse for nails. I'd tumbled with my brother; I wasn't some frail female from the city. But this guy was more determined than my brother had ever been. I was as useless as a log when confronted with a log splitter.

I think it only lasted a few minutes.

Then he left, closing the door almost softly behind him.

"Get cleaned up," I thought he whispered.

When I opened the bathroom door, my underwear were no longer clean.

"What is your speciality then?" the student asks.

I tell him it's literature. Tell him I've written a book on adolescent women in modern and postmodern novels.

“Ever write anything on teenage motherhood?”

I wish I could say that at that moment I know. That I break into a sweat or at least a pre-menopausal hot flash. But I don’t.

I answer him as innocently as if he had been asking me a question about the dissertation he said he was writing.

“No, I haven’t. You really should see Professor Moran. Senda Moran,” I advise him. “Her work is quite good. Have you read it?”

Not yet. Not yet.

On one of my notecards, emblazoned with my name, title, and the insignia of the university, I carefully write the name of my lachrymose colleague.

Hand it to him.

Stand up.

I would walk over and open the door, but it is already open.

He leaves, slowly.

In a few minutes, another student hovers at the threshold of my office door. She wants to discuss the outline of her paper for the Advanced Topics course. She’s shy and bold, simultaneously, as only an undergraduate can be. I find her reassuring, contrasted to Timothy the graduate student’s enigmatic presence. I think for a moment that I still see him, lingering in the hall, but then he is gone. Gone.

He returns in a dream. Or not a dream. When I wake up in the middle of the night, we are staring at each other, across some expanse of space and time that is unintelligible, or maybe it’s a wide red river. He’s playing a guitar and singing a Bob Dylan song, though I can’t tell which one. I’m naked except for a pair of boy’s sneakers, reciting Tennyson (“And love Creation’s final law—“). I curse the cappuccino I had with Professors Statistician and Senda Moran after the presentation.

My morning coffee doesn’t satisfy, so I buy another cup from the outside vendor before I go to my office. Double latte. Just to wake me up. Just to calm me down. Although I am not jittery, I tell myself. Just tired.

My closed office door beckons. It is always a joy to slide the key into the lock, balancing my leather bag full of books and papers, and this morning my latte. To open the door—to my office at a university—even after all these years, even after tenure, floods me with satisfaction. I was right to heed the advice of the more experienced girls and ask for money for “expenses;” right to leave my parents, the state, and everything behind as soon as I could; right to find a life that suited a girl who relished words, even if it took starting at a community college in California, studying like a demon and working at a 24 hour restaurant.

The door snags on something.
I hate it when students put papers under my door.
But this is something different. It looks like a crude invitation.
Funny, what a person thinks at first.

I bend to get the paper from the floor, spilling some of my latte on it, then righting myself by tossing my leather bag onto the chair usually reserved for students. I bring the paper up close to my face, the way I've always read, then move it away. I wonder if I'm getting old enough to need those little glasses.

The print comes into focus.

OR ST §§ 432.240 Issuance of certified copy of certificate of birth to adopted persons

Upon receipt of a written application the state registrar, any adopted person 21 years of age and older born in the State of Oregon shall be issued a certified copy of his/her unaltered, original and unamended certificate of birth in the custody of the state registrar, with procedures, filing fees, and waiting periods identical to those imposed upon nonadoted citizens of the State of Oregon.

Contains no exceptions.

It wasn't as if I hadn't heard about the statute, I had. I had been sitting in my car with my colleague the statistician's wife, of all people, queued for parking at the medical center garage, of all places. Listening to the university public radio station's report about Oregon's new open adoption statute, the first in the nation. The segment presented what someone had determined were the opposing views. First, there was a statement by a birth mother, imaginatively named Jane Doe, who'd allowed her child to be adopted twenty years ago under what she was promised were confidential conditions and was now suing. "There should be exceptions for mothers who don't want to be contacted, who have gone on with their lives." Next there was an interview with a member of the Adoptive Rights Association, an adoptee herself, who argued that she had a right to know her origins, not to mention her medical history. "I have the natural right to know my parents and the law should not be able to take that away."

"What an ingrate. She knows her parents; the people who adopted her and raised her and cleaned up her puke," the statistician's wife said. "That's why I'd never adopt." It was something she'd obviously considered, I assumed, since she was about to undergo another painful fertility procedure. Harvesting something or another, I think it was called, though I didn't want to know too many details. I had my own judgments about her quest at forty-something to have a baby, but I didn't share

them, or even develop them in my own mind. I was no expert on motherhood, after all. I merely accompanied her to the medical center when her husband had classes, waiting in the pastel room, reading something I'd brought with me, a volume of poetry usually, and driving her home.

Before I turn the piece of paper over, I close my office door.

I expect, I suppose, to find something on the other side. A copy of the "unaltered, original and unamended certificate of birth," with my name. And maybe my age? Fifteen, still, by seven days. I know it had no father's name, for despite the promptings of the social worker who I knew even then was trying to be kind, I didn't reveal what I didn't know. What was there to say, some big soldier type in camouflage who smelled like beer? Like that wasn't a hundred guys. She did ask me his race, several times, as if she didn't believe me. One of the other pregnant girls revealed that white babies were worth more. As were boys, for some reason or another. My plan wasn't original; all the girls were doing it. Before we signed those final adoption papers, we discovered mysterious expenses that needed to be paid. Naive, at first I tried for the cost of college, but it seemed that would be illegal baby-selling, the expenses had to be related to the birth of the child. But just think of all the money I could have earned logging if I hadn't been pregnant and confined to swallowing huge vitamins and memorizing all twelve verses of the lyrics to Bob Dylan's "Desolation Row" as well as pretty much the entire volume of one of the few books on the premises, *Best Loved Poems of the English Peoples*. The girls even discussed ways of concealing the money from the hands of those tearful and ashamed parents who had relegated us to this place, who hadn't told us about abortions or counseling, but were, we feared, not too embarrassed to be greedy.

But the other side of the paper is blank.

Except for a small scrawl, decipherable into something that looks like an email address. Timothy. Some numbers dance around the rivulet from my dripped coffee. Is that a seven or a one? A five or a three? There's a clear @ announcing the name of a national ISP.

I could write him back.

I could compose an email to my son.

But what would I say? Share my medical history of chicken pox and treatment for duodenal ulcers? Tell him he looks like my brother, whose sneakers I was wearing that New Year's Eve, now dead from something diagnosed as hepatic encephalopathy, which when I looked it up on the internet I learned was caused by alcoholism? I wouldn't tell him about that night, of course, who would want to know about such inauspicious

origins in a bathroom? And I wouldn't tell him how happy I'd been that he was a boy, not just because of the extra money I thought I could extract, but because I assumed he'd be safer, more valued in the world and more able to take care of himself. At least his chances of being assaulted and then called a harlot by his mother were a lot less. It made him easier to leave.

Or should I ask him some things? About his parents, his interests, his academic aspirations? Was he really a graduate student in sociology? Perhaps we could discuss Talcott Parsons' functionalism. What about literature? Had he read my book? Did he have favorite women writers?

Maybe I would think of something later.

For now, I could only wonder what kind of people would be so ingenuous as to name a child "Timothy."

I would have named you River.

Or Tennyson.

Or at least Dylan.

