

***Synopsis:*** *Forty-eight year old Rose, a three-times divorced, successful novelist, falls in love with the photo and profile of a man on Match.com, only to have him reject her as “too too.” When she sees him, by chance, at a coffee shop in Harvard Square, her spontaneous nature can’t keep from posting a notice on Craigslist’s Missed Connections board. To her surprise, she receives a reply from someone calling himself Rabbitfish. Thus begins an odd, nearly inexplicable, communication with the mysterious Rabbitfish, leading to a series of changes in Rose’s life and, ultimately, the comic appearance of her hapless angel, Ralph. In a sideways journey of discovery, Rose tells her story of awakening with self-deprecating humor and wisdom.*

# **“I Think I Know You”**

by  
Josephine Carr

# **Part One**

**Falling**

**(1)**

**It all started when I decided to join an online dating service and, in a few catastrophic minutes, saw the face of my beloved. You know, the one for whom you wait your whole damn life. I'd already had a pretty long life, forty-eight years, and I wasn't looking for that face. Not in a million years. I was searching for someone to date, period, end of discussion. He was handsome, with a full head of rather glorious brown hair. His eyes crinkled up and dimples popped.**

**He charmed the pants right off me.**

**Though, actually, my pants ended up staying on. Not by my choice.**

**So, in the parlance of Match.com, I winked at him. He sent me an e-mail in response, saying that he didn't**

**date women who wrote books. It wasn't personal, he assured me, but he'd found that women writers were altogether too too. Those were his exact words. "Too too." I, as a woman writer, was too too. I quite liked the idea, particularly because it had never occurred to me before. I became committed to changing his mind.**

**All this in a matter of ten minutes or so.**

**Somehow, despite being too too, I failed to change his mind.**

**I called my best friend. "Jenny, it's Rose and I just want to tell you, in case you've forgotten, that life is unfair."**

**This was a running joke between us because Jenny was one of those walking (or, actually, non-walking) cases who rather**

**readily brought to mind the concept of life being unfair. At the age of twelve, she'd been in a bicycle accident and had both legs amputated from the knees down.**

**“Remember me,” she said cheerily.**

**“Why do I have a best friend to whom I can never complain?”**

**“That’s a complaint.”**

**“It’s all I’m allowed.”**

**I could tell that she was still smiling when she said, “What’s the matter?”**

**“You’re not too busy to talk right now?”**

**Jenny was a high-powered attorney in one of Boston’s best firms. She was exactly my age, unmarried, and she literally worked all the time. The fact that she was a workaholic was her only failing and,**

**obviously, I couldn't call her on it, so I never did.**

**"I've fallen for with this guy on Match.com, but he told me he had a policy of not dating women writers because they're too too."**

**"Does he date women who have no legs from the knees down?"**

**"I could ask, but somehow I doubt it."**

**We giggled.**

**Then I said, "Seriously, am I too too?"**

**"Yeah, to be honest."**

**"Too too what?"**

**"Exuberant, for want of a better word."**

**"I think being exuberant is a good thing. You're exuberant."**

**"I agree."**

**"I'm confused." I twirled around in my desk chair, like a Sufi dancer.**

**“He’s the one with the problem, not you. Not me, either, for that matter.”**

**“It feels like my problem.”**

**“Probably because he managed to seduce you, sight unseen.”**

**“I did see his photo--should I send it to you?”**

**“You are in trouble.”**

**I stopped twirling rather abruptly.  
“I know.”**

**She spoke kindly. “How’s the new novel idea coming?”**

**“Obviously, it’s not.”**

**“Figured.”**

**“I’ll let you get back to work,” I said.**

**“Rose--”**

**“I won’t.”**

**“You don’t know what I was going to say.”**

**“I shouldn’t e-mail him again,**

**right?”**

**“True, but that wasn’t it.”**

**There was a pause. I had an uncomfortable feeling that, as usual, Jenny could read my mind. Finally, I blurted out, “What, then?”**

**“Don’t go riding the subway for the rest of the afternoon.”**

**“I’ve stopping doing that.”**

**“Okay, good.”**

**We hung up and I twirled right off my chair. I was going to ride the subway.**

**Ever since I’d discovered the Missed Connections board at Craigslist.com, where anonymous people posted alternatively beautiful and/or hilarious messages about having seen the love of their life, or the lust of their life, somewhere in the city of Boston, I’d become obsessed with the possibility that a man might**

**actually write a Missed Connections for me. Since many of the postings derived from sightings on the subway system, I rode the trains like a crazy woman. I told myself that it was a great way to experience humanity, and it would, therefore, improve my writing.**

**Pure bullshit.**

**In order to encourage someone to post a Missed Connection about me. I had to show well. I tended toward a natural look, but I've discovered that, with age, the natural look requires a slew of unnatural accouterments. Using my super-dee-duper hair straightening device, I eased the few gyrating gray hairs that tended to corkscrew out of my scalp like I was a cartoon character. Then I smoothed on a thin veneer of foundation, the kind that costs a**

**fortune and promises that it deflects light away from your wrinkles. Or maybe it reflects the light. I'm not sure. I can vouch for its efficacy while it simultaneously makes me appear to be wearing absolutely no make-up. Very cool. A smidgen of pink blush, a smear of taupe eye shadow, a quick dash of mascara.**

**I changed into my black jeans, the ones that magically transformed me into a size two. Again, I'm at a loss to explain how the pants accomplish this. I guess that's why some people design clothes and invent cosmetic products, and other people do things like write novels. It's funny how most of the population believe that being a writer is a big deal (other than the love of my life on Match.com, that is) when it's a lot more impressive to take a woman who's essentially a**

**size six, and with the right pants, make her look like a size two. That's an accomplishment.**

**I grabbed my notebook and a pen that can write upside down, if necessary, and took off. I lived behind a substantial almost-mansion on Mt. Auburn Street in Cambridge, in the property's tiny carriage house originally built for the servants. I rented even though I could afford to buy a place, and despite Jenny's periodic ranting to me about how stupid I was not to invest in the real estate market. I was a sucker for darling carriage houses with miniscule rooms, slanted floors, and four tiny working fireplaces.**

**Although it was already one o'clock in the afternoon, this was my first step outdoors. I discovered that spring was truly happening. It must**

have been close to seventy degrees and the sun shone from a pure blue sky. This didn't make me happy. Normally, I'm as susceptible to the weather as the next person, but given my experience that morning on Match.com, I was feeling averse to spring. Spring was too too, after all, and being too too was getting me nowhere, especially in the world of romance.

Grumpy, I tromped along Mt. Auburn Street, heading for Harvard Square and the closest subway stop. As the sun warmed the top of my head, I became ever more aware that it was possibly the dumbest thing in the world to ride the subway on such a beautiful day. Maybe, I thought, that guy on Match.com (his moniker was "The Sky") had a point. And maybe

**Jenny was wrong. I wasn't too too exuberant. I was too too pathetic. It occurred to me that the second most mentioned spot in the Missed Connections board were coffee shops, and there just happened to be a busy one in Harvard Square, the Au Bon Pain.**

**Never say I'm not flexible and capable of changing direction.**

**Since academics and students have as much free time as novelists, the outdoor seats were crowded. I bought a nonfat decaf latte and meandered through the tables, searching for a spot. That's when I saw the back of his head. I recognized the long lazy curls of his brown hair. I knew it was "The Sky," though his photo on Match.com had obviously been of his face.**

**He was hogging a table all to**

himself, and by the rules of cafes on a beautiful spring day I could ask to share it. But I didn't. Instead, I found another spot where I was in his line of vision.

Politely, I asked the two women already sitting at the table if I could share with them.

They nodded yes without stopping their intense conversation. I settled myself, careful not to look at The Sky. I felt certain he was watching me. I'm not sure how we know things like that, but there's been some interesting research on the subject, and it's clear that we just do. I debated whether I should take out my notebook. If he recognized me from my photo on Match.com, and I started writing, he would conclude that I was too too.

For a few minutes, I just tilted my

face to the sun. I closed my eyes. The murmur of the women's conversation dropped and I figured they were worried I was eavesdropping. So I decided to pull out my notebook. Screw it, I thought, I am a writer. Since writing was my livelihood, I couldn't exactly pretend I was anything but.

When I finally dared to glance his way, The Sky was gone. Bereft, I stared at the empty table. Within seconds, two undergraduates had plunked down in his place. He must have left just seconds before I turned to look at him.

I flipped open my notebook and wrote.

Au Bon Pain, Harvard Square,  
1:30 p.m.

I saw the sky. Did you see me?

**When I got home, I would post the message on the Missed Connections board, and then I would wait, pacing around my sideways little house, to see if he answered. I knew all this seemed a bit absurd. The guy had said no on Match.com. That was that. But, somehow, I was convinced that his no actually meant yes. I didn't know where this conviction came from. I'd sworn off trusting myself when my third marriage had ended with a lot of noise and trouble, almost two years earlier.**

**And here I was, two years of celibacy making me certifiably nuts. Everyone, including my three children, had persistently lectured me on the value of celibacy for a woman like me. That phrase, a woman like me, was a disguised way of saying I was impetuous when it**

**came to romantic relationships. I couldn't deny the validity of their judgment, and I'd sworn off sex, though not dating. Except, without sex, dating seemed like a big fat bore. I had close friends, my kids, other family, so I didn't need to go out with some guy to have an intelligent conversation. I could find intelligent conversation all over the place, most particularly with myself. As a writer, I naturally enjoyed being with me.**

**A man and sex just went together, like wine and cheese. And now it was spring, my second spring since this celibacy nonsense began, and I'd had enough. Though not so enough that I was willing to sleep with any man who chanced along. I did feel like the two long years that stretched behind me**

**had made a difference. I'd cultivated a patient passion, if you will.**

**That's a a bit of a paradox, which, when it came to sex, seemed utterly right.**

**I thought longingly of my cell phone and calling Jenny to tell her the latest, but I didn't approve of having personal conversations in public. So I picked up my pen again, twiddling it around, and thinking about what I could write. I'd been trying to jump-start my next novel for weeks. I had plenty of beginnings that extended as far as twenty pages or so, but nothing that I felt really good about.**

**I'd already tried writing about every one of my marriages, and the results were dreadful. People seemed to believe that novels were born out of the writer's personal**

**experience, but I didn't think so. A good story usually had little to do with real life since real life was, well, tedious. Or, anyway, that was the case for me. A good story required conflict, and I was conflict-phobic. I would agree to the most egregious demands and situations just to avoid the slightest hint of disagreement.**

**I worked on this issue with my therapist, of course. I mean, a fear of conflict is custom-made for deep psychological counseling. I'd made some progress. Only last week, I'd sent back my dinner order because it was tepid. True, I'd apologized so profusely that I felt sweat forming across my forehead, but still, I did end up with a hot dinner. Getting there.**

**The two women at our table stood up, gathered their belongings, and**

**left. I looked around, mildly hopeful that another handsome man might be lurking, in search of a seat. Despite the gorgeous day, the lunchtime crowd had begun to thin and there were several available, empty tables. Sighing, I tilted my face to the sun again and closed my eyes. A minute later, a familiar voice interrupted me.**

**Husband number three, the bastard of all bastards, otherwise known as Isaac, spoke.**

**“Working hard, I see.”**

**My eyes flew open. “Hey,” I said, choosing not to answer his challenge. Yeah, yeah, conflict avoidance, I know.**

**“May I join you?”**

**“Sure.” I gestured to an empty chair. In my head, I began to swear softly. Isaac had the unfortunate ability to make me want to jump into**

**bed with him, despite the fact that he'd been notoriously unfaithful to me, with scads of women. Physically, I found him impossibly attractive. He stood tall, at six foot, four inches, with huge shoulders, slim waist, and expressive hands. His face was dark and swarthy, like a gypsy, and he had bright green eyes.**

**As he folded himself into the chair closest to me, I pushed myself away from the table, trying for even a few inches of distance between us. Isaac hadn't wanted the divorce. Instead, he'd argued for an 'open marriage,' going so far as to suggest that we might enjoy adding a third person to our own couplings (male or female, either way seemed interesting to him). It had taken endless energy to convince him that I wasn't up for an open marriage. Since he'd moved**

**out, I still hadn't slept with anyone else.**

**"You look awfully pretty," he said.**

**"Thanks."**

**He sipped his espresso and squinted at me, narrow eyes assessing. "So far, you've spoken only a single word in answer to anything I've said."**

**Isaac was a very, very smart man. Brilliant, in fact. His field was cognitive science, so he was particularly adept at watching for, and spotting, little tiny behavior things that no one else would ever notice. This made a woman believe that he was deeply interested in her, when, in actuality, he was simply doing his job.**

**I grinned. "Really?"**

**He reached across the table and touched my hand with a his index**

finger. “How are things?”

“Struggling with the next book--I can't seem to find anything to write about.”

“You've never had that problem before.” One of his hairy eyebrows arched. “How's your sex life?”

“Fine.”

“Cause I was thinking that maybe your creative powers are affected by a less-than -exciting sex life.”

I ran a hand through my hair, deliberately provocative. “Nope.” Then I put on a thoughtful look, as if I'd just had a great idea. “Maybe the opposite, though.” I stared dreamily into the sun for a minute before taking a peek at him.

He looked gratifyingly disturbed. “I thought you weren't dating--”

“I don't tell the kids everything, you know that.”

**“So you’re seeing someone?”**

**I looked directly into his eyes.**

**“What about you? Fucking your way through all of the eastern seaboard?”**

**“Rose--”**

**“Umm?” I sipped at my cooling latte.**

**He waved a hand. “Never mind.”**

**This was an invitation to delve more deeply into whatever was bothering him, exactly what he wanted, with the end result that we’d go back to my four-poster bed and find solace in each other’s arms. It took all I had to resist. He was a great lover. I could practically feel the way his hands opened my legs and--**

**I stopped thinking about it. Instead, I stood up, shoving my chair back with a loud scraping noise. The latte splashed up the sides of my**

**mug, like a mini tidal wave. “In fact, I’m going to be late if I don’t get a move on.”**

**He stared at me, mournful. For a second, I really wondered why he seemed so sad. It wasn’t like him. Did I, as a former wife, have an obligation to make sure that he was all right?**

**Firmly, I thought a single word. No.**

**I walked home as quickly as I could, working up a good sweat in the warm sun. I dropped my backpack on the floor of the small entrance hall, then grabbed the notebook out of it. It took only three strides to walk through the living room, decorated in the bright colors of a flowered chintz that covered the cozy sofa. I ducked under the low ceiling and dashed down the crooked stairway to the basement, where I**

had my study. It had taken years, but I'd finally figured out that I liked to write in subterranean, dark spaces. A rich dark green carpet and a mahogany desk, with a wall of bookcases, made the study so seductive that I still took a deep breath of satisfaction when I walked in.

I pounced on my computer and quickly typed out the internet address for Boston's Missed Connection board on Craigslist. I glanced over the postings that had blossomed since I'd last accessed the site early that morning. Nothing for me, naturally. I clicked on the designated spot that would allow me to write my own posting and copied exactly what I'd drafted earlier at the Au Bon Pain.

In five minutes, it appeared for all

**the world to see.  
But, would he?**

**(2)**

**Fifteen minutes later, I stared at the words of a Missed Connection posting, with the heading “Re: Au Bon Pain, Harvard Square, 1:30 p.m.” A tiny diamond of drool quivered in the right corner of my open mouth. I**

**was astonished that I actually had an answer and, for a moment, I didn't even want to read the rest. I had made it onto the boards of Craigslist. It occurred to me that for the three months during which my addiction to the Missed Connection board had grown, I'd always had the ability to post something myself. I had to wonder what was wrong with me. For example, why hadn't I posted a message about that absolutely devastating man with the silver hair and red jeans? I swear he'd been staring at me for a full ten minutes on the subway last week. The red jeans, though certainly unusual, were riveting. What a colossal dope I'd been.**

**I scooched my desk chair closer and clicked on the answer to my posting. I practically stopped**

**breathing. Yes, I knew my reaction was extreme. That was what celibacy and being forty-eight and having a too too personality because I was a woman writer, combined with a sideways little house, did. I read the tall bold letters, that formed words, that made two sentences of utter confusion and delight.**

**I sure did. I saw the sky and I saw you, and furthermore, I do believe I saw a former husband sit down next to you just after I left (when I turned around to look at you again).**

**This was, without a doubt, the most flirtatious writing I'd ever experienced. I was galvanized. I leapt out of my chair and walked in a quick circle, then sat back down again to reread it. I found my original posting and reread that, too.**

**I saw the sky. Did you see me?**

**Of course, I was going to respond. It was also tempting to send The Sky an e-mail on Match.com, but I decided it would be better to answer the posting. I read his message about three zillion times, then I jumped up again, and took the stairs two at a time. I dashed through the wee living room and took the next set of stairs one at a time, but fast. Ah, age. My funny kitchen was on the second floor, directly above my bedroom. I checked the time and noticed it was only mid-afternoon. Though I had an insane desire for a Tom Collins, I knew a Tom Collins at this hour would lead, ultimately, to my destruction. I popped a pod into my high-tech pod coffee maker, placed the mug underneath its spout, and pushed the ON button. In a mere thirty seconds, I had an espresso, to**

**which I added fake sweetener. I carried the mug to the front window and sat at the old pine table.**

**I stared out the window and sipped the coffee. The leaf buds on the sweet gum tree seemed to be fattening and swelling right before my eyes. My mind hopped from composing an answer, to thinking about whether I dared to get married a fourth time. Really stupid, I knew that. Stupid because I didn't even know The Sky's name, so imagining our whirlwind romance and marriage was quite ridiculous. But also stupid because three failed marriages ought to be enough for anyone. I had no business even fantasizing about marrying again. It was a sickness. I should hate the institution.**

**Yeah, well.**

**But there were extenuating**

**circumstances to several of my marriages. I didn't mean to make excuses, exactly, or maybe I did. The first marriage, to my college sweetheart, occurred because we were young and valiant and stubborn. He came from a working class background, though he'd gotten a good scholarship to Amherst. He'd been so uncomfortable with the middle class lifestyle attached to me that he pretended he actually loved it. He didn't. We were divorced eighteen months after the marriage, fulfilling everyone's predictions.**

**Now, when I really had news for Jenny, I didn't want to call her. She would disapprove of the whole thing because she thought, number one, that the Missed Connection board was absurd and, number two, that**

online dating sites were also absurd. She figured, either you met someone in the natural course of events in your life, or you didn't. In her case, that meant she didn't. I would tell her about The Sky eventually, and she'd be okay because that was how female friends supported each other, but I tended to share stuff after the first rush of enthusiasm. I didn't want her to stop me from doing something really ill-advised.

Not to pretend that being ill-advised had ever been a good thing for me.

The desire to reply to The Sky's posting got stronger and stronger until I could hardly keep myself from ripping down the stairs. Deliberately, I washed out the mug and spoon I'd used. Then I dried them. Then I put them away. Finally, as calm as I

**could act, if not be, I wandered down the two flights. I clicked on all the right spots and started to type. There were many false starts and revisions. I kept straying into an overly serious tone. This was a failing of mine, which was why, to counterbalance it, I tried to write funny. Or, bare minimum, amusing. Light.**

**Umm.**

**My difficulty was that I knew this guy and he, apparently, knew me. How else had he figured out that Isaac was my former husband? It boggled my mind. And, in knowing him, I felt like I could say anything, in whatever manner I wanted. All the usual defenses and barriers just kept falling around my feet. Finally, in a ruthless attempt to be cool, I ended up with the following.**

**How'd you know he was former**

**husband? A sky's perspective, I suppose.**

**Before I could change my mind, I sent it in. Unfortunately, or fortunately, the Missed Connection board worked by forwarding a copy of your posting, for final verification, to your e-mail account. So there was always a last chance to change it. I resisted.**

**I waited, impatient, but after fifteen minutes my answer still hadn't appeared on the web site. There was probably a backlog. I stood up and wandered around the study until I suddenly realized that I needed to pee. A large bathroom was tucked into the basement, to the left at the bottom of the stairs. I went in and, again, felt a strange satisfaction at my peculiar house. A rather gigantic, claw-footed bathtub stood like**

**garden statuary along one wall. This was the bathroom closest to my bedroom, requiring a trip downstairs. The other bathroom, on the second floor between the kitchen and the guest bedroom, had a small shower. I kept an electric heater in this one, and enjoyed endless soaking baths with flickering candles and a kind of massive moistness that felt like it entered my soul and kept me lubricated. At forty-eight, lubrication was not to be assumed.**

**When I'd finished and checked the board again, I saw my posting. Its brevity pleased me. Now I had to wait to see whether he would answer. Of course, my other option had been to send him an e-mail directly, to the anonymous address that went with every posting on the Missed Connection board. An e-mail to that**

**anonymous address would automatically be forwarded to the person who made the posting, in which case, my e-mail address and identity would be revealed. Somehow, it hadn't seemed so flirtatious to answer that way. And I, the consummate flirt, chose flirtation.**

**Ching!**

**The signal that I had received mail.**

**I got a thrill. It could be that he'd decided to write me directly.**

**Nope, the return address was my oldest son, Elliot, a screenwriter out in L.A. who, at the age of 26, made more in three months than I made in several years. He'd sold six, yet-to-be-produced scripts.**

**Hey Mom,**

**Just got a strange phone message from Isaac. What gives? Thought I'd**

**check with you before I called him back.**

**E.**

**Isaac had been a terrific stepfather to my three kids, which made the breakup of our marriage even more difficult. He also, occasionally, used them to get to me. I had no way of knowing whether that was what he was doing in this case, but I was suspicious.**

**E-**

**I don't have a clue. I ran into him at Au Bon Pain a couple of hours ago and he seemed a little sad or something, but....**

**Mom**

**While I waited to hear back from him, I checked the Missed Connection board. Nothing. I had a nasty feeling about this, like I'd already lost The Sky or something.**

**Stupid, stupid, stupid. I decided to reread his profile and information on Match.com. That turned out to be a mistake because it inflamed me. I checked whether it was still too early to have a Tom Collins. It was.**

**An e-mail from Elliot arrived instead.**

**He sounded like he was about to cry or something, said he needed to talk to me. I'll let you know.**

**Okay, I thought, I've had enough of this cyberspace stuff. I always knew when it was time for me to break away from the internet because I began to feel more like a machine than a woman.**

**I tore up the stairs and into my bedroom where I changed into running clothes. I usually had a daily jog in the late afternoon, though unlike most dedicated runners, I**

**never really wanted to do it. Mostly, I just wanted to throw myself across my bed, burrow into its comforter, and bliss out. But I'd accepted that running gave me a high I loved, and it also kept me slim.**

**So, I ran.**

**I pulled my long red hair back with a tight elastic and yanked a sweatband around my forehead.**

**After a final pee, I tucked my house key into the zippered pocket on my shorts and shot out the door. I always acted as if I was in a terrific hurry because, otherwise, I was afraid the lure of the bed would overwhelm me.**

**The afternoon had warmed up even more. I did a few stretches, then walked down the long path that ran alongside the main house, fronting on Mt. Auburn Street.**

**The owners, an elderly couple, seldom came outdoors. I'd worried about this in the beginning, but one of their daughters assured me that she came to check up on on them at least three times a week, so I stopped worrying. Except to wonder which of my kids would ever check up on me three times a week.**

**Besides the oldest, Elliot, I had a daughter named Alex and another son, Noah. Naturally I assumed that Alex would take care of me in my dotage, except that she really wasn't the type. She'd come out as a lesbian when she was a freshman in college. Not the easiest moment in my life. At the time, I'd felt like it would be hard for her to be gay, despite the ways the world was changing. I knew perfectly well that no one can choose whether or not to**

**be gay. But, all told, it seemed like it would be easier to be gay in about a thousand years. Plus, husband number two and her father, Trevor, had been utterly apoplectic about her announcement. Alex was now twenty-four years old and in medical school.**

**Out on the sidewalk in front of my landlord's house, I turned right and burst into a desperate run, too fast and awkward. I ran that way for a few minutes, trying to rein myself in and hit a more reasonable stride. I was heading for the Mt. Auburn Cemetery where I would jog along its meandering paths, dodging the giant angels and crosses. I heard pounding feet behind me and instinctively moved to the right-hand edge of the sidewalk. Sure enough, a man passed me in a spurt of speed,**

then settled into a slower pace about ten feet in front of me. Ordinarily, this would have irritated me, except that I'd noticed he had graying hair and absolutely terrific legs. My eyes moved up his legs, to where they ended in a tight butt. For a middle-aged guy, he had a stupendous rear end.

He was the perfect antidote to my mild obsession with The Sky. (Can an obsession be mild? Dubious.) I enjoyed the view while I had it, but I figured he'd keep going straight down

Mt. Auburn after I turned into the cemetery. Instead, he pranced through the massive cast-iron gates framing the cemetery's entrance. I slowed, wondering what to do. I didn't want it to seem as though I was stalking him, but, on the other

**hand, I'd been planning to go there, too, so why should I change my direction?**

**On the other, other hand, there was always the business of changing directions. Supposed to be laudatory, indicative of great flexibility, blah, blah, blah. So, shit, I kept going. Only I immediately started composing a Missed Connection post in my head, reminding myself of exactly what he'd been wearing and having some fun figuring out my word choice.**

**Which made me think of writing. Or, more specifically, not writing.**

**My pace quickened. I felt like my running shoes had bouncy balls in them. I ran like a gazelle. Really, a gazelle, leaping through the tall grasses of the African plain. That's when I truly changed direction, took**

**such a radical right turn that my feet almost tangled together, though quick footwork saved me.**

**I quit.**

**Writing.**

**I bounced higher and higher, as the enormous weight of expectation lifted from me. After thirty years of working, sometimes successfully and sometimes not-to-successfully, at the profession of writer, I up and quit. Momentarily, guilt exploded somewhere in my midsection. I had, relatively speaking, a good career going when it was harder and harder to actually make a living as a writer. I could almost hear the pounding feet of all the wannabe writers behind me, fury at my ingratitude making them nuts. At my career stage, I'd hit pay dirt, after all. I had a publisher practically salivating for my next**

**novel. This was not to be idly tossed aside. Nevertheless, I figuratively yelled over my shoulder. “Hey, if I step aside, there’s more room for you guys!”**

**I kept on running until I knew, even with the energy pulsing through me, it was time to head back. When I was two blocks from my home, sweat pooled in slick spots on my stomach, the small of my back, and ringing around my neck. Outside my little house, I threw myself onto the patch of new grass struggling to grow in the deep shade of very old trees. I bent my knees and stretched my arms above my head, heaving for breath. “Okay,” I said loudly, “I’ve got to get a real job.”**

**Came close to changing direction again. The safety and relative ease of writing another novel beckoned. It**

**was daunting to try and imagine what kind of job I could get, and how that job would interfere with what had become, relatively speaking, a life of ease. And that, I knew, was exactly the problem. My bed was way too soft. I had to get a harder mattress, and maybe a hard mattress would somehow, inexplicably, bring to my bed the man of my dreams.**

**(3)**

**Jenny, unlike me, had a passion for good eating. If I really wanted to entice her away from work, and get her complete attention, I made reservations at a great restaurant for dinner. Two days after my decision to quit writing, I waited for her in the Back Bay's wonderful French restaurant, L'espalier, on a Thursday night. Jenny was late, but I'd expected that, so I'd told her the reservation was at seven-thirty when it was really for eight o'clock. I'd also informed the maitre d' that she'd be arriving in an electric wheelchair, and he'd given us a table in a corner, with the other chair removed to make**

**room for the wheelchair.**

**A bottle of burgundy sat uncorked and breathing on the table before me. I really wanted to pour myself a glass, but I was trying to be polite and wait for her. I looked up and saw her gingerly making her way through the dining room. I smiled and gave a little wave. As usual, Jenny defied expectations. She wore a dazzlingly red silk halter top that made her white skin and white-blond hair leap out in contrast. Her features defined the quintessential WASP look. Other than the fact that Jenny was crippled, she was actually perfect. Brilliant mind, deep soul, gorgeous face, spectacular hair, great taste, humble and proud, both, in spirit. Quite the package. Men had literally toppled for her, either in spite of her disability, or because of it.**

**Jenny said because of, and she would have nothing to do with love.**

**She also argued that until the last couple of years, I'd given her plenty of material for a living a romantic existence vicariously.**

**She engineered an effortless parking job at the table. I stood up and leaned over to kiss her on the cheek.**

**When I sat down again, I immediately poured the wine for both of us. We sipped and rolled it around in our mouths.**

**“Nice,” Jenny said.**

**“I've got a lot to tell you,” I said, “so do you want to decide what you're having before I start?”**

**She picked up the menu and raised one pale eyebrow, without saying anything**

**We perused the menu and the**

**waiter came over to announce the evening's specials. After several careful questions, Jenny ordered the foie gras to begin, and the braised lamb as an entree. Since I didn't want to bother thinking about it, I asked for the same thing, which made Jenny nuts. She promptly canceled my copycat order and got something completely different for me.**

**“This way we can try each other's,” she explained. “By the way, I thought you knew better than to order the wine ahead of time.”**

**“You seemed awfully glad to have it here.”**

**She smiled. I was forgiven.**

**Jenny picked up the wine glass and extended her arm toward me.**

**“Shoot.”**

**I told her about going to Au Bon**

**Pain and seeing The Sky, pausing for a brief mention of my conversation with Isaac, and then continuing with the Missed Connection posts.**

**“You never heard back after that second one?”**

**I shrugged, trying not to show how disappointed I was. “It’s only been a couple of days.”**

**“He did say that he found women writers too too.” She sipped her wine and fiddled with the silverware.**

**“Maybe he meant it.”**

**“What a great segue into my next bit of news.”**

**“My goodness, hell’s a-poppin’.”**

**“I quit my job.”**

**She practically screamed.**

**“What?”**

**“I’m not going to be a writer anymore.” I picked up my wine glass, a tad defiantly. I knew Jenny**

would grill the bejesus out of me, and I wasn't particularly looking forward to the experience.

“So, you're giving up the profession everyone dreams about, for--?”

“A regular kind of job.”

“Nine to fucking five, excuse my language?”

“If need be. Maybe it'll be a night job or something.”

Our first course arrived at that moment.

Jenny said dryly. “Guess I'll be picking up the check from now on.”

“I've got enough money, you know that. There's the royalties on the last three novels, all of which are still in print.”

She pointed her fork at me. “Not for long.”

We both took careful bites and

**chewed thoughtfully.**

**After I'd swallowed without really tasting anything, despite giving an appearance otherwise, I said, "What's that supposed to mean?"**

**"You're the one who told me that publishers build a writer by slowly creating a demand and readership, almost like you're a brand. The minute you're no longer building, won't they give up on you?"**

**"I guess they might." I stared at her. "The thing is, Jen, I'm sick to death of writing. I don't want to do it anymore."**

**"Then you shouldn't."**

**"You mean that?"**

**She nodded and tried to look enthusiastic for me. "We could brainstorm job possibilities. What about teaching?"**

**I tilted my head and stared blankly**

out at the dining room. “I don’t know about that.”

The waiter cleared our appetizers and poured more wine.

I said, “I can’t solve everything all at once here. Tell me what’s going on with you.”

Jen smiled. “My big news is that I’m planning to murder my mother, but this time I mean it.”

“You look like you mean it,” I said. Indeed, her lovely face had twisted like a pearl-pink seashell. “What’d she do this time?”

“Arranged a blind date, including the actual time and date, to some guy whose mother she played doubles with at the club.”

Oh, by the way, Jenny came from mega-wealth.

“You’re forty-eight years old! Hasn’t she figured out that she’s not

**allowed to do that?”**

**With a dry smile, she said, “Sure, except that I’m a forty-eight year old cripple. Big difference.”**

**I burst out laughing. “You’re so full of shit.”**

**“Exactly what my mother thinks.” She giggled, but didn’t make it to a full laugh.**

**Our entrees arrived and we took a moment to contemplate the display. Jenny had ordered me sea bass, which arrived looking like it was wrapped to go under the Christmas tree. I poked here and there, trying to figure out the best way to unwrap the damn thing. Finally, I plunged my fork in, watching awestruck as the whole edifice collapsed. Made me feel quite destructive.**

**I allowed Jenny time to taste, critique, and applaud her dinner**

before trying to return to the subject of the blind date. I didn't think her mom should pull this kind of stunt, but I did sympathize with such a desperate mother-act. There had been moments in our long friendship when I'd dreamed of locking Jenny in a closet with one of the men who admired her. Leave 'em in there, with only bread, cheese, and champagne for twenty-four hours. Jenny was, as far as I knew, a virgin. This struck me as monstrous, though, obviously, it was none of my business. If I had to guess, and it would only be a guess, I'd say Jenny didn't find it monstrous at all.

“I assume you nixed the plan?” I said finally.

“Do you remember at one of your weddings--”

I interrupted, “Very funny.”

**“Yup, anyway, I think it was to husband number two, and my mother told you that you couldn’t wear that beautiful red gown you’d bought for the occasion--”**

**I nodded and sipped my wine, wishing I could forget.**

**“Because she said red was absolutely not appropriate for a bride, even if it was a second marriage?”**

**“Umm,” I muttered.**

**“And you actually listened to her, except with only two weeks until the wedding, you ended up with that hideous dress from Filene’s Basement--”**

**“You never told me it was hideous!”**

**“I did, actually.” She grinned, enjoying my discomfort. “If you recall, I looked awful, too. Mom made**

**me wear that blue and white eyelet dress better suited for a five-year-old and, unbeknownst to me, she decorated my wheelchair for the trip down the aisle so I appeared to be riding some kind of Bride mobile, you know, like the Pope mobile?”**

**We started laughing louder and harder than is entirely correct behavior for a fancy restaurant. For the first time, I noticed that the dining room was filled with elegant people. I reached over and gripped Jen’s arm. “Stop it!”**

**“Moral of the story: it’s very difficult to say No to my mother.”**

**I thought, Especially if you don’t really want to.**

**“When’s the big date?”**

**“This Saturday.”**

**“I assume he knows you’re in a wheelchair, right?”**

**She opened her beautiful eyes wide. “I sure hope so.”**

**“Are you going out to dinner?”**

**Jen shook her head. “Nope, he’s got tickets to the ballet.”**

**“Wow.”**

**“He probably didn’t think about how sensitive I might feel at watching a bunch of beautiful ballerinas dancing on their long legs.”**

**I slapped her arm this time. “He’ll realize it right in the middle of the performance. If you peek at him, he’ll be blushing furiously.”**

**She put both hands over her mouth, trying to control the snorts of laughter.**

**“Well, maybe it won’t be too bad-- what’s he do for a living?” I said.**

**“I’m not telling you.”**

**“What?”**

**She repeated, “I’m not telling**

**you.”**

**“Oh shit, he’s a writer.”**

**“Bingo.”**

**“Would I know his name?”**

**“Nonfiction--a journalist--writes political stuff. His name is Tom Callahan.”**

**“Actually, I think we have the same publisher. What’s he look like?”**

**She shrugged her shoulders.**

**“Nice, at least in the book’s photo.”**

**I could see she was dismissing him already. “Maybe you should keep an open mind. Life can change when you least expect it.”**

**“Yeah, like my best friend, the almost-famous writer, is no longer a writer and instead I’m going to have to tell everyone she’s joining the Peace Corps.”**

**“Exactly.”**

**I drove my ancient Volvo station wagon home and parked it on the street in front of my house. I'd been imagining a book contract any week now and having the funds to buy a new car, something smaller for maneuvering in a city. Not that I really cared about cars.**

**Inside my house, where I'd purposely left a few lights on, I turned right into the bedroom. The mahogany four-poster bed that came with renting the house because the owners insisted that it couldn't be taken out, dominated most of the room. A black chintz-covered wing chair was in the corner, with a small table and brass lamp next to it, and the miniscule fireplace. The window on the front of the house was draped by full-length blue and white striped raw silk that I'd extended three feet**

**on either side so that most of the wall now undulated from the open window's night breeze.**

**I tore off my clothes, hung them up hurriedly in the wardrobe and tiny closet, then dashed down the basement stairs naked. I turned on the taps full-blast and started filling the bathtub. While I waited, I went to check my e-mail. To my surprise, there was an e-mail from someone I'd never heard of, whose name was Rabbitfish. Befuddled, I stared at the word, trying to figure out if it was really possible that I was receiving an e-mail from a person named Rabbitfish. I checked the subject line and saw that it read "Anon415467." That's when I realized it was an e-mail sent in answer to one of my Missed Connection's posts. I had also posted a message about the**

**jogger running in front of me the other day, who'd turned into the cemetery. So, Rabbitfish could be either The Sky or the jogger. Somehow, I just knew it was The Sky.**

**I don't know how I knew. Guess I'm smart.**

**I sat in my chair without moving a muscle. I remembered that my post had asked how he'd known Isaac was a former husband. I thought, who was this guy? With such few words, mere strokes, he exuded insouciance. Why should that be appealing? How could dispassion seem so passionate?**

**I started typing.**

**Guess so.**

**I hit the send button. He would now have my name, Rose Marley, but I wasn't worried about it. My phone number and address were unlisted. No harm could come to me through e-mail.**

**I lit the candles around my subterranean bathroom and prepared for a long soak, during which I would meditate. Five years earlier, it had seemed as though every magazine, newspaper, book, and person brought up the subject of how good meditation was for finding peace and tranquility. So, in one gigantic puddle-jump, I'd read the articles, bought the books, and begun to meditate. I actually liked it, although it had taken awhile to figure out my best method was in this old bathtub. Just before getting into the tub, I remembered to run back to my**

**computer and tune into the internet Wiccan channel, which usually broadcast the kind of hypnotic, rhythmic music that sounded like the earth's heartbeat, or something equally bizarre. I recognized that I rather looked down on the Wiccan movement, not to mention its music, but hey, the beat worked for meditating.**

**Since I was at the computer, I clicked on the Mail icon, expecting no answer from Mr. Sky Rabbitfish. Yet there was. I swallowed with excitement and tried to remind myself that I was forty-eight years old, far too mature for these kinds of love palpitations.**

**Playing hard to get, are we?**

**I jumped out of the chair and**

**paced up and down, aware of the way my breasts bounced around. This guy made me very conscious of my body's many parts, especially since I was naked. A quick half-dozen retorts popped into my mind and I almost typed one of them right away, but in a show of self-control, or maybe fear, I walked back into the bathroom, calmly switched off the overhead light, and climbed into the tub. Because it was such an old bathtub, and located below ground level, it reminded me of a sarcophagus. In a good way, of course.**

**I sank beneath the hot water, all the way up to my neck, which meant I floated slightly. At five-five, I was almost too short for my toes to touch the far end of the tub and there was always a moment when I felt like I**

**was in my own private swimming pool, about to sink beneath the surface of the water. I lay still, thinking.**

**Basically, I had to conclude that something quite weird was going on. I didn't actually know that this man was The Sky, with whom I'd briefly corresponded through Match.com. Just because he'd answered my post on the Missed Connection board, and commented that he'd seen my former husband sit down with me, also didn't mean anything. Maybe I'd been wrong when I was so sure that the man at Au Bon Pain was The Sky. Or maybe I was right, but the man answering my MC post wasn't the same man. Not only was this weird, it was complicated. Some other guy entirely could have seen me at exactly the moment when Isaac sat**

**down.**

**I kicked my legs and paddled my arms, keeping afloat. Finally, the confusion became too much for me. I sat up in the tub and reached for the soap. After a thorough scrubbing, I scooched down in the water again and used the washcloth to swish off all the soapy residue. I heard the music from the Wiccan station, a plaintive weeping sound like a wild cat stuck in a tree. Finally, I turned sideways in the tub, sitting up with my legs folded beneath me and my hands together in my watery lap. I closed my eyes.**

**Playing hard to get, are we?  
Playinghard toget arewe,  
playinghardtogetarewe,  
playinghardtogetarewe,  
playinghardtogetarewe?**

**So much for emptying my mind.**

**My eyes flew open and I stared at the candle flickering across the room, where it balanced on the sink. Sometimes, when I had trouble getting into a meditative state, a candle's flame could help me go into a trance. I watched the flame without blinking, until my eyes watered. The wailing wild cat music kept screeching, coming perilously close to making me screech along with it. Resolute, I closed my eyes again.**

**You, sir, are the one playing hard to get.**

**I don't play games.**

**Are you The Sky from Match.com?**

**I've been married three times;  
what's your grand total?**

**I quit being a writer. I am,  
therefore, no longer too too.**

**For some reason, I appear to have  
fallen in love with you.**

**For some reason, I appear to have lost all reason.**

**For some reason, I appear to be alone in my bathtub.**

**I gave up on meditating. I rose to take the rather daunting step up and over the bathtub's rim, grabbing a towel as I made the maneuver. I dried off quickly and wrapped my white terry-cloth robe around me. I practically ran into the next room to turn off the damn Wiccan music. Then, naturally, I clicked on the e-mail from Rabbitfish again.**

**There were many things I wanted to write him, but I knew I was scared of what was happening, disconcerted not merely because he was behaving so strangely, but also because I couldn't understand why.**

**Yeah,, he was just a nutter.**

**On that note, I wandered back into**

**the bathroom and rubbed cream over my arms, paying special attention to my elbows, then my legs, and more extra attention to my ankles and knees. Finally, my face. I took my flannel nightgown from its hook on the back of the door, and dropped it over my head. Though we'd been having such warm spring weather, it still got cool at night, particularly in a two-hundred-year old carriage house with the heat turned off .**

**In my study, I went over to the computer and reread his e-mail. I couldn't resist. What can I say? I'm far from perfect, especially when my romantic sensibility is engaged. Also, as a writer, I'd come to trust my judgments about people. So, yeah, he was a nut case, except....he wasn't. I knew it. He called to me and I was unable to resist answering**

**the call.**

**I think I know you.**

**I hit SEND.**

**I couldn't really explain why I wrote that. He could, and probably would, judge me as crazy. Maybe that would put an end to the whole nonsense. I turned off the computer and printer, then switched off all the lights. A light from the steep stairway shone down and lit my way as I climbed the stairs. In my bedroom, I reorganized the pillows so that I would have a nest in the center of the bed and I poked the switch on the electric blanket. The window on the front of the house was wide open, which I left that way, but I closed the window in the back because there was only a dark alley out there and it**

tended to creep me out. I snapped the lock on the window into place. By the time I'd climbed into bed, the blanket had become toasty.

I expected to lie in the dark, worrying about what to do with myself professionally, now that I'd received Jenny's blessing to quit the writing gig. I started to compose a letter to my agent and, zap, I was asleep. I woke up sometime in the middle of the night, in a state of complete confusion. I wasn't sure that I'd really been asleep at all, but the glowing dial of the alarm clock read 3:12 in the morning. I turned over and tried to pretend that, number one, I wasn't really awake, and number two, that I didn't have to pee.

Finally I gave up on all pretense and hauled myself out of bed and

**down the rickety stairs to the basement bathroom. After I'd gone to the bathroom, I felt even more awake. I went into my study and switched on a single lamp, then booted up the computer. By this time, I knew I'd woken up because I wanted to see whether Rabbitfish had answered my e-mail. And there was a reply from him, which had been sent only fifteen minutes earlier, at 2:55 a.m. Seemed like an odd time to be writing e-mails.**

**I am not knowable. Sorry to disappoint you.**

**Obviously, I could think of zillions of answers, some silly, some serious, and a few funny. I left the computer on, but turned off the small lamp, waited a few minutes**

**until my eyes had adjusted to the dark, then carefully headed back upstairs to bed. I crawled under the covers, punched the pillows to make them plump up invitingly, and settled in. I'd made a resolution. No more e-mail exchanges with this Rabbitfish character.**

**I spent the next couple of days immersed in the painful process of informing my publisher, agent, children, former husbands, and all manner of friends and relatives, that I was no longer a writer. I must have said the words, “I quit,” at least a hundred times. Unfortunately, the very next question everyone invariably asked was What are you going to do?**

**I didn't have a clue, which was what I said over and over again. This response didn't resonate well. On Saturday morning, I carried my morning coffee out to the front steps of my house and sat down, wrapping my nightgown around my legs. I heard the phone ring inside, but I ignored it.**

**Somehow, I had to come up with a plan. But how? I was suffering from a bad case of I-don't-care-itis. This had never happened to me before. I was a typical baby-boomer, not to mention a woman who'd had to rely on herself financially simply because she'd somehow managed to screw up three marriages. I felt vaguely as if I'd gone to take a nap two days ago, and had yet to wake up again. I sipped my coffee and enjoyed the warm early morning air. I began to believe that devil winter was gone.**

**Which got me nowhere fast, beyond appreciating the moment. I stared down at my bare toes and tried to imagine some childish game as a way to decide what I could do for a second act job. I'd figured out that I should make at least some money,**

**so a purely volunteer position wouldn't cut it. I had health insurance that was privately arranged because of my freelance writing career, but it was expensive. I decided that it would be nice to have health insurance provided.**

**I wiggled my toes.**

**Okay, I thought, every toe will be a possible job. I went through the first ones quickly, wiggling each toe as it was named. Teach, public relations, real estate, administrative, secretarial. That was one foot. Waitress, maid, government, library aide, bartender. That was the second foot. Boom, there it was, smack dab in the wee baby toe.**

**Bartender.**

**I hopped up, tossed the rest of the coffee into the bushes by the side of the steps, and ran inside. At my**

**computer, I looked up bar tending courses and clicked on the information for the closest location in Harvard Square. In minutes, I'd signed on for the next series of classes, beginning Monday.**

**I thought about sending a mass e-mail to my entire Address file, announcing my new career, but decided that I was being slightly precipitous. The course was only one week long, and I could tell people slowly, when they asked what I was up to. I'd say, "Oh, I'm enrolled in a bartending course in Harvard Square. I've always wanted to be a bartender, ever since I was a little kid." Also, it might be good to wait until I actually landed a job.**

**Nevertheless, I felt rather electric. I was thrilled by the idea of being a bartender and I wanted to tell**

**someone. Oddly, the someone I most wanted to tell was Rabbitfish. I'd successfully avoided answering his last e-mail, in which he said he was not knowable. In one of those spasms of joy (or fear?), I sent off an e-mail.**

**I've quit being a writer. I am going to become a bartender and make big tips. I am very excited.**

**After I sent the e-mail, I remembered the phone ringing earlier, so I checked my voice mail. There was a message from Jenny, sounding strangely discombobulated. "Rose, please call me. I think I'm getting sick or something, and I don't know whether I should cancel the date tonight with Tom Callahan."**

**I dialed her number immediately, but not before I'd figured out for myself that she was probably so stressed by the prospect of a date that she was making herself ill.**

**"It's me."**

**"I'm very nauseated," Jenny said.**

**"Did you drink some flat coke?"**

**"Is that what I should do?"**

**"Yeah, pour a little in a glass and sip it slowly, then call me back."**

**"Okay."**

**We hung up. I checked my e-mail. Nothing, naturally.**

**Since I hadn't eaten yet and it was relatively early, I decided to go for a run. As I was changing from nightgown to jogging clothes in my bedroom, the phone rang again.**

**Jenny's voice was weak and pathetic. "I feel a little better."**

**"Would you like me to come**

**over?”**

**“Maybe that would be good.”**

**She lived in a sleek high-rise condo with a spectacular view of the harbor.**

**“I’m just getting dressed, so it’ll be at least an hour from now. Do you want me to bring you anything?”**

**“Mmm--maybe I’ll be ready for some breakfast--”**

**“Bagels?”**

**“Yeah.” Jenny sighed. “I really need to go into the office.”**

**I bit back my initial response, finally ending with a tepid, “I don’t think that’s in the cards today. I’ll see you soon.”**

**I pulled off my running shorts and replaced them with blue jeans, then a white t-shirt and black blazer I loved because it bagged in the elbows. I ran up the stairs to the second floor,**

**grabbed some bagels from the freezer, and made a quick pit stop in the bathroom next to the kitchen. I, therefore, had no reason to descend to the basement where my computer might harbor an e-mail response from Mr. Rabbitfish. I, therefore, tried not to run down there, but in the end, I simply couldn't help myself.**

**My reward for being silly was the boing sound. An e-mail! From him.**

**Aren't you being impetuous?**

**I wrote back, in a flash.**

**Hope so.**

**Then out the door and into my Volvo to battle Saturday morning traffic. All the way to Jenny's, I also battled euphoria. I was too mature to**

**get sucked into something that  
smacked of  
love notes sailing through a third-  
grade classroom, like little missiles  
landing on my head and shoulders.  
Or I thought I was. Or I certainly  
should be. But I was a surprisingly  
happy chick given that I didn't have a  
date on the Saturday night glaring  
down at me.**

**I decided I needed someone to  
whip me into a more rationale point  
of view, and it was clear I wouldn't be  
able to count on Jenny, under the  
circumstances. I activated the  
handsfree cell phone in the car and  
hit the number 1, which automatically  
made the phone dial my daughter,  
Alex's, apartment. When her phone  
trilled for the second time, I realized it  
was only nine o'clock in the morning.  
As a third-year medical student, her**

**schedule was both intense and impossible for me to follow from week to week. I never knew if she might be catching up on sleep or working, but 9:00 a.m. on a Saturday morning suddenly seemed like it could be a ripe time for sleeping. I quickly hit the disconnect button.**

**A couple of seconds later, the car's cell phone rang.**

**“Hey, Mom, you called?”**

**“I'm sorry--I forgot it was so early.”**

**“I just got back from a run--don't worry about it.”**

**The matter-of-fact tone in Alex's voice abruptly made me change my mind about telling her anything. In fact, it struck me as quite odd that I'd ever imagined doing so. I hoped I wasn't becoming one of those mothers who treated their kids as**

**pseudo-best friends. Instead, I'd made the more heinous mistake of bothering one of my grown children for absolutely no reason. Also something I'd vowed never to do.**

**"So, how was your week?" I said.**

**"Exhausting. Plus, I went to a party last night, where I drank too much and I think I met this really nice woman. I wanted to follow up with her, but I can't even remember her name."**

**"You should post something on the Craigslist Missed Connection board!" I said, undoubtedly with too much enthusiasm.**

**"How do you know about the MC board?"**

**"I read an article about it and visited the site a couple of times, out of curiosity, you know? For a writer, it's fascinating."**

**“Maybe I should--”**

**“Okay, I’ve arrived at Jenny’s place.” I pulled into the underground garage of her building. “She’s got a blind date tonight, arranged courtesy of her mother, and I think she’s having a panic attack.”**

**“It must be hard.”**

**We said good-bye quickly, but not before I managed to get in another plug for the Missed Connections board. Alex probably didn’t realize that if she posted something, her dear mother would definitely see it. I hoped she wouldn’t make it sexually suggestive, but it would be my own fault if she did.**

**I had a key to Jenny’s apartment so that I could always let myself in without making her come to the door. I found her stretched out on the low white couch in her living room,**

**moaning dramatically.**

**“Have you puked yet?” I said.**

**“No.” She rolled her eyes towards me.**

**I crouched next to the couch, holding out a hand. “Time for some tough love, sweetheart.”**

**She ignored my hand. “If I sit up, I’ll definitely spew.”**

**“Good word, spew.” I picked up first one of her hands and then the other. They were limp and clammy, like octopus tendrils. “Heave ho, Jen.” Without the lower parts of her legs, she had to be a little more careful in finding her balance. But I knew, from long practice, that she was perfectly capable.**

**She moaned again, except I could tell it was just for show. “I hate you,” she muttered.**

**The color was already coming**

**back into her cheeks.**

**“You want a toasted bagel dripping with butter?”**

**“Yeah.” Jenny gave me a disgusted look.**

**The pristine kitchen had a wall cutout so that I could see straight through the dining room, living room, and to the view of sky beyond. Up close to the window, looking down, you could see the harbor.**

**Jen yelled, “I don’t want to go on this date!”**

**I yelled back. “Could’ve fooled me!”**

**“What am I going to do?”**

**I cut the bagels and popped two halves into the toaster. As I turned to open the ‘fridge, searching for orange juice, I shouted, “You’re going on the date, falling in love with him, and getting married so that I can**

**finally be your bridesmaid instead of it always being the other way around.”**

**Total silence greeted what I’d thought was quite the inspired speech. I peeked through the kitchen’s cutout. Her face was averted and I couldn’t see her reaction. “I’m just joshing,” I said.**

**Still no answer.**

**Two minutes later, I brought out the plate of buttered bagels. She finally turned to face me, obviously embarrassed by the tears spilling down her cheeks.**

**I rushed to sit next to her, plunking the plate down on the coffee table. “I’m really sorry,” I said.**

**“That’s not why I’m crying.”**

**I put my arm around her thin shoulders. We’ve never been much for a lot of touching. Maybe it had to**

**do with her disability, but I'd been wary of coming too close, though, at the same time, there had been countless occasions when I'd had to physically help her. Still, that was different from expressing solicitude. Jenny hated the idea that people--including me--were sorry for her.**

**"I'm going to ask you a funny question," Jen said.**

**"Okay."**

**"If you met a really good-looking guy, let's say he was sitting at a table, and after you noticed him, only then did you see he was in a wheelchair--"**

**I interrupted, "I can guess where this is going, and it did happen to me once."**

**"You never told me." She swiped at the tears drying on her face.**

**"I was in Widener library, doing some research for one of my novels,**

**and there was this totally handsome guy at one of the reading tables. I thought later maybe he was a Vietnam vet because he was dressed like a hippie and had a ponytail.”**

**I picked up the plate and offered Jen a bagel. She grabbed a half and immediately took a huge bite. I took the second half and nibbled. She waved at me, obviously saying, Keep going with the story.**

**“So he must have become aware of my noticing him.”**

**“Yeah?”**

**“And he followed me.”**

**She stared at me. I knew what she wanted. She wanted me to have hooked up with this guy in a wheelchair, and somehow that fact would magically make her date tonight go well. Trouble was, I had to tell her the truth.**

**“I kind of freaked out,” I said. “It wasn’t because he was in a wheelchair, but more his extreme interest. I felt like he was stalking me.”**

**I glanced at Jen, who was still aggressively chomping on the last of the bagel. “You’ve had tons of guys attracted to you, Jen. The cripple thing really isn’t an issue, and you know it.”**

**“I’d never be attracted to someone in a wheelchair,” she said abruptly.**

**“Under the circumstances, I think that makes sense, but it doesn’t mean you can assume your feelings are the only possible feelings out there.”**

**“How can I figure a man is truly attracted to me if I don’t see myself as attractive?”**

**“You know you’re beautiful.”**

**She nodded. “I do....I know I’m beautiful.” Jen’s face was somber as she agreed with me.**

**So I said, “I was kidding. You’re not beautiful at all. I’ve been meaning to break it to you.”**

**She smiled. “Thanks.”**

**I finished my bagel half. “You could try therapy again.”**

**“There’s nothing wrong with me except that I don’t have legs from the knees down, and I’m entirely missing feet.”**

**Our eyes met and then all hell broke lose. We laughed so hard that I got the hiccups and Jen toppled sideways on the couch. I was too swamped by my own laughter to help her back up, so she lay there like a knocked over bowling pin, her hands in little fists beating at the couch pillows. By the time we stopped**

**laughing and I'd hauled Jenny back into a sitting position, I was pretty sure we both felt like we'd been reborn.**

**Jen said, "I guess I'm going on this dumb date."**

**"I have a good feeling about it," I said, grinning.**

**I cleaned up the kitchen and did a few odd jobs around Jenny's apartment, until she ordered me to leave. I looked at her suspiciously. "Are you going to work now?"**

**"No choice. We're in court first thing Monday morning, and I've got a ton of material to review."**

**I shook my finger at her, and she shook hers back at me. We laughed, and I took off. I knew she was going to be all right. Her date might not actually succeed, but I could hope that it would. So I did. Hope, that is.**

**(5)**

**I powered through the rest of that Saturday with an unusual, and yes, excessive display of energy, especially for sluggish me. Three loads of laundry, all ironing done immediately, a five-mile run, major grocery shopping that included enough fresh fruit and vegetables to**

**stop any cancer cells in their tracks, and the beginnings of a tomato sauce simmering on the stove. At seven o'clock in the evening, I became quite ill from the smell of the tomato sauce, an odor that I normally found intoxicating. That was when I remembered I didn't have a date for the evening ahead, and I plunged into despair. I wandered down to my basement study and checked my e-mail. Nothing from Rabbitfish. I swung around in my chair and tried to imagine what he was doing. The only possibility that seemed at all feasible was a fabulous night out with a hot blonde babe, age thirty-five, who spoke five languages and could have had a professional singing career if she'd wanted.**

**Unknowable, he'd said.  
Undoubtedly true.**

**Back up the stairs and in my living room, I sat down on the flowered chintz couch. The two front windows were open and the early evening spring air was surprisingly chilly. I felt so tired and dispirited that I knew I had to do something to cheer myself up. I laid a fire in the fireplace, struck a match, and lit it. Then I ran upstairs, opened the windows in the kitchen so that the tomato sauce smells wouldn't be quite so overpowering, and made myself a Tom Collins. I settled into a corner of the living room couch, with a Mozart CD playing quietly, and the lights turned off. I gazed into the fire and began to give myself a talking-to. The kind that says, Buck up, Be grateful, Quit complaining, It could always be worse, Who needs sex anyway, You have your health.**

**Before I'd gotten very far, the phone rang.**

**Isaac said, "Rose, am I interrupting?"**

**I didn't want him to know that I was sitting alone in my living room, drinking a Tom Collins. So I answered his question with a question. Always a good tactic. "How can I help you, Isaac?"**

**"If you weren't busy tonight, I was wondering if I could come over. I need to talk to you."**

**I swallowed. He sounded so damn serious, and this was the second time he'd asked to get together and talk. Obviously, something was up and I had this gruesome feeling that it might be serious. Maybe he was dying. How would I feel if I'd refused to listen to him when he really needed me at**

**such a terrible moment in his life?**

**“I just built a fire and I’m having a drink. You can come by, if you want.”**

**“Thanks--I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”**

**In the kitchen, I packed a crystal glass with ice and carried it back downstairs where a small cabinet held my collection of liquor. I took out the bottle of Scotch and placed it with the glass on a tray. Then I poked at the fire. I did not check my hair or make-up. The days when I wanted to impress Isaac were long gone. In fact, I prayed that my mood of depression had made me look unattractive. Maybe the same thing would be true of him, too. I opened the front door so that he could just walk in, then settled back on the couch.**

**Naturally I began to worry about**

**what he was coming to talk to me about, but he arrived before I managed to get very far with the worrying.**

**I stood up and he kissed me on both cheeks. I pretended to do the same to him, but I was really just smooching the air around his face.**

**“Help yourself to a scotch.” I gestured to the tray.**

**“Great, thanks.”**

**I sat back down in my corner, and he took the opposite corner. Very cozy. The fire crackled and spit sparks.**

**“I have something to tell you that may come as a shock,” he said immediately.**

**“Are you sick?”**

**“Oh, god, no! I’m sorry you thought--”**

**“I didn’t think you were sick, it’s**

**just that when someone sounds so serious and determined to talk, it can be worrisome.”**

**“It’s serious, but not bad.”**

**I found I was genuinely relieved. “Now I can enjoy my drink.” I took a hefty gulp.**

**Isaac matched my gulp with his own. “I’m making a big life change, and you’re one of the first people I wanted to tell.”**

**“Must be something in the water,” I said. “Seeing as how I quit the writing life.”**

**“I did wonder about both of us doing this at the same time.” He smiled, but gently, without much joy in it.**

**“Or maybe it’s the approach of the big five-oh.”**

**“The big five-oh?”**

**“Fifty years old!”**

**He shook his head. “Doubt that has anything to do with my situation.”**

**I cocked my head and swallowed more Tom Collins.**

**He sucked in his breath. “I’m just going to spit it out.”**

**“This better be good,” I said.**

**“I’m becoming a monk.”**

**I blinked at him, then glanced at the fire while I replayed the words in my mind. Finally, I said, “Uh, Isaac, you’re Jewish.”**

**He nodded. “Was.”**

**“You’re not Jewish anymore?”**

**“I’m a Buddhist now.”**

**“I think I’d feel better if you’d said you had a brain tumor.” After the words were out, I clapped both hands over my mouth, horrified.**

**“You’re awful,” Isaac said, pulling his face into a funny expression. “I**

**know you don't have much use for organized religion."**

**"Or disorganized religion," I said. "Or any kind of religion in any way, shape, or form."**

**He nodded, but he didn't seem troubled by what I was saying. I was very troubled. The smell of the tomato sauce seemed to cascade down the stairs and swirl into the room with us. I tried to get a handle on what Isaac had announced, first of all, but also on why he'd somehow felt it necessary to confide in me. His future was his future. He knew we were over, particularly if he was becoming a monk. Not much room for an ex-wife in a Buddhist monastery, for crying out loud.**

**"So I know this isn't something that you care about, but at the same time, I feel you know me better than**

**almost anyone. You may not understand or respect religion, but I think you do understand and respect me. What do you think of my plan?"**

**I stared at him. I'm afraid my mouth had dropped open a little bit. I was at a loss. "I can't imagine what makes you say that I understand you. I don't understand you at all. I never did."**

**'But you're the one who told me I was running from love by engaging in so much promiscuous sex.'**

**Frankly, I couldn't remember having said that, but I was pleasantly surprised that he seemed to think I had. It sounded wise to me. Suddenly, I was wise.**

**Isaac continued, "And you're the one who's been celibate for two years, showing me the way."**

**"You don't know for a fact that I've**

**been celibate!”**

**“It’s obvious.”**

**“Oh, great.” I drained the Tom Collins and got up to ferociously jab at the fire before throwing two more logs in and watching with satisfaction as they burst into flames. I whirled around and pointed the poker at him. “Whether or not I’ve been celibate is none of your business and whatever I’ve done has nothing to do with showing you the way!”**

**“I disagree. And I do agree that I was running from love by using sex. The really surprising thing is that I was running from God’s love when, if anything, I figured I was running from your love.”**

**“Isaac, you don’t believe in God. You told me so yourself, many times. Anyway, I thought Buddhism was**

**anti-God.”**

**“I believe in God,” he said firmly, finishing the Scotch and standing up to head over to the cabinet, where he poured himself another.**

**“You won’t be drinking Scotch when you’re a monk.”**

**“That’s why I’m doing it now.” He grinned mischievously and for the first time that evening I saw the old devil dog, Isaac.**

**I shouted, “I’m not going to bed with you!”**

**“I have to admit it did occur to me, but I know it would be wrong. There are degrees of difference between sex and Scotch.”**

**“Love and Scotch.”**

**He looked confused. “Yeah, but weren’t we talking about sex?”**

**I shook my head. “The stuff for a Tom Collins is in the kitchen--I’ll be**

**right back.”**

**I stirred the tomato sauce, added a little red wine, and left it simmering. It had started to smell good to me again. After I made the second Tom Collins, I went back downstairs. Isaac was stretched out on the couch, reminding me of Jenny earlier that day, when I'd arrived at her apartment. Briefly, I wondered how her date was going. I still had irrationally positive feelings about it. Please, let her find happiness in love.**

**Now, if you'd asked me to whom I'd directed that little prayer, I wouldn't have anything logical to say, other than to explain that, when desperate, we human beings have a tendency to say and do dumb things. I meant well by asking, but I can't say I believed I would be answered. Not a chance.**

**Meanwhile, it appeared that Isaac had actually fallen asleep. The nearly full glass of Scotch sat sweating on the coffee table. His hands were folded across his chest, like a dead person laid out in a coffin. I sat in an armchair close to the fire and sipped my drink. I studied him, up and down his body, trying to imagine him in the robes of a monk. Then I imagined going over and unzipping his fly. I zipped it back up again, pronto. Finally, in a moment of pure nuttiness, I began to laugh. I laughed so hard and long that I woke him up. He started to laugh with me.**

**He said, “When are you making the spaghetti? I’m getting hungry.”**

**“Monks don’t eat spaghetti, either.”**

**“You don’t know thing-one about what monks do.”**

**I sighed. “Okay, I’ll go make the pasta, but you have to do the salad.”**

**We spent a pleasant couple of hours, but even the nostalgic experience of having dinner alone together didn’t, in the end, create intimacy between us, for which I was surprised, but grateful.**

**After Isaac left, I curled up in the living room, nursing a cup of tea in front of the fire’s deep glowing coals. The good news was that I’d enjoyed talking with him about his crazy plans to become a Buddhist monk. I’d even told him that I thought he’d look handsome with a shaved head and orange robe, but that I doubted he’d survive very long without sex. He tried to convince me that the point was to do something you believed you were incapable of doing. I didn’t**

**get the rationale for that, but I'd stopped disagreeing with Isaac years earlier, and even his reincarnation as a Buddhist monk couldn't alter my resolve on that one.**

**I wanted to call Jenny, except it was only ten o'clock and I knew it was too early. Instead, I did what any sane single woman would do when she was alone on a Saturday night. I checked my e-mail. I had no real expectations, except, perhaps, something from one of my kids, sent in a fit of confused Mommy-love. I hadn't heard from my youngest, Noah, in more than ten days, which was right on the edge of causing me worry, especially since he was the most gentle and sensitive of the three. He'd graduated from college the previous spring and was trying to become a literary writer, unlike the**

**more commercial bent of his mother and older brother, Elliot. Trevor, his father, had agreed to partially support him for one year. His deadline loomed. That's when it hit me: I hadn't heard from him since I'd announced my decision to quit writing. Maybe I'd upset him in some way.**

**I sat down at the computer, already composing an e-mail to him in my mind, but first checking on what mail might have arrived for me.**

**Rabbitfish!**

**I gasped with surprise. On Saturday night? He was revealing his alone status on a Saturday night? I clicked so fast that for a second the e-mail seemed to disappear. I was afraid I'd actually deleted it, but then it exploded onto the screen.**

## **Whatcha doing?**

**Those words moaned with sexual suggestion. To me, anyway, in my present celibate-induced coma state. I clicked Reply and began to type, my fingers flying. It took twenty minutes, even at a rip-roaring speed of 85 wpm. No braking, no turns, and my foot heavy on the accelerator. I wrote him all about my evening with Isaac. Everything. Then, with a careful proofreading but few revisions, I sent it to Rabbitfish. Or, actually, Mr. Rabbitfish, as I'd begun calling him in my mind.**

**In another fit of possibly excess energy, I wrote Noah a brief e-mail. I tried to keep it light by describing Isaac's monkish plans, but I finally approached the subject of his own writing. Usually, I didn't ask how it**

**was going since I wasn't sure whether he appreciated his mother's, who happened to be a writer, curiosity. But, I figured, now I wasn't a writer, so it would be all right. If I didn't hear back from him within 48 hours, I'd call his house, which he shared with innumerable others, in the Adams Morgan section of Washington, D.C.**

**The phone rang, making me jump. For some reason, I thought it might be Mr. Rabbitfish, even though my number was unlisted, not to mention that it was ludicrous to imagine he'd actually call me when he hadn't even given me his real name.**

**"Hi!" Jen's voice was nearly unrecognizable. She often sounded happy, but never maniacally happy.**

**"That you?" I said.**

**“Yeah!”**

**“Are you drunk?”**

**“Of course not,” she said. “Don’t you want to hear about how it went?”**

**“You sound really, really drunk.”**

**She giggled. “Drunk with love, maybe.”**

**I stood up and sat down. Then I did it again, up and down. I’d never heard her like this. “Tell me.”**

**She started to talk, and she didn’t stop until an hour later. My right ear felt permanently folded and stapled against the side of my head.**

**Apparently, after waiting forty-eight years, Jen had found her soul mate, that elusive dream of every woman.**

**At various moments during her recital, tears filled my eyes and I had to blow my nose. I kept imagining the unknown Tom Callahan carrying her in his arms, down the aisle.**

**Thanks, I mouthed to Isaac's  
Buddhist-deity-entity-whatever. Had  
to thank someone. No one else came  
readily to mind.**

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