

Enough About Me

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EVERY DAY ANYA SEES THE BOY: FRIENDLESS, BESPECTACLED, husky, a touch, well, spastic. She wonders if spastic is an insult in this case; the school he attends, which Anya passes on her way to work, the Louisa May Alcott School, is supposed to be for children with special needs. But the small number of little men and women who attend it seem not so much to have special needs as they do special appetites, this being their last stop before Hazelden or Betty Ford or someplace where there are euphemisms for “lockdowns.”

There they are, congregating before homeroom or whatever it is that begins their day. They have their conversations: fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck. They chain-smoke. They chain-smoke and play hackey-sack. You don't need your hands for hackey-sack—why not keep them busy with something? They make Anya feel old and tired; the small joy she derives from them is that she is not herself a parent staring down the barrel of an adolescence she has helped to create.

Their hair is neon, their clothing doesn't fit—too big, too small—they're pierced in places that seem to Anya to possess a distinct lack of flesh for the task. They take up too much room on the sidewalk where they stage their dramas every morning: clumsy fistfights, some making out, small gestures of collegiality—a shared cigarette, a pat on the back, a general mutant bonding.

Except for the boy. In this palace of losers, the boy is king, which is to say he's in exile even there. He sits on a nearby stoop by himself, making occasional forays to check the bank clock on the corner. His

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stance is wide and he pitches forward when in motion. His arms swing randomly to keep his balance. But his worst feature, the one that makes Anya turn away and hold her breath as if she were passing a cemetery, is a certain petulance, a certain opaque thickness to his features. Anya knows all too well that this makes one not inclined to like or help him, just two of his special needs among the warehouse of possibilities: like me; help me. It is safe to say the boy's special needs are not being met at the Louisa May Alcott School.

Anya gives him six months before he begins wearing his winter coat throughout summer and completing his conversations with himself out loud.

Everything that Anya has spent her life trying to extinguish, excise, exorcize from herself, burn, cut, bore to death, is in that boy.

When she was in high school on an A Better Chance scholarship, her classmate, Andrew Lumer, fledgling graffiti artist, ran into some boys tougher than he thought he was. They stole his bike, his allowance, knocked him around some. Then they found his fat graffiti marker and drew on Andrew Lumer a black eye, a moustache, and sideburns. They also tried to black out a tooth but Andrew Lumer kept his mouth firmly shut even though or maybe because it kept him from calling out for help.

Indelible, it turned out, was a bit of an overstatement when it came to human skin, but Andrew Lumer's inky bruise and facial hair faded slowly from black to dingy gray before vanishing.

Vengeance, of course, was on Andrew Lumer's mind and on the minds of his friends. That could've been unfortunate, but they went to a Quaker school and were instead encouraged to express themselves in assemblies where they could be guided to a pacifistic point of view, where they could play songs by The Who and talk about anger.

Anya enjoyed The Who and did consider herself a pacifist, mostly because she suspected that in a violent confrontation she would lose and it would be painful. This didn't, however, stop her from imagining a more powerful version of herself beating the living shit out of some real or imagined tormentor.

Still, the boy at Louisa May Alcott keeps her faithful to a non-violent world view. She's a conscientious objector, always.

Anya lives in New York, she's back, running out of money, gaining weight, trying not to weep on the subway in the mornings because if she starts she will have to check in somewhere and that would make her feel even worse. She works at Think, Inc., where she tries to think as little as possible and that is not difficult. Think, Inc., despite its jaunty name, is a loosely organized group of PhD's with more than the usual flair for pretension. They put out *Think Quarterly*, but are so busy thinking that only two issues have appeared annually for the last several years. The editorial board, headed by renowned analyst Dr. K, likes Anya because she has a master's degree: she's like Cinderella but not too stupid.

Think, Inc. is housed on one floor of a psychoanalytic training institute: the basement. Anya's office is literally a closet; for the first month she would occasionally walk into the other door on her hallway, momentarily disoriented by the floor-to-ceiling book cases full of patient files where her monastic desk should have been. Aside from Anya, Think, Inc.'s only staff member is Jake, who typesets *Think Quarterly* on inadequate software.

In the absence of completed manuscripts to do anything with, Jake puts his feet up, reads Spinoza and Stephen King, and drinks Mountain Dew by the liter. The extra caffeine almost counteracts the THC he's got stockpiled in his body.

Anya has been at Think, Inc. for two months and has fantasized for about seven weeks that she is not a copy editor at all, but a subject in the institute's latest research project. She taps the walls for evidence of microphones, one-way mirrors, cadavers.

"I think I'm losing my mind," she says to Jake one day.

Jake puts his finger carefully on the place where he's stopped reading *Cujo*. "Want a Xanax?" he says.

Anya sits down heavily. "No," she says.

"Let me know," he says.

"No," she says.

Some evenings she goes out to Sheepshead Bay and sees girls from the old neighborhood. Girls she was in school with. Girls who made no effort at academics but who could wax an eyebrow perfectly in one shot. Anya made an effort, got a scholarship, many of them, in fact. Married a boy with no connection to either motherland—

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Brooklyn or Russia. Not that that worked. Now she goes to see the girls she can remember; they're all still married, many of them with small children. It doesn't mean they're necessarily happier than Anya is, but she has little patience for their plights and suspects they fabricate their miseries to cheer her up.

"You're so lucky you don't have children," says one. "It really does unspeakable things to the body."

Anya's list of reasons not to have children is long, but bodily damage ranks low on it. It's age, she thinks, not procreation that plays its cruelest joke on form. Age, gravity, and the shrapnel of myriad decisions, all of which include the phrase, "Oh, fuck it . . ."

"So," says Jake sometime during her ninth week at Think, Inc., "you want to smoke a joint?"

"Do you know how old I am?" Anya says. "I'm old enough to be your . . ."

"Sister," Jake says. "You're old enough to be my sister. Maybe my aunt in a nontraditional family."

"Sister," Anya echoes. He's probably right. Think, Inc. has destroyed her mathematical skills, which helps when she looks at her paycheck.

"At least keep me company," Jake says.

In the patient file room she glances around nervously as Jake sloppily inhales next to yellowed onion-skin sheets, the crumbling histories of generations analyzed at the institute. She keeps her hand on the doorknob, imagining the fireball will be sudden and fierce.

Jake stubs the joint out carefully on the metal bookshelves. "Could you watch that?" Anya says. The back of the door is mirrored and she wonders why as she looks at herself become irritable, looks at the silky boyish back of Jake's head. He has a nice neck, too delicate a stem for the rest of him.

"Watch what?" Jake says, looking around. "You have a really cute accent, you know."

"I don't have an accent," Anya says. "I've been here since I was eleven. No accent."

"Uh, okay," Jake says. "Maybe not in the Ukraine." This cracks him up.

"I'm Russian," Anya says.

"What's the difference?" Jake says. He means it.

"I don't have an accent," Anya says again. But she knows it's hopeless. Her ex-husband once told her in exasperation that he couldn't argue with her because when she was angry she stacked up her words with phonetic perfection but no inflection, so that it was impossible to understand what she was saying. She had never believed it was only that.

"You want to go out sometime?" Jake says.

The next day they have a visitor at Think, Inc., an older woman with a bouffant and spike heels who sits herself down at the third empty desk and proceeds to line up prescription bottles wrapped in tinfoil. Anya sees the first one go down and recognizes it: Valium, five milligrams. She looks at Jake, who gestures for her to follow him out into the hallway, and then out a heavily padlocked door into Think, Inc.'s backyard. It is something like freedom.

"That's Dr. K's mistress," Jake says.

"Oh, please," Anya says.

"Really," Jake says. "Okay, she's the executive editor of *Think Quarterly*, but that's because she's Dr. K's mistress. She comes in about once a month to make long-distance calls."

Anya doesn't like these kinds of theories, rejecting them as flabby and misogynistic, but after an hour of listening to the woman chat on the phone, she realizes it's true: fucking. Fucking is the only possible explanation for this woman's presence at Think, Inc.

When Jake gets up again later, Anya follows him out. She likes the backyard he has just shown her. Although the sun is not hitting their scrap of concrete, Anya can see that the sky is a brilliant bright blue. Somewhere not so far from them, the sun is making contact, warming everything in its path. It makes her feel brave and almost happy and when Jake passes her the joint, she shares it with him. From the number of pills the woman inside has swallowed, she figures it's going to be a long day.

Jake looks up and around, the mere movement of his head making Anya feel much more stoned than she is. He scans the buildings above them. "I think," he says, "it's raining snot. Or spit. Or something."

Simultaneously, a beat behind, it's hard to tell, Anya becomes aware of a sound different from the muffled noise of the city. She fol-

lows it and high above them she spots the boy sitting on the fire escape of the Louisa May Alcott School.

He's on the stairs, hugging his knees and weeping with no attempt at control. His mouth hangs open and gasps and snorts escape from it. His face is wet from crying; tears drip from his eyes, off the end of his nose, from his chin. The sound is steady: unh-unh-unh.

"Holy shit," says Jake.

"I'll go out with you sometime," Anya says, to fill in the space, to make whatever is happening stop, to keep Jake from being a Good Samaritan, if that's what he has in mind, or maybe it's to keep from having to watch him laugh if that's the other thing he may have done.

When they leave that evening, Dr. K's mistress ahead of them having stumbled toward a cab, Anya sees the boy sitting on the stoop of the school. He seems somewhat recovered, at least he's not sobbing as he rocks and looks through a notebook. A teacher is leaving the school when they walk by, and Anya tries to catch their conversation as the boy starts to speak. "Gotta run, Toby," the teacher says. Anya's sorry she now knows his name.

"Let's go to your place and order a pizza," Jake says. "I live with my parents."

"You do?" Anya says. "Doesn't that interfere? With your lifestyle? With girlfriends? With all the pot you smoke?"

"Not really," Jake says.

It is homey, domestic, this pizza in her small apartment in an outer borough with this man whom she has seen more of than anyone else in months. She started at Think, Inc. in the summer, now they are moving fast through fall. The heat has just started to come up in the apartment, its stale smell reminding her how long it had been dormant.

Anya thinks of the boy and it disturbs her. What is it, she wonders, that separates him from every other zero wandering the city and somehow passing? What lack of style—real or faked, it doesn't matter. What lack of innate grace? What missing ability to convey "fuck you" without even trying? These are microscopic distinctions, it occurs to her, but the difference is enormous. The leap from that boy to popular bully, that space in between, is so small, she knows. She knows because that space is the scrap of cosmos she happens to occu-

py, filling it to capacity, feeling it closing in. And now there is Jake, warm and happy and full of pizza, somehow wanting to share it.

Dr. K is on the phone. Anya hasn't spoken to him in a month. "Exciting news, Anya," he says. "My book has been accepted for publication. By a mainstream *publishing house*."

"That's *great*, Dr. K," Anya says, in her best Up with People voice, its tone decidedly faded by noon each day, but it's only nine-thirty and she and Jake have just stumbled into work. Outside, it's sleeting.

"I've left it, a copy, on your desk," Dr. K says. "It will have to be proofed, of course."

"Of *course*," Anya says. She watches Jake start in on his first liter of Mountain Dew.

"I'm not much of a typist, I'm afraid," Dr. K chuckles.

"Of course *not*," Anya says, trying to remain cheerful. She locates the manuscript on her desk, on top of the jumble of patient records she and Jake have been reading aloud to each other, killing time. It's typed on onion skin paper, the place seems to have nothing but, the manual typewriter heavier on the r's than on any other key. It gives the impression, of *course*, of being decades old. But with Dr. K. that could be illusory. She wonders if he's an idiot or just affected, but decides with Dr. K. the distinction is probably illusory too.

"Do you see it there?" Dr. K asks.

"*But Enough About Me, What Do You Think of My Narcissism: An Analyst's Memoir*," Anya recites.

"*Exactly*," Dr. K says. Anya wonders suddenly if he's wearing any clothes on the other end of the phone. But enough about her, she thinks, what would Dr. K make of her thoughts?

Some nights Anya and Jake go to Mr. Mezze in Anya's neighborhood. The beer is cheap and olives and miniature grape leaves are free at the bar. Sometimes the owner—Mr. Mezze himself—maybe remembering his humbler origins, maybe just aware of the overage in his kitchen, sends out borek and spanakopita to them. The phyllo, warm and drenched in butter, makes Anya happier than almost anything she can think of.

"What do you want," Jake says one night.

"I want some moussaka," Anya says. "I'm feeling bold."

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Jake studies his beer bottle—Latrobe! Anya thinks, it just says Latrobe—and keeps studying it. “I mean, from me,” he says finally. “Like, what do you want from me?”

Anya takes a long sip of her own beer while Jake waits for an answer. He has that kind of patience, she’s noticed. He seems almost to have forgotten he’s asked any question at all. It occurs to her that he is young enough not to know the difficulties what he’s asking; in fact, he is so unformed somehow that he wouldn’t even know the trouble he would have if she asked him the same.

“I want,” she begins, trying to brighten, trying as you would with five-year-olds, convincing them that washing dishes is a really fun game, “I want you to send me flowers for no good reason.”

“Okay,” Jake says.

The next morning they arrive at Think, Inc. before he does: a dozen shrieking pink tulips. “For no good reason,” the card says. “Jake.”

Jake lies in bed, the sheets artfully askew, the sun streaming in the windows: it looks almost like something, this warm sunny winter thaw. He smiles lazily at her, stretches. Mid-stretch he shouts, “Ahh-Ahh-Ahh! Ahh-Ahh-Ahh!” He collapses and plays a little air guitar. Shaking his head, he wails, “I come from the land of a-ice ’n snow, from the . . .”

“That’s ‘The Immigrant Song,’” he says.

“That’s *your* immigrant song,” Anya says from the doorway.

“*I’m* not the immigrant,” Jake says. “*I* was born here. My mother . . .”

“I know,” Anya says. “Your fresh-off-the-boat mother went into labor watching *Chinatown*. That’s why your name is Jake. It’s a beautiful story.”

Jake pats the bed. “Come here,” he says. “The sun is doing really weird things to the dirt on the windows.”

As for Anya, she came over—already born—with her parents; some foundations liked her and sent her to college; she left her husband by packing a bag and exiting the apartment; she worked in the basement of a nearly defunct psychoanalytic institute. Was it so wrong to feel the facts of one’s existence so tersely, as she often thought while rummaging through other people’s files; the patients’ minutiae poked, prodded, plundered for every nuance: the impure

thoughts about the upstairs neighbor, the upset stomach after the pork chop, the dream about the librarian from fourth grade. Yes, Anna surmised, it was wrong. But what was the other choice? To let it rip, all the Slavic heaviness she carries around, built for tragedy somehow, for opera and expensive brandy and an extravagant bubble bath by candlelight where she opens her veins into the warm water. The capacity is in her, long subdued but not quite dead. It's in the architecture of her genes.

"You've got to love your parents," Jake informs her one night. "At least," he says, "you've got to love that they love the American dream."

"My parents don't love the American dream," Anya says, tossing the day's mail into the recycling bag that hangs by her sink. "They love the Soviet dream, which is to be in America drinking better-quality vodka than they get in Odessa."

Jake stares at her like there are things he might dare say. Then the moment passes. He stares instead into the refrigerator he has opened. "I love the American dream," he says, his back to her.

"Not really," Anya says. "You happen to love the New York dream, and that is to somehow live rent-free in two places. But it's all downhill from there."

"You know," Jake says, "what is so wrong with me? I know you've got a long list, but what happens to be at the top of it right now?"

Anya considers this carefully. "You make love like you're happy," she says.

"I am happy," Jake says.

"You make love and it's like Frisbee, it's like soda pop," Anya says. "It's like puppies and bobbing for apples."

"You're insane," Jake says. This seems to Anya like a good place for him to storm out, but he doesn't. He just walks into her bathroom and takes a bath, and not a melodramatic one either. She can hear the splashing.

Anya goes in and sits on the edge of the tub. He's still not unhappy, she notices, though he does pick distractedly at the grout of the tiles. "How should I make love?" he says. "According to you?"

"I don't know," Anya says. "Maybe with urgency. Like your life depended on it."

Jake slides under the water and taps his fingers along the sides of

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the tub; she knows he's enjoying the deep rumbling sound that makes. He finally comes up for air. "If my life depended on it," he says, "I would've died somewhere between twenty-two and twenty-four."

Dr. K takes Anya out to lunch when she's finished proofing chapter one. He says he wants to do this on a chapterly basis. "That's so kind, Dr. K," Anya says.

"The least I can do, Anya, the very least," he says.

Chapter one is a reverie of the women who have transferentially desired Dr. K, which seems to have been his entire female patient load. Always the professional, Dr. K, declined the invitations, but his imaginings of himself as a more devious psychiatrist are vivid. She's proofed it while reading it out loud to Jake, who's declared it better than *The Stand*. She skims ahead, looking for evidence of the big-haired high-heeled pill-popping mistress, but Dr. K appears to be the model of decorum when it comes to her.

In the slow lunch rush of an Upper West Side diner, Dr. K asks her what her husband does.

"What?" she says.

"Your husband, what does he do?" Dr. K says, sipping his coffee and waiting for her answer.

"I'm not married," she says. "Anymore. I'm not married."

"That's very interesting," Dr. K says. "You look fantastic."

"I'm seeing someone," Anya says.

"You don't say that like you mean it," Dr. K says.

Of all the indignities Anya imagines herself to have suffered, of all the ways that she once thought her life would turn out, ways she can't even remember anymore, she knows this, this present, isn't it, that to be analyzed, unbidden, in a warm and greasy diner on a winter's day by an old and horny shrink. Well, this is a low point, she thinks.

And she figures Dr. K has asked for it, so while he devours a Salisbury steak, mashed potatoes, gray green beans, and several cups of black coffee, Anya unburdens herself. She tells him everything: about coming here with no English, about not wanting to be like the other girls, about not wanting to be herself; she goes on at great length about personal diaspora, a term she figures he will appreciate. About Jake and his unrelenting cheerfulness, a cheerfulness bolstered by lots of reefer and lots of beer and lots of sleep and lots of carbo-

hydrates and maybe lots of her. That he has appeared in her life, all over her life, and this seems not to disturb him at all. That there is a boy she sees every day who rips her heart out of her chest. That he rips everybody's heart out and they all respond as they will. What does it mean, anyway, that there are such people in the world, what does that say about God?

Dr. K signals for more coffee. "Do you want my professional or my personal opinion?" he says.

"Is there a difference?" Anya asks. "I've read chapter one."

Dr. K smirks. "Perhaps not. But suffice to say, there are really only two kinds of people in the world," he says. "Those who find the suffering of the sufferers stupid because they're too stupid to know they shouldn't suffer, and those who find the non-suffering of the non-sufferers stupid because they're too stupid to know they should be suffering."

"Okay," Anya says. "Sure."

"It's a dilemma," Dr. K says. "But what did you think of my book?"

Back at the office, Jake looks up from Dr. K's manuscript. "Did you read chapter seven?" he asks.

"Nah," Anya says. She tries to consider Jake in a new way, as a complicated person in his own right, if not in hers, as a person who has concerns, surely, even if they're invisible to her. She'd spent the walk back to the office along Central Park in its winter starkness telling herself that Dr. K couldn't be right. What kind of analyst tells you there are only two kinds of people in the world? Perhaps, having said all she had said, she had cleared the way for something new, for her and Jake as something, if not romantic, then at least plausible.

"That's good," Jake says. "Chapter seven. I was worried about you."

They smoke a joint right in the office. The mistress won't be back for a month, they decide, her most recent visit having been a few days ago. That they do no work, that they mock confidentiality statutes up and down the line, that they are slowly withering away in a basement is such an open secret that even its openness needs to be hidden from no one. They decide to leave work, such as it is, early, go back to Anya's apartment and turn up the heat and order Chinese food. They lock up the basement and hit the street with all the school children,

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walking through the wall of their cigarette smoke.

When Anya peeks down the tunnel to see if the train is coming, she sees instead the boy, one foot in front of the other, on the yellow caution line. She knows he doesn't have the motor control, gross or fine, for that kind of stunt. As soon as it occurs to her—magical thinking, Dr. K would accuse—the boy plops onto the tracks.

He lands on his knees.

His howling begins immediately.

And then he is running sloppily, stumbling away from the direction the train will appear. He shrieks, shrieks that are a long time coming, that go far beyond his immediate circumstances, dire as those might become in a few moments.

Anya watches him, made small by his descent down to the tracks, and feels chilled, sick, and like him, that the world has suddenly gotten much worse in one thoughtless second. She looks at Jake, and he is slightly purple, stoned and stupid, under the fluorescent lights of the station, propped languidly against the blue post. "Oh my God," Anya says. "Do something."

"What?" Jake says. "I'm not going down there."

She takes another look down the long tunnel. There is no train coming. Other passersby are beginning to notice what has happened and they are trying to shush the boy to communicate something, anything, to him. His schoolmates, who have clustered near Anya and Jake, curse and point. "You have to," Anya says. "Get to him. Do something."

"Fuck me," Jake says slowly. "I'm no hero."

Anya moves toward Jake to shake him into some kind of action, but when she grabs his shoulders they feel thin under his thin winter coat. She practically outweighs him, she realizes, she is more substantial, a larger woman than he is a man, stronger. A plan seems to be in action down the tracks but Anya doesn't want to see. She keeps her hold on Jake, buries her head into his thin neck, while they stand, both of them, under Columbus Circle, and wait for braver people to come to the rescue.