

there's a
word for
that

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Janine was lost. The smell of bleach and sweat followed her through the empty halls. She could hear a woman arguing with someone somewhere on the floor above. Or was it below? What floor was she on, anyway? She pushed her weight against a door and found herself standing in an identical corridor.

That it all seemed familiar struck her as ironic, as she'd never gone to high school, let alone college. Maybe she was confusing the building with a hospital, with its similar organizational system based on numbers and letters that seemed foreign until they became so customary it was hard to believe they had ever held any mystery. The first time she'd been sent to McLean, she'd been a teenager. But this wasn't a hospital, she reminded herself, envying the sense of ownership the real students enrolled here must feel. She wondered if they were sad when it was time to leave it all behind. She hated endings almost as much as beginnings. Almost.

She found the classroom and took a deep breath. Her stomach cramped with anxiety. She was taking a cartooning class but could barely draw. How like her to pursue a dream for which she had only half the aptitude. Like being a blind bus driver, she thought. Having a good sense of direction probably wasn't enough.

Two men, sitting on opposite sides of a long table, were already inside the classroom with their portfolios in front of them. Neither of them acknowledged her when she entered.

The younger man had on a shirt with the name *Segun* embroidered on the pocket. The other man was middle-aged with a beard and a long, graying ponytail. He was wearing an oversize Batman shirt under an unbuttoned flannel. How could a man live in Manhattan and dress like that? she wondered, trying to imagine what kind of job he had. Subway maintenance? Toll collector? Only transportation would accept such sartorial negligence. She took a seat equidistant from the two men and quietly opened her portfolio.

The silence was broken when three twenty-somethings spilled into the room, looking like they'd fallen off an Abercrombie and Fitch billboard. Janine was undone by the unexpected presence of beautiful young people. Wasn't there a separate room for them? They positioned themselves on the table and chairs, reminiscing about some party or art event they'd been to the night before.

She felt the space around her expand as her heart began pounding. She tried to recall some of the tools she'd learned in therapy. *AWARE*, she said to herself, grasping for the acronym like a drowning child for a floatie. *A: Acknowledge that I am afraid but not in real danger. W: Wait and watch. A: Actions to make myself more comfortable. R...* she forgot what *R* stood for. *E: End.* What the fuck did any of that mean? Maybe *R* stood for *Run*? She wasn't ready for this. Watching the performance of this coterie of hipsters was quickly exhausting her reserve of sanity.

She looked over at Big Foot, as she'd taken to thinking of the bearded guy with the ponytail. Did he feel as old and irrelevant as she did? He was sketching, seemingly oblivious to the noise around him.

The conversation stilled and she felt someone looking at her. She white-knuckled her pencil. If she had a full-blown panic attack now, she'd never come back. She stared at her portfolio and breathed in and out the way she'd been taught.

"Hi," a girl said.

Janine looked up, then glanced around to confirm the girl was actually talking to her.

"I'm Kayla," she said with genuine affability.

"Janine," Janine said, envious that simply being kind was enough to make a pretty girl like Kayla seem generous. She remembered how easy it had been for her to impress people when she was young and pretty. Being famous had helped too.

"This is Corey and Anya," Kayla started but she was interrupted by the hurried arrival of a little woman with spiky red hair and matching red glasses.

"I'm Joon Louie. I'll be teaching this course. Please open your portfolios and introduce yourselves." She put down her bag and picked up a clipboard. "And tell us a little about why you're here," she said, looking at Big Foot.

"I'm Mike Hemingway," he said. "No relation. I work as a production editor at First Second and I've always been into graphic novels. I love to draw. I want to publish a graphic novel before I croak."

There was courteous laughter as Mike pulled out a few sheets from his portfolio. It was no surprise that he was into graphic novels, Janine thought. She could picture his collection of action figures tidily lined up on a bookshelf. What was surprising was that his drawings were mind-blowingly good. There was a collective sound of appreciation from the class. "My problem is keeping the characters looking consistent from different angles," he continued. "That's what's been holding me up."

"That's a common problem and certainly one we will address here," Ms. Louie said with a brisk smile. "Thanks very much, Mike. Next."

"I'm Janine. I'm—"

"Last name, please," Ms. Louie said, looking at her clipboard.

Janine hesitated briefly. "Kessler."

"I *knew* you looked familiar!" the boy who'd come in with Kayla said, slamming both palms on the table. "You were, like, totally famous. You were mad-hot on that show."

Janine felt a rush of dread and looked down at her feet. Penny loafers? Was she kidding? In what possible universe did penny loafers represent the beginning of good things? They were meant to be ironic, of course. As if a forty-one-year-old woman taking an extension class should be expressing irony through her footwear.

“God, that show totally defined my childhood,” the other girl said. She was staring at Janine like she wanted to lick her. What was it about fame that made people want to touch it, even after it had expired?

“Jenny Bailey,” the boy said, then he made a whooping sound and pointed at Janine. His head was shaved and covered in tattoos. “I’m sitting next to Jenny frickin’ Bailey from *Family Happens!* The crap we had growing up was so not as good as the old stuff on TV Land.”

His friends nodded in silent agreement as Janine considered the words *old stuff*.

“My brother was way into you,” he continued. “He had a poster of you on his closet door. You look different but it’s so you. He’s gonna freak.” He examined her from head to toe. “You’re like a hundred times smaller in person than you looked on TV.”

The room was lit with the glow of glamour. People aged; fame never did.

“Class,” Ms. Louie called.

“Whatever happened to you?” he asked, a faint look of distaste and curiosity on his face. “Why’d you cut your hair so short?”

“Um . . .” Janine started. She reached for the back of her neck, wondering again if the haircut had been a mistake. Being less recognizable was a bonus, but she’d begun to suspect resembling the latest Pokémon character might not be.

“God, Corey,” Kayla said with a pout, jabbing him in the neck with the eraser end of her pencil. “Don’t ask her that.”

“Class,” Ms. Louie said again.

“For real,” Kayla whispered, turning to Janine. “I think he’s starstruck. Your hair’s savage.”

Again with the goodness to spare, Janine thought. It was insufferable. Janine's looks had been enough to sell lunch boxes and posters back when dissecting celebrity faces wasn't a public sport. She was painfully aware of her current shortcomings and understood that people were troubled by her not being eternally fifteen. If she acknowledged what a disappointment it was that she'd had the gall to grow up, made a joke about it, maybe it would leave her audience without anything to say behind her back.

"Can we please continue?" Ms. Louie said. She looked at Janine with impatience. "Ms. Kessler, your portfolio, please."

Everyone was staring at Janine. This was not how the class was supposed to go. Every time she tried anything new, it was the same. She was the "Remember that girl" person, the "You'll never guess who I met today" woman. She was nothing but five minutes of conversation at whatever party or dinner everybody else was attending that night.

Her hands were trembling as she considered the options in her portfolio. She tried to shield the drawings from the others. Each page displayed some uncertain pencil lines with a joke written boldly underneath. They were jokes in search of an artist, the *New Yorker's* caption contest in reverse. She heard the click of a camera and saw Corey snapping a photo of her from the phone in his lap under the table.

"Seriously?" Janine asked him. She hoped she wouldn't look like she had a double chin from that angle.

"Don't be such a dick," Kayla said, grabbing the phone out of his hands.

He shrugged as a kind of apology.

Janine tried to focus on how best to show her work. Nobody said anything as she silently flipped through her papers, looking for something presentable, struggling to keep her hands steady. She pulled out what she thought was the best picture, a clumsily drawn couple sitting on a sofa with a basset hound between them and a child in front

of them. The mother was speaking to the child: *Look, honey, it's not that your father and I love the dog more than you. It's just that we love the dog more than you.*

Everyone laughed and leaned in closer. Too close. Janine tried to arch back without being offensive.

"Have you had much experience with drawing?" Ms. Louie asked with a frown.

"No." She bit the inside of her lip until she tasted blood.

"Sometimes a life-drawing class is the best place to start. You see, once we are cartooning, we are exaggerating the familiar, so we need to be able to actually capture reality before we can successfully distort or exaggerate it. Do you understand?"

"Mm," Janine said, trying not to cry. "I thought if I could develop a style then I could work around my inexperience."

Ms. Louie's laugh was patronizing. "It's not that simple, Ms. Kessler. Maybe in the movies, having a style is enough, but in the world of cartooning, you must know how to draw."

Big Foot was nodding.

"You must have some instinct for the form," Ms. Louie went on.

Janine wanted to disappear. Being a somebody made everyone else a nobody. But being a nobody who used to be a somebody? The only thing more humiliating than that, she thought, was being a nobody who used to be somebody taking an extension class in cartooning at Hunter College. She could imagine more respectability in a drug overdose.

She felt the itching start around her ankles as she considered her options. She should probably pick up her things and leave the room before the rash kicked in. But she'd promised herself she would do this. Her new therapist had driven home the importance of Janine's finally sticking with something, had clarified just how many years she had lost doing nothing. She'd become so good at protecting her privacy that she'd failed to create a life. And the problem was that once she'd grown accustomed to hiding, it was hard to live any

other way. Janine looked at Ms. Louie and blocked out the other students.

"I came here to learn. It's a level-one class. If drawing skills were a prerequisite, it should have said so in the course description."

"It was implied."

"It wasn't."

"Ms. Kessler—"

"Raw talent isn't everything, right? You can't teach someone to be funny, but you can teach someone to draw," she heard herself say, echoing her father.

"That's very true, Ms. Kessler. But you must be able to express your humor in visual terms if this is what you want to do, so some natural ability is an advantage and if it's not there, well . . ."

"But a unique worldview is most important," Segun said, coming to her rescue. "Look at John Callahan. He wasn't a trained artist but he was very successful."

"I'm not sure Ms. Kessler shares Callahan's colorful personal history but I do appreciate the point."

Absurdly, Janine raised her hand. "I'm an aging former child actress who's about three minutes away from being a complete shut-in. I've got two decades of therapy behind me, I subsist on a steady diet of pharmaceuticals, and I have a stint at a mental facility under my belt. My history is colorful."

There was nervous laughter; nobody knew if she was joking.

Janine thought of tossing in her mother's suicide too but she'd always disliked watching that shock register. The compulsion to voice the matter pragmatically, effectively punishing people for asking too many questions, wasn't worth the trouble of having to assure them afterward that she was "fine." Anyway, it was obvious she wasn't fine. She'd never been fine after the show. Her father had been right.

"Is there anyone other than Ms. Kessler interested in text comics?"

"I am," Kayla said, smiling at Janine.

"Let's see what you've got, then," Ms. Louie said.

Janine made herself look beyond Kayla's well-sketched drawing to the joke below. It was forced and unoriginal. "You can't teach funny," she heard her dad say again. Nobody was looking at her anymore. They had moved on to Corey, who was talking about his interest in storyboarding for short films. Her secrets were out. She was an unhinged former child star and an aspiring cartoonist who couldn't draw. What could be worse?

Calling her dad to ask for the money to pay for the class—that could be worse, Janine realized the next morning. She'd been up half the night worrying about the overdue credit card bill sitting on her kitchen counter since before Christmas. She'd put the six hundred dollars for the cartooning class on the card in November, figuring she'd deal with it later. Now it was later. She'd have to ask her father to send her the money. She could see no way around it.

Even with the monthly allowance her father sent her and her royalty payments, she had to live frugally. And there were times, like now, when cat-sitting for people in her building and teaching English as a second language didn't cover expenses. She'd initially thought about using her father's Visa to pay for the class, but it seemed that Gail, his girlfriend, was now combing through his credit card statements and highlighting anything she considered excessive. Gail had called Janine just last month wanting to know what *MTA* stood for after Janine had used his Visa to buy a *twenty-dollar* subway card. Janine had been mortified. Her father had always been happy to help in the past. His mantra had been "I'm your father. Tell me what you need." But Janine wasn't able to escape the shame that came with taking his money at her age. Whenever she called to apologize for having used his card, he'd stop her and say, "That's what it's there for. If I didn't want you to use it, I wouldn't have given it to you." With Gail, all that was changing.

"Fuck it," she said to herself. She grabbed the phone and dialed her dad.

Gail picked up. She'd taken to answering Marty's phone lately, making sure he was never available when Janine called. "He's sleeping, sweetie. You're up early."

"Busy day."

"Really?" Gail asked with an astute incredulity that made Janine hot with anger. "What's on the schedule?"

"Just stuff." She knew that swimming laps, going to therapy, and buying Col-Erase pencils for the cartooning class wouldn't constitute *busy* by most people's standards. Not that Gail was in any position to judge her. "Is it that hard to imagine I have things to do?" Janine laughed, failing to sound invulnerable.

"Of course not. I was just curious about what you were up to."

Janine knew exactly what Gail was curious about. She was curious about why her boyfriend's middle-aged daughter didn't have a job or at least a husband and maybe children who could justify her unemployment. It was a reasonable question but the answer was complicated and Janine wasn't about to get into it. However, she did need the six hundred dollars, and apparently she'd have to ask Gail.

"Mmm. Do you know how to type?" Gail asked once Janine had explained the situation.

"Type?" Janine laughed. "I'm gonna be a secretary?"

"You can be a personal assistant," she suggested. "There's always a demand for that kind of work."

"I'm forty-one years old and not exactly equipped to take care of someone else's business affairs." *You go be someone's secretary, you mercenary bitch*, she thought.

Janine had initially imagined that Gail might be good for her dad. She was a longtime family friend, *almost* age-appropriate, smarter than she was attractive, and comfortably well off following the death of her second husband, Bob Engler, a few years earlier. Only once Gail and her father had become an item did Janine realize that Gail had married Bob Engler *after* his first round of chemotherapy and had, as she told anyone who'd listen, "taken care of him for years"

when “nobody else” (meaning his son) was available. “It’s not like Bob had dementia,” she would explain when forced to confront the raised eyebrows at her having inherited so much after a relatively short marriage.

“Cartooning just seems so . . . specific,” Gail continued.

“I guess.”

“What about nursing or teaching?”

The conversation was like the lowest points in therapy, a humiliating analysis of Janine’s limitations that made her want to evaporate. It would take her eight years to get her teaching credentials or qualify for a nursing degree. She’d be in her fifties before anyone would even let her change a colostomy bag.

At least she wasn’t like so many of her friends from the studio days. Seraphina was on *Celebrity Fit Club*. Both Tom and Noel had been on *Celebrity Rehab* and *Survivor*. The rest had overdosed or gotten multiple DUIs or become porn stars; a few had done all three. She’d rather be dead than humiliate her father like that. Once she’d tried to get a job selling makeup at Bergdorf Goodman but the flamboyant queen with the bad eyelift behind the counter had flipped out when he saw her name on the application. He’d made such a scene that Janine stayed home for five days afterward.

“There’s always real estate,” Gail suggested.

“I don’t want to be a real estate agent,” Janine snapped. She started crying, hating herself for letting Gail burrow under her skin.

“Janine,” Gail said. “What did I say? I’m so sorry, honey. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Janine didn’t think anything Gail did was accidental. The woman scheduled her dinner parties based on the post-op recovery time from her sundry plastic surgeries.

“Let me talk to your father,” Gail whispered in a conspiratorial tone. As if Janine needed Gail to ask her father for permission. As if Janine couldn’t speak to her dad directly. As if Gail were the new sentry.

There's a Word for That

The next day Gail left a message on Janine's machine. "It's all taken care of, honey. The money was wired over this morning with a little bit extra. Go buy yourself something nice from us."

"Us?" Janine said out loud, even though she was alone. She deleted the message and looked out the window. Fuck, Gail was the new sentry.