You're Not from Around Here, Are You?

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It’s Just So Hard to Get to Brooklyn
A month after my novel came out, the press was sold. “We’ve all been fired,” my editor told me flatly.

“You have?” I said dumbly. “That’s terrible.” I chased the concept around in my mind for a while, like chasing dust mice in a breeze. The press had been sold. But what did that mean? What about my book, my contract, my next-book clause? Never mind that all those nice young women were losing their jobs. What about me? “Who bought it?” I asked.

Karen paused. “The guys who run the Advocate,” she snarled. Her tone dripped venom. She might as well have been telling me it had been purchased by right-wing fundamentalists as by the owners of the largest commercial gay men’s magazine in the country.


After I hung up the phone, I sat there for a moment, staring at the receiver. Just a few moments before I’d been so happy, so full of hope for my future. Now the skies had clouded over again, threatening to dump more rain all over my head. Alyson Publications had been sold. I pictured my novel gracing the shelves of bookstores everywhere, and the long tentacles of the Advocate guys reaching out to pull them all back. I shook my head. What was this, anyway? My press had been sold, my editors fired, my job stuck in limbo somewhere in the tenure review process. When would I have some measure of success that I could just enjoy, instead of having to worry every moment that it might be snatched away from me? Inside me, Zoe kicked as if on cue. I touched my belly, softly, tenderly. At least this was still happening, at least one aspect of my life was still going on, untouched by the bureaucratic comings and goings of the business world.

Birds chirped merrily, impervious to the sinking feeling in my chest. A robin pecked beneath the window, its beak full of grass and straw, gathering materials for its nest. It paused for a moment and looked right at me, its beady little eyes on mine. We watched each other for a moment. I wondered if it was male or female. The
bird flapped its wings, gazing at me as if it had some questions of its own. I wondered where birds went to sleep, if they had nests only for their young. I pictured her eggs cuddled together deep in the nest this bird was building, gestating silently until the first beak came forth, pecking its way through the fine shell of its outer atmosphere, opening its mouth for food. It would know exactly what to do in a way that my baby never would. From what I’d read, Zoe wouldn’t even know how to latch onto my breasts in the beginning. I ran my hand across my stomach, waiting for her kick. We were born without instincts, forced to learn everything from scratch. If left to our own, alone, there was no point at which we wouldn’t die. The robin blinked, lifted its wings, and flew away, the straw trailing from its beak. I watched it go, one hand on my stomach, watched it fly off to a life where certain things were guaranteed, like the sure and present knowledge of how to stay alive, a guarantee that we would never have, at any moment in our time on earth.

“I don’t know what to do about your reading,” my sister said, calling me from Yonkers the day before Mother’s Day, the last Mother’s Day that I wouldn’t be celebrating. I was scheduled to read in Brooklyn the next week, in a lesbian bookstore called A Room of Our Own.

“What about it?” I asked. I was surprised she’d called at all. We talked to each other only every couple of years and even then only out of some obligation to remember that we had, after all, sprung from the same gene pool. I still harbored the secret conviction that I’d been adopted somehow, that surely I had a more exotic set of parents somewhere else, people whose lifestyles and philosophies would instantly make sense of me, clarify my existence in the world in a way that my supposed family never seemed able to.

“Well, Mom’s coming that weekend, and I don’t know whether we should both come, or I should just come, or neither of us should come,” my sister said.

I didn’t say anything. My mouth had gone dry from the mere possibility of their coming.

“It’s in Brooklyn, after all,” my sister said, as if I had asked her to travel to the Persian Gulf.

“Well,” I mumbled noncommittally.

“Mom read some of your book,” my sister said.
“Oh?” I said, swallowing with difficulty. Something sharp and rough seemed to be growing in my throat, sending its roots deep into the flesh.

“She was horrified by the descriptions of Dad,” Nancy said.

But it isn’t Dad, I wanted to say, it’s a novel, he’s a character, but the words just wouldn’t come. My larynx had been immobilized. Besides, of course it was Dad. Nobody who knew the man could deny it.

“It’s just so hard to get to Brooklyn,” my sister said. Her tone was severe, the implication that it was somehow my fault that Brooklyn lay so far away, several subway trains from where she lived.

After I hung up, I could feel an emptiness deep inside me, a hollow place where my family should have been. Why did I care? What gave them such power, this group of people who ultimately had so little to do with me? And yet they did matter. I wondered how much of my life had been spent chasing after them, tugging at their hems and sleeves, fighting for their notice.

My mother’s voice on the phone was bright and cheery. “Do you want to get together before or after the reading?” she asked.

My heart stopped. She was coming? I thought they weren’t coming. “I thought you weren’t coming,” I said faintly.

“Don’t you want me to come?” she asked.

I closed my eyes, pictured her face, that line between her eyes that always seemed to be there when she looked at me, as if I were some foreign image she couldn’t quite make out, couldn’t begin to understand.

“I won’t come if it will make you nervous,” she said.

I opened my eyes. The sun streamed through the window, illuminating the room, our profusion of spider plants, the yellow paint on the walls. She was already reading the book. I had no more secrets. She would know everything there was to know about me. She knew what she was getting into. The worst was already happening. “It won’t make me nervous,” I said. And in that moment I felt absolutely sure.

“It won’t make you nervous?” Connie asked me, her eyes narrowed in disbelief. We sat at the kitchen table, poring over the map of New York City we’d gotten from AAA, so dense with streets their names were indiscernible.

I shrugged. Inside me something flipped. I suspected it was my stomach knotting in fear, not Zoe ambling around the confines of my womb, checking out what was for dinner.
“How are we going to find this place?” Connie asked, peering at the map.

I shook my head. I’d called the woman at whose apartment we were staying to see if she could tell us but had no luck.

“In a car?” the woman had said dubiously. I might have been asking her for the best place to land a private jet. “Gee, I don’t know,” she’d said. “I’ve never driven a car.”

“We’ll find it,” I told Connie, wishing I felt more sure of myself. Everything about this trip was making me nervous. That moment of epiphany I’d experienced with my mother had dissolved like Alka Seltzer, without the accompanying sense of relief. The woman had sounded a little disorganized on the phone, but surely that didn’t matter. I didn’t care, as long as her apartment was clean.

“Let’s order a pizza,” I said. I was starved and suddenly gaining much more weight than I was supposed to. I thought about my mother. Weight gain was the last thing I had to worry about. I looked at Connie. “Pepperoni and double cheese?” I asked.

“Nancy says there’s a train we can take to Brooklyn,” my mother informed me in a call later that night.

“A subway train,” I said.

“Oh, no,” my mother said. “I won’t ride a subway. Nancy says there’s a train.”

“That’s what she means,” I said. “A subway.”

There was a slight pause. I glanced at Connie and shrugged. My back ached. I’d had Dr. Gordon, who doubled, thank the lord, as an osteopath, crack it during my last prenatal, but it still ached. Every now and then I felt something akin to mild menstrual cramps. I tried to ignore the fact that both were listed as symptoms of premature labor in my ever pessimistic pregnancy book. “As many as 40 percent of all premature babies are born to women who were thought to be at ‘low risk’ for early labor,” it scolded, presenting expectant mothers with a list of signs to watch for. I’d memorized it at first glance, in a way I’d never managed to memorize important facts before exams.

“Oh, I don’t know,” my mother said. “I don’t know if we’ll come or not.”

“Well,” I said, feeling a twinge of irritation, “whatever.”

“Couldn’t they take a taxi?” Connie asked when I’d hung up the phone.

I shrugged. Taking taxis just wasn’t something my family did. It was akin to charging something on your credit card and then pay-
It’s Just So Hard to Get to Brooklyn

It’s just so hard to get to Brooklyn, and still hid from my mother. We’d practically charged the down payment on the house, had contemplated quietly taking $500 cash advances and squirreling them away in our savings account. This was not something I’d shared with my parents.

“They won’t come,” Connie said.

I nodded. She was right. They weren’t going to come. As I got ready for bed, I tried to feel relieved, but all I felt was a mild regret, so faint that if I tried I could almost pretend it wasn’t there.

All night I lay awake, trying to lie still, to keep from waking Connie. The small of my back ached, making every position uncomfortable. Zoe did so many back flips I thought she must have turned into a dolphin. I tried to breathe. It was hard enough for me to breathe normally when I was afraid, but now my lungs were so compressed by my swelling uterus that I was eternally short of breath.

My mother might come to my reading. My mother wanted to hear me read. The very prospect of it struck fear into my heart. I’d been writing all my life. My mother had never asked to see anything I’d written, though on occasion, beside myself with joy or doubt, I would show her things. She read them all with the same expression, the same quizzical line between her eyebrows. “I don’t understand why you wrote this,” she would say. I rolled over and tucked a pillow beneath my stomach, trying to ease its pull on my back.

I never knew how to explain. Why did I write? My mother was the one who’d started me off on telling stories. She used to hold me on her lap, and I would name three things for her to tell a story from. After a while she named the three things, and I told the story. I had written them down since the very first moment that I learned how to print in Mrs. Fisher’s first-grade class, when the simple movement of the pencil on the page had brought the whole world into focus. My favorite place, other than the woods behind our house, had been the public library. I’d carried around two books at a time, so that I could start one the moment I finished the last. In all the time I’d lived with them, I didn’t remember ever having seen anyone else in my family even pick up a book. My brother would stomp through the room where I sat curled in a chair reading. “I don’t see where some people get all this time to sit around,” he’d say on his way to cut down some tree, clear some trail in the woods. I used to sneak up to my room and do my reading and writing where nobody
could see. My mother had never approved. “Don’t you want to spend time with your family?” she would ask me.

The truth was, I never did.

My back ached. I readjusted my pillow and touched my belly, firm as a metal casing around my baby. Every morning she was a little bigger, stretching and growing through her seven months of life. According to the books, consciousness began now. If hypnotized, people could remember back to their seventh month in utero. She could make out light beyond the confines of my womb. She was a constant presence in the center of my belly, pulling me forward. If my mother came to hear me read, three generations of us would be in the room, three generations of women, from one whose history had already been written to one whose slate was still clean. I slid my palm across my stomach and caressed my daughter’s home. I wondered whether she would be listening too.

My mother wanted to hear me read. Connie shifted in sleep, her face at rest, her features composed. Her breath was deep and even, her sleep a state I could never get to anymore. A thrill of excitement rippled through my body. My mother had never seen me in my element before, in front of a roomful of people, giving voice to my words. I pushed off the blankets and looked at my body in the quiet moonlight of the room. It was long and still and full of my baby. It resembled those snakes we used to study in school, boa constrictors who had swallowed an egg, whole.

Zoe stirred and shifted her weight the same way Connie did. A part of her protruded from one side of my abdomen, faintly visible in the moonlight that filtered through the blinds. A foot? A hand? The smooth curve of her rump as she snuggled into me? What would she do that I would not understand? What ways would I look at her that would strike terror into her heart, make her lose her voice in fear?

I took a deep breath and turned to my side, closed my eyes. The truth was I wanted my mother there. I wanted her to see me read. She was the one who’d started this, the one who’d turned me on to storytelling. I wanted her to see me, pregnant, take my place at the podium, open my book in my hands, and give my voice to the things that I had written. I wanted to read, to my mother and to my daughter, to let them in on who I was, the woman I had become.
“Where the hell are we?” Connie asked, peering through the windshield. “This can’t be right.”

I glanced uneasily out the passenger window. This part of Brooklyn looked like a war zone. Trash littered the streets; dog shit and broken bottles lined the sidewalks. Connie pulled the car over to the curb. We both studied the address on the building. This was it. We were in the right place. This was the apartment where they were putting us up. We looked at each other for a moment. “I don’t know,” I said, peering up at the building.

Connie turned off the engine. “Let’s check it out,” she said.

Climbing the four flights of stairs to the apartment, I could feel my courage waning. The stairwell smelled strongly of roach powder. I put one hand on my belly protectively. What had we been thinking of, bringing a baby to a place like this? I sorted through the keys we’d picked up from the woman at the bookstore and unlocked the door. The smell of oil-based paint hit me like a toxic explosion. Connie and I exchanged a look. The woman had said she was an artist. I remembered that now, belatedly. Canvases dotted the wall, splattered with what looked like a spray of noodles, painted brown and affixed with some kind of industrial strength glue. Plastic stars stuck to the ceiling above the bed. An array of dil­dos covered the wall, grimy with dust. Connie peeled back the bedspread, gingerly. “The sheets are dirty,” she said. Her voice sounded thin, as if she were speaking from a high elevation. The fumes were stifling. From the street we could hear shouting, the sound of glass breaking.

“I wonder if that’s our car,” I said. I lacked the energy to go to the window and check.

Connie stepped into the kitchen. “I think there’s an iguana on the refrigerator,” she said.

I nodded. “She said it eats the roaches.” We both looked away at the same moment, uneasily. I made a mental note not to open any cupboard doors too suddenly.

Connie glanced at her watch. “We have an hour before the reading,” she said. “Do you want to shower?”

I glanced into the bathroom, lifted the shower curtain a little. Grime lined the tub. The grout was black. The toilet smelled. “I don’t even want to pee in there,” I said.

We looked at each other. The paint fumes were suffocating. I wondered if any were making their way through my uterus, into Zoe’s little forming lungs. “Let’s get out of here,” I said.
The bookstore was empty when we got there. “Well, there’s a softball game tonight,” the woman at the register told me.

Oh, great, I thought, surveying the empty chairs. My first reading at a lesbian bookstore and I’m competing with a softball game? No self-respecting dyke was going to come hear me!

Fifteen people attended the reading. I took a deep breath to quell the nervousness and began to read. I knew these passages backward and forward. The words rolled off my tongue, all the right pauses, perfect delivery. I could have been reading to an auditorium. Despite myself, I kept watching the door. At any moment my mother might walk in, take her seat in the audience, and listen to what I had to say.

She never did. It was the best reading I’d given, and my mother never came to hear it. When I was done, I closed the book and took a sip of water, then talked to the women present for at least another hour. We talked about our families. We talked about our silent fathers. I tried not to watch the door. I imagined my mother coming in late, breathless with her haste, full of apologies for not having made it sooner, not having gotten there in time to hear her beloved daughter read aloud. I sighed and looked around for a chair, imagined going back to that dirty futon on the floor, leaving the light on to scare away the roaches. I wondered how long it would take me to finish paying the dues of being an unestablished writer.