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*Elyse
Friedman*
The
Answer
to
Everything
A NOVEL



**THE
ANSWER
TO
EVERYTHING**

ELYSE FRIEDMAN

PATRICK CREAN EDITIONS

 HarperCollins e-books

Dedication

To Daphne Floros and Max Friedman-Cole

Table of Contents

Dedication

Griffin

PART I

John

Eldrich

Amy

John

Amy

Eldrich

John

Amy

Eldrich

John

Amy

John

Eldrich

Amy

John

Eldrich

Amy

John

Eldrich

John

Amy

John

Amy

Heather

Keith

Anne-Marie

Ibrahim

Drew

Ibrahim

Heather

Tyson

Catelyn

Wayne

Marina

John

Amy

Heather

Eldrich

Griffin

PART II

John

Eldrich

Amy

John

Amy

John

Amy

Steve

Eldrich

John

Amy

John

Amy

Eldrich

John

Amy

Eldrich

John

Eldrich

Amy

John

Eldrich

Amy

Eldrich

John

Amy

Eldrich

John

Amy

John

Amy

John

Eldrich

Amy

Griffin

PART III

Griffin

PART IV

Amy

John

Eldrich

Amy

John

Eldrich

Amy

John

Griffin

Acknowledgements

About the Author

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *THE ANSWER TO EVERYTHING*

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[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

I needed a story. Something local, but juicy. And more than just newsworthy. I was holding out for a gasp-worthy.

And I found it. Or rather, it found me. Yup, your humble J-school grad was pretty much handed a tale that had it all: sex and drugs (not the regular kinds), multiple deaths (untimely, natch), rich folks and rituals and loads o' lawsuits—even a celebrity cherry on top.

My newbie journo peers might be settling for three inches of coyotes in the subway, some septuagenarian's weightlifting regime or a bucket of campylobacter in the church supper salad, but I was planning to debut large and with oomph.

The story was mine.

I just had to figure out how to tell it.

PART I

John

Why? That's what they keep asking me. As if it matters, as if *why* changes anything. I don't respond when they ask that. I don't say a word. I'm taking a page from Eldrich. *Don't you care about those individuals, Mr. Aarons? Don't you feel responsible?* I feel sad, I say. It's too bad, I say. All those people.

Answer me this: If a fool steers their Carrera into oncoming traffic, is Porsche responsible? Jägermeister responsible for the frat boy frozen in the snowbank? You make a product available. You can't be held accountable for how it gets used. Farmer Jones grew a lovely fat zucchini. Does that make him responsible for some idiot's perforated emergency-room rectum?

The world is full of humans, some of them good, most of them rotten (or rotten under the right circumstances). There are approximately 360,000 new ones each day. Plenty to go around, if you ask me. A very successful virus, if you'd like to know what I really think. Seven billion parasites, blindly, almost gleefully, defiling their host.

But back to the why of it all. I can't speak for others. I was out of the Institute at the end (luckily according to the attorneys). I can't say why Eldrich did what he did. It was definitely counterproductive. Mystifying. Absurd. But I stopped understanding Eldrich a long time ago. I have no idea why those people chose the path they chose. I suppose that on a case-by-case basis I could formulate theories—this one's alky father/harelip/abortion, that one's war-torn native land ...

As for Amy, well, I'll keep my opinions to myself for now. When it comes to the big why—why I started it all in the first place—I've been advised not to say anything just yet. When I am obliged to speak, I'm going to state plainly that I was trying to help people—that I wanted to connect with fellow Seekers who were curious about more than Brad Pitt's offspring or how much the markets had risen or fallen on any particular day. That's what I plan to say. I'm going to raise my right hand and swear an oath on the bible and say something just like that. It won't hurt that Eldrich believes me, and that Amy will claim she does. It's not like she can admit otherwise. So I'm confident I'll be in the clear.

Here's what I'm not going to do. I am not going to tell that old joke about the dog. Do you know it? Question: *Why does a dog lick his balls?* Answer: *Because he can.*

Eldrich

I knew from the beginning. I've always known, in the marrow of the marrow of my bones. God is Grand. Great. Mysterious. A beautiful Rorschach of happiness for all humankind. If you open yourself to the light, you will receive it. Think of a flower blooming in time-lapse. Think of a fist relaxing and turning, making itself ready to accept.

God first visited me in the form of a bumblebee. Heavy yellow. A warm buzz in the mouth. It is my earliest memory. My mother told it always like this: *It was a humid afternoon and we were out in the yard. We didn't have air conditioning back then. Eldrich was about two and a half. He was playing in the sprinkler with a couple of neighbourhood kids—Sergio and Anthony from next door, and Patricia who I used to babysit. Anyway, Eldrich toddled off, wandered into the garden and just plopped himself down in the middle of the daisies. I was going to fish him out, when I saw him pick up a bumblebee—I just scooped it right up and popped it in his mouth! I almost died! You know his father was allergic to bees? I screamed and went for him, but before I could get there his little mouth opened and the bee just flew out. It kind of bounced off a couple of flowers, and then lifted up and away. It didn't even sting him. And it was huge. The biggest bee I've ever seen! I just grabbed Eldrich and held him. I swear I almost died.*

Here's what I remember: everything is yellow and bright and shiny. The world vibrates with color and shine. It's like a cartoon, but more vivid. You know when sun sparkles in blue pool water? The whole world was like that. Undulating and connected. Jell-O world. Illuminated from behind. God finds me in it. God feels that I am special. I am happy. I am happier than I have ever been. I open myself up, get the yellow inside me. The buzz of life in my mouth. Now I'm being lifted and twirled. It's Mother. It's sky. It's Mother. Sky. It's blue blue and white cloud.

My first real taste.

Amy

If it hadn't been for inconsiderate slob in the laundry room, none of this would have happened. If it hadn't been for brown eyes and curly hair and the initial irresistibility of a certain acerbic asshole ...

The first time I saw John Aarons was in a photograph. The Fine Arts Department was having its year-end exhibit, and I had wandered in to check it out on my lunch break. Visual Arts had taken over the Janine & Jeremy Goldstein Hall with a combination painting, drawing and photography show. Most of the stuff was crap—clunky or derivative. There were maybe a few items that fell into the technically-competent-but-totally-uninspired category. And then his installation, the only thing that showed any originality at all.

According to the artist's statement, he'd been working on it since the idea came to him when he was thirteen years old, on vacation with his parents. It was a series of photographs of people taking photographs of people in front of the world's most famous landmarks and tourist sites. He had taken hundreds of pictures of people taking pictures of people in front of Niagara Falls, the Hoover Dam, the Golden Gate Bridge and many other familiar spots. He claimed to have worked an entire year on a paper route in order to save enough money to fly to Egypt to take photos of people taking photos of people in front of the pyramids. I thought it was interesting. In a simple way it seemed to say a lot about our relationship with awe and mystery. And it was fascinating to see how sometimes the landmark in the background seemed cheapened by the tourists posing in front of it, and how sometimes the dignity and power of the thing seemed magnified. I thought it was pretty great, especially for a student piece. It was the only exhibit I lingered in front of and the only artist statement I made it all the way through that day—a straightforward description of the project, mercifully free of art speak. There was a small portrait at the bottom, a selfie that showed a cute young guy with a sly smile—eyes hidden behind vintage Ray-Bans.

It was taken in front of the Sphinx.

Come
Come to me now
And rest
You are tired
So tired
A bird with no shore
A wheel turning and turning
Your struggle has not been worthwhile
But it will be worthwhile
The fruit can be yours
But you must first plant the seed
Come to me now
Begin

theanswertoeverything.org

John

“To live without meaning is the greatest challenge and the highest art.” Who said that? Was it Sartre or Spinoza? Whoever dreamed it up, I think he may have been mistaken. I’ve had no trouble living without meaning. Living without money, on the other hand, has tested my mettle over the years. I am a resourceful type, though, and have always managed to fill my belly.

Art openings were a good bet. The fancier the gallery, the finer the spread. But even tiny joints on Queen Street would cube up some Costco cheddar and dump a box of Triscuits on a plate. You ingest a pound of cheese, it’ll carry you through to the next morning. Book launches were also a solid source of nutrition and absurdly frequent—at least three a week once you got on the right mailing lists. You sometimes had to endure live readings by obscure/windy authors, but if you timed it right, not so much. I once dined modestly for several days on foodstuffs pilfered from a buffet table in the Reference Library during the Toronto Book Awards ceremony. While the crowd listened to our deputy mayor intone on matters civic, I filled my ironic, 100 percent plastic “Ceci n’est pas une plastic bag” bag with a half-tray of vegetarian sushi, a monstrous brie wedge and enough fresh broccoli florets to steam for dinner that night (thank you, authors who set their stories in Toronto).

In the afternoon, I often sampled my way through Whole Foods—a few grapes or cherries here, a handful or three of bulk cashews there. Customer Appreciation Day at the various big banks or Senior Day at the drugstore yielded coffee and cake or cookies. I’ll never forget this one grey granny giving me the hairy eyeball and waving a palsied digit in reprimand as I sword-swallowed a row of Arrowroot biscuits by the blood pressure monitor.

Open houses were reliably fruitful. While the real estate–mad inhabitants of Toronto checked out the coffered ceilings, front-loading washer-dryer and other features and finishes, I was checking out (and helping myself to) the contents of the stainless-steel refrigerator.

In summer, I ate locally and organically, harvesting veggie riches from various backyard and community gardens. And I found the rooftop bar at the Park Hyatt to be a very pleasant place. They served trays of premium toasted almonds, spicy olives and dried plantain, which you could inhale while waiting for your elusive friend, who never arrived. I’d use that tactic at restaurants too, downing a basket of bread and butter or, if I was lucky, humus, while repeatedly checking my watch and glancing anxiously at the door whenever somebody entered. When the carbs had been consumed, you would receive a call on my cell phone (my ex’s, defunct, battery dead) indicating some kind of emergency and quickly mutter my harried apologies to the server as I swept past and out. When that else failed I invoked the old standby of inviting a flush friend out for a meal, dropping hints of impecuniousness during the repast and then high-tailing it to the bathroom as the cheque arrived.

Yes, there was an art to finding food and staying nourished. And I had no trouble mastering it. Rent, on the other hand, was a whole other matter.

Amy

The first time I saw John Aarons in the flesh was about five months after finding the exhibit in the Fine Arts Department. I was pretty sure it was him. He audited one of the classes I was in, a lecture on group influence and persuasion. I recognized the curly hair and the square jaw and the sly smile—he smiled a lot during the class and doodled spirographically on his white Converse sneakers while the rest of us took notes.

A week later, he turned up for Memory and Cognition. He was wearing a T-shirt that had “Eat More Cake” written on the front, and baby-blue, cockroach-killer cowboy boots. I tried to find him in the halls after class, but he had bolted. I started casually looking for him in the Arts wing. I’d eat lunch over there or take the long way to the bus stop, but I never ran into him.

Around that time I started sleeping with Ryan, my Statistics TA, and forgot about John for a while. Still, at the end of the year I made a point of attending the big Fine Arts exhibit opening-night party. He wasn’t there and had nothing on display. I asked one of the profs, and she said he had dropped out halfway through the year—she seemed kind of drunk, and when pressed, let it slip that it had something to do with a series of bounced tuition cheques. I’m not quite sure why, but this piqued my interest in him more; maybe because I was bored and done with Ryan at that point. I Googled his name but got nothing relevant. There was no sign of him on Twitter/Vine/Vimeo, and while there was one “John Aarons” on Facebook, the listing was inactive—no profile picture and no Facebook friends. I figured I had seen the last of him.

If only!

Eldrich

I liked to watch the girls play. Philomena, Debbie, Gabriella, Jane. They lived on my street, and I would watch them do their hopscotch and gymnastics and skipping. I would watch them act out scenes with their Barbie dolls. They would fill a Tupperware container with water and the Barbies would have a pool party. Sometimes the girls played a game where they'd hold hands and dance around in a circle singing a chant about flowers: *Apple blossom, almond blossom, fuchsia and azalea ...*

One day a new girl came to play. Her name was Nikita. She was six years old but at least half a foot taller than the other girls who were the same age. She had a big head, a long neck and the skinniest legs I'd ever seen. Like a newborn colt's legs, barely able to support the weight of the body. Nikita did gymnastics with the others and everything seemed all right, but when the girls started to form a circle for the flower chant, she began to cry. She was on the sidewalk, sobbing, while the other girls stood in a circle on the lawn.

"What's going on?" I said. I was ten years old and bigger than them.

"They won't let me play," said Nikita.

"Why won't you let her play?" I asked the others.

Debbie said her parents told her not to touch black people. Philomena said her parents told her black people were bad.

"It's not true," I said. "Your parents are wrong."

The girls were shocked to hear this. Parents could be wrong?

"They're wrong," I said. "Nikita's skin is just a different colour than yours. How would you feel if the other girls wouldn't let you play because you had green eyes?" I asked Philomena. "How would you feel," I asked Debbie, "if the other girls wouldn't let you play because of that large brown mole on your shin?"

I brought Nikita into the circle. The girls joined hands and started doing the flower chant. They were instantly happy and smiling again. Just like that, every one of them having perfect afternoon fun. I stood in the centre of the circle and watched them. *Apple blossom, almond blossom, fuchsia and azalea ... baby's breath and hollyhock, gardenia and camellia ...* Faster and faster they went, chanting the names of the beautiful flowers—smiling faces spinning around me, faster and faster, an orbit of pretty—until they collapsed on the grass, all laughing and tangled, a kaleidoscope of happiness and relief.

I learned something that day. I learned that people sometimes need guidance. A small nudge in the direction of holy.

John

What ever happened to quiet desperation? All the bleating that goes on these days. I swear it makes my cochleas cringe.

When the ex turfed me out of our apartment (one that I'd found but had her fully employed, office worker name on the lease), I didn't write a memoir about it, I got busy trying to locate a place to live. I couldn't afford anything on my own, so I had to look for shared accommodation. As far as I was concerned, there were only two options for potential roommates—gay males or straight females. Individuals from either of these subsets were far more likely to clean up after themselves, and perhaps even after me if I was lucky. They would never use flags as curtains and wouldn't be slobbering around watching sports all the time, trying to engage me in conversations about baseball or hockey or the most mystifying of pursuits, football. They would consistently have food in the fridge, and quality food too—butter (possibly organic) and premium, not-from-concentrate orange juice. None of those hetero male tubs of margarine and jumbo jugs of SunnyD crapola. More important, if I was charming enough, they would likely share their food with me, or at the very least not give me hell for pinching a pot of coffee or a bowl of cereal now and again. Lesbians had good food too, but they tended toward vegetarianism (I need my meat) and usually chose female roommates. They were also savvy and wary and weren't likely to put up with my crap.

Anything over \$850 per month was out of the question. Anything north of Eglinton, west of High Park or east of Greenwood was out of the question. Any habitation with the owner living on-site or within a half-mile radius was out of the question.

It took about six days to find a handful of viable options and narrow the field to three candidates. There was Vickie, twenty-something, associate producer at CBC Radio, in a flat on the second floor of a house near Pape and Danforth. Good restaurants, shopping and subway nearby. Hardwood floors, dishwasher and a claw-footed tub that had recently been reglazed. Seven hundred and forty dollars per month plus half the cable. Not bad. No outdoor space, though. And Vickie was a very unattractive girl. On the one hand, this was a plus. Vickie would be less likely to bring home romantic partners, who would clutter up the space and use all the hot soaking-tub water. On the other hand, ugly Vickie might be at home every night, filling the couch with methane and dust mites, watching *Long Island Medium* or *Cake Boss* marathons on TLC. Vickie clearly wasn't comfortable in her own, alarmingly oily, skin. The day I toured the apartment she wore a voluminous sweatshirt in an effort to hide her protruding belly and watermelon breasts. Because of my interest in social psychology, I knew that recent studies had shown that low self-esteem inhibits generosity and helpful behaviour. I required a generous and helpful roommate.

There was handsome Hal, an affable, twenty-something gay man who had a small, well-appointed condo to share on Hayden Street. The location was great, and the suite was decorated tastefully—a creamy natural colours, and framed black-and-white photos. Pretty pricey, though, at \$850 per month. It did have a Juliet balcony, so one could at least step outside and taste the air, but the available bedroom was tiny and so narrow as to feel coffin-like. Hal seemed like a decent sort, but he was an actor, which meant he didn't have regular hours outside the home. It also meant that he wanted the whole world to love him, and only felt truly real when he was the centre of attention, preferably with a camera pointed at his professionally whitened teeth. He would always be “on,” which could be

annoying and emotionally exhausting. His grooming sessions in the bathroom would run long, and he'd probably want to host an annual Oscar party in what I would quickly come to consider *my* living room.

Finally, there was Amy, a university student in a mid-century high-rise just west of Yonge between St. Clair and Davisville. The area was a bit yuppie for my liking, and dull, but the space itself was good—a twelfth-floor penthouse apartment with an open and airy living room/dining room and two large bedrooms, either of which could easily accommodate a king-size bed, dresser and desk. The kitchen was substandard, an absurdly narrow galley affair that would not have looked out of place on a U-boat, but at least the midget-size fridge and stove were relatively new. The most astonishing feature of the apartment was its private rooftop patio, not attached to Amy's corner suite but adjacent to it and accessible through a door in the building's stairwell at the top landing. The thing was colossal. It ran the depth of the building and was at least thirty feet across. It could have easily served as the outdoor space for the entire population of the high-rise, but for some reason it belonged to Amy's apartment alone, even though she already had a regular balcony off her living room. There was a tiny window next to the locked steel entrance door to the roof, just big enough for the rest of the saps in the building to press their noses against and see what they were missing. This exclusive enclave appealed to me enormously, and I had visions of reclining in the sun on one of Amy's blue-and-white-striped cushioned lounge chairs, while she, bikini-clad and straw-hatted, barbecued our dinner and, as the lamb burgers were cooking, refreshed my gin and tonics or applied coconut-scented sunscreen to the less hirsute portions of my dorsal vertebrae.

Amy was a good-looking girl. Not my type, but objectively attractive. I like soft, round, dark-haired women with some thigh and ass. Brown eyes and olive flesh, if we're talking made-to-order. Amy was tall and bony and blue-eyed. She had close-cropped orange hair and the palest skin I'd ever seen. Her cheeks were perpetually flushed, and the effect of the pink on the white of her skin with those blue eyes and the orange hair was startling. She looked like a Victorian doll that had got its hair chopped off by the owner's naughty brother. I didn't want to fuck her, but I wanted to keep looking at her. I wanted to photograph her.

In many ways it seemed like a no-brainer to opt for Amy as a roommate over Vickie or Hal, but one thing that gave me pause was how enthusiastically she was pushing the apartment. She seemed just a little too anxious to have me move in, which made me suspicious. The rent was already very reasonable—\$640 per month—and when I asked about cable and phone expenses, she volunteered to take care of the costs, provided I didn't make any long-distance calls that weren't covered by her plan. She didn't appear to mind that I could give her only first month's rent, or that I didn't have an actual employer. And while I didn't know her from a hole in a squirrel's ass, and had no behaviour to compare it to, I sensed that she was behaving unusually nervous and giggly. I'm no beast, but I'm not enough of a stud to provoke blushes and stammers from women. There was something off about it. I told her I'd get back to her.

As I was leaving her apartment, the guy who lived across the hall was leaving his. A sweet hashish smell wafted toward me. The dude was tall, at least six foot three, with shoulder-length locks. The only sign he wasn't in his twenties was the hairline, ebbing a bit on the deeply tanned forehead. He was shirtless and had a faded kaffiyeh draped around his neck. He was wearing sweatpants, Birkenstock sandals and pink, Janis Joplin-style sunglasses. He was actually leaving his home dressed like that. He grinned at me—a stoned-out, Muppetey grin—and I sensed in an instant that there could be a lot of gratis grass in my future.

Free pot, free cable, free North American long distance, a private rooftop patio and an easy-to-look

at roommate who would be around too much during the summer, but at school all day in the fall ... realized in the elevator as I watched my potential new neighbour put in his earbuds and begin headbopping to what I recognized as a Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan remix, that I hadn't asked Amy what she was studying. When I got down to the lobby, I buzzed up.

"Hello?"

"Hey Amy, it's John. Sorry to disturb you. It just occurred to me that I forgot to ask about the water pressure."

"Oh. I've never had any problems with it."

"Good. That's good."

"Do you want to come up and check it out?"

"No, no. I trust you. Thanks."

"OK. Just let me know."

"I will. Oh, and Amy, I also forgot to ask what you're studying at school."

A bit of crackle from the intercom, and then: "Does that matter?"

"No. Just curious."

"Psychology" came distorted through the speaker.

"Hmm," I said. "So the pressure's pretty good, huh?"

"It's phenomenal."

"OK, you know what? I think I'm going to go ahead and take the room, if that's all right with you."

"That's great," said Amy.

She buzzed me in.

Truth
What is it?
Where can it be found?
A sculptor knows that the finished piece resides
Fully formed in the unworked stone
The artist's mission is to find and reveal
The Truth within
So it is with us
Let us chip away the years of pain
That obscure and conceal
Let us work away the layers of
Personal and societal subterfuge
Let us discover
And reveal
The Beautiful Truth
Inside
You

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Amy

The next time I saw him was in a gallery on Spadina. I was off for Christmas break and I went to the K-Space Affordable Art sale, looking for nifty gifts. But even the so-called cheap art was out of my price range. I did score some stocking stuffers, though—white matchbooks with interesting bits of text stamped on them, like: *She was laughing on the outside but smiling wanly on the inside*. Fifty cents each. Not bad.

As I was leaving I heard sounds of a party down the corridor at the Wroblewski Gallery. It turned out to be the opening of a group show of electronic installation art, and front and centre was a piece by John Aarons. It was a Rube Goldberg-like contraption that had a box of photographs on one side and a clear glass container of liquid on the other. A robotic pincer picked up one of the photographs and conveyed it along a kind of ski-lift track to the front of the piece, where it was presented to the viewer. The gizmo featured a big black button labelled *SAVE*. If you pushed the button, the photograph moved back along a track and was deposited safely into a velvet-lined box. If you did nothing, the photograph inched along another track, dropped into the liquid—some kind of hydrochloric acid—and dissolved in a sizzle of chemicals.

These were not digital images that could easily be re-created; these were vintage, one-of-a-kind family photos that had been collected from estate sales and Goodwill. Once they were gone, they were gone forever. There was already a murky slime of dissolved humans and memories floating in the glass vessel.

I stood at the machine for a long time, pressing the big black button. Here comes a little boy in flannel pyjamas, playing with his train set in front of the Christmas tree. *Save*. Here comes a smiling young woman in a cloche hat and flapper coat, her hands in a muff. *Save*. Here are two stern-looking babies, twins I think, in matching frocks and bonnets. *Save*. Here comes an extended family, all dressed up and dapper in front of the Horseshoe Falls *circa* 1950-something. *Save*. I had trouble walking away from the device. And I resented it. It was an uncomfortable burden to have power over the fate of all those people. What was even more chilling was the feeling I had in the moment when I hesitated to push the black button. Why didn't I do it? Why did I let the old lady in the babushka and the housedress and the clunky, untied man shoes disappear? Why didn't I save her? And most disturbing of all, why did I feel a tiny fizz of satisfaction when she was dispatched to the acid bath? I moved off then, headed to the refreshment table and got myself a plastic goblet of wine, and then another, steadying my nerves and gathering the guts to find and confront him. I rehearsed the clever comments I would make about his installation, and the playful conversation that would follow.

I love your piece. And also hate it.

(Laughs.) *Thank you, I think.*

I mean it in a good way. I love that it's truly interactive, that it involves you on more than just a superficial button-pushing level. I just hate that it made me culpable.

Well, that's the point.

*It reminds me a bit of what Cronenberg achieved with *A History of Violence*, how he made the audience complicit with their blood-lust and desire for revenge.*

I never saw that.

Really? You should try to find it on iTunes or Netflix.

Maybe we could watch it together sometime?

~~By the time I had played out the scenario to my satisfaction, I had downed four cups of wine and was feeling both tipsy and jumpy. I scanned the room. There he was in the corner, talking to a woman with long, blown-out locks and big boobs. There was something crocodile in his smile. The woman was pressed against the wall, and he was leaning toward her, obviously hitting on her. I waited for a while—a fifth cup of wine—but eventually realized they weren't going anywhere any time soon, and when they did, it would be together.~~

As I left the gallery, I made straight and fast for the exit. I didn't want to have to glance again at any humans who needed to be saved.

Eldrich

Have you ever had to walk anywhere with a toddler by your side? Maybe a stroll to the corner store, the mailbox or the park? If so, you'll know that it takes three or four times as long to reach your destination. Why? Because children haven't lost the sense of wonder and curiosity that all of us are born with but most of us forsake as we get older.

Children don't move purposefully from point A to point B. They meander. They notice. Here is a dandelion that needs to be sniffed, pulled apart, examined. Here is an ant: a tiny miracle moving along the sidewalk. Here is a wheelchair ramp; I am going to run up and down it just to see what that feels like. Pebbles on a driveway? Let me touch them. Let me feel them crunch under my shoes. Let me throw some. Children are naturally curious and not in a hurry. The journey is more important than arriving at the destination.

It is possible to recapture that sense of inquisitiveness and wonder. Why rush purposefully, with blinkers on, toward death? The world invites us to look around, to take our time, to explore. Let us roam and ramble. Let us question and delve. Let us learn from our former, better selves and embark on what I like to call The Toddler Walk through Life.

John

My ex, Julianne, didn't want to be there when I went to pick up my things. She left the spare key, the one I'd been asked to return (and didn't need, since I'd had it copied long before she ever thought about kicking me to the curb) duct-taped to the bottom of the doormat. I was instructed to leave it on the kitchen table when I was done clearing out my possessions, which would be fewer than I expected as Julianne had opted to keep my Balint Zsako painting as compensation for seven months of missed rental payments. A thorough ransacking of the apartment proved futile (although I did find and help myself to a quarter vial of pot oil secreted between mattress and box spring). The cunning Julianne had conveyed the work off premises. She had also left me a couple of not-so-subtle messages in the kitchen. One, a picture of her co-worker, the asshole Rob Teskey, secured by a corn-cob shaped magnet to the refrigerator. The other, in case the mug shot wasn't enough of a tipoff that she had moved on in a serious enough manner to warrant large-appliance photo placement, was a poem by the idiot Teskey written for Julianne, folded and tucked inside an envelope on the kitchen table, where I was certain to find, unfold and read it.

Bitch.

The ode was spectacularly awful. I copied it out for use in some future artwork, and then amused myself by annotating it before returning it to the envelope.

***Her Name Is Julianne**¹
She curls like a cat in bed²
Eyes gleaming³
Strong yet soft⁴
Ready to pounce⁵
We roll like thunder in the covers⁶
Her mouth on mine
And everywhere
I want it⁷*

Like a vagrant, I moved my paltry possessions east from Christie and St. Clair in a Sobeys shopping cart filched from the parking lot the night before. Amy seemed pleased that I wasn't piling a ton of stuff into our shared domicile, yet perturbed that I would be encamped on an air mattress in the large second bedroom. I assured her I was there to stay and would be purchasing a proper bed forthwith. That was a lie. Even a single futon would have set me back a hundred and fifty bucks. All of my funds—the approximately two thousand dollars remaining from a five-thousand-dollar Arts Council grant that had been spent on a photo-dissolving installation piece, were earmarked for rent and my next art project, whatever that happened to be. Also, I had caught a glimpse of Amy's bed during the apartment tour—she wanted to show me how well a king-size fit in the space—and thought it looked mighty comfy. And something about the thought of the moron Teskey getting his dick nibbled by Julianne made it doubly inviting. My plan was to fuck Amy as soon as possible. I had no doubt I could do it, so to make it interesting I set myself a deadline of three weeks in which to slide my way under that wide expanse of Ikea duvet.

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