

THE DOTTED LINE

“Your cheeks look funny.”

“You’re not pregnant, are you?”

“I’m fond of shadows, aren’t you?”

I really should move. I thought this nearly every time we spoke. It wasn’t as if moving would be a protracted ordeal. I had so few things, I wouldn’t even need to label my boxes. Yet I couldn’t summon any real energy around the idea. The savory aroma of Jorie’s ever-simmering vegetable broth made me feel lethargic. Although the second I had that thought—the crazy broth thought—I realized it was something she would say, which made me want to run screaming into the street.

Yet my flat in Jorie’s small house was nicer than the average apartment, and I paid lower than average rent and she allowed pets. I lived more or less paycheck to paycheck, making my student loan payments but falling further and further behind on the credit card bills that had eventually found their way back to me. Jorie hadn’t checked my credit or required a deposit.

“You’ve been such a loyal tenant,” Jorie said, daring me to contradict. My lease would expire in a month.

Our mothers had failed to survive—a double blow to their breast cancer support group. They had died within a week of each other, one-breasted, gallant, hospiced. “You two should be friends,” my mother, usually a keen judge of such things, urged. Jorie’s mother’s advice was surely more helpful. “Hang onto that one,” I could imagine Nora rasping.

Mother-inspired or not, Jorie had made it her job to bend me to her will. She wanted me to remain a tenant in her house until she’d finished her dissertation on the sociological implications of the Jamestown Flood and subsequent relief efforts, a project whose date-of-completion estimates fluctuated spasmodically.

I was pretty sure my rent covered most if not all of Jorie’s mortgage payment. Jorie had inherited a roof over her head, whereas I’d quit my job as assistant development director at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma and moved back to where I’d set out from at eighteen as the skinny, bookish, under-confident daughter of a single mother. I spent eleven months sleeping in the fetal position on my mother’s loveseat, depleted my nest egg-lette, and landed in a less lofty, less remunerative job at the community arts center. Instead of helping mastermind fundraising campaigns and courting rich connoisseurs of glass, I planned small-town fundraisers and held the hands of volunteers. It was no great fall, mind you. But.

Every time I flushed, I felt Jorie wincing downstairs, imagining the no-good I was up to.

“You’re not flushing tampons, are you?” she asked, intercepting me on my way out to work.

“No tampons,” I said.

“I told you about Angel Soft, right?”

“It’s the only brand I buy.”

I tried and mostly failed to travel silently down the steep staircase from my flat. A door off Jorie’s kitchen opened onto the landing.

“You tell your guests, don’t you? About only flushing little bits of toilet paper?”

What guests? I’d invited over exactly one person, Suzette—friend by coincidence and default. We had lived on the same floor of Busey-Evans during my first two years of college in Urbana, but I hadn’t seen her again until a shopping trip to Target shortly after I moved to Edwardsville. I remembered her as a shy girl who changed majors every semester. Her voice had grown strident, but she was still working on her degree.

“I taped a note on the toilet seat lid,” I told Jorie.

She nodded, apparently satisfied. “What do you think about me planting some marigolds?”
“Marigolds are okay,” I said.

“It doesn’t have to be marigolds. If you have a bad association with them or something.”

The thing was to not ask any questions, thus avoiding a disquisition on menstrual synchronicity or toilet paper dissolvability statistics.

“Do you know how rare it is for a landlord to not raise the rent every chance she gets?”

“I’ve really got to go,” I said. “I’m going to be late.”

“How about this? I’ll give you a two-year lease with no increase.”

“Loco landlordus,” Suzette said.

“She’s just being careful,” I told Suzette. It wasn’t hard to understand how the picture of human excrement and hygiene products bobbing in your basement might impede your concentration.

“You don’t owe her anything,” Suzette told me. Suzette’s basement apartment was entirely carpeted—walls, ceilings, and floors. Just enough light came through the dirty half-windows to appreciate the carpet’s stains. There was a rodent problem, too. The apartment’s only perks were free cable and day-old bagels from the shop where her landlord baked. But I was the illogical one for sticking with Jorie!

“You’re like two miles from the bus line, right?” Suzette asked.

“More like two blocks.”

“Two long blocks. You feel sorry for her, don’t you?” Suzette asked.

“You can’t tell me it wouldn’t screw up her plans if I left now,” I said.

“I’ve got three words for you: not your problem.”

Suzette, I knew, would pounce on my apartment if I moved out.

Jorie set my mail halfway up the back stairs. Quite often, she swung open her door just as I reached for my clump of unwanted mail.

“Any big checks? Love letters?”

Likewise, she would trap me at the garbage can in the alley, disposing of a toxic tub of cottage cheese, or in the basement as I pulled my soggy clothes out of the washer.

“Your hair is so curly.”

“Your cat’s eyes give me bad dreams.”

“It’s not true that fresh air is good for you, you know.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the dryer. I did two loads last night, and it was fine.”

“You’ll never find a place better than this, not even for \$200 more a month.”

“You look like you could use a bowl of broth. I heard you sneezing last night.”

Not only did Topaz have “spooky” golden eyes, he was mischievous as well. Paperclips, lipsticks, pens, and flash drives were all a source of great merriment. He’d knock a matchbook off the counter and bat it across the room like a star soccer forward until losing it beneath the refrigerator or a closet door. Of course, I could have tucked these items away in drawers or cupboards, but why should I spoil his fun?

“What does your cat do up there?” Jorie asked.

I felt her attention amplify as the day approached when I would have to either give notice or sign another lease. I had less than three weeks left to decide.

In addition to telling my mother that I would try to be friends with Jorie, I had promised I would have myself genetically tested for the BRCA mutation and, if it turned out I had it, take “the next logical steps,” such as having my breasts and ovaries removed.

“This needs to stop now,” Mom had said, referring to the string of deaths in our family. She’d lost her mother, three aunts, two great aunts, and her grandmother. Two cousins and her sister, my aunt Marti, had already been through one round of lumpectomy-radiation-chemo. This latter group was a staunch lot. They weathered the harsh treatments pretty damn cheerfully and then marched forward, going years cancer-free, though no one had yet to reach the magic seven-year mark. Mom’s pronouncement carried a lot of authority, being issued as it was from her goddamned deathbed, but . . .

“There’s always a but with you,” she would scold if she could speak from the grave.

But why should I be ruled by probability? She was the one who’d prodded me from the nest, told me that life was all about taking chances. And what did it really mean, to be friends with Jorie? Couldn’t an argument be made that having me as a stable tenant actually made it easier for Jorie to delay finishing up her dissertation? Would a real friend be such an enabler?

I set my alarm clock volume to low, I didn’t shower after 10 p.m., and I never wore shoes in the apartment. But once a week or so, I banged my cupboard doors open and shut to keep Jorie on her toes, to make a sound louder than the thudding in my chest.

“You don’t look like you’re thirty.”

“Those are interesting boots.”

“How would you feel about new carpet on the stairs?”

“This month’s tea is incredible—an organic Emperor’s red from the Fujian Province. I’m about ready to put on a pot.”

“I think we should decorate the outside of the house this Christmas.”

It made me nervous how she studied my face.

“I know you like it here,” she said, handing me a pizza delivery flyer. “You can’t tell me you don’t.”

She’d ease up, I knew, if I just said yes. Yes, sign me up.

Jorie was a scrappy little woman with wiry, muscular arms and a flat chest. She parted her limp dishwater blonde hair in the middle and pulled it back with tiny plastic barrettes. Did she feel like her body was a time bomb waiting to go off? Did she believe there was more to her destiny than genetic code? Was it possible she’d had her own breasts lopped off, her ovaries yanked?

There were times I wished Mom had been less tenacious. That abundance of chemical and human smells, her diminishment, her blotchy, puffy skin and pink scalp. Inside, I was grimace and gag, fastening a mask of neutrality over my disgust. But she was a shrewd woman, and it was hard for me to convince myself she’d been taken in by my meek ministrations. I wondered if she had ended up regretting her request that I move in with her so she could die at home. Perhaps my mother’s insistence that I befriend Jorie was a form of punishment. One way of looking at my situation was that I’d gotten exactly what I deserved—just desserts for my insincere bedside manner and reluctance to keep a promise.

“Are you unhappy?” Jorie asked. “Is there something you want to talk about?”

She’d tacked up a calendar at the foot of the stairs, thick black Xs marking the passing of days. Just seven blank squares left in the month.

“I’m fine,” I said.

“You’ve been drinking more wine lately, have you not?”

“You’re keeping track?”

“When you drink, your walk is heavier. And you scuff.”

“I scuff?” I made my voice as stern as I could with a word ending in ff.

She blinked. She’d momentarily forgotten her mission. “Do you want to paint? Your walls, I mean. I’ll supply the paint, of course.”

I vowed to dispose of my empties elsewhere. I wondered which would be worse—if Jorie really did know everything about me, or if she didn’t know one damn thing.

“I’ll help you paint,” she rambled on. “Did you know that if you buy high quality paint you don’t usually need a second coat? Provided you choose a light color. A pretty pale yellow would be cheery, especially in the afternoon. But whatever color you want is fine.” She paused to take a breath. “I’m not talking that toxic crap. I’d buy ultra-low VOC, you know? So you won’t get high or nauseous or anything.”

Paint was one of Jorie’s new areas of expertise. She’d recently begun a procrastinatory romance with another grad student, a painter who worked weekends at the Sherwin-Williams paint store.

I’d seen him once when he nearly ran into me as he barreled out the back door. Stuart the painter was ostentatiously paint-spattered. I was suspicious of his artfully blue-flecked bangs.

Below, Jorie’s teapot whistled shrilly, ten seconds, thirty seconds, a minute, and then thump, thump, thump, sturdy Stuart ran to cut off the burner. Before Stuart, I hadn’t noticed what a quiet neighbor Jorie was. Now, I heard the murmur of conversation, chairs squeaking against the linoleum, and NPR playing in the morning while Stuart clanged about in Jorie’s kitchen, bellowing for his lover from two rooms back: “Jor-reee!” I hadn’t even known Jorie’s teapot had a whistle, having never taken her up on her invitations to share a pot. I was coming to understand that these sounds were part of our negotiations—Stuart’s brand-new presence a reminder that I wasn’t indispensable.

“You have a lovely chin.”

“Clara Barton was sixty-seven years old when she arrived to help the flood victims.”

“Do you eat a lot of bananas?”

“Bananas?” I asked, in spite of myself.

“I’m getting a really strong whiff of banana peels. If you put the peels in little plastic bags before you throw them away, they don’t get all stinky in the garbage can.”

“So noted,” I said, trying not to stare at the calendar’s four empty squares.

“I hope I didn’t offend you the other day,” she said.

Which time? “It’s forgotten,” I said.

“I care about you, you know.”

The stairwell was a convection oven in the summer. I could feel sweat from my fingertips seeping into the envelope containing my cell phone bill.

“How’s the dissertation coming?” I surprised myself by asking.

Jorie picked at a splinter of wood protruding from her doorframe. “Stuart’s landlord won’t let him use refrigerator magnets. She says they can scar the surface.”

“This whole ‘will I stay or will I go’ refrain is a sham,” Suzette told me over a dubious eight-dollar glass of pinot grigio at the local wine bar. “It’s pretty obvious you’re not going anywhere.”

Suzette was determined to goad me into dating. Undeterred by a .100 first-to-second date conversion record, she had just renewed her online matchmaking service membership. “I don’t remember you being the type for the nunnery,” she said.

Exactly so. What I might have said was that before returning to Edwardsville, drinks with a man more often than not led to sex, second date or not. My current day-to-day life allowed for the illusion that I was little more than an abstract idea of a woman. Embarking on any sort of anything with a man required a sense of concreteness, if not optimism, and my body didn't feel like a going concern.

"So," Jorie said.

"So," I replied.

It was two days before the deadline. The flower boxes in front of the house were still empty. She gave my face a once-over, but if she saw a blemish or a flaw in my cosmetics she kept mum.

"You could just tell me what you plan to do," she said.

What if I was wrong and she actually wanted me out? What if Jorie's mother had made her pledge fidelity to me?

I wondered if I still had any leverage. Would she have the bathtub reglazed? Replace the goddamned clothes dryer?

I did want marigolds, I thought—big, fat, orange and yellow ones flecked with red. And lots of fat-bulbed, multi-colored lights hung on the bushes for all of December and January.

"What are you waiting for?" Jorie asked. She kicked at the baseboard. A small patch of grey paint fell off. She sighed.

"Have you had the test?" I asked.

Jorie's eyes bugged, but she understood the question. She crossed her arms over her chest. "Fucking genes," she said.

"Tell me," I said.

"I'll tell you in two days."

Mom had lived in a crummy, small apartment just a few quality steps above Suzette's. It smelled stale and dank even before she got sick and I moved in with Topaz and his litter box. She'd worked for years as a secretary for an old-timey real estate investment firm. Her employers were three bachelor brothers who chomped on their cigars and whistled show tunes and dictated their letters to my mother, who sat with her taupe pantyhosed legs crossed neatly at the ankles, hand sliding deftly across her steno pad. What I'm saying is that I could never figure out what my mother was fighting for. Another luncheon with the brothers Razykowski at Bella Milano on Administrative Professional's Day? Discussing Ian McEwan's latest with her book club? Her annual visit to Aunt Marti in Tampa?

The men in my family were itinerants and alcoholics. The women led puny, truncated lives: associate degrees, church group memberships, craft hobbies, three-day cruises, clerical jobs—the kind of life you might make if you didn't much count on hanging onto it. But then there was that wondrous tenacity, their fierce clinging to the puniness, just in case or just because.

"It's sort of like renewing our vows," Jorie said. She bobbed in her chair like a toy boat, buoyant at the prospect of our two-year future.

The signed lease sat on the table between us.

Then she went serious. "You should get the test," she said. "I've got to think it makes a difference to know what you're up against."

"What about you?"

“I’m going to put on the kettle. Stuart’s holed up painting all weekend. He’s got a group show in a couple of weeks.” She gave me a sort of pleading smile. “You could stay for a cup, at least. As it happens, I just received Oolong Symphony #18.”

Above us came the skitter-skitter-skitter-whump of Topaz batting what sounded like a tube of lip balm across my front room and under my coat closet door.

I shrugged and shook my head. What can I do?

Her head was still cocked toward the ceiling. “Do you have a new clock? I keep hearing this loud ticking, like Captain Hook’s crocodile.”

“Nope. No new clock.” Just new batteries for one of my mother’s old clocks.

“That’s weird,” she said. “I swear I never heard it before a few days ago.” She looked at me squarely. “Your blusher is too pink,” she said. “You should go with something peachier.”

I’d take up clogging. I’d paint the living room walls a deep shade of amber, an amber that matched Topaz’s eyes. Somehow, I’d have the last word.