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# How To Be Lost

## Amanda Eyre Ward

### ONE

THE AFTERNOON BEFORE, I planned how I would tell her. I would begin with my age and maturity, allude to a new lover, and finish with a bouquet of promises: grandchildren, handwritten letters, boxes from Tiffany sent in time to beat the rush. I sat in my apartment drinking Scotch and planning the words. "Mom," I said to Georgette, the cat. "Mom, I have something important to discuss."

Georgette stretched lazily on the balcony. Below, an ambulance wailed. A man with a shopping cart stood underneath my apartment building, eating chicken wings and whistling. The heat had dimmed, but the smell of New Orleans seemed to grow stronger: old meat, sweat, and beer.

"Mom," I told the cat, " please listen to what I am telling you." Although Georgette continued to ignore me, the man with the shopping cart looked up, and I took this as a good sign.

I had to work that night, so after the Scotch and a small nap, I stood in front of the mirror and put on mascara. I was going for sultry European, so I took my hair in my fingers and twisted it, securing the roll with bobby pins. Was this a chignon? How did one pronounce chignon? In any case, my hair was out of my face, and this would please the health department. I washed my hands with the rose-scented soap my sister had sent me, and slipped my feet into heels. As a final gesture, I drew a mole next to the left corner of my mouth.

We had been told, at The Highball, to "glamorize our images." This is a direct quote. Jimbo, the club's elderly owner, had begun soliciting buyers for his "little piece of New Orleans history." The Highball was the cocktail lounge at


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the top of the World Trade Center in New Orleans. It revolved. If you sat drinking expensive themed cocktails for a full hour, you would see the whole city, from the lazy Mississippi River to the dilapidated downtown, to the French Quarter, and back again to the mighty Miss, Old Man River.

Jimbo had implored us, in his memo, to glamorize. I believe he thought that despite the old plush décor, despite our advancing ages (I was thirty-two, in a town where many cocktail waitresses were underage runaways) and annoyed demeanors, if we tarted up, he could convince some Yankee that The Highball was an exclusive club, and not a tourist trap that revolved. So, why not? My old look (irritable and overtired) hadn't gotten me many dates. Along with Winnie, I went to Payless Shoes and bought a few pairs of high heels. We bought fishnet stockings and perfume. And then we went to Bobby's Bar and drank beer from giant cans until we ran out of quarters for the jukebox.

I drove slowly to The Highball. With my car windows closed and my air-conditioning on, the night was lovely. People sat on their front steps drinking from paper bags and watching kids play soccer. I was one of the few white people in my neighborhood, and one of the many heavy drinkers. I waved to Lady B, my landlord, who was sitting on her porch swing and braiding her daughter Lela's hair. Lady B winked in response.

Although I didn't have to, I drove up Canal Street, past Harrah's. Three frat boys, their necks strung with beads, sat on the sidewalk outside the casino. Their eyes were glazed, and they were not drinking from their giant daiquiris. They were simply staring at the street, defeated. These were the sorts of people who eventually roused themselves to ride the elevator to The Highball. More than one of my customers had fallen asleep in their velvet chair.

Things were slow up at The H-ball. Winnie was leaning on the bar, her tight dress leaving no inch to the imagination. Behind the bar, Peggy the yoga queen mixed a martini like Tom Cruise, shaking her hips this way and that. A few customers gazed out the window. One couple was making out madly. The good thing about a revolving bar is that odious customers are soon out of sight.

"Look at you!" said Winnie, pointing red fingernails and laughing throatily.


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"What?" I said. "It's a chignon."

Winnie and Peggy looked at each other. Sometimes, I surprised them.

It was a long night, and everybody wanted bourbon. When my shift was over, even I wanted bourbon, instead of my usual Scotch. Peggy poured me a stiff one. "I am dreading tomorrow," I told her.

"Why?"

"I have to tell my mother I'm not coming home for Christmas. She's going to flip."

Peggy sat down on her stool. She had removed every bit of her eyebrows, and drawn thin lines. "Why not?" she said.

"What?"

"Why aren't you going home?" said Peggy. She poured herself a glass of bourbon.

"Oh, it's a long story," I said. "For one thing, I'm an adult, you know? I can't go flying home to New York for every holiday like I'm in college or something."

"I never went to college," Peggy said, dreamily.

"And my family...well, it's a bit fucked up, is the thing," I said.


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"I wonder," said Peggy.

"What?"

Peggy sipped her drink, and looked through the enormous windows at the sparkling city below. "I wonder who I would be," she said, "if I had gone to college."

"I went to college," I said, "and I'm still here."

Peggy nodded. "But you're you," she said.


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