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Opening Extract from...

All Grown Up

Written by Jami Attenberg

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All Grown Up

The Apartment

You're in art school, you hate it, you drop out, you move to New York City. For most people, moving to New York City is a gesture of ambition. But for you, it signifies failure, because you grew up there, so it just means you're moving back home after you couldn't make it in the world. Spiritually, it's a reverse commute.

For a while you live downtown with your brother and his girlfriend, in a small spare room, your bed jammed between shoe racks and a few of your brother's guitars in cases plus a wall of books from his girlfriend's undergraduate days at Brown. You get a job, via same girlfriend. You don't hate the job and you don't love the job, but you can't sniff at a hard day's work because you are no better than anyone else, and, in some ways, you are much, much worse. You acknowledge your privilege, and you get to work.

You start making money. You find a small, dusty, crumbling loft in a shitty waterfront neighborhood in Brooklyn. It has one floor-to-ceiling window, a tiny Empire State Building in the distance framed beautifully within it. Now you are home. Everyone in your life breathes easier. She's safe now, they all think. At no point does anyone say to you, "So you've stopped making art?" It is because they don't want to know the answer or they don't care or they are scared to ask you because you scare them. Whatever the case, everyone is complicit in this, this new, non-art-making phase of your life. Even though it was the thing you loved most in the world.

But you have a little secret: while you are not making Art anymore you are at least drawing every day. To tell anyone about this would be admitting there is a hole in your life, and you'd rather not say that out loud, except in therapy. But there you are, once a day, drawing the same thing over and over: that goddamned Empire State Building. You get up every morning (or afternoon, on the weekends, depending on the hangover), have a cup of coffee, sit at the card table near the window, and draw it, usually in pencil. If you have time, you'll ink it. Sometimes, if you are running late for work, you do it at night instead, and then you add color to the sketches, to reflect the building's ever-changing lights. Sometimes you draw just the building and sometimes you draw the buildings around it and sometimes you draw the sky and sometimes you draw the bridge in

the foreground and sometimes you draw the East River and sometimes you draw the window frame around the whole scene. You have sketchbooks full of these drawings. You could draw the same thing forever, you realize. *No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river, and he's not the same man* is a thing you read once. The Empire State Building is your river. And you don't have to leave your apartment to step in it. Art feels safe for you again, even though you know you are not getting any better at it, that the work you are making could be sold to tourists on a sidewalk outside of Central Park on a sunny Saturday and that's about it. There's no challenge to it, no message, just your view, on repeat. But this is all you can do, this is all you have to offer, and it is just enough to make you feel special.

You do this for six years. Brooklyn apartment in a changing neighborhood, why move when the rent is so cheap? Mediocre but well-paying job at which you excel; you receive a few small promotions. Volunteer work here and there. You march where your activist mother tells you to march. Pointless sketchbooks pile up on the bottom row of a bookshelf. Barely scratching a feverish itch. You also drink plenty and for a long time use, too, coke and ecstasy mainly, although sometimes pills to bring you down at the end of the night. Another way to scratch the itch. There are men also, in your bed, in your world, foggily, but you are less interested in them than in muffling the voice in your head that says you are doing absolutely nothing with your

life, that you are a child, that the accoutrements of adulthood are bullshit, they don't mean a goddamn thing, and you are trapped between one place and another and you always will be unless something forces you to change. And also, you miss making art.

Other people you know seem to change quite easily. They have no problem at all with succeeding at their careers and buying apartments and moving to other cities and falling in love and getting married and hyphenating their names and adopting rescue cats and, finally, having children, and then documenting all of this meticulously on the internet. Really, it appears to be effortless on their part. Their lives are constructed like buildings, each precious but totally unsurprising block stacked before your eyes.

Your favorite thing is when a friend asks to meet you for a drink, a friend you have had a million drinks with in your life, and then, when you get to the bar, your friend stares at the menu and orders nothing, and you are forced to say, "Aren't you drinking?" and she says, "I wish," and she pauses dramatically and you know exactly what's coming next: she's about to tell you she's pregnant. And there is this subtext that you are lucky because you can still drink, and she's unlucky because she can't drink, she has this dumb baby in her. What a stupid fucking baby. In her.

Eventually your brother and his wife get pregnant, and you can't hate on that because it's family, and also they've always been incredibly kind to you, your brother and you

particularly bonded because of your father's young demise, an overdose. You throw a baby shower, at which you drink too many mimosas and cry in the bathroom, but you are pretty sure no one notices. It's not that you want a baby, or want to get married, or any of it. It's not your bag. You just feel tired for some reason. Tired of the world. Tired of trying to fit in where you don't. You go home that night and draw the Empire State Building and you feel hopeful doing this thing you love to do, so hopeful you look up online what tonight's colors mean—the lights are green and blue—and find out it's in honor of National Eating Disorders Day and you get depressed all over again even though you've never had an eating disorder in your life.

Nine months come and go, a baby could be born at any minute. You call your brother to find out when exactly, but they've been using a hippie-dippie midwife and he says, "We don't know yet. Could be another week." You are suddenly aswirl with enthusiasm. It's going to be a girl. "Call me whenever you hear anything, anything at all," you tell him. Then you have three intensely dull, soul-deadening afternoon meetings in a row and after that you are moved to a new cube, which you must share with a freshly hired coworker who is thirteen years younger than you and is hilarious and loud and pretty and is probably making half of what you make but still spends it all on tight dresses. It is a Friday. You go out for drinks in your neighborhood. You get lit. Then you call your dealer, whom you haven't called in a

few years. You can't believe the number still works. He says, "It's been a while since we last met." You say, "I've been busy," as if you need to justify why you're not doing drugs anymore. You don't buy that much, just enough, but then you meet a man at the bar—you both pretend you've met before although you haven't, but it just feels safer that way for some reason—and he has more than enough for the two of you. Then you go home together, to your place, to tiny Manhattan in the window, to the piles of sketchbooks, and the two of you proceed to do all the drugs. This goes on for hours. There's a little bit of sex involved but neither one of you is that interested in each other. Drug buddies, that's about it. You can't even get it up to get it up. Eventually he leaves, and you turn off your phone and go to sleep. You wake up on Sunday night. You turn on your phone. There are eight messages from your brother and your mother. You have missed your niece being born.

You don't do any drugs after that, ever again. No rehab necessary. You start to see the world with fresh eyes. But the world looks the same. Job, apartment, friends, family, view. For a few weeks it seems like they might try to give you an enormous promotion at work, but then you realize you'll have more responsibility so you wiggle your way out of it. This promotion would mean you're staying there for a while. You lie to yourself: I should keep my options open. You never know what could happen.

Still you draw. This is the best part of your day. This is your purest moment. This is when the breath leaves your body and you feel like you are hovering slightly above the ground. On New Year's, that day of fresh starts, you allow yourself to flip through some of the old sketchbooks. You recognize you have gotten better. You are not *not* talented. That is a thing that fills you up. You sit with it. You sit with yourself. You allow yourself that pleasure of liking yourself. What if this is enough?

A week later, you are leaving your apartment building and you notice a fence around the lot across the street. There is a sign up, a construction permit. A ten-story condo building. Starts in a month. You live on the fifth floor. This building will block your view, no question. For a second you wonder if this is a joke. You look behind you to see if there's a camera filming you, waiting for your reaction, but no, it's real, your life is about to change. At last, something surprises you.

It takes a year for the building to go up, and you watch the construction every day. Brick by brick. You can't tell when it will be finished exactly, when you'll finally lose the view, but you decide to throw one last party to signify the end. You invite everyone you know and you even allow children to come. Your friends toast the Empire State Building, and you. "It was a good view," says one of your old work friends, her fiancé in tow. "It wasn't a million-

dollar view," you say, "but it was worth fifteen hundred a month." "You have such a good deal," says her fiancé. "You can't move, even without the view. You can never leave this apartment," he says and shakes your shoulders.

The day the final brick is cemented and your view is officially gone, you buy a bottle of wine and order a pizza and sit at your table. You stare at air and nothing and brick. The thing that made you special is gone. You will never have that view back, nor that time. And all you have to show for it are these sketchbooks, which are useless anyway. You think about burning them, but what good would that do? And they're the only things that prove you existed on this earth. You realize all along you were just trying to prove to yourself you were still alive. *But if I don't have this, am I dead?* Surely not. Please, no. You take a bite of your pizza and a sip of your wine and ask yourself the question you're finally ready to ask: What next?

Andrea

A book is published. It's a book about being single, written by an extremely attractive woman who is now married, and it is a critical yet wistful remembrance of her uncoupled days. I have no interest in reading this book. I am already single. I have been single a long time. There is nothing this book can teach me about being single that I don't already know.

Regardless, everyone I know tells me about this book. They are like carrier pigeons, fluttering messages, doing the bidding of a wicked media maestro on a rooftop in midtown Manhattan. Nothing will stop them from reaching their destination, me, their presumed target demographic.

My coworker Nina, the bangles on her wrist clinking, hands me her copy when she's finished with it, even though I have never expressed an interest in reading it, let alone

discussed it with her. She is newly single, and she is twenty-four. A woman who was not newly single, and also not twenty-four, would know better than to hand this book to another single woman.

My mother orders a copy for me online and it shows up one day, a surprise in the mail, without a note or a name attached, and it takes me a week to figure out who sent it to me. The whole time I am thinking: A ghost sent me this book. A ghost wants me to think about being single.

Finally my mother confesses she sent it. (She does not see it as a confession, of course. I am the only one who sees it that way.) "Did you get the book?" she asks. "Oh, *you* sent the book," I say. "Mom, why would you send a book like that to me?" "I thought it would be helpful," she says.

My sister-in-law, who lives in the hinterlands of New Hampshire and who has dedicated her life to taking care of her dying child, my niece, and spends her days contemplating mortality, mentions this book to me on the phone during my weekly Sunday phone call to her home. "Have you heard about this book?" she says. "Yes," I say. "I have heard about the book."

Old college friends post links to reviews of it on my Facebook wall and say things like, "Sounds like something you'd like," or "This reminded me of you." I think, Am I supposed to like this? I don't, in fact, like it. I dislike it. Where is my dislike button? Where do I click to scream?

I go to my therapist and say, "Why is being single the only thing people think of when they think of me? I'm other things, too."

And this delights her, this old, wry, wrinkled, brainy bitch. This feels like a breakthrough, at the very least a valuable exercise, a teachable moment. Something. This is a change in our conversation. An assertion is being made, a thesis statement about my life, finally. "Tell me who you are, then," she says. "What other statements are true?"

"Well, I'm a woman," I say.

"Good, yes."

"I work in advertising as a designer."

"Yes."

"I'm technically a Jew."

"OK."

"I'm a New Yorker."

I start to feel unsettled. Surely I am more than that.

"I'm a friend," I say. "I'm a daughter, I'm a sister, I'm an aunt." Those things feel farther away lately, but they exist as part of my identity.

In my head I think:

I'm alone.

I'm a drinker.

I'm a former artist.

I'm a shrieker in bed.

I'm the captain of the sinking ship that is my flesh.

To my therapist I say, "I'm a brunette."

I go out on a date with a man I meet online and it does not go well. Although there's a certain pleasure I take in not being the one who drinks too much on the date, it's only momentary, because I still have to contend with a drunk, I still have to spend time with this man, monitor whether he'll be hostile or joyful. I have to step outside myself. This is not a date; this is an audition for a play about a terrible date.

He's two bourbons in by the time I arrive, and I'm patient but then sour about it when I feel that he's touching me too much. He's too familiar, too presumptuous, and also he's wearing a turtleneck and he does not have the right head for a turtleneck, or maybe it's just his chin, or his mouth, I don't even know, I mean I just *can't* with that turtleneck. And then, as we part ways, he asks me if I've read it, read the book. I say, "No, have you?" And he says, "No, I don't read a lot," and I think, *Quelle surprise.* And then he adds, "But I can tell it's totally about you." And I say, "You're single too, why isn't it about *you?*" And he says, "Oh, this? This is just temporary for me."

The permanence of my impermanence. I stand in possession of it. I stand before him at the entrance to a subway station, in possession of nothing but myself. Myself is everything, I want to tell him. But to him it is nothing, because that's how he feels about himself right now. He is alone, and so he is nothing. How do I explain to him that what applies

to him does not apply to me? His context is not my context. How do you blow up the bus you've been forced to ride your entire life? It wasn't your fault there were no other means of transportation available.

"You should read it," he says, and I swat him in the arm with my purse as if I have been assaulted and want him to leave me alone. I exit the scene, audition over, and he yells after me his final line: "Hey, what was that for?" If he called me a bitch, I can't recall hearing it now. It was probably under his breath. A last-minute improvisation.

I never read the book. I leave it in the laundry room of my apartment building, and it is gone the next time I return. My mother doesn't ask about it again. Her assessment of my burdens is ever-changing. Singleness forgotten for the moment.

Let's forget it, shall we? Can we all just talk about something else, please?