

Citizen Girl

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Extract

BBBBUUZZZZ!

'Hello?' I ask tentatively, holding down the 'Talk' button, blood draining from my head.

Static.

'Hello!' I cry into the wall.

Crackle. Crackle.

'HEEEELLOOO!!!!'

'It's me.' Whoosh, whoosh, crackle, crackle.

'Who?'

'YOUR BROTHER! I'M COMING UP!'

Shocked, I press the button firmly with an added jiggle at the end, undo the multiple locks, and step out onto the landing, blinking beneath the bare bulb. I hear Jack trudging upwards, thumping something heavily against every stair. He emerges. Cubs hat first, dragging our mother's ancient plaid suitcase, and looks squarely at me. 'Been sent to rescue you.' He flexes a hint of bicep before leaning back against my neighbor's front door to catch his breath. He lifts his cap off to run a hand through his tangled chestnut mop.

'Rescue me?'

Jack gives my old bathrobe a once-over before raising an eyebrow with disdain. 'Yup. Grace says you've stalled.'

Following inside, I drag the suitcase down the path between the we-regret-to-inform-you's, lock the door, and do my best to scrape up some semblance of dignity in furry parrot slippers. But Jack's already thrown off his coat, chucked aside the empty Mallomars packages, and dropped onto my futon. 'There're muffins,' he says, clicking on the Knicks game.

'Jack! It's not safe for a fourteen-year-old to be wandering around this neighborhood alone. It's rife with junkies and pimps and . . . and . . . drummers.' I kneel down to

tug at the suitcase's chipped gold zipper to find two Tupperware bowls of Grace's oatmeal pecan muffins nestled between my grade-school skating trophies. I hold up my dusty Twelfth Night costume in disbelief. 'This is what I need right now? Pantaloon?''

'Mom packed it. Said you needed to 'reconnect with your root accomplishments' — there's a note.' I find a piece of torn paper bag marked by Grace's editorial red ink: 'Get on with it.' I bite into a muffin to quell the lump in my throat, swallow, and dial home.

'Chatsworth Writers' Colony.'

'Hey.'

'Hey, chica.' My mother's voice drops to an intimate timbre. 'I only have a minute — that poet has locked himself in the pantry, trying to 'rebirth'. It's nearly dinner. We're all getting hungry and grumpy and I really don't think I can invite him back. Has Jack arrived?'

I watch Jack clicking through my meager seven channels. 'Yes, miraculously he hasn't been sold for crack.'

Well, I didn't think he'd fetch much.'

'I'm being serious.'

'I know you are. You wouldn't let me come, so I sent an emissary. At fourteen I was —'

'On a kibbutz. Fifteen in Finland. I know.' Jack gestures a gun to the head.

'You should go back to Finland. Remember when you were three - you loved the Northern Lights.'

'So you tell me.'

'Feeling any better?'

'It's not the end of the world,' I lie.

'I know. Out here, we know that.' I shut my eyes to the pile of homeless résumés, my unworn interview suit. 'After you eat the muffins, I want you to celebrate all the incredible things you've accomplished. Put on the pantaloons.'

'Right, a tenth-grade play is exactly what I want to look back on as my professional high point.'

'And then I want you to get some perspective. Reread the opening to *Grapes of Wrath*. It sounds like you're getting a little dire over there.'

'It is The Grapes of Wrath - nobody's hiring! I'm competing for unpaid internships with fifty-year-old PhDs who've introduced their own bills in Congress! Nobody is sitting out there tonight praying that some twenty-four-year-old with a whopping two and a half years' clerical experience will swing down their chimney.'

'C'mon, chica, who was the five-year-old who had a booming business charging a nickel an adjective to the writers —'

'Mom.'

'The fifth-grader who got her idiotic school board to build a Women's History section in the library —'

'Mom —'

'The twelve-year-old who offered her own class in the barn when that ballet school refused to teach modern —'

'Grace —'

'Do I have to remind you that class is still running? You and I both know what you're capable of. As soon as you get in the door, you're going to knock their pantyhose off —' The televised roar of Madison Square Garden fills my tiny apartment, drowning Grace out.

I grab a balled-up sock and toss it at Jack's head. He gives a suit-yourself shrug before the basketball game audibly shrinks back to its nineteen inches. 'Thanks, but there is no door. I haven't been offered a single interview.' My shoulders slump. 'I should've handled things differently with Doris.'

'Oh, no, Missy May, we're not going down that road. You wanted to quit that job from day one. Now you're shot of it and can sign up for unemployment. It's a blessing —'

'A blessing that I spent eighteen months on research that may never be released? I dredged up every single detail dating back to the first suffragette! I went to the Smithsonian Institute - on my own dime! And it's all going to have zero impact by the time she's done translating it into crazy to make it sound like she wrote it. All that work and it won't make a fucking difference to a single woman —'

'Language. G, I have about thirty seconds so here's my three cents.' I see her pointing her red Bic as she speaks. 'Start your own thing. If you can't function within the system, strike out on your own. Start your own organization —'

My head reverberates. 'Oh my God. Mom, I'm doing everything I can just to get a desk. A desk and a paycheck. I just want my desk back. I want my paycheck back. I even want that fucking broken fax machine back —'

'Language. And that's system talk.'

'I know! I operate fine within the system. I like the system! The system and me, we're like this!' I cross my fingers.