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Opening Extract from...

Where'd You Go, Bernadette

Written by Maria Semple

Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

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WHERE'D YOU GO, BERNADETTE

MARIA SEMPLE

WEIDENFELD & NICOLSON
LONDON

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by Weidenfeld & Nicolson
An imprint of the Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

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978 0 297 86729 6 (trade paperback)
978 0 297 86728 9 (hardback)

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset by Input Data Services Ltd, Bridgwater, Somerset

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

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For Poppy Meyer

The first annoying thing is when I ask Dad what he thinks happened to Mom, he always says, 'What's most important is for you to understand it's not your fault.' You'll notice that wasn't even the question. When I press him, he says the second annoying thing, 'The truth is complicated. There's no way one person can ever know everything about another person.'

Mom disappears into thin air two days before Christmas without telling me? Of course it's complicated. Just because it's complicated, just because you think you can't ever know everything about another person, it doesn't mean you can't try.

It doesn't mean I can't try.

I

MOM VERSUS THE GNATS

Monday, November 15

Galer Street School is a place where compassion, academics, and global connectitude join together to create civic-minded citizens of a sustainable and diverse planet.

Student: Bee Branch
Grade: Eight
Teacher: Levy

KEY
S Surpasses Excellence
A Achieves Excellence
W Working towards Excellence

Geometry	S
Biology	S
World Religion	S
Modern World	S
Creative Writing	S
Pottery	S
Language Arts	S
Expressive Movement	S

COMMENTS: Bee is a pure delight. Her love of learning is infectious, as are her kindness and humor. Bee is unafraid to ask questions. Her goal is always deep understanding of a given topic,

not merely getting a good grade. The other students look to Bee for help in their studies, and she is always quick to respond with a smile. Bee exhibits extraordinary concentration when working alone; when working in a group, she is a quiet and confident leader. Of special note is what an accomplished flutist Bee continues to be. The year is only a third over, but already I am mourning the day Bee graduates from Galer Street and heads out into the world. I understand she is applying to boarding schools back east. I envy the teachers who get to meet Bee for the first time, and to discover for themselves what a lovely young woman she is.

• • •

That night at dinner, I sat through Mom and Dad's 'We're-so-proud-of-you's and 'She's-a-smart-one's until there was a lull.

'You know what it means,' I said. 'The big thing it means.'

Mom and Dad frowned question marks at each other.

'You don't remember?' I said. 'You told me when I started Galer Street that if I got perfect grades the whole way through, I could have anything I wanted for a graduation present.'

'I do remember,' Mom said. 'It was to ward off further talk of a pony.'

'That's what I wanted when I was little,' I said. 'But now I want something different. Aren't you curious what it is?'

'I'm not sure,' Dad said. 'Are we?'

'A family trip to Antarctica!' I pulled out the brochure I'd been sitting on. It was from an adventure travel company that does cruises to exotic places. I opened it to the Antarctica page and passed it across the table. 'If we go, it has to be over Christmas.'

'This Christmas?' Mom said. 'Like in a month?' She got up and started stuffing empty take-out containers into the bags they'd been delivered in.

Dad was already deep into the brochure. 'It's their summer,' he said. 'It's the only time you can go.'

'Because ponies are cute.' Mom tied the handles in a knot.

'What do you say?' Dad looked up at Mom.

'Isn't this a bad time for you because of work?' she asked him.

'We're studying Antarctica,' I said. 'I've read all the explorers' journals, and I'm doing my presentation on Shackleton.' I started wiggling in my chair. 'I can't believe it. Neither of you are saying no.'

'I was waiting for you,' Dad said to Mom. 'You hate to travel.'

'I was waiting for you,' Mom said back. 'You have to work.'

'Oh my God. That's a yes!' I jumped out of my chair. 'That's a yes!' My joy was so infectious that Ice Cream woke up and started barking and doing victory laps around the kitchen table.

'Is that a yes?' Dad asked Mom over the crackling of plastic take-out containers being crammed into the trash.

'That's a yes,' she said.

• • •

Tuesday, November 16

From: Bernadette Fox
To: Manjula Kapoor

Manjula,

Something unexpected has come up, and I'd love it if you could work extra hours. From my end, this trial period has been a lifesaver. I hope it's working for you, too. If so, please let me know ASAP because I need you to work your Indian magic on a huge project.

OK: I'll stop being coy.

You know I have a daughter, Bee. (She's the one you order the medicine for and wage valiant battle with the insurance company over.) Apparently, my husband and I told her she could have anything she wanted if she graduated middle school with straight A's. The straight A's have arrived – or

should I say straight S's, because Galer Street is one of those liberal, grades-erode-self-esteem-type schools (let's hope you don't have them in India) – and so what does Bee want? To take a family trip to Antarctica!

Of the million reasons I don't want to go to Antarctica, the main one is that it will require me to leave the house. You might have figured by now that's something I don't much like to do. But I can't argue with Bee. She's a good kid. She has more character than Elgie and I and the next ten guys combined. Plus she's applying to boarding school for next fall, which she'll of course get into because of said A's. Whoops, S's! So it would be in pretty bad taste to deny Buzzy this.

The only way to get to Antarctica is by cruise ship. Even the smallest one has 150 passengers, which translates into me being trapped with 149 other people who will uniquely annoy the hell out of me with their rudeness, waste, idiotic questions, incessant yammering, creepy food requests, boring small talk, etc. Or worse, they might turn their curiosity toward me, and expect pleasantry in return. I'm getting a panic attack just thinking about it. A little social anxiety never hurt anyone, am I right?

If I give you the info, could you pretty please take over the paperwork, visas, plane tickets, everything involved with getting we three from Seattle to the White Continent? Is this something you have time for?

Say yes,

Bernadette

Oh! You already have credit card numbers to pay for airfare, trip, and accoutrements. But in terms of your salary, I'd like you to take it directly out of my personal account. When Elgie saw the Visa charge for your work last month – even though it wasn't much money – he wasn't thrilled that I'd hired a virtual assistant from India. I told him I wouldn't be using you

anymore. So, if we could, Manjula, let's keep our romance an illicit one.

• • •

From: Manjula Kapoor
To: Bernadette Fox

Dear Ms. Fox,

It would be my pleasure to assist you with your family travel plans to Antarctica. Attached please find the contract for moving forward on a full-time basis. Where indicated, please include your bank routing number. I look forward to our continued collaboration.

Warm regards,
Manjula

• • •

Invoice from Delhi Virtual Assistants International

Invoice Number: BFB39382
Associate: Manjula Kapoor

40 hours a week at $0.75 USD/hr.

TOTAL: 30.00 USD
Invoice Due in Full upon Receipt

Wednesday, November 17

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Letter from Ollie Ordway ('Ollie-O')

CONFIDENTIAL: TO GALER STREET SCHOOL PARENT ASSOCIATION

Dear Parents,

It was terrific to meet you last week. I'm thrilled to have been brought in to consult for the wonderful Galer Street School. Head of School Goodyear promised a motivated Parent Association, and you didn't disappoint.

Let's **talk turkey**: in three years you're losing your lease on your current location. Our goal is to **launch a capitol campaign** so you will be able to purchase a larger, more suitable campus. For those of you who couldn't attend the meeting, here's the **drill-down**:

I conducted an off-site consisting of 25 parents in the Seattle area with an income of $200K+ and whose children are entering kindergarten. The **headline** is that Galer Street is considered a **second-tier school**, a fallback option for those who don't get accepted to their first-choice school.

Our objective is to **move the needle** on Galer Street and kick it up into the **First-Choice Cluster (FCC)** for Seattle's elite. How do we achieve this? What is the **secret sauce**?

Your mission statement says Galer Street is based on global 'connectitude.' (You people don't just think **outside the box**, you think **outside the dictionary**! You received some impressive **big-media** coverage for the cows you bought for the Guatemalans and the solar cookstoves you sent to the African villagers. While raising **small sums of money** for people you've never met is commendable, you need to start raising **large**

sums of money for your own children's private school. To do this, you must emancipate yourselves from what I am calling **Subaru Parent** mentality and start thinking more like **Mercedes Parents**. How do Mercedes Parents think? My research indicates the following:

1. The choice of private schools is both **fear-based** and **aspirational**. Mercedes Parents are afraid their children won't get 'the best education possible,' which has nothing to do with actual education and everything to do the number of other Mercedes Parents at a school.
2. When applying to kindergarten, Mercedes Parents have their **eyes on the prize**. And that prize is **Lakeside School**, alma mater of Bill Gates, Paul Allen, et al. Lakeside is considered *the* feeder school to the Ivy League. Let me rock it straight: the first stop on this **crazy train** is **Kindergarten Junction,** and nobody gets off until it pulls into **Harvard Station**.

Head of School Goodyear took me on a tour of your current campus at the industrial park. Apparently, Subaru Parents have no problem sending their children to a school adjacent to a **wholesale seafood distributor**. Let me assure you, Mercedes Parents do.

All roads lead to raising the money to buy a new campus. The best way to achieve it is to pack the incoming kindergarten class with **Mercedes Parents**.

Grab your crampons because we have an uphill climb. But fear not: **I do underdog**. Based on your budget, I have devised a **two-pronged action plan**.

The first **action item** is a **redesign** of the Galer Street **logo**. Much as I love dirty clip-art handprints, let's try to find an image that better articulates **success**. A coat of arms divided into four, with images of the Space Needle, a calculator, a lake

(as in Lakeside), and something else, maybe some kind of ball? I'm just throwing out some ideas here, nothing's set in stone.

The second **action item** is to hold a **Prospective Parent Brunch (PPB),** which we aim to fill with Seattle's elite, or, as I have grown fond of saying, **Mercedes Parents**. Galer Street parent Audrey Griffin has generously offered to host this gathering at her lovely home. (Best to keep away from the fishery.)

Attached please find a spreadsheet listing Seattle **Mercedes Parents**. It is imperative that you go over this list and tell me who you can deliver to the PPB. We're looking for the **watershed get** we can then **squawk** as **leverage** toward securing other **Mercedes Parents**. When they all see one another, it will alleviate their fears about Galer Street being a second-tier school and the applications will roll in.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, I'm working on the invite. Get me those names ASAP. We need to take this brunch at the Griffins' house live before Christmas. Saturday, December 11, is my target date. This puppy has all the ingredients of an epic **game changer**.

Cheers,
Ollie-O

• • •

Note from Audrey Griffin
to a blackberry abatement specialist

Tom,

I was out in my garden, cutting back the perennials and planting some winter color in preparation for a school brunch we're hosting on December 11. I went to turn the compost and got attacked by blackberry vines.

I'm shocked to see that they have returned, not only in the

compost pile, but in my raised vegetable beds, greenhouse, and even my worm bin. You can imagine my frustration, especially since you charged me a small fortune to remove them three weeks ago. (Maybe $235 isn't a lot for you, but it's a lot for us.)

Your flyer said you guarantee your work. So, please, could you come back and remove all the blackberries by the 11th, this time for good?

Blessings, and help yourself to some chard,

Audrey

• • •

Note from Tom, the blackberry abatement specialist

Audrey,

I did remove the blackberries on your property. The source of the vines you're talking about is your neighbor's house at the top of the hill. Their blackberries are the ones coming under your fence and into your garden.

To stop them, we could dig a trench at your property line and pour a concrete barrier, but it would need to be five feet deep, and that would be costly. You could also keep on top of them with weed killer, which I'm not sure you want to do because of the worms and the vegetables.

What really has to happen is the neighbor at the top of the hill has to eradicate their vines. I've never seen so many blackberries growing wild in the city of Seattle, especially on Queen Anne Hill, with your home prices. I saw a house on Vashon Island where the whole foundation was cracked by blackberry vines.

Since the neighbor's bushes are on a steep hillside, they're going to need a special machine. The best one is the CXJ Hillside Side-Arm Thrasher. I don't have one of those myself.

Another option, and a better one in my opinion, is large pigs. You can rent a couple, and in a week's time, they'll pull out those

blackberries by the roots and then some. Plus, they're dang cute.

Do you want me to talk to the neighbor? I can go knock on the door. But it looks like nobody lives there.

Let me know.

Tom

• • •

From: Soo-Lin Lee-Segal
To: Audrey Griffin

Audrey,

I told you I'm starting to take the shuttle bus in to work, right? Well, guess who I rode in with this morning? Bernadette's husband, Elgin Branch. (I know why *I* have to save money by taking the Microsoft Connector. But Elgin Branch?) I wasn't certain it was him at first, that's how little we all see of him at school.

So you're going to love this. There was only one seat available, and it was next to Elgin Branch, an inside one between him and the window.

'Excuse me,' I said.

He was furiously typing on his laptop. Without looking up, he moved his knees to the side. I know he's a Level 80 corporate VP, and I'm just an admin. But most gentlemen would stand up to let a woman through. I squeezed past him and sat down.

'Looks like we're going to finally be getting some sunshine,' I said.

'That would be great.'

'I'm really looking forward to World Celebration Day,' I said. He looked a little frightened, like he had no idea who I was. 'I'm Lincoln's mom. From Galer Street.'

'Of course!' he said. 'I'd love to chat, but I've got to get this email out.' He grabbed some headphones from around his

neck, put them over his ears, and returned to his laptop. And get this – his headphones weren't even plugged in! They were those sound-canceling ones! The whole ride to Redmond he never spoke to me again.

Now, Audrey, for the past five years we always figured Bernadette was the ghastly one. Turns out her husband is as rude and antisocial as she is! I was so miffed that when I got to work, I Googled Bernadette Fox. (Something I can't believe I've waited until now to do, considering our unhealthy obsession with her!) Everyone knows Elgin Branch is team leader of Samantha 2 at Microsoft. But when I looked *her* up, nothing appeared. The only Bernadette Fox is some architect in California. I checked all combinations of her name – Bernadette Branch, Bernadette Fox-Branch. But our Bernadette, Bee's mom, doesn't exist as far as the Internet is concerned. Which, these days, is quite an accomplishment in itself.

On another topic, don't you love Ollie-O? I was crushed when Microsoft ten-percented him last year. But if that hadn't happened, we'd never have been able hire him to rebrand our little school.

Here at Microsoft, SteveB just called a town hall for the Monday after Thanksgiving. The rumor mill is going crazy. My PM asked me to book a meeting room for the hours just prior, and I'm hard-pressed to find one. That can mean only one thing: another round of layoffs. (Happy holidays!) Our team leader heard some scuttlebutt that our project was getting canceled, so he found the biggest email thread he could, wrote 'Microsoft is a dinosaur whose stock is going to zero,' then hit Reply All. Never a good thing. Now I'm worried they're going to punish the whole org and that I won't land well. Or I might not land at all! What if that meeting room I booked was for my own firing?

Oh, Audrey, please keep me, Alexandra, and Lincoln in

your prayers. I don't know what I'd do if I got managed out. The benefits here are gold-plated. If I still have a job after the holidays, I'll be happy to cover some of the food costs for the prospective parent brunch.

Soo-Lin

Thursday, November 18

• • •

Note from Audrey Griffin
to the blackberry abatement specialist

Tom,

You'd *think* nobody lives in that big old haunted house above us, judging by the state of their yard. In fact, someone does. Their daughter, Bee, is in Kyle's class at Galer Street. I'd be thrilled to raise the subject of her blackberry bushes with the mother at pickup today.

Pigs? No. No pigs. Do take some chard.

Audrey

• • •

From: Bernadette Fox
To: Manjula Kapoor

I'm ecstatic you said yes!!! I've signed and scanned everything. Here's the deal with Antarctica. It will be three of us, so get two rooms. Elgie has a ton of miles on American, so let's try for three tickets that way. Our winter break dates are December 23 through January 5. If we have to miss a little school, that's fine. And the dog! We must find someplace willing to board a 130-pound, perpetually damp dog. Ooh – I'm late picking up Bee at school. Again, THANK YOU.

Friday, November 19

• • •

Note from Ms. Goodyear
sent home in our weekend folders

Dear Parents,

Word has spread about the incident at pickup yesterday. Luckily, nobody was hurt. But it gives us the opportunity to pause and revisit the rules outlined in the Galer Street handbook. (Italics mine)

Section 2A. Article ii. There are two ways to pick up students.

By Car: Drive your vehicle to the school entrance. Please be mindful not to block the loading dock for Sound Seafood International.

On Foot: Please park in the north lot and meet your children on the canal path. *In the spirit of safety and efficiency, we ask that parents on foot do not approach the drive-up area.*

It always inspires me that we have such a wonderful community of parents who are so engaged with one another. However, the safety of our students is always top priority. So let's use what happened to Audrey Griffin as a teachable moment, and remember to save our conversations for coffee, not the driveway.

Kindly,
Gwen Goodyear
Head of School

Emergency-room bill Audrey Griffin gave to me to give to Mom

Patient name: Audrey Griffin
Attending Physician: C. Cassella

Emergency Room Visitation Fee	900.00
X Ray (Elective, NOT COVERED)	425.83
R: Vicodin 10MG (15 tablets, 0 refills)	95.70
Crutch Rental (Elective, NOT COVERED)	173.00
Crutch Deposit:	75.00
TOTAL	1,669.53

Notes: Visual inspection and basic neurological examination revealed no injury. Patient in acute emotional distress, demanded X Ray, Vicodin, and crutches.

• • •

From: Soo-Lin Lee-Segal
To: Audrey Griffin

I heard Bernadette tried to run you over at pickup! Are you OK? Should I come by with dinner? WHAT HAPPENED?

• • •

From: Audrey Griffin
To: Soo-Lin Lee-Segal

It's all true. I needed to talk to Bernadette about her blackberry bushes, which are growing down her hill, under my fence, and invading my garden. I was forced to hire a specialist, who said Bernadette's blackberries are going to destroy the foundation of my home.

Naturally, I wanted to have a friendly chat with Bernadette. So I walked up to her car while she was in the pickup line. Mea culpa! But how else are you ever going to get a word with that woman? She's like Franklin Delano Roosevelt. You see her only from the waist up, driving past. I don't think she has once gotten out of her car to walk Bee into school.

I tried talking to her, but her windows were rolled up and she pretended not to see me. You'd think she was the first lady of France, with her silk scarf flung just so and huge dark glasses. I knocked on her windshield, but she drove off.

Over my foot! I went to the emergency room and got an incompetent doctor, who refused to accept that there was anything wrong with me.

Honestly, I don't know who I'm more furious at, Bernadette Fox or Gwen Goodyear, for calling me out in the Friday Folder. You'd think *I* did something wrong! And mentioning me, but not Bernadette, by name! I created the Diversity Council. I invented Donuts for Dads. I wrote Galer Street's mission statement, which that fancy company in Portland was going to charge us ten thousand dollars for.

Maybe Galer Street is happy renting in an industrial park. Maybe Galer Street doesn't want the stability of owning its new campus. Maybe Gwen Goodyear would like me to cancel the Prospective Parent Brunch. I have a call in to her now. I'm not the least bit happy.

The phone is ringing. It's her.

Monday, November 22

• • •

Note from Ms. Goodyear sent home in the Monday Messenger

Dear Parents,

This is to clarify that Bernadette Fox, Bee Branch's mother, was driving the vehicle that ran over the other parent's foot. I hope you all had a wonderful weekend despite the rain.

Kindly,
Gwen Goodyear
Head of School

• • •

If someone had asked me, I could have told them what happened at pickup. It took me awhile to get in the car because Mom always brings Ice Cream and lets her sit in the front. Once that dog gets the front seat, she does not like to give it up. So Ice Cream was doing the thing she does when she wants to get her way, which is to go completely rigid and stare straight ahead.

'Mom!' I said. 'You shouldn't let her get in the front—'

'She just jumped in.' Mom pulled Ice Cream's collar and I shoved her butt and after a lot of grunting, Ice Cream finally got in the back. But she didn't sit on the seat like a normal dog. She stood on the floor squished behind the front seat, with this miserable look on her face, like, See what you guys make me do?

'Oh, stop being such a drama queen,' Mom said to her.

I got buckled in. Suddenly Audrey Griffin started running toward the car all stiff and out of rhythm. You could just tell she hadn't run in about ten years.

'Oh, boy,' Mom said. 'What is it now?'

Audrey Griffin's eyes were wild, and she had a big smile as usual, and she was shaking a piece of paper at us. Her gray hair was coming out of its ponytail, and she was wearing clogs, and under her down vest you could see the pleats on her jeans bulging out. It was hard not to watch.

Señora Flores, who was on traffic duty, gave us the signal to keep it moving because there was a huge line of cars and the Sound Seafood guy was videotaping the traffic jam. Audrey motioned for us to pull over.

Mom was wearing dark glasses like she always does, even when it rains. 'For all that gnat knows,' Mom muttered, 'I don't see her.'

We drove off and that was that. I know for a fact we didn't run over anybody's foot. I love Mom's car, but riding in that thing is like 'The Princess and the Pea'. If Mom had run over something as big as a human foot, it would have set off the air bags.

• • •

Tuesday, November 23

From: Bernadette Fox
To: Manjula Kapoor

Attached please find a scan of an emergency room bill I suppose I should pay. One of the gnats at Galer Street claims I ran over her foot at pickup. I would laugh at the whole thing, but I'm too bored. See, that's why I call the mothers there 'gnats.' Because they're annoying, but not so annoying that you actually want to spend valuable energy on them. These gnats have done everything to provoke me into a fight over the past nine years – the stories I could tell! Now that Bee is graduating and I can smell the barn, it's not worth waging a gnat battle over. Could you check our

various insurance policies to see if something covers it? On second thought, let's just straight-up pay the bill. Elgie wouldn't want our rates rising over something so trifling. He's never understood my antipathy toward the gnats.

All this Antarctica stuff is fantastic! Get us two Class B Queen rooms. I'm scanning our passports, where you'll find our birthdates, exact spelling of names, and all that other good stuff. I've thrown in driver's licenses and SS numbers just to be safe. You'll see on Bee's passport that her given name is Balakrishna Branch. (Let's just say I was under a lot of stress, and it seemed like a good idea at the time.) I realize that her plane ticket has to read 'Balakrishna.' But when it comes to the boat – nametag, passenger manifest, etc. – please move heaven and earth to make sure the divine child is listed as 'Bee.'

I see there's a packing list. Why don't you get us three of everything. I'm a women's medium, Elgie a men's XL, not for his girth but because he's six foot three without an ounce of flab, God bless him. Bee is small for her age, so why don't you get her whatever would fit a ten-year-old. If you have questions about size and style, send us several to try on, as long as returns require nothing more from me than leaving a box outside for the UPS guy. Also, get all suggested books, which Elgie and Bee will devour, and which I will *intend* to devour.

I'd also like a fishing vest, one replete with zippered pockets. Back when I actually enjoyed leaving the house, I sat on a plane next to an environmentalist who spent his life zigzagging the globe. He had on a fishing vest, which contained his passport, money, glasses, and film canisters – yes, film, it was that long ago. The genius part: everything's in one place, it's handy, it's zipped in, plus you can whip it off and plop it down on the X-ray belt. I always said to myself:

next time I travel, I'm going to get me one of those. My time has come. You'd better get two.

Have it all shipped to the manse. You're the best!

• • •

From: Manjula Kapoor
To: Bernadette Fox

Dear Ms. Fox,

I have received your instructions regarding the packing list and will proceed accordingly. What is manse? I do not find it in any of my records.

Warm regards,
Manjula

• • •

From: Bernadette Fox
To: Manjula Kapoor

You know what it's like when you go to Ikea and you can't believe how cheap everything is, and even though you may not *need* a hundred tea lights, my God, they're only ninety-nine cents for the whole bag? Or: Sure, the throw pillows are filled with a squishy ball of no-doubt toxic whatnot, but they're so bright and three-for-five-dollars that before you know it you've dropped five hundred bucks, not because you needed any of this crap, but because it was so damn *cheap?*

Of course you don't. But if you did, you'd know what Seattle real estate was like for me.

I came up here on a whim, pretty much. We'd been living in L.A. when Elgie's animation company was bought by Big Brother. Whoops, did I say Big Brother? I meant Microsoft. Around the same time, I'd had a Huge Hideous Thing happen

to me (which we definitely do not need to get into). Let's just say that it was so huge and so hideous that it made me want to flee L.A. and never return.

Even though Elgie didn't *need* to relocate to Seattle, Big Brother strongly recommended it. I was more than happy to use it as an excuse to hightail it out of La-La Land.

My first trip up here, to Seattle, the realtor picked me up at the airport to look at houses. The morning batch were all Craftsman, which is all they have here, if you don't count the rash of view-busting apartment buildings that appear in inexplicable clumps, as if the zoning chief was asleep at his desk during the sixties and seventies and turned architectural design over to the Soviets.

Everything else is Craftsman. Turn-of-the-century Craftsman, beautifully restored Craftsman, reinterpretation of Craftsman, needs-some-love Craftsman, modern take on Craftsman. It's like a hypnotist put everyone from Seattle in a collective trance. *You are getting sleepy, when you wake up you will want to live only in a Craftsman house, the year won't matter to you, all that will matter is that the walls will be thick, the windows tiny, the rooms dark, the ceilings low, and it will be poorly situated on the lot.*

The main thing about this cornucopia of Craftsmans: compared to L.A., they were Ikea-cheap!

Ryan, the realtor, took me to lunch downtown at a Tom Douglas restaurant. Tom Douglas is a local chef who has a half-dozen restaurants, each one better than the next. Eating at Lola – that coconut cream pie! that garlic spread! – made me believe I could actually be happy making a life for myself in this Canada-close sinkhole they call the Emerald City. I blame you, Tom Douglas!

After lunch, we headed to the realtor's car for the afternoon rounds. Looming over downtown was a hill crammed with, say what, Craftsman houses. At the top of the hill, on the left,

I could discern a brick building with a huge yard overlooking Elliott Bay.

'What's that?' I asked Ryan.

'Straight Gate,' he said. 'It was a Catholic school for wayward girls built at the turn of the century.'

'What is it now?' I said.

'Oh, it hasn't been anything for years. Every so often some developer tries to convert it to condos.'

'So it's for sale?'

'It was supposed to be converted into *eight* condos,' he said. Then, his eyes began to pirouette, sensing a sale. 'The property is three whole acres, mostly flat. Plus, you own the entire hillside, which you can't build on, but it does ensure privacy. Gatehouse – which is what the developers renamed it because Straight Gate seemed antigay – is about twelve thousand square feet, loaded with charm. There is some deferred maintenance, but we're talking crown jewel.'

'How much are they asking?'

Ryan gave a dramatic pause. 'Four hundred thousand.' He watched with satisfaction as my jaw dropped. The other houses we'd seen were the same price, and they were on tiny lots.

Turns out the huge yard had been deeded to open space for tax purposes, and the Queen Anne Neighborhood Association had designated Straight Gate a historic site, which made it impossible to touch the exterior or interior walls. So the Straight Gate School for Girls was stuck in building-code limbo.

'But the area is zoned for single-family residences,' I said.

'Let's take a look-see.' Ryan shoved me into his car.

In terms of layout, it was kind of brilliant. The basement – where the girls were penned, it appeared, from the dungeon door that locked from the outside – was certainly creepy and depressing. But it was five thousand square feet, which left

seven thousand feet above-grade, a swell size for a house. On the ground floor was a kitchen opening onto a dining room – pretty fabulous – a huge receiving area that could be our living room, and a couple of small offices. On the second floor was a chapel with stained-glass windows and a row of confessionals. Perfect for a master bedroom and closet! The other rooms could be a kid's room and a guest room. All that was required was cosmetic: weatherproofing, refinishing, paint. A cinch.

Standing on the back portico, facing west, I noticed ferry boats gliding like snails along the water.

'Where are they going?' I asked.

'Bainbridge Island.' Ryan answered. No dummy, he added, 'Lots of people have second homes out there.'

I stayed an extra day and grabbed a beach house, too.

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From: Manjula Kapoor
To: Bernadette Fox

Dear Ms. Fox,

The items on the packing list will be shipped to the Gate Avenue address.

Warm regards,
Manjula

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From: Bernadette Fox
To: Manjula Kapoor

Oh! Could you make dinner reservations for us on Thanksgiving? You can call up the Washington Athletic Club and get us something for 7 PM for three. You *are* able to place calls, aren't you? Of course, what am I