

The Year of Yes

The True Story of a Girl, a Few Hundred Dates, and Fate

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Extract

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A Day in the Life of a Naysayer

In Which Our Heroine Decides to Start Saying Yes ...

That woman speaks eighteen languages,
and can't say "no" in any of them.

– Dorothy Parker

IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT THAT YOU are young, female, and appallingly, possibly unattractively, well read. You grew up in a small town in Idaho, but now you live in New York City, the most exciting and romantic place in the country, and feasibly in the world. According to the literature you're choosing to apply to your current situation (you've carefully forgotten that you ever read *Last Exit to Brooklyn*), you are supposed to be wearing sequins to breakfast and getting your hand kissed by a heterosexual version of Cole Porter. Incandescently intelligent men are supposed to be toasting you with Dom Perignon. Instead, you're sharing a cockroach-ridden outer-borough apartment with two roommates and one dysfunctional cat. You're spending your evenings sitting on your kitchen floor, drinking poisonous red jug wine, and quoting Sartre. Hell is not only other people, it is you, too. You're not getting laid, because even if you were meeting something other than substandard men, you don't have a

bedroom to call your own. And instead of the smoldering, soul-baring, Abelard-to-Heloise-sans-castration solicitations you rightfully deserve, you're getting stupefying lines like: "I'm listening to NPR. Do you want to come over and make out?"

That would be a direct quote.

Let me back up. Seven a.m. on February 14th, and I was lying on my lumpy mattress, alone again. The noises of NYC had ceased to metamorphose into the hopeful bird trills and tender love songs I'd imagined when I'd first arrived, a year before, and instead sounded like what they were: garbage trucks, honking horns, and the occasional cockroach scuttle. Granted, my last doomed relationship had been significantly more crow than canary, and more Nirvana than Sinatra. Still, it was Valentine's Day, and I was considering a backslide. It didn't matter that ceasing communication with my most recent disaster, Martyrman, an actor twice my age and half my maturity, had unquestionably been the right decision. It didn't matter how many times I told myself that I was the brain-washed victim of propaganda created by sugar lobbyists in order to engender mass consumption of chocolate. Waking up on February 14th without someone to love was depressing.

I was becoming convinced that I was going to be lonely for the rest of my life. It wasn't that I wasn't meeting men. I was. It was just that they all drove me crazy. I was not a member of a modern-day Algonquin Round Table, populated with the pretty, witty, and wise, as I'd moved to New York envisioning I'd be. Instead, I was a denizen of something more along the lines of the Holiday Inn Card Table,

populated with the zitty, twitty, and morally compromised. I wasn't yet to the point of Dorothy Parker's infamous quote – "Ducking for apples. Change one letter and it's the story of my life." – but that was only because I didn't have time to approach my own bed, let alone anyone else's. The main problem of living in the city that never slept was that neither did I.

When I got home from my usual exhausting day of racing uptown and downtown between classes at NYU and my various temp jobs, all I did was crumple up on my mattress, muttering to myself and reading books that made my problems worse. The night before, for example, when the front neighbor's lullaby of sternum-thumping bass had made it clear to me that I wouldn't be sleeping, I'd picked up *Prometheus Bound*. Reading Aeschylus had thrown me into a waking nightmare of being stretched on a rock, my liver plucked at by rapacious turtledoves.

Somewhere nearby, someone was practicing an aria from *The Ring Cycle*. Whoever was singing Brunhilde was flat. Worse than that, someone small, soprano, and canine was singing harmony, sharp. My downstairs neighbor, Pierre LaValle, had started his daily apartment sanitization process. For someone with linoleum floors, the man had an unhealthy relationship with his vacuum. Add to this the revival tent set up at the end of the adjacent block, the house party two buildings down, and the fact that the back neighbor's illegal psycho rooster couldn't tell headlights from sunlight, and the night was pretty much a wash.

The opera singer switched to "What's Love Got to Do With It?" The canine backup started in on a rousing coun-

terpoint of “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun.” I let fury course through my veins. My sleep deprivation was partially my own fault, admittedly, but since I hadn’t had a good time the night before, I was blaming it on everyone else.

I’d arrived home at 3:00 a.m., having spent the evening with a fellow New York University student. We’d eaten Korean barbecue, discussed Kierkegaard, and split the check in half, despite the fact that he’d eaten four times more than I. He’d then tried, and failed, to wheedle the traditionally clad waitress’s phone number from her “perfectly symmetrical lips.” At the subway, he’d given me a rubbery smooch on the cheek and told me he thought we’d really had a meeting of the minds.

I levered the window open and stuck my hungover head outside. Everything looked bleak. I felt disturbingly Steinbeckian, as though, at any moment, I might find myself begging my roommates to “tell me about the rabbits.” My life was a great big fat NO. It wasn’t like I didn’t want to be happy. It just seemed that happiness was eluding me.

My landlady, Gamma, was standing outside in our Astroturfed courtyard, feeding a pack of feral cats a platter of shriveled hot dogs. Gamma’s six-year-old granddaughters, the twins, were sharing a ketchup-covered hot dog with a notch-eared tabby. One bite to each child, one to the tomcat. Gamma was not known for her vigilance.

“Probably rain,” Gamma announced.

“Probably flood,” I said. Never mind the clear skies. I was embracing pessimism.

“World’s ending sometime next week,” Gamma informed me. Gamma liked to talk about only two things:

the Apocalypse and the Weather Channel. One of the twins gave a war whoop, and pitched the rest of the hot dog at my window. It landed inches from my face and slid down the building. The twins shrieked with mirth.

“What do you think you’re laughing about?” demanded Gamma, and herded them indoors. It was clear from the rear view that one of the twins had wet her pants in the excitement. This was my home. These were my neighbors, the urban equivalents of the hicks I’d been desperate to leave behind in my home state of Idaho. Give Gamma and company a little more space, and they’d have had a few rusted-out cars, some scrabbly hounds, and a stockpile of *The Book of Mormon*. I’d thought things would be different here. No.



“NO,” I SAID, TO THE WORLD AT LARGE. “No. No. No.” I thought that maybe if I chanted it enough times, all the aggravating things in my life would stumble away into oblivion. Then I’d be free to have the existence I wanted, something much more glamorous and gratifying.

The “no” was nothing new. It had, after all, been the first word I’d ever spoken. There were photos of me, posing prissily as an infant, my arms crossed over my chest, and a look of pointed fury on my face. By the time I was two, the initial no had become a string of nyets, neins, and the occasional sarcastic ha! I’d swiftly learned to read, and books had been the end of any social aptitude I might have possessed. I’d retreated from whatever unsatisfactory experience was coming my way, be it hamburgers (I was,

from birth, vegetarian) or PE class (steadfast refusal to play for anyone but myself caused issues with team sports), a volume of something clenched firmly in my hand. My mother maintains that I wasn't rude, but I think about the kind of child I must have been, interspersing meows (my cats were my only real friends, and I'd developed an unfortunate nervous tic that caused me to meow in stressful situations) with the vocabulary of a seventeenth-century noblewoman, and I do not know how I survived my childhood. Time was spent in both Special Education and Gifted and Talented programs.

From a second grade report card: "Maria has a good sense of humor, but doesn't tend toward social interaction and instead just laughs to herself. She could also use some supervision when it comes to her school clothes."

I'd learned to use a sewing machine at the age of seven. Sometimes I came to school dressed in quilt fragments and safety-pinned togas.

In high school, I got in massive trouble during an assembly, because I'd laughed at soon-to-be-elected Congresswoman Helen Chenoweth, who'd pleaded ignorance of her own policies. I was not the only person in opposition (Chenoweth turned out to be embarrassing even to the Republicans – in 1996, when her GOP primary opponent stripped nearly naked during a televised interview, and spent the month prior to the election in a psych ward, he still got 32 percent of the vote), but I was the only one dumb enough to think that everyone else would laugh, too. Moreover, I was, alas, sitting in the front row, wearing a ruffled orange frock and purple combat boots. When Chenoweth started crying, her cohort, Senator

Larry Craig, shook his finger in my face and told me that I was a “very, *very* bad girl.” It was a familiar theme. The only thing that kept me from being expelled was my friend Ira petitioning the principal with the suggestion that I was “a little bit retarded.” My mode of existence obviously didn’t work for everyone, and half the time it didn’t work for me, either, but I was resigned. It was how I was made. I was a protestor. I was such a protestor that I regularly protested things that might have been good for me.

When I’d moved to New York, after high school, I’d begun to suddenly, miraculously, sort of fit in. Unfortunately, I’d said no to so many things that I wasn’t sure how to say yes anymore. This was problematic, considering that what I’d thought I’d wanted had turned out to be a shifting target, and that every day, the city gave me new things to say yes to, things I’d resoundingly denied in the past. My nos had begun to tremble, particularly in the dating category. I’d tentatively started saying yes, but it had turned out that my judgment of who to bestow my yeses upon was deeply flawed. After a year in New York City, I’d dated plenty of people, but none that had even come close to whatever I thought my ideal was. That was the other problem. I was looking for something different, but I didn’t know what it was.

Certainly nothing that was outside my window. Across the way, I could see my neighbors wandering around half-naked. It seemed that everyone in my neighborhood was always in a state of unappealing undress. Not only that, they were always screaming at each other, even at 7:00 in the morning.

a man who wore sweater vests, any more than I could date a man who was a mime. Everybody had phobias. Sweater vests threw me back, not to my charming grandpa, as they would some people, but to my skeezy high school geometry teacher, who had recently gone on trial for attempting to calculate the surface area of his female students' breasts. (My phobia of mimes was simpler: I was a playwright, and words were my business. I took miming as a personal insult, but more on that later ...)

The Director, with his sweater vests, with his husky voice, was not my first choice for someone I wanted to speak to at 7:30 in the morning. I liked him, but I didn't like him like that. We were supposed to see a play that night, and he was suggesting we meet up earlier. I said sure, but that I was still in my pajamas. He said he was really looking forward to seeing me, I said great and tried to say good-bye, and then, something went very wrong.

"I'm listening to NPR," he suddenly stammered. "Do you want to come over and make out?"

Well. I was finally going nuts. It was about time. Other people in my family were nuts. Why had I thought I'd been skipped?

"I didn't quite hear you," I said, just to make sure I was really losing it.

"I'm listening to NPR," the Director repeated. "Do you want to come over and make out?"

It wasn't a delusion. He'd offered me a radio rendezvous. Making out to *Morning Edition*. I had one question.

WHOSE LIFE WAS THIS?

"Is it for me?" yelled my roommate Victoria, but I didn't respond. I was itemizing the things I'd said to the

Director that might have caused him to think that National Public Radio turned me on. I could think of nothing. I liked public radio, of course. Who didn't? But my attraction was strictly platonic.



A TINY LITTLE EXISTENTIAL crisis began to nibble at the back of my left eyeball. Maybe it had been there for a while, and I just hadn't noticed it. My life left little time for reflection, given that my typical day involved rising at 5:30 a.m. to write a paper I'd inevitably forgotten, flying to the subway in order to get to NYU in time to attend an 8:00 a.m. lecture, where I'd usually fall asleep, flinging myself onto the train again for five or six hours of midtown temping, then a mad dash downtown for a few more hours of classes. I'd get home, write half a play, then go out again for a rehearsal until midnight, at which point I'd return home, write some more, and fall into bed for my usual three hours of sleep. I was fried. Most of my energy was spent on surviving, and I filled in the gaps in my nights with a series of unsuccessful love affairs.

At some point, my dissatisfaction had hit critical mass, and things had started to overflow. The Director didn't really deserve my contempt. He was probably just trying to woo me in some new and intellectually stimulating way, but the result of his comment was an extreme allergic reaction. NPR? What had I done to make the Director think he could get into my pants with NPR? I knew some kinky people, but I didn't know anyone who'd spread her legs for *Car Talk*.

I needed coffee, I needed sleep, and I needed better judgment when it came to men. In the scant year I'd lived in New York City, I'd accumulated a sheaf of romantic failures roughly comparable in length to *Remembrance of Things Past*. There were entire genres of food I now had to avoid as a result of Proust's madeleine effect; memories of bad dates that I didn't want to conjure up with an errant bite of ramen noodle. Because many of my worst debacles had occurred in dives misleadingly named Emerald Garden and the Cottage, I was having to avoid cheap Chinese food, normally a collegiate staple, altogether. Not to mention art house movie theaters, the NYU library, and basically all of Bleecker Street.

"Is it Brittany?" asked my other roommate, Zak, trying to grab the receiver. Brittany was his girlfriend that week, and I was lobbying heavily against her. Zak usually dated what I called Perilously-Close-to-Underage Nymphets, and what he called "Oh God! So Hot!!"

I shook my head at Zak, and pressed the heel of my hand into my eye socket. The existential crisis had grown into something the size and shape of a hamster. I moaned.

"That sounds pretty good," said the Director.

"I have a headache," I protested, weakly.

"I can fix that," said the Director. There was a growl in his voice, the kind of anticipatory rasp usually heard in commercials for sex hotlines.

"*Mrrroooooow*," said Big White Cat, our demonic angora adoptee, introducing his claws to my pajama pants. On Big White Cat's list of favored things to annihilate, silk was second only to expensive leather jackets belonging to visitors. He'd been an inadvertent acquisi-

tion, a friend-of-a-friend cat-sitting episode made permanent when his actor-owner went on tour and abandoned him. Big White had a Dickensian past: The actor had abducted him from a front lawn in Alabama, during a production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and named him Mr. Dissel, after his character in the play. I liked my cats dark, sleek, and self-sufficient. Big White (we couldn't bring ourselves to call him Mr. Dissel) was needy and bitchy, not to mention fluffy. It was yet another example of how my life had gone awry.

"NO," I yelled, prying Big White Cat's talons out of my thigh, and forgetting to cover the receiver.

"But, *Morning Edition* is on," said the Director, trying to somehow excuse himself.

"You're kidding," I informed him, attempting to keep my crisis contained. Surely, he didn't think that NPR was my open sesame. We hadn't even kissed!

"I'm not, actually," he said, sounding a little hurt.

"No? Come on!" I laughed uproariously, hoping to lead him to confess that he'd been joking. Even if he had to lie. Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!

"So, you're not coming?" His voice seemed to be trembling.

I stopped laughing, chagrined.

"You know, I guess I'm not," I said, trying to modulate my tone into that of a Compassionate Rejecter.

"Right. Good-bye, then." Dial tone.

Damn it. Now he'd go out into the world, telling all our mutual acquaintances that I'd brutally laughed at his heartfelt declaration. And I really wasn't a bad person! I tried to be kind! Unfortunately, for every pleasant date I

had, there were equally as many messes. I got asked out frequently. It wasn't that I was gorgeous; I wasn't. In my opinion, and in the opinions of plenty of people in my past, I was distinctly odd looking. It was location. The Hallowed Halls of Academe were known for their tendency toward echoing loneliness, unnatural partnerships, and flat-out desperation. As a result, a significant percentage of my recent life had been spent dashing through campus buildings, my collar pulled up to hide my face from the scattered tribe of the Miserably Enamored – NYU men who'd spend hours comparing me to Lady Chatterley, who'd try to pass off Philip Glass compositions as their own, who'd diagram their desire for me in interpretive dance cycles pilfered from Martha Graham. This might have been fine for some girls, but it wasn't turning me on. At all. Maybe it was ego run amok, but I thought I deserved better.

The existential crisis was now the size of a rabbit. It beat its back feet against my sinuses and gnawed a piece of my brain. The crisis grew into a rat terrier, then a mule, then an elephant. It trumpeted. It stomped and shook my foundations, and then unfurled a banner, which informed me that I would never be happy. No one would ever, ever love me. Furthermore, I would never love anyone, because, in fact, I was incapable of love. My life was going to be a ninety-year no.

I frantically opened my address book and searched it for someone, anyone, who'd moved me, who'd been good in both bed and brain. No. A slew of the so-so. A list of the losers and the irrevocably lost. And, oh yes, my mom. I shut the book, nauseated.

The existential crisis had evolved into a dinosaur. It opened its toothy maw, raised its shrunken front legs, and gave me a mean pair of jazz hands.

“You’re screwed, baby, seriously screwed,” it sang, in the voice of Tom Waits.

Senior year of high school, I’d written a play, the title of which, *Tyrannosaurus Sex*, had been censored to *Tyrannosaurus* ... At the time, I’d been bitter, but now it occurred to me that I much preferred the ellipses to the actuality. The whole world of sex and love had turned out to be far too much like living in the Land of the Lost. I’d wander across lava-spattered plains for a while, miserably lonely, and then run into some Lizard King, who would seem nice, until he bared his teeth and went in for a big bite of my heart. Even more depressingly, there’d been times when the lizard had behaved perfectly pleasantly, but I’d somehow found myself spitting and roasting him anyway. True Love combined with Great Sex was the goal, but I had a feeling I was going to end up fossilized before I found anything close. I held my head in my hands and whimpered.

Zak approached, cautiously. He shook two Tylenol into his hand and offered them to me, patting my shoulder. He’d had significant personal experience with existential crises, usually related to the same topic as mine: love, and lack thereof. I swallowed.



I FELT LIKE I’D DATED and then hated every man in Manhattan. This was, I reminded myself, not strictly true. In fact, I’d gone out with a lot of writers and actors, a lot

of academics – the kind of men who maintained hundred-thousand-dollar debts as a result of graduate school, the kind who possessed PhDs in Tragedy. In order to attend NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts Dramatic Writing Program, I’d moved sight unseen from Idaho to New York, dragging all my worldly belongings in a bedraggled caravan of psychedelic pink Samsonite suitcases from the Salvation Army. I’d had my fortune of four hundred scraped-together dollars hidden in my bra, because my mom had told me I’d probably get mugged immediately upon leaving the airplane.

Taylor, a brilliant actor I’d met the summer before, had speedily taken the role of my only friend in the city and met me at JFK.

“You have to learn to take the subway sometime,” he’d announced.

I was fully ignorant of mass transit, and had to be led onto the train. Upon disembarking into the flattening heat and humidity of August, we’d discovered that we were roughly five thousand miles from my dormitory. Taylor had manfully carried most of my luggage, as I’d begun to have a total nervous breakdown and was unfit to be responsible for anything but my backpack. The elevators in my building were, of course, broken, so Taylor had lugged the endless bags up eleven flights of stairs. Then he’d taken me to a burrito joint, bought me a beer, and told me it would be okay.

Taylor’d been right. I’d fallen in love with New York City anyway. In the crippling Caucasian Potato State, my olive skin and brown hair (“ethnic”) had rendered me dateless. Revise. I’d been asked out, yes, but I’d never any

intention of accepting the offers. Only creepy people liked me. Gray-ponytailed hippies often stalked me at all-ages poetry slams, reciting lascivious odes that referred to me as “a luminous, nubile woman-child.” They’d get my mom’s number from information, and then call incessantly, inviting me to accompany them to the beatnik mecca of Denny’s for “coffee and cigarettes.” No thanks. I’d been delighted to discover that the men of New York City were not only ponytail free, they had no reservations about my skin tone.

I’d met the first of my failures only hours after hitting the city. He was a dweeby Cinema Studies major from Cincinnati, who did not, in all the time I knew him, ever manage to zip his fly. It had only gone downhill from there, but still, I’d been dazzled by the dating options available to me: Men with Books! Men with Biceps! Men with Encyclopedic Knowledge of French Farce! I’d felt like I’d been wandering in a cultural desert for my entire life, and had miraculously stumbled upon a shimmering city of intellectual splendor, every man bearing a bejeweled braincase. It was a mirage, of course, but that hadn’t kept me from repeatedly immersing myself in its sand dunes.

I’d wasted the year flinging myself into abortive relationships with a bunch of brilliant losers. I’d been forced to imagine myself as a thesis committee, so that my dates could practice defending dissertations on such varied topics as Misery and Maiming in the Russian Literary Canon; Masturbation Metaphor in Shakespeare – A Design for Contemporary Life; and Images of Insects in the Films of David Lynch. I’d spent a month or two in

Drama with Donatello, an NYU graduate film student who preyed on freshmen. He was Haitian, via rich parents in Florida, and in possession of a rickety skateboard on which he could perpetually be seen flying half-drunk from the marble banisters of historic campus buildings. He'd been so peerlessly self-confident that he'd managed to convince me he was necessary to my emotional development, and thus had enjoyed the privilege of torturing me with a recurrent alleged joke: "You're so racist. I can't believe you don't see it."

"If I'm racist, why am I hanging out with you?" I'd point out. But his argument involved subtleties, like me being inherently against ethnic mingling even as I was kissing him. He'd taken me on a date to a screening of the unfortunate 1952 Orson Welles blackface *Othello*. During the Desdemona murder scene, he'd stage-whispered, so loudly that every cinephile in the theater could hear him, "Are you worried?"

I felt that I somehow might have deserved this. It was a given that I was underexposed to any kind of racial diversity. Maybe I *was* racist, and just didn't know it. I was white, after all, even though in Idaho I'd been frequently assumed to be Mexican. Anytime I'd foolishly admitted my home state (which had been, for many wretched years, the homebase of the Aryan Nation's skinhead compound), people would say things like, "Huh. So you're a neo-Nazi?" Donatello had been ingeniously confrontational with everyone. One day, walking on Broadway with him, me hoping that we were finally having romance, he'd pounced for an hour on a Hare Krishna, "just because."

We'd finally imploded one morning in my dorm room, as he'd meticulously directed the application of my makeup, forming his hands into the universal symbol for "I Am Now Framing a Shot." Initially, I'd been flattered, but then he'd started using the close-up to point out zits. When I'd thrown him out, he'd earnestly declared that he'd expected to be my boyfriend for "seven years, but now you've fucked it up, so it's your loss." Then, he'd called for weeks, aggrieved that I was no longer speaking to him. I'd picked up the phone once.

"No," I'd said.

"No, what?"

"Just. No."

It wasn't that I had anything against intellectual men. I liked them. Indeed, I sought them. The problems happened later. We'd be on the verge of kissing, and they'd suddenly lurch away, whispering irrelevant lines clearly memorized in high school. Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" was a favorite recitation among college-age males. "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness," indeed. I was unravish'd far too often for my taste. "Never, never canst thou kiss" seemed to be a life philosophy for some of my paramours. One guy, engaged in the study of possibly pedophilic Victorian authors, had given me a scrap of "Jabberwocky" ("And, as in uffish thought he stood/The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame/Came whiffling through the tulgey wood/And burred as it came!") before attempting to do something that I speedily decided was anatomically inadvisable. Other guys tried quoting the drunken renegade poet Charles Bukowski's "love is a dog from hell." Frankly, I was weary of hearing about dogs as

an excuse for not being able to deal with pussy. The poem was about neither dogs nor love. The title was the best thing about it. This was often the case with men, as well as poems. When I'd called my mom to tell her I was going out with a PhD in English Literature, it had sounded terrific. But what it'd really meant was that I was planning to subject myself to endless discussions of *Middlemarch*, capped off with the theoretically kinky suggestion that I pull a George Eliot and crossdress. An evening with a sensitive Virginia Woolf expert had ended with him gently closing his apartment door, and suggesting that perhaps "you just need a room of your own."

I did not want a room of my own! I just wanted to find a guy I wouldn't mind sharing a room with. It didn't seem too much to ask. New York City was theoretically populated with the most attractive and intelligent men in the world. I could think of no explanation for my failure. Except that, as Shakespeare would no doubt have informed me, the fault was not in my stars, but in myself. Or rather, in my no policy. I'd always believed that I knew exactly what was good for me, but clearly this wasn't true. I was no longer a trustworthy guardian of my heart. I was twenty years old, and I hated everything.

I was sick of the intelligentsia. I was sick of poetry. I was sick of theses and screenings of student films. I was sick of sweltering theaters, populated with unintelligible actors in Kabuki makeup and vinyl loincloths. I was sick of expensively disheveled tweed jackets and designer spectacles.

I was sick of the species of man I was meeting.

I was from Idaho, goddamn it! The Wild West! I wanted to meet a real man! Well. Maybe not a cowboy. I'd

had significant interaction with cowboys, and it had been less than positive. At some point, in high school, I'd seen one engaged in intimate dealings with a bovine. I was a vegetarian. Anything that enjoyed meat, in that way, had no business coming near me. And, since I was being specific, maybe I didn't want a banker. And maybe not a trucker. And maybe not a lawyer, a construction worker, a fireman, a goth, a taxi driver, a mime, a Republican, anyone with blond eyelashes, anyone in tight jeans, anyone I knew ...

And maybe I was a bit too judgmental.

"Zak?" I called to the kitchen. "Am I too critical?"

"Is that a question?"

"Vic?"

"Obviously," said Vic. "That's why we get along." Victoria and I had met as assigned roommates in the NYU dorms, and become friends largely because we hated everyone else.

Fine. I could change. I could switch my acid-green tinted glasses for a rose-colored pair.



IT WAS TIME FOR A NEW POLICY. I decided, in that moment, to do with men as I'd done with books. Read them all.

In seventh grade, I'd started in the A section of the library, and by the end of high school, I'd made it to N, checking out twenty books at a time. If only life were like the library! My mother had no idea the kind of guys I'd met between the stacks. F. Scott Fitzgerald. Allen Ginsberg.

John Irving. Franz Kafka. D. H. Lawrence. Some hadn't even been guys. Marguerite Duras. Anaïs Nin. Toni Morrison. Between A and N, there was not only a lot of great writing, there was a lot of hot literary sex. Granted, I'd allowed myself, by F, the luxury of judging books solely by their covers, and I'd been doing it ever since, probably to my love life's detriment. At J, I'd been at once daunted by, and desirous of, James Joyce. My gaze had wandered to the Rs. *The Satanic Verses* seemed an easy read in comparison with *Finnegans Wake*. What could be more enticing to a rebellious teenage girl than a fatwa? Once I was in the Rs anyway, I'd taken a foray into the smutty paradise of Tom Robbins, with whom I'd fallen rather speedily out of love. He had far too many sex scenes involving things that did not sound pleasurable to me. Goat horns. Engagement rings lost in cavernous vaginas. I'd fled Robbins for *Ulysses*, where the proclivities of Molly Bloom had scared me even more.

Regardless of the overall quality, I had, with my reading policy, found plenty of things I'd liked. I'd found authors I would never have given a second glance, predisposed as I'd initially been toward pretty covers and Piers Anthony. Surely, I reasoned, it'd be the same with guys. If I just went out with all of them, there'd have to be some in there that I'd want to read again. See again. Either.



AND SO, I DECIDED that I would say yes to every man who asked me out on a date. I'd go out with all of them, at least once. I'd stop pretending to be deaf when my taxi

drivers tried to tell me I was cute. I'd stop pretending to be crazy when strange guys walked too close to me on the street. I'd turn toward them, and smile. And if they wanted to go out with me, I'd say, "Sure."

No more nos.

Well. A couple of exceptions. No one who was obviously violent, or too drunk or drugged out to walk. No one who introduced himself by grabbing me. And the dates could be flexible. "Date" was an almost obsolete term at that point, anyway. Mostly, you'd end up "hanging out," possibly going to a bar, possibly going to dinner, possibly getting naked. Most of the women I knew yearned, at least a little bit, for the days before the sexual revolution, when men were forced to commit to the Official Date, arrive in a sport coat (yes, it was tweeby, but at least it signified a certain intention), and take the girl out for surf, turf, and Lovers' Lane. Now, it was hard to know whether or not you were actually dating someone. He might call you up and blurt a string of frenetic phrases involving anything from *Star Wars* to Egon Schiele before he finally got to, "So ... you wanna, like, hang out?"

You might "like, hang out" for six months, and still have completely different ideas of whether or not you were a couple. At least if I went out with guys who asked me out on the street, they'd be asking me out based on some kind of established attraction, as opposed to the guy who (for example) happened upon my number while making spitballs.