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Muffins as Big as Your Head

Rick Ewing
NY, NY

So hella not crying, she said, swooping to the counter where girlfriend poured them all yet another rum with ginger-beer Dark ‘n’ Stormy. Stomping her bitty, bare pink foot on Leena’s inky size twelve, Gillian torqued screw-face upward at the towering Antiguan.

“Was those, what’s the word, *livid* scotch bonnets you made me *Mosh up* to sprinkle all over your luscious oxtail and salt fish weirdness. Maybe that beachy incense, I’m ‘llegic.”

Blynn lowered the mandolin quadrille on the decrepit hi-fi and flicked around for possibilities, promising next time, her turn, she’d do a lamb vindaloo to blast them to Hades. I’ll Ghost Pepper you wussies, she said, and after that haggis abomination Gillian made them try? Leena’s flamethrowers were Shiva-sent to kill the taste.

“Honey, does your tribe produce anything vaguely edible?” Blynn said. “Not that I don’t occasionally fiend for sheep-lung and suet. I imagine you’re crying either over your culinary lineage, or, let’s think...your choice of swimsuit.”

Gillian Duff gunned her the finger and fell into the bean chair, shielding her face from Leena’s spit-take laugh as she reached for the glass. Her dad shipped it up from Jersey, she explained. Along with the poster. He knew about their Ethnic Nights. Thumbing up the bikini strap to wipe her left eye, she denied crying for the third time. But if I were, she said, it would be over him.

“Popsickle makes less sense each time we talk,” she said, “Babbling how he should have thought of the picture years ago but at least I’ll have it for Monday. Drunk off his fanny, confessing more than he meant to. He’s not even going home most nights. Just pulls the *Queen Margaret* into some cove off the bay. Sits there eating his own raw oysters, sucking Jameson.”

The Angel of Silence fluttered over the women as Springsteen came up on the stereo.

And the girls in their summer clothes

In the cool of the evening light--

Leena St. Clair and Blynn Puri tugged at their rum, swapping looks. All in bathing suits bought that Saturday morning on a shopping spree in SoHo to kick-off their Memorial Day weekend staycation. Leena gestured with her chin toward the poster they helped Gillian hang on the wall of her wee West Village flat before dinner.

It was a blown-up photo of an AH-64 Apache attack helicopter. To Leena it looked like a dragoness. Snarling, huffing. Pregnant with munitions. In front of the murderous reptile, blazing a grin as wide as the palm leaves tonguing down in the background, copper hair fanning, Warrant Officer, US Army--M. Duff.

Sweet Maggie to her dad. To Gillian, Mommerliscious or Mothership. The bottom-right quadrant of the picture was filled with gold, cursive script:

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven--

A woman clothed with the sun

And the moon under her feet,

and upon her head a crown of twelve stones.

When Leena pegged it as Revelations, pretty sure the twelfth chapter, they said Damn, girl, you're good. *Suma* good. Go, Crimson!

Gillian began not-crying again, no crying here, nothing to see, move it along, folks. Blynn rose to hand her a napkin, but she waved it off.

“Ladies.”

“I may have a boy issue.”

She gulped at her drink. “But I will not weep. Only for targeted, worthy purposes. For lost rings and jellyfish stings, one-eyed horses with stories to tell—“

“I beg you,” Leena said. “No lists tonight. Please, no lists.”

“Funny you say that, dearie. Here we have a curious junction of circumstances. Three things...” Blynn and Leena eyed each other. “First, stipulate I’m a little loopy just now. Also? I have a hidden agenda tonight. Finally, I need you to violate your core principles. Before you combust, consider my suggestion that we all do, on a daily basis. Stroll with Captain Obvious a moment.”

Fingering chords on the poster tube, Blynn drummed her heels on the floor and strummed a mean air-guitar.

The girls in their summer clothes

Pass me by

“Leena.” Gillian was suddenly all prosecutorial severity. “Up at school, you double-concentrated. Folklore and Mythology plus Women’s Studies. How do you spend your days, currently? Oh, that’s right. You model. Setting the globe afire with your dusky charms. Ms. Puri, who points out my execrable fashion sense. You majored in Environmental Sciences and Public Policy. I believe you are an investment bank-skank. Mornings, you merge. Afternoons, you acquire.”

“Long as we’re getting all biblical,” Leena said. “Sammy 8, verse 3: *And his sons walked not in his ways, but turned aside after lucre, and took bribes, and perverted judgment.* Holla!”

Gillian went on to say they could spend the night chatting about dreams colliding with rent checks, consequences of bliss unfollowed and souls compromised. Let’s not do that.

“Let’s, beloved bitches,” she said, “Turn me into a lady in society, a chef in the kitchen and a whore in the bedroom.”

“Never did!”

“Believe it.”

Maggie Duff convulsed laughing, whirling backward to trip over the garden hose. Windmilling into the kiddie pool. Came up spitting water, still howling, saying just as well ‘cause guess who peed herself. Gillian was on the tire swing with manuals, printouts and cheese popcorn, a pile of college brochures underfoot. The Delaware Bay was a green mist in sight beyond the wetlands, wafting its fishy funk toward the coral-pink clapboard house.

The picnic table and benches, along with an array of her father’s oystering rakes and gear, served as proxy for the Apache. As they had for the past ten days, they were rehearsing Maggie in the craft’s preflight.

“Tell no one, ever, pookie,” she said, climbing out of the pool, “What’s that black woman thingy? *I brought you into this world...I’ll take you OUT!*”

“Mothership. You nailed everything—airframe, environmental, sensors, avionics, hard and software. All systems. Except--”

“Weapons,” Maggie giggled, “Oh yeah, this little whup-whup bristling with death on offer in a hundred different flavors. My bad. Again!”

Three more go-throughs and they hopped in the car, Gillian driving. Mom cranked up Shaggy on the radio, hollering out the window to puzzled pedestrians the glories of 30-milimeter chain guns, Hydras and Hellfires.

They raced east across the width of South Jersey to make Maggie’s shift in Atlantic City. Shaggy wailed, disingenuously, Gillian thought, about his darling angel and his peeps. How life’s one big party when you’re still young.

“Gotta admit,” Maggie said, “Joyriding these babies for the Reserves is different from booting up to deploy. Eh. I’ll be fine, kick some ass. Pookster, you’ve been my savior. You can see what a tech marvel that bird is. Call me *Invincible* Mothership.” Barking here comes *my* part, she mimicked the guttural basso of the dancehall rapper:

But who’s gonna have your back when it’s all done--

Gillian pointed out that flying sightseeing tourists off Steel Pier in the Bell, party-rides up and down the coast, wasn’t exactly what she’d be facing soon. Maggie responded, drumming the dashboard--

It’s all good when you’re little, you have pure fun—

Can't be a fool, son, what about the long run?

As they sailed up Atlantic Avenue, Maggie said thanks for the lift, pooker-mook. Try to finish that application tonight. That there's the Big Kahuna.

"They don't accept you, maybe I pay 'em a little visit with the chopper. Pump a few divots into the Yard."

Well, wasn't that her warning on the phone, Gillian scolded herself. This woman could be brusque; don't get my feelings hurt? Leena told her this Melanie Smart creature goes for \$400 an hour as an Etiquette Coach, but the sumptuous Ms. St. Clair blackmailed her to do it free...industry bodies buried and such, better not to know. Massive help to *Lady Tall Ting* as her career rocketed--because she's also terrific with fashion.

"Delighted to meet you," Melanie said, her smile double-dutching into a frown. "You're perfectly dreadful, I see that straightaway."

On the Saturday following Memorial Day, the women met midtown in front of Saks. Smart kept interrupting her monologue about the day's plan to excoriate Gillian's ensemble. Truly, darling, a buttercup sweater against your Winter complexion? And that catastrophic hair--don't in an albeit lovely color? Khakis to further wash you out and make you seem hippy? Scuffed loafers? What do you think you are, some kind of Kennedy?

To Gillian, Ms. Smart looked the archetype of...who's the guy...*Tom Wolfe's Social X-Rays*: a study in greys and knife angles, topped with a soupcon--or would it be a screaming pheromone?- - of desperate hunger. Glacially elegant, of a certain age. The kind of female, she thought, about whom men-people say *Feed that woman a bacon-cheeseburger, peanut-butter-chocolate ice cream, then we'll talk!*

A paycheck's worth of shopping and styling later, Gillian drooping with fatigue, unable to retain much more, the women retired to the Village on Thompson Street. Lupa Something-Something run by Mario Somebody-ends-in-a-vowel, featured on the Yo' Mammy Cooks Channel, with whom Melanie shared air-kisses. Madame rapped on a goblet with a fork--rudely, Gillian believed--Elbows off the table!

"Italian because it's so bloody goeey," Melanie said, "Ideal training for the preternaturally clumsy."

Gillian Duff was fifty-fifty between slapping this woman silly or licking her pewter mules, begging for more, cowed but edified, trying to catalogue it all. For pale skin, never yellows or oranges, only some reds sometimes. But go ape-wild on jewel tones: emeralds, teals, cobalts. Warm greens and deep blues. Baby blue in moderation. Whites are fine and certainly blacks and...what else? She must be forgetting something crucial.

The Etiquette Brute alternately savaged and coddled her through a meal, though lovely, Leena would condemn with a patois *too stoosh*. Snooty. Mario grandly delivered the dishes himself, clearly aware of the project at hand, giving Gillian that Student Driver feeling. A woman eating soup can be an atrocity, Smart pointed out, do as I do. Your hair, dear, earlier it drooped like these noodles. Now it has body and frames your face to best advantage.

“You’re twenty-four,” Melanie Smart said, “I wonder, um. The event that precipitated our acquaintance. Was this your only, how shall we say, *disappointment* in love?”

Gillian corrected her, that this was the point of all these goings-on. She didn’t intend to be disappointed. The boy currently in question had, two weeks before, scuttled a quite promising launch of what she planned to make the voyage of a lifetime. He was, beyond dispute, The One.

“But,” she said, “Once, just once, I took *no* for an answer.”

Maybe it was the biography of Zelda Fitzgerald on the table. Inspiring an osmotic fancy that trap-doored Gillian into a loony netherworld, four years ago, as the first boy ever to defile her world said his brief piece. Blynn and Leena had breezed by five minutes earlier, laden with backpacks, scarves whorling, saying *Bye, guys*, they were off to the Square for curry, did she want take-out?

To Gillian, they were no longer in the library, facing each other across the table. All her senses geysered skyward. The fan in his laptop morphed into the whine of a surgical saw, the glow from the brass lamp a blaring morgue light--and Gillian some inert slab on a steel table.

His cadaver.

But a corpse of little note, a one-off, a toss-away. Pre-med Nick commenced to sever and cleave her ribs, whisking her heart aloft, a perverse trophy, then smacked it on a tray to practice with his scalpel, seeing how thin he could make the slices...

It started badly enough. She was sitting there feeling frumpy in her raggedy, red school sweatshirt, one of four she’d bought from the Coop as a first-year. Which she knew clashed diabolically with her auburn hair. Made her wan face look like a cotton-ball wedged between two lusty autumn vegetables. She had been scribbling on a legal pad, pausing between items to do the Asian pencil trick. Nick tapped away, a raven forelock curling into a parenthesis toward his nose. Finally, he stopped and looked up at a spot over her head. Nodding as if to confirm some ominous calculus, he cleared his throat.

“I can’t do this anymore.”

He spun the laptop, pushing it toward Gillian as she backed away instinctively. For more than one reason. If there was a way worse than email to be kissed off, she was certain this would be it.

On the screen was a detailed description of OCD.

Nick had scrolled down to a subset manifestation of the disorder—Compulsive List-Making. Vertigo and nausea battling to claim her, she blinked to adjust to the monitor’s glare. And read to the end.

Shakily, Gillian rose without looking at him, threaded her freckled arms through her coat, gathering her things. To the scarred wooden table, she deadpanned:

“Says there Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were inveterate list-makers. Saw that, did you?”

Before Nick could answer, she put up a palm.

“You should cut your hair.”

She zombie-strode through the library, staring ahead at the exit, afraid to see Widener’s stacks, where she and Nick, more than once, had fulfilled obligatory tradition and gotten up to frisky shenanigans.

Gillian nearly got drop-kicked by an SUV as she high-stepped through slush across Mass. Ave, aiming toward Dunster House. By the time her boot touched the opposite curb, she was persuaded that the first consonant in *Nick* should be replaced by a more suitable two, that their split was a fait accompli, bootless to plead otherwise, and she had at least a preliminary lineup of what she wouldn’t do to get him back. Or wait. Should she try anyway? Then came a telekinetic goose on her baggy jeans from Jersey-sis, still-dead Whitney, Gillian Duff crying aloud “OH...”

...HELL TO THE NO!!

- No bloody knee-crawling across molten glass inset with razor-wire to purge his disdain with a cloudburst of tears and put a nice buff on his Timberlands, mouthing well-reasoned entreaties
- No locking herself in an old-timey phone-booth filled with killer bees
- No making face-planted, prone snow-angels under his dorm window
- Wouldn’t pull an Ophelia, finding a nice willow aslant a brook, in this case the Charles, where she would be discovered mid-stream, gilding the lily with a rope around her neck affixed to a trailing antique bottle stuffed with a suicide note of staggering poignancy, titled FLOTSAM, I AM
- No wearing a T with a pointing arrow saying NICK’S TRIPLETS!!, telling everyone
Stop it stop it

Stop it, jerky-boy, she demanded of herself, switching to the second-person *You* in submission to the balm of denial. With some problems it doesn’t matter that you’re aware how screwed up you are. You can even acknowledge its origins and have instinct for the cure. Worse, you can see clearly the absurdity of the compulsion. That what you do daily, involuntarily and obsessively, was of no use, in the end, to...

Mothership Duff. She’d been tireless; Gillian remembered it too well. Relentless. Drilling herself to prepare for war. Fearful she was behind the curve. She was a maniac about readiness, forethought, decision trees to anticipate outcomes and respond.

Her job was to drive and fight with one of the most sophisticated machines ever devised for combat. To Gillian, the welding of the Apache's grandeur and Mommerliscious' tenacity forged a doubtless winner. A guarantee against catastrophe.

Then on 8 November, 2009, dawned a day where God hung a cloudless sky alive with promise.

North of Baghdad in Saladin Province, mid-morning, an AH-64 was downed by an RPG.

Took a freakin' grenade up her tailpipe, Dad said. Just about the crudest, stupidest Vietnam-era weapon the bastards in man-dresses employed. Like a damned matchstick flicked at a firestorm.

"Listen, Gilly," he said. "Never get this wrong. Maggie was the most apolitical critter on the face of the globe. She never thought twice about the mistake of us being in Iraq in the first place. Her's was a personal war, she never stop being obsessed with the idea that you or me 'coulda been in the Towers on nine-eleven. Never. Your mom was a she-bear hell-bent on destroying psychopaths who want her family dead. That simple."

By Christmas of sophomore year, Gillian excommunicated herself from her generation's Church of Tech. Its worship of gizmos, its phones wiser than Jesus, burgeoning social media.

The compiling of lists was the second phenomenon. First she started performing every action three times, or tapping things thrice for no reason.

That ceased abruptly and the lists began.

And yes, she'd read about it before. It somehow derives from fear of being bushwacked by reality, blind-sided by the unexpected or being apt to forget critical things.

"Almost forgot," Mario Somebody-ends-in-a-vowel said, "Bop down to Canal Street, one last stop before we hit your kitchen. A final tool to procure. My quirk and fave." Massive bags of cookware from restaurant supply stores in the Bowery now filled the trunk of his Volkswagen. Twenty minutes later, he placed in her hands a huge Chinese cleaver.

"I'm wacky, use it for almost everything, even fine work. Chopper of mass destruction. Know how chefs have their zillion-dollar bags o' blades? Look. Ten inches, ten bucks. Now that's how we bring a knife to a food-fight, youngster."

Mario was the only miracle-worker Gillian recruited herself in The Great Lady-Chef-Whore Quest. He volunteered with gusto as they chatted before leaving Lupa Blah-Blah, making a date of his day off two Mondays forward. "I'm a simple animal, we have the same color hair." He waved his carrotty pigtail. "And you remind me of my daughter. She's studying in Europe. Hasn't been home in a year."

Heading back to Jane Street, Mario reprised his Simple Animal theme. "That beast in the backseat. Man, did you looked spooked when I had her wrap it up. Looks like God didn't finish designing it, no?"

“So, you wanna be a bad-ass. Everybody asks what women want,” he snickered, “Simple. They want everything. And men? Listen closely. They. Have. No. Idea.” Take me, he said, the only thing I’ve ever been sure of--and I still tell my wife this after thirteen years—every time I, uh, uh... after every time we’re intimate, I still want her to turn into a pizza. Hasn’t happened yet. Keep hope alive!

“This’ll be fine,” he said, surveying her kitchen, “We’ll trash this up real good. If those weren’t gas burners I was gonna take you over to Lupa. Fire ‘em up.”

They uncorked a bottle of red for inspiration, Mario going all cagey, scrutinizing her, finally saying everything he was about to teach her was also a principle for life in general. “And in particular, for you, chickadee, a lesson in handling men. Figure out how, you’ll never go hungry again.”

Scarlett O’Hara possessed Gillian mid-sip. “Whaaaa, Mario, if y’all jes show a lady how to do that *chaaaaaming* flip-the-food-by-tossing-the-pan trick, Ah sweah Ah’ll git the vaypuuhs!”

To Ponder While Toenail Painting:

- Clean as you go!
- A dull knife is dangerous. Keep it keen; don’t handle it like a wimp but with AUTHORITY!
- No such thing as too much garlic, ditto hot pepper.
- Creative plating is half the game.
- Butter is your dirty little secret. Never let ‘em know. Calorie counts are a joke. *Chef, this is so rich, how do you do it? Tons o’ butter--enough to choke a pig--IDIOTS.*
- The three-second dropped-food rule is the Thirteenth Commandment. Honor it.
- Sicilian folk-magic witchy additive a woman puts in a man’s food. YIKES!!! But hmmm...
- Value white space, emptiness. Stay as simple as you can and accord elements—you wouldn’t pit sodium-vapor lighting against a candlelit twosome.
- Cooking is love. Tough love, the best kind.

In no time, Mario had her prepping, chopping and sautéing while he sauced, then pointed with an elbow to the monster on the counter.

“You’re gonna filet that bad boy. A kitchen offers endless lessons. Consider our friend the monkfish. That ghastly maw. Not much uglier in the briny deep. Sometimes, grasshopper, the most unprepossessing critters boast the sweetest meat. You’ll see, that’s gonna come up like lobster.”

This is my joy, he added. Peasant food. Always let that be her spirit’s guide. Never the chichi claptrap he turns out for the society mooks at the shop.

When he left at dusk, bussing her on the forehead, the place was pristine, everything cleaned and stored just so.

“Listen, *adorabile*. You tell a hell of a story,” Mario said, “Keep on keepin’. My money says that dude’ll come around.”

Gillian tugged his ponytail, saying Grazie, Big Boy, closing the door behind him, wondering if kegel exercises might, at the right moment, allow her to turn into a pizza.

Mario Vowel-io had made it easy to dump the beans about Ethan. And more tolerant of her blather than Blynn and Leena had been on Dark ‘n’ Stormy Night.

It had been close to two in the morning that Saturday before Memorial Day, the women still voguing in their swimsuits, buoyed atop a gulfstream of rum. Bob Marley’s *Legend* albumskanked soulfully on the hi-fi, jammin’ by the light of the three-quarter moon.

Leena had her own boy drama unfolding as the summer began—*Rough-sketching my next mistake*, she said--and Blynn was off on one of her periodic I’m-So-Off-Men Snits. Insisting she was jaded by their bunk.

“I’m a *uuuuuuuy*,” she said, foghornng her voice, tramping a masculine swagger across their sleeping-bag dance-floor in her charcoal biki. “Let me say it with music, how full of crap I am. Who’s that goofball whose girl now dances with another man ‘cause he was too dumb to realize but by gosh he sure hopes the new dude buys her flowers? Yeah, okay, *I’m* buyin’. Probably stalking her with a Glock. Forget who the fool is, but he’s the same one who wants to catch a grenade for me. Oh, Christ--” She snuck a guilty look at her friend in the hideous mango two-piece.

“Sorry, Gilly.”

“But he can’t wait to jump in front of a train for me, take a bullet straight to his brain for me. Please do, foolio. ‘Cause you cross him just once? Suddenly he’s all *My mama don’t like you and she likes everyone...*”

“You’re a hot, brown Punjabi mess,” Leena said, “To paraphrase my man Josh, As for me and my house, we follow poor, gone Bowie--” Crooning toward the ceiling: “*Ain’t there one damn song...that can make me break down and cry-aye?*”

“Scuse, I’m the one crying here.” Gillian winged her arms wide. “Let me tell you about a boy.”

“Blynn, already I know you’ll say he got buyer’s remorse. Okay, so. I already said this part, right? This is after eight weeks of seriouso flirtation in the office. Just a blissful run-up to... g’head and shoot me...*eternal devotion*. Then. At last, it happens. Our first date outside of work. Yada-yah and we’re up in some fakey-Irish bar on Seventy-Somebodyeth Street, East Side. Instead of offering him—what’s it now?—an *amuse bouche*, I gorge him on a seven-course meal of Gillian Duff. Like foie-gras-ing a duck or whatever. He freaks. I flee.”

She told them sure, she could hear herself babbling world without end, maybe reciting mental lists, yeah, quite possibly, Ethan beginning to squirm like a bloodworm on a J-hook, but she couldn't just take it *smoove* and zip it. When he finally went bonkers, calling her *batshit crazy* because Gillian said she was from a town called Shellpile, she was positive the outburst was an excuse. A cheap, transparent, ad hoc way to kill the deal.

“At issue here? He’s my perfect boy. That simple. And girls, what a beginning it was.” The innocent-but-not-really coquetry across the firm’s vast floor-space. The niches, the knolls, the warrens, copses and swales, the nests over and underground. The glades, dells, clearings or enclosures, the peaks and the switchbacks—all along the waterways. Even the arid places. These are the places love may bud.

Gal-pals Primer Re the Male-Female Physicality Construct:

- At core, Gillian is smokin’-on-the-cusp-of-whowzee, makeover required.
- Never be so glamorous nor stunning that her boy would be intimidated, upchuck and flee the county.
- Nor can the boy be heinously dreambooty, because then he would be, ipso facto, *narcissistic*, ditching her by the roadside to suck eggs.
- Ethan and Gillian appear to fall within the acceptable range of prevailing criteria.

“Too,” Leena said, “I see the Almighty’s twisty symmetry at work here. You ivied in his state, he in yours. Playing Tiger over there, Mister Man, in the institution genius enough to expel Scott Fitzgerald. Does he speak *Baaahhston*? Extra points if he talks funny.”

Funny enough, Gillian allowed, but listen, the point was that the flirting ramped up, believe it, ascending steadily over two months, all the way to *Excuse me, remind me again why we’re not married yet?*

Come Hitherings 1:

- The averted looks, surprise bagel with lox, the Virgin de Guadalupe votive candle
- Six extra copies of a significant document, gratuitous cubicle-visits
- Reddening of faces, turning away at inopportune moments, the “Oh, I love your shoes, they’re snazz!”
- The shared eye-rolls at corporate and individual idiocy, the unexpected Kilimanjaro of pastrami, the incense, the sage oil, salt and pepper chips...
- The Bardy beast-with-two-backs joke, countered by a Green Eggs and Ham citation
- Tactile daydreams of cuddling, a couple spooning(viewed from above)
- And forever the coffee, the coffee, the coffee—

Gillian insisted it was a trevail, this bilateral campaign to woo, occasionally taking infelicitous turns. There’d been the lurchy conversational digression about women’s cycles, the proffer of ibuprofen--but there followed a rhapsody on moons, calls for hired cars, the fragrant tuft of forget-me-nots.

On the hi-fi, Bob Marley wondered if that was love he was feeling, 'cause he was willing and able and there he goes, throwing his cards 'pon the table.

“He used nasty language in the bar, about Shellpile, saying there was no such blankety-blank place. Such a surfeit of passion from the boy, the profanity’s plosives, yea, its fricatives also, evoked spittle, smacking me in the eye.”

Leena thought her barking laugh sounded close to hysteria. “Wow, I’m toasted, listen to me.”

“Don’t tell us,” Blynn said, “But you, losing your religion, couldn’t tell him to just Google your oystery burg, because outside the workplace, you forswear everything techy.”

My dilemma, Gillian agreed, so there she was, out on the sidewalk, Ethan still in the bar, a flailing flounder just hauled from the surf, wheezing his useless gills. Demolished, she was, upended! Belching absinthe and champagne, those hipster Death in the Afternoons Mr. Potty-Mouth ordered, Gillian now running a burpy-teary risk/benefit of cabbing it back home. But the labor of love beforehand! All for nothing? Consider:

Come Hitherings 2:

- The band-aid, accolades in meetings, the forgiveness of errors, the expiation of sins
- The harmony of popular tunes, throwback dual devotion to the quite-cold Karen Carpenter, the savaging of colleagues, the coconut pie, the pat on a neck’s nape
- The pistachios, the nougat, the caramel, the NOUGAT reprised ‘cause it’s such fun to say, the surmising of foot-size, apprehended hunts for things that poke(hers, his)
- The feta salad, the loathing of cats and the mockery of unicorns, the sanctity of large, dummy-head dogs
- The seaweed, the civil disagreement on a business matter, the hazy offer of foot-rubs, applause at neckties
- The pens, almonds, poached powerstrips, crab-dip, the re-routed printer, hot mustard packs, the proof-read copy(returned w/fortune cookies)
- And always...the courtesy, the curtsy and the bow--

“Geez, I forgot this...so I get to the door, stop. Then I turn back and go and make a bigger dork of myself by taking a nougat candy from my bag...Christ, this is embarrassing. It had kind of become our word. Made us laugh at work no matter what. Professor Clueless here walks back to Ethan in the corner booth, holds out the candy. Boy fixes me with this glance of total disdain, shakes his head like I’m a bigger nutter than the candy and waves his hand... *just go away*.

Blynn did her best to stifle a laugh while Leena winged a prayer not to let her head shake like the boy.

“For all my obsession with detail, I realize what a doof I am, how *obliv* I can be.” Gillian hopped up to sit on the counter, her emerald eyes now level with her mother’s of the same color on the poster. “Hamstrung by some kind of ultimate cluelessness, like it’s my—“

“Métier,” Blynn giggled. “Special gift.”

The wattage in Gillian's Duff's gaze surged as her voice dipped an octave lower.

"*The Devil doesn't get to win.*" The words came out hoarse but sounded to Blynn as if they were laced with iron.

"Her answer. Oh me, I swear. Busting on my father for swimming without a life-preserver in his scotch bottle. Here I'm plowed, ploughshared, whatever. Look. I have no idea how these two things are connected for me, Mothership's words and my thing with Ethan, but they are. Mommerliscious, before she deployed? What she was fiercest about...was reassuring Daddermunks and me. All laughs and jokes. Conning us that she was taking it lightly so we would too. She got serious exactly once. When I asked her, I *demanded* why? Why the war, why her? Two days before she left, we're out back hosing down Pappmonkeys's gear, Mammerhunk deflecting in her usual way what she doesn't want to address, what's uppermost in her mind at the moment is Dad, yammering she adores that man for all his faults, yada-yah, so watch his drinking while she's gone, do it, teenypook! She could gauge his number of drinks, she says, any given time, by the level of peril he thinks she's in, but he'd never dream of dissuading her from doing what she loves. Vowing he's a god among men. Her prayer for me is that one day I find a man who'll smooch the ground I walk on, thick-and-thin-me, better-or-worse me, as he does for her. So what I--"

"Gillian, this is spooky," Blynn whispered huskily. "Especially with you looking her in the eye the way you are? You have no idea how much you look like her right this minute."

"Mmmm. Huh." To Leena it seemed Gillian had left the building, in spirit utterly transported into that South Jersey backyard four years ago. "So girls, what I do, I persist, please keep to the subject, Mom, I'm begging her. Why she was so gung-ho-rabid-gonzo, like, to go overseas. And, her words, *first* words, rather?"

"*Kick some ass.*" She groped behind her, not looking, for Leena's pitcher of Dark 'n' Stormies. "I say do better than that. Something, anything, c'mon."

"So she targets me with this look. As if sighting in one of her Hydra rockets. Always thought, man, wouldn't want to be a baddie scrunching behind a sand dune--swear I used to fantasize about this--suddenly Mommerliscious in the Apache uplifting from nowhere, to toast your jihadi ass. But what she said, what she finally goddammit said was *Because the Devil doesn't get to win.*"

She gave a harsh cough, eyes blinking wildly three times.

"Now the way I see it. Love, right? Wasn't there, then it's there. Creates something from nothing. With each instance, the universe reborn. Maybe it's to make up for all the love that's lost at the same pace, some weirdy, zero-sum self-replenishment the cosmos insists on. Maybe once this new love sprouts, the universe pulls that Ralph Waldo Emerson thing. Conspires to make it happen."

Leena goosed the music a notch as Mr. Bob Marley blew some wicked synchronicity smoke from the beyond:

I don't wanna wait in vain for your love

'Cause if summer is here

I'm still waiting there--

“Stick with me, because this is tangled, for me, way beyond what I understand. So it’s all good if you believe in, you nurture these young shoots, you bring to full flower this new love. But watch the hell out, peoples! Check your six! Bogeys from the rear! The converse is just as true. If you deny it or let it wither, um, *untended*? You suffer all creation’s payback forever after. Like it guarantees misery, maybe all you get is that one shot to make it truly, madly, deeply right.

So. When it’s real, what you do, you put in the effort, leverage your soul to a promise, you lock and load for love. You call out *Damn the freakin’ torpedoes*. Here to tellya, women under my command, this boy’s goin’ *down!*”

“Whoa,” Leena intoned woozily. “‘Devil doesn’t get to win.’ Heavy shit, babe. *And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly*. Big Paulie, Romans. Caution, Antigua gyal gets Bibley when shlockered.”

“Oh man oh man oh man. Can’t believe I’m about to leap on this bandwagon,” Blynn shrieked, springing up to serve a fresh round. “Duff-LLeuwellyn To Wed.” She sniggered. “Sounds like a mattress brand. *Friends, do as I do, sleep like a babe on a Duff-Lleuwellyn!*”

“Lleuwellyn. Lou-ellen. First kiddo? If a boy, hasta be Rafe,” Leena said. “I’m Rafe Lleuwellyn, great ta meecha.”

Blynn said: ‘I’ll hate myself tomorrow, hell with the rum, lemme suck on that Kool-Aid. Your first *girl*...Fawn. Heard on the phone--Fawn Lleuwellyn, why hello! This is your Auntie Blynn, coolie woman, at your service for life.’

“Hoo-Yah! Fawn. Curry chick hits it from downtown!” crowed Leena St. Claire. “To everything there is a season... a time to plant... a time to pluck, or is it a time to do what rhymes with it?”

“Vapid millennials score!” Blynn said, “I remember Lleuwellyn from intermediate school, a certain novel. Gillian, baby, did he ever lean in close and say, this prodigal boy, Hey, honey-munch, How green is *your* valley? Oh, Shiva, I just got an idea...”

To keep from whimpering in agony, upside down with her knees in places knees should never be, feet splayed outward in defiance of natural law, Gillian tried to admire the mare’s tail clouds aloft in the inverted grenadine sunset outside her kitchen window, mewling that surely even Shakira’s hips lied occasionally, could Doc please stop singing it? Everyone’s hips must, not so?

White lies? Something benign about, lemme think, uh, your lover's choice of luncheon meats? "Uh-oh," she squealed. "Prolly shouldna said that, considering."

The only thing less scrutable than this woman's accent was her choice of music, a cappella, self-performed.

Dr. Santhini Namagiri, neurosurgeon at Mount Sinai St. Luke's by day, Kama Sutra instructor by night, ordered her to hold the position a bit longer, that it would commit to muscle memory, available on command. "With a significant payoff for both parties." Her laugh twinkled in a glittering glissando as she observed Duff critically--she had only called her *Duff* since arriving--circling around her like a panoramic tracking film camera.

On the yoga mat just before, they'd rehearsed Duff in an even unlikelier arrangement Doctor called *Kneading the Naan*. Between *Ooh Baby when you talk like that* and *You make a woman go mad*, the surgeon suggested this pose could be replicated in the kitchen, one of the girl's feet on the table and the other in the sink.

"Ouch!"

Which turned out to be Duff's favorite word that night. At every yelp, every protest, the 63-year-old brain-cutter, Blynn's aunt, would only titter, brandishing items from a bagful of Indian veggies and fruits a full level of magnitude naughtier-looking, Duff believed, than those commonly bandied about.

"Couldn't you just, what's it called, *trepan my brainpan*? Isn't that what you people do? Sounds less painful. Doctor *She-makes-a-man-wanna-speak-Spann-eeesh*."

After two hours of this pain and horror, Namagiri sat with her at the yet-undefiled kitchen table, administering a fragrant mug of Darjeeling, putting her through an exhaustive review of the evening's contortions.

"Something also, Duff. We women are more creative, fantastical and imaginative about these matters than we're inclined to admit to ourselves. Not only may you woo your boy in every room in the home, you must allow yourself the freedom to do as most women wish they could. What do I mean? The car, the beach, the supermarket, parks, behind a church..."

As many places as God made, that's where we may make love."

Duff, speechless, accepted the elegant, burnished copy of the Kama Sutra that Doctor Sexy placed in her upturned palms.

"A treasure for you," she said. "Now you have three. Including here..." She tapped a honey-brown finger on the side of Duff's head. "And of course..."

Then she pointed somewhere else.

Golly. Criminy, even.

“OUCH!! Ooo, Ooo, *Oooh...*”

Leena St. Clair took a break from applying sunburn salve to Gillian’s fiery skin to fan her back with two of the small American flags they’d picked up on the boardwalk at Long Branch. Gillian was draped over the ottoman on her belly, looking, Blynn quipped as she dished up Mexican take-out, like a marooned octopus.

“What you need, dearie, is Independence Day from that porcelain skin. Leens? Agree or no? We’re never so happy to be browns or blacks than at the beach.”

“Says our Celtic cousin to Mr. Sun,” Leena intoned, “*Blaze me all over, baby!*” Gillian called them callous bastards, adding something Blynn mostly missed in their eddying glee about the White Woman’s Burden, which made them howl even louder.

“So unfunny,” Gillian keened, “Ooo-ooo, it hurts so bad. *I am slain! I am slain!*”

Blynn said spare us the Polonius, no Shakespeare; all allusions today should concern Americana. Had they, she asked, ever heard the story of the Civil War soldier, life ebbing away on the battlefield, who had time to record in his diary “At Antietam, I was killed?”

Just give me a reason

Just a little bit’s enough

Leena and Blynn froze as Pink materialized, singing and vibrating from Gillian’s phone atop the stereo.

“My tiny life’s one mighty fiasco. Ethan hates me, I blew it with him, thought I was so clever but now that I’m afire...I see how stupid, how stupid futile the whole thing was.”

Blynn pointed the serving spoon at Leena, eyebrows raised. After hearing what Gillian titled The Cubicle Debacle, they’d conceived the July 4th shore excursion as an attempt to cheer her up.

What happened, with the Great Tutelage Mission complete, Gillian had resolved that it was time to act. She was inspired to create--not lists, exactly--but *Rules of Engagement* to launch the final assault on Ethan.

Midway through a drab Friday afternoon at work a week ago, Gillian, said, she sat doodling a menu, synthesizing what she knew about Mr. Llewelyn’s declared foody tastes and the best of what she’d learned from Mario Whateverboddy-io.

How about Seafood Pasta w/ Tuscan Hot Oil? More innovative than just a red sauce, and look, it includes oysters, which made her think of Dadderhunks. She’d just got to wondering if that might not be a smidge of Electra Complex tossed in with the sea-salt and olive oil, when...

Karen Carpenter, three cubicles down, commenced to lament about “Rainy Days and Mondays.”

What’s this now? Detente? Truce? Rapprochement? Gillian peeked around to see who may catch her looking like a total idiot as she crept, tiptoeing, toward Ethan. There he was in profile on the

phone, beautiful jerk, hand on his mouse. Oh, Lawdy. Huh? Up on his screen was a site she knew called *Hidden New Jersey*. She leaned in to see that it was scrolled to the portion about Shellpile. She must have gasped, because Ethan's head whipped around as she darted behind the cubicle, her cheek abrading the fabric wall. On the phone he was saying "Yessir, yessir," baritone laugh trumpeting in the stale air.

Gillian's universe ruptured into a billion razor-glass shards. This could only be one thing. He'd sensed her there, nabbed while mocking her on the phone with a friend--or worse, another girl?--and this lame-o coverup with the "Yessir, yessir," was the best he could come up with.

Boys suck.

Just a second we're not broken just bent--

"And no way, *no way* can I speak to anyone on the phone. Not even to my dad."

"You don't have to." Leena had the device in her hand. "It's a text." Gillian moaned Please girl, just delete it, whatever, it was guaranteed calamity anyhow, some Fresh Hell, but Leena raised a palm to quiet her.

"Wipe it girl, obliterate it, this agony, I swear I--"

"Yes, honeybunchee, you are slain," Leena said. "Now hush, let me read it. *Whoa.*" She waggled the phone at Blynn.

"Buckle up, girlfriend."

Gillian:

Kill me later, but:

You flummoxed me--

So,

I dark-webbed the deal.

Bottom line:

Your pops gives us until Labor Day

"To get our sweet asses down to Cumberland County

So's he can get a clue what his grandkids will look like."

You're a true loon.

So am I.

Listen, woman:

When I fall it's forever

And the echo

So way down

Sounds like love.

Panis nucatis, baby.

For the Harvard unlettered:

NOUGAT.

“What a nut,” Gillian said. “I no longer, uh. Um. Feel quite so slain.”