

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
Music	S
Creative Writing	S
Ceramics	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.

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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.

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*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 Hindu 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 pleasantries 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.

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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

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*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 with 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 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 **kilt lifter**.

Cheers,  
Ollie-O

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*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

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*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

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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*

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*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 pigs. Do take some chard, though.

Audrey

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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*

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*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
Rx: Vicodin 10MG (15 tablets, 0 refills)	95.70
Crutch Rental (Elective, NOT COVERED)	173.00
Crutch Deposit:	75.00
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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.

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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?

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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*

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*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

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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.

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*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 list, 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 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!

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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

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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 dozen restaurants, each one better than the last. 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

• • •

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

thinking? That's all you people do now.

I recognize it's slightly odd to ask you to call from India to make a reservation for a place I can see out my window, but here's the thing: there's always this one guy who answers the phone, 'Washington Athletic Club, how may I direct your call?'

And he always says it in this friendly, flat ... Canadian way. One of the main reasons I don't like leaving the house is because I might find myself face-to-face with a Canadian. Seattle is crawling with them. You probably think, U.S./Canada, they're interchangeable because they're both filled with English-speaking, morbidly obese white people. Well, Manjula, you couldn't be more mistaken.

Americans are pushy, obnoxious, neurotic, crass – anything and everything – the full catastrophe as our friend Zorba might say. Canadians are none of that. The way *you* might fear a cow sitting down in the middle of the street during rush hour, that's how *I* fear Canadians. To Canadians, everyone is equal. Joni Mitchell is interchangeable with a secretary at open-mic night. Frank Gehry is no greater than a hack pumping out McMansions on AutoCAD. John Candy is no funnier than Uncle Lou when he gets a couple of beers in him. No wonder the only Canadians anyone's ever heard of are the ones who have gotten the hell out. Anyone with talent who stayed would be flattened under an avalanche of equality. The thing Canadians don't understand is that some people are extraordinary and should be treated as such.

Yes, I'm done.

If the WAC can't take us, which may be the case, because Thanksgiving is only two days away, you can find someplace else on the magical Internet.

• • •

I was *wondering* how we ended up at Daniel's Broiler for Thanksgiving dinner. That morning, I slept late and came downstairs in my pajamas. I knew it was going to rain because on my way to the kitchen I passed a patchwork of plastic bags and towels. It was a system Mom had invented for when the house leaks.

First we lay out plastic bags under the leaks and cover them with towels or moving blankets. Then we put a spaghetti pot in the middle to catch the water. The trash bags are necessary because it might leak for hours in one place, then move over two inches. Mom's *pièce de résistance* is putting an old T-shirt inside the spaghetti pot to muffle the drip-drip-drip. Because that can drive you crazy when you're trying to sleep.

It was one of the rare mornings when Dad was around. He'd gotten up early to go cycling, and he was sweaty, standing at the counter in his goony fluorescent racing pants, drinking green juice of his own making. His shirt was off, and he had a black heart-rate monitor strapped across his chest, plus some shoulder brace he invented, which is supposedly good for his back because it pulls his shoulders into alignment when he's at the computer.

'Good morning to you, too,' he said disapprovingly.

I must have made some kind of face. But I'm sorry, it's weird to come down and see your Dad wearing a bra, even if it is for his posture.

Mom came in from the pantry covered with spaghetti pots. 'Hello, Buzzy!' She dropped the pots with a huge clang. 'Sorry-sorry-sorry. I'm really tired.' Sometimes Mom doesn't sleep.

Dad tap-tap-tap-tapped across the floor in his bicycle shoes and plugged his heart-rate monitor into his laptop to download his workout.

'Elgie,' Mom said, 'when you get a chance, I'll need you to try on some waterproof boots for the trip. I got you a bunch to choose from.'

‘Oh, great!’ He tap-tap-tapped into the living room.

My flute was on the counter and I played some scales. ‘Hey,’ I asked Mom, ‘when you were at Choate, was the Mellon Arts Center there yet?’

‘Yes,’ Mom said, once more laden with pots. ‘It was the one and only time I was ever onstage. I played a Hot Box Girl in *Guys and Dolls*.’

‘When Dad and I went to visit, the tour girl said Choate has a student orchestra, and every Friday people from Wallingford actually pay to see the concerts.’

‘That’s going to be so great for you,’ Mom said.

‘If I get in.’ I played some more scales, then Mom dropped the pots again.

‘Do you have any idea how strong I’m being?’ she erupted. ‘How much my heart is breaking that you’ll be going off to boarding school?’

‘You went to boarding school,’ I said. ‘If you didn’t want me to, you shouldn’t have made it sound so fun.’

Dad pushed open the swing door, wearing muck boots with tags hanging off them. ‘Bernadette,’ he said, ‘it’s amazing, all this stuff you’ve gotten.’ He put his arm around her and gave her a squeeze. ‘What, are you spending every waking hour at REI?’

‘Something like that,’ Mom said, then turned back to me. ‘See, I never thought through the actual implication of you applying to boarding schools. I.e., that you’d be leaving us. But really, it’s fine with me if you run off. I’ll still see you every day.’

I glowered at her.

‘Oh, didn’t I tell you?’ she said. ‘I’m going to move to Wallingford and rent a house off-campus. I already got a job working in the Choate dining hall.’

‘Don’t even joke,’ I said.

‘Nobody will know I’m your mother. You won’t even have to say hi. I just want to look at your gorgeous face every day. But a

little wave every now and then would sure warm a mum's heart.' She did that last part sounding like a leprechaun.

'Mom!' I said.

'You have no choice in it,' she said. 'You're like the Runaway Bunny. There's no way for you to get away from me. I'll be lurking behind the sneeze guards with my plastic gloves, serving hamburgers on Wednesdays, fish on Fridays—'

'Dad, make her stop.'

'Bernadette,' he said. 'Please.'

'Both of you think I'm joking,' she said. 'Fine, think that.'

'What are we doing for dinner tonight anyway?' I asked.

Something flashed on Mom's face. 'Hold on.' She went out the back door.

I grabbed the TV remote. 'Aren't the Seahawks playing Dallas today?'

'It's on at one,' Dad said. 'How about we hit the zoo and come back for the game.'

'Cool! We can see that new baby tree kangaroo.'

'Want to ride bikes?'

'Will you be on your recumbent bike?' I asked.

'I think so.' Dad made his hands into fists and twirled them. 'These hills make it tough on my wrists—'

'Let's drive,' I said quickly.

Mom returned. She wiped both hands on her pants and took a gigantic breath. 'Tonight,' she declared, 'we are going to Daniel's Broiler.'

'Daniel's Broiler?' Dad said.

'Daniel's Broiler?' I repeated. 'You mean that totally random place on Lake Union with the tour buses that always advertises on TV?'

'That's the one,' Mom said.

There was a silence. It was broken by a huge 'Ha!' which was Dad. 'In a million years,' he said, 'I'd never have thought you'd pick Daniel's Broiler for Thanksgiving.'

'I like to keep you guessing,' she said.

I used Dad's phone and texted Kennedy, who was with her mom on Whidbey Island. She was totally jealous we were going to Daniel's Broiler.

There was a piano player and they gave you free refills on lemonade, and the chocolate cake was a huge slab, they call it Death by Chocolate, and it was even bigger than the colossal slice you get at P.F. Chang's. When I got to school on Monday, everyone was all 'No way, you got to go to Daniel's Broiler for Thanksgiving?' That's so cool.'

*Monday, November 29*

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*Note from Tom*

Audrey,

I don't need chard. I need you to pay your bill. Otherwise, I will have to start lien proceedings.

• • •

*Note from Audrey Griffin*

Tom,

I find it rich indeed that *you* are threatening liens against *me*. My husband Warren, who works in the DA's office, finds it especially amusing because we could take *you* to small claims court and easily win. Before it gets to that, I donned my thinking cap and came up with a friendlier solution. Please write an estimate for removing my neighbor's blackberries. If you need to get one of those machines, fine. Whatever it takes, as long as it doesn't literally involve swine.

Once I have this estimate in hand, I will pay you for your past work in full. But I'm hosting a very important school brunch in less than two weeks and I need my yard back.

*Wednesday, December 1*

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*Note from Tom*

Audrey,

For a job this size, you'll definitely need the Hillside Thrasher. But my guy prefers not to use it until after the rains. The earliest he could start is May. For an estimate, we'd need to gain access to the neighbor's property. Did you ever talk to them that day? Do you have their phone number?

• • •

*Note from Audrey Griffin*

Tom,

I feel like I am living in cuckooville. In ten days, Seattle's elite are descending on my home for a momentous school function and will want to enjoy my backyard. I can't have their clothing shredded by pricker bushes. May is not OK. One month from now is not OK. I don't care if you need to rent the Hillside Thrasher yourself. I need those blackberries gone by December 11.

As for gaining access to the neighbor's property for an estimate, she is very prickly, no pun intended. My suggestion is we meet at my house on Monday at 3PM sharp. I know for a fact that's when she'll be at school picking up her daughter. We can quickly climb through a hole in the side fence and look at her blackberry bushes.

• • •

*Excerpt from my report on  
Sir Ernest Shackleton*

The Drake Passage is the body of water between the southern tip of South America at Cape Horn, Chile, and

the Antarctic continent. The five-hundred-mile passage is named after the sixteenth-century privateer Sir Francis Drake. There is no significant land at the latitudes of the Drake Passage. This creates the unimpeded circular flow of the Antarctic Circumpolar Current. As a result, the Drake Passage is the roughest and most feared water in the world.

• • •

From: Bernadette Fox

To: Manjula Kapoor

The things you learn from eighth graders when you ask rhetorical questions like, What are you doing in school these days?

For instance, did you know the difference between Antarctica and the Arctic is that Antarctica has land, but the Arctic is just ice? I knew Antarctica was a continent, but I figured there was land up north, too. Also, did you know there are no polar bears in Antarctica? I didn't! I thought we'd be watching from our boat as poor put-upon polar bears attempted to leap from one melting iceberg to another. But you'll have to go to the North Pole for that sad spectacle. It's *penguins* that populate the South Pole. So if you had some idyllic image of polar bears frolicking with penguins, disabuse yourself now, because polar bears and penguins are literally on different ends of the earth. I suppose I should get out more.

Which brings me to the next thing I didn't know. Did you have any idea that getting to Antarctica requires crossing the Drake Passage? Do you know that the Drake Passage is the most turbulent body of water on the entire planet? Well, I do, because I just spent the last three hours on the Internet.

Here's the thing. Do you get seasick? People who don't get seasick have no idea what it's like. It's not just nausea. It's nausea plus losing the will to live. I warned Elgie: All that

matters during those two days is that he keep me away from guns. In the throes of seasickness, blowing my brains out would be an easy call.

Ten years ago I saw a documentary on the siege of that Moscow theater. After just forty-eight hours of the terrorists confining the hostages to their seats with no sleep, the lights blazing, and being forced to pee in their pants – although if they had to shit, they could do so in the orchestra pit – well, more than a few hostages just stood up and walked to the exit knowing they'd get shot in the back. Because they were DONE.

My point is this. I'm getting really scared about the trip to Antarctica. And not just because I hate people, which, for the record, I still do. I just don't think I can make it across the Drake Passage. If it weren't for Bee, I'd certainly cancel the trip. But I can't let her down. Maybe you can find me something really strong for seasickness. And I don't mean Dramamine. I mean *STRONG*.

On another topic: I fully expect you to be charging me for the time it takes to read all my rambling emails!

• • •

*Letter from Bruce Jessup,  
dean of admissions at Choate*

Dear Bee,

After a careful review of an outstanding group of Early Decision applicants, it is our great pleasure to offer you admission to Choate Rosemary.

We thoroughly enjoyed learning about your academic achievements and your varied interests during our review process. Your scores and assessments were so outstanding, in fact, that our director of studies, Hillary Loundes, has sent a

letter under separate cover to your parents discussing your unique enrollment opportunities.

For now, let us warmly congratulate you on surviving this extremely competitive process. I have absolutely no doubt that you will find your classmates as stimulating, challenging, and engaging as we find you.

Sincerely,  
Bruce Jessup

• • •

*Letter from Hillary Loundes,  
director of studies at Choate*

Dear Mr and Mrs Branch,

Congratulations on Bee's acceptance to Choate Rosemary. As you know better than anyone, Bee is an extraordinary young woman. So extraordinary, in fact, that I am recommending she skip third form (ninth grade) and enter Choate Rosemary in the fourth form (tenth grade).

This year, Choate Rosemary will accept one in ten applicants. Almost without exception, each candidate, like Bee, has excellent SSAT scores and near perfect GPAs. You may wonder how we wade through this sea of academic sameness consisting of grade and recommendation inflation to find students who will truly thrive at Choate Rosemary.

Since the late 1990s, our admissions department has been working with Yale's PACE (Psychology of Abilities, Competencies, and Expertise) Center to develop a hard measure of the soft skills required to adjust to the academic and social challenges of boarding school. The result of this work is something unique to the admissions process at Choate Rosemary, the Choate Self-Assessment.

It was on her CSA that Bee truly separated herself from

the pack. In this new vocabulary of success, there are two words we like to use when describing our ideal student. Those words are 'grit' and 'poise'. Your daughter tested off the charts for both.

As we all know, the worst thing that can happen to a gifted child is for her to grow bored. Therefore, we think it is in Bee's best interest to enter the fourth form.

Boarding tuition is \$47,260. To guarantee Bee's place, please submit the enrollment contract and deposit by January 3.

I look forward to discussing this further. Above all, welcome to Choate Rosemary!

Sincerely,  
Hillary Loundes

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From: Bernadette Fox

To: Manjula Kapoor

Do you hear the weeping all the way in India? Bee was accepted to Choate! Truly, I blame Elgie and myself, for regaling Bee with our boarding school adventures. Elgie went to Exeter; I went to Choate. It was nothing but brilliant kids, Grateful Dead concerts, and innovative ways to prevent your dorm room from reeking of bong water: what wasn't to like? A gigantic part of me does want my daughter sprung from the dreary provinciality of Seattle. And Bee is dying to go. So I have no choice but to cowboy up and not make this all about me.

Elgie is composing a letter about not wanting Bee to skip a grade. But that's not your concern. Please pay the deposit from our joint account. Any word on the seasickness medicine? I'm kind of freaking out.

More later, but I'm late picking up Bee and I can't find the dog.

• • •

‘OK,’ Mom said that day, as soon as I got in the car, ‘we have a problem. Ice Cream got into my closet, the door shut behind her, and I can’t open it. She’s stuck.’

If that sounds weird, it isn’t. Our house is old. All day and night it cracks and groans, like it’s trying to get comfortable but can’t, which I’m sure has everything to do with the huge amount of water it absorbs any time it rains. It’s happened before that a door all of a sudden won’t open because the house has settled around it. This was the first time Ice Cream was involved.

Mom and I raced home and I flew upstairs calling, ‘Ice Cream, Ice Cream.’ In Mom and Dad’s bedroom, there’s a row of confessionals they use as closets. The doors are rounded and pointy at the top. Behind a door, Ice Cream was barking, not a scared whimpering bark, but a playful bark. Trust me, she was laughing at us.

There were tools all over the floor and also some two-by-fours, which are always on hand in case we need to secure tarps to the roof. I pulled the door handle, and there was no give whatsoever.

‘I tried everything,’ Mom said. ‘The fascia is totally rotted. See there? How the beam is sagging?’ I knew Mom fixed up houses before I was born, but she was talking as if she were a whole different person. I didn’t like it. ‘I tried to raise the door-frame with a jack,’ she said, ‘but I couldn’t get enough leverage.’

‘Can’t we just kick it in?’ I said.

‘The door opens out ...’ Mom drifted off in thought, then had an idea. ‘You’re right. We’ll have to kick it open, from the inside. Let’s climb up the house and go in through the window.’ Now that sounded fun.

We ran down the stairs and got a ladder from the shed and dragged it across the squishy lawn to the side of the house.

Mom put down some plywood as a base for the ladder. 'OK,' she said, 'you hold it. I'll climb up.'

'She's my dog,' I said. 'You hold the ladder.'

'Absolutely not, Bala. It's too dangerous.'

Mom took off her scarf and wrapped it around her right hand, then began her ascent. It was funny seeing her in her Belgian shoes and Capri pants climbing up the paint-splattered ladder. She punched the stained glass with her protected hand and unlatched the window, then climbed in. An eternity passed.

'Mom!' I kept calling. The rotter didn't even stick her head out. I was so drenched and annoyed that I didn't care. I put my foot on the ladder. It was totally secure. I scrambled up superquick because what would have made me lose my balance was Mom catching me halfway up and yelling. It took me about eight seconds and I climbed in the window without slipping.

Ice Cream had no reaction when she saw me. She was more interested in Mom, who was karate-kicking the door, and karate-kicking the door, and karate-kicking the door. 'Gaaah,' Mom cried with each kick. Finally, the door skidded open.

'Nice job,' I said.

Mom jumped. 'Bee!' She was furious, and got fierouser when there was a loud crash outside. The ladder had fallen away from the house and was lying across the lawn.

'Whoops,' I said. I gave Ice Cream a huge hug and breathed in her musty scent for as long as I could without passing out. 'You are the worst dog ever.'

'This came for you.' Mom handed me a letter. The return address was the Choate seal. 'Congratulations.'

Mom had dinner delivered early and we drove out to celebrate with Dad. As we zoomed across the floating bridge over Lake Washington, my mind was wild with images of Choate. It was

so vast and clean, and the buildings so majestic, red brick with ivy on the sides. It's what I imagined England would look like. Dad and I had visited in the spring when the tree branches were heavy with flowers and ducklings glided across sparkling ponds. I'd never seen a place so picturesque except for jigsaw puzzles.

Mom turned to me. 'You're allowed to be happy about going away, you know.'

'It's just weird.'

I love Microsoft. It's where I went to day care, and when the sun was out they'd load us into big red wagons and pull us around to visit our parents. Dad made a treasure machine. I still don't understand how it worked, but when it was time to get picked up, you got to put in a coin and out would drop a treasure, matched perfectly to you. A boy who liked cars would get a Hot Wheels. Not just any Hot Wheels, but one he didn't already have. And if a girl was into baby dolls, she would get a bottle for her baby doll. The treasure machine is now on display in the Visitor Center because it's an early example of facial recognition technology, which is what Dad was doing in L.A. when Microsoft bought him out.

We parked illegally, and Mom swanned across the Commons carrying the take-out bags, with me at her heels. We entered Dad's building. Looming above the receptionist was a jumbo digital clock that counted down:

119 DAYS  
2 HOURS  
44 MINUTES  
33 SECONDS

'That's what they call a *ship clock*,' Mom explained. 'It's how long until Samantha 2 ships. They put it up as motivation. No comment.'

The same clock was in the elevator, the hallways, and even the bathrooms. It ticked down that whole meal in Dad's office, where we sat on the inflatable balls he uses instead of chairs, our take-out containers wobbling precariously on our knees. I was telling them about all the different kinds of penguins we were going to see on the trip.

'You want to know the coolest part?' Mom chimed in. 'There isn't assigned seating at the dining room, and they have tables for four. That means the three of us can sit down and if we pile the extra chair with our gloves and hats, nobody can sit with us!'

Dad and I looked at each other, like, Is she joking?

'And penguins,' Mom quickly added. 'I'm wildly excited about all those penguins.'

Dad must have told everyone we were coming, because people kept walking by and peeking through the glass, but acting like they weren't, which is what it must feel like to be famous.

'I wish this was more of a celebration,' Dad said, glancing at his email. 'But I have a video conference with Taipei.'

'That's OK, Dad,' I said. 'You're busy.'

• • •

*From Dad*

Dear Ms. Loundes,

First off, we're thrilled that Bee has been accepted to Choate. While I'm an Exonian myself, my wife, Bernadette, always said her happiest days were spent at Choate, and Bee has wanted to attend ever since she was a little girl.

Secondly, thank you for the kind words about Bee. We agree, she's extraordinary. However, we are strenuously opposed to her skipping a grade.

I have just looked over her application, and I realize there is no way you would know the essential fact about Bee: she was born with a heart defect, which required a half-dozen surgeries. As a result, she spent her first five years on and off at Seattle Children's Hospital.

Bee entered kindergarten on schedule, even though her little body was having difficulty keeping up. (She was in the zero percentile for height and weight during this time; she is still struggling to catch up, as you saw for yourself.) Yet her profound intelligence was already making itself known. Teachers encouraged us to get Bee tested. Really, though, Bernadette and I had no interest in the gifted-child industry. Perhaps because we both went to prep school and Ivy League universities ourselves, we did not fetishize them like other Seattle parents. Our primary concern was that our daughter know a modicum of normalcy after the sickening circumstances of her first five years.

It was a decision that has richly benefited Bee. We found a wonderful neighborhood school, Galer Street. Sure, Bee was 'ahead' of the other kids in her class. In response, she took it upon herself to teach the slower kids to read and write. To this day, Bee stays after school and helps in homework lab. She didn't mention that on her application, either.

Choate has marvelous facilities. I'm certain Bee will find more than enough to keep her from 'growing bored'.

While we're on the subject, please indulge me while I tell you the story of the first and last time Bee ever claimed she was bored. Bernadette and I were driving Bee and a friend, both preschoolers, to a birthday party. There was traffic. Grace said, 'I'm bored.'

'Yeah,' Bee mimicked, 'I'm bored.'

Bernadette pulled the car over, took off her seat belt, and turned around. 'That's right,' she told the girls. 'You're bored. And I'm going to let you in on a little secret about life. You

think it's boring now? Well, it only gets more boring. The sooner you learn it's *on you* to make life interesting, the better off you'll be.'

'OK,' Bee said quietly. Grace burst into tears and never had a playdate with us again. It was the first and last time Bee ever said she was bored.

We look forward to meeting you in the fall, when Bee arrives with her fellow third formers.

Sincerely,  
Elgin Branch

• • •

I am not sick! I was born with hypoplastic left heart syndrome, OK? It's a congenital condition where the mitral valve, left ventricle, aortic valve, and aorta don't develop completely and which required me to have three open-heart surgeries plus three more because of complications. The last surgery was when I was five. I know I'm supposed to be so smart, but guess what? I don't remember any of it! And double-guess what? I'm totally fine now, and have been for *nine and a half years*. Just take a time-out and ponder that. For two-thirds of my life I've been totally normal.

Mom and Dad bring me back to Children's every year for an echocardiogram and X rays that even the cardiologist rolls her eyes at because I don't need them. Walking through the halls, Mom is always, like, having a Vietnam flashback. We'll pass some random piece of art hanging on the wall and she'll grab onto a chair and say, Oh God, that Milton Avery poster. Or, gulping a big breath, That ficus tree had origami cranes hanging on it that awful Christmas. And then she'll close her eyes while everyone just stands there, and Dad hugs her really tight, tears flooding his eyes, too.

All the doctors and nurses come out of their offices hailing me like the conquering hero and the whole time I'm thinking,

Why? They show me pictures of when I was a baby tucked into the hospital bed wearing a little cap, like I'm supposed to remember it. I don't even know what the point of any of it is besides I'm totally fine now.

The only thing now is I'm short and don't have breasts, which is annoying. Plus my asthma. Lots of doctors said I could have asthma even if I was born with a good heart. It doesn't keep me from doing anything like dancing or playing the flute. I don't have the thing where you wheeze. I have the even grosser thing where any time I get sick, even if it's a stomach virus, it's followed by two weeks of disgusting phlegm, which I have no choice but to cough up. I'm not saying it's the most pleasant thing to be sitting across from, but if you care about how it feels to me, I'll tell you that I barely notice it.

The nurse at school, Mrs Webb, is totally ridiculous the way she's obsessed with my cough. I swear, on the last day of school I want to pretend to drop dead in her office just to freak her out. I seriously think that every day Mrs Webb leaves Galer Street and it's a day I didn't die on her watch, she feels this soaring relief.

I'm totally off-task. Why did I even start writing all this? Oh, yeah. I'm not sick!

*Thursday, December 2*

From: Soo-Lin Lee-Segal

To: Audrey Griffin

You have been very dear *not* to ask me how the Microsoft town hall went. I'm sure you're dying to know if I was a casualty of the epic downsizing that has been all over the papers.

This was a top-to-bottom RIF, a ten percent haircut. In the

old days, a reorg meant a hiring spree. Now it means layoffs. As I might have told you, my project was about to be canceled, and my PM got a little unhinged and flamed half of Microsoft. I maniacally checked meeting room reservations and the jobs website, trying to glean *something* about my future. Our top people landed at Windows Phone and Bing. When I tried to get answers from my PM about me, all I received in response was eerie silence.

Then, yesterday afternoon, I got pinged by an HR rep who wanted to see me in the meeting room down the hall the next day. (I had seen that appointment. I had no idea it was for me!)

Before I got out the teapot and threw myself a pity party, I dropped everything and found the nearest Victims Against Victimhood meeting, which helped enormously. (I know you're a huge skeptic when it comes to VAV, but they are my rock.)

I drove myself to work this morning because I didn't want the added indignity of having to load a bunch of boxes onto the Connector. I showed up in the meeting room, where the HR woman calmly informed me that our entire team, except for those who already left for Bing and Windows Phone, were being RIFed.

'However,' she said, 'you rank so well that we'd like to assign you to a special project located in Studio C.'

Audrey, I just about fell over. Studio C is on the new Studio West campus, and their work is the most high profile at Microsoft. Good news: I'm getting *promoted*! Bad news: the new product I'm working on is in high gear, and I'll be expected to work weekends. It's a hush-hush project. I don't even know its name yet. Bad news: I may not be able to make the Prospective Parent Brunch. Good news: I'll definitely be able to pay for the food.

Talk soon, and go Huskies!

• • •

From: Ollie-O

To: Prospective Parent Brunch Committee

**REAL-TIME ✨ FLASH!**

We're up to 60 RSVPs! I'm just **throwing out some fertilizer**, but: **Pearl Jam**. I hear they've got kids entering kindergarten. If we get one of them – **it doesn't have to be the singer** – I can **grow** it.

• • •

From: Audrey Griffin

To: Soo-Lin Lee-Segal

Great news about the promotion! I'll gladly take you up on your offer to pay for the food. I still have enough green tomatoes in the greenhouse to fry up for appetizers, plus dill, parsley, and cilantro for aioli. I've stored two bushels of apples and want to make my rosemary tarte tatin for dessert. For the main course, how about we get that traveling pizza oven to cater? They can set up in the backyard, which frees up my kitchen.

Ollie-O was right about buzz being 'viral'. Today at Whole Foods, a woman I didn't even recognize recognized *me* and said she was looking forward to my brunch. Judging from the contents of her shopping cart – imported cheese, organic raspberries, fruit wash spray – she is the exact quality of parent we need at Galer Street. I saw her in the parking lot. She was driving a Lexus. Not a Mercedes, but close enough!

Did you hear? Shipping a sick child off to boarding school! Why am I not surprised?

• • •

That day, I had a hall pass because our music teacher, Mr Kangana, asked me to accompany the first graders for the song they were performing for World Celebration Day, and he needed me for rehearsal. I was at my locker getting my flute, and who did I run into, but Audrey Griffin. She was hanging some prayer rugs the third graders had woven for the art auction.

‘I hear you’re going to boarding school,’ she said. ‘Whose idea was that?’

‘Mine,’ I said.

‘I could never send Kyle to boarding school,’ Audrey said.

‘I guess you love Kyle more than my Mom loves me,’ I said, and played my flute as I skipped down the hall.

• • •

From: Manjula Kapoor

To: Bernadette Fox

Dear Ms. Fox,

I have researched medicines for motion sickness. The strongest remedy available by prescription in the U.S. is called ABHR transdermal cream. It is a composite of Ativan, Benadryl, Haldol, and Reglan, formulated into a cream for topical application. It was devised by NASA to administer to the cosmonauts to combat motion sickness in outer space. It has since been embraced by the hospice community to use on terminally ill cancer patients. It would be my sincere pleasure to send you links to various message boards that sing the high praise of ABHR cream. However, I must warn you, there are accompanying photographs of gravely ill patients which you may find disturbing. I have taken the initiative to research the obtainment of ABHR cream. It is available only through ‘compound pharmacies’. We do not have these in India. Apparently, they are widely used in the

U.S. I have found a doctor who will call in a prescription.  
Please advise me how you wish to proceed.

Warm regards,  
Manjula

• • •

To: Manjula Kapoor  
From: Bernadette Fox

If it's good enough for astronauts and cancer patients, it's  
good enough for me! Call it in!

• • •

*Note from Audrey Griffin*

Tom,

Here's the check for your past work. To confirm, we'll meet at my  
place Monday afternoon and pop up the hill to the house with the  
blackberry bushes. I understand your hesitation about entering the  
neighbor's property uninvited. But I know for a fact nobody will be  
there.

• • •

*Monday, December 6*

That day, we had art sixth period, and I had gunk in my throat,  
so I stepped into the hall to spit it in the water fountain, which  
is what I always did when I was in art. Who turned the corner  
as I was hawking it up? Mrs Webb, the nurse. She got all  
panicked that I was spreading germs, which I tried to explain I  
wasn't, because white phlegm is *dead* germs. Ask a real doctor  
and not some office administrator whose only justification for  
calling herself a nurse isn't nursing school but a box of Band-  
Aids she keeps in her desk.

'I'll get my backpack,' I grumbled.

I'd like to point out that Mr Levy, my biology and home-room teacher, has a daughter who has viral-induced asthma like me, and she plays travel hockey, so he knows my cough is no big deal. In a million years he would never send me to Mrs Webb's office. When I get gunk in my throat, it's easy to tell because I'll be answering a question and my voice will start cutting out like a bad cell-phone connection. Mr Levy will do this thing where he passes me a tissue behind his back. Mr Levy is really funny. He lets the turtles walk around the classroom, and once he brought in liquid nitrogen and started freezing our uneaten lunch.

I didn't feel that bad about Mom having to pick me up early, because it was already sixth period. The thing I mainly felt bad about was that I wouldn't get to tutor at homework lab. The fourth graders were doing a debate, and I was helping them prepare. Their class was studying China, and the debate was going to be *pro and con* Chinese occupation of Tibet. Have you ever heard of such a thing? Galer Street is so ridiculous that it goes beyond PC and turns back in on itself to the point where fourth graders are actually having to debate the *advantages* of China's genocide of the Tibetan people, not to mention the equally devastating cultural genocide. I wanted them to say that one of the pros was that Chinese occupation is helping with the world food shortage because there are fewer Tibetan mouths to feed. But Mr Lotterstein overheard me and told me I'd better not dare.

There I was, sitting on the overpass steps in the rain. (We weren't allowed to wait in the office ever since Kyle Griffin was sent there one day, and when nobody was looking he went through the Galer Street directory and started calling all the parents from the main office number. So when the parents looked at their cell phones, it said there was an incoming call from Galer Street. They'd answer, and Kyle screamed, 'There's

been an accident!’ and hung up. From then on, all the kids had to wait outside.) Mom drove up. She didn’t even ask how I was because she knows Mrs Webb is totally annoying. On the drive home, I started playing my new flute. Mom never lets me play in the car because she’s afraid someone might crash into us and my flute will impale me into the seat. I find that ridiculous, because how could that even happen?

‘Bee—’ Mom said.

‘I know, I know.’ I put the flute away.

‘No,’ Mom said. ‘Is that new? I’ve never seen it before.’

‘It’s a Japanese flute called a *shakuhachi* Mr Kangana lent it to me from his collection. The first graders are going to sing for the parents on World Celebration Day and I’m going to accompany them. Last week, I went to rehearse, and they were just standing there singing. It was my idea they should do a little elephant dance, so I get to choreograph it.’

‘I didn’t know you’re choreographing a dance for the first graders,’ Mom said. ‘That’s a huge deal, Bee.’

‘Not really.’

‘You need to tell me these things. Can I come?’

‘I’m not sure when it is.’ I knew she didn’t like coming to school, and probably wouldn’t, so why pretend.

We got home and I went up to my room, and Mom did what she always did, which was go out to the Petit Trianon.

I don’t think I’ve mentioned the Petit Trianon yet. Mom likes to get out of the house during the day, especially because Norma and her sister come to clean, and they talk really loudly to each other from room to room. Plus the gardeners come inside to weed-whack. So Mom got an Airstream trailer and had a crane lower it into the backyard. It’s where her computer is, and where she spends most of her time. I was the one who named it the Petit Trianon, after Marie Antoinette, who had a whole mini-estate built at Versailles, where she could go when she needed a break from Versailles.

So that's where Mom was, and I was upstairs starting my homework, when Ice Cream began barking.

From the backyard, I heard Mom's voice. 'Can I help you with something?' she said, all dripping with sarcasm.

There was an idiotic little shriek.

I went to the window. Mom was standing on the lawn with Audrey Griffin and some guy in boots and overalls.

'I didn't think you would be home,' Audrey sputtered.

'Apparently.' Mom's voice was superbitchy. It was pretty funny.

Audrey started short-circuiting about our blackberry bushes and her organic garden and the guy who had a friend with a special machine and something that needed to get done this week. Mom just listened, which made Audrey talk even faster.

'I'll be happy to hire Tom to remove my blackberry bushes,' Mom finally said. 'Do you have a card?' A long painful silence as the guy searched his pockets.

'It seems like we're done,' Mom said to Audrey. 'So why don't you go back through the same hole in the fence you crawled in, and keep out of my cabbage patch.' She spun around and marched back into the Petit Trianon and shut the door.

I was, like, Go Mom! Because here's the thing. No matter what people say about Mom now, she sure knew how to make life funny.

• • •

From: Bernadette Fox

To: Manjula Kapoor

Attached, please find information for a fellow who 'abates' blackberry vines. (Can you believe there's such a thing?!) Contact him and tell him to do who-what-when-where-how he needs. I'll pay for it all.

• • •

*Five minutes later, Mom followed it up with this:*

From: Bernadette Fox

To: Manjula Kapoor

I need a sign made. 8 feet wide by 5 feet high. Here's what I want it to read:

*PRIVATE PROPERTY  
NO TRESPASSING  
Galer Street Gnats  
Will Be Arrested  
and Hauled Off to Gnat Jail*

Make the sign itself the loudest, ugliest red, and the lettering the loudest, ugliest yellow. I'd like it placed on the western edge of my property line, at the bottom of the hill, which will be accessible once we've *abated* the despised blackberries. Make sure the sign is facing toward the neighbor's yard.

• • •

*Tuesday, December 7*

From: Manjula Kapoor

To: Bernadette Fox

I am confirming that the sign you would like fabricated is *eight feet wide by five feet high*. The gentleman I have contracted remarked it is unusually large and seems out of proportion for a residential area.

Warm regards,

Manjula

• • •

From: Bernadette Fox  
To: Manjula Kapoor

You bet your bindi that's how big I want it.

• • •

From: Manjula Kapoor  
To: Bernadette Fox

Dear Ms. Fox,

The sign has been ordered and will be erected the same day Tom completes the abatement work.

Also, I am pleased to inform you I have found a doctor willing to write a prescription for ABHR cream. The only compound pharmacy in Seattle that will fill it, unfortunately, does not deliver. I inquired about messenger services, but, alas, the pharmacy insists that you pick up the prescription because they are required by law to review the side effects with you in person. Attached please find the address of the pharmacy and a copy of the prescription.

Warm regards,  
Manjula

• • •

*Friday, December 10*

From: Bernadette Fox  
To: Manjula Kapoor

I'm heading down to the pharmacy now. Not a terrible thing to be getting out of the house while this infernal machine with spikes, telescoping arms, and vicious rotors is chewing

up my hillside and spraying mulch everywhere. Tom has literally lashed himself on top of the beast so he doesn't get bucked off. I wouldn't be surprised if it starts spitting fire.

Oh! The fishing vest's arrived. Thank you! Already, I've tucked away my glasses, car keys, cell phone. I may never take this thing off.

• • •

From: Soo-Lin Lee-Segal

To: Audrey Griffin

As Ollie-O would say ... **REAL-TIME ✨ FLASH!**

I told you I was being made admin of a new team? I just found out the team is Samantha 2, headed by none other than Elgin Branch!

Audrey, my body is a cauldron of emotions right now! When Elgin unveiled Samantha 2 at the TED conference in February, it caused a near riot on the Internet. In less than a year, his is the fourth-most-watched TEDTalk of all time. Bill Gates recently said his favorite project in the whole company is Samantha 2. Last year, Elgin was given a Technical Recognition Award, Microsoft's highest honor. The Samantha 2 guys, and Elgin in particular, are like rock stars around here. You go over to Studio West and you can tell by their swagger they're on Samantha 2. *I* know I'm good at my job, but to be put on Samantha 2 means everyone here knows it, too. It's a giddy feeling.

Then there's Elgin Branch himself. His rudeness and arrogance that day on the Connector, it was a slap in the face that still stings. Wait until you hear what happened this morning.

I went to HR to get my new key card and office assignment. (In ten years, this is the first time I've had a

window office!) I was unpacking my photos, mugs, and snow baby collection when I looked up and saw Elgin Branch across the atrium. He wasn't wearing any shoes, just socks, which I found odd. I caught his eye and waved. He vaguely smiled, then kept walking.

I decided to be proactive (one of the three P's that serve as the interpersonal foundation for Victims Against Victimhood) and initiate our first face-to-face meeting in our new roles as manager and admin.

Elgin was at his stand-up desk, his hiking boots in a tangle at his feet. Immediately, I was struck by the number of patent cubes haphazardly piled around the office. (Anytime a developer patents something, he receives a ceremonial cube, a cute thing we do at MS.) My last GM had four. On Elgin's windowsill alone there were twenty, not to mention those that had fallen on the floor.

'Is there something I can do for you?' he said.

'Good morning.' I straightened myself. 'I'm Soo-Lin Lee-Segal, the new admin.'

'Nice to meet you.' He held out his hand.

'We've actually met. I have a son, Lincoln, at Galer Street, in Bee's class.'

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'Of course.'

The Dev lead, Pablo, popped his head in. 'It's a beautiful day, neighbor.' (Everyone on the team teases Elgin with Mr Rogers references. It's a quirk of Elgin's, apparently, that as soon as he gets inside, like Mr Rogers, he removes his shoes. Even on his TEDTalk, which I just rewatched, Elgin is standing there in his socks. In front of Al Gore and Cameron Diaz!) 'We're on for noon,' Pablo went on. 'We have a third-party meeting in South Lake Union. How about we turn it into lunch downtown? Wild Ginger?'

'Great,' answered Elgin. 'It's next to the light rail station. I can go straight to the airport.' I had seen on the Samantha 2

calendar that Elgin has an out-of-town presentation tomorrow.

Pablo turned, and I introduced myself. 'Hooray!' he said. 'Our new admin! Man, we've been dying around here without you. How about you join us for lunch?'

'You must have heard my stomach growling,' I chirped. 'I have a car. I can drive us downtown.'

'Let's take the 888 Shuttle,' Elgin said. 'I'm going to need the Wi-Fi to get some emails out.'

'The 888 Shuttle it is,' I said, insulted at the rejection but a little consoled because the 888 Shuttle is for VPs and up, and this will be my first opportunity to ride it. 'Wild Ginger at noon. I'll make a reservation.'

So here I am now, dreading the meal on what should be the happiest day of my life. Oh, Audrey, I hope your day is going better than mine.

• • •

From: Audrey Griffin

To: Soo-Lin Lee-Segal

Who cares about Elgin Branch? I care about you. I'm so proud of everything you've overcome since the divorce. Finally, you're getting the recognition you deserve.

My day is going dandy. A machine is ripping out all the blackberry vines from Bernadette's hill. It has put me in such soaring spirits that I am able to laugh off an incident at Galer Street that otherwise might have landed me in a snit.

Gwen Goodyear grabbed me this morning and asked to speak privately in her office. Who was sitting there in a big leather chair with his back to me? Kyle! Gwen shut the door and went behind her desk. There was a chair next to Kyle, so I sat down.

Gwen opened her drawer. 'We found something in Kyle's

locker yesterday.' She held up an orange pill bottle. It had my name on it – it was the Vicodin prescription I got after Our Lady of Straight Gate tried to plow me over in her car.

'What's that doing here?' I said.

'Kyle?' Gwen said.

'I don't know,' said Kyle.

'Galer Street has a zero-tolerance drug policy,' Gwen said.

'But it's *prescription* medicine,' I said, still not understanding her point.

'Kyle,' Gwen said. 'Why was it in your locker?'

I did not like where this was going. Not one bit. I told her: 'I went to the emergency room thanks to Bernadette Fox. I left *on crutches*, if you remember. I asked Kyle to hold my purse, and the prescription medicine. Good lord.'

'When did you realize your Vicodin was missing?' Gwen asked.

'Not until this moment,' I said.

'Why is the bottle empty? Let Kyle answer this, Audrey.' She turned to Kyle. 'Kyle, why is it empty?'

'I don't know,' Kyle answered.

'I'm sure it was empty when we got it,' I said. 'You know how understaffed they are over at the UW Medical. They probably forgot to fill it. Are we done yet? Maybe you haven't heard, but I'm hosting a party tomorrow for sixty prospective parents.' I got up and left.

Now that I write this, I'd like to know what *Gwen Goodyear* was doing in Kyle's locker. Don't they have locks on them? Isn't that why they're called lockers?

• • •

All our lockers have combination locks built into the doors. It's a total drag to turn the little dials back and forth a million times whenever you need to get something. Everyone hates it. But Kyle and the juvies figured out a way around it, which is to

smash the locks until they break off. Kyle's locker door is permanently ajar. That's what Ms. Goodyear was doing in Kyle's locker.

• • •

From: Bernadette Fox

To: Manjula Kapoor

It was the first time I had been downtown in a year. I immediately remembered why: the pay-to-park meters.

Parking in Seattle is an eight-step process. Step one, find a place to park (gooooo luuuuck!). Step two, *back* in to the angled parking space (who ever innovated *that* should be sentenced to the chokey.) Step three, find a ticket dispenser that *isn't* menacingly encircled by a stinky mosaic of beggars/bums/junkies/runaways. This requires step four, crossing the street. Oh, plus you've forgotten your umbrella (there goes your hair, which you stopped worrying about toward the end of the last century so that's a freebie). Step five, slide your credit card into the machine (small miracle if you've found one that hasn't been filled with epoxy by some misguided malcontent). Step six, return to your car (passing aforementioned putrid gauntlet, who heckle you because you didn't give them money on the way there – oh, and did I mention, they all have shivering dogs?). Step seven, affix the ticket to the proper window (is it passenger-side for back-in angle parking? or driver-side? I would read the rules on the back of the sticker but can't because WHO THE HELL BRINGS READING GLASSES TO PARK THEIR CAR?). Step eight, pray to the God you don't believe in that you have the mental wherewithal to remember what the hell it was you came downtown for in the first place.

Already I wished a Chechen rebel would shoot me in the back.

The compound pharmacy was cavernous, wood-paneled, and home to a few poorly stocked shelves. In the middle of it sat a brocade sofa, over which hung a Chihuly chandelier. The place made no sense at all, so already I was pretty much a wreck.

I approached the counter. The girl was wearing one of those white headdresses that look like a nun's hat without the wings. I have no idea what ethnicity that made her, but there are tons of them here, especially working at rental-car places. One of these days, I really need to ask.

'Bernadette Fox,' I said.

Her eyes met mine, then flashed mischief. 'One moment.' She stepped onto a platform and whispered something to another pharmacist. He lowered his chin and examined me severely over his spectacles. Both he and the girl descended. Whatever was about to happen, they had decided beforehand it was a two-person job.

'I received the prescription from your doctor,' said the gentleman. 'It was written for seasickness, for a cruise you'll be taking?'

'We're going to Antarctica over Christmas,' I said, 'which requires crossing the Drake Passage. The statistics about the speed of the swirling water and the heights of the swells would shock you if I told you. But I can't, because I'm hopeless when it comes to remembering numbers. Plus, I'm trying really hard to block it out. I blame my daughter. I'm only going because of her.'

'Your prescription is for ABHR,' he said. 'ABHR is basically Haldol with some Benadryl, Reglan, and Ativan thrown in.'

'Sounds good to me.'

'Haldol is an antipsychotic.' He dropped his reading glasses into his shirt pocket. 'It was used in the Soviet prison system to break prisoners' wills.'

‘And I’m only discovering it now?’ I said.

This guy was proving resistant to my many charms, or else I am without charm, which is probably the case. He continued. ‘It has some severe side effects, tardive dyskinesia being the worst. Tardive dyskinesia is characterized by uncontrollable grimacing, tongue protrusion, lip smacking. . .’

‘You’ve seen those people,’ the Flying Nun gravely added. She held a contorted hand up to her face, cocked her head, then shut one eye.

‘You obviously don’t get seasick,’ I said. ‘Because a couple of hours of that is a day at the beach by comparison.’

‘Tardive dyskinesia can last forever,’ he said.

‘Forever?’ I said weakly.

‘The likelihood of tardive dyskinesia is about four percent,’ he said. ‘It increases to ten percent for older women.’

I blew out really hard. ‘Oh, man.’

‘I spoke to your doctor. He wrote you a prescription for a scopolamine patch for motion sickness, and Xanax for anxiety.’

Xanax, I had! Bee’s battalion of doctors had always sent me home with Xanax or some sleeping pill. (Have I mentioned? I don’t sleep.) I never took them, because the one time I did, they made me nauseous and not feeling like myself. (I know, that should have been a selling point. What can I say? I’ve grown accustomed.) But the problem with the Xanax and the hundreds of other pills I had squirreled away was this: they were currently jumbled together in a Ziploc bag. Why? Well, once, I was thinking about OD’ing, so I dumped the contents of every prescription bottle into my two hands – they didn’t even fit, that’s how many I had – just to eyeball to see if I could swallow them all. But then I cooled off on the whole idea and dumped the pills in a baggie, where they languish to this day. Why did I want to OD? you’re probably wondering. Well, so am I! I don’t even remember.

'Do you have some kind of laminated chart of what the pills look like?' I asked the pharmacist. My thinking was, maybe I could figure out which ones were Xanax and return them to their proper container. The poor guy looked baffled. Who can blame him?

'Fine,' I said. 'Give me the Xanax and that patch thing.'

I removed myself to the brocade couch. It was murderously uncomfortable. I put my leg up and leaned back. That was more like it. It was a fainting couch, I now realized, and wanted to be lain upon. Hovering over me was the Chihuly chandelier. Chihulys are the pigeons of Seattle. They're everywhere, and even if they don't get in your way, you can't help but build up a kind of antipathy toward them.

This one was all glass, of course, white and ruffly and full of dripping tentacles. It glowed from within, a cold blue, but with no discernible light source. The rain outside was pounding. Its rhythmic splatter only made this hovering glass beast more haunting, as if it had arrived with the storm, a rainmaker itself. It sang to me, Chihuly . . . Chihuly. In the seventies, Dale Chihuly was already a distinguished glassblower when he got into a car accident and lost an eye. But that didn't stop him. A few years later, he had a surfing mishap and messed up his shoulder so badly that he was never able to hold a glass pipe again. That didn't stop him, either. Don't believe me? Take a boat out on Lake Union and look in the window of Dale Chihuly's studio. He's probably there now, with his eye patch and dead arm, doing the best, trippiest work of his life. I had to close my eyes.

'Bernadette?' said a voice.

I opened my eyes. I had fallen asleep. This is the problem with never sleeping. Sometimes you actually do, at the worst times: like this time: in public.

'Bernadette?' It was Elgie. 'What are you doing asleep in here?'

'Elgie—' I wiped the drool off my cheek. 'They wouldn't give me Haldol, so I have to wait for Xanax.'

'*What?*' He glanced out the window. Standing on the street were some Microsoft people I vaguely recognized. 'What are you wearing?'

He was referring to my fishing vest. 'Oh, this. I got it from the Internet.'

'Could you please stand up?' he said. 'I have a lunch. Do I need to cancel it?'

'God, no!' I said. 'I'm fine. I didn't sleep last night and just dozed off. Go, do, be.'

'I'm going to come home for dinner. Can we go out to dinner tonight?'

'Aren't you going to D.C.—'

'It can wait,' he said.

'Yeah, sure,' I said. 'Buzz and I will pick a place.'

'Just me and you.' He left.

And this is when it began to unravel: I could swear one of the people waiting for him outside was a gnat from Galer Street. Not the one who's hassling us about the blackberries, but one of her flying monkeys. I blinked to make sure. But Elgie and his group had been absorbed into the lunch rush.

My heart was really thumping. I should have stayed and popped one of those Xanax. But I couldn't stand to be in that compound pharmacy anymore, trapped with the icy portent. I blame you, Dale Chihuly!

I fled. I had no idea which way I was pointed, where I was even headed. But I must have gone up Fourth Avenue, because the next thing I knew, I was standing outside the Rem Koolhaas public library.

I had stopped, apparently. Because a guy approached me.

A graduate student, he looked like. Completely nice, nothing mean or threatening about him.

But he recognized me.

Manjula, I have no idea how. The only photograph of me floating around was one taken twenty years ago, right before the Huge Hideous Thing. I am beautiful, my face radiating with confidence, my smile bursting with the future of my choosing.

'Bernadette Fox,' I blurted.

I am fifty, slowly going mad.

This can't make sense to you, Manjula. It doesn't have to. But you see what happens when I come into contact with people. It doesn't bode well for the whole Antarctica thing.

• • •

Later that day, Mom picked me up. Maybe she was a little quiet, but sometimes that happens, because on the way to school she listens to 'The World' on PRI, which is usually a downer, and that day was no exception. I got into the car. A terrible report was on about the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and how rape was being used as a weapon. All the females were getting raped, from baby girls, six months old, all the way to eighty-year-old grandmothers, and every age in between. More than one thousand women and girls were getting raped *each month*. It had been going on for *twelve years* and nobody was doing anything about it. Hillary Clinton had gone there and promised to help, which gave everyone hope, but then all she did was give money to the corrupt government.

'I can't listen to this!' I smacked the radio off.

'I know it's horrific,' Mom said. 'But you're old enough. We live a life of privilege in Seattle. That doesn't mean we can literally switch off these women, whose only fault was being born in

the Congo during a civil war. We need to bear witness.’ She turned the radio back on.

I crumpled in my seat and fumed.

‘The war in Congo rages on with no end in sight,’ the announcer said. ‘And now comes word of a new campaign by the soldiers, to find the women they have already raped and re-rape them.’

‘Holy Christ on a cross!’ Mom said. ‘I draw the line at re-rape.’ And she turned off NPR.

We sat in silence. Then, at ten of four, we had to turn the radio back on because Fridays at ten of four is when we listen to our favorite person ever, Cliff Mass. If you don’t know who Cliff Mass is, well, he’s this thing me and Mom have, this awesome weather geek who loves weather so much you have no choice but to love him in return.

Once, I think I was ten, and I was home with a babysitter while Mom and Dad went to Town Hall for some lecture. The next morning, Mom showed me a picture on her digital camera. ‘Me and guess who?’ I had no idea. ‘You’re going to be so jealous when you find out.’ I made a mean face at her. Mom and Dad call it my Kubrick face, and it was a glowering face I made when I was a little baby. Mom finally screamed, ‘Cliff Mass!’

Oh my God, can someone please stop me before I write more about Cliff Mass?

Here’s my point: first, because of the re-rape, and second, because Mom and I were so in love with Cliff Mass, of course we didn’t talk much on the way home that day, so I couldn’t have known she was traumatized. We pulled in the driveway. There were a bunch of giant trucks on the side street, and one was parked on our loop to keep the gate open. Workmen were coming and going. It was hard to make out what exactly was going on through the rain-smearred windshield.

‘Don’t ask,’ Mom said. ‘Audrey Griffin demanded we get rid of the blackberries.’

When I was little, Mom brought me to see *The Sleeping Beauty* at the Pacific Northwest Ballet. In it, an evil witch puts a curse on the princess, which makes her fall asleep for one hundred years. A gentle fairy protects the sleeping princess by enveloping her in a forest of briars. During the ballet, the princess is sleeping as thorny branches grow thicker around her. That's what I felt like in my bedroom. I knew our blackberry vines were buckling the library floor and causing weird lumps in the carpet and shattering basement windows. But I had a smile on my face, because while I slept, there was a force protecting me.

'Not *all of them!*' I cried. 'How could you?'

'Don't get all peevisish on me,' she said. 'I'm the one taking you to the South Pole.'

'Mom,' I said, 'we're not going to the South Pole.'

'Wait, we're not?'

'The only place tourists go is the Antarctic Peninsula, which is like the Florida Keys of Antarctica.' It's shocking, but Mom genuinely didn't seem to know this. 'It's still zero degrees,' I continued. 'But it's a teeny-tiny part of Antarctica. It's like someone saying they're going to Colorado for Christmas, and then you ask them, How was New York? Sure, it's the United States. But it's just totally ignorant. Please tell me you knew that, Mom, but you forgot because you're tired.'

'Tired *and* ignorant,' she said.

• • •

From: Soo-Lin Lee-Segal

To: Audrey Griffin

Before you write me off as the Girl Who Cried Real-Time Flash!, listen to this.

As I told you, Elgin, Pablo, and I had a lunch meeting downtown. Elgin insisted we take the 888 Shuttle. (Which, it

turns out, is no different from the Connector. All these years I'd imagined the doors opening and it looking like the inside of a genie's bottle or something.) There was construction downtown, so when we got to the corner of Fifth and Seneca, traffic had completely stopped. Elgin said it would be faster to walk. It was pouring buckets, but it wasn't my place to argue so I followed them off the shuttle.

Now, Audrey, you're always talking about God's plan. For the first time, I understand what you mean. I would have thought God was forsaking me when he made me walk three blocks in the pouring rain. But it turns out there was something on that third block that God intended me to see.

Elgin, Pablo, and I were scurrying along Fourth Avenue, heads down, clutching closed our hoods over our faces. I happened to glance up, and what do I see? Bernadette Fox asleep in a pharmacy.

I repeat, Bernadette Fox just lying on a couch with her eyes closed in the middle of a compound pharmacy. She might as well have been in the window at Nordstrom for all of Seattle to see. She wore dark glasses, trousers and loafers, a men's shirt with silver cuff links, and some kind of vest underneath her raincoat. Also, she was clutching a fancy purse with one of her silk scarves tied to it.

Pablo and Elgin were up ahead on the corner, turning in circles, wondering where I had gone. Elgin spotted me and marched over, looking irate.

'I—' I stammered, 'I'm sorry—' It was my first day on the job. Whatever was going on with Bernadette, I wanted no part of it. I ran to catch up, but it was too late. Elgin had already looked in the window. His face went white. He pulled open the door and went inside.

By this time, Pablo had come over. 'Elgin's wife is asleep in there,' I explained.

'It's really coming down,' Pablo said. He smiled and refused

to turn his head toward the pharmacy.

'I already know what I'm going to order for lunch,' I said. 'The salt-and-pepper calamari. It's not on the menu, but they make it for you if you ask.'

'Sounds good,' he said. 'I'm probably going to have to check out the menu before I order.'

Finally, Elgin came out, looking shaky. 'Change my flight to D.C.,' he said. 'I want to leave in the morning.'

I wasn't completely up to speed on Elgin's schedule. But I did know his presentation was in D.C. at four p.m. I opened my mouth to explain that with the time difference —

'Just—' he said.

'Fine.'

Then, wouldn't you know, a Connector passed by. Elgin darted into traffic and stopped it. He conferred with the driver, then waved me over. 'He's taking you back to Redmond,' Elgin said. 'S-plus me my new itinerary.'

What choice did I have? I boarded the shuttle. Pablo did bring me back an order of salt-and-pepper calamari, but it didn't travel well.

• • •

From: Audrey Griffin

To: Soo-Lin Lee-Segal

This will have to be quick because I'm up to here with party preparations. The real 'flash update' is that you're starting to realize that God is driving the bus. (In your case, literally. Honk, honk!) I'd love to talk to you more about it sometime. Coffee, maybe? I can come out to Microsoft.

• • •

*Email from  
the guy outside the library  
to his architecture professor at USC*

From: Jacob Raymond

To: Paul Jellinek

Dear Mr Jellinek,

Remember how I told you I was going to Seattle on a pilgrimage to see the public library, and I joked that I'd let you know if I had a Bernadette Fox sighting? Well, guess who I saw outside the public library?

Bernadette Fox! She was about fifty, her hair was brown and wild. The only reason I looked twice was because she was wearing a fishing vest, which is something you notice.

There's the one picture of Bernadette Fox taken about twenty years ago when she won her award. And you hear all the speculation about her, how she moved to Seattle and became a recluse or went crazy. I had a really strong feeling it was her. Before I could say anything, she abruptly volunteered, 'Bernadette Fox.'

I started gushing. I told her I was a graduate student at USC, and had visited Beeber Bifocal every time they opened it to the public, and that our winter project is a competition to reinterpret the Twenty Mile House.

I suddenly realized I had said too much. Her eyes were vacant. Something was seriously wrong with her. I wanted to get a picture of me with the elusive Bernadette Fox. (Talk about a profile pic!) But then I thought better of it. This woman has given me so much already. The relationship has been one-way, and still I want to take *more*? I bowed to her with my hands in prayer position and walked into the library, leaving her standing outside in the rain.

I feel bad because I think I might have messed her up.

Anyway. In case you were wondering: Bernadette Fox is walking around Seattle in the middle of winter wearing a fishing vest.

See you in class,  
Jacob

• • •

Mom and Dad went out to dinner that night without me, to some Mexican place in Ballard, which was fine because Friday is when a bunch of us go to Youth Group and they have fried shrimp, plus they let us watch a movie, which was *Up*.

Dad left at five in the morning to catch a plane because he had Samantha 2 business at Walter Reed.<sup>1</sup> Claire Anderssen was having a party on Bainbridge Island, and I wanted to go out to our house there, plus I wanted Kennedy to spend the night. Kennedy gets on Dad's nerves, and there was no way we could have a sleepover if he was there, so I was happy he was gone.

Mom and I had a plan. We'd catch the 10:10 ferry to Bainbridge, and Kennedy would take the passenger ferry after gymnastics, which she tried to get out of, but her mom wouldn't let her.

1 I'm not divulging any proprietary Microsoft information when I say this. Microsoft is built on ideas, and you can't just go blabbing those ideas, even to your family, because they might blab it to Kennedy, who blabs it to her Dad, and even though he works at Amazon, he used to work at Microsoft and knows people, who he tells, and Dad hears about it, and you learn your lesson. Normally I'd never say where Dad was going on business, but I looked it up on the Internet, and there's a video of his presentation at the Walter Reed hospital that afternoon, so it's totally public.

*Saturday, December 11*

• • •

*Cliff Mass blog post*

This storm is turning into a complex weather event. I will need some time to describe it because the media is not fully comprehending its implications. The cloud band leading the approaching weather system hit western Washington yesterday afternoon. The latest high-resolution computer models shows sustained winds of 40–50 mph with gusts of 70–80 mph and the low going north of us instead of the southern trajectory predicted earlier.

On the radio yesterday, I expressed extreme skepticism at yesterday's track for the low center, and the latest satellite pictures confirm that the center of the low will cross southern Vancouver Island and move into British Columbia. Such a position allows warm, moist air to move right into western Washington with the potential for heavy rain.

Yesterday, the media shrugged off my serious weather warnings for Seattle as a Henny Penny false alarm. *This is no false alarm.* The unforeseen storm path has allowed a low-pressure system to move north of Puget Sound and warm temperatures to abound.

In Seattle, warm temperatures, associated with moist, Pineapple Express air, have already produced a rainfall of two inches between 7 PM yesterday and 7 AM this morning. I am now going out on a limb and projecting that this flow will stagnate over Puget Sound and the deluge will continue for hours. We are in the midst of a most notable weather show.

• • •

See, that's what I mean about loving Cliff Mass. Because, basically, all he's saying is it's going to rain.

• • •

From: Ollie-O

To: Prospective Parent Brunch Committee

**REAL-TIME ✨ FLASH!**

The day of the PPB has come. Unfortunately, our biggest get, **the sun**, is going to be a no-show. Ha-ha. That was my idea of a joke.

It's imperative we **run tight**. It would be **death-dealing** for Galer Street if the prospectives felt their time was being wasted, especially during the **holiday shopping season**. Our objective is for the **Mercedes Parents** to see and be seen, and then spring them so they can storm U Village and take advantage of these astonishing **fifty-percent-off storewide sales**.

10:00 – 10:45 – MPs arrive. Drinks and food passed.

10:45 – Mr Kangana and parent Helen Derwood arrive with kindergarteners, who enter, quiet as **church mice**, through the side door and situate themselves for marimba performance.

10:55 – Gwen Goodyear gives short welcoming speech, then directs MPs to sunroom. Mr Kangana leads kindergarteners in marimba performance.

11:15 – Closing remarks.

Gwen Goodyear will be stationed at the door, **bidding adieux**, and handing out Galer Street swag. There is no way to overemphasize the importance of this. Just because they're **Mercedes Parents** doesn't mean they're not highly receptive to **free shit**. (Excuzey-moi!)

Cheers!

• • •

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

GOOD LUCK TODAY! I just spoke with Pizza Nuovo. The rain doesn't affect their wood-burning oven. They will set up a tent in the backyard. I'm stuck in Redmond because Elgin is making a presentation in another city and he wants me at my desk to troubleshoot any glitches. No comment.

• • •

From: Ollie-O  
To: Prospective Parent Brunch Committee

**Crisis.** Enormous billboard hovering over Audrey's house. Erected overnight by **crazy neighbor**. (Fellow Galer Street parent?) Audrey hysterical. Husband calling city attorney. I don't do **black swan**.

• • •

From: Helen Derwood, PhD  
To: Galer Street Kindergarten Parents  
Cc: Galer Street All-School List

Dear Parents,

I assume your little ones have told you snippets about the shocking events at today's brunch. No doubt you are concerned and confused. As the only kindergarten parent in attendance, I've been inundated with phone calls asking what really happened.

As many of you know, I'm a counselor at Swedish Medical Center, specializing in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I went to New Orleans after Katrina and still make frequent trips to Haiti. With the permission of Head of School Goodyear, I am writing both as a parent and PTSD counselor.

It's important to root our discussion in the facts.

You dropped off your children in front of Galer Street. From there, we boarded the bus, and Mr Kangana drove us to the Queen Anne home of Audrey and Warren Griffin. Despite the rain, the setting was lovely. The planters were full of colorful flowers, and the smell of burning wood filled the air.

A gentleman by the name of Ollie-O greeted us and directed us to the side entrance, where we were asked to remove our raincoats and rain boots.

The brunch was in full swing. There were approximately fifty guests in attendance, who all appeared to be enjoying themselves. I noted palpable tension coming from Gwen Goodyear, Audrey Griffin, and Ollie-O, but nothing a kindergartener would be able to detect.

We were led to the sunroom, where Mr Kangana had set up his marimbas the night before. The children who had to go potty did, then kneeled behind their instruments. The shades were drawn, leaving the room quite dark. The children had difficulty locating their mallets, so I began to raise the shades.

Ollie-O materialized and grabbed my hand. 'That's a nonstarter.' He turned on the lights.

The guests packed in for the performance. After a short introduction by Gwen Goodyear, the children started in with 'My Giant Carp'. You would have been so proud! It was going delightfully. About a minute in, however, a commotion erupted in the backyard, where the caterers were.

'Holy s—!' someone shouted from outside.

A few guests reacted with good-natured titters. The children hardly noticed, they were so absorbed in their music. The song ended. All the little eyes were on Mr Kangana, who counted them into their next song, 'One, two, three—'

'F—!' someone else shouted.

This was *not* OK. I dashed through the laundry room to the

back door, with the intention of shushing the raucous caterers. I turned the handle. A strong, dull, *consistent* pressure pushed the door toward me. Immediately sensing a terrible force of nature on the other side, I attempted to close the door. The inhuman force wouldn't allow it. I stuck my foot against the bottom of the door. I heard an ominous creak. The hinges began pulling loose from the frame.

Before I could compute any of this, the marimba music suddenly stopped. A series of pops and pings erupted from the sunroom. A child squealed in distress.

I abandoned the threat at the door and hurtled to the sunroom, where I was met by the shattering of glass. The children were running, screaming, from their instruments. With none of their own parents to run to for comfort, the kindergarteners collectively burrowed into the crowd of prospective parents, who in turn were trying to squeeze through the one small door leading to the living room. It's a small miracle nobody was trampled.

My daughter, Ginny, ran to me and hugged my legs. Her back was wet . . . and muddy. I looked up. The shades were now eerily raised of their own accord.

And then came the mud. In it sloshed, through the broken windows. Thick mud, watery mud, rocky mud, mud with beveled-glass shards, mud with window muntins, mud with grass, mud with barbecue utensils, mud with a mosaic birdbath. In a flash, the sunroom windows were gone, and in their place, a gaping, mud-oozing hole.

Adults, children, everyone, was trying to outrun the wreckage, which now included furniture. I stayed behind with Mr Kangana, who was attempting to rescue the marimbas he had brought with him as a young boy when he emigrated from his beloved Nigeria.

Then, as suddenly as it began, the mud stopped. I turned. An upside-down billboard was flat against the hole in the

sunroom, forming a dam. I have no clue as to where this billboard originated, but it was bright red and vast enough to cover what had been a wall of windows.

*PRIVATE PROPERTY  
NO TRESPASSING  
Galer Street Gnats  
Will Be Arrested  
and Hauled Off to Gnat Jail*

By now, the guests were flying out the front door and screeching off in their cars. Mud-caked servers and chefs were milling around, viciously whooping as if this were the most hilarious thing they'd ever seen. Mr Kangana was swimming in mud, scooping up marimbas. Gwen Goodyear was in the foyer, trying to keep a brave face as she handed out Galer Street gear. Ollie-O was in a semicatatonic state, uttering nonsensical phrases like 'This is not biodegradable – the downstream implications are enormous – the optics make for rough sledding – going forward—' before getting stuck on the words 'epic fail', which he kept repeating.

Most incredible, perhaps, Audrey Griffin was running down the street, away from her home. I called after her, but she had turned the corner.

I alone was left to care for thirty traumatized kindergarteners.

'OK,' I rallied. 'Let's everyone find their boots and rain coats!' I recognize now this was the wrong thing to say, as it only drew attention to the impossibility of such a task. Further, these children were in their socks, some even barefoot, and there was broken glass everywhere.

'Nobody move.' I collected every cushion I could find and laid a path out the front door to the sidewalk. 'Walk on these cushions, and line up against the hedge.'

If there's one thing kindergarteners understand, it's how to line up. One by one, I carried each child down the street to the bus, which I drove back to Galer Street.

This is why your children were returned to you shoeless, jacketless, covered in mud, and full of fantastic stories.

Now let me speak to you as a PTSD specialist.

'Trauma' can be loosely described as any event a person experiences which he perceives as being a threat to his life. This can take as little as 1/18th of a second. In the immediate aftermath of trauma, children might demonstrate fear or confusion. I took the time to carry each child to the bus so that I had the opportunity to physically connect with them. Research has shown how healing touch can be immediately following trauma, especially with children.

During the walk to the bus, I was able to listen, express curiosity, and simply 'be' with each child. I was also able to observe them for early indications of PTSD. I am happy to report that your children appeared to be coping very well. Their greatest concern was whether they'd get their rain gear back, and how it would be returned to them. I answered every question as honestly as I could. I told them we'd do our best to recover their belongings, which would probably be dirty, but the mommies would try to clean them.

The good news is this was a single traumatic incident, and therefore the chances of developing PTSD are minor. The bad news is that PTSD can surface months or even years after an event. I feel it is my responsibility as a doctor to let you know some symptoms of PTSD that may occur in your child:

- worry about dying
- bed-wetting, nightmares, insomnia
- reverting to thumb sucking, baby talk, and diaper wearing

- physical complaints for which there is no underlying physical cause
- withdrawal from family and friends
- refusal to attend school
- sadistic, violent behavior

If you notice any of these symptoms now or within the next several years, it is important you immediately notify a specialist and tell them about the events at Audrey Griffin's house. I'm not saying this will happen. The chances are very much against it.

I have offered Gwen Goodyear my counseling services for both kindergarten classes. We are still weighing whether to have an all-school assembly, a kindergarten-only gathering, or a parent forum to collectively process this traumatic event. I'd like to hear your feedback.

Sincerely,

Helen Derwood, PhD

• • •

So you understand fully, here's how freakish the weather was that morning: it was the first time since 9/11 that ferry service was suspended.

Mom and I had breakfast at Macrina, then hit Pike Place Market for our usual Saturday rounds. Mom waited in the car while I ran to the flying fish guy for salmon, Beecher's for cheese, and the butcher for dog bones.

I was going through an *Abbey Road* phase because I had just read a book about the last days of the Beatles, and I spent most of breakfast telling Mom about it. For instance, that medley on the second side, it was originally conceived as individual songs. It was Paul's idea to string them together in the studio. Also, Paul knew exactly what was going on when he wrote, 'Boy, you're going to carry that weight.' It's about how

John wanted the Beatles to break up, but Paul didn't. Paul wrote, 'Boy, you're going to carry that weight' right at John. He was saying, 'We've got a good thing going. If this band breaks up, it's all on you, John. You sure you want to live with that?' And the final instrumental at the end, where the Beatles trade off leads on guitar, and which has Ringo's only drum solo? You know how it always seems like this tragic, intentional farewell to the fans and you picture the Beatles dressed like hippies playing that last part of *Abbey Road* all looking at one another, and you think, Oh, man, they must have been crying so hard? Well, that whole instrumental was also constructed by Paul in the studio after the fact, so it's just a bunch of fake sentimentality.

Anyway, when we got to the ferry dock, the line was all the way out the loading lot, under the viaduct, and across First Avenue. We had never seen it that long. Mom parked in line, turned off the engine, and walked through the pelting-down rain to the booth. She returned and said a storm drain on the Bainbridge side had flooded the ferry terminal. Three boats were backed up, full of cars waiting to unload. It sounded totally chaotic. But all you can do when it comes to ferries is get in line and hope.

'When's that flute performance?' Mom said. 'I want to come see you.'

'I don't want you to come.' I was hoping she'd forgotten about it.

She dropped her jaw all the way down.

'The words to it are too cute,' I explained. 'You might die of cuteness.'

'But I want to die of cuteness! It's my favorite thing, to die of cuteness.'

'I'm not telling you when it is.'

'You are such a rotter,' she said.

I popped in a CD of *Abbey Road* which I'd burned that

morning, and cranked it. I made sure only the front speakers were on because Ice Cream was asleep in the back.

Of course, the first song is 'Come Together'. It starts with that great weird 'shoomp' and the bass part. And when John started singing 'Here come old flattop ...', what happened, but Mom knew every single word of the song! Not just every word, but every cadence. She knew every 'all right!' and 'aww!' and 'yeaaaaah'. And it kept going, song after song. When 'Maxwell's Silver Hammer' started, Mom said, 'Yuck, I always thought this was totally sophomoric.' Still, what did she do? She sang every single word of that, too.

I hit the pause button. 'How do you even know this?' I demanded.

'*Abbey Road?*' Mom shrugged. 'I don't know, you just know it.' She unpaused the CD.

When 'Here Comes the Sun' started, what happened? No, the sun didn't come out, but *Mom* opened up like the sun breaking through the clouds. You know how in the first few notes of that song, there's something about George's guitar that's just so hopeful? It was like when Mom sang, she was full of hope, too. She even got the irregular clapping right during the guitar solo. When the song was over, she paused it.

'Oh, Bee,' she said. 'This song reminds me of you.' She had tears in her eyes.

'Mom!' This is why I didn't want her to come to the first-grade elephant dance. Because the most random things get her way too full of love.

'I need you to know how hard it is for me sometimes.' Mom had her hand on mine.

'What's hard?'

'The banality of life,' she said. 'But it won't keep me from taking you to the South Pole.'

'We're not going to the South Pole!'

'I know. It's a hundred below zero at the South Pole. Only

scientists go to the South Pole. I started reading one of the books.'

I wiggled out my hand and hit play. Here's the funny part. When I burned the CD, I didn't uncheck the thing iTunes defaults to when it asks if you want two seconds between songs. So when it came to the awesome medley, Mom and I sang along to 'You Never Give Me Your Money', then 'Sun King', which Mom knew, even the Spanish part, and she doesn't even speak Spanish, she speaks French.

And then the two-second gaps started.

If you don't understand how tragic and annoying this is, seriously, start singing along to 'Sun King'. Toward the end, you're singing all sleepy in Spanish, gearing up to start grooving to 'Mean Mr Mustard', because what makes the end of 'Sun King' *so great* is you're drifting along, but at the same time you're anticipating Ringo's drums, which kick in on 'Mean Mr Mustard', and it turns funky. But if you *don't* uncheck the box on iTunes, you get to the end of 'Sun King' and then—

HARSH DIGITAL TWO-SECOND SILENCE.

And during 'Polythene Pam', right after the 'look out', it – GAPS OUT – before 'She Came in Through the Bathroom Window'. Seriously, it's torture. During all this, Mom and I were howling. Finally, the CD ended.

'I love you, Bee,' Mom said. 'I'm trying. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn't.'

The ferry line hadn't moved. 'I guess we should just go home,' I said. It was a bummer because Kennedy never wanted to spend the night in Seattle because our house scares her. Once, she swore she saw a lump in one of the rugs move. 'It's alive, it's alive!' she screamed. I told her it was just a blackberry vine growing through the floorboards, but she was convinced it was the ghost of one of the Straight Gate girls.

Mom and I headed up Queen Anne Hill. Mom once said

the ganglia of electric bus wires overhead were like a Jacob's ladder. Every time we drove up, I imagined reaching my fanned fingers up into the web and pulling them through the roof in a cat's cradle.

We turned into our driveway. We were halfway through the gate. And there was Audrey Griffin walking up to our car.

'Oh, boy,' Mom said. 'Déjà vu all over again. What is it now?'

'Watch out for her foot,' I said, totally joking.

'Oh, no!' Mom's voice kind of barfed out the words. She covered her face with her hands.

'What?' I said. 'What?'

Audrey Griffin wasn't wearing a jacket. Her pants were covered in mud from the knee down, and she was barefoot. There was mud in her hair, too. Mom opened her door without turning off the car. By the time I got out, Audrey Griffin was screaming.

'Your hillside just slid into my home!'

I was like, *what?* Our yard was so big, and the end of our lawn was so far down, I couldn't see what she was talking about.

'During a party,' Audrey continued, 'for prospective Galer Street parents.'

'I had no idea—' Mom's voice was all shaky.

'*That* I believe,' Audrey said, 'because you are totally uninvolved in the school. Both kindergarten classes were there!'

'Was anyone hurt?' Mom said.

'Thank the Lord, no.' Audrey had a crazy smile. Mom and I share a fascination with what we call happy-angry people. This display of Audrey Griffin's had just become the best version of that ever.

'OK. That's good.' Mom sighed a huge sigh. I could tell she was trying to convince herself.

'Good?!' Audrey shrieked. 'My backyard is six feet high in

mud. It broke windows, destroyed plants, trees, hardwood floors, ripped my washer and dryer out of the wall!’ Audrey was talking really fast and taking lots of breaths. It was like with each item she ticked off, the needle on her happy-angry meter was moving more and more to the right. ‘My barbecue is gone. My window treatments are ruined. My greenhouse crushed. Seedlings killed. Specimen apple trees that have taken *twenty-five years* to establish, pulled up by the roots. Japanese maples flattened. Heirloom roses gone. The fire pit that I tiled myself is gone!’

Mom was sucking in the corners of her mouth to keep a smile from forming. I had to quickly look down so I wouldn’t crack up. But any perverse humor we might have found in the situation suddenly ended.

‘And that sign!’ Audrey said with a growl.

Mom’s face dropped. She could barely utter the words ‘The sign’.

‘What sign?’ I asked.

‘What kind of person puts up a sign—’ Audrey said.

‘I’ll have it taken down today,’ Mom said.

‘What sign?’ I repeated.

‘The mud took care of that for you,’ Audrey told Mom. I’d never noticed how light green Audrey Griffin’s eyes were until they bugged out at my mother.

‘I’ll pay for everything,’ Mom said.

Here’s something about Mom: she’s bad with annoyances, but great in a crisis. If a waiter doesn’t refill her water after she’s asked three times, or she forgets her dark glasses when the sun comes out, look out! But when it comes to something truly bad happening, Mom plugs into this supreme calm. I think she got it from all those years half living at Children’s because of me. I’m just saying, when things are bad, there’s nobody better to have in your corner than Mom. But this calm of hers seemed only to set Audrey Griffin off worse.

‘Is that all everything is about for you?! Money?!’ The madder Audrey got, the sparklier her eyes became. ‘Up here in your gigantic house looking down on all of us, writing checks, but never deigning to come off your throne and honor us with your presence?’

‘You’re obviously emotional,’ Mom said. ‘You need to remember the work I had done on the hillside was at your insistence, Audrey. I used your guy and had him do it on the day you specified.’

‘So none of it is your responsibility?’ Audrey clucked. ‘That’s mighty convenient for you. How about the sign, then? Did I make you put that up, too? Really, I’m curious.’

‘What sign?’ I started to get scared with all the talk of the sign.

‘Buzz,’ Mom turned to me. ‘I did something really stupid. I’ll tell you about it.’

‘This poor child,’ Audrey said bitterly. ‘With everything she’s had to go through.’

‘Whaa—?’ I said.

‘I’m truly sorry about the sign,’ Mom stated emphatically to Audrey. ‘I did it on impulse the day I found you on my lawn with your gardener.’

‘You’re blaming *me*?’ Audrey said. ‘Isn’t this just fascinating!’ It was like her happy needle had busted through the danger zone and was now entering uncharted territory where no happy-angry person has gone before. I, for one, was frightened.

‘I’m blaming myself,’ Mom said. ‘I’m just making the point that there is a larger context to what happened today.’

‘You think a gentleman coming to your house to give you an estimate for yard work, which is legally required by city code, is equivalent to putting up a billboard, traumatizing both kindergarten classes, jeopardizing Galer Street enrollment, and destroying my home?’

‘The sign was a reaction to that,’ Mom said. ‘Yes.’

‘Wooowww,’ Audrey Griffin said, spreading the word up and down like a roller coaster. Her voice was so full of hate and craziness that it pierced my skin. My heart began racing in a scary way it never had before.

‘This is really interesting.’ Audrey widened her eyes. ‘So *you* think putting up a hateful billboard over my home is an *appropriate* reaction to getting an estimate for yard work.’ She pointed her finger in eight different directions during that last sentence. ‘I think I understand.’

‘It was an *overreaction*,’ Mom told Audrey with renewed calm. ‘Don’t forget you were trespassing on my property.’

‘So basically,’ Audrey exploded, ‘you’re insane!’ Her eyes fluttered spastically. ‘Golly, I was always wondering. Now I have my answer.’ Her face froze in demented wonder and she started clapping her hands really fast and small.

‘Audrey,’ Mom said. ‘Don’t stand there and pretend you haven’t been playing this game, too.’

‘I don’t play games.’

‘How about getting Gwen Goodyear to send out that letter about me running over your foot? What was that?’

‘Oh, Bernadette,’ Audrey said, shaking her head sadly. ‘You really need to stop being so paranoid. Perhaps if you interacted more with people, you’d realize we’re not a bunch of scary bogeymen who are out to get you.’ She held up both hands and clawed the air.

‘I think we’re done,’ Mom said. ‘Again, I want to apologize for the sign. It was a stupid mistake and I intend to take full responsibility, in terms of money, in terms of time, in terms of Gwen Goodyear and Galer Street.’ Mom turned and walked around the front of the car. When she was about get in, Audrey Griffin started up again, like a movie monster come back to life.

‘Bee never would have been accepted to Galer Street if they

knew she lived in this house,' Audrey Griffin said. 'Ask Gwen. Nobody realized you were the people from L.A. who came to Seattle and bought a twelve-thousand-square-foot building in the middle of a charming neighborhood and called it *your home*. Where we're standing now? Within a four-mile radius is the house *I* grew up in, the house *my mother* grew up in, and the house *my grandmother* grew up in.'

'That I believe,' Mom said.

'My great-grandfather was a fur trapper in Alaska,' Audrey said. 'Warren's great-grandfather bought furs from him. My point is, you come in here with your Microsoft money and think you belong. But you don't belong. You never will.'

'Say amen to that.'

'None of the other mothers like you, Bernadette. Do you realize we had an eighth-grade moms-and-daughters Thanksgiving on Whidbey Island, but we didn't invite you and Bee? But I hear you had a wonderful holiday at *Daniel's Broiler!*'

My breath kind of stopped then. I was standing there, but it was like Audrey Griffin had knocked the wind out of me. I reached for the car to steady myself.

'That's it, Audrey.' Mom took about five steps toward her. 'Fuck you.'

'Fine,' Audrey said. 'Drop the f-bomb in front of a child. I hope that makes you feel powerful.'

'I'll say it again,' Mom said. 'Fuck you for bringing Bee into this.'

'We love Bee,' Audrey Griffin said. 'Bee is a terrific student and a wonderful girl. It just goes to show how resilient children are because she's turned out so well in spite of it all. If Bee were my daughter, and I know I'm speaking for every mother at Whidbey Island, we'd never ship her off to boarding school.'

I finally caught enough of my breath to say, 'I want to go to boarding school!'

‘Of course you do,’ Audrey said to me, all full of pity.

‘It was my idea!’ I screamed, just so furious. ‘I already told you that!’

‘No, Bee,’ Mom said. She wasn’t even looking at me. She just held up her hand in my direction. ‘It’s not worth it.’

‘Of course it was your idea,’ Audrey Griffin said to me, poking her head around Mom, and boinging her eyes. ‘Of course you want to go away. Who can blame you?’

‘You don’t talk to me that way!’ I screamed. ‘You don’t know me!’ I was soaking wet and the car was running this whole time, which is a waste of gas, and both doors were open so the rain was pouring in and ruining the leather, plus we were parked on the loop so the gate kept trying to shut but then opening again, and I was worried the motor would burn out, and Ice Cream was just stupidly watching from the back with her mouth open and tongue hanging out, like she didn’t even sense we needed protecting, plus *Abbey Road* was playing ‘Here Comes the Sun’, which was the song Mom said reminded her of me, and I knew I’d never listen to *Abbey Road* again.

‘Oh, God, Bee, what’s wrong?’ Mom had turned and seen that something was the matter with me. ‘Talk to me, Buzz. Is it your heart?’

I pushed Mom off me and slapped Audrey across her wet face. I know! But I was just so mad.

‘I pray for you,’ Audrey said.

‘Pray for yourself,’ I said. ‘My mother’s too good for you and those other mothers. *You’re* the one everyone hates. Kyle is a juvie who doesn’t do sports or any extracurriculars. The only friends he has are because he gives them drugs and because he’s funny when he’s making fun of you. And your husband is a drunk who has three DUIs but he gets off because he knows the judge, and all you care about is that nobody finds out, but it’s too late because Kyle tells the whole school everything.’

Audrey said quickly, 'I am a Christian woman so I will forgive that.'

'Give me a break,' I said. 'Christians don't talk the way you talked to my mother.'

I got into the car, shut the door, turned off *Abbey Road*, and just started whimpering. I was sitting in an inch of water, but I didn't care. The reason I was so scared had nothing to do with a sign or a stupid mudslide or because Mom and I didn't get invited to stupid Whidbey Island, like we'd ever want to go anywhere with those jerks in a million years, but because I knew, I just knew, that now everything was going to be different.

Mom got in and shut the door. 'You're supercool,' she said. 'You know that?'

'I hate her,' I said.

What I didn't say, because I didn't need to, because it was implied, and really, I can't tell you why, because we'd never kept secrets from him before, but me and Mom both just understood: we weren't going to tell Dad.

Mom wasn't the same after that. It wasn't the day in the compound pharmacy. Mom had bounced back. I was there in the car with her singing to *Abbey Road*. And I don't care what Dad or the doctors or the police or anybody says, it was Audrey Griffin screaming at Mom that made her never the same again. And if you don't believe me:

• • •

*Email sent five minutes later*

From: Bernadette Fox

To: Manjula Kapoor

Nobody can say I didn't give it the college try. But I just can't go through with it. I can't go to Antarctica. How I'll ever

extract myself, I'm not sure. But I have faith in us, Manjula. Together we can do anything.

• • •

*From Dad to Dr Janelle Kurtz,  
a shrink at Madrona Hill*

Dear Dr Kurtz,

My friend Hannah Dillard sang your praises regarding her husband, Frank's, stay at Madrona Hill. From what I understand, Frank was struggling with depression. His inpatient treatment at Madrona Hill, under your supervision, did him wonders.

I write you because I too am deeply concerned about my spouse. Her name is Bernadette Fox, and I fear she is very sick.

(Forgive my shambolic penmanship. I'm on an airplane, and my laptop battery is dead so I've taken up a pen for the first time in years. I'll press on, as I think it's important to get everything down while it's fresh in the memory.)

I'll begin with some background. Bernadette and I met about twenty-five years ago in Los Angeles, when the architecture firm for which she worked redesigned the animation house for which I worked. We were both from the East Coast and had gone to prep school. Bernadette was a rising star. I was taken by her beauty, gregariousness, and insouciant charm. We married. I was working on an idea I had for computer animation. My company was bought by Microsoft. Bernadette ran into trouble with a house she was building and abruptly declared herself through with the L.A. architecture scene. To my surprise, she was the engine behind our move to Seattle.

Bernadette flew up to look at houses. She called to say she

had found the perfect place, the Straight Gate School for Girls, in Queen Anne. To anyone else, a crumbling reform school might seem an odd place to call home. But this was Bernadette, and she was enthusiastic. Bernadette and her enthusiasm were like a hippo and water: get between them and you'll be trampled to death.

We moved to Seattle. I was swallowed whole by Microsoft. Bernadette became pregnant and had the first of a series of miscarriages. After three years, she passed the first term. At the beginning of her second term, she was put on bedrest. The house, which was a blank canvas on which Bernadette was to work her magic, understandably languished. There were leaks, strange drafts, and the occasional weed pushing up through a floorboard. My concern was for Bernadette's health – she didn't need the stress of a remodel – she needed to stay put – so we wore parkas inside, rotated spaghetti pots when it rained, and kept a pair of pruning shears in a vase in the living room. It felt romantic.

Our daughter, Bee, was born prematurely. She came out blue. She was diagnosed with hypoplastic left heart syndrome. I imagine that having a sick child can knit a husband and wife together, or rip them apart. In our case, it did neither. Bernadette immersed herself so thoroughly in Bee's recovery that it became her every fiber. I worked even longer hours and called it a partnership: Bernadette would call the shots; I'd pay for them.

By the time Bee entered kindergarten, she was healthy, if unusually small for her age. I always assumed this was when Bernadette would return to her architecture practice or, at the very least, fix up our house. Leaks had become holes in the roof; windows with small cracks had become cardboard-and-duct-tape panels. Once a week, the gardener weed-whacked under the rugs.

Our home was literally returning to the earth. When Bee

was five, I was in her room playing restaurant. She took my order, and after lots of furious activity in her miniature kitchen, she brought me my 'lunch'. It was damp and brown. It smelled like dirt, but fluffier. 'I dug it up,' she remarked proudly, and pointed to the wood floor. It was so damp from the years of rain, Bee could literally dig into it with a spoon.

Once Bee was settled into kindergarten, Bernadette showed no interest in fixing up the house, or in any kind of work. All the energy she had once channeled so fearlessly into architecture, she turned toward fulminating about Seattle, in the form of wild rants that required no less than an hour to fully express.

Take five-way intersections. The first time Bernadette commented on the abundance of five-way intersections in Seattle, it seemed perfectly relevant. I hadn't noticed it myself, but indeed there were many intersections with an extra street jutting out, and which required you to wait through an extra traffic light cycle. Certainly worthy of a conversation between a husband and wife. But the second time Bernadette went off on the same topic, I wondered, Is there something *new* she wishes to add? But no. She was just complaining with renewed vehemence. She asked me to ask Bill Gates why he'd still live in a city with so many ridiculous intersections. I came home and she asked if I'd asked him yet. One day she got a map of old Seattle and explained that there were once six separate grid systems, which, over time, bled together without a master plan. One night, on the way to a restaurant, she drove miles out of our way to show me where three of the grids met, and there was an intersection with seven streets coming out. Then she timed it while we waited at the stoplight. The helter-skelter layout of Seattle streets was just one of Bernadette's greatest hits.

Some nights I'd be asleep in bed. 'Elgie,' she'd say, 'are you awake?'

‘I am now.’

‘Doesn’t Bill Gates know Warren Buffett?’ she’d say. ‘And doesn’t Warren Buffett own See’s Candy?’

‘I guess.’

‘Great. Because he needs to know what’s happening at the Westlake Plaza. You know how See’s Candy has a policy where they hand out free samples? Well, all those horrible runaways have caught on. So today I had to wait thirty minutes, in a line *out the door*, behind bums and drug addicts who didn’t buy anything but demanded their free sample, and then went to the end of the line for another.’

‘So don’t go to See’s Candy anymore.’

‘Believe me, I won’t. But if you see Warren Buffett around Microsoft, you should tell him. Or tell me, and I can tell him.’

I tried engaging her, tuning her out, asking her to stop. Nothing worked, especially asking her to stop, which would only tack ten minutes onto that particular rant. I began to feel like a hunted animal, cornered and defenseless.

Remember, for the first several years of living in Seattle, Bernadette was pregnant, or had recently miscarried. As far as I knew, these moods were hormonal swings, or a way of processing grief.

I encouraged Bernadette to make friends, but that would only trigger a diatribe about how she had tried, but nobody liked her.

People say Seattle is one of the toughest cities in which to make friends. They even have a name for it, the ‘Seattle freeze’. I’ve never experienced it myself, but coworkers claim it’s real and has to do with all the Scandinavian blood up here. Maybe it *was* difficult at first for Bernadette to fit in. But eighteen years later, to still harbor an irrational hatred of an entire city?

I have a very stressful job, Dr Kurtz. Some mornings, I’d arrive at my desk utterly depleted by having to endure

Bernadette and her frothing. I finally started taking the Microsoft Connector to work. It was an excuse to leave the house an hour earlier to avoid the morning broadsides.

I really did not intend for this letter to go on so long, but looking out airplane windows makes me sentimental. Let me jump to the incidents of yesterday which have prompted me to write.

I was walking to lunch with some colleagues when one pointed to Bernadette, asleep on a couch in a pharmacy. For some reason she was wearing a fishing vest. This was especially strange because Bernadette insists on wearing stylish clothes, in protest against everyone else's terrible taste in fashion. (I'll spare you the specifics of that delightful rant.) I hurried inside. When I finally roused Bernadette, she said quite matter-of-factly that she was waiting for a Haldol prescription.

Dr Kurtz, I don't have to tell you. Haldol is an antipsychotic. Is my wife under the care of a psychiatrist who's prescribing Haldol? Is she obtaining it illegally? I haven't the faintest clue.

I was so alarmed that I rescheduled my business trip so we could have dinner, just the two of us. We met at a Mexican restaurant. We ordered, and I immediately broached the subject of Haldol. 'I was surprised to see you at the pharmacy today,' I said.

'Shhh!' She was eavesdropping on the table behind us. 'They don't know the difference between a burrito and an enchilada!' Bernadette's face tightened as she strained to listen. 'Oh my God,' she whispered. 'They've never heard of *mole*. What do they look like? I don't want to turn around.'

'Just ... people.'

'What do you mean? What kind of—' She couldn't contain herself. She quickly turned. 'They're covered in tattoos! What, you're so cool that you ink yourself head-to-toe, but you don't

know the difference between an enchilada and a burrito?’

‘About today—’ I started.

‘Oh, yeah,’ she said. ‘Was that one of the gnats you were with? From Galer Street?’

‘Soo-Lin is my new admin,’ I said. ‘She has a son in Bee’s class.’

‘Oh, boy,’ Bernadette said. ‘It’s all over for me.’

‘What’s all over?’ I asked.

‘Those gnats have always hated me. She’s going to turn you against me.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ I said. ‘Nobody hates you—’

‘Shh!’ she said. ‘The waiter. He’s about to take their order.’ She leaned back and to her left, closer, closer, closer, her body like a giraffe’s neck, until her chair shot out from under her and she landed on the floor. The whole restaurant turned to look. I jumped up to help. She stood up, righted the chair, and started in again. ‘Did you see the tattoo one of them had on the inside of his arm? It looked like a roll of tape.’

I took a gulp of margarita and settled in to my fallback option, which was to wait her out.

‘Know what one of the guys at the drive-through Starbucks has on his forearm?’ Bernadette said. ‘A *paper clip*! It used to be so daring to get a tattoo. And now people are tattooing *office supplies* on their bodies. You know what I say?’ Of course this was rhetorical. ‘I say, dare *not* to get a tattoo.’ She turned around again, and gasped. ‘Oh my God. It’s not just *any* roll of tape. It’s literally Scotch tape, with the green-and-black plaid. This is too hilarious. If you’re going to tattoo tape on your arm, at least make it a generic old-fashioned tape dispenser! What do you think happened? Did the Staples catalogue get delivered to the tattoo parlor that day?’ She stuck a chip into the guacamole and it broke under the weight. ‘God, I hate the chips here.’ She dug into the guacamole with a fork and took a bite. ‘What were you saying?’

'I'm curious about the medicine they wouldn't fill for you at the pharmacy.'

'I know!' she said. 'A doctor wrote me a prescription, and it turned out to be Haldol.'

'Is it your insomnia?' I asked. 'Haven't you been sleeping?'

'Sleep?' she asked. 'What's that?'

'What was the prescription for?'

'Anxiety,' she said.

'Are you seeing a psychiatrist?' I asked.

'No!'

'Do you want to see a psychiatrist?'

'God, no!' she said. 'I'm just anxious about the trip.'

'What specifically are you so anxious about?'

'The Drake Passage, people. You know how it is.'

'Actually,' I said, 'I don't.'

'There's going to be a lot of people. I'm not good when exposed to people.'

'I think we need to find someone you can talk to.'

'I'm talking to you, aren't I?'

'A professional,' I said.

'I tried that once. It was a complete waste.' She leaned in and whispered. 'OK, there's a guy in a suit standing at the window. This is the fourth time I've seen him in three days. And I will promise you one thing. If you look now, he won't be there.'

I turned around. A man in a suit disappeared down the sidewalk.

'What did I say?' she said.

'Are you telling me you're being followed?'

'It's unclear.'

Fishing vests, sleeping in public, anti-psychotic medication, and now men following her?

When Bee was two, she developed a strange attachment to

a novelty book Bernadette and I had bought years ago from a street vendor in Rome.

ROME Past and Present  
A Guide  
To the Monumental Centre of Ancient Rome  
With Reconstructions of the Monuments

It has photographs of present-day ruins, with overlays of how they looked in their heyday. Bee would sit in her hospital bed, hooked up to her monitors, and flip back and forth among the images. The book had a puffy red plastic cover that she'd chew on.

I realized I was now looking at Bernadette Past and Present. There was a terrifying chasm between the woman I fell in love with and the ungovernable one sitting across from me.

We returned home. While Bernadette slept, I opened her medicine cabinet. It was crammed with prescription bottles written by an array of doctors for Xanax, Klonopin, Ambien, Halcion, trazodone, and others. All the bottles were empty.

Dr Kurtz, I don't pretend to understand what's wrong with Bernadette. Is she depressed? Manic? Hooked on pills? Paranoid? I don't know what constitutes a mental breakdown. Whatever you want to call it, I think it's fair to say my wife is in need of serious attention.

Hannah Dillard spoke so highly of you specifically, Dr Kurtz, and all you did to help Frank through his rough patch. If I remember correctly, at the outset Frank was resistant to treatment, but he soon embraced your program. Hannah was so impressed that she's now a member of your board.

Bernadette, Bee, and I are scheduled to go to Antarctica in two weeks. Bernadette obviously does not want to go. I now think it might be a better idea if Bee and I go to Antarctica, just the two of us, while Bernadette checks into Madrona

Hill. I can't imagine Bernadette will be too keen on the idea, but it's clear to me she needs some supervised R&R. I am anxious to hear your thoughts.

Sincerely,  
Elgin Branch