

MOLASSES SUGAR

When it is coloring time, don't be weird. Be original—you're not a clone, are you?—but don't be weird. Try. Say thank you when Mrs. Post hands out the coloring pages, even if she doesn't look at you. What is the picture? Okay, it's a cookie. Judging from the chunky morsels in it, it's probably supposed to be a chocolate chip cookie. But think. Think. You're already quite handy in the kitchen. You have quite the culinary background. Aunt Jemima pancakes when you were four. And not the wimpy "Buttermilk Complete" kind, where all you do is slosh tap water into the mix. The true Aunt Jemima mix required an egg, milk, shortening, and a personal stamp, like vanillin or cinnamon. Your favorite part was pouring in the melted butter. At first, Mother did the pouring, and you leaned over the bowl to smell the aromas. But soon, you were manhandling the heavy hot griddle by yourself. Mixing the batter with a large spoon, ladling it on to the sizzling surface, then flipping the pancake--the trickiest part of the procedure. Don't mind Suellen, Gracie, and all the others when they accuse you of being a big shot. Don't mind them! Feel sorry for them, even. They don't know what you know. And you know the Easy Bake Oven is a sham.

You know you're a wicked cook, but you also know your hands aren't good for much else. You still can't tie your shoes, like Missy and Dominique and Randall can, much less lace them. You know not to take any milk at snack break, since you can't open the carton without help. You can't use a pair of scissors, and you can't draw a proper number eight. You found a way around the eight, though. You are clumsy, not stupid. Draw two stacked circles, and put a 7 behind the stack and a 9 in front. Mrs. Post can't read that as anything *but* an eight.

Maybe you should have skipped to second after all. Remember those tests in the principal's office, when Mr. Lovito said you belonged in second grade, not first. Mother and Dad didn't agree, though. They said your "poor fine motor control," along with your extreme shyness, meant that you should start your new school in first grade.

You wondered how something could be poor and fine at the same time.

Now, the class you are in is a "reading readiness" first grade. And here you are already an avid reader. It goes back to nursery school days, outdoor recess, sneaking back inside the building to eavesdrop on your cousin's kindergarten class. His teacher always read stories, and the kids got to read them, too. In *your* soft-lit classroom all you did was watch Romper Room, learn colors, numbers, shapes, checkers, hopscotch, manners, and how to pound Play-Doh.

You weren't so good with the Play-Doh. And now you know why. This "poor fine motor" thing.

So here is this cookie coloring in front of you. Everyone is rushing the Crayola 64 box and taking the brown, sienna, and umber crayons. But wait. It might be that this isn't a chocolate chip cookie at all. The picture is not titled. So, it might be any one of a number of cookies. Recipes can make anything. Decide your cookie will be a strawberry one, and color the picture pink, with dark red chips.

You sort of know that this corrupt move will not sit well with Mrs. Post. She roams the room, reviewing every child's coloring, showering praise over each small shoulder. When she reaches you, parts of her face have been erased.

"What's *this*?" she asks. "What *is* this, Lucy?"

"A cookie." Too soft.

"What sort of cookie?"

"A strawberry cookie." Raise your voice. Good. Don't back down.

"Where have you ever seen a strawberry chip cookie?"

You have never seen, or even heard of, a strawberry chip cookie. But your background tells you that in the kitchen—in any kitchen--surrounded by fun, friendly skillets, pots, measuring cups, bowls and flour and butter, you and Mother could pool your whims and bake one. Yes, ma'am.

Mrs. Post throws her hands in the air. “Why didn’t you color a chocolate chip cookie like everyone else?”

Mrs. Post’s voice is higher than usual, which is curious, but you can’t puzzle that out now. Tell her why you haven’t made a Keebler clone.

“Because it doesn’t say anywhere what type of cookie it is.”

Mrs. Post holds your paper up to the class. “Look at what Lucy colored. She made a strawberry chip cookie, which isn’t even a real cookie.”

Your cheeks flame as the class erupts in laughter. Saliva pools in your mouth because your throat closes. For God’s sake, don’t let it drool out. Don’t forget and open your mouth.

Mrs. Post slaps your paper on your desk. “Come on, Lucy, you know better. Try to follow the assignment next time.”

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Today, the potato chip project. Here comes Mrs. Post and her stack of water-wrinkled magazines, asking us to tear out “pictures of snack,” photos of chips, raisins, brownies, pretzels. Your favorite is Betty Crocker Snackin’ Cake, cinnamon raisin. Look for a picture of the purple box. You’ve been dealt Ladies’ Home Journal and Good Housekeeping. Blond, brown-eyed Christopher sits next to you. You are on-again, off-again pals. He has a McCall’s and a Redbook. Your mother subscribes to all four. You turn the pages, and that is your downfall. You see an article title here or an intriguing sentence there and can’t blur past them. You forget about snack. You read about how to sew a

rolled hem, why microwave ovens are lethal, and what to do if you think your husband is having an affair.

Mrs. Poste is calling you. “Come up to my desk, Lucy. Bring the magazines with you.”

The way she says it gives your belly a dark feeling. Bring up the Good Housekeeping. Mrs. Post takes it from you and flips the pages. “Now, come on, Lucy,” she says, like you are three years old, “you know what snack is, don’t you? Don’t you have snack every day? Ten o’clock? You know what snack is. It’s what the children are having now.”

You gaze around the room as though just awakened and notice that yes, it is snack time. Everyone’s munching, laughing, talking, sipping the lukewarm milk. Now, you love yourself some snack time. How did you miss the start of this one? The sound of crinkly bags, Reynolds Wrap, and uncorked boxes?

“Here’s a picture of snack,” Mrs. Post tells you, pointing to a bag of Cheese Doodles, “and here’s a snack.” She folds the page towards the binder and along the crease, rips out a box of Nabisco Vanilla Wafers, the kind Grandma puts in the bottom of her bourbon banana pudding.

Then it dawns on you. She thinks you don’t understand the task. That you’ve been fumbling about in the pages, bereft and absent. She thinks you are slow. Your fault, because you should have been tearing, not reading.

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By now you know coloring pictures of food is not your area of strength. But here is another one, the third in three weeks. An ice cream cone. Kids around you debate whether theirs will be chocolate or strawberry— vanilla *de facto*, is out, since it's not any fun to use a white crayon on white paper. But, you. You think about what *e/se* this cone could be. There is way more ice cream in the world than chocolate, strawberry, and vanilla. Settle on butter brickle, that flavor you always see in Carvel but have never tasted. Are the goldenrod and yellow crayons still in the box? Oh, thank goodness, they are.

You are a quick learner. You connect dots with ease. So you know better. You know better. But you can't stand your picture looking like everyone else's—or even worse, like the teacher's. What is the point of that? Are you at school to become a robot, or, as Dad says, to become a person? He says that school is a “becoming-a-person program.” You don't understand why you have to go to school to make you a person when you're sort of one already. But you *are* pretty sure that any person-becoming program doesn't involve copying everyone else.

Besides, at home you have milk, cream, eggs, and butter in the refrigerator. Sugar and syrup in the pantry. If you had to, you could fashion a blend of ice cream worthy of the butter brickle name. So defend your case with evidence, just as Perry Mason does at 9 o'clock. Dad said you are practically a lawyer. Remember the number eight. Just write BUTTER BRICKLE in large block letters at the top of the page.

Mrs. Post gives both you and your cone a long, hard look. A really long look. You start to sweat. Large salty drops run off your face and sting your eyes. Suck your lips in and dig the sharpened pencil into your left palm. Harder. The point breaks. But it's okay, she replaces the paper on your desk, smiling that never-know smile with only half of her in it. But at least she is smiling at you.

Try not to smile back. She will get the idea that her smile matters. Let her continue around the room, complimenting your classmates, patting an arm here, smoothing a head there. Never mind, never mind, never mind about that.

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By November the weekly coloring and battle-of-wills exercises are over. You are learning addition. You are bored, not because you know how to add, but because you have a box of flash cards at home with addition on them. You've looked at them so many times you have the sums memorized. If they go above the number ten you will be in trouble. But they don't. You finish your mimeographed worksheet, while Suellen and Gracie count on their fingers and stick their tongues out at you. Dominique grabs her neck and pretends to throw up on your papers. Do *not* pay attention to them. Dad says you will never use half the stuff you learn anyway. Don't sweat it, he says.

How does he know you sweat in school?

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The kids in the Guppy and Goldfish reading groups think the word “always” is a big deal when Mrs. Post writes it on the blackboard as Word of the Week. In fact, everyone thinks it is a big word, an important word, and they go around all day slotting the word into conversation. Gracie walks around the room saying *AL*-ways, *AL* -ways, *AL* -ways in a singsong voice. You are confused. What are you missing here? What is so special about the word always? Wonder about it, but for heaven’s sake don’t ask about it. It might show that you are missing yet another skill the other kids have, like using scissors, tying shoes, or making eights. Don’t forget the milk. *Al*ways remember, do not take a milk at snack time.

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It is February, winter vacation is over, and for the first time all year someone is using a word you don’t know. It is kind of exciting; maybe this is where the becoming-a-person part begins, with brand-new stuff. Mrs. Post hasn’t written a Word of the Week, though. Christopher Meyers says the word. He smiles when he says it. You smile, too, and ask him how to spell it. He says he doesn’t know. You are both confused about the vowels that should complete the word.

It takes you a while, but you notice that Chris uses the word only around you. His smile, cheerful at first, gets more and more spooky, like an evil doll’s. The word begins to feel like the sooty snow drifts ringing the schoolbus parking lot and that, somehow, it applies only to you. Chris is fond of repeating it. It is

not just a word, it's a name of some sort, or a substitute for a name. You know what substitute means. When Mother ran out of brown sugar that once, for raisin bran muffins, she mixed plain white sugar with molasses, and called it a substitute for the brown sugar. Is Christopher making fun of your name? Your cooking? The only thing you ever made and brought to school was a tin of cupcakes for Danielle's birthday. And Chris had three of those, so he must have liked them. Who eats three of something they don't like?

You ask about the word that night at dinner. You pronounce the word carefully, since you can't spell it. Dad slams his juice glass on the table, sloshing some of it over the rim. Mother looks serious, then like she is going to cry, serious again, then again like she's going to cry. You ask Dad to spell the word. Ignore the shocked look Mother gives him when you ask this. Dad answers you, spells out n-i-g-g-e-r. He tells you why Christopher isn't calling anyone else in the class this name. Mother says to tell Chris to stop it if he calls you the name again. Dad says to hell with that, and tells you to knock Chris' teeth into the next zip code the next time he calls you this name. He tells you it is *not*, it is *not*, a substitute. Nothing like the molasses sugar. You are not to let anyone call you this name, even next year in second grade. Or in ballet class, or Sunday school, or on the playground, or anywhere else.

This turns out to be the only new lesson you learn all year.

JAYWALKING

by

Lyzette Wanzer

This sidewalk? The opposite side?

Though deceased, my father prevented me from giving. His frown's wraith and ire's echo double-teamed me, partitioning me from merciful acts. Clouds of guilt and shame curtained me off from upturned palms.

Dad had harbored unrelieved disdain for homeless people. As a child, I was instructed not to give anything to them, at any time, under any circumstance. In his eyes, to give either nickel or nod was akin to a federal offense. They should be working, he'd say, or out looking for work. Hadn't we just passed a "Help Wanted" sign two blocks back? It didn't take a doctorate to haul boxes, now did it? They shouldn't be begging. Shame on them for begging. Where was their dignity? Their shame? *I grew up poor. I grew up hungry. We knew lean, coarse times. But none of us ever sought a handout in the streets. Don't give to the homeless. If they speak, don't respond. Don't make eye contact. They're spongers! Refuse. Losers.*

I'd nod my head to acknowledge his rant, though bewildered by both Dad's vitriol and the naked lack in the eyes of the homeless we passed. I realized that cons existed, and knew that having a dog or small child could signal a ploy. But the where-was-their-shame question gripped me. By the time I was 13, I couldn't help but wonder that, if someone felt ashamed when begging, they were likely not hungry enough. Perhaps any residue of shame had evaporated in tandem with the soaring attributes Dad felt should attend their state. Dignity had vaporized alongside income, homes, food, opportunity, hope.

Any defense I raised was met with round dismissal. My sympathies, while touching, were misguided. Honest, diligent people wouldn't be on the streets in the first place. They are trying to leech off those of us who work for a living. If they'd just get off their idle butts and work...

During my junior year of college, Dad passed away from carcinoma of the lung. After graduation, I made my first foray into independent adulthood, living on my own in New York City. First jobs, first apartments, first bank accounts, first credit cards, first missteps, barbed consequences, first late charges, last chances.

By the time I was 25, I was treading the heady waters with aplomb, if not ease. New York can be a callous place for young people starting out, but it has its benefits. Via an edgy, no-nonsense education that doesn't suffer fools gladly—if at all—the city toughens you. It dispenses knowledge. If you're smart, attentive, and resourceful, you graduate *cum laude* with a diploma in street smarts. This diploma serves you well wherever you venture.

You've learned to turn a corner and read the street. The people on it: who they are, the number of them, how they're moving in relation to one another, where their eyes are, what's in their hands. You can read objects—cars, doorways, signage, brick walls. You can read what's not there: lighting, lifelines, lookouts. You know whether you're going to walk down that street, or run. Or whether you'd *like* to run, but should walk. And if you're going to walk, what kind of walk you need to effect. Where you should walk. This sidewalk? The opposite side? The street? In a straight line? Should you peek into a window, wave as though you know someone within? Should you jaywalk across a busy avenue because you can read either that a) it's what's expected on this block, and doing what's expected will preserve you, or b) it's *not* what's expected, and doing the unexpected guarantees you don't look like prey. You've learned to determine which people, if any, to look in the eye, and prime the look to fit your study. You know to use the eyes in the back of your head, with both your peripheral and visceral visions. In the midst of this calculus, you find that it's challenging to traverse any part of the city without encountering the homeless. You grasp that you can be one, two paychecks away from being in their position. The city can kick you to the curb in less than a heartbeat.

I began to feel differently about the displaced: people, not refuse, not lower than animals, not even, necessarily, lower than myself. Despite my early tuition, I couldn't blur past the homeless like they were squashed cigarette butts. Certainly, some were bound to be the scalawags Dad had suspicioned. But I'd

come to appreciate that some of them had been in my shoes just a few years (or months or weeks) ago.

Ungoverned intersections

Manufacturer's Hanover executed a pattern-interrupt one August morning. New York's Avenue of the Americas, not far from 42nd Street, was the backdrop. When I entered the ATM vestibule I found a three-person line waiting for one of the two machines. A gentleman on the far side of fifty, in mangy, tan, semi-buckled pants, and a dated suit jacket two sizes too big, asked each person joining the queue whether they could "spare any change." Small thread coils swayed from his jacket hem as he moved between the window and the line. He didn't say he was homeless, and I don't know that he was, but what was evident was that he had been snared in some wretched ordeal. His ripe gray hair fanned out in all directions. His teeth, sallow and askew, featured knotty banks of vacant gums. Two sooty palms sheltered a worn paper cup. Dark eyes, dewy and jaundiced, blinked slowly as he appealed to our profiles. We were oblivious to him, to the clamoring avenue outside the glass. We adopted perpendicular stances, the learned stance of ATM dawdling. Eyes for the machine only, ears primed for the all-hail triple beep signaling the end of a transaction. When that customer left, our line would crease forward like an accordion pleat.

As I left the machine and headed toward the exit, my hand slipped into my denim pocket and shut around a fistful of change. In one smooth motion I

transferred the coins from my right hand to my left and dropped it into the man's cup. He murmured several thank you's and patted me twice on my shoulder. Ignoring both the pats and his thanks, and without breaking stride, I booked it out of the bank.

On the sidewalk, I headed uptown with a practiced nonchalant gait. I was painfully conscious of my betrayal. My face burned, my throat closed, and my shoulders hunched forward, skimming the mutiny off of my body. I had done it. Committed high treason and disrespected both my father's orders and his memory.

On paper, helping someone was the right thing to do. But maybe Dad had been right. I was enabling the spongers. I had just encouraged a leech. He shouldn't have been inside of Manny Hanny's, panhandling and glad-handing up and down the line. He should be outside searching for Help Wanted signs.

What I had done amounted to a Class D felony.

"On my own" or not, more than two decades passed before I felt comfortable speaking with, smiling at, or giving to the homeless. During that time I moved from east coast to west. My father's reproach continued to assail me. Most often I came away from a donation feeling diminished, not charitable; scourged, not merciful.

Now, living in San Francisco, I count three of the homeless as among my friends.

There's the handsome grey-bearded man with gorgeous eyes in front of the Russian Hill Walgreens on Polk, greeting me with a heart-stopping smile.

He's chosen an auspicious corner. The Russian Hill neighborhood has a potent collective feel. The area abounds with coffee shops, nail salons, frozen yogurt outlets, pet stores, and ungoverned intersections. It's a community whose rents are far too pricey for me to afford.

How well does *he* do here?

He sells Street Sheet, the Coalition on Homelessness' bimonthly outreach tabloid. Sometimes he sings, with a respectable voice. The creases in his face are reminiscent of Frederick Douglass' regal visage. This man so reminds me of my maternal grandfather. A jovial personality, he moves in so tight to talk that I feel like I'm receiving hallowed secrets.

Starbucks on the corner

There is the quiet, dark-skinned, forever-baseball-capped man in front of Cal-Mart supermarket in Laurel Heights. The first time I met him he was Al, the next visit he was Fred, then he was Al again, and the next time, he was someone else. He hits all comers and sometimes flirts. Sporting large, thick glasses too large for his face, he jiggles change in a cup. I can tell by the sound whether he's had a good day on the corner. In this respect, he's not as artful a panhandler as those who follow the bait-and-stash model, secreting the bulk of donations into pockets, so that just a few coins remain in the cup. That way when they shake the cup, it sounds like a death rattle.

If it's one of the Street Sheet days, he's got a natural front. If not, he doesn't craft nimble scripts for an alternate cover, just "Can you help me out?" or "Have any extra change?" His immediate grid includes a Walgreens, 5 & 10

Standard Ace, Starbucks on the corner, a Books Inc. store small enough to fold and slip into your hip pocket, several eateries, and a Bank of America. Stationed before the Cal-Mart sliding door, he's positioned to catch folks both on the way in and on the way out. Once, upon exiting, I told him, "You know, not many people carry money any more. Everyone's got cards for everything—even for the bus."

That's the only time I saw him smile.

The opposite end of the block

And there is Tutu, the one I know best, whom I've encountered all around the city. He alternately stays with a sister in Oakland, at a shelter, or at an SRO. If he's at a shelter, he laments the fact that he must report in by curfew, or risk losing his bed. He shakes my hand each time we meet and inquires about my health and family. He doesn't haul a cart of blanketed miscellany with him. Dressed in cuffed jeans, serviceable shoes, and jacket, he sports a perpetual bandana—usually midnight blue, though I've seen an occasional red one—and a close-cropped grey beard. He's the only one of the three gentlemen that is always sitting on the sidewalk. No Street Sheet, no cup. I know for a fact that Tutu is often up to no good, but that hasn't curbed our friendship.

When I met him several years ago, his post was in front of the Osha Thai restaurant at the opposite end of the block. Police requested he move from that spot, even though the restaurant provided him with ice water during Indian summer. He has since selected the opposite end of the block which, for

whatever reason, seems to be an acceptable choice in the eyes of the law. I've run into him in a number of other neighborhoods as well.

Tutu's a non-aggressive auditor possessed of a shrewd screen. He doesn't spin a catch-all net, but pitches only the most likely persons. I've watched him work, trying to guess which pedestrian shapes up as a mark, but I'm never right. He's the most mobile, and perhaps the most discerning, but least creative, of the three men. He has only two lines: "Can you help me with change for the bus?" and "I'm trying to get a slice of pizza."

If more than two weeks pass without my seeing Tutu, I begin to worry that something may have befallen him. Is he in jail? Dead on a corner somewhere, stretched prone, while folks step over his body, plugged into smart phones and macchiotos? Did he lose his shelter spot? Has his sister had enough and evicted him permanently? Does he even truly *have* a sister?

On such occasions, I was relieved to see Tutu slink through the back doors of a MUNI bus. Our eyes would light up as we greeted each other enthusiastically. Riders stared at me in my business attire, questions and incredulity shading their eyes. I dreaded the stares and felt as though a spotlight had gone on and I was *en scene* in a traveling exhibit. Over time, though, I came to relish the perplexed looks.

Once, after an especially ardent parting—because I hadn't seen Tutu in more than a month—a group of German tourists in the front of the bus followed his exit with curious faces. They ceased speaking, stopped consulting maps and guide-books. Then, as a flock, they turned to gape at me, young and old, men and

women alike. Their eyes transmitted their shock, though their sculpted faces remained closed. After several silent minutes of this inspection, their measured peering prompted me to fling my arms upward in a V and yell, "Show's over!" This being the 38, the locals paid me no mind, but the front flock turned their heads to look out of an adjacent window. I watched them for the rest of my ride, but they never re-established eye contact.

The evening of Election Day 2012, I found Tutu at his Geary site and asked whether he had voted. He said he had. I pressed: which polling place? Which measures had been on the ballot? Where's your red trilingual I Voted sticker? He was unable to produce a sticker or name any measures, but he did pull a tattered voter registration card out of his pocket.

Has Dad forgiven me? It's hard to tell. I can't say I feel as though he has. I still feel his ghost's glower. It's possible. But if he has, would I not *feel* that? Wouldn't I *know* it?

Tutu closes our curbside visits with two or three handshakes and an "I'll pray for you." He inevitably asks if I am waiting for the bus, and, whether I am or not, apprises me of the time the next bus is due, seemingly having the 38's timetable memorized.

He never fails to warn me to be careful as he watches me jaywalk across the street, and against the light.

END

LEFTOVERS

Why—for the love of heaven—is our workshop reading *Crime and Punishment*? It's July. Summer! No one should have to vie with Dostoevsky after the solstice.

Diane is 20 years older than I, sports curly slate-blond hair, a curveless frame, and crisp, staccato words. I'm in my twenties, hellbent on becoming an author. She hails from Boston, I from New York. We love Shelley, Shakespeare, and sonnets, but part on Keats. We appreciate alliteration. But we wonder what is so vile about the passive voice? What mayhem awaits us should we cap a sentence with a preposition?

The dining hall features fresh fare, courtesy of the campus farm. As marvelous as the meals are, Diane and I decide we need a change. We're at The Bennington Writers Workshop in 1991. We, two of the bookish hopefuls dorming in the College's white clapboard cottages. Urban denizens, Diane and I long to flee the bucolic campus. We'll brunch at the Black Horse Tavern just outside the campus' northern border.

We meet in the cottages' fairway, and stroll towards the baked path flanking the farm. We wend through a skein of cattails and brambles. Upon emerging, the first word that floats is: quaint. Postcard houses, hushed tree-trimmed lane, and opposite the tavern, a true white picket fence. The restaurant resembles a weathered bungalow, graced with painted trim, earth-toned shingles, and a wooden wraparound porch.

Inside the door, a chalkboard directs, "Please seat yourself." We cross the springy floorboards, choosing a window-side table near the front door.

Two women, cupped in the sun's early nimbus, silhouette the door. Their eyes stall at our table. For a long moment, they stare at me, and I at them. Diane reads the menu. She ponders the special. Peeks at the desserts. But the ladies stare at me, and I at them. They turn and settle at the counter on the opposite side of the room.

A reedy man in paint-splattered clothes and damp boots clomps in. He looks for a seat, but stops his search when he sees me. He leans towards the hostess, who has arrived at her station to seat diners. Opaque words bob between them. They spout speech balloons in wispy ink. The man straightens to his full height; both he and the hostess look in my direction, more subtly, more muted, more veiled--but just.

A steady spate enters the now propped-open door, singly, in pairs, one Dick-and-Jane quartet. (Was Spot tethered outside?) Without exception, they double-take upon seeing me. My mouth turns barren. I watch Diane across the bread

basket, to see whether she's breathing the scarred air. Her brow puckers, and she mulls over whether she should do pancakes and bacon, or be a good girl and have the roasted vegetable omelet. Or the egg-white omelet. Too many temptations. Too many variations on the omelet. All is savory, to her. Genuine dither, for her.

Our waitress appears and greets Diane. No eye contact. She takes Diane's order, but fails to inquire of me, so I raise an absolute voice: scrambled eggs, whole wheat toast, sausage. The waitress' rainwater eyes swing to me, sterile. Her head tilts to one side, reminding me of a pigeon's broken neck. She never speaks to me. Chalk-white knuckles gripping her notepad, she bolts into the kitchen.

Diane ponders aloud about how green the trees' leaves are, how honeyed the clover smells, how fragrant the breeze, how the co-eds rebel with style, how plain the townfolks' dress, how long a while before we're published, how bleached the porch's wood, how she missed Boston less and less, how she missed home-cooked food, how dear this time just to *write* was, how loud a hornet's buzz sounds with such quiet all around, how cute the preening squirrel outside our window, and had I seen the russet moonglow frosting the sky as I headed to workshop last night?

Plates arrive, bearing portions more demure than is customary in our rife cities. The fluffy eggs smell hot and venal. My insides writhe into a hitch knot.

They talked about me in the kitchen. They must have.

Perhaps the cook had peeked through a kitchen door to view the astonishment for himself.

Perhaps he, the waitress, and the dishwasher had stifled the tenor of their howls with starched sleeves and suppressed snorts.

Perhaps my toast fell on the floor and was buttered anyway.

Perhaps my toast was *thrown* on the floor, and buttered anyway.

Perhaps they wondered about Diane. What was she *doing*?

Perhaps they'd spit into my eggs.

I graze around the periphery of my plate and nibble into a toast slice. The bread wads in my mouth like steel wool. Eating as Origami. What a title that would make. I use a hard gulp of water to propel the morsel through my seized throat, beyond the infernal iceberg damming my stomach. Swallowing? All the guerrilla warfare I can muster on such foul notice.

Digestion is supposed to start the moment you smell food. That isn't happening here.

Diane mops the last of her egg-white omelet with a sourdough crust. She doesn't see it. She doesn't smell it. A canopy of tension so coarse, I can damn near snatch a swatch of it in my fist. Her plate's clean. Crumb columns line her fork. She lifts the last roll from the bread basket.

This is smoke. Art. Magic. It has to be.

Diane butters the last bread sliver. Laments that there are no seconds on the Coke. This is freedom. Favor. She has a cloak. I have no dagger.

What will happen if I leap up and twirl a dance? What if there is no note, or beat? What if I jump a broom while I prance? Trip the light on measured feet?

What if I raise my arms, style my palms? Swish my lavish hips? What if I brand the waitress with her own tongs? Jilt, skirt this script? What if I coax the hostess with a haughty finger? Gloat at the dread within her? What if I share with Diane the true toll? Tell her what time it is? Sever her shielded soul, splinter her privileged mist? What if I capsize grits on the buffet? What if I leave and don't pay? What if I'd come here with my mother instead of my friend? What if my mother tells me how this story ends?

END

LEARNING TO SPEAK CHOCOLATE

by

Lizette Wanzer

My vigilant recruiter had nabbed the W2 requisition when it slid across his desk: “You’d be perfect for this. Great fit.”

Yellow cabs, pretzel carts, my own chaste briefcase reflected off the spinning window panes. Suited, slick-haired gentry queued and caroused through the doors. Rockefeller Center Management Corporation’s Purchasing Department, Avenue of the Americas, 1980s New York City. In my early 20s, I’m proud of landing my first post at a corporate powerhouse. I arrived flushed with anticipation. Rode the suave mirrored elevator to the eighth floor.

After meeting the office staff, my enthusiasm cooled. Bearing toothy grins, the purchasing assistants and office manager mentioned that my associate, Jana, was hard of hearing.

Actually, she was sort of hearing-*impaired*.

The truth of the matter was, she could not hear very much at all.

To get right down to it, she was deaf. More or less.

They went on to explain that listening devices afforded her trivial assistance, but these were large and ungainly. Jana was proud and often “forgot” to wear them. When she did wear them, they rendered no support whatever unless folks were standing directly before her. Without the aids, she was sheathed in silence. My colleagues showed me the front-and-shout practice they used to arrest Jana’s attention. In her immediate sight line, magnified gestures could work, as well. If you were deft at charades.

My manner was diffident, contemplative, not given to histrionic performances as agents of workplace intercourse. The recruiter’s ambush! He could have shared these circumstances with me prior to my accepting the contract. He could have, and he should have.

Jana was not due in for another hour. I tried to settle at my desk which, disconcertingly, was adjacent to hers. I stowed my supplies, studied the staff directory, and gave my typewriter a whirl before Jana arrived.

A first glance revealed her to be in her 50s, a stout graying blonde, round glasses, worn leather purse. She halted when she saw me, stunned. I read her telegraph: no one had apprised her that I was coming on board. What percentage of the office’s daily grind, water cooler gossip, eluded her? On how many inside jokes was she left on the outside?

Sally, the office manager, introduced me to Jana in a loud yell. The hearing aids were truant. Sally repeated my name, *fortissimo voce*, to no avail. She resorted to air-spelling: L-I-Z-E-T-T-E.

Dread doused me. Then flooded, then brimmed, crested, slopped over.

I foresaw tortuous hours of missed messages, failed connections, faulty wiring.

The two of us, hard-pressed to morph into a productive duo.

My first few weeks, we finessed the situation through ignoring one another.

I avoided having to speak with her.

Eye contact? No.

Insular functionaries, we two.

For a while, our gambit worked. I diverted large wedges of time to orientation, training, shadowing counterparts. Short-term, our silent settlement was tenable.

Destiny dropped during my third week. A compulsory matter arose, requiring Jana's input. I ambled over to her desk, and planted directly in front of it. She looked up.

I put my question to her in a high-pitched voice, then tried again one notch higher.

I, not a consummate yeller.

She, not a proficient lip-reader.

When I glanced around the office for help, eyes and heads were trained--most earnestly--on Selectrics, notepads, and screens. No lifeline available here. A full ten minutes elapsed before I was able to convey one sentence and a related question. Sweat rolled from my hairline, seared my eyes.

My exchanges with Jana remained fraught with dark reckoning. I loathed having to engage her. Chagrin curtained our desks off from one another. Stubbornness added another panel.

Richard, the sequestered, balding, back-room tech whiz, emerged on a

steamy afternoon and decreed an ice cream run. As keeper of the petty cash, I offered to do a Dairy Queen dash. Folks called out their orders--parfaits, cones, popsicles, shakes, Blizzards.

Jana sat oblivious at her desk.

I waited for Sally to mention Jana, perhaps approach and find out which treat she wanted. But Sally didn't. Nor did anyone else. From my top drawer I removed a cube of green sticky notes. Drew an ice cream cone on the top sheet.

Placed a large question mark after the cone.

Walked over.

With a flat palm, ironed the note onto her invoice heap.

She jumped, startled. She stripped the note off, gauged it for a beat. Our eyes met, and we broke into wide grins. She spoke, scarred syllables stirring. I could seize one word: chocolate. It was enough.

In the weeks following, I consumed several stacks of notepads. Sometimes I scrawled questions or statements on them, sometimes drew pictures, and once in a roguish while, I'd cast my message in the form of a rebus. Jana loved the picture-questions, and grew especially fond of my rebus requests. Her keen mind enjoyed cracking the codes. I warmed up to yelling, but still was not loud enough to be heard without her hearing aids. I devised an algorithm for deciphering her blurred speech: attain the sum of the conversation context and her body language. Divide that understanding with my best estimate. Arrive at a meaning. Jana was fluent in American Sign Language, and I picked up the few signs that our coworkers knew. They had learned these

from Jana's deaf friends, who often met her at the office before a planned dinner or outing. At home, I came across a predawn, half-hour PBS show that taught sign language. The program was geared for children, but I watched anyway. Unable to apprehend the alphabet, I became skilled in learning basic nouns such as man, woman, church, and mountain. I knew the signs for seeing, climbing, one expression (I love you), and one adjective (beautiful). My vocabulary grew, but my surest bets remained rebus and pictures. Staff often came to me and inquired whether I would "ask" Jana about bank reconciliations or "find out" what she thought about the latest balance statement.

After a couple of months, Jana and I were "speaking" almost non-stop on a daily basis. We conversed about work, but also shared news of our personal lives, current events, our favorite silent movies (*Metropolis* for her, *Broken Blossoms* for me), and the latest celebrity gossip on the newstands. I learned to answer her TTY machine and field calls from the relay service. We even found that--with her disability, and my being African American--we shared similar experiences of bigotry, inequity, and intolerance. We traded war stories. On her birthday I presented a card announcing "Happy Birthday!" in nine languages. She stared at the phrases, ran her fingers over them for a long time. One December Friday when she wore her hearing aids, I brought my Walkman over to her, inserted the earphone, and turned Handel's *Messiah* choruses up full blast. And the Glory of the Lord. Unto Us a Child Is Born. Another time, Duke Ellington. Another time, We Will Rock You. Another, Rapper's Delight, the LP version.

On an early Monday morning, she pounded on her desk. I straightened

from the filing cabinets to peer at her. She rose, turned her back on me, and vigorously yanked her slacks hard on either side. She looked over her shoulder. I wrinkled my brow. She turned, repeated the gesture, tugged her pants harder. I also turned, and followed her movements. She nodded approval even as I remained puzzled. When I returned to my desk, a pink sticky note was pasted on my blotter: *Your pants were stuck in the crack of your ass.* I laughed uproariously, causing the staff to cast cautious glances in my direction.

In my third year at Rockefeller Center, our department learned that it would have to lay off all of its contractors in a cost-cutting move. I was still on a W2 contract, so that meant me. I made it clear that I wanted a no-frills exit, and foiled offers of an appreciation party, farewell lunch.

It was difficult bidding everyone goodbye; I felt an engaged part of the Rockefeller Center family. Jana walked with me to the elevator, carrying my box of bureaucratic detritus. We rode down to the concourse, stilled, fixed, hushed, the physical animation common to our interactions, vaporized. We passed through the subway turnstile, and waited together on the platform. In the uncanny choreography peculiar to Manhattan's subways, our trains arrived simultaneously, on opposite platforms, bound for divergent destinations. Jana handed my box over. We stood, tears pooling, as commuters swarmed around us. Only when we heard our respective door-closing bells did we whirl and race for our trains. Our good-bye, as silent as our beginning had been. And yet this silence? Woven of an entirely different fiber.