

“Would you get me the Parmesan cheese? Oh, no, sorry, I keep it in there now.” It was a few days later, and I was hiding in my mother’s kitchen.

My parents lived in a Spanish style four-bedroom house with pool, nestled in a Spanish style four-bedroom sort of cul de sac in Woodland Hills. I spent my childhood in that same quiet landscape of stucco walls, dark brown window frames and undulating S-bend tiles that rolled across the roof like a terracotta ocean, and my parents were spending their semi-retirement there. Most of my friends had endured childhood dramas of divorce, a parent dying, being abandoned on a mountain to be suckled by wolves, stuff that had made them happy to grow up and move on. But my folks, they never moved, never divorced, never even seemed to fight much. I’d had an idyllic American middle class sort of childhood, and part of me had never really left it behind. That house was still home, still the place I grew up in, and still the emotional low ground I inevitably slid back to like the smog that collects on the Valley floor.

I found my mother’s Parmesan for her – not the real stuff, but the long lasting powdery version in the green can – and she kept on cooking while we talked about nothing. Then I noticed her starting to fidget, and the pauses between sentences growing longer. That warned me that something was coming.

“I had lunch with Sue the other day,” she said in her typical way of launching into a story entirely out of context.

“How’s she doing?” I asked, glancing out the kitchen windows at the juniper hedge, which was desperately in need of trimming.

“Really well. She just had some dental work done, and she looks so much better. It used to be so embarrassing, trying not to stare at that gap while she talked. Well, Dr. Kim did a really nice bridge and she looks wonderful.”

“Hmm, that’s great.”

“Well,” she continued after a pause, “now, Peter, I hope you don’t mind, but I mentioned to her a little while ago that you were still having some trouble finding a job . . .”

I rolled my eyes and puffed a little, as my teenage self had done a thousand times. Mom glanced away as if she smelled something burning, then continued “. . .and she spoke to her husband Phil about it. You remember Phil, don’t you? We ran into him that one evening at Puccini’s, around Christmas I think.”

I remembered Phil. He was bald.

“Phil’s the manager of the San Fernando Savings branch down on Fallbrook, and he said that they’re always looking for good tellers. He said he’d have to check with his personnel people, but he seemed pretty sure that . . .”

“Mom.”

“Well honey, it is a job, after all.”

“I’m not a bank teller. I have no interest in being a bank teller.”

“Sometimes you have to start small and work your way up. You would learn all about banking and then, who knows? You could do all sorts of things with a background in banking.”

“Mom, I’m not a kid just out of high school looking for a job. For Christ’s sake I’ve got a degree from UCLA and six years of work experience.”

“Please don’t swear. I’m only trying to help.”

“I know, I’m sorry.”

“I understand that you’re looking for a better position than that, but maybe, just in the meantime, you should be willing to consider something that isn’t quite so ambitious. There must be so many jobs out there that you could do really well if you put your mind to it. But you’re not going to find them if you refuse to look at anything less than perfect. Your brother even worked for free for a while, remember?”

Yeah, I remembered. That unpaid internship at the State Department before he went off to Harvard. Poor guy. I tried not to let all this get to me, but when your own mother tells you to set your sights lower, it’s kind of hard. After a few more helpful suggestions, such as “maybe you should write a résumé,” and “aren’t there people who specialize in finding other people jobs?” I managed to turn the conversation in a less painful direction. Dad came home, we had a nice dinner with minimal controversy, and then I drove back to Tanya’s.

Tanya was a relatively new addition to my life, although it didn't feel that way. She was an okay girlfriend: pretty without being unobtainable, neither fat nor thin, smarter than average but not overly ambitious. Kind of like a peace lily: decent looking, unexceptional but easy to maintain. I wouldn't have put it that way when a mutual friend introduced us at a party almost two years ago. She was a junior associate at a law firm in Studio City doing real estate law, and she had seemed sexy, intelligent, upwardly mobile. We had a great few months together when we first started dating. We both had a taste for long lazy weekends, getting up late and spending the day watching crap movies on cable and eating popcorn. We didn't challenge each other, but we also didn't judge each other, and, thinking back on it, we were happy. Up until meeting Tanya I'd nursed my old unspoken crush on Emily, one of my college friends, and used it as a sort of excuse to avoid serious relationships. But when Tanya came along, I guess I was ready to grow up a little. I accepted that my idealized longing for Emily was becoming silly, and for the first time I was with someone I really cared about.

But things changed when I lost my job and moved in with her. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. Things were going well between us, what could go wrong? I'd have a new job soon and life would be better than ever. But it didn't work out that way. The new job didn't happen, so I played video games and moped. Tanya got herself a new job with a bigger firm and a paycheck to match. I grew bitter, she grew resentful. After just a month of sharing a bathroom seven days a week, the stress of familiarity started to take its toll. She nagged me about cleaning the apartment. I nagged about her nagging. And somewhere in the middle, the spark died.

By the time I reached her apartment that evening I wasn't in the greatest of moods, having spent my trip across the Valley with "Welcome to San Fernando Savings, how can I help you?" echoing in my head. Tanya was there, decked out in her standard ratty old college sweatshirt and pajama bottoms, puffing distractedly on a cigarette, watching a game show on TV. She glanced in my direction as I came through the door, but her attention quickly returned to glowing screen in front of her. The cold remains of a pack of instant noodles sat on the coffee table, along with a half-finished two-liter bottle of Diet Coke and the Calendar Section of yesterday's LA Times.

"Hey, you still up?" I asked absent-mindedly as I closed the door behind me and turned the bolt. A moment of silence followed.

"It's 10:30," she responded. The look in her cavernous eyes as they peered at me from under a tired tangle of hair seemed to tack a silent "you dimwit" on the end. Her attention was drawn back to the television. I knew better than to interrupt again, so I kicked off my shoes in silence, pulled a beer out of the fridge, and joined her.

"Mom and Dad say hi," I ventured during the commercials. They hadn't really. They never did. My parents didn't particularly like Tanya, and she knew it.

"That's nice," she replied mechanically. "How are they?"

"Fine. Dad scored two birdies yesterday."

"Go Dad," she muttered.

"How was your day?"

"Fine. Don was being an asshole again. He keeps hinting that times are tough and they might have to let someone go, and then dumps more work on me. If there is that much work around then times can't be that tough, can they?"

"He knows you won't quit."

"Whatever. It's just a job."

"Speaking of which, Mom wants to get me a job as a bank teller," I added dryly, assuming the irony spoke for itself.

"Hmm, where?"

"Well, the offer was for San Fernando Savings, but I think I should hold out for Wells Fargo, don't you?" Maybe she was right, maybe the best I could hope for was a career in customer service, but I wasn't about to admit it.

She just stared, and I thought for a second that she didn't get it.

"Tanya?"

"You don't need to be stupid about it," she said after giving me a brief contemptuous look. "It wouldn't be that bad."

"Bank teller," I repeated, clearly, just to be sure we were talking about the same thing.

Tanya blew out a puff of smoke and shrugged. "Better job than you have now."

"It's one step up from pizza delivery."

“Since when are you such a snob, anyway? I’ve worked some shitty jobs before. I even spent a summer working at the Gap.”

“Tanya, it’s not that being a bank teller is the worst thing in the world, it’s just that I’m not one. I need to get my career back on track, and I’m not going to be able to do that standing behind a counter helping people fill out deposit slips.” As if my career had ever been on track. As if I even had a track. I was as trackless as a fucking pachinko ball.

“Fine, whatever.” Tanya’s attention returned to the TV screen, which had started counting down the best music videos of the 1980s without the slightest doubt that we cared. We sat in silence, listening to Madonna and Culture Club squeak and croon with all the neatly packaged sterility of a children’s breakfast cereal. Eventually Robert Palmer showed up with his leggy, humorless guitar girls pretending to play in the background. “I always hated this one,” Tanya murmured. Me too, I agreed dutifully, although I remember having been pretty beguiled by all that red lipstick when I was younger. Tanya smiled at me in a moment of false complicity, then turned her head again to watch the video that she thought we had managed to share a dislike for.

Duran Duran finally spelled the end for me – I took my laptop into the small spare room and surfed the net for what seemed like an hour. By the time I emerged into the living room, it was past one. I hadn’t noticed the TV being turned off, but Tanya was already sound asleep.