

Fiction
The Unbinding
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Installment 11

[USPS – Cont’d]

I’ll keep this story factual.

It started four days ago, last Monday night. I was taking a facialist to eat sashimi. I’d had a crush on the woman since January, and we’d been swapping vibrations at our complex. Things heated up between us when, one weekend, at a new acquaintance’s suggestion, I rented a German epic about conquistadors that happened to be the facialist’s favorite film. She spotted me carrying the disc to my apartment, we talked a bit, we realized we had a lot in common, potentially (especially if I watched and liked the movie), and so I asked her out for Japanese food after learning from her AidSat file that she’d been hospitalized on New Year’s Eve for a violent digestive episode that she blamed on consuming spoiled raw fish.

On our drive to the restaurant we stopped at the apartment of the phobic old colonel who tutored Tom Cruise, where the facialist feared she’d left a crockpot on. She’d met the colonel while helping with the search for that allegedly kidnapped teenage girl whose story went national for a time last fall, with the relatives spreading out across the morning shows (lovely, soft-spoken, trusting immigrants who flinched under the lights) until the TV people got annoyed with them over their refusal to show photos of their missing daughter’s face. (Photos were against the family’s religion.) When a newspaper later reported that the girl had been pledged in some ceremony to a man of 39 who taught at a college here once but lost his job for claiming that our government still kills Indians and that it dropped an atom bomb on Egypt but hushed it up with a transfer of gold bouillon, the public decided that the family wasn’t worth helping. The girl has never been located, but the facialist and the colonel still think about her.

As we were leaving his apartment, I felt my cell phone shudder in my pocket. It rattled again while the facialist and I were chopsticking up small slabs of slippery tuna and discussing movies and the universe, the way people do on uncomfortable first dates. About the movies we agreed that *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* may be the grandest tragedy ever filmed, though neither of us could explain exactly why. About the universe we had this exchange:

“I feel sometimes,” the facialist said, “like I’ve woken up in a dark room and I’m walking with my arms stretched out, trying to find the walls.”

“Succinct,” I said.

“But what do I do when I reach the walls?” she asked me.

“Try to climb over them?”

“What if they’re too tall? What if the walls go clear up to the ceiling?”

“Then sit on the floor and wait for them to crumble. All walls do, eventually.”

“But what if I die first?”

“Your ghost can just pass through them.”

“But what if there aren’t ghosts?”

“There have to be,” I told her. “Why would there be walls,” I reasoned, “unless there were also things that could pass through them?”

“Eat that last nice hunk there. It’s for you.”

“Do you believe in walls, Sabrina?”

“Walls are all I believe in, I’m afraid.”

“Then,” I explained, “you also believe in ghosts.”

During this talk my cell phone jumped a fourth time, but I didn’t pick up the messages until I was sitting on the facialist’s mattress, waiting for her to wash up and brush her teeth. It was 1 in the morning. We’d jabbered for four hours. Once you really get to pondering, walls and ghosts are an enormous topic.

Message one: “This is Jesse. Call me back.”

Message two: “You need to call. It’s Jesse. I’m in Las Vegas. I’ll be up all night.”

Remember Jesse, Mom? The windburned sailboarder from Outback Steakhouse who I bought an engagement ring for after three weeks? Who dumped me for the Don Juan who built log homes? She’s an official W Hotel slut now who rubs that glittery make-up in her cleavage and can have any man she points her nukes at.

Message three: “You have to call immediately. I’m down here with Rob, from the bar. He’s in the poker room. I was scrounging for Advil in his overnight bag and I found some things you need to know about. I care about you. I’m anxious for you. Call me.”

Who this Rob is doesn’t matter, Mom—just a guy from my complex (who recommended that movie). What matters is that Jesse mistreated me and that I take calls for a living, all day, all week, and I’m required to answer every one of them. But I didn’t have to answer hers—not with a cute facialist right there who seemed, from all the electric brushing noises and toilet-flushing to-do and bathroom racket, as though she was preparing the sort

of circus that pythons like Jesse don't have to show a guy, since all they need to do is smoothly clench.

Though it wasn't a circus I'd want to join each night (and maybe the facialist sensed this, and it hurt her, and that's why I haven't heard from her this week) at least it convinced me when I heard message four (after kissing the facialist goodbye and noticing that her copy of *Aguirre* was still immaculately shrink-wrapped) that I didn't have to give in to temptress Jesse. No matter how deeply I realized that I still loved her.

Message four: "Rob has copies of your journal entries from MyStory.Com. They're paper-clipped neatly together in a blue envelope. In one of them he highlighted the word 'Nazi' with pink fluorescent marker."

Well, at least one sicko's reading them, I thought. I'd better put in more stuff about the gym. About how I never launder my skunky shorts. About how I get noble stiffies in the hot tub from imagining my paintball team vanquishing the breeder who took our mascot.

Then I remembered one entry had mentioned Jesse, so I looked it up and reviewed it: disdainful. Good. In the next one I'll call her a mud hen, I decided, and pretend that the facialist was my best lay ever. And I might say "Hello, dear" to Rob. To stun the freak.

Then, a day later, this call came. From Rob.

"We need to discuss your ridiculous ex-girlfriend. Not right away, but when I'm there again."

Because, obviously, Jesse wants me back, Mom, even though she hasn't placed a fifth call. But I know she will—just wait. The day she left me for the construction monkey, she built a wall that made me into a ghost; but the night I began ignoring her in return, I changed into Jesse's wall.

And when I crumble, as I'm bound to, we'll become each other's lifelong mates. If the facialist doesn't go Chuckie and knife me first!

Now stick all of this in your scrapbook.

Love,
Your kid

P.S. At work they're producing a series of radio ads featuring actual recorded calls, and one of them (as of now, at least) will be an artistically edited tape of me helping a panicky New Hampshire babysitter smother a grease fire in a toaster oven. And that's the last real ever letter I'll ever write you.