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**Y**ou should not, I've read many times, reach for your phone first thing in the morning—the news, social media, and emails all disrupt the natural stages of waking and create stress—which is how I'll preface the fact that when I reached for my phone first thing one morning and learned that Danny Horst and Annabel Lily were dating, I was furious.

I wasn't furious because I was in love with Danny Horst or, for that matter, with Annabel Lily. Nor was I furious because two more people in the world had found romantic bliss while I remained mostly single. And I wasn't furious that I hadn't heard the news directly from Danny, even though we shared an office. The reason I was furious was that Annabel Lily was a gorgeous, talented, world-famous movie star, and Danny was a schlub. He wasn't a bad guy, and he, too, was talented. But, for Christ's sake, he was a TV writer, a comedy writer—he was a male version of *me*. He was pasty skinned and sleep-deprived and sarcastic. And, perhaps because he was male or perhaps because he was a decade younger than I was, he was a lot less self-consciously people-pleasing and a lot more recklessly crass. At after-parties, he was undisguisedly high or trip-

ping. He referred often, almost guilelessly, to both his social anxiety and his porn consumption. When he'd considered going on Rogaine, I had, at his request, used his phone to take pictures of the top of his head so that he could see exactly how much his hair was thinning there, and when he applied the medication the first time, I'd checked to make sure the foam was evenly rubbed in. And I was so familiar with the various genres of his burps that I could infer from them what he'd eaten recently.

Danny was like a little brother to me—I adored him, *and* he stank and got on my nerves. But his foul and annoying ways had, apparently, not precluded Annabel Lily's interest. She'd been the guest host of *The Night Owls* three weeks prior, coinciding with the release of her latest film, the fourth in an action franchise in which she played a corrupt FBI agent. She'd delivered the opening monologue while wearing a one-shouldered black satin cocktail dress with a thigh slit, highlighting her slender yet curvy body; her long red hair had been styled into old Hollywood waves. Annabel was beautiful and sweet and charming, and if she didn't have the best comic timing, she was completely game, which was just as important. In one sketch, she'd been called on to play a woodchuck, which entailed crawling around on all fours and wearing a furry suit and two enormous prosthetic front teeth. In fact, Danny had written this sketch, meaning it was plausible that they'd first been attracted to each other while rehearsing it.

The woodchuck part was endearing enough that I might have been able to forgive them both except that theirs was the third such pairing that had occurred at *TNO* in the last few years, and, as anyone knows who's ever written a joke—or heard a fairy tale, or read an article in the style section of a newspaper—there's a rule of three. In this case, it constituted the trend of a romance between a bona fide celebrity and a *TNO* staffer who'd met on the show. But, crucially, a bona fide *female* celebrity and a *male* staffer. The year before, at a wedding I'd attended, an icy blond Oscar-winning British actress named Imogen Wagner had married a cast member named Josh Beekman, best known for his recurring character Backne Guy.

And the year before that, the head writer, Elliot Markovitz (five-foot-eight, forty, and my Top-Sider-wearing boss), had married a multi-platinum-album-selling pop singer named Nicola Dornan (five-foot-ten, thirty, and a special envoy for the U.N.). And this, of course, was the essence of my fury: that such couples would never exist with the genders switched, that a gorgeous male celebrity would never fall in love with an ordinary, dorky, unkempt woman. Never. No matter how clever she was.

But I also knew, as I lay in bed glaring at the screen of my phone—Danny and Annabel’s debut as a couple had occurred the night before, in the form of making out at the club where Annabel’s twenty-fourth birthday party had been held—that I would write about my fury. Just as I always did, I’d turn my feelings into comedy, and that was how I’d cure myself.

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# CHAPTER 1

April 2018

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WEEKLY SCHEDULE FOR  
*THE NIGHT OWLS*

**Monday 1 P.M.** pitch meeting with guest host

**Tuesday 5 P.M.** start of all-night writing session

**Wednesday 12 P.M.** deadline for submitted sketches

**Wednesday 3 P.M.** table read of submitted sketches

**Wednesday 9 P.M.** preliminary show lineup posted internally

**Wednesday night–Saturday morning** rehearsals; scripts revised; sets built; special effects designed; hair, makeup, and costumes chosen and created; pre-tapes shot

**Saturday 1 P.M.** run-through of show

**Saturday 8 P.M.** dress rehearsal before a live audience

**Saturday 11:30 P.M.** live show before a new audience

**Sunday 1:30 A.M.** first after-party

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Monday, 1:10 P.M.

**F**or the meeting that marked the official start of that week's show, I planned to pitch two sketches. But I had three ideas—you could write and submit more but pitch only two—so I'd play by ear which ones I went with, depending on how the guest host reacted to the pitches preceding mine. About forty writers, cast members, and producers were crammed into the seventeenth-floor office of the show's creator and executive director, Nigel Petersen. Nigel's seventeenth-floor office—not to be confused with his office on the eighth floor, adjacent to the studio where the show was filmed—was both well-appointed and never intended as a meeting place for anywhere close to forty people. This meant that Nigel sat behind his desk, the host sat in a leather armchair, a few lucky staffers nabbed a place on the sole couch, and everyone else leaned against the wall or sat on the floor.

Nigel started by introducing the host, who, as happened about once per season, was also that week's musical guest. Noah Brewster had twice in the past been the musical guest, but this was his first

time hosting. He was a cheesily handsome, extremely successful singer-songwriter who specialized in cloying pop music and was known for dating models in their early twenties. Though he looked like a surfer—piercing blue eyes, shaggy blond hair and stubble, a big toothy grin, and a jacked body—I’d learned by reading the host bio we were emailed each Monday morning that he’d grown up in a suburb of Washington, D.C. He was thirty-six, the same age I was, and had been famous ever since releasing the hit “Making Love in July” more than fifteen years before, when I was in college. “Making Love in July” was a paean to respectfully taking the virginity of a long-haired girl with “glowy skin,” “a pouty mouth,” and “raspberry nipples,” and it was one of those songs that had for a year played so often on the radio that, in spite of finding it execrable, I accidentally knew all the words. In the time since then, Noah Brewster had won many awards and sold more than twenty million albums, a figure I also had learned from his host bio. It was not a coincidence that his tenth album was being released the following week; hosts, musical guests, and the combinations therein were usually either celebrating newfound fame or promoting imminent work.

After Nigel introduced him, Noah Brewster looked around the room and said, “Thanks for letting a musician crash the comedy party. Hosting *TNO* has been a lifelong dream, ever since I was a middle school misfit sneaking down to the basement to watch after my parents went to bed.” He smiled his big smile at us, and I wondered if his teeth were real or veneers. After nine years at *TNO*, I was as accustomed as one could be to interacting with high-wattage celebrities, though it often was surprising to discover who was even better-looking in person (most of them), who was an asshole (not many, but definitely a few), who was shockingly vacuous (the lead from a popular police procedural stood out), and who you wished would stay on the show forever because they were so great in the sketches and also just so fun to hang out with in the middle of the night.

Nigel glanced to his left, where a writer was sitting at his feet, and said, “Benji, why don’t you kick things off?”

Benji pitched a sketch about the former FBI director, James Comey, writing the memoir he’d just published, dictating Dear Diary–style girlish reminiscences. Then a cast member named Oliver said he was working on an idea with Rohit, another writer (it wouldn’t become clear until the read-through of the sketches on Wednesday if this was true or an excuse on Oliver’s part). Then a writer named Lianna pitched a sketch where Noah Brewster would play the token hot straight boy in a high school chorus, then a writer named Tony pitched a sketch where Noah Brewster would play a preppy white guy running for office and guest-preaching in a Black church. Henrietta, who was one of the two cast members I worked with the most, said she and Viv, who was the other cast member I worked with the most, wanted to do a sketch about Internet searches made by dogs. I went sixth.

“I think of this one as The Danny Horst Rule,” I said. “Because it’s inspired by my very own officemate, whose big news I trust we’re all aware of.” Everyone clapped or hooted. Over the weekend, after seven weeks of dating, Danny and Annabel Lily had gotten engaged, as revealed in a post on Annabel’s Instagram account showing a close-up of a ring on her finger, her hand resting atop Danny’s. Celebrity gossip websites immediately reported that the diamond was an emerald-cut halo with a pavé setting, and estimated that the ring had cost \$110,000. Although I myself had been married briefly in my twenties, I had no idea what *emerald cut*, *halo*, or *pavé setting* meant—my ex-husband and I had both worn plain gold bands.

As the cheering died down, Danny, who was sitting on the floor two people to my left, said, “Thanks, everyone. And, yeah, pretty fucking psyched that I get to be Mr. Annabel Lily.” There was another round of cheers, and Danny added, “If you’re wondering, Sally did warn me that she’d be exploiting me to advance her career.”

“I’m trying to convince Danny to write it *with* me,” I said. “But we’ll put a pin in that for now. Anyway, I want to write about the phenomenon where—sorry, Danny, I really do love you—but where men at *TNO* date above their station, but women never do.”

There was widespread laughter, though laughter at the pitch meeting could mean you’d revealed your punchlines too early. For this reason, some people pitched only decoys, though I took the risk of sharing my real ideas in order to lay claim to them in case anyone else was considering something similar. And anyway, to a surprising degree, laughter was never the ultimate determinant of a sketch’s fate; Nigel’s whims were. Of the forty or so scripts that would be submitted for Wednesday’s read-through, about twelve sketches would make it to the dress rehearsal Saturday and just eight to the live show. Sketches featuring the host had a better chance of surviving, but beyond that, it was impossible to guess what Nigel would decide. All of us in his office at that moment, cast members and writers alike, had had our hearts broken many times.

“Obviously, Danny should be in the sketch in some capacity,” I added, “either as himself or as someone else. And, Noah, it could work really well if you’re a guy who gets arrested for somehow breaking the rule, like you’re on a date with either Henrietta or Viv made up to look less gorgeous than they are in real life.” Though I was close to Henrietta and Viv, I wasn’t just flattering them. They really were both gorgeous, which wasn’t unusual for female comedians, *and* they were both so funny that their funniness often obscured their beauty, which also wasn’t unusual for female comedians.

“Just so I understand—” Noah Brewster said, and the confusion on his face made me wonder if he’d turn out to be one of the ding-dongs. I’d never previously spoken to him. The first time he’d been the musical guest had been before I worked at the show, and the second time, I hadn’t had any reason to interact with him. Occasionally, musical guests appeared in sketches, or you could watch them rehearse their songs on Thursday afternoons if you weren’t otherwise occupied, but that didn’t mean you’d meet. “In this sketch,” he

said, “I’d be breaking the law because I’m so much better looking than a woman I’m dating?”

There was some chuckling, and a writer named Jeremiah said, “The bail for your hair alone would be a billion dollars.”

Noah’s expression was agreeable as he looked at me and said, “No, I’m really asking.”

“Well, yeah,” I said. “Basically.” I was seated with my back against the west wall of Nigel’s office, about ten feet from Noah, and many of my co-workers were between us.

Noah’s voice remained cheerfully diplomatic as he said, “I’ve always thought it works better when the host is making fun of himself—or herself—instead of mocking other people, so I’m inclined to pass on this one.”

That self-deprecation was a winning strategy wasn’t wrong. But declaring this early and this publicly that he didn’t want to participate in any particular sketch was both unnecessary and irritating; Nigel always gave hosts veto power. In fact, I was irritated enough that I decided to pitch as my second idea the one I’d been on the fence about, which I’d been on the fence about because I wondered if it was insulting to Noah Brewster.

“Fair enough,” I said in a tone intended to be just as diplomatic as his; I knew I had to tread carefully. “And if you really want to make fun of yourself, I have some good news. My next idea is that obviously you have tons and tons of fans, and one of the reasons they love you is for how romantic your music is. Since romance and cheesiness go hand in hand, I wonder about a sketch where you play a cheesemonger and the cheeses you’re selling correspond to your songs. So you can show a customer some Brie and be like, ‘This has a silky flavor with delicious raspberry hints, perfect for making love in July.’ Or ‘The saltwater flavor of this Gruyère is reminiscent of the breezes at Lighthouse Beach.’”

“This velvety taste goes down on me very smoothly,” said Danny. As it happened, someone else riffing on your idea was higher praise than an outright compliment.

Noah wasn't visibly insulted, though he again seemed more puzzled than amused. He said, "So it's like descriptions of wine but for cheese?"

"You can think on it," I said. My third idea, the one I'd submit for the read-through but wouldn't mention at this meeting because of the two-pitch limit, was for Noah to be a guest judge in a Blabbermouth. Blabbermouth was a recurring sketch I wrote based on the singing competition show *American Lungs*, which aired on the same network as *TNO* but was shot in L.A. It featured three famous musician judges who coached the contestants, and the part I parodied—I'd borrowed this directly from real life—was not only that the two male judges spent a great deal of time telling the female judge she talked too much when giving feedback to contestants, but that the male judges spent far more time telling the female judge she talked too much than she spent talking. Most galling to me on the real show was that instead of refuting the accusation, the female judge would good-naturedly respond, "Y'all, I know! What can I say? I'm a blabbermouth."

"Thank you, Sally," Nigel said. Nodding toward the writer next to me, he said, "Patrick?"

As Patrick started with an idea about Trump melting down his gold toilet to make teeth fillings, I watched Noah Brewster's cheesily handsome surfer face watching Patrick, and I continued to watch Noah's face, off and on, for almost three hours because that was how long pitch meetings lasted. Before Nigel released us, he asked Noah, as he asked all hosts, if he had any sketch ideas of his own. By this point, I had come to the conclusion that Noah was not, in fact, a ding-dong. He smiled and laughed often but didn't seem to be trying too hard, as some hosts did, to prove that he was funny. And his requests for clarification had come to seem confident in a way that, in spite of my lingering annoyance about his response to my Danny Horst Rule pitch, I respected.

Once again looking around the room, Noah said, "Hearing all this has made me even more excited about the week ahead. A little terrified, but mostly excited. I'm psyched to roll with your ideas and

I don't have a big agenda. I'll admit there's an idea I've been noodling over, kind of trying to write it myself, and I'll have to decide before the table read if it should or shouldn't see the light of day, but, in terms of your sketches, I'm down for any of it."

*You mean any of it other than pretending to date a woman less attractive than you,* I thought. I was wondering if his aversion was somehow tied to having dated so many models in real life when I heard a long, low belch and immediately became aware of an unpleasant odor, a noxious version of a breakfast burrito. I snapped my head in the direction of Danny, and he pursed his lips and widened his eyes in a ridiculous way—as if to say, *Oops!*—and I scowled. Burping was part of life, yes, but could he not have held it in for the last thirty seconds of a three-hour meeting?

Patrick, who was the writer sitting between Danny and me, leaned toward me. He murmured, "That was you, right?"

#### MONDAY, 4:47 P.M.

I was responding to emails when Danny entered our office carrying a can of Red Bull. "Yo, Chuckles," he said as he sat backwards on his desk chair and rolled toward me. The room was narrow enough that the only way to fit a couch was for both of our desks to be against the same wall. Gesturing at my computer screen, he said, "How's the great American screenplay coming along?"

"I wish," I said. "I'm telling my agent I don't want to write a"—I held up my fingers in air quotes—"humorous animated short for an organic douche company."

"How much does it pay? Because maybe I want to write a humorous animated short for an organic douche company."

"Ten thousand, but also douching is bad, and I assume the organic part is bullshit. Your vagina is a self-cleaning organ."

"Maybe *your* vagina is a self-cleaning organ. But yeah, ten grand is a nonstarter. I don't sell out for less than six figures." I suspected Danny earned close to what I did. He'd been hired as the youngest-



ever host of News Desk, *TNO*'s satirical show-within-the-show, and he wrote and occasionally appeared in other sketches, meaning that, as a second-year cast member who wrote, he probably earned the same amount as a ninth-year writer who never appeared on-screen. This was currently \$12,000 an episode, or \$252,000 a year—not a huge amount for a TV job where you pulled several all-nighters a week, and obscene compared to, say, a fourth-grade teacher's salary. Even if Danny didn't yet earn more than I did from *TNO*, he'd recently begun appearing in movies, whereas I used my summers off for the considerably less lucrative activities of reading novels and traveling.

"Okay, I need your advice," Danny said. "Annabel is freaking out because she just found out our signs are incompatible. Belly's a Pisces and I'm a Sagittarius."

"Oh my God," I said. "I can't even believe you've lasted this long."

"I get that it's ridiculous to you, but she takes this shit very seriously."

"Did she not know when your birthday is until now?"

"She had a session with her astrologist yesterday, who told her even though our connection is authentic, our communication styles are inharmonious and I'm not the person to walk beside her on her healing journey."

I bit my lip, and Danny added, "It's okay, you can laugh. But I still fucking love her."

"What about *your* healing journey?"

Danny made an aw-shucks face. "I'm all healed, Chuckles."

My resentment about their relationship and the sketch I'd just pitched notwithstanding, I found Danny's unbridled love for Annabel sweet. Their sincerity and spontaneity and sheer optimism all seemed so misguided, so destined to fail, that how could anyone, including a cynic like me, not root for them? Getting engaged after seven weeks was only the latest in their dramatic and very public declarations of love. After a week together, they had traveled to Paris for a make-out session in front of the Eiffel Tower, and after

two weeks they'd gotten matching tongue piercings, and all of this had been documented on social media then breathlessly described by celebrity journalists.

In general, Danny's emotional openness made me hopeful about either Gen Z, males, or maybe both. A year and a half prior, I had been less than thrilled when I learned that I was being moved from the office I shared with Viv to an office with Danny, who was then new to *TNO*. I hadn't yearned for this proximity to Danny, who'd found success as a stand-up comic with bits so steeped in irony that I couldn't always tell what the joke was, which then made me feel extremely old. Relatedly and even more unsettlingly, I wondered if the office change was intended to send a message to me. *TNO* and Nigel specifically were notorious for indirection, with people often literally not knowing they'd been hired or fired. Was putting me in a crappy office with a new twenty-four-year-old dude a way of nudging me toward the exit without telling me to leave? For the first few weeks of the 2016 season, Danny and I had barely spoken, as he worked a lot in the office of the dedicated News Desk writers, whose names were Roy and Hank, and quickly became the most visible new cast member. Then, five weeks into the season, it was election night—a Tuesday, so we were at the office, ostensibly writing, though no one was getting any work done. Around 11:30 P.M., just after Florida was called for Trump, following North Carolina and Ohio, with Wisconsin and Pennsylvania looking bad, Danny and I were walking toward our office at the same time from opposite directions, got within a couple feet of each other, made eye contact, both began sobbing, and threw ourselves into each other's arms. It was shortly after Trump's inauguration, as our democracy started to unravel, that Danny took to calling me Chuckles. This was short for *chuckle slut*, which was the term for women who slept with comedians, and Danny bestowed the nickname after I told him I'd never once slept with a comedian.

Almost eighteen months later, I said to him, "Maybe Annabel just needs a day or two to absorb what the astrologist said. Like, she was thrown by it, but she'll realize it's not that big a deal."

“I wish people could change signs,” Danny said. “I’d totally convert to Scorpio for her.”

“I think she’ll come around,” I said.

He nodded toward my computer screen. “It’s very demeaning that you think my vagina needs cleaning. It shouldn’t smell floral when I’m getting oral.” He grinned. “I’ll invoice you for the ten grand.”

### MONDAY, 7:32 P.M.

Mondays were the only days during a *TNO* workweek when I got home at a remotely normal hour, and I tried to use them to continue recovering from the previous week if there’d been a show—from October to May, shows typically aired three weeks in a row then we got two or three weeks off—and to brace myself for the week ahead. I’d walked the forty minutes from the *TNO* offices in Midtown to my apartment on the Upper West Side, picking up Thai takeout near my building. I ate pad see ew from the container while sitting at my kitchen counter and talking on speakerphone to my seventy-nine-year-old stepfather, Jerry. My mother had died three years prior, devastating both Jerry and me in ways we couldn’t really express. Four months after the funeral, I’d convinced Jerry to get a beagle named Sugar, who brought him so much happiness that I considered her presence in his life to be my crowning achievement. Plus, she gave us something to chat about every Sunday or Monday instead of our feelings.

“She was a very good girl getting her nails cut today,” Jerry said jovially, then dropped his voice to a whisper—presumably because Sugar was nearby and he didn’t want to offend her—and said, “She really wasn’t. It took two attendants to hold her because she was wiggling so much.”

“Was she whimpering, too?”

“Like a baby,” he said. Jerry and Sugar lived in Kansas City, in the house I’d grown up in. I tried to visit twice a year, though since my mother’s death I hadn’t been able to bring myself to go for

Thanksgiving or Christmas. I'd either stayed in New York or traveled far away, once to the Seychelles with Viv and once, with Viv and also that time with Henrietta, to Mexico City. Jerry spent the holidays with his sister.

"I saw on the Internet that your host this week is also the musical guest," Jerry said. "That sounds awfully tiring." My mother and I had debriefed about each show on Sunday afternoons, and in her absence, Jerry had, on Sunday afternoons, taken to emailing me two formally written paragraphs sharing his feedback. The kindness of this impulse almost made up for the fact that, apart from appreciating Sugar's antics, Jerry didn't have much of a sense of humor and wasn't familiar with almost any of the pop cultural phenomena or people that *TNO* satirized. Though he and my mother had been in the studio audience twice, he'd never have even watched it on TV if I didn't write for it.

"You've probably heard Noah Brewster's songs playing in the background in a restaurant or department store," I said. "And I'm sure it *is* really tiring to host and be the musical guest, but he gets to promote his new album."

"I meant to tell you," Jerry said. "I ran into Mrs. Macklin at Hy-Vee, and she said to give you her best. She said Amy just had another baby, which I believe is her third."

*Who's Mrs. Macklin?* I thought. *Who's Amy?* Then I remembered a high school classmate named Amy Macklin, a girl I'd worked with on the student newspaper. (I'd been the copy editor, not a reporter, because reporting would have required interacting with other humans in a way I couldn't then have managed.) I said, "Good for Amy." A third child inspired in me more gratitude for my own circumstances than envy for Amy's.

Jerry described a tapas restaurant he'd eaten at the previous Friday with his sister and her husband, which had featured a garbanzo-bean-and-spinach dish he thought I'd like (though I didn't perceive myself as having a special relationship with garbanzo beans, Jerry's belief that I did arose from the fact that when I was staying with him, I often bought hummus). Then we circled back to Sugar. A

family with two daughters had moved in next door the month before, and Sugar had taken to sitting on Jerry's back deck, facing the other house, and barking, as if to summon the sisters. "I think she likes it when they tell her how adorable she is," Jerry said.

"Who wouldn't?" I said, and Jerry laughed.

"All right then," he said. "Be careful on the subway, honey." This was how he always ended our conversations.

After I'd hung up, I refrigerated the leftovers and took a shower. I still rented the seven-hundred-square-foot apartment I'd moved into almost ten years before, when I'd arrived in New York. The difference was that for the first two years, I'd had a roommate who slept in the real bedroom while I slept in a shoddily built loft above the living room, where the ceiling was four feet from the mattress. It was hard to say in retrospect if I hadn't had sex during those two years because I was me, because I was adjusting to my divorce, or because there simply wasn't space.

When I emerged from the shower, I put on the huge T-shirt I slept in, brushed my teeth, rubbed cheap lotion on my legs and expensive lotion on my face, then retrieved my phone from the pocket of the jeans I'd left on the bathroom floor and got into bed. Four texts were waiting, three of them from Viv.

The first: *I still look like a zombie*

The second: *You think I should skip dinner?*

The third was a close-up photo of her right eye, the white part of which had a red and blurry-edged dot slightly bigger than her pupil. In a sketch during the live show the previous Saturday, a cast member named Gregor had thrown, of all things, an oven mitt that had been intended to lightly hit Viv's chest but had somehow struck her eye. She'd noticed the blotch when removing her makeup after the show but it hadn't hurt and she'd attended the after-parties that lasted long into Sunday morning. When the blotch hadn't gone away by Monday, she'd seen TNO's set nurse, who recommended Viv make an appointment with an ophthalmologist just to be safe.

I texted back, *Take a pic where I can see your whole face*

A few seconds later, another photo arrived of Viv's entire and

very pretty face, in this moment unsmiling and preoccupied-looking, with both her eyebrows raised. Viv was Black and thirty-one, five years younger than I. I knew that both she and Henrietta, who was white and thirty-two, used preemptive antiaging measures like Botox and chemical peels. At the same time, Viv appeared in a recurring sketch where she played a famously well-preserved middle-aged TV host talking to her reflection in her dressing room mirror, uttering with pleasure the phrase “Black don’t crack.”

*It really doesn’t look that bad, I texted. I’d decide about dinner based on how you feel*

*Still doesn’t hurt, Viv replied. But*

She sent the female zombie emoji, green skinned and holding out curled fingers.

*No you look fine, I wrote.*

*By which I mean great!*

*I think ok to go to dinner or ok to skip but you don’t need to skip to spare anyone*

On Monday nights around eleven o’clock, Nigel always took that week’s host and a few cast members to dinner at a fancy restaurant. The only writer ever included was the head writer, which I actually didn’t mind because even after nine years, I was more comfortable having fleeting rather than sustained encounters with Nigel. Many people in- and outside of *TNO* were obsessed with the man who’d created the show in 1981 and produced it ever since. Born Norman Piekarkski in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, in 1947, Nigel Petersen was indisputably the comedy kingmaker of twentieth- and twenty-first-century America, and it was often said that your relationship with your father was revealed by the relationship you had, or thought you had, with Nigel. But I’d long believed that being quietly competent would serve me better than trying to curry favor with him directly. For my entire first year, I hadn’t even been sure he knew my name, and then at the after-party following the season finale, he’d said in his surprisingly soft and understated voice, “The field trip sketch was very funny, Sally.” These eight words were possibly the greatest compliment of my life, which might have revealed

that I had daddy issues if I hadn't already been well aware I had daddy issues. The following year, we'd interacted more because I had many more sketches on air, but we spoke only when he was giving notes on them. Our annual superfluous exchange came after he'd complimented with similar brevity a sketch I'd set at a Kansas City barbecue restaurant, when I'd dared not just to mumble thank you but to follow up by saying, "I know you're from Oklahoma. Do you think of that as the Midwest or the South?"

Again in his soft and understated voice, he said, "According to the census, it's the South." That was that for the 2010–2011 season.

*Did you make appointment with eye dr,* I texted Viv.

*Tomorrow at 11 AM,* she texted back.

*Oh great,* I replied.

*Go tonight!*

*Have fun!*

She replied with a winking emoji, and I opened the other text that had arrived while I was in the shower. It was from Gene, the guy I'd been hooking up with off and on for the last eight months: *Hey Sally how's it going?*

It occurred to me to invite him over—it wasn't yet nine o'clock, I'd just washed my hair and the rest of myself—and then I thought I'd rather go to sleep early. I almost never saw Gene during show weeks; even when I knew by Wednesday that I'd have no sketches on the live show, I was expected to attend Thursday rewrites, which could go until nine or ten, and it was all just so mentally consuming that I found it easier to give myself over to *TNO's* rhythms. It was perhaps the one workplace in America where people who had spouses and kids were not only in the minority but were looked at with vague pity, because how could anyone possibly manage that, too?

Also, though we had decent sex, I didn't like Gene that much. He was a financial analyst who'd early on mentioned that the University of Florida's business school, which he'd attended, was ranked among the top fifteen in the country. Though I'd never previously wondered about the University of Florida's business school ranking,

of course this had prompted me to look it up and discover the claim was off by about ten. Far more alarmingly, he'd once used the word *snowflake* to disparage a co-worker who regularly took sick days because of migraines. While it was possible he meant the term apolitically, the meaning he apparently did intend wasn't much better. And I hadn't called him on it because I feared doing so would result in my needing to find another sexual outlet, meaning I'd have to resubscribe to a hookup app and meet enough strangers at enough bars to determine which one probably wouldn't kill me if we went back to my apartment.

If, on the plus side, Gene wasn't homicidal, he wasn't particularly cute, either. He was of medium height and build, with light brown hair, and there was something so generic about him that he could have played an extra in any *TNO* sketch set in an office. He was unobjectionable in the way that a person you sat next to on an airplane was usually unobjectionable; unlike with an airplane seatmate, though, most of what we did was get each other off. In the months this had been going on, he'd asked me exactly two questions. The first was if I'd ever tried butter coffee (no), and the second was if I'd ever been to Rockaway Beach (also no).

None of Gene's predecessors had been particularly inquisitive, but they'd asked enough that I'd given a fake job, which I never had to do with Gene. I'd told other guys I'd "dated" that I was a writer for the newsletter of a medical device company, which had been one of my jobs before *TNO*. Though I wasn't much of a liar generally, I feared the guys I hooked up with would be overly interested if I mentioned my real employer. In a best-case scenario, they'd merely want tickets to the live show, but in a worst-case scenario, they'd be aspiring improv performers. Or maybe the real worst-case scenario was that they'd know me in a way I didn't want to be known by them. Even I wasn't sure if my in-person self (a mild-mannered woman of average intelligence and attractiveness) or my scripts (willfully raging sketches about sexism and bodily functions) reflected my real self—or if I had a real self, or if anyone did. But I suspected that much of my writing emerged from this tension or