

Mary Poppins is a cunt.

This is likely an unpopular statement. I'll explain. Because of Mary Poppins, every woman is expected to have everything at all times, carry a chic handbag that is the size of Montana on the inside, and always be well-appointed, put together, and no-nonsense. A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down, my ass. What if you're diabetic? I am. If I take a spoonful of sugar with my medicine, I'll go into a coma or lose a foot. What then, Mary? I do not have a magical umbrella to transport me to work. I have to use a bus.

That's how I arrived at work today. On a bus, not with a flying umbrella. I'm a librarian at the academically flaccid but highly Catholic Our Lady of Graves Academy, an all-female institution.

"Miss Apple?" a fresh-faced freshman with red hair stares at me from the circulation counter. "Are you talking to someone?"

"Of course not." She hands me a novel to check out. "Reading *Scarlet Letter* again? Haven't you read this at least ten times, Jennifer?"

She smiles, showing her toothy braces. "I just really like it. Hester is so bad." I stamp the book and hand it to her.

"She's bad?"

"Haven't you read it?"

I snort derisively. "Of course, I've read it. I'm a librarian. I just wonder why you think she's bad."

Jennifer blinks rapidly, this unexpected challenge to her reading material a shock.

"She...she sleeps with the reverend. She has a baby out of wedlock."

“Why do you think they call it ‘wedlock’?”

Jennifer is thoroughly confused now. “I don’t know.”

“Once you’re married, you are locked in, like in a prison, or a mental hospital. You can’t get out. That’s why Hester never married Dimmesdale. She wanted to sleep around.”

Jennifer says nothing. She frowns, grabs the book, and leaves, looking back at me over her shoulder.

Hester Prynne, also, is a cunt.

You may be surprised to learn that I never used to say or use that word at all. I found it terribly offensive. It has the hard consonant ‘k’ sound, combined with a ‘unt’ sound that reminds me of grunt or runt or brunt, none of which have positive connotations. Words are powerful. All the words for the female genitalia have some kind of unpleasant connotation or some silly way of pretending it’s ‘magical’ or ‘disgusting.’

As I said, I never used that word. If I heard it, I flinched. If I read it, I put the book away, deemed it unworthy due to coarse language. That changed recently, for reasons I will elaborate on later. Suffice it to say, I now embrace the ‘cunt’ as never before, although using it out loud at a Catholic-school library is frowned upon. It is imperative that these girls never know they even have a cunt, because once they find it, they’ll use it for evil. That’s why nuns are nuns. None. And is it a coincidence that ‘nun’ and ‘cunt’ share two letters? And that a nun’s vagina is supposed to be as dusty and disused as Mary Poppins’ lingerie?

“Miss Apple.” Sister Margaret Bernard stands before me, a gray-robed penguin with enormous round glasses. I am not sure she actually has hair on her head; I’ve never seen her out of her headdress.

“Yes, Sister?”

Sister MB stands with arms folded across her inaccessible breasts. I can hear her wristwatch ticking. “The principal would like a word.”

“Which word?” I stare at her, pretending not to understand.

Her pursed lips become even thinner, almost pursing themselves into lip dust with the immense pressure to keep Sister MB from telling me I’m a cunt. “I mean to say, she would like to talk to you. In her office. I will take over your duties here while you go meet with her.”

“Right now?”

“Yes, right now.” She tap-taps on her orthopedic heels and joins me behind the circulation desk. “I’m sure I can do whatever you do. It’s not that difficult.”

“Of course. Do I have time for a smoke?”

She does not answer, just makes her lips disappear in disapproval.

“I’ll just be off, then. Be careful of the cockroaches. They like to climb into your coffee cup if you’re not watching.”

I grab my sweater, soft and green, and teeter toward the office on my very high heels, skirt an inch too short for our staff dress code. It’s red plaid, with a little embroidered corgi at the hem. Unlike the nuns, I am not part of the Order of the Dusty Netherregions. I can wear whatever I want, within reason. No doubt I’ve been reported again for wearing ‘inappropriate’ clothing. Or maybe it’s something I said about a book, or maybe the way that I touched young Brother Scott’s hand in the lunch line yesterday. (To be fair, I was just trying to get the last peanut-butter chocolate cookie, and so was he. I didn’t let go, so he let me have it, but our hands

were in contact well past the 3-second rule of touching another person within 100 yards of a holy relic. Not my rule.)

Sister Mary Buzzard (this is my nickname for Sister Margaret Bernard) is the principal's hench-nun. Whenever bad news needs to be delivered, she's more than happy to drop the bomb. As an adult, I've taken more trips to the principal's office than I ever did as a student. Does that imply progress or retarded growth? I'm never sure.

The principal's secretary, Nice Denise, smiles as I approach her desk. The bell has rung, so swarms of identical virgins buzz about the hallways, smelling of baby powder and contraband junk food. "Good morning, Denise," I say with an apologetic smile.

"Geniva! Good to see you!" Denise grins broadly, as she does no matter what news she is delivering. "What can I help you with today?"

"Sister MB said the principal needed an audience with me."

Denise's high-wattage smile dims a bit. "Oh." She flips through a little appointment book nervously. "She's currently in a meeting with Brother Scott. Was it urgent?"

"No idea. It sounded urgent." I examine my short nails, hoping to find an answer.

Denise gives me the one-finger be patient signal (as opposed to the other one-finger salute that she would never use) and punches a button on her space-aged phone. "Principal Orgavon? Ms. Apple is here to see you. Were you expecting— oh. Certainly." Denise's very white face goes even whiter. She's almost translucent. I want to see if I can poke through her skin, but I refrain. She looks up at me with watery eyes full of misgivings. "She says to come on in."

This should be delightful.

Principal Orgavon is said to have been a nun in her pre-education existence, but other mysterious rumors swirl around her: she was a man, she was a priest, she was a Mexican drug lord, an exotic dancer. I have to admit, I am the one who has started most of those rumors, but I have no reason to believe they are not true.

Brother Scott, the young, handsome seminarian I touched in the food line, sits nervously in a straight-backed chair facing the principal. Orgavon gestures to another chair, similarly uncomfortable, for me to sit in next to him.

“Ms. Apple, thank you for coming in.” She smiles in her way, which means her lips stay closed and disappear behind the beginnings of a pale ginger lady stache. “Did Sister Margaret Bernard tell you why I’ve called you in?”

“No. She just said it might be urgent.”

“Hmm.” Orgavon shuffles some papers on her desk. I glance at Brother Scott, who does not look at me. “Well, let me get right to it. We’ve had some complaints.”

I lean back and cross my legs. I feel my skirt ride up an inch higher on my thighs. I wait.

“Yes. Well.” Orgavon coughs politely, waiting for me to apologize for whatever it is she thinks I’ve done. Her watery eyes focus on me over tiny Mrs. Santa Claus reading glasses.

I sit silently. I have learned that this technique usually yields information, or a chair being thrown in my general direction.

Being young, Brother Scott needs to fill the silence. “I just want to say that whatever you’ve heard, it’s not accurate.”

Orgavon focuses her gaze on him instead of me. “What do you think I’ve heard, Brother Scott?”

I can see his pale skin blush violently. “Nothing—I mean, I don’t know. Why am I here?”

The Principal tilts her head toward me now, as if I can explain it all. “Ms. Apple?”

“Yes?” I uncross my legs and recross them, careful to shield my netherregions from accidental exposure which would surely smite everyone in the room. Again, I bring the silence. If you can tolerate the social discomfort, it is an admirable strategy.

Principal O is clearly frustrated, so she sniffs loudly and gives up on our confessions. “Several students have complained about some unseemly behavior in the cafeteria.”

I give Brother Scott some side eye, but he looks down at his folded hands, perfectly manicured and covering his crotch. Poor kid.

“What unseemly behavior are you referring to?” I willfully dangle a preposition.

“It has been reported that you and Brother Scott frequently run into each other in the cafeteria, and such casual touching is misconstrued by the students as flirting. You can see why this would confuse and upset our girls.” Orgavon watches Brother Scott’s scarlet skin flush. Irish genes are the worst. Shame is literally in the blood.

“Some female students saw our hands brush each other as we reached for bland potato salad, and you think this qualifies as an indiscretion?” I lean forward. “Unless we’re actually having sex in or with the potato salad, I think it’s clearly an unintentional brush. What do you think, Scott?”

Scott appears ready to blow. I fear a total meltdown and confession.

To you, dear reader, I must confess: I’ve been banging dear Brother Scott for nigh on eight weeks. I would love to say I’m ashamed, but I’m absolutely not. We have been quite discreet, but as with most Catholics, guilt has accumulated with every subsequent boink, and

poor Scott is so steeped in sin you could dunk him in a big pot of hot water and make a delicious tea.

Is this conduct unbecoming a Catholic girls' school librarian? I suppose. But in my defense, Brother Scott is really not cut out for the priesthood, and in a way, I'm helping him see that. I am a wayfinder, a beacon toward a brighter destiny. He may not realize it now, but my willingness to tease his desire into acts of anti-contrition is really saving him a lot of time. He's still relatively young, and could find a wife, have some kids, buy a house. A career change would be needed, yes, but he can look forward to a more fulfilling life than the paltry parson's lonely celibacy.

"Ms. Apple? Did you hear what I said?" Orgavon the Inimitable asks.

"I'm sorry, no, I didn't. Can you repeat it, please?" I recross my legs and Brother Scott moves his chair a bit further from me. Rude.

Orgavon peers at me over her glasses. "We are starting proceedings to fire you."

Brother Scott is crying. I put a hand on his arm; he recoils. He doesn't seem excited about his possible future. "You've ruined my life," he whispers with a sob. "You've preyed on my weakness and now what am I going to do?"

Oh, cruel heart. Of course, I feel badly for him. I know empirically what we did was wrong on a lot of different levels, and I wish I could feel remorse, but I don't. "I'm sorry," I mumble. "I truly didn't mean to cause you any harm."

He angrily scrapes his chair away from the desk, wipes his face, and yanks the white cardboard collar from his black shirt. "Here," he hisses, throwing it at me. "You might as well

have this. As a trophy.” It lands on my shoe and I stare at it as the office door is yanked open, then slammed.

The principal sighs heavily. “Can I be frank with you?”

I nod, still staring at the cardboard collar. “I can imagine what you’re going to say, so you don’t need to say it. I’ll gather my things and be out by the end of the day.”

“I don’t think you know what I’m going to say.” She pushes away from her desk and goes to the window, pulling aside a sheer white curtain to, I presume, watch Brother Scott’s walk of shame. “I know losing a job is traumatic, especially at your age, Geniva, but too many people know about what happened. You were sloppy.”

“Sloppy?”

She nods silently, still staring out the window. “Do you think you’re the first person to have an affair with a seminarian?” She chuckles, something I’ve never heard. Since I’m leaving, I guess she feels free to show her human side. “The difference here is that I think you wanted to be caught.”

“Well, that’s absurd.” I pick the collar up and pitch it perfectly into a wire wastebasket. “Why would I want to be caught?”

She turns to me. “You need desperately to get out of here. You’re suffocating. And if I’m honest, the best years of your life may already be behind you, so I think you want to live while you can. That will be hard to do without a salary, I imagine, and I don’t think you thought of that. But somewhere in your soul, you wanted to have this conversation, you wanted to be discovered, and you wanted out.”

Such an astute observation leaves me breathless. How can such a dusty, dried up administrator know my very soul? It's gobsmacking. However, I am unable to give her the satisfaction of knowing that, so I say "Brother Scott shouldn't be punished. It was all my fault."

"I'm sure it was. But you know he has to be reported as well. We have strict codes of behavior—"

"He's just a man. It's unreasonable of the Church to expect anyone to give up sex. You must know that. You're married."

She laughs. "Being married has nothing to do with sex, Ms. Apple. I'm sure you know that. This was not even about sex. You were looking for an escape, and it appeared in the admittedly attractive form of Brother Scott."

"So, I can't expect a glowing recommendation from you?"

"No, but I will offer you early retirement if you would like a dignified way out. You're 55, right? It won't be much of a pension, but it's an option. Better than being fired."

"I'll go get my things and lock up the library." I stand and face her. "How long have you been banging Brother Scott?"

"Just since October. He's not a very sound sleeper, I'm afraid."

"Snores."

"Exactly." She presses a button on her phone. "Miss Denise, could you please bring me the forms for retirement?" To me she says, "Have a wonderful life, Ms. Apple. Maybe say a prayer for poor Scott. He has very little impulse control."

My apartment looks different than it did this morning. I am not usually here in the daytime, so the shadows and light make it look as if I'm in someone else's place. My stuff is still here, and it obviously hasn't been truly, deeply cleaned for months, so I know it's mine, but the sense of displacement causes my stomach to rumble and my head to ache.

I call my best friend, Jos. "I got fired."

"Wow. Was it because of the priest?"

"He was a seminarian. Not a real priest. Fewer years in purgatory."

She chuckles. "Smart. Seems like you'd get more time since he's young and good looking."

I take a sip from my wine glass. "I didn't make the rules, Jos. Our Lord and Savior runs the office of crime and punishment. It's a loophole, but I am more than happy to take advantage of it."

I hear Jos chopping veggies on her end. After a few seconds of silence, the real question comes. "Jesus. Fired. I mean, I'd like to say I am surprised, but I'm not. You've been trying to get fired for literally years." I don't comment. Of course, she's right. Instead, I say, "Are you cooking?"

"Making stir fry. What kind of wine is that?"

I finish off the glass. "Riesling. Chilled."

"If you have more, grab a bottle and come over. We have to talk, obviously."

"Obviously." I open the fridge. Ten more identical bottles stand at attention, cold and ready for action.

Suddenly, the enormity of being fired hits me, almost knocks me off my feet like a strong wind. Tears start (traitors) and I wipe them furiously away. “I’ll be there in twenty minutes. I need to clean up first.”

“I don’t care if you have lobster face,” she says.

“I know you don’t. I need to just get myself together and then I’ll be over.” I pitch the empty wine bottle into the trash can and set my glass in the sink. “Maybe I’ll Uber, actually. I appear to have drunk an entire bottle of wine since I got home half an hour ago.”

“Wow. Yeah, Uber is a better idea, then. Don’t forget your bathing suit.”

I nod, leave the call, and get ready for an extended period of unintended free time.

After arranging for an Uber to pick me up, I drink some more and ponder life without employment. It wouldn’t be so bad. I did enjoy having money, but I also enjoyed freedom.

As I wait for my phone to alert me about my ride, I take stock of the apartment. It’s not really a great place. I still have stuff in boxes after five years, as if I never expected to stay very long. Honestly, I thought Bernard would take me back and he never even called again. I moved out of the house we shared in gorgeous Mission Hills (he described it as the old-money white part of San Diego for intellectuals) five years ago on my birthday. I found this place above a garage the same day and rented it from a landscape architect and his wife.

Shit. I don’t know what I’m going to do.

I push the panic aside and throw some clothes, my bathing suit, my phone, and another bottle of chilled wine into my Barnes and Noble tote bag. Virginia Woolf’s inky face peers at me with dour eyes, as if to say, “this is what happens when you live authentically.” Sunglasses, hat, THC loaded chocolate bar, a touch of coral lipstick so I don’t look dead.

It's still hot outside, so I wait in the shade of a diseased palm tree that sheds little inedible dates. Watching a trail of ants march inexorably to their deaths into what must look like an insect condo but is in reality a bait-trap murder box, I wish them well. Death doesn't sound so awful. As long as it is peaceful and not filled with pain. How could it be worse than living?

Living still offers a chance at redemption, I suppose. You never know what's going to happen on any given day. *Turn a corner, change your life. There are no guarantees. Today is a gift, that's why they call it the present.* I have unwrapped my gift, and I would like to return it for a full refund.

After more dark thoughts, the Uber arrives, a dark green sedan with tinted glass. I climb into the backseat with my bag and buckle up. A female driver, blond ponytail, which is unusual. Some loud rap song exudes from the car.

"Hey, I'm Ashley," she says loudly, turning slightly toward me in acknowledgment. "How are you today?"

"I just got fired," I mumble as I settle myself.

"Cool." She smoothly pulls away from the curb and into traffic.

As we drive, the female rap singer is blathering, with an empowered vigor, about parking somebody's truck in an especially slippery garage. "Could you turn that down?" I yell.

"Sure." She turns tweaks the volume slightly, but the cars till thumps. Oh, fuck it. It's not a long trip to Jos's house. She lives in the cool part of town, where all the liberals congregate like pioneers circling the wagons against flaming Republican arrows. Lots of craftsman cottages in muted earth colors, succulents in bespoke river gravel, and those vertical fence slats (of reclaimed wood) that make me slightly disoriented.

As I watch the beautifully appointed stucco homes become more and more expensive, I remember the first time I met Joselyn Engelberg. We were two of four roommates in a college dorm and we quit school at the same time. She quit because she met Ted Engelberg and got pregnant. I left because I couldn't tolerate journalism courses anymore, and I needed to find a job. The results were the same; neither of us had degrees, and we both needed a steady income stream to pay off our student loans. I became a Catholic school teacher and eventually a librarian; she became a wife and mother and settled in with her eye-doctor husband.

Until he died, of course. Last year.

We pass a large brick Catholic church whose parking lot is filled with uniformed children playing tetherball. I feel a pang of panic remembering I've been fired. Jos would know what to do. I go to her for everything important. In fact, she's been the one constant personal relationship in my life. Jesus. Is that sad? Or fantastic?

My driver continues in rhythmic silence, her head bobbing to the pulsing beat of the music. When we turn down Jos' street, she starts looking for house numbers. "It's the one on the right, the ivory stucco with the big palm tree in front," I say. She drives past it. Fuck. People never listen. "Stop the car!" I yell as she zips past my destination.

She jams on the brakes and I hit my forehead on the back of her seat. "Dude, sorry," she says, craning around to see if I'm bleeding on her upholstery. I'm not. "I missed it, huh? I don't get house numbers. They should be clearer. Anyway, here you go. Have a great day."

I stumble out of the car and Ashley barely waits until I shut the door to move on to her next fascinating pickup. My destination is three houses up the street, so I weave toward it, my

head pounding. Sweet wine is not a great thing if you have to do any physical stuff, like walking or breathing.

Jos perches on the top step of her four wide, elegant, curved cement steps. “Hey,” she says. “Hail the conquering hero.”

“Heroine.”

“None for me, thanks. I’m trying to cut down.” She stands and envelops me in a familiar hug, the same one that has gotten me through failed relationships, parental deaths, writing fails, and job losses. My body feels like it’s made of ill-formed molasses, and it might slide slowly down the steps if she doesn’t support it. “Come on in. I see you brought enough wine to last us at least an afternoon.”

“Sure.” I sniffle, wiping my runny nose on a sleeve. “If you’re not drinking any.”

“I would never let you drink alone.” She opens the wide oak door with leaded glass, and ushers me into the cool, old-world calm of her enormous house. “Living room, patio, or kitchen?”

“It’s a kitchen conversation.” Those are the most serious. Over time, we’ve developed a hierarchy of chatting spots, and the kitchen is reserved for truly catastrophic occurrences. I follow her silently to the sunny, butter-yellow room (which is spotless) and collapse into a Marian blue banquette at a wide window looking into her garden. I rest my head on the cool surface of the white wooden table between the L-shaped benches. (4000 words)

She puts two clean wine glasses on the table, uncorks the bottle I brought, and pours. “So. Tell me the story. Don’t leave anything out.”

So, I do. I tell her the whole sordid mess. About the pleasure of not following the rules, the remorse of getting caught, the frustration of getting fired when the principal did the same exact thing I did. “It’s not fair,” is my closing statement, and as I say it, I know it’s not true.

“I guess it wasn’t fair,” she agrees, sipping. “But you knew it was coming.”

“That’s not what I wanted to hear.” I sip too. Now it tastes too sweet.

Jos nods. “Right. But what kind of friend would I be if I told you what you wanted to hear?”

“The nice kind.”

She snorts. “Right. Okay, so, instead of having this monstrous pity party, why don’t we look forward. How do you see your future?”

“Don’t therapist me.”

She puts her hands up as if surrendering. “I’m not! Just helping you transition. As your friend.”

“Transition to what?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?”

I hate when she’s right, which is most of the time. I use one of my most reliable methods of discussion: changing the subject. “How did you do it when Ted passed?”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“Goddammit!” I put the glass down a bit too forcefully, but it doesn’t shatter.

Jos gets up and goes to a drawer under her meticulous cupboards. She pulls out a brochure and tosses it casually onto the table.

“What’s this?”

“Read it,” she says, sitting, arms crossed.

I pull it close to my face (no reading glasses to put over my distance glasses, which is the only way I’m able to read these days) and see that it is a travel brochure for one of those super expensive river cruises, this one down the Seine in Paris.

“We’ve been talking about doing this since we met,” I say, waving the pamphlet. “We’re never going to do it.”

“Well, we weren’t going to do it because you had a job that kept you grounded. But now you don’t have that job, so you’re free to travel.”

“Freedom is great, but freedom with no income is not.” I open the first page and see the middle spread, which shows well-to-do 50-somethings drinking wine on the deck of an elegant boat at sunset. “These are heinously expensive.”

“Maybe you know someone who’d pay your way,” she says.

“I can promise you Brother Scott is not going to have anything to do with me after today. Plus, he gets paid in holy relics.”

“I’m sure they’d take Saint Martha’s tailbone as down payment.”

“Or the middle finger of Saint Disgustus.”

“Exactly.” She smiles, although I don’t.

“You cannot seriously be suggesting that we go on a vacation after I’ve just been fired.” Tasteful matte photos of beautiful couples laughing tastefully, sunsets on the water, champagne on ice...they are tempting. “That wouldn’t be very responsible of me.”

Jos snorts. “Responsible?” She pours more of the straw-yellow wine into our glasses.

“Haven’t you had your fill of responsible?”

Anguish punches me in the gut as I contemplate the light glowing golden off the wine glass. Jos notices.

“Hey. Apple.” Her soft hand covers mine as she leans toward me across the table. “I know it’s not funny. I’m sorry it happened. I mean, sort of. I don’t think that place was a good fit for you.”

“I know.” A hot tear suicides from my eye onto the tablecloth, leaving a crime-scene silhouette. “It was just so stupid.”

“Yeah.” She says gently, patting my hand. “But you knew it was pretty much inevitable, right?”

“No.” I draw my hand back. “Not inevitable. I had high hopes for this job.”

Jos sits back, arms folded, a righteous feminist goddess. “How many private school jobs have you had in the last five years?”

I cough politely to cover up the question. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t play. How many?”

“Six.” I gulp my wine and run one paw across my chin to catch the drops.

“I counted seven.”

“St. Abrogats doesn’t count. They were shut down because of rats.”

She stands as she exhales an exasperated sigh. “Fine. Six. In five years. You’ve bounced from job to job over the last two decades. There is clearly an issue here. You won’t go to a therapist, so you have to do the next best thing, which is travel. Lose yourself in the bidets of Europe.”

“Neither physically possible nor attractive.”

She drains the bottle into our glasses. “We’ve been talking about this figuratively since Ted died. I’ve been rattling around here in this mausoleum by myself, smothered by tasteful native American art and expensive pillows. I might as well be in a convent.”

“Probably not too late,” I offer.

“Definitely too late. My lady parts already know what it’s like to be alive. They’re dusty, but not dead. So that life ain’t for me. Hang on.” She scampers out of the room and returns with two royal-blue folders, one of which she plops down in front of me.

The tasteful gold lettering on the cover reads *Celtic Water Ways: transport to the past via transportation of the future*. “What’s this?”

“We are going on a trip.”

I open the folder; inside is a thick packet of tickets, maps, an itinerary, and other paper paraphernalia of an organized travel adventure. “You already bought these?”

“It’s fully refundable, so if you really don’t want to go, I’m not going to force you. Once you started describing Brother Scott, it seemed things were escalating.”

“He was pretty tasty,” I mutter, perusing the brochure. “You can afford this? Because I can’t.”

“I got a chunk of insurance money last month. What am I going to do with it? Knit? Redecorate my bathroom a third time? Ted never wanted to travel.” Her face becomes cloudy, shadowed by her loss but tempered with excitement. “I need to do this.”

“What is this, exactly?”

She clinks her glass against mine. “Two middle-aged ladies take on the world.”

“Somebody’s in trouble,” I mutter, draining my glass.

