

The news was nothing but bad. Bombings, shootings, terrorists both foreign and domestic seemed to pop up and hide again like cardboard bandits in a carnival shooting gallery. Things were randomly on fire, people were yelling, and in general, life in the United States of America was at the least unpleasant, and at the most life-threatening.

From her spot curled up on the sofa, Jiffy Pembroke, a middle-aged librarian who had given up the battle for her midriff, watched the 24-hour news channels obsessively. Her husband of 22 years, Paul, saddened by her disconnection from the ‘real’ world of their domestic bliss, and her inability to be 33 again, was moving the last of his things to a brand-new Toyota Tundra outside in the driveway. “I think that’s about it?” It was a question rather than a statement.

“Hmm?” Through round, blue-framed glasses, she glued her eyes to the screen. It was Anderson Cooper. She had to watch everything he did.

“I said, I think I’ve got everything now.” She didn’t hear the sadness in Paul’s voice, although she did pick up a slight whiff of his clean-smelling aftershave. She would miss that. *I guess I could just go buy a bottle and spritz it around*, she thought. Would that be pathetic, or a creative solution to his absence?

Paul’s fiancée, Prishka, stood in front of her, blocking the screen. Tall, lanky, exotically Indian (the red dot kind, not the protesting-pipelines kind). “Jeffra,” she said kindly. “I hope things go well for you.” She patted Jiffy on the hand consolingly as Paul’s last crate of music equipment was dragged to the U-Haul by two underpaid college students.

“Thank you.” She tried to look around the woman’s narrow, blue-jeaned hips, but only saw one of Anderson Cooper’s ice-blue eyes. “I do appreciate that.” Prishka sighed and moved out of her field of vision.

Paul crouched down in front of her, careful not to block her view. He tenderly patted her mouse-colored, cotton-candy hair. “Jif, we’re going now.” Was he crying?

“Mmm.” She stared straight ahead, absently swatting his hand away. “I hope things go well for you.”

“Look at me.”

“Why?”

“Just...do it. Please. One last time.” His voice cracked.

*Oh, for Pete’s sake*, she thought. *Fine*. She swiveled her eyes from the television to her soon-to-be-ex-husband’s face. “Jesus, Paul, you have a mustache.”

“I’ve had this mustache since September.”

“Really?” His eyes were bleary. The mustache looked like an unenthusiastic, sandy-grey caterpillar.

“Jif. I hope you get some help.” He covered her hand with his own. The warmth registered, but she felt nothing. “You know, it’s not how I wanted things to go.”

“That’s what you said.” A choking wave of emotion threatened to overflow the strained levees of numbness.

This Saturday, a cool California morning dotted with hummingbirds and low clouds, Jiffy was considering suicide, mostly as a concept rather than a choice. To her ginger cat, Mr. Cranks, she said “I wouldn’t do it, you know. I just think it’s interesting.” Her research consisted of browsing websites devoted to methodology, and news stories about current and past events of

suicide. The zookeeper from Singapore who let himself into the white tiger enclosure and provoked the animal with a broom seemed cruel (why involve an innocent animal?) and the man who racked up huge debt, tied a rope between his neck and a tree, and sped off in a brand-new convertible (top down) was creative and not a little disconcerting.

Her cell phone chirped, the ring tone a theme song from her favorite BBC detective show. It was Ellis, her gay boyfriend. “Is he gone?”

“Yes.” She picked a chewy caramel from a box of chocolates and popped it into her mouth. “They just left with the last of his stuff.”

“Was it awful?”

“Not so much.” She chewed, picking the pieces of sticky sweetness from the edges of her teeth. “She was horrible. He was annoying. Nothing new.”

Ellis sighed like a deflating election balloon. “We have to celebrate. Where should we go?”

“Mmmm.” The muted television scene of a huge sinkhole in the middle of the city had captured her attention. “Did you see the Sinkhole?”

“Huh?”

“Can you come over, Ellis?” She grabbed the TV remote, prepared to turn up the volume as soon as she hung up the phone.

“I guess. I’m not working today.”

“Okay. See you when you get here.” She clicked the phone off and turned up the TV simultaneously.

An exotic woman in red (probably Indian, like Prishka) stood at the edge of the sinkhole, a microphone bobbing just below her perfect, heart-shaped face. “The sinkhole apparently appeared twenty minutes ago, in a busy intersection at Grand and 4th Avenue. City crews are en route to identify the source of the sinkhole, and to create a plan to repair the damage. Here with me now is Frank Bestie, a postal worker who was delivering mail when the phenomenon occurred.”

“Bestie?” Jiffy snorted. “What kind of a name is Bestie?”

The balding postal worker, socks held up with those elastic bands, looked like a frightened deer. “I was just dropping off mail at this bank here, and I heard a really loud booming sound, and then singing.”

The woman with the microphone registered the singing comment a beat late. “Right, and then you—wait, singing? Did you say you heard singing?”

He nodded vigorously. “Yes, ma’am. Singing. Coming from that hole.”

The puzzled newscaster wasn’t sure quite where to go with that line of questioning, so she changed the subject. “Did you happen to notice if any cars or pedestrians fell into the hole?”

“I don’t think so. But I wasn’t looking right at it when it opened up. I heard the noise, then the singing, then I looked, and all I saw was this big, black cavern.”

“Was the so-called singing possibly coming from somewhere nearby, and you just thought it was coming from the sinkhole?”

“No, no. It was definitely coming from right in the middle of that portal.”

“Portal?” Reporter lady looked pretty worried now. Jiffy chuckled at her uneasiness and picked another chocolate out of the box.

“I know it’s not conventional thinking, but I believe this sinkhole is a portal. There is a lot of research to back me up on this, actually. Last year alone, there were several sinkholes that were confirmed portals. To hell.”

The news lady’s eyes grew wide, and Jiffy nearly choked on her chocolate buttercream. “Portal to hell!” She laughed, then quick keyed Ellis on her cell phone. “Ellis!”

“I’m on my way, Jesus.” Judging from the bumpy noises, he was already driving. “What is it? You want me to pick up rum on the way?”

“That would be great, but no, I was calling because there is a guy on TV who says there is a sinkhole that is a portal to hell.”

“I thought that was your bathroom.”

“Fuck you. I can’t help it if I have IBS.” She grabbed a truffle. “I’m sensitive.”

“Yeah, ‘kay. Should I get rum, or no?”

She mumbled affirmatively, then clicked the phone off so she could watch the squirming reporter and the postal worker-slash hell-portal expert do their dance of awkwardness.

Fifteen minutes later, Ellis burst through the door in purple sweats and an untucked blue oxford shirt, dark sunglasses eclipsing the top half of his narrow face.

Jiffy glanced up as he wordlessly entered the kitchen. “Did you buzz your hair?”

“Summer cut,” he sang out as he filled a Tupperware with ice and set the glasses and rum bottle on a tray with a can of Coke. He whirled into the living room, set the tray down, fixed the drinks, and handed a tumbler to Jiffy, who took it gratefully. She hadn’t moved from her vantage point on the sofa, still enthralled with the news crews at the sinkhole. He plopped down beside her.

Jiffy studied his close-cropped brown hair and ran a hand over the fuzz. “Nice. Makes you look like Macaulay Culkin. Older Macaulay, obviously.”

“No need to be catty.” Ellis removed his sunglasses, tucked them in the shirt pocket, and raised his glass. “A toast. To freedom.”

Jiffy raised her thin eyebrows and smirked as they clinked glasses. “Sure. Freedom. Whoopee.”

He downed half his glass. “So, what’s the scoop?”

She set her untouched glass of rum on the table and unmuted the TV. “Postal guy thinks the sinkhole is a portal to hell.”

“Ooh.” Ellis scanned the box of chocolates on the coffee table. “Are there any brown sugar ones?”

“Seriously? Those were the first to go.”

He sucked his teeth, smacking them loudly as he zeroed in on a nut cluster. “You never think of the needs of others.”

“I just went through major trauma. You could be a little more understanding.”

“I understand that you ate all the brown sugar buttercreams, so...”

Jiffy ignored the comment and gestured to the screen. “Look at this, though. When did people become so delusional? Portal to hell?”

“I thought that was the Macy’s menswear department.”

“I thought it was the all-you-can-eat buffet at the Best China Crab Shack.”

It was great to live through personal tragedy with a friend who shared your dark sense of humor, Jiffy thought warmly.

Ellis stretched his tall frame across the blue velvet-and-down cushions. “Your couch is a portal. To laziness.”

“I like to be comfortable.”

“Yeah, but this thing grabs you and doesn’t let go. Oh, well. Chin chin.” He drained the rum drink in one gulp.

Jiffy pondered the black emptiness of the sinkhole on the television screen, seen from above by way of an intrepid traffic helicopter pilot angling for investigative reporter status. “I wonder how close he’ll fly to it,” Jiffy said.

“You mean, you wonder if you could see inside, like see how far down it goes?” Ellis leaned forward, resisting the gravity of the couch. “From here, you can’t really see the bottom, can you?”

“Well, it *is* dark,” Jiffy answered doubtfully. She had thought the same thing, though; the gaping chasm seemed as dark and empty as her love life.

A blast of synthetic trumpets and a thumping drumbeat interrupted her pity party as Breaking News bled across the screen and blotted out the sinkhole. “We have breaking news at this hour,” the blond Barbie-doll anchor said anxiously. She touched her earpiece, frowned, and blinked at the teleprompter in front of her.

“Jesus, everything is breaking news now,” Ellis griped, jiggling the ice in his glass. “President gets a hangnail. Uber driver gets lost in eternal loop on the cloverleaf.”

Jiffy shushed him so she could hear. “It might be important.” Ellis snorted as the blond woman read. “The President today announced plans to—” He grabbed the remote and switched the television off.

“Why did you do that?” Jiffy grabbed for the remote, but he kept it out of her reach.

“Enough of this doom and gloom nonsense. Anything that twit says will just push you further into a downward spiral,” Ellis said reasonably. “Now, honey. Let’s talk about the real breaking news. The real breaking-up news.”

“Fuck.” She slumped into the couch, dejected. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Of course, you don’t.” He poured more rum into his tumbler on the table, splashed Coke into it and swirled it with his finger. “But talk about it we must.”

“He came in, he brought HER with him—”

“What’s her name? Pushcart? Pashmina?”

“Prishka.” She took a sip of rum. “He brought her, they took the rest of his stuff, they tried to talk to me, I ignored them. They left. End of story.”

“Oh, no, no, no.” Ellis shook his head. “Not the end of story. You are terribly damaged.”

She sighed and stared at the black mirror of the television screen, where she saw a middle-aged woman with nothing to live for, and her gay boyfriend. “Maybe.” She turned to look at him. “Why don’t you move in with me? Then we could hang out all the time.”

He rolled his eyes. “We’ve talked about this, sugar. It just wouldn’t suit my...lifestyle.”

“I don’t care who you bring back here. I’m totally nonjudgmental.”

“I know that, Jif. It’s just that I’d feel weird about it.”

Like an insensitive 2 by 4, the reality of Paul’s leaving metaphorically hit Jiffy square in the forehead. She shakily put her drink down again. Hot tears rushed down her cheeks and she swatted them away.

“Oh, hon,” Ellis said softly. He put his free arm around her without spilling his drink. “I know he wasn’t even what you wanted, but you want *something*. It’s hard to let go of what you don’t want when it leaves you empty.”

She choked on snot and tears, nodding. “He...he...we haven’t had sex for, like, at least a year.”

Ellis nodded knowingly. “You didn’t want to, did you?”

“No,” she whispered. “But I didn’t *not* want to, either.”

He squeezed tightly. “Remember that time I was dating the doctor who looked like Neil Patrick Harris?”

“The one we called Doogie? What was his real name?”

“Randall.”

She nodded. “You were going to get married.”

“Right. But remember, the closer we got, the more scared I got. And you told me that being scared was a sign that I was doing something right. I absolutely have this vivid memory of us sitting by the river on a bench in the cold, and you told me I should fight that fear and just go for it. You were so much yourself at that moment, and I could see you so clearly. You were brave, and strong, and you just knew what was true. And I believed you.”

A cluster headache began to march across Jiffy’s forehead. “Yeah. I remember that.”

“So, I took him up to Antonio’s Restaurant so we could have a sweeping view of the city lights at night, and it was perfectly clear. We could see all the constellations and the moon was just a fingernail, and it was absolutely gorgeous. Like a technicolor Doris Day movie.”

The headache had decided to conduct a parade through her cerebellum, and many very incompetent marching bands were participating, with extra tubas and stabby flag twirlers. “Doris Day movie. It was the perfect setting. I’ve heard this story —”

“Hush. I’m making a point. We were drinking champagne on the outside patio at the top of the restaurant, and I could just feel how right it was. You know, the feeling of being in phase with the universe, of being in exactly the right place at the right time with the right person.”

Jiffy leaned forward, hands on knees, as if she might puke. “El, I already know how the story ended. Why are you telling me again?”

He continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “We’re there, bathed in starlight, drinking champagne, and the ring is in my pocket. All I have to do is get down on one knee, look up into his warm, brown eyes and say the words. And do you know what I did, Jiffy?”

“Yes, I actually do know—”

“I fucking choked. I drained the champagne glass, laughed in a carefree, Noel-Coward-comedy way, and said to him ‘look at Orion’s belt!’ I mean. I just let the moment go by. I laughed it off.”

“And he broke it off the next week. And then he married a hot nurse from the Philippines a month after.” Jiffy knew the unfortunate story by heart. “And you couldn’t return the ring.”

“And I couldn’t return the ring!” Ellis’ voice rang off the ceiling. “Nothing but regret from top to bottom. So why am I sharing this story right now in your hour of crisis?”

“No idea.” She plucked another chocolate and popped it into her mouth.

“Because you are at the same crossroads. You are at a pivotal moment in your life. So was I. I had a choice: I could fold up my tent and turn into a sad gay hermit gently graying as I

watch Drag Race alone, or I could use it as a learning experience and go out into the world and find my real true love. I think you know what I chose.”

“You’re still single.”

“Exactly. I chose to become a hermit. I haven’t had sex with anyone whose last name I know for months.”

“I don’t think that fits the strict definition of a hermit—”

“My life, my rules. The point is, I haven’t made a real connection to another man since that happened. I’ve been terrified. I’ve been paralyzed. Stuck. Using our friendship as an anesthetic to numb the pain of disappointment.”

“Thank you?”

“And you are trying to go down that same road now, Jeffra Pembroke. And I will not allow it. I love you and I am not going to let you turn into the straight white female version of me.”

“Out of curiosity, what would that look like?” She frowned, debating on whether or not to snag another candy.

“Paul is gone. He’s not coming back. That train has left the station, but you have a choice to make. Are you going to just fold up *your* tent and watch the news all day, eat chocolate, get fatter, feel miserable, get diabetes, lose your feet, and become the saddest middle-aged woman in America? Or will you choose a different path?”

Spent from his speech, Ellis deflated like a Macy’s parade balloon after Thanksgiving, sinking into the spongy couch. “Chocolate.”

Jiffy chose a vanilla buttercream and shoved it into his mouth.

“Do you know what happened to him? Doogie?”

Ellis chewed the chocolate, moving his jaw like a cow in exaggerated, circular motions. “I believe I read that he’s doing very well, living in Pago Pago or Bora Bora or Walla Walla. Some place with two names that are the same. Point is, what are we going to do with *you*?”

Tears threatened to spill out again, so Jiffy coughed to cover it. “We didn’t even talk about him leaving. He told me. Just stood in front of the TV and told me one night before bed, and then he slept on the couch. He just ambushed me with it. What was I supposed to do?”

In truth, Paul had tried to talk to her, many times. The problem was that Jiffy was very good at ignoring things she didn’t want to hear, and the end of her marriage was not something she wanted to hear about.

“See, I never thought Paul was a great fit anyway.” Ellis stretched his long arms across the back of the sofa. “Nice guy, sure. Hard worker. But you’re a unicorn. You’re a chimera.”

“What is that? I always wondered. And how do you say it?”

“Shim-ear-ah? CHIM-er-a? I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. No one says it anyway.”

“You just did.”

Ellis sighed, exasperated. “You always find a way to deflect any unpleasant conversation. Point is, Paul wasn’t extraordinary enough for someone like you. And that’s why it ultimately didn’t work out.”

“I think it was mostly that I never took off my sweatpants.”

“See? There you go again. Deflecting with your razor-sharp humor.”

Jiffy stretched and turned it into a chocolate grab, popping one more truffle into her mouth. “Is that really great for a life plan?”

“No. It is not. We both need to get out there.” Ellis almost got off the couch. “But maybe not today.”

Jiffy took advantage of his ennui to grab the remote and turn on the TV again. They were still on about the huge hole downtown, which meant there wasn't much else to talk about, no real news. Nothing to distract.

“I know *you* know I'm right about this. Maybe we need some time to grieve, though.” Ellis sighed. “Doogie was just kind of perfect, though. I think of him, probably way too much. The man who got away.”

“You would've hated being married to a doctor. I should know. Paul worked weird hours.”

“Paul was a plastic surgeon. It's not like he operated on peoples' hearts or anything.” Ellis sniffed in disapproval.

“Rhinoplasty can save lives.”

He shot her an eye roll. “Please. Don't try and make him out to be a saint now that he's gone. Nose jobs are optional.”

“It doesn't matter. He's gone now, and he's not coming back.” New tears threatened to spring forth and she willed them back. “I have to be an adult about it. I have to move forward. Right?”

“Right,” Ellis said, not sounding too convinced. “But what are you moving *toward*? That's going to be the big question. For both of us, I guess.”

Jiffy didn't like to think about that. What was ahead of her? A life of solitary meditation on America media and occasional trips to the vet for Mr. Cranks? Shit. That was depressing. And

work? Going back to the community college library, a gray and tattered popcorn-ceiling rectangle stuck somewhere in 1970, seemed both pointless and sad. Look for another job? Her stomach churned at the mere thought of starting over, looking at job descriptions, realizing she didn't have the dazzle necessary to be a superstar in any field. Superstars got jobs. Fat, middle-aged divorced ladies got whatever might be left.

"I can read your face," Ellis noted. "You're going dark, really dark. We need to get out of here. Get a change of scene."

"Do you have a spare 50k so we can vacation on the French Riviera?" Mr. Cranks jumped up in her lap, sending up a small cloud of ginger-cat fur that gravitated toward her clothes as if she were magnetic and the cat was made of iron filings. She rubbed his ears, and he tried to nip her hand.

She shoved the cat off her lap. Fuck husbands, fuck cats, fuck living. All of this was a cruel waiting game for death. A Kafka-esque farce of suffering in all its varied shades and flavors. Dark, depressing, a black parade to the—

Ellis sat up as if electrified. "I know! I have an amazing idea! Let's go see the sinkhole!"

"You mean, drive down there?"

"Yes!"

"What about parking?" She was really considering the annoyance of putting on clothes that didn't fit and shoes that pinched. "I don't want to."

"You never want to do anything." Ellis stood up, grabbed her wrist and pulled her up too. "No arguments. We'll see the sinkhole, have some lunch, maybe go shopping. It'll do you good. I think you need a change of scenery."

"Maybe you're right. But I'm not wearing a bra."

“Who cares? Don’t wear a bra. I promise I’ll control my urge to jump your gigantic titties.”

“Snot.” She fake-slapped him on the shoulder and moved to find some clothes that didn’t make her feel like a stuffed sausage.

“I’ll drive,” Ellis yelled.