

Chapter 5: Who Remembers Prefab Sprout?

“Oh, look, Lisa. It’s a sign that you should call Seth,” Michael tossed a Rubik’s Cube at me from a jumbled bin marked “miscellaneous nostalgia” in a shop that called itself an antique store. The shelves were stuffed with items from our childhood, which was making me crotchety. I didn’t like to think of myself as an antique. Vintage lacked a certain appeal, too.

I tossed the annoying puzzle back to him. “Maybe it’s meant for you, as a prop for a history lesson for your really young boyfriend.”

"Ugh. Let’s not talk about Wilson." He sighed with terrific volume and proceeded to talk about Wilson. "I never know which Wilson I'm going to get — the warm, interesting one who is really into me or the icy, detached one who can’t wait to go home alone. It's getting annoying. Plus, when I called him on it, he didn't even get my Sybil reference. He thought I was talking about Cybill Shepherd, like that makes any sense.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him that a Cybill Shepherd reference was pretty dated, too. I simply asked what was going on with the two of them.

"I mean, the other night was terrible,” he went on. “One minute we’re having a nice dinner, the next minute he can’t get out of the restaurant fast enough. Even after he agreed to a

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nightcap at the bar on the way out. All of a sudden he remembers some early meeting and he has to go home immediately. Immediately! Worst of all, he insisted I stay and finish my drink, then left without me.”

“Well, speaking for all of us who have normal jobs with early meetings and can’t subsist on three hours of sleep, I’m going to side with Wilson on this one. He probably didn’t want you to feel like you had to call it a night just because he was.”

Wilson, like me, had the most normal of normal jobs. He was an attorney at one of the city's biggest firms and that was just one of the many ways, I was discovering, that he and Michael were complete opposites. Wilson was shorter than Michael by a good six inches, his skin leaned to olive, he had small, dark eyes and thick, dark hair that looked to be in a permanent state of disarray, where Michael's glowing, fake-tanned skin, neat goatee and close-cropped hair maintained a freshly trimmed look that seemed to be in a state of suspended animation. Michael seemed to live in an unknown wrinkle in the space-time continuum that kept him perpetually polished, even after a long run, a tough training session or a shopping trip on an unseasonably hot day in September.

I was accompanying him on his hunt for the perfect nightstands and only Midcentury Modern would do. Andersonville boasted no end of home furnishing stores that looked like they had been stocked from Don and Betty Draper’s garage sale, and Michael was picky. He liked to compare and contrast and compare again. It necessitated a lot of walking north, then south, then north again zigzagging across the street all the way. All the activity hadn’t wilted him in the least, despite the ridiculous humidity that pummeled us every time we exited a storefront onto the glistening hot Clark Street sidewalk. Not so for me. I couldn’t believe a person could sweat

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so much. Particularly while shopping.

The third time we passed Simon's, I offered to buy him a cold beer in the dark bar.

"Not until we accomplish our mission."

"Your mission," I corrected him.

"You agreed to join me. If you didn't want to come, you shouldn't have. But you have a hard time making choices, don't you?"

"This from the man who has to revisit a store 16 times just to buy some bedroom furniture."

"I am clarifying for myself what I want and what will work best with my décor. I am being a careful consumer. You, on the other hand, are making a decision by not making a decision. And that's the most pathetic way to make a decision. And to live."

"That doesn't even make sense, Michael."

"You know exactly what – and who – I am talking about. You know, Lisa, one little divorce doesn't mean you have to swear off men forever."

"I did not..."

"Oh, please. You never date. You never want me to set you up. You don't call Seth back. If you're going to pass up *that*, you are going to pass up anything."

"You and Wilson should move in together." It was the only way I could think of to shut him up. Ever since Seth and I spent the weekend together, the question of what to do next had been ping-ponging in my head ceaselessly. Should I pursue a relationship that has all the odds stacked against it or do I steer clear? Should I make room for Seth in my life again or do I consider that a lesson learned in 1985? Should I stay or should I go, which was the same

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question The Clash were fond of asking in 1982.

That had been happening a lot, too. The soundtrack of my life was completely dominated by 80s music. Sometimes it was through TV commercials for Swiffer cleaning products. One time, I caught myself singing along to “She Can’t Sing” as it blasted from the speakers at the grocery store. I had been shopping at that Dominick’s for years and never once heard a Joe’s Got a Problem song. But I ran into Seth once out of the blue and all of a sudden I was picking out apples while Seth’s 80s voice serenaded me. Old music from college had been popping in my head unbidden since July – “Head Over Heels” by the Go-Gos, “Don’t Change” by INXS, “When Love Breaks Down” by Prefab Sprout. It was ridiculous. Who remembers Prefab Sprout?

During those first few weeks, Seth kept his part of the bargain. He had told me he wanted us to see each other again, and then left me to make up my own mind. For the most part. There were the occasional texts, meant to be simple and informative.

“Hey, Lees. Writing some new songs. It’s going well. How are you?”

I’d respond as nonchalantly as I could. “Fine, thanks! Busy with work, too!”

“Hey, Lees. Headed up to Portland with Beth to catch a couple of her shows. Proud dad.”

“Have fun!”

“Night, love.”

“Good night, Seth!”

He never asked overtly, but we both knew the subtext of his messages was plain: Are you in or are you out? And the subtext of my rampant exclamation point usage was equally clear. I couldn’t say “in” but I wouldn’t say “out.”

Then the flowers arrived.

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Just like any other day, my boss was bellowing at me from down the hall, “Lisa, I need you in here now. The hiring freeze conference call got pushed up. Kim’s ordering you a turkey on wheat for lunch.”

Even my boss knew that I only ever ordered turkey on wheat with mustard, no mayo, from the deli downstairs and preferred to wash it down with a bottle of water. I considered it efficient and healthy, not boring or stale, but everyone else in the department referred to that combination as “The Lisa.” I was about to cross Harry’s threshold when I heard Kim calling.

“Lisa, what do you want me to do with these?”

I turned toward her, expecting to be handed a white deli bag and some extra napkins. Instead, I saw a sea of magenta emanating from her midsection. She was holding an enormous vase stuffed with at least fifty lipstick-pink tulips and grinning like the twenty-year-old she was.

“Wow. That’s a lot of tulips,” I said nervously, taking in the slender green stalks and touching a few of the velvety petals. There was a card, of course, and I hesitated for a moment before I plucked it from its little plastic pitchfork. By the look on her face, Kim was bursting to ask me who they were from, what prompted them, and other excited, girly questions. But all she got from me was a request that she make room for them on my desk.

They could only be from one person, so there was no point in reading the card. Besides, Harry was waiting, so I tucked the card into my pants pocket and dashed down the hall, trying to refocus myself on the business at hand. The flowers were not what demanded my attention at the moment. I’d deal with them later, perhaps have Kim call the florist and make sure they hadn’t sent too many by accident. All of which could wait until after the meeting.

It was a brilliant plan, really. The only glitch was that every time I shifted in my seat

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during the conference call, the corner of that little florist's envelope dug into my thigh. It was a prickly little distraction from the meeting that let in thoughts of Seth and our weekend together back in July, our time together in college and the question I was currently pondering. Which was exactly what I wanted to avoid. I made a mental note to call him at the end of the meeting and put the silliness to rest once and for all. There was no way I could allow Seth to become a prickly little distraction. Been there, done that. I tried to ignore the stupid envelope for as long as I could, but it was persistent. I made it through lunch and half way into a thick stack of spreadsheets when I finally cracked.

"Harry, can we take a little break? I need to use the ladies room."

Safely ensconced in a stall, I slipped the little aggravation out of my pocket and slid my index finger under the flap. It was a typical florist's card, imprinted with an old-fashioned image of roses and greenery. The message was short.

I want to see you again. Seth.

Immediately, I crammed the card back in its envelope and the envelope back in my pocket, but it was too late. Opening it had a genie-in-a-bottle effect; once the top was off it grew more aggressive in making its presence known. I could plainly hear the scratch of its paper against the acetate of my pocket as I walked back to Harry's office, its cardboard contours still chaffing against my leg. Back at the conference table, it showed its real power. Harry was putting his phone down as I walked in, and an ingratiating smile spread over his face.

"Lisa, how would you like to spend some time in L.A. this fall?" He had a way of making requests that sounded very much like a question one could reply "yes" or "no" to, but the reality was they were statements that were meant to be agreed with. "Charlie decided to quit his job and

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move to Belize. Today. That was him on the phone. Lisa, I need you to handle things out in L.A. through the shutdown. I'm thinking you could split your time, a week here, a week there. You could make that work, couldn't you? You know you are my go-to girl, Lisa!" He appreciated my talent, I know, the fact that I didn't have a husband to negotiate my travel schedule with or kids to arrange overnight care for was really what made me the go-to choice.

I thought about what it would mean for my workload, and how exhausting it would be to fly back and forth across the country twice a month. I thought about Zelda and whether it was too much to ask to have Angela look after her two weeks of the month. I thought about how hard it would be to keep up my running schedule and how my brother would undoubtedly mix things up causing my cell phone to ring in my hotel room at 4 a.m. with an irate Michael demanding to know why I wasn't waiting for him at the Bryn Mawr underpass. But I made a point not to think about Seth at all. In fact, the first thing I did when I got back to my office was toss that annoying little florist's card onto a pile of expense receipts where it could get good and lost.

Just because my work was going to take me to L.A. repeatedly wasn't a reason to see Seth him. What would it accomplish to have dinner with him in L.A.? I could thank him for the flowers, but a phone call or even an old-fashioned, handwritten thank-you card would take care of that, no travel necessary. It would be a chance to sleep with him again, and while I could not deny the sex was nice, pretending to be carefree college students hooking up seemed slutty, inappropriate and a little desperate. I could finally find out why he blew me off at Live Aid. But that was a question so old that the answer didn't matter anymore. No matter how I sliced it, the bottom line was always the same. I couldn't figure out the point of seeing him again because there *was* no point.

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A mere 24 hours later, I was at O'Hare waiting for my flight to LAX to board. I looked at the To Do list that I had scribbled during the El ride to work hours earlier and was satisfied with the number of cross outs I had amassed. Work projects were delegated. Angela was happy to care for Zelda while I was gone. Of course, she also insisted that I take down the number of her salon where they did amazing bikini waxes, because having one was "a nice gesture, sort of like sending flowers", even though I repeatedly reminded her that my trip was strictly business. I cancelled my running dates with Michael and chose not to respond to his text reminding me to pack my running shoes, stretch after I used the hotel treadmill and say "hi" to Seth for him.

Only one item remained unmarked; the one I had been putting off all day. "Thank Seth for flowers."

I picked up my Blackberry and contemplated texting him. It *was* an accepted method of communication. But as I began to type, I knew I was making a cheesy, immature choice; the kind of cop-out move I chided middle-managers for making when dealing with difficult employees. There were dozens of flowers in that bouquet, after all. I scrolled over to the email application, but the cop-out feeling didn't leave.

"Oh, be a grown up," I chided myself, not quite as under my breath as I hoped. The woman in the plastic chair opposite me squinted over the top of her magazine and seemed to wonder why I thought she was too old to read *In Style*. I entered Seth's phone number, and hit "call" while a herd of butterflies rose in my midsection.

"It's Seth. Leave a message." Thank God for voice mail.

"Seth, it's Lisa Grant. From Bradley?" I shook my head and hit the pound sign hoping his system was the kind that would let me erase and rerecord my message. It was very likely that he

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would know who I was without mentioning my college affiliation. That familiar, yet unknown woman whose voice populated the world's voice mail systems informed me that I could indeed start over by pressing three. I took her suggestion.

"Seth, it's Lisa. I um..." An overhead announcement indicating that passengers in first class could start boarding my flight distracted my train of thought and I blanked on what I wanted to say. I hit pound three again.

"Seth, it's Lisa. Lisa Grant." My first name was probably enough, but I kept going anyway. "Thank you so much for the flowers. They are beautiful. I really appreciate it."

Appreciate? What the hell did that mean? That I appreciated the gesture of sending them? That I appreciated that he wanted to see me again? I hit the pound-three combination and readied for another, less idiotic take.

"Hi Seth, it's Lisa. Thank you for the flowers. You really shouldn't have. I mean, you didn't need to. Good luck with everything. Um. Have a nice day."

"Have a nice day?" That sounded like thinly veiled code for "I sincerely hope you fall off the face of the earth at your earliest convenience." Even though the sane, responsible, sensible part of me was lobbying hard for that to be true, it wasn't. I did the pound-three dance again.

"Seth, it's Lisa." I paused and caught the woman with the magazine gazing at me expectantly, interested to hear if I would finally finish the message this time. "Thank you for the flowers. They are beautiful, and unexpected and extravagant and..."

My one good message was interrupted by call waiting, specifically by Seth calling and waiting for me to pick up. I took a deep breath and switched over to the incoming line.

"Seth, hello! I was just leaving you a message." This made the woman with the magazine

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laugh out loud.

“Yes, I saw I missed your call. How is your day going, Lees?”

“Well, it’s fine, really. Thanks. Thanks for asking. Is that why you are calling? To see how my day was?”

“Um, you called me first, love.”

“Oh, right. I did. I was calling to thank you for the flowers. They are beautiful. Really. Overwhelmingly beautiful, actually.”

“Good. They were meant to make you happy.”

My breath caught in my throat. That simple statement felt like the nicest thing anyone had said to me in a long, long time.

“Lees? Did I lose you?” Seth said to the silence.

“No, I’m still here. Thank you, again, for the flowers. That’s what I was calling for. To let you know I got them and all. I don’t want to keep you, you’re probably busy.”

“Not really. Jade and I are just sorting a few parental issues before Beth gets home. The three of us have dinner any Monday night we are all in town, so her mum and I have poured ourselves a glass of wine and we’re figuring out how to present a united front.”

I couldn’t stop myself from glancing at my watch, deducting two hours from the time, and being a little judgmental that Jade and Seth were imbibing that early in afternoon. But that was probably typical rock star life.

“Sounds important, I should let you go.”

“We have plenty of time. The girl’s never on time.”

I heard a woman laugh and mutter something on Seth’s end of the call. Jade’s presence

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was strange to contemplate, especially when Seth said to me that he meant what was on the card. He wanted to see me again. And again, I couldn't find the breath to respond.

“Lees, you're at the airport, aren't you?”

I nodded. It's an ineffectual response for a phone conversation.

“And you're coming to L.A.?”

In the absence of any witty banter or any type of response from me, Seth had been able to hear the very detailed boarding announcement that was blaring from the speakers above.

“Um, yes.”

“Lees, that's brilliant! What night are you free for dinner?”

It was such a simple question, such a simple request. And I knew how to answer simple questions, simple requests. I had years of experience agreeing to do anything for anyone, yet denying myself at every turn. Every automatic “no” I uttered during the course of that day came flooding back. Should I skip my run and sleep in to prepare for a grueling schedule in L.A.? No, I had to run. It was good for me. Do I risk all and eat both pieces of bread in my sandwich because I am ravenous? No, gotta watch the carb intake. Do I admit to my boss that untold months of handling two jobs in two different cities was a problem? No, of course not. He needed me to do this.

Yet that time, the time when it probably would have been in my best interest, the automatic “no” wouldn't come. I looked around the congested gate area where my fellow passengers were impatiently edging toward the jetway, then out at the hallway where travelers of all sizes and ages were hurrying in every direction, then at the crowds filling every waiting area up and down O'Hare's long corridors. I was surrounded by people, and at the same time,

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suddenly quite aware of how lonely I felt. Somewhere deep within me, at a place that my brain couldn't reach, I really did want to have dinner with Seth.

“That would be nice.”

“Brilliant. Thursday night. I'll pick you up. Okay?”

“Okay.”

I sat in my coveted aisle Economy Plus seat and fired up my laptop while fully outfitted in my business casual uniform, but I wasn't on a business trip. I had entered a time machine. A woman walked past me on her way to her seat in the back and left an olfactory trail of perfume in her wake. Giorgio. She was seriously wearing Giorgio in 2009. And just one song was playing in an endless loop in my head, regardless of how many times I tried to evict it by concentrating on email or the insipid inflight movie. Split Enz would not leave me alone.

And I say, history never repeats. I tell myself before I go to sleep... And there's a light shining in the dark. Leading me on towards a change of heart...

“History Never Repeats” by Neil Finn. 1981 Enz Music, Ltd.