

Chapter 7: It Was Really Nice

I expected home to look different. At least a little bit. When the cab reached my street, I looked out the window searching for signs of change. Not something dramatic like the solid brick buildings of the neighborhood morphing into fanciful castles, or the trees suddenly appearing as lollipops. Just a fresh patina of some kind, a sharpening of details or a joyful Gene Kelly doppelganger rounding the corner, swinging his umbrella and singing in the rain.

But there wasn't as much as a puddle as far as the eye could see. Folks were simply doing their Sunday things: walking dogs, pushing strollers, sipping coffees. Not one of them looked ready to burst into song. Everything was just as it was when I left a week earlier, as if I hadn't been gone at all but rather just momentarily whisked off to an alternative universe for a while, then dropped back down, unceremoniously, into my old life. I had been expecting the wrong musical. The scenario I found myself in was far more Dorothy returning from Oz. I always thought she looked kind of let down when she first opened her eyes to see Auntie Em pressing a washcloth to her forehead and her room exactly as she left it. In the cab at that moment, I understood why.

Maybe I was the one who was different. Neither the cab driver nor the jogger sweating

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past me as I paid my fare seemed to notice that anything was amiss, but perhaps it would take friends and colleagues, those with knowledge of the old me, to catch the shift. I wondered if I'd start doing things that would give me away. Would I become one of those precious people who picked up the quirks of travel and arrived home saying "pleasure" instead of "you're welcome" or eating with their forks in their left hands? Would it be so bad if I did? Because things, many things, possibly everything, was different.

The first thing I noticed when I pushed through the door of my house was a note written in Angela's perfect, looping handwriting taped to the wall.

"Took Zelda to my house for a play date with Lily. Come and fetch her when you get home, and be prepared to spill all." The word "all" was underlined several times.

I tossed my bags aside and made a fruitless search in the kitchen cabinets for something that could pass for dinner. Coming up empty, I went to the fridge. It, too, had little to offer other than another note from my most persistent friend.

"We have food at our house. Come over and I'll feed you. But be prepared to spill (and I'm not talking about your meal!)"

The baby carrots in the vegetable bin were only a little shriveled. I nibbled on one, considering whether the stubs could constitute a meal. It wasn't realistic from a nutritional standpoint, of course, but it was also downright delusion to think that I could avoid Angela's twenty questions simply by avoiding her doorstep. I had to bring Zelda home sometime. Even more startling was the realization that I was kind of looking forward to having this conversation with her. There was quite the story to tell, what with the simple plan to have dinner with Seth Thursday night and how it somehow led to everything else: staying for the weekend, my

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untimely encounter with Beth, our rom-com worthy Saturday and the unreal conversation that unfolded in his Volkswagen when he drove me to the airport. I pulled a bottle of wine off the rack and walked boldly across the street.

"I came to get my cat," I said when Dean yanked open the door, holding a marinara-streaked Lily.

"Hey, Lisa, come on in. Ang, Lisa's here. You girls can go gossip and I'll give Lily her bath." He shifted his daughter to his other hip and smiled at me conspiratorially. "She's been dying to talk to you all weekend."

"Welcome home!" Angela shouted as she threw her arms around me in an enormous hug, smacking me on the head with the two wine glasses she was already clutching. "Oh, sorry. Food's still out from dinner. Grab a plate and let's go up to the roof. I want to hear about every minute of the entire weekend. Skip no details. I mean none. "

"You know, Angela, the weekend was..." I thought about the words that were available to me. I could have said it was "amazing" with that word's firework implications. There was "lovely" and its swell Cole Porter vibe. I could have said that my time with Seth was "mind bending" if I were feeling cosmic and granola-y, or maybe "rad" if I wanted to shave a few points off my age and IQ. Thesauruses were overstuffed with options to describe how my weekend was and none of them felt right. But Angela's eyes were as big as the base of her wine glass and I got the feeling that she wasn't going to let me do anything – not take a bite of my meal, not blink, not breathe until I finished my sentence. "It was... It was really *nice*."

I hoped Angela heard my voice italicize the word and understood that I didn't mean the frumpy, boring sense of "nice" but rather something more exquisitely comfortable. Because

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really, that was what it had been; an incredibly comfortable, uncomplicated weekend. Well most of it.

"So you *were* having sex when I called."

"Well, maybe. Probably." I shrugged and smiled, trying to find a way to launch into the rest of the tale.

"This is so great," she said, beaming at me.

"Yes, it was great." My agreement made Angela literally squeal.

"So, what's next for you two?"

"Well..."

"Well? Well what?"

I debated how best to explain to her what had happened during the weekend. Should I try to nearly sum up the experience or take her through the whole thing, blow-by-blow and day-by-day? The thought of a long, unedited story made me itchy, but one look at Angela's face told me I owed it to her to spare no detail. For years, she'd been waiting to date vicariously through me. I owed her this. I took a big swig of wine and dove in.

The weekend, and my outlook, really shifted as daylight began to fade late Saturday afternoon. Seth had taken his guitar out to the porch and I followed with gin and tonics. The air was warm and still and there we were, playing the parts of an old, settled couple, rocking on the porch, waiting for sunset, happy to be next to one another. I sat perfectly still and, for once, I didn't have the desire to multitask. I wasn't mentally nagging myself that I ought to be using this time to get something useful done. I just wanted to listen to Seth play and stretch my toes out in the grass. It seemed the best way to show appreciation to myself for ignoring that voice in my

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head that was always ready to say “no” when Seth suggested I stay. I was nearly overwhelmed by a sense of contentment and peacefulness that I wasn’t sure I had ever truly experienced before.

When he paused, I asked Seth if the song he was playing was new. He told me it wasn’t, but he was thinking of resurrecting it for an upcoming show he might do.

“An opportunity has presented itself to do a short solo set in London.” Seth looked unrecognizable, almost sheepish.

“London? Interesting.”

“Yes, interesting. I mean, on the one hand it’s a great excuse to get the rest of my stuff, because God knows Careener’s never going to send it.”

“Um, I’m confused. What stuff?”

“The stuff in my house, Lees. Did I never tell you that Careener and I lived in London; that *I* lived until recently?” He laughed, dumbfounded that the tiny detail of being an expat for years had escaped our conversations to this point.

“Oh thank God.”

“Which means what, Lees?” Seth busted me. I hadn’t meant to express my relief out loud.

“Well, I was...worried, I guess.” I paused, hoping that Seth wouldn’t need more. He did. “It’s just that your language – using words like “loo” and other British terms made me fear that just maybe you had, well, broken with reality.” I stopped to gauge his reaction.

“And why would you think that?” He was looking at me as if I was the one having a break with reality. I reminded him that I was there when he adopted his stage name on that

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snowy night in the TV lounge of our dorm. We had been watching videos on MTV for hours and Seth was analyzing every aspect of every band and their music. It started out that way, at least. By 2 a.m. he was distraught that all these bands had record deals while his was stuck playing frat parties and college bars. Billy Idol's "Rebel Yell" put him over the edge.

"If we were British this would be so much easier," he declared throwing my can of Tab at the screen.

"I wasn't done with that..."

"Billy Idol, Thomas Dolby, the Police, Duran Duran. They're all British."

"Prince, Michael Jackson, Bon Jovi. All not British. And technically, the Police are one-third American."

But he wasn't in the mood for logic and he informed me that he had zero desire to be anything like Prince, Michael Jackson or Bon Jovi. When Michael Hutchence and the rest of INXS took over the screen, he looked as if he might burst into tears.

"Look at them," he moaned. "I've got to find someone British for the band." Apparently, he had to find someone right that moment, because he picked up his coat and headed for the door without even saying goodbye or worrying over little details like INXS actually being an Australian band.

When I saw him the next day outside of the library, he was much brighter.

"From now on, call me Seth Austin-Smith. With a hyphen. Doesn't that sound British? If anyone asks, don't tell them where I'm really from. Let's just keep that a mystery." That was the first hint that he'd soon be gone, chasing down his music dreams.

Sitting in the fading light of a California evening, I apologized to the still-hyphenated

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Seth for thinking that he had snapped somewhere in the last 20 years and had come to believe his own fiction.

He played the chords to “She Can’t Sing” and explained that Carina had been angling for him to come back “home” and play at a fundraiser she was organizing. She’d already put Beth’s band on the bill and knew that Seth would be a huge draw, with or without the rest of Joe’s Got a Problem. He was torn about taking the gig. Part of him was dying to do it, part of him was terrified to look like one of those has-been 80s singers desperate to keep the spotlight on himself, and the paternal part of him worried that his presence might overshadow Beth just as her band was gathering steam. I had never seen a tentative side to him before. Ever. It was endearing. Not so endearing that it erased the tension that crept up on me at the mention of Seth’s ex-wife’s name, but endearing nonetheless.

I began to paint a mental picture of her, based on absolutely nothing. There were no pictures on Seth’s shelves or countertops; not of him, not of Beth, not of anybody. Yes, I had looked. Nonetheless, I had convinced myself that Carina was impossibly tall, maybe even taller than Seth. And impossibly thin, with very straight, very glossy dark hair. In my imagination, she had the frosty edge of Victoria Beckham and was always wearing chic suits tailored within an inch of their lives with nothing under the jacket but her pricey perfume that was also Gwyneth's current favorite. Or maybe she was the one who told Gwyneth about it. And stilettos, of course. The Carina of my imagination could run to catch a cab on a cobblestone street wearing heels that would kill a mere mortal.

"...and she calls incessantly to cajole me into saying ‘yes.’ It’s like she’s fucking Bob Geldof or something."

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“Carina is fucking Bob Geldof?” It was possible I had missed some of Seth’s conversation while I was constructing my paper doll of her. My version hadn’t included the part about her copulating with the father of Live Aid.

“No, not literally, Bob’s a little scruffy for her taste. I just meant that she is completely focused on this fundraiser and making it a huge success. And she does have a point, though. I had a decent fan base there, thanks to her, but do you think anyone could stand to hear ‘She Can’t Sing’ one more time?” he asked me.

“The crowd in Chicago sure did. Did I tell you I heard it in the grocery store a couple of weeks ago?”

“You did not.” I assured him I did and he made a crack about the enduring legacy of goofy pop songs.

"You wrote some good ones."

"There's an epitaph for you! 'He wrote goofy pop songs, and some good ones at that!'" He was smiling, but not quite enough. I remind him that the songs I heard in Chicago were very different from what he did with Joe’s Got a Problem. One was quite sad actually, covering the arc of a relationship that quickly went from blissful to over.

"The ones you did that night, were they about your marriage?" I asked him.

"You know, Lees, not all songs are autobiographical."

I was skeptical, because I knew that most songs in the early JGP catalog were quite directly about Seth and me. It was not unreasonable to assume that other people who had passed through his life also passed through his music. I reminded him that the “she” who couldn’t sing was sitting right next to him.

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"True. But musicians sometimes like to think of themselves as creative, as having an imagination."

"So when the guy from Style Council wrote 'You're The Best Thing,' he wasn't thinking about someone specific?"

"I don't know Paul Weller. That's the other thing about musicians, Lees. We don't all know one another."

"Or that Spandau Ballet wrote 'True' on a whim."

"I don't know them either."

"You get my point. I have a hard time believing that when Elvis Costello wrote 'She,' he was just thinking of some generic female."

"Charles Aznavour."

"The 'she' he's singing about is a guy named Charles?"

"No, Charles wrote the song. Elvis just covered it for the *Notting Hill* soundtrack. And yes, it's quite possible that 'She' is about a generic female. It's like this, 'We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth, at least the truth that is given to us to understand.'"

It wasn't what I expected to come out of the mouth of a guy who quit school so he could wear aqua blue suits and checkerboard ties.

"It's a Picasso quote. One of my favorites, actually. And no, I don't think he was talking about one of his mistresses." Seth put his guitar down and leaned forward to get nearer to me.

"What's interesting about this conversation, Lees, is that every song you just referenced is pretty romantic."

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"No they're not," I replied quickly, probably too quickly.

"Um, yes they are. I think you like it here. I think you're having a really nice weekend.

Lees, I think you like me."

"They're just nice songs."

"Whatever you say, Lees."

It stayed between us the rest of the night and well into Sunday morning; that perfumed, calm aura of being comfortable, of being happy, even if I didn't dare proclaim it out loud. I could feel it washing over me, the way the carefully calibrated scents and flute music piped into a day spa trick you into thinking you are at a remote, tropical hideaway and not just steps from the grime and bus fumes of a city street.

It changed me, too; wore down my resistance. I changed up my travel schedule when Seth learned work wouldn't bring me back to California until a week from Monday. He insisted I come back early so that I could spend the weekend with him and his patchwork family for Jade's birthday. It was the one holiday they all spent together, every year, since Beth was born. Seth explained that he had never missed it, not when the band was touring, not when he was living in London, even if it meant flying to the west coast for only one day.

"My daughter would never admit it, but it means a lot more to her than it does Jade. It was the one day she knew she could count on seeing me. I would love for you to join us."

"Wouldn't that be weird, me crashing a family event?"

"Of course not. I want everyone to meet you. Besides, Jade's an amazing cook. She uses her birthday as a practice round for her Thanksgiving menu. She's bloody brilliant with a

turkey.”

Well, how could I argue with that? Mingling with Seth’s contorted family wasn’t completely devoid of trepidation, but I knew that I was at least as curious as I was nervous. I was proud of myself and my new decisiveness. And maybe that’s why the conversation that ensued as Seth pulled my bags out of his car at LAX was such a jolt. I thought I had already dealt with all the surprises I was going to have thrown at me for one weekend.

We were winding our way to my terminal knowing that the end of the weekend was just moments away.

"This has been such a great weekend, Seth. Thank you."

"It was good, wasn't it? I'm really glad you stayed."

“Me, too. This time with you has been so ... comfortable. That probably sounds strange or like a backhanded compliment, but I mean it. This weekend I feel like I never had to change out of my most reliable pair of jeans.”

His smile told me that he understood.

“‘Comfortable’ is a big compliment, Lees. Thank you. I enjoy being your reliable jeans. I also enjoy being in your reliable jeans, pulling off your reliable jeans...” His laughter took over his speech and continued as he maneuvered the car up to the curb and popped open the trunk.

Once the bags were out of the trunk there was nothing left to do but say goodbye and go inside to trudge through security. I pushed myself up onto my toes to kiss Seth goodbye and in return, he pulled me off the ground into a tight, long hug.

“Bye, Seth,” I said into his ear.

"Bye, Lees," he replied, setting me down with the tiniest push toward the door. He stared

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while I gathered up my things and fished my driver's license out of my purse. Apparently, this act was more engrossing than I could have imagined.

"Got everything?" he asked. I smiled and nodded, thinking that would be his cue to get in the car and drive away. But he didn't make a move to leave, not even as I turned toward the big glass doors of the terminal. I got about five steps away when I heard Seth call my name. I turned to him and resisted the urge, the habit really, to glance at my watch and assure myself that I still had plenty of time to make my flight. He was just standing there, grinning and leaning on his car.

"I love you."

With those words, I lost all ability to blink or look away, so was left to simply stare at him. Communication skills were gone, too. I couldn't process words; not the ones coming at me from Seth and not the ones I knew I was supposed to send back to him. I felt my eyebrows scrunch together completely without my permission and my jaw go slack. It seemed possible that I was having a stroke. Seth just continued to grin at me. He shifted his weight, but not his gaze.

"So, I just said 'I love you.' For the first time. Ever. In all these years." He paused a second for the fact to sink in. "Any thoughts?"

Thoughts? Oh no, he didn't want to know my thoughts. Particularly not the ones that were zooming around in my brain like a bunch of hepped up NASCAR drivers. He absolutely did not want to know that my thoughts were, in this exact order: I can't breathe. What kind of lunatic tells someone he loves her after two weekends together? Love? What the hell does that mean? I should remember what I'm wearing right now, what this moment looks like. I don't think he's been drinking. I was with him all morning, it's not possible he's impaired. Is that really Seth? Am I on the flight already, sleeping my way to Chicago and having the world's

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strangest dream? Are my hands actually starting to shake? Shit. Seth thinks he loves me.

None of those reactions seemed appropriate for sharing, so I went with the one thought that was shouting louder than all the others, over and over, hoping to be heard. I looked at Seth and said to him, "I'm stunned."

He laughed and shook his head.

"Well, that's the first time anyone's replied that way to my heartfelt declaration of love." I couldn't discern from his laugh if he was amused, trying cover up his anger or coming to the realization that he was spending time with a crazy woman. Even as he walked closer, to join me on the vast sidewalk in front of the terminal doors, I could not determine his reaction. He zeroed in on me, ignoring the police patroller rolling slowly up to his car threatening tickets and towing, to take my face in his hands and look me in the eye. "Get used to it, Lees. I love you."

Just as quickly as he approached, he turned back, waved off the police car and settled into the driver's seat of his car. He flashed one last smile and pulled out into the endless stream of traffic. I watched his car until it was just a blur and I couldn't make out his set of tail lights from any of the other cars. It was as if he rode off into the sunset, even though it was barely noon.

Back in Chicago, recalling the image of Seth grinning at me, leaning on his car and telling me that he loved me sent a small shiver through my body. Angela mistook it for a chill and offered me a blanket. I shook my head and opened my mouth to tell her about the conversation at the airport, but I seemed to have lost my voice. I stared off at the stars emerging in the autumn sky, trying to bring myself to the present even as the memory was enveloping every sense to the degree that I could smell the jet fuel and hear the automated No Parking

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announcements.

Angela put her hand on my arm and looked at me with genuine concern.

"Sweetie, did something happen?" I saw her trying to reconcile the woman sitting in front of her right now with the woman who just seconds ago was chirping happily about her weekend.

"Well. He, um. This is so dumb. He said that... Oh, Angela, you're not going to believe this, but he sort of, well, not sort of, he did. He told me he loved me." My voice was low, a whisper.

"Oh my God!" Angela shouted loud enough to make Dean run up the stairs to check if we needed his help. All he found was a couple of women curled up on the patio furniture, one wearing the biggest, widest grin on her face and the other chewing her thumb nail. Angela waved Dean away, then gave my shoulder a push with the same hand.

"Lisa! You waited to the end to tell me that part?"

"Angela, it's so stupid."

"Stupid? Who says that about being loved?"

"I mean, really. We have a nice couple of days together and all of a sudden he's in love with me? He's crazy."

"He's not crazy."

"He doesn't know what he's talking about."

"Of course he does."

"I suppose you think it's normal."

"I think it's wonderful."

"Then you're crazy, too."

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"I am not crazy. Seth is not crazy. He loves you. This is great."

"But..."

"Lisa, don't start."

"Seth has enough baggage to take an around-the-world trip."

"Ugh, we've talked about this. And let's not pretend that you don't have some baggage of your own."

She had a point, and I got the distinct feeling she was working really hard to not reach over and knock me upside the head. When she had the impulse under control, she asked me what I said after Seth made his declaration.

"Well, I was stunned."

"Sure you were. But what did you say?"

"Um, that's what I said."

Angela settled back in her chair and looked at me with disbelief and what I surmised was a touch of resignation. She pushed me to repeat the whole exchange verbatim, as if I had been taking copious notes the whole time or had conveniently thought to press "record" on some hidden device I just happened to have in my bag. I walked her through the curbside conversation one more time and the look of concentration on her face made her look like she was diffusing a bomb. I repeated the part about being stunned, and she shook her head.

"Oh, Lisa, what are we going to do with you?" She was also smiling at me, so I knew she wasn't going to write me off once and for all. "Do you love him?"

"How could I possibly know that in just this short period of time?"

"Okay, that's fair. Just promise me one thing."

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"What?"

"Let yourself enjoy this. Just see what happens. Don't automatically assume it won't work out." She refilled my glass in an attempt to seal our pact with Shiraz, and I realized that while I had drained mine even though I was doing most of the talking, Angela had only taken a sip at most. This made me a crazy woman who didn't know how to respond when a man told her he loved her *and* a lush. Rough day.

"Save some of that wine for yourself," I told her.

"Well, I have some news, too." Her face burst into a conspiratorial smile and she glanced around to make sure Dean wasn't still lurking about. "It pales in comparison to yours, and it's still unconfirmed at this point, but I think I might be pregnant."

"Angela, oh my God! That is great news!"

"It's not news yet, so say nothing to no one. I haven't even peed on a stick yet, but timing would tell me that it's an excellent possibility. Keep your fingers crossed for me, okay?"

I assured my friend that I would indeed cross my fingers for her if she would do the same for me. The only difference between us was that Angela knew what outcome she was hoping for. For me, it was nothing but question marks.

Zelda and I arrived home to the last ring of a phone call. I stared at the handset and realized I was wondering if I had just missed a call from Seth. This was what I had become: a 45-year-old woman who stared at her telephone wondering if a boy called her. And not just any boy. I wasn't curious if Michael was calling to confirm tomorrow's run, or my boss presenting me with another ridiculous office "emergency." I dialed into voice mail hoping for one particular

voice.

"Hello, Lees. I just called to say goodnight. Sleep well. I love you."

I listened to Seth's message twice, thinking it was just as well I missed his call. No one should have to hear "I'm stunned" twice in one day.

Maybe things were different, just not in the movie-scene way I had imagined earlier. I washed my face and brushed my teeth – my normal getting-ready-for-bed routine – but the next step was a choice I hadn't had before. My suitcase was open and it was spilling its schizophrenic contents, my staid wardrobe choices mingling with Seth's more colorful and interesting picks. The old, ratty t-shirt I normally slept in was rolled up right next to the beautiful silk nightgown. It was the perfect image of before versus after, now versus then, the shape of my life on Friday morning versus the shape of my life on Sunday night.

Intellectually, I knew that it didn't matter which one I chose, yet I continued to stare. I was weighing the options as if I were choosing between two job candidates who were both qualified, but in completely different ways. I could stay in the known and familiar, yet I also had the opportunity to get to know someone brand new, the once and future woman named Lees.

Beth was probably right. Seth and I were probably just each other's midlife crises. We were a bridge to each other's past, to when we were both younger, shinier and all we had to do was focus on the exact moment we were living in, along with music and bands and the occasional class. Maybe Seth and I were just nostalgia. But Seth was nostalgia that called to say goodnight.

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