

CAREN CANIER

Storia della bambina perduta
(Elena Ferrante), 2019
Oil on panel, 30 x 40 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

STEPHEN KOVASH

The Drive Home

An excerpt from
the memoir *Driving
the Truck Off the Bridge*
about emotional resilience

My little red pickup truck was making fine time. In the final stretch of my drive home from DC, I could barely make out the road. My windshield wiper fluid had run out halfway through Arkansas and the legs and assholes of a thousand grasshoppers covered my view. When I tried to use them, the wiper blades bounced across the glass like it was pebbled.

I don't like talking to people at gas stations and convenience stores, so I just get gas. I don't stop unless I can pay at the pump. I pee at McDonald's but don't buy anything. I should have brought extra wiper fluid, but I would have had to talk to someone in the automotive store. Car parts people make me nervous.

I was seven milligrams of Xanax and six Percocets into the day. I was flexible about what constituted my dosages. The ghost of my soul was trailing twenty miles behind me like a B-52 long-wire antenna. It might take a couple of days to catch up.

I crossed the border between Arkansas and Oklahoma and pulled into the breakdown lane. Without checking for oncoming traffic, I stepped out of my truck and kissed the asphalt. Gravel and road dirt stuck to my lips. I got back in my truck and drove to the next exit into Sallisaw, Oklahoma, the home of the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath* and the nearest Sonic Drive-In restaurant. Washington, DC, had some great restaurants, but for a double cheeseburger and milkshake delivered by a skating carhop, Sonic was the shit. I took my first bite of that cheesy death burger and felt my cortisol level going down to almost zero. It was better than two blue Xanax. I took the pills anyway, washing them down with the last of my milkshake. Vanilla malted actually.

I tried to scrape some of the bug carcasses from my windshield using the greasy cheeseburger bag. That just made it worse but there was nothing else I had to wipe it with. I stopped at the next gas station to fill the gas tank and saw they still had a water hose for filling overheated radiators. Without the help of anyone at the gas station, I filled the plastic jug thing next to my engine that squirted water onto the windshield. The water didn't help much, but it cleared enough random spots for me to do that weird head dance to peep through the openings. Like an owl. Or that guy in the B-52s singing "Mesopotamia."

I started thinking again. The Xanax was supposed to

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keep me from doing that. I put another one in my mouth, chewing it this time. Unlike Percocet, Xanax tastes really nasty, but chewing got it into my bloodstream faster. I learned this from one of my junkie friends in high school. The meds smoothed out the edges but did not stop me from thinking. I had tired of listening to my mixtape and tales of Lake Wobegon on the other side of Tennessee, so it was just me, my thoughts, and the souring smell of cheeseburger grease for the rest of the trip. My life is charmed.

The belongings I cared about were in the back of my truck. Mostly compact discs, vinyl LPs, and a Bang & Olufsen turntable. It was expensive when I bought it but now everyone was moving to compact discs. Change is hard for me. I hoped I had remembered a change of clothes. Driving nonstop and sleeping in the truck, I was getting rank. Everything else I owned was in a shipping container, on its way to Detroit for all I knew.

My focus back on the road, I imagined that I saw Naomi's angry face through the Pollock painting of dead insects on my windshield, coming toward me at seventy-five miles per hour. I swerved into the breakdown lane, crunching over a couple of dead armadillos before I corrected back onto the highway. Naomi's face flew through the windshield and back into my head before I could jam AC/DC back in the tape player. Fucknuts. Now the inside of

my truck smelled like stale cheeseburger, dead armadillo, and my own fear. I dry swallowed two more Xanax and chewed a Percocet. Percocets taste way better than Xanax. Drive defensively.

Three Days Earlier, Washington, DC

Moving day. I had been dreading this for weeks. My soon-to-be ex-wife, Naomi, had *promised* she would stay away while the movers were there. I knew she was lying but my psychiatrist had prescribed me something like three hundred milligrams of Xanax and Percocet with seven refills. I loved him so much.

On the lookout for her, I approached my condo with stealth. The Xanax was barely touching my anxiety and I was as stealthy as John Belushi in *Animal House*. It didn't matter though. Tiptoeing through the condo, I found it smelling of stale clove cigarettes, but empty.

Nothing had changed since my recent escape. The aquarium in the front room needed cleaning but at least she hadn't killed the fish. *What the hell was I going to do with the fish?* I drifted around what used to be my home feeling lost. I recognized my stuff, but everything felt foreign and disconnected. Like I was viewing my life in black and white and two seconds out of sync.

Naomi came in with the movers. *Of course she did.* I didn't ask her why she was there, and she didn't tell me. She crossed the room imperiously, looking at me and the movers like she was a soap opera diva. She lit a clove cigarette. It made that crackling noise as she drew on it. She knew the smoke bothered me. She flicked the still-sizzling match at me. Not the first time. It fell short, burning the carpet. She crossed her arms and glared at nothing. The only time she moved was to blow smoke at the ceiling and light a new cigarette off the old one.

It wasn't a truce. I didn't want a scene and wasn't going to be baited. Not this time. She wanted a scene and was waiting for the right moment to bait me. The movers, who had seen it all before, focused completely on boxing my things, sneaking the occasional wary glance her way. These were big dudes, but she was scary.

I could see her working up to the scene. She knew from experience that I wasn't going to hit her, and I probably wouldn't raise my voice. I would never raise my hand to

her and wouldn't raise my voice in front of other people. She was going to find a way to stir shit up and she would probably hit me. She'd done it before.

I had told the movers to pack the knives first. She wasn't a good knife fighter, but she had cut me before too. The movers were not going to help. I was on my own. For now.

She had decided it was time to cause a scene. I could see it in her eyes and her body language. She uncrossed her arms and came toward me, a low-budget Bette Davis, lips parted and baring her teeth. A loud rap on the door stopped her. She opened the door to my friends Laura and Josie. Naomi recognized them and froze at the open door. Only her eyes moved, flitting between me and Josie and Laura. It made me think of an old Clint Eastwood movie. Ennio Morricone music played in my head. Both women were angry, badass lesbians from my dojo. Dojo as in karate school. They were both black belts and worthy street fighters. I knew because I'd taught them how to street fight. They were still in their karate uniforms and had come directly from sword practice. With their swords.

Four Years Earlier

I fit in almost everywhere I go. I'm uncomfortable around other people, so I'm not completely sure why. Maybe it's because I don't judge people, and others sense that. Maybe I'm just a likeable potted plant. I've rarely questioned it.

I learned to be a good mimic growing up. Some of my friends call it "passing." I'm good at passing. The angry lesbians were a challenge though. They did not want men in their school, especially a straight man with a black belt. The owner of the dojo must have seen something worthy in me. I met with her and she invited me to try out a class.

Regardless of your gender, entering a new martial arts school has a specific rite of passage. The dojo master runs the new student through a gauntlet of her best fighters. I'd been through it before. I'd put others through it before. It is always brutal. If a newbie does well, they give her more respect.

My first day in class, the women in the school knew what was coming and so did I. The instructor declared it "fight day" and we lined up, bowing to honor her. She called up several pairs of students to fight. As I expected, the instructor was saving my fight for last. The longer a student

waits for their fight, the more anxious they become and the more likely they will make a mistake. I wasn't anxious. I had been taking beatings a long time.

The other students were nicely trained but their fighting was predictable. I'm good with patterns and eventually saw what these women were capable of. They were tough fighters but lacked imagination and their fighting style was linear, like fencing. Easy enough to deal with. We were sitting in a circle around the fighters, black belt students in front. While darting an occasional glance in my direction, most of my potential opponents focused on the fighters. Then I spotted her. Hard to miss, actually. We could have been twins. Like me, she was short, surly, and built like a cigarette machine. I'd watched her during warmup exercises. She was good. My warmup partner told me that she had never lost a fight since earning her black belt.

I wouldn't mind losing a fight to her. Someone was always better than me and I learned from every fight. She stared daggers and venom at me the entire class. That was an old-school technique to intimidate your opponent. She might as well have given me the two-finger signal indicating she had her eyes on me.

I wasn't intimidated, but I was excited. This was going to be a good one. Our instructor introduced us. My opponent was named Laura and she tried to stare me down like a boxer would before a fight. Another old-school intimidation trick. She wasn't trained as a boxer. I was.

Fighters use protective gear based on their preference. We were required to wear padding on our hands and feet. Everything else was optional. I never wore a cup. My first instructor once told me that "groin protectors teach you bad habits." It was true.

Women sometimes wear cups and breast protection. I wasn't going to ask about breast cups, but Laura was wearing headgear. It looked like a football helmet made of dense foam. The helmet told me that she was used to winning and had never grappled. I never wore helmets. They restrict your vision and make grappling impossible. Plus, I think they look silly. I was wearing a mouth guard to protect my teeth. I kept it clean, but it was stained a rusty red from previous fights. The color of old blood. Showing a blood-stained mouth guard was one of my secret tricks.

The instructor had us bow to each other, bow to her, and shake hands. Instead of shaking my hand, Laura

knocked my fist away. Another intimidation trick, but I didn't care. I loved to fight. Winning was beside the point.

We squared off to fight. Laura took a sideways stance, perpendicular to my hulking, face-forward boxer's stance. She backed up and waited, affecting fierce warrior eyes. She was full of tricks, this one. She wanted me to come to her. I half expected her to give me the Bruce Lee "come to me" finger gesture. I stared back and smiled. I smile when I fight. It comes naturally for me, but most fighters don't do that. Laura's pupils dilated when she saw my smile and my bloodstained mouthguard. I'd seen that before too. She was afraid. The fight was already over. My smile got bigger.

Laura swallowed her fear and charged at me like a freight train with a blond pixie cut. As I expected, this was a linear attack, easily sidestepped. I tapped her on the back of the head, winning a point. Her face reddened with embarrassment and anger. She continued her heavy-handed linear attack for two more points. I say points. Time becomes meaningless in a fight. We had been fighting for less than two minutes but it felt like twenty. The points were mine. I needed two more to win.

Her fighting style had served her well in her dojo, but she had never fought outside of it and had never seen anyone fight like me. I was getting bored and she was getting tired. A tired fighter increases the potential for injury. A bored fighter can seem arrogant. I wasn't dancing like Ali, but I was toying with her. Everyone watching knew I was toying with her, which can be considered rude. I didn't want to finish the fight as a complete douche. I took a sideways stance, mirroring hers. Lowering my hands, I rested them on my legs. Lowering your hands in a fight means you are either bone tired or insulting your opponent. I was not tired. She took the bait and charged me again. Undetected, I raised my front foot a couple of inches from the floor and swept her front leg, causing her to fall backward onto her butt. She scrambled up and now, with real anger, she charged me again, this time forgetting her training and dropping her hands. Instead of breaking her nose with a jab, I pulled her into a boxer's clinch, hugging her arms close in to my chest. She grunted into my ear, "Sweeps aren't allowed, fuckface." I was surprised by her profanity, but I smiled some more, released the clinch, and spun her headgear so it was covering her eyes before I pushed her away. Turning in my direction, she angrily pulled off her

headgear, throwing it at me. I could hear the other fighters gasp at this massive breach of fighting etiquette.

She changed up her attack with a spinning technique that should have ended with her striking my throat with the back of her fist. A potentially deadly strike but easy to predict. Skip-stepping sideways this time, I avoided the strike, trapping her striking arm with my right arm. I spun her into my left arm for a choke. She was up on her toes, tapping my choking arm as a sign of submission. Before I let her go, I whispered in her ear, "Spinning techniques aren't allowed, cupcake." She knew I was playing, and I saw her try not to smile at my use of *cupcake*. I released the choke. I was secretly glad that she had no grappling or boxing skills. Holding her in the choke, I felt how sturdy and muscled she was, and she outweighed me by at least twenty-five pounds. If she had known how to grapple, she would have kicked my ass. I think she knew that too. The choke had earned me my final point, so the fight was over. We returned to our starting positions, this time both bowing and smiling for real. Real handshakes and hugs followed. We were officially friends and I had claimed a place of high stature by winning a fight with the toughest woman in the room. And go figure, they wanted me to teach grappling and street fighting. Later, the school sent me to Hollywood to learn how to teach hand-to-hand combat to women survivors of rape and incest. That is where I met Naomi.

Stephen Goes to Hollywood

My mission was to learn to teach hand-to-hand combat to rape and incest survivors. It sounds cooler than it was. I was training to be a glorified (and sentient) punching bag. The school was called Model Mugging of L.A. I never understood the name.

I was learning to teach women how to fight their way out of an attack. I learned acting and physical skills to replicate their trauma and act out rapes, muggings, and other attacks. I acted out whatever the women needed to fight through to claim victory over people who had hurt them. They partnered me with various female instructors who showed the women students how to poke out my eyes, rip off my ears, crush my genitals, and fracture every bone in my body.

I wore body armor. It took forty-five minutes to put on

the foam-enhanced football helmet and shoulder pads as well as modified knee and elbow braces to protect me from hyperextensions and fractures.

Then there was "the diaper." To protect my junk, a testicle-sized polycarbonate box was covered in high-density foam held in place by duct tape. It looked like a giant duct tape diaper and covered my junk from my tailbone to my belly button. I strapped it on first, over a standard groin cup. The cup tended to move around in the diaper, but I was only going to take knees to the groin, no karate kicks. The diaper was held up by chartreuse suspenders and looked ridiculous.

Being fully dressed in the entire outfit was like wearing a refrigerator. It was also a work in process. During the training, one of the female instructors nailed me with a hard palm strike, dislocating my jaw and putting me on my back. I had dislocated my jaw before and knew how to jam it back in place, but the instructors dislocated it again pulling off the helmet. I spent the rest of the session rebuilding the helmet with bags of ice tied to my face. I looked like Elmer Fudd with a toothache.

Later that week, an enthusiastic student stomped my hand, fracturing three fingers. It wasn't the first time for broken fingers, so I wrapped them in duct tape and carried on. The worst injury came from another instructor. Showing off for the females, he slithered out a martial arts front kick to my "diaper" when I wasn't looking. The martial arts kick shifted the diaper and my groin cup into the perfect formation to crush my left testicle. I was on the ground immediately, writhing and screaming. I never scream. The pain was amazing. The bruising, already starting on my nutsack and inner thigh, presented spectacular colors, like a corpse with livor mortis. I couldn't tape that injury, so I was sidelined, covering my junk with a one-pound bag of ice. Looking at the damage later I cried. I never cry. I never wore a cup again either. Bad habit.

Along with a predictable cross-section of Southern California moonbeams and holistic life coaches, my classmates included Ceena Davis, a woman from Israel named Naomi, and Robin Williams's girlfriend. I've never remembered her name. My testicles were not damaged by any of them.

Geena Davis showed absolutely no interest in me. Go figure. Ceena did bring her acting coach to help us learn to act like muggers and rapists. Robin Williams's girlfriend

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was the one who dislocated my jaw. She felt guilty and invited me over for lunch. I assumed "lunch" meant lunch. It did not. After a fine "lunch break" (some people called them nooners), we ate mangoes and talked about Robin's personal hygiene and love for cocaine. Robin's girlfriend said he smelled like a goat.

Later that week, Naomi invited me to her North Hollywood apartment for an actual shower with hot water. I had been taking a whore's bath in the cold water of the dojo bathroom each day. Hot water sounded like a good idea.

We had been working on boundary setting in class that day and it made a lot of sense to me. No one had respected my boundaries growing up. I couldn't read a woman's mind and I didn't understand flirting. I still can't understand it. After my shower, Naomi sat next to me on her couch. She tried to stare into my eyes. I assumed she intended the long stare to be soulful, but I couldn't stand more than a couple of seconds of eye contact. It was invasive and scary. She put her hands on my face and kissed me. I almost shit myself. Not in the good way. She had touched me twice on the face. She hadn't asked and I had not given her permission. I gasped and she smiled, assuming I liked it.

I asked her if we should discuss boundaries. Totally missing my point, she said she was okay with kissing but wouldn't sleep with me unless we had a committed

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relationship. *Good to know.* In my head, I was looking for the closest exit and trying not to fight my way out of her embrace. I felt like the cat in that cartoon, fighting off the horny skunk. I mimicked a smile and told her we needed to get back to class.

After class that evening, a married flight attendant invited me to dinner while her husband was out of town. All things considered, her invitation felt gratuitous. It didn't bother me that the flight attendant was married, but I was starting to get confused by all the attention from my new lady friends. I was still shaky from Naomi's unwanted kiss and touching. I told the married flight attendant that I was tired and my groin was still sore. It wasn't that sore. I needed a break.

I still had my lady friends in DC, but we weren't exclusive. I liked sex well enough but since I had taken a long vacation from self-medication, sex wasn't important enough to make a commitment. Cuddling was the worst. Like I said, I don't like to be touched. Without drugs, cuddling was almost out of the question. More than one sleepover friend found herself in an unintended choke hold or arm bar after trying to snuggle while I was dozing.

That might have explained my shortage of committed relationships. Maybe it was the PTSD I had from the times my mother and her friends forced five-year-old me to have

sex with them. Most of my lady friends preferred sleeping in their own beds after an evening hookup anyway. I appreciated that about them.

I rarely tell jokes. It's not that I don't understand them. I just don't think most jokes are funny. People rarely understand my jokes. I like lightbulb jokes sometimes.

Question: How many babies does it take to screw in a lightbulb?

Answer: Zero. Babies haven't developed the motor functions necessary to install a lightbulb.

That joke cracked me up. Still does. I occasionally told a story about myself that most people thought was funny. "I could be placed in a room filled with supermodels, every single one of them into me, and I would always pick the ax murderer." People thought that was one of my best jokes. It wasn't a joke. I now had lady friends on both coasts. One of them was probably an ax murderer.

Naomi intrigued me. Of course she did. All the signs of an ax murderer were there. I chose to ignore them. There was something off about her, but I couldn't figure it out. She was something I could figure out. Maybe something I could fix. It was our next-to-last day of training and we had a break. We met her parents for lunch and talked.

Naomi taught kindergarten at a private school where the Hollywood elite took their children. She was the best looking of my current lady friends. I'm vain and shallow that way. She could have been sisters with Elaine on Seinfeld. Her father was a rabbi. He seemed sane but unhappy. Her mother was unpleasant and didn't seem to like anyone. It occurred to me that her mother reminded me of Naomi, only older and meaner. It occurred to me much later that her mother reminded me of my mother. None of them cared about my great hair and cool, artsy sweaters. After lunch I asked Naomi to go for a walk.

Naomi: Nobody walks in LA.

Me (in my head): *Did she really just say that?*

Me (out loud): Like in that song?

Naomi: Exactly like the song. Did I tell you that Dale Bozzio's kids are in my class?

Me: I met Dale in college. She was nice. So, no walking? At all?

Naomi: We can drive over to Venice and lay out on the beach.

Me: Do they have vintage record stores?

Naomi: On the beach? No. I've never heard of that. Do people still buy records?

Me: I still buy records. Do they have galleries? Vintage clothing stores?

Naomi: I don't know. Who cares? We are going to the beach. Maybe get a margarita.

Me: Let's go.

Her: We have to wait. The 405 is a parking lot right now.

The 405 is a major expressway in LA and almost always adds three hours to your trip. No one drives in LA either. They sit in their cars and talk on those phones in a bag. We took surface roads to Venice.

I don't like beaches unless I can snorkel. It's a bad idea to snorkel at Venice Beach. The water is sick with bacteria and industrial toxins. Still, Venice Beach has surfers and a few brave swimmers, but they often end up with skin lesions, internal parasites, and other diseases. Water is sacred to me, but this didn't seem like water. Standing at the edge of the beach, I'm still certain I saw a school of used condoms swimming toward me.

Instead of swimming, I spent my beach time people watching and taking pictures. That's the coolest thing to do on Venice Beach anyway. Naomi and I spread our beach towels next to the fenced-off space where body builders were lifting weights. Every TV show remotely connected to Venice includes B-roll of those insanely ripped lifters. I could smell the illegal steroids and growth hormones in the air. I missed the scent of chlorine, Coppertone, and freshly mowed grass from the community pools back in Oklahoma. The water was blue there.

Close to the lifters, many of the surrounding sunbathers were men with great hair, great bods, and G-string swimsuits. Many of them sported porn mustaches like Freddie Mercury. Faces pointed toward the lifters, they were lying stomach down, admiring the rolling, oiled muscles through amber-tinted aviator sunglasses. One of the sunbathers rolled over and I saw why the others were facedown. The dude had the biggest penis I had ever seen outside of a porn video and it was at full attention, testing the durability of his royal-purple spandex G-string. A communal gasp was followed by the sound of a dozen clicking cameras. Even mine. I'm not a huge fan of other dudes' genitals but this guy was impressive. I had to clap and

shout out bravo along with my gay brothers on the beach. Naomi snored through all of it. I hate snoring. One of my mother's friends used to snore after she fell asleep. Raping a child while holding his mouth closed is hard work. I didn't always lie still. Even remembering that, it did not occur to me that Naomi's snoring might become an issue.

I had lost interest in huge cocks and wanted to go shopping for music and vintage sweaters. Maybe find a gallery. I had noticed a few vinyl shops on the boardwalk and a resale shop a couple of streets east of the boardwalk. Naomi didn't want to go. Outside of Jackson Browne and Michael Jackson, she didn't care about music. Her clothes came from the Jaclyn Smith collection at Target. She was happy on the beach and wanted a margarita. I wanted to find a cool sweater.

She walked with me but didn't even pretend to be interested in what I was looking for. Our stroll took us past three dozen T-shirt shops, a seventy-five-year-old woman on a skateboard, and Chili's for a margarita. Naomi liked Chili's. I did not like corporate restaurants, but she was getting cranky. Chili's it was.

I hadn't planned on a relationship with Naomi, so I didn't give much thought to why her father was unhappy or that her mother didn't like me. I also wasn't thinking about ax murderers. I was twenty-nine, had never been in a long-term relationship, and was invincible. I was a god and I would never die. I flew back to DC and said goodbye to my East Coast lady friends.

I talked with Naomi almost every day on the phone. We would alternate flights between the East Coast and the West Coast. To her dismay, we walked everywhere in DC. She soon came to prefer my trips to LA over her trips to DC.

My promise of being her boyfriend earned me bedroom privileges. Her sexual performance earned her a mediocre score and she was worse at kissing. I wasn't concerned. I just knew I could help her improve her bedroom skills, and I liked telling my DC friends that I had a hot girlfriend in (North) Hollywood. I always left out the North part. It sounded so much cooler to say "hot girlfriend in Hollywood." It sounded even better to my friends back in Oklahoma. I stopped seeing my other lady friends. I didn't do that for Naomi. Juggling relationships was very confusing to me and even my day planner calendar didn't help. I also sucked at lying.

I visited in December that year. Naomi was Jewish but preferred Christmas presents over Hanukkah presents. She also preferred warm weather, so Christmas was in North Hollywood.

In the six months we had been jet-setting, I had noticed and put up with several things I shouldn't have. Her snoring rattled the windows. She was a competitive swimmer and had an undefined inner ear problem from her years in the chlorinated water. According to her, it caused pain that could only be relieved by sitting up straight, pulling down her earlobe, and clearing her sinuses with a noise something like throwing phlegm-covered ice cubes into an industrial garbage disposal. The noise frightened me, and she knew it. Before and after we married, she would wait until I fell asleep to do it. She sneered at most of my jokes and often asked me when I was going to give up my "martial arts hobby." But I was her boyfriend now. We could work that stuff out.

The next trip was for Valentine's Day. It was still cold and gray in DC, so I flew to LA. We had fallen into a routine during our visits. In DC, we would walk to parks and restaurants and had mediocre sex in my bed. Sex in other parts of the condo made her uncomfortable. I talked about art and music and books. She talked about Farrah Fawcett and Ryan O'Neal and the other stars who had kids in her class. Naomi didn't have a television and didn't care about owning one, so I brought books to LA. When we weren't having mediocre sex or eating at Chili's, I would sit on her front stoop and read. I had never been a fan of Southern California for several reasons, but I did like the warm-weather smell of the constantly blooming flowers and the salt water from the ocean.

For Valentine's Day, I brought her a Native American dream catcher I had picked up during a visit to Oklahoma. I cooked dinner. She didn't cook and constantly told me the joke about being such a bad cook she could burn water. That wasn't a funny joke. You can burn the pan when the water evaporates, but you can't burn water. She gave me a silver-plated identification bracelet with my name engraved on it. I hadn't seen an ID bracelet since high school and generally didn't wear jewelry. I'm dangerously clumsy and always find a way to snag jewelry on something. In my mind, an engraved ID bracelet was the jewelry equivalent of eating at Chili's, but I only wore it when I was around

her, so no big deal. Nobody walks in LA, so I was relatively safe from a life-ending jewelry snag.

Naomi was restless and crankier than usual during the Valentine's Day visit, so I spent a lot of time reading on her porch. I was reading *The Cask of Amontillado*. She came out to the porch, her face twisted into a giant red raisin. It reminded me of her mother. For a split second, it reminded me of my mother. The conversation went like this:

Naomi: What the heck did you call that Indian thing you gave me?

Me: We don't say Indian. We say Native American.

Naomi: What the fuck did you call that *Native American* thing you gave me?

Me (frowning): It's a dream catcher. You hang it over your bed and it will capture your nightmares. It will keep you safe.

Naomi: It's not very romantic.

Me: I'm sorry. I thought it was romantic. It's authentic. A Native American made it.

Naomi: A *Native American* in China. I wanted a ring. What is wrong with you?

Me (confused): Nothing is wrong with me. What kind of ring did you want? Like turquoise or something?

Naomi (at a high and screechy volume): Are you SERIOUS? An engagement ring!

Me (in my head): *Huh. I didn't see that coming. She wants to get married. I don't really love her, but I am thirty years old. I suppose I should try being married at some point. It might as well be her. Things always work out for me eventually. I should give it a try. I can fix anything.*

Naomi (slapping my face): Pay attention to me! What is wrong with you? Stop being an asshole! Don't you love me? What the fuck?

Me (eyes big, one hand rubbing the welt on my face where she hit me, the other hand up to catch another punch): You hit me.

Naomi: Don't be a pussy. I asked you if you loved me.

Me (in my head): *She just hit me! She called me a pussy. That's not okay, is it? Tell her you don't love her! I have three days until my flight back. I don't have any place to go, and I don't want to pay to change my flight. I don't want her to yell at me anymore. She looks like she is going to hit me again. Would it be so bad to marry her? Maybe I do love her. She*

is mean, but I can fix that. I need to fix that. It won't be so bad. Shit, she's going to hit me again.

Me (out loud): Wait! Don't hit me again. I didn't mean to make you mad. Why are you mad? Dream catchers are cool.

Naomi: I asked you if you loved me. Answer me! What is wrong with you?

Me: There is nothing wrong with me. Don't hit me again.

Naomi (face red, voice whining, tears starting): Asshole! You don't love me!

Me (in my mind): *Shit. Tell her you love her. You can fix this. You are supposed to get married sometime. Make her stop yelling. Fucking hell.*

Naomi: I hate you.

Me (scared): I do love you. Please forgive me. I'm so sorry. Do you really hate me?

I had an anxiety attack. Not my first one, so I knew what it was. This one was bad. I tried to hold hands with her. She slapped my hand away, crossed her arms over her chest, and looked past my shoulder at nothing. The slap on my hand almost put me in fight mode. Her tears had stopped. Maybe I had imagined the tears. The look on her face was confusing. I wasn't sure if I was imagining it, but I thought I saw the tiniest curl of a smile. A Grinch smile like in the cartoon. It might have been a grimace.

Me (confused and panicking): Are you okay? I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to. *Of course* I love you. Please don't say you hate me.

Naomi: Are you going to ask me to marry you?

Me: If you want to get married, let's get married.

Naomi's expression transformed from an enraged-happy face back to her Elaine-from-Seinfeld face. She jumped up, clapping her hands like a grade-school girl and ran into her apartment. I could hear her talking to her mother on the phone. "He asked me to MARRY HIM!"

I felt like a feral dog and was full of anxiety. I wasn't dead. I had survived. My entire body was shaking as I rocked back and forth, hugging myself. Fucking hell. I don't remember much of what happened next, but she said she still wanted me. Eight months later, we were married.

Being spontaneous used to be fun. My life until then had been a series of spontaneous adventures and I assumed being married to Naomi would be the same. It was an

adventure but not a fine one. My job paid too much for me to move to LA, so she moved to DC. She found a job teaching kindergarten at a private school where the DC political elite took their children.

I soon found out that she was angry, violent, and had a fondness for heroin. I usually recognize red flags like drug addiction and an angry, violent nature, but Naomi was that ax murderer in the room of gorgeous women. I'm pretty sure I knew that, but I was still "invincible." I was convinced that I could fix Naomi. I was a *feminist*. I understood women! I could fix it. Except that I couldn't. Naomi was broken, perfectly happy being broken, and she didn't want to be fixed.

DC is a blast for tourists, but it is a tough town. My job was political and stressful. Between that and Naomi, I was losing my enthusiasm for being married and living in the District. We fought epically for four years. Naomi hit me and burned me with cigarettes in my sleep. She cut me with my butcher knife when I was taking a shower. Twice. I moved halfway across the country to get away from her.

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