

Parrot Girl

I hate the girl with the parrot on her shoulder. I don't want to but I do. She's nineteen, maybe twenty, smoking as she waits in line at the restaurant. There's always a line now for Sunday brunch and I know it's my fault. Sometimes I should just keep these things to myself. But the Parrot Girl. She's wearing shiny blue short-shorts with white piping, soccer socks with the stripey tops pulled up to her knees. I can tell her cowboy boots have been scuffed and distressed on purpose, the leather warped and discolored by water, they're scratched and dirty—she probably dragged them behind a car through an unpaved alleyway then invited her friends to stomp on them with their filthiest shoes. I know all the tricks. Still, the boots are too stiff. She wears a short gold satin jacket that the parrot keeps snagging with its claws every time it readjusts itself on her shoulder. From where I'm sitting I can't see what's underneath the jacket and the way the sun is reflecting off the satin, I can't get a clear view of her face. Plus, the parrot is in the way. Ted has a better view and assures me her face is good, so I polish off my third champagne cocktail and grab my camera bag from under the table.

Up close I see Parrot Girl has a tiny diamond stud in her nose. Her makeup is perfect: smudgy kohl eyes and sticky mascara, smeared lips, classic morning-after face. But her hair is too clean and smells like apples, her face freshly moisturized. I wonder how long she spent getting ready this morning, if she had a fitful sleep editing all the possible combinations of outfits in her head.

"Excuse me." I tap Parrot Girl on the shoulder. "My name is Sara B. and I was wondering if I could take your picture?"

Parrot Girl turns to look at me. Her friends titter behind her. She lights another cigarette and I notice her hands are shaking slightly. She knows who I am, I'm sure of it. She takes a deep drag and shrugs. "Yeah, okay, that's cool."

I lead her away from the line and ask her to face my camera. The satin is tricky in the sun and the parrot won't look at me. I think for a moment that the parrot is smarter than either of us—it knows how ridiculous this all is, and doesn't want any part of it. I get the shot and Parrot Girl signs the release allowing the magazine to use the photos however we see fit. She doesn't ask the obvious—it never occurs to the ones who try so hard to be a DO that they could possibly be a DON'T.

I push my way back through the line and to our table by the window, which is open onto the busy street. A couple opeople call my name and wave. I have no idea who they are, but smile and wave back anyway. One of them yells, "Sara B.! Take my picture!" I smile again and sit down.

Genevieve is breast-feeding the baby in the washroom. She won't do it at the table anymore after last week when a woman in bad camouflage pockety pants that emphasized her puffy abdomen berated her for drinking one champagne cocktail, then feeding the baby an hour later. According to Genevieve, this was typical. The situation was made worse when the Bad Camo Woman broke from her rant and narrowed her eyes at Genevieve. "You!" She pointed a finger in Genevieve's face. "You! You're that singer! Gen-Gen! You had that song—what was it called? 'J'taime, J'taime something...'"

"'J'taime My Baby Tonight,'" Ted spoke up. Genevieve glared at her husband. Bad Camo Woman snapped her fingers. "That's it! Wow! I used to listen to that song over and over when I was a teenager! You're Gen-Gen! Andrew, look, it's Gen-Gen!" Andrew, who had been hanging sheepishly in the back, nodded a quick hello. He, too, was wearing bad camouflage pockety pants. "So do you think I could get your autograph? Here." She shoved a crinkled receipt in front of Genevieve and produced a pen from her fake Louis Vuitton bag. "Sign this."

Genevieve obliged, scrawling *Best Wishes, Gen-Gen* across the crumpled paper.

“Wow, thanks. I can’t wait to call my friend Angela. She was my best friend in school and she loved you, too. We’re not that close now—she lives in Vancouver—but we try to keep in touch, you know. It’s hard, though, with our kids and our jobs and—”

“How would you feel about me taking a picture of you two?” I interrupted. I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Of us?” Bad CamoWoman brought her hand to her chest.

“Sure. But let’s do it outside. There’s not enough room in here,” I said as I ushered the Bad Camo Couple to the door.

“Check it out.” Jack nods toward the table behind ours. We’re silent, we listen. They have the magazine open to the DOs and DON’Ts fashion page and I can see my shot of the Bad Camo Couple staring out as the man holds it up to take a closer look. They are the featured DON’T, the biggest DON’T of the week, more DON’T than the unitard juggler or any of the three other DON’Ts on the page. “Could be a good look for us,” the man jokes.

“Ugh. Put that thing away.” The woman snatches it out of his hands. “It’s so *mean*.”

Jack leans into me and whispers, “I like it when you’re mean.” Then he kisses me on the neck. I order another drink and he does the same. Ted asks for the check.

“What? No more champagne, Ted? Oh, yeah. I guess you’ve got that long drive ahead of you,” I say. I’m tipsy and when I’m tipsy I can’t help needling Ted about having moved to the suburbs.

“It’s not that bad, Sara. You should come out sometime. You might even like it.”

“We’ll see about that,” I say. I’ve refused on principle to visit Ted and Genevieve’s new house. Jack says I’m being stubborn and immature but Jack’s young and doesn’t get it.

As soon as Genevieve and baby Olivier arrive back at the table, Ted announces it’s time to go. He has to mow the lawn. Genevieve’s parents are coming for a barbecue supper. She has to make potato salad. Genevieve hands Olivier to me, freeing her hands to pack the baby gear and pop open the stroller. I grip the baby firmly, but not too close. Jack tickles Olivier’s nose with his finger and makes goo-goo baby-talk sounds that I hope I’ll be able to block out the next time we have sex. Which won’t be for three weeks, I remind myself. Jack’s leaving for his home in Toronto late this afternoon.

Hugs. Kisses on both cheeks all around. Safe drive, have a great time. Give my best to your parents, Gen. Call me tomorrow. I’ll see you at the office, Ted. They’re gone and I slump back into my chair, knocking back the champagne cocktail that’s been placed in front of me. Then Gen suddenly reappears. She’s frantic. Olivier is wailing. His pacifier has disappeared. We look between plates, under napkins. Jack finds it on the floor and hands it to Gen. She gives it a quick wipe on her shirt and pushes it into Olivier’s mouth before scrambling back out the door. I shudder. Doesn’t it have to be sterile or something?

Jack looks at me but says nothing. His smile is crooked and his eyes are warm. “That is one cute baby,” he says.

“Yup,” I say, my eyes darting around, trying to find a waitress, a hostess, a bus boy, anyone who can get me a drink.

“Do you ever think about it, Sara?”

I can’t look at him. I catch the eye of our waitress and point to my empty glass. She nods.

“We’ve never talked about this, you know.” Jack is not letting up. I hate this conversation more than I hate Parrot Girl.

“That’s true.”

“I have to be honest with you, Sara. And you need to be honest with me. You’re thirty-nine and you know I’m totally cool with that, but I also know that, well, your time is...”

“Running out?”

“I guess, yeah.” Jack’s voice is very quiet.

I laugh. “Jack, I don’t want to have a baby, if that’s what you’re worried about.” He looks relieved. My drink arrives and I immediately suck half of it down. “I’m not one of those women.”

“I know *that*. I just thought that we’ve been together for almost a year so maybe we should make sure we’re on the same page with this.” I am certainly not on the same page with anyone who says *on the same page*, but I say nothing and smile. “I mean, I love kids, my nieces and nephews are great and Olivier is adorable, but it’s not for me. I’ve never wanted kids of my own.”

“Great. That’s just great, then.” I raise my near-empty glass to clink Jack’s, down the last of it and instruct him to order another round as I excuse myself to use the bathroom.

I squat above the toilet to pee and wrestle my cell phone out of my purse. I dial Gen’s number, but click the phone shut before it has a chance to ring. I can’t call her about this, about Jack not wanting to have kids and me not wanting to have kids and how great that should be but how I feel mysteriously winded and sad and I don’t know why. I can’t call her and we can’t spend hours dissecting my feelings and his feelings and still not really know why I feel like this by the time one of our phones starts to die. I can’t call her about this because she has Olivier and her parents are coming for a barbecue supper and she has potato salad to make.

There’s a girl sitting in my spot, laughing with Jack. “Hello,” I say.

The girl stands. “Oh, my goodness, Sara B. I saw you over here and I didn’t want to be rude or anything, I just wanted to meet you—you’re, like, my idol, seriously. I want your job. What you do is amazing. I mean, you’re *Sara B.*”

“You can just call me Sara.” I stick my hand out to shake hers. “And you are?”

“Eva. Eva Belanger.”

“That would make you Eva B., then.”

“Gosh, yes. I guess it would.” Eva’s face is bright red. She looks away from me and to Jack.

“Go ahead,” Jack says. “She won’t bite. Well, not unless you want her to.”

“You’re funny,” I say to Jack. “So what can I do for you, Eva?”

“I just, well, I was wondering if you’d ever consider letting me tag along, shadow you for a day, see how you do it.”

“It’s not magic. It’s just a job.”

“No, no, it’s *important*. You know, I have almost every issue of *Snap*. I had to get the older ones off eBay, but now I’m only missing issues six and eight, when you were still only monthly.”

“Nineteen ninety-three,” I confirm. The first year, when it was just Ted and I and a bag of money his dad gave us. By ninety-five we were weekly and had an office. Now we have a building, six satellite offices and three retail stores. Last month, a stuffy American company paid Ted and me twenty thousand dollars to spend a day with their marketing team. Advertising agencies pay us more. We don’t mention those things in the magazine. “I think I’ve got some of those old issues kicking around,” I say to Eva. “If I can find six and eight, they’re yours.”

“Really? Are you serious?”

“It’s not a problem,” I say.

“What is a problem is that you’re not sitting down,” Jack says. “Another round?”

“Sure,” I say. “Would you like to join us, Eva?”

“Oh, my! Yes, of course—if you really don’t mind.”

“We really don’t mind,” I say. I wouldn’t mind anything that’s a distraction from Jack and the baby talk and the talk about babies and not wanting one, and not knowing why I was spooked when he said he didn’t want one when I don’t want one, either. I definitely want this Eva girl to join us.

Eva tells Jack stories about me. She tells him about the time I got into a very public squabble with a Hollywood starlet after we published a picture of her wasted and bleary-eyed, attempting to dress in what I could only guess was her misguided interpretation of Audrey Hepburn in *Funny Face*. Here to shoot a film, the starlet was on the town, trying like they all do when they come to Montreal to look French. But like they all do, she got it wrong. The striped top was not black and white like Hepburn’s, but too short and striped in multicolored pastels. The black leggings were shiny and too tight and made her ass look like a big balloon. Instead of ballet flats, she wore stilettos and her trashy big blond hair was nothing like Hepburn’s neat-and-sleek brunette style. To top it off, the starlet had the scarf—they always had the scarf, no matter the season—wrapped around her neck like a strangling tensor bandage. It was not French. It was sad. She was definitely a DON’T.

Eva tells Jack about how I’d started wearing shrunken kidsize T-shirts with cutesy logos and sayings when everyone else was decked out in Doc Martens and plaid. She tells Jack that when she’d read my TO DO column a couple weeks back she knew she had to meet me for real. The column was about recycling old Girl Guide and Boy Scout merit badges by sewing them onto the sleeves of the prettiest

vintage beaded sweaters, and Eva said she had done the very same thing just days before the magazine came out.

I got that particular idea from Sophie, the woman who ran a thrift shop in Westmount I frequented. I didn't mention this in my column and I don't mention it now. Sophie said that the kids were coming in and rifling through a bin of old patches in search of merit badges to sew on their coats. Sewing the badges on vintage sweaters was my idea and, according to Eva, hers, too.

Indeed, she's wearing a pink vintage cardigan, buttoned up to the neck with brown triangular Brownie badges sewn in pairs down one sleeve. I recognize the one for cooking, the one for puppet-making, another for writing. They're the oldstyle ones, the ones from the seventies. I had all of these. Eva's wearing pearls, three strands and they're real. She wears glasses, vintage cat-eyes with custom lenses and the tiniest rhinestones clustered at the edge of the frames. She has on a brown pencil skirt that falls below her knees, panty hose and shoes that look clunky and orthopedic, something a nurse or your grandma might wear. But it's her hair—that red—that gets me. Montreal red, the color old ladies in the city dye their hair instead of trying to keep their natural color or letting it go grey. It's not red, exactly, but more burgundy, with a bit of that purple that's the color of eggplant. Aubergine—that's the word. A bit of aubergine mixed with the color of the reddest wine. It's no one's real hair color. It belongs to the old ladies and to Eva.

It's 3:00 p.m. and Jack and I are sitting at the same table we have been since eleven. I'm drunk, and so is he. Eva is still here and I'm glad. She's sober and has offered to drive Jack to the airport. If we don't go soon, Jack will miss his flight, so we stumble out into the afternoon and smoke cigarettes and wait for Eva to bring her car around to pick us up. There's still a line to get into the restaurant. We're going to have to find someplace new, and this time, I make a vow to myself, I'm not going to write about it.

"Looks like someone has a fan," Jack says as he wraps his arms around me.

"She's cute," I say.

"Not as cute as me." Jack gets cocky when he drinks. "Maybe she can keep you company while I'm in Toronto." Jack also worries about what I'm up to with whom when we're apart, even though we have an agreement about this.

I kiss him on the lips. "Nope. She's not as cute as you, baby."

Jack smiles. I think I'm going to throw up. I am not a baby-sweetheart-darling-sugarpie kind of girl. Jack likes that kind of thing so sometimes I do it for him and I hate that more than I hate the baby conversation and Parrot Girl.

Eva zips up in front of the restaurant in a silver Saab convertible. Jack and I pour ourselves into the car and we head to my place in the Plateau. Jack and I race up the stairs and into my apartment. We grab his bags and we're off to the airport. "It's really nice of you to do this, Eva. We could have taken a taxi."

"No, no, don't be silly. It's no problem. I just wish we had more time to talk. There are so many things I'd love to ask you about." She bites her lower lip. "But I don't want to be a pest."

"How about you come over after we drop Jack off and we'll have some wine and talk all you want?"

“Oh, my goodness, Sara, that would be the most amazing thing.”

“Then it’s a plan.”

I toss a packet of breath mints at Jack and straighten his shirt before he heads to the check-in counter. I feel like his mother. But he’s thirty. Biologically, I couldn’t actually *be* his mother.

“So how long have you two been doing the long distance thing?” Eva asks as we wait for Jack to get his boarding pass.

“Almost a year.”

“Gosh, that must be hard.”

“Not really,” I say. It’s easier than trying to explain how it isn’t hard most of the time but then some of the time it is, like when I’m sick or he’s sick, or at night when I think I hear something weird or I can’t open an especially tight jar of kosher pickles. The worst is when I have to go to a party or dinner and it’s all couples and I wish he was there so we could snicker together in the back of the room—Jack is good for that—and not feel alone and old.

“I don’t think I could do it. You must really trust each other.”

“We have to,” I say. I don’t have to tell Eva about my arrangement with Jack, that our relationship is open, that we can have sex with other people, but not date them, we can screw them, but not love them. I once told Genevieve about this and she called me crazy. I said it was practical, better than making all sorts of promises to each other only to have them broken. Gen called my attitude defeatist. I called it modern and reminded her that she told me once that she had exactly the same arrangement with the two boyfriends she had before Ted.

“Look how that worked out,” Gen said.

“You were fine with it at the time.”

“I could have never done that with Ted.”

“I’m not saying you should have. It’s different with you and Ted.”

“It’s never going to be serious with Jack unless you’re monogamous.”

“Who says I want serious? Who says monogamy is the only way?” Discussing the finer points of your open long-distance relationship with your staunchly monogamous married friend is ill-advised.

“Come on, Sara. You’re almost forty.”

“Yup. I’m almost forty.”

I know that I’m supposed to know what this means. People say it all the time. *You’re almost forty. Wow, you’re turning forty. How are you with the big four-oh? How am I with the big four-oh?* The big four-oh is super, and I’m not quite there yet, but thanks for reminding me. And yes, I know I’m not married and I know I don’t have a baby and I don’t think I want either of those things. And yes, my boyfriend is nine

years younger, so you can stop asking questions and doing speculative math in your head. I am fine with the big four-oh, but you people are freaking me out, and I already had my freak-out at thirty-five, so stop it or I will slap you.

Eva wanders over to the newsstand, leaving Jack and I a moment alone. It's always the same. I'll be ready, almost anxious for him to go, to get back to work, to sprawl in my bed and sleep alone, but then I want him to stay and I nearly cry. I kiss him goodbye at the security gate and he says he loves me and that he'll call when he gets in.

I find Eva at the newsstand thumbing through a celebrity tabloid. "That one's my favorites," I say.

"Me, too," she says. "It's so trashy."

"But not *too* trashy. There has to be a balance."

"I used to buy it at this Metro stop up in Chabanel when I'd go look at fabrics, then I'd put it inside, like, *V* or Japanese *Vogue* or something and read it on the way home. I didn't want anyone to see me with it."

We step out of the terminal and walk to Eva's car. "You can't worry about what everyone else thinks."

"Oh, I don't, not now. Especially after reading that column you wrote about embracing your guilty pleasures."

"I wrote that years ago."

Eva stops for a moment. "Two thousand and one, I think. Sometime in the spring?"

I have no idea if she's right, but I'll assume she is. "I think you know more about me than I do."

The drive to the airport and back with the top of Eva's convertible down has sobered me up and a dull headache is setting in. Eva parks and we walk to the corner and buy two bottles of cheap French wine at the *depanneur*. A couple glasses and my headache is masked by the liquor. Then there's the guilt and the phantom pain of work tomorrow. It's not even eight.

Eva walks around my apartment as if it were a museum. She looks closely at everything, every picture, every knickknack, the title on every spine of every book on my shelves. She doesn't touch a thing. I take my camera out and upload the weekend's photos onto my computer. Of the twelve DOs for the fashion page, seven are strong enough to use. I only need five. I have fifteen DON'Ts, of which ten are hysterical, but I only need five of those, as well. And then there's Parrot Girl.

I hate Parrot Girl because I don't know what to do with her. It used to be easier when people just dressed how they dressed and it was about style, not irony and preciousness or getting their picture taken. I'm tired of Parrot Girl and all the other girls who may not have parrots but they're the same because they try so hard not to be. I hate Parrot Girl and her soccer socks and her cowboy boots and her satin jacket. But I hate her most because I know she looks ridiculous and that she is a DON'T. But it's not about me and my personal DON'Ts, not really, not anymore, it's about the perception of DON'Ts and knowing whether twenty-year-olds will think Parrot Girl is a DON'T. Stuffy American companies don't pay people twenty thousand dollars to talk to their marketing department for a day unless they can tell

them definitively what a DON'T is to a twenty-year-old. *I'm almost forty*. I want to slap myself, but instead I take another swig of wine, and then I want to slap Parrot Girl, but she's not here. Eva is. I don't want to slap her. She's twenty-four. I could ask her what she thinks about Parrot Girl. She'd be thrilled, I'm sure. But I don't because I can't, because I can't fucking tell *what* Parrot Girl is. Is she a poseur or some newfangled post-post-ironic poster child for some save-the-birds society? Is she wrong or all right? Is she a test, a comeuppance for something I did last week or last year? *Fuck me*. Is she a DO or a DON'T?

My brain flips over and hurts. Get me a cold compress and a very soft pillow. Let me not care and play dead or pretend I'm a teacher, a strict schoolmarm. It's a pop quiz for Eva: who's a DO, who's a DON'T? Pencils down in three minutes! I'll check her work right away, taking my time—making her wait, making her nervous and possibly sweaty, though Eva seems likely to be one of those girls whose sweat smells like rosewater and never stains. Yes, a pop quiz could be fun, with Parrot Girl first up. No, second—I don't need Eva to sense that I need her, and that I want her to spill every secret she knows.

I'm quite sure that Eva would tell me everything—anything—I wanted. She'd be happy, I'd be happy, we could do a dance around the living room because we'd know, we'd know, we'd *know* just what Parrot Girl is. We could revel and open more wine, make a toast to the most fabulous DO or DON'T of the week. I stare at the photo of Parrot Girl and her stupid fucking parrot and my mouth seals shut. I say nothing and there will be no pop quiz. I don't need Eva, she holds no secrets I haven't heard or told before. Parrot Girl is my problem, she's a riddle, not a test, maybe even a joke.

I click through the photos and print them out. I spread them on the floor and Eva stands beside me as I decide which photos will make the column. Skinny Denim Shorts Man with the skeezy mustache is a DON'T. Skinny Pink Polo Shirt Man with the mutton chops and a kilt is a DO. Headband Girl is a DON'T. Babushka Girl is a DO. And so it goes until there is one more DON'T slot and one more DO. Parrot Girl is still on the floor. My confidence is sunk; it's not too late for the pop quiz and this is no joke. I've made a Skinny Pink Polo Shirt Man with mutton chops and a kilt a DO. He looks absurd and he's trying too hard but I know he's a DO because the boys at *Snap* keep trying to grow mutton chops and half of them are in kilts—but never sarongs—and they really like pink and girls like Eva like *them*. And there are no fucking pets at all so it's really not so complicated.

I look closer at the photo: it's technically good. I have to use it. Eva shuffles her feet. She's bored, she's waiting, one second longer and she'll know I'm a fraud. I pick up the photo and put it on the DON'T pile. I feel a rush of bravado and decide she'll be the feature DON'T. Eva's shuffling stops. Fuck Parrot Girl.

Jack calls. He's home and safe. The flight was good. No snacks or bar service, but it was only an hour and he tells me he found a half-eaten protein bar in his jacket pocket. I'm drunk and I can't believe I'm dating someone who eats protein bars. Eva's sitting on the sofa wearing gloves and examining issues six and eight of *Snap*. She told me that she carries the gloves in her handbag at all times. She won't read an important book or periodical without them, she said. Eva is odd. I slip into my bedroom and say this to Jack and he says, "*You're odd.*" And he's right, of course. I like her—Eva—and her oddness. I like that she carries gloves in her bag and wears panty hose and orthopedic shoes and has hair the color of a Francophone grandma. Jack tells me he loves me and that he misses me already. "I know you do, baby," I say and as soon as that *baby* is out of my mouth I feel again like I want to vomit.

Eva is too drunk to drive so I tell her she can stay here. I make up the spare room that's so rarely used. I lend her a black cotton camisole and a pair of boxer shorts printed with grinning flowers. They're

Japanese and they were free. They look cute on Eva. I rifle through my sleepwear options and decide on a long black silk chemise with lace trim and a matching robe. I keep my bra on so my breasts won't flop around. I catch myself in the mirror. I look like a madam, but the silk feels cool and soft against my skin. At home, I'm usually in long johns and T-shirts, my hair tied back in a ponytail and my glasses on. I swipe a neutral gloss across my lips before heading back to the living room.

As we finish the wine, Eva tells me all about how great and important and influential I am. Sometimes I ask her about herself. She grew up in Pointe-Claire with an Anglo mother and a French father, not far it turns out from Ted and Genevieve's new house. I look up their address in my book and Eva knows the street, it's about six blocks from her parents' place. She's living there now, just temporarily she says. She has a job, an office PA for a French film company, but the pay is shit. She hates it, says the producer is a prick who wears a fedora and a trench coat every day and does nothing except play video games and look at porn on his cell phone. I tell her I'll take his picture and make him the featured DON'T one week. She laughs until her eyes tear and I do, too. Eva tells me she went to private school, with uniforms that she started altering at thirteen. She says she makes clothes she sometimes sells to friends, but mostly she's a stylist and a writer—like me. Except when I was twenty-four no one knew what a stylist did and no one knew our names. I tell her this and she goes on about how it's about time people—but mostly me—were recognized for our talent. We're the ones who spot and set the trends, not the movie stars, not the pop stars. Eva is very passionate about this. I'm fading and my eyes are heavy, but Eva keeps talking, telling me how remarkable and inspiring I am. "Look at all you've accomplished—look at everything you've done. And you're not even forty." Eva says this and it's better than sex, it's better than a lullaby.