

HEAVENLY CHORUS

“We were just getting used to the gay thing, and now this,” my mom says, pointing to the bandages on my wrists.

“Young lady, what’s up?” the doctor asks. He’s twinkly and it’s irritating. Trying not to stare at the tufts of black hair sprouting from his ears, I mutter, "Life sucks."

“She’s always been gloomy,” my mom says. “She sees the worst.”

He nods. “Life does suck, sometimes.”

“And then you die,” I add.

“Whoa. What about joy and pleasure?”

“Raindrops on roses, whiskers on kittens? Humans abuse their gifts. Don’t get me started on how they treat animals.” I rub my arms – the adhesive itches.

“This is not your problem to solve. You are responsible for yourself only. And not doing so great a job of that.”

California’s Prop 8 results pushed me to the edge, where I teetered until Mary Bee dumped me, fed up with my gloominess, dire predictions and lack of humor. She told me to get help and when I argued with her she slammed the door in my face. At the memory I weep and choke on the tears running down the back of my throat.

Dr. Kleinschmidt tells my mom he will hospitalize me for electroconvulsive shock treatments. They will fry away my memories. My mom opens her pink trifold organizer and selects a date.

“You’re treating my symptoms,” I snuffle. “Not my disease.”

“Dear child, your symptoms are your disease,” he says. I can’t argue. He’s fifty-eight and his wall is papered with credentials. I’m seventeen and failing high school.

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Some days later, a smiling woman with short brown hair is sitting on the foot of my bed. She’s not a nurse or a doctor. She offers me a brownie. I know what brownies are but I don’t know who she is. My mind is working poorly – it’s hard to describe. As though files are missing. My thoughts buzz, searching for what’s always been there. She pulls out a pink trifold organizer, shows me the date, and says I’ve been here two weeks. Her hands look familiar and it comes to me then, that she’s my mom. Scary, but good. My mom, good.

“When can I go home?”

“When Dr. Kleinschmidt says you’re ready. He’ll be along in a minute, we can ask him.”

I close my eyes. I’m cured. I’m fine. I practice smiling and raising my eyebrows a bit. I want to look happy but not manic.

A knock on the door, and the doctor pokes his head in. His hairy knuckle beckons my mom into the hall. My hearing is acute, and he isn’t even whispering. So I hear him say that I need another series, three more treatments, another week. “She’ll be so unhappy to hear that,” my mom says.

“My point exactly,” says Dr. Kleinschmidt. “She’s still unhappy. However, there’s an alternative, no guarantees. A drug trial. It’s up to you.”

My mom looks at me and I nod like a bobble doll. He hands me a bottle of little green pills. The pharmaceutical company is named Psylex. Take one a day with food. I accept the brownie and pop a pill.

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Lying in bed again, at home, I study my posters. Apparently, I’m interested in the environment (coral reef), gay rights (Matthew Shepard march), and revolutionaries (Mandela). Props to me. A dog wanders in, a black lab with a whitish muzzle. Tail a-wagging, she lays her head on my knee. I stare at her for a while, finally remembering her name, Myrtle. I decide to take her for a walk.

It may be a mistake. All the houses are identical, all the streets look alike. We walk and walk, Myrtle padding along with her tongue hanging out. I ask a kid to bring the dog some water. I’m just about to ask him to call my mom when I see my brother Aaron washing his car. He’s my twin, the successful one, six feet of prickitude.

“Can I borrow your car?” I ask.

He barely looks up. “No, you’re on medication.”

Probably not the right medication, because I have an overwhelming desire to stab him with something pointy. Instead, friendly-like, I put a hand on his arm. “It’s important. I really need to borrow your car.” The air lights up with a golden glow and a melodic warbling. Dizzy, I put my other hand on his arm to steady myself, and the glow and singing intensify.

He reaches in his pocket, pulls out the keys, and hands them to me with a big smile.

“Here you go! I’m going to Florida for spring break, so just keep it till I get back.”

Reeling from the unexpected bequest, I encounter my dad in the garage. Normally I avoid my dad, since it’s painful to watch him pretend I’m not a loser. “Hi, Dad,” I mumble, and he gives me a hug. The garage fills with twinkling light, accompanied by ethereal trilling.

I may be forgetful and depressed, but I’m not stupid. On a hunch, I ask him for money. I’m expecting five bucks, but he empties his wallet into my hand. “Need more than that?” he asks. He’s given me \$80.

“Uh, yeah,” I say, curious to see what will happen. He goes into the house whistling and comes back with a credit card. “Use this, honey. Have a good day.”

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At first I’m cautious, worried that touching will drain me. But each use seems to recharge the energy, like a Prius battery. I don’t want to waste it on my parents. It’s spring break and I decide to take a road trip with Myrtle, in Aaron’s car, fueled with my dad’s VISA. I’m thinking big. I’m going to adjust some attitudes, starting with the No. 1 developer in New York City.

On Fifth Avenue I head for Trump Towers, into the Grill, where I’m pleased to learn they need help. The manager, a haggard smoker named Joanie, likes me. Her eyes roam all over me and she laughs at her own jokes until she chokes for air. She gives me a job bussing tables and tells me I can sleep on her couch for a couple of nights until I find a place. I’ve been clearing tables for about an hour when Joanie backs me against the dishwasher and clutches my ass. “The Donald is here and I’ll introduce you if you’re a good girl.” Her breath is lethal. I grab her wrists and push her off me, accompanied by soaring voices, sparkly lights. She leads me to his private dining room. I shed my apron along the way.

As soon as we shake hands, The Donald is mine. He pulls out a chair. “Have a seat. Joanie, bring us some champagne. ”

“I can’t drink, I’m seventeen,” I say. “How’s about some OJ?”

“Put a drop of fizzy in it. Now what can I do for you?”

I lay it on pretty thick. His achievements, his celebrity, his success. Blah, blah, blah. He’s not bored with this. “What’s left for you, Mr. Trump? You’re at a point in your life when you are questioning your purpose. It’s time to give, so that your tombstone doesn’t just say Rich Guy. You want it to say Saint.” I take both his hands in mine, and the choir bursts into song. I can hardly hear myself think.

He floats in the light, aglow, beaming joyfully at me. “Money’s easy. It’s the saint part that’s hard.”

“I have total faith in you, Mr. Trump.”

Joanie serves our lunch, grilled tofu with linguini for me, and mahi-mahi with mango chutney and brown rice for Donald. She shoots me a sad, pleading look, and I wink to let her know, no harm done. I throw out some ideas for achieving sainthood. “What do poor kids need? A neighborhood library. Smaller classes. You could lobby for revised drug laws.”

He shakes his head. “Good ideas, dearie, but not up my alley. I’m in real estate.”

I am silent, because I know he’ll get there.

“The words ‘New York real estate’ and ‘help the needy’ don’t belong in the same sentence.” He pokes a finger at me for emphasis.

“The poor live somewhere, don’t they?”

“The city puts them in hotels.” He nods and Joanie trots over. “We’re done. Bring her a dessert menu. She’s a growing girl.” He jabs his finger at me again. “There’s a bunch of

abandoned apartments in the South Bronx and East Harlem. I look at them and smell failure. Rats. Broken elevators and falling down ceilings.”

It’s time to seal the deal. I reach out and take hold of his hairy white arm. It’s wearing a gold chain bracelet. A soprano sighs delicately, and specks of gold float through the air. “You should remodel them,” I say. “It’s your philanthropic duty as a New York real estate developer.”

He jumps up. “You’re right, by God. It’s what I was put on earth for!”

Joanie brings me apple pie with vanilla ice cream, and I eat it, content, listening to Donald on the phone to his bank, to the mayor, to his broker. He even calls Senator Clinton and asks her if there’s Federal grants or tax credits for what he’s about to do. He dictates a press release to his PR firm.

I thank him for the meal.

“No, by God, it’s you I should be thanking. Who are you? I didn’t even catch your name.”

Joanie gives me a to-go cup of water for Myrtle.

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My next target is in Connecticut, visiting her parents. I lie down with Myrtle in a juniper hedge behind a daffodil border. It’s seven a.m., time for Ann Coulter to walk her dogs.

There she is, with two waddling corgis. When the corgis notice Myrtle, they drag Ann to the junipers. I stand up and say hello but she ignores me in a way that feels familiar. I notice that she’s not so horse-faced in person and she looks older than my mom. I need to touch her but she keeps backing away. I hold out a felt-tip pen and the menu from the Trump Tower Grill.

“Miss Coulter,” I say, “can I have your autograph? I’m such a fan.”

She eyes the menu suspiciously. “What’s that?”

“See, Mr. Trump signed it too.”

As she takes the pen, I clasp her hand. A ghostly soprano warms up with minor arpeggios. The corgis stop sniffing Myrtle’s butt and look up at me through the glittering air for instructions.

“Sit,” I tell them. To Ann, I say, “Your father loves you, you know.”

Her face crumples. “He – he – he’s never said it!”

“Forgive him. He’s a product of our misogynistic culture.”

“How’s that?” She takes the tissue I offer and wipes her eyes.

“The Madonna-whore dichotomy. Where does a daughter fit in? He had no choice but to ignore you.”

“He likes my books!”

“My point. You’re trying to please him. What about Ann?”

“I’m happy! Goddam happy!”

I let it lie there as she sobs from the depths. Finally she catches her breath. “Everyone hates me except the weird ones who glom on.”

“How’s that working for you?”

“It’s a form of attention.”

“Punishing, isn’t it? You can stop, today. Work on your golf swing. Go to Mexico for a few months. Adopt a baby.”

“You’re right. Being toxic poisons me.” She laughs at her little joke. “Excuse me.” She pulls out her cell phone and places a call. “Matt. Can you get me on tomorrow? Exclusive. I want to tell everyone I’ve just been kidding.”

I break off a daffodil bloom and tuck it behind her ear. The soprano’s been joined by two others, and they harmonize like triplets.

#

There’s only a day left before I have to go back to school, not nearly enough time for all the people I need to visit. Ken Lewis, CEO of Bank of America. Rex Tillerson, Chairman of Exxon Mobil. The NRA’s Wayne LaPierre. James Dobson of Focus on the Family. They’ll have to wait until summer.

Heading home, I drive under the influence, fly along the humming interstate, intoxicated by my gift. Three times, troopers pull me over, examine my driver’s license, then let me go with a warning to “take it easy, honey.”

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“She’s much better,” my mom says. “Straight A’s on her last report card.”

Dr. Kleinschmidt raises his caterpillar eyebrows but says nothing. I think he doesn’t believe her.

“It’s true,” I say. “I’m running for student council president.”

“Amazing.”

“I’m promising an organic salad bar in the cafeteria. Of course, I have to shake a lot of hands too.” I decide not to tell him about my spring break trip. He’s skeptical of my rapid improvement, and the miracles would seem unscientific.

“Are you back with your girlfriend?” he asks.

I shake my head. “It’s over, no biggie.” I lie like a rug. I miss Mary Bee terribly. The only time I see her is in American History class at 8 a.m. She sits two rows up, three seats over,

a thousand miles away. Her hair is always slightly damp from her morning shower. I’ve forgotten how it smells.

The doctor says the drug trial is ending and the blind will be broken.

“What do you mean?” my mom asks.

“We’ll find out whether she’s been taking the drug or a placebo.”

I think about this broken blind. If I find out the pills are nothing but sugar and filler, will the miracles cease? “Well, I don’t want to know. Just give me a lifetime supply,” I say.

He chuckles. “Sorry, dear. It’ll be at least a year before the FDA approves it.”

I hold up my bottle and rattle the three lonely pills that are left. “What’s it called?”

He leafs through a folder. “Um, looks like the name will be Chorus.”

Wow. Suspicious, I ask about side effects.

“I don’t know who’s taking the drug versus the placebo. A couple of patients have reported constipation. Any problems like that?” He studies me over his glasses.

“No, no. What else?”

“One patient dropped out of the study. He had auditory and visual hallucinations. They went away when he quit taking the pills.”

On the surface I’m calm, reflecting Dr. Kleinschmidt’s twinkle right back at him. On the inside, my stomach has turned to concrete and my thoughts swirl in confusion. Aaron, my father, The Donald, and Ann Coulter – didn’t my touch simply free them to do the right thing? Make my fellow students notice me and vote for my good ideas? I just made people aware of a better choice.

Or was I fooling myself? Maybe the drug let me manipulate people and take away their free will. What if others might have the touching power? Like a postal worker who deciphers

secret messages in the dictionary, or someone who’s chewed through the leather straps. After all, it would be prescribed for the mentally ill.

After a sleepless night I know what I must do. Google and the Psylex website give me a name: Dr. Garth Slate, Chief Scientist. After dinner I drive to his house, two towns over. He lives in an immaculate Victorian, three stories high, pale gray with red and black trim. All around it, flowers are a-bloom – crabapple trees, dogwoods, tulips, violets and dandelion dots in the bright green lawn. A driveway curves around to a garage, and there’s Dr. Slate, carrying a garbage bag in one hand and an armful of newspapers in the other, and he’s walking towards his trash bins. I’m glad to see that he recycles.

My strategy is shaky. The drug – if that’s what I’ve been taking and not a placebo – works well. If Psylex doesn’t market it, some other company will eventually come up with a similar formulation. Well, he’s the genius. He’ll think of something.

Dr. Slate drops the newspapers into the blue bin. As he lifts the garbage bag towards the gray bin, it splits and spills Slate family trash all over the ground. Plastic bags, paper towels, apple cores, macaroni boxes, coffee grounds, moldy cheese. “Fuck,” he says.

I pop the trunk of Aaron’s car, where he keeps trash bags, blankets, a first-aid kit, a flashlight, energy bars, and water. in case he has a breakdown. I whip out a couple of bags, and trot down the driveway towards the mess. “Let me help you, Dr. Slate!”

“Have we met?” He’s a skinny guy, a fat-free runner. He smells like beer. “Are you one of the new people down the street?”

Why not? “Yes I am. Let me give you a hand.” I start shoving crap into a bag. He tries to stop me but I push his hand away. Sparkles fill the air. A woman’s voice, a rich alto, begins to hum minor scales. “Got a scoop?”

He goes into his garage and comes out with a shovel. Together we clean up the trash.

“Nice of you,” he says. “Neighborly.”

I hold out my hand and he has no choice but to take it. The humming voice is joined by a mezzo counterpoint. A glowing pink light flows over us. “Come on in, have a drink,” he says.

Except for a vase of red tulips, the kitchen’s hard and permanent: granite, stainless steel, marble. The oven gives off an herby chicken smell. He says his wife will be back soon, she’s gone to pick up their son. I don’t have much time. I refuse the beer but take a Pepsi.

“I’m in the Chorus drug trial,” I tell him, “and experiencing some unusual side effects.”

“Lights, singing? Harmless. Hence the name.”

“Has anyone mentioned a certain, um, ability?”

“Very rare. Why, you?”

“Definitely.”

“You have a certain genetic variation that enhances your response to the drug.” He pops a Guinness and goes to the stove. He takes the lid off a pot and pokes at what’s inside with a spoon.

“Please sit down, Dr. Slate. This is vitally important.”

He turns a chair backwards and sits astride. “Call me Garth.” He pours half the can down his throat. “You know that Chorus works. The company needs a money-maker. We owe it to our shareholders.”

“Your shareholders are mutual funds. You owe them nothing.”

He’s glum. He picks at his nails.

“Think back. Has Psylex ever *not* gone to market with a drug, after trials?” I ask.

“Of course. After the Vioxx scare, we stopped the development of our own COX-2 inhibitor. And there was a gout drug that also opened arteries. Looked good, until thromboses killed a few.” He sips his beer. “If the hazards outweigh the benefits, we stop development. In the case of Chorus, I can’t reveal the hazards. Not in so many words. How can I say it ... Delusional? Intensified grandiosity? Narcissistic?” He laughs. “A description of my board of directors. It doesn’t seem like a big deal to me. What’s your name, anyway?”

He doesn’t get it. I must touch him, make him understand. I take my glass to the sink, then twirl quickly and grab him around his middle. He tries to wrench away and we fall to the floor but I’ve got one hand on his neck and the other under his shirt and as I whisper, “Relax,” a tenor voice begins a smooth ooo-ooo-ooo and the air pulsates purplely. It’s so beautiful that I get goose bumps. “Chorus must never go to market,” I tell him, stroking his forehead and feeling him calm down.

“I’ll have to report some deaths. Is there a word for this? Falsifying results to keep a drug *off* the market?”

“It’s ironic, Garth.”

“Hey, thanks. For being my conscience.” He slaps the floor, disturbing the glow, which shifts into the red spectrum. “Feels good. It’s the right thing to do.”

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The next morning, I twist the top off my bottle. There’s one pill left, the last one in the world. I swallow it with my Cheerios. I’ve been dreaming about Mary Bee, her silky white-blond hair and plump little mouth. I don’t know why we broke up. We were perfect together, and will be again. I just need one more chance.

It’s time. I pull up in front of her house, stride to the front door, and ring the bell.

Mary Bee opens the door and her precious face creases in a frown. “What are – ” but I reach out and take her hand. In the silver light, a liquid soprano solo rises and falls.

“I’ve missed you, Mary Bee.” I won’t ask for anything this time, at least not out loud.

“Me too.” She presses against me and kisses me with her delicate mouth. She’s irresistible – soft-firm, salty-sweet. Twinkling speckles fill the air around us. I inhale the scent of her hair, like apples, as the heavenly chorus erupts into thrilling song.