

## DIANA CAGE

*Illustrations by Buzz Slutzky*

### *The Husbands*

I was at the Metrograph, a new movie theater on Ludlow Street, when a woman approached me in the lobby. “Can you fucking believe this?” she said. I nod just to be nice until I realize she’s performing that faux shock that long time inhabitants of formerly crummy New York neighborhoods love so much. She is right though; the theater is over the top. There was a guy in the lobby dressed exactly like Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*, and Ted and I split a twelve-dollar bottle of green juice before the film. We watch a documentary on Fassbinder that’s mostly mediocre. After, at Congee Village, I tell my friends the story of watching *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant* while having sex with my then husband for the last time.

Petra tells a story about falling out of love with her husband. She’s putting on makeup, fawning over her own beauty while sensuously stroking the fur trim on her white satin gown. Suddenly she turns and forcefully pins her friend Sidonie to the bed. Petra lies on top of Sidonie and describes the disgust she felt during sex. She has some gems in this monologue, describing his filthy smell—“He stunk of man,”—and her reluctant submission—“He mounted me like a bull mounts a cow,” she tells her Sidonie, “with no regard for a woman’s pleasure.” Sidonie lies dead-eyed on the pillow while Petra goes on about the shame she felt when she orgasmed beneath him.

“At that point I started crying,” I explain to everyone at the table.

I’d been dating a woman named Karen for weeks while trying to stay married to Ian, and they were both about to break up with me. Crying after sex is fine, but crying during is not a good sign.

Fifteen years later Ian is breaking up with someone else and maybe I am too. He’s laughing at me because I don’t understand how Tinder works.

“But sometimes I get notifications that say, ‘You have new people interested in you.’ So I click to see who liked me.”

Ian used Tinder all the time and had hoarded a list of matches, which I now understood were women who he’d liked who’d then liked him back. He never contacted any of these women, but he often visited the list, satisfied by its potential.

“How is your sex life?” my cool new doctor asked. “Are you monogs?”

Discussions of monogamy are now so ubiquitous we don't even use the whole word. JMill asked if I was nonmono—like a test result. I can't help it. I only want to fuck my husband. What happened? When I lived in San Francisco, every party turned into an orgy, totally normal. Not so in New York. Last Christmas, Max and I were cruised by a famousish academic. Should we have a threeway with her? I was very worried about the details. Who would do whom? Would it be gauche to bring her to the apartment on the subway? Do I need to clean the bedroom? By the time we were done discussing the idea, the subject had left town.

My cousin Bets reaches for me, her face screwed up and red. Why the sobbing? I wonder. I haven't seen her in ten years. She looked different then, long hair, very normal. She mumbles sympathetically while gripping my shoulders so that I hunch uncomfortably forward. I silently urge her to release me before I have to say something and make it awkward. She feels small in my arms. I think I must feel large in hers. Everyone I like tells me that frailty isn't attractive but I don't believe it.

Bets was my mentor when we were kids. She taught me everything—how to roll joints, how to chop up drugs for snorting. She took me to concerts and taught me what an eighth of weed and an eight ball of cocaine should look like. She used her mom's kitchen scale, which usually heaved under piles of millet from the bulk bin, to parcel out bricks of weed into baggies to be distributed among the boys at our high school. The girls were interested only in Adderall, which Bets also supplied, having had a prescription since childhood.

"Bets," I say, as meaningfully as I can manage as my father's funeral drags on. "I have such a headache. Do you have anything I can take?" Is she high? Why is she crying? I feel conspicuous asking for pills, like a tragic lesbian on the cover of a pulp novel. She finds ibuprofen in her purse, a little foil packet like you buy in bodegas. I'm too embarrassed to ask her for Vicodin, so I take the packet and slip it into my pocket. No one in California takes drugs anymore.

My dad's girlfriend has the urn tucked into the crook of her arm. The design, the funeral director said, would prevent "ash blowback." Ash blowback sounded like something I wanted to avoid. I once helped Ian scatter the ashes of his friend Ray in the park where he used to cruise for sex. Ashes are heavier and chunkier than you'd expect. They stick to your fingers, which you will inevitably wipe on your jeans like Cheetos. And then

there's wind. Huge gusts blew bits of Ray into our faces, where they stuck to my lip gloss.

"This funeral cost more than a wedding," Candy said, stuffing the urn into a tote bag and putting it in the trunk. She wanted to get married, but my father put it off. "You already have a ring," he told her. And what a ring, I think, as I stare at her glinting hand. It's enormous. A giant cushion-cut diamond, set in yellow gold, highlighted by her long, elegant fingers and ballet slipper colored manicure. I get a lot of pleasure out of her earnest femininity. I was married to Ian for ten years. I wore his clothes. Straight men love a pretty version of themselves.

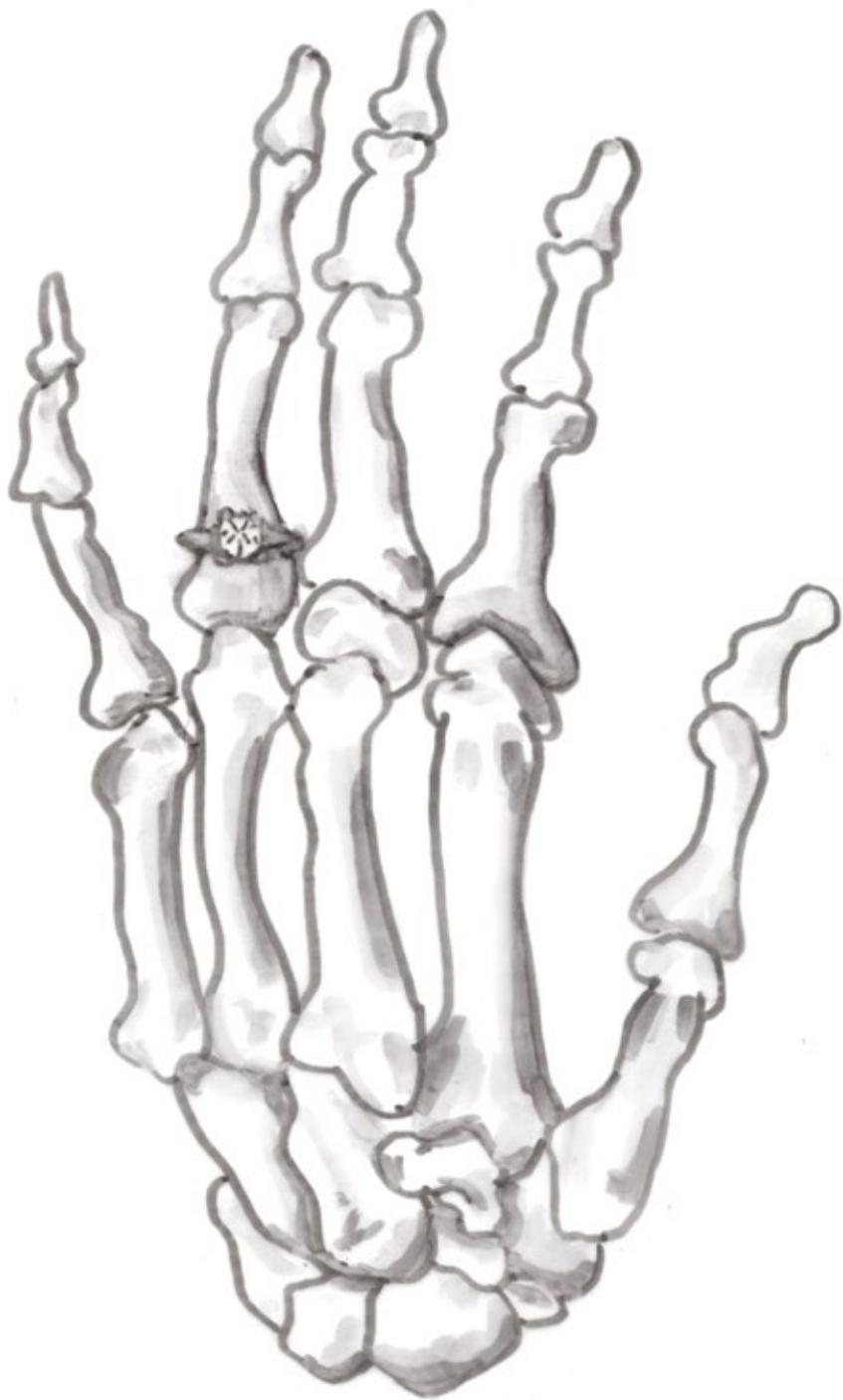
Ian and I married on a whim and were dismayed when the clerk explained that we needed a ceremony to make it legal. So fortunate that many of our friends were ordained by made-up churches. This was pre-internet, when you found out about things like ordainment in the back pages of *Rolling Stone*. A pagan demi-goddess married us on her rooftop. We threw a party, scrambled up a ladder to the roof-access billboard, and made it legal in front of a picture of two smiling, white-toothed smokers holding a pack of Parliaments.

When Max got a job in California and I decided to stay in New York, I wanted to get married. I imagined marriage as a magical force that would tether us to each other. Why I would think this, I can't explain. I wanted, especially, a ring, which seemed like a talisman. Max was bewildered and refused to play along with my fantasy. "I don't believe in marriage," he said. Adding, in case it wasn't clear, "I don't want to be married."

Roland Barthes says that missing a lover is a woman's problem. Men leave and women write about it. To miss someone, he says, is to become feminine. I wonder now if Max's refusal to marry me was more about gender. Were we a lesbian couple? Maybe he didn't want to be my wife. How can I possibly unravel something as mundane as this? My therapist said, "You identify as a lesbian." I wasn't sure where she was going. And then, in a gentle, concerned tone, she said something so mortifying I cringe in recollection. "Since you are a lesbian, would you rather be with a *woman*?"

Oh boy. In my mind I thought, "Lady, I have never dated a woman in my entire lesbian life." No one is homophobic anymore. I mean, sure, bakeries in the Midwest don't want to make gay cakes, but otherwise straight people are down.

"Well, I suppose I've stopped thinking about sexual identity," I told her. "I am a lesbian because that is how I identify culturally but not because I think 'man' and 'woman' are actually discrete categories." Who knows



what she made of that. When coworkers ask about my girlfriend I correct them, saying that Max is trans and goes by he. Then they ask me if I've read *The Argonauts*.

It's funny the conflicting ways you can feel. I was disgusted by the thought of wanting something as banal as marriage, and yet wanted it with such intensity I made myself physically ill from crying. Eventually we married at Brooklyn City Hall. We were too unprepared to have brought a witness, but an industrious citizen offered his services, witnessing our union for a fee of fifty dollars.

Marriage and monogamy arose around the same time as agriculture, about 5,000 years ago. But romantic marriage has only been a thing for 250 years. We visited Max's parents and told them the news. We're married! Just like heterosexuals! Like us, they were unsure how to react.

Rituals are bewildering. When we first got the box with my father's ashes, Candy, Mom, and I were unsure what to do. Mom wanted to scatter them in the sea but forget it, you have to be at least three miles from shore and that was a bit too Dexter. It's illegal to sprinkle them in any public parks or on the beach. They'll probably just sit there indefinitely in the trunk of Candy's Subaru.

"Can you please drive?" Mom asks, handing me the keys. The traffic is very slow. We sit for a while without talking. Eventually, she takes a small wooden box out of her purse.

"What's that?" I ask.

"It's the rest of your father. Candy insisted on sharing him with me." She pulls a plastic bag filled with gray dust out of the box and dumps it out the window. "The box is pretty," she says, offering it to me.

One million steel caskets filled with chemically preserved bodies are buried in the U.S. each year. There are greener options though. You can have your body rolled up in an organic grass blanket and dumped into a hole to naturally decompose. You can have your ashes mixed into a fake plaster reef and launched into the ocean to become a habitat for sea life. A whole family, should they all die at once, can be made into one reef. Pets included.

Mom rubs hand sanitizer between her palms and up her forearms to the elbow. When she's finished, she checks her hair in the visor mirror. "We put a pull-out couch in Sharon's studio," she says, tucking the little box into the glove compartment.

Sharon is my mother's partner. She's older than my mother, but young-

er than my father was. She favors long, flowy dresses, round glasses, and tons of jewelry, like Auntie Mame if she'd had a Wiccan phase. Sharon is black and my mother is white, and they deflect the racist microaggressions constantly thrown at them by staying angry. There's no laughing anything off. Ever. As best friends they were pretty great. But as a couple they are a force.

When I was a kid, Sharon and her husband Bob were my parents' closest friends. The four of them met at a swingers' meet-up, a monthly event held in a motel near the airport. I know all about it, because my mother loves to tell the story.

When they weren't hanging out with other swingers, my folks and Sharon and Bob went to Tantric retreats and hung out at a hot spring in Mendocino that catered to the Ren Faire set. It had giant warm pools full of fat bearded guys who identified as satyrs. It was the cruiseiest place you've ever been; horny old men, menopausal witches, and non-mythological creatures too. Women like my mom, pendulous breasts tanned to a deep brown, dark nipples pointed at their bellies.

The neopagan set is overwhelmingly white, though they borrow their semiotics from cultures that are not. It's the main reason Mom and Sharon finally gave up on that scene. Well-meaning white liberals and their ankh tattoos, too dumb to know what culture they're appropriating. My friend Rachel came to the hot springs with us and an older couple trapped her in the stargazing pool, lavishing her with racist compliments. She had the body of an African Queen, they said. Rachel never went back. "These people will probably die stupid," Sharon says.

It's all gone now, anyway. Burned in the valley fire. I wasn't prepared for the pictures in the news—just a charred spot in the middle of a stretch of brown.

For years, Sharon and Bob and my parents held Sunday family dinners, a peaceful coexistence of countless backyard barbeques. Then one summer night when I was sixteen, my mother said, "Sharon and I want to tell you all something." We were all seated around the picnic table in the back yard.

She and Sharon were in love. Bob already knew. Sharon had told him privately. He'd made his peace with it. Bob was like that, easy going. Sometimes you had to check him for a pulse. He held Sharon's hand while my mom explained that she and Sharon were going to move in together. "But we don't want to break up the friendship the four of us have," Sharon added, as if my mother were just switching roommates. My father did not adjust to this news as smoothly as Bob. He set down his potato salad with disgust,

like Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. “Bullshit,” he said.

“Henry, it’s all been decided,” my mother said. Everyone stared straight ahead. Bob patted Sharon’s hand and Sharon frowned as tears dripped down my mother’s face.

My parents never spoke directly to each other again. Any communication between the two of them was delivered through me. My dad claimed it was because Mom and Sharon hate men, which they do, but come on. Men can’t even stand themselves these days.

“White men are watching their power fade away and they are scared because they’ve benefitted from their own bigotry their entire lives,” says Sharon when the subject comes up, sweeping her arms like she’s delivering a prophecy.

Now we’re all so post. We are post marriage. We are post gay. We are post trans. We’re entirely made of posts. When Max began taking testosterone, we had so much sex. I’m not supposed to notice that anything is different. But we were already having a lot of sex. We had a lot of sex plus more sex. We did it multiple times a day. It was the good kind of too much sex; not the bad kind. The bad kind is when you don’t really like the person or you’re always drunk or high. When you disappear except for a giant gaping hole that never seems to get filled. It’s some *In the Realm of the Senses* meets Dennis Cooper feeling where you wake up the next day and parts of you are broken or there’s blood and shit on the bed.

This was the great kind of too much sex. It was the kind of sex you have when you are falling in love and everything is new. Except, I was already in love with Max. I’d been in love with him for years. He was flush with androgens and bolstered by a newly discovered intrepidity, and for weeks we fucked constantly. We couldn’t get enough. Once he fucked me on a flight from New York to San Francisco, right there in our seats, with people all around us. He put the tray table down and wedged his hand between my legs. I don’t know if people knew what we were doing, we weren’t being careful at all. We were making noise and staring at each other and acting insane. It was like being in a private bubble of sex and I didn’t care what was going on around us.

I loved every new way his body would respond to mine and every new way he wanted to fuck me. I can’t really let go unless I know the other person wants it. I was amazed at the things my body could do. I have loved every version of both of our bodies, and anyway, bodies are so beside the point. I loved the way he felt and looked when we were naked, but the fact that he also liked it was very sexy.



I feel defensive here. As if it's weird to desire a person you also love. Normal is just a series of actions that we've performed enough times that we've come to expect them. I explain this to my students often, and they repeat it back to me in their smart papers about pornography or the marketing of BDSM. They are so blasé. I once gave them a Gayle Rubin essay called "Temple of the Butthole." It's about the Catacombs, an underground fisting club in 1980s San Francisco. Rubin describes a wall of slings, and next to each one a large can of Crisco. Buttholes are lined up waiting to be fisted. "What else ya got?" the students asked me, bored.

They still get stuck, though, on the idea that we must have a sexual identity. Current wisdom says that each sexual act gives rise to an impenetrable identity: straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex,

asexual. But two million years of evidence suggest that we are capable of an eros more vast than we currently imagine. There are Paleolithic-era dildos. Neolithic Shamans experimented with herbs and the urine of pregnant animals to change their sex. The Venus of Willendorf, which your undergrad art teacher probably told you was a fertility idol, was actually pornography. There are hundreds of Venus dolls. Some are round and fleshy like the famous Willendorf Venus. Some are thin and clothed. Some wear restraints around their wrists and ankles. Some are wildly adorned. Some have penises, some have vulvas, and some have both.

Before teaching, I spent a bunch of years working in and around the porn industry. My first job entailed writing capsule descriptions of porn videos in order to make searchable online databases. I got paid per video description and quickly became insanely good at it, sometimes earning 500 bucks a day. There were lists of euphemisms and slang terms for genitals tacked to the walls; helpful when you'd written cock or pussy too many times. Watching porn for hours on end takes a toll, though. I'd get home at 2 a.m., drink a whole bottle of wine and have anxiety dreams about watching my grandmother urinate into a dog bowl.

I left that job and eventually became editor of a porn magazine. Every year I went to the AVN awards, aka, the Porn Oscars. One year I got invited to be on a panel of judges on a porn set. It was part of a gimmick that the producer had come up with to set his all-girl gang-bang porn off from all the other all-girl gang-bang porn. He told me, "The girls love doing my videos. It's like a party."

The judges, there were five of us, were supposed to watch the action while it was being taped, and vote for the girl who we thought gave the best performance. The winner got 250 bucks in cash. The producer told us to vote for "Whoever has the best orgasm," adding, "Take a point off if they fake it."

I directed lots of shoots for the magazine, and usually it was fun, or at least as much fun as watching people fuck can be—it kind of depends on who is doing the fucking. But mainstream porn is pretty tedious. One of the other judges kept talking about how much he liked to eat ass. "Really clean ass," he said. The producer pulled me aside at one point and said, "When guys say stuff like that it's because they're insecure."

We were at a giant house in the suburbs with beige carpet, beige furniture, beige everything. The performers hid in the upstairs hall while they waited for the shoot to start. None of them wanted to talk to me so I wandered around the house checking stuff out. Someone had set lunch out



for the cast. It was an open bag of Wonder Bread, a jar of Miracle Whip with a knife stuck in it, a package of bologna and couple 2-liter bottles of Diet Coke. One of the crew members saw me looking at the food and said, "Eat, baby. Go ahead."

It was ninety degrees outside. There was a pool that no one could swim in because they'd all done their makeup and hair. Before the shoot, the producer interviewed girls by the pool, asking them about their turn-ons and what they do when they aren't making porn. It was all part of this new thing where women in porn are expected to have fun and really enjoy themselves. As soon as the world discovered that women really were capable of sexual pleasure, they wanted to monetize it.

It's hard to have sex, to really get into it, without thinking about porn. It's everywhere. Max tried to make a video of us. He set his phone up on the nightstand. We were at a conference in Savannah, Georgia. The hotel was lavish. There was an enormous claw-foot tub in the middle of our room. It was like a movie set. I couldn't watch the video. I was surprised by my body. I didn't love it. My dirty talk horrified me. My vocabulary, oh god. We're both English professors; it's a problem. I think at one point I said, "Debase me." I begged him to delete it.

Bodies are terrible as often as they're fantastic. "Annie," my mother said to me the year after she dropped thirty pounds. "I'll never be able to wear a bathing suit again. I'm still a young woman. I have many, many years of life ahead of me." Her post-divorce bosom hung unceremoniously somewhere near her navel.

"Mom, you realize perky breasts are not essential to a happy life," I told her.

"Honey, you are twenty-two years old. You have no idea what's essential to a happy life." The surgeon suggested implants. From the side, my sixty-eight-year-old mother looks like an early Pam Anderson.

Mom and Sharon's house is bright and airy with large, south-west-facing Palladian windows that look out over the bay all the way to the city. The glass is sparkling clean. Behind the house is a detached garage that they've refinished and made into a study. Beyond the garage is a hot tub and beyond the hot tub is a canyon, too deep and overgrown to explore. Sometimes a neighbor's dog or cat will get out and become coyote food.

She brings us two glasses of pale green tea, no ice, a tiny sprig of mint on top she pinched from the herb box on the porch. She sets the glasses on two tile coasters and sighs, “Well, at least that’s over.”

I shrug. I stopped paying attention to my father years ago. “Your father was grotesque,” she adds.

She’s not wrong. Dismayed by his failing body, he was more unbearable than ever. He called the hospice nurses either faggots or cunts. No one wanted to care for him. Mom and Sharon had mostly ignored him for the past decade.

“Do you have any booze?” I ask her.

Mom knits her eyebrows, the space between them folding into two deep lines, then retrieves a mostly full bottle of bourbon from the cupboard. I pour a little into my tea and hand it back. She pours some into hers, pauses, and pours a little more. “How’s Max?” Mom asks.

I tell her he’s fine. And he is. “We had some therapy,” I say. She looks bored. After a few minutes of sipping tea, she excuses herself to nap. Our therapist’s name was Rand but sometimes we called him Brad or Dan or any one of a number of lazy homonyms. Not to his face, of course. He told us to use “I” statements to express our feelings. So Max said to me, “I think you’re a bitch.”

Marriage counseling has its roots in eugenics. It became popular in the 1930s. There was general panic that the ease with which couples could suddenly divorce would lead to a breakdown of social purity; that middle-class white couples would become a minority. The social hygiene movement began urgently promoting marriage to the middle class. By the 1960s, marriage counseling was officially a thing, though for most of the mid-century the focus was on teaching women to obey their husbands. Middle-class women fared better than their poorer counterparts though, who were unknowingly sterilized.

I leave my tea and drift toward their many books, a library amassed over years of conscientious collecting. On the shelves, there are two framed photos of me. In one, I am standing on a balcony, a large goat hair pashmina wrapped around my neck and shoulders. I’m somewhere in Nepal, and behind me you can see the Himalayan mountain range. In the other photo, I’m in their kitchen, talking on a wall-mounted phone, the long cord wrapped around my fingers. My hair is short and I am very, very tan and very thin. I vaguely remember this day, not the day exactly, but the time when it was taken and the reason I was there.

I had just come back from a long backpacking trip in Central America,

and was living at their house while I figured out where to go next. I'd met up with my friend Sara, who'd broken up with her boyfriend, a sexy, macho guy who cheated on her with women they both knew. Sara had rented a small house in the jungle just off the main drag of a small town occupied mostly by backpackers, B-list rock stars, and not yet famous members of the Phoenix family. Our little house had walls on two sides and the rest was open. We slept on the second floor, our beds draped in mosquito netting.

A mango tree dangled over our front porch and capuchin monkeys the size of well-fed cats darted from limb to limb, pulling mangos off the branches and eating them. They were very territorial about the mangoes and completely unafraid of us. Instead of retreating when we walked by, they would hop to a closer branch and screech at us or climb to higher branches and rain pee down on us. Red land-crabs lived in the rainforest and crawled into the house and across our floor like cockroaches.

Cocaine was very easy to come by. Strangers would offer it to you in the discotheque the way you might offer to light someone's cigarette. People carried it in tiny plastic bags sealed with twist ties, and when you wanted some you would open the little baggie and scoop a small amount out with the end of the twist tie and sniff it.

One night, we got so high we stopped speaking English. I was surprised at how much Spanish I actually spoke. With drugs and alcohol, I was nearly fluent. We'd gotten a ride to the disco from our friend Manny. He was sweet and short and heavy-set. He wore a tank top with multiple gold chains. Sara got tired early on. "I've had enough," she leaned in close and yelled into my ear. "I'm going back to the house." But Manny grabbed my hand and said, "Stay," offering a little baggie to me. So I sat outside the disco with him as he tried to hit some kind of chemical pinnacle.

The disco was cut right into the jungle. It had a cement floor and big speakers and a grass roof, no walls. I was sweating heavily from dancing. We were yelling, even though we were sitting inches apart. He kept shoving the tiny scoop of coke under my nose, and then under his nose, and then under mine. Somehow we'd become connected, and Manny offered me the coke with the same intensity that he wanted it for himself. "I have to go home!" I yelled.

There was another guy with us, another friend of Manny's, not high, just hanging out, and he tried to intervene, tugging at Manny's arm. I was starting to worry he would want some kind of payment. He was a friend, but I'd only known him a few months, and men giving you lots of drugs rarely turns out well.

I got anxious. Manny wasn't letting me say no. Or, I was saying no but he wasn't listening. "Manny, I'm not going to have sex with you!" I yelled, even though he was right there. But it came out like Manny, blahblahblah.

He yelled back, "It's okay. It's okay." And then he shoved the little spoon under my nose again.

The friend said, "She doesn't want anymore. She's done!"

Manny said, "It's okay. It's okay."

I didn't get it. What was okay? "I don't want to have sex with you!" I yelled again.

And he repeated, "I don't want to have sex with you!"

I thought he was making fun of me. I put my hand up in the stop position like a traffic cop. "No sex!"

Manny gave me the oddest look. He cocked his head and leaned in slowly, looking at me with what I thought could be pity. Then he pointed to himself and yelled, "*Soy maricón! Soy maricón.*"

So funny that I didn't know. I didn't feel embarrassed. I felt relieved.

I told this story to Ian on one of our walks. We were in Prospect Park, sitting near the dog beach. The sun seemed enormous and close, framed by bare trees, just beginning to set. There were nests in the trees, large, formidable-looking nests like fortresses. Ian looked at the sun, then at his phone, and announced that it was 4:09 p.m.

The park was crowded that day. People streamed in from other boroughs hoping to spot the Painted Bunting, a colorful bird that had been tricked by warm weather into hanging out in Brooklyn. It was in the *Times*. This was a special bird, they said. For birders, it was like spotting a unicorn. Everyone wanted in on the action. WNYC referred to it as the Liberace of Birds, due to what they called its flamboyant coloring. The Prospect Park Alliance had trapped a feral cat in the area that they claimed was stalking the gay little bird. Poor kitty, we thought. That would have been the catch of a lifetime.