

CAKE

Written by
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Annette the facilitator pretended to be Kate, a woman in our chronic pain support group who killed herself. We went around the circle, Annette in the middle, each of us given the opportunity to tell “Kate” what we were feeling.

Gail with fibromyalgia: “How could you give up?”

Stephanie with the botched spinal fusion: “You should have reached out for help!”

Liz with diabetes-related neuropathy: “What about your children?”

There were a lot of tears. A lot of hugging. Then it was my turn.

“I have a question,” I said.

“For Kate?” Annette asked. “Or for me, Annette.”

“Makes no difference,” I said. “Is it true she jumped off the San Pedro Bridge?”

“Yes. But—”

“Is it also true that she landed on a Maersk cargo ship headed out to sea?”

Annette shifted uncomfortably. “Claire, we should focus on our feelings—”

“And is it also true that Maersk sent back what was left of her body in a Rubbermaid cooler, that the cooler was stuck in customs for a week before Kate’s husband could take custody of it, that the cooler was stolen on the way to the funeral home because a homeless guy thought it contained a picnic?”

Annette looked around the circle at the horrified faces. When she looked back at me, she nodded.

I started applauding.

“Why are you clapping?” Annette asked, her big fat cow eyes filled with confusion.

“For a job well done. Personally, I hate it when suicides make it easy on the survivors.”

*

When I got home there were two messages. On the first one, Annette said the group had stayed late after I left, that it had been a difficult session for everyone and she didn't want to minimize my feelings, but—

She and the others feel it's in everyone's best interest if I find another support group—perhaps one specifically to deal with my “anger issues.”

The second message was from my ex-husband Jason. He said he wanted to come by and pick up the last of his things. He asked me to call his assistant with a time when I won't be home, because he feels it's prudent that we don't see each other right now.

I'm sure his mother told him exactly what to say on the message because he never used to say things like “prudent.” He always was a big mama's boy.

With all the excitement it was no wonder I was experiencing breakthrough pain. Breakthrough pain is my worst nightmare because it means the meds aren't working right.

Imagine the most excruciating thing you ever experienced. A migraine. A kidney stone. Giving birth.

All of these I've experienced, by the way.

Now try to imagine that the nerves involved in that pain are being pulled out by a sadistic fuck, one by one. No matter what you scream to make the sadistic fuck stop, he won't. The sadistic fuck just keeps laughing at you because he's enjoying your agony.

That, in a nutshell, is breakthrough pain.

*

Guess who got a private room at Cedars with her very own morphine drip?
Morphine is like being wrapped up in warm towels fresh from the dryer.
Morphine is like your mother rubbing your back when you have the flu. Morphine is like
drinking cold water from a hose on the hottest day of the summer.

Who am I kidding? Morphine's even better than all that.

Thank you morphine.

Thank you.

Thank.

You.

Morphine.

*

Drug Induced Hallucination #1:

There was a boa constrictor slithering under my sheets. The snake tried to
convince me that *As You Like It* is Shakespeare's most unjustly criticized play. I stared at
the mound under my sheets and didn't move a muscle for hours. I knew if I made any
movement the snake was going to stop arguing literary theory and devour me.

*

Drug Induced Hallucination #2:

A group of young kids was standing outside my room, talking loudly. They didn't
go away. I got angrier and angrier.

I finally rang the nurse and told her to tell those fucking brats to move it somewhere else, if that wasn't too much fucking trouble. Or was I interrupting her goddamned fucking break?

That's when the kids started throwing a basketball against my door.

"Don't you hear that?" I asked the nurse.

She pulled the drip out of my arm and started jabbing the needle in her eyes. "I can't hear a thing."

*

Drug Induced Hallucination #3:

Kate walked into my hospital room carrying a cake with a bunch of candles on it. I told her I liked her new look.

"Thanks," she said. "I wish I could say the same about you."

"The morphine makes it kind of hard to fix myself up."

"You're probably wondering about the cake."

"I didn't want to be rude, but yes."

"Remember that time when Annette asked us what our dream would be if we didn't have chronic pain?"

"I always hated her drippy little exercises."

"You said your dream involved the Brazilian soccer team." Kate crinkled her nose in disapproval.

"And you said you wished you could bake your kids a birthday cake."

Kate lit the candles. "Everyone in the group cried after I said that. You didn't though."

“I had my reasons.”

“I know that now.”

“To be honest, I wasn’t that impressed with the whole Saint Kate thing.”

“Saints don’t jump off the San Pedro Bridge onto a Maersk cargo ship.”

“Nice touch.”

“I thought you’d like it.”

Kate brought the cake over to me. “Make a wish,” she said.

I closed my eyes and blew out the candles, even though I couldn’t think of anything to wish for. When I opened my eyes, Kate threw the cake out the window and jumped out after it. There was a sickening thud and someone started screaming from the street below. A nurse ran into my room.

It took me awhile before I realized that the person screaming was actually me.

*

The remote didn’t work so my TV had been stuck on the Discovery channel the whole time. No wonder I was having nightmares about fucking boa constrictors. I told the mousy Filipina nurse to change the channel manually.

“No problem your highness,” she said.

“Ooh,” I said, “somebody developed a spine while I was out of it.”

She left the TV on the History Channel after I told her to turn it to HBO. Touché, Imelda.

I watched a documentary about the demise of drive-in theaters in America. Apparently there aren’t any left in California except for one in Barstow.

Jason took me to a drive-in theater when we were dating, back when we were both in law school at UCLA. He'd been mortified when I found the *Carpenters: Greatest Hits* in his glove compartment. I teased him about it, until he cued the tape up to "Close To You." He held me in his arms while we listened to the song—I'd never felt as safe as I did at that particular moment.

It was only the second time I'd ever gotten drunk. Captain Morgan's Spiced Rum and Coke, on top of a large carton of buttered popcorn. After I threw up his car smelled like sour cinnamon toast. He gently stroked my hair and told me everything would be okay.

I was stupid enough to believe him.

*

When I got home I made two phone calls. First I called Rosalva, my cleaning lady, and asked if she had a driver's license. When I found out she did, I asked her if she wanted to make an extra couple hundred bucks.

Then I called Jason's office. I told his assistant to tell him I was going to be out of town tomorrow, so he could come by the house then.

I told her to tell Mama's Boy I'd changed all the locks, but I'd leave a key in the bottom of the deep end of the pool for him.

*

For the road trip:

1. Vicodin.
2. Oxycontin.
3. Methadone.

4. A nasal opiate from Glaxo that's still in the trial phase.
5. The phone number and Mapquest directions for a pharmacy in Barstow. Just in case.
6. A fifty-dollar ergonomic travel pillow I bought at Sharper Image.
7. A two hundred dollar lumbar support pillow I bought off the Internet.
8. Orange juice.
9. Chips.
10. My sunglasses.
11. A change of clothes. Just in case.
12. A bottle of Captain Morgan's Spiced Rum.
13. A six pack of Coke.

*

The drive to Barstow should normally take two hours, not five. I had to get out every twenty minutes to stretch. I felt like my breaks were starting to get on Rosalva's nerves.

"No, no, no, Mrs. Fine. Is okay," she said.

I told her I was still freaked out by the crow we killed near San Bernardino, the way it dived head-on into our car like a kamikaze pilot.

Rosalva acted like she was about to cross herself. "No more please."

"Sorry. We don't have to talk about the crow." I offered her some chips and a Coke and that seemed to improve her mood.

*

The pain got bad near Apple Valley. That annoyed me. It also annoyed me the way Rosalva looked at me when I took my pills.

“Could you do me a favor?” I asked.

“Yes, ask me what you need.”

“Don’t call me Mrs. Fine,” I said. “I’m divorced now so I don’t want to be called Mrs. Fine.”

“But what to call you?”

“How about Claire. That’s my name.”

“Okay Mrs. Claire,” she said.

With a sweet smile. Oh fuck it. She’ll get it right one of these days.

*

Rosalva loved *The Passion Of The Christ*. I found it kind of weird to listen to all the torture through the small, tinny speaker. I started chipping off the polish on my toenails.

“You must be seeing this,” Rosalva said, her eyes filled with tears.

“I *am* seeing this,” I told her, as chunk number forty-five flew off Jesus’ body.

“I’m also seeing we’re out of Coke.”

She seemed relieved when I offered to go to the concession stand so she could keep watching the movie. It’s okay, I get it: The Jews killed Jesus, so we should have to go to the concession stand during *The Passion of The Christ*.

*

The desert night sky is dreamy this time of year—a deep purplish blue and stars that look like Christmas lights. The cold air hurt my lungs, but in a good way.

I crawled under the low wire fence behind the concession stand and walked through shrubs and gravel down to the train tracks.

What would Jesus do? I think if he were in my shoes he would lie down and wait for the next Union Pacific freight train.

*

When you think you're going to die imminently, you choose your final thoughts carefully. I tried to think of beautiful things, like Michelangelo's David. A Bach cantata.

That got me thinking about the *Nutcracker Suite*. When I was a little girl I danced as a mouse two years in a row. It's still one of my favorite pieces of music.

My thoughts turned to Jason.

I hated to admit it, but I did understand what he meant when he said I wasn't the only one suffering—right before he handed me the divorce papers he'd personally drawn up. It was hard at the time to react graciously to what he said, because, after all, he'd walked away from the accident with only a sprained shoulder.

But now—I can see.

I can see that we were both the wrong kind of people to deal with this kind of situation. Problems that could be solved by money: *that's* the most we could handle. Not the loss. Not the pain. Not all the thousands and thousands and thousands of pills.

Too bad Jason's such a mama's boy that he'd never take methadone, because it really does help take the edge off life.

I felt the low rumble of a train. Then I heard a voice, getting closer and closer.

"Mrs. Claire! *Ay Dios mío!* Mrs. Claire!"

I struggled to sit up and saw Rosalva scrambling towards the tracks. I tried to gauge how far the train was in relation to her distance from me.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” I said, “I just got tired and needed a rest.”

*

During the drive back Rosalva kept looking at me like I was going to jump out of the car.

“Knock it off with the attitude already,” I said.

She scolded me in Spanish. I think she said something about how it was a good thing Jesus told her I went “loco.”

I was thinking of the most profane thing I could say when the car started making a grinding noise. Right before the “service engine” light went on.

*

The guy at the garage in Barstow said it was going to take at least three days to fix the car. He tried to explain the problem to me.

“I don’t need to understand what a head gasket is,” I said. “Just make the arrangements for a rental car.”

Blank stare.

“Okay,” I said, “maybe you don’t understand Triple A. I have the *platinum* coverage that gets me a free mid-size rental if repairs are going to take more than twenty-four hours.”

“There’s nothing open now,” he said.

“Why? Is it a holiday?”

“It’s nearly midnight. People have to sleep.”

Now it was my turn for a blank stare.

*

Inside a dark Greyhound bus, strung out on opiates, traveling through the high desert in the middle of the night, I started to feel like I was in a rocket flying through outer space. I stared at Rosalva while she slept next to me. She opened her eyes.

“Gracias,” I said.

“Why?” she asked.

“For putting up with me,” I said. “I wish I knew how to say that in Spanish.”

“Sleep Mrs. Claire.” Rosalva closed her eyes again.

I heard muffled laughter from the back of the bus. I turned around and saw a group of teenagers passing around a joint. Everyone else on the bus was asleep. I waited a few minutes, the smell of pot becoming stronger.

I made my way to the back. The leader of the group, a girl with a bad tattoo of a python on her arm, glared at me.

“Toilet’s broke, bitch.”

Her friends laughed.

“I don’t need to use the toilet.”

She sneered. “Then beat it.”

Her friends were enjoying the show. I leaned down into her face.

“I used to be married to a federal prosecutor in LA. Even though I hate his guts, I have no problem getting on my cell phone and asking him to send a marshal to the bus station.”

The sneer disappeared.

I pointed to the joint in her hand. “Is that just pot or did you morons cut it with something else?”

*

I’d hoped the girl—Becky, a runaway from Idaho—wouldn’t want to talk, but once we started on the second joint she wouldn’t shut up.

“I want to be an actress,” Becky said.

“Can I give you some unsolicited feedback?”

“Hell no.”

“You’re going to end up doing porn. Or worse. That’s what happens to girls from Idaho like you.”

“Gross! I won’t do porn!”

“Right. Do any of these stars ever say in an interview, ‘I ran away from Idaho when I was sixteen and ended up doing Hollywood movies’? No. That’s what porn actresses say. Not Hillary Duff.”

“I hate Hillary Duff,” she said.

“If I had your body I would too.”

“At least I don’t look like you.” She pointed at my face and arms with a vicious little smile.

“Give it time honey. You’ll get your own scars some day.”

I asked if she had another joint.

“I hope you know these weren’t free,” she pouted.

I pulled out a hundred dollar bill. “Let’s skip the soul baring. It’s starting to get on my nerves.”

*

Becky finally passed out. The bus was absolutely quiet as we went down the Cajon pass. The sun was just coming up. The San Gabriel valley glowed from under an ozone shroud.

Rosalva woke up. She panicked when she didn't find me next to her. I waved from my seat next to Becky.

"Who is this?" she asked, eyeing Becky's tattoo.

"I'm starved. I want a yellow cake with lots of fudge frosting."

"I make one tomorrow."

"I want one the minute we get home."

"Mrs. Claire, I must go to my home. Later I come to your home."

I realized I had no idea where Rosalva lived.

"Downey," she answered. "You do not know this place I am sure."

"Isn't that where the Carpenters were from?"

"I have not met them."

When we sat down in our seats Rosalva pulled out a brush and started combing my hair. I began to sing.

"Why do birds...suddenly appear..."

Rosalva smiled. "This is very pretty song."

"Every time...you are near? Just like me...they long to be...close to you."

*

At the L.A. bus station I sent Rosalva to Downey in a cab. While I waited for my own cab I noticed Becky's friends had deserted her. She walked up to me with a shy look on her face.

"What are your big plans?" I asked. "Oh that's right, you're going to be a star."

"Shut up."

"Want to make an easy hundred?"

She gave me a look of disgust. "I knew you were a dyke."

"I don't want to fuck you. I just want you to bake me a cake."

"You're a freak. You know that, right?"

"Can you follow directions on a package, or are you illiterate?"

"Am I what?"

"Jesus. Can you read? Do they still teach that in Idaho?"

A cab pulled up. I opened the door and waited for Becky. She studied my face, trying to decide if I was a good risk or not. I felt bad for her until my legs started killing me again.

I sighed. "Do I look like someone who could hurt you?"

"You're mean enough."

"You outweigh me by at least fifty pounds."

"Fuck you."

"Fine."

I got inside and gave the cabbie my address. We were driving off when I heard Becky's voice.

"Wait!" she yelled, running after the cab.

I didn't look at her when she got in the car. "Offer's fifty now."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"That's not fair."

"Life's not fair. Any more lip and it goes down to twenty five."

*

Becky decided to make the cake from scratch. We were at the grocery store right by my house, in the baking section. I'd become distracted by the Disney-themed birthday candles.

"Do you have baking powder?" Becky asked.

"I'm not sure." I was starting to lose focus. "Is that the stuff you put in the fridge to keep it from smelling?"

Becky rolled her eyes. "That's baking soda."

"Then I don't think I have baking powder."

"Who doesn't have baking powder?"

"People who order out, that's who."

"You're pathetic," Becky said while we were standing in the checkout line.

"You're only just now realizing that? God you *are* stupid."

"What about booze?" Becky asked.

"Can you handle liquor? I don't want green puke all over my carpet after you drink a whole bottle of Midori."

"Why are you such a cunt?" she hissed.

"Paper or plastic?" the clerk nervously asked.

*

While Becky made the cake, I went through the house. The last of Jason's clothes was gone. All the tools were missing—not that I'd ever use them. All his books were out of the den. With his collection gone it really exposed my intellectual laziness—Clive Cussler no longer propped up by *The Collected Works of Shakespeare*.

I found the picture on the desk, the framed photo of Jason and me and the twins. We'd hired an expensive photographer, a guy who does fashion spreads for *Los Angeles* magazine. The year before the accident, for our holiday greeting card.

I picked it up and studied our faces, until none of us was recognizable. I thought I'd made it clear to Jason he could keep the picture.

I called his office.

"Mr. Fine's not in. Would you like to leave a message?" his assistant asked.

"Tell him he won."

"Won what?" The assistant sounded nervous.

"He'll know," I said, before I hung up the phone.

*

I took so much methadone I just barely made it to my bed. Becky yelled from the kitchen.

"Where's the fucking booze?"

"Be resourceful!" I yelled back. "You need to be resourceful!"

My last thought before I passed out was that maybe primitive cultures are right—I think the camera did steal my soul.

*

When I woke up, Rosalva was wiping my face with a cold washcloth.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Too many hours,” she said.

“Is the girl still here?”

“No. I think she stealed.”

Rosalva helped me get up. We discovered that Becky had taken my purse, all of my jewelry, all of the liquor, and the entire stash of pain medication, including the methadone.

How did she find the methadone? I’d completely underestimated her.

“I call the police,” Rosalva said.

I stared at the frosted cake on the kitchen counter, covered in plastic wrap. “No.”

“She does wrong when you are sick! This is bad girl!”

I dabbed my finger on the top of the cake and tasted it. Homemade fudge frosting. A little on the sweet side, but definitely homemade.

*

It’s impossible in L.A. to find out where someone lives if they haven’t given you the information. The white pages are useless; 411 is a fucking joke. I needed to talk to a human being and not Verizon’s annoying computer, so I called Annette.

“And how are we doing Claire?”

“We’re doing *great*.”

“Well, that’s super. Did you find another support group?”

“Funny you should mention that. Ever hear of Gloria Allred?”

“Uh, well, yes I have.”

“Because I’ve decided to sue you for discrimination.”

“Goodness. A lawsuit?”

“Just kidding. I’m calling to get Kate’s address.”

“I don’t think I’m allowed to give out that information. Was there something I could help you with?”

“That’s hardly possible.”

“Well I’m certain I can’t give you that information. I’m sorry.”

“Remember when I said I was kidding about the lawsuit?”

“Uh huh.”

“Now I’m not kidding.”

*

The address was in Palos Verdes, for a house that looked like the bastard child of a mansion and a small hotel. Rosalva, bless her heart, drove me there in the mid-size rental. I told her to wait for me in the car.

“I help you Mrs. Claire.”

“Thanks, but I need to do this by myself.”

I wonder what Kate’s husband will say. I have to remember his name before I ring the doorbell. Ken? Ben?

Fuck it. I’ll just mumble something.

I hope he doesn’t freak out and think I’m a crazy person for bringing a cake with cheap Disney-themed candles. Will I actually tell him it was something Kate had wanted to do for the kids? Jesus, I hope he doesn’t start crying, or worse, ask me to come in to meet the family.

I stand outside the front door, my hand ready to press the bell. I hear children's voices inside. Lots of children.

I take a deep breath.