

# 40 Days

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*By Jill Smolinski*

Author of *The Next Thing on My List* and  
*Objects of My Affection* (May 2012)

I didn't think it was any big deal. Turning forty. In fact, when a friend mentioned, "Gee, your big 4-0 is right around the corner, isn't it?" I hardly gave it a thought. That was, until that same night, when I woke in a cold sweat with the sudden realization: *I can never get my belly pierced! I've had my chance! The time for belly piercing has come and gone and I've missed it!* Never mind that I have no interest in inserting jewelry anywhere near my midsection. Or that when I'm sitting I can hardly find my belly button anyway.

Point was, it set my mind racing. I began compiling a mental list of the things I'd never done.

It was a long list.

Granted, I'd been busy. There was getting married, and having a baby, and working a job, and getting a divorce, and running errands and wiping around in the kitchen and picking up and putting away and on and on.

But I began to wonder if someday, lying on my deathbed, none of that would matter.

What would matter is that I'd never worn thong underwear.

And, trust me, no one wants to watch some old lady on her deathbed trying to wrestle herself into a thong.

Something needed to be done. Soon.

"You should take off for an exotic island," my best friend, Ellen, suggested after I confessed my worries to her. "Have yourself an affair with a young stud. Get your groove back."

I laughed and tossed a towel at her head. We were at the gym for our regular Saturday morning workout—me, speed-walking on the treadmill while Ellen jogged next to me. "Don't I need to have had a groove first in order to get it back?" I quipped.

"I'm serious."

No doubt she was. Ever since we met in college, I've been in awe of Ellen. Naturally athletic, tall, she's one of those people who just gulps life. Ellen isn't afraid of anything.

"Believe me, I wish I could go somewhere," I said, "but the timing's terrible. I'm broke, and I'm swamped right now at work. Plus, Jeannie has homework, and gymnastics, and—"

"And, and, and," Ellen interrupted.

"Hey! All I'm saying is—"

Ellen ignored my protests. “So, fine, you can’t go away. That doesn’t mean you can’t shake things up. We live in Los Angeles, for crying out loud—there are plenty of ways to get in trouble right here at home.”

I pushed up the speed on my treadmill, the idea of getting into trouble sounding strangely appealing. “Maybe I could squeeze a few things in...”

Ellen saw an opening (and perhaps a chance for a partner in crime) and interjected, “Sure! It’s perfect! And I don’t think you need to worry about Jeannie. She’s thirteen—she’s hardly ever around now anyway.” Then she shot me a look, adding, “Besides, if you need help, it’s not as if that deadbeat of an ex of yours couldn’t pitch in more.”

Please—as if Frank could possibly think about anyone but Frank? I couldn’t help but sigh. “I’d just like to find out what I’ve been missing. Maybe finally feel better about myself.”

Ellen nodded. “You know what would help you raise your self-esteem?”

“You think I have low self-esteem?”

“A young stud,” she continued, as if she hadn’t heard me. “That’s what would help.”

It was a few days later, having woken in the night—tearful that it was too late for me to be a groupie, even haggard old rock stars would find me decrepit now—that the idea struck me.

Sure, I may have missed out on some things.

But not everything.

There was still time to squeeze more life into my life. Make up for all the years that I’d been too cautious, too scared, too stuck in the same routine.

So right then and there I issued myself a challenge. A personal exodus, as it were, across the valley of me. Because, with forty days and nights left before my fortieth birthday, I, Donna Dawson, made a vow to do one thing—however small—each day that

- 1) I’d never done before,
- 2) I’d been afraid to do
- 3) Was just for *me*.

It wasn’t going to be easy. I’ve practically made a career out of taking the safe route. God knows I didn’t know where I’d find the time. Yet somehow I knew I had to make this happen. It felt like more than just forty days.

It felt like my last chance.

\* \* \*

I decided to jump right in, feet first.

Day 1: *Go skinny-dipping*.

Even though I lived less than a mile from the beach, I drove the hour to the Valley to use the pool at my parents’ condo—more privacy that way. I’d hoped Ellen would join me for moral support, but she had to work late.

It was my mother who kept me company while I sat at the edge of her pool, waiting for night to fall. Toes in the water, I wore nothing but a towel, which I clung to like a life raft.

“How is it possible,” my mom asked after I’d outlined my plan to her, “that you’ve never skinny-dipped?”

Her tone suggested this omission was an affront to her mothering skills. That at some future date, she feared I may appear on the *Jenny Jones* show and say—to the gasps of the audience—Well, I wouldn’t have murdered all those people, except *my mother never let me swim naked*.

“You know how cruel kids can be,” I said. “What if someone saw?”

“Lots of people get caught; it’s part of the fun!”

“Yeah, well, the whale jokes wouldn’t have been so fun.”

My mother, bless her innocent heart and fuzzy memory, was genuinely perplexed. “Why would anyone do that?”

“Mom,” I said, “I *was* a whale.”

“You were no such thing. You were a healthy girl.”

Seeing me roll my eyes, she added, “Well, you *were*. You’re pretty now, too. But you were darling then.”

Whatever my mom’s got, I wish I could bottle it. Take a swig and look back at my life through kinder eyes.

Fact is, since I can remember I’ve fought my weight (and weight usually won). Still, I’d managed to marry a man who didn’t mind some extra pudge on his woman—probably because he liked eating as much as I did. Then Frank and I went on Weight Watchers together when Jeannie started kindergarten. I lost forty pounds; he lost sixty. As he got smaller, however, his ego got bigger. Even though I was feeling better about myself than I ever had—wearing size fives and getting second glances from men—suddenly I wasn’t good enough for my husband anymore.

I pulled the towel more tightly around me, as if a chill had set in.

My mom patted my shoulder and then stood to leave. “Well, honey, I’d join you in your little adventure, but you don’t need to see your mother’s saggy old bottom. You have fun. I’m going to fold the laundry.”

Okay, I scolded myself, pulling up to my feet after she disappeared inside. *Enough stalling*. Glancing around for passersby, I took a deep breath and let the towel drop. Then I plugged my nose and jumped.

As soon as I made the plunge, I couldn’t believe it! This was nothing like swimming in a bathing suit! The water wrapped itself around me. Cool hands seemed to touch me all over. I felt fizzy...floaty...

Squealing a laugh, I turned over and did a slow backstroke across the pool. I felt transformed already. I was a mermaid...my hair curling gently around my face...my breasts buoyed...my hips gently curving into...

“Well, sweetie!” my dad’s voice rang out. “I thought you might like some lemons—”

I ducked down into the water.

Too late.

I could hear the clatter of plastic cups and a platter hitting concrete, and my mother hollering, “Marv! Make sure you don’t go outside! Marv!?”

And there you had it.

One down.

Thirty-nine to go.

\* \* \*

My work-buddy, Martin, assured me I didn't have low self-esteem. I was simply too nice. I needed to discover my inner bitch.

"Quick"—and he turned to me as we strolled back to the office with coffees—"don't think about it. Give me the first thing that pops into your head. Name something so bad you'd never do it."

I knew exactly what to say: "Litter."

He looked disappointed. "Litter?"

"You asked."

"Okay then." He handed me his empty Starbucks cup. "Litter it is. Your task for today. Go on. Do it."

I gawked at him. Litter?! Was he kidding? Couldn't I do something easy, like drown baby kittens or set a building on fire?

"All right. Fine," I snapped. "Give me that." I'd already managed in the past few days to take a yoga class, try a new restaurant for lunch, finally see *The Godfather*, and wear thong underwear (which I promptly took off when I got home and tossed in the trash). To be honest, I was happy not to have to think of something to do for the day. People litter all the time. How hard could it be?

I held the cup in my hand and started to open my fingers. They wouldn't let go. I couldn't do it. Not after a lifetime of conditioning—of seeing that commercial with the Indian crying on the garbage-filled front lawn. I gave a hoot. I couldn't pollute.

Finally, in slow motion it seemed, the cup floated to the ground.

"Excellent," Martin said.

A woman came up from behind. "Excuse me, you dropped something," and handed me the cup.

*Day 8.*

"Quit staring at my tits," I scolded Ellen in a whisper.

"I can't help it. They're just so...*buoyant*."

Ellen had signed us up for one of those Speed Dating workshops—the ones where you essentially have a dozen or so blind dates in a row, each lasting a matter of minutes. For the occasion, I'd worn the water bra I'd purchased the day before. Each of its cups (designed for lifelike look and feel!) held enough water to take me from my usual B to a very buxom D—or, as Ellen had pointed out when I first walked into the conference room, enough to float half of the U.S. Navy fleet and still have some left over for splashing about.

Okay, so maybe it was a bit much, especially on someone with as small a frame as I have. I just thought it might help with my self-esteem problem.

There were thirty of us in the room, divided evenly between women and men. By seven o'clock we were still at the "meet-n-greet" stage of the event, which involved standing around, pretending to read the information packet and stealing furtive glances at the people you were about to be forced to bond with.

“I hope they’re rocket scientists,” Ellen grouched, “because nobody here is much to look at, much less—” She stopped mid-sentence and elbowed me so hard it nearly caused a tidal wave. “Over there, at the registration table. Girlfriend, I am in luuuuuurve.”

I turned to look at...*whoa!* She wasn’t kidding. He was that startling kind of handsome. Tall, dark, cheekbones you could hurt yourself on—looking luscious in a black shirt and jeans. “He can’t possibly be coming for this,” I whispered “He must think it’s a—“

I was interrupted by a frighteningly chipper woman clapping her hands. “Everyone! Everyone! I’m Brenda,” but she said it like *Brendah*. “Welcome to Speed Dating! Let’s get started!”

With the efficiency of a Nazi soldier, *Brendah* soon had the men sitting at individual tables in a circle around the room. “Here’s how it works: You’ve been given a card with the names of the men, or women, you’re going to meet tonight. Each of you ladies will be assigned a table at which to start. You’ll have precisely seven minutes to get to know that person, then I’ll say ‘Switch,’ and you’ll move on to the next table!

“Now don’t worry, ladies,” she added, “you’ll get a chance to meet each and every one of the fellows here tonight!” and—did I imagine it—or did all the women’s heads swivel as a unit in the direction of one fellow in particular?

“Ready?” *Brendah* chirped. “Let’s go!”

I’d come prepared with an ice-breaker question to get the conversation flowing: *What do you want to be when you grow up?* First on my list: Scott. I sat across from him as he opened with, “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

Good thing I hadn’t asked it first. What a stupid fucking question.

I hesitated before replying, unsure of how truthful to be. I decided to go with a straight answer. “A painter.”

“You’d make one sexy painter. I can just see you wearing a big tool belt.”

Thrown by his salacious remark, I didn’t get a chance to clarify that I meant painter as in pictures, not houses.

Besides, it wasn’t long before I moved on to Peter...Patrick?...whatever—who wanted to know my life’s dream. I confided that I hoped to one day sell some of my paintings, to become a professional artist.

He shared his dream, too.

A threesome.

As I rotated around the room, the men clearly split into two distinct categories: those before the gorgeous guy in the black shirt, and those after him. I swore I could smell his sex appeal from tables away—from where I was talking to...Greg was it? ...telling him, yes, my job as a publications manager for an insurance agency was, indeed, every bit as rewarding as it sounded.

And before I knew it, there I was, about to be one-on-one with a god. That flipping in my belly should have been desire. It was, in fact, dread.

Men like him are never interested in me. He’d probably stare at his watch the entire time. *God, please let me not make a fool of myself.*

I walked up and said a casual hello, as if I have the opportunity to gab with Calvin Klein model look-alikes every day of the week.

“Ah, my beautiful lady at last,” he said, his voice dripping in a French accent.

Beautiful lady? I looked around—no supermodel standing behind me. He must mean me. Huh.

He introduced himself as Jean Pierre, and situated our chairs so that we sat nearly knee to knee. I could feel the warmth of his leg where it brushed against my own.

“So,” I opened, growing jittery when he didn’t say anything else right away, “what do you want to be when you grow up?”

Ugh. Please. Kill me now.

He shrugged, one of those Frenchy shrugs that’s usually accompanied by a cigarette in one hand and a drink in the other (which, come to think of it, was sounding awfully good about now). “Who says I’m going to grow up?”

Jean Pierre, I learned, had recently moved to the States. That’s why he was at Speed Dating. He hadn’t had much time to meet anyone.

Especially, he added, leaning closer, anyone nearly as exquisite as myself.

He touched the edge of my neck, and a sudden flush shot from my face down to my heaving—and I do mean heaving—breasts. “You have such lovely...” he breathed, trailing a finger down my collar bone, “...skeen.”

I gulped, and before I could blurt what I was thinking (which was *Take me! Take me right here, right now!*) *Brendah’s* voice bellowed, “Switch!”

Then it was on to Tad...poor Tad...a nice enough guy who had the grave misfortune of following Jean Pierre with the ladies.

At last, we were instructed to mark on our papers anyone we liked well enough to exchange phone numbers with. Out of pity, I circled poor Tad’s name. Everyone else, to be honest, blended together. Except for, of course, Jean Pierre. They should have put a check by his name right on the form—saved all us ladies the trouble of filling it in ourselves.

I was exhausted by the time I met back up with Ellen, having depleted my store of small talk for the next decade. Plus, I couldn’t wait to take the bra off. That water weighed a ton.

*Brendah* returned to give us our tally sheets—the men we chose who chose us in return. Although Ellen had several names on her list, her voice quavered as she said simply, “We’re not a match. He didn’t pick me.”

There was only one name on mine.

Tad, the cheeky little loser—didn’t he realize he was only a mercy pick?—hadn’t selected me.

Jean Pierre had.

When I showed it to Ellen, he snipped, in very un-Ellen-like fashion, “He only wants you because of your boobs.”

Nevertheless, I woke the next day feeling buoyant. Faux bosom or not, the evening had been the ego boost I needed.

Just for fun, instead of the oldies station I usually listened to while I got ready for work, I thought, hey, why not try some new music? *Day 9: Listen to something other than the Monkees.* I cranked one of Jeannie’s Eminem CDs on the stereo. Hmm, not bad, really. Quite peppy!

I was dancing around the living room when Jeannie—dubbed Recessive Jean by her dad because she’s so trim and lovely and perfect we can’t figure out how she could possibly be a child of ours—emerged from her bedroom. Her hair was in six tiny buns on her head. She’d probably copied the style from a magazine and, unlike my attempts at that sort of thing at her age, had pulled it off. She looked like a cupcake.

“Mother,” she said primly, “that is so disgusting.”

“What?”

“That!” and flailed her arms in my direction.

Oh. That. *Me*.

I responded by playing air guitar and giving my best Mick Jagger pout.

After she stomped off, however, mumbling about mothers refusing to grow old gracefully, I turned the volume down and went back to ironing my pants.

I’d just gotten home from a charity race-walk on Saturday when Jean Pierre called to ask me out. A date already and only day ten! I couldn’t believe my good luck. Until he said he wanted to meet for drinks that same night.

So close and yet...

Despite my vows to be more spontaneous, it wasn’t going to work. I’d promised Jeannie I’d come watch the rehearsal for the play she was in. Plus, I was snack mom.

Of course I didn’t tell Jean Pierre any of that. Only that I couldn’t make it.

I sure wished I could make it, I clarified. Drinks would be nice, mmm, I love drinking, yes I do! I’m one of the thirstiest women I know! In fact, here, let me get my appointment book because, if not tonight, then perhaps...let’s see...

“No problem. Another time,” he said cheerfully as he hung up.

Scrawled in my journal is a list of what I accomplished over the next week:

*Sing karaoke*

*My first pedicure*

*Invest \$100 in stock market*

*Treat myself to fresh flowers*

*Learn to drive a stick shift*

*Rock-wall climbing at the Y*

And in a moment of supreme bravery:

*Post one of my paintings for auction on eBay*

It's amazing I managed to squeeze all that in, what with the time I devoted to my other new activity: Obsessing about Jean Pierre. Nonstop.

He hadn't called back, and I couldn't help but fret—was that it? Did I miss my one chance? Was I a slightly used, thirty-nine-year-old Cinderella and no one could bear to tell me that my charms had expired?

It occurred to me I could call him. We'd exchanged numbers. I did have his. That could've been one of my adventures, in fact: *Today, for the first time in my life, I call a boy for a date.*

But it wasn't. Instead, I scowled at the phone, which, in the ultimate treachery, insisted on only letting telemarketers through.

Checking my email Saturday morning, I found one from Ellen.

Sorry I was such a bitch the other night...just being a jealous cow. Of course he wants you. You looked amazing. You ARE amazing.

P.S. Went out with Tad last night...remember Tad? Girlfriend, I think I'm in luuuuuurve!

I emailed her back:

Invite me to the wedding!!! And nothing to be jealous of on this end. My love life is...as usual...not.

*Day 18.* I was painting highlights in my hair with one of those do-it-yourself-kits—praying to the Lord above in the way one does when one is administering home beauty treatments—when I heard Jean Pierre's unmistakable voice on my answering machine.

I leaped for the phone.

Before he could even get so much as another word out I was insisting yes, yes—*oui!*—tonight would be perfect. I'd love to meet for a drink.

Perfect wasn't exactly the right word.

More like a big-fat-pain-in-the-ass. If that's a word—and if it isn't, it should be. I'd already promised Frank that I'd shuttle Jeannie and some of her teammates to a gymnastics finals over in...oh, I couldn't remember where, precisely...but somewhere so far he'd suckered me into covering for him again. Now I was going to have to beg someone to cover for me. But it'd be worth it.

I needed this.

I deserved this.

And in order to get to this, I was trying to hurry off the phone—cripes, how long had these highlights been in? Had I even set a timer?—when Jean Pierre asked, "Tell me, what are you wearing now?"

"Wearing?"

"I want to peecture you."

“Um, shorts and a T-shirt,” I answered, and immediately wanted to die from shame. A *T-shirt*—sexy lady! Couldn’t I have made something up? At least I left out the part about the foil cap on my head.

“Mmm,” was all he said, leaving me to wonder if he’d even heard me.

Drinks were at Nate’s, a restaurant and club up the street from my house that I’d wanted to check out for ages. Jean Pierre kissed me hello on each cheek.

“Ah, *belle*,” he purred, giving me a lingering once-over. I’d tried to redeem myself from the T-shirt comment by wearing a strappy top and skirt. The highlights turned out more subtle than I’d hoped—the water bra, however, more than made up for it. You couldn’t miss my breasts for a mile. They nearly grazed my chin.

But enough about me because, if it was even possible, Jean Pierre had grown more broodingly handsome than since I’d seen him last. Not that that sort of thing matters, but...

Hoo, boy, he’s a looker.

We cozied into a corner booth and ordered wine, which was joyously received (remember that thirst I boasted about?). When the waiter set down a basket of bread along with garlic oil, it was waved away. “No garlic. We will be keesing,” Jean Pierre explained.

Pretty nervy, when you think about it—did the *bread* really need to go? Except that moments later we were, as it turned out, kissing. Right at the table. I couldn’t even say why, other than to say, why not?

Besides, it’s not as if there was a lot to talk about. The majority of our conversation, it seemed, involved my assuring Jean Pierre that the music wasn’t too loud, that we needn’t go to his apartment to hear each other better.

Okay, so he’s a man on the make, I thought. I’m not so naïve. I was having a great time anyway—at a hot club, kissing an even hotter guy. It’s the type of thing that never happens to me.

Before I could do something I might regret—and since we’d plowed through a couple bottles of wine there was an increasing chance of that occurring—I murmured an excuse and grabbed a taxi home. Jean Pierre didn’t let me stumble out, however, without first extracting a promise that I’d stay longer next time.

Next time. I leaned back in the cab and smiled. Mere weeks since I’d set a goal to rev up my life, and look how far I’d come already. Doing the sort of things I’d never do. Dating the sort of man I’d never date. Taking the sort of chances that...well, who knows?

I wasn’t expecting to find love in forty days. To be honest, I was more interested in finding *me*.

Still, I sighed, it might be nice to add “get laid” to my list of accomplishments. It wouldn’t qualify as something I’d never done before. But it sure would be fun.

I tell you, coming up with this forty-day idea was nothing short of *brilliant*.

\* \* \*

“I tell you, this forty-day idea is nothing short of a *disaster*,” I cried to Martin the next day as I stared numbly at the computer screen.

The painting I put up for eBay auction? It was about to end in an hour. With zero bids. *Zero*.

“Don’t worry, you’ll sell another,” he assured me.

I struggled to hold back tears. “It’s not just a lost sale. It’s a lost dream.”

“Well then,” and he patted my knee, “as long as we’re not being overly dramatic.”

How could I explain it, the courage it took to post *Dog*? The painting snarled at me in its on-screen digitized form. *Dog*, a rottweiler in oils, was my exploration of dog being God spelled backward. I hadn’t even given it a proper name after I painted it, as if somehow I knew it was never truly mine to keep.

“Just one bid, just one teensy bid,” I sniffed. I’d set a minimum of \$9 to get things rolling. All I wanted was for someone to buy it. With the exchange of cash for art, it would elevate me from the level of hobbist to pro. It’d prove that I wasn’t crazy for thinking I could be an artist—and, maybe, also that Frank was wrong for saying I *was* crazy. Just. One. Teensy. Bid.

Leaning back in resignation, I hit the Refresh button.

And there it was.

Cowboy 100—whoever he was—had come through.

Nine big ones.

I leaped to my feet. Martin threw his arms around me, and we started jumping up and down and screaming like we’d just scored on *The Price is Right*.

Then he looked at me, wild-eyed, and uttered the words that I suspected immediately I would come to regret: “I have an idea!” He fired up the computer in the next cubicle and logged onto eBay. “I’ll pretend to be the competition!” he shouted over the wall.

The next thing I knew, a bidding war was underway. Martin (user name Hot&Sexy, which I could have lived without ever knowing) vs. Cowboy 100.

The clock was ticking.

My heart positively clattered in my chest.

The price kept climbing, dollar by dollar. Martin and I were drawing a crowd. One of the agents brought microwave popcorn. An office pool started up to guess the final price.

With seconds left, *Dog*’s price had reached a whopping \$301.50.

“This is it—stop!” I shouted to Martin. “Ohmygosh, I can’t believe it!” I blubbered, high-fiving the people packed in my tiny workspace.

Then I heard Martin whoop, “Yee-hah! Let’s take this cowboy for a riiiiiiide!” Followed by the unmistakable clacking of fingers on computer keys.

My heart froze in place.

The auction ended.

I became the lucky buyer of my own painting.

\* \* \*

“Gosh, Donna,” Martin said, sheepish. “I sure didn’t see that coming.”

I limped out of the office, stopping by Miss Grace’s on my way home to pick up a tin of lemon muffins—a treat for Day 19 that I haven’t dared allow myself since...well, I suppose since I was the type of person to eat them all in one sitting.

I ate them all in one sitting.

Martin felt terrible, he really did.

That’s why—when I got an email from Cowboy 100 saying he liked my work, asking if I had any other paintings for sale—I made a point not to mention it until hours later. Let the boy stew for a while.

“He emailed?” Martin said when I finally told him.

“He wants to come to my studio.”

“Terrific!”

“Sure, except I don’t have a studio.”

“Humph.” After much deliberation, it was decided that Martin would take digital photos and help me compile a portfolio. I’d meet the cowboy on neutral territory.

“Can we do it today?” I pleaded. “I can count it toward my forty days.”

*Day 20. My first-ever portfolio.*

It felt as exciting as my first-ever box of crayons.

Cowboy 100—real name, Bill—and I arranged to meet Wednesday at a coffee shop not far from my office.

I’ll be there at 9. How will we find each other?  
Donna.

I was aiming for professional with a touch of friendly, yet I couldn’t shake the feeling I was setting up a blind date.

Looking forward to meeting the artist! As for me, I’m about 6’, brown hair, medium build. I’ll probably be wearing jeans and a T-shirt.

Bill.

P.S. Oh, and I have just the one arm.

I wasn’t sure what to make of his message—was that a piece of real information or an odd sense of humor? I sent back:

Great. I’ll be holding a rose in my teeth.

He replied only with one of those smiley-face emoticons. ☺ I cringed. If he likes those, what does it say about his taste in art?

When I walked into the coffee shop, it was packed. This cowboy had better really be one-armed, I thought, or I won't stand a chance of finding him. The place was positively rife with brown-haired guys in jeans and T-shirts. Take for example that one standing over there...with the ice-blue eyes and the sweet curve of a jawline and the shoulders and the...

One arm. And another that stopped just above the elbow.

Okay, I'd say that's my man.

My first client.

Taking a breath for courage, I marched over, clutching my portfolio. *I don't want to blow this. Please let me not blow this.*

"Bill?"

"Hey, you found me," he said, his easy Texas drawl answering any questions I might have had about the cowboy moniker.

Blame the nerves—or that strange phenomenon that makes people say the very thing they're trying hardest not to—but I quipped, "Yeah, well, no thanks to your description! Technically, you've got at least an arm and a half there."

There was a pause.

A waitress turned away, averting her eyes from the car crash before her.

He opened his mouth...

Then burst into a laugh so robust I swore I could feel it reverberating inside me.

"Well, so I do," he said. "Now let's grab us a table."

I figured it shouldn't take long to go through my portfolio. I only had a couple dozen paintings. Yet I was on my second cup of coffee and we still hadn't finished. Neither of us seemed to be in any hurry—me, in particular, since I'd only be heading back to work. Plus, he was so easy to talk to.

He studied each painting asking when I did it, what was the inspiration, and so on. I was thrilled to learn he worked as a graphic artist. It seemed an endorsement of my own work to have a professional interested.

By cup of coffee number three, I happened to mention my forty-day experiment.

Bill nearly knocked over his chair to go rifling through his briefcase. "I have the perfect thing for you to do," he insisted. I stifled a groan. Since I started all this, I'd been plagued by well-meaning friends trying to fulfill their fantasies through me. There are a lot of people out there who for some reason want to see me leap from a plane.

He handed me a flyer. "It's for a performance art piece I'm in Friday night. An interactive sort of thing. You should stop by."

"I'll try," I said. The Art of Therapy, it was called. Well, maybe. I tucked it in my purse.

He flipped to the last page of my portfolio.

"Is this you?" he asked, smiling.

It was an abstract—an image of a nude woman, curvy along the hips, with wide eyes and a heart-shaped face...and an expression that seemed

almost hopeful. I'd done it in the days and weeks after my husband said he was leaving.

I didn't answer but drained the last of my coffee.

He paid me \$301.50 for it.

Apparently that's the going rate for fine art these days.

Just as I was starting to wonder if I'd ever hear from Jean Pierre, he called to ask if I'd care to join him on a road trip to Vegas.

Las Vegas—Sin City? With a fabulous Frenchman? You bet I would. "When?" I asked, already mentally packing my bags, dropping my thirteen-year-old unceremoniously at the curb in front of her father's house. Being free, free...

"Now," he said breezily.

"Now?" As in, *now*?

"You need a few meenut to get ready? Eet's okay. I can wait."

*Minutes* to get ready...that's a good one, ha ha. I could hardly be ready for a trip to the front porch in *minutes*. The clothes that my mind packed were already being tucked neatly back in their drawers.

It occurred to me as I said thanks-but-no-thanks to Jean Pierre—catching a glimpse of my daughter at the kitchen table, bent intently over a science project due the next day—that there's a whole other world out there.

It's filled with the type of people who don't think twice about going away last minute. Who as a matter of habit drop everything and *do* the sort of things I was trying desperately to cram into forty days. Making up for forty years.

This other world is stranger than Vegas. It may as well be Mars.

Jeannie must have sensed my gaze on her because she lifted her head. "I can't get the paper to stick right," she scowled. There was a worry knot between her brows.

I recognized that worry knot.

I saw one like it in the mirror every morning.

"Why don't you set that aside?" I said. "I'm going to try roller blading. I'd love it if you'd join me."

Even when I promised to fall and look incredibly stupid, she insisted she couldn't. She had a ton to do.

*Day 23: Today I am staying in the moment. My experiment in Zen. No thoughts of the past or future. No regrets. No worries. I was simply going to let myself be.*

As I made breakfast, I experienced the buttering of the toast, the pouring of the juice. Chewing. Swallowing. I stayed focused as I drove to work, participated in meetings. I allowed my feet to walk and my eyes to see. While I washed the dishes—concentrating on the suds and the movement of the rag around the plate—my mind never wandered from the task at hand.

Which was good, I suppose. My thoughts would have just been about how boring I'd let my day-to-day life become.

"You realize," my mom said, leaning against her car as we waited for Jeannie to get ready, "you have to stop letting that man walk all over you."

"That Man" had become her pet name for Frank since we'd split. *Has That Man picked up Jeannie yet? Do you think That Man would be so kind as to let us come to our own granddaughter's party?*

"That Man, unfortunately, is the father of my child." Although, I had to admit, this was bold even for him. He'd called saying it was his turn to have Jeannie and, since he was vacationing in Palm Springs I was required—*required!*—to bring her to him. My mom, bless her heart, offered to do it. I'd had plans to check out the art event Bill had mentioned—I thought I'd use it as my opportunity to hand-deliver his painting.

"I just don't understand why he thinks he can make such ridiculous demands," my mom grumbled.

"Trust me, it's easier to let him think he's getting his way."

"He is getting his way! He has you driving for him, and rearranging your schedule for him, and constantly apologizing for—"

I heard a bang of the front door and Jeannie ran up holding her overnight bag. "Hi, Grams!"

Eager to change the subject, I said, "Hey, you know what I'm going to do tomorrow for my forty days? I'm going to open the dictionary to a random page, pick the first unfamiliar word I see and learn it—expand my vocabulary by one."

My mom tossed Jeannie's bag into the car. "Try to open it to the letter N," she said, her eyes fixed on me. "You could stand to learn the word 'no.'"

An hour later, Ellen and I waited in the lobby of an art studio in Venice for the first of our fifteen-minute sessions with the "therapists" we'd signed up for. "I wish we could see what's going on," I said, squinting as though that would help me see better through the solid doors into the other room.

The sign-in sheet had warned that this was not real therapy. It was for fun. It was "art." As it was explained to us, we should just make up a "problem" and our therapist would help cure us.

All I knew was that—if sharing your fake problems with an artist posing as a therapist qualified as "art"—I was grateful I'd wrapped the painting I'd left for Bill at the front desk. Suddenly it seemed so pedestrian. As much as I longed to be part of an art community, it was becoming clear that I'd never really be cool enough. (Like the time I'd brought a nice bottle of Chardonnay to a book club? When I got there, everyone was sitting on the floor drinking whiskey. How do people keep up?)

Ellen and I agreed to have our first therapy session together. I'd also signed up for a "Dr. Cowboy" assuming that was Bill.

The doors burst open and a woman began calling names for the next appointments. “Donna and Ellen...for Madam Love!”

We followed her inside a large, dimly lit room where stationed about were a dozen or so “therapists.” I spotted Bill, dressed in full cowboy regalia, and gave a little wave as I passed by. He tipped his hat.

“Is that the guy who bought your painting?” Ellen whispered. When I nodded, she said, “Hmm. Cute.”

Madam Love conducted our session inside a tent pitched in the room’s center. Before Ellen and I could tell her about the problem we’d concocted (we thought it’d be fun to be quarreling lesbians), the good madam let us know there would be no talking.

Only screaming.

Ellen without hesitation let loose a piercing wail, as if there was nothing in the world she’d rather be doing than scream therapy with a crazy madam in a tent in a room full of people.

I, alas, was not cured so easily.

Sure, I screamed—again and again, as instructed—but Madam Love was never fully satisfied that I really *meant* it.

It was nearing the end of the night by the time I had my therapy session with Bill.

“Howdy, Miss Donna. Have a seat.” When I did, he added, “Now, what brings you in here today?”

I felt silly making up a problem with him. “I’ve already tackled the big issues,” I said. “My kleptomania...my fear of the word moist.”

“Ah, that moist word trips a lot of people up.”

“So...” I hesitated.

“No problems, huh?” He reached inside his desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of tequila and two shot glasses, pouring one for me, then one for himself. “How about, then, we just have a visit?”

“Interesting...is this how you treat all your patients?”

We clinked glasses and drank them down. He poured another round. “I’ve been dying for a drink all night. I don’t know how real therapists handle this. Some of these folks need *serious* help. I’ve only got one person after you”—and he paused to down his second shot—“they’ll have to take me in whatever state they find me.”

“My friend Ellen is next. Trust me, you might need a third one of those.”

So we just talked, and I was feeling loose from the tequila and relieved that it was finally a normal conversation. We talked about our jobs and our kids (he’s got a son in college) and our ex’s, and the new things I’ve tried in the past few weeks, and how I should try mountain climbing, and how he often goes and it’s not a problem because they have these special ropes that accommodate his arm—“Or, as you so delicately pointed out,” he said, “my arm and a half.”

I found myself blushing, grateful he was such a good sport. “I hope it’s not tacky to ask,” I ventured, “but how did it happen...losing your arm?”

“Boating accident. I was eighteen,” he said simply. “And, no, it’s not tacky. I like the fact that you’re not afraid to mention it.”

“Do you ever feel it? I’ve read that—how people who lose an arm say that it still hurts or itches.”

“Sometimes,” he nodded. “They call that a ghost limb. Drives me crazy. I can look straight at myself and see it’s not there, but I’d swear it is.”

It was after Ellen joined us and the last session was the three of us, hanging out and drinking tequila, that it occurred to me.

The reason I was so messed up.

The reason I’d made so many changes in my life and yet couldn’t seem to recognize that I was no longer that overweight girl, scared she’s going to be made fun of, or left out, or left altogether.

I didn’t suffer from low self-esteem.

I had ghost fat.

*Day 30.* The buzz of the alarm clock demanded that I get up.

And it could piss off for all I cared. I rolled over and buried myself farther under the blankets. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t face another day. In the final stretch of my forty days, I was so exhausted even my follicles ached.

The past week’s activities, scrawled wearily in my journal:

*Day trip to mud bath*

*Take a cooking class*

*Slot car racing*

*Swing dancing*

*Get a massage by a man—preferably one named Sven*

I’d even gotten Jean Pierre to commit, at least for the next night, but, tired as I was, I couldn’t drum up enthusiasm.

The energy it was taking to decide on new things to do each day, much less execute them, was cutting into every aspect of my life. I was low on sleep, constantly late for work, and winning no popularity awards with my daughter.

Ah, yes, my daughter, who I could hear bellowing outside my bedroom door. “Moouoom! I’ve got praaaaaactice. I need a riiiiiiiide.”

I tried to ignore her, but she barged in. “Get up.”

*Hello? Who is the mother here, and who is the daughter?’*

“I’m too tired.”

“Oh wonderful,” she snapped, “you’re sick!”

“Your empathy is touching. And I’m not sick. I’m simply not getting up.”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “Ha! Yes you will, I know you will, because you have to do one of your new *important* things.” She nearly spat the word important.

It didn’t offend me as much as one might think. Fact was, for thirteen years—the entirety of her life—the world had revolved around her. For the past thirty days, it had shifted on its axis to accommodate me as well. I gave her a bleary smile, my bright, beautiful daughter, my stunning Recessive Jeannie who, like it or not, was simply going to have to deal with it.

“Staying in bed for me is a special treat. I’ve decided to play hooky.”

“But I need a ride!”

“Sweetie, just go down to the Kramers; you know you can catch a ride with them.”

“But I want *you* to drive me!”

“Well,” I sighed, and fluffed my pillow before sinking more deeply into it, “people in hell want ice water.”

As I dressed for my date with Jean Pierre—strapping on the water bra like armor before battle—it struck me that I was eventually going to have to come clean.

Eventually.

Maybe when he was drunk.

Or so overcome with lust that he wouldn’t care one way or another.

And who knew? Maybe he *wouldn’t* care. Who’s to say he wasn’t interested in *me*? My rapier wit? My supreme intellect?

Sigh...or my bodacious ta tas.

It was later, when I was slow dancing with Jean Pierre—at Klub Kat, one of those cavernous clubs with a dance floor so dark, packed and offset by strobes that you’re nearly blinded—that I realized the time was upon me.

“*Ah, cherie,*” he said pressed up against me, nuzzling along my ear. As we danced, his hand slid along my waist then, slowly...upward...under my shirt.

I started to pull away. “Jean Pierre...”

“Relax,” he said, tugging me back, “no one can see.” And no one could, really, so lost were we in the cloak of the bodies around us.

The hand found my bra, and rubbed slowly along the curve of my breast.

Far from aroused, I was stiff with terror—would he be able to tell? Apparently not, because as his hands ran over the bra, he murmured, “You are so soft...but firm...so soft...but firm...”

He gave my breast a gentle squeeze—whom am I kidding? The *bra* a squeeze—and then, growing more passionate, a firmer squeeze, rubbing me, caressing me. “I want to make love to you,” he moaned, and as he said it, I could feel it—a trickle of wetness, running down my belly. Oh shit! I’d sprung a leak!

I yanked his hands from under my shirt. “Me, too,” I said, breathlessly. “Just not tonight. I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

And off I ran, leaving my prince charming behind on the dance floor.

When I walked into the house, deflated in more ways than one, Jeannie was on the couch with her best friend, Celia, watching a *Buffy* rerun.

“Hey, Mrs. D,” Celia said excitedly, “Jeannie and I were just talking—she said she helped you put on one of those henna tattoos today. You know what would be fun? You guys should get real tattoos! Matching ones!”

“Yeah!” Jeannie piped in.

“That’d be a sight,” I said absently, and stole some popcorn from them before heading for my room. “Don’t stay up all night, okay?”

“Okay. Oh, yeah, I almost forgot,” Jeannie said. “That guy who bought your painting called. He said to tell you he hung it and it looks great.”

I smiled. Bill rang just to tell me that? I found myself imagining it—his cool, intelligent eyes taking in the strokes of my painting—and it did something funny to my insides. “Did you tell him I’d call him back?”

“Nah,” she said, turning back to the TV. “I said you were at your boyfriend’s and you’d be gone all night.”

“You said it like that? That I was at my boyfriend’s?”

“That’s what you said!” she shot back defensively. “That you were off on a date and you’d be out late!”

“That’s fine, honey. Good night,” and I went to bed, not knowing how to tell my daughter I’d rather she’d said that I was off on my meaningless fling.

Speaking of calls...

Frank phoned to say he’d prefer I didn’t show up to Jeannie’s gymnastics event the next night. He’d be there with his new girlfriend, and she didn’t like the idea of his ex showing up. It would make her uncomfortable.

I didn’t have any fight in me. I was spent from the kickboxing, the driving range, riding my bike to work, and pulling out my old clarinet. Anyway, I said fine, *whatever*, there were other meets. I told myself I could use the free evening for the big tete-a-tete with Jean Pierre.

But all the justifying in the world couldn’t cover up the other voice in my head. The one saying my mother was right. The one saying I needed to stop letting That Man walk all over me.

*Day 37.*

I had feared disappointment, perhaps even anger.

Hoped for happy acceptance.

More than anything, though, Jean Pierre appeared confused when I showed up on his doorstep for our date.

“Where are your...your *bosom*?” he asked. His hands made rounded shapes over his own chest, as if to indicate where the correct placement of breasts should occur, the proper elevation they should be achieving.

I stood proud. They stood proud. “This is me. This is how I really am.”

“They’re so leetle.”

Shrug.

“Okay,” he sighed, and I could see him peeking around me, checking to see if I might be hiding them anywhere. “Eet’s not so bad,” and he perked up. “What the hell,” he said benevolently, “we can still fuck...no?”

He started unbuttoning his shirt as he leaned against the door,  
propping it wider so I could come in.  
And, just like that, I learned it.  
It was easier than I thought.  
Hard to believe it took me all these years.  
“No,” I said, my voice soft but firm. “No, we cannot still fuck.”

To keep the evening from being a total waste, I stopped by Jeannie’s  
gymnastics meet—sat right next to Frank and his new girlfriend, Lisa.  
Frank glared, whereas she didn’t seem to mind my being there. In fact, she  
was nice. A bit young, a tad thin, but nice.

As the evening wore on—and Lisa and I did that chick thing where  
we felt compelled to compliment each others’ shirts and hair and shoes—I  
started to suspect that Frank was trying to keep us apart not by her  
directive, but more in fear I’d tell her how he used to be fat.

Who knows, I thought. Maybe I will. I glanced down the bench and  
gave Frank a smile so kind, so knowing, that he immediately paled and  
offered to get up and grab us some sodas.

I said, thank you, a Diet Coke would be lovely.

Perhaps I’d grown more in touch with my inner bitch than I’d  
realized.

And so, with days left to go it was time.

I’d put it off long enough. Forty years, in fact, give or take.

The only full-length mirror in the house was in Jeannie’s room. I  
waited until she was downstairs, let myself into her room, then secured the  
lock.

Standing before the mirror, I let my robe fall to the ground.

And just looked.

Of course, I’d seen myself naked before. A million times. This time,  
however, I was determined to really see myself. Not up-close scrutiny—the  
kind you do, say, in brightly lit bathrooms, where suddenly every flaw leaps  
to attention. Just eyes open. Looking.

What I saw surprised me.

After all, I’d made so many changes recently. I’d tried new things,  
spoken up more, let myself make mistakes. I had to laugh, thinking how  
important it had seemed to have Jean Pierre want me, never stopping to  
wonder whether I really wanted *him*. Surely, I thought, the wisdom and  
experience of the past thirty-eight days would be reflected in the mirror.

Yet standing before me was a woman who could best be described as  
curvy along the hips, with wide eyes and a heart-shaped face...and an  
expression that seemed almost hopeful.

In other words,

And I’ll be darned,

Me.

\* \* \*

*Day 39. For the first time in my life I called a boy for a date.*  
He said yes.

Well, and here it is. Finally. *Day 40.* I made it! Happy birthday to me.

I don't look any older and, remarkably, I feel younger than I have in ages. Go figure.

Jeannie brought me breakfast in bed this morning—lemon muffins, my favorite. Then Frank actually showed up with a gift. A shirt. His girlfriend picked it out.

Maybe I'll wear it tomorrow, when my cowboy and I go to the movies.

Anyway, you'll never guess what special thing I'm doing today.

Nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

I can't wait.

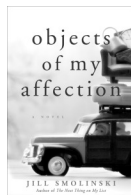
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