

Tina Fey

Bossypants



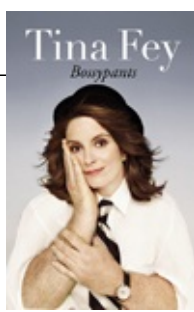


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For Jeanne Fey:

Happy Mother's Day. I made this out of macaroni for you.

Introduction

Welcome Friend,

Congratulations on your purchase of this American-made genuine book. Each component of this book was selected to provide you with maximum book performance, whatever your reading needs may be.

If you are a woman and you bought this book for practical tips on how to make it in a male-dominated workplace, here they are. No pigtails, no tube tops. Cry sparingly. (Some people say “Never let them see you cry.” I say, if you’re so mad you could just cry, then cry. It terrifies everyone.) When choosing sexual partners, remember: Talent is not sexually transmittable. Also, don’t eat diet foods in meetings.

Perhaps you’re a parent and you bought this book to learn how to raise an achievement-oriented, drug-free, adult virgin. You’ll find that, too. The essential ingredients, I can tell you up front, are a strong father figure, bad skin, and a child-sized colonial-lady outfit.

Maybe you bought this book because you love Sarah Palin and you want to find reasons to hate me. We’ve got that! I use all kinds of elitist words like “impervious” and “torpor,” and I think gay people are just as good at watching their kids play hockey as straight people.

Maybe it’s seventy years in the future and you found this book in a stack of junk being used to block the entrance of an abandoned Starbucks that is now a feeding station for the alien militia. If that’s the case, I have some questions for *you*. Such as: “Did we really ruin the environment as much as we thought?” and “Is *Glee* still a thing?”

If you’re looking for a spiritual allegory in the style of C. S. Lewis, I guess you could piece something together with Lorne Michaels as a symbol for God and my struggles with hair removal as a metaphor for virtue.

Or perhaps you just bought this book to laugh and be entertained. For you, I have included this joke: “Two peanuts were walking down the street, and one was a salted.” You see, I want you to get your money’s worth.

Anyone who knows me will tell you that I am all about money. I mean, just look how well my line of zodiac-inspired toe rings and homeopathic children’s medications are selling on Home Shopping Network. Because I am nothing if not an amazing businesswoman, I researched what kind of content makes for bestselling books. It turns out the answer is “one-night stands,” drug addictions, and recipes. Here, we are out of luck. But I *can* offer you lurid tales of anxiety and cowardice.

Why is this book called *Bossypants*? One, because the name *Two and a Half Men* was already taken. And two, because ever since I became an executive producer of *30 Rock*, people have asked me “Is it hard for you, being the boss?” and “Is it uncomfortable for you to be the person in charge?” You know, in that same way they say, “Gosh, Mr. Trump, is it awkward for you to be the boss of all these people?” I can’t answer for Mr. Trump, but in my case it is not. I’ve learned a lot over the past ten years about what it means to be the boss of people. In most cases being a good boss means hiring talented people and then getting out of their way. In other cases, to get the best work out of people you may have to pretend you are not their boss and let them treat someone *else* like the boss, and then that person whispers to you behind a fake wall and you tell them what to tell the first person. Contrary to what I believed as a little girl, being the boss almost never involves marching around, waving your arms, and chanting, “I am the boss! I am the boss!”

For me this book has been a simple task of retracing my steps to figure out what factors

contributed to this person...



developing into this person...



who secretly prefers to be this person.



I hope you enjoy it so much that you also buy a copy for your sister-in-law.

Tina Fey
New York City, 2011

(It's so hard to believe it's 2011 already. I'm still writing "Tina Fey, grade 4, room 207"
on all my checks!)

Origin Story

My brother is eight years older than I am. I was a big surprise. A *wonderful* surprise, my mom would be quick to tell you. Although having a baby at forty is a commonplace fool's errand these days, back in 1970 it was pretty unheard-of. Women around my mom's office referred to her pregnancy as "Mrs. Fey and her change-of-life baby." When I was born I was fussed over and doted on, and my brother has always looked out for me like a third parent.

The day before I started kindergarten, my parents took me to the school to meet the teacher. My mom had taken my favorite blanket and stitched my initials into it for nap time, just like she'd done for my brother eight years earlier. At the teacher conference my dad tried to give my nap time blanket to the teacher, and she just smiled and said, "Oh, we don't do that anymore." That's when I realized I had old parents. I've been worried about them ever since.

While my parents talked to the teacher, I was sent to a table to do coloring. I was introduced to a Greek boy named Alex whose mom was next in line to meet with the teacher. We colored together in silence. I was so used to being praised and encouraged that when I finished my drawing I held it up to show Alex, who immediately ripped it in half. I didn't have the language to express my feelings then but my thoughts were something like "Oh, it's like that, motherfucker? Got it." Mrs. Fey's change-of-life baby had entered the real world.

During the spring semester of kindergarten, I was slashed in the face by a stranger in the alley behind my house. Don't worry. I'm not going to lay out the grisly details for you like a sweeps episode of *Dateline*. I only bring it up to explain why I'm not going to talk about it.

I've always been able to tell a lot about people by whether they ask me about my scar. Most people never ask, but if it comes up naturally somehow and I offer up the story, they are quite interested. Some people are just dumb: "Did a cat scratch you?" God bless. Those sweet dumdums I never mind. Sometimes it is a fun sociology litmus test, like when my friend Ricky asked me, "Did they ever cat the black guy that did that to you?" Hmmm. It was not a black guy, Ricky, and I never said it was.

Then there's another sort of person who thinks it makes them seem brave or sensitive or wonderfully direct to ask me about it right away. They ask with quiet, feigned empathy, "How did you get your scar?" The grossest move is when they say they're only curious because "it's so beautiful." Ugh. Disgusting. They might as well walk up and say, "May I be amazing at you?" To these folks let me be clear. I'm not interested in acting out a TV movie with you where you befriend a girl with a scar. An Oscar-y Spielberg movie where I play a mean German with a scar? Yes.

My whole life, people who ask about my scar within one week of knowing me have invariably turned out to be egomaniacs of average intelligence or less. And egomaniacs of average intelligence less often end up in the field of TV journalism. So, you see, if I tell the whole story here, then I will be asked about it over and over by the hosts of *Access Movietown* and *Entertainment Forever* for the rest of my short-lived career.

But I will tell you this: My scar was a miniature form of celebrity. Kids knew who I was because of it. Lots of people liked to claim they were there when it happened. I was *there*. I *saw it*. Crazy Mike did it!

Adults were kind to me because of it. Aunts and family friends gave me Easter candy and oversized Hershey's Kisses long after I was too old for presents. I was made to feel special.

What should have shut me down and made me feel "less than" ended up giving me an inflated sense of self. It wasn't until years later, maybe not until I was writing this book, that I realized people

weren't making a fuss over me because I was some incredible beauty or genius; they were making a
~~fuss over me to compensate for my being slashed.~~

I accepted all the attention at face value and proceeded through life as if I really were extraordinary. I guess what I'm saying is, this has all been a wonderful misunderstanding. And I shall keep these Golden Globes, every last one!

Growing Up and Liking It



At ten I asked my mother if I could start shaving my legs. My dark shin fur was hard to ignore in shorts weather, especially since my best friend Maureen was a pale Irish lass who probably doesn't have any leg hair to this day. My mom said it was too soon and that I would regret it. But she must have looked at my increasingly hairy and sweaty frame and known that something was brewing.

A few months later, she gave me a box from the Modess company. It was a "my first period" kit and inside were samples of pads and panty liners and two pamphlets. One with the vaguely threatening title "Growing Up and Liking It" and one called "How Shall I Tell My Daughter?" I'm pretty sure she was supposed to read that one and then talk to me about it, but she just gave me the whole box and slipped out of the room.

Dear Ginny,

I finally got my “friend” today!! Yay!! It’s about time! If I roller-skate while I’m MEN-STRU-HATING, will I die?

Dear Pam,

Of course you can roller-skate! Don’t be silly! But be careful of odor, or neighborhood dogs may try to bite your vagina. Friends forever, Ginny

Dear Tabitha,

Sometimes I get stomach cramps on the first day of my period. My mom showed me some stretches I can do, but I also heard that drinking peach schnapps will work.

Dear Ginny,

Schnapps will work. Act like you’re putting orange juice in it, but then don’t.

Dear Pam,

I’m supposed to go to a pool party this week, but my “Aunt Blood” is still in town. Can I go?

Dear Tabitha,

Of course you can still go! Modess makes great feminine-protection products that are so thick and puffy, you’ll be super comfortable sitting on that bench near the pool telling everyone you’re sick.

“Growing Up and Liking It” was a fake correspondence between three young friends. Through the spunky interchange, all my questions and fears about menstruation would be answered.

“How Shall I Tell My Daughter?”

As I nauseously perused “How Shall I Tell My Daughter?” I started to suspect that my mom had not actually read the pamphlet before handing it off to me. Here is a real quote from the actual 1981 edition:

A book, a teacher or a friend may provide her with some of the facts about the menstrual cycle. But only you—the person who has been teaching her about life and growing up since she was an infant—can best provide the warm guidance and understanding that is vital.

Well played, Jeanne Fey, well played.

The explanatory text was followed by a lot of drawings of the human reproductive system that my brain refused to memorize. (To this day, all I know is there are between two and four openings down there and that the setup inside looks vaguely like the Texas Longhorns logo.)

I shoved the box in my closet, where it haunted me daily. There might as well have been a guy dressed like Freddy Krueger in there for the amount of anxiety it gave me. Every time I reached in the closet to grab a Sunday school dress or my colonial-lady Halloween costume that I sometimes relaxed in after school—"Modesssss," it hissed at me. "Modesssss is coming for you."

Then, it happened. In the spring of 1981 I achieved menarche while singing Neil Diamond's "Son of a Preacher Man" at a districtwide chorus concert. I was ten years old. I had noticed something was weird earlier in the day, but I knew from commercials that one's menstrual period was a blue liquid that you poured like laundry detergent onto maxi pads to test their absorbency. This wasn't blue, so... I ignored it for a few hours.

When we got home I pulled my mom aside to ask her if it was weird that I was bleeding in my underpants. She was very sympathetic but also a little baffled. Her eyes said, "Dummy, didn't you read 'How Shall I Tell My Daughter?'" I had read it, but nowhere in the pamphlet did anyone say that your period was NOT a blue liquid.

At that moment, two things became clear to me. I was now technically a woman, and I would never be a doctor.

When Did You First Know You Were a Woman?

When I was writing the movie *Mean Girls*—which hopefully is playing on TBS right now!—I went to a workshop taught by Rosalind Wiseman as part of my research. Rosalind wrote the nonfiction book *Queen Bees and Wannabes* that *Mean Girls* was based on, and she conducted a lot of self-esteem and bullying workshops with women and girls around the country. She did this particular exercise in a hotel ballroom in Washington, DC, with about two hundred grown women, asking them to write down the moment they first "knew they were a woman." Meaning, "When did you first feel like a grown woman and not a girl?" We wrote down our answers and shared them, first in pairs, then in larger groups. The group of women was racially and economically diverse, but the answers had a very similar theme. Almost everyone first realized they were becoming a grown woman when some dude did something nasty to them. "I was walking home from ballet and a guy in a car yelled, 'Lick me!'" "I was babysitting my younger cousins when a guy drove by and yelled, 'Nice ass.'" There were pretty much zero examples like "I first knew I was a woman when my mother and father took me out to dinner to celebrate my success on the debate team." It was mostly men yelling shit from cars. Are they a patrol sent out to let girls know they've crossed into puberty? If so, it's working.

I experienced car creepery at thirteen. I was walking home from middle school past a place called the World's Largest Aquarium—which, legally, I don't know how they could call it that, because it was obviously an average-sized aquarium. Maybe I should start referring to myself as the World's Tallest Man and see how that goes? Anyway, I was walking home alone from school and I was wearing a dress. A dude drove by and yelled, "Nice tits." Embarrassed and enraged, I screamed after him, "Suck my dick." Sure, it didn't make any sense, but at least I didn't hold in my anger.

Thankfully, blessedly, yelling "Suck my dick" is not the moment I really associate with entering womanhood. For me, it was when I bought this kickass white denim suit at the Springfield mall.



I bought it with my own money under the advisement of my cool friend Sandee. I wore it to Senior Awards Night 1988, where it blew people's minds as I accepted the Sunday School Scholarship. That turned-up collar. The jacket that zipped all the way down the front into a nice fitted shape. The white denim that made my untanned skin look like a color. Just once I'd like to find an Oscars or Emmys dress as rad as this suit.

Suburban Girl Seeks Urban Health Care

It may have been a mistake to have my first-ever gynecology appointment in a Planned Parenthood on the north side of Chicago. I was twenty-three and honestly, there was no need. My whole setup was still factory-new. But I had never been and I had some insurance, so why not be proactive about my health like the educated young feminist I was? I slipped on my pumpkin-colored swing coat with the Sojourner Truth button on it and headed to their grim location in Rogers Park. All the windows were covered, and you had to be buzzed in through two different doors. This place was not kidding around.

I sat among the AIDS posters, proudly reading Toni Morrison's *Jazz*. Maybe later I would treat myself to sweet potato fries at the Heartland Café!

I was taken to an examining room where a big butch nurse practitioner came in and asked me if I was pregnant. "No way!" Was I sexually active? "Nope!" Had I ever been molested? "Well," I said, trying to make a joke, "Oprah says the only answers to that question are 'Yes' and 'I don't remember.'" I laughed. We were having fun. The nurse looked at me, concerned/annoyed. "Have you ever been molested?" "Oh. No." Then she took out a speculum the size of a milk shake machine. Even Michelle Duggar would have flinched at this thing, but I had never seen one before. "What's that device f—?" Before I could finish, the nurse inserted the milk shake machine to the hilt, and I fainted. I was awakened by a sharp smell. An assistant had been called in, I'm sure for legal reasons, and was waving smelling salts under my nose. As I "came to," the nurse said, "You have a short vagina. I think I hit you in the cervix." And then I fainted again even though no one was even touching me. I just woke up like she had hit a reset button. I'm surprised I didn't wake up speaking Spanish like Buzz Lightyear. When I woke up the second time, the nurse was openly irritated with me. Did I have someone who could come and pick me up? "Nope!" "You're going to have to make another appointment. I couldn't finish the Pap smear." "WHY DIDN'T YOU FINISH IT WHILE I WAS OUT?" I yelled. Apparently it's against the law. Then she asked if I could hurry up and get out because she needed to perform an abortion on Willona from *Good Times*.

All Girls Must Be Everything

When I was thirteen I spent a weekend at the beach in Wildwood, New Jersey, with my teenage cousins Janet and Lori. In the space of thirty-six hours, they taught me everything I know about womanhood. They knew how to “lay out” in the sun wearing tanning oil instead of sunscreen. They taught me that you could make a reverse tattoo in your tan if you cut a shape out of a Band-Aid and stuck it on your leg. They taught me you could listen to *General Hospital* on the radio if you turned the FM dial way down to the bottom.

Wildwood is a huge wide beach—the distance from your towel to the water was often equal to the distance from your motel to your towel. And “back in the day” the place was packed exclusively with very, very tan Italian Americans and very, very burned Irish Americans. As a little kid, I almost always got separated from my parents and would panic trying to find them among dozens and dozens of similar umbrellas.

One afternoon a girl walked by in a bikini and my cousin Janet scoffed, “Look at the hips on her.” I panicked. What about the hips? Were they too big? Too small? What were *my* hips? I didn’t know hips could be a problem. I thought there was just fat or skinny.

This was how I found out that there are an infinite number of things that can be “incorrect” on a woman’s body. At any given moment on planet Earth, a woman is buying a product to correct one of the following “deficiencies”:

- big pores
- oily T-zone
- cankles
- fivehead
- lunch lady arms
- nipples too big
- nipples too small
- breasts too big
- breasts too small
- one breast bigger than the other
- one breast smaller than the other (How are those two different things? I don’t know.)
- nasal labial folds
- “no arch in my eyebrows!”
- FUPA (a delightfully crude acronym for a protruding lower belly)
- muffin top
- spider veins
- saddlebags
- crotch biscuits (that’s what I call the wobbly triangles on one’s inner thighs)
- thin lashes
- bony knees
- low hairline
- calves too big
- “no calves!”
- “green undertones in my skin”

- and my personal favorite, “bad nail beds”
-

In hindsight, I’m pretty sure Janet meant the girl’s hips were too wide. This was the late seventies and the seventies were a small-eyed, thin-lipped blond woman’s paradise. I remember watching *Three’s Company* as a little brown-haired kid thinking, “Really? This is what we get? Joyce DeWitt is our brunet representative? She’s got that greasy-looking bowl cut and they make her wear suntan pantyhose under her football jersey nightshirt.” I may have only been seven or eight, but I knew that this sucked. The standard of beauty was set. Cheryl Tiegs, Farrah Fawcett, Christie Brinkley. Small eyes, toothy smile, boobies, no buttocks, yellow hair.

Let’s talk about the hair. Why do I call it “yellow” hair and not “blond” hair? Because I’m pretty sure everybody calls my hair “brown.” When I read fairy tales to my daughter I always change the word “blond” to “yellow,” because I don’t want her to think that blond hair is somehow better.

My daughter has a reversible doll: Sleeping Beauty on one side and Snow White on the other. I would always set it on her bed with the Snow White side out and she would toddle up to it and flip the skirt over to Sleeping Beauty. I would flip it back and say, “Snow White is so pretty.” She would yell “No!” and flip it back. I did this experiment so frequently and consistently that I should have applied for government funding. The result was always the same. When I asked her why she didn’t like Snow White, she told me, “I don’t like her hair.” Not even three years old, she knew that yellow hair is king. And, let’s admit it, yellow hair does have magic powers. You could put a blond wig on a hot-water heater and some dude would try to fuck it. Snow White is better looking. I hate to stir up trouble among the princesses, but take away the hair and Sleeping Beauty is actually a little beat.

Sure, when I was a kid, there were beautiful brunettes to be found—Linda Ronstadt, Jaclyn Smith, the little Spanish singer on *The Lawrence Welk Show*—but they were regarded as a fun, exotic alternative. Farrah was vanilla and Jaclyn Smith was chocolate. Can you remember a time when pop culture was so white that Jaclyn Smith was the chocolate?! By the eighties, we started to see some real chocolate: Halle Berry and Naomi Campbell. “Downtown” Julie Brown and Tyra Banks. But I think the first real change in women’s body image came when JLo turned it butt-style. That was the first time that having a large-scale situation in the back was part of *mainstream* American beauty. Girls wanted butts now. Men were free to admit that they had always enjoyed them. And then, what felt like *moments* later, boom—Beyoncé brought the leg meat. A back porch and thick muscular legs were now widely admired. And from that day forward, women embraced their diversity and realized that all shapes and sizes are beautiful. Ah ha ha. No. I’m totally messing with you. All Beyoncé and JLo have done is add to the laundry list of attributes women must have to qualify as beautiful. Now every girl is expected to have:

- Caucasian blue eyes
- full Spanish lips
- a classic button nose
- hairless Asian skin with a California tan
- a Jamaican dance hall ass
- long Swedish legs
- small Japanese feet
- the abs of a lesbian gym owner
- the hips of a nine-year-old boy
- the arms of Michelle Obama

- and doll tits
-

The person closest to actually achieving this look is Kim Kardashian, who, as we know, was made by Russian scientists to sabotage our athletes. Everyone else is struggling.

Even the Yellowhairs who were once on top can now be found squatting to a Rihanna song in a class called Gary's Glutes Camp in an attempt to reverse-engineer a butt. These are dark times. Back in my Wildwood days with Janet, you were either blessed with a beautiful body or not. And if you were not, you could just chill out and learn a trade. Now if you're not "hot," you are expected to work on it until you are. It's like when you renovate a house and you're legally required to leave just one of the original walls standing. If you don't have a good body, you'd better starve the body you have down to a neutral shape, then bolt on some breast implants, replace your teeth, dye your skin orange, inject your lips, sew on some hair, and call yourself the Playmate of the Year.

How do we survive this? How do we teach our daughters and our gay sons that they are good enough the way they are? We have to lead by example. Instead of trying to fit an impossible ideal, I took a personal inventory of all my healthy body parts for which I am grateful:

- Straight Greek eyebrows. They start at the hairline at my temple and, left unchecked, will grow straight across my face and onto yours.
- A heart-shaped ass. Unfortunately, it's a right-side-up heart; the point is at the bottom.
- Droopy brown eyes designed to confuse predators into thinking I'm just on the verge of sleep and they should come back tomorrow to eat me.
- Permanently rounded shoulders from years of working at a computer.
- A rounded belly that is pushed out by my rounded posture no matter how many sit-ups I do. Which is mostly none.
- A small high waist.
- A wad of lower-back fat that never went away after I lost my "baby weight." One day in the next ten years, this back roll will meet up with my front pouch, forever obscuring my small high waist, and I will officially be my mother.
- Wide-set knockers that aren't so big but can be hoisted up once or twice a year for parades.
- Good strong legs with big gym teacher calves that I got from walking pigeon-toed my whole life.
- Wide German hips that look like somebody wrapped Pillsbury dough around a case of soda.
- My father's feet. Flat. Bony. Pale. I don't know how he even gets around, because his feet are in my shoes.

I would not trade any of these features for anybody else's. I wouldn't trade the small thin-lipped mouth that makes me resemble my nephew. I wouldn't even trade the acne scar on my right cheek, because that recurring zit spent more time with me in college than any boy ever did.

At the end of the day, I'm happy to have my father's feet and my mother's eyes with me at all times. If I ever go back to that beach in Wildwood, I want my daughter to be able to find me in the crowd by spotting my soda-case hips. I want her to be able to pick me out of a sea of highlighted-blond women with fake tans because I'm the one with the thick ponytail and the greenish undertones in my skin.

And if I ever meet Joyce DeWitt, I will first apologize for having immediately punched her in the face, and then I will thank her. For while she looked like a Liza Minnelli doll that had been damaged in a fire, at least she didn't look like everybody else on TV.

Also, full disclosure, I *would* trade my feet for almost any other set of feet out there.

Delaware County Summer Showtime!

(All names in this story have been changed, to protect the fabulous.)

Gay Wales

In 1976, a young Catholic family man named Larry Wentzler started a youth theater program in my hometown called Summer Showtime. It really is a terrific model for a community program. Young teenagers would put on daily Children's Theater shows for the community, giving preschoolers access to live theater at a very low cost for parents. The older kids would direct those Children's Theater shows and perform in Broadway-style musicals by night. In the process, all the kids would learn about music, art, carpentry, discipline, friendship, and teamwork. It's a fantastic program that continues to this day, and I can't recommend it highly enough.

Larry didn't set out to create a haven for gay teens, but you know how sometimes squirrels eat out of a bird feeder? Larry built a beautiful bird feeder, and the next thing you knew—full of squirrels.

I took a job as the night box office manager at Summer Showtime because my eleventh-grade boyfriend said we'd have fun there. He promptly broke up with me to date a hot blond dancer girl to whom he is now married, God bless us every one. I should have known he and I weren't going to make it when for my seventeenth birthday he gave me a box of microwave popcorn and a used battery tester. You know, to test batteries before I put them in my Walkman. Like you give someone when you're in love.

Those first few nights of being freshly, brutally dumped and sitting alone in the box office were not so great. I was heartbroken and, because no one had central air back then, I had to cry myself to sleep on the floor under the air conditioner in my parents' room. But then, like Dorothy's in *The Wizard of Oz*, my world went from black-and-white to color. Because, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, I was embraced by the gays. They loved me and praised me. I was so funny and so mean and mature for my age! And with my large brown eyes I really did look like a young ~~Judy Garland~~ Lorna Luft.

Before my evening shift, I would hang out with my new friend Tim, who ran the costume department. Tim had the highest, loudest voice you've ever heard. I could sit there for hours listening to him screech along to "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going" while hot-gluing Joseph's Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat together because none of us could really sew. Parents of the world, this is where you want your seventeen-year-old daughter spending her summer—snorting her DQ Blizzard out her nose from laughing so hard. The only person funnier than Tim was his meaner, louder, higher pitched brother Tristan. One family, two impressively gay brothers.

That summer I got to know four families in which half the children were gay. In case you're interested from a sociological point of view, they were always Catholic and there were always four kids, two of whom were gay. What Wales is to crooners, my hometown may be to homosexuals—meaning there seems to be a disproportionate number of them and they are the best in the world!

Tristan would egg me on to trash-talk the little blondie who had "stolen" my boyfriend. Of course I know now that no one can "steal" boyfriends against their will, not even Angelina Jolie herself. But I was filled with a poisonous, pointless teenage jealousy, which, when combined with gay cattiness, can be intoxicating. Like mean meth. And guess who played Joseph in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, by the way? You guessed it, old Battery-Tester Joe. I got to watch him in the

show every night and then count my stubs in a four-foot room while he and the blonde left to get pizza. ~~He would've never given her a crappy battery tester. And if he had, she probably would have shoved it up her twat and tried to turn it on. (This is the kind of mean stuff Tristan and I bonded over. Clearly it's very toxic.)~~

The unstated thing that Tim and I had in common was that we had crushes on all the same boys. The only difference was, I was allowed to talk endlessly about my feelings and Tim was in the half closet. Nobody thought he was straight, but he wasn't "out" either. He certainly never made a move on anyone. His crushes would manifest themselves in other ways. Tim had a real job working at Macy's and sometimes he would use his disposable income to, you know, buy Rick McMenamin a baseball glove. "You were saying the other night after rehearsal how you needed a new glove, so... anyhoo," he'd trail off. The nice thing was, the straight boys didn't freak out about this, and they definitely kept all the free stuff.

Lots of teenage girls have taken comfort under the wings of half-closeted gay boys, but how many of us can brag that her two best friends in high school were twenty-five-year-old lesbians? I met Karen and Sharon one day in the middle of our giant thousand-seat auditorium. The kid who ran the lighting booth, a roughneck girl named Rita who would only answer to "Reet," was climbing from ladder to ladder hanging lights for *The Jungle Book* and cursing like a sailor with a corneal paper cut. Karen was the improv teacher and Sharon was the head scenic painter, and the three of us found ourselves spellbound by the spinning mobile of profanity that was hanging from the ceiling. It was like looking in the monkey cage but you can understand the monkey, and what the monkey is saying is "Fuck all these fucking zoo people." We started laughing and were inseparable for the next six years.

Karen and Sharon had been a couple at some unspecified time in the past but were now just friends with asymmetrical haircuts. We spent days and weeks doing nothing, calling one another ten times a day to schedule our nothing-doing. An entire evening could consist of renting a movie, such as *The Stepfather* or that one where spiders come out of Martin Sheen's face, and making nachos. Do you remember what a cultural phenomenon homemade nachos were? If you are under thirty, you probably don't even realize there was a time when people didn't have nachos. We just stood around eating crackers.

You know that game Celebrity that you and your friends invented in college? Well, first of all, you didn't invent it. It was developed by NASA to keep girls virgins well into their twenties. And second of all, we played it better than you because we played it four nights a week. We wore it out. "Okay, this is Joan Collins's character from *Dynasty*." "Alexis!" "No, her *full* name." "Alexis Carrington Colby Dexter!"

When we finally got tired of playing, around midnight, we would switch to a version called Celebrity Boff, in which you could only write down the names of celebrities you would sleep with. Playing Celebrity Boff with two half-closeted gay guys, two lesbians, and one straight girl made for an easy game. Jodie Foster's name was always in there four times. Antonio Banderas appealed to all sectors. "This is that same one we keep getting—" "Princess Stephanie of Monaco!"

It is a testament to my parents that they never reacted negatively to the four-year-long pride parade that marched through their house. They welcomed these weirdos (they were weirdos in other ways, not because of their sexual preference) with open arms and fed them all until they were sick. Only once did my mother say, "That Karen is a little butch, don't you think?" I feigned ignorance badly, "I not know what you mean!" and slipped out for a night of same-sex nachos and name yelling.

I guess I should also state that Karen and Sharon never hit on me in the slightest and it was never weird between any of us. Gay people don't actually try to convert people. That's Jehovah's Witnesses

you're thinking of.

~~No one was ever turned gay by being at Summer Showtime, because that's not possible. If you could turn gay from being around gay people, wouldn't Kathy Griffin be Rosie O'Donnell by now? The straight boys quickly learned to be accepting and easygoing, and the straight girls learned *over the course of several years* to stop falling in love with gay boys.~~

By August, I was coming out of my gloom. I took a free afternoon dance class where we basically just did jazz runs back and forth across the lobby. The teacher called me "Frankenstein Arms" because I would move my right arm in unison with my right leg, like a Frankenstein. Since I had been thrown over for a dancer, this stung. But I persevered.

I was the youngest person in our group of friends and I always had a curfew. I was notorious for freaking out when it was time to go. It didn't matter if we were at local eatery the Critic's Choice enjoying mozzarella sticks after a rehearsal or at Tim and Tristan's house watching *Sleepaway Camp*—the one where the demonic little girl turns out to have a penis—when I had to go, I would shut a party down. "Hurry up. I don't want to get in trouble." Pleated eighties Bossypants.

When the summer was over, I had made about twenty-five new friends and was no longer weeping into my mom's radiator cover. But most of the kids in Summer Showtime went to the Catholic school down the road or were well into their twenties, so I didn't see them as much once school started.

After the Greatest Summer

I had to take eleventh-grade health in twelfth grade. I had postponed it the year before so I could take choir and Encore Singers—it was kind of a big deal to be in both, whatever. I was alto 1, but sometimes they had me sing second soprano. I had a solo in "O Holy Night" in a performance at the mall. In downtown Philadelphia. Enough! Stop asking about it!

The health teacher, Mr. Garth, had a thick blond mustache—the universal sign of intelligence—and a rural-Pennsylvania accent that made him say "dawn" instead of "down" and "yuman" instead of "human." One day, in what I hope was a departure from the state curriculum, Mr. Garth devoted an entire period to teaching us "how to spot and avoid homosexuals." I could not believe what I was hearing.

I don't know what happened to this guy at the Teachers College of Anthraciteville, but he had some *opinions*. "These homosexuals, they'll trick ya. They'll fine out what kinda music ya like, what kinda candy ya like, then they'll invite you dawn to their house." As I listened, incredulous, I couldn't help but picture a young Mr. Garth being lured into a van by Paul Lynde. "Hey there, sonny, my friends and I were just going into the woods to enjoy some Jethro Tull and a Mars bar. Interested?" Oh, the shame that must have washed over Mr. Garth as "Minstrel in the Gallery" came to an end and he realized there was no Mars bar! But there was no turning back. He had already eaten half of it.

My blood started to boil as he continued. "If you're talking to someone and you think they might be a homosexual, just run. Just get out of there and tell the nearest adult." I stayed after class to tell him that I thought he had misspoken. "I think what you meant to say was 'child molesters,' not 'homosexuals.'" He just watched my hands move as I talked, not unlike a dog. It became clear that my school life and my Showtime life were separate.

The Greatest New Year's Eve Party of All Time

The line between Showtime friends and school friends was breached on New Year's Eve 1987.

My Summer Showtime friend Brendan had a New Year's Eve party. Brendan was a very dramatic

boy who would say things to me like “Did you ever think that maybe the man that did that to your father did it to *mark* you so he could find you later in life?” See what I mean about the question being a reflection of the asker? When Brendan lost himself in a long dramatic rant, you could always shut him up by saying, “I like that monologue. Is it from *’night, Mother?*”

He had a beautiful face with pouty lips and that swoopy hair that was so popular during the second Reagan administration. He was the scenic artist under Sharon and he would do things like paint the entire floor of the stage an hour before a performance (ruining the white shorts the kids had been asked to bring in from home to be in the chorus of “Free to Be... You and Me”). Then he’d disappear for two days, emerging with a ten-page letter of apology. He was a mess, and his New Year’s party was expected to be awesome.

I was a teetotaler at the time, and none of my close friends were big drinkers. I went with Karen and Sharon, and the place was already packed when we got there. The kitchen and dining room were full of Brendan’s athletic Catholic school friends; the living room was packed with theater nerds. Brendan’s mom had locked herself in her room upstairs. There was an unclaimed dog turd in the hall outside the bathroom.

People sat in small groups, talking about the other small groups that were just out of earshot. My ex and the dancer made a brief appearance, but I held my head high. I was wearing my best Gap turtleneck and my dates were two adult lesbians, so yeah, I was pretty cool.

The Summer Showtime kids had to weave nervously through the jocks to get to the Doritos. Brendan’s long-suffering Catholic school “girlfriend,” Patty, tried to bridge the gap between the two groups. A sweet, quiet girl with short curly hair and a face as Irish as a scone, Patty seemed to be the only person at the party who didn’t realize what Brendan’s deal was—even the family dog had registered his disapproval again on the kitchen floor.

Brendan and I ran into each other on the front lawn. He seemed to be in a particularly Oscar Wilde mood. “May I kiss you?” he asked. Sure, who cares. After a tender, playacted non-French kiss, Brendan suddenly “came out” to me. In my experience, the hardest thing about having someone “come out” to you is the “pretending to be surprised” part. You want him to feel like what he’s telling you is Big. It’s like, if somebody tells you they’re pregnant, you don’t say, “I did notice you’ve been eating like a hog lately.” Your gay friend has obviously made a big decision to say the words out loud. You don’t want him to realize that everybody’s known this since he was ten and he wanted to be Bert Lahr for Halloween. Not the Cowardly Lion, but *Bert Lahr*. “Oh, my gosh, no waaaay?” You stall, trying to think of something more substantial to say. “Is everyone, like, freaking out? What a... wow.”

Brendan had clearly decided to make this party his debut, and he wandered through the crowd, performing his one-man show in various locations.

Bored, I tried making out with Victor Anthony, a straight kid who was cute but kind of a wang. He was the Cream of Wheat of making out. I would try it every now and then, thinking maybe I’d like it, but every time: no. He really was a stunningly bad kisser. It was as if he took a running start at your mouth. Brendan’s stage kiss was way more skilled.

I went back inside and parked it with Karen and Sharon in the theater living room, where Brendan was deep into Act II of “coming out.” The Monsignor Bonner football team was peering in from the dining area, hearing all of this. “Here’s a toast to being free of other people’s expectations,” Brendan monologued, “and loving whomever you choose.” In the background, scone-face Patty was quietly giving people coasters. Jesus, she was really not getting it.

This evening was actually turning out to be quite boring. But then it happened.

One of the drunk girls from the Archbishop Prendergast side of the party wandered into the

Showtime room and started making out with Alexis Catalano. Everyone froze. Patty looked on, scone faced. ~~This was unprecedented. Brendan talked a good game, but these two were going at it—in public!~~ This was years before every pop singer in the world started fake lezzing out at the VMAs. It simply was not done. What would happen next? Karen and Sharon went into protective adult mode and pulled the two *wasted* girls apart and took them upstairs to a more private location.

Just then Brendan's mom—who was totally unaware of the proceedings—started screaming and throwing everyone's coats down the stairs, which shall henceforth be known as An Irish Goodnight.

Brendan's mom may have perfected my "party shutdown" move, but it didn't stop me from working it at the amateur level. I followed the four women upstairs, ducking the flying parkas, because it was almost two A.M.: my special expanded New Year's Eve curfew. Karen was my ride and we needed to get a move on. Alexis and jock girl were so drunk they could barely function. Karen and Sharon tried to convince them it was time to call it a night. They would give them a ride home. "Noooo, I loooooove herrrr," jock girl sobbed as Karen helped her get her coat on. I said I'd be waiting in the car and they needed to *hurry up*.

Meanwhile, Brendan stormed out of the house and drove away, furious—probably because he had "lost the room" when two girls started going to town on each other.

After I'd been waiting in the car twenty minutes and missed my curfew, I couldn't control my temper anymore. "Get the dykes in the car!" I screamed down Childs Avenue, banging my shoe on Karen's dashboard and leaving a slight crack. My husband could tell you that I still get this wound up when I'm trying to leave the house on a Saturday morning and nobody in my family has their shoes on. It's not a great quality.

(And just in case you were wondering, yes—when he returned later that night, Brendan tried to run Patty and his mother over with the car. I believe it earned him a Regional Theater Tony nomination.)

The Second Summer

My second year at Summer Showtime, I was promoted to be one of the Children's Theater directors. I directed shows with a cast of sixty twelve-year-olds and, I'll toot my own horn, I made some interesting directing choices. Such as pushing the Little Mermaid around on a rolling office chair papier-mâché'd to look like a large shell. Her hair only got caught in the wheels twice.

I knew everyone. I was fully immersed. "Immersed," Brendan would say. "You're so smart. Why don't I know more people who use words like 'immersed'?" And then he'd disappear for two days. He may have been a drunk.

Sharon's brother Sean was our "visiting director" for the Mainstage musical. Everyone referred to him as Equity Actor Sean Kenny. He was a member of the stage actors union! He was living the dream in a basement-level studio apartment in Hell's Kitchen with a rat problem. We were all in awe.

Sean was and is a skilled and confident director. I was excited to be his assistant director on a murder mystery musical called *Something's Afoot*.

My first job as assistant director was to make sure he didn't cast the talented blond dancer who had so easily stolen my boyfriend the summer before. I accomplished this with the persistent and skilled manipulation of a grade A bitch. I made articulate arguments as to why the other blond girl would be better. The Dancer Girl was "too overused." It would be more exciting to "use someone unexpected," and the other girl's "look" was "more British." A fat load of nonsense, but it worked. Dancer Girl was relegated to playing the title role in a Children's Theater show called *Guess Again*. Yes, her character and the show were both called *Guess Again*. A harsh punishment.

Obviously, as an adult I realize this girl-on-girl sabotage is the third worst kind of female behavior right behind saying “like” all the time and leaving your baby in a dumpster. I’m proud to say I would never sabotage a fellow female like that now. Not even if Christina Applegate and I were both up for the same part as Vince Vaughn’s mother in a big-budget comedy called *Beer Guys*.

Sean and I were Mentor and Mentee that summer. I was eighteen, he was twenty-seven. Sean taught me a lot about professional dignity. For example, this was when “call waiting” was new, and if you left Sean on the other line for more than ten seconds, he would hang up. And our show was a hit! On both nights! The cast party was in a backyard with paper lanterns. The cast and crew mingled. It was very glamorous.

Summer Showtime alum Richard D’Attelis was there. My friend Vanessa had gone to her eighth-grade dance with Richard D’Attelis, and he had picked her up wearing a baseball shirt customized with an iron-on photo of Olivia Newton-John. It said “Olivia Newton-John” in puffy letters on the front and “Totally Hot!” on the back. Richard had been the first of the Showtime boys to quietly come out after his stint at the Pennsylvania Governor’s School for the Arts, an exclusive state-run arts intensive that might as well have been called the Pennsylvania Governor’s Blow Job Academy. Imagine a bunch of seventeen-year-old theater boys away from home for the first time for six weeks. They were living in empty college dorms, for the love of Mike! Literally! Think of the joy and freedom they must have felt, like being on an all-gay space station. (I’m sure there were one or two straight boys there, too, and I imagine they did incredibly well with the one or two straight girls.)

Sean was flirting with Richard. We were seated at a picnic table at the party, and I realized they were playing footsie under the table. I could not contain my judgment. “What are you doing?” I demanded, trying to be funny and controlling at the same time. They ignored me. Richard got up to get a soda. I turned to Sean. “He’s so cheesy and gross!” My power-of-suggestion technique had worked so well when I was screwing over that blond girl. I used any ammunition I could muster. “He smokes, you know.” As the night wore on, I didn’t get the hint. I stayed at the table with two people who were clearly going to hook up. I tried some sarcastic eye contact as Richard told Sean about his dream to turn *Xanadu* into a stage play. Like that would ever work.

In my mind, I was doing Sean a favor by trying to stop him from hooking up with someone regrettable. “Oh, my God. You know he’s only, like, *twenty*.” Sabotage *and* saying “like.” I was really in a bad place.

Sean shot me a look. I was out of bounds. It’s one thing to be a wisecracking precocious teen hanging out with twenty-seven year olds. It’s another thing to get in the way of a grown man trying to get laid.

I don’t know what happened between Richard and Sean that night, but the next day Sharon called me to say that Sean was very annoyed with the way I’d behaved. She said she had talked him down because “they all realized” that I had a crush on Sean. “It’s natural.” They *all* realized? They were all talking about what a baby I was and how I must have a crush on Sean? “I don’t.” I wept from sheer embarrassment. “I really don’t.” But the more I protested, the guiltier I seemed. And here, after twenty years, is the truth. I really didn’t have a crush on Sean. I had reacted that way because I viscerally felt that what they were about to do was icky. The stomachache I felt had nothing to do with a crush. I had to face the fact that I had been using my gay friends as props. They were always supposed to be funny and entertain me and praise me and listen to my problems, and their life was supposed to be a secret that no one wanted to hear about. I wanted them to stay in the “half closet.”

Equity Actor Sean Kenny did not live in the half closet. He had moved away to New York and was just back for a visit. He was a grown man. My reaction to his hooking up with Richard D’Attelis mad

me feel like Coach Garth. I stroked my thick blond mustache and think about what I had done.

~~It was a major and deeply embarrassing teenage revelation. It must be how straight teenage boys feel when they realize those boobs they like have heads attached to them.~~

I thought I knew everything after that first summer. “Being gay is not a choice. Gay people were made that way by God,” I’d lectured Mr. Garth proudly. But it took me another whole year to figure out the second part: “Gay people were made that way by God, *but not solely for my entertainment.*” We can’t expect our gay friends to always be single, celibate, and arriving early with the nacho fixin’s. And we really need to let these people get married, already.

Before the final performance of every summer, all the kids were invited onstage and together we sang “Fill the World with Love” from *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*. Everyone would cry their heads off. It felt like the end of camp, and I imagine some of those kids had more to dread about going back to school than just boredom and health class.

With his dream of a theater program for young people, Larry Wentzler had inadvertently done an amazing thing for all these squirrels. They had a place where they belonged, and, even if it was because he didn’t want to deal with their being different, he didn’t treat them any differently. Which I think is a pretty successful implementation of Christianity.

We should strive to make our society more like Summer Showtime: Mostly a meritocracy, despite some vicious backstabbing. Everyone gets a spot in the chorus. Bring white shorts from home.

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