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“Shopping”

(To My Brother Roy, Who Asks Me Via Email Why I Don’t Have a Boyfriend)

My Dearest Bobey,

Although I live in Arizona now, and my life is quite different now than then, thinking about dating again takes me back to all the times I’d go to Fred Meyer on 39th and Hawthorne in Portland when I knew I shouldn’t, and then regretted it later. Why shouldn’t you go to Fred Meyer? People used to ask me this. “It’s a harmless store; not too expensive. You have to treat yourself! It’s ok!” But I knew it wasn’t ok. Going to Fred Meyer wasn’t a treat, really, though it wasn’t as damaging as say, a string of one-night-stands in one week or an impulse flight to London. If I had wanted a treat, like, something of real quality in my life (that also didn’t bankrupt me), I’d have gone downtown to the little cute, indie shops on Northwest 23rd—I guess they call it “The Alphabet District” to sound more cosmopolitan, like New York, and I would have bought myself a good pair of leather shoes. Or, I would have pretended I was in New York and I would have gone dancing at the ballroom with deep purple curtains from ceiling-to-floor and hard Euro techno pounding through the walls. I would go to the tiny subway car bar where people all wear peacoats, white flats, legwarmers, black glasses, and bangs, and the DJ tries as hard as the crowd not to smile (for hipsters never smile) and this would

still become fun by way of participation. You see the keyword here? Participation: A thing where all parties involved are engaged and interested (and you can see where I am going with this). There was the Bar of the Gods, the Bar at the End of the Universe, Dots Café with black velvet wallpaper, the bar downtown that is actually under the street and you can hear the cars rumbling above while you order your grapefruit drop. Add these options to the downtown public library (a free good book is hard to beat!), the movie theatre painted like the coliseums, the Church of Elvis, any number of concert halls, galleries, poetry slams and bridge pedals, and you can surely find something worthwhile and enriching around that city to add to your life and make you happier.

But alas, the dating world is not like shopping: people are not as they seem, wrapped up nice on the outside and all kinds of different on the inside. You could order a grapefruit drop and get a gascan. You could order a library book and get a piece of old almond roca. Which causes me to like dating more like going to Fred Meyer than anywhere else, where you know there are bound to be some things of quality hanging around, but a lot of tschotske is from China, most of the food is GMO, the clothes may look great when you put them on (and maybe they'll itch when you get them home, or maybe not), and the act of hesitation (a downfall in any other field of endeavor!) becomes a necessary friend.

This is what I recall about Fred Meyer: I would take the bus, the number 14, from my house near Mt. Tabor down through the Hawthorn district, and I would be looking for something, just something (who knows what) and the red sign would loom up through the foggy bus window. I'd ask myself, "should I? Naw... Should I? Naw...Ok, well, I can get...a doughnut...and then go somewhere else." So I'd champion my excuse to get out

of the now smelly damp-and-breath-filled bus, walk past the five homeless people begging for change and feel guilty when I got through the doors that I would even consider spending spare change on a doughnut that would make me fat and tired when someone could use the money for real food or at least a pain-easing six pack of Hamm's. After all, my troubles weren't so bad. But once I'm inside, I have to do something (perhaps this barrier might be like signing up for online dating? Guilt and a shakedown combined?).

So, I'd put all my doubts behind me and start strolling the aisles, ask myself the death-dealing question: do I *need* this? Do I need a new book? (God no, none of these books). Swiffer? No, I never mop. How about a jug of milk? I do need milk, but then I'd have to carry it around until I felt directed enough to go back home and who knows when that'd be. So no milk (consider milk, perhaps, the good standby boyfriend who's solid as a rock but too dull for words?).

Shoes? Any girl can use a something to carry her along with more ease and grace (the supportive and handsome boyfriend?). So, I'd find the escalator and take it upstairs to check out that department. But once I got there it would be all cheaply made, chemical-smelling shoes that I don't like because they look like what 15 year old mall-rats wear and 15 was a hard year for me. Then, there it would be: a black kitten-heeled model made for dressing up the everyday capris (just enough heel to challenge your calves a little and make you feel elegant but not enough to be dysfunctional—you know, when people look at you like you're crazy for tottering down any public street in so much pain). But all the size 9 ½'s have

All.

Been.

Taken.

Right.

So I'd move through to the clothes, and note that I already have a ton of them except for cute lingerie. Both my mom and grandma for some reason still buy me new pajamas every year, though, so it seems pointless and redundant to buy anything more to sleep in when I can't possibly sleep enough in a year to make use of it already.

What I really could use is a raincoat, I'd think, but they don't have any good-looking raincoats ever, just the fifth-grade red and "forest green" kind. Like, "hunter green" (and I imagine myself some 40-year old Midwest Republican's wife cutting up venison for her brood, and find the escalator). Downstairs, passing the fabric section, I'd catch a glimpse of an old tablecloth that graced the kitchenette set of the 52nd street apartment I shared with Nick (my last real boyfriend), and want to cry.

There I am in front of the doughnuts again. Would a doughnut really offer me any information I need to make a better decision about how to spend my day? Or how to add value to my life through the correct choosing of enriching experiences? No. "Fat and tired! Fat and tired!" I repeat it to myself and head back toward the streetside of the store, like I'll make my escape without buying the shitake mushrooms I know I can't cook properly and without the lipgloss I never wear and the fashion magazines I can't

buy because what kind of a feminist would I be, then, anyway?

But I swerve at the register, nearly at the door, and stop to buy: a Twix.

And that's what thinking about dating makes me think about—that I'll entertain the idea initially because the sugar-coating of so-and-so sounds kinda nice; he has nice fingers or broke up with his girlfriend "because his feelings are for me" or he has bragged about giving good head and I know we get along in a friendly way, the same way Fred Meyer and I are cordial and casual, and I'd go for it because I'd have nothing more directed to do that day and why the hell not? I'm sick of the rain! And then there I'd be—stuck in a relationship as giant and overwhelming as the store itself or heartbroken again because the item I took home shrinks on the first wash or gives me hives. If dating could be less about ending up in a position where I'm not sure me and X have much to offer one another and everything we do looks kind of generic and overdone and I'd try so hard to avoid taking the wrong things out of it but find myself, after burning *more* than an afternoon's time, walking away, back into the grey and still without a raincoat, and more about those other fun things I'd mentioned earlier....well...why don't I just do the other fun things?

You generally stumble onto the best bargains anyway.

Sincerely and with Great Hope,

Your Sister