

'A truly adorable, heart-warming, swoon-worthy love story.
A book hasn't given me the warm-fuzzies like this for
a very long time'

BETH O'LEARY, author of *The Flatshare*

SECOND FIRST IMPRESSIONS



SALLY THORNE

'THE WARMEST, COSIEST, SWEETEST BOOK OF THE YEAR'

EMILY HENRY, author of *Beach Read*

CHAPTER ONE

One of the “benefits” of working in the front office of Providence Retirement Villa is I receive feedback on every aspect of my lifestyle and appearance, whether I want it or not. (I do not.) Here are the three questions the residents always have for me:

- How old are you? (Twenty-five)
- Do you have a boyfriend? (No)
- Why not? (Miscellaneous reasons, none of which will satisfy them)

“There’s more to life than having a boyfriend,” I once told Mrs. Whittaker as we walked up the rain-slicked front path to her town house, her arm hooked into mine. “I’m right where I want to be, helping you all.”

“That’s true, Ruthie, honey. You’re a good worker,” she replied to me. “But boyfriends are a very nice part of life. I once had three at the same time.” She shuffled inside, her walking

stick clicking on the tiles. Just as I was thinking I'd misunderstood, she said over her shoulder, "They knew each other, so it wasn't awkward. Boy oh boy, I was exhausted. You're prettier than I was, why don't you try doing that?"

I was left on the doorstep, fighting the urge to ask some follow-up questions, primarily:

- How?

It's likely Mrs. Whittaker could still get more action than me, and she's eighty-seven. I think about that conversation a lot.

While my boss, Sylvia, is on her cruise, I get her desk with the good view. I'm emailing maintenance, and I'm also grappling with my daily three P.M. wave of melancholy. I save a yogurt for this exact moment. Sitting at my usual desk is Melanie Sasaki, the temp. She doesn't understand the concept of pacing oneself, so she eats her lunch at 10:30 A.M. I can hear her stomach growling as I peel open my snack.

In a desperate outburst in the silence, she says, "Ruthie, I was thinking about you."

I wish she wouldn't. "Let me just finish this email to maintenance, then we can talk."

I know I sound like a prissy jerk, but to survive these next two months as acting office manager, I've been trying to enforce a quiet-time policy. When Sylvia is here, I never speak to her if she's typing. Or clicking. Or unless she speaks to me first.

Hey. I haven't been this relaxed in years.

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Melanie would probably talk while under a general anesthetic. “Let’s make you a dating profile.”

I break my own silence rule. “How do you know I don’t have one?” She’s teasing me, I know it. The residents of Providence are, generally speaking, brutally honest with me. But it’s always well intentioned.

She says, “You don’t even have an Instagram account, so you’re not exactly the type to put yourself out there. Am I wrong?”

She’s not. “Let me just finish this, Mel.” Quiet Time Shields Up.

I reword my request to maintenance from a *where the hell are you guys* to a more diplomatic *as per my last email*. There’s only so much DIY I can learn from YouTube.

When that’s sent, I find a Word document titled “RUTHIE_PROFILE” in my personal folder. According to the file history, it hasn’t been accessed since I wrote it in a weird lonely moment last year, when online dating felt like a good idea for about thirty seconds. Maybe it’s not that bad? A workable base draft for a dating profile that will find me my Mr. Right? If Melanie wasn’t staring at me, I’d read it through my fingers.

Can I Take You Home to My Churchy Parents?

I’m a very old soul (24 going on 124). I’ve only seen one penis firsthand (briefly) and was not impressed enough to seek out another (probably should, though). Seeking patient, safe cuddle-bug soul mate to tell me

when my cardigan is buttoned crooked. I live and work in a retirement villa. At this rate I'll retire here, too.

Okay, so the only update to this I'd make is I'm now twenty-five going on a hundred and twenty-five.

Like she's my impatient supervisor, Melanie asks: "Are you done now?"

After deleting that incriminating evidence, I counter with, "How's that new resident profile you're setting up for me in the system?"

Melanie purses her lips like, *Spoilsport*. "I don't know why you wouldn't want to utilize my true talent. The one I can't put on my résumé." She pauses for dramatic effect. "Getting peeps all loved up. If you only knew who you had here sitting across from you, you'd be jumping on this chance."

When someone is that confident in themselves, it does make the offer tempting. "Well, you do have a lot of things on your résumé."

Melanie stretches her arms above her head. "You know I'm livin' dat temp life. I'm dating all the jobs, until I find my perfect match. And I'm dating all the boys, too. Answer this quick without thinking: Are you ready to be in love?"

"Yes." I don't have enough strength to hold that word in, and it's humiliating how much force my answer had.

Every night as part of my security rounds, I walk to the western edge of Providence to check that the roller door securing the dumpsters is padlocked. I know that no one wants to steal garbage. I lean on the chain-link fence and stare at the town lights

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below. The knowledge that my cuddle-bug soul mate might be just there under that particular streetlight star, but I'm too chicken to go find him, makes my heart feel like a toothache. If I don't attend to it soon, it may have to be pulled out altogether.

Every night when I check the padlock, I look at the lights and apologize to him again.

Melanie is looking at me with such naked empathy in her expression that I scramble to try to cover up how much that word *yes* means. "I mean, everyone hopes they find—"

"Shush, shush, shush," she repeats until my face-saving caveats fade away. "Don't worry. I'll help you."

In the three weeks that she's been here, Mel's had at least four first dates, all at a tapas bar she calls "the Thunderdome." Before each one, she puts in an excessively long black ponytail extension and makes me check it from all angles. She also writes down the details of each date, "in case I'm murdered." She trusts me to be her police witness? I'm conflicted about how honored I am.

I recheck the calendar. She really has only been here three weeks. Maybe I should take the opportunity to consult with this seasoned professional. She's like an electrician for my love life. "Well, what's your dating profile say?"

Her phone is always in her hand. She can open the app without having to glance down. "Mine says: 'High-maintenance twenty-two-year-old half-Japanese princess who makes no apologies. Take me on adventures. No weirdos, little dicks, broke dudes, or fugs.'"

I can't categorically say any of those would be a deal breaker

for me. “What if your soul mate is one of those things? A . . . broke weirdo, or . . .” I study the banana and the ChapStick on my desk. The world is full of a lot of variables. My neck is getting sweaty under my ponytail.

Melanie shakes her head. “He won’t be. You believe in soul mates? I wouldn’t have picked that.” She studies me with an *Aaww* expression. “You secret l’il romantic you.”

“You don’t need to help me, I’ll work it out myself.” I try to backpedal but it’s too late—she’s taken the case pro bono.

Melanie turns to a fresh page in her sparkly notebook. “Name: Do you prefer Ruth or Ruthie Midona?”

“Ruthie’s fine.” Less rhymes with it. The teachers used me as their airplane black box if they left the room and came back to chaos, hence my school nickname *Truthful Ruth*. I was the church girl with thrift store shoes; my classmates had ponies and Jet Skis.

Melanie is also distracted. “Oh, got a message. I’d give that a four out of ten. See? A dick.” She holds up the screen to me; it is indeed a dick. I need a banana or ChapStick for scale. She smirks as she prepares a response. “I always reply with a photo of a zebra’s dick. Gives them some perspective.” She shows me that too.

What human dick would get a ten out of ten? It dawns on me that this is the first page of a lawsuit. Dicks in the workplace: Sylvia would be furious. “We should do some work. I really don’t have time to date.” I file some paperwork under *B* for *Boring*.

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“You’ve definitely got the time, let’s be real. How have you worked here for sixteen years?”

“How old do you think I am?” I see her eyes lower to my clothes. “Mel, I’ve worked here for six years. Not sixteen.”

“My contract goes until Christmas and that’s an eternity, no offense.” There’s complete desolation in her tone.

The only reply I can give to that is, “I’ve got a spare yogurt if you want it.”

“God, yes, please.” We find the strength to carry on.

“I’m twenty-five,” I say, feeling weirdly embarrassed by the fact.

“Twenty-five” she says in a marveling tone as she writes it down. “Only three years older than me, how’s that possible? But you have great skin,” she amends, realizing how that sounded. “You’re just so grown-up, running this place. That’s all I mean.”

I’ll follow her suggested profile format. “Low-maintenance twenty-five-year-old peasant who makes a lot of apologies.”

She snorts in amusement and taps her pen. Her dark eyes assessing me critically, she asks, “How do you know that you’re low maintenance?”

“Look at me.”

“It’s not just about looks.” Melanie is charitable. I’m okay-looking but I’m not fancy. “Do you like the guy to be all over you? Texting you all the time, taking you out places, giving you presents? Do you want him obsessed with you, or someone who gives you space?” She thinks of something. “Oh, whoops. If you’re not into guys, that’s cool too.”

“I’m really not sure.” I watch her blink several times and clarify, “I like guys. But I don’t know if I want him all over me.”

(Liar. I’d love that.)

(I think.)

“What was your last boyfriend like?”

“He was . . .” I can’t think of anything except *very religious*. I make a praying shape with my hands and hope that’s enough. “A long time ago.”

She narrows one eye. “How long ago, exactly?”

I cannot answer that without opening myself up for a total crucifixion. “Quite a while ago.”

If this were a teen movie, they’d intercut a couple of scenes here: Me in a prom dress slow-dancing with a Devout Young Man, literally named Adam. Cut to us in a single bed, partially naked. Adam is facing away from me, his shoulders shaking with sobs. If you think that memory can’t get any worse, what if I told you that:

- My dad is a reverend?
- Adam went to my dad for counseling the next morning?
- Counseling re: the sin he committed with me?
- Yeah.

My counseling was outsourced to Mom and she told me that Dad was “deeply disappointed” by my “choices.” Apparently, he was so disappointed that we haven’t had a proper talk since, and I’ve never made a bad choice again.

“Looking to jump back into the dating scene.” Melanie

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writes that down. “I’ve written all my friends’ dating profiles, and for my older sister Genevieve. My bridesmaid’s dress is this pistachio color. That’s the thanks I get.”

An engaged sister? Melanie has some heavy-duty credentials. But this feels like the start of another teen movie and I have no intention of starring in it. “Please don’t actually post anything without my permission.”

“I won’t,” she replies, so puzzled by my suspicion that I’m ashamed. “We’ll create a schedule of homework activities starting out very easy, until you’re down at the Thunderdome getting your neck kissed by some sexy guy. We won’t just pick the first one who comes along. By the time I leave here, you’ll have someone.”

I gape at her. “That is literally impossible.”

“Not when you follow the Melanie Sasaki Method.” She writes that down and underlines it many times. “The Sasaki Method. How catchy. That sounds just like a self-help book. That sounds like a Netflix series.” She’s sold the rights within ten seconds of having the idea.

She’s not the only one jumping way ahead; I’m still caught up on the sexy-guy-neck-kissing concept. By the time she’s worked her magic and left, I’ll be watching the Christmas special of my favorite TV show, *Heaven Sent*, on my couch with someone who wants to kiss me. Is it actually impossible?

“So you in? The Sasaki Method?” Melanie grins widely. “It’ll be a lot of fun.”

I’m a sleep-on-it person. “Can I think about it?”

“I want a reply by Friday, close of business.” Today is Monday.

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She turns to her computer and begins typing. Just as I think a miracle has occurred—she’s doing some work—my computer chimes with a meeting request for Friday five P.M. Subject? The Sasaki Method, of course. I click accept, and just like that, the conversation is not over, just rescheduled.

CHAPTER TWO

After our yogurts, Melanie begins setting up the new resident profile in the system, but now that she's working, I kind of wish we were still chatting. It's a beautiful afternoon. Through the open office door, I can see the neat path leading to the residents' accommodations. There's perfect hedges, emerald grass, and a tiny sliver of blue sky. "I like Sylvia's view from this chair."

Melanie replies, still typing, "Are you angling to get her job?"

I nod. "If nothing disastrous happens, she says she can retire with confidence." I think she means, she'll retire before things get serious.

Prescott Development Corporation (PDC) acquired Providence eighteen months ago. They have a reputation for giving their acquisitions a glamorous, repurposing makeover. Would Providence become a wellness center? A boutique hotel? A set for a reality TV show? Time passed and nothing happened. There was no visit, no call, no bulldozers, but eventually a decree was

issued on PDC letterhead: All tenancy agreements have been altered to have the same end date of December 31 next year.

“That’s fine,” Mrs. Whittaker (she of the legendary three boyfriends) told me when I dropped off the paperwork explaining the tenancy amendment. “I’ll be dead by then, honey. Got a pen?” The attitude of residents has either been cheerful don’t-careness or gossipy conspiracy theories. The calls from their families were stressed-out questions we still can’t answer. By next Christmas we could be packing up this office.

We keep trying to impress PDC with the perfect investment they’ve made, by sending through regular financial reports and cute newspaper clippings about our contributions to the community. But our corporate daddy’s too busy to notice our A+ report cards and flawless ballet recitals. We are the forgotten achievers. And I’m really okay with that.

Melanie’s head turns. “Oh, I hear a scooter. Tag, you’re it.”

“Part of your duties is assisting the residents. Probably your top duty.”

“They’re all so old with see-through skin. I can’t handle it.” Melanie gets up and goes into the bathroom, phone in hand. I walk outside to create a drive-through service.

A sharp voice shouts, “You’d think for the price we pay, they’d do something about the turtles.” Steaming down the hill toward me are the Parlioni sisters. The older sister taking the lead is Renata. She’s just turned ninety-one. I put a birthday card in her mailbox and it was returned to me, torn into pieces. It’s okay—I knew she’d do that.

“Be more careful, they’re endangered” is what Agatha

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(Aggie) replies. She is younger at eighty-nine years old and she is correct: They're endangered tortoises and they're everywhere. Providence has the highest concentration of golden bonnet tortoises of anywhere on the planet. They swerve their scooters around the slow-motion lumps dotting the path and my heart is in my throat.

Renata bellows back, "I'm the one who's endangered around here. I want to turn them into hair combs." When they reach me, they brake to a stop. Britney Spears blares from a portable radio in Aggie's front basket.

Renata was once a fashion editor. The devil wears brands you've never even heard of. YouTube has footage of a fashion show in 1991 when she called Karl Lagerfeld "Weekend at Bernie's" to his face. He called her something far worse in French, but she considers it a triumph. *He had no creative reply.*

HOT OR NOT magazine is long gone, but Renata is not exactly retired. I can pick out brand logos all over her.

Her sister, Aggie Parlioni, is my style goal. Gray suit, white blouse, and black loafers. She has fine white hair cropped close to her head and is smart, neat, and reasonable. I get along with her great. Aggie is a quiet person, but she's noisy because of her radio. The local station has a competition: Win \$10,000 if they repeat the same song in a day. Aggie doesn't need the money, or any of the random prizes she's always trying to win. It's the what-if feeling between entering and the prize draw that she is addicted to.

I ask her loudly, "Any luck?"

Aggie turns down the volume a touch and holds out some

envelopes to me. They're prestamped and ready for the afternoon's mail run. They'll be twenty-five-word-or-less entries. Collect-ten-coupons. Name This Yacht for a Chance to Win. "I did have a small windfall," she says carefully, like she knows she's about to be teased.

"She won a Frisbee," Renata cackles. "Let's ask the neighbors to toss it around, shall we? Break a few hips."

The mental image almost pixelates my vision. "Is there anything else I can do for you?" The fact that their assistant isn't in tow is a very bad sign.

Renata smiles, and it's pure evil. "We need a new one."

I know exactly what she means. "What happened to Phillip?"

She ignores me and lowers her sunglasses, cooler than I'll ever be, and looks through to Melanie's vacant chair. "Where's your pretty Asian minion? Or is that not PC? Inspired by her, I ordered a lovely black wig."

"You absolutely cannot call her that." I hold eye contact until I see she understands. "But in regard to the wig, Melanie will be very flattered. She's busy checking her social media in the bathroom."

Renata's cackle always hits my bloodstream like a drug. It's the Providence equivalent of making the popular girl at school laugh. "The youth of today. On the toilet, right where they belong. I wish I'd had 'the Instagram.'"

"Is it too late for you to try it?" Aggie's a quiet instigator. Thanks a bunch. Before the day's out, I'm going to be taking street-style shots of Renata leaning against a brick wall.

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Renata narrows her eyes like I'm a magazine cover and I'm Not Hot. "You're looking very old today, young woman. Where's the visor I bought you for Christmas? You are asking for LIVER SPOTS," she booms, loud enough to scare birds. "Look at my spotty OLD HANDS. This song was playing this morning," Renata says to Aggie abruptly when the radio changes tracks. "Quick, call them."

Aggie consults her notebook. "It was 'Billie Jean' at 9:09 A.M. This is 'Thriller.' Tell her what you did to Phillip."

Renata is triumphant. "I gave him the joke pair of panties and told him to iron them. Who knew such a simple request would be the last straw?"

"He just picked up his keys and walked out," Aggie says wearily. "Two and a half days. He lasted longer than most."

For entertainment, some people go on safari. Renata Parlani prefers hunting a very specific type of game. She's reloading her weapon when she says, "We haven't had a Goth boy in a while. I want one that's constantly thinking about his mortality."

I steel myself. "We had an agreement. We're putting up a sensible advertisement. I'll go get it." Imagine being able to tell Sylvia that I fixed the Parlani situation once and for all.

Renata says when I'm back with my file: "Read the old ad. I want to hear what's wrong with it."

"Position Vacant. Two ancient old women residing at Providence Retirement Villa seek male assistant for casual exploitation and good-natured humiliation."

Renata interrupts. "What's wrong with that bit?" Both sis-

ters are jiggling slightly on their scooters now. No one could stay still to “Thriller.” I’m shifting foot to foot, trying to hold the dance in.

I explain, “It’s illegal to discriminate based on gender. This says only males can apply.”

“I have no desire to boss around a female. Read the rest,” Renata bosses me. Aggie gives me a deeply empathetic look.

I continue, “Duties include boutique shopping, fast-food fetching, and sincerely rendered flattery. Good looks a bonus—but we aren’t picky.” I appeal to Aggie. “I’m not sure that’s legal either. You can see that isn’t going to get anyone who will be any use to you. All you’ve gotten so far are—”

Renata interrupts again. “Skinny boys with skateboards and dark circles under their eyes. Useless kids who don’t know how to peel an orange or drive a stick shift.”

I pull out my draft advertisement. “Wanted: Experienced aged-care nurse to provide assistance to two active elderly women residing at Providence Retirement Villa. Domestic duties, outings, and errands. Driver’s license plus police check required.” I try not to cringe under Renata’s poisonous stare. “We had a deal.”

Aggie is on my side. “Ren, I think we need to go with this new ad. It would be nice to have someone who could actually complete tasks. Laundry. Making the bed. I am too old to live in this kind of mess because of your strange hobby.”

Renata fires up. “We agreed that when we were rich and old—”

“That was fifty-five years ago,” Aggie cuts in. “You’ve gotten

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your revenge on the male species. Yes, having young people around the place is enjoyable. But I have no clean clothes. I have no clean coffee mug. Let me live comfortably. My hands are no good anymore.” She has peripheral neuropathy, causing numbness in her fingers.

Renata’s expression softens. “One last boy and I’ll retire. I’d better put in a good effort to really break him in. Find him for us, Ruthie.” She adjusts her visor. “I need a strong drink. But I have no boy to make it for me. Drat.”

“Maybe we’ll win the lottery with this last boy,” Aggie says to me with not much optimism. “Got to be in it to win it, I suppose.”

“I’ll go and sort out that ad for you and take your mail. Have a lovely afternoon.” I must have a shred of optimism left in me. I nearly make it back to the door before Renata stops me.

“We need you to put gas in the car. We need snacks. And get us some dinner—Thai, but nothing spicy. No noodles or rice. No soups or coconut. Absolutely no cilantro or mint.”

My pulse bumps at the thought of leaving the grounds this evening, but I can’t exactly leave them up the hill to starve. “I was busy tonight, but . . . okay.”

Renata snorts. “You? Busy on a Monday night? Puh-lease. Look, keep this good service up and I’ll write you into my will.” (A common tactic. Her sister and I interject with admonishments and she moves on.) “Get us some fresh flowers—some sort of elegant mix. But no lilies. You know I don’t like feeling like I’m at my own funeral.”

I know exactly what sort of flowers will get me yelled at. I

turn my face to the sky and send up a request: *I can't take much more. Please send us the One.*

Renata revs her scooter and accelerates off. "Then come up and register me for the Instagram. Then fix our DVD player." Her voice is fading into the distance. "Then stay and watch a DVD with us. And then you can wash all of Aggie's . . ." (inaudible).

My only plan for tonight was walking 127 steps from the office to my cottage, to have a hot bath and then watch *Heaven Sent*. But it sounds like I'm going out instead. Gas is one of the only things that can't be delivered, unfortunately for me.

"Thank you, Ruthie," Aggie says to me. She has been struggling to liberate her purse from her smart handbag that I secretly covet. She peels out two hundred-dollar bills from an inch-thick stack. "Is this enough? I wish we could have you as our assistant, but Sylvia would never let us. Girls like you are gold dust."

If Sylvia gave me to the Parlonis, I'd age ten years in a week, and that would make me 135. "I'll find someone reliable. You need someone who can run your house for you. Life will be much easier." *For you and me.* "I hope when Sylvia comes back—"

"Don't worry. I'll tell her you managed the place just fine." Aggie peels out a third note from her purse. "I apologize for Ren. Here is a thank-you present." She hands me the most perfect hundred-dollar bill I have ever seen, her eyes on her departing sister.

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“Oh thank you, but you don’t need to.” I try to hand the money back, but her purse is in her bag. In the distance, we can hear Renata still shouting. I say, “Aggie, this is too much.”

“It’s not against the rules, you can take it. Go buy yourself something indulgent.” She looks at my plain outfit with kindness rather than critique. All the pieces are clean and in good condition, but they’re all thrifted. “Be twenty-five years old. How nice it must be, to be so young. That’s the only prize I can never win again.” She scoots off.

I put the windfall into my pocket and go back inside. Melanie is back at her desk. A white earbud dangles from her ear and she’s wearing no shoes. I put the job file into her in-tray and Aggie’s envelopes in the mail tub.

“We’re going to put their job ad up for a few days, then we’ll change it to my new version. Could I leave that with you?” The local recruitment agency we got Melanie from won’t deal with the Parlonis any longer. We throw out the net and trawl the internet for fresh boys. I think of my dating aspirations and wince; will I be doing the same?

“Sure thing,” Melanie says. “I’m stuck with this new resident setup. What do I enter here, for tenancy end date?”

“All contracts end December thirty-first next year.”

She looks up at me quizzically. “What happens after then? Their tenancy gets extended?” She thinks of something. “Is this because they’re all . . . you know? Old?”

“No, it’s our new corporate policy. We actually don’t know what happens after that date.” I reach back behind me and find

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Sylvia's file labeled "PDC DEVELOPMENT." "If you run out of work, you can read through this for some background. I might go for a walk and check in on a few residents."

Melanie flips open the file, decides it's boring, and says, "Think about the Sasaki Method. Think about giving a smile to the next cute guy you see."

I do think about these things for a long time as I walk up the hill, moving tortoises off the path with my hand in a latex glove. I give each one a flirty fake smile. I know that when I circuit back around, they'll be on the path again.

No one can say I don't try my best.

CHAPTER THREE

Time to saddle up and hit the trails on this gleaming borrowed steed. For the journey, I'll be needing:

- My cool cardigan (it has foxes and mushrooms)
- A freshly retightened bun with no escaping wisps of hair
- Brushed teeth and some pink lip gloss
- Some courage, which I know is weird

Hold on to your hat, partner, we're about to ride out into the valley and . . . who am I kidding? I'll sit here and simmer in my own nerves. I once googled how much the Parlonis' car cost, and my brain instantly forgot the amount like I'd experienced a trauma. I hate leaving here. What if something happens? Someone falls, a hydrant explodes? A tortoise sprains its ankle? I make myself start the (very valuable) engine, because the sooner I leave, the quicker I can get back for tonight's episode of my favorite show.

I haven't told a real-life soul this, but I'm one of the founding creators of the longest-running *Heaven Sent* online forum, Heaven Sent You Here. *Heaven Sent* is about Pastor Pierce Percival; his wife, Taffy; their studious teen daughter, Francine; plus twin eight-year-old girls (Jacinta and Bethany), who are always up to mischief.

The forum hosts an annual global rewatch of the entire show. Tonight we're up to Season Two, episode eight. That's the one where the homesick twins think they've seen the face of Jesus singed onto a marshmallow at Bible camp. When I get back from my errands for the Parlonis, I need to rewatch this episode to refresh myself on it and start a discussion thread.

With this goal in mind, I begin the trip. Holy moly. I'm in the outside world. I'm filling the car with liquid gold at the less-busy gas station when I realize I am staring at the back of a young man. He has very long black hair that puts Melanie's hair extensions to shame. Resplendent, gleaming hair is wasted on men. I bet he doesn't even condition or get the ends trimmed. He sits there sideways on his motorbike, ankles crossed, that unearned glory lifting on a breeze in an inky swirl.

He's oblivious to my presence. Fine by me.

This particular specimen is in his twenties. His skin sits tight on his body, inked all over with tattoos. I see a scorpion, a knife and fork, a diamond ring. It's like his body is the page he's been doodling on while on hold to the electricity company. An upward trail of butterflies, a switchblade, a donut. The artistry is lovely. This is a guy who took a lot of care getting trivial, unrelated things printed all over himself.

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Nothing's been colored in, and I want to unzip my pencil case and get to work. I'd start on that big unfurled rose on the back of his arm. Actually, I think I'd use a pink lipstick. The slanted tip would be just the right size for the petals, each the size of a woman's kiss.

He turns his head, feeling my eyes like an animal would, but he doesn't look back at me. I stare at the concrete until he resettles. I put my hand on my neck; I can feel my heartbeat. This is an interesting development: My body knows it's twenty-five.

Melanie told me to take a chance and smile at a guy. I look down at myself. Mom told me once that I have nice calves and my reflection in the car's window is perfectly fine, maybe even pretty when I soften my face.

Imagine being a guy. How would it feel to sit on a neat butt that doesn't spread out like a hen when you sit? If I was turned into a man for a day, I'd spend the first hour carrying around hay bales, making myself sweat. Then I'd muster the courage to unzip my pants to make a decision on whether seeing a penis is a worthwhile priority moving forward. As the minutes tick on, the Rolls-Royce guzzles and he continues to sit motionless. I can't see a second helmet. He does have a very full backpack. I worry for that zipper.

I lock the car. Then I check each individual door. I say under my breath: "I locked the car doors." I mostly believe myself as I walk inside to pay.

As I'm deliberating over what soft-looking chocolate bars I'll get for Renata, my ears tune in to the gas station clerk's hushed telephone conversation. "He's going to steal it."

I rush to the window to check the car, but Tattoo Guy's sitting where I left him. I lay my purchases on the counter.

The clerk says into the phone, "It's been more than ten minutes. He's filled his bike, can't pay for it, and he's deciding what to do." He begins scanning my items and mouths my total at me. "Yeah. As soon as he touches the ignition, I'm calling the cops."

I look through the dusty windows. It's evident from the set of this guy's shoulders and the stark deliberation on his face that he is sitting inside a terrible moment. I was oblivious as I admired his butt. Then I suspected him of theft. Is it true that he has no money? I was in a similar situation once. I was only a few weeks out of home and my card kept getting declined. My neck was hot from bottling up the tears. A motherly type paid for me and disappeared into the night. All she'd said was, *Pay it forward.*

Time to settle my karmic debt. "I'll pay for him. How much?" I dig out my special hundred-dollar bill.

The clerk hangs up the phone. "Twenty dollars. Aren't you nice?" The way he says it doesn't make me feel that nice.

I'm almost back to the car door when the clerk says over the loudspeaker: "Pump number two, please thank your Good Samaritan. Your gas has been paid for and you can leave."

We are the only customers. So much for me just melting away into the night. I give it a try anyway. Tattoo Guy says behind me, "Ma'am, thank you so much."

"No problem." I fumble with the car keys and drop things. "Don't mention it."

Second First Impressions

“You’ve just saved my ass—I mean, my butt. I’m having the worst day ever.” He’s closer behind me when he adds, “I left my wallet somewhere, but I always find it. The world’s full of Good Samaritans, just like you. If you give me your details, I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.”

“Not necessary,” I say, but now he’s right behind me. I smell the cotton on his body when a breeze blows through it. When I look down at my loafers, there’s big inked hands picking up my dropped groceries.

No way am I going to say *Pay it forward*. Men probably think that’s girly nonsense. But I’ll try to have an exciting story to tell Melanie. I turn on the balls of my feet.

“Here you go,” he says when all the chocolate is gathered up. When he straightens to full height, he’s obviously surprised. After a beat, he lets out a big joyful howl. Up at the sky, he yells at full volume, “Oh my God, you look absolutely amazing!”

Did Melanie pay a gorgeous local actor to perk me up?

“Oh shit, too good. You got me.” When I don’t reply, he continues, “I can tell you, from the back, you’ve absolutely nailed it.” His smile is white and lovely as he drags his hair back. “I love costume parties. Can I come?” His slender-muscly body shakes from laughing. It’s a full-body workout. He’s standing so close, for a moment I don’t process the words. Then I feel the slice.

“Excuse me?”

He is staring at my chest with open appreciation. The glasses that I wear for computer work are still hanging from a chain

around my neck. “Perfect,” he says reverently before dissolving into laughter again. “Are you going as one of the Golden Girls?”

“No—”

“You just need a string of pearls and a walking stick. Look at those granny shoes.” He says it like a fond scold and taps my toe with his. “You’ve even got the old-person car to match. You’ve thought of everything.” He wipes a tear from his eye. “You look like Tweety Bird’s granny.”

“You don’t need to be rude.” The prim words are out of my mouth before it occurs to me that I should just say, *Sure, I’m headed to a big party, I hope my costume wins.*

I don’t think I’ve helped someone who really needs it. Tattoos are expensive and he’s covered himself in a fortune. His unusual biker-guy jeans have a lot of seams and diagonal lines, the result of skilled craftsmanship. My thrift-store eyes spot a tiny logo on his pocket: BALMAIN. Very, very pricey.

He’s noticed my attention and the corner of his mouth lifts in a mischievous way. “So how old are you? Are you an eighty-year-old with a facelift?”

“How old I am is none of your business.” The words I’ve ached to say to all the residents at Providence, and I blurt them in the face of a tattooed guy with a motorbike? “I paid for your gas because I thought you were in trouble. But I can see you don’t really need it.”

“I was just psyching myself up to call my dad.” This guy scratches his jaw and I can’t read the word printed across the knuckles. “I try to fuck up during business hours, so I can speak to his assistant instead. Less of a lecture that way.”

Second First Impressions

“I’ll give you my PayPal address. You can pay me back and I’ll find someone who actually needs the money.” I can’t write on the Parlonis’ receipt. I have one of Sylvia’s business cards in my pocket. I cross out her email and write mine. The gas station attendant gives me a grinning thumbs-up and I burn red with humiliation.

He studies the business card I put into his palm. “A retirement villa?” His eyes spark. The irises are mixed colors—familiar, but I don’t know what they remind me of. He is holding a new laugh in. “What’s going on with you, anyway?” I cram myself into the car and lock it. “Wait, wait,” the guy shouts. Now his *I’m sorry* is muted and far away. I’m sorry too. Funny how fast a good deed can turn bad in the outside world, like time-lapse footage of rotting fruit.

While I wait for a gap in the traffic, I look in my rearview mirror, praying he doesn’t try to follow. The heel of his palm pressed to his temple is universal language for, *I fucked that up*. At least he realizes it. Most people who hurt my feelings never have a clue they did. I just invested twenty dollars for a reminder of why I stay at Providence and tucked in my safe little forum in the far corner of the internet.

Outside World Shields Up.

“YOU’VE BEEN SO quiet today,” Melanie says behind me. “Did I say something, or . . . ?”

“I got my feelings hurt a bit last night. Not by you.” I keep staring at the parking lot, watching for a car.

After I sorted out the Parlonis and left them asleep on the

couch, holding hands, I stood in front of the mirror in my bedroom. Then I used a second makeup mirror to look at myself from behind. That guy was right: From most angles, I am an old lady. I messaged my forum admin friends Austin, JJ, and Kaitlynn. The group chat was a big chorus of outrage—*what a dick, that's so RUDE, of course you're not old*—but the reassurance didn't feel authentic because none of us have ever actually met in person.

“Here's what I know. You're a good person, Ruthie,” Melanie says so kindly. “And you don't deserve hurt feelings. Tell me who did it and I will kill them.”

“A complete stranger. Someone I'll never see again.” I recheck the time and sidestep the tight squeeze of emotion in my throat. “I need to focus on the meeting. I wish I knew what it was about.”

“I'm sorry,” Melanie says. “I know I screwed up big-time.”

When I was up a ladder replacing a blown bulb outside the recreation center this morning, Melanie took a message for me. All she wrote down was:

- *Jerry Prescott*
- *Today @ 3 P.M.*
- *Maintenance something?*

“Jerry Prescott owns Providence,” I told her, with sheer terror coursing through my veins. “You spoke to his assistant?” She shook her head no. “You spoke to the owner of Prescott Development Corporation? PDC? PDC?”

Second First Impressions

“He sounded nice, I think,” she replied.

I have tried everything—even an improvised hypnotism session in the darkened office—but Mel swears she can’t recall any more details than that. Jerry’s assistant never called me back.

A motorbike turns into the parking lot.

“Nope.” I’m looking for a rental car. The rider takes off his helmet, shakes his head back, and looks up at the office. I’d know that phenomenal head of hair anywhere.