

## THE DAY ANN LANDERS DIED

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On my thirteenth birthday my grandmother came into my room without knocking. I was naked and lying on a pillow on the floor. In front of me was an Italian magazine opened to a three-page spread of a woman copulating with a Zebra.

“I’m making Brussels sprouts,” she said, pale, dazed.

“Why didn’t you knock?”

She averted her eyes.

“We don’t have locks on the doors in this house for a reason,” she stammered. Then, as she departed, mumbled, “You can’t lock every door.”



The day after my grandmother found me masturbating, I awoke to find a book at the end of my bed. On the cover was a sparkling woman with coiffed hair. I fanned through the book that covered everything from masturbation to menstruation. I searched for photos, anything that might arouse me, yet there was nothing. Just bold headlines and pages of advice from a woman named Ann Landers.



Many years later, I was informed of the death of Ann Landers from Stan Al Kohamid as we headed up Fifth Avenue in a yellow taxi. He had a plastic clock in the shape of a Koran mounted on his dashboard that alternated between the date and the time. It was seven a.m.

“Now we have Brother Joyce and that man Phil who helps Oprah lose weight,” Stan said. “They have no character. Ann Landers not only gave smart help, but she had nice teeth. That Doctor Phil, you never see his teeth. He just points a lot. That finger. Very rude.”

As Stan demonstrated how Doctor Phil pointed, I stared out the front window at the waking city. People were buying white-capped

cups of coffee while their dogs sniffed the shadowy spaces where the buildings joined the sidewalks. Near the Williamsburg Bridge the sun sifted through the rusting beams, distorting the rows of pigeons under the rippling morning heat.

“Normal women make out nowadays like lesbians,” Stan concluded at a red light, thumping the dashboard. Not a single car passed through on the other side as we waited.

“But that Ann Landers,” Stan said glancing up and down the street. “She never would have approved of all this divorce and that Grind show on MTV. She had the guts to say ‘No!’ and to write about it. That was a woman. A woman for all other women.”

The meter flipped to six dollars. The second hand of the Koran clock spun at a steady pace. And seeing that there were no cars or police, Stan Al Kohamid rolled through the red light, and toward my apartment.



At home, I made some green tea and sat down on my couch. I pulled out a plastic baggy that had once contained ten ecstasy pills, but now only half of one remained. I popped the bitter-tasting chemical in my mouth, took out a tape from my backpack, and inserted it into the VCR. There was a flicker, a few seconds of mayhem, and finally the auto tracking brought the picture together. Soon, there was Rebecca, her curly Jewish hair cascading over her olive Puerto Rican shoulders. She was staring into the camera, holding up her hand, and displaying her new wedding ring.

“I know women who wait all their lives for this,” she said faintly, twisting the ring in circles.

She stared at the camera solemnly, held out her hand, and extended it past the camera’s lens.

“People like you,” she said into the camera. “Don’t know what you are missing.”

Then Rebecca’s husband, Eli, appeared behind her, wearing only sweatpants.

“Is the camcorder’s battery full?” he asked. “The indicator is on the right.”

“It’s full,” I replied and, as the auto focus hummed away, anything that had remained blurry up to that point, solidified into a crystal image.

Halfway through the video, my phone rang. I was at the point where Rebecca was sprawled out on the kitchen table with her husband sweating above her. I had bent down low with the camera, where their genitals and legs and flesh became a tangled mass with no spatial reference. The phone rang in syncopation with their moaning.

"Francis?" Rebecca said as I picked up the receiver. Her voice was faint, but urgent. "What are you doing?"

"Watching the tape."

"So was I. It's too hot to leave the apartment."

"It's suppose to rain later."

I knew Rebecca couldn't linger on small talk, so she asked: "Why did you leave?"

"I was tired."

"Does it have to do with Cynthia?" she asked, as if anticipating my response.

"No."

"No what?"

"Just no. It didn't feel right."

"What about all those other times?" she asked.

"Your husband wasn't there."

"Sometimes he was," she said. "When the four of us were together. You know he doesn't care."

The second half of the pill was kicking in, leaving a light tingling on my skin. Rebecca was chain-smoking, exhaling into the air beyond her phone. Through the phone, I could hear Middle Eastern music in the background, the tinny, languorous rhythms emanating from her apartment and into mine.

"I can't sleep," she said after a moment. "This X has too much speed."

Then she paused before asking: "What's going on in that head of yours?"

"It's private."

"When you left. This morning. You walked out all weird. Was it me?"

"I told you. I was tired."

"Then, why are you still awake?"

A pigeon landed on my fire escape, picking under its wings.

“I should go.”

“That seems to be your theme,” she said, letting out a defeated sigh. There was a faint fumbling, followed by a solid click, and the line went dead. I pressed the OFF button, set the phone down on the coffee table, leaned back, and sunk into the couch. Underneath the phone was an architectural magazine that had suddenly appeared months ago, when Cynthia was convincing me to leave New York. Next to the magazine was a picture of Cynthia standing in front of an adobe house in Santa Fe. She was blowing a kiss toward the camera. Underneath the photo was an unopened wedding invitation from Cynthia. She had written my address so carefully that her handwriting had almost ceased to be her own.



Many months before Ann Landers died, there were rumors that she had lost the ability to write. The tabloids said she would dictate her advice to an assistant and then the editors for the newspapers would make the final changes. It was also during this time that Cynthia convinced me to leave New York, to see the rest of the country. She said that she wanted to take me to all the places she found in the past and had saved to show “someone special.” As we drove south along the Jersey turnpike, early on the morning of our departure, Manhattan began to fill with all the Ann Landers’s readers, the fluorescent lights in the towering buildings switching on, one by one.



“What would you have done if I had run off with Rebecca?” Cynthia asked me one still, dry afternoon outside the chapel at the Taos Pueblo. There was fresh snow on top of the surrounding mountains, the whiteness blinking through the dense green of the pine forest.

“I didn’t think good Catholic girls did that,” I answered.

“I’m a recovering Catholic. Besides my upbringing no longer has any bearing on how I live my life.” To illustrate her point, Cynthia lifted her sleeve, exposing a tattoo of an angel surreptitiously circling her bicep. “It’s all about freedom. Freedom to do whatever you want and not care what other people think. I know you laugh when I mention Dr. Phil, but he says some mighty interesting things. Like nothing



is permanent except our choices. Our choices are representations of our fears. Because of Dr. Phil I find it easier to let go. To let things slip away. I don't hold on like I used to."

An elder Native American woman came along and tried to sell us some wind chimes. They were all wood and carved into shapes that were remarkable, but not readily distinguishable. Cynthia and I politely looked through the woman's wares and pretended to be impressed, although from the very beginning, from the first glance, we both knew that we wouldn't buy anything.



The day Ann Landers died was accompanied by an uncomfortably bright morning. By the time the videotape of Rebecca and her husband finished, the bustle of the city had started. Cars honked, construction workers shouted, and a senile man tapped his cane rhythmically against a trash can. Feeling depleted, lonely, and anxious, I removed the tape from the VCR and tossed it into the trash can. I stared at it for a minute, amongst carrot peelings and tofu containers, remnants of a dinner that had existed before the video had been created. I flipped to the back pages of an old *Village Voice*, made a call, and waited for Smiley, a Puerto Rican escort, to arrive and buzz me twice.



"D'you hear Ann Landers died?" Smiley said, unrolling a condom onto my penis. "That's crazy, right. I used to read her all the time. Specially when I was in the hospital."

I helped her with the condom because some pubic hairs had gotten caught and pulled painfully. I asked why Smiley had been in the hospital.

"My ex-husband shot me three times in the neck."

"You lived?"

"I'm here ain't I?"

She put her lips to my penis, the condom crackling in her mouth. Her movements were mechanical, as if she were wiping down the inside of a stove, and I could tell she was thinking about something, waiting to tell me. She stopped after a moment and stretched out.

"My husband also tried to kill me with rat poison," she said.

“Made dinner for me and my little boy. Put the stuff in the tamales and used lots of hot sauce so we’d never know?”

She glanced out the window, not looking at anything in particular. “People are fucked up, you know? Three bullets. And I was pregnant. Three motherfucking bullets. I still got them. Put them in plastic. Like they do with those jars you turn upside down and it snows.”

She lifted her shirt and showed me her breasts. Her nipples were pierced, the silver loops artificial and sterile against her light olive skin. “I did that on the day we split up. My husband never would have let me do that if we was together. You wanna suck on them?”

I shook my head and she dropped her shirt back down.

“How come you ain’t hard?” she asked, shaking my penis with her hand. Then she cocked her head. “You think I’m sexy, right?”



Smiley was examining the contents of my bookshelf, cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth. She was completely naked except for my sandals, which flopped loudly with every step.

“You got a lot of books.” She pulled one out, examined it, then slid it back in. “Why you need all these books?”

“To read.”

“You think books make you a better person?”

“Some.”

She nodded, but it wasn’t clear whether she accepted this answer. Smiley leaned against the window. “You married?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t think marriage is for me.”

“Maybe you haven’t met the right person.”

I shrugged. “I don’t think that’s the case.”

Her menthol cigarette had burned to the end. She stabbed it out against the fire escape, closed the window, and returned to the bed. It creaked under her weight.

“What if I said I didn’t want to fuck you?”

“I’d ask for my two hundred dollars back.”

She raised an eyebrow. “The money is mine. Besides, you ain’t even hard.”

“I’d still ask for my money back.”

She stared at me for a long time, but I wasn't sure if it was an attempt to intimidate me or to convey her annoyance.

"I'm gonna go," she said, reaching for her dress.

"You can't just leave."

"Then you better rape me," she said, tilting her head. "Because my time is up."



As I watched Smiley cross the street down below I felt a terrible emptiness, a mixture of regret and defeat, opening up inside of me. I went into the bathroom, popped open a prescription container labeled Cynthia O'Donnell, and took two Valium. I returned to the kitchen, pulled the videotape out of the trash, wiped it off with a dish rag, and put it back in the VCR. Instantly I saw the couple appear from a storm of static, Rebecca and her husband. This time however, I saw a part that I had never seen before. Rebecca was on all fours with her husband behind her. His eyes were closed, but she was staring straight at the camera, straight at me. "Does this look good?" she whispered. I grabbed the remote and rewind it. Once again, the sweat, gasping, and quick movements were all there, her lips mouthing those words seemed so alien, so out of place.

"Does this look good?"



When I was seven my mother woke me up late one night. She had been crying, her words and comments depressed gibberish. She dressed me in a circle of light from a desk lamp. Soon we were in her Volvo, driving eastward. I fell asleep again, but was awoken by the slam of my mother's car door. She lifted me out from the back seat and led me by the hand to my father's new apartment. I had only been there a couple of times, but already knew that inside lay a treasure trove of M&M's and newly purchased Star Wars toys. When she knocked on the door, there was a long pause, and one by one the lights in the apartment were switched on. Eventually my father appeared at the door dressed in a robe.

"How can you leave this?" my mother asked him. "How can you

just leave this family? Is this what you do with a marriage? Is this what my husband does with his marriage?"

Then there was another voice from inside, a light, questioning voice. My mother brushed past my father, letting go of my hand. My father lifted me up and chased after her, his slippers unsteady against the bare wood floors. Suddenly, we were in his bedroom. My mother had a yellow Tonka truck lifted over her head, and before my father could stop her, it came down on the perplexed, naked intruder with the sheets pulled up to her neck.



The following week I stayed with my grandmother while my mother rested up in a mental hospital. My grandmother gave me a book by Ann Landers about divorce. I read and reread a letter, written by a boy my age, whose parents were constantly fighting. Although his story was quite different from mine, I found myself gravitating toward his problem because he couldn't understand why people tried to stay married, even when they didn't like each other. "Shouldn't people love each other?" he asked. "Shouldn't people who are married stay married because they love each other and not for some other reason?"

Ann Landers answered "Yes" and defined love within one paragraph.



"Did you like watching Rebecca and me together?" Cynthia asked, as we stood in front of an adobe house in Santa Fe. She wanted the house, the hot tub, and the barn that went with it. She wanted pictures of her, lots of pictures to send to friends to show how happy we were, out here, away from New York City. She posed, blew kisses, sat on the corral railing, and did a cartwheel that later only came out as a blur.

"I think sometimes I liked watching more than participating," I replied. She didn't answer immediately, but swung the front door slowly on its new hinges.

"Don't you think that's strange?"

"What?" I asked.

She closed the door and watched it cautiously, as if it might open

again on its own. "That you liked watching more than getting involved."

I shrugged, but she didn't seem to notice. "This could be our house," Cynthia said, turning her back to me. "We could live here and have children, and sit on this front porch."

I was quiet.

"You know I did that for you," she added. "I was with Rebecca for you."

"You said you wanted to try being with a woman."

"In the end," Cynthia said, her voice dropping. "In the end it was for you."



Cynthia and I were staying at a bed and breakfast in Santa Fe, near the university. Every morning we would have breakfast with Gerald, the financial analyst from Des Moines. He would carefully carve his cantaloupe from the skin and slice it evenly into four pieces. Every morning he offered me a piece and I declined.

"Francis doesn't eat cantaloupe," Cynthia explained. "There's not enough taste in it for him."

"How do you quantify taste?" Gerald asked.

"Francis quantifies everything."

"How's your wife?" I asked Gerald, frowning toward Cynthia. "We still haven't met her."

Gerald shrugged. "She's sick again. We'll probably be here for a few more days. Until she's able to sit in the car."

I stirred cream into my coffee. "What do you do with your time?"

"Walk around," he said. "I like being by myself."

"So does Francis," Cynthia interjected. "That's why we'll never get married."

Gerald nodded as if he had expected this and carefully placed a piece of cantaloupe on his tongue with his two fingers.

Cynthia's face was red now. She needed a response. "In a few years Francis will be walking around by himself. I'll be married, maybe not happily, but married. And I'll think about Francis, walking around by himself, and everything will be better. I'll feel good knowing he is alone."

Gerald swallowed his bite of cantaloupe and set his fork down.



He did not show any immediate reaction to what Cynthia had said. Instead, he set his napkin on the table and slid his dish toward the center.

“My wife and I have been married for thirty-two years now,” he said. “I’ve never seen her this sick. We might have to cancel the rest of our trip.”

Then Gerald excused himself and poured another cup of coffee from the carafe by the doorway.



When I woke up late in the evening, on the couch, the half-pill of ecstasy having worn off, I found myself counting the rotations of the ceiling fan. My life was flitting away, swirling up into the air and scattering like some fantastic sci-fi movie sequence. And there I was drained, staring through the darkness at the ceiling. Down below a woman was talking on her cell phone, asking the person on the other line, “Does she even know her ass from her face?”



“Can you come over?” I asked, holding the phone tightly, pressing it against my ear. Outside a plane was flying above, there were the screams of children, and the slamming of a car door. In my apartment the only sound was the fan blowing a stream of air across the hallway.

“This is a change,” Rebecca answered.

“Eli’s at work. I know you are alone.”

“I’m not the one who is alone.”

There was a longing in her voice, touched with reserve. I imagined Rebecca at her apartment, resting on the couch with her robe on. I knew she was twisting the wedding ring on her finger, spinning it slowly as she had done in the video.

“If I come over, then what?” she asked.

“Don’t be coy. Coyness is only effective during courting.”

“I love it when you are pretentious and analytical at the same time. It gets me wet.”

We were both silent. I could tell that I would never be alone with her again. From now on, her husband would be there, watching, giving stage directions.

"If you had called me a few months ago," she said. "We could have run off together."

"I thought that was what you and Cynthia wanted to do."

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"In the end," she whispered. "In the end I wanted to be with you. But after you and Cynthia broke up, you said you wanted to be alone."



On the day Ann Landers died, I was sitting on my fire escape sipping ice water and dangling my legs into space. A young man was escorting an older woman, who I assumed was his grandmother, up the first flight of stairs to her brownstone. He was cautious, caring, and she gripped his arm tightly as they ascended.

The unopened wedding invitation was sitting next to me, reflecting the afternoon sun. There were grooves on the envelope, places where the pulp had been squeezed and steamed together, then flattened. I ran my fingers across the grooves and, after a moment, placed the unopened envelope behind me, onto the windowsill.

Down below a couple was strolling with their young daughter. The girl was holding their arms and lifting her feet off of the ground. The man and woman were deep in conversation, discussing a Con Edison bill, while the carefree girl swung from her parents' support. I watched the couple and their child turn the corner, onto Fifth Avenue, the sounds of the bustling street swallowing them up.

The sun was low, slinking below the black and silver buildings that rimmed Times Square. The car traffic had been transformed into strolling people, burdened with grocery sacks and duffel bags full of gym clothes. As dusk approached, I slowly fell asleep, four stories above the world. And as I drifted into that familiar dark, solitary place, the people below carried on without me, as if I had never existed.