

Lactose Intolerant

“Hello?”

“Hiya Edwood.”

“Just a minute.”

I hold the kitchen phone up in the air and call to my mother.

“Ma, it’s for you.”

“Who is it?”

I immediately launch into a high-pitched coyote yowl.

“*Yahhh-woooo!!!*”

From the den my father echoes the call, and Ginger our retriever joins in from her favorite corner by the pantry. Although we do this every time Jen Wolfberg calls, and have for as long as I can remember, my mother is still irritated. She covers the receiver with her free hand and shushes us, as if after all these years, Jen’s still unaware that it isn’t just the dog howling.

“Hi, Jen...Oh, it’s nothing; she probably heard a car. Listen, you gotta hear; you’ll love this! My son, ‘Mr. Actor’...”

My mom’s been dying to tell Jen all about my latest “fiasco” as she calls; she just can’t resist garnering laughs at my expense.

“...Yes, he was the number-one salesman but his brilliant scheme backfired...”

My mother’s relish as she continues relating the story causes my sphincter to tighten.

“No, but they’re subtracting the cancelled orders from his paycheck, and this week he owes them nine dollars...Oh, he’s all right. I told Rita, and she nearly choked on a bear claw...I did call you first, but Barry said you were busy dusting your statues...Right, Lladros. I tell you, *I had Rita wetting herself!!!*”

I join my dad in the den, but even with the TV blaring my ears are assaulted by Jen’s nasal laughter pouring out of the receiver. Ginger hears it too, and growls suspiciously. Since she was a puppy, she’s regarded Jen as an intruder. Years later, her reaction will seem tame compared to the rabid grunts Jen will elicit from my father after dementia destroys his frontal lobe, and he can no longer mask his emotional reaction toward her.

My mother continues. “No, we’re not gonna let him quit! He’s gotta pay it back! He’s working full time and *still* accruing debt...I know, I know. Rita said he’s practically an indentured servant!!!

My mother explodes into laughter. Jen erupts too, and her abrasive honking causes Ginger to go mental. On one hand it seems unbelievable that a voice coming over the phone could provoke such a reaction from such a sweet-tempered animal, and on the other it wouldn’t surprise me to learn that field biologists were at that moment studying Jen’s effect on dingoes in Australia.

Truthfully, I don’t really care what Jen thinks. What’s upsetting is that she laughs at everything. That’s bad news. My mother getting a few chuckles for telling a story is like a compulsive gambler hitting the jackpot on the first pull of the slot machine; she’ll

continue to retell the anecdote to poor response in an effort to recapture the initial high of that first laugh. Like a gambler, she'll eventually lose some friends.

My mom continues. "Listen doll, I have to go. What time do you want me to pick you up for the cemetery? That's early -- she's dead, she's not going anywhere... Don't worry; I know where it is -- section five, row seventeen -- next to Goldclang."

Every Saturday, Jen and my mom visit Mt. Golda cemetery where their friend Lucille is buried. They've had trouble locating the grave among the waves of gray granite ever since the grounds keeper removed the pastel windsock and day-glow pinwheels Jen placed there as markers. As I listen I feel sorry for Lucille, who probably thought that succumbing to the cancer would at least rescue her from Jen's grating voice.

"Okay, Jen ... Okay...Okay...I will...Okay...Bye."

My mother enters the den and falls into a wing chair -- exhausted but elated by Jen's response to the story.

"I had Jen hysterical!"

My father shrugs at me as I storm into the kitchen. It doesn't even occur to my mother that she's done anything wrong.

It's 1985, the summer before my junior year at Vassar, and I'm stuck at home on Long Island. Although I've been out at college for two semesters, I still haven't told my parents that I'm gay. I've spent the entire vacation rerouting my sexual energies into grueling morning workouts at the gym, then sabotaging myself by eating crap from lunch until bedtime.

Irritated by my mother's ridicule, I rip open a package of Oreos that she's attempted to hide behind the lettuce. I keep count while I eat them, and after knocking off an entire row, I don't trust myself to stop and throw the remainder in the garbage. I even spray the leftover cookies with Lemon Pledge to avoid the temptation of retrieving them from the trash later on.

Back in the den I flop down on the couch. On TV a delicious guy on a razor commercial directs all of my frustrations into my crotch. I contemplate a trip to my room for half an hour but decide to stay put because I don't want my mother claiming the couch for the rest of the evening. Also, I've been masturbating several times a day and am finding the frequency worrisome. At times, I've even considered spraying my cock with Lemon Pledge.

The summer started off well enough -- actually better than I'd anticipated. Utilizing two years of college theatrical training to spectacular effect, I became the most successful telephone salesperson that *New York Newsday* has ever had.

A born salesman! The king of the phone banks! I was certain I'd have no problem talking someone into Scientology or depositing money into a Nigerian bank account. Unfortunately, my stint at the newspaper would be the only practical application of my drama degree until I attempted stand-up comedy ten years later.

Techniques I mastered in Drama 101 -- Introduction to the Actor's Art -- allowed me to manipulate my cadence and timbre as I notified the suckers on my call list that they'd been selected to receive the paper at *almost* no cost. Modulating my instrument (that's theater lingo for voice), I simulated unbridled excitement as I congratulated them and took their credit card numbers. Of course I was creative with semantics; I never actually used words like "win." And I never divulged that the elite pool of those selected was limited to people in the 516 area code. Everything backfired six weeks later when

the invoices went out, and the suckers complained. The cancelled subscriptions were now being deducted from my paycheck. There will even be several weeks where I wish I owed *Newsday* only nine dollars.

My success was making the barely bearable job fun. Now the windowless office full of college students, single mothers, and retirees depresses me. All of them read the boring sales script in a droning monotone that makes the room sound like a beehive.

“Hi Mr. /Ms., _____! This is _____ at *Newsday*! How are you today? (Wait for answer...) Great! Listen, the reason I’m calling is to let you know about an exciting new offer here at *New York Newsday*, New York’s favorite newzzzzzzzzz...”

Despite my mother’s mocking I’m content to be home after my evening shift, lying on the lumpy couch watching TV with my parents. We’re watching a rerun of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* -- arguably the greatest sitcom of all time. It’s the brilliant episode where Chuckles the Clown, dressed as a peanut, is killed by a rogue elephant. It is without a doubt the best thirty minutes of the series.

Ten minutes into the program my father gets up to make coffee. He doesn’t care at all for Mary -- or Lucy -- or Maude. He finds Carol Burnett unwatchable and *The Golden Girls* beyond endurance. It crosses my mind that his aversion to funny women hasn’t prevented him from loving my mother so much. I place an order for iced tea and my mother asks for a cup of decaf Sanka -- which for some reason she doesn’t find redundant.

Returning with our beverages, he delicately breaks the news to her.

“Honey, we’re out of milk.”

“*For God’s sake! I told you to buy an extra quart! What in the world am I supposed to do now?*”

It’s a calamity of immense proportions understandable only to someone who’s had to drink Sanka black.

I’m irritated before the words leave her lips.

“Oh, Ed?”

“What?”

“Would you mind?”

“Sure, right after the show.”

“I need you to go now. They close at eleven.”

My shifts at *Newsday* are exhausting and the remnants of my top salesman’s ego heighten my annoyance. Plus it’s over ninety degrees outside, and my car has no air conditioning and a broken window handle on the driver’s side.

“Oh, Ma, can’t you drink it plain?”

Her eyes remain focused on me as her head changes from full front to three-quarter view. I don’t stand a chance.

“Yeah, all right, I’ll go -- do we need anything else?”

“No, just the milk.”

I get up muttering that I’m going to miss Chuckles’s funeral.

As I scan the cluttered kitchen for my keys, I spy a few packets of Cremora Non-Dairy Creamer on the counter. I call to my mom in the den.

“Ma, you know you have some Cremora right here?”

“I don’t like the fake creamer -- it makes the Sanka taste fake.”

The irony is lost on her.

“Then why’d you buy it?”

“I didn’t. I took it from the diner.”

“What for?”

“You don’t know when it might come in handy.”

What was I saying about irony?

Under a stack of coupons, I locate my Farrah Fawcett key ring. Looking back I marvel at how naïve I was to think that a key chain could serve as my beard. Oh, occasionally someone would notice it, and I felt like one of the boys. But they probably knew that the engine was the only thing she ever got revved up.

I hop into my car, a 1969 Oldsmobile Delta 88 -- a vehicle almost as massive as a Delta 747 -- and lumber through the quiet town toward the only supermarket with evening hours. The market is fifteen minutes away but it feels like thirty if you factor in the humidity. I won’t even get back in time for Chuckles’s eulogy; by the time I return he’ll be moldering in his grave.

The market’s isolated and the drive there is eerie at night. It’s located on a piece of wooded land about three miles square, which always strikes me as the perfect place to dump a body. The rest of the parcel had also slated for commercial development, but construction was halted when a high school biology class discovered an endangered species of salamander. The street lamps are kept off since artificial lighting may have a detrimental effect on amphibian breeding behavior. Apparently the salamanders have poor body images and will only have sex in the dark.

The supermarket glows conspicuously, allowing me to guide the Delta like a ship around a lighthouse. I dock in a handicapped space and feel a twinge of guilt even though there are only two other cars in the lot and plenty of empty spaces. I pull the disabled parking tag down from the visor and hang it from the mirror. My mother has renewed my grandfather’s permit every year since his death to avoid walking an extra twenty feet each time she goes to the store. She justifies depriving someone in a wheelchair of the spot, claiming she needs to minimize the wear and tear on her expensive nine-and-a-half double-A shoes with the high arch that she has to special order through a catalogue.

I jump ship and sprint to the door. It’s locked. In the far corner of the store I see the fluorescent fixtures starting to go dark one by one. I bang on the window, and the darkness stops its advance midway across the ceiling. A guy with curly hair emerges from an aisle and I wave my arms frantically like an idiot in the background of a TV news report.

As he walks toward me his face comes into view under a spray-painted sign for infant formula. “Handsome!” I think, noticing his strawberry locks tinged with carefully placed Sun-In highlights and the Aerosmith tee shirt under his polyester smock. His nametag says Tommy. He’s the kind of guy I would have been slightly afraid of in high school. As Tommy points to his watch and mouths, “We’re closed,” I notice the dark blond fur on his forearm. I smile, shrug, and hold up a finger to indicate that I only need one item.

He smiles back, relents, and loosens the lock at the top of the door. He motions me in, and it crosses my mind that he looks a lot like Christopher Atkins from *The Blue*

Lagoon. Thanking him profusely, I think that he would indeed look pretty excellent in a loincloth.

I sprint the perimeter of the store. At the end of the produce section, I turn right at the bakery and nearly slam into the dairy case. I grab a carton of skim milk on purpose, because I know my mom prefers the two-percent and I'm still pissed off about missing the show.

I arrive at the express line out of breath. Tommy looks down at the milk.

"No cookies?"

"Yeah, cookies."

"Aisle three."

"One second."

"Take your time."

I bolt down the aisle and return with a package of Hydrox.

"Excellent choice."

"Yeah, much better than Oreos."

"Most people don't know what's good."

"I do."

When I get home, it's almost twelve thirty. Before I can turn the knob my mother opens the door.

"Oh, thank God you're back. I was ready to call the police!"

"I don't think they'll bring you milk."

"Don't get smart with me! Where have you been???"

"You won't believe what happened."

"I'm listening...."

And so even though I know I'll never live it down, and the story will be one that she can't wait to share with anyone who'll listen, I begin.

"...The guy follows me out of the store and shuts the security gate..."

"Have a good night. Enjoy the Hydrox," he says before he hops into his car and drives off.

As I walk to my car, I'm agitated by the cyclic cricket song. The chirping augments the awkward absence of foreground noise -- as if God just told a really bad joke and no one is laughing. There seem to be millions of crickets; the salamanders must be eating like kings -- or at least like frog princes.

The parking lot's completely empty now except for a tiny foreign job. I reach my car and put the milk on the roof. The carton's sweating through the brown paper bag and I wonder if fat-free milk, like a thinner person, perspires less than heavy cream.

Sliding my hand into my right pocket, I feel some change, some Chicklets, and a Chapstick, but no keys.

I stop breathing, then start again.

I check my left pocket -- more coins and, of all things, a Monopoly house -- but no keys. My back pocket yields a pay stub and the pocket on my polo shirt, where I know that my keys most certainly are not, yields nothing. I look in the bag, on the ground, and under the car. As I pick my head up, I catch a glimpse of Farrah hanging from the ignition.

I stop breathing, then start again.

I peer into the car to check the locks. All the buttons are down.

It's about eight miles back to my house. There are no pay phones -- just posts installed before construction was interrupted. (And of course there are no cell phones; it'll be years before I'll have to suffer Jen's nails-on-chalkboard voice anyplace but at home.)

I try to relax. I repeat Chuckles the Clown's Credo in my head. "A little song, a little dance, a little seltzer down your pants," but I can't calm down. I'm angry with my mom, the keys, the fucking salamanders. Looking at the milk I think, "Sanka is for losers."

The heat is aggravating, and the crickets won't shut up.

Stressed, I pull myself up onto the hood, rip open the cookies, and aggressively scarf down an entire row. Disgusted, I fling the rest of the package into the woods as dessert for the salamanders.

After the rage and gluttony, but before sloth takes control of my insulin soaked brain, I try to formulate a plan. A long thin piece of wood on the ground catches my eye. Skillfully cramming it between the window and frame, I attempt to lift the button and unlock the door. After a few minutes I'm sweating profusely. I stop for a swig of milk and decide that skim really does suck. Sweating, stopping, and swigging, I continue in vain. Eventually, using all of my strength, I wedge the stick in so tightly that I can no longer move it at all. It would be easier extracting the sword Excalibur from the stone.

The air's humid and the mosquitoes, attracted by my sucrose-infused blood, are tapping me like a sugar maple. I down another mouthful of milk, breathe deeply, and resolve to give it one more try before I give up and start the long trek home.

I grab the stick and am making another attempt to dislodge it when I'm nearly scared out of my skin by a raspy Darth Vader voice, only inches from my ear.

"Looks like you got yourself a problem."

I let out a girl-on-a-rollercoaster scream, turn, and come face-to-face with an incredibly creepy guy who seems to have just faded in from the darkness. He's tall and gawky, with a tangle of stringy hair that occludes his right eye. His posture is so poor that if he were an old woman, he'd be described as having dowager's hump. He's spooky as hell, and for a moment I imagine him as the Lord of the Salamander People. I'm reluctant to engage him, but I'm in need of assistance and reason that given his spinal curvature, I could outrun him if need be. I explain my predicament to his visible eye, and he professes expertise at opening locked cars. For some reason, he seems like someone who would know a great deal about such things.

I watch his assuredness fade, however, as he too is unable to dislodge the stick and then spends fifteen minutes attempting the same maneuver with a piece of wire that we find nearby. Perspiration sparkles on his ear lobes, and his hump looks even more pronounced through his sweat-drenched shirt. He throws the wire to the ground in disgust.

"It's these old cars -- they're a lot sturdier than the crap they churn out today."

He offers to give me a ride. Though I'm tempted, there's still something eerie about him. Besides, he's not hot at all.

Not wanting to be perceived as rude, I assert that I don't want to trouble him any further and am adamant that he shouldn't go out of his way. We agree that he'll call my house when he gets home. As I tell him my number -- 4,9,9,6,3,9,2 -- I get a goose-

bumpy vision of him leaving my parents an anonymous message detailing the locations of my trunk, head, and limbs.

He says the number aloud several times, “4996392, 4996392, 499...” and walks away chanting it in time to the cricket’s chirping. Repeating the number automatically, he stops to think, and either forgets it or loses confidence that he has it right. He turns and heads back toward me to confirm but stops before I can answer. Wiping the forelock out of his eye, he squints, bends forward and says, “Hey buddy, your passenger window is open.”

My mother snorts and yells to my father in the den, “Mike, your son’s a genius!” Then she turns back to me, “I’m so glad we’ve gone into debt sending you to college!”

She goes into the den to relay the details to my father, but by the grace of God, the phone rings. At this time of night the caller can only be Jen Wolfberg. I call to my mother and hold the phone out.

“Yahhh-wooo!!!”

She grabs the receiver and smacks me on the shoulder.

“Hi, doll... Oh nothing... they’re watching *Wild Kingdom*...I know, it must be a rerun... Anyway, you’ll get a kick out of this. My son, I send him out for milk...blah, blah, blah...”

So as I predicted, the story has become one of her favorites. It follows on the heels of my introduction to folks at her office, she pulls it out of mothballs at family birthdays and weddings, and uses it to regale her replacement friends. Once I even heard her tell it to a stranger on the check-out line at that very supermarket.

Unlike some of my mom’s other stories, this one always gets a chuckle from the listener. Sometimes they find the story funny, but other times it’s because she cracks herself up as she tells it -- and they find it too uncomfortable not to laugh along. Occasionally someone will shoot me an apologetic look for being entertained at my expense and are surprised to see me laughing too.

I can’t help it. I find my mother’s enthusiasm for this story hysterical -- especially since the entire thing was fabricated to account for the hour and a half I spent getting stoned and having sex with Tommy the supermarket guy.