

## PROLOGUE

She had to get away. It had been six years since Audrey had graduated from the Cooper Union School of Art, four since acquiring a Masters in Library Science for the Arts from Pratt, and two years since she could remember the names of everyone she had slept with. At the age of twenty-eight, Audrey was finding self-reflection in the most disturbing places and decided to do something about it. She would make the out-of-character and ultimate romantic gesture: move to the Midwest, purge, take a look at what was left beyond the toxins, and then come back and let herself slowly and unavoidably get polluted again.

There were perhaps two distinct incidents the year before the relocation decision that lead to this quarter-life metro-crisis. Both involved men. And rent.

First, at an alarming and ultimately life-changing gynecological exam, Audrey learned, to her horror, that she had contracted both chlamydia and gonorrhea. The sexually transmitted diseases were gone from her system after three excruciating weeks of abstinence from both sex and alcohol, at which point Audrey learned how boring and dirty New York clubs and exclusive parties were, and how it felt

to interact with men with whom she had no chance of sleeping. The significantly older gentlemen, celebrities, the live-in fiancés of other girls, the men who are not normally characterized as potential sexual partners, were for some reason under a different classification for Audrey. She was, after all, a librarian, and it was her job to categorize the true character of things by the most specific criteria. William, her ex and first college love, currently living with his girlfriend in Greenpoint, was not filed under “unavailable,” but rather “usually occupied.”

One can imagine, therefore, that when Audrey transmitted to Will the aforementioned power couple of vaginal dysfunction, things got a little complicated. When the girlfriend acquired the surprises and yet nonetheless continued her romantic and domestic partnership with Will, things got a little confusing. When Will explained to Audrey in their final conversation that neither he nor said girlfriend could afford a New York one-bedroom that wasn't shared by two people and decided it would be easier to forgive and forget than endure such a drastic change in lifestyle, Audrey knew she had to take a vacation.

The second incident was, quite simply, a “not-boyfriend” becoming a “live-in boyfriend” following the loss of his irregular installation job at PSI. After “just crashing” for three weeks, Jacob, a one-time football star turned abstract painter, discovered that selling coke was an easier way to make money than part-time museum work, and left way more time for his canvases. As the paintings were stacking up and Audrey's socks were disappearing, she knew it was time to move. Out of the city, away from the bad choices and lost nights, to a place where after working hundred-hour weeks between the library and her studio, she could be bone tired somewhere that was not always too noisy to sleep deeply.

That place, as it turned out, was Rochester, Minnesota. Thanks to the Mayo Clinic, the nation's best and largest hospital, this was where patients went hoping for some miracle to keep them from dying. To Audrey, the position of head librarian for the Arts Collection opening that May was just what the doctor ordered.

# 1

Audrey was tall, lithe, and super sexy. She was sitting at her new desk, getting to know the holdings of the Rochester Public Library's collection, a task she regarded as one of the most insignificant undertakings of her last ten years. Quickly and silently admonishing herself for being so geocentric—defining irrelevant as land-locked—Audrey tried to remind herself that this was a time for emotional growth. She pressed a finger to her thick, black, Prada glasses, rubbed her legs together lazily, and wrote on a stray card catalog card: "Be less pretentious." It was the first, and only, personal touch she had made to her work space. The adjacent desk boasted a photo of a Jell-O mold used to form the words "Number One Grandma," and Audrey hastily discarded the note, lest she appear insincere.

The last week had been hazy and automatic, as she set about to close up her life in New York like a widow in an interstitial phase of grief: numb and productive. She was worried only about leaving behind her books, now under the charge of a subletter, and about people talking to her out here like she was some kind of alien. The woman at the Java Hut this morning glanced at Audrey's designer T-shirt,

which read “New York Crimes” in the tell-tale New York Times font and actually began speaking louder, as if Audrey didn’t speak English.

In the middle of a stray worry about having to explain to her Midwestern fantasy men that New Yorkers don’t actually have a different kind of sex that involves more foreign objects, she decided to start evaluating the physical condition of the library’s materials by strolling through the stacks.

Audrey’s hair was straight, dark, and smooth, like her limbs, and she only wore jeans that were tight at the ankles. Blouses with high Victorian ruffles and slim flats were her professional standard, although she always had a shop shirt in her bag for sculptural moments. In fact, she had an object for nearly every situation in her bag, a habit born of many years as a spontaneous urban youth, ready for sleepovers, borough stalling, etc. Her brother Lionel, an impeccably manicured editor, once lovingly described this personal quirk with, “Audrey, I hear hobo is the new boho.”

Audrey grew up just outside New York, a biographical bi-line that she assumed accounted for the comfortable way she slipped between disaffection and optimism. She dreamed of a wavy, full head of hair that belonged to a future soul mate and spouse, but slept around as if there was no such thing as a reserve shelf. She was completely unaware that her particular level of dishevelment, normally caused from thinking about sculpture while assigning call numbers, worked to imbue her bookish physical authority with such a level of chaos that men assumed she was a slut. Her easiness was further particularized, however, with a cool distance that arose from her own intense ambitions. Making art meant she had to keep a lot of herself for herself. The result was that as Audrey was chewing on a pencil, thumbing through an old edition on *Kinetic Art*, men watched thinking, “I’m a bad boy, she’d fuck me, and she wouldn’t call the next day because she’d be doing something smart and righteous.” Her set up was, to be blunt, irresistible.

Many men in her life had been fascinated with the librarian stereotype. Assumptions had run rampant that, sexually, Audrey’s

co-workers should all have some kind of Jackie Bouvier perspective, infamously described by Gore Vidal as a notion that sex was untidy and therefore unappealing to the ultra-fastidious. Many times, Audrey's inherent sexuality surprised and delighted her partners. She functioned like a properly ordered card catalogue. The neat logic to her approach and system made for a more direct and efficient interaction between patron and product. Audrey's sexual encounters almost always ended in mutual orgasm.

The tantric, aimless pleasures of sex—long hours of ecstasy that were not aimed at a climax—were of little interest to Audrey. As a result, sex was constructive, every movement a scaling-up of a previous sensation until the weight of the pleasure snapped its support system. This peak was often described as one of the highest-reaching and greatest releases that Audrey's partners had ever experienced. It was like the feeling of not having orgasmed in a long time.

Having decided the physical condition of the Arts collection was good, Audrey turned and began to walk back to the office she shared with the other subject specialist librarians behind the main circulation desk.

Suddenly, as she passed a man checking out a large-print Western from Popular Fiction, she had the realization that the art books might be in particularly good condition because they are rarely checked out.

She had quickly found a small house to rent in her new city, using the classifieds of a local paper. Rochester was not yet on craigslist.

As culture-shocked as she had been at work, back in her little twinplex Audrey felt a buoyancy that she hadn't known in years. There was a blank-slate quality about the place that was impossible to find in a New York residence. Even though the previous tenants were a forceful presence, leaving countless tell-tale stains and scratches, there was only space and calm now. The clean, empty house was instantly alive with her visions for renovations, the colors she would

paint each wall, the style of furniture that would be all hers, accented with fresh-cut flowers from her garden. Audrey's optimism was an independent and productive sort. She would be self-sufficient here, not needing to rely on a call from a friend or date revealing where the hottest party would be that night. She could stay at home and work on projects that she genuinely cared about and not feel like she was missing anything.

The first order of business was to secure some essentials. Without a shower curtain, toilet paper, light bulbs, or coffee beans, Audrey could do little to get on with her new life. In the face of all normal standards of good taste, Audrey had bought a bright yellow Dodge Neon when she touched down in Minneapolis. Cruising toward Wal-Mart, she thought about how no one would get confused here and hail her. In Rochester, the car was the color of corn, not cab. She suddenly stopped feeling like it was possible to run into anyone she knew.

The parking lot was packed at 10 p.m. on a Sunday, the concrete lit up like a football field at night. In keeping with the normative highs and lows for the Minnesota summer, the air was nippy, and Audrey pulled her vintage jean jacket more tightly around her slim build. Inside the place was like Times Square—over-stimulating, crowded, tacky, and in the business of displaying ramen noodles.

The prices astounded her. She grabbed a big box containing a toaster, blender, *and* coffee maker for \$18. At first the thriftiness filled her with dread rather than pleasure, a reaction that Audrey did not entirely understand. Until she passed the lingerie aisle. There, among all the racks of push-ups and Hanes, was something that jogged a distant memory.

It was several years ago, when she was still an undergrad. His name was Lindsay, and despite what the effeminate nomenclature would suggest, he was the tallest man she had ever been with, and had the largest goods to match. Lindsay was also uncircumcised, a small detail that Audrey first found curious and then quite fulfilling. She remembered screaming, "Ram me," a phrase she had never

before felt compelled to use while engaged in a sexual act.

Lindsay had once commented, when Audrey was strutting around in a pair of red lace Australian-backed panties, that her unmentionables were hot because they looked torn straight from the sexy underwear page of the Kmart catalogue. He said it made him feel young and dirty, masturbating to family mail. Audrey was appalled then, but not as appalled as when she saw that Wal-Mart carried almost exactly the same pair of underwear as she had been wearing that night.

Audrey and her mother had a long-standing, well developed tradition of buying each other lingerie. When Pat traveled for work, she would always find the city's finest lacy undergarments—and over the years Audrey amassed a well rounded collection. Like the good creative librarian she was, Audrey had organized her underwear drawer geographically. She grabbed the \$3.99-duplicate of her Riviera red possession, and made her way to the checkout, intending to mail the purchase to her mother.

Audrey's first days in Rochester were filled with the kind of foggy optimism that clouds all anticipation. She found her new environment so different from the fast-paced impermanence of city life and the countless ramblings of travel that Audrey literally couldn't imagine what her life here was going to be like. She had no experience on which to base predictions. Audrey had never been an adult in the Midwest, let alone in a city populated by fewer than six million. Disregarding the obvious novelty factor of her current surroundings, she decided that her unprecedented sanguinity was owed to another, more mystical cause.

Audrey felt that here, more than anywhere else, her daily happenstance and ultimate fate was out of her hands. In New York she could try to make logical decisions where to be when based on guest lists and social graces. Those factors multiplied in her head into a thousand possible outcomes with different probability levels organized in an exponential web. There, Audrey felt that she could

predict her possible futures and was constantly evaluating where her life was going.

Sitting on her rough wooden deck, staring at her skinny strip of lawn with a hot cup of coffee made with her new six-dollar coffee pot, she reflected on the fact that the web and its exponents had vanished, or at least were hidden behind some tacky Midwestern tapestry. For the first time in as long as she could remember, Audrey did not try to fight for the clearest view of her future. She trusted it to spin itself.

Content with having accomplished enough self-improvement for the month in one lazy outdoor morning, Audrey grabbed her coffee and started inside for a load of laundry and an unpacking session.

At times it was clear to Audrey that the Dewey Decimal system had subtly transformed her life approach. Her belongings were so perfectly classified and categorized by some subconscious information science system that the entire house had come together in the matter of a morning. The items in the last room she was tackling, the kitchen, were now almost completely organized by potential usage. Multi-purpose tools like the blender were centrally shelved between breakfast implements and cocktail hour accessories, a cross-reference between the smoothie and the piña-colada. Satisfied with her efforts and the state of her new home, Audrey stepped once again into the sunshine spilling down onto her deck.

It was difficult not to notice that the house next door was a bachelor's dwelling. In place of the kitsch that was a gold standard in these parts—bells, wind chimes, ceramic frogs in bonnets—the lawn displayed a subtle, manicured, sophistication. There was a high level of craftsmanship pervading every aspect of the house: the deck, the roof, even the paint job—a natural earth tone—that led Audrey to believe that the tenant had labored over the place with his own skilled hands. She imagined a gentle touch, a confident stroking of material, skilled but also naturally intuitive. Audrey sighed reluctantly, realizing the owner was probably more like the men she had seen up and down her street, who sported plaid shirts,

beer bellies, and a self-righteousness that displayed an utter disregard for full-length mirrors.

Suddenly, in a golden, glistening flash, Audrey's new neighbor appeared in the afternoon sunshine. Toned, dark, and confident, he pulled the string of a lawn mower, employing the exact movements required to ripple every one of his exposed back muscles. The scene seemed imbued with such cosmic humor that Audrey felt none of the flutterings that were usually coupled with sexually charged situations. There she was, moist in her form fitting jeans, drinking in the pure manliness oozing from the deliciously unaware lawnmower and not feeling the least bit heady.

As he suddenly turned, she raised her eyebrows and developed a tight little smile. The beefcake acknowledged her attention with a subtle flex that seemed to say: I'd gladly show off for such a worthy audience.

Audrey sighed to herself and was surprised and delighted that her first interest was not in what this man did or who he knew. Maybe she was less irrevocably metropolitan than she had thought. She scurried inside with a smirk to relieve the aching heat collecting in the seat of her worn snug jeans. The purr of his lawn mower matched the hum of her vibrator so perfectly it was as if they were having sex—suburban sex that smelled like grass and involved carpeting. She lightly massaged the outside of her shirt, her nipples hardening in response, as she rhythmically squeezed her thighs together around the cool plastic of her sex toy. She came quickly and quietly, her soft moans droned out by all the new sounds that filtered into the half-windows of her cool, dark basement.

Audrey's first week of work made her face hurt. The smile plastered on her introductory visage was genuine but exhausting. She hoped that her sincerity would translate into new friends, as she knew no one for hundreds of miles, and although her colleagues seemed warm, no one stood out with that indescribable nature that she thought she would want to connect with.

In New York, Audrey had pursued a degree in Library Science to give her the stability and financial independence that would allow her to continue to make sculptures without compromising her artistic integrity to accommodate commercial gallery representation. She had seen too many friends capitalize again and again on a single formula because it sold their work. Her alternate path, art librarianship, helped complexify her projects. At the library she could research anything, draw conclusions between unlikely things, and prepare to produce hyper-intellectual, deeply considered, and entirely original concepts. As a result, she had been featured in many exhibitions, but she never felt the pressure to sell or sell out. Her day job had been at the New Museum, as assistant librarian to Digital and Print Collections. The Rochester Public Library had, thanks to the Mayo Clinic, just received a generous donation for acquiring new media material. In New York, this would have meant sound art or something difficult to classify and collect, such as “digital paintings,” but in Rochester it meant mostly mainstream DVDs. On the top of the stack waiting on her new desk was a Joseph Campbell lecture series. Smart but boring as far as arts material went. That was going to be the name of the game here, she assumed—“safe” material. It didn’t really matter though. This job was going to be for no more than a year and was meant to be as low-profile and low-stress as possible. She was here to figure out Audrey, not the new wave in participatory three-channel video projects.

The morning and afternoon were classified by more getting-your-bearings-first-day-hum-drum. Although Audrey’s mind did wander over to her neighbor’s backyard several times throughout the day, her musings lacked the urgency they usually did when in New York. Perhaps it was the fast-lane mentality of all her friends and fellow urbanites, but she couldn’t seem to draw out the first steps of any relationship in the city for more than a week.

She would meet a guy and have gotten to the third-date status with an alarming efficiency by the end of the first evening. Although she took men home with less regularity than many of her girlfriends,

she never passed up such an occasion without a feeling of anxiety, finding that her memories of new faces had less potency than a cup of bodega coffee. Audrey was constantly getting excited about men, and constantly losing touch with that enthusiasm. There was something about sharing the streets with thousands of single men a day that made it impossible to care about a new flame who hadn't called in a few days, or hours, or...

"Hi Audrey," interrupted a brisk voice. "I am Victoria Van Wyck, the director of the Rochester Public Library."

"Oh, it's so great to meet you..."

"And you." Victoria interjected. "We are all very impressed by your resume and slightly confused about what you are doing here. What I mean to say is we are happy to have you. If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask me." The woman talked with the speed of a New Yorker but with less confidence. She was beautiful. Stunning even, with rich, dark features and pale green eyes.

Just like that, she was gone, and Audrey promptly forgot her.