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#fictionsuit

A Zine in Book Form

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FOREWORD

I wanted to write something in the idiom of how people actually communicate in 2021, which is largely text and instant message. If you like it, leave a review. Maybe I'll even reformat it to look like it really is a set of texts on a screen (round, shaded bubbles and all). Those styles aren't built into Word but CSS can repurposed for print, with a bit of ingenuity and hackwork.

This is a fiction story. All of the characters represent some aspect of myself. Well, maybe not Didi.

Back when I published my 'zine in college, I printed 30 copies. I sent in a listing to *Factsheet Five*, then traded, gave away or sold all but one. I'll be amazed

if I get as many as 29 readers this time around. But that really isn't the point, I guess.

Writing is not my day job.

I wanted a space that was effectively uncrawlable, where I could talk about whatever I wanted without fear of a prospective investor, employer, or suitor googling my name and taking a few words out of context. This is a love letter to the Matrix, in many ways—not the movie but the online space—and to some of my favorite people there, who shall remain unnamed.

Most of all, I wanted to make a record of who I am and what's on my mind. A time capsule of text. Because if the past two years have taught us anything, it's that history comes along and bites you in the ass when you least expect it.

- THE AUTHORESS,
November 25, 2021

JB: So did you like the movie?

RR: Not sure.

JB: Wot??? I thought everybody liked the movie.

RR: Yeah, it was visually stunning. Really true to the book. It's just...

JB: What?

RR: I remember reading the original. As an adult. I had it out from the library, I think. We were on vacation, visiting a friend in grad school. Ithaca, NY.

I couldn't put the book down. Whenever we went anywhere, even it was just a five-minute drive into town to get barbecue, I grabbed it out of my bag and was reading.

JB: I take it you weren't driving?

RR: It wasn't even like it was that good a book! The writing was nothing special. And it had one major

Deus ex Machina, let me tell you. The whole time, I was making fun of it—trying out the “Voice of Command” on the car ride back. Nobody else had read it, but they got how goofy it was.

JB: Sounds like a fun time.

RR: Anyway, I watched the movie in the theatre. Which is the only way to see it, IMO.

JB: Totally agree.

RR: And the whole time, beautiful though it was, I was all fidgety. Couldn't wait to check my phone.

JB: Well, the pace was sort of slow...

RR: I just miss that feeling I used to have, of being totally immersed and caught up in a narrative. In suspense and waiting for the next plot twist to unfold...

JB: It's a way of losing yourself.

RR: Yeah, I suppose it is.

JB: A lot easier than meditation.

RR: Or at least it used to be. Can't remember the last time I was totally caught up in a story. Like, thinking about it while I load the dishwasher.

JB: And yet here we are trying to be writers.

RR: I know, right? It's a dying art.

JB: Like singing madrigals. Or churning butter.

RR: I don't think that butter churning was ever really an art...

DD: Hi all! I'm Didi.

JB: Hi Didi.

RR: Hi, and welcome. 😊

DD: So where's the Zoom call?

JB: Rags, did you schedule a Zoom call?

RR: Ummmm, no. I thought we agreed we were only going to use Jitsi. Less corporate.

JB: It's your show.

RR: Didi, so sorry for any misunderstanding! We mostly just use real-time chat when we meet.

JB: Text is easier for sharing work and giving feedback. You know, copy and paste.

DD: Oh, ok.

RR: Plus we're all hopefully pretty fast typists.

DD: LOL. I'll see if I can keep up!

RR: So Didi, what type of writing do you do?

DD: Mostly memoir and personal essays. I really want to write a romance novel set in Scotland. But I need to do the research first.

JB: So basically you just want to travel to Scotland on the cheap and write it off...

RR: Hey Jack, that's not fair.

DD: Your name is Jack?

JB: Yes, it is.

RR: And he is single...

DD: What does the "B" stand for?

JB: Just "B." As in, "Just be."

RR: Very Zen.

DD: Hahaha

RR: So Didi, did you bring any pieces to share?

DD: I'm pretty shy about sharing my work, actually. I wanted to get a sense of the group dynamic first. You know. Whether it felt like a safe and affirming space.

JB: Ain't nothing in this world safe, milady. Not hot coffee. Not spinach in a plastic tub. They've all had recalls.

RR: The pen is mightier than the sword!

JB: Pen vs. sword. Who'd win?

RR: Somebody should do a meme. Or a celebrity deathmatch.

JB: But look at us. We've got no skills...

DD: So did *anybody* bring writing to share?

JB: Don't look at me. I got nothing.

RR: Well, if nobody else has anything... I guess I can go.

DD: Can't wait to see what you wrote!

RR: Keep in mind, this isn't finished yet. It's only the intro scene.

JB: Doesn't matter. Fire away.

RR: Here it is!

“The Bra Consultant”

I never intended for this to happen. But she was irresistible.

Dark shoulder length hair. Inviting smile. French manicure.

I want you to know that I take my business very seriously. I am a professional.

We were all alone, in my upstairs fitting room. It is a beautiful space. Natural light. Full of plants. Monstera deliciosa, heliconia, even a bird of paradise. Screens and mirrors. White couch and upholstered chairs with cushions. Wide plank hardwood floors, Tibetan rugs. Always a basket of fruit, cold pressed juice, and a coffee service. My sessions are by appointment only.

RR: What do you folks think of the intro?

DD: I like it. It’s very vivid and evocative.

JB: Too much interior décor. Tone it down. Less is always more.

RR: Shall I continue?

DD: Sure, whenever you're ready.

RR:

Helping women find the right bra isn't easy. Maybe it's because I am a woman too. I know what the Hollywood wringer is like, so I do everything I can to make my clients feel comfortable and safe. Some of them are getting through bad divorces or dealing with body image issues after childbirth. Many are models and actresses, at every stage in their career. They come into my office hoping that a change in silhouette will lift their career, find them a new man, or boost their Instagram following.

A lot of the time it works, too. I'm not cheap, but I'm a better deal than plastic surgery. Even if you're doing it on the DL in South America or Thailand. Trust me, I know. I see the clients who have had the boob jobs... sometimes two or three. Believe me, they need my help the most.

She was a sales rep for Finferli, my favorite line of Italian lingerie.

This new collection had a racing motif. Bold colors. A red, white, and yellow stripe along one seam. Sleeveless mesh. Cutaway garters. and matching gloves.

I wasn't sold. My customers like their intimate apparel soft and forgiving. Ninety percent of my orders are either black or nude. Or they want dead sexy. And we can do all that. A lot of my regulars are strippers. They know value when they see it.

Last year Finferli did rock n' roll as their signature theme. That limited edition suede fringe bikini top with matching boots and G-string sold out in six hours.

But racing? The lines were unforgiving. The style didn't seem like anyone I knew.

I told her so.

She wouldn't take no for an answer.

I informed her that their entire catalogue that year was sketches--no photographs. She said that I had to see them in the flesh.

Well, how was that going to happen?

She looked straight at me. That's when I noticed her eyes were violet. Contact lenses? Who knows?

"You know, you have the perfect body for this bra."

She bent down, took out a stretchy black garment out from her trunk, and placed it on my table that sometimes doubles as a desk.

"What?"

"You do. Your arms are slender, but your bust is... generous."

She reached across the table and ran one manicured finger along the scoop neck of my white T-shirt, meandering down over the fabric, coming to rest just above my left nipple. I don't know how she found it--the bra had perfect coverage. But every nerve ending was tingling in response to her touch.

That's when the irresistible force met the immovable object.

Except it turned out, I could be moved.

Before I could stop her, she was taking my shirt off. She moved one of my arms up, and then the other. The t-shirt slid off my body and landed on the ground.

<DD has left the conversation.>

RR: Oh shit, we lost her.

JB: Doesn't matter, keep reading.

RR: I feel really bad now. I didn't even tell her there was mature content in the story. What if she was triggered, or...

JB: Or what?

RR: You don't know her story.

JB: Triggered by two lesbians in a bra shop? How can anyone object to that?

RR: Crap, crap, crap. This was her very first meeting.

JB: Robin, I know you're trying to grow this group. I know it means a lot to you. But she's a fucking homophobe. Forget her.

Look.

If anyone should be triggered, it should be me, and I really liked it.

RR: Thank you.

JB: Too many nouns, though. Nouns are almost as bad as adjectives.

RR: Well, at least I don't use many adverbs.

JB: “... *she moaned lustily.*”

RR: But seriously, why triggered?

JB: Well, the breast thing.

RR: Oh, right, right. I could see that...

JB: You know I’m trans, right?

RR: That’s what you tell me.

JB: Did you know I had a double mastectomy?

RR: Oh god. I had no idea.

When? Why? I’m sorry.

JB: It was preventative. My sister had breast cancer. And so did my grandmother. The doctors said I could get the surgery if I wanted it. That was when I was still in Silicon Valley. I had really good health insurance at the time.

RR: Was this before or after you decided you were trans?

JB: I never “decided.” I always knew.

RR: Sorry, sorry.

JB: Don’t worry about it. If you ask me, you’re too concerned with not hurting anybody’s feelings.

RR: Further proof that you don’t know me very well.

JB: Well, ok then. Go ahead and prove me wrong.

RR: Can I ask a personal question?

JB: Sure. But I get to ask you one too.

RR: I just mean, I’m trying to be respectful. If I cross any of your boundaries...

JB: You worry too much.

RR: So, do you feel like surgery was the right decision?

JB: Yes and no.

RR: How so?

JB: First off, to prevent cancer they have to take out all the breast tissue. That means reconstructive surgery, or you're going to be walking around with visible scars and a sunken chest. So I still have boobs. They're just very tiny.

RR: The itty bitty titty fairy.

JB: You could say that. They're A-cups. I kept telling the surgeon to make them less perky. But there's only so much they can do.

RR: Why not just get F-to-M chest surgery?

JB: You seem to think that if you have a job as an engineer at a Silicon Valley tech startup you are made of money. Do you realize how much I was paying for rent?

RR: I remember the last time I flew in for a conference, a Starbucks latte cost ten bucks at the hotel. Or maybe that was Pasadena.

JB: Anyway, that wasn't the only reason. I also wanted to live.

As in, not get cancer. Which meant working with a team that had the right kind of expertise for a preventive mastectomy.

RR: Versus an ensemble cast. That makes sense.

JB: Recovery time wasn't bad. I was on my feet and back at work after only a week.

RR: Were you out at work? As trans, I mean?

JB: Well, the whole thing with the pronouns hadn't really gotten started yet. I hadn't changed my name, if that's what you mean. I was just... me. Kind of one of the boys.

RR: Do you ever miss them?

JB: Who, my coworkers?

RR: No, your breasts.

JB: Now *that* is a complicated question. I miss the sensation. Particularly in the nipples.

They had no actual function, though, since I wasn't planning on having kids.

RR: That's a cute picture of you on Meetup. Dig the short hair and the skater clothes.

JB: Thanks.

RR: Is the photo from before or after you transitioned?

JB: Well, that's just the thing. I never transitioned all the way.

RR: I thought you told me you changed your name.

JB: Yeah, I did that.

RR: So you decided not to take hormones? Lots of people go that path. You don't need to feel bad about it.

JB: Not exactly. How well do you want to get to know me, Miss Robin?

RR: You're a colleague. A fellow writer. You found me on Meetup.

JB: The penzone. Only thing worse than the friendzone.

RR: Haha. You know, you don't have to tell me anything you don't want to.

JB: Well, it's just that it will change the way you think about me. And you can recognize me out in the real world.

RR: So why don't you ask me a question instead for a change?

JB: It's Friday night and neither of us are going anywhere...

RR: Speak for yourself. There's a Goth show starting in an hour.

JB: So are you going to dress up like your avatar?

RR: Oh, her? You really need to read the comic.

JB: You know, you're much more into that superhero stuff than I am.

RR: Invisibles isn't a superhero series. More punk.

JB: Whatever you say. It's a sexy look.

RR: Not always sexy. She manifests in odd ways. Did you know that the writer created the character in a script, and then the next week, he met his future girlfriend—who looked just like her?

JB: Dang. I wish that worked for me. No more dating apps.

RR: There's a lot of occult symbolism in the comic.
Do you believe in that stuff?

JB: I take it case by case.

RR: Did you know I can tell fortunes?

JB: I did not know that.

RR: Tarot.

JB: So that's cool and all. I'm really impressed.
But..

RR: But what? All your questions so far have been
softball.

JB: What I really want to know is why you write
erotica.

RR: Now that is a question with an easy answer.

JB: Let me guess. For the money.

RR: Are you joking? I get like a third of one cent
per page view, if that.

JB: I always heard erotica writers could make bank.

RR: It's true that the first story I wrote was with dreams of passive income. I was thinking maybe, just maybe this new hobby could give me the safety net I needed to learn how to code.

JB: How's that going, by the way?

RR: Finding new ways to send the CPU to 200% usage every week or so.

JB: Attagirl.

RR: Anyway, that's not the reason I kept on. Have you ever heard of the Theory of Disintermediation?

JB: Vaguely.

RR: It's a new economic model where growth and profitability are achieved by taking out the middleman. Usually with the help of the Internet.

JB: "Disruptive technology."

RR: One form of it, yes. Anyway, this may change in a week or two, but for the past six months my entire life has been Disintermediated.

JB: Quarantine, yes.

RR: I'm not even talking about the social aspects. I'm talking economically. DoorDash, day trading, and dirty stories. What do these three things have in common?

JB: Plot devices?

RR: Nope. They are all completely disintermediated activities. I deliver food to the customer's door, but I am not employed by the pizza parlor or the noodle shop. I trade my stocks from my phone, on my bike, in between delivery runs. No broker required.

JB: And that's why my pizza's always cold!

RR: Disintermediation is neither bad nor good, but it tends to drive prices down. I found a handyman

through an online app to replace three smoke detectors and a light fixture in my apartment. He did a great job. I wanted to pay him with Venmo, but he asked me to please go to the ATM and get him some cash, because he needed to put gas in his car.

JB: I get your point. I'm a liberal too. What's the tie-in with writing?

RR: Erotica is the only way to find an audience without marketing.

JB: You mean, without a publisher or an agent.

RR: There are plenty of successful self-published authors out there, but as they say, "You've got to have a gimmick." The work doesn't sell itself.

JB: Unless it's porn.

RR: Even writers at major publishing houses are expected to do most of their own promotions and book their own tours.

JB: It's a hard life...

RR: Keep in mind, when I say “success” I’m not talking about making a living. Not even a delivering-sushi-and-burritos type of living. I’m talking about finding an audience. More than you can count on the fingers of both hands. Having readers who are not your friends or family members. Emily Dickinson I am not.

JB: Nobody said you were.

RR: I just mean, some people don’t need to believe that anyone else out there is listening or paying attention to make their act of expression worthwhile. They write, they journal...

JB: Journal-as-a-verb.

RR: They write for themselves, or for God. And they’re probably better people for it.

JB: Or just not very good.

RR: You can get people to read an e-book by a completely unknown author, but only if it's erotica.

I can't see who reads my work (and that's a good thing) but I know they're out there. My titles aren't long, but people rarely stop halfway.

JB: That would take both hands.

RR: You know, on the rare occasions when somebody does stop partway through—say, at 18 pages—I have to wonder what's going on with them. Did they get disgusted and turned off? Or just skip to the smutty parts?

JB: You take yourself too seriously. What you're providing is a commodity.

RR: I actually enjoy writing sex scenes. There's a lot of artistry to them. But more than that, there's an opportunity to create an entire tapestry of characters and situations. Include social satire. Invent a world...

JB: I hate to be the one to break it to you, but that's probably not what most of your readers are paying attention to.

RR: I have a friend who writes mystery novels. She wrote her undergraduate thesis on Hegel at Bowdoin. She writes genre fiction instead of "literary" fiction, because there is a built-in audience of mystery readers. And her books still get reviewed in the *New York Times*.

JB: So why don't you write mysteries?

RR: Never been that into whodunits. Also it would be like going dress shopping with your friend, and then showing up to the prom in the exact same dress.

JB: You are such a girl.

RR: Genderfluid, if you please.

JB: I have to ask... do you get turned on when you write?

RR: No comment.

JB: There's some intense stuff in the links you sent me...

RR: Yes, I'm aware of that. I'm still trying to figure that part out.

JB: How so?

RR: Well, it's like horror stories. Nobody equates liking Stephen King with liking sadism and graphic torture. You're talking about a story playing out. It's not real life, or something that most people would want to explore in real life.

JB: You're not into the kink scene?

RR: Sex with strangers? Not my thing.

JB: Who would have thought you would be so vanilla?

RR: It's one flavor out of many.

JB: So you've never actually *done* any of the things described in the books?

RR: Given a blowjob? I have done that.

JB: Well, color me shocked!

RR: It's a fine line, deciding what to write about. Everything in my stories is consensual. It is also very clear that the parties involved are enjoying what is happening and also that they are free to go if they want to.

That's part of why I changed to writing in the first person.

You can't compare a fictional story to actual porn, where the women featured are often trafficked and abused.

JB: Enough with the guilt, already. You are a friggin' Puritan in disguise.

RR: You know, most readers of erotica are women. I don't believe that helping more women have orgasms is a bad thing.

JB: Do you have to be so damn earnest about everything? It's just a wankfest.

RR: Well, my last name's not Hemingway, so no, I guess not.

JB:



RR: From the Hemingway House on Key West?

JB: Yes, Wikipedia. Digital photo by Marc Averette.
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Polydactylcat.jpg>.

JB: Wish I still had my own album from that trip. So many things got lost on old hard drives, in between all the moves. I always figured I had the originals somewhere, so I never thought to index them.

RR: That's one of the tasks women usually take on. Being the archivists. The keepers of the family photo albums.

JB: Another reason I need a girlfriend.

RR: Hey, I should get ready for my show. What are you up to next?

RR: Are you still awake?

JB: Apparently.

RR: You never answered my last question.

JB: Must have been up getting a beer. Sorry. How was the show?

RR: It was ok. Nothing special.

JB: You didn't meet anyone who swept you off your feet?

RR: Lol, you don't go to dance clubs to meet people. Certainly not to live acts.

JB: But you went by yourself?

RR: None of your business, but yes.

JB: Why do that?

RR: Because I wanted to dance.

JB: Seriously?

RR: Sure, why not?

JB: Um, COVID?

RR: I consider it like a Geiger counter—which I have, by the way, if you ever need to borrow one.

JB: That's cool.

RR: You are fine up until certain maximum dose. And then when you start hearing the clicks, you take a break.

JB: Meaning?

RR: If I go out on Friday, I'll stay home on Saturday.

JB: So, basically like playing Russian Roulette, except only one out of every two guns has a loaded barrel.

RR: I mean, I am vaccinated.

JB: You get the booster?

RR: Not yet. How about you?

JB: I got everything I could.

RR: Relieved you're not one of the anti-vaxxers. A lot of so-called cyberpunks are.

JB: Yeah, out of all the privacy battles out there...

RR: It's just not the one I would pick.

JB: Exactly.

RR: So what kind of beer are you drinking?

JB: Before I was drinking a Black Butte Porter. Now it's on to whiskey.

Want to come over for a nightcap?

RR: Deschutes? You can afford that on disability?

JB: Hey, when you have EBT it frees up some disposable income.

RR: What's EBT?

JB: Food stamps.

RR: Oh, right. That's what I thought but I wasn't sure.

JB: How do you survive without them, girl? I know what the delivery services pay.

RR: Sweat and elbow grease. Also, I rent my place from my parents.

JB: Hahaha, I thought you were calling it "your condo."

RR: Well, I did stay an extra year there in the height of the pandemic to help them avoid an eviction situation. That ought to count for something.

JB: Wait, who were they trying to evict? Not you?

RR: Friend of mine. Guy who wouldn't pay rent and wouldn't leave.

JB: Ohhhh...

RR: One of the worst judgment calls I ever made.

JB: Which part?

RR: I let him crash with me for a few weeks before COVID hit. I had a spare bedroom...

JB: Don't go around telling people that!

RR: Other than my amazing jugs, I think the spare bedroom is probably my best feature.

JB: I still haven't seen them. I don't know why you keep bringing them up.

RR:





JB: Those aren't yours.

RR: Property is theft.

JB: You play the anarchist when it's convenient, but you're just another spoiled rich girl.

RR: Not really a girl, actually.

JB: Okkkk... you had me fooled.

RR: I mean, I'm in my mid-40s.

JB: This is a problem for you?

RR: I'm 44. About to be 45.

JB: May I point out, you don't actually know how old I am?

RR: There's a lot of things I don't know about you.

JB: I think you don't take me seriously because I don't have a penis.

RR: Excuse me? I'm bi.

How could that possibly be an issue?

JB: All you bi girls...

You flirt, you try to show off how wild you are, but after you've had your fun and taken your selfies you go back to the old guy with money.

RR: Do you want me to pull a Didi on you?

JB: What?

RR: Just cut you off.

Cold. EOT. No further contact.

JB: You wouldn't.

RR: Try me.

JB: What else have you got going on?

RR: I could sleep, for one thing.

JB: Boring. Face it, I'm the highlight of your week.

RR: Not even close.

JB: So why are you still here?

RR: That short story you wrote, the one you brought to the first meeting, was really good.

JB: *Shining Rain?*

RR: Yeah, that one. Everything was very well-researched, very hard-tech.

But the writing style was great. It crackled.

JB: You've been saving up that compliment all month, haven't you?

RR: No, I just toss these ones off on the fly.

I'm cool like that.

JB: You're a legend in your own mind, Rags. Or do you prefer Robin?

RR: You can call me anything you like.

JB: Not so uppity after all, are we?

RR: Well, actually...

JB: What, are you going to femmesplain me?

RR: Something like that.

JB: I'm quaking in my boots.

RR: Just this. Treat me with respect.

JB: Ok....

RR: Negging doesn't work on me.

JB: You think I was trying to neg you?

RR: A lot of people assume that because I'm sweet, and empathetic, and outgoing... because I try to be considerate and make people feel at home...

All these feminine traits...

JB: Go on, stereotype yourself.

RR: They assume that they can walk all over me. Then when I turn out to mean what I say and say what I mean, they're in for a shock.

That's ended more relationships than almost anything else.

JB: If that's the way you want to spin it, sure.

RR: Also, I'm not a Sub.

JB: Ok, this is getting personal.

RR: I'm a Switch.

And even if I were a Sub, what I enjoy in the bedroom doesn't translate to how I want to be treated the rest of the time.

And by the way, what I enjoy most is vanilla sex.

JB: You are straining credibility, my dear.

RR: It doesn't always work all the time, between two people. A lot depends on chemistry. A lot depends on age and health.

JB: You about to hit menopause?

RR: Not as far as I know.

Put it this way, with a harness there are certain problems you're never going to have to worry about.

JB: Like not being able to get it up?

RR: And also staying power.

JB: True.

RR: You know the song "The Final Countdown?"

JB: By Europe?

RR: One time, a guy I was seeing put it on as mood music.

He couldn't last all the way through.

JB: It's five minutes.

At least it wasn't a Ramones track.

RR: Seriously, though, sex is not the most important thing for me. Being able to talk to someone ranks much higher.

JB: Save it for your Bumble profile.

I want a woman who can scrapbook with pinking shears.

RR: “Hey baby, want to make some memories?”

JB: Let’s sniff some glue.

RR:

<https://open.spotify.com/track/4A4yOK7VqZBdnTtfESIBk4?autoplay=true>

JB: Seriously, we should meet IRL sometime.

RR: But not tonight.

JB: I wasn’t really serious.

RR: Well, good. Because I still have no idea if you are who you say you are.

JB: Same to you, Miss Fortysomething Karen Who Goes to Goth Shows. You know, I have no idea what you actually look like or if you're even a real person. Your avatar could be anyone.

RR: Don't call me Karen. It's a slur.

JB: Do you like your catfish grilled or fried?

RR: I'm serious. I'd like you to apologize for calling me that.

JB: Which? Catfish or Karen?

RR: Both.

JB: I don't know. Karen Catfish could be a comic book character in her own right. She could be your new avatar...

RR: Don't be like this.

JB: Or what? You'll write me a romance set in Scotland?

RR: I don't know why I'm still talking to you.

JB: Hold on...

Give me a moment...

RR: I'm still waiting for that apology.

JB: Just send me a picture.

RR: Why?

JB: So I know you don't look like this.



RR: Fuck you.

JB: Send me a calendar invite.







RR: I'm going to bed.

JB: Sorry about last night.

RR: Don't worry about it.

JB: I was drunk.

RR: Just remember, this is a writing group, not a dating group.

JB: Sure, whatever you say.

RR: So... why don't you get back to writing?

JB: It takes a lot of time to research.

RR: How about you just write what you know?

JB: Network security? Nobody would find that interesting.

RR: You'd be surprised.

JB: Anyway, I wouldn't want to give away any good exploits.

RR: You're making excuses.

JB: You know, you could write more too.

RR: About the Bra Consultant?

JB: Sure, if you like. Or something more serious.

It's up to you. Whatever it is, I'll read it.

RR: Great idea. Catch ya next time.

<GG has joined the conversation.>

GG: Sorry I'm posting this late.

“Jumping Cars”

There is a character in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* who talks about sobriety this way.

“Did you ever hear of this fellow Evel Knievel? This motorcycle-jumper?”

“At St. Collie only the Crocodiles’d heard of him. My own Daddy’d followed him, cut out pictures, as a boy.” Gately can tell she’s smiling under there. “But what I used to do, I’d throw away the pipe and shake my fist at the sky and say As God as fucking witness NEVER AGAIN, as of this minute right here I QUIT FOR ALL TIME... and I’d bunker up all white-knuckled and stay straight. And count the days. I was proud of each day I stayed off. Each day seemed evidence of something, and I counted them. I’d add them up. Line them up end to end... and soon it would get... improbable. As if each day was a car Knievel had to clear. One car, two cars. By the time I’d get up to say like maybe about 14 cars, it would begin to seem like this staggering number. Jumping over 14 cars. And the rest of the year, looking ahead,

hundreds of cars, me in the air trying to clear them... Who could do it? How did I think anyone could do it that way?"

That's how I feel every day.

Except my problem is not drugs or alcohol. My problem is psychotic mania. I take the prescription my doctor gives me.

But it feels like I'm Evel Knievel on the motorcycle, jumping cars.

I've been fine for years. Other times, it's been just seven or eight months between episodes.

I don't know what to do.

I can't have a normal life.

Everybody who tells me I'm beautiful and talented and smart and creative... they just vanish when they see me go off the rails. Even one time.

I never even get the chance to tell them, “I am not like that most of the time.”

Well, I’m telling you now.

Please believe me.

<GG has left the conversation.>

RR: Crap. She posted this like a day ago.

JB: How can you tell that?

RR: You click CTRL-H-DEL to see the headers.

JB: This platform is screwy.

RR: Don’t get me started on open source.

JB: Hey, it’s free. And totally private and secure.

RR: Except I forgot to close out our chat from last week. She probably clicked on the link and got confused about the day and time.

JB: So GG may have seen all of that?

RR: Afraid so.

JB: Maybe that was why she left.

RR: Honestly, I hope so. Did you see her profile page?

JB: Why?

RR: Those initials stand for “Ghost Girl.”

JB: Oh, shit. Cry for help?

RR: Yeah, I’m thinking so. Wish I had a way to get back in contact with her.

JB: She didn’t leave an email?

RR: It’s optional with this platform. Remember, zero knowledge encryption?

JB: Such a bad idea from an infosec perspective. Risk of user error vastly outweighs risk of outside threats.

RR: Spare me your hacksplaining. Did you actually read the story?

JB: Yeah. I'm kind of dodging the subject.

RR: What? You don't like David Foster Wallace?

JB: Never read him actually.

RR: *Infinite Jest* is surprisingly readable. And it's the perfect book to lend to a guy you've hooked up with. If you want to see him again.

JB: Because it makes you seem like an intellectual and not just another dumb slut?

RR: Because it's over 1,000 pages long. No way is the dude going to read the whole thing and give it back to you.

JB: Which means...

RR: Provided you observe basic rules of engagement, i.e. text or call first, you can just bop on over any time and get it back.

JB: Oh really?

RR: Oh yes. Even months or years later.

JB: The Jest Pass.

RR: Trust me. This has actually IRL worked for me.
Spontaneous sex in the afternoon.

Cigarettes, after. A wall full of books.

JB: So where is your copy now?

RR: Never mind that.

JB: You know, I think you might be trying to
change the subject.

RR: Now why would I do that?

JB: Maybe because we just got an anonymous
submission from somebody with a serious mental
illness.

RR: You mean bipolar disorder? I have it. It's not
that bad.

JB: Never would have guessed.

RR: I'm not sure if you're being sarcastic or not.

JB: Believe it or not, no sarcasm.

RR: We don't have any way of getting in contact with the story author. If she comes back, we can try to be supportive.

JB: I admire your attitude.

RR: What else can you do?

JB: DFW committed suicide, you know.

RR: Yeah, I remember when it happened. I wasn't doing too well myself. That was round about the time the Large Hadron Collider went online at CERN. I found out David Foster Wallace was dead because there was a bumper on *Adult Swim*.

Life just seemed absurd.

JB: Doesn't it always?

RR: That's Why We Write.

JB: Not Why We Fight?

RR: I sent an email with that title to my ex-boyfriend and business partner of five years. It was all about why I was doing the work that I did. He never bothered to reply.

JB: Well, why do you fight?

RR: Pretty simple.

I want to do for bipolar disorder what Elon Musk did for the autism spectrum.

JB: Ok...

RR: I don't even have to be a billionaire. Maybe not even a millionaire. I just need enough spare change to found a 501(c)4 and lobby Washington.

JB: Which you're going to get by delivering for DoorDash and investing your tips.

RR: I have a few other things going. And actually I have a legit day job at the moment.

JB: Which is?

RR: I can't talk about it.

JB: What, are you working for the CIA?

RR: Not even a funny joke. Not when you know at least four people who are part of the US intelligence community and you may be getting surveilled because of it.

JB: Right.

RR: Oh shit. Now, because I outed myself as bipolar you think I'm paranoid and crazy.

JB: Not at all.

RR: It's ok, I'm used to it.

JB: No really, it's just that it brings me right back.

RR: To what????

JB: I guess it's time for me to be up front with you. I was also diagnosed bipolar. At the same time I started taking T, for my transition.

RR: That's why you had to stop taking the hormones?

JB: You got it.

RR: I didn't know testosterone could have that effect.

JB: It's not common, but it happens. Same way a lot of people go into a manic episode if they start on Prozac.

RR: This was when you lived in California?

JB: That's right. I was already mid-transition. I had changed my name and legal gender, everything. I had this great job. Everybody knew. Everybody was really supportive.

RR: And then what happened?

JB: I completely lost my shit. It only took about three weeks.

RR: This is starting to sound familiar.

JB: I got really paranoid. I thought all my equipment had been bugged. My home equipment, my phone, my Roku, my PlayStation...

RR: Oh no.

JB: But it didn't stop there.

At work, I wrote a bullshit diagnostic script and thought it was pure genius. I thought I was using machine learning to analyze our system logs for signs of exploits. I never stopped to test. I never bothered to clean the data. Really all I was doing was changing around a few variable names from a TensorFlow demo.

I was running report after report, on "Threat Assessment."

I turned off debug mode and forgot to turn it on again. I just plumb forgot.

RR: Ouch!

JB: Then I started taking down our servers, as a precautionary measure.

RR: That can't be good.

JB: It actually affected our stock price.

RR: I see.

JB: I had supplemental disability insurance. And they gave me a really good severance package. But coming back wasn't an option.

I wasn't "operationally secure."

RR: Did you spend time inpatient?

JB: I did. About six weeks.

They put me on Abilify and Topamax. After that, everything was kind of a blur for several years.

RR: Oh man. That doesn't sound like a good combo.

JB: You know those drugs?

RR: I know that Topamax lowers IQ.

JB: Doctor prescribed it because I was gaining a shit ton of weight from the Abilify. I was only on Topamax for a few months, but it turned me into a different person.

Might still be on it if I hadn't gotten into a fender bender on El Camino Real. It was the middle of the day. Sunny day. No heavy traffic. I was turning left. Forgot to check my blind spot.

RR: Yikes. Were you ok?

JB: Yeah, no injuries but it was a wake-up call. I made the docs lower the dosage.

RR: That sounds like a good outcome.

JB: Kept my driver's license but sold my car. It was a BMW Z4.

RR: I'm sorry.

JB: It's ok. I'm not really that into cars.

RR: Did you have family in the area? A good support network?

JB: You forget. Trans.

RR: Oh I see...

JB: My birth family didn't exactly throw me out, but we weren't on great terms. They still call me by my birth name. They don't accept who I am.

All my friends were in the trans community... well, not everyone, but a lot of people were just weirded out by what had happened. They didn't want to accept that the hormones played a role.

RR: That makes sense.

JB: If you have two or three friends come and visit you in a mental ward, and more than one person stay in touch after, you can count yourself lucky.

RR: In my experience, I have found that to be true.

JB: I was sleeping a lot, watching bad tv, playing video games, farting around on Reddit. I didn't have a real life anymore. I wrecked my car on a quest for a friggin' burrito.

RR: Was the burrito any good?

JB: I never even got there. Add insult to injury.

RR: So how did you end up here?

JB: Once my head had cleared, I wanted to be in a city where the public transport was better.

I took the last of my remaining savings, even cashed in some Bitcoin, and moved north. It wasn't easy. Took everything I had to stay focused and pull it off.

RR: And now?

JB: I've been off Abilify for a year. Feel fine.

RR: And yet you're still on disability...

JB: It's like that girl said in her piece. What if it comes back?

RR: You're a computer programmer. You could get another job.

JB: I was a Cybersecurity Engineer. It's similar, but a little different.

I can never get clearance. Most places wouldn't dream of hiring me if I told the full story.

RR: So why not... retool your skills?

Try to work in computer graphics instead. Become an animator.

JB: Rags, for the first time ever, you are on the verge of becoming annoying.

RR: Oh. Sorry.

Didn't mean to give unsolicited advice.

JB: Not just unsolicited, but unhelpful.

Why shouldn't I try to become a professional writer instead? I know the odds of success are lower but look at it this way. I have time to hone my craft.

RR: That's entirely up to you.

JB: I know you're happy to have jumped back into the corporate rat race, but not everybody embraces the same values.

Especially here and now. In this city. After last summer.

RR: And I'm sure it doesn't hurt that you still have Bitcoin squirreled away.

JB: Monero, actually.

RR: I'm surprised you told me that.

JB: If the Feds want to come after me for hiding assets on my disability application, they are more

than welcome to. But one of the things I realized when I woke up, after that paranoid episode and the long dull years of medication that followed, is that I really don't matter anymore.

Nobody is paying attention.

I may as well be off the grid. I'm invisible.

RR: That's what you think.

JB: It has its advantages.

I also don't think I was ever really bipolar, by the way. I think I just had a bad reaction to a drug. And it cost me almost a decade of my life.

RR: I feel the same way. You know I had my first episode from taking Lariam?

JB: I know now that you told me. What is Lariam?

RR: It's an antimalarial drug. I was traveling through Central America. You're not the only one who does medical overkill.

Anyway, it's been linked to insanity.

JB: You don't say.

RR: "May induce psychiatric symptoms such as anxiety disorders, paranoia, depression, hallucinations and psychosis."

That's according to the FDA. There's been a lawsuit.

JB: Wow, when did you find that out?

RR: Years ago. Once we knew that Lariam might have played a role, my doctor wanted me to try discontinuing Lithium. That was back in 2002.

JB: So why didn't you?

RR: I was doing fine. Didn't want to rock the boat.

JB: I can understand that.

RR: You have to understand what a sea change it is to go from having your whole life ahead of you, a great fiancé, all these plans, all these dreams...

JB: And then suddenly you lose it all.

RR: I didn't even lose most of it. I married the guy. I kept going with my career. It was more just the realization that it could all go away in a heartbeat.

If you lose your core self, you lose everything.

JB: I feel ya.

RR: Now I just wish I'd tried going off the meds back when I had a good support system.

JB: There's never going to be a perfect time.

RR: Don't get me started.

JB: How much longer do you think we should wait for GG to rejoin the chat?

RR: I don't think she's coming back

JB: Hope she's ok.

RR: Yeah, me too.

JB: What are the odds of three people showing up at the same online writers' group and all of them being bipolar?

RR: Well, bipolar is a very common diagnosis. About 1 in 23 people have it.

And you're forgetting Didi.

JB: Maybe she's bipolar too!

RR: Not to mention the fact that we're writers, and by definition all crazy.

JB: Startup founders are worse.

RR: The odds of three out of a random group of four people in the United States being bipolar are .03144 percent, or approximately 1 in 3000.

JB: You just raise $1/23$ to the power of three and multiply it by four, right?

RR: Close. You need to multiply the product by $22/23$ as well.

JB: Doesn't change the number much. I would have thought it would be higher.

RR: If you get 23 people in a room, do you know what the probability is of two people having the same birthday?

JB: Something like 1 in 400, I'm guessing.

RR: Nope. It's just over 50%.

JB: Oh, I get it... because you're not trying to match against your own birthday. You're matching everyone's to everyone's.

RR: 253 possible permutations, to be precise.

Just Google the "birthday problem." *Scientific American* has a good write-up.

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/bring-science-home-probability-birthday-paradox/>

JB: As I recall, there's actually a cryptographic attack based on the same model.

RR: Probability is a funny thing. Very counterintuitive. Often misunderstood.

JB: You should have been an actuary.

RR: Nah, I'm a rank amateur. I just find this stuff interesting.

It's a way of predicting the future. Or I guess asserting control over a reality where I have almost none.

JB: Whatever helps you get through the day.

RR: It can also get me in trouble.

JB: How so?

RR: I took your advice...

JB: Glad somebody finally did.

RR: I've been working on some new stuff. Not erotica.

JB: The Bra Consultant is languishing in her glorious sunlight office, pacing the hardwood floors, all alone with her plants...

RR: By now she's probably rented a U-Haul and moved in permanently with the lingerie rep. That's how lesbian relationships work in real life.

JB: Yet another reason neither of us can find a date.

RR: It's not even that simple for me.

JB: Oh, right. You must be single "by choice."

RR: Do you want to see the new stuff or not?

JB: Sure. Bring it on.

RR: It's not ready yet.

JB: Tease.

RR: Can you give me a week?

JB: Of course.

RR: Ok, then.

TTYL.

JB: Same Bat Channel.

RR: Same Bat Place.

JB: So what you got?

RR: I got nothing.

JB: Really? I thought you said you were working on something.

RR: I was, but I can't get it to go where I want to. It's a tough subject to write about.

JB: Maybe you're being too hard on yourself.

RR: I just feel like it's one of those essays that's gonna piss *everybody* off.

JB: Oh goody. Those are my favorite!

RR: The left. The right. Nuns. Grandmothers...

JB: Well then at least people have a reaction.

RR: I tried posting something similar on Twitter a few months back and got roundly pilloried.

JB: What about? May I ask?

RR: Sorry this is turning into group therapy session instead of writing critique.

JB: Just don't cry on me.

RR: A while back I shared some tips online for not getting raped.

JB: Ok. That is heavy.

RR: Yeah. Based on personal experience. Some of it, anyway.

JB: I am so sorry.

RR: You know, it's all right. I already wrote that story.

JB: If you want me to beat the guy up, I actually do know some judo.

RR: You're not the first person who has offered. And no thank you.

JB: Suit yourself.

RR: One of the reasons I don't share his name. Vigilantes are the last thing I need.

JB: So back to Twitter cancel culture...

RR: The piece that I shared was based on advice I wrote up for my niece on her fourteenth birthday. Most of it was just generic "Hooray! You're about to be a woman," advice. Treasure your girlfriends, don't downplay your own accomplishments, etc.

But there was also a section which talked very explicitly about consent. I showed it to her parents first, got their permission and checked in about it being age appropriate.

And I got everybody's permission before I shared it on the web. After adapting and anonymizing it, of course.

JB: I get it. I get it. Privacy is important. What didn't people like about it?

RR: They thought it was blaming the victim.

JB: Not sure I follow...

RR: It's like, if you leave your car unlocked and your keys in the ignition, it's still illegal for me to steal it. But it's a good deal more likely to happen.

JB: I don't have a car, remember?

RR: I have actually had my car stolen.

JB: Dang, girl. You have all the luck.

RR: I got it back.

JB: But I'm not sure your analogy holds up, because plenty of people have their cars stolen who lock them up correctly.

RR: That's exactly my point!

JB: Your point is what? Use the club? Or mace?

RR: My point is that there are zero risk situations and there are high risk situations, and if we teach young women to realistically assess the risk and

avoid the highest risk situations, guess what: *fewer women will get raped.*

JB: And people got upset about that?

RR: People did. Most of them were women.

They want to live in a world where all you have to do is tell someone, “Don’t do that.”

..and they don’t do it.

JB: I can see the slippery slope argument... get in bed with somebody, or even in a room alone with someone, and suddenly anything that happens after that is your fault.

RR: That’s not at all what I was saying! It’s just that every person I know who has been raped (and there are a lot of us) blames themselves for what happened and thinks constantly about what they could have done to prevent it. It’s part of the script that plays out.

JB: Glad you said person this time and not “woman.”

RR: I know men who have been raped. I wouldn’t say it’s the defining story of their lives. But it’s not for most women either. It’s like COVID.

JB: Except much more common.

RR: I meant, the cases vary in severity.

JB: Also, being “functional” doesn’t necessarily mean no PTSD. A lot of people mask symptoms for years and years.

RR: For me, it was like being hit with a lead pipe on the back of the kneecap. I just crumpled.

JB: Again, really sorry that happened to you.

RR: A lot of other factors played into it. Work. Illness. Overall mental health. Another time it might have been no big deal. I can’t judge.

JB: The perfect storm...

RR: Yeah. Pretty much. Or actually, here’s how I would describe it.

JB: Go on.

RR: I used to have a PC that ran Windows XP.

JB: Best operating system ever released by Microsoft. They don’t make ‘em like they used to.

RR: And then I got hit by a virus.

JB: Clicked the wrong email attachment?

RR: It was a link for a fake Flash upgrade.

JB: Oh yeah, that got a lot of people, back in the day.

RR: Anyway, it killed my hard drive. Not just the software, but the hardware. I tried reinstalling the OS from disk and it wouldn't work.

So then I took the PC to my local computer repair shop.

JB: Good for you that you had one nearby.

RR: And they couldn't fix it either! They said the malware had burned out the motor on the fan... or something. Not only was the software screwy but the hardware was permanently fried.

JB: Ooooh, you got hit bad.

RR: Anyway, there were days when I had to tell myself, "I am not a broken computer."

Because that's what it felt like.

Like the trauma was a pop-up window constantly showing up on my screen. And I couldn't get it to go away. And meanwhile it was mining Bitcoin or something in the back of my brain...

JB: Neat trick.

RR: Because I was always tired and angry and on edge. I had been living with a mental health diagnosis for almost 20 years, but that was the first time I ever felt like a broken person.

JB: When did all this happen?

RR: It's been three years. I'm here to tell you that time heals.

JB: Well, that's good to know.

RR: I still think about it a lot but there isn't any emotion associated with it.

JB: So is this why no dating...

RR: Not exactly. But it has made me more wary.

JB: I'm curious to see what you wrote. Even if it isn't polished.

RR: Are you sure? You may hate it.

JB: Unlikely.

RR: I don't want it to come across as anti-male, because I'm not...

JB: You think I haven't gotten flak in my time for joining the other team? I can take it.

RR: Right then, here it is.

Four Stories about Rape

1. The Rape that Didn't Happen

Where were you the day you learned that Kurt Cobain died?

I remember that day very well. It was a Friday. I was at boarding school in Maryland. I heard the news on the radio, my tinny Sony boom box tuned to 99.1 HFS, stopping by my dorm room after lunch. I relayed the news to my classmates.

The only reaction I remember is the one girl who said, "Oh my god! The tribute album is going to be amazing."

We were seniors. It was an all-girls' school. We had the day off from classes for a special three-day college prep workshop. The topic: rape prevention. We heard from a local DA. We watched videos. We learned self-defense techniques. Most importantly, we learned about binge drinking and events organized by fraternities and others can specifically target vulnerable women. We talked through how all of this made us feel.

I have no complaints about the content. It is different to judge the impact of preventative measures, but I am certain the information I absorbed made me safer. It would be more than 20 years until I had a serious brush with trauma.

2. Jersey Shore

It was the end of our sophomore year. My friend Alice had a family beach house on the Jersey

shore. She invited us all to stay there—me, my suitemates Marcy and Ellen, and Ellen’s boyfriend, Brad. Ellen was blond, bubbly and outgoing. She was the only one of us who had a boyfriend. Brad was an athlete and an artist. After his first love left him for another guy on the same floor his sophomore year, he acted out and gained a reputation for being a bit of a player. He was still considered a real catch.

The trip was a roaring success! Or so I thought. We all had laughs when Ellen (a native child of the Midwest) brought frozen custard with her in the cooler and tried to refreeze it after it had melted. We swam and sunbathed. I sketched and lent Brad my copy of a *Sandman* graphic novel.

One night, we went on a spontaneous road trip to Atlantic City. The idea came from yours truly. It was as simple as saying, “Why don’t we all go to Atlantic City?”

So we went. None of us gambled, but I remember the waves on the shore at night.

Ellen had decided she wanted to wait until marriage to lose her virginity. Her reasons were primarily religious, although she wasn’t a strict Christian. I never totally understood that. My own mother—who came of age in the 1960s—

used to tell my fifteen-year old sister that “Jesus never said anything bad about premarital sex.”

Ellen and I had different views. We talked about them in the hallway, late at night, while we were procrastinating from term papers and problem sets. I respected where she was coming from. I wasn’t about to try to change her mind.

Towards the end of the trip, Ellen approached me. The door was closed. No one else could hear. She told me that while they were fooling around and making out, she and Brad had “accidentally” had sex. She gave me all the details. She seemed upset. But it didn’t really show in public.

If she had wanted to go to the police, I would have supported her every step of the way. But I don’t think I or she ever mentioned the “r-word.” I didn’t encourage her or discourage her.

I don’t want to say that I repressed Ellen’s story or dismissed the account as trivial. It was more that I saw it as Ellen’s place to judge and not mine. She and I didn’t discuss the events again until many years had passed—until I was grappling with my own trauma.

I wanted to know if she thought those events were why she didn’t date anybody else in

college, or for many years after. She thought that had more to do with being in graduate school in Vermont, but she confirmed that yes—she had not forgotten and those events still bothered her. Now she is married, with three children and a good job working for the government. Her husband works in the same field. They are both committed Christians. Lutherans, last I checked. I asked her if she had ever told him about what happened and she said she had. She said it made him angry, but not at her.

Brad and I stayed close. We were already set to live in the same suite the next year. He had a good camera and I asked him to take my wedding pictures. His reputation for being a player followed him—the night that he announced his engagement (at a New Year's Eve party in Boston, packed with mutual friends from college) another of his ex-girlfriends who happened to be at the same party pitched a fit. A very public one. It seemed he had started dating his fiancée our senior year, without ever actually breaking up with her. She later apologized to the host but not to the happy couple.

The last time I saw Brad was just under two years ago. He and his wife have a nice house in a city where real estate is expensive. He is a senior

level executive at a major tech company, so they can afford it. They have two children: a girl and a boy.

3. The Trouble with Hot Tubs

I used to have a hot tub in the backyard of my old house. It's the thing I miss most now that I've moved away. You could see the Milky Way on a clear night. I would soak out there nearly every night. One time, I asked the Goddess for a sign. Moments later, I saw a shooting star.

My best friend was a guy who used to share office space with me. We had hooked up more than a few times, but while the sex was always terrific I never wanted him to get too close. Lots of reasons for that. Mostly, he was always obsessed with gorgeous, thin women who treated him terribly. Also, he had a kid and I was friends with the mom too.

I really liked us being friends.

One night, after we hadn't seen each other for several months, we met up for a beer and ended up coming back to my place. I had already told him "No sex!" on the phone, before venturing out.

Here's the thing about hot tubs. When you are in one, and you and another person are not wearing clothes, it is really easy to have sex. It just happens. It's like going back to the phase in our evolution when our ancestors were all amphibians.

My friend had asked me to sit next to him, so I did. Before I knew it, he had his arms around me and was inside me. I froze. It only lasted for a moment. He could tell that something was wrong, so he stopped. We hung out peacefully in the tub for a few minutes longer.

We never spoke about what had happened. I didn't feel the need. He was aware of my reaction, and he had taken immediate action in response. We stayed friends.

Close friends, actually.

We still talk and text almost every week. We don't live in the same place, but I am the unpaid relationship counselor for his latest beautiful, troubled live-in girlfriend and their two dogs. I don't mind. It's something that I'm good at, I think. I loaned him \$500 when he was flat broke and he paid me back—the true test of any friendship.

If I had to describe what happened between us that one time in my hot tub, I would call it nonconsensual sex. Two words, not one. It's an important distinction.

4. TFW You Find Out Your Dreamboat Boyfriend Is an Accomplice to Human Trafficking

He was Dutch, tall and good looking. A competitive chess player and ballroom dancer. We were together for about two years. It was my first relationship after divorcing my college sweetheart. Everybody told us how good we looked together. Seemed like it was going to be a forever thing. He was really, really into me. Gave me a diamond necklace when I told him I wasn't ready for a ring.

It didn't bother me at all when he told me he had worked at a porn studio to make extra money while an undergrad in Amsterdam. No, not as an actor! He was working on the porn studio's video compression codecs. At the time it seemed like a fun and titillating story. Something we could bring up if we ever needed to shock somebody stuffy and hidebound. Or play the "I Never" game.

One day, he casually let slip that the women were not Dutch citizens. They came from Russia

and Eastern Europe. And were locked in at night.

It wasn't a big confession or anything. It just came up casually, in conversation. I was silent for a moment. Then he laughed nervously and said something like, "Oh yeah. I guess there was something wrong with that."

I didn't confront him. It was in the past. Nothing could be done.

He had not only taken money from men who regularly enslaved and raped women, he had gone to work in an office *in the same building*, only a few meters away.

One of the 2600 hackers I knew back in Albany gave me a hard time for not reporting the case to the authorities—in 2019. I was assuming that the people and legal entities responsible had morphed like insects outgrowing their casings, and that they would be impossible to catch.

I don't know what the law was in the Netherlands in the first decade of the millennium. The Dutch have an entire cultural vocabulary when it comes to looking the other way. I would imagine that trafficking was against the law then, as now.

I do not agree with Catherine MacKinnon that all pornography is rape. I think the human body is beautiful, and that all parts of it are holy and sacred.

As an artist I admire the human form. As an activist I decry censorship. I write erotica for fun and profit.

With that said, I have never understood how men can still get off, given the knowledge that nearly any anonymous image of porn found on the Internet can and likely is, a victim of rape and human trafficking. I would think it would be an instant boner killer.

Yes, in the United States there are porn stars and that is great! I am all for that. It may not be most people's first choice of profession but sex work is here for a reason. In a just society it is legal and consensual.

There is collective responsibility and there is individual responsibility. But pornography without consent is rape. Profiting from it is worse.

I still have most of the cards and notes my boyfriend gave me. Most of the drawings too. The old emails and letters. But I sent him back the necklace. With insurance, the certification

that it was conflict-free, and all the other paperwork. It was a half carat. Very distinctive white gold setting, like a Moebius strip. It was hard to trace the edge.

Conclusion

In the United States, the crime of rape is defined differently from state to state. In much of the EU, any instance of sex without consent is rape—no grey areas, no lesser charges.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2020/12/consent-based-rape-laws-in-europe/>

Should we adapt a similar “hard line” here? I’m not sure how useful that would be.

As it is, while **one out of every 6 American women** has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape (14.8% completed, 2.8% attempted), only **28 out of 1000 sexual assaults result in a felony conviction**.

Source: RAINN

<https://www.rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system>

<https://www.rainn.org/statistics/scope-problem>

It would seem that what we would need is not harsher laws, but better enforcement.

Or perhaps, better education.

What if we viewed non-consensual sex as an action akin to drunk driving? Something that happens all the time. Sometimes the consequences are harmless. Sometimes it destroys lives.

This definition applies, without question, to situations where one or both people have been drinking (a common cause of felony rape convictions not involving violence) but I think there is also a wider analogy to be made around behavior and impulse control.

I was taught that rape is always an act of violence. Never of sexual desire. In my experience, that simply isn't true. Consent is what matters, not intent.

Think about it. Culturally, we have at least agreed that drunk driving is a problem. Law enforcement makes about 1.5 million arrests every year.

Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

<http://www.drunkdrivingprevention.com/drunkdrivingarreststatistics.html>

Culturally, we also understand that drunk drivers are not monsters. They may simply be good people who make bad decisions.

We teach young people not to get into a car with somebody who has been drinking heavily. Can we just teach them to apply the same standard when it comes to sex?

If you're not sure yet whether you want to have sex:

- **Don't** get naked with somebody.
- **Don't** consume a lot of alcohol or drugs with somebody.
- **Don't** get under the covers in bed with somebody.
- **Don't** skinnydip or get in a hot tub alone with somebody.

These are my four stories. Those are my four rules.

How hard can they be to remember?

JB: Wow. A lot to process here.

RR: I know. I know. I'm amazed you made it through.

JB: So, first things first. There actually is a blockchain-based technology to prove consent in porn. It's an NFT. <https://www.pokmi.com/>

RR: I know. I know. Or you can just follow individual stars. Stoya comes to mind.

JB: Believe it or not, technology can sometimes solve the problems it creates. Maybe you make a note of it in your next draft.

RR: Good point.

JB: My main question is, why didn't you talk about your own experiences?

RR: Numero uno – I'd already written about that, under a pseudonym.

Numero dos – I think the guy will probably sue my ass, even if I take pains to disguise his identity.

JB: Does he have a case?

RR: No, not in the slightest. But he's an attorney. He can file the suit *pro se*. He knows I would have to hire somebody to defend myself. And it would bankrupt me.

JB: Would he be that petty? To go out of his way to do that?

RR: I have to assume so. I know that he monitors my Medium, my Spotify, and my Blogspot accounts on a daily basis. What possible reason except he's afraid I'm going to "tell"?

JB: Maybe he's still obsessed with you. People are strange.

RR: Well, he actually did threaten me with a defamation suit, so no I'd say the odds that he is still interested in anything other than his own reputation are low to none.

Pity, because I actually would give him another chance.

JB: Whaaaaaa? Now that really surprises me.

RR: You break it, you buy it.

JB: Robin I didn't say this before, but you are not a broken person.

RR: The mind has the capacity to heal. I'm lucky for that. But I lost a lot of time dealing with the aftermath. Stayed in another relationship much longer than I should have. When I was finally ready to jump back into the dating world, that's when COVID happened. Almost to the day.

JB: It's like Chief and Cally on *Battlestar Galactica*. You're stuck making the best of limited options.

RR: Don't I know it? Found someone a little too quickly. And he turned out to be much worse than anything that came before.

JB: The roommate you were telling me about?

RR: No, but I don't want to talk about it. Can we just go back to talking about the story?

JB: Ok, no problem.

RR: Even as it stands now, the story is unpublishable under my own name.

JB: You changed the names, I assume?

RR: Of course I changed all the names. But I would have to contact my friend from college and get her permission; even then it would be dicey. And I'd be better off changing my ex-boyfriend's country of origin to Estonia, or some place other than the Netherlands.

JB: Does Estonia have a big porn industry?

RR: You're asking the wrong person. But this is the problem with "writing from your life."

This is something I *can't* fictionalize. The point is not to write a sad story about rape. The point is to give the casual reader some sense of how common this is, and how often it happens to nice people who go to nice colleges.

Believe me, I had more than four stories to choose from.

JB: I get it. I get it. But couldn't you change things up a little bit more? Maybe make it a trip that happened in high school. Or after college. Or maybe

you all went to Myrtle Beach and not the Jersey Shore?

RR: Wouldn't help. A lot of people remember us making that trip.

And it's a different story if we're in high school. Or in our mid-20s.

JB: I see your point.

RR: It's crazy how you obsess about details when recounting the past. What to leave out. What to leave in.

JB: I guess that's why I prefer writing the future.

RR: One of my biggest dilemmas was whether to change Brad's car to a Jeep.

JB: What was it in real life?

RR: A beat-up silver Volvo station wagon from the early 80's. He bought it for \$600. Kept that thing running for at least ten years.

JB: And you were afraid that leaving in that detail might make him too identifiable?

RR: It's worse than that. The guy I was telling you about just now—the one I didn't put in the story—he also drove a silver Volvo station wagon from the 1980s.

JB: They always seemed so sturdy and dependable.

RR: I didn't want to put in that [true] detail because there is a really good chance the guy who isn't my story will read that story. He knows most of my pseudonyms and he likes to keep tabs on me.

He would have thought it was a veiled reference to him. But it wasn't. It was just a coincidence.

JB: Or else it's just the rapist's favorite car?

RR: Jeep didn't seem quite right. Too redneck. Or else what one of the popular kids would have. I ended up just leaving that detail out.

JB: From a stylistic perspective, you know how I feel about this. Less is always more.

RR: Plus I would have IRL Brad, the other guy, and the manufacturers of Volvo all out for blood.

JB: You forget. We don't matter much. Nobody is paying attention.

RR: Nobody except the guy who is still stalking me on social media. My Number One Fan.

JB: Well, it's nice to have fans anyway.

RR: Correction—as far as I know he is my only fan.

JB: Hey, I'm a fan of your work... when you don't go on too many tangents and get sidetracked with meaningless detail.

RR: Well then you can be Fan #2.

JB: You know, I think your problem is that you're still not over this guy.

RR: How can I be over this guy when he won't go away?

JB: How sure are you that he's really still following you online? Maybe you're projecting?

RR: Very sure.

JB: Wot. Did you hack into his system? You bad girl, you...

RR: Never. Just maths and analytics. You're right. If it was coming from just one source, I couldn't be sure. But the pattern of activity is distinct enough, and it's recurred enough times in enough places, that the odds of it occurring by random chance are less than one in a billion.

JB: You know, all of us are due for at least one coincidence that is one-in-a-billion in our lifetime. Or close to it.

RR: Where are you getting that factoid from?

JB: Simple multiplication. What is the smallest fragment of time that allows to you register a complete thought? I'm going to put it around two seconds.

RR: Debatable. But ok.

JB: It's a conservative estimate but that's kind of the point. Figure an average of 18 waking hours a day and 70 years of conscious life. We're not counting early childhood or senility. You get a total of 827,820,000 distinct and unique moments.

RR: I'm not sure whether that number is encouraging or not.

JB: Anyway, most of those moments will be very predictable. You wake up in the same bed that you went to sleep in. You eat the breakfast cereal that you bought from the store the day before. You watch the same shows on television...

But imagine a jar full of 800 million marbles and only one of those marbles is red.

RR: With enough tries, sooner or later I'm likely to get the red marble. I get it.

It doesn't matter. I've already had my one-in-a-billion coincidence.

JB: Which was?

RR: It was years ago. Fall of 2008. Again, round about the same time as CERN...

Maybe a month or two after. Or maybe before.

JB: And what was it?

RR: I was working on this religion blog. That was before Google had switched to reCAPTCHA, which relies on the movement of a mouse to discern if you are human. Back then from time to time you needed to solve a captcha—the old fashioned kind. A bunch of letters and numbers reproduced as a bitmap graphic.

JB: Lol. Modern machine learning makes mincemeat of those.

RR: This was a while ago. Anyway, the captcha spelled out “**HiRags**,” phonetically. Nothing more and nothing less.

JB: Ok, that is fairly convincing.

RR: 36 characters possible. Not case sensitive. And that’s assuming no symbols in the captcha lexicon. Which there probably were but it’s been a long time. I can’t be sure.

JB: So let’s assume 36 to the power of 6...

RR: Even with phonetic variations, the odds are astronomically low.

JB: So what. You think God was talking to you?

RR: I didn't say that. Just that I've already blown my jackpot wad when it comes to meaningless coincidence. At least according to your model.

JB: You and I both know that's not how probability works. You got a screenshot of this captcha?

RR: Somewhere. It was a long time ago.

RR: Yo.

JB: How goes?

RR: Fine, thanks. Why do you ask?

JB: Just trying to be polite, I guess.

RR: That's the problem. You share something, and then people see you differently.

JB: Not at all!

RR: Don't go thinking I'm a fragile china doll just because I wrote a piece about rape...

JB: Let me guess. You're PMS-ing.

RR: How did you know?

JB: Never mind that. But soy helps a lot. Evens out the hormonal gaps.

RR: Thanks for the tip.

JB: So I actually wrote something this time.

RR: Oh, really?

JB: It isn't finished. It's a very early draft.

RR: Doesn't matter.

JB: You ready for this?

RR: Hit me.

JB: Bombs away...

THE PHOTON TORNADO

Brewster brushed a clump of hair back from his forehead. Male pattern baldness would be a relief, but it did not seem to be his destiny in life. He was low on funds, despite his enviable skillset.

So he wrestled with the eternal dilemma.

Clippers or Supercuts? Clippers or Supercuts?

With the one, you were responsible for the outcome. With the other, your fate was in the hands of a stranger. But with neither were the odds terribly much in your favor.

Just then came a knock at his apartment door.

It was the middle of the afternoon. Brewster hadn't ordered anything online in at least six weeks. Not hardware. Not software. Not even kits, or broken equipment he could refurbish and sell. He hadn't had the heart.

It had to be missionaries. The problem with missionaries was that most of them didn't believe in COVID. They either thought they would be miraculously healed, or that if they died, they would go straight to heaven.

Spreaders, in more ways than one.

The knocking continued. Brewster realized that to get it to stop he would have to open the door.

He put on his mask and cracked the front door open, chain in place. “What is it?”

The person he saw was not what he expected. He appeared to be in his twenties, about the same age as Brewster. He had curly sandy hair and was wearing a polar fleece jacket over a T-shirt that said, “**SCIENCE MATTERS.**”

He had a padded mailing envelope crooked under one arm. “You are Vincent Brewster, I presume?”

Brewster nodded. “What do you want?”

“I would like to discuss an opportunity with you. May I come in?”

“No, you may not. Who are you? What is this about?”

Science Dude chuckled. “Here is my card. I’m a post-doc. Physics. At the University of South Dakota. You can look me up on the Internet.”

Brewster left the door ajar and walked back to grab the phone off his desk. Sure enough, the name and address came right up in the staff directory. The photo matched, too.

“So if you’re from South Dakota, why are you here in Boston?”

“I can explain everything. Perhaps we could take a stroll. Grab some coffee?”

Brewster still wasn’t sold. He scowled.

More than likely, this was still some kind of scam. But he didn’t think that Science Dude was going to stick him up and he had no other

plans for the afternoon. His schedule was as windswept and open as the High Plains.

“Right. 1369 Coffee House is just down the street.”

Brewster grabbed a windbreaker and his wallet. They headed out.

“Nice neighborhood,” Science Dude remarked as they strolled along the sidewalk. “Central Square has always been my favorite part of Cambridge.”

“I wouldn’t call it cheap, but I get a good deal on rent,” Brewster grumbled. “My landlords like me because I don’t have children or pets.”

Soon they were sitting down and nursing cups of coffee.

“Sorry this is so cloak and dagger,” Science Dude said ruefully. “All I want to do is buy some monitors from you.”

“You know there’s a Best Buy at the Galleria.”

“Because we need old ones,” Science Dude told him. “CRTs, if possible. The largest, the biggest and the brightest that can be found.”

“Christ, why didn’t you just email me on Craigslist? Or eBay?” Brewster was incredulous.

“I would have. But all the listings you had up there were old. They were exactly what we needed, but they had already sold. We tried getting in touch with you through the site. We tried calling you, too. But it seemed like you were maybe blocking the calls as spam.”

Brewster had never been good at reading people. He let Science Dude continue. “Your real name was on your business page, so it wasn’t hard to find you. I have three more businesses on my list to check out. All with storefronts. Parking lots, even! But based on

your past inventory, you were by far the best place to start.”

Ok, this was sounding like it could be an actual legit business deal. Albeit quirky.

“You’re here from out of town?” Brewster asked.

“Yes, for another week.”

“Do you need the monitors shipped to South Dakota?”

“No, we’ll be installing them at a facility near Kendall Square.”

“Ok. Do you have a list of what you’re looking for?”

Science Dude handed him a printout.

Brewster scanned the list and wished that the coffee shop was a little less noisy. “You do understand that it’s going to take some time to

find monitors that meet your specs, much less get them into working order?”

Science Dude nodded. “We’re prepared to advance you the cost of the parts, as well as a deposit for your labor. Time is of the essence.”

“What’s your budget?” In the five years since Brewster had dropped out of engineering grad school, this was the question that had defined his day-to-day financial reality. That and the DeFi market.

At this question, Science Dude grinned broadly. “Do you want the part that I brought with me in cash, or do you want a cashier’s check?”

“Well how much is it?”

Science Dude reached into his envelope again and pulled out a wad of hundred-dollar bills.

“We weren’t sure how to set this up, so I brought both.”

Suddenly, Brewster was relieved that that the space was noisy. Instead, he felt concern that they were sitting at the counter, close to prying eyes.

“For that amount, you can just have the monitor out of my apartment. It’s an Apple Cinema Display from 2004. 20-inch. Not high res, though.”

“Low res is actually better for our purposes. But we’ll be wanting to order more too.”

“Just what are you doing, anyway?”

Science Dude shook his head. “If I told you, you’d think I was crazy.”

Brewster shrugged. “In this part of the world you meet a lot of crazy scientists. Try me.”

“Ok. But no backing out of the deal.” Science Dude clutched his envelope protectively.

“Relax. It’s a monitor, not a nuclear bomb.”
Brewster’s joke fell flat. He kept talking. “For that amount of cash, I can buy six modern flat screens and still have funds left over to upgrade my quadcore.”

“I really recommend that you take the cashier’s check. Better for accounting purposes. Yours and mine. Do you have a local bank in the area?”

Brewster wasn’t going to argue. He wasn’t an expert on the legal side of things, but it looked like this guy was just going to hand him a pile of cash without a contract.

“Yes, but if we do it that way, you’re going to have to pay Massachusetts sales tax.”

They got up from their seats and made their way to the lobby of TD Bank.

The deposit cleared immediately, to Brewster’s mild amazement and relief. By this

time, it was almost five and the light was fading. He invited his new client to the Phoenix Landing for a round on him.

It was a large enough sum that it seemed correct to celebrate. Also, Brewster had to admit he was curious.

“You know, we should have just started out here,” Science Dude remarked, as they sipped their pints.

“Your choice,” Brewster reminded him.

Brewster was still wondering if this was some kind of covert government operation but the one thing he knew was that he would never, ever get a straight answer out of Science Dude just by asking.

“Where are you staying? The Marriott?”

“Nope. I’m staying with my ex-girlfriend’s cousin in Allston,” Science Dude announced

cheerfully. “You have to remember, we’re on a budget.”

“So what exactly are you trying to do again?”

“It might take two rounds to explain.”

“Not a problem.”

For a while they just drank and watched the game. It was the first game of the season. The Red Sox were home at Fenway Park.

“So? What is it?”

Brewster had noticed that Science Dude was midway through his second stout.

“You have to understand, nearly all our funding got cut. What we’re doing right now is a Hail Mary Pass to get some reproducible results.”

Brewster nodded. “Sorry about that.”

Science Dude continued. “We were getting amazing results. Spooky, actually.”

“And they cut your funding anyway?”

Science Dude looked around the bar and lowered his voice.

“The problem is, even if the methodology is rigorous, if the data falls outside the spectrum of believability, it tends to get dismissed out-of-hand.”

RR: And????

JB: That’s all I wrote.

RR: Unless they go back to his place and fuck immediately, it’s a bit of a letdown.

JB: I would have thought you would have liked that outcome.

RR: I've read MM erotica, and I've written it.
Nothing new there.

Where were you really going with this?

JB: That's the problem. I realized my opening didn't work at all. It's not believable.

RR: It's science fiction, right? Who cares if it's believable?

JB: Well, that's the thing. Even if it's an idea piece (which this is) you want the characters and setting to be believable. Otherwise, it just distracts.

RR: Ok, I get what you're saying.

JB: Nobody would really go for a coffee with a total stranger who showed up and knocked at their door. It just wouldn't happen.

RR: Only in porno.

JB: Enough with that! You're just pissed because I made both characters men.

RR: I was actually trying to sort that out for myself.

In Hollywood, the physicist would be a hot Asian chick. No question about that. I was thinking about whether that would be more or less stereotypical.

JB: I really don't like the way you're referring to Asian women. Not cool. Not even as a joke.

RR: Come off your high horse. You called me a dumb slut the other day and I gave you a free pass.

JB: It's not the same.

Unless you are Asian? I have no way of knowing.

RR: Nope. I was completely in love with my Asian-American best friend for something close to a decade. She had a Japanese grandmother.

Does that count?

JB: No, but it's interesting. Tell me more.

RR: A few weeks after we first met, I saw her wearing a light blue long-sleeved T-shirt with the image of a geisha printed on it. Turned out, she had made the shirt herself. She had her own press.

She was like me. She would make art just for the fun of making art. No ulterior motives. She printed shirts for other people as a side gig but she gave away her own designs. I still have a bunch. Need to get them back from my ex. He's on the East Coast.

JB: You should get on that.

RR: It means I'd have to see him again.

JB: Did you ever tell her your friend how you felt?

RR: No, but I think she intuited. And then things were never the same. She pulled back hard.

JB: Sorry about that.

RR: It's ok. It was her choice. I was attracted to her—big time. And I'm not attracted to many women. But I would have been happy just hanging

out and shooting the shit and having long phone calls until the end of time.

JB: Was she queer?

RR: Sort of indeterminate. She told my ex-husband about having a relationship with another woman before any of us met, but she never told me. I asked her about this, years later, in the process of outing myself. She totally downplayed it.

Was like, “Oh. Yeah. That was just a threesome.”

JB: That could mean anything.

RR: She’s married now. Wears her hair short. Tons of gay friends. Mostly men.

JB: Closeted?

RR: I think bi like me. And going the path of least resistance. Anyway, it’s her choice. I just miss having her in my life.

She still sends me Christmas cards. That’s about it.

JB: If she is married and you're in love with her, I could see that being a problem.

RR: Were you ever a fan of They Might Be Giants?

JB: Not going to disclose that.

RR: Well anyway, there's this one lyric, "If it weren't for disappointment/ I wouldn't have any appointments."

My equivalent is, "If it weren't for ex-boyfriends, I wouldn't have any friends at all."

JB: Very funny. But not what I'd call super-healthy.

RR: I am really good with boundaries. Assuming that I'm the one allowed to set them.

JB: Ah, so we're back to your four stories.

RR: Yeah. I don't think I'm going to do anything with those.

JB: Why not?

RR: It all happened to me. But none of it is very relatable.

JB: I get it. I get it.

RR: I did change the names. And I actually forgot that I had a boyfriend the summer that we went to the Jersey Shore! He just didn't come on the trip.

Other than that, it's all true.

JB: Your own hot tub. Boarding school. The diamond necklace...

RR: It's like that scene on the Simpsons where Montgomery Burns tries to recall his childhood.

JB: Lol.

RR: The ideas are valid. But there are other ways and places to express them.

JB: Like what?

RR: I dunno.

A book? A “think piece?” An underground comic with a hot pink cover that I leave at local nightspots?

JB: The world is your oyster.

RR: Love me some oysters.

JB: I meant that metaphorically. I don’t eat meat.

RR: Good for you. Right now, my philosophy is the same as with alcohol: ok in moderation. I’d like to give up meat eventually. Just need a good reason.

JB: Like living creatures suffering isn’t a good reason?

RR: Tell that to somebody who doesn’t live with chronic anemia. I go with a plant-based diet when possible. Source and conditions very important. For everything. Not just meat and poultry.

JB: You know, maybe you should just pick a cause and stick with it. Seems like you have a different mission to save the world every time we talk.

RR: That's our whole problem as a society. We compartmentalize, rather than seeing the whole.

JB: I wasn't going to say this but I will...

RR: Oh shit. It's payback time.

JB: That was the thing that got me about Part 4. I mean, you make some valid points—but how does the suffering of anybody you wrote about compare to a chicken that's been de-beaked?

RR: You giving me shit about not being vegan doesn't change matters. Neither does you giving up meat all on your own.

JB: Well, it's something. Every little bit helps.

RR: That's how I feel about my food choices too. All of us got to go some time or other. I pay the extra \$\$\$ for grass-fed and cage-free.

JB: It's not enough.

RR: I think you're missing the point of what I said before.

JB: Honestly, it's hard to keep up.

RR: Well, it has to do with feminism.

JB: Oh great.

RR: Is that a dirty word to you?

JB: Of course not. I always saw myself as male, back from when I was a little kid.

Never felt right in this body. And still don't.

That's why I transitioned. In no way am I anti-woman.

RR: Feeling a little skeptical about that just now.

JB: FWIW I really like women.

Want to find somebody who's young. With promise and potential. Help her and guide her. If she wants

to have kids, that's fine. If she doesn't, that's fine too. They just won't be biologically mine.

RR: Good luck with that.

JB: I do better than you know.

RR: The thing is, we as women can't be waiting for men to "save us." It never works.

JB: You're putting words in my mouth.

RR: First off, it isolates us from each other. Second, when we do find a man, turns out we're the ones who do most of the saving. And the caring. And the nurturing.

JB: I know you like painting in broad strokes, and it probably gets you likes on Medium...

RR: Not many.

JB: But isn't it better to take things case by case? Anything else just promotes stereotypes.

RR: I just know I don't see other women like me.

JB: To be brutally honest, women in this country have it good. Yes, I know there is a wage gap, and there are problems with harassment and assault, but look at custody and child support laws. Nobody is more revered in America than a mom!

RR: That's just it. There is a great grid and support system laid out if you want to have children and define yourself in relationship to other people. Wife, mother, etc.

JB: And what is wrong with that?

RR: A lot, actually. Because it's asymmetrical.

Men are the go-getters. They are encouraged to be completely ruthless and amoral as long as they're "supporting their families."

JB: So you want to wear the pants too? Is that it?

RR: I look best in a tube dress with boots. But never mind that.

JB: So what is your point?

RR: Everything that's not your immediate spouse and progeny gets left out of the picture. Community causes, political action, and most of all supporting and forming ties with other women fall way down on the priority list.

JB: Ok, I think I see where you're going.

RR: It's friggin' embarrassing that we have to have a name for when a woman interacts with another woman on-screen in a movie or television show!

JB: The Bechdel Test.

RR: It's like being in remedial classes.

JB: You were never in remedial classes.

RR: No, but I did a teaching internship my senior year of college. Another "helping profession."

JB: Anyway, movies aren't reality.

RR: In my experience, reality is even worse.

JB: Nowadays, none of us talk to each other anyway. It's all text or IM.

RR: The other half of my point is that whether culturally or biologically, women are socialized to think about others ahead of themselves.

JB: I think you underestimate the number of cunning, manipulative gold diggers out there...

RR: What's the matter? Had a few Hinge dates go bad on you?

JB: I'm just saying we're all human.

RR: Biology may play more of a role than you think. Imagine millennia of getting less to eat than your brothers. Not being able to physically defend yourself because you are smaller and weaker. Having to think fast to avoid getting hit or raped. Having no legal rights. Being told by the church you are sinful from birth.

Having to strategize to protect and keep alive the children you have little or no choice in bringing into the world...

JB: You're talking about patriarchy. Ok.

RR: We're not just talking about an isolated decade or two. We are talking about a system that has endured roughly 4,000 years, enforced by empire.

JB: Not to mention religious teaching!

RR: The Goddess abides.

JB: What you're saying, if I understand you right, is that that was a long enough period of time to make certain survival traits sex-linked?

RR: Yes.

Smaller height and weight to protect against starvation.

More neurons in the corpus callosum gives you greater empathy. It's a way to keep yourself alive by understanding what your captor needs and wants.

JB: Captor meaning husband.

RR: In many cases. Perhaps most.

JB: Outsmarting them.

RR: Yes, except Stockholm Syndrome.

JB: Internalizing the values of the oppressor. The church. The state. The abuser.

RR: I would argue that still goes on today.

JB: For sure.

RR: We're taught to value everyone *but* ourselves. And other women.

JB: We talked about this already.

RR: I never got to finish.

JB: Sorry.

RR: It's all right. It takes a while to explain.

All this built-in ability for empathy is a pretty amazing superpower...

JB: And you can use your abilities for evil or good.

RR: That's right. You can use your ability to understand the way that other people think to manipulate them, or to cheat on your husband...

JB: That came out of nowhere!

RR: In the Middle Ages, or any culture with arranged marriage, it was probably the only way that village women *could* rebel.

Peasant women would have had more freedom than their aristocratic counterparts. They might forage or gather, draw water, sell vegetables at market, or work the fields, in addition to cooking, tending children, and keeping house.

JB: Maybe that's your next erotica series right there...

RR: Maybe. Like you I'm a slacker when it comes to research.

JB: So what you're saying is cheating is a part of our DNA.

RR: Probably more because in an age of fever and death most partners would not both live to old age.

All I'm saying is that women are a whole lot less likely to get caught.

JB: Until the age of electronic surveillance.

RR: If you hack into your partner's phone, you are every kind of creep. I don't care about your gender.

JB: Getting back to your original point, women have most of the purchasing power in this country. And they vote.

RR: Yes, but how often are they running the companies? Or running for elected office?

JB: Good point.

RR: If women had power to chart the course...

And if more women were free from living in near poverty...

JB: And trapped in bad relationships because they can't afford to leave...

RR: If any of these things happened, I guarantee you factory farming would disappear from this country in five years.

JB: That's a big statement.

RR: I know how women think.

We live by "should" and not by "want."

We do as much as we are able, when we are able.

We are simultaneously compassionate and practical.

JB: Is that a good thing?

RR: Your team could stand to learn a few things from us, in my view.

JB: I hate to break it to you but we're not living in the Middle Ages anymore. You have equality under the law. You have the freedom to start a business, or get your own apartment, or marry another woman.

Why aren't women ruling the world already?

RR: I think a lot of it is rape, actually.

JB: Right. Trauma.

RR: It's prevalent enough and it's severe enough, that it makes it very difficult to plot a revolution.

JB: Don't forget the fear of being raped. Women are told they are powerless and vulnerable from a very young age.

RR: Right. That too. But we're dealing with maybe 27 million women in this country who are walking

wounded. I wouldn't have believed how much of an effect it would have on me. Trauma means it's an accomplishment just to get to the supermarket and stay employed. You don't have energy or bandwidth left to advocate for systemic change.

JB: So you are saying that rape is our core problem in this society. Not a fringe issue.

RR: That and global warming, yes.

JB: I'm just remembering who was behind the original Green New Deal.

RR: Yup. And in the private sector too.

I think so many women would invest in green technologies and sustainable food and energy sources if they just had access to the capital and felt informed and confident.

JB: A "Pink Robinhood"?

RR: That's a company I would love to found if I were 20 years younger and had no health issues.

JB: Make your money in the market and then recruit a sweet young thing...

RR: You just want me to introduce her to you.

JB: Sshh.

RR: So many women are sidelined by trauma before they ever turn 21.

Women need other women to enact systemic change. To support each other, to babysit, to cheer each other on, to found companies together, to work on getting their friends elected.

JB: It's not like it's a life sentence.

RR: No but it sets you on a path. It takes real effort and mental strength to choose another one.

JB: You're never going to make this problem go away.

RR: No but what if we cut the numbers in half? We could do that.

JB: If you say so...

RR: The number of drunk driving fatalities nationwide has decreased by 52% since 1982.

JB: So you are advocating what? Better education? Changes to laws and enforcement?

RR: Yes, all of the above.

JB: It won't happen overnight.

RR: I know.

JB: You have a lot of battles you're trying to fight.

RR: I do what I can. Where I can.

JB: Just be good to yourself. Ok?

RR: Always am.

JB: Do you really think any of this will ever change?

RR: Have you read *1984*?

JB: It's been a long time but yeah.

RR: Do you remember the end of 1984? Just before the Thought Police come to take them away?

JB: I think so.

RR: Everything that Winston says about the proles, just substitute in the word “women.”

That's how I feel.

JB: They're a lot of the same people, anyway.

RR: The future belongs to us. We just don't know it yet.

*“It was only an 'opeless fancy.
It passed like an Ipril dye,
But a look an' a word an' the dreams they stirred
They 'ave stolen my 'eart awye!”*