

THANK YOU

The slow lane in the swimming pool is free, thank god. It's rare I have a whole lane to myself in this outdoor college pool. Dinner hour is encroaching and students are punching their meal cards, professors are off to their family table, except those, like me, who are empty nesters or without family, who prefer a late supper, preceded by a cocktail, gin on ice, a splash of lime, celery bitters in my case.

I'm doing the backstroke, fins on, and my eyes flicker over the bearded guy about to jump into the fast lane, two over from mine. He's fit, late fifties, I conjecture. Youthful goatee. Bit knock-kneed. Long neck. Big head. Engineering Department? Life Sciences? Probably divorced. He likes this hour too. He rotates his arms in their sockets, turns his torso this way and then that. Fuck him. I hate him. No reason. Of course I'm thinking of my ex. Fuck him too; he on his sixth thirty-five-year-old girlfriend in the ten years since we got divorced, or to put it more accurately, since our marriage started to fall apart.

I tell myself not to think about that, which, after all, is old, very old news, but to watch the light on the trees – the tall eucalyptus, sweet dear tree friend, who, now in early March, is naked with white bark that will soon become old skin that will shed and leave messy chunks of derma on sidewalks and in gardens. I watch the light. The sun is descending to that nether region where everything exciting happens.

Because I'm watching the light, I also observe the seagulls – people in the rest of the world envy us in California – and I understand why – because we can swim in outdoor pools in March and watch seagulls fly – the Pacific is not too far away – but here's

the thing — the white bellies of the seagulls are perfectly lit by the descending sun. They glow with heavenly light, vaguely pink, soaring with hardly a flap of wings, catching invisible currents way up high there. I, an adjunct teaching basic English skills and a volunteer teacher of incarcerated juvenile boys, doing the backstroke, have not failed to notice these perfectly lit seagulls and I think to myself, oh, this is beauty itself with a capital B. And because I can acknowledge it, because I am aware now of moments of utter transcendence, even in the dense chaos and congestion of a city like Los Angeles, I know I am ennobled in an important way. Or so I want to believe.

“You have to use condoms,” I tell the boys. “It’s not a choice,” I stare them down. God forbid if I sound like I am lecturing them like every other adult they hate. Six incarcerated juveniles sit around the table in the MLK Jr. classroom of Camp David Gonzales; a room that no amount of sunny yellow paint emblazoned with words of inspiration can cheer up. There are the stark facts of their circumstances, circumstances that it is my mission to get them to write about each week. I come here once a week to volunteer teach.

Valley has incited me, telling me, with a smile, he has a baby on the way, his second; the first with another baby momma who he says under his breath, but which we can all hear, is a bitch. Valley has his name scrawled in big flowing blue letters around the width of his neck. The tattoo looks like some kind of ancient warrior necklace. He has a big stubble-haired head on which he’s seen fit to have devil horns tatted just above each temple. My god, I thought, the first time I met him, he’s hard-core. It’s a policy of mine not to ask the boys what they are incarcerated for — and because it’s a camp and not jail, the sentences are fixed from six to eighteen months. They’re mostly here for probation violations — weed, tagging, some assault and robbery, which is not to say they have not witnessed or committed violent acts.

“Abuela,” Valley says, “you know that rubber don’t feel good.” The other boys laugh. I can see, in their eyes, sweet

memories of their pre-incarcerated sexual escapades. “Yeah Abuela, it just don’t feel right. You feel me?” Jose says. Jose with a baby face and deep Mayan eyes with black eyelashes. I bet his real abuela calls him Juanito and rubs his stubble with affectionate work-worn hands. And then there’s Jackson, who just looks at me, a kind of bemused smile on his half-black, half-Hispanic face. His hair is Afro, and his skin is like milky tea. His cheekbones are Aztec high, his nose is Negroid. I find myself studying him, but I also notice him studying me. Maybe he’s looking at the queer sprigs of gray hair, or the plump double chin, or the way my glasses enlarge my plain brown eyeballs. He is one of the quiet ones. He sits with shoulders hunched, but he carries a kind of light. Yes, I could say it comes from his eyes, that when he looks at me I see hunger for *everything*: for life beyond these bars, for love, for a chance. But he also carries light in his feet; he practically skips up to me every time class starts. I must seem like I’m from another planet—I’ve never pretended to know what these boys have gone through—the broken families, the shootings and stabbings, the hunger, the call of gang life and they don’t know my life—the well-loved organic garden on a tree-lined street, the reliable but unsexy gray Prius, the trips to far off places like Japan and Nova Scotia. Some of them have never even seen the Pacific.

They have taken to calling me abuela because I had them write about their grandmothers. Before that I was Miss Naomi. I am done with grandmotherly love for the moment, so incensed am I that these sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds are bringing children into the world. Or maybe this is abuela territory—wielding a stick along with love—I have no idea. My two daughters, nineteen and twenty-two, are not much older than these boys and they are as far from having children as these boys are from going to college.

“No, I don’t feel you,” I say bluntly. In my mind I see somewhere out there in the ‘hood’ a pregnant tub of a teenage girl, whose Christian values won’t let her abort, facing down a long tunnel of lonely child rearing. “Here’s your writing prompt for tonight.” I have already laid out two sheets of lined paper for the

students and handed them the black ink Bic pens they will have to return at the end of the session. "What does it mean to be a man?"

The big-headed professor is back the next time I swim. I'm down the lane on my back, sluicing and dragging through the water. Is there something arrogant about the way he stands at the end of the pool and swings his arms around and twists his torso, taking time to show off his muscle tone? Or is he a coward, delaying his entry into the cold water? I'm wrong on both counts. A young woman approaches. Their lips brush in a kiss. She tucks her ample hair into a silicone swim cap. Fresh faced, pert nose, no sag, no thighs dimpled with cellulite. She wears one of those new style swimsuits that are practically thongs in the back, exposing almost her whole surface of her butt cheeks. Clearly a student. So I have been right to hate him. I feel like a shark now, prowling the waters, my arms slapping the water. How I want to say something to him. To let him have it. What I would say fuels the next few laps. I'll tell him he's a predator. The worst kind of man. The kind that steals women's youth. No different than my boys in Juvie. He should know better. He really should. But what would I say to her? Should I tell her not to be fooled, not to be seduced by his intellect, his so-called worldliness, or whatever else is attracting her to him? To get over her Daddy issues? Then I imagine them turning to me and saying, "Get a life, abuela."

And maybe they're right. My days are a revolving door between teaching freshman comp, swimming, and Juvie. Not true. I have my posse. Just the other day Marisela called me in a heated up stew. She had seen Geena over the weekend. Geena, ten years younger than me, was going through what I went through ten years ago. Jake, her husband of sixteen years was leaving her for a younger woman, a partner in his law firm. But that wasn't all Marisela had to tell me. Lisa, another friend of ours, the woman who cut and styled all of our hair, was going through the exact same thing. And another woman, someone I didn't know, but was a friend of Marisela's — same story.

"It's a fucking epidemic," Marisela said. "Someone has to say something to these guys. I'm going to have Marc talk to Jake." Marc was her husband. She was the one in the bunch who seemed genuinely happily married and going on twenty years, the one who helped counter the awful statistics and made you have to check your awful generalizations about men at the door. Marc and Jake worked in the same law firm.

"What do you think he can say?"

"He can tell him to wake up. Stop being an asshole. He's married to a perfect woman."

"Let me know if it works," I said. In my experience, by the time your friends tell you you are an asshole, it's too late.

What Does It Mean To Be A Man? I prod Angel to read first. He looks at his paper, looks at us, looks down again. I'm patient. Finally he kind of mumbles what he has written.

"Yeah. Men be tough, men fight back, men take care of their family, men do the work, men be fathers, men don't cry."

As each boy reads, they mostly repeat what Angel has written. The provider, the tough one — this is what a man is supposed to look like. Valley raps, as he often does. "What does it mean to be a man? You're askin' me if I can? If my father is a man, I ain't stepping in that pan. He's a beater, a bum, he's low-key dark, and key to my mark. He beat my moms, he took his belt to me. He's a trigger happy punk, into his junk. Serving time. Not mine. So yeah, show me a man. 'Cause he ain't one."

We all click our fingers heartily in approval "Valley," I say. "Look at you. You blew us away."

"I ain't lying, you know," he says. He looks down and I can see his devil horns better. As I've come to know the boys who circle in and out of the class, I have come to learn that just beneath the surface of the very tough devil is a very injured angel. The devil in them seeks revenge, the devil doesn't trust, the devil play-acts the tough man. The angel is sorry he hurt his momma, the angel cries because his best homie was murdered and he couldn't do

anything about it, the angel is lonely and scared and can't tell anyone. Finally I can see the beaten child in Valley, though he has done his best to hide him from me.

I ask Jackson to read. I tend to save him for last. His voice is soft. "If a man is like a rock, I been chisled, broken, laying around in a hundred million pieces. I broke myself and I can't put me back together. If a man can swim, I'm drowning in all the mistakes I ever made. Do I forgive myself and others who have hurt me? Not yet. When I do, then I'll be a man. Own my heart. Let it crack open. Imma let it cry. So I can be a man."

He finishes reading and looks at me with that light he's lit up with. Again we click our fingers.

"That there is some real shit," Dameon says.

"That's dope," Valley says magnanimously.

"Jackson," I say, "you just broke my heart with that piece of writing."

He smiles this beautiful smile that is like a crater that swallows me up. I want to take him home with me and stitch him back together with love threaded on a needle. Valley, too. All of them, really.

When I think about my ex, who I am done thinking about, really, I think he never really got past the standard definition. He was a good provider and continued to pay alimony and child support on schedule. I had hoped, over our long years together, that all the stitching I had done would not become the tattered history I now hold in my hands. I loved watching us grow up together, how we changed from boy and girl into man and woman. I was never bored in my marriage. I was endlessly fascinated by each moment of interaction, each investigation into his state of happiness, and into my own. I loved how our buttery passion morphed into something different when we became a family of four. The quiet laughs we shared when one of the girls, for example, got a pea stuck up her nose, or wept after a hair cut. So what happened? When did the angel selves turn devil? One day

as we woke up together I felt his skin corpselike against mine. As if it had no breath in it. Something was going on with him; I could feel it. He had gone silent. I had asked him the night before, innocently I thought, about a project he was working on. He was an executive in the entertainment business, overseeing multiple film and television projects.

"What do you care?" he said. "You have no interest in my work." His angular face was jutting towards me, his eyes pointed like missiles.

I could taste the bitter apple he was chewing on. It shocked me. "That's not true!" I protested, but even as I did I knew there was an element of truth in what he said. I had drifted away from the very engine of his soul, his work. I had complained how it pulled him away from all that was important to me — our family, me. Like common marital arguments about money, I knew, but maybe I did not know, this was a well played out scenario, an age-old argument that would not find resolution. It had all become an endless negotiation of power, his needs versus mine, the old see-saw game, "Farmer Brown, Farmer Brown, what will you give me to let you down?" He wouldn't give me anything to let him down.

"Fine," I said, after too much begging and pleading and shedding tears, and pleas for talk and couples therapy, and my head banging around in itself searching for answers until it was bruised and exhausted. I stepped off the see-saw and let him crash down, and came crashing down with him.

I meet Geena for a walk in Palisades Park, at the edge of Santa Monica. The land ends here, and drops steeply one hundred feet or so on eroding cliffs. The long stretch of Santa Monica beach is largely empty. It's too early in the day and there's no real heat in the sun yet. The ocean, from this remove, is placid, like a sleeping baby.

Geena's the one who is married to Jake who is leaving her for his exciting new love. She looks too thin; her sweats are hanging

off her, and her normally plump cheeks are drawn. She looks exhausted and saggy all over. She's on the divorce diet, the same one I was on when I found out my ex was leaving me. Food, like everything else, had gone rotten. There seemed no point in self-nourishment.

She fills me in on the latest, the ugly rounds between the lawyers. Jake only wants to pay alimony for five years, until their kids go off to college.

"I put this guy through law school. He seems to have forgotten that. I practically raised Ben and Jimmy single-handed, I put dinner on the table every night, I even took care of his father when he was dying and he wasn't even nice to me. All this while starting Kids Krafts, which by the way, he never believed in."

My heart breaks for her. I know the arguments that will spin in her head for the weeks and months ahead. I know how she will hate the other woman and see in her mind how he makes love to her, all rapturous over her youthful pussy. I know how she will protect her children from her own tarry grief because that is the right thing to do, how she will never talk dirt about Jake in front of them. I know all the tears she will cry and all the ones that will get stuck in her wet places. If she hopes for justice, she isn't going to get it.

I take her to a coffee shop and make her eat some eggs and toast.

"Stop punishing yourself," I tell her. "It will get better. Trust me."

"Men just get tired of old pussies, I guess," she sighs. "What about you? Why aren't you dating? What have you got to lose?"

"I've been on dates," I tell her defensively. "I just haven't met anyone." I don't want to tell her about all the coffee and lunch and dinner meet-ups I've sat through. I've listened to men tell me about their failed marriages. And I've shared my own story. I've heard them shred, dice and julienne their ex-wives. Some men took responsibility. Some were heartbroken. But they all seemed ready to go at it again. Which I am not. The truth is I'm not at

all sure I'm in the game anymore. Somehow it died for me. Is it selfishness, or laziness, or cowardice? I can't truly say.

"I'm not the right person to talk to," I tell her. "Talk to Jeanette or Willa. They're happy in their second marriages."

"You know they're saying now that humans aren't meant to be monogamous," Geena says. "Serial monogamy is where it's at."

"Wish we had known that years ago," I say. "Maybe we would have played the game a little differently. Been less devoted, you know."

"Yeah, but what kind of life is that?" Geena says, taking the teeniest bite of her unbuttered toast.

Jackson, Jackson, Jackson. His writing continues to blow me away. I have learned his drug-addicted mother abandoned him and his brothers to foster care where they were separated. His father was abusive. I don't know why, of all the boys, he is the one I want to mother. What attracts me to him? I call my youngest, who is on the East Coast in college, and I tell her about Jackson and how sweet he is. How curious and hungry for knowledge, how much he just needs someone to have faith in him, to be a steady presence in his life. I tell her I would like to adopt him.

She says, "Wow, Mom, you're such a cougar!"

I recoil. "What! How can you say that? I would never —"

She laughs. "You should just go for it. If you were Dad you would."

"I am not your father," I say in my iciest voice, wishing for an instant I could chop off her cute millennial head for seeing what I won't allow myself to see.

The next time I am in the pool, swimming the fifth or sixth lap of my thirty-six, it hits me so hard that I want to be a man. I want that experience. Was it the sight of the well-groomed professor with his "junk" stuffed into a Speedo? I'm not sure. But I think of a man making love, maybe I am thinking more specifically of my ex, or maybe not, I am thinking of that push for orgasm that they

have, and how different it must be for them when they achieve it. I imagine it brings a whole different level of accomplishment that I can't really imagine. Is this why they feel the urge to build skyscrapers and steam engines and take us to Mars? Is that why they wage war and all the other sick shit they do? I can't really understand any of it. I feel a great sense of loss. I swim lap after lap, each stroke heightening my sense of ignorance. I imagine introducing myself to the professor, inviting him to have a conversation. Maybe I will go on a Match.com date and that will be my opening parry. Why did I never have this conversation with my ex? How did I miss the opportunity?

Geena tells me she thinks she has met someone special, a very kind man. It's been six months since her divorce papers have been signed.

We meet for tapas at a restaurant that is too noisy for the kind of conversation we are trying to have.

"How old?" I ask.

"Look at you," she says. "You're such an ageist. What have you got against older men?"

"You know what they say. A man of a certain age is either looking for a purse or a nurse."

"I know, I know." Geena says. "He's only sixty-nine," she says. "A young sixty-nine. He bikes, he swims, and he even competes in triathlons."

"That's not bad," I say. "That's good." I notice Geena's stylish new haircut and all trace of gray removed. I stare down at my plate of clams with chorizo swimming in wine and lemon and butter. I feel like those little clams, forced open by unwanted heat. I feel crusty and outdone. Stupid, really. "So you're all over Jake? And what he did to you?"

"Did I ever tell you what my mother-in-law, of all people, told me? She was in the playground one day with Jake and his little brother. Her first husband had just left her and she thought her life was over. This was way back when, you know, when divorce

was a stigma and all that. And this other woman in the park told her to remember two things: one, she was not going to die of this, and two, one day she would thank him."

Geena looks at me. "It's like the wisest thing. Every divorced woman should hear that, don't you think?"

"You're not going to die of this, and one day you will thank him." I repeat this extremely delicious morsel of truth. "Geena," I say. "I think you're going to be all right."

"Hell yes," she says. "I already called Jake and thanked him."

"Hey Abuela," Valley says to me. "So what does it mean to be a woman?"

He's so clever, this tattooed, devil-horned beast of a young man who has a baby on the way and one born to a woman he hates. The boys look at me with intense curiosity. Jackson's god-lit eyes pierce me more than the others. I shrink away from him.

"What does it mean to be a woman?" I pause. I have to think about this. Is there a standard definition? A woman nurtures. A woman tends. A woman grows a garden. A woman takes her care of her family. A woman takes care of her man. A woman creates a home. These are not definitions I will share with them. I tell them something else. "A woman teaches her man how to respect women."

"That's dope," Jackson says. "I like that."

"Woman got to take care of her man," Valley says.

"Yeah," Angel says. "I wanna girl gonna take care of me. You feel me?"

The other boys high five. Once again I have failed.

Did I teach my man, my ex, how to respect me? Obviously not. If he had respected me would he have carried out the grand deception of making off with a younger woman? Where had I failed? "Boys," I say. "Here's your next prompt: Write a letter to the most important female in your life, your girlfriend, your mother, or your grandmother, your abuela, and say thank you. Be specific. Are you thankful that they put carne asada on the table?"

Or they bought you your favorite Nikes? Are you thankful they wiped your snotty nose?" The boys laugh.

"I'm thankful my bitch lets me do her," Angel says, cracking up the other boys.

I give him my best death glare and invite him to leave the class.

"Aw come on, Miss. I'm thankful you come out here every week. Imma write my letter to you. Thank you Miss Naomi for teaching us." And he bends over to make scratches on his paper. Somehow I don't feel like saying 'you're welcome.'

The days are lengthening. The water is heavenly. Swimming is a balm. Next to the beauty of the seagulls' sunlit bellies, I see the sleek white underside of an airplane, high above. And then another one.

The professor is nowhere in sight. That's too bad. I want to play with him in my head. To toss him about like a cat with a mouse, to love him, and hate him, like I have been doing, imagining fancy and deep conversations, and calling him to task. I mull over the phone call I made to my ex three days ago. He was surprised to hear from me. Even more surprised when I said "thank you."

"For what?" he asked.

I didn't want to light him up with any big ideas. "I'm free," I said. "I don't have to worry about making you happy. I failed at that anyway. I don't have to lie to you about enjoying sex. I don't have to make the perfect home for you. I don't have to be your mother and your whore. So, thank you." I heard him land a chuckle of surprise. Then a soft groan. I heard him clanking the chains of his manhood. I felt a deep ache for him, for the tears he couldn't cry.

I think about Jackson, who came up to me all excited the last time I was at the camp.

"So yeah, Miss Naomi, I'm be out next week," he told me. His eyes were liquid with excitement.

I gave him my phone number even though we're not supposed

to give the boys any personal information.

"Please call me," I said. "I would like to stay in touch with you." I wonder if he will call me or whether the scrap of paper I wrote my number on will be the first thing he will lose. If he does call, I'll take him out for a meal. I wonder what he will choose— Mexican, or a hamburger, or maybe pizza. I wonder if he will let me be the mother he never had. I daydream about running into him on the college campus holding hands with a young woman, a bright-eyed ambitious woman who will inspire his respect and awe and how together they will forge a life for themselves. But I'm getting ahead of myself. I still have a lot of laps left in this mile, a lot of pulling my thick womanly body through the water, a lot of not knowing who I will be thanking next.