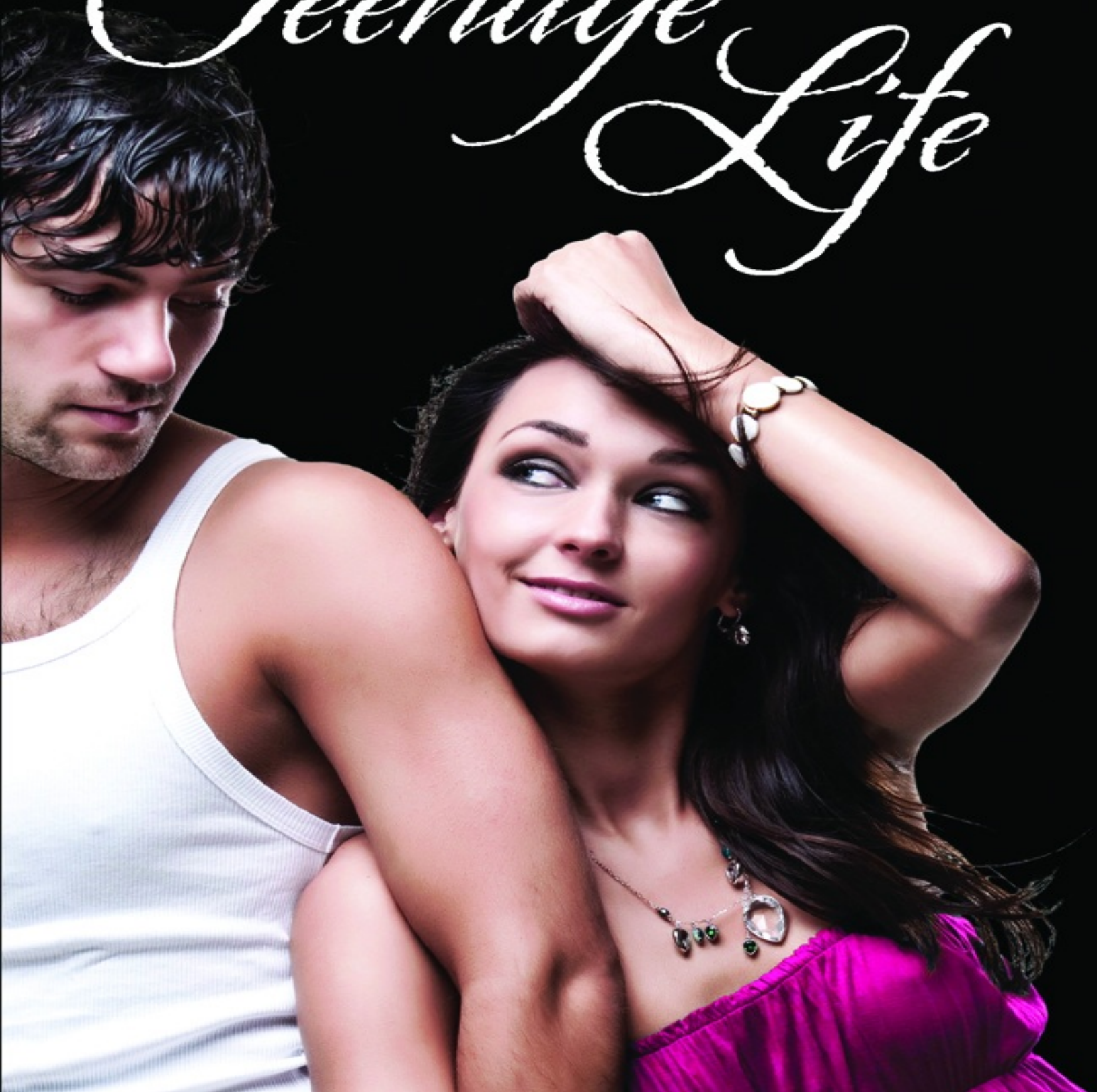


*New York Times* Bestselling Author

**SIMONE ELKELES**

How to Ruin My

*Teenage Life*



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*In conversion class, Rabbi Glassman told me that every word  
in the Torah is meant to be there for a reason.  
No wasted words. It makes me think about all the wasted  
words I've used in my life.*

My name is Amy Nelson-Barak. My mom is a Nelson and my dad is a Barak. And no, they were never married. Being an illegitimate kid used to freak me out, but I guess this past summer when my Israeli dad took me to his homeland I got over it.

Mom got married a few months ago to Marc “*with a c.*” He’s okay, I guess, if you like the über-conservative type. They moved to the ’burbs after the wedding, as if marriage somehow warrants moving to a place where you have to drive a car to get to the nearest Starbucks.

I’m living with my father in Chicago. I call him *Aba*, which means Dad in Hebrew. He owns this cool condo in a building in Chicago on the fortieth floor. He was pretty non-existent in my life up until a few months ago. To make a long story short, this past summer my dad and I got to know each other and worked out our issues. He’s learning how to be a dad to a teenage girl (me) and I’m learning how to deal with an overprotective father. I’ve decided to live with him until I graduate high school so I don’t have to change schools. The best part about his place is it’s situated directly next to a coffee shop called Perk Me Up! It’s like a Starbucks, only it has better coffee.

Okay, so I don’t *exactly* drink coffee. I just turned seventeen in December and

haven't gotten that acquired taste thing goin' on. But that's not the point. I'm a city girl. And a coffee shop steps away from your front door equals city.

I'm sitting at Perk Me Up! right now, doing algebra homework on this frosty January day. Winter break ended a week ago, but I'm still struggling to get into the swing of things at school. I could go upstairs and study in a quiet place, but since my dad is coming home late tonight I'm vegging out here. Besides, the owner of Perk Me Up!, Marla, is super cool. She always piles the whipped cream on my hot chocolate extra high.

Did you know whipped cream has little or no carbs? It's true. You could spray a whole can of whipped cream into your mouth all in one sitting and still have less carbs in your system than one nutritious apple. Nothing compares with extra whipped cream, unless it's a spicy tuna roll from my fave sushi restaurant, Hanabi. Okay, so I admit sushi rolls surrounded by rice aren't exactly lacking in the carb intake department. Sushi rolls are my obsession and addiction, so I give them a wide berth when it comes to counting sushi as high in carb content.

"Your dad working late again?" Marla asks as she wipes off the table next to mine.

I close my algebra book. "Yep. I swear, it's as if the world will collapse if he misses one day."

"He's a dedicated man," Marla says, a newspaper in her hand from someone who left it on a table. "It's admirable."

"I guess."

New customers walk in the door. Marla heads to the register, leaving the newspaper on my table. I notice it's open to the personals. Men seeking women. Women seeking men.

Man, how desperate are people? I mean, who would actually need to go out and advertise for a date?

"What are you doing?" a familiar voice says.

I look up at my best friend, Jessica. She's got dark hair and dark eyes, just like her parents. And her brother and sister. And her cousins. They all look like dark-haired, dark-eyed clones of each other. I swear there's not one recessive gene in her entire Jewish family tree.

"Me? I'm not doing anything." I say, then shove the paper in my backpack.

“Amy,” Jess says. “I saw you reading the personals.”

“Okay, you caught me.” I show her the paper. “Get a load of these ads, Jess. They’re so ... personal.” I feel like I’m *peeping tom*ming into these people’s lives.

Jess leans in and we both read:

*Big-Hearted Taurus*

*SWF, 38, 5’10”, lazy but likes music, dancing, casinos, dining out. Seeking SWM, 30-42, who likes lazy women for LTR.*

“She can’t be serious,” I say.

Jess snickers. “Who’d want a lazy gambler?”

We lean our heads together and read more:

*Professional Model*

*Sexy SWF, 28, 5’4”, 110 lbs., blonde hair, blue eyes, enjoys trying new things and having fun. Seeking SWM, 25-65, for LTR.*

Seriously, I’m confused. “Can you please tell me what an LTR is?”

“Long-term relationship.”

Oh. I guess I don’t have the personals lingo down pat. “Why would a skinny blonde model want a sixty-five-year-old?” I could understand the lazy chick, but the model?

I call Marla over to our table.

“Need more whipped cream, honey?”

“No, thanks,” I say. “Why would a model advertise for an LTR in the paper?”

“Huh?”

Jess shakes her head. “Long-term relationship.” She holds out the paper to Marla.

“Don’t knock it,” Marla says. “I know plenty of people who’ve met their soul mate online or in the personals section.”

Jess takes a sip of my hot chocolate. “Amy can’t understand. Avi is the perfect guy, right?”

I smile at the mention of my non-boyfriend, who is serving in the Israeli army. We can’t really be boyfriend and girlfriend with him a billion miles away. And he’s not perfect. A perfect boyfriend wouldn’t be living in another country.

“What about Mitch?” I ask Jess. “Last week you told me God made him just for you.”

She makes a yuck face. “Don’t even mention his name around me.”

This doesn’t sound promising. “All right, what’s up?”

Jess sighs. “Well, he hasn’t called in two days and the Valentine’s Dance is right around the corner. You’d think if he was going to ask me he’d have done it already. My mom wants to go dress shopping but I don’t even have a date.” She’s about to cry. “And I checked my smile in the mirror this morning and realized my face is crooked.”

“It is not.”

“Is too. See,” she says, smiling like she’s in pain. “The right side of my mouth droops down.”

“Let’s go to the dog park,” I say, heading off a huge rampage about how bad Mitch is and how crooked her face is. Does she really think God can make everyone totally symmetrical ... I mean, give the Big Guy upstairs a break. Besides, Jess has been a hypochondriac and hypercritical of herself ever since third grade when she thought she had lice but it was just bad hair spray flaking. She just needs to chill and redirect her energy into positive thoughts. “I need to walk Mutt.”

Mutt’s my dog. And yes, he’s a mutt. Avi gave Mutt to me before I left Israel. No purebred anything in his blood. He used to be a little fur ball, but in the past two months he’s tripled in size.

Back at our condo I fetch my dog and the poop bags. Jess and her one-one-hundredth-of-an-inch crooked face is waiting for me when I walk back outside.

“Oh my God, he’s even bigger than when I last saw him,” she says, each breath causing puffs of steam in the winter cold.

“I know. If he grows any more I’ll have to buy a king-size bed just to fit the both of us,” I say, bundling my North Face jacket around me. Visitors here wonder why we Chicagoans brave the cold weather when we could be wearing shorts right now if we lived in Arizona. I’ll admit Chicago winters suck if you hate cold weather. I love the cold, I love Chicago, and I love the change in seasons. I need to live in a place where in autumn the leaves actually fall off the trees.

Jessica bites her bottom lip. “You don’t think Mitch’ll be at the dog park with Zeus, do you?”

Yes. “No. Jess, why don’t you just ask him to the dance?”

“So I can be the loser chick of the entire school?”

A bit of an exaggeration, don’tcha think? But I don’t disagree with her. Sometimes you challenge Jess, and other times you don’t. This would be one of those other times.

Besides, Mitch probably hasn’t even thought about the Valentine’s Day dance. It’s January and the dance isn’t until the middle of next month. Guys are a different breed, I tell you. I glance at Jessica, who has this pathetic, sad look on her face.

We’re walking down the street with my white, furry monstrosity practically pulling my arm out of my socket. Mutt gets über-excited just going out for a walk. But when he realizes we’re going to the dog park, watch out. He’s a total spaz about the dog park.

“Can’t you send him to doggy boot camp or something?” Jess says as she tries to catch up with us.

“He just came to this country five months ago,” I argue. “And he had to be quarantined. I refuse to put him in another stressful situation, the poor guy will need therapy.”

Jess shakes her head. “He’s a *dog*, Amy. You spoil him way too much.”

I do not.

Okay, I do.

But Mutt is my companion. He protects me. He makes me laugh. He’s everything to me.

We arrive at the dog park and Mutt can’t contain himself. As soon as I close the gate and unlatch the leash from his collar, he romps toward his dog buddies to play.

Mr. Obermeyer, the grumpy old man from the fourteenth floor of our building, sneers at me. “Keep that dog of yours away from Princess.”

*Princess* is Mr. Obermeyer’s champion poodle. He hates Mutt. That’s just fine because I hate poodles named Princess.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Obermeyer,” I say. Why the old man even hangs out at the

park is beyond me. He doesn't talk to anyone, except to bark and tell people to keep their dogs away from his pampered pooch.

"Look, there's Mitch!" Jess whispers, then hides behind me.

I look over at the other end of the park and see Mitch. "Let's go talk to him."

"No! Amy, you knew he was gonna be here. Admit it."

It gets to be a problem when people call you out on your passive-aggressive behavior.

"Jess, he's your boyfriend." Okay, Mitch used to be my boyfriend, but that's another story. I'm not into him at all. Besides, I'm content with my non-boyfriend. Well, sort of. I hate the "non" part of it. I wish Avi didn't have me promise not to make any formal commitment to him and vice versa.

Jess peeks over my shoulder. "Don't you see who he's with?"

I crane my neck. A flurry of red hair attached to a long-legged girl comes into view.

Roxanne Jeffries.

I hate Roxanne Jeffries almost as much as I hate dogs named Princess.

She's smiling at Mitch. The *ho*. "Jess, get your ass over there," I order, then move out of the way.

"He's smiling at her! Roxanne doesn't have crooked features, just a crooked personality. Do you think he asked her to the Valentine's Dance?"

"No," I say. "He's *your* boyfriend. What's making you all insecure? You've got gorgeous straight hair I'd die for, perfect features, and perky boobs. Now go over there and claim your man."

There's no way we can stay undetected. Mutt is the biggest, fluffiest, friendliest dog in the place. In fact, everyone in the neighborhood knows Mutt. And everyone in the neighborhood knows Mutt is my dog. Mitch, who thinks he's too cool to wear a jacket in twenty-five-degree weather, has already spotted my beast and waves to me.

"He sees me," I tell Jess.

"Shit," Jess mutters into my back.

Okay, I've had enough. "He can't ask you if you don't talk to him." I start walking over to Mitch, assuming Jess will follow. "Hi," I say to Mitch and Roxanne. Only now I look back and realize Jess hasn't followed.



Mitch gives me a half wave. “Hey, Amy.”

Roxanne, bundled up with a scarf, leather gloves, and a new winter coat I heard she got at Barney’s and cost over five hundred dollars, doesn’t greet me with a hey, hello, or even a hi. Instead she says, “Your dog is humping Zeus.”

I look over at Mutt. She wasn’t kidding; he’s humping Mitch’s black lab like there’s no tomorrow. “He’s showing Zeus who’s the alpha male,” I say matter-of-factly.

Roxanne gives Mitch a disgusted look. Mitch laughs.

Mutt hops off Zeus, then takes a huge, steaming dump. Seriously, before I had a dog I would never have thought I’d be okay picking up raunchy, hot steaming dog poop with a plastic bag being the only thing separating me and the excrement.

“Where’s Jess going?” Mitch asks.

I quickly scan the dog park and catch sight of Jessica’s retreating back. She’s leaving. “Come on, Mutt!” I order, then run toward the gate. Mutt is preoccupied with sniffing a pug’s butt. Damn. I open the gate, say, “Mutt, treat!” and he comes faster than a horse at the Kentucky Derby.

I have the warm poop bag in one hand and Mutt’s leash in the other. The problem is that, instead of stopping so I can put on his leash and dump the poop, Mutt flies right past me, through the open gate, and onto the crowded Chicago street.

“Mutt, get back here!” I yell at the top of my lungs. I swear, when I catch the beast, he’s toast.

You’d think my dear dog would listen to me. But no. He’s bolting so fast I imagine him singing “Born Free” like I heard on one of those animal shows.

I run about two city blocks which, I might add, are way bigger than any suburban blocks. And my boobs are flapping together, which is not a pretty sight no matter what your gender is. I’m panting and it feels like my lungs are running out of air and shriveling up. I still see a blur of white puffy fur and a wagging tail, but it’s getting farther and farther away.

I give a little curse to the snow that melted and is now frozen ice on the sidewalks. I’m slipping and sliding in my boots, which I picked out for fashion and not traction, while trying to avoid the barricades in front of most buildings.

If you live or work in Chicago, you know it's a hazard just walking down the streets in winter when ice melts off the tops of the skyscrapers. Ice falls to the street and the people below are targets. Once I got tagged by a chunk of ice from a building. Luckily, I put my head down so I only had a huge lump and serious bruise on top of my head. If I was looking up ... well, let's just say I would have either died or my nose would have been broken. I'm careful to look straight ahead and ignore the sounds or warnings of falling ice.

"Mutt!" I scream, but in my state of decreased lung capacity it comes out as a squeak.

I'm about to give up when I see Mutt halt. Thank the Lord. I slide up to the person who stopped him.

A teenager, wearing a geeky button-down plaid shirt and corduroys, is kneeling down and holding Mutt's collar. "Is he yours?" he asks while pushing his glasses high up on his nose as I come to a halt.

I'm huffing and puffing, but I manage a yeah.

Before I can catch my breath and formally thank the guy, he stands up and says, "He should be on a leash, you know. It's the law."

"Thanks for the tip," I say between puffs, then reach out and clip Mutt's leash on.

"Seriously," he says. "He could have been hit by a car."

"Seriously," I say. "I know."

The guy steps toward me. "Do you realize how many dogs are hit by cars or end up in shelters because of careless owners?"

Is this dude kidding me? The last thing I need is a lecture on dog safety. I wave the poop bag, which is still in my hand, at the guy. "Listen, I am not a careless owner. Careless owners do not carry poop bags. And, as you can see, my dog is safe and sound."

He holds his hands up in mock surrender. "Don't get all angry with me. I'm just a concerned citizen."

"Whatever. Thanks for catching my dog," I say, then walk toward home with the poop bag still in my hand.

"Arg!" Mutt barks as we walk.

I look down at my dog and give him my famous sneer, the one where my lip

curls up just the right amount. “You are in so much trouble.”

My dog farts in response. It’s a steaming one, too. Yuck.

Talk about passive-aggressive

*God talked to Moses (Exodus 3:4).  
Does God still talk to people?  
And how come when I talk to God,  
he never seems to answer back?*

On Sunday I drive to Mom's new house in Deerfield with Mutt. Since I moved in with my dad, I visit her on the weekends. Mutt springs inside the house before I even open the door all the way.

"Arg! Arg!"

I don't need to guess where Mom is. Her little shriek alerts me she's in her kitchen. "Amy!"

Here she goes. "What?" I say extremely unenthusiastically.

"Did you have to bring the mutt?"

"Mutt, Mom. His name is Mutt." Okay, so he's also technically a mutt.

"Arg!" Mutt responds.

"Why does he bark like that?"

"I already told you, he's got a speech impediment." It runs in the family. My dad can't say the "th" sound because Israelis don't have the "th" sound in their language. I'm used to it, though, and I don't even hear his accent. It's the same way with Mutt.

"Maybe he's got something wrong with him," she says, backing up. "Did he get all his shots?"

I roll my eyes. "And you call me the drama queen. He's perfectly healthy."

“Just ... let him outside, okay? Marc is allergic.”

I feel bad leaving Mutt in the cold, especially because I got him in Israel and he’s used to the heat. But, hey, he’s got a fur coat on so I shouldn’t worry. Right?

“Mutt. Out,” I order while I open the back door. He doesn’t seem to mind going outside, actually, and bounds out the door.

To be honest, I think Marc is allergic to the *idea* of having a dog around. He’s a clean freak. And Mutt is a slobbering, shedding animal.

I turn around and find my mom staring at my chest.

“They’re looking a little saggy lately. I think it’s time to go buy you new bras.”

“Mom,” I say, horrified. “My bras are fine.”

“When was the last time you were fitted properly?”

Oh, no, here we go again. As if I’m going to stand inside a dressing room and have a lady come in, size me up, and watch/help me shove my boobs into bras. Once my mom made me go to one of those specialty bra boutiques. It was the most embarrassing moment of my life. (Okay, so I’ve had a ton of embarrassing moments in my life, but that one is high on the list.)

“Can we not talk about my boobs, please?”

Great. Now O Holy Allergic One is walking into the kitchen. I hope he didn’t hear the convo about my saggy boobs. “Hi, Amy,” he says.

I mumble a “hi.”

He leans over my mom and kisses her. Eww! Seriously, if he starts making out with her I’m outta here.

“Ah-choo!”

“Oh, sweetie,” Mom says (not referring to me). “Amy’s dog was in the house.”

“It’s okay,” he says.

Kiss-ass.

I can’t stand all this lovey-dovey stuff. “I’m taking Mutt for a walk.”

“Wait. We want to ask you something.”

I turn to Mom. “What?”

“Just ... come sit down.”

I plop down in a chair in the kitchen. Mom sits down beside me. Marc sits

next to Mom. She reaches out to hold my hand.

Okay, this is bigger than boob talk. I can tell just by the way Mom is squeezing my hand.

“How would you like to be a big sister?”

I shrug. “I wouldn’t.”

I like my life just how it is. I have my mom, I have my dad, I have Jessica, I have my non-boyfriend Avi, and I have Mutt. My life is fine, why would I want a little brat screwing it up?

Mom’s excitement deflates.

“Why, were you thinking about adopting a baby? Listen, Mom, I doubt people would even allow you adopt at your age.”

“I beg your pardon. I’m only thirty-seven.”

Duh! “You’re almost forty!”

“Besides,” she says, ignoring me. “We’re not thinking of adopting. I’m pregnant.”

Pause.

Silence.

Back up. Did I hear right?

“You’re *pregnant*? As in you’re going to have a baby *pregnant*?”

Marc smiles wide. “Yep.”

I stand up. “And you didn’t consult me on this?” I mean, you’d think they would have at least talked to me about it. Are they replacing me because I moved in with my dad? It’s not like I don’t come around the ’burbs. I do. But Mom just up and sold our condo in the city. I couldn’t move schools my junior year. Then I would have to make all new friends. Oh, man. And they’re so excited about it, too. Like the new, shiny kid is going to be way better than the old, used model.

A baby.

There’s no getting around the fact that I’m being replaced.

“I’m not changing diapers,” I blurt out. Yes, I know it was immature and childish to say that, but it just came out. Sue me for being a teenager.

Mom gives me a tearful look. “You don’t have to change diapers.”

I’m sorry, I just can’t stand here calmly. My mind is whirling with questions.

“Was this planned?”

Marc and Mom look at each other. “Well, yeah,” he says.

“And you didn’t think it was important to ask my opinion?”

“Amy, Marc and I want to have children together. I thought you’d be as excited as we are.”

I swallow, which is no easy feat because I have a lump in my throat the size of a basketball.

“I gotta go,” I say, and get Mutt. “Come on, boy,” I say, leading him to the front of the yard. I need to get away from the house and figure out where I fit in my so-called family.

My mom runs after me. “Amy, stay. I don’t want you to be angry.”

I sigh. “I’m not angry, Mom. I just need to sort this all out in my head.” In my car, I flip open my phone to text Jessica.

*Me: Guess who’s pregnant?*

*Jess: u?*

*Me: Get real.*

*Jess: ur mom?*

*Me: yep*

*Jess: Mazel tov!?*

*Me: Don’t congratulate me, plz*

*Jess: Could b worse*

*Me: How?*

*Jess: Could b u?*

*Me: I’m a virgin.*

*Jess: Nobody’s perfect.*

*Me: Don’t make me laugh.*

*Jess: Better than crying, right?*

Leave it to my best friend to put it into perspective. But Jessica doesn’t know that there’s history with my mom and dad. History that I think still stings for one of my parents. And that is no laughing matter.

When I get back to the city, I swear the temperature in the city has decreased by at least twenty degrees. It mimics the chill in my body.

Crying isn't my thing, but my eyes water on their own. Damn.

I feel sorry for my dad, even more now that I know Mom and Marc are really going to have a new family. My poor dad is alone. He'll never get my mom back now. When he finds out about the baby, he's really going to get depressed. I'll have to do something about that, sooner rather than later. My perfect family life just blew up in my face.

Are families supposed to drive you crazy? I need to talk to someone about this. I'd like to talk to my non-boyfriend, but he's somewhere in the middle of Israel in training. No phone calls during boot camp.

I glance at the picture of Avi on my nightstand. He's in his army fatigues, a machine gun strapped to his shoulder. And he's smiling. Smiling. As if being stuck in the middle of the hot Negev Desert during military boot camp is no biggie. I miss him more than anything right now. He's so strong, inside and out. I wish I was like that.

In his last letter he wrote about stars. He said in the Negev Desert at night he looked up and the sky was so clear he could swear he saw a billion stars.

He said he thought of me right there, wondering what I was doing under the same stars. My heart just about melted into garlic butter sauce (which I love to dip my pizza in) when I read his letter. Sometimes I feel like he has the right perspective on life. Me? I'd probably look up at billions of stars and think, *I'm so insignificant*.

I sit on my bed and open my backpack. There, staring back at me, is the personals section. I must have shoved it in there accidentally. I wipe my eyes and focus on the paper.

A small idea, as tiny as a faraway star, starts forming in the back of my mind.

If Mom and Marc can create their own little suburban family, I'm going to create one of my own for my bachelor dad ... right here in the city.

After all, what's wrong with placing a personal ad for my dad? Maybe, as Marla said, he could meet his own soul mate.



*Kosher question # 1: In Leviticus (11:1), God lists what's kosher and what's not. Nowhere in the entire Bible does it mention anything about spicy tuna sushi rolls with little pieces of tempura crunch inside.*

*Hunky, brooding single Jewish dad with an adorable teenage daughter seeks woman for dinners, dancing, and walks in the park. Needs to like dogs and be free of any neurosis or hang-ups.*

“Amy, I’m home. And I brought sushi for you.”

I shove the draft into my backpack and rush for the door. Okay, okay, I know the ad needs a little tweaking. But I’ll deal with that later. Sushi can’t wait. “Did you get spicy tuna rolls?”

“Yes.”

I kiss him on the cheek and say, “You’re the best. Did you remember to ask for tempura flakes inside?”

“Sorry, I forgot. I hope they’re still edible.”

He’s joking with me because he’s well aware I’ll devour the spicy tuna rolls with or without the tempura crunch.

My dad is sifting through the mail by the front door. He lives for mail. Sundays he positively goes nuts not having any. When Monday rolls around, he’s like a hawk.

I snatch the white takeout bag off the table by the front door. My mouth is

already watering in anticipation of eating freshly made sushi. “How was work?”

“Hectic as usual. How was school?”

“Hectic as usual.”

He looks sideways at me.

“Well, it was,” I say. “I had three tests, one I probably failed, two hours of homework, and I have no date for the Valentine’s Dance. Top that.”

We walk into the kitchen together. “Avi is in Israel,” he says as if I’m pining for a relationship that’s bound to fail. Talk about the “like father, like daughter” syndrome.

“I know,” I say.

My dad gives me a weak smile and shrugs. “I just don’t want you to miss out.”

Mutt bounds into the kitchen and starts jumping on me. “Arg!”

“We have to get him fixed,” he says.

I sit on the kitchen floor with Mutt and pat his springy hair. “We aren’t going to do that,” I tell my dog. “Only mean people do that to their dogs.”

Mutt responds by licking my face. There’s no way I’m having my dog’s balls cut off.

My dad takes extra food for himself out of the refrigerator because he mistakingly treats sushi as an appetizer. He says sushi doesn’t fill him up. “Amy ... ”

I give him my I-am-not-backing-down stare. “What?”

“The vet said—”

“Yeah, and the vet thought Mutt was a goldendoodle, too. Can you believe that? A *designer* mutt, no less. I don’t trust that guy.” Give me a break. My dog is a pure, un-poodleized mutt.

My dad takes a piece of pita and swipes it into a container of hummus. It’s his staple food. Israelis are to hummus as frat boys are to beer. (We’ve been studying analogies in English. Can you tell?)

“Don’t double dip,” I warn him.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he says, stuffing the pita into his mouth.

“Maybe you haven’t had a date in a while because you shove food into your mouth when you eat,” I say.

“Maybe I haven’t had a date in a while because I’ve been busy,” he says back.

Yeah, right. “So what kind of woman do you like?”

“Why?”

“Maybe I can help you.”

“Amy, we are not having this discussion.”

“But—”

“But nothing. Stop thinking about finding me a date and start concentrating on your schoolwork.”

I assure you schoolwork is a lot more boring. “You know what your problem is?” I ask him.

“Yes. I have a daughter who insists she knows everything.”

“That’s not your problem, *Aba*. That’s your blessing.”

My dad chuckles, then sets our dinner on the table.

Taking the chopsticks from the takeout bag, I pick up a spicy tuna roll from the platter and dip it into a little container of soy sauce. I’m so glad he got sushi from my favorite place. They always have the tuna without any stringy white veins attached. I do not eat sushi with stringy white veins attached. After I pop the roll into my mouth, my insides smile.

“I forgot to ask,” my dad says. “How was it at your mom’s yesterday?”

I gauge his reaction as I say, “She’s pregnant.”

The poor man puts down his fork and stares at me. “Really?”

I nod. I can’t talk now even if I wanted to. I refuse to get emotional.

“Wow.”

He goes back to eating after his “wow” comment. I want to apologize even though it’s not my fault. He’s probably devastated my mom chose a dork over him. Now she’s not only married to the new guy, but she’s had sex with him to procreate. Eww. The thought of my mom having sex at her age is just plain gross. The fact that she’s having it with my stepdad is even grosser.

The only way to fix this situation is to find my dad a wife. Not for procreation, but so he doesn’t feel like the odd one without a partner. He’s for sure hiding his true feelings, covering up his devastation of losing my mom to make me feel better.

After we finish dinner, he goes to the workout room in the building while I make a beeline for the computer.

I'm web surfing. Don't worry, I know not to give out any personal information when I'm in chat rooms. My dad is a consultant for the Department of Homeland Security and has bored me to death with the dangers of the Internet until I thought my ears would bleed.

I'm not interested in chat rooms, no siree bob. I'm focused purely on finding my dad a wife. Now ... where can I find the perfect woman?

I surf the Net until I finally find it. Yeah!

Professional Jewish Singles Network.

They guarantee *you will find the Jewish mate a matchmaker would be jealous of.*

I saw *Fiddler on the Roof*. This is the best possible news.

My heart races as I read the home page and the requirements to join the PJSN. Need to be single. Duh! Need to be between the ages of twenty-one and seventy-five. Check. My dad is a whopping thirty-seven. Need to have a college degree. Check. My dad has a degree from the University of Illinois. Need to have a credit card to pay the \$59.99 monthly fee.

Okay, the credit card thing is going to take a little manipulation.

My eyes dart over to the front door. His wallet is on the table where we put the mail. I know his credit card is inside.

I saunter over to his wallet. I've used my mom's credit card before. Of course I had permission then.

It wouldn't hurt just to take the card out. Just to look at it. I slowly open his wallet. Yep, in one slot the top of a shiny gold credit card is staring back at me. I slip it out and glance nervously at the front door.

I have at least thirty minutes before he comes back. After I put the wallet back on the table I trot back to the computer with his credit card in my hand. I'm not thinking about how it's probably illegal that I'm using someone else's card—this is about helping my father.

The words in my head are chanting *soul mate, soul mate, soul mate*. My dad can't just live the rest of his life in solitary misery.

I click the word *Register*. The computer prompts me to answer a list of questions. My fingers automatically type in the info.

Name: Ron Barak

Age: 37

Hair color: dark brown

Eye color: dark brown

Children: one *delightful* seventeen-year-old

Occupation: security consultant

State: Illinois

Hobbies: reading, hiking, tennis, baseball

Okay, I'm having a tough time with the hobbies question. And, to be completely honest, I've fudged a few of the hobbies I listed. My dad doesn't know the first thing about baseball. It's not exactly a popular Israeli sport. But if you live in Chicago, you gotta be into either baseball, basketball, hockey, or football. This is a sport-centered town. I'm not even going to get into the Cubs/Sox, North Side/South Side rivalry.

On to the next question: *Describe yourself in two words.*

Hmm... what two words will attract women? I type in *Israeli* and *hunk* something quick and click *enter*. It prompts me to scan a picture for his profile and I find one from our trip to Israel.

Finally, it asks for my credit card number. I mean *his* credit card number. I punch in the numbers and before you can say "stolen credit card," my dad has his own profile, PJSN e-mail, and is ready to meet his soul mate. Oh man, oh man, I am excited. My dad is in the Professional Jewish Singles Network and is ready to join the dating scene.

Oh, shit. I hear the door opening and I still have my dad's credit card in my hot little hand. *Do something quick*, my mind tells me.

I slide the credit card under the keyboard and close all of the open windows on the computer. I'll place the Visa back in his wallet later. By the time he figures out I used it, he'll be so thrilled to have met his future wife he won't get pissed off. In fact, he'll be thanking me all the way to the rabbi who'll marry them.

"Amy?"

He's onto me. He knows I took his credit card without permission. Oh, no. I swallow, hard. "Yeah?"

"Don't you think Mutt needs to go out?"

I let out a breath. "Uh, I guess."

“Well ...”

I stand up, put the leash on Mutt, and dash to the elevator. As soon as the elevator door opens, I’m pushed back by a huge cardboard box and almost fall backwards. My boobs are squished, I tell you. I probably just went from a saggy C+ cup to an A– cup.

“Hey!” I yell.

“Sorry,” a masculine voice murmurs, then the guy puts down the box.

But he’s not a man, at least not a real one. It’s the boy from yesterday who caught Mutt and gave me the *concerned citizen* lecture.

Today he’s wearing a green plaid shirt and jeans with a waist way too high. And I swear cranky Mr. Obermeyer has those same gym shoes.

“Arg!” Mutt barks, then tries to sniff his crotch as if he’s hiding a treat in there.

Concerned Citizen covers his privates with his hands like a soccer player during a penalty kick. Then he pushes his glasses high up on his nose, the rims circling his green eyes. “Oh, it’s you.”

I pull Mutt away from his pants. “Just watch where you’re going next time. As a *concerned citizen*,” I add, “you should know not to crash into people with large boxes.”

With my rant I miss the elevator. Damn. I push the down arrow again.

He steps forward and trips over the box. “Are you always this friendly?”

I don’t even answer him. Where does he come off challenging me? Thankfully the elevator dings and the door opens. I hurry inside with Mutt. There’s no way I’m missing my second chance at freedom.

“Arg!”

As the elevator door closes, he bends over to pick up the box again. I wonder what this boy is doing in my building, on my floor, in my life.

Avi says everything happens for a reason. I hate to disagree, but he’s wrong.

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