
HOW ADULT CONVERSATION WORKS

'No more men,' she said.

She was still working at Sturmberg and Lecker on Union Square then. One of their clients was a cruise line. They had places they couldn't fill on their short spring cruise, and they offered them to the agency for next to nothing.

'*Strictly not for resale.* And that includes your mom,' she said. 'My dating days are done.'

Goose hadn't been further south than Washington DC. It was quiet at the diner, and Madeleine said she could do without him for five days. It would make no difference. His mom picked up on that.

'They didn't ought to say they can do without you, sweetheart. That's not right.'

He told her not to worry; he'd been there for five years. He was like one of the family – not that he knew too much about family.

The wind blew bitterly down Fifth, but once you got inside a store, you were cooking. Macy's was like a TJ Maxx – no class, Mom said, and the way men wore more fragrance than women made riding the escalator an unpleasant experience. She

batted her hand like there were fruit flies accompanying them up to Casual Sportswear. Goose encouraged her to buy the cat-eye sunglasses she tried.

‘You wear designer sunglasses, and no one thinks you’re cheap,’ she said. ‘You can get away with anything in Michael Kors.’

They walked along East 60th to Central Park, where Mom mentioned the time she had dinner at The Plaza with a senior executive from McCormick’s and how she wore leather pants, a mistake. She had a pixie cut then, but her hair was brown; another mistake. ‘He was from Baltimore. They come to the city for a good time in their cotton coats.’

‘They got a bunch of sauces. *Sweet pepper aioli...*,’ Goose said, coming out of the mall past Bergdorf Goodman with the paper wrapper of the sandwich up around his ears. ‘I can’t believe you never had a Subway. That’s so weird.’ He crammed the last of into his face, then balled the paper, and punched it into the trash bin. ‘Two dollars ninety-nine,’ he said.

Mom sat on the bus with her hands folded over the Macy’s bag.

‘The last time I was in that store was with Marisa Coty. Had an addiction to sashimi cost her fifty bucks a throw and she had to have a Subway in the afternoon; steak and cheese. She was the one who explained what that message on Jimmy’s phone meant.’

Goose frowned. 'We liked her. Didn't we?'

'She gave me that tin jug on my birthday. With the matching espresso beakers.'

'The one you put out on the stoop.'

'All homespun with a craft paper tag on brown twine string like I'm so rustic. Why buy someone that? What are you trying to say with a gift like that? Have yourself a little picnic if you can find yourself three thin-lipped friends with nothing better to do.'

He yawned. 'That's a bit mean.'

'I think a bunch of mean things I never say out loud. That's what you call being *generous*, knowing when to keep it buttoned. I can still see her face when she said to me – *that's his hooker texting him, that's what that is*. She enjoyed that. You can't trust a woman who lets her hair go grey like they're too highbrow for hair colour.'

She went to kiss his face, but he dodged her.

'My handsome boy,' she said, cuffing his chin with a knuckle.

She was happy, and he thought – maybe this is the way our life is going to work out, with a bit of luck and money. They could take a trip a year if they both kept their jobs. Cancun? Or maybe the one vacation would be enough.

Before they took the F train home, they had a late lunch at Gotham Bar and Grill. A table in the corner by the window. Mom asked for the shrimp cocktail, no sauce, and regular water – *tap*. Goose had the black cod. When the girl came back to ask how they were doing, he told her it exceeded their expectations. As her eyes drifted over the rock face of his mother, her smile faded, and she said, ‘Right.’

‘We’re paying for it, aren’t we?’ Mom said. ‘Don’t have to kiss her ass too, do we?’

Then she made the wise-guy face where she rolled her lips and waved her glass. With a bourbon rickey inside her, Mom began expanding on the theme of how she’d given up men entirely. She fixed her sights on a man in a Christmas sweater. He met her gaze and paused over his burger like a dog caught taking a shit.

She could only bring to mind one decent one, she said, and she had to go thirty years back for that. (It was not his father.) She was sixteen, and people used to come up to her and ask if she was a model. He was a sweet kid, Vernon with the zips in his pants. They drank strawberry daiquiris at South Street Seaport, and she blew the drink right through the straw into his face for fun.

‘But that was a long time ago. The upside of being single at my age is you don’t get invited anywhere.’

‘Look over there, Mom,’ Goose said. ‘You’ll never believe who it is.’

It was Robert De Niro with his children. He thought she'd be stoked. De Niro was all gestures with his kids spectators like they were ringside.

'He wouldn't eat here.'

'It's him, Mom. Look.'

'I'm telling you it's not. I'm not stupid.' She pushed her plate aside.

'You don't like your shrimp plate, Mom?'

'They smell funky.'

'It's okay, Ma, I'll have them,' he said.

'It's sad. Nothing's ever how you think it's going to be. It's either all so ordinary – like nothing's happening at all – or it goes too slow. Or too fast. You're always in the wrong place.' Mom said.

Outside, a family stepped back from the kerbside. A coincidence of movement and light produced a déjà vu of a dream he'd had in which a car pulled over, the driver got out to open the trunk, and a deer leapt out and took to the streets.

'Well, we'd best get back where we belong and go grab some clothes at Old Navy on Atlantic for this vacation. That's about our level. Goose? Are you with me? Your lazy eye's gone a-gander.'

'Sorry.'

'Old Navy, on Atlantic, I was saying.'

'Sure. They have some neat stuff. I like their cargo shorts,' he said, helping himself to her dish. They tasted like good fresh cold-water tiger shrimp to him. 'I'm excited for the trip, Mom.'

She felt for his hand. 'My blue-eyed boy. You are the literal spit of Good Job Bob, you know. I wish your grandfather was with us now. He'd be sure to say the wrong thing. He always knew how to spoil a moment. Ah, honey, it's a cold world when you lose your parents,' she said. 'No one loves you the same again.'

To hide her eyes, she put on her new sunglasses.

They looked spruce when they went for a cocktail at the long bar that first night, Mom in clamdiggers and a halter-neck. On more than one occasion, she said – *it's such a shame about my neck, when I turn this way and that, it's all loose skin*. He told her to relax and enjoy looking at the sea. She liked the evening shows.

They got talking with an old gentleman from South Carolina. He'd been in tobacco and lived on a lake; his wife was deceased. Mom said it was a shame he didn't have any family. He had a daughter, but Mom didn't hear that, and when Goose reminded her later in the cabin, she said he was wrong, she knew what she heard. *He was all alone in the world, poor man.*

She said he could sit with them at dinner time. There were five courses. You got a salad bowl with croutons, whether you wanted it or not. Mom turned her bracelet on her wrist and looked aside with great dignity, while the waiter went through the extensive list of dressings: *Thousand Island, French, Ranch, Caesar...*

A couple joined them, the young woman heavily pregnant. Mom said, 'Bless you and that child. You shouldn't have the Roquefort dressing on your salad leaves because it's made with soft cheese. From France. It has green mould in it. Got to have gotten worse on the way over here. That's a long journey by sea. Unless they fly it in, and I can't think they fly cheese over. Maybe they do.'

'And by the way, young lady, you'd be better off smoking cigarettes than drinking diet soda,' the gentleman said.

'That's so true,' Mom said.

The next day, they saw the woman on deck wearing her bikini in the sunshine. Her husband had drawn a smiley face on her stomach, and where the belly button protruded was the nose.

'I wish I had that time again,' Mom said, 'with you safe inside me and feeling like nothing could ever go wrong. It's the most terrifying thing bringing a child into the world. Might as well tear your heart out and throw it on the cold floor.'

San Juan was all palm trees and candy-coloured buildings like you'd imagine the Middle East or Egypt. Oranges and blues and oblong windows and palm trees. The sky was overcast, but he was hoping to taste a real pina colada and stroll about some. He was looking forward to seeing the country his father's family came from. Mom got dressed in her day-trip shorts, T-shirt, and walking sandals, and they waited on line to get off the boat, Mom fanning herself with her designer sunglasses. But when they got to the bottom of the walkway, she said she couldn't do it; it was too painful for her. She couldn't bring herself to set foot in a place where it was considered acceptable for men to leave their children. She said for him to go ahead if it meant so much.

From the pier, he saw her at the railing doing her open-and-close wave. He went in a few shops and came back with a painted cockerel in a paper bag. But he couldn't find her anywhere.

He sat in the cabin feeling low. He'd been looking forward to that day out together so much. He walked round and round, worried out his brain. The ship was empty except for the cleaning staff. He went to the information counter and asked them to put out a public address. Then he found her in the corner of the deck bar drinking a mint julep with the gentleman from South Carolina.

'How old are you, son?' the fellow said when Goose sat.

'He'll always be my baby,' Mom stroked his knee.

'Comes a time when a child's the parent in the relationship.' The man pulled out a People magazine from the side of his chair and showed him the front page. 'That's the Queen of England, and that was her mother. One hundred and one. This here's a commemorative issue. The Queen of England was in her seventies and look at the way she's looking at her mom. Like she's worried about her.'

'A hundred and one.' Goose looked at Mom to see if she had it in her.

'We're not there yet,' she said. 'We're some way off that!' And she threw her hands up, fingers like exclamation marks. When he was in Junior High, he wrote a history essay on the Truman Doctrine and ended every sentence with an exclamation. In the last sentence, he put a whole row of exclamations for a big finish, and the teacher said he'd gone too far.

'Is there something wrong with your boy?' he heard the gentleman say when he went to the bar.

'I hear you know Robert De Niro,' he said when Goose set his soda down along with a bowl of pretzels for Mom.

She wasn't one for sharing, and if you said – *hey where have all the pretzels gone*, she'd become a little hostile and say she'd only had two. His grandma was the same with the Whitman's Sampler. 'I don't know who ate them, it wasn't me,' she'd say. They weren't big talkers, the Goosemans. There was never much to do at the family home. Goose used to stick his nose in Aunt Jennifer's mules on the floor, and poke about in the tin of buttons, bored out his mind. The only grandchild. One time, he rode a tray down the stairs, jazzed on eggnog, and Grandma wept. She never showed much feeling otherwise, and she was only ever physically close with him or anyone to settle the matter of a splinter. Grandpa was a walking emergency case, wandering the house seeking triage, cuts on him from his chores in the yard. All he wanted was attention, which was the very thing Grandma made sure to deny him. In his retirement, his chief occupation was keeping strangers out of the property. A fake security alarm was fixed proud blue on the white weatherboard of the home in Westchester. His grandfather was a sincere man, every inch of him full of unrequited love, and Goose, like Mom said, was the spit of him. The old-timer made do with congratulating himself for his labours. '*Good job, Bob*,' he'd pant. He refused to concede that life was anything less than how he saw it - *beautiful*.

'I was telling our friend how Robert De Niro comes into your restaurant,' Mom said, peering into her drink, pushing the ice with the straw. 'Sure wish they wouldn't put in so much ice.'

'Does he?' Goose's eyes widened. 'Yeah.'

They left before the ice melted.

'You just don't get how adult conversation works, Goose,' she said to him before dinner, then struck out ahead of him across the red carpet through the lounge. She kept her hand up to the side of her face throughout the meal.

The young couple were from New Jersey. He was Jewish, and she was Greek. They smashed a few things at their wedding.

'People must have thought you were regretting getting married kind of soon,' Goose said. In New York State, you could get a license one day and be married twenty-four hours later. He told them how he asked a girl to marry him once.

'I don't guess she's thinking about it anymore.'

'Maybe she is,' said the young woman pleasantly.

'No,' he said, 'we were in junior high. She'd be a grown woman now and have other things to think about now,' he said. 'This is my first time at sea. My grandfather was in the US Navy. He went to Korea. I've been thinking about how it must have been to cross the ocean to go to war and wonder if you were coming back.'

For polite conversation, you have to know when to stop, so he left it there and put his napkin on his plate. Normal people nod and smile at each other and sometimes show the flat of their hand, and everyone stays relaxed. They don't go on and on and on and on and on.

'And did he come back?' the gentleman asked.

'My grandfather? Yes, he did, sir. And he lived a good life until he died the second time.'

'Well, I'll be danged - he died twice, you say?'

'He did. Came back and told me all about it. He was eighty when he passed the last time.'

The gentleman made a face. 'Well son, you get what you're given. Main thing is to stay fit. Sixty is a bad age to get old, but it beats the alternative. I go to the gym every morning because I can't bear the thought of not saying yes to another slice of sweet potato pie. Then there's the things you've been meaning to fix. All of them and the fields of dandelions in summer make it hard for me to leave just now. Life's worked out well enough,' he smiled at Mom. 'And you never can tell what will happen next, or who you'll have the pleasure to meet.'

The waiter cleared the table, and Mom went on deck for after-dinner drinks with the gentleman from South Carolina.

She didn't come back to the cabin until the next morning when the boat was halfway up Florida. She had a shower, then she lay in her robe on the bed, her face to the sea. Goose asked if should he bring her something. Some vanilla cheesecake?

She took his hand and said, 'Why do people have to be so cruel?'

He told her he loved her very much. It was all he could say.

'I wish I'd been a better mother to you. I shouldn't have left you so much when you were a child. Pull the curtains.'

But he was sorry when Bernard Bernaud left them, and Mom had to let Sandra go. So was Sandra. It took her some time to leave the bottom step of the stoop. She kept lifting her hands to the windows, calling out his name. Mom was at the shutters, saying, '*Because there is no money and I don't have a man.*'

'I could fix you a sandwich at the lunch buffet or fetch you some pretzels?'

She tossed the Danielle Steel book to the floor. 'Full of lies,' she said. 'Throw it out to sea.'

He watched it bobbing in the wake, then leaned on his forearms on the rail, and thought of his grandfather, younger than he was then, heading off across the high seas to the other side of the world. Better to throw a book over the side of a boat than a gentleman from South Carolina. Not that they saw him again. Gone — just

like his father, Bernard Bernaud, Michael Shaughnessy, Jimmy James, and one or two others who'd come briefly into their lives. He couldn't comprehend how people could just go away like that, like the other party was dead to them. If he was the one who went, he'd feel like it were him who was dead. He'd be ashamed of himself. '*A goose can walk, and it can squawk; it can swim, and it can fly. But one thing a goose will never do is desert its own.*' That was what his grandfather wrote in his sixteenth birthday card.

Waiting to disembark at the Port Authority Passenger Ship Terminal, they overheard a couple saying that a passenger had gone missing. They had the fellow on camera going into his cabin on the last night of the voyage, and all his possessions were there that morning, but he was gone. An older man from South Carolina. A crew member said it happened more than people knew; the chances of rescue were slim. If the hundred-foot fall didn't kill a person, then the giant swells of the Atlantic Ocean would.

'He couldn't bear to go back to living in that big house of his all alone,' Mom said, 'the poor man.'

She cheered up when Goose reminded her they'd be home within the hour. She said she'd never leave it again; they'd have to carry her out of that house in a box.

'Better still, bury me in the backyard,' she said, and he was relieved to see the light of humour back in her eyes. 'Not too soon though, and make sure I'm good and dead when you do. You're my world,' she said. 'No more men.'