

# I Running a Balance

**T**he anonymous woman in bed beside me adamantly shakes my shoulder. She had a name last night. She must have; as part of my hook-and-line, I complimented her “pretty name” and said, “It suits you.” Unless a woman’s name is Mavis, I normally compliment her pretty name.

“Your phone keeps ringing. Four times in a row. Maybe it’s an emergency?” Not-Mavis is still naked. I, evidently, pulled a nightshirt on backward before completely passing out.

I don’t have to look at my call display to know it’s a 1-800 number. Debt collection agencies call early in the morning, and repeatedly. They’re not supposed to call before nine a.m., or at least that’s what other flunkies and bums tell me, but so far I’ve failed to convince the telephone goon squad to stop.

“I can’t believe you slept right through it,” she says.

“I took a sleeping pill.”

“You took a sleeping pill? Are you crazy? We drank two bottles of wine last night.”

Who said you could sleep over? What’s wrong with your own bed? That’s how I want to respond. But it’s a bad idea to aggravate a naked woman. There are only two reasons for a woman to sleep naked next to someone she just met. One—she is extremely comfortable with herself. Two—she has hastily decided that she is comfortable with you. Either way, she is not a woman I want to fight with at the crack-of-my-ass in the morning.

“May as well seize the day,” I say, slowly sitting up. I have an eyeball-socket headache. “Coffee? I know a cute place on DuPont.”

In the elevator I get the feeling her name could be Tabatha or Tammy or Tiffany. Tatiana? I don’t dare address her by any of these, as I’m likely wrong. Not-Mavis is wearing the perfect day-to-night dress. Was she anticipating doing the walk of shame this morning? It’s leopard print, but, like, business leopard, with a mid-thigh hem and three-quarter sleeves. Her leather oxford shoes have been recently polished. I figure she’s got five years on me. Or more. Might be pushing thirty. Knees are how I tell age. She’s got beginner kninkles—knee wrinkles—frowning under each knee. I picture a cartoon eyes and a nose on her kneecaps. Sad-faced clowns.

We reach my lobby and both put on sunglasses. Ha! She was prepared to spend the night. Who carries sunglasses in an evening bag?

I take her to Gigi’s Bakery because counter service will make this whole thanks-and-goodbye bit go more quickly. “Their Nutella croissants are divine. Let me buy you one,” I offer.

We sit outside on wobbly bistro chairs sipping espresso. Not-Mavis breaks off a piece of her croissant and tosses it to a nearby pigeon. “I won’t bother leaving my number,” she says.

“Enjoyed yourself that much, eh?” Bitch, buy your own croissant from now on.

“No, no. I had a lot of fun.” Not-Mavis squeezes my arm. I pull away, pretending to take a last sip from my already empty cup. “Josie and Zed warned me not to try to get a second date out of you.”

“Josie and Zed?”

“You know. Your friends who set us up.”

“I know who Josie and Zed are,” I say, quietly, hoping that if I speak quietly she’ll lower her volume too. “I’m just ... surprised they said that.”

“I was looking for a discreet thing. Remember, I’m married.”

This is exactly why I don't go to breakfast diners with one-night stands. If I had to wait for a waitress to take care of the bill right now, I'd die. The extra five minutes would kill me. I'd clunk Not-Mavis over the head with her tiny espresso cup and kill her too. And where do Josie and Zed get off? What am I, the dregs of casual sex, bottom-feeder of blind dates? I swear I'm never having another threesome with those two again.

I refuse to watch Not-Mavis walk away in her business leopard dress, and that's one of my favourite parts. The walking away part. Women's hips are spellbinding after they've been fucked. Men too, actually. Except there's often less hip and more shoulder sway with a guy's goodbye march. Weak moment, I turn to see Not-Mavis hail a cab as she reaches Spadina.

I follow in her wake. How long has it been since I've taken a taxi?

Loitering at the intersection, I count the yellow Checker cabs driving by. The best thing to do would be to go home and sleep for a few more hours. Unplug the phone. Pull the blinds. My right arm rises. A familiar thump thump thump pulses under my jaw as a cab pulls up to the curb. "Lawrence and Bridle Path."

The cabbie harumphs. He switches on the meter.

We pass jocks in University of Toronto's Varsity Blues hoodies walking toward campus in a small huddle. The football team hasn't won a Vanier Cup since 1965. They've been losing longer than I've been alive. Put that slogan on a hoodie: "Varsity Blues: losing since before I was born." Campus fables claim the team is cursed. I think about curses a lot. How we need something titillating to blame for all our failures. How blame itself is titillating.

Blame: Latin *blasphēmāre*, "to blaspheme." Titillate: verb, Latin *tītillāre*, "to tickle." Curse: noun, Latin *cursus*, "course," as in the direction taken. *Quod est super*. I no longer study Latin.

The Varsity Blues are no longer my team.

The cab is hot and smells sickeningly sweet like Vanilla Armor All. Why didn't I drink any water at the bakery? My hangover presses on my dry tongue. I crack the window.

Outside of Davisville station, we pass a busker with dyed green hair playing "Sweet Jane" on acoustic guitar. Not the Velvet Underground version, the Cowboy Junkies version. MuchMusic still plays that video like three times a day. My Pay-TV was cut off last Thursday.

Men in grey shorts jog along the shoulder of Sunnybrook Park. Further toward the hazy horizon line, a pair of horses and riders stand stationary in a field.

Today is my third trip to the Bridle Path—a.k.a. Millionaires Row—since I moved to Toronto. I have chosen a favourite house from one of the few that isn't hidden behind hedges and high iron gates. Twenty or more of my apartments could fit inside this house. A dozen of my apartment towers could sit on the property. The façade is flanked by Corinthian columns. Not those budget Tuscan columns, oh no, Corinthian columns. Gilded street lamps flag the driveway, like they are saying "welcome to a world of happiness and supremacy." Inside, I imagine a grand staircase centred around a chandelier, marble floors, and Persian carpets, a two-storey library and an Olympic-sized swimming pool. And maybe a taxidermy African elephant head mounted above a fireplace, or something equally ostentatious and devastating.

"You know which house you're supposed to go to, right?" asks the cabbie. He thinks I'm a what? A strip-o-gram? A call girl?

"No, sorry. We can head back. Midtown is good." My words come out gurgled. Wine phlegm gags the back of my throat.

The cabbie pulls over. "You pay for the ride here first. Then I'll drive you back." His meter reads \$39.50. I swallow back spit as I

pass him my Visa. Silently, I will him to simply ink my card through the imprinter and have me sign. He picks up his car phone for authorization. Run, I think. Run, as he punches in my card number. Run, as he waits on hold.

I tell him, "That's my good card. That one's good."

"Declined. You wanna talk to them?" I reach for the receiver. "The cord doesn't go as far as the back seat. Come up."

Again, I picture myself running. My imaginary superhero body bolts through a row of hedges and leaps over a wrought iron fence. In each of these yards there is likely a Doberman or a pet tiger or something I'd have to wrestle. And I can't actually wrestle. Delicate ankles. My superhero fantasy has real corporeal limits. I'm not much of a dreamer. And I already have a juvenile record for shoplifting. I open the passenger side door and slump defeated beside the cabbie. The Visa representative on the phone politely chides me, "If you were a customer who paid your minimum on time, I could make an exception. But you're running a balance month after month." The cabbie shifts his gear stick from neutral to drive. I make a head gesture that I'm sure appears to him like a nod, but really it's only my neck giving up the burden of carrying my stupid head.

He parks in the loading zone behind Crestwood private high school. I am relieved as he undoes his pants in the front seat. Front seat equals blowjob. Back seat equals more. Or at least that's what the boys in my hometown taught me.

My ears fill with vacuum noise as if the world has just been punctured and everything is being sucked through a small hole. I am spared from hearing the sounds he makes. I expect him to be a rough ride. Isn't that what happens when you cheat a cabbie? A head-pushing, hip-pumping rough ride? He only rubs his hands up and down my arms, dips his fingers under the back of my dress.

Afterwards, I sit forehead to knees on the curb in front of the private school in the richest zip code in the country. When the recess bell rings and teens in navy blue cardigans and grey slacks swarm the lawn, I quickly move along.

I head down York Mills Road, past the auto-body shops and Mr. Subs and self-storage lots. Past Sleep Country Mattress and the Rogers Cable headquarters. Past the biggest liquor store in the entire province. Hardly anyone walks York Mills Road. It's a thoroughfare. A driving route. I am an obvious outcast legging it along as station wagon after station wagon whips by me.

I reach the York Mills Station, which is where I should catch the TTC, but I'm not ready to share a small space, like a subway car, with other humans. I turn down Yonge. *The Guinness Book of World Records* says that Yonge Street is the longest street in the world. *The Guinness Book of World Records* is mistaken. The longest is the Pan-American Highway. I can fact check better than those Guinness dimwits. Although Yonge may as well be the longest, since now I've doomed myself to walk it.

I make myself stop at the Bedford Park Community Centre to use the women's washroom beside the pool. My body slips out of autopilot and back into present time and place. The tile floor is slippery. Mirrors are fogged from the perpetually running showers. Old women bathe and speak a language that sounds a lot like Italian, except I don't understand a word. I edge my head into a metal sink and slurp back cold water from the tap. The cold metal faucet lets me grip it tightly—it doesn't care about what I've done.

Further down Yonge, I welcome pedestrian density and transit hubs. I am delightfully nobody in the crowd. The shopping centre at Eglinton lets me know I've almost reached Midtown. For several blocks, the buildings turn to glass and steel and become dispro-

portionately taller. This too is comforting—how small I am in comparison. Then, a few blocks later, I’m shouldered up to Mount Pleasant Cemetery. Cherry blossoms and magnolias are at the end of their bloom. Pink petals snow down on the headstones. Spring has been warm, too warm. I feel an eyeball headache coming on again.

It isn’t until I pass Summerhill that I feel the surroundings are “mine” again. The corner grocery store that is just called FOOD is mine. Rows of red brick houses with rock-and-roll flags instead of curtains in the windows are mine. And finally, finally, my building on St. Georges, always with a VACANCY, BACH, 1 BED, 2 BED sign posted out front.

I slip my shoes off in the elevator. Swollen feet. Almost five hours have elapsed since Not-Mavis and I left my apartment. From the hallway, I can hear my phone ringing. It rings again as I hang up my keys. A third time as I collapse into my bed. You just paid for a cab ride with a blowjob, I remind myself. What’s left to lose? I pick up the phone.

“Star? Star, I got this message on my machine.” I can hear my mother’s utter dismay from 150 kilometres away. “It said you owed a lot of money.” Yes, this also is what other flunkies and bums warned me about—creditors will track down family members, growing their phone tree of harassment.

Again, there is a ubiquitous suction, a velocity so much bigger than me. Its master force pulls confessions from my cerebral cortex or whatever part of the mammal brain holds secrets: I dropped out of school. My student loans defaulted. I owe a fuck ton of money. And I hate myself.