



When you're looking for parking in North Beach you have plenty of time to examine where you've gone wrong in your life. It sort of forces you to go slowly and consider all your options. I was finding it increasingly annoying because – like finding a place to park – introspection is not an activity I generally build into my schedule.

I don't waste mental cycles kicking myself for not cashing in my stock options before the bubble burst. I don't examine my face in the rearview mirror and wonder if at thirty-three I'm starting to look like my mother. And I don't generally obsess about my boyfriend – possibly because I don't generally have a boyfriend.

However. The question that persisted as I slowed to evaluate a hand-holding, sunlit couple – who, it turned out, were not getting into a car and opening up a parking space – was the same question that had been announcing itself with increasing frequency and mounting urgency over the past few weeks: *Greg?*

Lately it seemed he was everywhere. It wasn't so much that he'd developed a habit of showing up unexpectedly; it

was more as if he'd come over five weeks ago and never left. His *Office Space* video was on top of my television. His Head & Shoulders was in my shower. He didn't even have to be there to be there.

Even now he was in my passenger seat, nattering on about – I tuned in briefly, heard the words 'Internet baseball fantasy league,' and tuned out again. He was sucking all the air out of the car.

I admit I had only myself to blame. If I'd noticed that what had, for me, been an I'm-bored-so-I-might-as-well-have-coffee-with-someone situation had, for Greg, been an if-I-just-hang-in-there-she's-got-to-fall-for-me-eventually scenario, this could all have been avoided.

But I hadn't. I'd let all the warning signs slip by and had never seen it until that night he'd come over to help me rearrange my furniture. Then *bam* – just as soon as he'd positioned the throw rug and the sofa at exactly the thirty-eight-degree angles I'd specified, he'd pounced.

I know I should have pushed him away. Or at least verified that this was just going to be sex between friends, no more meaningful than a game of racquetball, and not the beginning of something (*shudder*) beautiful.

But I hadn't. Because despite my better instincts . . . well, one gets swept up in these things. And although I knew it was imperative to set some firm parameters immediately after straightening my clothes, he'd made his post-sex declaration first – complete with puppy-dog eyes – 'What are we doing next weekend?'

We.

One goddamn moment of weakness and by the following weekend his Peanut Butter Cap'n Crunch was in my kitchen.

I changed lanes to avoid getting caught behind a bus and was instead caught behind someone trying to make a left turn. 'Whoops.' I could feel Greg's loopy grin without

looking over at him. 'You're spanked. That's why I always stay in the right-hand lane.'

I forced a smile. He wasn't really a bad guy. Most people seemed to classify him as a sort of likable flake. And professionally he had a reputation as a good-bordering-on-inspired programmer. At least he'd managed to hang on to his high-tech career better than I had. So there was no logical reason why I shouldn't be perfectly happy to spend half my life looking for a parking space just so we could buy the damn cannoli for the stupid party his idiot friend was throwing that night.

Maybe it was my attitude.

'Hon, can we find an ATM before we park?' he asked. I braced for the inevitable. 'I think there's a Smells Fargo around the next corner.'

Smells Fargo. Not Wells Fargo, the real name of the bank. Smells Fargo. Every time, every time, *every time*.

I wondered if he even realized he was doing it anymore.

I know we all have these little unconscious things. And the point is, they're little things. You have to look beyond them. You have to remember all the little unconscious things he does that *don't* make you want to hurl the car into oncoming traffic.

'There it is,' he sang out. 'Smells Fargo!'

I watched my knuckles turn white on the steering wheel. It was time for Greg to go.

'Aw, sweetie.' This was accompanied by a crinkled-brow frowny face from my friend Max. 'He broke up with you?'

'Hell no,' I said, 'I broke up with him. When are the girls supposed to be here?' I looked across the crowded restaurant toward the door, hoping to catch Connie and Vida as they came in. From the look of things, they'd have

to force their way through a gang of suburban moms in the throes of a Union Square-induced shopper's high.

I glanced over to find Max biting his lip. Actually biting his lip to keep from saying what I knew he was dying to. I sighed. 'Say it.'

'You're insane.'

When it comes to offering opinions, Max never needs to be asked twice.

'He was driving me insane,' I said. 'But only in the right-hand lane.'

'He was nuts about you,' Max said. 'And he was cute, and let's not forget he was nuts about you.'

'He was nuts all right.'

Max gave me an accusatory look. He was six-foot-four with jet black hair, deep gray eyes, and a body that was as near perfection as his five weekly appointments with a personal trainer could get it. Luckily, he was also just Max, and he didn't intimidate me for a minute.

'Okay,' I allowed, 'he wasn't nuts. He was perfectly sane. Annoying, but sane.' I shrugged. 'He'll make some dandruff-prone, pun-loving, cereal eater a lovely boyfriend someday. Can we change the subject now?'

Max took my hand in both of his, and I couldn't help noticing how much softer his skin felt than mine. 'Becks, I'm your oldest friend in this town, and we've seen each other through the good men and the bad, so believe me when I tell you, and I say this with love' – he took a moment to give me a totally sincere look – 'you're going to die alone.'

'Very funny.' I withdrew my hand and patted him patronizingly on the arm. 'I hope you've got better material in your show.'

Max Trop, which of course was not the name his parents had given him, led two very different lives. By day he was a dermatologist with a thriving practice near enough to Union Square that his clients could schedule

their Botox injections or microdermabrasion appointments conveniently between a little shopping spree at Saks and lunch at the Neiman Marcus Rotunda. By night – at least for the past few months – he was one of four first-time producers attempting to mount a musical-theater-topical-cabaret-snappy-patter-and-sing-along show that would put the classic San Francisco favorite *Beach Blanket Babylon* on notice that a new showbiz kid was in town.

Max's eyes narrowed. 'Nice try. You think if you mention the show, you'll distract me. How self-centered do you think I am?'

I held my hands about a foot apart. 'This much?'

'More. But I'll spare you because the girls are here, and neither of us will get to talk about anything but the bridal event of the century for the rest of the day.'

Connie and Vida were excusing-me and pardoning-me their way through the crowd, trying to squeeze what looked like a half dozen large shopping bags each between the tables.

'Should we help them?' I asked, although between Vida's lithe athletic grace and Connie's former-debutant manners, they weren't having much of a problem.

'I was thinking we could pretend not to know them.' Despite this sentiment, Max stood and scooted chairs around to make more room.

Connie reached the table first, flung the packages around her, and collapsed into a chair somehow managing to avoid compromising her flawless posture. 'So here's the latest,' she said. 'Vee thinks I shouldn't sleep with Ian until after the wedding.'

'I didn't say that.' Vida deposited herself into the chair next to me and reached for my glass of water. 'I just said I read an article about it.' She took several large gulps. 'I was dying for that.' She looked around the table at us. 'You know, reclaiming the mystery before the wedding night.'

‘Mystery is overrated,’ Max said. ‘But if you’re looking to inject a little spice, I know this great shop on—’

‘Anyway,’ Connie said firmly, ‘it’s a stupid idea. Ian and I have been living together for two years. It’s a little late now to play hard to get.’ She scooped her long, perfectly highlighted hair away from her face, then dropped it straight down her back. ‘We both know exactly what we’re getting and we’re both completely content.’

‘How romantic,’ Max murmured.

I gave him a warning look, but apparently Connie hadn’t heard him. Maybe she was too busy being content. And why not? She was thirty-four years old and had everything the magazines told her she should. Great career as an events planner – she basically got to throw fabulous parties using other people’s money. Great guy – or at least great for her, if a little bland for my taste – who ran his own company and worshiped the ground she walked on. Her just-slightly-too-intellectual-to-be-a-supermodel looks completed the package. She had that toned sleek look that racehorses and girls who grow up with a good deal of money seem to share. It had taken a tremendous effort of will not to hate her when we’d met.

‘What’s going on with you two?’ Vida asked. She had finished my water and was eyeing Max’s when the waiter came with reinforcements. ‘You looked like something serious was going down when we came in. Thanks!’ The last word was addressed to the waiter and accompanied by one of Vida’s you-can-take-the-girl-out-of-Southern-California-but-you-can’t-take-the-sunshine-out-of-the-girl smiles. But she frowned when she turned to me. ‘Did you get laid off again?’

Oddly enough, I wasn’t insulted by the question. Since the high-tech crash I’d been laid off – *ugh*, it’s too depressing to say how often.

I had done well in the boom years, though. I’d planned

carefully and worked hard and had graduated from the ranks of computer-show booth bunnies to become an associate product marketing manager right on schedule. And I'd just been promoted to the lofty position of marketing manager for a sizable software company when said company lost 87 percent of its market value in one week.

They 'restructured' and suddenly I was out on my ass, which had definitely not been the next planned step on my career trajectory. My only consolation was that I'd managed to pay off most of my credit cards and make a down payment on a loft before everything fell apart.

Since then I'd developed an amazing knack for signing on with companies that were on the verge of their last corporate gasps. One memorable time I'd actually shown up on my first day to find that the company had declared bankruptcy that morning. More than one person had suggested I was the Typhoid Mary of high tech.

'Becks, you didn't get laid off!' Connie looked momentarily panicked. I didn't think for an instant this was due to any genuine concern about my professional well-being. She just didn't want me to plead financial hardship and back out of being a bridesmaid at the international festival of excess that was to be her wedding.

In all other aspects of her life, Connie was a perfectly reasonable adult. But when it came time to plan the wedding, her insanely wealthy parents had convinced her that the concept of 'too much' would not apply. It hadn't taken much convincing.

The extravaganza would include a flight to London and a week at some *chi chi* hotel, followed by transportation (possibly via magic pumpkin coach) to a country manor house where, over the course of another week, the wedding of the century would take place. Leading up to the main event would be more cocktail parties, formal

dinners, and tea thingies than I could keep track of without a part-time assistant.

I'd need killer outfits for every gathering, not to mention a bridesmaid dress that looked like something out of a Merchant Ivory film. So Connie was very concerned about my cash flow.

'If you'd been keeping score, you'd know I don't have a real job to get laid off from these days,' I told them. Then I shrugged. 'But don't worry. I've still got Vladima.'

Silly, really, but there it was. Despite a business degree from Stanford and several years of experience working in serious, grown-up marketing departments, I was currently earning a living as the voice of a kick-ass vampire/vixen in the Internet-based animation phenomenon known as *Vladima Cross – Defender of the Night*.

It was a complete fluke. Ages ago I'd briefly been the Product Marketing Associate for a computer animation tool, and I'd had the rather clever idea that we should make little animated movies showing how to use the software. Using animation to teach animation. Brilliant, right? Except that the actress who was supposed to come in and record the voice of the cartoon instructor never showed up. And since it had all been my bright idea, I'd had to fill in for her.

Eventually the animation company tanked, but not before a poorly socialized artist/programmer named Josh Fielding had gotten so used to hearing my voice that he'd wanted nobody else to record the extremely campy dialogue of his cartoon vampire heroine.

It wasn't something I'd want in the alumni newsletter, but, hey, it paid the bills. And it had to because lately I couldn't score a second interview for a marketing job. The vampire business, on the other hand, was booming. We were just getting ready to go live with *Vladima XVI – Daemons of the Night*.

‘Sure she has a job,’ Max said smoothly. ‘Three guesses what she doesn’t have.’

‘Oh.’ Connie looked relieved. ‘Is that all? She just broke up with Greg?’ Connie turned to Vida. ‘How long did he last?’

Vida looked up from the menu and squinted. ‘She wasn’t seeing him on Valentine’s Day. I remember because we went to that “bring a used boyfriend” party at Jennifer’s place. Oh, I think that’s where she met Greg.’ She did a quick calculation. ‘So if it’s April now, and that was mid-February, he probably made it six, maybe seven weeks.’

‘Not bad.’ Connie nodded absently while looking over the list of lunch specials. ‘What do you think pushed her over the edge? The growly thing when he ate?’

‘Probably the whole deal about not killing spiders because they’re our friends,’ Vida guessed.

‘No,’ Connie reconsidered, ‘my money’s on the way he said “for all intensive purposes”.’

‘You’re both wrong,’ Max informed them. ‘It was Smells Fargo.’

‘Are you three sure you don’t need me for this discussion?’ I asked them. ‘Really, it’s okay, because I’m right here.’

They all looked at me for about two beats, then resumed the conversation, leaving me out of it. Which was fine. I needed the practice. I was going to die alone.



Despite the firmly held belief among my friends that the only problem I had was the lack of a man I could stand for more than two months straight, I had bigger concerns. The most pressing of which was the increasingly large gap in my résumé. My real-world résumé. The one that didn't mention my connection with the computer-generated undead. My biggest problem now was that I hadn't worked – aside from voicing Vladima – since my most recent layoff. Almost five months ago.

And it hadn't been for lack of trying. Convinced that a lot of the game was knowing who to know, I had developed a phased, systematic approach to networking. I'd gone through every contact on my BlackBerry and created a spreadsheet with specific categories for everyone. Where I'd met them. What we had in common. Where they were now. What they could do for me.

And then I'd started making calls. And I'd kept making calls. Because my initial results had been dismal. Apparently not one of the dozens and dozens of people I'd cultivated over the years was now in a position to help me.

Either that or I was doing something wrong.

Looking over my call stats, I tried to objectively assess where my approach might be weak. As I thought about it, I realized that what I'd been doing, when you broke it down to basics, was telemarketing. I was the product, and the people on my networking list were the leads. And what did every telemarketer have that I didn't have? A script.

I grabbed the laptop and began.

LIST OF ESSENTIAL
CONVERSATIONAL POINTS

- GREETING: Keep it light and informal. Confidently assume they remember you and greet them as they would greet one another. Try: 'Hey, how the hell are you?'
- PRELIMINARIES: Let them know you've followed their careers and demonstrate your delight at their successes. Inquire as to their happiness in their present positions.
- PRIVACY: Do not let them draw you out about your recent period of unemployment. (Never use the word unemployment.) Be cheerful and vague. Change the topic.
- EMPLOYMENT STATUS: Wait for them to bring it up. Surely you will be asked where you're working. That is the moment to casually mention that the right offer (and there have been many) hasn't come along. Present yourself as very, very desirable and very, very choosy.
- THE CLOSE: Do not be obvious. The initial contact is simply to plant the knowledge of your availability. If they instantly suggest a position with their group, that's a bonus. But *under no circumstances* must you ask about one. Let them hang up feeling refreshed by your conversation

and reminded of your stellar attributes, not hounded by your blatant need.

After a certain amount of time spent adjusting the font and margins, I faced the fact that eventually – no matter how perfect the talking points were – I would still have to pick up the phone. I took a deep breath, visualized a successful conversation, and dialed.

‘Mitch? Hey you! It’s Becks Mansfield! From Tarantula!’

One of the creepier aspects of the Internet business was the tendency to name companies after spiders. It’s the whole Web thing. I should have realized the company was doomed just by the name. Tarantulas don’t really do webs. They’re nesters. And the World Wide Nest didn’t quite have the right ring to it.

But this wasn’t about the past. This was about networking. According to my spreadsheet, Mitch Hastings had landed a director gig at PlanetCom. He had three stars in the ‘Useful’ column.

‘Becks? Hey how the hell are you?’

Excellent. And proof that I shouldn’t have chickened out of using the ‘how the hell are you’ greeting.

‘I’m good, great. How are you? Congratulations on the new job!’ No gushing, just an easy familiarity.

‘Yeah it’s pretty cool here. Where are you these days?’

The fateful question. Remember, be cheerful and vague. ‘Oh you know, I’ve been taking a break. I really wanted to do some traveling, you know?’

‘Yeah sure. Sounds great.’

Was there a touch of wariness creeping into his voice? I upped the nonchalance a level, broke my own rule and skipped straight to the Employment Status point. ‘Besides, none of the offers I’ve been getting really do it for me, you

know? I mean, I'm just not excited enough to want to commit.'

'Sure. It's better to wait for the right thing.'

Okay, he was relaxing again. I could backtrack to the Preliminaries.

'So, how do you like it there at PlanetCom?'

'Yeah, it's great, but Becks – hey, I've got someplace to be. But it was great talking to you. Let's grab a beer sometime, okay?'

'Great!' Keeping it bright. 'See you soon.'

I hung up cursing, robbed of my close. The whole point had been to refresh his memory about how fabulous I'd been to work with, and let him know that I'd be open to entertaining the right offer. Then, the next time he heard there was trouble in his marketing department – and when wasn't there? – he'd think, 'Bingo! I'll just call Becks and talk her into coming here and sorting everything out. Good old Becks.' And he'd smile fondly and I'd have a job.

Instead, he was probably sitting in his director's office right now, thinking, 'Good old Becks. I wonder when she lost it. Maybe she has a drinking problem.'

I allotted myself twelve minutes for that line of thought, walking laps around the ground floor of my loft. It was a big space, with twenty-foot ceilings and a glass wall at one end looking out on a courtyard I shared with my neighbors. On the opposite end of the room a spiral staircase led up to the sleeping deck.

I looked around the place as I made my circuits. I wanted to put a huge mirror over the fireplace. I wanted to install bookshelves all the way up the wall by the stairs. I wanted to paint the bathroom purple. But mainly, I wanted to be so busy I wouldn't have time to think about redecorating. I wanted a job.

‘Leon!’ I sounded surprised and delighted, even though I was the one who had placed the call. ‘How the hell are you? It’s Becks!’

I’d worked with Leon Stevens for a while at Wired-Globe. I had even, in a fluke of organizational restructuring, been his boss for about three weeks. Just long enough for me to have been handed the dirty work of laying off the entire department before I’d been let go myself.

‘Becks! How the hell are you?’

It really was the magic greeting. ‘I’m good. I’m great. What’s new with you?’

‘Oh, you know.’ He sighed, and I could picture him scratching behind his ear in that kitten-with-a-flea way he had. ‘I’m totally busy, totally stressed out. Same as always.’ He laughed. ‘I’m sure you are too.’

‘Me? Oh, no!’ I tried to sound surprised, despite the fact that we were following the script to the letter. ‘I’m totally chilled. I’ve taken a real break.’

‘Really? A break? You?’ He sounded skeptical.

‘Yeah, well, I really wanted to just take care of my life for a while, you know?’

‘Since when have you had a life?’

I laughed, as if it was a shared joke. He went on before I had a chance to come up with a clever reply.

‘Hey, Becks, great talking to you, but I’m late for something. See you soon, okay?’

‘Sure, great, Leon.’

He took the time to cackle ‘A life!’ before the line went dead.

It came back to me that I’d always hated Leon. I paced some more. Of course I had a life. Wasn’t I currently walking laps in my loft? A loft is a life. Wasn’t I going to be a bridesmaid for Connie? Being in a wedding is a life. Didn’t I have a – well, no I didn’t have a boyfriend anymore, but having a boyfriend isn’t having a life.

Having a job is having a life.

I cursed and referred to my spreadsheet.

The sad truth of the matter was that I'd already gone through most of my A-list resources. I was now clearly in the realm of these gosh-I-haven't-seen-you-in-ages-how-*are-you* sort of guys, and with most of them I couldn't really remember many personal details. Like whether they had wives, or children, or pet iguanas.

I stared at the phone with loathing. Part of me knew I didn't have to get another marketing job right away. Believe it or not, showing up in a recording booth every so often and saying things like 'Impale this, you filthy worm!' was lucrative enough that I didn't have to worry about making the mortgage.

But it wasn't about the money. It was about having a *career*. At this rate I'd never make director by thirty-five, and that meant I could kiss being a VP by thirty-eight good-bye. And as for being made CEO by forty... doubtful.

Aside from all that, the simple truth was that I missed my old life. I missed the press tours where I never quite knew what city I was in. I missed waking up with a jolt of adrenaline as I realized how packed my day's schedule was. I missed being too busy to think of anything other than my next deadline. I missed the old me.

I picked up the phone and dialed.

'Hey, Stu! it's Becks! How the hell are you?'

The third time was not the charm.

'Becks who?'

'Becks Mansfield' – keeping it light – 'from CyberVision?' Damn! Why had I put a question mark at the end of that?

There was an uncomfortable pause.

'Becks Mansfield?' Disbelief.

‘Stu, you remember—’

‘Becks Mansfield from CyberVision?’

‘Yes!’ Now it was clicking for him. ‘How the hell are you?’ Brightly.

Another pause.

‘How did you get my number?’ Not the response I’d expected.

‘Oh, gosh . . .’ *I Googled you, you idiot.* ‘I heard you were—’

‘Why in the hell would you ever call me?’

Okay, we were way off script here. ‘Stu—’

‘I can’t believe your nerve.’

It may take me a while to catch on, but I was definitely clinging in to the fact that Stu was not pleased to hear from me. ‘Um . . .’

‘You don’t even remember, do you?’

‘Well . . .’ Remember what?

‘The post-launch review meeting?’ he prompted angrily. ‘The one where you pointed out thirteen different ways I’d fucked up the—’

‘The X32 launch!’ I finished for him, everything falling into place. ‘Right! Of course! That was a complete disaster. What ever happened to—’ Oh. I had a feeling I knew what happened.

‘They fired me!’

I winced. Why hadn’t I remembered that? ‘Well, Stu, I hardly think you can blame me for that.’ Could he?

‘You bet your ass I can!’

‘But, Stu, I was only offering constructive criticism. I mean, the point of those review meetings was to learn from our mistakes, right? And let’s face it . . .’ No, better not go down that road. ‘But look, you’ve landed on your feet, right? And, really, you can’t fault me just for being direct.’

Apparently he could. ‘Direct? You were a complete bitch!’

Okay, that stung. I had no idea how to come back from that.

‘Good-bye, Becks.’

Click.

I stared at the receiver. I took a breath. I knew that, statistically, there were bound to be people in my professional past who remembered me less than fondly. And I knew that, statistically, women in the workplace are called bitches in direct proportion to how high they climb on the corporate ladder. Also, statistically, women who can deal with that fact generally do better than those who can't.

I knew in my heart I was one of those women. I could deal.

I hung up the phone and closed the laptop. Because I also knew I could deal a lot better after a massive amount of ice cream.