

FICTION

FROM AWARD-WINNING
WASHINGTON POST WRITER

ALEC KLEIN

“You’re a drunk, you’re a womanizer, you’re lazy—”

I raise an index finger.

“A point of clarification,” I note.

“What?”

“You forgot *Godless*.”

“And you can’t take anything seriously,” she steams.

“Thank you,” I say, tipping a hat that isn’t there.

And so it goes between Miles and Sunny, warring next-door neighbors in an uproarious comedy about the urban mating ritual. Miles, a public relations executive in Chicago, is a slothful Lothario who relishes his self-image as a dishonest, shallow and vain anti-hero. Sunny, though, forces him to reconsider all of that. Along the way, Miles concocts an elaborate PR scheme, ventures into the wilderness and finds himself attached to the leash of an unwanted mutt. There’s only one way to extricate himself.

Can he change, even if he doesn’t mean to?

Beast of Love is a tale about finding love — and finding grace.



Photograph by Bill O’Leary

ALEC KLEIN is an award-winning journalist, playwright and author. His first book, *Stealing Time: Steve Case, Jerry Levin, and the Collapse of AOL Time Warner*, was an acclaimed national bestseller that is being translated into Japanese, has been published in Chinese and was excerpted in Great Britain. His comedies have been performed in theaters in Washington, D.C., Chicago, New York and elsewhere. Klein, a staff writer for *The Washington Post*, has won numerous national journalism awards. He previously wrote for *The*

Wall Street Journal, *The Baltimore Sun* and *The Virginian-Pilot*. *Beast of Love* is his first novel. A Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Brown University, Klein teaches at Georgetown University and guest lectures throughout the country. He was born in Sleepy Hollow, N.Y., and lives in Washington, D.C., with his wife, Julie-Ann.



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BEAST of LOVE

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BEAST of LOVE

ADVANCE READER’S COPY



a novel

ALEC KLEIN

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *STEALING TIME*

BEAST OF LOVE

Beast of Love



a novel

by
Alec Klein



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Beast of Love by Alec Klein

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For Julie-Ann

*Thou art so fat-witted with drinking of old sack
and unbuttoning thee after supper, and sleeping upon
benches after noon, that thou hast forgotten to
demand that truly which thou wouldst truly know.*

—Hal, to Falstaff
Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I*

CHAPTER ONE

The Not So Sure Thing

My mind wanders. I'm staring into the bathroom mirror and wondering: Who is that guy? He's staring back at me. It isn't a friendly look. More judging. Measuring. Even cold. I barely recognize him. The crow's feet bracketing the steel coal eyes. Did I ever laugh so much? The furrowed lines of the forehead—oh yes, there's been plenty of furrowing. No mystery there. The speckles of gray in the flop of wavy hair—it's still dark, but I'm wondering how the rest of this happened. Wasn't I just 22 years old? When did I turn 36? The mirror answers:

"Today, Miles, today. Happy birthday, big guy."

"So what," I mutter.

It isn't really a question, though. So *what*. Not: so *what*? And then I think: The chin is still solid. There's still *that*. The defiant chin. Walloped and banged and knocked about but still standing. Take *that*, mirror! I whistle in relief. The guy in the mirror whistles back. Our eyes lock. It's as if he's mocking me. And why not? I'm a lousy son of a bitch, and I know it. No. Better: proud of it.

And so I force myself to remember last night . . .

I stumble out of the warm neon glow of Foley's, my favorite dive bar in Chicago, a pointy birthday hat strapped under my dribbling

chin, celebrating the scintillating thought that I have one muscular arm tightly wrapped around the curvaceous waist of one Sure Thing.

Her name, technically speaking.

I turn to admire her. She doesn't respond. My kind of woman.

Conversation won't be a problem. We won't have one. We'll just resort to little facial contortions—a bat of an eyelash, a show of gleaming fangs. Surely, grunts will be involved. Lots of them. It's the way they used to communicate. The Cro-Magnon, cave-dwelling way.

"I have to pee," she announces.

I pause to consider the ramifications of this declaration. That kind of communication, I finally decide, will be permitted from time to time: basic, necessary, pithy.

But it's in the wee hours of the morning, and there's not a mouse stirring in the house. No, wrong anecdote. Only thing in sight: a late-night convenience store. Woozy as I am, I direct my equally sloshed companion to the fluorescent mirage, blinking into the stark light until two things come into focus: a security camera bolted into the ceiling and a slightly disheveled bloke who has a silly grin plastered to his rather charming visage. He looks vaguely familiar. Even related. Come to think of it, he looks like . . . me. Then it occurs to me: It *is* me.

I wave at my image waving back at me in a nearby television monitor: "Hi, Mom," I croak.

The Little Man Behind The Counter doesn't look amused.

"I need to pee," the Sure Thing repeats.

I'll give her this. She knows how to drive home a point. The Little Man Behind The Counter, another thrifty communicator, wearily nods his head at the back of the cluttered store, no doubt the site of the toilet. My little friend nods back in tacit understanding and gravely lurches off to the promised land, leaving me standing there, face to face with the Little Man Behind The Counter.

I smile amiably. He doesn't smile back. An incredibly deep hic-

cup ensues. Mine, I believe. Or was it a burp? They're such close cousins. Automatic bodily functions. An emitting of oxygen—or is that an intake of oxygen? I shake my head, ponder the question no more, forthwith. *Forthwith?* File it for future consideration. A more pressing matter. The Little Man Behind The Counter is looking impatient. A girl in the bathroom. A drunk at the front. And neither girl nor drunk is doing any purchasing. So I scan the immediate vicinity through the lens of my blurred vision, identify a stack of newspapers by the front door and grab one. The Little Man Behind The Counter gives me a baleful stare.

Then it registers: money. Right. Groping in my pocket, I produce a crumpled dollar.

"Keep the change," I slur and flip directly to the most important part of the newspaper: the gossip page.

Therein, I'm saved by the fascinating machinations of a celebrity bimbo who, according to well-placed sources familiar with the matter, just got a breast reduction. I begin to notice that I'm nodding my head in gross absorption, mouthing the words of the newspaper article. Then, out of the blue:

"So it's true."

My head pivots toward the sound of the mellifluous voice. So buried in a tequila fog am I that I can only make out the contours at first: big saucer eyes of an indiscriminate shade. Full lips, unsmiling, no lipstick. High cheekbones, well defined. A rich sheen of long chestnut hair, slightly mussed.

"What's true?" I ask, feeling the axis of the globe tilting out of orbit. Cause: the woman? The booze?

"So it's true that you can read," she clarifies.

Something doesn't compute. A woman is mocking me, but it's still early; I haven't had the chance to offend her yet. Unless—

"Have we met?" I ask, offering a crooked smile, which I'm told is charming; I'm apt to agree.

“Miles,” she says with considerable annoyance. “It’s *me*.”

In my advanced state of inebriation, such a declaration is of little help. Which leaves me no other choice but to crane my head in such a way as to jostle the alcohol to one side of my brain, allowing the other side to pretend to be sober. The maneuver, as it turns out, is a big mistake. All that happens is, I give myself a splitting headache with the sudden realization that I am confronted by the Bride of Frankenstein. Otherwise known as—

“*Sunny?*” I shudder.

“I’m impressed,” she says, arms folded. “Even in your condition, you’re almost functioning at the level of primates.”

“You should know,” I reply. “Primates are your people.”

I feel like doing an end-zone jig. Then think better of it. Instead, I do my best imitation of a mentally impaired monkey. We *were* just talking about primates. *N’est-ce pas?*

So now I’m furiously scratching an armpit while pressing my tongue under my lower lip and jumping up and down, producing primordial grunts. It’s actually quite refreshing, all this emoting. Sunny, however, doesn’t seem to find the emoting terribly entertaining, judging by her little frown. Not that I care. I have my own problems. For instance: Of all the people in the world, why do I have to bump into Sunny? Especially when I’ve got the Sure Thing in the back of the store, preparing herself for a long evening of sweaty sex I won’t remember but which I’m sure I’ll convince myself later was epically satisfying.

“What are you doing here?” Sunny asks.

“What are *you* doing her?” I fling back.

“If you must know,” she says, “I’m buying milk.”

“At midnight?”

“It’s not midnight,” she says.

A technicality. It’s probably, like, fifteen to. But Sunny’s not

giving an inch. I turn to the Little Man Behind The Counter. He's not helping out. I turn back to Sunny.

"Does this come naturally to you?" I ask.

"What?"

"Your talent at being annoying."

Her frown dissolves into an arctic stare. The woman is clearly girding herself for combat.

"Are you *ever* sober?"

"Not around you," I say, leaning in, breathing the residue of stale alcohol on her. "That would be frightening."

Score.

Miles: Two.

Sunny: Zippo.

Evidently, though, she wants to go another round: "You know what your problem is?"

When a woman turns to the you-know-what-your-problem-is scenario, it can only mean one thing: She's getting down into the mud in preparation for a swift kick. I feel like covering my privates. Instead, I jut out my chin.

"No, what is my problem?"

I should shut my eyes, brace myself for the blow to come, the verbal wallop Sunny is winding up. But I can't help myself. My gaze drifts from her frothy furrowed frow (alliteration, a side effect of alcohol poisoning) down toward her rather perky breasts.

And then the tirade begins. "You're a drunk, you're a womanizer, you're lazy—"

I raise an index finger.

"A point of clarification," I note.

"What?"

"You forgot *Godless*."

"And you can't take anything seriously," she steams.

"Thank you," I say, tipping a hat that isn't there.

“Including yourself,” she says. Then she lowers the boom: “You’re a joke.”

A slight twinge. Turn to the Little Man Behind The Counter. Now he’s smiling. No. That’s a grin. Lot of gums showing. So there we have it. Courtesy of a little verbal zinger at my expense, I’ve brought a sliver of happiness to another human being on the eve of my birthday.

Maybe Sunny’s drawn blood. But it doesn’t hurt, not really. I’m still drunk, although the effects are fast wearing off and I’m thinking I could use another stiff drink. Keep this party going. I glance down an over-stuffed aisle. Nothing but shelves of dog food.

“You know,” I say, turning back to Sunny, “you’d be kind of pretty if you weren’t such a bitch.”

Suddenly, I slap myself. Probably saving Sunny the effort. Well, not really *slap* myself. But an iota after I belch out *bitch*, my left hand involuntarily rises and covers my still-gaping mouth with a big smacking sound, as if I can bottle up the foul word and pretend like it never happened.

But of course, it’s too late. It’s out there. *Bitch*. A big void in the wilderness. A dark hole. There it goes, whistling right out the window: all pretenses of politeness, kaput.

“What did you say?” Sunny asks in utter befuddlement.

She may be giving me a chance to back out of this self-inflicted predicament. The Little Man Behind The Counter is leaning on his knobby elbows, waiting for my next move. I resist the temptation to squish his hyena face. But then again, maybe I’m over-thinking this. And thus, I respond with a little more bravado: “I said you’d *almost* be pretty if you weren’t such a bitch.”

I’m not sure if she noticed I just downgraded her from *kind of* pretty to *almost* pretty. A status report: Sunny is blue in the face. I get the feeling she’s completely overlooking my backhanded compliment, tepid as it is, focusing instead on the negatives, as women are wont to do.

"I cannot believe you," she says, casting a look of utter disgust.

"I know," I says, "pretty unbelievable, aren't I?"

"Amazing," she says in awe, the kind reserved for deformed circus performers.

"I amaze myself, too," I say chirpily. "It's part of my charm. That's why women find me so attractive."

"I can't imagine why *any* women find you attractive," she says.

"Perhaps women like me," I reply, "because of my large member."

What's a little tiff in a convenience store in the middle of the night without a decent PR plug?

"I doubt it," she says, tightening with pursed lips.

"You doubt I have a large member, or you doubt that's why women love me?"

"I didn't say *love*," Sunny says. "I said *attractive*."

"You find me attractive?"

"Absolutely not!" she says, backing up.

I push the offensive, looking to begin the rout. "I distinctly heard you say I was attractive."

"Quite the contrary," Sunny says. "I said I didn't know why *any* women found you attractive."

"Same difference," I shrug.

"Hardly."

"Care to find out?"

I'm leering.

Sunny's grimacing.

"Not in this millennium," she deadpans.

"So it's not out of the question," I say, preferring to emphasize the upside. What's a thousand years anyway? I'm a patient man.

"Let me clear this up," Sunny says, moving forward, invading my personal space. "No. Not ever. Never ever."

"So what are you *really* saying?" I query.

Sunny rolls her eyes. Even the Little Man Behind The Counter recognizes that the moment is over, withdrawing back into his Sphinx-like expression of complete nothingness. I glance at the stack of newspapers because there is nowhere else to look. The front page blares something about a transvestite high school teacher in a love triangle with two of his (her?) students. Big deal. Instead, the headline should read:

WOMAN KICKS MAN IN PRIVATES

Masculinity in doubt

Story on page six

And then I am rescued.

“What’s going on here?” The Sure Thing, back from her excursion to the little girl’s room, is surveying the scene, thick with the musky scent of carnage. She may not be Sherlock Holmes personified, but she still possesses a woman’s intuitive grasp: Something has occurred, though she knows not what. Suspicion lurks in her glance from me to Other Woman.

“Not much,” I say, breaking the pungent silence. “This nice lady was just telling me how she wouldn’t sleep with me under any circumstance. How about you?”

A solid PR ploy: Tell the truth. No one will ever believe it.

“I puked,” the Sure Thing snorts in satisfaction.

I give her a bear hug, lifting her off the ground and squeezing her plump rump.

“Well, I’ve got to go,” Sunny says, moving for the front door.

“What about your milk?” I call after her, dumping the Sure Thing back on solid ground. The Little Man Behind The Counter perks up. A potential sale in the offing.

Sunny stops at the threshold, hesitates. Without turning back, she says, “That’s none of your business.”

Hub? What's none of my business? That she was about to buy milk in the middle of the night, then changed her mind? It doesn't add up. Why would a woman wander into a grocery store late on a Saturday night, looking to buy a carton of milk? Then it dawns on me: She's a woman! There is no logic! Naturally! Of course it's confusing! I'm not supposed to understand! She came to buy a bottle of milk that she isn't buying because, well, that's just the way it is when you're one of *them!*

"Who is she?" the Sure Thing asks, tugging on my exposed shirt-tail.

Snapping out of my reverie, I wave grandly at my antagonist at the front door and bow. "This," I announce with a little snarl, "is Sunny, my obstreperous next-door neighbor."

The Sure Thing waves hello. A sure bet: She has no idea what *obstreperous* means. Frankly, I'm having difficulty remembering the definition myself. All I know is, it's pretty close to *bitch*, only a tad more refined. Sunny, standing akimbo at the front door, apparently is not having such trouble getting the gist. She gives me a withering glare. But oddly, it doesn't last. Pure hatred slowly morphs into a wicked smile.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your little friend?" Sunny asks.

"Why not?" I say nonchalantly before struck by a sudden numbing sensation. What *is* her name? I glance at my nubile friend. She looks up at me expectantly. The Little Man Behind The Counter has been roused from his catatonia, sensing looming disaster.

"You were saying?" Sunny prods.

Somehow, I get the feeling that it wouldn't go over terribly well if I introduced my little friend as the *Sure Thing*. Doom washes over me. Then: despair. Futility. Angels cry. The heavens fall. It all comes crashing down on my head, a deafening silence. The Sure Thing is imploring with anxious eyes.

And so I begin even though I don't know where to begin. "I'd like to introduce you to—"

"—Nicole," the Sure Thing swoops in, sparing me the humiliation.

"Nicole," I repeat, as if I knew it all along.

I am so relieved, I want to take Nicole—dear *Nicole!*—on a long trip to somewhere tropical, where we can frolic in the waves, weave each other dreadlocks and be native. But something is amiss. Nicole slowly looks up at me, a wave of disappointment written all over her vacuous face.

"My name isn't Nicole," she says. "I just wanted to see if you remembered."

Maybe the girl isn't so stupid, after all. Sunny is mute but euphoric. The Little Man Behind The Counter, meanwhile, is nodding his head. I want to crawl under a rock. I want to go home. I want my mommy. Instead, I take it like a man.

I lie.

"I knew your name wasn't Nicole."

"No, you didn't," she says, although I can tell: She wants to believe me.

"I was just kidding," I say, forcing a chuckle.

"Really?"

"Of course," I say, patting her on the back. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Thank goodness," she exhales.

That was too easy. I feel guilty. Almost. "Come on," I say, guiding her toward the door, "let's get out of here."

And I'm practically off the hook, a clean escape all but assured, when Sunny intervenes.

"So, what *is* her name?"

Sunny is blocking the door. I think I can take her. Wrestle her to the ground. Put her in a headlock. That'll teach her.

"Look," I say self-righteously, "I'm not going to play this game."

Unfortunately, Nicole, or whatever the hell her name is, wants to play this game. “Just tell her my name,” she says.

“You can’t, can you?” Sunny challenges.

My mind is racing, desperately scrolling back in time. Foley’s. The dive bar. Just hours ago. I can still hear the El rumbling in the distance. I spotted her at one end of the bar. Bought her a drink. A Cosmo, right? Why can I remember the drink, but not the girl? Details, details. I played the sympathy card. That, I remember. Told her it was my birthday tomorrow. Told her I needed to celebrate it with someone. A half-dozen tequila shots later, we were falling all over each other. Somewhere along the way, she told me her name. I’m pretty sure of it.

“Okay,” I relent. “You win. I don’t remember her name. Happy now?”

“Actually, yes,” Sunny says triumphantly.

The Little Man Behind The Counter reaches into the cash register, produces a crumpled dollar bill and wordlessly passes it back to me. A gesture of sympathy. My newspaper, gratis.

“You really don’t remember my name?” says the girl.

“I’m sorry.”

“I remember your name,” she says.

“I know.”

“Miles,” she whispers, just in case I didn’t believe her.

“That’s correct.”

“Well . . . ,” she says.

“Yes, well . . . ,” I reply in kind.

“I guess I better go,” she says, moving for the door.

There’s regret but finality in her voice. There’s no point in arguing. I’ve committed a mortal sin, and we both know it. One can belch. One can insult the next-door neighbor. But one must always remember the name of the woman with whom one is about to exchange bodily fluids.

“I had fun,” I call after her, and I mean it.

And she’s gone.

It’s probably all for the best. I mean, what would have happened if I had remembered her name? We’d have gone back to my place, done the deed, then she’d have left me her phone number, I wouldn’t have called, I’d have felt remotely uneasy, forcing myself to forget the whole ugly incident by drowning myself in a heap of alcohol, by which time, I’d be on the prowl again, and the unholy cycle would have started all over.

So I can’t seem to get too upset about her departure. Not that I want Sunny to know. Which is why I say with a heavy dose of sarcasm, “Thanks a lot.”

“You’re welcome,” she says.

“What are you *still* doing here anyway?” I say, wondering what *I’m* still doing here. “Gloating over your victory?”

“Listen, I probably did you a favor, even if I didn’t mean to,” she says, holding her ground.

“I fail to see it that way.”

“That’s because you’re an idiot,” she says.

“Do you know what you’ve just done?”

“Saved you from yourself?” she posits.

“No,” I say, although I instantly wonder if she has a point. “What you’ve done is ruin a sure thing.”

Hands on hips: “And I’m supposed to care?”

“Yes!” I bark a little louder than I mean to. “This is like the Geneva Convention. Even in war, there is a sense of decorum! There are rules!”

“Miles, what are you talking about?”

I don’t know. “I’m talking about a *sure thing!*”

“A sure thing?”

“Yes! A sure thing! It’s a cardinal rule of the urban mating ritual: You don’t interfere with a sure thing!”

“*That* girl was a sure thing?”

“Yes, *that* girl!”

“Fine, Miles,” Sunny says, dripping with condescension. “Next time, we’ll work on names.”

How did this happen? One moment, I’m about to get laid; the next, I’m in a heated argument with the Anti-Christ. I’m losing my touch. Or getting old. Then: a rare moment of reflection. Is that *morose* I feel? Must be the alcohol, I tell myself. I’ve turned the corner, reaching the trough of the bell curve, arriving at tequila-induced gloom.

“Whatever.”

It isn’t much, but it’s the only thing I can muster to indicate the conversation is over.

Sunny, however, has other ideas. “And what made you so sure she was a sure thing?”

“Maybe it was the thing when she was tonguing my tonsils.” Graphic but true. And there’s this calculus: The more obnoxious I become, the more likely I’ll offend Sunny until she has no choice but to scamper off.

“Men,” she mutters.

There’s a little too much edge in her voice, suggesting there’s a long, bleak Russian novel behind that remark: agony, rejection, bitterness. I relish the thought.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” she says. “Just that you’re all the same.”

“Hallelujah!” I exclaim. “Finally someone who understands!”

Just for the record, Sunny understands nothing, my histrionics notwithstanding. In fact, she doesn’t get it at all.

Sunny stands there, but no words emerge. What does it mean? Happy? Sad? Angry? She cuts an inscrutable pose—yet another reason not to like my next-door neighbor. Emote, woman! Let me have it! Yell, scream, tear your hair out! Give me a reason to hate myself

and promise to reform! But no. Sunny doesn't give me the satisfaction. Instead, there is a silent gathering of emotions, a harnessing of her thoughts, which crystallizes into a monotone:

"You don't know the first thing about women."

"Sure I do," I say flippantly. "I know, for one, that you didn't come here at midnight to buy a carton of milk."

A stab in the dark convenience store. But I go with it, giving Sunny a wise-ass look, like I know what I'm talking about because I'm such a clever bastard, which I am. Then I see it: her face draining of color.

"That's true," she says, faltering. "I'm not really here for milk."

Whoa. Now I scramble to keep up the charade, while puzzling over this conundrum: Why *is* Sunny wandering her neighborhood convenience mart at midnight? Just when my time is up, when Sunny will begin to wonder why I'm mutely staring at her, a big dumb ox with nothing remotely intelligent to say, it occurs to me, as a last resort, that there is possibly one other way to go with this, far-fetched as it may seem: Ask her.

"Then why are you here?"

"I had trouble sleeping," she says, looking up at me.

Just like that. She comes clean. Sunny's human. It almost makes her likeable.

"Sometimes, I have trouble sleeping, too," I hear myself say.

An inward double-take, toppled by a pang of sheer mortification. What did I just do? Was that me just saying *me too*? Where did that come from? Am I having an out-of-body experience? And since when did I become honest and sensitive? Take that back, Miles!

"Really?" she says.

"Sure," I say.

There I go again! It's an epidemic! Stop the madness! Who administered the truth serum? Why am I telling her this? Why is *she*

telling me this? More important, when did Sunny begin to look so damn fetching?

“Are we having a civilized conversation?” she smiles.

“There’s a first for everything.”

This is all wrong. We’re practically flirting. This must stop. Immediately. I do not like this woman.

“We’re almost acting like adults,” she says.

I’ll put an end to that.

“You find me attractive,” I lean in, an adult no more. “Don’t you?”

Sunny recoils. “Don’t ruin the moment, Miles.”

Why not? It’s my birthday tomorrow. I can do what I want. “Just admit it,” I forge ahead recklessly. “You find me attractive.”

“Why don’t *you* admit it?” she says defiantly.

“Admit what?” I waver momentarily.

“Admit,” she says, “that you find *me* attractive.”

Bulbous and clammy. That’s me. A rivulet of sweat coursing down the small of my back.

“I already said you’re *kind of* attractive,” I say, retreating a step toward the aisle of dog food.

“No,” she says, stepping forward. “you said I was *almost* attractive.”

She noticed the downgrade from *almost* to *kind of*. Either she’s brilliant in an autistic sort of way, or she’s secretly tape-recording our conversation. Regardless, I’m quite disturbed.

“Same thing,” I shrug.

“No, it’s not.”

I’m about to toss back something terribly fascinating and witty when I am startled by an overlooked fact: I am completely sober. When did this happen? I’m not sure, but I suspect it took place somewhere between the name-forgetting fiasco and the brief moment when Sunny and I shared a nearly civil moment.

What a waste of perfectly fine alcohol.

“Listen,” I say, changing the subject, “if you don’t mind, and even if you do, I’ve got some shopping to do.”

Who knows what would’ve happened if I’d told her the truth, that, in fact, she is rather attractive? But I’m okay with the not-knowing. I like *not* liking her. It’s the way things should be. It’s the right alignment of all things cosmic between hostile next-door neighbors.

Besides, I’ve suddenly got the munchies.

I’m craving peanut butter and jelly, a throwback to my childhood. And tomorrow being my birthday, I’m feeling sentimental, so I’m thinking I’m going to buy some p-b and j, waltz home and lather up a sloppy sandwich, a celebration of the good old days.

“Fine,” she says.

The gates of Sunny have closed. There is a *do not disturb* sign hanging on her forehead. And now, to my eternal relief, she’s flipping her rich mane as a punctuation point, putting a period at the end of our conversation and heading for the exit.

“Hey,” I call out.

She doesn’t turn back. “What?”

“How did you know I wouldn’t remember the girl’s name?”

“I didn’t,” she says, deigning to swivel back. “By the way, happy birthday, Miles.”

She gives me one last, inscrutable, golden smile. And then she passes through the door, there’s a giant whoosh of air blasting in, and a strand of my well-coiffed hair falls out of place. Then it hits me: How did she know it was my birthday? Well, almost my birthday. Except it’s after midnight, which makes today *tomorrow*, which is my birthday, although I can’t recall exactly what time I was born. Not that Sunny would know any of this. I never told her. Not once. I’m sure of it. I glance around for reassurance. But all I come up with is this: I am not alone. There he is, the Little Man Behind The

Counter, because he has been there the whole time, and so I put a question to him even though he has long since lost interest in my predicament, intently reading the newspaper that I had planned to buy eons ago.

“How did she know?”

The Little Man Behind The Counter barely looks up, straining just to nod his head, gesturing at the top of my head. I don't know what he means until I catch a glimpse of myself in the security-camera monitor.

Right.

I am still wearing the pointy birthday hat.

