

Listing to Love

I love little things. I don't mean little things like a *rainbow* or a *baby's smile*. Who doesn't love a rainbow or a baby's smile? You'd have to be such a jerk. I mean really, really little things, like:

- I. The elevator in my eighty-year-old building in Manhattan has finally been programmed to remain on the floor at which it last opened. Living on the tenth floor, I've long had to wait for the elevator to make its slow vertical journey. Now, every once in a while, when I press the button, the elevator door just *opens*.
- II. With a bit of mental math—something I do quite well thanks to my math teacher mother and engineer father (though because my father died well before I had the chance to know him I have to take it on face value that he helped foster my love of math)—I've discovered that I burn a half a calorie more per minute when listening to the band Snow Patrol than when listening to any other music, save for Dolly Parton's version of "I Get a Kick out of You," which for some reason compels me to increase the incline on the treadmill.
- III. Last week, on the 5 train at 86th Street, I stuck the paint swatch card that I use as a bookmark into the back of my book and noticed, in the few seconds before the train stopped, that the book's inside cover was exactly the same color as one of the choices on the card. I love that the people who put the book together must have been thinking "First Snowfall" when they chose the paper. I want those people to know their choice has had a winsome effect on one of their readers.

IV. My mother mails a packet of coupons to one of her four daughters each week, along with pre-stamped envelopes to send the rejects to the next sister on the list. More, my mother slips a single dollar in the envelope, tucked between coupons for Air Wicks and Chi-Chi's. Like an excited puppy, I love those dollar treats.

V. I finally talked to a neighbor with whom I've shared many elevator rides but have ignored because he hints that I should acknowledge the adorableness of his kid (just because I work with kids doesn't mean I need to universally acknowledge their adorableness) and in this inaugural conversation he told me he's an economics professor crusading to make our building a model of conservation. Turns out last fall he single-handedly convinced the board to reprogram the elevator to remain on the floor at which it last opened.

VI. I love lists. My lists extend beyond the typical (to-do, groceries with coupons and groceries without, songs for the workout mix). Some lists I'm working on:

A. What I learned about sex, intimacy, and my body, not from my mother and three older sisters, but from *The Clan of the Cave Bear*:

1. If a body part is described as pink, I should either like it or be afraid of it.
2. "Stir" and "essence" have multiple meanings.
3. Eyes can be "impossibly" blue, which is a good thing to look for in eyes.

B. Religious lyrics that incited rich internal debate while I sang them in Catholic school, like those in the hymn "Jesus, Thou Art Coming":

1. *I am very sorry I have caused Thee pain.*

- a. What did I do wrong?

- b. What kind of pain? Like, brief but blinding pain? Or dull, drawn-out, slow-burning pain?
 2. *I will never, never wound Thy heart again.*
 - a. Why did I do it the first time?
 - b. How can I be so sure I won't do it again?
- C. Awkward moments with my in-laws:
 1. That time in the garage.
 2. That time at the spa.
 3. That time late at night by the open refrigerator.
- D. New vocabulary:
 1. For use with the "q" in *Scrabble*, like "qi," "qat," and "quod."
 2. For use in writing, like "winsome" and "idiophone."
 3. That I've already been using without knowing the precise meaning, like "nonplussed" and "plenteous" and "sundry." In fact, I'd assumed there was something a bit naughty about "sundry" (akin to the naughtiness of "stir" and "essence") but it just means "various" or "miscellaneous." I find naughty pleasure in renaming my miscellaneous file the Sundry File. When I need something from the Sundry File, I have to really hunt. My latest excavation unearthed:
 - a. An ATM withdrawal slip from my checking account, dated 09/29/02. It lists a withdrawal of \$20. Then, "Balance \$0.69." For at least a day I had less than a buck to my name.
 - b. Mix tape covers. Mixes made by college hallmates, high school sweethearts, friends met while studying abroad. Mixes for running errands, for car trips, for

working out. My favorite is one that I made: the “Welcome Back Mix,” which I carefully put together and presented to my college crush after a summer break. It worked, because we’re married now. The mix begins:

- i. “When I Fall” (Barenaked Ladies), “I” written in pink.
 - ii. “Labour of Love” (Frente!), “Love” written in pink.
 - iii. “With or Without You” (U2), “You” written in hot pink.
- c. Crayon portrait of me by my young niece. I am shown in vibrant lime green. My eyes are just haphazard loops, unfortunately not blue. I do have a lot of electric blue hair on my right side, but am deliberately bald over the left ear.
- d. Program from *Menopause the Musical*.
- e. Sticky note from my sister declaring “A little taste of childhood.” I can’t remember our childhood, but my sisters sure can, and this note accompanied chocolate and peanut butter fudge, apparently a long-ago favorite.
- f. Note from a fellow teacher on sneaker paper, sealed for privacy by a purple dolphin sticker. “A Big Splash!” announces the dolphin, and indeed, the message *is* a big splash.
- g. Racy photograph of stuffed bears. The bears, classroom mascots, are, in their own way, wishing me goodbye from my job teaching at that school.
- h. Handbook on how to earn membership in the P.I.T.A. (Pain in the Ass) Club. In it, my brother-in-law claims the founder of P.I.T.A. was renowned bullfighter Luis Miguel González Lucas. The rest of the executive staff:
- i. Bill Clinton
 - ii. Britney Spears

- iii. Trent Lott
- iv. Jeff Probst
- i. List of countries I have visited, stapled to a list of countries a friend has visited, his list longer than mine. What started as fun dinnertime listing turned sour when competition and a misunderstanding about the United Kingdom settled over the table.
- j. Personal astrological portrait. My natal chart says that I am a complicated person, in the stars and on paper. It assures me that when I went through a crisis at age twenty-five it was because that month and year had been predetermined to be a time of “extreme inner conflict” and “unfulfilled responsibilities, depression, and self doubt.” The planetary and house positions of my various celestial bodies make my real body susceptible to hemorrhoids, bowel disorders, and maybe a hernia. I have “fear and distrust” due to a “rather cold childhood” but am also “deeply attracted to the hidden, dark, secret side of life” and should apply my intellect to “writing, traveling, and human analysis.” According to my chart, I tend to be a packrat.
- k. On an orange index card, a list of breast enhancers I’ve tried:
 - i. *The Green Wonder*. I’d just moved into my ten-by-ten-foot college dorm room and like most freshmen, I’d become fast friends with my hallmates. Sitting in the cafeteria, spreading cream cheese on a toasted bagel, I noticed one new friend throwing glances at my chest. Two others followed, pointing and laughing. A lizard-green insert in my first-ever

enhancing bra had come loose from its little slot, traveled up into my cleavage, and poked out, like a tongue.

- ii. *Nu-Bra strapless stick-ons*. No straps, no tape. Just two nude-colored cups, lined with adhesive. I bend over and stick. If it's not perfect the first time, I can just unstick them and try again.
- iii. *Push-ups*. I don't know why anyone would ever wear anything else.
- iv. *Big Red*. My first true size-up bra. Big Red convinced me once and for all that I would never need breast augmentation, that I would always find a way to fit my clothes and skin.
- v. *Stuffed fabric Hershey's Kisses*. Because of their shape, the kisses helped me fill out a high school play costume. A fellow cast member gave me a small crystal Hershey's Kiss as a memento, one I kept because I loved high-school theater and how acting augmented my small self-esteem. That Kiss now sits on my bathroom windowsill, alongside sundry items:
 - (1) Six glass cubes with rounded corners, each painted on a side or two with primary colors, given to me by a beloved student.
 - (2) A bell with a sturdy wooden handle. Its metal base, perhaps tin, is corroded, and sits a bit off, like a lip curling up in a slight sneer. It reminds me of the collection of bells in my old bedroom at my mother's house. Oddly mute symbols of car trips and holidays, snowmen and monuments. Bells not ringing, idiophones robbed of their vibrations.

- (3) Lump of shiny black rock, probably coal, topped by yellow-gold bears, one on hind legs and the other a cub on all fours, chewing. A memento from my family's trip to Alaska, my mother's effort to provide her daughters one big vacation, a trip taken when I was nearly twelve years old, the first life experience I remember in near fullness.
- (4) Statue of Liberty coin, including the engraving: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." I don't remember ever learning the rest of the poem, but it's included on the coin: "The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost, to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door." I love the spelling of "tost" and I love that when I have children I'll be able to teach them, perhaps during bath time, the entire poem.
- (5) Mementos from loved ones lost:
 - (a) Cherry wood tobacco pipe: my father's. Though I don't remember him, I'm learning to love him through the little things he left behind.
 - (b) Opal ring: a token given to me by my godfather at my godmother's funeral, at which we sang "Jesus, Thou Art Coming."
 - (c) Fafnir ball bearing inside a taped-up box, marked with the words "wrapped for your protection." My grandfather's. His manual labor at the radio factory allowed my mother to attend college for teaching, and despite my father's sudden, early death, my mother's manual labor to continue raising us alone allowed me to attend a Catholic high school and an excellent college where I met my future husband, and

eventually become a writer who now wraps her grandfather's ball bearing in protective words. I collected the ball bearing from the plenteous boxes of tools and supplies taken from my grandfather's home after he died. While brothers-in-law snagged tools, nails, screws, washers, and odd bits of wire, I took just the ball bearing because the box is green and matches the bathroom. Despite what is said about love's abstract qualities, a single ball bearing, encased in a green box on a bathroom shelf in an old apartment complex in New York, is:

- i. a legitimate, tangible, if tiny, morsel of love.
- ii. the smallest common love denominator.
- iii. the atomic output of love.
- iv. the most discrete element of love.
- v. one of the littlest things I love.