

1 The Daily Grind

Elaine Barlow was enjoying her conversation with Tiffany-the-human-hedgehog as she steamed the milk for Elaine's cappuccino. Despite the scary-looking barbs and rings jutting from her eyebrows, nose, lips, and tongue, Tiffany was friendly, even bubbly, and Elaine found it easy to draw her out. Then Stella tugged on Elaine's sweater, and Elaine noticed with chagrin that there was a long line of people behind her, waiting to order their coffee. She really needed alternative conversational outlets, beyond chatting up clerks.

Elaine looked down at her daughter. "Stop tugging, Stella. What is it?" Stella lifted her arms in the universal toddler command for "Pick me up." Elaine groaned, but obeyed. Now that Stella was three, her increasing weight gave Elaine backaches. Stella nestled her head against Elaine's bosom, from which vantage point she watched Tiffany.

Tiffany asked Stella, "Do you like whipped cream on your hot chocolate?" Her voice was gentle. Stella nodded her head, still pressed against Elaine's bosom. Tiffany sprayed the whipped cream into a mound, arching above the top of the mug. She turned again to Stella.

"Would you like chocolate syrup on top?" Despite her fearsome appearance, her voice was incredibly sweet. Stella sat up in Elaine's arms now and nodded eagerly.

Stella watched the girl as she reached for the squirt bottle of syrup. Then she whispered into Elaine's ear, her breath warm and moist.

Elaine answered Stella softly. "Why don't you ask her?" Stella clamped her head against her mother's shoulder and shook it. Elaine whispered to Stella. "You can ask her. She's nice."

Stella whispered to Elaine again.

Elaine kissed the top of Stella's head and turned to Tiffany. "She wants to know if that's a boo-boo on your eyebrow. She wonders if that safety pin is holding you together." Elaine and Tiffany laughed. In an instant the girl had removed the ornament in question. The girl leaned over the counter to show it to Stella.

"Nope. It's just a decoration, like your mom's earrings. See?" Stella leaned forward to examine it. Elaine leaned to look at it with her. Earring?

Eyebrow ring? Elaine found herself pondering a whole new category of commerce, of which she knew nothing. Her back started to ache.

“Okay, kiddo. Time to get down so I can carry our drinks.”

Bearing her cappuccino and Stella’s hot chocolate, Elaine led Stella to a table. She breathed deeply, inhaling the coffee smell deep into her lungs, feeling it race through her bloodstream. It had been years since she’d spent time hanging out in coffee shops. For a moment she pretended she was back in Berkeley, once again a graduate student with a bright academic future. As Dr. Seuss had put it, she had a head full of brains and her shoes full of feet. Of course in those long-ago days, she hadn’t thought in phrases from children’s books.

As she sat at the table with Stella, she looked around. Most of the tables were taken, and the place hummed with a dozen conversations. The other patrons all looked interesting and intense. Ithaca was good that way, just as Berkeley had been. Lots of people she’d like to know. She sipped her coffee and scanned the room more systematically. No one whose eye she could catch to make conversation. Two months in Ithaca and she still didn’t really know anyone. Stella was the only child present. She’d always made friends through work or school and she hadn’t quite figured out how this full-time mom stuff worked. She’d tried joining the Y, hoping to make friends there, but nothing had materialized. Elaine pulled a coloring book and a box of markers out of her purse.

As Elaine cleared away a newspaper someone had left behind, she noticed it was open to the personals. She’d always found them fascinating, and she paused to peruse them. Elaine knew several people who had met their spouses this way. The good thing about the personals was that people were upfront about looking. No coyness, no playing hard to get. It was no disgrace to be looking for companionship.

Stella was saying something about wolves. Elaine read a few of the ads, imagining the writers. Some sounded like people she would like. She wished her problems finding companionship could be solved by placing a personal ad. She scribbled on the margins of the paper. “Zaftig, burnt-out, formerly academic, newly at-home mom seeks simpatico companions for afternoon playdates. Must have child aged 2–5 and enjoy foreign films, solving the world’s problems and pretending to be puppies.” No, that wasn’t right. She wasn’t formerly academic; that made it sound like she wasn’t going back to it. She was between opportunities, that was all. You might say she was on a sabbatical. Well, a sabbatical of a sort.

Elaine closed the paper and looked up at her daughter, who was still talking. Something about boy lions and girl lions. Lions and lionesses, Stella corrected herself. Her vocabulary was growing really fast these days. Elaine looked at her scribbled ad again. Solving the world’s problems, did that sound pretentious, or what? She scratched it out. No one would want to play with her anyway, that’s what she’d been coming to realize after all

these months of job hunting. She just hadn't known it would be so literally true.

She went over to the newspaper rack and retrieved the *New York Times* and the *Ithaca Journal*. She sat back down and opened the *Times*. Inflation was in the low single digits, the budget deficit had nearly disappeared, and the economy was growing like gangbusters. Elaine looked up to listen to something Stella was saying about the picture she was working on. She was coloring one of the 101 Dalmatians the same deep magenta as Tiffany's spiky hair. Elaine went back to the economic news and smiled as she read more. Several of her professors from Berkeley were high-ranking advisors to Bill Clinton. She took personal pride in how well the economy was doing. Too bad *she* hadn't been able to find another job.

At the next interruption from Stella, Elaine let her newspaper fall to her lap. She watched three people at a nearby table. A professor and two grad students, she decided. She recognized the way the students looked at the middle-aged guy. Not obsequious, but trying to impress him. Stella wanted to know about the picture from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

Elaine gave her a two-sentence summary of the plot. Those grad students wanted their professor to think they were clever, knowledgeable, worth his time. Elaine had been on both sides of that dance, first as a grad student and then, later, as a professor, with her grad students. Stella had more questions about the Hunchback. Why were Esmerelda's clothes raggedy? Why did that man have a humpy back? Elaine did her best to explain. It was when she'd been junior faculty at Sparta University, courting her senior colleagues' approval that she'd failed. Which is why she hadn't gotten tenure, and she was here at a coffee shop in the middle of a workday with Stella instead of with a colleague.

Elaine decided the three were social scientists. The professor's shirt had the creases of professional laundering, his hair was carefully trimmed, his glasses stylish. He must come from one of the more subjective disciplines, probably a political scientist. He'd fit right in on the MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour.

Elaine sipped her coffee and went back to her paper. The civil war in the Sudan raged on. She remembered when it had begun anew in 1983. Elaine tried to answer Stella's questions about why people weren't nice to the Hunchback. She explained that people are sometimes scared of people who are different from themselves. Like Stella and the young lady with the safety pin in her eyebrow. Elaine had been an intern at the World Bank, working on the Sudan the summer the civil war had restarted. Fourteen years later her star had risen and fallen, and people were still slaughtering each other over there.

Elaine put the *Times* aside. There were fewer and fewer African countries where she could be of help these days. She was an economist,

not a diplomat. Stella was puzzled by the picture of Esmerelda tied up to be burned at the stake. Elaine explained that sometimes people's fear of those who are different led them to hurt or even kill them. When pressed, she went on to tell Stella that there are some bad people in the world, selfish, mean people who hurt other people.

Elaine picked up the *Ithaca Journal* and flipped through it as she chatted with Stella. Stella was trying to tell her something about *Charlotte's Web*, but Elaine couldn't follow what she was saying. Her eyes drifted from Stella to the *Journal*. Parking problems, zoning issues, protests in the dorms. Lots of real estate ads, but she wasn't interested in that. She and George were just passing through, renting month-to-month, and hoping that soon she'd land an academic job, which might take them anywhere. George would quit his post-doctoral research job at the vet school so fast their heads would spin, and they would be out of here. The coffee shop door opened just then, letting in a blast of cold air.

As Elaine watched Stella work on her picture, she heard a familiar voice. Surely not. Ithaca was seventy-five miles from Sparta, but she could swear it was Tom Spaulding, who had chaired the ad hoc personnel committee that had recommended against tenuring her. Back-stabber-in-chief.

"Stella," she whispered. "Is there a really tall man standing behind me?"

Stella nodded, staring up. Way up.

"With a red beard, and a bald head, and one earring?"

Stella nodded again, and then his booming bass voice blasting from not four feet behind her almost flattened her. The man had always taken up too much space. He was with someone. He hadn't spotted her.

Elaine did *not* want to talk to him. She hated him, and she didn't want to make polite small talk. But she didn't feel she could afford to be rude either. She was still job hunting, and he was a big shot. Her face burned with shame. She hated to admit she hadn't found a job yet. She could hear him coming closer. What to do? She looked at Stella, with her coloring book and her markers spread out before her.

Elaine grabbed a marker and dropped it on the floor under the table. "Oops. I dropped your marker. I'll get it." Elaine pushed her chair back a little so she could lean forward and put her head under the table. If Spaulding would just keep walking, he'd never notice her.

He stopped beside her table. This was a mistake. She felt acid rise in her throat as she pressed her torso down against her thighs. Her belly protested being squished. She should have worked harder to take off the weight she'd put on when she was pregnant with Stella.

Spaulding boomed again and each blast made Elaine squint her eyes. She hated that voice, having come to dread it in the course of seven years of faculty meetings. He was always saying something she thought was

dead wrong, but saying it so forcefully and with such natural authority that Elaine found it hard to get any airtime to even begin to contradict him.

As Spaulding moved forward, his feet came into Elaine's field of view. His salt-stained wallabies were enormous, battleships, from which his nasty attacks were launched. Elaine averted her eyes, putting her head down farther. She contemplated her own feet, the only thing she could see. Even bundled in insulated snow boots, they seemed small in comparison. She'd always hated how small she felt around Spaulding, as if she were a child. How could he make her feel that way, when he was the unguided missile? More than one student had filed a complaint against him for making inane, offensive comments in class.

Elaine's lower back started to burn. Would he never move on? She couldn't stay down much longer.

"Mommy? Did you find it?" Stella's high voice pierced the hubbub of the coffee shop. The jig was up. Elaine started to straighten up and whacked her head on the underside of the table.

"Ouch! That hurt!" she yelped as she sat up.

"Elaine?" boomed Spaulding. She looked up. He looked from her to Stella. "And little Sarah? Must be ladies' day. What are you doing here?"

I live here. What are *you* doing here? "Oh, hi, Tom. I didn't see you come in." Elaine rubbed the back of her head. She could feel a bump beginning. She looked at the man Spaulding was with. She could vaguely remember him. He had collaborated with Spaulding on some work over the years. "Hi, I'm Elaine Barlow," she said, extending her hand to shake his. "And this is my daughter, Stella Cranski."

"Oh, now I remember. I heard you'd moved to Ithaca. How's the vet?" Tom always pretended to forget George's name, and to act as if they might not be married. Elaine took it as his way of indicating his disapproval that Elaine and George had different last names.

"George is fine. Still doing his post-doc."

"Well, I guess you gotta go where the money is. So what are you up to these days?"

The question she dreaded. "Oh, working on some articles. Got another revise and resubmit I'm working on." The truth was that Elaine was stumped by the referee comments on the last paper she'd submitted to an academic journal. She'd carried it around for months, but every time she looked at it, she put it away again, unrevised.

"Yeah? That enough to keep you busy?" What did he imagine? She was watching Oprah, or playing Barbie dolls with Stella?

"Well, I've been talking to some people about some consulting projects." She'd thought about talking to some people about doing some consulting. She'd intended to. She planned to in the future.

"Consulting's good. Sometimes you don't want to do it, but the money's so good, you can't turn it down."

Oh, yeah, Elaine thought. Sometimes the bullshit's piled so high, you can hardly hear for the flies buzzing. "Yeah, the money's good sometimes," she agreed. She'd never had a consulting job in her life. She prayed he wouldn't ask more.

"Look Elaine, it's been real, but we've gotta go. Catch you later." Spaulding turned away, followed by his friend, whose name Elaine still couldn't remember, and who hadn't bothered to introduce himself.

"Get a load of that!" boomed Spaulding, nodding toward the counter as they approached it. Elaine looked up and saw that Tiffany was still on duty.

"Mommy, can we go home now? I'm finished here."

"Yes, sweetie. I'm finished too."