

Free Samples

by Laurel Croza

See that building? That condo across the street? If you count twenty-six floors up there's my apartment. Second from the end. You can't see much; only the balcony sticking out and the windows. Glassy-eye windows. I don't know what's going on up there but I get the feeling those windows know what's going on with me down here on the sidewalk. Like they're watching me. Peering over their sills, squinting, keeping me in sight.

I give myself a shake. A quick shake from the shoulders up to get my head level. Looking north. I used to live a couple of blocks that way. Used to. Until Dad moved out and a 'For Sale' sign got hammered into the lawn in front of our house.

That's when Mom's sister, my Aunt Liz, said, "Jen, you and Jake can move in with me. There's lots of room. It'll be fun. Like a pajama party."

Yup, that's my definition of fun - living with two women. It gets really hilarious when Mom and Aunt Liz joke around and puff themselves full of air, im-PORT-ant air, and say, like they're swearing on a Bible, "We promise to mould Jake man." Funny. Ha ha. The 'mould me man' thing is from some poem called 'Paradise Lost'. Mom teaches English and she's making all her grade twelves read it this semester. Lucky class.

But most of the time, we're good. We're cool, Mom and Aunt Liz and me. Except today. And that's why I'm standing out here in this crappy weather.

It was drizzling when I woke up but that didn't stop me from going for a walk. A little spit's better than sitting at home dry, looking at Mom's bedroom door closed tight, after she got home early last night from her date with Ricky. Nothing, not Led Zeppelin turned up high on my i-Pod, was drowning out the quiet coming from Mom's room.

The little spit turned into full out rain, soaker rain, so now I'm hunched under an awning in front of a store. I'm already wet. Hair dripping in eyes, sweatshirt soggy through to t-shirt kind of wet. It's my cellphone I'm doing my best to keep dry. Mom said I couldn't have one unless - and these are her words - "you demonstrate to me you've earned the privilege." Translated that means clean my room and put out the garbage without being asked - "one hundred times". Dad gave me the phone for my birthday last month.

I'm sharing this space with a sign. It was here first. One of those sandwich board signs that says *Grand Opening*. Couldn't have picked a lousier day for that. Yonge Street's a lineup of cars both ways, everyone driving to the malls with only the wipers going at full speed.

I try phoning Mom. She's not answering even though, before I left, I laid the phone on the floor outside her door. Beside the tray with the breakfast I made, and the glass of orange juice and a flower from the vase on the kitchen table.

I thought breakfast in bed was a good idea but when I knocked on Mom's door this morning, she spoke flat, flat like the bread I toasted for her. "Jake, I'm not hungry. Maybe later. I'm going back to sleep. Okay?"

Aunt Liz is in Vancouver on business. She's coming home tonight. Maybe she's on an early plane because she's not answering either. Her phone goes right into leave a message. "Aunt Liz. It's me, Jake. Phone me on my cell as soon as you get this. It's about Mom."

I'm pretty sure Aunt Liz wasn't a fan of Ricky from the start. Mom met him in July, at the gym. The gym she started going to after Dad came home and said he'd met someone else - Chloe from his office. Chloe's twenty-six, fifteen years younger than Mom. Twenty-six is the number we're pressing in the elevator nowadays. I don't point this out. Even Mom-the-teacher wouldn't be happy that I get it. That I get the irony.

Anyway, when Mom told us she'd made a friend and his name was Ricky, Aunt Liz said, "Ricky? Oh for crying out loud Jennifer. Please tell me he's over twenty."

Turned out Ricky's closer to forty. He calls me Buddy and he tries to ruffle my hair. I'm fifteen and he messes with my hair. Dad calls me Buddy too. Always has. I'll tell you what the big difference is. When Ricky calls me Buddy, guaranteed, it's because he forgot my name.

So Mom and Ricky have been dating a few months and one minute Ricky's talking to us loud, like we're not all sitting around the dining room table eating turkey. He's going on about getting married and buying a house in the burbs with a big yard and a dog and a basement where I can play my guitar, hang out with my friends.

And the next minute? The next minute Mom and Ricky are sitting in a restaurant and Mom's having trouble hearing what Ricky is saying. He's talking into his mashed potatoes about how, maybe, he's not ready for the marriage and the house and the dog. And the teenage son.

That's about as much as Mom told me last night when she got home. Then she said, "I'm tired Jake. Tired and old. And I'm going to bed." Mom old? What do I say to that? I guess me jerking my head, back and forth, no no no, to her closed door didn't help much.

This happened once before - Mom shutting her bedroom door. The day she signed the divorce papers. By then Dad and Chloe had already made their own move to the burbs, all the way to Barrie. They didn't go for the dog. But they did go for the son. Now there's Daniel, my brother - my half-brother. 'Dan The Man', Dad and I call him.

I haven't taken the bus to Barrie for a couple of weekends, not since my birthday. So I phone Dad. I've had no luck getting through to Mom or Aunt Liz but Dad picks up on the first ring.

Dad answers but it's Daniel I hear. He's crying. No, make that screaming. I have to hold my cellphone away from my ear. Last bulletin from Dad - breaking news - Dan The Man is teething. Dad sounds muffled like he's got the phone braced under his chin. "Hold on a minute Jake." And I listen to Dad humming a song. It doesn't matter his voice is far-off - the words are familiar, I've heard them before. But it's not the old song he's singing, it's a new one. "Buddy. Shhhhhh, Buddy. Buddy, shhhhhh."

Then Dad says, "Jake, can I phone you back?" And I think he's hung up, until he says, "Bud. We're still on for next week? Right? Leaf's season opener! You psyched?"

Yeah. Sure I'm psyched. I'm psyched there's no one close to me on the sidewalk. No one watching me wipe the rain out of my eyes. Thinking about how the 'd' at the end of Bud sounds so different, changed without the 'y' holding on to it, holding it up. The 'y' is in Barrie singing to Daniel.

I look up at my apartment windows again. Maybe I'll go home - pick up my guitar, try to figure out the solo to that Zeppelin song I was listening to this morning - Dazed and Confused.

"Why don't you come inside? Dry off a bit?"

It takes me a couple of seconds to get turned around. To figure out the voice is coming from behind me and not from across the street, twenty-six floors up. Not my apartment, all polite, telling me it's time to come home.

"I'm giving away samples. Free ones."

The voice belongs to a woman. I'm thinking older than Chloe but not by much. She's on the sidewalk, near enough to touch my arm, and she's holding open the door to the store with the awning. She's wearing an apron. My stomach's way quicker than me. "Apron means food," it's growling. It's saying, "Go in you idiot," pushing me inside.

My stomach got it wrong - it doesn't always know everything. There's lots of jars and bottles on the shelves and the store smells sweet like a bakery, but I can see there's nothing to eat here. Joanna - that's what it says on the name tag pinned to her apron - Joanna waves away the puddle my squelchy running shoes are making on her shiny-new wood floor. Like it's no big deal. Then she holds out a small bag and she hands it to me like it's a gift. There's more bags on the counter, wrapped up with tissue paper and ribbon. A bunch of them, like she's expecting a crowd of customers to walk in. Any time now.

I don't need a mirror on the wall to show me what Joanna sees standing in front of her. She sees me with my shoulders up to my ears looking at her gift like I haven't got a clue. What's inside the bag. But before I get my mouth open to say, "Uhh?", Joanna says, "For the bath." Like it's an everyday thing, her giving away free bath samples to waterlogged teenage guys.

There's a chandelier hanging from the ceiling above Joanna with light bulbs that look like candles. There's gotta be at least twenty of them and I swear I'm not making this up - all those candle light bulbs keep getting brighter as she's talking. "A young man like you. You must have someone special you can give this to."

That day Mom signed the divorce papers? Aunt Liz came home from work and turned on the lights in our apartment and said, "No worries Jake, leave it to me." She didn't stand around in the dark, outside a closed door, wondering what to do. She opened the door and talked Mom down the hall and into the bathtub.

I'm a mess. A stupid mess. I haven't said anything to Joanna. Not. One. Word. But I must be looking around like a hopeful stupid mess because Joanna leans forward a little. She smells the same as her store and my stomach starts making noises again and she says, "Is there something else you'd like?"

You know what? Sometimes you have to go for it. Throw it out there. Say what you need, what you want. So I do and I see Joanna's eyebrows shoot up to a question mark, as soon as it's out of my mouth. Out there. "Do you know where I can get some wine?"

She doesn't freak out on me, doesn't ask me to leave. But her eyebrows stay up there, wrinkling her forehead, and she says, "Who's the wine for?"

"My mom."

That day? After Aunt Liz got Mom into the bath? She opened a bottle of wine and then she disappeared into the bathroom with two wineglasses. By the time I went to bed they were singing noise in there. Heh. You try falling asleep to, "I Will Survive."

Joanna's eyebrows are back to the way they were when I first saw her, when she was holding the door open for me, inviting me in. And she says, "I might have something in the back."

It's simple crossing the street. Like I said, Yonge's a parking lot today. The thing that's not so simple is getting my cellphone out of my pocket so I can leave my aunt another message. Not so simple when you got a couple of gift bags in one hand - one for Aunt Liz too - and your other hand is wrapped around a coffee cup.

Joanna rinsed out an empty Tim Horton's cup and she filled it with champagne left over from her *Grand Opening* party. We couldn't find the plastic lid so we covered it with some tissue paper and tied it down with ribbon. It takes a steady hand not to spill the champagne but I've got it covered. "Aunt Liz. About that message I left before? Don't worry, leave it to me." And I snap shut my phone. Yeah, that'd be me. Not Buddy or Bud. Just me, Jake. Moulded man.