



sunny side up

a novel

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one



I was trapped. Panicking. Trying not to, because how embarrassing.

My arms were pinned to my sides by stretched-to-their-limit straps the color of my grandmother's signature nail polish (a chalky pink, painted on too thick, pointer finger permanently chipped). My waist was being suffocated by the hidden "figure-flattering" boning that the swimsuit's hangtag had bragged about. My thighs were losing circulation, exiled from the world by two tight leg holes that were cut in as far below the hipline and butt cheeks as one could get without being legally required to call this a wrestling singlet.

It was ten thousand degrees in January. Seal was playing from the same dressing room ceiling that bore down unholy lighting. This was miserable. My worst nightmare. *Exactly* what I knew would happen.

You are such an idiot, Sunny, I told myself, before the stinging prickle of tears began. Why did you think you could fit into anything at Bergdorf Goodman other than a pair of sunglasses?

I'll never forget the time Kelly Feeney suggested we weigh ourselves in her mom's bathroom during her birthday sleepover. The lightest person "won." (Kelly, obviously.) The "loser" was dubbed the monster, whom Kelly instructed everyone to run away from. Guess who lost?

You know what else I won't forget? Bring Your Daughter to Work Day. I was twelve years old—which was already embarrassing, way too old for that—and my mom introduced me to her new boss, Bob Something or Other. He made a comment about recruiting me for his son's high school basketball team, then shook my hand. You try looking into a grown man's eyes at twelve, realizing he's just noticed that your hand dwarfs his own.

By the latter half of elementary school, I was forced to shop in the women's department if I wanted to find clothes that fit. Looking for a cute Picture Day outfit? Try some business-casual blouses! Middle school dance on the horizon? How about a smart pair of capri pants with a blazer? Dressing rooms became hellscape. "*It's too short in the crotch!*" my mother would yell out in Abercrombie, as I jammed my big, adult-sized-body into jean shorts better designed for teddy bears than teenagers.

Wiping the inevitable tears from my face in those awful fitting rooms, I always felt so alone. I *loved* fashion. (If you considered Wet Seal and Abercrombie fashion, which I *did*, thank you very much. I was, after all, a preteen in the Midwest in the early 2000s.) I loved fashion magazines. I loved clothes and wild outfits and fantasizing about what my personal style would look like on Cher Horowitz's budget. Why wouldn't it love me back?

I soon learned to avoid dressing rooms altogether. My mom started bringing me clothes she'd picked up on her way home from work to spare us both the in-store arguments. When my friends wanted to stop at the mall for that weekend's birthday party, and,

three years later, in the first onslaught of sweet sixteens, I knew to stick to the accessories section rather than tear a zipper in front of everyone while squeezing into Express's stretchiest party dress.

I only tried on clothes at home, where my bedroom walls were a love letter to the rail-thin models in Chanel, the iconic faces of Ralph Lauren, and the impossibly sexy figures in Tom Ford's Gucci. Deep down, I still believed that could be me one day.

I was obsessed with the fashion industry. Obsessed with the people who made the clothes, the people who wore them, and the people who deemed them "in" or "out." But looking around Wisconsin, I knew the odds weren't likely that I'd rub elbows with Gisele at my local Culver's. I didn't want to be a Midwestern young professional. I wanted to be a fashion editor in *NEW YORK CITY*! Cue the bright lights. Cue the hustle. Cue the late nights before each monthly issue went to print, the staff surviving on coffee and the drama of it all.

Later, as a young adult entering her internship era, when I began trying to elbow my way into my dream life, I learned that becoming a fashion editor took more than just the classic "hard work and determination." Just because you showed up first and were the last one to leave (my dad's favorite piece of internship advice) didn't mean you were promoted. It meant you schlepped a few more garment bags around the city than the other interns who got to work on time. The jobs I coveted most seemed to be reserved for people whose parents had grown up with the magazine executives or for those who'd gone to boarding school with the editors' kids. Or for my fellow fashion-closet interns who looked like models and as such were favored, then plucked, by the fashion assistants chosen to hire their eventual successors.

After a few years toiling in seemingly dead-end entry-level fashion jobs, fate intervened and I found my true calling: public relations. At twenty-three, I got a job at a small fashion PR agency, where luck of the draw made me assistant to an incredible, overworked manager

named Michelle. *She* was grateful for my first-one-in, last-one-out hustle. A year later, her favorite account switched to an internationally renowned fashion agency, who then poached *her*, and Michelle took me and her coordinator along with her. It was there that I received a seven-year-long crash course on the other side of glamour. Here were the people who solved problems and made things happen, who guided designers' careers and got their designs onto the pages of all the major magazines, who soothed anxious egos when editors passed on pitches. The powerhouses who negotiated major deals and luxury partnerships, who helped edit down overwhelming piles of ideas into cohesive, marketable product lines. The tastemakers who threw the events that caused industry buzz and got editors to pay attention. The kingmakers who determined which editors were invited to fashion shows, where they sat, who was invited to the after-parties. This is where I shone.

After learning from the best, I left the PR agency with Michelle's grudging blessing to start my own boutique PR firm, Le Ballon Rouge. I wanted to focus on small, mission-driven, women-owned businesses within the fashion, beauty, and lifestyle space, like the jewelry-designing sister duo who made their own lab-grown jewels and the eco-friendly handbag line centered around sustainable practices—an early industry pioneer, before the concept of sustainability had gained momentum among mainstream retailers. One of my clients made carbon-neutral, BPA-free vibrators that were so beautifully designed, they were frequently photographed on the top shelves of notable celebrities' bathroom tours.

An unexpected side effect of helping my clients thrive was watching my own star rise. Over the years, as LBR grew, the same magazines and blogs that covered my clients started getting quotes from me for career-related articles and asking me to speak on panels. They did mini-profiles on Le Ballon Rouge: our office decor, our team's style. The Fashion Institute of Technology hired me as a guest lecturer. Just last year, I was honored with an *Entrepreneur* magazine 35 under 35 award, a level of recognition that even my parents understood. When

it came to my career, I felt unstoppable. I was capable beyond my wildest dreams. Fearless, even! Still, I avoided dressing rooms wherever I could.

Until today.

Because sometimes, when your personal life is falling apart, you forget to fear the otherwise avoidable things that normally terrify you. Like the dressing rooms of high-end stores. The clothing racks in your average department store, mall retailer, and local boutique are usually stocked with sizes zero to eight, *maybe* ten, which means the rest of us giant beasts have to go find a salesperson and ask the embarrassing question, *Do you have bigger sizes in the back?* Now, this interaction can go one of two ways: The first, if you're one of the lucky ones, is a glowing *Yes, of course, what size can I get you?* But more often than not, you will receive a disdainful up-and-down look followed by instructions for using the internet to shop. *Better yet, they might add, try Lowe's for a tarp.*

If you happen to find your size in the store, you are ushered to your prize: a vertical coffin with garish lighting, an antagonistic fun house mirror, and an inexplicable scattering of tailoring pins all over the shabby stained carpeting. Plus, it's always about ten degrees hotter in the fitting rooms than the rest of the store, so the simple act of disrobing usually encourages a light sweat. If you aren't breathing heavily by the time you wriggle yourself into your desired item, then, well, I applaud you for your cardiovascular endurance. For most of us, it takes only a slightly-too-snug zipper to send us backpedaling from the cash register and headfirst into a series of negotiations with ourselves instead: *That's it! No more bagels on the way to work. And we are doubling our spin classes: twice a day from now on, bitch. We have to lose ten pounds by tomorrow!*

I've been making these types of negotiations with my body for as long as I can remember.

Today was, unfortunately, no exception.

At least it started on a positive note. After a morning spa session with two of my closest friends, Brooke and Noor, a celebratory New

Year's treat to ourselves, I was drunk on palo santo essential oils, a bright manicure, freshly waxed eyebrows, and the delicious, elated sense of self-worth that comes from spending time with incredible women who celebrate every fiber of your being. At the lunch that followed, the three of us spent a good half hour passing around our phones to show off the swimsuits and beach-adjacent outfits we'd saved and screenshot as packing inspiration for our upcoming mid-winter divorcée escape to Harbour Island. After Brooke left to pick up her kids from a playdate, Noor suggested she and I try on our digital mood boards in person. At Bergdorf's, naturally, because, like me, Noor—a fellow divorcée without kids—viewed Bergdorf Goodman as one of the end-all, be-all New York City shopping institutions. The difference was that, unlike me, Noor—a celebrity-chef-slash-restaurateur who was quickly becoming a fixture on the daytime television cooking scene—could probably fit into the sample sizes of every designer in the place, whereas I mostly came here for major accessory splurges. So I walked in ready to play one of my favorite mind games, *This Looks Stretchy, Think It Could Fit?*, while knowing I would probably end up with yet another sarong, maybe a pair of sandals from the men's section. No problem. I was mostly there to hang out with Noor. She was one of the funniest people I knew. I would have gone with her to a dentist appointment if she'd suggested it. Turns out, that may have been less painful.

We rode the escalator one floor up to the beauty counters, where we took our time spritzing our wrists, smelling each other, and rating designer perfumes on a scale of Upper East Side Grandma in a Mink Coat to Downtown Blue-Chip Gallerist with a Separate Wardrobe for Her BDSM Extracurriculars. We experimented with bronzers at Chanel and lipsticks at Tom Ford, where the makeup artists fawned over us like we were their dolls. One high-cheekboned model-ballerina-alien behind the Guerlain counter told me she wished she had my skin, and I nearly gave her the password to my bank account. Love me some luxury customer service.

Then we went up to the designer shoe salon, where skyscraper-

high heels glittered and beckoned. While Noor walked in a trance toward a pair of truly insane Versace platforms that, according to her, kept selling out online before she could buy them, I decided to walk over to Dior's in-house boutique and peruse the newest resort colorways.

I realized that this whole experience was, quite honestly, the nicest afternoon of shopping I'd had in . . . ever. Everyone at the store was so gracious and helpful. Like they actually wanted me there. Like they thought I belonged. I appraised my outfit in the mirror behind a wall of quilted leather handbags and printed toile totes. I certainly *felt* like I looked the part: hot-pink Max Mara teddy coat, blond hair tucked back but with a few strategic face-framing pieces pulled out of my bright-blue cashmere beanie. (A standard color combination for me: the bolder, the better.) Underneath my coat, I wore a skintight, chin-high, dark-navy turtleneck and matching wide-leg pants with white-soled Vans: a neck-to-ankle monochromatic tribute to the great Phoebe Philo. I'd come a long way since my days as an awkward, wide-eyed, New York City newcomer who didn't know herself, let alone her personal style. Standing tall among the Dior, I felt confident and supremely adult: I paid other people's salaries, *with* excellent health care benefits. I put my brands in front of luxury retail buyers, just like Bergdorf Goodman. My picture was in a publication that my parents occasionally bought at the airport. I belonged! The sixth floor could no longer rattle me.

Noor returned to me, quintessential Bergdorf-purple shopping bag in hand.

"You got the shoes!" Maybe it was a good omen, I thought to myself as we linked arms and headed to the elevator and up to our final destination, the sixth floor: sportswear, coats, evening wear, lingerie, hosiery . . . and swimwear. Noor and I split up. I watched her work quickly, methodically, loading her arms with minimalist one-pieces by ERES, Karla Colletto, Matteau. Ugh, she was so chic.

I turned my attention to all the suits that caught my eye: I wanted colorful Brazilian-cut bikinis. Flirty, feminine ruffles. Knit

Missoni zigzags, beaded straps, hand-embroidered florals. I wanted high-cut legs and low-cut tops. I wanted to feel confident and sexy. I wanted my “*Birth of Venus* meets Phoebe-Cates-coming-out-of-the-pool-scene” fantasy. But one tag after the other shut that down in a matter of seconds: small, extra small, extra-extra small. Medium, extra-extra-extra small (what the fuck), small, a single size large that looked like it had come from the kids’ section, and my favorite: One Size Fits All.

“I’m heading to the dressing room, Sunny,” I heard Noor call.

“Be there in a sec!” I felt my face grow hot. Didn’t I know better? Shouldn’t I have expected this?

You belong here, I reminded myself. *You are an adult with an excellent credit score. You use your Waterpik every single day. You were just offered a glass of champagne at Dior. Go ask someone for help.* You’d think I was pumping myself up to hit on Jason Momoa.

I walked up to a petite woman wearing a 1960s-esque pastel floral bell-sleeve dress and gold sandals with straps wrapped around her ankles at least four times. She must have changed when she got in to work. It was freezing outside. The only giveaway that she worked at Bergdorf’s was the fact that she was taking the time to carefully re-hang and remerchandise all the tiny little swimsuits that had wilted off their hangers—so delicate they couldn’t bear to hold on any longer.

I cleared my throat.

She turned around.

We both smiled.

“Hi! How can I help?”

I replied in one breath with my usual TMI. “I’m heading to the Bahamas in a few weeks with my girlfriends. Women friends. Weird word. We’re all recently divorced—that’s how we met, isn’t that funny? I mean it’s not funny-funny, but you know what I mean—so we decided to take a ‘divorcation’ and we’re really doing it up: We’re chartering a boat, getting massages, going snorkeling, going *out*, and we decided to dress like the movie version of ourselves—giant hats, caftans, jewelry at the beach, you get it—”

She blinked at me with a professional blank expression.

“So, I’m looking for some real showstopper swimsuits. In larger sizes.”

“Follow me.”

That was easy.

She led me out of the swim section, toward the lingerie. *Okay, getting creative, I’m into it*, I thought.

We passed the lingerie—*Makes total sense, that would have been weird*—and walked toward the sleepwear section. *Huh*.

An elderly woman was restocking silk pajama sets, hair in a chignon, eyeglasses on a chain around her neck.

“Francis?”

“Hello, dear!”

“Francis is OG,” the sixties Bergdorf pixie told me. “Francis, can you please help this customer find her swim size? She has a”—she gestured toward me—“*divorce party coming up on the beach*.”

“A *divorcation*,” I said, this time with instant regret. Brooke had titled our shared itinerary “First Wives Club: The Ultimate Divorcation” as a joke. It made me cringe to hear it in the wild, outside the comfort of our three-person group chat, but I was already blacking out, unable to control my words, slowly exiting the back wall of my body like that meme of Homer Simpson backing into a bush. *Why do you always feel compelled to tell strangers everything about yourself? Shut up, be mysterious!*

“Ah,” replied Francis. She nodded and pointed to her chest, then mine, then to hers again, as if she and I were in a secret club for Women with Ample Bosoms.

She guided me toward a rack of shapewear that hung next to the hosiery. Sixties Pixie walked away while Francis tutted to herself.

“Et voilà!” She handed me three different one-pieces—one red, one pink, and a black-and-white floral skirted tankini.

“There you are, dear. There’s a dressing room right here, if you’re ready to try on.”

I could see Noor, basically naked, in the distance. She was wearing

a low-cut white swimsuit with a silvery see-through caftan over it, scouring the swim racks with such fierce intensity that I doubted she realized I was gone.

"This is perfect, thank you," I said, accepting my consolation prize.

I stepped into the pajama section's dressing room, hung up the suits, rolled my head to both sides, and decided to get straight into it.

The black-and-white floral was something my mom would wear, so I didn't even bother. Also, a *tankini*? Immediate no. I pulled the beanie off my head and shook off my giant coat.

No wonder I'm sweating.

I stretched the turtleneck up over my head, paused to unhook my chin, then birthed myself through its never-ending fabric neck. My hair stood upright in static shock. My chest looked red, angry. I was feeling a little lightheaded. This wasn't good.

I stepped out of my pants and started to feel a pulse in my right temple. I couldn't tell if the thumping noise was the faint pop-club remix meant to lull customers into a shopping trance or my own blood threatening to turn up the anxiety that was already humming steadily in the background. Shouldn't a store like this play soothing classical music, or, like, the *Bridgerton* soundtrack?

I stepped my polished toes in the leg holes of the first one-piece. The red one. At least it was a fun color. *Baywatch*-y. It felt stiff, and kind of spongy, like it was made of neoprene. With my left hand on one seam and my right hand on the other, I started shimmying the suit up over my spa-slicked legs. It snapped hard around my belly button, so I took a moment to breathe. I could not. I was full-on sweating. The leg holes chomped down around my thighs. *What the fuck?*

I resumed pulling and shimmying, until I got one strap over my left shoulder and tucked an unruly boob inside the padded cup. There was no point in trying to get the right strap over my right shoulder. This suit had to be three sizes too small. What did she hand me, an eight?

I released my left boob and left strap, then twisted the suit around for a glimpse at the tag. A size *fourteen*?

This had to be European sizing or something. Maybe Australian? I'd been a size twelve for most of my adult life. A fourteen in dresses, maybe, because of my chest. Ample Bosom Club. I took the suit off for closer inspection.

US: 14. AUS: 18. EU: 46.

Which meant I had to be at least a size sixteen. Extra, *extra* large.

I felt a wave of nausea course through me. I knew my clothes had been feeling tighter than usual, and I'd been favoring stretchy pants over jeans, but we'd just rung in the New Year, and everyone gained weight over the holidays. It was normal. It was just water weight, right?

Right??

. . . This could not be happening.

In the fashion world, brands simply did not make clothes above a size fourteen. Even then, fourteen was a rarity, considered the "upper limit." Extra, *extra* large. I'd felt that way my whole life, a "maximum-sized" body, squeezing into the biggest sizes available. But usually, those biggest sizes would at least fit-ish.

I tore the red death trap off my body and threw it to the ground. Surely it was some kind of mistake, likely by a very depraved designer who purposefully made his swimsuits three sizes too small. I grabbed the Pepto-Bismol pink one-piece off its hanger and checked the size: fourteen. On its hangtag, it boasted a "hidden, figure-flattering corset." Okay. Let's try again. It was made of this scrunchy knit-Lycra-elastane-I-don't-know-what. It was super stretchy, and the hidden corset was bendy. It had to fit. Ish.

There was no fit-ish-ing today.

By the time I'd trapped both boobs behind underwired cups that sliced them into quadrants, the violent shoulder straps had dug deep purple grooves into my skin. Flesh popped out of every seam. You don't even want to know what was going on with my hoo-ha. It was a good thing I'd kept my thong on underneath, is what I'll tell you.

I stepped closer to the mirror to examine my pale limbs, reddening face. I'd completely lost the post-spa glow. I just looked greasy. So much fat that I didn't remember having. A body I didn't recognize. I immediately started making a familiar pact with myself: two-a-day workouts and lettuce for dinner. I was supposed to be out here getting my postdivorce "Revenge Body"! Not feeling so angry, so disgusted with myself. I knew I'd put on some weight since the divorce, but had I let my body change *that* much?

I started to cry. The anxiety hives began to claim residence over my neck and chest as a shitty memory flashed through my mind, one from just a few years earlier, when an outfit and my too-big body had left me feeling defenseless.

You really want to wear that in public?

I shook my head to clear away the douchey voice.

I had to get out of there. I left the suits in a puddle on the pin-covered floor and apologized silently to Francis, who would have to clean up my mess. I shoved myself back into my own clothes, which suddenly felt too tight and all wrong. I had to jam my arms into the coat sleeves as though they'd shrunk in the past thirty minutes. I threw the hat into my bag and barged out of the dressing room. It must have been a thousand degrees.

I think . . . that you think you look cool in that outfit, but I don't think you realize what you actually look like.

I tried to breathe like my therapist had instructed: in-two-three-four-five-hold-hold-exhale-two-three-four—it wasn't working. Too hot. Too many numbers. Everything too tight. His stupid-ass laugh, the one he does when "he's just kidding around," but isn't.

You kind of look like your dad in drag, he said, smirking at his own joke.

You look like a football player who tried on the cheerleader's outfit by mistake. He was on a roll. There was no stopping him once he started his roasts.

It was as though they were playing him from the sixth floor's loudspeakers. I had to get out of there. I pressed the down-elevator's

call button. Pressed it again. Pressed it again. Press-press-press-press. Too slow, couldn't wait.

My pace quickened as I made a beeline for the escalator, which I ran down. Then I kept running, across and down, from one floor to the next, causing horrified women and men to jump out of my way.

Elephant stampede, I imagined them crying out.

Take cover! It's King Kong!

Make way, I pictured them yelling down to the floors below me.

Hagrid is BIG mad!

I burst out of an emergency exit and onto the street. If I set the alarms off, I didn't hear them. I crossed the street and ran two blocks south, until the cold wind was punching me in the chest, making me cough, stopping me in my tracks. I leaned against the side of the building, took out my phone, and texted Noor that I had a dog emergency and needed to go. I said a quick prayer to the dog gods asking them to forgive me for that one. The last thing I needed was for my dogs to fall apart on me in real life. Then I resumed walking down Fifth Avenue at a late New Yorker's pace, until my breathing started to calm down a bit and my mind stopped spiraling quite so fast. I could do this, I told myself. I could lose the weight. I had a solid diet program in place: salads only, dressing and everything on the side. Hard-boiled eggs with mustard, that's it. I'd eat those at home because something about an office amplified their smell. I'd stick to black coffee and plain berries at my business breakfasts. I'd do Pilates in the morning, spin class after work. Four weeks remained until I needed to pack for the Bahamas. I could drop twenty pounds by then, easy. I had time.

As I started walking down Fifth, dodging meandering tourists struggling to catch the rhythm of a Manhattan sidewalk, my breath started to even out. I felt myself gaining some control of the swirling, panicked chaos in my head. I had a plan, I had a plan. I dug through my purse for my AirPods, shoved them in my ears, and hit play on Chappell Roan Radio. I immersed myself in a fake music video all the way to Fifty-Third Street, where I stormed down the

steps of the E train station and charged through the turnstile. My brain replaced anxious thoughts with angry ones. Anger felt so much better. Power! Fury! Rage! *Screw those swimsuits. Screw those dressing rooms. And screw my asshole ex-husband.*

I removed an AirPods to hear an overhead announcement.

“The downtown. E train. Will arrive. In. Ten. Minutes.”

Across the platform, two teens ran down the steps, yelling “Go, go, go” at each other while laughing. The uptown train closed its doors and started pulling out of the station.

I kept staring ahead, straight toward the strip of wall that had been blocked by the idling train. I squinted, my eyes taking a minute to adjust to what was in front of me.

It was him. Plastered on a peeling billboard framed by dingy subway tiles: Zack and his stupid smirk. What’s worse is that I’d actually orchestrated the photo shoot for this six months ago. He was grinning, taunting me in a larger-than-life-size frame. *The Zack Attack—America’s #1 Ranking Sports Podcast. Tune in Today.*

My immediate impulse was to leap across the platform and draw a dick on his face.

I was thirty-five, recently divorced, fatter than I had *ever* been in my life, and fully haunted by the voice of my ex-husband. Meanwhile, my ex, who has had *everything* handed to him like he’s some sort of helpless little baby prince, smiled across from me on a billboard campaign that *I’d* helped him land, like he didn’t have a damn care in the world. I felt used. Spit up and chewed out. Was this part of the dream I’d moved to New York to chase?

No, I decided. Fuck that.

Then I made myself a promise.

This was the lowest I’d ever felt.

Which meant it was time to start climbing back up.