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— P A R T O N E —

THE COVEN

I slid the fried egg—extra crispy, embedded with cracked pink peppercorns—onto a nest of baby arugula centered atop a slice of toasted sourdough. I sharpened my paring knife with a few satisfying slashes and sliced four cornichons thin enough for light to pass through. Those I placed across the warm egg, chevron-style. I capped it all off with a second piece of toast, this one thick with lemon aioli.

Or: I made a fried egg sandwich.

But how you do anything is how you do everything, and one might say my life's work has been chasing the Platonic ideal.

Viv appeared wearing that day's iteration of short-shorts, baby tee and sneakers. Her alarm had gone off at six. Evidence indicated she'd devoted the past hour to awesome lashes and beachy waves.

“Good morning!” I couldn't help but sing out.

Gorgeous, shallow creature, Viv! Reliably irritable, bereft of interests. Scroller, consumer, influencee. That Fate gave me Viv as a daughter provides a daily fountain of dismay and delight.

I encased the sandwich in glass, snapped shut the lid and presented

it to Viv. She looked down and back up in dawning, victimized bewilderment.

"I'm not shivving you," I pointed out. "I'm handing you your favorite sandwich."

"But . . ." she began.

"But all my friends go out to lunch? But bringing lunch from home makes me look poor? It's okay, you can say it."

Viv narrowed her eyes, swiped the sandwich and pivoted back down the hall to her room. For punctuation: ye olde door slam.

A scrape in the lock. Our dog walker, Ziggy, returning Mr. Man from his morning constitutional.

Ziggy, there's a kid: freshman at LaGuardia, he just had three pieces in the student art show. He's a dedicated runner, has a dog-walking business and in his free time is watching all of Bret Easton Ellis's movie recommendations. Added bonus, he's besotted with me.

Mr. Man, unclipped from his harness, shot past me and straight to his bowl without a hello.

"Hey, Ziggy," I said, positioning myself outside Viv's room for maximum effect. "How's photography?"

Also, as an infant, Ziggy had contracted meningitis, which resulted in progressive hearing loss. He grew up in the building and is a fan favorite. When we learned he was saving for eardrum surgery, we put up flyers in the elevator. Within a week, residents and staff had raised enough for two surgeries; we threw in one for his pal from camp. Not one to let a skill go to waste, Ziggy gets paid princely by gossip sites to lip-read clips of celebrities bad-mouthing other celebrities at awards shows.

"Or," I said, loudly enough for Viv to hear, "is photography on pause because of cross-country?"

"I can do both," Ziggy answered, hopping up and down while standing still, which is his lovestruck way.

"How do you find the time? You must never be on your phone."

"You can stop trolling me," a muffled command from within.

"Hey, Viv!" Ziggy stared at the closed door, hanging for a response. None came.

Or: maybe it's Viv he's besotted with.

Mr. Man, seeing his bowl was sans treat, returned and gave me an abject look.

"Don't you worry, Mr. Man," I said, all cute. "You'll be dead soon enough. We'll all be."

"Oh!" Ziggy said. "Seven-sixteen. I saw them talking in the elevator."

"For real?"

Ziggy poked his head into the hallway and indicated they were still there.

I whipped the dish towel over my shoulder.

At the far end of the hall, a luggage cart—the brass cage type, a remnant from when the Ansonia was New York's grandest hotel—was stacked and strung with Fairway bags.

A blonde in her twenties, who I'd seen in the trash room (sweet-faced but notably unfriendly), came out in stocking feet and hoisted a case of IPA onto one knee.

"Hi!" I called as I approached. "You're selling your apartment—"

At the sight of me, the girl became skittish as a bird.

"How did you know?" she half-gasped.

"I live down the hall, and—"

A handsome man with loose curls and strong captain-of-the-lacrosse-team vibes appeared and stood, shoulders flat against the

door frame. At well over six feet, he looked down on me in more ways than one.

"Why, hello," I said, and returned to the girl. "I'd like to talk to you about buying."

"Hold on," the guy said. "Are you—"

"Matt!" the girl whispered. "No—"

"—in the coven?" A grin broke out across his cherub-hued face.

Mention to one doorman, in passing, that you're starting a coven, and soon the whole building is looking at you askance!

I chose to ignore.

"We can do it off-market," I told the girl. "Save you the hassle and stress of listing."

"I'm not really sure," she said, eyes darting at Matt.

"How much?" he asked.

"We can get it appraised," I answered. "If we don't use a realtor, it saves you commission."

"Not bad," mused Matt. "We'll get back to you." He tossed a laughing look my way. "Now, if you'll excuse me. Duty calls."

Matt returned to a big screen television. He dove onto the couch, pulling off a midair half-rotation to land him flat on his back and aimed at the TV. This, he unmuted to "Breaking News."

"TERRORISTS HIT THE BRITISH MUSEUM," read the chyron.

". . . No casualties have been reported," blasted the anchor. "But we can confirm the Rosetta stone has been badly damaged."

I was beginning to reassess my man Matt, the news lover, when the screen went black and switched to a crude animation of the back alleys of Baghdad.

Matt clutched a videogame controller with both hands and, elbows

dug into his sides, began the grim business of annihilating soldiers, prostitutes and fruit merchants alike.

“He’s in commercial real estate,” the girl offered, starry-eyed. “We’re moving to Phoenix for his job.”

“Call me before you decide anything,” I told her. “I can think of five people who’d be interested.”

Just inside, I spotted a Sharpie on the counter. I popped in and wrote my number on a jumbo bag of Cool Ranch Doritos.

“Wait!” said the girl, as I turned to go. “Are you saying that the coven . . .” She was doing some kind of math.

“Yes?”

“Has a waitlist?”

Inside her apartment, Matt (shoes-on, doing the couch luge) was gunning people down with an intensity I reckoned he never applied to learning her love language. A statement bong dominated the coffee table. Meanwhile, out in the hallway, bag handles had begun to cut off circulation to his beloved’s ringless fingers.

“You’ll see,” I said.

I entered Central Park at Seventy-Second Street with amazement that this was my route to work. Even after five years, I took in the city with the mawkish wonder of a recent arrival. On the upside, tourists never stopped me to ask directions. On the downside, I tripped and fell more than your average New Yorker.

Passing the Dakota with its lit torches: each step I took as if through history itself. Approaching the Imagine mosaic and its unceasing soundtrack of buskers: my ears peeled through the din of car horns and helicopters to name that tune. Today, a deep cut, "Savoy Truffle." Not even a John song! Descending the dogwood-flocked path: the majestic clomp of distant horse hooves sent a reliable thrill. Beholding the crazy quilt of budding magnolia blossoms, lime-green chutes and cutesy crocuses beginning their annual prison break: spring had sprung, baby!

The reflexive next move would be to stop and breathe it all in. But I've learned the hard way. Central Park, no matter how fresh-smelling it may look, you take one whiff and it's piss all the way down.

I crossed the park, my pace juiced by the recent bomb-drop. (Not your bomb-drop, British Museum. Sorry, Rosetta stone, you were fun

while you lasted!) The available apartment. Who would I ask to join . . .

Whatever you'd call our trio of highly competent, accomplished women (theater director, lawyer, philosopher) of a certain age (divorcee, widow, divorcee) who'd bought apartments on the same floor of the Ansonia so that down the line we could age in place and go out in a blaze of independence?

An unimpeachably intentional, highly curated, feminist old folks' home? Nah, not much of a ring.

A tragic, estrogen-free trio trying to put our best face on the realization society is done with us and we're destined to die alone? No, and bite your tongue.

It had started innocently enough. I'd moved to the Upper West Side after my divorce. Weeks in, I went to see chamber music with my friend Emily Ann (widowed lawyer), and on the way home said I had to stop at the market.

Emily Ann did, too. "What are you getting?" she asked.

(Now see, looking back, I already want to spend the rest of my life with that person: someone genuinely interested in my shopping list.)

"I've been craving tuna," I said. "But the celery comes prepackaged in two heads, and I only ever want a couple of stalks." I hated waste. Emily Ann did, too.

"It's why I never make tuna," Emily Ann put in ruefully.

"What are you getting?"

"Bread for sandwiches."

Sliced bread. That, too, I hadn't bought because I only ever needed a couple of pieces at a time. (Viv was away, summering with her dad.)

Right then, in the fusty cavity between the inner and outer doors of Morton Williams on Fifty-Seventh, inspiration struck.

I grabbed Emily Ann by both arms and dug my fingers in.

“You buy celery!” she cried, reading my mind. “And I buy bread, and we give each other half!”

A runaway train couldn’t have stopped us. On the aggressively narrow dining counter, I broke off celery stalks and slipped them into her Dave’s Killer Bread bag. Into my celery bag went six pieces of her twenty-one-grain bread. It was divine, if spinsterish—

Strike that.

It was divine *and* spinsterish.

When I attempt to define happiness and understand its place in the hierarchy of the human project (divorced philosopher), my mind leaps to those five minutes in the market with Emily Ann. (Sorry, marriage-to-Hal! Sorry, birth-of-Viv!) They were marked by spontaneity, creative problem-solving, lawlessness, laughter and kinship. I existed vividly and exclusively in the present moment. The universe was harmonious and it had my back. I felt wide and well.

Obv, the next day Emily Ann and I texted each other pictures. Her tuna: rough chunks of celery and onion drowning in mayonnaise. My tuna: finely diced celery, onion, fresh dill, parsley, kalamata olives, capers and Mama Lil’s Peppers, undetectable mayonnaise, generous lemon juice. Her arms: fingerprint-bruised from being dug into. Mine: not.

I recounted the story to our friend Minna (making her the divorced theater director). She wildly wanted in.

Thus began Fridays at Fairway. A meetup of single women who purchase and divvy celery, carrots, basil, muffins—anything we want but comes packaged too much for one. We’ve been known to bring

Tupperware and Ziplocs. I call it a meetup because when other women see what we're doing, they instantly get it and want in. Sometimes it's a dozen of us. Other times it's just me and a bag of Mexican limes, ten for a dollar. I'm still surprised *The New York Times* hasn't gotten in touch; isn't that all the Style Section is, breathless reporting on trends that barely exist?

We kicked it up a notch when an apartment became available on my floor. I mentioned it to Minna, who'd turned on her longtime East Village neighborhood for getting overrun by bougie NYU students. So she escaped to the suburbs of Manhattan, aka the Upper West Side, followed by Emily Ann a year later. The idea being to pool our resources and, when the time comes, we'll take care of one another.

Women. You can't accuse us of not being practical.

Whenever I mention this arrangement to married couples, I'm met with one of two responses neatly divided along gender lines.

1. "Wait, you can do that?" (Said with wheels turning and fond memories of Ding-Dong Ditch.)

2. "Keep away from my wife."

I took out my phone and texted Minna and Emily Ann.

716 available. I'm on it.

In immediate response, not just the shriveled witch, but an outbreak of shriveled witches floating across my screen.

So, yes: coven.

As I waited to cross Fifth Avenue, I bid good morning to the private security guard who patrols the block.