

## “Cape Cod” by Colson Lin [Short Story]

A lot of how we talk about middle school in America is something I take issue with—like, for instance, that it's somehow *not* the most formative experience of our lives. (It is.) A lot of people say “college,” but I had already cycled into an idea of who I was going to be as an adult by then—an A student, a talker, a birdwatcher, a take-no-prisoners observer of human social life. I studied sociology at the University of Maryland. At my retail job now—I work at a Nordstrom in Connecticut—I interact with a dying breed: old rich white women who still buy their cashmeres at the mall. At my old retail job in Farmington I was a cashier. At Nordstrom I'm more of a saleswoman—I don't *hand* my customers their purchases after I'm done folding their clothes into the bag, I walk around the counter to deliver their parcels to them personally. I work six nights a week until the mall closes at 11 and on Sundays, Mondays, and Thursdays I drive to my second job at a call center in Southington. I earn enough money to pay for my Hyundai and an apartment above the laundromat, have coffee on the weekends, keep up with my student loans, and map out what the next step will be.

College feels like a million years ago.

Middle school still feels like yesterday.

“Brenda” (not her real name), my supervisor at my old department store in Farmington, was the portrait of managerial incompetence. She was fat and unmarried and all of the associates who weren't actively helping a customer used to crowd into the stock room whenever she came out of her office, usually to berate one of us for misplacing a store key. We all know a Brenda from middle school. Everything you say is wrong, and everything *she* says can't be improved upon. Three of us quit within the first ten months of Brenda's arrival, and at least one of us later wrote an anonymous email to the district manager about her obvious drinking problem.

My old department store—I don't want to get into any trouble here so let's just call them “Not-Quite Sephora”—was in a strip mall. I never knew who to feel more sorry for during the day, myself or the customers who came in. I once explained to my boyfriend that we were kind of like Wal-Mart's “more youthful older sister”—a high school varsity cheerleader perhaps, but still stuck in the past all the same.

There were ten of us on the first floor—the second floor, “Men's,” might as well have been a different planet entirely. Brenda acted like she was better than all of us, because she has a master's degree in “Global Business Administration,” whatever the fuck that was. Brenda didn't seem to understand that all her master's degree did was make her look both underqualified and overqualified for her job at the same time. (Her main role, from what I could tell, was assigning

holiday bonuses and amplifying customer complaints.)

Not-Quite Sephora has a dying business model, but we were kept artificially alive by a steady stream of suburban glum as the principal anchor of a once-iconic strip mall. The first floor was perpetually understaffed—our Google reviews under Brenda’s mismanagement decayed from 4.2 to 2.8 stars (and this coming from a woman who tends to take “American public opinion” with a grain of salt). The turnover rate among everyone except me, Ashley, and Gabby seemed to be such that a new Chris, Brian, or Andy was being fired every three months. Good riddance, I always thought.

Men don’t understand how to take orders from a woman, and the ones who say they do are liars from the black lagoon.

I understand Brenda.

I really do.

Brenda’s most direct feature was that you couldn’t get a direct answer out of her, ever—it was either caustic sarcasm or happy-peppy self-deprecation. Everything she said was either designed to suppress or to charm. She was intelligent, which was the problem—quick-witted even—she prized competence, prided herself on being everything everywhere all at once (with self-pity), once complained to me in the break room that she was an ex-spelling-bee champion. Appearance-wise, what once made me jolt awake at night was that she tries, she actually tries. Not doing anything to set Brenda off had become something of an obsession of mine by her third month there. I applied to other jobs, but only in non-retail.

Trying to go non-retail—my life in a nutshell.

Brenda took over at a precarious time. Inflation was rising. Covid was either over or about to be over, but either way, brick-and-mortar seemed to be one of its death tolls. Brenda had mousy blond hair, wore black trousers to work, and used to tramp around the store carrying an inventory clipboard whenever she was upset about something. I didn’t think it was possible for anyone to take fashion-merchandising so seriously. Her first day at Not-Quite Sephora, Brenda compared our fitting rooms favorably to the fitting rooms at her old Kohl’s in Florida, now shuttered (“So coming back up here was kind of like coming home for me, y’know?”). Brenda grew up in a trailer park in New Jersey and you can tell.

You can guess what her politics are.

I think what appealed to me most about the Cape Cod trip, if I were to be honest, was the right to tell Brenda that I'd have to take a few days off in mid-September because my boyfriend had invited me on a trip to "the Cape."

Here was a woman in her late forties or early fifties who had located the profundity of her self-esteem in "competence"—and yet it never finally occurred to her that the only way to be "competent" in your everyday life is to *command the trust of those around you*. Trust is *earned*, Brenda, and it's lost with unreliability. I could never really trust that woman not to trap me inside a rule without being able to explain to me the reasons—not to not be imperious and self-certain and in self-protection mode at all times—and not to not explode all of her emotional wreckage on me, drenching me in the black mist of her self-absorption. Brenda was always right. Brenda is never to be questioned. (Brenda's real name is "Karen," which is why I didn't want to say it at the time.)

It felt so good to be able to tell Brenda that—all of her anxieties about the back-to-school rush aside—I'm going to have to take three days off in mid-September because my boyfriend has invited me on a trip with his three friends to the Cape. (I met my boyfriend a year ago on Opal.) It pained me to be so petty—no, not the reference to Cape Cod, which was just a kiss on the lips, but the reference to having a boyfriend, which was my primary poison. I wore *more* eyeliner to work, not less, the longer the weeks went by trying to circumnavigate Brenda's imperialism. I enjoyed looking like a magazine cover while supplicating to her at the makeup counter.

We worked at a department store.

("—so that's *my* life, okay?")

I could see it already. I love how Brenda, with her master's degree in Global Business Studies or whatever the fuck she majored in, has to flinch every time who I really was blinked in front of her. I bet you flinched every time you saw me shrug into your office, Brenda, no matter *what* you called me into your office for, because I know about the *Us Weeklies* you stole from the front stands—I told Accounting about them!—I *know* how responsive you are to young women with movie-star looks who had won the genetic lottery. I smile at you, Brenda, precisely because I know how my angelic dimples make you feel. It makes you feel like you want to protect me.

It makes you feel you need to defend your true queen.

Beauty was my one and only power over Brenda, but I can assure you I only used it sparingly (all it *took* was sparingly with a woman so obsessed with appearances). We don't talk about being pretty enough, which is another way of saying we don't talk about seeing only the appearances enough.

Seeing only the appearances was how I, prior to this weekend, once saw Cape Cod. What do you know about Cape Cod anyway? What's the first thing that comes to mind when you mentally google it? I want to leave you now with an image of seagulls.

I matched with my boyfriend last September on Opal.

Now I know what you might be thinking—this whole story basically amounts to one long humblebrag about how I have an account on Opal, lol. No. First of all, I deleted that account six months ago. My boyfriend and I both did, on the same day—that was how we agreed to be serious.

Opal's cornered the market on young attractive people who like to paraglide to remote destinations—the one and only trick it has up its sleeves is "exclusivity," which in America is a royal flush. I'll tell you real quick how I landed an account on Opal. A hedge-fund apparatchik I had gone on two dates with wrote me a recommendation letter after I told him I didn't think it was going to work out between us, but did he still want to be friends? (And what do friends do?) It was his fault. He was the one who'd bragged to me about having an account on Opal in the first place. He even helped me pick out my profile pictures.

I left the Alma Mater field blank.

Opal's about what you'd expect—videos of narcissist after narcissist who summer in Thailand. I swiped past all of the alpha males, which took days. Men who were earnest or men who were silly were the only men I could take seriously.

My boyfriend's in that five percent of men just below the top ten percent that most women don't know to circle the ocean for. You know the type. He'd be unstoppable if just one or two more things had gone right for him, but as it were, the wrong job, the wrong company, the wrong alma mater, had kept a handsome face trapped beneath a monthly gym membership. You'll recognize these five-percenters from their personality—pure souls who'd lucked out facially, two sevens on the slot machine, but whose unambiguous victory had been stunted by some existential lemon. Some of them have eating disorders. Some google "male plastic surgery" in the dead of night. In my boyfriend's case, he's pansexual. Open-minded women have rejected him, which gives him a chip on his shoulder, and now he thinks he understands what it's like being a minority. My boyfriend's the type to care a *lot* about social issues. I'm not sure he even knows we're interracial.

His parents have a house in Cape Cod.

His dad's a federal judge and his mom's an immigration attorney. Until we met and he started

showing me pictures on his phone of his childhood vacation home, I had never really thought a lot about Cape Cod. I only knew it as the brand of a potato chip one step up the class ladder from Lay's, and as a cultural metonym for white-sand beaches, old stone lighthouses, and the Kennedys. Brenda grew up in a trailer park in New Jersey, but I'm sure she must have learned at her master's program what Cape Cod was.

Cape Cod was where she wanted to be.

And as it so happens, Brenda?

**Cape Cod is me.**

*I wanted so desperately to tell her but I couldn't.*

I wanted so *badly* to inform Brenda that I had more important things to worry about than making sure the lipsticks were alphabetized, or that the powders were arranged in alternating shades of rouge and beige: namely, that a splitting image of one of the stars you read about in *Us Weekly* had a life to live, and she was going to enjoy the fruits of her beauty—fruits that Brenda could only live vicariously through (I tallied six missing issues of *Us Weekly* over the course of a year; no other magazine had gone unaccounted for during the same period except for a single issue of *Better Homes & Gardens*, which I found one night crumpled on top of Brenda's desk).

The way Brenda's eyes lit up whenever she talked about Mackenzie Davis—I just needed Brenda to recognize my own beauty in the same way! It flipped around, you see, like a head trip—sometimes Brenda bowed to her true queen, and sometimes she said mean things to me. I wasn't thought of as "intelligent" by Brenda, and I could never tell if it was because of my race or my beauty—the two possibilities flickered around in my head like a dueling candlelight until one night I decided, "It's both," and just let it die.

Resentment was brewing between me and Brenda.

Ever since I realized I would have to lie to her about my Cape Cod trip, because September would be the back-to-school rush, and there was no way Brenda was okaying me those vacation days. At Not-Quite Sephora, Brenda's first rule was: "Just be honest. I want to know everything."

But do you, Brenda?

Do you want to know how I plan to get out of work during the back-to-school rush, because I'll be

with my boyfriend and his three Yale Law classmates traipsing across Cape Cod? Do you really want to read about a beautiful woman's life in *Us Weekly*? (Just steal my diary.) I'll call in sick. I'll lie and cough right to your face over the phone, Brenda, and I'm *telling you it's corona*. I don't *have* to be honest with you about anything because you rule by fear, not trust, and in a world of fear without trust anything goes.

Fear without trust is the animal kingdom.

And Not-Quite Sephora is the animal world.

The night before my last day at Not-Quite Sephora, Brenda humiliated Ashley in the stock room. (Ashley had made the mistake of asking her for paid time off for a wedding in December.) I didn't overhear it, but I heard about it, which was enough. I have always had a way with words, and I gave Brenda some direct evidence of it by way of a resignation letter I wrote to the district manager—only it wasn't really a resignation letter, it was more like a record of how Karen McHiggins was a terrible supervisor, sent to Corporate and cc-ed to the entire floor. (What mattered wasn't that I had cc-ed the entire floor, but that the next morning, every single person on the floor congratulated me.) The group chat I'm in with Ashley and Gabby pops off more than ever now ever since I quit, only I didn't mean to quit.

I only wanted to take a truthful temperature.

Brenda showed all of her cards when I showed up to my shift the next day. "*Nina? My office. Now.*"

I made eye contact with Ashley, who was already in her uniform, and we both smiled.

She kind of gave me an eye hug.

I wore nude lipstick that day.

The email I had sent Corporate was subject-lined "Management's Mismanagement," and it listed six bullet points about Brenda's bad behavior (one involved throwing a purse at a mannequin; the last five were instances of emotional abuse). It ended with a paragraph about Brenda's encounter with Ashley in the stock room (Brenda had called Ashley "unlikable," "self-absorbed," "a fucking dipshit").

I laid out the case like the lawyer I couldn't afford to be (I had other interests, hobbies, and pursuits in middle school, like not killing myself). Brenda was probably shocked I could write. She was

probably shocked I could read, but I wield words as weapons—that's the only thing you ever have to know about me. (In third grade, I won the spelling bee too.)

How did I dress for work the day after I wrote "Management's Mismanagement" (and really I should say the morning after, because I sent the email at 4 a.m. and had to wake up three hours to let an exterminator in)?

I looked like a star.

I had even spent the last six months of my life casually coaxing Brenda toward the mixed-race celebrities I wanted her to subliminally see me as. Cape Cod would smile. I'd fit in well there, because in my late forties or early fifties I'd have the sort of personality that everybody at Beach Road would know to be impressed by—I could lift my life up to heights that the bourgeois rabble couldn't even see. Not a single one of my applications to a white-collar job had ended in a palatable offer. Not-Quite Sephora, founded in Vermont, has a labor-friendly CEO. My benefits were good—I even had vision and dental. "One way or another, I'm bringing up my Cape Cod trip," was the last clear thought I had before knocking on Brenda's door.

"Come in," a harsh voice gruffed.

I opened the door.

"Close that please," was the first thing I heard Brenda say before she and I even made eye contact.

I closed the door dutifully.

Karen McHiggins was standing next to her desk in red pants and a black blazer. She had tied her hair into pigtails that day for some reason, although her hair was so short that they ended up looking more like ringlets, and her eyes behind her glasses were blue and pixel-like. Brenda made a quick gesture at the floor with her hands, almost like she was trying to say "*Enough!*", and then said: "What is going *on*, Nina—what is going *on*, because *I do not understand you!*"

Her voice was hoarse.

I couldn't take my eyes off her red pants—but your blazer is black?—so I just said, "I—" while panning my gaze to her desk, waiting for her to continue.

Brenda's desk was a mess.

Just like her thought processes.

“If you have ever had a problem with me, you could have come to me *directly*. What have I *always* told you, Nina—” Brenda was now screaming.

Brenda thinks screaming has an effect on me.

She’s right—loud noises do have an effect on me. Elevated decibels have an effect on every animal that evolves through nature. How much do I hate Brenda right now? My eyes are staring into hers—but I don’t see a human.

I see an animal.

The power of volume is that it throbs the ear—and ears desire music. Ears desire harmony. Wild animals make me forget poetry as I bolt into the jungle—how much do I hate the woman screaming into my ears right now? Well, there’s a simple formula for that, and all of us are making it, even if we don’t know that we’re making it. We take how much anxiety we experience from being around a person, and then we multiply it by a factor.

My factor is 1 when that person is equal to me.

My factor is a fraction of 1 when that person is homeless.

My factor is greater than 1 when that person is greater than me.

And for Brenda my factor was 42,137—that’s 1 for every dollar that the winds of Brenda’s turbulence lorded over me, granting me vision and dental.

The ensuing number is a hatred.

How much anxiety was Brenda creating in me? Well, for starters—how much did I *distrust* Brenda? (And how much did I secretly want Brenda to like me?) All the eyeliner I wore to work every day—it wasn’t for mall patrol, it wasn’t for Ashley, and Lord knows it wasn’t for Gabby.

It was for me.

But maybe a little bit of it was for Brenda.

And how much taller does Brenda tower over me right now?

And how much taller does Brenda tower over me right now? Well, let's see—I submitted 42 job applications, all non-retail. Interviewed at 11. Final-rounded at 7. Received an offer at two—both in New York, which I couldn't afford. A young white boy at a social media marketing firm told me during the interview that I was "obviously brilliant" before offering me an internship. By July, Brenda towered over me like a god. I fell asleep at night fantasizing about her supervillain origin story. Brenda complained so much about Americans who weren't vaccinated that I once asked her if she was a childhood polio survivor. "Where in the world did you get that idea?" Brenda laughed, and I laughed too. "Oh, I was just curious." "How many times have I *told* you, Nina..."

My expenses have been going up, thanks to my new boyfriend. (As a matter of fact, I *am* the type of girl to go Dutch!) Taking over Brenda's position would mean a four-percent raise. To my surprise, Brenda took off her glasses, put them on top of a crinkled magazine on her desk, and started crying. Like, actually crying.

Two actual teardrops leaked out of her eyes.

Self-pity makes me uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable when the powerless do it, because now I have to *do* something, and it makes me uncomfortable when the powerful do it, because now I have to eat them. When somebody more powerful than me expresses self-pity, I can't help it: I want to guillotine them. I want to take away their right to exist, but I want to watch them suffer first. If I were God, I'd invent Hell just for Brenda. It satisfied me that Brenda would most likely die without children or a partner. I want all capitalists in the First World to die without children or a partner, but to have afterlives that go on forever.

It still doesn't seem enough though.

Brenda's office has a desk, no windows, and a door that leads to the loading dock. A poster on the wall behind her desk, and I was just noticing this about her office now for the first time, was of a lighthouse in Cape Cod. "*—the back-to-school rush—*" Brenda was saying, dabbing her eyes with a tissue.

The ceiling light was fluorescent, and the walls were built of the same beige bricks that made up my elementary school. I once applied to a master's program in sociology at Johns Hopkins University.

I got in, too.

I hate it here in America—doesn't anybody else? Is this really *that* much better than the Soviet Union?

Sympathy for Brenda?

Brenda who lorded over my vision and dental like a bureaucratic algorithm—my boss Brenda?

I did good work.

I was Brenda's *star employee!* (I left that part out because I'm not the bragging type.) The only work I couldn't charge for was the work I didn't want to do—navigating around the runes and mysteries of Brenda's uncharted sensitivities like Leif Erikson. The truth was, I *hated* Brenda for not being able to see me as a beautiful woman just because I wasn't a beautiful white woman like the pin-up girls she'd gone to school with in New Jersey. Brenda bleeds white guilt, but she rarely ever let me massage any of it toward my favor, except superficially (and you can guess by now how I feel about superficiality). Brenda's insincerity dehumanized her to me. We humanize each other first as leaps of faith, and then through trust—and nothing about Brenda's way of existing suggested she could be trusted by me. Not her white guilt. Not her New Jersey liberalism.

Not even her tears.

In fact the longer Brenda cried, the more intensely I wanted to punish her—the phrase “white bitch tears” comes to mind. I wondered if Brenda sincerely didn't understand that if I could push a button to keep her trapped inside a hole for the rest of her life, I would, and her tears only made me want to push harder. Still, it gave me a start to see—this woman who could take away my ability to not go into debt like checking “Buy Now” on Amazon—reduced before me into a person now trying to trick me into believing she has a soul.

Don't the workers of the world understand?

**Powerful people don't have souls.**

Brenda having a soul would have meant taking my ideas about the BOPUS orders seriously, and not dismissing them out of hand because how could *any* good ideas come from Nina, the pretty one, if Brenda's even not-racist enough to see me as pretty (BOPUS is industry slang for “buy online, pick up in store,” and it's basically brought Not-Quite Sephora to its knees—that and Brenda's mismanagement). I could divide my hatred of Brenda by a factor to account for the fact that she

was fat and unmarried—but whose fault was that, Krispy Kreme? Do you think I actually *like* exercising?

Are you ready for some real talk now?

I can tell you about the runner's high until I'm blue in the face, but I'm not built inside like a runner—I'm built inside like a girl who understands that nothing tastes as good as being pretty *feels*. I don't know how American society decayed to this point—my Ph.D. dissertation in sociology at Johns Hopkins would have been about the link between an artificial society and the importance placed on appearances, but I couldn't afford to go, I had *actual* work to do in middle school (like not killing myself) so I never bothered thinking very long and hard about anything. "Quitting would mean losing my gym membership," I suddenly remembered.

A new recognition suddenly dawned over me—no gym membership would mean no Cape Cod. It takes a couple hundred months and a couple thousands steps to get there, but trust me, I've worked out the odds.

(I make my brain work for me.)

I looked at the lighthouse poster behind Brenda's desk and said: "Brenda, it's just—how you treated Ashley last night in the stock room..."

"You weren't even *there!*" was what a clear-headed Brenda would've said, but Brenda the Tender said nothing.

"I heard about it from Gabby," I continued. "You know, we've talked about this so many times."

"I know, I *know*," Brenda whispered.

"You don't know how to create a functional work environment sometimes. Groups are held together by trust, not fear."

I wasn't quitting.

I was saving everyone at Not-Quite Sephora from Brenda's bad temper. Brenda's boss Charles would understand—he'd say, Nina made some good points in this email, but it sounds like you guys have everything worked out, so get back to work—and everyone would move on.

Only Brenda would now be moving into the light.

She would see how her anxieties about Not-Quite Sephora's declining sales figures were spilling into her paranoias about job security ("And what will I do with all of my *competence* now that I can't find a job because I'm old, fat, and ugly?") and have been spilling into us as sarcasm and curt dismissals ever since her second day on the job. (Her first day was lovely—I was obsessed with Brenda! I even nicknamed her "cool Mom" to Gabby and Ashley.)

How Brenda appeared to me that first day was how Cape Cod once appeared to me too, before this weekend—white-sand beaches, old stone lighthouses, the Kennedys.

Cape Cod had told me a story—and so had Brenda when she first took over Kristi's post at Not-Quite Sephora (Kristi got pregnant and never came back). Cape Cod's story was Yale Law, benevolence, *intellectualism*. Brenda's story was that she was loud and earthy and understood how to make an entrance—if she'd been honest, she would've just said: "I can use my power to make you feel however I want you to feel about yourself. I'm an emotional abuser."

But the story I heard, because I'm a gullible sweetheart, was "Fun Mom."

I laughed along amiably to "stressed-out Mom," bopped along bewilderedly to "not everything is functional upstairs Mom," and—how do I put this?

I didn't like the mother who had a master's degree.

Self-protection was Brenda's middle name, and nothing I said using the tools of reason or logic could penetrate the fortress of Brenda's first impressions—that's the *definition* of "closed-minded," by the way (Brenda has a lot to say about closed-minded people—that's the crazy part).

How we look is the first story we tell each other about who we are. It's our audiovisual accompaniment to the words that make up the second half of our story—the "spoken half"—and everyone understands that this isn't fair, everyone understands and then does nothing. Brenda isn't the only person who learned how to survive in America by going to an American middle school. She's only lost her temper at me a couple of times, but I've been tracking all of them.

I've been watching you like a falcon, Brenda.

I've been watching you like a true A student.

True A students are out of favor in America for a reason. We're only mortal, but we're a little bit supermortal too. Because what I *really* didn't like about Brenda was her insincerity—"When have I ever said *no* to you, Nina?" Brenda was now drying her eyes with a tissue and screaming.

It was a change in the air—a subtle bit of misdirection that she probably thought I was too stupid to catch (I'm not).

**I was the powerful one now.**

And Brenda McHiggins was now "the victim."

"You threatened to fire me right after Easter for being late on a BOPUS order," I treaded carefully.

"Nina, ninety-nine per *cent* of our Google ratings come down to the BOPUS orders—"

Which is why I said you needed a better system for assigning roles for when people aren't—

"Which is why I said you needed a better system for assigning roles for when people aren't *here*."

"But I never threatened to *fire* you."

"You told me you'd have my name forwarded to Charles!"

"Exactly!"

"Which is the same as getting fired!"

"That isn't *true*, Nina—I would have protected you."

This statement was so stupid that it almost broke my brain. "Wha—*protected* me: do you not understand how Charles operates?" Brenda turned her back to me, waved her hand in the air, and said: "I'm not going to go into this with you again" as she looked for her glasses.

"It's right there," I said. "On top of *Better Homes & Gardens*."

"Oh," Brenda said without acknowledging me.

Brenda put on her glasses and then sat down into the chair, which made a sound like it was about to

snap in half.

This was how she always liked to berate us—from her chair. I had seen that painting of the lighthouse behind Brenda's desk so many times—it just never occurred to me that it was Cape Cod. Sometimes, I'd overhear Brenda berating Gabby on my way to the restroom and I'd think, "Well, she isn't *wrong*—Gabby *is* kind of stupid—but that's still not the way you talk to her. You have to incentivize her to trust you first." (Gabby was the one who first changed Brenda's nickname from "Fun Mom" to that cunt with a stick up her ass.) Ashley and I burst out laughing. (What else is there to do inside a dying country?)

"Everyone here is so short-tempered with each other because *you set the tone*. I've been too afraid to ask you for three days off in September to go on a trip with my boyfriend for our *one-year anniversary* because I knew you weren't going to say yes, so I was just going to take them off as sick days—and that's not a functional work environment if people are constantly doing things like that all the time, because what you really need to do is go to Charles and ask for more staff."

"*This* September—oh, Nina, you got to be kidding me!"

It was the first honest thing I ever heard Brenda say.

I thought about my naïve dream from earlier—how I thought I was going to turn Brenda around.

How I thought I was going to save the store. "The problem is we're *un-der-staffed*" was what I should've said—I get that now, I do, and I don't know why I couldn't wear it in my mouth even as it was trying to form inside my subconscious. Because other forms were rising in me now too, forms like: "Brenda is a world-class manipulator. She butters you up just to brine you." (I couldn't even trust her *tears*, and if you can't trust someone's tears, you can't trust them to ever find help.) I don't know how I'd fare if it were just me and Brenda on a deserted island—I could see her killing a cougar for us with her own bare hands, but I could also see her killing me. "I never said that, I just told you I'd have to forward your name to Charles"—Brenda the liar. Brenda who could probably play dead about as well as she could play stupid—any falcon worth its weight in bird could see through it.

"I've been having issues with my boyfriend," I suddenly blurted out.

Where had I learned this from?

Middle school.

"The anniversary trip means a *lot* to him, and I can't even say yes or say no—it just hangs there over

us, because he knows about the back-to-school rush. And he's not even someone I—even feel fully *comfortable* with in some ways. But I'm also scared to lose him, I'm scared every time I come into work on Tuesday because I don't know how you're going to change my hours. Everything we do revolves around my not having enough time—I'd have issues building a perfect relationship with him if we had the rest of our lives to ourselves on a deserted island, but every weekend until closing? He works a normal *job!* He's tired all the time too, but he makes time to see me and I *can't*—I can't come to you about anything."

I didn't cry.

But I did smile in my head:

**"Wanna play victim, bitch?"**

I could see Cape Cod now—I could see its lighthouse drawing my boyfriend and I closer and closer, I could see us dancing now to The Strokes at midnight like we were back in middle school because I didn't *want* this to be the rest of my life, I don't *want* retail, I don't *want* resumes and cover letters and I don't *want* to meet any more Brendas—what I want is for the Brendas of the world to collapse at my feet, but all I can see are the Brendas of the world closing in on me until death and so I need a *release*, I need to go back to middle school (I was popular in middle school, I can admit that now, I had bee-stung lips, and a bee-stinger too)—I need The Strokes (haven't you ever made out with a boy in a hot tub while stroking your nails across his abs, parting the hair where his lower back begins?)—"Is this it? ... Is this it?"—(my boyfriend and I swimming in the stars of our liberation, and I'll give him all the vision and dental that he likes)—prey: always just a one-click order away (and we'll eat lobster, because lobsters hold harms forever)—I the warm body and he the warm arms, holding me in his lanky-panky forever (and if Connor ever got a gym membership I would die—I don't *need* a perfect 10, I can settle for an 8.9)—my captors: do they know? Do they understanding I'm not living my one true life? Wearing Ray-Bans while gazing out at the Atlantic from a yacht, because Comfort is my one true God—I'm ready, Mr. DeMille, for my one true closeup to begin. *How am I still in Brenda's office?* I'm twenty-seven years old—how am I twenty-seven years old and *still* smoldering in Brenda's office? In middle school I listened to The Strokes while everyone else listened to pop hip-hop—another Universe has been calling to me all my life. And all it would take was just a few more thousand steps to get there.

I've been running every day since I was thirteen. I don't even eat my desserts correctly—I just spit and chew.

Ashley and Gabby remind me of who I was back in middle school. I had power over everyone back

then except Abercrombie Couture (not her real name). Abercrombie was the class favorite—it's hard to explain, but among the very-outgoing girls, Abercrombie was Frivolity Personified. And when only the people who needed to see it could see it, Abercrombie was the cruelest human you've ever met—she'd ignore you so subtly you'd drive yourself crazy for days asking the other girls if she was mad at you. Back then I had already begun telling myself I was too cool to care—but I still have nightmares about Abercrombie sometimes, about the way she'd say hi to everybody else at the party except me. "I just can't deal with your emotional up and *downs* anymore, Brenda! Like I'm *sorry*—I've defended you to Ashley and Gabby so many times! I'm sick of having these conversations with them."

Abercrombie, I later realized during college, must have been unsettled by how candidly I could talk about her behind her back. That was my little power over her, and I'd like to think I wielded it gracefully. (Abercrombie was dethroned by a lurid sex scandal involving a used condom in eighth grade, and I'd like to believe I led our class to a more open and inclusive place after her dismissal.)

"Three days—where you trying to go, Wuhan?"

"No. The Cod."

"The what?"

"The Cod."

"Where's that?"

"In Massachusetts."

"You mean Cape Cod?"

That was how quickly I realized I had fumbled the ball—that was the speed at which I realized I had fumbled the fuck-you—the one thing I needed to do correctly and I had *fumbled the ball trying to cross the finish line*. "It's the Cape, not the Cod sweetie," Brenda was already huffing to me by the time I realized my mistake, with a smile on her face. She'll deny it to this day, and in absolute candor I can't really say it was a "physical" smile—I don't remember what it looked like, I don't remember if Brenda actually huffed or if she even moved her mouth all that much at all, it was more in the eyes, but that bitch smiled.

I grew up in Nevada.

My boyfriend graduated from Yale Law and with him I can see a way *out* of my life—and I really don't understand why that's such a terrible thing to say. And I'm about to lose him—it's in between the lines, but I can just *feel* it, I have him wrapped around my little finger because that's the only way I'd ever have any man who loomed so tall over me, with him it'd be Cape Cod until the end of my days and nobody would ever laugh at me for calling it the Cod again—I'll just rename it.

My hatred of Brenda in that moment was rivaled only by my childhood hatred of Abercrombie Couture.

But I knew I had to proceed gingerly.

I began to feel like Leif Erikson again—what other uncharted sensitivities do you *have*, Brenda?

### **Do white people really have white guilt?**

Verbalizing the subconscious is like navigating by stars—*Pequod* knows where it's trying to go, it just needs the conscious mind to plot out the steps to get there first—only I couldn't verbalize *any* of this, all I could do was feel the mind for throbs like the twitches of a rat's tail inside the forest below—and I was throbbing for a release, I was throbbing all my middle-school embarrassments, I was throbbing Cape Cod. A woman who understood nothing but appearances stood in front of me, utterly preoccupied with her own self-preservation—neither wise, open-minded, nor beautiful—but who could mean the difference between *me* and my income, between *me* and my livelihood, between *me* and my boyfriend breaking up (which would mean the difference between *me* and Cape Cod)—and I couldn't even get anyone on the second floor to take her *magazine theft seriously*. How do I even begin to tabulate all her subtle knife-wounds to the psyche?

My favorite song by The Strokes?

"Hard to Explain."

"You can correct the way I say things all you'd like, but it doesn't change the fact that I live in *fear* of you—okay? I go home every night and *cry*. You bully Ashley and Gabby every day but I'm *not Ashley or Gabby*—okay? You have not created an emotionally safe environment in the workplace and it's affecting my *life*—okay? I'm *sorry* you take yourself so seriously, and I'm *sure* it has nothing to do with your fear that all the girls who thought you'd never amount to anything in middle school might be *right*, but if you have to terrorize other people just to feel better about yourself, that's not how I *roll*—okay? That's not me. The way you talk to Ashley, Gabby, Mike, Chris—it's *un-ac-cep-ta-ble*,

Brenda."

And this is where my ship was trying to go:

"I don't think you belong in your position. So that's what I told Charles."

I'd set fire to Cape Cod if I could.

I'd set fire to my boyfriend's lake house, I'd set fire to Brenda's *Us Weeklies*, and I'd certainly set fire to the poster of the lighthouse with seagulls behind Brenda's desk.

"I don't work here anymore. Not until you apologize to Ashley," I added quickly.

My speech was now outpacing my life decisions.

"And I'm not going to be *manipulated* by you anymore, *okay*? Because you *know* how hard I work, you know how much I give to this store every day but Wannabe-Nordstrom isn't my *life*, okay? I am *not living the life I want to live every single day*—so *that's* my life, okay?"

Were ordinary people in the Soviet Union this unhappy? Has anyone ever bothered to ask them?

The only thing I ever knew how to do around Brenda was say whatever I needed to say to make her feel comfortable.

Like seagulls exploding out of a cove, that was the only thing Brenda ever seemed to value: her personal comfort. I don't remember how Brenda looked in that moment. She kept darting her eyes between *Better Homes & Gardens* and the floor, and her glasses were foggy. I gazed at Brenda with a falcon's stare and said:

**"Think of last night as my last straw."**

It'd be worth it, you know.

It'd be worth it to suspend my gym membership for a few months to see Brenda have to swallow the fruits of her own disorder. I hadn't coaxed Brenda into reacting the way she did to Ashley's request—I had only coaxed Ashley into talking to her, and that was a sincere act of friendship: "You have to stand up for yourself with people like that, Ashley."

"That's easy for you to say, Brenda and you are like best friends."

"We are *not*."

"You have her wrapped around your little finger, Nina."

"No I *don't*," I said, and then I hit Ashley's face with a big fat pillow until feathers fell out, which of course never happened because Ashley and I don't have open and honest conversations about anything. All Ashley said was "You're probably right," and I could sense in Ashley's eyes that she was perceptive enough to understand I was probably wrong—but even *I* couldn't pick that up, at least not consciously, so in a way, Ashley doomed herself by failing to correct me.

I was Brenda's star employee and everybody knew it.

I've been an A student all my life.

I'm the picture of good anger management.

Management hates it when you quit. That's the one thing you can still lord over them, even during a recession (and July 2022 in America was anything but)—replacing an employee costs time, and time is money. Every store manager knows that—even Brenda (her management woes don't source back to her inability to optimize).

And then Brenda said something so stupid that for a second I almost thought she was parodying Gabby.

"I thought you and I could speak openly to each other."

Brenda.

Girl.

Just because you tell me about the medications you take for your back problems doesn't mean we're friends.

Was this really happening right now?

"I don't know what you expect me to say," I told Brenda. "I did speak openly in the email."

Was Brenda really buying into Ashley's delusion that management and workers can be just friends?

Or was she just calculating that I—because I'm pretty—was stupid enough to buy into it too?

"Actually, no—the way you engage with others doesn't seem intended to provide a pathway for sincere and open conversations. You have a 'No Assholes' policy that seems intended to make other people suppress their true feelings around you at all times, because anybody who contradicts you is automatically an asshole."

I didn't say that.

I just said: "It can be intimidating to speak to you sometimes."

Even when you try to laugh with me about your muscle relaxants, I laugh back, but what I really want to say is "Brenda, a certain percentage of the population is going to have *back* problems, and you have given me no particular reason to care about *yours*." I think again now about if Brenda and I were stuck on a deserted island. I'd probably have to save her life from the elements from time to time, and that'd build trust between us. "What we'd need to do is charter a plane somewhere, and have the plane crash. That's the only way to resuscitate this relationship."

"How many times have I *told* you, Nina, you can come to me about anything..." and before I could even respond, Brenda began comparing our dynamics to a mother-daughter relationship and I was one second away from saying, "Bitch, that's *your* problem," but I caught myself and said calmly:

"Brenda, that's the *problem*."

Brenda looked at me earnestly.

"Just, that right there—the word you used. I don't think you really understand other people's boundaries? I tell you obligatory anecdotes from my personal life because you specifically ask to hear them, *not* because I want to volunteer them—again, that's how afraid I *am* of you, Brenda, because I don't even feel like I have the right to tell you that my dating history is, actually, now that I think about it, none of your business. And then you *lecture* me about how I talk to my boyfriend? Again, because you *asked* to hear the details, and you actually make it so that now I'm thinking about my boyfriend at work instead of focusing on my job, which you then get mad at me for? I don't think you really understand, Brenda, how your friendliness comes *off* when it's mixed with so much—*neediness*, I don't know, this *need* to *control* everything all the time—to make everything

*perfect."*

The first time I ever met Brenda, we got along so well that after our shift we went to a Red Lobster on the other side of the strip mall, where she bought me three milkshakes. I told her about growing up with my mom in a trailer park in Nevada and she told me about growing up with her mom in a trailer park in New Jersey—we laughed a lot that night. I don't even remember what we laughed about, but we were both talkers, Brenda and I, we were both tellers, and we were both showers. I could tell after my first milkshake that Brenda must have floated in the margins of the sub-popular crowd in middle school, and she all but confirmed it on the second (she just had one of those *I've seen it all* energies).

"So how does it feel being back in the Northeast?"

"Honestly?" Brenda said, grabbing a French fry. "I'm ready."

You couldn't hear the ocean from where we were sitting, but you could hear a highway.

I understand Brenda.

I really do.

Sometimes at night, while I fantasized about quitting a company whose Corporate was famous for giving their employees vision and dental (and anyway, what else would I do besides marketing or retail? In what other way might I be called upon to serve the good people of America?), I'd climax with an image of Brenda sitting alone at home on a Thursday night (that was Brenda's day off), crocheting to Fleetwood Mac, with a cat rubbing up against her ankle. The only mystery was how many paintings of beaches dotted her apartment.

I know Brenda doesn't talk to her mother anymore ("Neither do I!" was probably one of our first laughs), and I'd fantasize about how much she probably secretly admired me—because I was pretty—because I could always talk my way into classes and parties she could only stare through the curtains of (I once helped Brenda create an account on Plenty of Fish), and now it was too late for her because she was already in her *late* forties or early fifties—and I?

**I was bound for Cape Cod.**

"What are the locals there like," all summer long I used to wonder. I work at a Nordstrom now.

And I no longer wonder.

"Oh, sweetie—it's called the *Cape*, not the *Cod*."

Wasn't that how she had said it?

Even in her most helpless moment, she was still so condescending—she was still just so *frivolously* condescending—I mean think about the stakes here, girl, you're about to lose your star employee right before the back-to-school rush—was the poison dart worth it?

Was the poison tip worth it, Brenda?

"I don't think it's healthy for me to work here anymore," I suddenly blurted out. "You're not a good influence on me."

"What can I say to make you stay just through September?"

It was so quick and direct that it snapped me instantly out of my sympathy spell.

Brenda.

*There's* the Brenda I knew—Brenda, you're back!

And you're still holding onto threads in the air.

This store *will* dissipate, Brenda. Your job *will* dissipate, and then you'll have to go right back out there again and sell your competence at another round on the roulette wheel. (Just don't end up at another store that sells beauty supplies, Brenda—I don't think you *quite* understand what they're really telling the world.) "I don't think there's anything you *can* say, Brenda. I know how hard the last few months have been for you, and I thought very long and hard about doing this to you. But I have to prioritize my own mental health."

"You know Charles is only giving me a year."

Brenda said this with a vulnerability I had never heard from her before.

Her voice was like a child's.

Guilt—it's impossible to summon it for a person you've already dehumanized. Cockroaches die every day.

My subconscious was churning again—I would have a child with my boyfriend someday, and I would protect her from people like you, Karen McHiggins. "Brenda, you have the mental age of a child," was what I really wanted to say to her. "When I fuck up at work, *who* do you think I go to? *Nobody*—do you understand that, Brenda, because adults take responsibility for their *shit*."

But I would have to sugarcoat it, because someone with the mental age of an Abercrombie would be unable to understand that the powerful can't be friends with the powerless, no matter how hard they tried—and someone with the mental age of an Abercrombie would also need everything sugarcoated for them.

"Brenda, I don't know how to break this to you but there *isn't going to be any back-to-school rush!* It's not 2019 anymore—Covid *killed* retail. We don't know whether we want to be bargain basement or high-end and *the middle class is dead*, everyone wants either a bargain or an experience! What did they teach you in that master's program?"

Only I couldn't say *that* either, because Brenda would somehow spin it into me losing my cool, which is the one thing I never do—I've been one thing and one thing only all my life, and that's an A student.

"You've given your life to a dinosaur, Brenda—move on. Department stores are dead—this isn't the '80s anymore. Your image of America—it's a *façade*, and I can prove it. It's that picture of the lighthouse you keep behind your desk that you pilfered from returned merchandise, and I can prove that too. We're like explorers in an uncharted land. Things are going to fall apart for us in ways we have no templates for, just like they did for all of the generations before us—only *they* weren't as trapped inside the *façade* of returned merchandise as we are! Settled mores are changing. This century could still look like anything—it's *all* up for grabs, and more and more people are just beginning to wake up to this new dawn. Maybe what you really need to do is start a YouTube channel. You have the voice for it, you have the charisma, and you have the storytelling abilities—we could *all* profit from hearing from your perspective, only nobody will because you're not young, thin, or beautiful, but hey—it's worth a shot! You'll have a better chance there at the lighthouse than you do in retail."

Only I didn't say any of this either, because I knew Brenda couldn't hear a word I was saying. Brenda was dead between the eyes—her soul died in middle school, and she's been dragging the corpses of would-be lives ever since.

"You're not a particularly smart or competent person, Brenda, and what's happening right now speaks for itself. You didn't just get *unlucky*, Brenda."

Brenda once whistled to me when she saw me change into a sundress as I was leaving my afternoon shift—"Whose heart are you breaking tonight, Nina?"

"None of your business!" was what I wanted to tell her, but I wanted to let Brenda live vicariously through me—it was the only gentleness I could ever offer her.

"You know Charles is only giving me the year," Brenda had said, and she was staring into the void now. I could feel her back pain. She had given her whole entire life to Not-Quite-Sephora, six days a week, and on most nights on my way to the restroom I could hear "Dreams" by Fleetwood Mac playing from a small Bluetooth speaker. I looked at Brenda and said: "I have no idea what you want from me. It's not my job to make you look any better than you are at *your* job. And I don't know what your agreement with Charlie has to do with anything—in fact, I had lunch with him the other day."

Brenda lifted her eyes.

"What?" she said stupidly.

"Oh, I'm sorry—I was *trying to get a vacation approved*. No, Brenda. I needed to talk to him about a few things."

"What things?"

And then, before I could offer an answer, "What are you trying to say, Nina? Just *spit it out!*"

"You have a *problem*, okay? I've seen the way you've unraveled in the last few months—Gabby and Ashley are afraid of you, Chris is about to quit, literally *nobody* can handle your emotional volatility anymore. Everybody's so short-tempered with each other all the time and coming to me for help, and it's not *my* job to help them—that's *your* job! You've created a situation where nobody can even *talk* to you. We just smile at you out of *fear*. You don't command anybody's respect—you know that, right? So we basically have to operate without a supervisor—you understand that, don't you?"

It feels good to eat.

I no longer have a gym membership anymore. Instead, I jog every Tuesday and Friday at the public

park.

"So yeah—so I guess I just thought it was about time Charlie heard all of this. He's actually *very* reasonable if you talk to him in a reasonable way. He said he'd look into opening one or two more positions for us to cover the weekends. But you probably won't be there to oversee it."

Not-Quite Sephora was founded as a regional competitor to J.C. Penney in 1991. It never expanded beyond the Northeast, Minnesota, and California, and it's about to die—it's only a matter of time. Unless if maybe Corporate in Burlington saw the light and hired someone like me and actually *listened* to her ideas for turning all of their stores into "experiences," which is what I've been trying to tell Brenda every time she questioned one of my lipstick arrangements. A lot of what I miss about middle school is the taste-test of freedoms I enjoy every day now as an adult: you build a friendship with the highest person who'll take you in.

*That's* how you climb a hierarchy.

Brenda looked at me like a wounded animal.

There really isn't ambiguity, is there, about which one of us would survive if it were just you and me on a deserted island. A new recognition was forming inside of Brenda, and I didn't want to be there to watch it settle in—you can't treat people like you treated Ashley the other night in the stock room, this isn't the '80s anymore. Of course, Brenda was too obtuse to work out that I was only bluffing. The truth was, I *had* talked to Charlie briefly on the second floor, but he just told me to "put it all in an email," and I knew he was never going to speak to Brenda long enough to ever contradict anything I had just said—Charlie's not exactly the open type. Besides, Charlie *did* agree to look into hiring more part-timers, the way Charlie ever agrees to anything—by pretending it was his idea all along. "It's the unreliability of when customers come in, that's the problem," Charlie had explained to me. ("Yes, that's true. Unreliability is *a/ways* the problem," I told Charlie.)

You can't rely on other people's testimony when you ask them about Abercrombie Couture.

You have to come to me.

I've seen sides of Abercrombie that nobody else has.

"So what's the dating scene like out here?" Brenda had asked me that first night at Red Lobster, while popping a French fry. I remember trying not to look at Brenda like she was serious. "It's just men!" I remember laughing to Brenda in front of two tall glasses of milkshake. "It's just a bunch of

*men*—that's the only way I know how to put it!"

And then Brenda in her black blazer and black pants laughed too.

Like we were girlfriends.

"I would've given you those vacation days, Nina," Brenda finally said in a whisper. "If I had just understood that *you* knew what you were doing when you took them—what you were doing to the store—I would've given them to you."

A new sincerity is trying to grow in the air all around us—I can hear its infant-screams, can't you? (Couldn't Brenda?) "Oh my *God*, Brenda. This is about so much more than whether or not I can go on one trip to Cape Cod."

"That is *all* this is about to you, Nina, and don't you pretend otherwise—"

"No, it isn't."

"—because you have a fancy boyfriend now."

"Leave Connor out of this."

I don't really know where my life's going to go after Cape Cod. Colson's mental health—it causes collateral damage to people (Colson was one of Connor's three friends that had stayed with us at the lake house). I don't really think he understands that his actions have consequences on other people. He thinks I'm one of the popular kids who terrorized him in middle school, but the truth is—I'm just a little bit higher or lower on the pecking order than he is. All of us are—all of us down here. I can't really bring myself to fully hate him for what he did, but then I remember what his life is and I do—I hate him by several orders of magnitude more than I ever hated Brenda. And what Colson and Brenda both have in common, of course, is their dripping self-pity: they're both absolutely lacquered in it (what is it about competitive social environments that produces so much self-pity anyway, dripping like honey?). I didn't have too much compassion for Colson when he asked me to feed some of his honey back to him with my fingers. "Money," I wanted to tell him.

"How much money you have is an easy way to tabulate what your self-pity is worth to me."

But to be honest, I couldn't even lift a finger to care.

Cape Cod was only four days ago, but it's already just another memory now—that's how all of our weekends are bound to end. Several hundred more of these and then it's lights out. Connor and I listened to the first season of *Serial* on the way up, and as we walked through Martha's Vineyard later that afternoon, we saw fifty migrants from South America file onto a bus bound for a military installation.

There were cameras and cake everywhere.

We're all participants in this gladiatorial contest to see who ends up in Cape Cod as the sun sets over our lives.

Colson recently wrote a book called *A Stick of Dynamite in the American Elite*.

I wish him luck.

I have plans for him, you know.

No matter what his next chess move is—I have a plan to stop him. I left Brenda alone in her office that day. I never learned where she went after she was dismissed from Not-Quite Sephora, all I remember is Ashley and Gabby coming over to hug me as I grabbed my purse from the break room, and they both quit two days later. It was because there's something in my soul that doesn't like to see other people are in pain—even people without souls like Brenda (Colson doesn't count because he's not really a human in my eyes, he's more like a bad anecdote you shake off)—that I found myself hugging Brenda right before I said goodbye, holding her as she kept saying to me that I'd been like a daughter to her: "Brenda—Brenda, *listen* to me. My boyfriend has an ex-boyfriend whose stepmom *a/so* has a drinking problem, okay? Brenda—are you listening to me? They live in Westport..."

**Cape Cod will die.**

It's only a matter of time before it collapses under the weight of its own contradictions. I sail America's values like Leif Erikson now—other people have built their homes and comforts here, but I don't mind. I wonder sometimes what Abercrombie Couture anesthetizes her listlessness to these days—HBO? Unsubtle affairs with younger men? "How long before mundane dehumanization bears fruit?" I smile to myself every day at Nordstrom, as I walk around the counter to deliver my customer's parcels to them personally.

I see Abercrombie sometimes in the eyes of the women I help at Nordstrom. They're all moms, and

if that's the final meaning of our lives—then yes, I agree.

Let's all be moms.

You don't know the Hell I'll reign over America's guilty class in the twenty-first century, but you will soon: I will mother the destruction of America's gilded gilts into existence. I broke up with Connor this morning. Something about his reaction to Colson's breakdown in Cape Cod just didn't sit well with me—he couldn't see through Colson's insincerity, and that makes me think he might not have what it takes in this life to go where I'm trying to go. At my new job at the mall, I nibble on old memories like a woman who hasn't eaten now in years. The last person I ate was my narcissistic mother in Nevada—she ruined my childhood—she was the Leif Erikson of my formative years—but then again?

So was my middle school.

College feels like a million years ago. My sorority sisters are all married with kids now. Mothers will do anything to protect their young.

#MeToo.

*September 27, 2022*