

yes please

AMY POEHLER

PICADOR

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writing is hard:

a preface

I LIKE HARD WORK AND I DON'T LIKE PRETENDING THINGS ARE PERFECT. I have learned that about myself. And I don't have any fear of writing. I have been writing my whole life: stories and plays and sketches and scripts and poems and jokes. Most feel alive. And fluid. Breathing organisms made better by the people who come into contact with them. But this book has nearly killed me. Because, you see, a book? A book has a cover. They call it a jacket and that jacket keeps the inside warm so that the words stay permanent and everyone can read your genius thoughts over and over again for years to come. Once a book is published it can't be changed, which is a stressful proposition for this improviser who relies on her charm. I've been told that I am "better in the room" and "prettier in person." Both these things are not helpful when writing a book. I am looking forward to a lively book-on-tape session with the hope that Kathleen Turner agrees to play me when I talk about some of my darker periods. One can dream.

It's clear to me now that I had no business agreeing to write this book. I have a job that keeps me shooting twelve hours a day, plus two children under six. I am going through a divorce and producing many projects and falling in love and trying to make appointments for cranial massage. All of these things are equally wonderful and horrible and keep me just off balance and busy enough to make spending hours alone writing seem like a terrible idea. Plus, I am forty-two, which is smack-dab in the middle. I haven't lived a full enough life to look back on, but I am too old to get by on being pithy and cute. I know enough now to know I know nothing. I am slugging away every day, just like you. But nonetheless, here we are. I've written a book. You have it.

Everyone lies about writing. They lie about how easy it is or how hard it was. They perpetuate a romantic idea that writing is some beautiful experience that takes place in an architectural room filled with leather novels and chai tea. They talk about their "morning ritual" and how they "dress for writing" and the cabin in Big Sur where they go to "be alone"—blah blah blah. No one tells the truth about writing a book. Authors pretend their stories were always shiny and perfect and just waiting to be written. The truth is, writing is this: hard and boring and occasionally great but usually not. Even I have lied about writing. I have told people that writing this book has been like brushing away dirt from a fossil. What a load of shit. It has been like hacking away at a freezer with a screwdriver.

I wrote this book after my kids went to sleep. I wrote this book on subways and on airplanes and in between setups while I shot a television show. I wrote this book from scribbled thoughts I kept in the Notes app on my iPhone and conversations I had with myself in my own head before I went to sleep. I wrote it ugly and in pieces.

I tried hard not be overly dramatic, like when I wrote this poem in Social Studies class at age thirteen:

Amy Beckler

May 21, 1985
Social Studies
1:10

When life attacks you from every side,
It hurts —
too much
And the most
painless
easiest way out is —
death
to survive.

At this very moment I am attempting to write this preface in the dark while my oldest boy, Archie, sleeps next to me. He is dreaming and talking, and I am turning down the light on the screen as I write about how hard it is to write. Writing a book is awful. It's lonely, even with Archie beside me and my editors nagging me. During this process I have written my editors e-mails with subject headings such as "How Dare You" and "This Is Never Going to Work" and "Why Are You Trying to Kill Me?" Most authors liken the struggle of writing to something mighty and macho, like wrestling a bear. Writing a book is nothing like that. It is a small, slow crawl to the finish line.

Honestly, I have moments when I don't even care if anyone reads this book. I just want to finish it.

If you are reading this, it means I have "finished." More likely, it means my editors have told me I can't keep tinkering anymore. I will take this time now to thank you for buying this and reading it and eventually turning it into a feature film with Kate Winslet/Katy Perry/Katie Couric as the star.

Let me offer this apology. Please excuse this self-indulgent preface. I know what I am doing. I am presenting a series of reasons as to why you should lower your expectations, so that you can be blown away by my sneaky insights about life and work. I am a grown woman. I know my own tricks! I know how good I am at bemoaning my process and pretending I don't care so that my final product will seem totally natural and part of my essence and not something I sweated for months and years. One of the things I have learned about me while writing about me is that I am really onto myself. I have got Amy Poehler's number, I'll tell you. I also learned that writing topless tends to relax me. Go figure. Life is a mystery.

While writing this book I made many mistakes. I kept a copy of Nora Ephron's *Heartburn* next to me as a reminder of how to be funny and truthful, and all I ended up doing was ignoring my writing and rereading *Heartburn*. I also kept a copy of Patti Smith's *Just Kids* nearby, which was awful because her writing is beautiful and poetic and how dare she. I also read and reread wonderful books by wonderful women: Rachel Dratch's *Girl Walks into a Bar . . .*, Sarah Silverman's *The Bedwetter*, Mindy Kaling's *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me?*, Lena Dunham's *Not That Kind of Girl*, Caitlin Moran's *How to Be a Woman*, and Tina Fey's *Bossypants*. All are superb and infuriating. My dear friend and *Parks and Recreation* cast-mate Nick Offerman had the nerve to start and publish his book *Paddle Your Own Canoe* in less time than it took me to write this preface. I congratulated him when he presented it to me and then immediately threw it in the garbage.

I made other terrible mistakes while I tried to write this book. I asked people who have already finished books for advice, which is akin to asking a mother with a four-year-old what childbirth is like. All the edges have been rounded and they have forgotten the pain. Their books are finished and in their libraries, so all they end up talking about is how you need to "stick to your guns" and "not let the editors push you around" and that "your title is important." Stick to my guns? I am hiding from my editors because I feel so guilty that I haven't worked hard enough and given them something genius or interesting or new. My title is important? Well, I am screwed, because right now I am vacillating between *The Secret 2* and *Mosquitos Love Me: A Woman's Guide to Getting Her Funk On*. The only people I can stand to read right now are Pema Chödrön, who reminds me that life is messy and everything is a dream, and Stephen King and Anne Lamott, who are two of my favorite writers on writing. But

now that I think of it, both of them are funnier than me, so they can tie their sixty-eight books to their ankles and go jump in a lake.

Many people suggested ways I could carve out more time for my writing, but none of their suggestions involved the care and consideration of the small children who live in my house. Every book written by men and women with children under the age of six should have a “sleep deprived” sticker. I could find lots of discussion online about “waiting for the muse” but not enough about having to write in between T-ball games. I want more honesty from people who write books while they have small children. I want to hear from people who feel like they have no time. I remember once reading about J. K. Rowling, and how she wrote *Harry Potter* while she was a single mom struggling to make ends meet. We need to hear more stories like that. However, I do need to point out that J. K. never had to write a personal memoir AND make it funny AND do it while she had to be on camera with makeup on, AND she had ONLY ONE KID AT THE TIME IF I REMEMBER CORRECTLY. (This could be wrong; editors, please fact-check. Also let marketing know I am very interested in *Yes Please* becoming the next *Harry Potter*.)

In my desperation, I searched out other writers who were struggling and asked them if they wanted to take a break from their own misery and contribute to my book so I would have fewer pages to fill. I thought about asking Hillary Clinton but realized she was too busy writing, finishing, and publishing her own book. If I had timed it better, I could have contributed to her book and she could have contributed to mine. But I blew it. I guess my essay “Judge Judy, American Hero” will have to be read in *Harper’s* at a later date.

Writing this book has been so hard I wrote a *Parks and Recreation* script in three days. It was a joy, writing in a voice that wasn’t my own. I have also written two screenplays in the time it has

taken me to crank this sucker out. (This isn't true but whatever. I can write a screenplay in my sleep. Shiiiiit.)

So what do I do? What do we do? How do we move forward when we are tired and afraid? What do we do when the voice in our head is yelling that WE ARE NEVER GONNA MAKE IT? How do we drag ourselves through the muck when our brain is telling us youare-dumbandyouwillneverfinishandnoonecaresanditistimeyoustop?

Well, the first thing we do is take our brain out and put it in a drawer. Stick it somewhere and let it tantrum until it wears itself out. You may still hear the brain and all the shitty things it is saying to you, but it will be muffled, and just the fact that it is not in your head anymore will make things seem clearer. And then you just do it. You just dig in and write it. You use your body. You lean over the computer and stretch and pace. You write and then cook something and write some more. You put your hand on your heart and feel it beating and decide if what you wrote feels true. You do it because the doing of it is the thing. The doing is the thing. The talking and worrying and thinking is not the thing. That is what I know. Writing the book is about writing the book.

So here we go, you and me. Because what else are we going to do? Say no? Say no to an opportunity that may be slightly out of our comfort zone? Quiet our voice because we are worried it is not perfect? I believe great people do things before they are ready. This is America and I am allowed to have healthy self-esteem. This book comes straight from my feisty and freckled fingers. Know it was a battle. Blood was shed. A war raged between my jokey and protective brain and my squishy and tender heart. I have realized that mystery is what keeps people away, and I've grown tired of smoke and mirrors. I yearn for the clean, well-lighted place. So let's peek behind the curtain and hail the others like us. The open-faced

sandwiches who take risks and live big and smile with all of their teeth. These are the people I want to be around. This is the honest way I want to live and love and write.

Except when it comes to celebrities without makeup. I want my celebrities to look beautiful. I don't need to see them pumping gas.

I tried to tell the truth and be funny. What else do you want from me, you filthy animals?

I love you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large loop at the end of the "y".

instructions for

how to use this book

THIS BOOK IS A MISSIVE FROM THE MIDDLE. It's a street-level view of my life so far. It's an attempt to speak to that feeling of being young and old at the same time. I cannot change the fact that I am an American White Woman who grew up Lower-Middle-Class and had Children after spending most of her life Acting and Doing Comedy, so if you hate any of those buzzwords you may want to bail now. Sometimes this book stays in the present, other times I try to cut myself in half and count the rings. Occasionally I think about the future, but I try to do that sparingly because it usually makes me anxious. *Yes Please* is an attempt to present an open scrapbook that includes a sense of what I am thinking and feeling right now. But mostly, let's call this book what it really is: an obvious money grab to support my notorious online shopping addiction. I have already spent the advance on fancy washcloths from Amazon, so I need this book to really sell a lot of copies or else I am in trouble. Chop-chop, people.

In this book there is a little bit of talk about the past. There is some light emotional sharing. I guess that is the “memoir” part. There is also some “advice,” which varies in its levels of seriousness. Lastly, there are just “essays,” which are stories that usually have a beginning and an end, but nothing is guaranteed. Sometimes these three things are mixed together, like a thick stew. I hope it is full of flavor and fills you up, but don’t ask me to list all the ingredients.

I struggled with choosing a quote that would set the table for you and establish an important tone once you started reading.

I thought about Eleanor Roosevelt’s “A woman is like a tea bag; you never know how strong it is until it’s in hot water.”

I dabbled with “A woman who doesn’t wear perfume has no future” from the seemingly hilarious and real “girl’s girl” Coco Chanel.

I was tempted by “I always play women I would date” from Angelina Jolie.

But Wordsworth stuck with me when he said, “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.” This book is a spontaneous overflow in the middle of chaos, not tranquillity. So it’s not a poem to you. It’s a half poem. It’s a “po.” It’s a Poehler po. Wordsworth also said that the best part of a person’s life is “his little, nameless, unremembered, acts of kindness and of love.” I look forward to reading a book one day in which someone lists mine. I feel like I may have failed to do so. Either way, it’s obvious I am currently on a Wordsworth kick and this should give you literary confidence as you read *Yes Please*.

The title *Yes Please* comes from a few different places. I like to say “Yes please” as an answer to a lot of things in my personal and professional life. The “yes” comes from my improvisational days and the opportunity that comes with youth, and the “please” comes

from the wisdom of knowing that agreeing to do something usually means you aren't doing it alone.

It's called *Yes Please* because it is the constant struggle and often the right answer. Can we figure out what we want, ask for it, and stop talking? Yes please. Is being vulnerable a power position? Yes please. Am I allowed to take up space? Yes please. Would you like to be left alone? Yes please.

I love saying "yes" and I love saying "please." Saying "yes" doesn't mean I don't know how to say no, and saying "please" doesn't mean I am waiting for permission. "Yes please" sounds powerful and concise. It's a response and a request. It is not about being a good girl; it is about being a real woman. It's also a title I can tell my kids. I like when they say "Yes please" because most people are rude and nice manners are the secret keys to the universe.

And attention, men! Don't despair! There is plenty of stuff in here for you too. Since I have spent the majority of my life in rooms filled with men I feel like I know you well. I love you. I love the shit out of you. I think this book will speak to men in a bunch of different ways. I should also point out that there is a secret code in each chapter and if you figure it out it unlocks the next level and you get better weapons to fight the zombie quarterbacks on the Pegasus Bridge. So get cracking, you task-oriented monkey brains.

I still wish this book was just a compendium of searing photographs I took in Afghanistan during my years as a sexy war correspondent, but hey, there is still time.

Shall we?

how i fell in love with improv:

boston

I WAS IN FOURTH GRADE AND IN TROUBLE. The students of Wildwood Elementary School in Burlington, Massachusetts, shifted in their uncomfortable metal seats as they waited for me to say my next line. A dog rested in my arms and an entire musical rested on my shoulders. I was playing Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, and it was my turn to speak. Dorothy is *Hamlet* for girls. Next to Annie in *Annie* and Sandy in *Grease*, it is the dream role of every ten-year-old. Annie taught me that orphanages were a blast and being rich is the only thing that matters. *Grease* taught me being in a gang is nonstop fun and you need to dress sexier to have any chance of keeping a guy interested. But *The Wizard of Oz* was the ultimate. It dealt with friendship and fear and death and rainbows and sparkly red shoes.

Up to this moment, I had only been onstage twice. The first was for a winter pageant in second grade. I was dressed as a snowflake and had to recite a poem. The microphone was tilted too high,

and so I stood on my tiptoes and fixed it. A year later I was in a school play in the role of a singing lion. My “lion’s mane” (a dyed string mop worn on my head) kept slipping, and I surreptitiously adjusted it midsong.



My parents would later point to these two small moments and tell me that was when they knew I would be a performer. Honestly, I don’t think I had a burning desire to act at that young age. Back then, I didn’t know acting was a job, really. All I knew was I liked roller-skating in my driveway and making people sit and watch. I liked setting up dance contests in my basement and being the only judge. I liked attention. Attention and control. Attention, control, and, it turns out, laughs.

In *The Wizard of Oz*, the part of Dorothy isn’t exactly the comedic lead. She spends a lot of time listening to other people explain

themselves. She is the straight man among a bunch of much juicier character parts. The Wicked Witch of the West is more dynamic. The Scarecrow has a bigger arc. Even the Lollipop Guild has a killer song. Dorothy just asks a lot of questions and is always the last to know. I didn't care. At the time, I was in fourth grade, which, for me, was a heavenly time to be a girl. It was all elbows and angles and possibility. I hadn't gotten my period or kissed a boy. My beloved grandfather hadn't yet died of a heart attack on my front porch on the Fourth of July. I wanted to be an astronaut or a scientist or a veterinarian and all signs pointed to my making any or all of that happen. The worst things I had encountered to this point were lice (which I'd had), scoliosis (which I didn't), and the threat of nuclear war (a shadow that loomed over everything). My generation was obsessed with scoliosis. Judy Blume dedicated an entire novel to it. At least once a month we would line up in the gym, lift our shirts, and bend over, while some creepy old doctor ran his finger up and down our spines. Nuclear war was a high-concept threat, two words that often rang out in political speeches or on the six o'clock news. Our spines. Lice. Nuclear war. The Big Three.

AIDS was just around the corner, but we didn't know it yet. The only AIDS I knew were Ayds, an unfortunately named caramel diet candy my mom had in our kitchen cabinet. The anxiety-filled eighties would dovetail nicely with my hormonal teenage years, but in fourth grade, in 1980, I felt like I would live forever.

I stood onstage in my blue-checked dress, Toto in my arms, and looked at the audience of parents, teachers, and students. I breathed in and had a huge realization. I could decide right then and there what the next moment would be. I could try something new. I could go off script and give something a shot. I could say *whatever* I wanted.

It was because of this Dorothy Moment that I had the nerve, years later, to try out for the high school musical. It was my senior year and Burlington High School had been a great place for a floater like me. I weaved in and out of activities and groups, and hid on occasion. My school was big and sprawling, with four hundred students in my graduating class. I played basketball and soccer for a while and I thought I might be some kind of athlete. My dad was a semipro basketball player in college and I inherited his hand-eye coordination. I was a decent point guard and middling fullback. Softball was the most fun because of the opportunity to shit-talk. But my enthusiasm for team sports fell away once I realized I would never be great. (Once they move you from shortstop to second base, you might want to start making other plans.) I was a cheerleader for a while. I did student council. I started to hang with the popular crowd but was never considered the prettiest or most interesting. I tended to blend. In my high school yearbook I was voted third runner-up for “Most Casual.” I never figured out if that meant most casual in dress or in overall manner. In any case, I didn’t come in first. I guess the two ahead of me wanted it less.

Every year our school put on one musical, and in my senior year I auditioned for *Once Upon a Mattress*. I didn’t know any of the “theater kids” by name. My experience with musicals was limited, at best. In our sophomore year, my class had taken a trip to New York City and gone to a few Broadway shows. We saw a production of *The Fantasticks*, which I liked, and *A Chorus Line*, which I loved. The part of Diana Morales spoke to me. I loved that she was short and blue-collar. I loved how she stood up to her grumpy and withholding acting teacher, Mr. Karp. I loved how she cried when that bastard died. Because she FELT NOTHING. So badass!

On the same trip, we visited the Empire State Building and the World Trade Center, as well as swinging by 30 Rockefeller Center

and taking the *SNL* studio tour. We pressed our noses against the glass and watched the *SNL* cast rehearse. It was 1985, and Anthony Michael Hall and Robert Downey Jr. were on the main stage. I would meet both of them twenty years later—I directed Anthony Michael Hall in a reenactment of *Sixteen Candles* for a VH1 program, and I met Robert Downey Jr. in a Hollywood coffee shop, where I pitched him my idea for a little indie film called *Iron Man*.

In *Once Upon a Mattress*, I was cast as Princess Winnifred, a part that had physical set pieces and lots of loud singing. It would be the beginning of me playing a long line of crazy big-mouths.



Carol Burnett had originated this role on Broadway and I looooooved *The Carol Burnett Show*. I loved Carol Burnett. She was funny and versatile and up for anything, but most importantly, I could tell that the ensemble around her loved her. I could tell that she was a benevolent captain of that team and was having a hell of

a time. Watching that show proved that good comedy can be fun and you don't have to treat people badly to be on top. I felt the same when I watched Gilda Radner, Andrea Martin, and Catherine O'Hara. You could tell that the cast adored them. You could see Bill Murray look at Gilda in a way that told you he loved her, for real.

I was lucky enough to meet and do an interview with Carol Burnett once, for *TV Guide*. I told her that I loved everything about that show: how it represented time spent with my mother, how it reminded me of myself as a young woman learning to love comedy, how when she took off her makeup and answered questions at the end of the show it was such a generous act because she seemed like one of us. She said, and I quote, "Oh, Amy, you are my new best friend!" It's in print, I swear.

A lot of people ask me if I always knew I was going to be on *Saturday Night Live*. I think the simple answer is: yes. I don't mean to sound cocky. I didn't know if I had the talent or drive, I just had a tiny little voice whispering inside of me. That same voice would tell me I would meet Carol Burnett someday, I would find love, I would be okay. We all have a tiny whispery voice inside of us, but the bad ones are usually at a lower register and come through a little clearer. I don't know where the good voice came from. It was a mix of loving parents, luck, and me. But ever since I was a small child, I would look at places where I wanted to be and believe I would eventually be on the other side of the glass. I believed that someday in the future, I would be rehearsing onstage at *Saturday Night Live* while a gaggle of sophomore girls would be waving to me. All of them wearing cooler outfits than my classmates and I wore that day.

My high school musical did not offer a shirtless Zac Efron, but it did provide me with many lessons. I learned that I loved being in a theater, attending rehearsals, and building sets. I loved listening to

the director and groaning about rehearsing choreography. When I would leave the bright sunlight of outside and enter into the dark and empty theater, I would feel like a real artist with a true sense of purpose. Time passed and the world spun, but all that mattered was the thing in the room you were making together. I started to go to theater parties and tried cigarettes. I had floated into the right pool, finally.

The play itself went well, from what I remember. It was a blur of adrenaline and costume changes. I reveled in this new feeling of being incredibly stressed and pulling things off last-minute. (A talent that I hope will help me finish this goddamn book—dear lord, when will I finish this book?) My parents rushed to congratulate me after the show. “You were so great, Ames!” my mom said. “You don’t have to go to college if you don’t want to!” my dad exclaimed. My mother hit him in the arm and told him he was crazy. This one-two punch of support and realism would help me deal with the many years of rejection I didn’t know were ahead of me. I then thought about the idea of being an actress and tried it on for size.

Back to fourth grade, *The Wizard of Oz* and Dorothy. I stood onstage in soft Dearfoams slippers. My mother had bought two pairs at Bradlee’s, and we spray-painted them silver and sparkly red. My hair was braided and I was wearing my own denim overall dress and blue-checked blouse. It was my time to speak during the tornado scene. All of the other actors were supposed to be running around and reacting to heavy winds. A teacher made a whistling-wind sound effect on a handheld microphone and construction-paper tumbleweeds were rolled across the stage. In my arms was Toto, played by a real dog. Some sucker had allowed us to cast their tiny poodle as Toto, which in hindsight begs the question: What kind of maniac hands over their tiny dog to a bunch of ten-year-olds for an elementary school play?

We were in the second night of a blistering two-night run. The previous evening I had delivered my line “Toto, Toto! Where are you?” during the tornado scene. The problem was the damn dog was in my arms at the time. The audience laughed. Lightning struck—and I discovered three important things. I liked getting a laugh. I wanted to get one again. But I wanted to get it in a different way and be in charge of how I got it. So, I stood onstage that second night and tried something new.

Trying something new was all I wanted to do when I graduated high school. I was so excited to go to Boston College that I distinctly remember wiggling in my seat as I wore my cap and gown. I wanted to go, go, go. Arriving at Boston College was like moving to a new country. I was unprepared for the fact that most of the kids were a lot wealthier than me. I met prep school kids who knew how to decorate their rooms with tapestries. I became friends with private school athletes who were familiar with living away from home. I studied with foreign students who had their own credit cards. When I got the name of my new freshman roommate sent to me in the mail, I noticed she was from Illinois and so I immediately assumed she lived on a farm. I was wrong. We spoke on the phone and I asked her if classical music was playing in the background and she informed me that was the sound of her doorbell. Her name was Erin and she ended up being very nice and fun. We would sing the soundtrack to *Les Misérables* by the light of a neon beer sign her dad sent us to put in our dorm room window.

I looked at my high hair and heard my New England accent and realized I was certainly bringing a lot of Boston to my Boston College experience. I decided I might want to tone both my hair and the lazy r’s down a little. The accent is a really hard thing for me. It reminds me of my family and my childhood, but it’s one of the

worst-sounding accents out there. I love Boston, but we sound like idiots. Our mouths never close and we talk like big, lazy babies. I might get shit for this but as a true Bostonian all I will say to that is FUCK YOU, AHHSOLE, IF YOU GOT A PRAWBLEM WIT ME THEN LET'S MEET BY THE RIVAH!

During my first week of freshman orientation I went to a performance at the Eagles Nest, the BC cafeteria and general social center. I was struck by how much fun it looked. It was ensemble comedy. It was improvisation. It was quick jokes and group mind dynamics. Everyone was getting to act and be funny and write and direct and edit all at the same time. The group was called My Mother's Fleabag and it was the oldest running improvisational group on campus. I wanted in. I met Kara McNamara, one of the performers. She was a Boston girl and would eventually be my roommate, and she pushed me to audition, though I have no memory of actually doing it. I think it was mostly short-form improvisational games. I do remember that it was thrilling. I went back to my room and waited.

We were told that we made the group by being woken up in the middle of the night and taken to a secret location to drink. It was like being hazed for one day, which is the exact amount of hazing I am able to withstand. We rehearsed constantly. We would spend hours arguing over one joke. Relationships were formed and trust was built. My Mother's Fleabag performed shows a couple of times a year. A cover band played "Pulling Mussels (from the Shell)" by Squeeze, and we would run out in baseball shirts. We did short-form improv games, sketches, and songs based on specific Boston College humor. It was fun but not too cool, and it got me in front of an audience. I had a theater I went to every day and a group that needed me all the time. It was heaven.

Kara and I moved in with a bunch of men and women off campus and my college life sort of exploded in happiness. We used to host big and boozy parties. We had a “Good-bye to the Eighties” party and everyone dressed in costume. At least twenty different women arrived in sexy Robert Palmer–girl outfits. I dressed as Baby Jessica, the little girl who fell down the well. (And was successfully rescued! Important fact!) I wore pajamas and pigtails and made my face a little dirty. Sexy stuff. We lived on a street called Strathmore and our motto was “Live More, Love More, Strath More.” I learned about Charles Busch and Kate Bush. I sat with the cool Jesuit priests and talked about Edna St. Vincent Millay. I took classes like “The Medium Is the Message” and “The Male Lens.” I carved out a pretty groovy off-campus curriculum in what was a very competitive academic program. I spent my days directing scenes from *True West* and my nights writing sketches about bad cafeteria food. I studied Shakespeare and learned to control my voice, and at night I huddled with a bunch of misfits and practiced being stupid on purpose.

I didn’t really know what kind of actor I wanted to be back then. I didn’t have a real plan or even a mentor to follow. I just knew the things I didn’t want. I didn’t want to be tied down and stuck. I didn’t want to decide who I was going to marry or where I was going to live. I took a public speaking class in college with Craig Finn, a friend of my cousin Lynn (Sheehan) Gosselin. Craig is a great musician who is now the lead singer of the band Hold Steady. I remember feeling like we both knew a secret: we were going to keep performing no matter what, and we both were going to have no money, stability, or children for the next ten years. I think we should stop asking people in their twenties what they “want to do” and start asking them what they don’t want to do.

Instead of asking students to “declare their major” we should ask students to “list what they will do anything to avoid.” It just makes a lot more sense.

I was in my off-campus Strathmore kitchen when Kara told me she was going to move to Chicago after she graduated. She was a year ahead of me and had heard about these classes at the comedy mecca Second City. Further investigation led us to research ImprovOlympic, and they also had classes. That settled it. Kara was going to Chicago and was going to get an apartment, and I would join her a year later. “I can be a waitress anywhere!” I said to my horrified parents, who had remortgaged their small house twice to pay for my brother and me to go to college.

I started to believe in myself. I realized I could say whatever I wanted.

In the second and final performance of *The Wizard of Oz*, I decided to take control during the tornado scene. I paused, put the blinking dog down on the stage, and walked a few feet away from it. “Toto, Toto! Where are you?” I said, pretending to look for my lost dog in the fearsome storm. The dog froze and played it perfectly. I got laughter and some light applause for my efforts. I had improvised and it had worked. One could argue that it worked because of the dog. A good straight dog can really help sell a joke. Whatever. I have been chasing that high ever since.

plain girl
vs.
the demon

I HATE HOW I LOOK. That is the mantra we repeat over and over again. Sometimes we whisper it quietly and other times we shout it out loud in front of a mirror. I hate how I look. I hate how my face looks my body looks I am too fat or too skinny or too tall or too wide or my legs are too stupid and my face is too smiley or my teeth are dumb and my nose is serious and my stomach is being so lame. Then we think, “I am so ungrateful. I have arms and legs and I can walk and I have strong nail beds and I am alive and I am so selfish and I have to read *Man’s Search for Meaning* again and call my parents and volunteer more and reduce my carbon footprint and why am I such a self-obsessed ugly asshole no wonder I hate how I look! I hate how I *am!*”

There have been forty million books and billions of words written on this subject, so I will assume we are all caught up.

That voice that talks badly to you is a demon voice. This very patient and determined demon shows up in your bedroom one day

and refuses to leave. You are six or twelve or fifteen and you look in the mirror and you hear a voice so awful and mean that it takes your breath away. It tells you that you are fat and ugly and you don't deserve love. And the scary part is the demon is your own voice. But it doesn't sound like you. It sounds like a strangled and seductive version of you. Think Darth Vader or an angry Lauren Bacall. The good news is there are ways to make it stop talking. The bad news is it never goes away. If you are lucky, you can live a life where the demon is generally forgotten, relegated to a back shelf in a closet next to your old field hockey equipment. You may even have days or years when you think the demon is gone. But it is not. It is sitting very quietly, waiting for you.

This motherfucker is patient.

It says, "Take your time."

It says, "Go fall in love and exercise and surround yourself with people who make you feel beautiful."

It says, "Don't worry, I'll wait."

And then one day, you go through a breakup or you can't lose your baby weight or you look at your reflection in a soup spoon and that slimy bugger is back. It moves its sour mouth up to your ear and reminds you that you are fat and ugly and don't deserve love.

This demon is some Stephen King from-the-sewer devil-level shit.

I had a lucky childhood. My demon didn't live in my room. My demon just walked around my neighborhood. I grew up with a naturally pretty but very earthy mother who never told me to put on makeup or change my outfit. I didn't have the kind of mother who flirted with my friends or wore tight jeans.

In middle school I was small and flat chested, which was also a lucky break. You can kind of slip around unnoticed that way, which is exactly what you want. I was made fun of for being short, but it was mostly by boys who were shorter than me. I rarely brushed my hair

and I was skinny. I bordered on being a tomboy, but not enough to be labeled one. It was a wonderful but short-lived time when I was in my body but not critical of it. If you ever want to see heaven, watch a bunch of young girls play. They are all sweat and skinned knees. Energy and open faces. My demon would receive my school picture and maybe gently suggest I “do something about those eyebrows,” but for the most part it left me alone. I felt safe in the middle—a girl who had a perfectly fine face but not one that drew any attention.

Then I started caring about boys and the demon pulled into my driveway.

The eighties were a strange time for teenage fashion. We wore silk blouses and shoulder pads, neon earrings and jodhpur pants. Come to think of it, our pants were especially weird. We also wore stirrup pants, parachute pants, and velvet knickers. It was a real experimental pant time. We curled our hair and sprayed it until it was crunchy and high. We wore jewel tones and too much makeup. With the exception of a few naturally beautiful girls who knew how to balance all of these elements, we looked ridiculous.



Dating in middle school often meant walking around the mall together and spending hours on the phone picking “your song.” There was light hand-holding and maybe a kiss on the cheek, but it was really all very innocent. I “dated” one boy and our song was “Faithfully” by Journey. Every time it played my body would turn electric, and I would stare out whatever window I was near and reminisce about experiences I hadn’t had. Is there a word for when you are young and pretending to have lived and loved a thousand lives? Is there a German word for that? Seems like there should be. Let’s say it is *Schaufenfrieglasploit*.

Dating in high school was very different. Boys suddenly went up your shirt. Girls were expected to give blow jobs and be sexy. You had to be hot but not a slut. You had to be into sex but never have it, except when your boyfriend wanted it. If you had sex you had to keep it a secret but also be very good at it, except not too good, because this better be your first time. Darling Nikki masturbated to a magazine, but Madonna was supposedly still a virgin. It was very confusing. Once high school started, I began to see the real difference between the plain and the pretty. Boys, who were going through their own battles started to point out things about me I hadn’t yet noticed. One told me I looked like a frog. Some told me I smiled like a Muppet. A senior told me to stop looking at him with my “big, weird eyes.” I looked in the mirror at my flat chest and my freckles and heard a sound. It was the demon, suitcase in hand. He moved in and demanded the top bunk.

Now, as I continue, please know a few things. I usually find any discussion about my own looks to be incredibly boring. I can only imagine what a yawn fest it is for you. But I cannot, in good faith, pretend I have fallen in love with how I look. The demon still visits me often. I wish I could tell you that being on television or having a

nice picture in a magazine suddenly washes all of those thoughts away, but it really doesn't. I wish I were taller or had leaner hands and a less crazy smile. I don't like my legs, especially. I used to have a terrific flat stomach but now it's kind of blown out after two giant babies used it as a short-term apartment. My nose is great. My tits are better than ever. I like my giant eyes, but they can get crazy. My ass is pretty sweet. My hair is too thin for my liking. My Irish and English heritage and my early sun exposure guarantee that I am on the fast track to wrinkle city.

Bored yet? Because I can't stop.

I went through high school and college and the years after dating all different types of people. I think if you lined them up in a row there would not be one single physical characteristic that they all shared. Most were white. Not all. Some were short and hairy, some were weird, some pretty, sweet, athletic. I would say that maybe most of the men I dated had a small current of anger fueling them, but that is the case for most funny people. I dated a lot of really funny people. And some medium funny. The best-looking ones were medium funny at best—it's tough to be both. In Chicago I dated a "male model" for a hot minute. It was the first time I had dated someone that "handsome" but the truth was he was in my improv class and not that funny, so I felt weirdly superior.

I made the mistake of snooping and reading the model's journal. We finished having medium-to-boring sex and I rifled through his things while he took a shower. I am pretty good at snooping around. It started in my own house, where I would go through every drawer and every pocket in my parents' room. Luckily, I didn't find much at home except for some well-worn copies of *Playboy* that seem positively charming compared to the up-close butt fisting that pops up on my computer these days when I am

trying to order salad tongs from Target. I honed my snooping skills when I babysat. It was then that I saw my first diaphragm, laxatives, and stacks of cash in an underwear drawer. I have basically ransacked every house I have been allowed into. My snooping tendencies have now abated somewhat, but I still have to fight the urge to immediately go through people's shit. I am not proud of this and I realize that by admitting this I am limiting future opportunities to be a houseguest.

Anyway, the bad part about snooping is you can find stuff you don't want to find. Snooping in e-mails, texts, or journals is a disaster. No one says good things about people in diaries. You tell people the good things. Diaries are for the bad things! I found an entry from model man that basically said he was kind of proud of himself for dating someone like me. He thought I was "funny but not that pretty, which was kind of like cool, you know?" He, like, wasn't "into me but like was totally down for the journey." Like, cool, man. I remember thinking, "HA HA! I know that already, dummy. We just had boring sex and I win because I tricked you with my personality! I don't even like you!"

Then I went home and cried and took way too long to break up with him.

But I was eventually okay. And you will be okay too. Here's why. I had already made a decision early on that I would be a plain girl with tons of personality, and accepting it made everything a lot easier. If you are lucky, there is a moment in your life when you have some say as to what your currency is going to be. I decided early on it was not going to be my looks. I have spent a lifetime coming to terms with this idea and I would say I am about 15 to 20 percent there. Which I think is great progress. I am not underestimating the access I get as a BLOND, WHITE lady from AMERICA.

Believe me, blond hair can take you really far, especially with the older men. It can really distract from the face. I am convinced I could have had sex with both Tony Bennett and John McCain if we weren't each happily married at the time we all met.

Decide what your currency is early. Let go of what you will never have. People who do this are happier and sexier.

Being considered beautiful can be tough. I know this because I work in Hollywood, which is filled with the most conventionally beautiful people in the world. Beautiful people can get objectified and underestimated. They didn't do anything to earn their genes so they have to struggle to prove they are more than their hot bods. People assume they are happy and good in bed, and most times this is not true. Plus, some beautiful people get a little addicted to being told they are beautiful and have real trouble when they get older, get less attention, or have their spouse cheat on them with someone considered "plain."

Improvisation and sketch comedy helped me find my currency. My plain face was a perfect canvas to be other people. There is nothing I like more than picking out wardrobe for a character. An *SNL* hairstylist once told me I had a great face for wigs. A Great Face for Wigs! What a compliment. (And also the title of my second book.) Looking silly can be very powerful. People who are committing and taking risks become the king and queen of my prom. People are their most beautiful when they are laughing, crying, dancing, playing, telling the truth, and being chased in a fun way.

Improvisation and sketch comedy let me choose who I wanted to be. I didn't audition to play the sexy girl, I just played her. I got to cast myself. I cast myself as sexy girls, old men, rock stars, millionaire perverts, and rodeo clowns. I played werewolves and Italian prostitutes and bitchy cheerleaders. I was never too this or not enough

that. Every week on *SNL* I had the opportunity to write whatever I wanted. And then I was allowed to read it! And people had to listen! And once in a blue moon it got on TV! And maybe five times it was something really good. Writing gave me an incredible amount of power, and my currency became what I wrote and said and did.

If you write a scene for yourself you can say in the stage directions, “THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN THE WORLD ENTERS THE BAR AND ALL THE MEN AND WOMEN TURN THEIR HEADS.” Then you can write a scene where you say, “SERGIO, THE MOST GORGEOUS MAN WE HAVE EVER SEEN, STARTS TO KISS HER.” If you are lucky enough to be directing this scene you can have casting sessions and bring in various attractive men and see if they are good at kissing you. You will arrive on set and the call sheet at the start of your day can read, “JASMINE HAS SEX WITH SERGIO IN A ROWBOAT,” and then you can go have fake sex with someone and still not cheat on anybody. Men do this all the time. Acting isn’t all bad.

Hopefully as you get older, you start to learn how to live with your demon. It’s hard at first. Some people give their demon so much room that there is no space in their head or bed for love. They feed their demon and it gets really strong and then it makes them stay in abusive relationships or starve their beautiful bodies. But sometimes, you get a little older and get a little bored of the demon. Through good therapy and friends and self-love you can practice treating the demon like a hacky, annoying cousin. Maybe a day even comes when you are getting dressed for a fancy event and it whispers, “You aren’t pretty,” and you go, “I know, I know, now let me find my earrings.” Sometimes you say, “Demon, I promise you I will let you remind me of my ugliness, but right now I am having hot sex so I will check in later.”

Other times I take a more direct approach. When the demon starts to slither my way and say bad shit about me I turn around and say, “Hey. Cool it. Amy is my friend. Don’t talk about her like that.” Sticking up for ourselves in the same way we would one of our friends is a hard but satisfying thing to do. Sometimes it works.

Even demons gotta sleep.