

Polly and Nina take Manhattan.

In which our heroine challenges herself in the Big Apple

“Ok, remind me why we’re here again?” Nina Hill was standing in baggage claim at Newark International Airport with an expression on her face that could kindly be described as truculent. If the describer wasn’t feeling kind, he or she might have gone for ‘thunderous’ or ‘homicidal’.

“Winter booksellers conference,” replied Polly, firmly. She was wearing a t shirt that said *booksellers do it between the covers*, she was carrying a tote bag that said *BDSM romance readers love a good binding*, and she had tickets to the conference saved on her phone. She knew why she was here, and she was here for it. Zero confusion in her mind. Solid on this.

“No,” said Nina, starting to raise her voice, “Not why are we in New York, I mean why are we in baggage claim? Why are we claiming baggage? We’re here for the weekend and you have a rolling suitcase and a garment bag already. When we met at the gate you didn’t mention...”

There was a pause as Nina noticed something over Polly’s shoulder and faltered into silence. She watched whatever it was for a moment, then her eyes slid back to her colleague’s face, which was doing its very best to look innocent. It did it well, but Nina wasn’t fooled.

“Polly,” said Nina, quietly. “You mentioned a literary-themed costume party, and I know how you feel about costume parties, but I assumed the change in location was going to stop you doing what you normally do.”

“Which is what?” asked Polly, turning to see if Nina was looking at what she suspected she was looking at.

She was. Polly’s face got more aggressively innocent, if that’s a thing.

Nina sighed, “Which is go big, and then go home. For Halloween you dressed as the twister from Wizard of Oz and demolished half the store before ten a.m.”

Polly shifted her energy and assumed an earnest expression. “Well, when I made the costume I thought clouds of black and grey tulle would be soft and, you know, kind of squashy.”

“We lost an entire display of children’s books. *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* was unrecoverable.”

“Well, force equals mass times acceleration...once I remembered that I moved more slowly.”

“You have never moved slowly.”

Polly shook her head and went to collect the costume. “This one is super light, it just wouldn’t fit in the overhead locker.”

“No shit,” said Nina, rolling her eyes and turning away. “You’re a fucking menace.”

“You love me,” said Polly, her arms around her costume, “You know it.”

Nina sighed. Polly was one of those people who carry chaos with them like an oversized backpack, vaguely aware that shit was going down right behind them, but confidently moving forward. They worked together at the bookstore Nina co-owned and had become true friends. This truthiness didn’t prevent Nina from seeing the chaos, but it did mean Polly was right – Nina loved her.

But now she was going to have to find a taxi big enough to carry a 6-foot recreation of Scout's ham costume from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and hope the driver wasn't going to charge them for an extra passenger.

It turned out Polly had constructed the costume out of fabric covered chicken wire (because that was how it was described in the book and Polly enjoyed accuracy when it amused her and wild inaccuracy if that was funnier) and she was able to squash it down sufficiently to get it into the minivan cab Nina was able to procure.

"I told you," Polly said airily, "It's really quite portable, just not portable enough for the main cabin. I'm surprised they didn't squash it more, I told them they could."

Nina had a momentary flash of the ham moving along a range of conveyer belts, like the sequence at the end of Toy Story 3 where the toys are trying to save Woody. In her mind the ham went up at a 45-degree angle on one conveyer and then down on another. It moved between suitcases, was glimpsed overhead passing through sorting machines and jerking unnaturally across junctions. Had the baggage handlers paused in their tales of drinking and football (she realized she was typecasting them, but daydreams sometimes require sketchy characterization) to gaze silently as the ham rumbled by? Or were they so inured to weirdness that they barely noticed?

She remembered one time she'd been waiting for luggage at LAX when a change in the atmosphere around the carousel had made her look up from her book (a Patricia Wentworth Miss Silver mystery) to see a pink rubber dildo wobbling along, stuck to the carousel belt by its suction cup base (why? storage? *Ok, that was fun, let me stick this here on the bathroom mirror (thwack, squeak) so I don't forget where I put it...?*) as the assembled crowd noticed, goggled,

comprehended, looked around for kids, giggled, and watched delightedly as the sex toy took on helmeted, heroic qualities on its journey back to where (one had to assume) the baggage handlers were peering out of the carousel entrance in giggling fits. She had half hoped someone would have the nerve to lean over and pluck it (cue suction noise) from the fanning segments of the belt, but no one did.

Nina looked out at the towers of Manhattan pencil potting on the other side of the river and felt the familiar fizziness that let her know she was teetering between anxiety and excitement. She mostly liked New York, but it made her feel like a small-town rube who should be leading a cow on a rope and chewing a piece of straw. Sure, Los Angeles was the USA's fourth largest city, but her neighborhood, Larchmont, felt and operated like a village, and Nina rarely ventured much further than her own comfortable world. There were millions of people in LA but most of them were individually clam-shelled in their cars, so she never got the sense of overwhelming biomass that she got in Manhattan. In small doses it was exhilarating, anything more than a couple of days and she felt like she'd chased three bags of cotton candy with a 2-liter bottle of soda and a line of high-quality cocaine. And not in a good way.

Polly, on the other hand, thrived in New York and this annual pilgrimage was always followed by a month of vacillation about whether she should relocate from LA. She loved Central Park, she loved Chinatown, she loved Greenwich Village, she loved it all. *I feel so warmly surrounded*, she would say, as she stopped on the street with snarling New Yorkers swerving and eddying angrily around her, *there's just so much energy here*. As it was barely above freezing every time they came Nina was never sure where Polly got the warmth from, but maybe, like the chaos, she carried it with her.

They entered the Lincoln Tunnel and Nina spent a pleasant five minutes wondering how long it would take for the tunnel to fill with the Hudson River if a tile came loose (she understood it would take more than a loose tile, it just didn't take more than a loose tile for her imagination to fill) but then they were out again and heading up the parkway to the Upper West Side.

Polly had pulled up the program guide for the conference and was reading out panels and highlights.

"There's an author breakfast tomorrow morning," she said, listing several writers whose books regularly sold out at the store, "and a panel I want to go to about pop-up merchandising after that, and then I was going to duck out for a while to go ice skating at Rockefeller Plaza." She looked up at Nina and raised an eyebrow, "I assumed you wouldn't want to do that, but I could have been wrong...?"

Nina shook her head, "Nope, you were right. I can barely stay upright *without* blades on my feet. I might come and watch, though."

Polly nodded. "There's also a bookseller's lunch we have tickets to, that's what I'm missing for the lesson."

"Oh. Well, one of us should go, so I guess you'll have to skate alone." She paused, "You know, Timmony Sunderland is going to be there."

"I know. I brought several books to get signed." Polly sighed, "She's the best."

"I'm hoping to get her to come to Knights on her next tour. She didn't last time, she just did...you know...the big place."

"Well, I guess they have the budget. We don't have the budget."

“Can you imagine the crowd we’d get if she came? We’d make our money for the month.”

“Ask her to come, then. The worst she can say is no.”

Nina frowned, “Yes, but she could *easily* say no. I’m not sure I have the balls to ask, honestly.” She paused, then said, “I realize the bookstore needs me to get out there and promote it, but I have a hard time doing stuff like that.”

“I don’t,” said Polly, “I’ll ask her.”

Nina looked dubiously at her, so Polly added, “By the way, there’s a literary scavenger hunt on Sunday and then the costume party. I heard that this year the clues are in the form of trivia questions.”

“Shut up.”

“Can’t. I...uh...already entered us as a team.”

“I should hope so,” replied Nina. She was a trivia obsessive; she couldn’t help herself. She ran her own team back in Los Angeles, and although Polly refused to officially join, Nina knew she was secretly a trivia nut too. Not as nutty as she was, but then few people were.

“By the way,” added Polly, looking innocently at Nina, “Did you sort things out with Tom?”

“No,” said Nina, shortly. She looked out of the window at all the people passing by. So many couples. “I didn’t speak to him.”

“I understand why you don’t want to leave your guest house, you’ve got it just as you like it.”

Nina nodded.

“Even though it’s not as though he couldn’t build you more bookcases.”

Nina nodded again.

“And it would be nice to have, you know, more than one room to read in.”

Nina slowly turned away from the window and looked at Polly. Her face was expressionless, but Polly frowned.

“Ok,” she said, “I get it. No more discussion.”

The cab pulled up to the hotel and Nina, Polly and the ham got out.

The next day was cold enough to freeze an egg on the sidewalk, though why would you want to, and after the author’s breakfast Polly headed off to take in the latest thinking on pop up merchandising. Nina checked her phone. Two texts from Tom.

“Good morning. Are we still not talking?”

And then, forty minutes later.

“Guess not.”

Nina pursed her lips and put her phone back in her pocket. She wasn’t sure what to say to him. They’d been together over a year, and the week before Tom had asked her to move in with him. Or rather, to join him in finding a new place for them both, a place that was theirs.

“Somewhere near here,” he’d said, excitedly, over dinner, “I’ve been really busy at work lately and I can afford a bigger place, and the store is doing well, and between us we can get a two bedroom and then you’ll be able to have an office or a reading room or a library or whatever you want to call it. I’ll put up bookcases for all your books and maybe we can find an apartment with a fireplace, and you can put your big chair there, and...” He’d faltered into silence because Nina’s face had gone very still. “You don’t like fireplaces?”

Nina put down her fork. "I like fireplaces, and I love the idea of a reading room... but I'm happy in my place. I thought everything was pretty good as it is?" She swallowed, "We see each other every weekend, and usually one or two nights a week, but we have our own space and time to decompress..." She looked anxiously at her boyfriend's face, which was now as still as her own had been. "Why do we need to change anything?"

"Because I want to live with you," he said, simply. "I want to wake up next to you every day, I want to share shelves with you, and get used to you, and see you in all your moods and various states of undress. I want to learn how you sort groceries and decide what to eat for dinner, and I want to be able to make plans."

"We do make plans." Nina could feel this conversation sliding out from under her. "You've seen me sort groceries. We often decide what to eat for dinner."

"Yes, but I want to see it every day. I want to see how you react to running out of things. I want to see you pay bills. I want to make longer plans. Distant plans. I want to be able to say 'next summer' and 'year after next'."

"Nothing's stopping you from saying those things now." She reached for his hand, "We're together, we're happy, you know I love you, I know you love me, we can totally take each other for granted." She tried a grin, "Moving in together wouldn't change any of that."

"I want to make a home with you. I want to move forward." Tom could occasionally be stubborn, and Nina could see the edges of it at the corners of his mouth.

Time to state your boundaries and expectations, Miss Hill, she told herself. "Well, I want things to stay as they are. I'm happy with things as they are, I'm happy with you."

"I'm happy with you too, I just want more of you." He frowned, "Don't you want more of me?"

“I like the amount of you I already get.” That didn’t sound as good out of her mouth as it had sounded in her head, Nina realized. “It’s the perfect amount.” That wasn’t much help.

There was a long silence. Then she added, “Maybe we can talk about this in the new year? I’m going to the conference next week, and then the store will be super busy for the holidays, and...” She tailed off. She hated change, she just hated it.

“Yes, of course,” he said, looking at his plate, his water glass, the wall, anywhere but at her. “We’ll talk about it when you want to talk about it, because that’s when we always talk about things. On your schedule, your timeline.” He picked up his fork and put it down again, presumably to stop himself from driving it into his own hand. “Whatever, Nina.”

And then he shut down and they’d finished the meal in silence. That had been four days ago and they’d barely spoken since.

Whatever, Tom.

“Nina? Nina Hill?”

Nina was sitting in the lobby considering her options when she heard her name. She looked up and smiled, “Oh my god, hiiii!” She got up to hug the man who’d stopped in front of her, “How are you? How are things in the bay area?”

“Good!” he replied, hugging her back and taking about two seconds longer over it than Nina had expected. She stepped back, a small internal sensor going off.

Peter Turecki was the manager of another independent bookstore, in Oakland. They met once or twice a year at events like this one, and she’d always liked him. Polly had once described him as romance cover face, science fiction personality, and she wasn’t wrong. He was as nerdy as they come, which Nina loved, and cute as hell, which she wasn’t so keen on. *Wait*, she told

herself, *it's not that you don't like the way he looks, you do, which is to say, not like in that sense, but...* her inner monolog tailed off.

“Did you read the John Scalzi I recommended?” He had a great voice, too, that didn’t help. It had a rough edge to it, and somewhere the sense that he might laugh at any minute. He looked at her, his eyebrows raised. “*The Kaiju Preservation Society?*”

Nina nodded, “I did! And then I got really into the history of kaiju in general, the influence of King Kong, the nature of stop motion animation, the relationship between Godzilla and nuclear weapons, it was days and days of happy rabbit holing. Thanks!”

“Uh... great,” replied Peter, frowning a little. Nina realized not everyone reacted to new information the way she did, but you would think a fellow bookworm would at least appreciate the stream of thought a single book could provoke.

“And then I read six or seven more of his and ordered everything for the store. He’s brilliant, hilarious.” She smiled at him. “Got any more recommendations?”

“Loads! Do you want to go for coffee? I was just outside for the window display presentation and I’m having trouble feeling my feet.” He stamped them as illustration, and they both stared down, as you do when someone says something about their feet.

Nina hesitated and looked at her phone, “I’ve got twenty minutes before the Historical Non-Fiction presentation, are you going to that?”

“I am. Let’s get coffee and then we can go together.”

“Ok, let’s do it.” Nina followed him out of the lobby, feeling slightly guilty. She had no idea why. Or not, at least, an idea she was willing to admit to herself.

While they were waiting for their coffee, Peter turned to her and smiled. “I have a surprise for you.”

Nina made the face you make when someone says that to you. The one where you tilt your head slightly to one side and raise your eyebrows. The *'oh yeah? Tell me more,'* face.

"We're opening a branch of the store in Los Angeles. In the spring."

Nina would have liked to raise her eyebrows higher, but they were already on their maximum setting.

"Really? Where?"

"Los Feliz."

"Huh," said Nina, trying to prevent the sinking of her stomach from showing on her face, "That's pretty close to us. Had you considered the west side? Plenty of readers over there too."

"Yeah, but we found a great space and decided to go for it." He grinned, "I'm sure there are enough readers to go around."

"I hope you're right," said Nina, reaching to pick up her coffee. "Business has been kind of tight lately. People buy digital more and more, and it's hard to compete with Amazon when they can deliver most books the next day."

Peter nodded, "I hear that, it's tough all around." He hesitated slightly, then said, "I was thinking it would be fun to see more of each other. You know, being in the same city and everything."

"Uh huh," replied Nina, wondering why all of sudden men wanted to see more of her. It made her want to pull inside her shell. Then she thought of the quieter periods at the store, when only a few customers came in. She loved the peace of it, but the store needed all the readers it could get. A coldness settled in her bones as she suddenly thought about losing the store she loved so much.

The silence was broken by the arrival of Peter's coffee on the counter. "Well," he said, raising his paper cup, "Here's to friendly competition."

Nina touched her cup to his and wondered at the contradiction in terms. *How about you be more friendly and look elsewhere for your competition*, she thought. *How about that?*

But she smiled and sipped her coffee, saying nothing.

After the Historical Non-Fiction presentation, which was about as thrilling as you would expect, Nina and Polly met up in the line for Timmony Sunderland. They could see the author sitting at a table, about twenty people away from them, smiling as she signed books and chatted with readers. Timmony had famously red hair, and as a fellow redhead herself, Nina was a little bit crushed out. She loved her books, she loved the interviews she'd seen, she loved the social media posts, she loved it all. Timmony's series of fantasy novels sold out as soon as they got them in, and a visit from the author would drive serious traffic. Nina felt nervous, and Polly could tell. Nina had also told her about the new competitor they were going to get, and Polly knew that wasn't helping. She'd suggested firebombing the place, and Nina had countered that book burning was antithetical to all that they stood for, and Polly had been sulking ever since. Now, however, she wanted to help her friend.

"Why are you freaking? Relax! Just get her to sign your book, tell her we're from Knights, everyone knows Knights, and ask her if she's planning on coming to Los Angeles when the next book comes out. You can do this, you're an adult woman in charge of her faculties."

Nina looked at Polly in surprise, "Are you drunk? I have only one hand on the tiller of my faculties, and that hand's extremely shaky. I love the idea you have of me and my self-control, but it's totally wrong."

Polly shrugged, “You seemed fine earlier. I just assumed a stable trajectory through the day, maybe that’s where I’m making a mistake.”

Nina nodded. “That would be it. I go up and down all the time. You don’t?”

Polly shook her head. A woman in the line behind them chimed in. “Not to butt in, but I just wanted to say I travel from peak to trough many times a day.”

Her friend nodded, “Me too. I can be totally fine in the morning and then wait three minutes too long to eat lunch and suddenly I’m ready to shoot myself or someone else.” She looked suspiciously at Polly, “You’re saying you don’t? That your mood is stable all day?”

“Yeah, if feeling on edge, nervous and excited at the same time, with occasional flashes of joy or despair can be called stable. I maintain *that* mood all day.”

“Oh,” said the first woman, mollified. “Fair enough. I thought you were saying you felt good all day.”

“Perish the thought,” said Polly.

They all fell silent again, and the line inched forward.

When Timmony Sunderland looked up at Nina her first thought was that Nina’s hair was the exact same shade as her daughter’s, and it made her inclined to like the young woman. On such slender threads great friendships can be built, let’s be honest.

“Hi there,” said Nina.

“Hi,” replied Timmony, holding out her hand for the book Nina was holding.

“I’m from Knights, the bookstore in Los Angeles...” said Nina, relinquishing the book.

“That’s wonderful,” replied the author, “It’s one of the few independents left in Southern California, right?” She flipped to the title page and got ready to sign.

“That’s right,” said Nina, taking a deep breath. “I was wondering if you’re planning on heading West to promote your next novel?”

Timmony nodded, “I am, but I haven’t nailed down the details yet. I can let my publicist know if you’d like me to come by?” She smiled at Nina, “Who should I make it out to?”

“Uh...Nina,” said Nina, almost forgetting her own name. “That would be great, thanks.” She watched the author sign the book and stepped aside to make room for Polly.

“So, I’m from Knights, too,” said Polly, clearly, “And what would be even better would be if you *launched* your next book from our store. I mean, we’ve been getting pre-orders up the wazoo for it, and I don’t think you’ve even announced the publication date, have you?”

“No, not yet,” said the author, a slightly nervous light coming into her eyes, “And usually I launch the book on the East Coast...”

“But that’s so predictable, right? Come to our little independent bookstore and really blow the doors off. No one expects that, right? It would be like when Cassie,” Cassie was the heroine of the book series for which Sunderland was famous, “Launched her surprise attack on the Gremlins of Traverse, no one saw that coming. Knight’s would be an amazing venue for your launch. We’ll do cookies!”

Timmony Sunderland slowly reached for the book Polly was holding just out of reach, “Uh, sure...”

“You will?” Polly was holding her book tightly, waiting for an answer.

“No, I meant sure, it would be like Cassie’s attack...” She tugged on the book, “Do you want me to sign it or not?”

“Oh, sorry, yes of course.” Polly let go very suddenly, causing Timmony to wallop herself in the nose with the corner of the book. Tears came to her eyes, and she covered her nose with her hand.

“Whoopsy,” said Polly, leaning forward, “Sorry about that.”

“Thad’s ok...” said Timmony, indistinctly. Blood started to appear on her upper lip.

“Shit,” said Polly. She reached in her pocket for a tissue, handing it over to Timmony, who took it then looked at it with surprise. It wasn’t a tissue, it was a crumpled five dollar bill.

“Huh,” said Polly, “That’s where that went. Sorry.” She reached out and took it back.

Nina frantically searched in her own pocket for a tissue, the store assistant who was standing there started searching, and everyone suddenly got very busy hunting for absorbent materials. Timmony’s nose was bleeding quite copiously now and had started dripping on the book she was still holding. She realized it and handed it back.

“I didn’t sign it,” she said, smiling through her pain, “But I did bleed on it, is that ok?” She was clearly ready for Polly and Nina to go away.

“That’s great,” said Polly, “I mean, not great that you’re bleeding, but great that you bled on my book, I mean, you know, that’s pretty unusual...let’s go, Nina.” She grabbed her horrified boss and the two of them hustled away.

Once they were safely in the kid’s section they stopped.

“You just hit a very successful author in the face with her own book,” said Nina, in a hissing whisper. “But not before you’d said the name of the store several times. So, in a way, the store just punched Timmony Sunderland in the nose and the chances of her even coming to us, let alone launching her book there are essentially zero.”

Polly looked apologetic. “It was an accident. If I’d meant to punch her in the nose I would have done it much more emphatically. That was kind of a glancing blow, to be fair.”

“And yet enough of one that she’s still bleeding.”

A store assistant hustled by with a box of tissues.

“I can go apologize,” said Polly.

“No,” said Nina, taking her by the arm and leading her towards the escalator. “We’ve done enough. Let’s try and avoid assaulting any other writers, ok?”

“Sure,” said Polly, “I’m sure it’s all going to go smoothly from here on in.”

“Oh my god,” groaned Nina, holding her head, “Why on earth did you say that?”

As they made their way towards the escalator Nina saw Peter waiting in line for Timmony Sunderland. He didn’t see her, and she was glad.

The morning of Sunday dawned cold and clear, with the high-def winter sunshine New York specializes in. The wind whipping down 5th Avenue was cold enough to freeze the tears on your cheeks, tears that the wind itself had forced from your eyes, and Nina and Polly were standing on the street about to start the scavenger hunt.

Polly looked at Nina somewhat critically. “You really haven’t dressed properly, you’re going to slow us down because hypothermia is going to make your feet slow.”

“I don’t think slowness is caused by hypothermia, but ok. If I get too cold I’ll do jumping jacks or something. You, on the other hand, may have gone too far in the other direction.”

Polly shook her head. She was wearing stripey woolen tights with polka dot legwarmers under thick sheepskin boots. A long wool skirt made it nearly to her ankles (but still allowed for glimpses of the patterntastic leg coverings) and a thick fisherman’s sweater topped it off. Over

that she wore a duffle coat very similar to the one worn by Paddington Bear, a scarf, gloves and a furry hat with ear flaps.

“No, I am dressed appropriately for the weather.”

“If you fall down it’ll be like that little kid in *A Christmas Story* who couldn’t get up.”

“I get your reference, but you’re wrong. I have a full range of motion.” Polly waved her arms and legs, “Or at least 75% range of motion.” She looked at Nina, who was wearing jeans, boots, a puffy jacket, hat, scarf and mittens. “You are going to be cold.”

“If I get cold, I’ll shiver,” replied Nina, “Did you know that shivering is your body literally contracting and releasing all your muscles in order to raise your temperature. It’s basically the same as jumping jacks, only much smaller.”

Polly stared at her.

“Furthermore, you release the same hormone as you do when you do any kind of exercise, so shivering can be my work out for the day.”

“You don’t work out any day.” Polly frequently tried to get Nina to join a gym, but apart from the occasional spin class Nina was gym-averse.

Now she sniffed, though it may have been more from cold than derision. “I open and close multiple books a day, many of them hardback. My upper body is a finely honed machine.”

“Whatever,” said Polly. “Can we get back to the scavenger hunt?”

Nina nodded and flapped open the folded sheet of paper she was carrying. This made her drop it, thanks to the mittens, and Polly impatiently picked it up.

“Alright, we have six clues and six hours to solve them, go where they tell us and collect six books, each one of which is a book in a series that has six books.”

“A hexalogy,” said Nina, with some satisfaction.

“Gesundheit,” said Polly. “Ok, first clue. *You can’t lead a horticulture but you can go where she said it.*” She frowned and looked at Nina. “Do you get that?”

“Yes,” said Nina, “It’s Dorothy Parker. Algonquin round table, Algonquin hotel. Look up the address.” She grinned, “She was challenged to use the word horticulture in a sentence and she replied, you can lead a whore to culture but you cannot make her think.”

“Funny.”

“Yeah, she was amazing. She won the O. Henry, she was nominated for two Oscars, she left her estate to the NAACP, total banger.”

Polly said, “59 west 44th street. Let’s go.”

An hour later, clutching a copy of *Dune*, Polly read out the second clue. “*For many people, New York is a paradise. But it would be completely lost without this one special location.*” She stared at the piece of paper. “I love New York, not sure I would call it a paradise.” She looked at Nina. “Any idea?”

Nina had her brow furrowed and was looking at the sky. “I think so...read the question again...”

Polly did. Nina clicked her fingers. “I think it’s *Paradise Lost*. The Morgan library has the last surviving copy of the manuscript.” She looked at Polly, “We went there on our last visit, remember?”

Polly shook her head.

“We went to the Empire State Building after?”

Polly shook her head.

“And it was right after we went to the Dog Museum.”

Polly nodded, “Ok, that I remember.”

Nina raised an eyebrow. “You remember the dog museum but not one of the world’s great libraries?”

Polly shrugged, “There was an interactive exhibit that showed you what dog you resemble, it was memorable. I was wearing pigtails and they said I was a cocker spaniel.”

Nina giggled, “Yeah. And I was a whippet, I remember.” She looked it up on her phone, “Ok, Madison and 37th, we can walk.”

As they walked Polly started talking about how much she liked dogs, and Nina just let the sound of her friend’s voice wash over her.

I love dogs, I love the way they have a leg at each corner, I love that there are so many different kinds, I love that their noses are cold and they have tails...

Nina started thinking about Tom. She did love him a lot, maybe living together wouldn’t be so bad. She just really liked her alone time, needed it to decompress. As a registered introvert it was a necessity. But she had once told him that being with him was as good as being alone, and it was largely true. She sighed. It seemed to mean so much to him, and relationships were sometimes about compromising. Then she thought about her little guest house, just one big room with her favorite chair and all her books. Her happiest place. Then she thought about lying in bed next to Tom, her head on his shoulder, her book propped on his chest, reading as the book rose up and down with his breath. Another happiest place. Then she stopped thinking because it was confusing her.

They didn’t need to go into the museum to get their book, they had them at the front desk, so twenty minutes later, having added a copy of *If Only They Could Talk*, by James Herriot (one of Nina’s favorites in the animal stories genre) they were ready for the next clue.

“Can we eat after this?” asked Polly, somewhat plaintively. “There are all these pretzel vendors on the street and the smell is killing me.”

“Sure. Read the clue.” Nina was getting hungry too, hopefully this next one would be close.

“Ooh, it’s got my name in it! *Polly Garter says nothing grows in her garden but washing, but where did her creator live when he was in the city?*” She smiled broadly, “I know that one! It’s Dylan Thomas, and he always stayed at the Chelsea Hotel.” She frowned, “Which is presumably in Chelsea?”

Nina was already looking up the address. “I didn’t realize you were a Dylan Thomas fan, *Under Milk Wood* is amazing.”

Polly had the good grace to look abashed, “I just tend to remember characters called Polly.”

Nina looked up from her phone, “Are there many?”

“*Pollyanna*, Polly O’Keefe from *Wrinkle in Time*, Polly Plummer in *The Magician’s Nephew*... there are others but those are my favorite. And Polly Pocket, of course.”

“Polly Pocket isn’t in a book.”

“Well, she should be. And she had a cartoon. And they’re making a movie, supposedly.”

“Wow,” said Nina, “Give you the right topic and you’re as bad as I am.” She tucked her phone back in her coat, “Ok, let’s go to Chelsea, get the book, then eat some lunch.”

They ran into Peter Turecki at the Hotel Chelsea. He was standing alone on the street, holding a copy of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

“Aha!” he said, upon spotting them. “Hot on the trail.”

Polly went into the lobby to pick up their book, and Nina stayed outside. “Yes, we’re hoping to beat you back to the hotel,” she said, smiling. “We’re halfway through, how about you?”

“Same,” he said, “I just started at the end and worked backwards.” He grinned, “I have some excellent news.”

“Oh yeah? Spill it.”

“Timmony Sunderland is going to launch her next book at our store. The one in L.A.”

Nina’s heart fell, “I thought she always launched on the east coast?”

Peter shrugged, “I overheard you asking her, and then your friend hit her in the face, so I decided to throw my hat in the ring.” He laughed, “She’d stopped bleeding by then, and said seeing as there was so much West Coast enthusiasm maybe it would be a good idea.” He rubbed his hands together, “We’ll pack the place, it’ll be a great way to celebrate opening the new store.”

Polly had returned in time to hear the news, and she frowned, “We asked first.”

“It’s not a contest,” said Nina.

“Well, it kind of is.” Polly seemed certain of this.

Peter laughed, “Well, then you kind of lost,” he said. “Possibly because you hit her in the face.” He waved the Maya Angelou book at them. “I’m going to beat you at this, too.” He walked away, literally whistling.

Polly narrowed her eyes at his back. “You’ve always liked him,” she said accusingly, “But I never have, and now I never will.”

Nina shrugged. “Los Feliz isn’t all that close, it probably won’t make a big difference. I’m sure it will be fine.” She wasn’t sure, but she also didn’t think there was much she could do about it. “Let’s eat,” she said. “Let’s eat and solve the remaining clues and work out the best

route to get the books and get back in time to beat Peter.” She paused, “And anyone else who’s ahead of us, is opening a rival store dangerously close to us, or is generally deeply annoying.”

“But cute.”

“Especially if they’re cute. I’m done with cute men today.”

It was while they were at the last location, (Question: *Where might Miss Merriweather take her friend to visit his famous brethren?*) that Nina first spotted the little girl.

The New York Public Library main branch is enormous. The reading room is nearly three hundred feet long, and the stacks contain millions of books containing billions of words. Having collected the last book, *The Warden*, by Anthony Trollope, Nina wanted to take a minute to sit in the reading room and just...absorb.

As she sat down she realized that sitting across from her was a little girl who appeared to be all on her own. She had a small pile of books and was reading one of them, but every so often she would look up and around as if searching for someone. Polly had gone off to find more coffee, and Nina suddenly had an impulse. She leaned forward.

“Are you ok?” she asked quietly.

The little girl, who was maybe nine or ten, looked at her carefully. “I’m ok,” she said. “I’m reading.”

“Oh, I hear you,” replied Nina, “I’m always ok when I’m reading too. Are you here alone?”

The child evaluated the question. Nina realized she was fighting a small internal war. On the one hand, she wasn’t supposed to talk to strangers. But on the other hand, there was clearly something on her mind.

“Well, I wasn’t. And then I was.” The girl apparently reached a decision, because she leaned forward much as Nina had done, her long braids swinging free of her shoulders. “I was with my mother, we were outside, looking at the lions, and then she went to collect a book and told me to wait there, and I did, but then she was a long time so I went inside to look for her, but she wasn’t there, and I felt a little lost, but then I saw a sign that said reading room and came here to wait. And read.”

“Huh. And how long ago was that?”

“Three books ago.”

“I see.” Nina thought for a moment. “Do you have a phone?”

The child looked surprised, “No, I wish. If I had I wouldn’t be in this predicament.”

Nina laughed, “No, I guess not.” She loved a wordy kid, wordy kids were her *jam*. “Do you know your mother’s phone number?”

The child nodded.

“Well then, this is an easy problem to solve.” Nina looked around, “But we can’t make a phone call in here, you’re going to have to trust me and come downstairs.”

The child closed her book and carefully put it and the rest in the tote bag she was carrying. “These are my books,” she said pointedly, “I’m not stealing library books.”

“Of course not,” said Nina, “Heaven forbid.”

The child stood up, looking resolute. “Let’s go.”

If Polly was surprised that while she was getting coffee Nina had been collecting children, she didn’t show it.

“Who’s this?” she said, smiling at the kid. “You look like *Anne of Green Gables*.”

“I’ve heard that before,” said the kid, “It’s the hair.” She looked at Nina, “I bet you get it all the time too.”

“I stopped wearing braids when I was your age because I got tired of hearing it.”

The kid nodded, “I don’t wear braids at school, it’s just asking for trouble.”

Nina pulled out her phone. “Ok, kid, fire away. What’s your mom’s number?”

The child said the number as Nina dialed. While she was waiting for an answer, Nina asked her name, realizing she’d never asked.

“Polly,” said the child. “I’m Polly.”

Polly crowed, “I’m Polly too!”

The child regarded her with interest. “There are three other Pollys at my school, it’s a very popular name.”

“Well, that’s good to know,” said Big Polly, “It didn’t used to be.”

Nina heard a click, then a slightly desperate voice said, “Polly?”

“No,” said Nina, “But I’m standing right next to her. She’s totally fine, but apparently she lost you.”

The woman’s voice cracked. “Oh my God, I’ve been wandering around Bryant Park for the last hour looking for her. I was about to give up and call the police, I cannot thank you enough.”

Nina smiled into the phone, “No worries. We’re going to go outside and wait by the lions.”

“Where was she?”

“In the library reading room. Reading.”

The woman made a noise. “Of course she was, I should have looked there first, what’s wrong with me. I’ll be there in five minutes.”

Nina hung up. “Your mom’s going to meet us outside.”

Little Polly and Big Polly had been talking about their name, and now the little one looked up at Nina and smiled. “Did you know, Polly didn’t know about *Polly the Party Fun Fairy* from the Rainbow Magic series?”

Nina looked at Polly, who shrugged. “There were, at last count, over 200 books in the series and I can’t be expected to keep track of them all.”

They walked outside and waited by the left-hand lion.

“Mom!” said Little Polly, running over to a tallish woman and throwing her arms around her. “I read all my books! I had nothing left to read.”

“Well, that’s really a tragedy,” said her mom, bending down to hug her daughter tightly, “Thank goodness these nice ladies came along to help you out.”

She straightened up and looked at Nina and Polly.

“Well, goodness me,” she said. “This is quite the coincidence.”

Nina stepped forward but as usual Polly beat her to it. “Isn’t it? It’s like destiny gave us a second chance to make a first impression.”

Timmony Sunderland laughed. “As long as this time no one ends up bleeding.” She smiled, “There’s really no way to thank you enough for finding Polly and bringing her back to me.”

“Actually,” said Nina, swallowing nervously, “I have a way.”

It was that evening and they were in the hotel room getting ready to go to the costume party. Polly and Nina were lying on their respective beds, celebrating a win and a loss.

“I realize it’s been a mixed day,” said Polly, “losing the scavenger hunt but getting Timmony to agree to launch at our store rather than Peter’s, but I have an important question.” Polly took a breath, “What are you wearing to the costume party?”

Nina was gazing at the ceiling and daydreaming the launch party. “I brought my ‘Some Pig’ t shirt.”

Polly looked at her with a pained expression. “A t shirt is not a costume. Why do you refuse to enter into the spirit of the thing?”

“Because I get nervous enough at parties without feeling ridiculous. There are people there who want to talk.”

“Mostly about books, which you like.”

“Yes, but it’s still talking and I never know if they’re suddenly going to veer into personal territory or, worse, if I’m going to veer off on some conversational tangent they didn’t want to go off on, and then they get that expression people sometimes get when I’m talking. Like the heroine on the back of the runaway horse in an old movie, or the woman tied to the train tracks.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“I’m not. It’s not even that I’m scared of what *they* might say, I’m scared of what I might say. Sometimes bad things happen to good conversations, and I’m often present for it.”

“I think you should wear the ham.”

“Not in a million years.”

“You’ll feel safer in the ham. No one can even see your face in the ham.”

“Can you stop saying ham, it’s starting to sound weird. And if I wear the ham what will you wear?”

Polly smiled, “I shall wear the red Thing One costume that I packed as a backup.”

“You packed two costumes?” Nina looked at her suspiciously. “Did you plan this?”

“Plan suggests more thought than I spent on it, but I was aware you don’t tend to dress up and thought maybe the ham might satisfy to your need to hide.”

Nina thought about it. On the one hand, no, but on the other hand there was something appealing about being invisible inside costume charcuterie. And Peter was going to be there and she felt like hiding might be a strong option. He hadn’t been thrilled at what he called ‘her perfidy’. Strong words had been exchanged.

“Alright,” she said, “I’ll ham it up.”

Nina was quite a small woman, but her legs were long for her height, if you follow that, and the ham turned out to be a little...short. Polly had planned for this, unsurprisingly, and had brought a black thermal body suit, with long sleeves and legs.

“It’s New York in the winter, so I knew it would be chilly. I didn’t think there would be so much leg showing, but that’s because I planned it for myself and I am not proportioned the way you are. But you look amazing, and if you’ve got it, flaunt it, as my grandmother would say.”

“Your grandmother said a lot of things.” Nina had heard a variety of advice Polly attributed to her ancestor, most of it fileable under the heading *‘party on, Polly’*.

“True story.” Polly stood back and looked at Nina. “You’re totally selling the ham, you look amazing. And hopefully no one will attack you on the way home.”

Nina raised her eyebrows.

“Like in the book,” explained Polly, “What did you think I meant?”

“I’m never one hundred percent sure what you mean, honestly.” Nina looked at Polly.
“You look pretty fantastic yourself. I’m not sure Dr. Seuss imagined Thing One being quite so sexy.”

When Polly had described it Nina had imagined something tight and somewhat like her thermal underwear, but Polly was actually wearing a red satin 1970’s one piece jumpsuit, with flared pants, a high neck and no sleeves. Polly had sewn a patch with the number one on it on her chest and it was obvious what she was, as long as you imagined Thing One setting out for Studio 54 with Bianca Jagger and Andy Warhol. In red platform boots.

Nina got a few strange looks on the way to the grand ballroom, where the party was happening, but once she was inside she knew she was with her peeps. Everyone recognized what she was, people made Boo Radley jokes and generally agreed that Atticus Finch, as played by Gregory Peck, was the most attractive of the literary hotties. She felt, as Polly had foretold, completely safe inside the ham. She could see pretty well, thanks to the netting Polly had installed at face height, but no one really knew it was her unless she spoke. So she was able to move about and observe, like an ornithologist in a hide. She wasn’t sure why she didn’t conceal herself this way every single day.

She spotted Peter after twenty minutes or so. He was dressed in a red military jacket with plenty of gold braid and tight, pale breeches and boots. It was an attractive costume, and from within her ham she was able to take her time deciding who he was. She looked around for Polly, who she spotted dancing on a table. Note, she was the only person dancing on a table, the party had only been going on for forty minutes, but Polly could get her dance on at any time, it was one of her greatest strengths. No help there, so she decided to talk to Peter alone. No reason why

she shouldn't, it was all just friendly competition, right? And she really hated bad blood between booksellers, it just wasn't right.

"So," she said, walking up to him, "I can't decide if you're George Wickham from *Pride and Prejudice*, or Captain Troy from *Far from the Madding Crowd*?"

Peter peered into the ham, "Is that you, Nina?"

The ham nodded which, considering its size, came across as slightly more threatening than you normally expect from smoked meat. Peter took a step back.

"I was going for Wickham, but only because I didn't think of Troy. You really like the classics, huh?" His body language was still a little cool, and he hadn't smiled yet.

Nina kept her tone light. "I like those books, although the Hardy is sad. Most of Hardy is a little bit sad."

Peter looked at her, or what he could see of her through the netting. Then he sighed. "I've never read either, is that a terrible admission to make? I based my costume on the movies."

Nina laughed, "It's ok, you've read *Dune* and I haven't. I tried," she added, "But I couldn't get into it. It was sort of like *The Lord of the Rings*, I couldn't get into that either. And that feels like a much more terrible admission than yours."

Peter grinned, "It's pretty bad, for a bookseller."

There was silence for a moment, but then he added, "You know, our new store might not even be open by Spring, and Timmony agreed to do a signing up in Oakland the same week as the launch, it'll still be an enormous draw for us. And you did rescue her kid."

"Thanks, Peter. Business has been a bit slow lately, we could really use the help."

"Plenty of readers to go around," he replied. "And maybe we should look again on the West Side." He stepped closer to Nina. "I really was hoping we could maybe see more of each

other, once I'm living in Los Angeles. What do you think? He hesitated, "I'd ask you to dance but...not sure I could get my arms around you."

"It's a pretty big ham," acknowledged Nina, grateful again for the costume. "And hams are not known for their footwork." *Nice, Nina*, she thought to herself. *Cool comment*. She thought of Tom, who didn't make her feel anxious, who didn't make her words run nervously from her mouth. He made her feel safe, and loved, and seen. Suddenly all she wanted was to leave New York and go home.

There was a sudden crash, and Nina/Ham turned to see what had happened.

Oh dear. Polly was down. The combination of tabletop and platform boots had been too ambitious, clearly.

However, Polly was made of sterling stuff, and when Nina got to her she was already clambering to her feet. As soon as she got up she pointed.

"It's his fault, he startled me."

He was already walking towards them, having spotted Polly.

Tom. Her Tom. Apparently apparating from the other side of the country.

"Polly!" she hissed, "I can't let him see me like this."

"As a ham? Why not?"

"Because..." She wasn't even sure why herself, but it seemed important. She would go and quietly get out of the costume and appear looking normal.

And then Tom was there, right next to her. However, Polly was nothing if not a quick study.

"Hey there," she said, "What on earth are you doing here?"

“Polly! Have you seen Nina? I’ve been standing over there for fifteen minutes and I can’t see her anywhere. Isn’t she here?”

“Oh, she’s here,” replied Polly, “But I can’t see her right now. I’m sure she’s somewhere close.”

“I really need to speak to her.”

“She’ll probably reveal herself eventually,” said Polly. “What, uh, what did you need to talk about? I mean, what was so important that you flew across the country to say it?”

Nina had been sidling away, as much as a 6-foot ham can sidle, but at Polly’s question she stopped. She wanted to know, too.

Tom looked uncomfortable. “Well...it’s kind of personal.”

“Is it about sex?”

Tom raised his eyebrows, “No.”

“Then I probably already know about it. Nina tells me everything. Mostly everything. A lot of things, anyway.”

Nina made a face behind the netting. She didn’t tell her *everything*.

“Yeah...” said Tom, dubiously. “I get that.”

Polly looked interested. “Is it about moving in together? She told me about that.”

“Yes,” said Tom, looking relieved, “I realize I kind of overreacted when she didn’t immediately jump at the idea, and I’ve been thinking about it, and I’m kind of a doofus.”

“I accept your premise,” said Polly, “But why?”

“Because the whole point about Nina, the thing that I love the most, is that she’s uniquely herself. She’s consistently herself.”

“O.k...” said Polly, surreptitiously looking at Nina. The ham shook from side to side. *Do not reveal my whereabouts.*

“And sure, sometimes that can be irritating. Like, she doesn’t like to do anything spontaneous, she’s not good at stepping out of her comfort zone, she doesn’t like to put herself forward, that kind of thing.”

Nina frowned inside her costume. *Did he like her or didn’t he? Jeez.*

“But it’s also just the way she is, and I like her just the way she is. So while I want to live with her, I don’t want her to be unhappy about it, obviously.”

“Obviously,” said Polly, nodding sagely. She had no idea where he was going with this, and she had no idea why Nina wasn’t just saying hi, but she was rolling with it, because that was how she rolled.

“So I had a new idea. Instead of getting a two-bedroom place, we’ll just get a one-bedroom place and then Nina can afford to keep the guest house as well. We’ll live together, but she can go to her own place whenever she needs to. It’ll be a second bedroom, just in a totally different location.”

Polly brightened: she got it. “Like at the other end of a really long corridor. That happens to be outside and in a separate part of the neighborhood.”

“Exactly. That way we both win. I get to live with her, and she gets to have her own space too.” He looked worried, “What do you think?”

“I think you’re a genius,” said the ham, suddenly scaring Tom half to death. It came up to him, very closely. “And I love you very much.”

“Nina?” Tom was goggling. The room wasn’t brightly lit, and he bent down to peer into the costume. “Is that you?”

Nina was struggling to pull her arms into the ham but the fabric of her shirt kept catching on the chicken wire.

“Yes, it’s me.”

Tom got closer. “You’re inside the ham?”

“Yes.” She gave up on pulling her arms in and started trying to bend to lift the whole thing up and off. But every time she bent forward the whole thing tipped like a bell, with her like the clapper inside. It wasn’t working.

Tom was flabbergasted. “I can’t believe you dressed up. You never dress up.”

“Well, I’m trying to widen my comfort zone,” replied Nina, getting more and more frustrated as she tried to get her arms inside the costume, or reach the bottom. It looked like she was dancing, just not very well. “I also did something spontaneous today *and* put myself forward, so, you know...”

“Wow, you widened quite a lot for a first attempt,” Tom said, stepping back to give her more room to do whatever weird moves she was doing. “Other people might have gone for something a little less...”

“Large? Unwieldy? Impossible to get out of?”

“Sure.” He paused, “Did you hear my plan? I had to come and tell you myself because you’ve been ignoring my texts and not answering my calls and it was making me crazy. I talked to my brother and he was like, dude, just get on a plane and go talk to her, so I did.”

The ham paused its jerky maneuvers, “That’s also kind of a big step. Dressing up as a ham seems pretty reasonable in comparison.”

“Totally reasonable,” said Polly, who had taken a seat on the table and was watching the back and forth with open interest.

Tom looked at Polly, “There are a lot of things that seem reasonable to you that really aren’t, but ok.”

“Well, here’s the thing,” replied Nina, “While I’ve been on this trip I was talking to this other guy...”

Tom frowned, “I’m sorry?”

The ham shook its head, “Not like that. I was just talking, and I realized that people make me nervous, and crowds make me anxious, but you don’t make me feel anything but safe. You make me happy. Of all the people in the world, you’re the only one I don’t want to hide from.” She paused, “Even though I appear to be hiding from you now.” She crouched down and tried to reach the hem of the ham, if that’s a thing.

“Are you sure?” Tom’s face was concerned but hopeful, “I don’t need you to change, Nina, I just want you to be happy.”

“I am happy,” she replied, struggling, “But I’m also stuck in this ham.”

And then she gave up and just threw herself backwards, hoping the ham would cushion her fall. It did, and she lay there on the floor like a flipped bug, her arms and legs waving.

Polly laughed, “Now who looks like the kid in *Christmas Story*?”

“Stop laughing,” said Nina, “And get me out of this thing.”

Tom bent and lifted Nina and the costume as one piece and then bent back the chicken wire around Nina’s arms, pushed them into the costume and lifted the whole thing up and off. Then he turned and handed it to Polly.

“I feel like you’re probably responsible for this,” he said, “And congrats, because it’s much lighter than you would think.” He turned back to Nina and took her in his arms, “I like that

you dressed up, but hugging you is much easier this way.” He kissed her, hard. “Are you sure about moving in together?”

“I am. And now I’ve discovered how much I like dressing up we need to find a place with plenty of closets. I want to make a regular thing of it. I want a full body Totoro costume next. And then I’m going to borrow Polly’s tornado suit.”

Polly shook her head.

“Sorry, I dismantled it and reformed it into a giant bird’s nest. I have a hat with eggs on it, it’s a whole vibe.” She brightened, “But I can help you make something else. I’ve been pondering a Tairn costume…”

“The dragon from *Fourth Wing*? Isn’t he vast and terrifying?”

Polly nodded, “Yeah, but I have a concept using egg cartons that I’m confident will work.”

Nina and Tom stared at her.

“What?” said Polly, pulling out her phone, “I’ve been eating eggs for weeks. Look, I made sketches.”

“Polly,” said Nina, “I love you.”

“I love you too, you weirdo,” replied Polly, opening her notes app. “And I’m 100% moving into your guest house.”

“That works,” said Nina, turning back to Tom and wrapping her arms around him. “We’ve had a great weekend, I can’t wait to tell you about it.”

He looked down at her, “Good. Not talking to you is distinctly uncomfortable, let’s not do that again.”

There was a pause, and then Polly snorted.

“Well, she can hardly say anything when you’re kissing her like that, can she?” She got to her feet. “I’m going to go tease Peter.” She giggled to herself, “If he’s going to be our competition I need to start infiltrating the enemy camp. Besides, his little Bridgerton outfit is giving me ideas.” She walked away, then paused and called over her shoulder, “Don’t wait up, kids, I may be quite some time.”

But Tom and Nina weren’t listening at all.

The End

