



# Girl Meets Goy

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**Category:** Urban

**Description:** Leah Rosenberg moved to New York City to pursue her journalism career and hopefully meet a nice Jewish boy.

But her plans are derailed when Gabe saves her on the Subway platform. Handsome, romantic, intelligent, and ambitious, he's perfect in every way—except for one.

When her Jewish ex-boyfriend reappears, Leah faces a dilemma: Should she date the guy who gives her butterflies, even if he goes against everything she's ever known? Or should she play it safe and rekindle her past relationship?

Join Leah as she explores the happy hours, high rises, and holidays of Manhattan while she figures out if marrying Jewish is more important than following her heart.

**Total Pages (Source):** 30

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm*

Leah was giddy as she walked down the subway steps. It was her first night out in New York City and she was wearing her very special dress that people always said made her look like Carrie Bradshaw. She'd been dreaming of this day since the TV show series ended around the time of her Bat Mitzvah. Her mom had thought Leah was too young to watch the show (There is so much sex! And they are so materialistic!) but Leah watched it anyway, sneaking in episodes after her parents went to sleep. She wanted to remind her mom that it wasn't all about sex and clothing. They were career women! And they were powerful! And what about the importance of friendship! But she never said those things to her mom, she'd never understand. All her mom cared about was what her friends from the Synagogue Chavurah thought and who from her Bat Mitzvah class was getting married or a master's degree.

Leah was getting neither, but she felt infinitely more successful than her peers. She'd just graduated from Brandeis with a Journalism degree and she'd somehow landed a dream job as a researcher at Diamond Media for Teen Club. In no time, she would be a junior reporter and she was sure by 30 she'd be an editor. All inspired by Carrie Bradshaw!

Her New York dream also came with a quaint apartment in the basement of an Upper East Side building. Ok, it was the Upper Upper East Side, some might have called it Harlem, and it barely had the closet space she'd expected after years of dreaming about Carrie Bradshaw. But it was close to the subway and didn't exceed her budget by too much. She also had a roommate, a friend of a friend who she'd had dinner with once and they agreed they could probably live together. Leah was optimistic they'd be friends themselves, despite their differing opinions of how to set up their living room.

They still hadn't agreed on where to put the TV, but they had enough sense to decide that it could wait for the next day. They were tired after a full day of moving in and Leah had wanted to start experiencing New York. A friend of hers from Brandeis had told her about an event that night, that would be a great place to start. "This girl Jennifer from my temple met her husband at one of those events!" her friend had said, as though it was the best endorsement anyone could give.

Leah wasn't sure she was ready for a husband, but she'd be happy to meet someone. She'd only dated one person in her life, which she felt was very un-Carrie Bradshaw-like and now that she was in New York it was time to date and meet a lot of people. She was also looking for her own Charlotte, Samantha, and Miranda who would experience New York with her and complete her group of powerful, ambitious, and beautiful women.

She'd asked her roommate if she wanted to join for the evening, but her roommate declined, citing the evening's TV schedule that she simply couldn't miss. So Leah would go alone. Isn't that what Carrie would have done?

She swiped her card to get into the subway and looked for a map. She'd already checked on her phone how to get there, but seeing as she still wasn't used to public transportation, a second look couldn't hurt. She saw the map in the middle of the platform and started walking toward it.

As she stood confirming her route (yes, she had been right), a man who had been sitting on the platform floor stood and started singing. "Oohhhh I want to dance with somebody! I want to feel the heat with somebody!" The man clapped along with his singing, making eye contact with everyone on the platform. Leah noticed that everyone seemed to ignore him, despite the amount of noise his claps and voice were making. When he caught her eye, Leah couldn't help but smile. She nodded her head and gently sang along "Yeah, I want to dance with somebody! With somebody who loves me. "

“Yeaahhh, feel it girl!” the man said to Leah. The next moment, the man opened his jacket and stuck his arm inside. Leah panicked and wondered if he was reaching for a gun. Didn’t that happen in New York? Her mom had warned her that New York was dangerous! But this man singing Whitney Houston seemed so nice! Leah immediately turned and wanted to run away, but she saw the lights of the Subway car approaching and she was afraid that if she wasn’t ready, she could miss it.

“Come on, lady! Come on!” the man screamed at Leah, his arm outstretched to her. “You gonna leave me hanging like that?” Leah wasn’t sure what he wanted from her, but he seemed angry and the people pleaser inside her didn’t want to leave him hanging, whatever that meant. “Come on now! That’s not right!” He was screaming at her and a few of the other people on the platform were starting to steal glances while pretending they didn’t notice. She looked around, hoping there would be a cop or someone. “What’s wrong with you?!” He was in her face, much closer to her than she’d expected. She could smell the sweat on him, the mildew from clothes that hadn’t been washed in who knows how long.

Leah leaned back, her head hitting the Subway map behind her. “Gimme a dollar!” he screamed right in her face. “Gimme a dollar!” Leah could see the Subway approaching. All she wanted to do was jump in the car and find herself a place to sit on her way downtown. But she was stuck, how could she get past him?

“Here you go, sir.” Leah heard a man’s voice. She turned to see someone holding a dollar between her and her accoster’s face. “It’s from the lady, you can leave her alone now.” The man took the dollar and scuttled down the Subway platform, probably to sing and harass another innocent victim.

“You OK?” the man asked. Leah looked at him, her savior in a suit with the top shirt button opened.

“Oh, yeah,” she stuttered. “Fine.”

He motioned to the Subway car that was waiting with its doors open. “Don’t want to miss it.”

She nodded and started toward the car. When inside, she turned and smiled at the man. “They get angry if you make eye contact and then don’t give them money. Rookie mistake,” he said. She laughed and shook her head. “Enjoy your stay in New York!”

“Oh—” The Subway doors shut in her face, just as she was about to correct him. She wasn’t a tourist! She was living here! She was a New Yorker! Or at least in the process of becoming one! The Subway shot downtown and Leah grabbed onto a pole as she lost her balance and almost flew to the back of the car.

It was like an initiation exercise, she told herself. Getting accosted by a homeless person happened to every New Yorker, right? She was now one step closer to belonging. She shook it off, and took a deep breath, trying to channel her inner Carrie Bradshaw. This was it. Her New York dream was about to begin.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm*

“I should never have come here alone,” Leah thought to herself when she entered the room. When she left her apartment, she had so much confidence—she was a powerful young woman! Starting the life she’d always dreamed of! She didn’t need the protection of friends or a boy to have fun! But after getting accosted in the Subway station, and being called a tourist, she really just wanted to go back to her apartment and find the fluffy blanket she still hadn’t unpacked. But she was here, so she forced herself to walk inside. The crowd was completely partitioned into little pockets of people drinking and laughing as though each was hearing their very own comedy routine. How would she ever find her way into one of those pockets?

“Welcome to Chabad’s Young Jewish Professionals! Is this your first time here?” A smiley woman said as she approached her. Leah would have called her a girl—she didn’t seem that much older, except that she was wearing a wig, a telltale sign in this community that she was married and probably a thousand times more mature than Leah. Thankful for the friendly greeting, Leah nodded and smiled. “I’m Hannah! I’m so happy you’re here! Are you new to New York? Let me introduce you to some people!”

Leah nodded and followed Hannah toward the pockets. Her heart started to race as Hannah led her through the crowd as though carefully choosing who to introduce Leah to. Hannah scanned a group and her eye twitched as she pulled Leah forward toward another group of people. “Hey everyone!” Hannah broke into a pocket that immediately absorbed her and Leah as though they had always belonged there. “Hannah!” “How are you?” “How have you been feeling?” It was evident that Hannah did actually belong.

“I’m so great! I want you all to meet someone,” Hannah smiled at Leah and everyone

mirrored her expression. “She’s new here in New York.” Leah wondered how Hannah knew since she hadn’t had a chance to answer her question, but she figured it was obvious from the way she looked. A real New Yorker would have had more confidence walking into an event alone. “This is Mark, Sarah, Rachel, Dan, Yoni, and Becca.” Everyone smiled and waved as Hannah introduced them.

“I’m Leah,” she croaked, wondering how long it would be before she would fit into one of these pockets, or better yet, be like Hannah and be able to flutter between them seamlessly .

“Where are you from, Leah?” Mark asked. Or maybe it was Dan, Leah had already forgotten all the names and she feared she’d never make friends if she couldn’t manage that basic courtesy.

“Upstate.” She said, trying to loosen up. Maybe they would be her friends, they were interested in where she was from at least!

“Cool,” Mark or Dan responded.

“What brings you here?” Becca or Rachel asked.

“I just graduated and wanted to live in New York, you know. It’s like the dream.”

“Totally,” Becca or Rachel agreed and Hannah smiled as she motioned that she was going to continue mingling around, leaving Leah in the pocket.

Leah waited for the next question. Maybe they’d ask her what she was doing in New York or where she graduated from, but then Yoni jumped in. “Did you guys hear what happened to Shlomo at the FIDF gala?”

“Oh My God, I was there!” “It was so embarrassing!” “What happened?!” All eyes

were now on Yoni as he began to tell a story that started with Shlomo drinking too much from the open bar. Leah stopped listening and her eyes wandered around the room. She realized she was probably the only person there without a drink in hand, and a drink would probably make her much more interesting to these potential friends while helping her relax, so she silently excused herself and found the bar in the back of the room.

The bartender was a tall man wearing a yarmulke with his sleeves rolled up. He smiled at her when she approached. “Hi, can I get a Long Island?”

He laughed. “Sorry, I’m not a real bartender. We take turns working the bar at these things. Can I offer you something simpler?”

Leah felt her cheeks turn red and her mouth drop open.

“How about a red wine?” he asked, already pouring the drink into a long-stemmed glass. “By the way, I’m Shlomo. You new here?”

Shlomo. The name rang a bell and Leah tried to remember if he had been standing in the pocket Hannah had introduced her to. No! Shlomo had been the cause of excitement at the FIDF event that Yoni was talking about! Leah felt even more embarrassed knowing this about him.

“Yes.” She said holding the ‘s’ a little too long. “Leah.” He offered her the wine and she took a sip.

“You’ll get to know everyone once you start coming to more of these events. It’s a lot of fun and a great way to meet people.”

“Like the FIDF gala?” She instantly covered her mouth.

“What?” Another girl approached the bar .

“Hey, can I have a glass of wine, please?”

“Of course, my specialty cocktail coming up!” Shlomo poured a glass of wine for the girl. Leah looked over at her and smiled. She smiled back and Leah knew this was her chance.

“Do you go to a lot of these events?” she asked, suddenly feeling extremely lame.

“No, but I promised my mom I’d go to at least one Jewish event a month, so here I am.” The girl rolled her eyes and took a sip of her wine. “Thanks,” she said to Shlomo and started walking away.

Leah followed her, keeping her wine close to her lips. “How long have you been in New York?”

“About a year. You?”

“I just got here today.”

“Wow. You must be really excited.” Her tone made Leah unsure if excitement was a good thing.

“I am.” She hoped it was. “I don’t really know anybody here, so I was hoping to meet some people.”

“Everyone comes to these things to find their bashert , but they all just stand around and gossip with their friends.”

Leah laughed. “Yeah, apparently the bartender got really drunk at the FIDF gala.”

“They all get really drunk.”

“So why does your mom want you to go to these things? ”

“To meet my husband!” The girl scoffed. “But I’m telling you, my husband is definitely not here.”

“Mine neither.” The girls both laughed.

“I’m Maya.”

“Leah.”

“Leah, what are we doing here?”

Leah shrugged. “Trying to meet people?” She looked around at all the pockets, everyone still deep in conversations with very few people besides Hannah moving between groups.

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen. Want to go get something to eat? We’re right by Curry Hill.”

“Curry Hill?”

“All the Indian restaurants. Do you like Indian food?”

Leah nodded, although she wasn’t sure she’d ever had Indian food. But if liking Indian food would make her Maya’s friend, she’d eat anything.

“Great, let’s go.” Maya and Leah finished their wines and left the glasses on a small table by the door on their way out.

“Thanks for coming ladies! I hope we see you again soon!” Hannah called out to them. The girls both waved back with friendly smiles and then rolled their eyes at each other. Leah’s heart was pumping. Her first New York event was a success! No, she didn’t meet her husband, she met someone so much better! A friend! It was still to be determined which friend Maya would be (probably a Miranda by what she knew so far), but this was a great start.

## Page 3

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“I’ve never dated a Jewish guy,” Maya said, dipping a piece of naan into the red sauce with cubes of something in it. Leah couldn’t remember the names of what they had ordered, tikka something, but it was delicious. A little spicier than she was used to, but she thought the heat was a taste she could acquire. Leah felt herself starting to sweat after Maya’s comment.

“What do you mean?” Leah suddenly felt very naïve. She’d only ever considered dating Jewish boys, her mom had ingrained that in her since she was in diapers. She’d never even considered that dating a non-Jewish guy was an option.

“I don’t know, I guess I’m not really attracted to them.”

“But you’re going to marry one, right?”

Maya shrugged. “Did you taste the saag paneer?” Leah’s eyes drifted to the bowl Maya was referring to. A green soupy dish with more cubes of what Leah assumed was tofu, although she had never eaten tofu before.

“Yeah, it’s really good.” Leah scooped some onto her plate. It was good, strange, but good .

“My last boyfriend was Indian,” Maya confided. “It was starting to get serious, but then his family made him break it off because I’m not Indian. I mean, I would have totally gone to India and worn a Sari for the wedding, but they were not having it. Can you believe it?”

Of course Leah could believe it! Her parents would have responded the same way!

“No, I mean, well, I guess, I get it.”

“You get it?”

“Well, my parents would never let me date someone who wasn’t Jewish.”

“Let you? Why do they get to decide who you date?”

The truth was that Leah had never even wanted to date someone non-Jewish. She’d barely had the opportunity even if she had wanted to. She grew up in a typical Jewish neighborhood where even her public school was at least half Jewish. She spent her evenings and weekends in Hebrew school or going to Jewish youth group events and then studied at Brandeis, where almost everyone she knew was Jewish. Now it was Leah’s turn to confide.

“Well I’ve only really dated one person.” Leah felt embarrassed as she said it, but how could she and Maya ever be real friends if she hadn’t shared this information? She would have dated more people, lots more people! But she had fallen in love in ninth grade and until very recently she was sure that love would last forever.

She remembered the moment she first saw him, at the dance her Synagogue hosted for the B’nai Brith Youth Organization’s regional chapters. It was her first event and she couldn’t believe she was finally let into the club. She’d been hearing about BBYO events from her older sister for years and couldn’t wait to go herself. Her sister was always chanting songs from the youth group, mentioning little traditions they had (like eating pretzels in frosting, which sounded disgusting and delicious at the same time), and coming home with little paraphernalia and t-shirts that she treasured the way their mom treasured her wedding ring.

When she entered ninth grade and her bat mitzvah class was invited to the dance, all the girls had gotten excited—this was it! Their real initiation into becoming women

(and it felt like a much more legit transition than their bat mitzvahs!)

She'd spent hours getting ready. Her mom and sister had taken her shopping to buy a new dress at Neiman Marcus and when she put it on, she felt more like a woman than a girl. She and her sister stood together in their bathroom putting on their makeup and styling their hair. She'd dabbed glitter on her eyelids and struggled with the liquid liner until her eyes were even enough. After mascara and lip gloss, she pulled her curly hair into a ponytail and clipped a gold barrette on top. She was ready.

Her sister Shira was getting a ride from her friend to the dance and agreed to bring Leah along with them. She sat quietly in the back of the car while Shira and her friend gossiped during the ride. Usually, she would take any opportunity to listen to her sister's gossip. There were always people kissing or breaking up or getting in trouble for things. But this time Leah was nervous, wondering what it would be like for her to arrive with two seniors.

Her worries were answered as soon as they got to the social hall. Her sister checked that Leah found her friends and then she immediately abandoned her for her own friends. It was for the best, Leah thought, she was relieved to be with her familiar crowd. Leah and her friends danced in a tight circle for most of the night, enjoying the thrill of being there. All of the girls were constantly looking around as boys sometimes approached and circled them before returning to their own circles of friends. It was embarrassing and exhilarating at the same time. And then she caught his eye.

He wasn't dancing and she was pretty sure he hadn't danced at all the entire night. He was standing with his friends at the side of the room laughing about something that Leah was sure was truly hilarious. He looked at her and smiled. It sounds cliché to say that time stopped for a moment, but it did. And at that moment, Leah knew that she was going to marry that guy.

The moment ended. She continued dancing. And when the dance was over she wondered if he had felt it too. Did he also know they were going to get married? The crowd started to disperse and she looked for him.

Her sister found her first and asked if she had fun. “Yeah!” She said enthusiastically. “Do you know a guy with curly hair and really pink lips?” She asked her sister. “I think he had blue eyes.”

“This is BBYO,” Shira responded. “You’ve got to be more specific.”

Just then, he bumped her shoulder. “Hey.”

Leah blushed and then she knew it. She knew he knew it too. “Hey.” He introduced himself as Asher and asked if he’d see her around at future events. “Definitely!” she responded and that was the end of their first interaction.

It had been months until they had met again. She had been to every BBYO event in hopes of seeing him, but he wasn’t there until he was. During their second interaction, she learned that he was a sophomore and played soccer at his high school. It was only on their third interaction that he asked if she wanted to hang out after. Well, it wasn’t exactly a date, but it was the closest thing for a high school freshman. “Everyone’s going to McDonald’s, if you want to come,” he’d said. She went and ate fries with him and his sophomore friends and then her sister drove her home.

By Leah’s sophomore year, they were an item. The BBYO IT couple. Everyone knew they would eventually get married. And then Asher graduated. “I’m going to school in Los Angeles,” he’d declared as if it had always been a part of the plan. “You can come meet me there next year.”

Leah did not want to go to college in LA. She did not want to be so far away from her family. How could he make that decision without her? She had agreed to apply to

schools in LA and she kissed him goodbye when he got on the plane to start his freshman year. They'd stay together, they agreed. It would only be long-distance for a year, they told each other, but Leah had no intention of going to school across the country. But she lied and told Asher she applied.

When she got her acceptance from Brandeis, she couldn't hide it anymore. She begged him to transfer, didn't he miss her? In his freshman year, he'd only seen her three times! Thanksgiving, winter break, and a short weekend when she flew out to visit. Did he want to continue living like that?

In short, he didn't and they agreed on an open relationship. Just until they graduated and both moved back to New York. This was the best for both of them, Asher reasoned, they could enjoy college and know that they would eventually be together. Leah agreed, although she could never enjoy the open relationship. She didn't feel like she was in an open relationship, maybe she didn't know how it was supposed to feel. So she pretended they were still together and she never dated anyone else.

When Asher graduated, he moved back in with his parents. He visited her a few times in Boston, but whenever he was there, she felt smuggled. She realized she was happier when he wasn't around. So when her graduation started to approach and he started talking about getting an apartment together, she cringed. "Maybe we need our space still," she'd said and told him she wanted to move to New York City.

"I like NYC," he'd commented, but she explained that she wanted to move there alone. Well, not alone, she'd have a roommate, but not with him. He understood and then there she was, sitting in a restaurant in Curry Hill eating Tofu Saag Paneer with a girl she'd just met who'd dated an Indian guy.

She gave Maya the short version of the story: she'd stayed with her high school sweetheart throughout college and was newly single. She'd love to date someone new and have some new experiences, that's why she moved to NYC in the first place!

“But only Jewish guys, right?” Maya asked.

“I mean, if not, what’s the point?”

## Page 4

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Leah had all but forgotten her near-assault experience on the subway by the time she and Maya had finished splitting a bowl of kulfi for dessert. It was sort of like ice cream. But more ice and less cream. The girls split the bill and headed for the door.

“Where are you headed?” Maya asked as they stood outside. It was a warm night, neither of them had jackets on and Leah suddenly felt very overdressed for someone ending her night in front of an Indian restaurant.

Before she could answer, a couple of men bumped them as they walked by. “Rude!” Maya yelled out to the men’s backs. When they turned around, Leah stopped.

“Hey! Enjoying your stay here in New York?” one of the men called. His voice was deep and familiar in an unfamiliar way.

Maya scoffed. “Move along, boys! Nothing for you here!”

Leah’s eyes caught the man who had raised the question and her cheeks burned with embarrassment. “We live here.” Thankfully Maya by her side gave her the confidence to respond .

“Really?” the man looked shocked as he took a step closer to Leah. “You don’t look like a New Yorker. A New Yorker would have avoided singing with homeless men on the Subway.” Embarrassed, yet excited to see her Subway savior, Leah was trying to figure out what he looked like. Was he a New Yorker? He was still wearing a suit with the top button opened up. The collar was a little wilted, showing his Adam’s apple. He had freckles and dark brown eyes under a head of blond hair that looked like it would run wild if he ever let it grow too long.

“What do New Yorkers look like?” Maya challenged him with her eyebrows raised.

“Well, usually they look mean.” The guy scrunched his brow in a mockingly mean face. “And very, very busy. Like they are about to be late for a meeting so you better get out of their way.”

Leah laughed. She did feel like most of the people she saw could fit that description. “Well, we’re going to be late,” she giggled. “Out of our way!”

“Wow, that was almost convincing!” He winked at her. “Ok, New Yorker, what’s the plan? What’s the trendiest spot to head to next?”

Leah looked at Maya. Surely she’d know. But Maya looked less interested. “There’s a cool dive around here. They have like 80 beers on tap.” Leah was impressed. She didn’t even know there were 80 kinds of beer out there. “I could get a beer. Leah?”

Leah smiled and nodded at her friend before looking at the guy.

“Leah,” he said. “Nice to meet you. I’m Gabe.”

Maya started walking and Leah tried to stay in step without letting Gabe fall behind. He stayed close, walking with his friends a couple of paces behind them. Maya led them a few blocks away to a crowded bar where people seemed to be spilling out the front door. She pushed through, pulling Leah in with her. Leah feared they’d get absorbed in the crowd and find themselves in another universe where Gabe couldn’t find them. She pushed her way to the bar and shouldered her way in. Leah was relieved to see Gabe behind them.

Leah was thrilled with how the evening was turning out. New York was exactly how she imagined! Friends, exotic restaurants, and cute boys who saved your life and followed you into crowded bars, what else could she ever ask for?

“What beer do you like?” Maya shouted to Leah. Leah had no idea. She’d only had beer at college parties where people got excited if there was anything other than Budweiser.

“I’ll have what you’re having.” She shouted back. Maya leaned over and shouted to the bartender who came back with two tall glasses of beer .

“Cheers,” Maya said as she handed one to Leah. The girls clinked their glasses and took a sip just as Gabe and his friends got to them. Leah almost spit the beer out. It was bitter. Stronger than she could have imagined. She took another sip. Maybe it would grow on her. “It’s an IPA. The best.”

“Thanks for ordering for us!” Gabe joked while his friend got the bartender’s attention. When the boys had their beers everyone gave a round of cheers and Leah tried to continue sipping her beer even though it tasted disgusting. But disgusting in a way that made her want more.

“So, Leah, what were you doing earlier on the Upper East Side?” Gabe shouted in her ear in the most intimate way possible. His breath made her ear tingle and she was afraid of turning her head to get too close.

“I live there.” She kept her gaze on Maya who was already talking with one of Gabe’s friends.

“Really.” It wasn’t so much a question, or an accusation, rather, just a statement. “I live up there too. I guess we’re neighbors.”

“Leah, I have to go to the bathroom.” Maya grabbed Leah’s wrist and pulled her away. “We’ll be back in a few.” Leah handed Gabe her beer and followed Maya to the back of the bar where a graffitied door led to a completely black bathroom.

“He likes you!” Maya said when they were inside. “How do you know that guy? ”

“We just met.” Leah wasn’t sure how much of the story she should tell Maya. “On the Subway earlier. He lives in my neighborhood.”

“Or he is stalking you.” Maya laughed as she entered a stall. Leah looked at herself in the mirror. Maybe he did like her. She did look pretty tonight, she thought. Her make-up was just right and she had that glow of seeming happy. The toilet flushed. “Are you going to kiss him?”

“What?”

“He’s going to try to kiss you. Would you kiss him back?”

“Well—” Leah had never kissed someone she had just met! She hadn’t even thought about kissing him until Maya said something and now she was imagining it in her head. He had really pink lips and perfectly straight teeth. She could imagine his hand gripping her head as he leaned into her. She could feel her face heating up.

“You do want to kiss him!” Maya laughed as she dried her hands. “I knew it!”

“He’s cute.”

Maya nodded in agreement and Leah followed her out of the bathroom. Gabe and his friends were exactly where they left them and Gabe handed her the beer when she got back. “No roofies right?” Maya joked to the boys as she took a sip. Leah laughed but remembered the warnings her mom had always given her. She could trust Gabe, right? He shouted something in her ear.

“What?”

“What are you doing in New York?” He repeated, this time so close to her ear she could almost feel his lips. The feeling made her whole body shiver.

“I’m working for Diamond Media.”

“What?” He now shouted back. “Want to go somewhere quieter?”

She nodded and motioned to Maya that they were going to step outside. She followed Gabe and the two of them spilled out of the bar. “Cigarette?” he asked.

Leah shook her head and immediately felt disappointed. How could she kiss a smoker?

“Good, because I don’t have any,” he laughed. “I’m a runner and it kills my lungs.”

“A runner?”

“Yup, that’s why I live so close to the park. Do you run?”

Leah shook her head. She was one of those people who went to the gym daily for the first week of January, weekly by the second, and forgot her membership by February until May rolled around and she remembered that summer was coming.

“So what did you say you did?”

“I’m a researcher for Diamond Media.” She said proudly.

“Wow, impressive. Do you like it? ”

Here was where imposter syndrome showed up. “Well, I haven’t started yet. Monday’s my first day.”

“Good luck then.”

“Thanks.”

“So I have to get up early for training, so I think I am going to head back. Want an escort home? I’ll protect you from all the homeless people. I’ve got a few dollars left.”

Leah smiled and agreed, asking to first step inside and say goodbye to Maya. She pushed back inside and found her friend still talking to one of Gabe’s friends. “I’m going home,” she shouted to her friend.

“Oohhhhhhh,” Maya pursed her lips, implying something a little more scandalous than Leah would have done. Leah giggled. “Text when you get home,” Maya continued before Leah realized she didn’t even have her new best friend’s phone number. The girls exchanged numbers and Leah stepped back outside.

Gabe wasn’t there. She suddenly panicked. Did he leave her? Did he think she was lying about going home? Was he over her already? But then she saw him coming out of the convenience store next to them with two water bottles. He handed her one. “Got to stay hydrated after the alcohol.”

She followed him to the Subway and swiped her card feeling like an insider when the turnstile let her in. They stood together, drinking their water as they waited for the train. Conversation flowed easily between them. He’d been living in New York for a few years already. He grew up on Long Island and had a Business degree from NYU. He’d been working for a hedge fund for three years already and was hoping to one day start his own. He also liked to read and still used the public library to pick up new reading materials every week. “Usually I read on the Subway,” he said. “I love my commute to Wall Street!”

When they got off the Subway Leah led him all the way to Second Avenue to the doorstep of her tiny apartment. “Thanks for the escort.” She smiled at him.

“Anytime.” He smiled and stood in front of her. This was the moment, Leah thought. The one she had envisioned back in the dirty black bathroom at the bar. He leaned in and kissed her lightly on the lips, pulling back before his hands could grab her head or his lips could bind too tightly with hers. “It was nice meeting you, Leah. How about next time, I pick the place?”

She agreed and gave him her number, hoping he’d kiss her again. But he didn’t. He nodded his head and said goodbye.

Inside, she immediately pulled out her phone to text Maya. Home safe! He kissed me!

A moment later she got a response. Yay! But is he Jewish?

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm*

Leah had spent Saturday organizing her new room. She had stacks of pictures to hang up, which she meticulously measured and taped in a checkerboard formation on the wall above her bed. There were pictures of her high school friends dressed up at BBYO dances. She and her college roommate in Halloween costumes. A group picture from the Hillel Purim party from her senior year. Even one of her and her friends in front of the Christmas tree in the Boston Commons. Even she, a nice Jewish girl from upstate, could appreciate the beauty of the lights and the holiday season.

She focused on every picture as she hung it up, reliving the memories she had with her friends, until she came upon one with Asher. She and he were standing in his parents' kitchen, he was standing behind her, his arms hugging her around her shoulders. She was looking back at him, a huge smile on her face and her eyes full of love. He was looking at the camera, looking equally happy and in love with her. The picture had been taken during her junior year of college during winter break when Asher was home. They had treasured those few weeks every year, spending every moment together in an intense hope of getting an entire year of emotion into a short school break. They were happy during those times, she remembered. She was always so happy when he came home. And now that happiness made her sad.

She decided not to put that picture on the wall. That was the last thing she needed, a constant reminder of a time she was happy and in love. Before she could start wondering if she had somehow made a mistake, she picked up her phone to see if she had any messages.

Last night she had texted Maya back a simple emoji of the girl with her hands up by her shoulders as if to say she didn't know. What was she supposed to do? Ask Gabe?

As he leaned in to kiss her, should she have stopped him? “Wait, sorry, excuse me,” she could have said. “Are you Jewish?” If he said no, was she supposed to say, “OK, well thanks for the walk and let’s be friends!”? And if he said yes? Would the kiss continue as though uninterrupted by her awkward question? He could be Jewish, she thought. Wasn’t most of New York City Jewish? She’d heard once that there were more Jews in New York than in Israel, so the chances seemed high. And the name Gabe? It could go either way. She needed to find out his last name.

She had one new text message from her mom. Hope the move in is going well! I wish I was there to help you! Sunday lunch? Right, Leah thought. Her mom had promised to help her move into her new apartment, but there had been an emergency in the temple Chavurah. The Greenberg’s youngest sons’ bar mitzvah was that weekend and their catering had just fallen through. How were they going to feed everyone for the Shabbat luncheon? They couldn’t rely on the temple’s regular bagel and cream cheese spread! There would be hundreds of people there! Leah’s mom—head of the temple sisterhood—promised to help. She enlisted volunteers to meet in the temple’s kitchen Friday morning to cook together. They’d make kugel, rugalach, knishes, salads, and everything else that was expected on a Saturday after services lunch. I’m sorry honey! It’s part of my duties to oversee this! Leah’s mom had said Thursday evening. I’ll drive to the city Sunday to help! We’ll get lunch in your new neighborhood!

By Sunday, Leah was hoping she wouldn’t need any more help. On Friday morning, movers had picked up her furniture and she rode with them to the city, feeling that uncomfortable need to make conversation when she really had no interest in talking. They emptied her furniture and boxes and she had gotten to work. The living room and kitchen had been done before she’d gone out Friday (except for the TV dispute), and her room could be done in a day. After four years of dorm rooms, she was a pro at moving .

Leah responded to her mom: Don’t worry, everything is great! Would be happy to do

lunch Sunday. Hope the bar mitzvah went well.

The bar mitzvah was wonderful! Everyone loved the kugel! And everyone is so proud of you for moving to New York by yourself! The response came in a minute.

Leah put her phone down and went back to her pictures. There were a few more of her and Asher, which she stuffed back into the bottom of the box. After she finished hanging up all the pictures that did make her happy, she slid the box under her bed, not to open it again until her next move (which she hoped was more than a year away).

She organized her closet and her dresser and then stuffed her suitcases under the bed, pushing the box even deeper to a place she'd never think about again until necessary. It was mid-afternoon by the time she'd finished and she hadn't eaten a thing. Not that there was anything to eat in the apartment anyway. She still needed to figure out the closest grocery store and which restaurants or cafes in her neighborhood were worth becoming a regular at. She had her eye on a bagel shop she'd passed a couple of times on her walks to the Subway.

She asked her roommate if she wanted anything on her way out. "Get me an everything bagel with low-fat cream cheese! Thanks!" The roommate responded, enthusiastically. Leah had hoped she'd offer to join her, and the two of them could go together, but maybe if she bought her roommate a bagel, it would be the start of their friendship. They could eat them together on the couch and continue the discussion of where to put the TV.

Leah headed out, with her phone in hand. She wished someone would text her or call her. Ask her how she was doing, or better yet, ask her to hang out. When her phone buzzed, her heart jumped. Her first hope was Gabe, but then she thought a text from Maya would be so much better. It was her sister Shira.

How's the big city? Shira had moved to Los Angeles after she had graduated college three years before. Her degree was in film and everyone agreed there was no better place for an unemployed film major than Los Angeles. She'd quickly gotten an internship with one of the big studios where she was in charge of coffee for a film crew. After their parents had gotten tired of paying her rent for a year, Shira got a job working in the customer service department of a large bank. Their parents had been proud of her for the job, but had suggested that instead she go back to school. They'd even bribed her with another year of rent, but Shira had insisted she liked her job. It gave her plenty of time to work on her own projects in the afternoons and weekends. And she didn't need any help paying for rent, just a credit card number for plane tickets if her parents ever wanted to see her.

Leah sent her sister an overly enthusiastic message about how amazing New York was. She bought two bagels and headed back to the apartment, where she ate alone on the couch, while her roommate ate in her bedroom with the door closed. She grabbed her phone to text Maya, hoping she wouldn't sound too desperate asking her to hang out again already. New friendships and dating weren't all that different. She didn't want to come on too strong, but she really wanted to see Maya again. She started texting a message, but quickly deleted it. She'd wait a few days. Maybe suggest happy hour in the middle of the week. That was less precocious. More low-key. Less desperate.

She turned on the TV that was sitting on the floor in front of the couch and spent her first Saturday evening in New York.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm*

The honking woke her up. No surprise, she thought, because the honking had also kept her awake for her first few nights in the apartment. It wasn't just the honking. There were always people shouting on the street. Always some sort of music or noise blaring from an unknown location. There was even a sort of buzzing, like electricity was constantly flowing through the walls of her apartment.

When the sun started to peep through her window, she got up. She had plenty of time to get ready for her first day at work. She showered, brushed her teeth, and stood in front of her closet. When she had started job interviewing, she had shopped for an entire new wardrobe of professional clothing. She had everything from formal office attire to business casual. Once she picked out a light pink blouse and a gray pencil skirt, she sat at the vanity that she'd had since she was thirteen and moved with her every year in college and put on her makeup. Then, she clipped her curls back and put on a small pair of earrings.

She looked professional, she thought to herself. Like someone who was already on her way to being a professional editor at one of the top media companies in the world. She looked at the clock on her nightstand. It was 7:15. She'd figured it would take her an hour to take the subway downtown, so she still had plenty of time. She sat back on her bed to scroll through her phone as she waited. At 7:45, she decided it was time to go.

She walked to the Subway where people were standing in a crowd in front of the turnstiles. She tried to look forward to see what was happening, but all she could see was the slow movement of people trying to push forward to get to the platform. When it was her turn, she swiped her card as fast as possible and pushed onto the cramped platform. There were so many people waiting! She couldn't believe there were that

many people living in her neighborhood at her Subway stop! Were all these people going to fit on the train? A train came and when the doors opened, people pushed in. Leah tried to move forward but felt herself being pushed back by the crowd. The doors closed and the crowded train shot down the track. She looked around the platform. It was as crowded as before the train arrived and more people were pouring in.

She tried to stand close to the tracks, but not too close that she could accidentally get pushed in. When the next train arrived, she was more aggressive. She pushed herself on the train and found an inch of a pole to wrap her fingers around. She would have lost her balance when the train sped off if the people around her didn't hold her up straight. She checked her phone. It was already 8:15. Plenty of time to get downtown. And then the train stopped.

A voice came over the speaker announcing delays and Leah started to panic. She looked around at everyone who seemed preoccupied with their own things. Some scrolled through their phones, others read newspapers. Some books. But no one seemed concerned or surprised at the announcement. After five full minutes—who knew how long five minutes could be!—the train lurched forward and again Leah felt herself propped up by her fellow train riders. The ride downtown continued with more stops and lurches forward until she finally reached her station on Wall Street at 9:15.

Late on her first day. She wanted to cry. A good first impression had been so important to her! It would make or break her career and here she was already showing them that she was unreliable. She pushed off the subway and ran to the building. Inside, she tried to catch her breath as the security guard asked to see her badge. She didn't have one yet! It was her first day and she was late! She tried to explain between pants. Maybe she should take up running like Gabe, she thought. Maybe all New Yorkers needed to be runners. A drop of sweat fell on her hand. She was now late and sweaty. Perfect .

The security guard called up to Diamond Media's HR department, who said they'd send someone down to meet her. Leah felt relieved that they hadn't already dismissed her on the spot. She couldn't wait to get started. She imagined sitting in her manager's office listening to all the tricks of the trade. She'd be her manager's best employee! Hopefully her protégé! And get promoted in no time.

It took almost ten minutes before the HR woman came out of the elevators. "Leah Rosenberg? Nice to meet you! I'm Kelsey." Kelsey held her hand out. Leah smiled and shook her hand while trying to calculate what time she would actually get to meet her manager. 9:30? 9:40? She was so late! Kelsey signed Leah into the building and led her to the elevators.

"Did you get here all right?" Kelsey asked with a big smile as they rode the elevator to the sixteenth floor.

"Yeah, I mean, I took the Subway. I'm sorry I'm late!" She blurted out before she could remind herself not to apologize. Her dad always said never to apologize if something wasn't her fault. It made someone seem weak. And being late was not her fault! It was the Subway's fault!

"Oh, don't worry about it! The Subway during rush hour can be a nightmare!" Kelsey's smile appeared to be growing. "You'll get used to it and be able to time yourself better." There it was. The HR reprimanding for being late.

The elevator doors opened to a bright lobby with modern lighting and flower vases around the room. Kelsey led Leah past the reception. "Good morning, Carmen!" Kelsey and the receptionist exchanged smiles, but Kelsey kept walking. Leah eyed the clean cubicles and glass-walled offices around the perimeter. Everyone looked so busy! And so professional! "This is the business floor," Kelsey explained as she walked. "The sales teams, HR, operations department." Kelsey weaved through the cubicles smiling and waving at everyone she walked by. "All right, here we are." She

stopped at the door of a large office with a woman inside sitting in front of a computer. Leah recognized the woman as Helen Thomas, who had held her HR interview during the hiring process. “Good morning, Helen, I have Leah Rosenberg here for her first day.”

Leah smiled and waved to the woman, as if to say, hey! I made it! Remember me from the interview? But it seemed that Helen did not remember her. She looked up and gave a curt smile, her lips pressed together. “Welcome. Kelsey, can you onboard her? I’m in the middle of something.”

Kelsey agreed and took Leah to the cubicle in front of Helen’s office. She pulled up an extra chair and sat down at the desk. Leah positioned the extra chair and sat. “We’re so excited to have you. We just need you to sign some paperwork and we’ll get you a badge and everything will be all set up.” Kelsey threw a stack of papers in front of her. “It’s all standard for an employment contract. You should look over it, just to be aware, but I’ll give you the main points.” Kelsey started listing off information, how sick days worked, when she’d get paid, how she’d accrue vacation time. The hours she was expected to work (9:00-6:00 PM, which Kelsey seemed to emphasize) and she was allotted thirty minutes for lunch. How she should give notice should she decide to quit and the process if the company wanted to terminate her employment (they could do without notice for the first three months, which shocked Leah). Her head was starting to spin and she caught her eyes wandering around. There was no privacy for this conversation. Whoever was in the next cubicle over could hear everything. That didn’t seem very HR-like, Leah thought. Wasn’t HR supposed to protect employees?

“Everything clear?” Kelsey asked and Leah nodded. “I’m going to get your file, you can read over the contract while I’m gone.” Kelsey stood up and left Leah in the cubicle with the papers. She had never seen a contract before and had no idea what to look for. She flipped the pages until she saw her salary. \$35,000 a year. It was exactly what was agreed upon, and by her budgeting, exactly enough for the year in New

York. But she'd get a raise soon. As soon as she started proving herself at Teen Club.

Kelsey came back. "So I need to ask you something. You can definitely say no, we'll just have to figure things out." Leah immediately knew she couldn't say no.

"Our researcher at Club Business just quit yesterday, out of the blue." Kelsey rolled her eyes as though confiding in Leah. She leaned forward. "It was such a mess. Anyway, they are desperate for a researcher since they only had one and he had a lot of responsibilities. Teen Club has five researchers already and the Chief agreed to lend one out. We thought, since you know, it's your first day, and you're starting from scratch anyway, you could just start at Club Business. You'll be doing the same thing." Kelsey nodded as she finished talking. "It'll be great for you at Club Business. It's such a great opportunity. You'll learn so much."

Business? Leah thought. She knew absolutely nothing about business or investments or finances or anything that had to do with the money industry. She had been dreaming about Teen Club! She'd dreamed about writing advice columns for self-conscious girls and spotting trends and beach reads. What did a researcher for Club Business research?

Of course, Leah nodded in agreement, not wanting to start any problems on her first day. They'd hire a new researcher soon and then she'd move back to Teen Club. And by then, she'd be an excellent researcher!

"A great team player! Exactly what we look for at Diamond Media." Kelsey assured Leah as she led her to get her picture taken for her new badge. "You swipe this to get in the building," Kelsey explained while clipping the badge onto a lanyard. "If you lose it, it costs \$10 to replace."

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm*

Leah followed Kelsey to the elevators and down to the twelfth floor where the doors opened to a very different looking office. Instead of the natural lighting from upstairs, the lobby was lit with LEDs. Newspapers scattered the tables around the lobby and the reception was empty. Kelsey opened the doors to the office space, which was also lined with glass windowed offices centered around cubicles. But these cubicles looked different. Older? More cluttered? Leah glanced at the employees sitting at their desks, hunched over, on the phones, taking notes, reading newspapers, or concentrating on their screens. No one looked up and smiled.

Kelsey stopped in front of one of the glass offices and knocked on the window. “Hey, Tony, how’s it going?”

“How’s it going? Well, this morning my wife spent ten minutes lecturing me about how to put cups in the dishwasher! Can you believe it? At least I put my cups in the dishwasher. Unlike James and Andrew, who leave everything on the table like we have a maid at home or something. Teenagers!” Tony grunted .

“That’s frustrating,” Kelsey smiled.

“And now that Kevin quit, I have no one to do the TCR! I asked Mark and Alex, but they refused! As if they are too good for it now that they are senior reporters! They don’t remember what it was like to start out! So now, I, the bankruptcy editor, one step under the editor-in-chief, am doing data entry instead of editing and serving out my pearls of wisdom from years in the industry. You hear that Mark and Alex?” He yelled out from the office to the cubicles. “You’re the ones suffering in the end by not doing the TCR!”

“We’ll take that risk!” someone shouted back in a convivial tone. Leah looked to see who it was, but she didn’t catch it. Everyone seemed so consumed in what they were doing.

“Well, I have good news, Tony,” Kelsey jumped in before he could continue. “This is Leah Rosenberg, she’s your new researcher and she starts now. Maybe she can help with the TCR?”

“Hi, Mr....” Leah didn’t even know his name. She’d spent hours researching her boss at Teen Club. Marnie Gray had gotten a master’s in journalism at NYU and wrote young adult novels about girls whose insecurities turned into superpowers. She’d had three best sellers before becoming the Story Editor at Teen Club and was promoted to Editor-in-Chief after two years when the previous Chief was moved to corporate. In an interview, she’d said she was excited to bring a young voice to the magazine’s highest position. She was only 30, after all, and the youngest Chief in Diamond Media’s history. Leah was ready to ask all the right questions so she could learn everything from her. She hadn’t spent a second looking into Diamond Media’s other editors, especially not the Club Business ones. Leah glanced at the marker on the door. “Mr. Romano.”

“Tony,” he corrected her. “You don’t have to pretend to respect me. My other reporters sure don’t!” He directed that comment to the cubicles where laughter erupted.

“All right, well, I’m going to get going,” Kelsey said. “Leah, if you need anything you know where I am. Come say hi at the end of the day before you leave. Good luck!” Leah wanted to beg Kelsey to stay, she’d almost felt like Kelsey was a friend, or maybe just an ally, which she felt she desperately needed if she were to survive in Club Business.

“So, Leah,” Tony started. “Grab a seat.”

“It’s Lee-ah,” she corrected his pronunciation. She hated when people called her Leah, as in Princess Leah. It was Lee-ah.

“All right, Lee-ah,” he exaggerated the sound. “I like attention to detail, so that’s a good start. Your first assignment is the TCR.” He grabbed a two-inch stack of papers and handed it to her. “This is the Troubled Company Reporter. Every morning, we get a report of any company that files for bankruptcy or goes into default or anything else that happens that negatively affects the company’s finances. We need to get all this data in our database as soon as possible so we can have the most up-to-date business database around. Our readers come to us because we have all the data they need. You understand? We also use this data to come up with interesting stories to write about. We might see a trend in loan defaults, or notice a peculiar bankruptcy filing. It’s your job to bring these to our attention so the writers can write about them. Got it?”

Leah nodded, but she didn’t get it. How was she supposed to recognize a trend in loan defaults? Or a peculiar bankruptcy? She knew nothing about loans or bankruptcies!

“Great. Malcolm will show you how to do it. It’s really simple. Malcolm!” Tony screamed out the door. Before the sound disappeared from the air, a skinny African American man in glasses and a plaid shirt was standing in the doorway with a big smile on his face. “Malcolm, this is Leah, she’s taking Kevin’s job. Show her the TCR. And make sure it’s done fast! It’s already 10 am and it hasn’t been started!”

Malcolm motioned Leah to follow him and he led her to an empty desk with a computer on it. He turned it on and as he waited for it to boot, he pulled up a second chair. “Welcome to Club Business,” he said so quietly that Leah wasn’t sure he had spoken at all. “Are you new to the city?”

Leah leaned in closer to hear what he said. “Yeah,” she responded, self-conscious about the level of her voice. “I just moved here on Friday.”

“How exciting. Do you like salsa?”

Leah was sure she had misheard. She crinkled her eyebrows. “Salsa?” she questioned and Malcolm nodded. “I guess. It’s good for chips and Mexican food.” She felt silly saying it. This was the first thing she’d said as the researcher at Club Business. It was not Club-like and it was definitely not business.

“No, salsa dancing.” Malcolm giggled quietly as though Leah’s misunderstanding was completely unfounded.

“Um, well, I’ve never been salsa dancing.” That wasn’t 100% true. In college she’d once gone to a salsa club with her girlfriends. But they didn’t know any of the steps nor did they try to learn. They had just ordered margaritas and laughed as they pretended to know what they were doing on the dance floor.

“If you want to, I go to this club on Monday nights. It’s really fun and a great way to unwind after a long day of work.”

“Well, uh, I don’t have a partner.”

“You don’t need one!” His voice jumped one step above a whisper. “A lot of people come without partners. I have a partner who I’ve been dancing with for 20 years, we’ll help you.” 20 years? Leah had assumed Malcolm was just a few years older than she was! She couldn’t imagine him dancing as a three-year-old, flicking his wrists and clicking his heels to the music.

“OK, sure.” Leah wasn’t sure if this was crossing a line or if there were any ethical issues with agreeing to go salsa dancing with Malcolm. Was he her colleague? Her manager? Was he inappropriately hitting on her? Or trying to be nice to the new girl? “Why don’t we get started on the TCR? Tony seemed really stressed about it.” She needed to prove herself professionally.

“Tony is always stressed.” Someone had stood up from the other side of the cubicle. “Even if the TCR is done at 9 am, he’ll be stressed about something else. Hey, Alex, remember when Blockbuster filed for bankruptcy? Oh man, I was doing the TCR then and I went to Tony’s office to show him and he flipped! He was so mad that he was finding out from the TCR and not from one of his sources! I used to get the TCR done by 8:00 am in those days. I’m Mark. Senior reporter.”

“Leah.” She smiled and another head popped up from the side of her cubicle. “I’m Alex. Also a senior reporter. Also used to the TCR.”

“We should get started,” Malcolm said quietly and Alex and Mark both sat down. He helped Leah with her login and showed her how to access their database. He went through the stack of papers with her and showed her how to input the data into the computer. “Oh, this is a really interesting one!” He whispered excitedly. “I’ll have to take this one to Tony.” He showed it to Leah and she nodded. She had no idea what was interesting about it, but she’d take his word for it. After an hour, Malcolm asked if she was ready to continue on her own.

She nodded, despite fearing that she could mess up. A mistake could be detrimental to the company, she figured, based on the importance Tony had seemed to put on the TCR. But she had to prove herself, so she agreed and tried to input the data on her own. As she worked, she wondered if this was what researchers did. Was research a glorified name for data entry?

“Hey, Leah, we’re going to grab lunch, want to come?” Alex stood up from his cubicle to ask. Leah looked at the stack of the TCR. She’d gone through a quarter of it and feared she never have it done in time. Especially since a new one was coming tomorrow.

“I think I’ll pass today. But tomorrow!” She said hopefully, praying her rejection wouldn’t be seen as her not wanting to ever have lunch together. Alex nodded and

left with Mark. Malcolm stepped out a few minutes later, also probably getting lunch.

“How’s that TCR going?” Tony startled her at the side of her cubicle.

“Good, it’s going good. Malcolm was really helpful. ”

“Great. Yeah, Malcolm is the top data analyst here. He’s also a semi-professional salsa dancer, in case you didn’t know. Anyway, I’m going to have lunch. Tell me when the TCR is done.” Tony tapped her cubicle and left the office. Leah was alone in their section of the floor. She pulled a granola bar out of her bag and continued the data entry.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm*

When the clock on the wall ticked to 6:00 PM, everyone around Leah stood up. Computers booted down and footsteps thumped toward the door. Leah started closing down her computer. She'd finished the TCR sometime mid-afternoon. Triumphantlly, she notified Malcolm, who congratulated her, while explaining that it should only take an hour to do. "Next time, it will be quicker," he assured her in his soft voice. He'd given her some old issues of Club Business to read and she spent the rest of the afternoon reading while her stomach grumbled.

She picked up her badge and purse and headed for the door. "See you at salsa tonight?" Malcolm startled her when she passed his desk. She'd assumed he was gone like everyone else. She nodded obligatorily as though her boss had reminded her of an upcoming deadline and waved goodbye. The elevator was packed on the way down and she ended up walking up to the sixteenth floor to say goodbye to Kelsey. She hoped Kelsey would give her some encouragement; that it would get easier, or maybe she'd move back to Teen Club faster than expected. But when she approached Kelsey's desk, she noticed it was clean. The computer was off. There was no purse hanging from the hook on the side as there had been in the morning. An empty coffee mug with Diamond Media's logo sat clean on a coaster. Leah stayed and stared at the cubicle. She hadn't noticed earlier that the inside was covered with pictures and notes pinned to the walls. She saw pictures of Kelsey smiling with friends. Old tickets to the Met. Handwritten notes that were both professional and not. "Is it happy hour yet?" One note said. "Schedule annual reviews," said another.

The floor was eerily quiet, and Leah turned around to leave. She waited for three elevators before being able to fit inside one and she finally made it to the ground. She checked the map on her phone to make sure she remembered how to get back to the subway and started walking. It was like swimming through a storm, with currents of

people flowing both ways. Men in suits swarmed her direction, while tourists with children and cameras flowed the other way. She barreled through, getting to the subway station that had more people waiting in it than she could believe. Trains came immediately, people filled them, but the platform didn't get any less packed. She slid her way through trying to walk to the end of the platform where it would hopefully be less crowded.

"Enjoying rush hour?" She heard from behind her. Her heart jumped as she feared being accosted on the Subway for a second time. She turned and there was Gabe standing in a suit with a bag over his shoulder.

"Is it always like this?" she asked, afraid of his answer.

He looked around and pursed his lips. "Nope. Sometimes it's more crowded." She must have looked defeated because he continued talking. "But you know what, if you leave an hour later, it's almost empty." That didn't make Leah feel any better. Was she supposed to stay at work until 7:00? "Do you want to get out of here? Get back on in an hour? There are a few good happy hours around here."

There was nothing Leah wanted more than to get off that subway platform. She followed Gabe back through the platform and up the stairs, which was almost impossible with the tidal wave of people pouring down. But they made it and Gabe led her down cobblestone streets until he stopped at Stone Street Tavern. He pushed the door inside and sat down at a table near the windows. There were others in the bar, but it wasn't nearly as crowded as the last bar they had been to together. Here, the patrons were mostly men in suits, women in heels and pencil skirts. People who looked professional and ambitious while taking the edge off after a long day. Leah was surprised to see so many people drinking on a Monday. But this was New York Happy Hour! A trademark pastime !

A waitress came and took their orders. Monday was two-for-one beers, so they both

ordered a Sam Adams. It was a beer that Leah knew well coming from Boston. She'd even been to the brewery a few times where they did tours and tastings. "Cheers to our revolutionary forefather!" Gabe said when the beers arrived. They clinked their glasses and took a sip. "So, how does it feel to work at Teen Club?"

"I have no idea," Leah responded. "Because they moved me to Club Business." She rolled her eyes and took another sip. It was refreshing.

"Wow, a promotion already? Congratulations!"

"It's not a promotion. I'm doing the same job but for a different magazine. And apparently, at Club Business, researchers don't do any research! They do data entry."

"No!" he said dramatically. "That's outrageous!"

"I know!" she was happy with his exaggerated response. It made her feel somewhat validated for being so surprised by her first assignment. "I spent basically the whole day inputting data from this TCR thing into a database that I can't imagine anyone would ever look at! This is not what I got a journalism degree for. Maybe I should quit."

"We use Club Business' database," Gabe responded. "At WinterRock Capital we're looking at it all the time. Probably all hedge funds do. We get investment ideas from it. And also, the database includes which partners invest in different deals, so all the partners love seeing their names in the database."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah, you can imagine what happens if someone makes a mistake in the database. Last week, my firm invested in this distressed real estate company and Club Business listed the two partners on the deal in alphabetical order. Well, John Zebeck

had invested more than Will Eldridge and you can imagine how that made him feel to see his name second. Hedge fund managers are not modest at all. Anyway, he personally called the editor at CB and chewed him out.”

“I wonder if that’s why the researcher quit last week.”

“Maybe.”

Leah suddenly realized that the stakes of her data entry were even higher than she previously thought. People other than Malcolm or Tony would care if she made a mistake! They’d call and complain about her if she did! She couldn’t imagine getting reprimanded in the office or fired. How humiliating!

“Well, I’m sure things will get better,” Gabe assured her. “How are your colleagues?”

Leah thought about the people she had met that day. “Well, my boss, Tony is... He seems...” she paused, thinking about what to say. A little kooky? Loud? “Interesting. And there’s Malcolm, the data analyst. He’s really quiet and nerdy, but apparently a professional salsa dancer. He asked if I wanted to meet him at a salsa club tonight! And the senior reporters Alex and Mark seem nice. Oh, and there’s Kelsey from HR. I think she and I could be friends.”

“HR is not your friend!” Gabe warned. “Remember that.”

“What do you mean? She was so nice and friendly and everyone seemed to be friends with her.”

“That’s HR’s job. They try to be on good terms with everyone. But their job is to protect the company. Their loyalty is to the company. Anyways remember that when you talk to someone from HR.”

Leah nodded, but she thought that sounded a little paranoid. But who was she to know? She'd worked exactly one day in her life. Gabe had a little experience on her. "And how was your day?" She turned the conversation back to him.

"Well, I spent hours on a report about a potential investment we were thinking of making before my boss said he'd forgotten to tell me the investment was no longer an option. So that was fun."

"Cheers to fun jobs!" Leah giggled and raised her glass. They ordered a second round before happy hour ended and continued commiserating. Gabe also told her about the best places for lunch and happy hour in the area and offered to meet her for the best halal cart in FiDi the following day.

"Well, I think I want to have lunch with Mark and Alex," she responded. When Gabe looked confused, she explained. "The senior reporters. Today, they asked if I wanted to have lunch with them, but I was so busy with the TCR that I skipped lunch." She realized how hungry she was as she said that. Two beers on an empty stomach was probably not the most responsible choice.

"Totally understand. You have to bond with your colleagues. It's infinitely important. We can get halal another time."

"How about now?" She suggested, her mouth watering at the thought of food. He shrugged and motioned to the waitress for the check. When she brought it, Gabe grabbed it.

"On me," he said. "I couldn't let you use your hard-earned data entry money for beer."

She thanked him politely, wondering if that meant this was a date. Happy hour beers could go either way, but she was hoping this was more than just a friendly meeting.

She'd enjoyed spending time with him. He was intelligent and funny, not to mention handsome. He then led her out of the bar and down a few blocks to a patio surrounded by the famous New York food carts. He zigzagged through until he stopped at one. "This is the best," he assured her. They ordered two gyro platters and this time Leah offered to pay. When he accepted, she was slightly disappointed, wondering if this negated the chances that they were on a date, but optimistically hoped that maybe Gabe was a modern man who didn't believe men were required to pay for everything.

With their Styrofoam trays in hand, they sat down on a bench. Leah tore into it, realizing just how hungry she was. It was delicious. Greasy and dry at the same time. The rice was crispy and soggy. The salad was both fresh and wilted from the meat next to it. Now this really did feel like a New York moment.

"Well, I think we can safely get back on the Subway now," Gabe noted looking at his watch. Leah was disappointed at his comment. The moment was coming to an end. He led her back to the Subway platform, which was empty except for the memory in Leah's mind. When the train came, they sat down on the empty seats.

"Do you mind?" He asked politely, pulling a book out of his bag. "I got to a really good part this morning on the commute, and I was really looking forward to reading it on the way home." The book was *The Bonfire of the Vanities* by Tom Wolfe. Leah had never heard of it, not even of Tom Wolfe, but Gabe assured her that Tom Wolfe was one of the best authors of all time. "I'd lend you the book, but it's due back at the library on Thursday." Leah nodded and watched him open it to a dogeared page. His eyes focused and he seemed to get lost. She wasn't sure how she felt about his desire to read while sitting next to her. Was she too boring for continued conversation? Or was this a sign of his extreme intelligence that he was so passionate about reading? She decided to find it endearing and vowed to get herself a membership to the library. Maybe next time they'd sit next to each other and read together. That'd be romantic, wouldn't it?

She then remembered Malcolm's invitation to the salsa club. Should she ask Gabe if he wanted to go? She didn't want to interrupt his reading, so she sat quietly next to him until the train reached their stop on the Upper East Side. He hesitated to close the book when the car doors opened. She worried he'd miss the stop and end up somewhere in Harlem, but he bolted just in time and walked with her up the stairs into the air that had become dusk. As they walked, he told her about the book. "It's about this investment banker who gets into a car accident with his mistress with him. It basically ruins his life and he's a horrible person so he deserves it, but you actually feel bad for him." His face lit up as he spoke about the book, as though it was something that warmed his heart.

He walked her to her apartment and stopped in front. "I hope this evening made your day a little better."

"A lot better. Especially the halal."

"Yes, nothing better than fried meat that's been sitting out all day." He stood in front of her as though considering whether to kiss her. She tilted her head, hoping it invited him in, and it did. He met her lips and gave her a strong kiss. Her heart fluttered. Her cheeks twinkled and she hoped it would last forever.

When he pulled away, she felt flushed. "Good night," he said and disappeared down the brightly lit street.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm*

“He read a book in front of you?!” Maya exclaimed as she lay her yoga mat on the floor. Leah did the same, although there was barely enough space for hers to fit. Leah nodded. Maya’s tone made her feel very troubled by the situation. She had thought maybe it was endearing. He was nerdy and smart and loved books! How could that be a bad thing?

Maya lay on her back and started stretching her legs up to the ceiling. She’d invited Leah to join her for free yoga after work at Yoga to the People, a large brownstone on St. Marks that held almost hourly yoga sessions free of charge. Well, donation-based, Maya had clarified, but no one judges people who don’t pay. “Yoga needs to be accessible to all,” she’d explained and now Leah knew what she meant. They’d met for a class after work and the entire room was checkered with yoga mats. There was no space to walk between the brightly colored rectangles. Leah wondered what happened when the instructor told everyone to lift their arms. How many people would get a finger in the face? Who would topple over ?

“I think it was kind of sweet,” Leah responded. “I mean, he hadn’t planned on being with me. He said he’d been looking forward to reading all day!” She sat down with her feet together and pretended to stretch. She’d done yoga a few times before, enough to know that there were multiple warriors. She’d almost told Maya she’d just meet her after yoga, for dinner or something. Standing in a room of sweaty people after work wasn’t exactly her idea of fun, but when she moved to New York she had promised herself she’d be open to new experiences. She’d say yes to anything that didn’t seem overly dangerous or irresponsible. Yoga might have swayed toward dangerous, but she’d reminded herself of her promise. So far, she’d been doing great with it. She’d said yes to Indian food, and a crowded dive bar! She’d said yes to happy hour and street food! She’d even said yes to working at Club Business for

God's sake!

"I guess," Maya responded. "Did he kiss you after?"

Leah blushed, remembering the kiss outside her building. How her face tingled and she had wanted the kiss to keep going. How she'd imagined the feeling of his lips on hers the rest of the night.

"Welcome to yoga," a woman said softly. Leah couldn't see her, but immediately everyone in the class sat on their legs. "We'll start in a child's pose." Leah looked around and copied the person in front of her, placing her forehead on the mat that was slightly damp and smelled of stale sweat. "You can place your arms by your sides, palms up, or for a more active pose, reach them out in front of you." Leah opted to keep her palms up by her side. Yoga wasn't so difficult after all. Leah breathed according to the instructions whispered from somewhere in the room. Funny how even a whisper carried throughout the entire hall, where at least a hundred people were packed like sardines to experience Zen.

Leah could use a little Zen. Aside from being completely distracted by thoughts of Gabe, she'd just finished her second day at work, where she was able to finish the TCR by lunchtime. She'd waited for her colleagues to invite her to lunch, but they had left quietly without saying anything and she later snuck out to buy a sandwich by herself. She'd thought about texting Gabe and asking if his invite for lunch was still open, but she hadn't wanted to seem desperate. Desperate was worse than eating a sandwich by yourself in a cubicle. She'd passed Malcolm's cubicle when she brought her sandwich in. He was eating sushi and gave her a curt smile as she walked by as though he didn't want to be bothered. She wondered if she had offended him by not showing up to salsa the previous night. Maybe everyone went to salsa and they thought she was a snob for not showing up! She'd go next week, she reasoned. Salsa was not something she had meant to say no to, she really had meant to say, next time.

When Maya had texted her, she'd jumped for an evening with a friend. Sure, she wasn't excited about yoga, but Maya had assured her that the studio was on St. Marks, as though that was supposed to mean something to her. She'd Googled it and learned it was one of Manhattan's most notable streets with retailers, bars, and a history of pop culture. It had apparently been a hang-out spot for gangsters, musicians, poets, artists, hippies, and more recently, a plethora of homeless people. She had to see it!

Leah stood to chair pose upon instruction. She lifted her arms as high as she could, which seemed just above parallel to the floor, and pressed her legs together at a right angle. Her thighs burned and she slowly felt herself standing up even while the instructor challenged everyone to get lower. When the instructor invited everyone to forward fold, Leah almost fell to the floor. She looked to Maya, who gracefully clung to her elbows with her eyes closed, her body almost completely folded in half. "Half-way lift," the instructor said, and everyone flattened their backs. Leah continued copying the people around her as the instructor led them through a series of warriors and other tortuous positions. Leah had only wacked her neighbors twice and felt relief when the instructor told everyone to lie down on their backs. Leah waited in silence until a gong rang. She slowly sat up, watching the people around her lie still as if paralyzed. She waited for Maya to sit up, trying not to awkwardly stare at anyone.

"So, what'd you think?" Maya asked, an expectant smile on her face.

"It was...nice."

"I desperately need that after sitting in front of a desk all day." Maya worked as a paralegal at a law firm. She spent most of her day reading documents, filing things, and answering phone calls from clients that the firm's lawyers didn't want to talk to. "Want to get dinner? There's a great Vietnamese sandwich shop nearby and they have cheap beers."

Leah nodded as she lifted her yoga mat and hung it up to dry on the bar around the room like everyone else was doing. Then she grabbed her purse from a cubby and pulled out her wallet to give a donation to the instructor who was standing by the door holding an empty tissue box where people stuffed in money. She smiled warmly, thanking everyone who walked out, even those who didn't donate. Leah dropped in five dollars, hoping she didn't look cheap. Outside, she grabbed her phone to see if she'd missed anything. There was a text from her mom: Was today your first day at work? How was it? Another from her sister Shira: Did you have lunch with your work friends? And a third from Gabe. Leah's heart jumped as she opened the message. Instead of waiting to run into each other again, how about we plan on dinner tomorrow? I'll meet you by your building at 9.

She forgot about the texts from her mom and sister and immediately responded to Gabe. Sounds great. But don't bring your book if we have to take the subway . No, she deleted that. It sounded mean. Sounds great. It was all she sent. She felt like she needed a longer response, something to confirm the meeting and make it official, but nothing seemed right.

"Here we are," Maya said, stopping in front of a dimly lit storefront. She popped inside and Leah followed. The shop was dark and damp and Leah wondered if there were health inspections on St. Marks. But Maya was right about the sandwiches. Leah couldn't be sure exactly what she was eating, she'd ordered chicken but based on the taste and texture, she couldn't be sure that was what she'd gotten. Whatever it was, it was good. They ordered cheap beers that didn't have any English written on the can and talked about their jobs. Leah told Maya about Malcolm and how she didn't quite understand him.

"Well, I'm definitely going to salsa with you next week!" Maya said and Leah was relieved and excited to have a friend go with her. When they finished their beers, they walked to the Subway, now empty since rush hour was long over.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm*

“Well, as long as it isn’t serious,” Shira said on the phone. Afraid of jumping on the Subway right after work, Leah decided to start walking uptown. She’d see how far she’d get before her legs got tired and she’d ride the rest of the way. She’d called her sister during the walk, knowing that her sister finished work at the same time even with the three-hour time difference. Call center employees couldn’t work eight-hour days, Shira had once explained. It was too much to sit and answer calls for that long. It could make people suicidal . So call centers worked in shorter shifts. Sure, she only got paid for six hours a day, but she had the afternoons free for her real projects. She was working on a film now about a college student who went missing. Everyone thought it was one of those typical stories where a girl gets drunk and ends up with the wrong type of people, but in the end, it turns out she was abducted by some CEO of a huge corporation who had been stalking her. He brainwashes her to think that his corporation is saving the world and that she will run the company one day. When her parents find her, they try to get her back, but she ends up having them killed. “It’s an allegory for how all college students are brainwashed today,” Shira explained. “When I saw the script, I was just like wow. It’s so true. We’re all being abducted and brainwashed to think capitalism is right. And we never learn from the mistakes of the past.”

Leah agreed and then went on to tell her sister about Gabe. Their first official date had been everything she could have imagined. He picked her up right on time and took her to a tapas bar a few blocks from her apartment. He’d asked if she minded if he just ordered a bunch of things, and she excitedly agreed. He’d ordered tons of small plates with tortillas, potatoes, cheeses, meats, and all types of finger foods with flavors Leah had never experienced before. He also ordered a pitcher of sangria and made sure her glass was never empty. The waiter had even given them a free dessert, saying they were such a cute couple, which made Leah blush. Were they a couple? It

was romantic and exciting and Leah thought it was the best first date she had ever been on. (Sure, she'd never really been on one before.)

After dinner, they'd gone next door to a cocktail lounge and ordered fancy drinks that tasted like there wasn't any alcohol in them. Leah felt like they could talk about anything. He told her about his family, "Italians," he described as though that said it all. "Everything is extreme and loaded with pasta, but they are crazy." Leah commiserated, "We're JAPs," she joked. When he didn't understand, she clarified, "Sounds like Italians, but Kosher."

"Great, so our families would get along just great." He joked and Leah daydreamed about their families meeting. Gabe told her that he stopped going to church when he was old enough to stay home by himself and his parents kept their disappointment to themselves like good Catholics. His parents too had strayed. No longer churchgoers, they replaced religion with new hobbies they had taken up post-retirement.

"So Christianity isn't, like, important to you?" She'd asked, wondering if she crossed a line, asking about his religion. If she had, he didn't let on. He just shook his head.

"I don't really care about any of that stuff. God, no God, a hundred Gods, what's the difference? I really just care about being a good person, you know?"

Leah nodded. Sure, being a good person was the number one priority, she reasoned, although if someone had asked her whether she cared about religion, she probably would have answered differently. But maybe that was because she had been primed to think that way. The truth was, she wasn't sure if religion really was important to her. She'd never even thought about it because she had grown up being told that it was. She'd just assumed it was important to her because it was important to everyone else around her .

Leah told Gabe that she used to belong to a Jewish youth group and most of her

friends had always been Jewish.

“So what the hell are you doing with me?” He laughed as he took a sip.

“Sowing my wild oats,” she joked back, hoping she sounded coy and playful, without letting on to how she really felt, which she wasn’t sure what that was.

“I can deal with that.” When Leah started to yawn, Gabe got the check and walked her to her apartment. This time he kissed her hard, pulling her close to him with his hands spread wide on her back. She had wanted to invite him in, anything to stop him from leaving her side, but after a few minutes he pulled back. “There’s no rush,” he smiled. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Sure enough, he had texted her in the morning. Wow it’s tough getting up for a morning run after three cocktails.

You forgot about the sangria. She texted back.

You’re right. That must be what got me.

They’d spent the rest of the day texting, which made work go by fast. Leah had even somehow finished the TCR early, despite spending every other minute with her phone in hand. She’d even had enough adrenaline in her that at 10 am she’d asked Alex and Mark about lunch. She’d asked early hoping they wouldn’t forget her again and they’d enthusiastically responded with an invite to a burger place where they often ate. She’d spent lunch trying to stop herself from looking at her phone long enough to make conversation with her colleagues.

She found out that Alex was an amateur stand-up comedian in his free time and he sometimes performed midnight shows at clubs. During lunch, she felt that he might have been practicing some of his jokes on them. Who loves airline food? Nobody

right? Except me. I flew to Los Angeles last week and when I got my meal, I called the flight attendant over. Ma'am, I said, I just want to give my compliments to the chef. She was confused of course and got this look on her face like I was making fun of her. No really! I told her. What's the recipe? Honestly, it takes some talent to make food that all 300 passengers on a plane would hate. Well, 299 passengers. I thought it was delicious.

Leah promised she'd come to see one of his shows sometime. "Please don't," he'd responded. "It's terrible." She assured him that he was funny and she'd love to see him. And she promised to laugh no matter what!

Lunch had made the afternoon at work all the more bearable. Even the emergency team meeting her boss Tony had called where he spent twenty minutes lecturing about why Facebook was the death of integrity. Do you know people post everything that happens to them? My daughter posted about a piece of gum she found on the street! Apparently Tony spent more than a good amount of time stalking his kids on social media. He had a fake profile and everything. He was friends with his kids and even commented sometimes. I told her the gum was really cool. Leah nodded, wondering why this warranted an emergency meeting until he segued into a discussion of a recent article he read in the Times about bankruptcy. Why did they get this before we did? Unacceptable! We're supposed to have our ears to the ground!

After the reprimanding that Leah wasn't sure if she was supposed to feel guilty about since she wasn't a reporter, Leah went back to work. She'd been given a few new assignments that included looking up financial data and other information the reporters would use for their articles.

She was having a great day, which is why she wanted to share it with her sister. "It's not serious, right?" Shira confirmed.

"We just went on one date," Leah assured. One date wasn't serious. But she had

really enjoyed herself.

“Well, you know what, maybe it’s a good thing. You know, you never really dated anyone except Asher. So you don’t even know what you want in a partner. It’s good to date people you’ll never marry, so you can learn about yourself.”

“Really?” Leah liked the affirmation she was getting .

“Yeah! Definitely. I mean, I date people all the time who I will definitely never marry. Like now, I’m dating this guy, Murph, he’s hot, but he’s a total mess. It’s just fun and it means nothing. I’ll end it before it ever gets serious.”

That made sense. Shira was right. Leah needed experience dating. She needed to date people who were wrong for her so she would know what was right for her. Gabe was perfect for that. She could date him and learn about herself and when she was ready for serious, she’d find a Jewish guy who had the qualities she liked and not the ones she didn’t.

Her phone buzzed and she saw it was another text from Gabe. “Cool, well, I got to go! Love you, sis!”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm*

“Meeting your Goy toy, tonight?” Alex teased her over the cubicle wall. She’d recently told her work friends about Gabe during one of their lunch breaks. Usually they spent a lot of time complaining about work, listening to Alex test his standup material, or making fun of some of the dates the boys had been on. Mark had recently gone on a couple of dates with a girl who was an understudy for a chorus position in a Broadway show. “She can kick her leg up to here!” He exclaimed holding his hand flat in front of his eyes.

“How’d you find that out?” Alex joked back. “Is that why your nose is looking a little swollen today?” Lunch was always full of laughter and Leah had begun enjoying work for the sole purpose of lunchtime. She liked being the girl in the guys’ group. She liked listening to their jokes and sometimes chauvinistic opinions. She also liked when they asked her for her input as their token female friend. Should Mark contact the Broadway Chorus understudy again, even if she actually had kicked him in the face? No, well, only if you want to apologize for something , Leah had advised definitively. They took her seriously during lunchtime, which was the only time she felt taken seriously.

At her cubicle, she kept receiving assignments for data entry and number punching, yet she was always included in meetings where people were reprimanded for mistakes. She’d even asked Malcolm’s advice on how she could get Tony to assign her a story. Malcolm had smiled politely and curled his finger to motion her closer. “Just keep doing a good job and he’ll notice,” he had whispered to her. Leah thought it was horrible advice, but she smiled and nodded and went back to her cubicle and financial statements. But there was always lunchtime. Lunchtime was sacred. They took lunch breaks no matter their deadlines or how much Tony yelled at them for slacking off.

That day, when Alex and Mark had asked her whether she had dated anyone interesting, she'd responded that she was dating a goy.

"What the hell is that?" Mark had yelled over pastrami sandwiches.

"It sounds like a fish-guy. Half coy, half guy? Does he have gills? Fins? Did you meet near the pond? How's his kiss?" Alex made a mock fish face.

Leah had assumed that goy was common slang that everyone knew. Everyone she'd previously hung out with would have immediately understood she meant she was dating a non-Jew. Someone who wasn't a Member-of-the-Tribe. An outsider. So she explained the word to her new friends and they got a full kick out of knowing that Jews had secret codes to describe people like them.

"He's not my boy toy," Leah stressed over the cubicle wall. "He's my boyfriend."

"Your goyfriend," Alex corrected.

"Whatever." She giggled, unable to deny that it was funny. She was excited to call Gabe her boyfriend and wanted to say it all the time. The word first slipped a few nights ago when they were at happy hour after work and they ran into one of Gabe's colleagues. Gabe introduced her casually as his girlfriend. Leah smiled like everything was normal and shook the colleague's hand.

"I'm your girlfriend?" She asked once they were alone again.

"Oh, sorry. Is that OK if I call you that? I didn't mean to assume, I mean, I didn't want to call you a friend, because that could be offensive since we've already slept together. And mistress doesn't seem right, since it implies I'm cheating on someone else..."

“Girlfriend is fine, boyfriend,” Leah cut him off. And there it was. He was her boyfriend. They had slept together in her tiny apartment after dinner the previous night. He’d walked her home like usual, and when he kissed her, she couldn’t take it anymore. She brought him to her bedroom where he ignited her body unlike anything she had experienced before .

It was nothing like sex with Asher. He was the only person she had slept with before. They had lost their virginities together when she was a junior in high school and she had never even considered sleeping with anyone else. Sex was a long-time experiment. An ongoing challenge to find out what was so good about it. Something they hadn’t quite been able to conquer, despite the ambition and optimism that teenagers harbor when it comes to sex.

But with Gabe, Leah instantly understood the appeal. She wanted him more the more he touched her. She felt natural and sexy as they made love in her bed and even as they lay together naked afterward. She felt like she should have been self-conscious. She should have been uncomfortable baring her body to someone she’d only known for a couple of weeks. But she didn’t. Maybe it was the happy hour drinks (half off that evening), or maybe it was because things with Gabe were just right.

That morning, she’d gone to work a new person. She was someone’s girlfriend. She had a boyfriend and a newly heating up sex life. Two things she had been hoping would be part of her New York life. In fact, she was meeting Gabe that night. And Maya. And even Malcolm, who was constantly trying to convince her to come out salsa dancing. A few days previously, he’d pulled out his phone to show her some pictures and videos from the club. She watched the dancers shake their hips in the magenta light with a roar of music and shouting in the background. The women were beautiful, all wearing ruffled dresses that swiveled as they turned, with slick hair pulled back in buns surrounded by flowers. And they were sexy. The way they moved was sexy. Everything about it was sexy.

Leah was intrigued by how Malcolm fit in and she thought it would be a fun activity for her and her new (sexy) boyfriend. Maya had wanted to come along and was bringing a friend to dance with. Malcolm had assured Leah that it was fine for women and men to come on their own, there would be plenty of people there to dance with and it was fun for the regulars to dance with new partners. If they came early enough, there was even a short dance class for the first-timers. Malcolm wouldn't be there that early, he didn't need the class, but he highly recommended it to Leah and she had planned on getting there right on time.

She'd mentioned to Alex and Mark that she was meeting Malcolm at his salsa club. Did they want to join? Her single friend was coming, she said, trying to convince them. They both laughed and told her to have fun. Sneak a few pictures of Malcolm for us! Alex pleaded. I'm dying to see him in a tutu!

When work was over, she quickly packed up her things and ran to the subway. She had just about two hours to commute, shower, change, meet Gabe, and get to the club if she wanted to learn the moves during the free class. She shoved her way through the train platform and onto the car as though she'd been living in New York her entire life. She was no longer intimidated by the crowded station. She could easily scan the platform, plot her path, and slip into the car without making anyone too angry. Personal space was just nonexistent if you wanted to commute efficiently.

If she were lucky, she could even get a seat on the train, since this was the stop where most commutes uptown started. And on this day, she was lucky, extremely lucky because she managed to plop down in a lonely seat that had no one next to it. She pulled her bag on her lap and took out the library book she'd recently picked up. With her boyfriend. He'd gone with her to sign up for a library card. Maya had thought that was the epitome of a "nerd date," but Leah had appreciated it. She wasn't sure she'd figure out the system on her own. She had barely even used the library at her university and was used to just ordering on Amazon if she ever wanted to read something. But now, she was on a budget. A tight salary. An overpriced apartment. A

library card.

As the train lurched forward, she tried to concentrate on reading—it was contemporary fiction and she was enjoying it!—but her mind wandered, daydreaming about salsa dancing that night with Gabe. She couldn't wait to have his hands on her. To dance with him in public and then continue the routine in her bedroom. It would be every bit of New York magic that she'd hoped for. Instead of reading, she stared off to the side of the train tunnel and waited rather impatiently until her stop. She almost ran home, and then jumped in the shower without even saying hello to her roommate who was already in her room.

Sadly, that had become the norm. Instead of gushing about their days together on the couch as Leah had hoped for, they avoided each other, only moving around shared spaces when the other was closed inside their room or out. The TV they didn't know where to place was still sitting on the floor, plugged into an outlet and positioned at a very uncomfortable angle to watch from the couch, but neither moved it. Both just craned their necks whenever they watched alone and pretended that it was something that would be resolved one day.

Leah put on a low-necked red dress that was the closest thing she had to a salsa costume. She put on red lipstick and dark eyeliner and blew dry her curls so that they hung wildly around her face.

Her phone buzzed with a text from Gabe that he was outside. Right on time.

Her phone buzzed again. She assumed it was Gabe, or maybe Maya who was also on her way, but it was her mom. Hey honey! Did you know the Rosenbergs have a cousin your age in New York? I gave them your number and he is going to call you to set up a date for drinks. He works in business! Sounds like you'll have so much to talk about!

The Rosenbergs were a family from their synagogue. Leah knew the mom who was famous for her kugel, which she brought to every function. Leah did not know they had a cousin in New York. Nor did she care. She didn't need her mom setting her up with some random guy! Even if they had so much in common, such as...being Jewish! And working in "business," although Leah was still hoping that was temporary for her.

Leah hadn't told her family yet about Gabe. Aside from Shira, who had shown cautious enthusiasm when Leah told her they were now official. Her parents would be less understanding. They'd never be able to see that Gabe was an intelligent, kind, and handsome man. All they'd see is a goy.

She gave a last look to the mirror, tossed her phone in her purse, and headed out the door.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm*

Maya was standing outside Havana Nights when Leah and Gabe arrived. She had her phone in front of her face in that familiar look: don't talk to me, because I'm really busy doing something really important. Leah ran up to her and gave her a hug. "Where's your friend?" she asked, suddenly worried that Maya would be a third wheel.

"Oh, she canceled like four minutes ago. Such a flake. But it's fine." Maya seemed unphased as though the prospect of third-wheelership had not occurred to her. The three of them went inside, where an empty dance floor was surrounded by neon lights in front of a small stage where a band was setting up. A few people were scattered around the room drinking cocktails and leaning on high-top bar tables.

"I think we need some drinks before we start dancing," Gabe announced and offered to get a round for everyone. By then, he knew that Leah's cocktail choice was vodka cranberry, something way too sweet and overpriced, and that Maya preferred beer, even if there wasn't anything special on tap. He left the girls at a table and went to the bar .

"Well, look at you two!" Maya exclaimed as soon as Gabe was out of earshot, which was about three inches from the table. She must have been commenting on how they had held hands with their fingers intertwined and their elbows kissing as though walking through a narrow passageway. "How are things going?"

"Perfect," Leah gushed. "He's such a sweetheart."

"Sounds like it's getting serious."

Leah nodded, although she wondered if it could go in that direction. Whenever she thought of her relationship, her giddy feelings were tainted. She'd daydream of him proposing one day, but in her daydreams something always stopped her from saying yes, a storm, a giant truck whizzing by, a thief grabbing the ring right out of the box between them. Her wedding was even more unimaginable in daydreams, as though it were something mysterious and so impossible to conjure. Her perfect relationship was only that. Something doomed to stay in the present, unable to progress. "I really like him."

"What do your parents think?"

Leah glanced to the bar to see Gabe placing their order. "That I'm single. My mom wants to set me up with some cousin of someone from their synagogue."

"Oh God, that's the worst." Maya commiserated. "I once went on a date with someone who used to play tennis with a second cousin of someone at my parent's synagogue. It was seriously the worst. We had nothing to say to each other. He didn't even think I was really Jewish because I told him that I didn't fast on Yom Kippur last year. Somehow that fact then got back to my parents. Jewish gossip is awful."

"So awful," Leah agreed, remembering all the random pieces of information her mom always came home with after synagogue events. Did you hear that Elijah lost all his weight? He's apparently quite good looking now! Should I see if he's single? Aaron's son apparently got brainwashed by Chabad and is now engaged to someone he just met. It happened in college, have you heard that Chabad offers money to students who come to their events? Did this ever happen to you? Rachel Levine went to Israel over winter break and her parents are afraid she'll never come home! She met some IDF soldier. They hope she isn't pregnant. But even if she is, at least the father is Jewish!

"Well, obviously, I'm not going to go out with the guy."

“Your parents will bug you until you do. Even if you tell them you have a boyfriend. Especially if you tell them your boyfriend isn’t Jewish. That will just make them more fanatical about the setup. It’s like they believe that this setup will be the most important thing in saving your life. ”

“Talking about me?” Gabe asked, placing two coronas and a vodka cranberry on the table.

“Only good things,” Maya assured and grabbed her beer. “Thanks.”

“Good evening everyone!” A voice rang through a speaker. “We’re going to get the salsa lesson started in just a few moments! Would everyone please join us on the dance floor. You don’t need a partner to learn the moves! Let’s go!”

With drinks in hand, the three of them walked to the dance floor. Gabe had his hand on the small of Leah’s back and his touch was electrifying. A woman in a red and black polka-dotted dress with ruffles around all the edges stood in the middle of the dance floor with a microphone. She wore the highest heels Leah had ever seen, yet she was the same height as the man standing next to her in a short-sleeved black button-down shirt with the top three buttons open. The man smiled at the people filling up the dancefloor. “All right everyone,” the tiny woman with the giant voice said. “Let’s get started. We’re going to begin with the most basic step. Everyone face me. Step your left foot forward and shift your weight to it. Now shift your weight back and bring back your foot. Now right foot back, shift your weight back and then back to center! Great job everyone!” She and the man next to her held hands as they demonstrated .

Leah smiled at Gabe and Maya as she put her left foot forward and shifted her weight back and forth. Easy. She liked salsa dancing already. She looked around the room, wondering if Malcolm was there, but she didn’t see him. She continued stepping forward and back shifting her weight as the teacher instructed.

“You look great salsa dancing,” Gabe said in her ear making her forget which leg she was supposed to be placing her weight on. She mildly stumbled before finding the rhythm again. “So sexy.”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” she responded. “You sure this is your first time?”

“Definitely my first time.”

“All right, now let’s try it facing a partner!” The teacher shouted and swung to face her partner. Leah looked at Maya, unsure of what she should do about her lonely friend when she really wanted to dance with Gabe. But Maya wasn’t the only partnerless person. A man came up to her and held out his hand. Maya didn’t look twice, grabbing the hand and winking to Leah who felt relieved to swing into Gabe’s arm. “Sorry ladies, but you are going to start backward. When dancing with a partner, you first go back on your right foot and then forward on your left,” the instructor explained. “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight,” she shouted over and over as she stepped with her partner. “Are we ready to dance? ”

The lesson was apparently over and a live band started playing on the stage. The instructor pulled her partner in close and he swung her around in a move that was not part of the lesson. Leah looked at Maya who seemed like she was having fun. The man she was dancing with looked like he was probably a regular there, the way he shook his hips and twirled Maya around between steps. Leah and Gabe stuck to the basics, but Gabe did try to sneak in a few awkward turns that caused them both to lose their balance and giggle before reorientating themselves.

“Hey there,” Leah thought she heard on her side. She looked over and saw Malcolm wearing a white button-down shirt with a red carnation in his breast pocket. He had plaid pants that led down to the shiniest man’s shoes Leah had ever seen. “You made it.” Leah thought he said because she had to rely on lip reading.

“Yeah! Thanks for telling me about this! It’s so fun! This is my boyfriend Gabe and that’s my friend Maya!” She introduced them, suddenly so excited to feel like she knew people there. “Gabe this is Malcolm from CB. He’s in charge of data analytics.”

“Nice to meet you, Malcolm,” Gabe pulled his hand away from Leah’s to offer Malcolm a handshake. Malcolm gave Gabe’s hand a weak squeeze and he mouthed something that Leah didn’t understand. He then moved to the center of the dance floor and started dancing by himself until a woman approached him and placed her arms on his shoulders. Malcolm immediately grabbed her waist, pulled her close, and the two of them started dancing together as though their bodies were one. Leah was mesmerized. It was like watching people having sex. So intimate, like she shouldn’t be staring, yet beautiful and shocking as though their sex was something to aspire to. Leah found herself wondering if Malcolm had in fact had sex with his dance partner. They must have! And then she wondered what people could conjecture about her and Gabe’s sex life from the rigid and awkward way they were dancing.

“Wow, your friend is pretty good!” Gabe commented, breaking Leah’s stare.

“He’s semiprofessional apparently,” she responded and turned back to Gabe resolving to make their dancing look sexier. She shook her hips as she stepped forward and tried to stay closer to Gabe without stepping on his feet.

She looked over at Maya who was still twirling with her partner, who himself seemed to be crossing the line from salsa to sex. He trailed his fingers down her arms and his lips were getting dangerously close to Maya’s neck. But Maya didn’t seem to mind. She looked like she was enjoying herself. Letting loose. She winked at Leah.

Leah and Gabe continued to dance, although the longer they stepped, the more Leah felt like they were trying too hard and that she’d rather be standing around a booth, drinking, and watching the professionals do it. Gabe must have read her mind. “Let’s

take a break?" He offered and she agreed, following him to an empty table. She motioned to Maya who nodded, but continued dancing with her new partner. "So this is fun," Gabe commented, finishing the beer in his hand. "Another round?" He went to the bar to replenish their drinks. In the meantime, Maya approached.

"This place is awesome!" she commented.

"Yeah, looks like you are having a blast! Who knew you're such a good dancer!" Leah smiled.

"Oh, it's not me at all. It's Mario. He's a pro here. And of course, my synagogue offered father-daughter dancing classes for the bat mitzvah class. Who knew it stuck with me!"

"Did you give Mario your number?" Leah asked. For some reason, she felt hopeful about the question, as though she were somehow invested in the answer.

"No way! He's totally not my type. He's probably a total slut."

"It's just the salsa."

"Salsa is sex," Maya said.

"Then it's sick you learned with your father before your bat mitzvah," Leah joked. Gabe came back with drinks, including one for Maya. The three of them stood drinking and watching the dancefloor get even more crowded. Malcolm had switched partners and was dancing just as intimately with his new one. Mario was now dancing with Malcolm's previous partner. Leah wondered if this entire place was about to turn into an orgy.

"So what now?" Gabe asked when they were finishing their drinks.

“Pizza?” Maya suggested and the three of them stepped out into the New York night. “On me,” Maya insisted as though 99 cent slices was an even trade for her two beers. Afterward, Leah said goodbye to Maya and Gabe offered to take them back uptown in a cab.

“Let’s go to your apartment this time,” Leah suggested. They always went to hers. It wasn’t like Gabe was hiding his. She’d been there a couple of times for short periods. Never to stay the night. It was a small studio with a bed next to the oven and the bathroom by the fridge. It was less comfortable than her apartment. And of course, she didn’t have any of her own things there, but she felt like it was about time she stayed there. And she was getting sick of hearing her roommate’s exaggerated footsteps whenever she came home with Gabe.

“Sure,” he agreed. “I think I even have an extra toothbrush.”

Leah smiled, anticipating their upcoming sex. Maybe they could take a few things from the salsa dancing to the bedroom. She could swing her hips and step into his legs. She hoped that some of the sexiness from the evening had rubbed off on her.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm*

“Did the Rosenberg’s cousin call you?” Leah’s mother asked on the phone. Leah was sitting in her room alone that evening, watching Netflix on her laptop instead of on the TV in the living room. It was just easier to hide away in her room. “If he didn’t, I’ll ask Judy what’s going on. He seems like a really nice guy.”

Leah wondered how he could seem like a really nice guy. She was sure her mom only knew four things about him: he was related to the Rosenbergs. He lived in New York. He was Jewish. He worked in business. He had in fact called Leah. She’d accidentally answered because she hadn’t recognized the number. He politely introduced himself.

“I know this is like so awkward,” he had said on the phone. “But you know how Jewish moms are. Mine will never stop until I prove to her that we went out. I’ll have to text her a picture of the receipt. So how about it? Drinks tomorrow?”

Such a romantic proposition! Leah sarcastically thought. Like he was only asking her out as a favor to his mom! It was insulting. So insulting that even if Leah had been single, she would have said no. Probably would have said no. “I’m actually seeing somebody, so it’s not going to work out.” As soon as she said it she knew it was a mistake. He would surely tell his mom to get her off his back. His mom would tell her sister Judy Rosenberg who went to Leah’s family’s synagogue. Judy would wonder why Leah’s mom would be handing out Leah’s number when she was in a relationship and subsequently, Leah’s mom would know about her boyfriend.

“Ummmm,” Leah wondered how to answer her mom. Did her mom already know the whole story? Was she trying to see if Leah would tell the truth? Was it worth it trying to lie? She heard the door of her apartment open and her roommate step inside. She

could hear the thump of the floor as she walked the two steps from the door to the kitchen. The fridge door opened.

“Oh, honey, just stop.” Yup, she knew. “I know he called and you told him you have a boyfriend. Why would you say something like that? He could have been the one!”

“He’s not the one, Mom!” Leah rolled her eyes as she said it. “Just because he is Jewish doesn’t mean anything for if we’re compatible.”

“Actually it does, but you’ll never know if you won’t meet him. Why don’t you call him back? Say you changed your mind. Or you broke up with your imaginary boyfriend, or—”

“He’s not imaginary.” Leah accidentally blurted. Slam ! The fridge door swung close and the free magnets they had accumulated rattled.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“No, you said something. What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

“You said he’s not imaginary.”

“If you heard me, why did you ask?” Leah’s roommate continued to stomp around. A plate clinked on the counter. The silverware drawer vroomed open and crashed shut.

“Because I want you to be clear with me! What’s going on? Are you seeing someone?”

There was no backing out now. She had to tell her mom. She'd have to tell her eventually. Well, only if it lasted more than a few months. Her mom would continue pestering her about dates, wondering why she wasn't seeing anyone. Contemplating if she were a lesbian—which wouldn't be so terrible if the other woman was Jewish! You know we have a lesbian couple at the synagogue! They have an adorable baby. Not sure which is the real mom or who the dad is, but she is really cute, even though her moms are lesbians.

Rather than hear about the token synagogue lesbians yet again, Leah decided to bite the bullet. "I'm actually dating someone. He's really sweet and smart, and such a gentleman."

"That's so wonderful!" Leah could hear her mother's heart pounding. She could see the images of a Chuppah, a bris, and a bar mitzvah already rolling through her mother's mind. "Where did you meet him? What does he do?"

Leah recounted how she first met him on the Subway—he basically saved her life—and how they ran into each other later that evening when she was out with Maya—who her mother already knew plenty about. She mentioned how he worked near her and took her to happy hour and dates and since they were basically neighbors, he always walked her home. "You'd really like him, Mom." She hoped she was convincing enough, especially since she didn't mention the one detail her mom cared about.

"I'm so excited for you! Why don't you bring him over for Thanksgiving? You know Shira is coming home for the holiday. We just bought her a plane ticket because she said she couldn't afford one on her own. Not sure what's going on with her job. I'm sure Shira would love to meet him while she is here! What do you think?"

"Ummmm, I'm not sure, Mom."

“Well, why not?” The accusatory tone was not lost on Leah. She knew her mother was now wondering whether Leah was embarrassed about her or her cooking. Or maybe Leah wasn’t planning on coming home for Thanksgiving at all .

“Well, what if he wants to do Thanksgiving with his family?”

“Well, that’s ridiculous. If you’re a couple, you do holidays together. And if he is such a gentleman, he’ll do the first one with your family. So you’re bringing him? I promise we’ll make it extra special. I can even tell the synagogue that we have no extra space this year so there won’t be any, what did you and Shira call them? Randos at dinner.”

Leah’s mom had an open-door policy for holidays. Anyone from the synagogue who didn’t have a family to spend a holiday with was welcome, which often meant their house was full of a ragtag of different guests. There was a newly divorced obese man who had just moved to the area at Passover. A single mom whose 18-year-old daughter refused to come home for Rosh Hashana. An elderly woman who had just lost her husband and didn’t live close enough to her child to get an invite for Hanukkah.

“Fine.”

“Oh, I’m so excited! Don’t worry, we’ll go all out this year. We can even use your grandmother’s china, which I usually hate because it doesn’t go in the dishwasher, but it is just so beautiful.”

Leah heard her roommate’s door creak and groan as it hit the frame. “Sounds good, Mom. Anything else?”

“Oh, well, you know how it is...” Her mom started talking about that week’s Adult Education class at the synagogue, which focused on Israeli art and its connections to

politics...Leah thought about what to eat for dinner. She had some stuff to make sandwiches in the fridge. Maybe there were some frozen meals left? She couldn't remember because she rarely ate at home. She was constantly out buying lunch and having dinner with Gabe or Maya, or even just picking up takeout if she were on her own. Grocery shopping just wasn't something New Yorkers did frequently she was learning. "And we had a book club meeting last week. It was another Holocaust book. It was good, I mean if you can say Holocaust stories are good, but you know, they are all so depressing. Why can't the club choose something more upbeat?" Her mom continued discussing her weekly activities. Leah responded with yeahs and uh-huhs when necessary and when her mom finished, she politely said she had to go. Her stomach was grumbling and she wanted to eat something before her roommate emerged from her room.

She hung up the phone and quietly opened the door of her bedroom. She could see across the small kitchen and living area that her roommate's door was closed and she could hear the faint rumbling of voices from inside. She too was probably watching something on her laptop rather than using their shared TV. Leah gently pulled the fridge door open to scan whether she had anything to eat. There was some bread. Some cheese. Tomatoes. Grilled cheese, she thought, and got a pan out to heat on the stove. She heard her phone buzz.

What are you doing? It was a text from Gabe. They had been texting constantly every day. They told each other everything that happened. She told Gabe when her boss Tony began a rant about why pretzels were the death of snacks (because they were so good and ruined everything else) and when Malcolm came to work with a wilted carnation in his shirt pocket (do you think he didn't go home last night?). Gabe told her about meetings and reports and office politics that he hated dealing with. But she hadn't texted him after work. She knew he was tired—he'd been up all night finishing a book—and that he had planned on going to sleep early. So his text surprised her.

Making grilled cheese. Want one? She was half hoping he'd suggest something else, like Chinese food, or the deli around the corner. But his response was: I love grilled cheese! Be at your place in 10?

She gave a thumbs up and started scrounging the fridge to see if there was anything else to make the meal a little less pathetic. There was some old lettuce. Some grapes. The grilled cheese would have to do. When the sandwiches were frying in the pan, the door knocked. As she went to answer it, her roommate's door swung open. The two girls stopped and stared at each other as though both were completely surprised to see the other one. As though they hadn't been living together for a couple of months already. "I'm expecting someone," her roommate said and she bolted to the door in her pajamas before Leah could mention that she too was expecting someone. The door swung open, and her roommate stood there as though she had just opened the door to Frankenstein. "What are you doing here?"

Leah saw it was Gabe. "That's my roommate," she called over at the same time as her roommate's question. When she realized what was asked, she stopped. "Do you know each other?" Gabe seemed paralyzed in the doorway.

"Yeah, uh, I dated Marissa's friend a while back," Gabe answered. "Just a few dates." He smiled at Marissa—the roommate. "Can I come in? I'm here for Leah." Marissa didn't step aside, but she let him pass. "Smells good in here." He mentioned when he kissed Leah on the lips and looked at the stove. Leah flipped the sandwiches before they could burn.

Marissa stormed back into her room and shut the door. "That was awkward," Leah noted, hoping her comment would elicit further explanation.

"Yeah, what a small world New York is." He raised his arm showing he'd brought something with him. "You said grilled cheese, so I brought tomato soup and salad." He placed the bag on the small kitchen table .

“You’re amazing!” Leah blushed and she kissed her boyfriend.

“Well, taste the soup first before you decide that. I got it from that bodega that just opened on 98 th . Not sure how it stands up for bodega soup.”

Leah pulled out bowls and plates and set the small table. She almost never ate at their kitchen table. When she did eat at home, it was usually on her bed to avoid being in common spaces. But she and Gabe couldn’t very well eat soup on her bed. And besides, why couldn’t she use the common area? She was paying half the rent.

They sat with their grilled cheese and soup. It felt so natural to Leah, like they were an old married couple who didn’t need romance and fancy restaurants to prove the strength of their relationship. It was so perfect and she could imagine having dinner like that every night for the rest of her life.

A few moments later, there was another knock on the door. Marissa stormed from her bedroom, this time wearing jeans, a coat, and even some makeup, and opened the door. Leah heard hushed whispers as Marissa closed the door behind her without saying goodbye. Leah wondered if it was the friend that Gabe had dated. She wanted to ask more about that, but was it too early? Were they ready to go over their relationship histories? She wasn’t upset that he had one. Everyone had exes. She had one. But was his too close to home? Literally?

She didn’t mention it, and neither did Gabe, who pretended like he didn’t even notice Marissa walk past them. They finished dinner and washed the dishes together, which Leah thought was a true marker of real romance.

They kissed and snuggled in her bedroom and then she remembered she had something to ask him. “Will you come spend Thanksgiving with my family? I know you probably have a dinner with your family, but my mom really wants to meet you and she sort of insists that you come.”

“Sure, but on one condition.”

“What?” she expected him to request that she prepare her family to avoid awkward subjects or that she owed him a back massage or something like that.

“Christmas with my family.”

“Oh, that won’t be a problem.” She almost laughed. Her family pretended that Christmas didn’t exist. During the season, they walked around as though they didn’t see the lights on the neighbors’ houses. If they saw a Santa outside asking for donations, they pretended they couldn’t hear him. When someone said, Merry Christmas! They responded with Happy Holidays . They didn’t watch Christmas movies, didn’t cook a special dinner, didn’t even acknowledge the day was any different .

That night, they made perfectly good love. In the morning, he got up early and kissed her goodbye so he could go back to his apartment before work.

Not long after, she got up, got dressed, and was ready to leave for work. As she walked through the living room, she noticed a ripped piece of paper balanced on the door handle. I’d be careful if I were you, it said in scratchy handwriting that Leah didn’t recognize. She looked around as though for a clue of who wrote it. Marissa? Gabe? The friend?

But she was alone. She shuddered as she stuffed the note in her purse.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm*

“It’s your roommate,” Alex said during lunch. “She’s probably in love with your boyfriend.”

They usually didn’t bring up anything remotely serious during lunchtime. There was one time Mark mentioned his sister had been in a car accident, but the conversation quickly veered into another story about how Alex failed his driving test three times and eventually decided he would just live in New York City instead of getting a driver’s license.

But Leah couldn’t think about anything else at that point. She couldn’t read on the Subway. She did the TCR at work that morning like a robot, not really noticing what she was doing. She could do it with her eyes closed by then. When it was time for lunch, she drifted out with Alex and Mark, following them to the deli down the street.

“Where are you?” Alex had asked when she hesitated before ordering. They all knew she’d get a chicken salad sandwich. Even the guy who worked there knew she would order it, how could Leah be the only one to forget?

She shook her head, ordered her sandwich, and waited with the boys for their orders. Once they sat down, she pulled the note out of her purse and showed it to them.

“No, this is a guy’s handwriting,” Mark refuted Alex’s theory. “There’s no way a girl wrote this. Unless she’s like really butch.”

Leah didn’t think Marissa was butch. She was pretty, skinny, and when she dressed up, she wore fashionable jeans and pretty makeup. She shrugged.

“Haven’t you seen your goyfriend’s handwriting?” Alex asked.

“Or your roommate’s?” Mark added. Leah shook her head.

“I bet your roommate has a thing for him,” Alex theorized. “She probably likes him. Maybe she had a threesome with him and her friend.”

“Gabe wouldn’t do that.”

“Every guy would do that,” Mark countered. “Unless your roommate’s really butch.”

“She’s not butch!” Leah shouted out, almost spraying her chicken salad everywhere.

“So you think your goyfriend wrote it?” Alex said. Every time they said goyfriend it felt like they were pelting stones at her.

“Stop saying goyfriend!” She yelled and stood up. “I hate when you say that! He’s my boyfriend. Why does everyone care so much that he isn’t Jewish?”

“Oh, we really don’t care,” Alex laughed, amused by her outburst. “I just love the word. You taught us goy. ”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t think it would become such a big deal! You guys are my friends, you’re supposed to support my relationship! Especially if it’s a good one!” She grabbed the other half of her sandwich and her purse. “I’m just so sick of everyone making such a thing about this.”

“You’re the only one making a thing. We’re just trying to help,” she heard from behind her when she stormed off back to the office. She half expected them to chase her. That’s what would happen in a movie or a sitcom about friends in New York. But they didn’t. She went back to her desk, smiling at Malcolm on the way in, and

finished her sandwich quietly at her desk.

Maybe she was the only one making a thing about it. Maybe it was all in her head and everything was fine. Maybe her family would embrace him at Thanksgiving. Maybe they wouldn't care that he wasn't Jewish. Maybe they wouldn't even ask. She was kidding herself.

What's today's lunch topic? A text from Gabe popped up on her phone. She hadn't told Gabe about the note. She wasn't sure what to say about it. My roommate warned me about you . Or, is there something I should know about my roommate?

We worked through lunch today , she responded and received a sad face in response. She was deep into data entry when the boys returned from lunch. She kept her head down and pretended not to notice until Alex plopped a brown paper bag with the Sprinkles logo on her desk. Without saying anything, he walked around to his cubicle. She peered in the bag to see a red velvet cupcake with vanilla frosting on top. On the frosting, it said Sorry , in pink icing. She smiled and stood up to face Alex and Mark in their cubicles.

"I'm sorry too," she said.

"So you can share the cupcake with us," Mark suggested. "Our salaries here didn't leave us a budget for cupcakes for everyone."

Leah nodded and ran to the kitchenette to grab a knife to split the cupcake. The three of them stood up with their pieces and hit them together in a 'cheers' before shoving them into their mouths.

"Oh my god," Tony said. He had just come back from his own lunch break and was shaking his head. "You kids these days and your fancy schmancy desserts. When I was your age, a glazed donut was the fanciest thing I could even think of. And it just

cost five cents! Do you know how much I saved up for a donut? I had to mow the lawn three times!” He continued into his office and the three of them laughed with the red velvet crumbs spilling onto their desks.

“All right, team! Into my office!” Tony shouted once he sat down. The three of them shoved the rest of their cupcake pieces into their mouth and shuffled into the office. They tried to compose themselves with cheeks full and lips smeared with frosting. Leah was preparing herself for a reprimanding, as was what usually happened when Tony called everyone into the office on a whim.

“Well, here’s the story. Club Business is doing well and we’re going to be hiring another researcher. Leah, you’ll have to train them and show them the ropes. You can hand off the TCR when they get the hang of it. In the meantime, Leah, I want to see if you can write a story. Do you think you have time for that? You can only do it after you finish all your data entry work.”

Yes! Leah wanted to scream out. She was dying to write an article instead of doing data entry all day long. That was the reason she got a journalism degree! The reason she wanted to work at Diamond Media in the first place! Instead, she let out a muffled sound between chews.

“I’m sorry, Leah, I did not get that.” Tony raised his eyebrows at her.

“Yes, I can totally handle it.” She assured him after swallowing.

“Great. So here’s the story. CyBorg Tech is rumored to default on one of their second lien debts. We want to get the scoop. Do you think you can do that? 1,000 words by tomorrow?”

Leah nodded furiously. She had never heard of CyBorg Tech. She vaguely knew what a second lien was since she’d seen those words before during data entry. She

had no clue how to find out about their potential to default. In her role, she was given all the information she used. Literally, she was handed papers or emailed all the data she needed to input into the computer. Where this data came from, well, she'd never thought to ask.

"Alex and Malcolm can help you," Tony said. "Let me know if you have any questions." He dismissed them and they scattered back to their cubicles. Malcolm was already at Leah's when she arrived.

"Your first story!" He whispered excitedly.

She blushed with pride. "Can you help me? Where do I start?"

Malcolm sat on the edge of her desk in his perfectly fitted plaid pants. "This is a really big deal," he commented. Leah nodded and hoped he would get to the point. She didn't have that much time! It was already after lunch and Tony wanted the story by tomorrow!

"So what do I do?"

"Well, you know the important thing is all about the numbers. The numbers tell the story. You have to be able to translate that to readers."

"Yup, I know. Can you tell me where to start?"

"Have you ever written a news article before?"

Leah was more than just starting to get frustrated. She noticed Alex smirking from his side of the cubicle. Of course she'd written articles before! What did he think they did in journalism school? She wrote for the school paper. She had internships! She wrote articles for her classes! "Can you just help me with where to get the numbers?" She

tried to stay polite so she wouldn't offend him.

He nodded and showed her how to find financial statements filed with the SEC. He reviewed with her what numbers related to their debt and their different liens. He even explained to her what a lien was when she sheepishly admitted she wasn't sure. (It's who has first dibs on getting their money back from the company. First lien debt gets paid back first, second is paid back second, and third, well, if you're dumb enough to participate in a third lien loan, you don't deserve to get paid back.)

"How do I know if they are going to default?"

Malcolm shrugged. "Well, you can call their lawyers and ask."

"They'll tell me?" Malcolm shrugged and Alex shook his head.

"Alex, do you want to lend your expertise?"

"Well, when you've been in the business a while, you start to get sources, who pass along rumors to you and will tell you things that are not for attribution. You need sources."

"How do I get sources? "

"They have to trust you. You can start calling people and see what happens. Call the advisors of the lenders."

She nodded and got to work. An hour later, she'd been hung up on six times. She'd left eight voice messages and spoke with three receptionists who promised to get her message through.

How's your day ? A text from Gabe came in. She excitedly responded that she'd

gotten her first assignment, but that she was sure she would fail. She explained the situation to him.

Let me help . He offered. I can see if I know the guys working on the deal. She thanked him and waited impatiently as she tried to start writing something based purely on the numbers from financial statements and previous articles written about CyBorg. It was awful. She'd definitely fail.

Just as it turned 6:00 PM and everyone was ready to go, her phone buzzed. Gabe found someone who would speak with her! Off the record, of course, but he was working on the deal to reorganize the debt before the company defaulted. He sent her a number and said the guy was waiting for her call.

Leah was the only one left in the office when she spoke to the advisor. He gave her all the details, as though they were old friends just chatting about the weather. He was her first source! "Don't quote me, OK?" He confirmed at the end of the conversation. She assured him it was privileged and she started writing.

You're the best , she texted Gabe. I owe you one .

You can buy me a drink when you finish writing . She gave him a thumbs up and typed away at her keyboard. He was the best boyfriend ever. She had nothing to worry about. She buried the note from the morning deep into her head and even deeper into her purse.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm*

Leah's heart had been pounding since they left the Island of Manhattan. No, it had been pounding since they left the Upper East Side. Maybe even since she left her apartment. Gabe had met her by the Subway with a small backpack sitting high up on his back the way her mom had always nagged her to wear hers when she was in high school and let the bag sag and bounce on her bottom. It may not have been good for her lower back, but it was the right move for her popularity. She'd always assumed she'd just deal with her back later when she was old like everyone else did.

She had a small duffel bag over her shoulder, which she had regretted since she'd reached the corner of her block. It made her shoulder ache (residual pains from high school?) and it hit her leg with every step. "Let me get that," Gabe offered and he grabbed her bag. If only he had met her at the apartment, he could have carried the thing the entire four blocks to the Subway! The walk had never seemed so long before.

But Gabe wasn't coming around her apartment much anymore. They still hung out almost daily and he sometimes walked her home, but they were spending more time at his place or out enjoying city life. It may have been for the best, Leah thought, since she was pretty sure her roommate was depressed. Door slamming became more frequent and violent. Dishes were rarely cleaned or put away. Trash often found its way to the floor and got lost before reaching the can. It wasn't comfortable for anyone there. Not Gabe, who preferred not to hole up in Leah's bedroom. Not Leah, who hated navigating the trash and inspecting every plate and fork before use. And she couldn't imagine it was pleasant for Marissa either, who obviously had a lot of issues if she was letting herself go so fast. Leah had already given up her fantasies of bestfrienddom with her roommate and was now patiently waiting out her lease while clamping her mouth shut anytime someone mentioned where she would live next

year.

Would she and Gabe be ready to move in together? Would he be interested in finding a new place with her? Or would she move into his cramped bachelor pad? She hadn't said anything about this daydream to Gabe, even though she was dying for answers. Secretly planning her escape was the only thing that made being in her apartment bearable, which is why she too didn't mind spending more time at Gabe's.

At his apartment, they could play music loudly. They could eat in their underwear in the kitchen. Sex could be loud and spontaneous, and happen anywhere in the one-room apartment. They could almost reach the fridge from the bed. Of course, his apartment also had cracked ceilings that Leah often imagined would fall down on them and one of the hinges on the oven was rusting, so it shrieked every time the door was opened and closed and sometimes refused to cooperate when they were cooking, letting all the heat out instead of baking whatever was inside. But these were fixable. Also avoidable if they would just pool their budget and get a better place. She'd suggest it in a few months, she told herself. It was still early. They'd only been together a of couple months. She still had way too much time on her lease.

They took the Subway to Penn Station where they would catch a train upstate. Leah's mom would pick them up from the station and drive them to the home her parents had bought when her mom was pregnant with Shira. They'd bought the house thinking they would one day need lots of bedrooms for kids and house guests, but today it was just her parents and empty bedrooms.

As the train pulled farther from Manhattan, Leah found herself getting more and more nervous. She tried to imagine what would happen when her mom met Gabe. All she could see was an explosion. The minute her mom found out he wasn't Jewish, her head would explode and gush all over the new curtains that an interior designer from the synagogue had recently helped her pick out.

Since she'd confirmed to her mom that Gabe was coming for Thanksgiving, she had been bombarded with questions. Her mom found every excuse to call or text needing urgent information: Is Gabe allergic to anything? What does he like for breakfast? Should I buy bagels from Kaplan's? We always have too much cranberry sauce, but I'm thinking I should make a double recipe in case Gabe likes it I don't want to run out. What do you think? No, nothing special, don't worry, and I'm sure it'll be fine. Leah tried to be nice when answering, but she was already stressed enough about this meeting.

She thought back to the time her parents met Asher. They had been so excited! He was from her Jewish youth group! His name was Asher! Which was sort of Israeli even, right? Her mom had brought bagels and rugalach from her favorite bakery and had laid out an entire spread for the meeting. Asher had come over and smiled awkwardly as her parents stood with such anticipation in front of the door. Her father held out his hand and Leah cringed as she noticed Asher's weak handshake. Her cheeks burned when her mom asked Asher about his college plans and he shrugged that they had time. (He was a junior then! Of course they had time, plenty of time, but everyone knew you couldn't say that in front of parents! If parents—especially Jewish parents—asked about future plans, you had to discuss where you were applying, what master's program you were interested in, and what were your career prospects! Apparently Asher had none of those, and not even so much as a fake plan to give her parents!)

They sat in the kitchen and ate bagels and rugalach while her parents continued asking questions about his parents, his school, and their youth group. Asher answered everything with one word and barely looked her parents in the eyes while he ate two bagels and more rugalach than Leah could count. (She'd eaten only half of a bagel and one rugalach.) When he left, he kissed her goodbye in front of her parents and told them it was nice to meet them. Leah was sure her parents hated him. But her mom had given her a big squeeze.

“He’s so sweet, darling! And cute! Well, he’s just wonderful!” It was then that Leah realized that her parents only cared about one thing. Nothing else mattered. They loved Asher. They invited him to every family event and he would come. His mom hugged him and embroidered a pillowcase for him with the Theodor Herzl quote “If you will it, it is no dream” when he left for college.

Her mom cried when Leah told her they broke up. Actual tears. “I hope you’re making the right decision,” she said as though Leah had just given up on a huge opportunity. Leah consoled her mom and reminded her that she was going to move to New York City, the city with the highest number of Jews in the world. Surely, she’d meet someone new. Someone better. Someone who could shake her father’s hand with fortitude and discuss his ambitions with more than a shrug.

Leah knew Gabe could do those things. She hadn’t yet mentioned to her mom that he wasn’t Jewish. Maybe it wouldn’t come up. Maybe they’d get through the holiday without anyone mentioning Judaism or the lack thereof. Yeah right.

Leah wished the train would go on forever. It could just continue whirling down the tracks next to the almost naked autumn trees where orange and red leaves coated the ground. She and Gabe could just continue holding hands and talking about New York and the books they were reading and the restaurants they wanted to try. The train really didn’t need to stop. Things couldn’t get any better.

But sadly, the train pulled into the station and Leah already saw her mom’s car waiting by the exit. Gabe grabbed their bags and they walked to the platform where the cool air seemed to bite their faces. It was always colder upstate away from sidewalk vents blowing steam from the Subway and the heaters working overtime to warm every small indoor space. Leah led Gabe to her mom’s car where she could see her mom waving from inside. It was too cold to get out for a hug .

Gabe popped the trunk, placed the bags inside, and got into the backseat while Leah

got in front. Her mom greeted her and reached over for a sideways hug. Then, she turned around and reached a hand out to Gabe. “I’m Savannah!” She belted. “It’s so wonderful to finally meet you! And we so appreciate you coming to our family for Thanksgiving! I know it can be hard missing your own family traditions, but we hope you will feel right at home with us. If there is anything we can do to make it more like your family’s Thanksgiving, please let me know!”

“Well, as long as there is a Turkey, I’m sure it will be fine.” Gabe smiled and firmly grasped Savannah’s hand.

“Well, we have that! It’s already in the oven and will be ready by four!” Savannah laughed and gave her daughter a wink. “Seatbelts on?” She started to pull out of the parking lot. “So Gabe, tell me about what you do? Leah has been so secretive!”

Gabe chuckled and started talking about his job at the hedge fund. He politely explained what he did and what it meant to be a hedge fund in a way that didn’t sound pretentious or condescending should she not know what a hedge fund was. (It’s an investment firm that bets against its own investments. That way, if an investment fails, they still make money.)

They got to Leah’s house without any hiccups or mentions of religion. When they pulled into the driveway, Leah felt like she was seeing the place for the first time through Gabe’s eyes. It was a white wooden house with a picket fence and a perfectly manicured lawn. Three steps with potted plants on their sides led to the amber front door. To Leah, it looked warm and inviting, and she hoped that Gabe saw it the same way.

He carried their bags inside where it smelled like Thanksgiving. There were yams drenched in sugar, cranberries popping on the stove, and turkey crisping in the oven. Leah loved the smells. Her dad was in the kitchen, reading the newspaper and snacking on some of the extra stuffing that hadn’t fit in the turkey. He looked up

when they walked in. With food in his mouth, he hugged Leah and then he swallowed and cleared his throat to shake Gabe's hand. Another strong handshake, man-to-man. Leah was proud.

"I was just about to catch the game before dinner," her dad commented. "Want to join?"

Leah knew Gabe wasn't a football fan. She wasn't even sure Gabe would have understood what her dad was referring to, and she felt obliged to save him.

"Cowboys playing today?" Gabe asked, as though he'd been following the sport's entire season.

"Yup, but they have no chance against the Raider. "

Gabe nodded. He seemed like he'd surely invested some thought in this and had to agree. "I'll just take our bags to the room and then meet you back here?"

"I'll pop you a beer." Success! Leah could see that her father was smitten with Gabe. Who wouldn't be? He was simply perfect! Her parents would realize that long before they learned of his one small blemish.

Leah showed Gabe to her old bedroom that hadn't been touched since she graduated high school. "Just in case," her mom would say when Leah asked why they didn't just turn the room into an office or gym or whatever else empty nesters needed those days. While Leah was sure she would never be moving back home, it was reassuring to have her bedroom waiting for her. Her creaky bed with the sheets and pillows she'd picked out in ninth grade was still there. The same as it was when she'd slept on it with Asher, but she tried not to think about that.

"Cute room." Gabe studied the walls that were covered in magazine clippings,

pictures, and paraphernalia from her old youth group. “What’s Echad?” He noticed a big sign with the name of her old BBG chapter on it.

“My youth group. It means number one.” She tried to sound nonchalant, like it wasn’t a big deal when it actually was. She remembered her last BBYO convention, how she cried and talked about how much Echad had meant to her. How she’d always be a sister and how proud she was to hand the chapter over to the younger generation. It was impossible to explain to someone who hadn’t experienced BBYO what Echad had meant to her. Her chapter was her family. It was the most important thing she had. It brought her purpose, gave her ambition, taught her about her potential, and rewarded her for her achievements. She loved Echad and she loved BBYO. To her, it was more than just the number one.

“Cool.” He continued looking around as though unaffected by the Echad sign. Leah wanted him to understand what it meant to her, she wanted him to feel what she felt when she looked at that sign, but he just moved on and started studying the books on her bookshelf. She had the entire Gossip Girl series, Nancy Drew books from her younger days, and a whole list of embarrassing young adult novels about high school love and kissing.

“Why don’t we go get that beer.” She drew his attention back to the doorway. He kissed her and followed her back to the living room, where her dad had opened up three beers and a bag of chips, which her mom was reprimanding him for since dinner was in a few hours and he didn’t need any snacks before then. Leah grabbed a beer and went to help her mom in the kitchen while Gabe watched the game with her dad .

“He seems very nice,” Savannah commented to her daughter. “Did he grow up reform? He seems a little more reform.”

Leah hadn’t prepared any answers for questions like this. But just then, the door clicked and screeched open. “Hey! I’m home!” Shira yelled from the foyer. Leah ran

to go meet her sister and threw her arms around her in the biggest hug. “Is he here?” Shira whispered in her ear. Leah nodded and her face flushed with happiness. “And they don’t know yet?” Leah pursed her lips and continued with her ignorant smile as though they could get through the holiday without her parents finding out.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm*

“It’s the butter, isn’t it?” Gabe questioned with a wide smile. “That was my mom’s secret to a perfect turkey. Lots and lots of butter. This tastes exactly like how my mom makes it.”

Savannah sat with her mouth agape as though someone had accused her of using human blood to season the turkey. Butter on turkey went against everything Savannah Rosenberg stood for. It went against her values, how she raised her children, against her religion. Leah could see all this in her mother’s spread lips and she knew what her mother was thinking: he was too reform. So reform that he wasn’t even a member of the tribe.

“We don’t eat butter with meat in this house,” Savannah commented. “It’s not kosher. Did you not grow up kosher?”

“I’m Italian,” Gabe responded with pride as he took another bite of the turkey. “I could have sworn this had butter on it.”

“Italian,” Savannah repeated. Leah felt her cheeks burning and her ears smoking. How could she have let this happen? She should have prepared Gabe about what not to say. She caught Shira’s eyes, which told her: No, you should have prepared Mom and Dad for this . She wanted to smack Shira for telepathing this to her when she obviously knew it already. This was a mistake. A big mistake. “So, you’re not Jewish?”

“Jewish? Me? No,” Gabe smirked. “But I always felt like Jews and Italians were really similar. For example, we both seem to gravitate around food and lots of carbs. Jews do Friday dinners, we do Sundays. We’re both known for our guilt, a very

honed skill in both cultures—”

“Judaism isn’t a culture,” Leah’s father jumped in. “It’s a religion. Like Christianity. Are you Christian?”

“Well,” Gabe seemed to fumble, just like the football player did on TV earlier. “I grew up in a Christian household, but I’m not religious or anything.”

“Or anything.” Her father stressed.

“Yeah, I mean, I still go home for the Christmas ham and whatever, but it’s more about family than religion.” Leah felt her mom cringe at the word ham.

“I see,” Savannah commented. “Would you like some cranberry sauce? I made double what I usually do.” She offered up the bowl of sauce with a new layer of politeness that hadn’t been there before. “I do hope you like cranberry sauce. ”

“I do, thank you.” Gabe took the sauce that was passed down the table, not noticing the cloud that blew in with it. The table was silent except for the clinking of silverware on plates. A few crunches as teeth chomped on the salad croutons or pecans from the yams.

“Why don’t we talk about what we’re thankful for?” Shira broke the silence. Their family had a long-standing tradition of going around the table at Thanksgiving. Leah had memories of this from the time when she was most thankful for her goldfish and for her pink fluffy slippers that kept her feet warm. She’d surely still be thankful for those if her feet hadn’t grown out of them years ago. Leah remembered one year that she and Shira had both had boyfriends, Jewish boyfriends, and that was what her mom was thankful for.

“I’m so thankful that both my girls are dating wonderful men who will make good

husbands and fathers one day!” Her mom had said and both girls immediately fired back. AJ and I are never getting married! Shira had shouted. We’re in college! We’re not even thinking about marriage and kids! Leah had similarly fought back, while secretly she was also thankful that Asher seemed like perfect husband and father material. That year Leah had been thankful for her BBYO chapter, her sister coming home from college, and for Asher who was filling out his college applications .

“Great idea!” Their dad said. “I’ll start. I’m thankful that we’re all healthy. Savannah?”

“That’s it? That’s the only thing you are thankful for? Our health? Everything else is so horrible?” Leah’s poor father. He became the unintended target of Savannah’s misplaced anger.

“No, of course not! I’m just saying that’s what I am thankful for. You can be thankful for whatever you want. This is what I am thankful for.” He stood his ground.

“Well, what am I thankful for? I’m thankful for my daughters and my husband, even though none of you seem to be thankful for me!”

“What? Mom!” Shira shouted. “Why would you say that? Of course we’re thankful for you!”

Memories of previous holiday disasters came back. For some reason, her mom was always extra emotional on holidays and prone to snap. Maybe it was the early morning and long days of cooking. Maybe it was because they were some of the few times when the whole family was together. Leah remembered one year when she said she was thankful she was going to college the next year. “Why, because you don’t like being home?” Her mom had snapped. “Once you go to college, you’ll realize how much I do for you! You don’t appreciate any of it!”

“Well, you all sure have a funny way of showing how thankful you are!” Savannah huffed. “After everything I do, how much effort I put into raising you! Everything I taught you to value, you all just throw it out the window like it means nothing!”

“Mom, that’s not true!” Shira kept fighting.

“No? So how do you explain your job working in customer service? That’s what you got a degree for? That’s how I raised you? That’s how you thank me for giving you every opportunity in life? A job in a call center?”

“Mom, that has nothing to do with you-”

“It has everything to do with me! And Leah! I’ve been so supportive of you! And now, you—”

“All right enough!” Leah’s dad slammed his fist on the table. “Let’s just enjoy this food that we are all thankful that you cooked for us and have a nice Thanksgiving, OK? We are all thankful for you, Savannah, my lovely wife and a wonderful mother who supports and gives our kids all the opportunities they can imagine. All right?”

Savannah huffed and shook her head while stuffing a forkful of green beans in her mouth. “None of you are ever thankful. You don’t even know what that means,” she mumbled quietly.

Dinner continued despite the thickness in the air. Somehow the family made it through pecan, apple, and pumpkin pie without another outburst. Savannah quickly started clearing the plates the moment the last bite was taken. Gabe stood up and lifted two half-eaten pies. “I got it,” Savannah said as she grabbed the pans from him. “Why don’t you kids just leave me and your father to clean up? Don’t you have parties or anything to go to tonight?”

“Mom, it’s like 7:00 PM,” Shira responded.

“What? And that’s too early to get out of my hair?” Savannah grunted as she carried the plates and pans to the kitchen, her husband quickly following with whatever she had left.

“Everyone’s going out downtown tonight,” Shira said when it was just the three of them. “But I’m pretty sure nothing opens until like 10.”

From the kitchen, dishes clanked and the girls could hear their parents failed attempts at arguing quietly. “Why don’t we go for a walk?” Leah suggested. Gabe and Shira agreed and the three of them grabbed their coats and quietly walked outside.

“So is that what Thanksgiving is like at your place?” Shira asked once they left the driveway. The neighborhood was quiet, but all the houses had their lights on. Leah imagined most families were still sitting around their tables, stuffing themselves with another round of turkey, not yet even thinking about dessert. Probably everyone was enjoying their company and talking about all the wonderful things in their lives.

“Pretty much,” Gabe responded. “Although my mom probably would have already been upset before the meal started. I probably would have folded a napkin wrong it would have ruined the entire meal.”

Shira and Leah chuckled. “So our mom isn’t the only crazy one,” Leah said.

“Jews and Italians, I said. We’re all the same.” Gabe pulled Leah in closer and kissed her temple.

“Really?” Shira questioned. “What would your mom say if you brought a Jewish girl home? Do Italians care about those things?”

“Well, my grandma didn’t talk to my uncle for six years after he married a Protestant.”

“Really?” Leah questioned.

“Yup, my grandma pretended like her son was dead.”

“So why did they start talking again after six years?”

“His wife died. And then he did marry a Catholic.”

“What did your parents think? About your uncle?”

“It was my mom’s brother. She didn’t care so much. She stayed in touch with her brother. But she did marry an Italian.” Leah had hoped the story would have ended differently. “You didn’t tell your parents I’m not Jewish.”

Leah felt caught. “No, I mean, I was going to, I just, I don’t know... ”

“Leah knew they wouldn’t approve,” Shira cut in for her sister. “Our parents prefer us marrying Jews no matter what. We could bring home a Jewish guy and he could slap one of us in the face in front of our parents and they’d still love him because he was Jewish. On the other hand, you could be a total mensch, but since you’re Catholic Italian, you’re basically the worst guy Leah could end up with.”

“Well that’s reassuring,” Gabe responded. “I didn’t mean to cause any problems. I had no idea it was an issue.”

“How could you?” Shira responded. “It sounds like Jews are still a generation behind Italians.”

Gabe chuckled. They continued to walk quietly until the crisp air started to burn their cheeks.

“I’m going downtown,” Shira announced when they got back home. Leah also had friends meeting at the local bars and she had even been looking forward to showing Gabe off. But after dinner, Leah wasn’t so sure. Would her friends have the same reactions as her mom? Would they ask about Asher? She told Gabe she was tired—all that turkey and tryptophan, and suggested they go to sleep.

The house was quiet. The kitchen was clean, leaving no remnants of a holiday meal except a few plates in the drying rack by the sink. The lights were off and the door to Leah’s parents’ room was closed. She led Gabe into her old bedroom and snuggled into him. She couldn’t sleep, even to the sound of his rhythmic breathing that only made her feel more awake and alone.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm*

New York in December is just as magical as anyone could imagine. The streets are lined with Christmas lights, holiday markets pop up everywhere selling red and green felted trinkets, even the cold seems cheery when it brushes against your face. There were holiday parties, tons of them- for work, for different organizations, at bars that offered special deals for anyone interested in holiday cheer. It was exactly like every holiday movie Leah had seen and she couldn't wait to celebrate her first Christmas this year with Gabe.

Sure, she'd seen a Christmas tree, she'd even visited the giant one in the Boston Commons while in college, but she'd never celebrated Christmas. Unless of course, you count ordering Chinese food and discussing the history of this long-standing yet bizarre Jewish tradition. But this year was different. She and Gabe were meeting after work to see the Christmas tree lighting in Rockefeller Center and then he promised to take her somewhere that served alcoholic eggnog.

"Earth to Leah!" Mark yelled over the cubicle. "You already headed off into space? "

"She's daydreaming about her boyfriend's sexy Santa costume." Alex stood up and leaned over. "It's probably just a red satin thong, right? And a big white pompom on the front."

Leah nodded and glanced back at her computer before looking up at Alex. "Ew."

"Yes, Ew!" Mark repeated. "Alex, you're the only one who likes wearing red satin thongs. I feel disgusting just saying that word."

"And now I can't get that image out of my head," Leah responded.

“Neither can the victims! I bet there are now at least five therapists that specialize in failed sexy Santa trauma!” Mark laughed and Alex rolled his eyes.

“What?”

“In college that was Alex’s side job.” Mark snickered.

“Stop!” Alex snapped.

“Seriously, he was a seasonal stripper.”

“I was not.”

“He was!”

“You’re jealous because you couldn’t get hired as one.”

“What’s a seasonal stripper?” Leah asked. Her cheeks started to get warm as she started to picture Alex naked. He was good looking. Objectively. He was tall, probably fit, even though Leah had only seen him in business casual attire. He had deep green eyes and a military-style buzz cut. His teeth were a little crooked, but it was only part of his charm.

“Exactly what it sounds like,” Mark said smugly.

“It’s a very profitable profession,” Alex chimed in. “In fact, it’s part of the reason I don’t have as many student loans as Mr. Straight-edge over here!”

Mark rolled his eyes. “Anyway, are we going to happy hour today?”

“Wait, I’m still interested in this seasonal stripper thing,” Leah asked. Her curiosity

came from her journalistic instincts, she reasoned to herself. “You only stripped seasonally?”

“A lot of women hire strippers around different holidays,” Alex explained as though he were giving a tutorial about organizational processes. “Christmas, Valentine’s Day, Easter, you name it. Whenever there is a holiday, girls get horny.”

“Or lonely,” Leah added.

“Umm, I think horny,” Alex winked. “I was a contractor for an escort company that didn’t have enough contractors on hand during busy seasons. So when everyone else was studying for finals, I was getting bills stuffed in my thong.” Alex returned Mark’s smug look.

“So, happy hour?” Mark asked again. “Is there a reason we’re still here talking about male thongs?”

Leah glanced at her clock and the Word document on her screen. Since her first successful article, Tony had been giving her consistent new assignments. Most of them didn’t take much research. They could be written from the dry financial data she combed from the TCR and her data entry. But she was writing. And she was getting bylines. She was now writing a summary of a new loan drawn by a Fortune 500 company. Two months ago, she wouldn’t have been able to understand a word of what she was writing.

“I have plans tonight,” she smiled.

“I knew it was the goyfriend!” Alex commented. Despite her previous explosion about them calling Gabe her goyfriend, they continued to use the term. Leah was starting to warm up to it, she’d even used it once herself over drinks with Maya, who had gotten a real kick out of it. “If he needs to borrow a red satin thong, have him call

me.” Alex winked.

“I think he’d be a little cold in the thong. We’re going to the tree-lighting.” She felt like a little kid gearing up for their first trip to Disneyland.

“Oh no.” Mark shook his head. “Should we tell her?” He looked at Alex. “Nobody warned you?” He asked Leah.

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s a disaster. Tourists have been camping out at Rockefeller since five in the morning to see the lighting. You won’t be able to get within 10 blocks of it by now.”

“I’m sure it will be fine,” Leah responded with the optimism of a non-New Yorker.

“All right, well have fun,” Mark said. “You’ll end up standing in a crowd on Madison and watching the lighting on your phone while people push to try to get a glimpse.”

“I guess we’ll see.” Leah smiled, but inside she could feel the pangs of disappointment. She looked at her phone as the screen lit up with a text from Gabe.

Be outside your office in five.

She responded to let him know she’d be coming down and turned off her computer. “Enjoy happy hour!” She said to her friends as she stood up.

“Happy hour?” Someone whispered from across the room. “Where are you guys going? Have you been to Rolf’s? It’s the best place for Christmas.” Malcolm approached their area.

“Rolf’s?” Mark laughed. “Come on...”

Leah waved goodbye and left before hearing the rest of the conversation, but she tucked the name Rolf's into the back of her mind. Another New York landmark she'd need to experience.

Gabe was waiting for her when she walked out of her building. He kissed her and they started walking to the Subway. "Mark said Rockefeller is going to be really crowded now."

"He's right," Gabe responded with a smile .

"So where are we going to see the tree?"

"Do you trust me?"

Leah felt like Jasmine on the balcony when Aladdin held out his hand from the magic carpet. She definitely would grab his hand. "Of course."

"So just follow me." They rode the Subway, talking about their days at work. Leah told him about the article she was working on, but not about Alex's college profession. They got off the Subway right at Grand Central, which seemed even more crowded than usual. Gabe led her through the crowd toward Rockefeller Center. With every step, the crowds seemed to be getting thicker. Gabe even led her on the street, jumping to avoid taxis, just to get around the crowds. He continued to push forward until they were right on Fifth Avenue. When Leah looked up, she could see the tip of the tree, just as an elbow knocked her rib.

Gabe then pulled her into the lobby of a building. He smiled at the doorman and led Leah to the elevators. "Where are we going?" she asked, feeling like she was trespassing. She did not fit into this building with gold lining in the lobby.

"To see the tree!" They rode the elevator to the 11 th floor and Gabe led her to a door

at the end of the hall. He unlocked it to reveal the most beautiful apartment Leah had ever seen. There were wood floors, leather couches, and full-length windows facing Rockefeller Center. “Come inside!” Gabe beckoned when Leah hesitated in the doorway.

“Gabe, what is this place? Who lives here?”

“My colleague,” Gabe responded. “He said we could come here to watch the tree lighting. Come look!”

Leah stepped inside and carefully walked toward the window. She could hear her footsteps echoing on the floor. From the window, she could see the Christmas tree in Rockefeller Center. It wasn’t as big as she imagined it, but maybe that was because she had never imagined watching the lighting from above. “You sure this is OK?”

“Would he have given me his key if it wasn’t?” Gabe dangled the key and then put it in his pocket. He then walked to the kitchen and pulled two beers out of the fridge. He popped the tops and handed one to Leah.

“We can’t take his beer!”

“It’s open, if we don’t drink it now, it will go to waste.”

Leah couldn’t argue with that. Despite her discomfort and total disbelief, she took the beer.

“Cheers,” Gabe said. “Merry Christmas.” They clinked their bottles and took a drink. Leah looked around the apartment, afraid to sit down or touch anything. “They’re going to turn on the lights soon.” He seemed to pick up on her discomfort. “Don’t worry, you can’t ruin anything.”

She giggled and snapped a picture of the tree from the window.

How's this for a view? She texted with the picture in the group she had with Mark and Alex.

You didn't tell us your boyfriend was rich! We would have joined! Alex responded almost instantly.

She put her phone away and leaned into Gabe. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her lips. She put her hands around his neck and felt his hands start to grab into her back as his kisses became more passionate. "Gabe!" She slightly pulled away, even though she wanted him to keep kissing.

"It's OK," he said right into her mouth between kisses. "Don't worry." His hand felt around her legs and in between her thighs.

"Gabe, come on," she said, still not really wanting him to stop. He didn't. He slowly unbuttoned her pants and let the zipper fall. "Gabe..." She melted into his touch, even though she couldn't dismiss the discomfort.

"No one can see in the windows. Even if anyone is up this high, they won't be looking at us. Everyone is looking at the tree." He bent down in front of her and started to kiss her below. Her eyes darted out the windows looking around at the other buildings to see if she could see anyone. No one. But she could see the tree and suddenly it lit up, with thousands of tiny lights glowing around it.

"Gabe! You missed the lighting!"

"I have a better view from down here," he smiled and then picked her up and took her to the leather couch.

“Gabe, we can’t, what if your colleague...”

“It’s OK,” he reassured her and they made love on the leather couch that Leah couldn’t stop thinking about. But she looked to the side and stared at the giant lit up Christmas Tree in front of her. She focused on that and then on the electricity that she felt when Gabe touched her. She ran her hands through his hair and closed her eyes as she came, the image of the Christmas tree still in her mind.

After a few minutes, he got up and pulled her up to sit. “Amazing,” he said, kissing her cheek. She looked down at the couch and saw a white scratch across the leather. She traced it with her finger.

“Was this here before?” She asked, wondering if a button from her shirt could have done it.

“Fuck,” he said. “I don’t know.”

“I don’t think it was.”

“Oh well? What can we do?” he said with such calm and nonchalance that made Leah relax.

“So, eggnog?” he asked while still sitting naked, next to her on the couch .

She giggled while tracing the scratch on the leather between them. “I’ve never had eggnog before.”

“It’s actually disgusting,” he said. “But if you’ve never had it, you need to try it. It’s one of those things.”

Leah giggled again and stared at his body. He was so sexy. Everything about him was

lean and muscular and she wondered if that was from all the running he did or if he was just lucky.

Her stomach grumbled as she was staring at his abs.

“All right, get up!” he said. “I can’t have you here starving during the Christmas season!” He stood up and pulled his clothes back on.

Leah slowly got dressed and wondered if this was what Christmas was all about. Passion, pleasure, and the anticipation of more. If so, she liked Christmas. She liked it a lot.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:21 pm*

“It was so romantic,” Leah explained as she took a sip of her homemade cocktail – the cheapest vodka available with grapefruit juice. The vodka was so cheap it came in a plastic bottle and tasted like rubbing alcohol, but if she wanted to get a buzz without spending more than she got paid in a day, this was the only solution.

“Sounds like it.” Maya concurred and made a face as she sipped her own concoction. “This is disgusting.” They were standing in Leah’s kitchen, with the open vodka jug and juice next to them, getting ready for that night’s New York holiday festivity. So far, the holiday season hadn’t let Leah down. Since the Christmas tree lighting, she’d been to three holiday markets, heard at least 10,000 Christmas carols, tasted eggnog (which was disgusting, but an experience, as Gabe had prepared her), and bought more peppermint lattes than she could afford.

This night’s event would be a little different. Instead of red and green décor, there’d be blue. There’d be no eggnog or peppermint, but probably lots of oil and songs about the holiday season. They were going to the Matzah Ball, New York’s premier Hanukkah party that Maya’s mom had bought tickets for and guilted Maya into going since she hadn’t been keeping up with her duties of one Jewish event a month. Leah was excited to go. She’d heard about the event and knew it meant dressing up in cocktail attire and pretending like they belonged in high society and heels. Maya told Leah the only way she was going was if she had at least two drinks beforehand, so Leah bought the ingredients for her favorite college pregame drink and invited her friend over.

There was a click at the front door before it barged open and Leah’s roommate came in. The two girls had successfully avoided each other over the last few weeks. It hadn’t been that hard, Marissa wasn’t home much and when she was she rarely left

her room. Leah also didn't spend much time in the common areas—where the TV still stood on the floor—but on the rare occasions she did, it was usually during times she didn't think Marissa would be there. Like after work, since Marissa usually came home later.

“Oh, hey,” Marissa greeted them as though she found a peacock in her kitchen.

“Want a drink?” Maya offered.

“Um, sure.” Marissa startled Leah with the response. It had only been a polite offer, Leah thought, no reason for Marissa to agree and stand there with them pretending like they were friends. They were definitely not friends. Friends didn't leave cryptic messages for each other without explanations, nor did they so rudely judge each other's boyfriends. Which Marissa did. Leah was sure of it by how the stomp of Marissa's footsteps elevated in volume whenever Gabe was around or by the fact that once Gabe left his keys in the kitchen and Leah later found them in the trash. No one spoke about how the keys got there.

Maya made a cocktail for Marissa, who took a sip like it was water. “Disgusting, huh?” Maya commented.

“It's fine.”

“We were just talking about Leah's romantic evening at the Christmas tree lighting.” Maya filled her in. Leah wished Maya hadn't said anything. Leah had briefed Maya about the tension with her roommate and the apparent history with Gabe. How could she so carelessly mention this?

“Oh yeah?” Marissa took a long sip. “Gabe can be really romantic when he wants to be.”

“What does that mean?” Leah jumped, wondering if it was the comment or the alcohol making her cheeks burn.

“Nothing. He’s romantic.”

Leah had a million questions on the tip of her tongue. Like what happened with Gabe and Marissa’s friend? Why did it end? Why was Marissa so weird about Gabe? Weird about everything? But Marissa just grabbed her cocktail and went into her room, closing the door behind her. Leah rolled her eyes and blew out heavily. “What is her problem?” She whispered.

Maya shrugged. “Should we go?” The girls finished up their drinks and took a last look in the mirror. Leah was wearing a blue satin dress that she had bought in college for a formal event. It was short and low cut in the front and back. Her legs looked long, although covered in black tights that ended in her silver shiny high heels. She felt sexy in it and had even snapped a picture of herself while getting ready that she sent to Gabe.

Hope a nice Jewish guy doesn’t steal you away! He had replied. She’d sent him a reassuring kissing emoji and continued staring at herself in the mirror. She did look beautiful. Her curls were loose, her lips red, and her eyes were lined with dark makeup that she’d splurged on during a holiday sale.

Maya had also dressed up in a floral dress that her mom could have bought her. She wore dark brown lipstick which made her eyes pop and she had even blown out her hair. Leah thought she looked beautiful and was impressed by how her friend cleaned up.

Their looks called for a taxi, so the girls splurged and arrived at the Matzah ball like all their more entitled counterparts living in their parents’ penthouses on the Upper West Side. They handed their tickets at the door and walked into the club where

lights flashed and music roared. It was still early and the room was mostly empty except for a few crowds hanging around the bar or booths.

“Drink?” Maya suggested and the girls walked to the blue lit-up bar. They ordered cocktails and stood around one of the high-top bar tables. They scanned the crowd as though looking for something or someone, but neither knew exactly what or who.

“Do you think something is weird about Gabe?” Leah asked, saying the only thing that was on her mind.

Maya shrugged. “Everyone has something weird about them.”

“But, what Marissa said, and you know...” Her voice trailed.

Again Maya shrugged. “He’s your boyfriend. Neither Marissa nor I can tell you if something is wrong with him.”

“Yeah, but—” Leah wanted to keep talking digging deeper, maybe Maya did know something or have some insight she wasn’t letting on to. Of course she did! Friends always had opinions whether or not they knew when to keep their mouths shut! But the conversation was cut short when Leah’s room scan zeroed in on something. Or rather someone.

The curly hair was undeniable. The way he held his head and his slightly hunched shoulders. What was he doing there? As though he felt the lasers from the scan, his eyes moved to reach Leah’s. A smile grew on his face and he lifted one hand to wave and the other to sip a beer. Leah awkwardly waved back, instantly wishing she didn’t.

He said something to the people he was standing with and then started walking over. “Oh my God,” Leah blurted, her eyes darting to meet Maya’s. Maya looked calm and bored as she sipped her cocktail, totally unaware of what was about to happen.

“Maya!” She whisper-screamed.

“I really can’t tell you, Leah,” Maya responded totally nonchalantly. “He seems like a nice guy to me, but I don’t know him that well. I mean, his friends were a little weird at the bar that one time—”

“Hey.” Asher put his beer down on the table as though he was planning to stay a while. “Funny seeing you here.”

“Yeah.” Leah looked at Maya hoping she would understand the urgency of what was happening.

“I’m Maya.” She held out her hand for a shake.

“Asher.” He politely shook her hand in what looked to Leah like a very respectable handshake that Leah didn’t recognize and then turned back to Leah.

“How’s life in NYC?” He sounded so genuinely interested it was annoying.

“What are you doing here?” She said while ignoring his question. She hadn’t seen Asher since she’d graduated. Since they’d broken up after having not really been together for years.

“I’m thinking of moving to the city,” he responded. “Kevin and I are getting an apartment.”

“You’re thinking of moving or you already got an apartment?” Maya quickly asked.

“We got an apartment.”

“What about a job?” Leah asked, the voice sounded more like her mom’s.

“I’m interning at a real estate investment company. It’s a three-month internship that will lead to a job if they like me.”

“And if they don’t?” Maya asked.

“Then I’ll need to find a way to pay for my apartment.” Asher didn’t at all seem bothered by Maya’s questions, even though he immediately looked at Leah after each of his answers. “So, is life in NYC everything it’s made out to be? Am I going to be living the dream?”

At that moment, Asher’s friend Kevin approached. Leah knew him from high school, although she had never exchanged more than a few words with him, even when hanging out with Asher and his friends. “Leah! Woah! What are you doing here?” Kevin sounded like he had probably had more than just a few drinks already. “This calls for shots!” He pointed to the bar and his body followed.

Asher rolled his eyes. “Hasn’t changed since high school. ”

Leah chuckled and by then Kevin had come back with eight shots—two for everyone, he’d assured them! All of them raised a glass and the four of them clinked them together in the middle of the table, spilling a few droplets before shooting the drinks. They repeated the action with the second shot and Leah felt her face get warm.

“Maya let’s go to the bathroom,” she suggested and pulled her friend from the table. She didn’t wait to say anything to Asher or see his response.

“Maya! Oh My God!” She exclaimed when they were safely inside the ladies’ room.

“What? So what your ex-boyfriend is here! He seems nice.”

“Yeah, but what am I supposed to do?”

“Nothing! Just have fun.”

Leah felt the shots flowing through her veins and giving her that slightly elevated feeling of being invincible and drunk at the same time. “Let’s go dance.”

Maya nodded. Even if she wasn’t the most enthusiastic person at events, Maya did like the dance. And not the way most girls at these events danced, as though they were hoping someone was watching. Maya danced like the music moved her and surrendering was bliss.

The girls left the bathroom and headed to the dance floor. The venue had already started filling up with all the young and not-so-young Jews that attended these sorts of events in New York. The girls found a spot on the dance floor and sang aloud as they found their rhythm. Leah liked dancing, especially with Maya. She relaxed. Let loose. Tried to surrender like Maya did.

It wasn’t long before she felt someone grab her hand. By then the music had got her and she had to keep dancing, no matter what. She turned to see Asher holding her hand and swaying his shoulders as he smiled at her. She couldn’t help but smile back. The moment took her back to BBYO formals in high schools, like Beau Ball when he bought her a beautiful pink corsage to match her dress, or when he visited her in college for the Winter Ball and lent her his coat when she refused to bring a jacket even though there was snow on the ground. They’d been there a million times before and it was only natural for them to be there again. So Leah surrendered like Maya inspired her to, and she twirled toward Asher.

Kevin brought them each a beer and he danced with Maya with a familiarity that only exists between two drunk strangers. Leah felt Asher get close to her and sway the way she did. She smelled his cologne, the same one he’d been wearing the day they met. When beads of sweat started to form on both their foreheads, he cupped his hand suggesting they get some water. She nodded and let him pull her via their interlocked

fingers to the bar .

He asked for two waters and handed her one. “So I guess New York is everything that it’s cut out to be.”

“Sometimes.” She smirked. “Sometimes it’s just a dirty Subway and an awkward roommate.”

“That’s all just part of the experience,” he responded. “I’m looking forward to all of it.”

“With Kevin, you probably won’t be disappointed.”

Asher laughed. “So, you’re happy here?”

She looked at him and knew he really wanted to know the answer. “I am,” she responded and felt more assured after she said it. “I do really love it.” She thought about her data entry job and the passive aggressive encounters in her apartment. But she also remembered her work friends and Maya. Those were all the big parts of her life in New York. Oh, and Gabe.

“I hope you’ll show me around. As friends of course.”

“Friends?”

“Just friends. I don’t have that many friends here. And I don’t want to rely on Kevin for my social life.”

“Friends.” Leah repeated thinking she liked the sound of it. “I could also use more friends.”

“Then this is a perfect arrangement.” He clinked his water cup with hers and took a sip. “Continue dancing? ”

She nodded and they went back to the dancefloor where Maya and Kevin were still going. They danced until her feet hurt and the crowd started to thin. They all agreed it was time to go and they stepped outside to hail cabs. “So where is your apartment?” Asher asked.

“Upper East Side,” she responded feeling proud of the way her neighborhood sounded.

“I’m midtown. Too bad we can’t share a cab.” He said offering the first taxi that arrived to her and Maya. The girls got in and the cab drove them uptown until he dropped off Maya and continued to the upper border of the Upper East Side. When he dropped her off at her apartment, she stood in front of her building and turned left.

It was just a short walk to Gabe’s place. When she was outside, she rang the buzzer and waited. She rang again, starting to wonder where he was. Then the door buzzed and she walked inside. His apartment door was slightly open and he stood there in boxers and a t-shirt, his eyes squinting in the hall light. “What are you doing here?” he smiled at her.

“I had to see you.” She pushed inside his apartment and took off her coat, which she had learned was necessary, even for formal events.

“Wow,” he said. “So beautiful.” She twirled around. “I was sleeping. ”

“Continue sleeping. I’ll just snuggle up to you.”

“You think I can go back to sleep with you looking like that?” He pulled her close and the two of them fell onto the bed.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm*

Someone had forgotten to tell Leah that the holiday season was also exhausting. She'd barely recovered from her hangover from the Matzah Ball when Diamond Media's holiday party began the next day. She wore the new Christmas-themed dress with red and green plaid that she bought just for the occasion while being careful to conceal the puffiness under her eyes.

"Late night?" Alex had commented in the morning when she arrived at work with her sunglasses still on her face. She smirked and sat down at her desk, hoping she'd get through the day. "Coffee?" Alex placed a mug on her desk as he came around. "A little sugar, lots of milk," he recited from months of watching her make her own.

She gratefully drank the coffee and Alex left her alone to her data entry. She was in no state to do any writing. And that was fine because it was December. And the only people in the finance industry working in December were in that very room. The people they wrote about? All those movers and shakers? They had moved their way to ski resorts or shaken it down to warmer weather. Apparently winter break didn't stop after college in this industry. Well, not counting the underpaid journalists who stood on the sidelines and wrote about the millions of dollars changing hands.

After lunch and her third coffee, she started to feel better. By the end of the workday, she was ready for another holiday party. She, Alex, and Mark stuffed into the crowded elevators going up to the top floor of the Diamond Media building where the holiday party was starting. When the elevator doors opened, they were flung out into the venue surrounded by windows and the New York skyline. "Woah." Leah couldn't help but comment.

"You've never been up here?" Mark questioned and she shook her head. "I guess I

was only here for last year's party and that breakfast thing we snuck into a while back."

"That was a good breakfast," Alex commented.

"You didn't even touch the food! You were too busy drooling over the underage models they brought in. Who, also, by the way, didn't touch the breakfast."

"I remember the croissants. And those little cheese thingies."

"The cheese thingies," Mark nodded in agreement. They were handed chutes of champagne and the group cheered before drinking. Leah looked around the room. There were so many people who worked at Diamond Media, she felt like she knew no one there except her two friends. After drinking their champagne, the three of them found the bar and hors d'oeuvres.

"The ceviche is the only thing worth eating," someone whispered next to her. She turned to see Malcolm holding a plate with what she assumed was ceviche. "The catering at these events is not authentic though." Leah nodded as though she too appreciated authentic ceviche. "Did you try it?"

She shook her head and Malcolm took one of the little cups from his plate filled with tiny pink cubes and handed it to her. She'd never had ceviche, didn't even know what it was, but she accepted and shot the small cup into her mouth. It was fish.

"Not terrible, right?" Malcolm confirmed. Despite her instincts to spit it back into the cup, Leah swallowed and nodded.

They stood by the buffet and Leah wondered what happened to her friends and why they hadn't saved her. She took a sip of the cocktail she got. "How's salsa going?" She asked.

“Great! We have a new jazz soloist coming to the club next week. Will you be there?”

“I’ll try to come.” Which was a lie. She wouldn’t go. She wouldn’t even try.

“Oh!” Malcolm suddenly seemed surprised. “Did you meet Brittany?”

Leah shook her head. “Who is Brittany? ”

“The new researcher at Teen Club. She just started last week.” Malcolm waved over Leah’s shoulder. “Brittany! Come meet our researcher!”

Leah’s heart fell down to her hips. She was supposed to be the new researcher at Teen Club. She was supposed to move to that magazine once they found her replacement at Club Business. Had they forgotten? What about the woman who was supposed to be her manager? Her mentor who would take her under her wing? Had she forgotten Leah? And what about HR? Helen? Kelsey? Did they forget she was supposed to be just temporarily researching for Club Business?

“Hey!” said the blond girl with perfect makeup and way too much enthusiasm. “I’m Brittany!” Leah looked at Brittany and her huge boobs and professional, yet low cut dress.

“Brittany comes salsa dancing sometimes,” Malcolm noted. “This is Leah.”

“Yeah! It’s so fun, I just love it. Have you been?”

Leah nodded. “Yeah, so fun.”

“It’s so nice to meet you! Diamond Media is just, like, so big, you know? It’s hard to know anyone outside of your little department.” Brittany smiled. “Is that ceviche? Oh

my God, I lived on ceviche during my semester abroad in Spain!”

Malcolm nodded and handed her a cup from his plate. “You’ll be disappointed though. ”

Brittany ate the ceviche. “Shucks, yeah, it’s not so authentic. They used lemon, but real ceviche uses orange.” Malcolm nodded as though he were thinking the same thing.

“Oh, there’s my boss! She’s so amazing, I have so much to learn from her!” Brittany smiled. “Nice to meet you, Leah!” She said it like Princess Leah, instead of Lee-ah, the way it should have been pronounced.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” she said to Malcolm and darted away. She found Alex and Mark standing with their boss Tony. The three of them were all swirling fat round glasses with brown liquid inside.

“You know when I was your age, I hadn’t even tasted scotch,” Tony said. “And that’s probably best because you can’t appreciate it until you’re older. Scotch is better with age, just like your taste buds. At your age, you should just stick to all those crummy beers or well drinks. You guys don’t know how spoiled you are drinking this scotch.”

“Spoiled rotten,” Alex confirmed while taking a sip. “Leah! Where were you? I guess you’re not spoiled like we are!” He noted her cocktail, probably made from unbranded liquor.

“You kids are so lucky. When I started out, the holiday parties were just for the senior management, now everyone is invited! Drink up and enjoy though! You all work hard.” Leah wondered how much scotch Tony needed to throw a nice word at them .

When Tony walked away, she leaned in close. “So I just met Brittany!”

“Who’s that?” Alex asked, drinking his scotch.

“She is who I’m supposed to be!”

“I don’t get it,” Mark laughed.

“She’s the researcher at Teen Club! I can’t believe they just replaced me!”

“They didn’t replace you, you work at Club Business.”

“But I was supposed to work there! They were supposed to move me after a little while. Ugh! It’s so unfair!”

“Sucks.” Mark commiserated.

“So should we meet Brittany?” Alex questioned as he finished his scotch.

Leah rolled her eyes. “You probably would like to meet her! She seems like just your type!” Leah chugged the rest of her cocktail and grabbed another champagne flute from a waiter making rounds.

“Introduce us?” Alex asked, swirling his drink as though he thought he was James Bond.

“Introduce yourself!” Leah rolled her eyes and drank the rest of her champagne. “Are these parties always so lame?” She commented as she looked around the glittering bar, buffet, and the skyline lit up by all the people still sitting at their cubicles working while Christmas approached. There was even a harpist playing near one of the floor-to-ceiling windows. Leah knew this party was anything but lame. It was probably the fanciest place she’d ever been to since moving to Manhattan. Probably the fanciest place she’d been to ever. Except maybe Tory Goldenberg’s Bat Mitzvah

which was at the Plaza Hotel. Leah had begged her mom to bring her to the city for the event, all the girls in their eighth grade were going! “The Plaza is a little over the top for a bat mitzvah!” Leah’s mom had whispered, as though she weren’t sure if it were true and she didn’t want to be caught saying something so absurd. But in the end, she drove Leah and three friends to the event. Most likely, she had been just as curious to attend the event herself.

“Drinking with management is always lame,” Mark responded. “You have to be careful. You never met Clark from Celeb Club. He kissed Helen from HR at this thing a few years ago and no one saw him since.”

“Not even his roommate,” Alex chimed in. “Rumor has it that Helen’s lipstick is poisonous and he went down somewhere near the dumpsters and got taken out with the trash.”

“Celeb Club is trash,” Mark responded. Leah rolled her eyes again just as Malcolm came over with a tray of small cups.

“Please don’t tell me that’s some fancy liqueur that only people who have been to some remote Mediterranean island can identify.” Leah mocked sarcastically .

“Just tequila,” Malcolm smiled. “But if you want a Mediterranean liqueur—”

“Cheers!” Leah grabbed a shot and threw it back. Everybody followed and Malcolm whispered that he would go ask the bartenders if they had some liqueur that Leah couldn’t understand because Malcolm said it so quietly.

Leah looked around the room, wondering where that Brittany girl was and hoping Malcolm wouldn’t invite her for their shot of the fancy Mediterranean liqueur. If Brittany had stolen Teen Club from her, well, Leah couldn’t let her also steal her friends, or her sort of manager, or whatever Malcolm was to her.

Alex and Mark were suddenly both on their phones, typing away as though it was something seriously urgent, like a hilarious Facebook meme they couldn't miss out on. Phones are contagious and Leah felt the urge to pull hers out of her bag. She actually did have important messages to respond to. One from Gabe, which she opened immediately, feeling guilty that she hadn't thought about him all evening. He'd be excited to hear about the holiday party, although on second thought, he probably went to parties like this all the time, seeing as he worked for people who spent money the way others unwrap a candy bar.

Peppermint cocktails are half off at Hamlin's. Want to imbibe?

Imbibe. Leah chuckled. She loved that Gabe used smart words like that. He was smart. Smart, smart, smart and that was sexy. Just as she was about to respond, her phone buzzed, sending an electric shock through her arms. It was from Asher.

Have you seen the Christmas tree in Rockafeller?

He didn't even spell Rockefeller right! Leah rolled her eyes and texted that she had seen it. And it was pretty impressive. She was only slightly disappointed in herself that she couldn't think of some complex vocab word like imbibe to include in her text. She went back to Gabe's message and responded that she'd love to once her work party was over. She looked up to see Alex smiling at her.

"What?"

"You make funny faces when you're texting. You're like, acting out whatever you're typing." He responded with a giggle and started to imitate her.

"You're so immature." Like Asher, she thought in her head.

"You say it like it's a bad thing. Let's go to the buffet." Alex motioned and she

followed, feeling her stomach grumble. They loaded up plates and found a tableclothed table to sit at while they gobbled their food and made fun of each appetizer before popping it in their mouths.

Leah's phone rang just as she was chewing on a deviled egg.

"Why aren't there angel eggs?" Alex questioned .

Mark had the answer: "Because no angel would eat an egg, a.k.a. a baby chicken."

Leah's text was from Gabe. He was downstairs waiting for her. She quickly swallowed and stood up. "I'll see you guys later."

"I'll walk out with you. I have to go to the water closet after eating all these baby chickens." Alex smiled and they left Mark sitting alone.

"You're gross," Leah commented as they exited the event hall toward the elevator bay. Alex smiled and winked as though accepting a compliment. She felt herself swaying as she pressed the elevator call button. Alex stood next to her instead of heading to the bathroom. "You don't need to, like, be a gentleman and wait with me. I know you're not a gentleman."

"I can be a gentleman."

"Sure." When the elevator doors opened, Leah stepped inside. She was about to say goodbye to Alex when he swooped in after her. He pressed his lips to hers so hard she almost fell backward as the elevator doors closed. There was shock. Fear. And then thrill. Alex was sexy. Gross, but sexy. And not just the kind of sexy after at least four drinks. She kissed him back and he pushed her harder and harder toward the back of the elevator as they rode down the many, many floors of Diamond Media .

The elevator stopped. It pinged. And Alex pulled away as the doors opened. “See you Monday.” He said as Leah wiped her mouth and stepped into the lobby. Alex stayed in the elevator and the doors closed again.

She wasn’t sure what had happened. Had she imagined it? She probably should have skipped the tequila shot. She turned around and there was Gabe waiting for her outside the building. He smiled and waved.

She must have imagined it. What a ridiculous girl she had become.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm*

There was no work on Monday. In fact, Diamond Media was closed for the entire week around Christmas and New Year's. It was one of the small things that called into question the authenticity of such a giant news media company, that they could close for a whole week as though there would be no news, or no news so important that it couldn't wait until the executives finished their holidays in various locations in the southern hemisphere.

As just a lowly researcher at Club Business, Leah didn't have any qualms about ignoring the news for a week. Companies that went bankrupt would still be bankrupt in the new year. She did, however, have one qualm about no work for a week: Alex. Actually, maybe it wasn't a qualm. In young adult time, a week was plenty to get over any awkward feelings or misunderstandings or whatever else was possibly waiting for her when she'd see him again.

Over peppermint cocktails at Hamlin's after Diamond Media's holiday party, Leah had successfully convinced herself that the kiss hadn't happened. There was just no way. She and Alex were friends. Good friends who talked about dating and shared details of each other's lives that would never be shared with someone they had a romantic interest in. It must have been a figment of her imagination. A result of middle-grade champagne and the inferiority she felt after meeting the new researcher at Teen Club.

She had told Gabe about Brittany and by her third peppermint cocktail, she had decided that the day she went back to work, she'd march into the head of HR's office and demand her position back. Only, of course, if she still had the confidence and the will that were so potent in the cocktails.

But before then, she'd be celebrating her first real Christmas. She'd never decorated a tree, never stuffed a stocking, never opened presents on Christmas morning. For her family, Christmas had always been anti-climactic. Sure, Jews still love enjoying the Christmas lights and attending holiday parties, but for Christmas-celebrators, these things are all just a build-up for the main event. For non-celebrators, as Leah's family starkly were, these all led up to an uneventful day where everything was closed and there was nothing to do. Except order Chinese food.

This year, though, Leah would get to attend the main event. She'd sing carols, hide presents under the tree, and maybe even taste the Christmas ham. She'd prepared for meeting Gabe's family by buying as many presents as her researcher salary could afford. For Gabe's dad, she'd bought a bottle of scotch that Malcolm had recommended to her while scrunching his nose after she told him her budget. For Gabe's mom, she'd bought a silk scarf that she hoped didn't look like it came from a New York street vendor. She'd also bought a box of chocolates, each chocolate shaped like one of New York's monuments, and magnets that she bought specially because they were advertised as "perfect stocking stuffers" and she was desperately excited to stuff a stocking. For Gabe, she'd bought something special: a cocktail shaker set so he could make all the fancy cocktails he enjoyed right at home. His stocking she would stuff with running socks with Santa on them.

She slept at Gabe's apartment after peppermint cocktails and in the morning hurried home to pack her bag for the trip to meet Gabe's family. They'd be staying in his parent's home for a few nights and then come back to New York.

She packed quickly, almost forgetting the magnets, but grabbed them last minute before opening the front door of her apartment. She wondered if there was some roommate protocol about leaving for a few days. Was she supposed to tell Marissa? Would Marissa be worried if she didn't sleep at home for a few nights? Would Marissa notice? She hesitated in her open doorway, staring at Marissa's closed door .

Maybe she should leave a note. Did they have a notepad somewhere? Leah picked up her purse to rummage through. She always had papers and pens floating around in there. She dug deep and pulled out a torn shred of paper that had probably been in there for months. Perfect, she thought, as she fished out a pen. She uncrumpled the paper and was about to start writing when she read the note that was already written. I'd be careful if I were you.

Leah remembered finding the note balanced on the door handle. She remembered not knowing what it meant or who it was from and deciding to ignore it. Now, a couple months later, she knew it wasn't Gabe's handwriting. Which meant it could only be Marissa's.

She looked at Marissa's closed door and took a deep breath. She had to know. She dropped her bag and closed the front door before marching to Marissa's bedroom and knocking with the type of confidence she didn't know she had.

"What!?" Marissa mumbled in a tone reserved for too-early wake-ups.

"Marissa? We have to talk. I'm going to Gabe's for Christmas."

"Have fun." Marissa's tone still had the same indignation.

"Is that all you want to tell me?"

Silence. Then a noise like an anvil falling on the floor. Then the stomp stomp stomp. And the door opened. Marissa stood in front of her as though she had been waiting for this all along. But she didn't speak.

"Well? You wrote me this note, right? Explain." She held up the note in front of Marissa's face. Marissa scrunched her eyes to read it as though she didn't remember what it was. As if that crumpled, ripped piece of paper didn't hold the same

significance to her as it did to Leah. “What did Gabe ever do to you?”

“To me? Nothing.” Marissa looked angry and annoyed, like she pitied Leah at the same time. “But you should know, Emily is still not over him. They’re going to get back together one way or another and you’re just going to make it awkward.”

Leah scoffed. She had been afraid that Marissa would say he was a cheater, or used to be fat, or maybe was even a werewolf, but a warning that her friend still liked him? As if that was her problem! “They aren’t dating anymore,” Leah reminded Marissa. “He is dating me now.”

“You’re just a rebound,” Marissa responded. “He and Emily have been on and off for ages. You’ll see and then you’ll be the one making everyone uncomfortable.” The condescension in her voice made Leah want to scream.

But instead, she just rolled her eyes. She’d had enough of this conversation. She was now more sure than ever that Marissa was dramatic and simply trying to sabotage her relationship.

“All right. Have a merry Christmas.” Leah said and turned to grab her bags. She might need to find herself a new apartment, she thought as she walked back to Gabe’s place. She couldn’t keep living there, especially when Marissa said such ridiculous things about her boyfriend.

Gabe was waiting outside when she arrived. He kissed her frozen lips in the nicest way possible and together they walked to the Subway.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm*

It's a short train ride from Manhattan to Long Island. So short, that Leah hadn't thought about bringing entertainment along for the trip. But Gabe had. As soon as they sat down on the Long Island Rail Road, he pulled out his book and started reading. Leah would be lying if she said she wasn't disappointed. She'd be lying if Gabe had asked her if she minded if he read and she said she didn't. She wasn't sure what she'd expected, but it had been some sort of interaction during the trip. Talking, playing a game, maybe even resting their heads together.

But reading was fine. It wasn't a "not nice" thing to do when sitting next to your girlfriend for an hour on the train while she bore herself by looking out the window and scrolling through her phone. She texted Maya: On the way to LI for Christmas with Gabe! Wanting to feel the same excitement that her text conveyed. But something felt off. Maybe it was because of Marissa's "not nice" comment. Maybe it was the ordinary feeling of being out of place, a Jew on Christmas, doing something she shouldn't like eating a cheeseburger or touching the Torah with her finger instead of the designated yad.

She had waited until the last minute to tell her parents about her Christmas trip. Her mom had asked if she'd be coming home for winter break.

"Mom, there's no winter break in the real world," she'd explained, even though Diamond Media's week off between Christmas and New Year's was precisely that. "Winter break is only for people in college, and I graduated." Leah felt the need to drive the point home even further since she, somehow, still did have a winter break in the real world.

"Well, I'm sure you get a few days off for the holiday." Leah noted that her mom

used the word holiday instead of being more specific. Leah took a deep breath and knew she had to tell her mom. The same way she had to tell her when she had once snuck out of the house and broke the handle on the back door. Sure, she could have stayed silent, but eventually her mom would have noticed the broken handle, which had made it impossible to lock the back door and therefore endangered their whole family. You sure make it easy for someone to break in and steal all our stuff! Her mom had yelled. And also: Why didn't you just tell us you were going out instead of sneaking around? Leah had shrugged at both comments. Her mom had called a handyman to fix the door handle, just like she had always taken care of everything that needed care. And from then on, Leah simply used the front door and lied if she didn't want her parents to know where she was going like every other teenager.

But this was something that didn't need fixing, despite Leah's positivity that her mom would disagree and think her trip to Long Island to celebrate Christmas with her boyfriend (yes the nickname had caught on) was also something in need of care and fixing.

"I'm celebrating Christmas with Gabe," she confessed to her mom. Silence on the other end. Gabe had been a sore point since the Thanksgiving fiasco. Her mom pretended he didn't exist, while consciously avoiding setting her up with all of the potential husbands in her circles. Leah also consciously left him out when telling her mom about her adventures in New York, like salsa dancing with Maya (who her mom loved and desperately wanted to meet!) and lunch with her work friends (who were good people to network with!)

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Her mom asked. "Christmas is a very traditional holiday. His family probably has their own customs and I'm not sure you will feel comfortable there." Sure, Savannah was only thinking about Leah's comfort when advising her against the visit.

"I'm going." That was the end of that. The conversation then pivoted to the

Hanukkah cookie baking competition at Savannah's synagogue and how Debbie cheated by using duck fat. (Everyone else used butter so that the cookies could safely be eaten after latkes smeared with sour cream. Duck fat, while kosher if not eaten after milk, was delicious and catapulted the cookies to another level, but seriously unfair in a Jewish baking competition!)

Now, on the train, Leah was starting to wonder if her mom was right. Her mom was often right, even though she would swear under oath to the opposite, and there was a small possibility that Leah might feel uncomfortable celebrating Christmas with Gabe's family, whom she had never met. Would she look silly, not knowing the traditions? Would she offend them if she hesitated with any unkosher foods? Did they know she was Jewish? Would they care?

Leah looked over at Gabe, who was hunched over, his eyes darting back and forth across the pages in his book. He was so focused, she felt guilty for watching him, as though that type of focus warranted solitude to ensure no interruptions were possible. But, solitude and girlfriends don't go together, especially not on long, boring train rides to anxiety-causing holidays.

"How's the book?" Leah asked, hoping to start a conversation as interesting as the words he was reading. Gabe didn't respond, didn't act like he heard her so she cleared her throat and asked again. He raised a finger and then silently flipped the page, which Leah saw was the end of a chapter. She waited a few moments, and then Gabe gently closed the book.

"It's exquisite. Really," he marveled. "The author is so clever and actually thought of everything. It's genius." She asked him about the story and tried to listen as he animatedly told her about kingdoms and species and warfare. She smiled and nodded and wondered if she would have been better off staring out the window rather than trying to feign interest in the fantastical story he held in his hands. When he noticed her eyes glazing over, he smiled and opened the book to the next chapter.

By the time the train pulled into the station on Long Island, Leah was sure they had been traveling long enough to reach Europe, but Gabe looked disappointed to have to—again—close his book. They took a cab from the station to the address of Gabe’s parents’ home, which apparently was a giant apartment complex.

“What about the house you grew up in?” Leah asked, wondering about the memories Gabe had relayed to her about decorating a fireplace and sledding in the backyard.

“They downsized after I moved out.” He led her to a shiny elevator which shot them up to a dark hallway lined by vanilla-colored doors. Gabe motioned Leah to follow and knocked on a door that had nothing on it but the number.

The door swung open and a stout old woman appeared. She had red splotches on her face and white hair frazzled around her face. “Gabe!” she yelped, hugged Gabe, and then turned her head back. “Sam, Gabe is home!” The house croaked several times before an elderly bald man with posture like a candy cane appeared and joined in the hug. Grandparents? Leah wondered as she stood behind them wondering if their eyesight was good enough to see her there. When the hug ended, Gabe grabbed her hand.

“Mom, Dad, this is my girlfriend Leah,” he introduced her. Leah stepped forward and further examined the red splotches on his mother’s face. She tried not to stare at their cakey texture and wondered why Gabe didn’t warn her about his mother’s prominent skin disease. “Leah, meet Nancy and Sam.” He paused. “Mom, were you just in the studio?”

Nancy threw her hands to her cheeks. “I’m a mess! I’m so sorry, dear, I usually give a better first impression, but I was just in the middle of something and lost track of time!” Nancy turned around and trotted down the hall through a doorway. Sam stood, his smile almost hidden behind a mustache.

“Come in,” he offered, as though inviting in strangers. “Coffee? How was your trip? I’ll get Nancy to put her things away so we can get you settled.” Without waiting for a response to either of his questions, Sam followed Nancy down the hall, leaving Leah and Gabe in the doorway.

Leah looked around. The walls were covered in paintings, but not like the Chagall prints her mother liked to collect. It took Leah quite a few long stares to realize most of the paintings were nudes. Women in impossible poses and men standing just so.

“My mom took up painting in retirement,” Gabe said as he noticed her stares. “They don’t have space to store her work so they are all over. You get used to it.” Leah chuckled and wondered if you could ever get used to combining your parents and nude bodies into the same thought. Leah could hear muffled voices as though Gabe’s parents were arguing quietly in the room that must be the studio.

From Leah’s count, there were only three doors in the apartment. One could assume that one was a bathroom, another a master bedroom, and the third the studio, which—Sam soon confirmed—was also the guest room, a storage room, and sometimes an office if Sam had any work to do, which he did not since he also retired several years before. “Nancy is going to air it out,” he promised after emerging from the room. “How about that coffee?” He walked to the kitchen and started a pot.

Gabe had already dumped his bag in the hallway, the way you can only do at your parent’s house. Leah could not dump her bag the same way, despite not having been given much of another option other than to hold it, which was less than ideal since aside from the nude paintings on the wall, there were also many clay statues and cases callously positioned around the apartment, waiting to be bumped into by something with an awkward-sized duffel packed with holiday outfits.

Leah didn’t look close enough to examine the clothing status of the statues, she just held her bag close and waited for better direction of where she could store it as she

followed Gabe and his dad to the kitchen. “Should we go buy a tree?” Sam asked. “Nancy and I weren’t sure. We were going to, but then things got busy and we never made it out. We can easily go get—”

“It’s fine, Dad,” Gabe jumped in, making Leah feel much more disappointed than she ever had leading up to Christmas. “How about Leah and I go pick one out?” And then she felt like a child on Christmas morning and wondered if her heart could take such an emotional rollercoaster.

They drank coffee, while Sam asked Leah what seemed like an infinite number of questions about her work and for the first time, Leah was happy she worked at Club Business rather than Teen Club. She imagined Sam would have been less impressed (but also probably have had fewer questions) if she had said she researched fashion trends and tips to avoid common high school calamities. Sam mentioned he worked in “investments.” Leah didn’t know what that meant, other than that he was very interested in hearing about her job at Club Business. Leah suddenly felt very grown up discussing the TCR and her data entry and was more than flattered when Sam asked, “Are you sure you don’t have an MBA?”

She was quite sure she didn’t have an MBA, and also quite sure she had passed the test of being a serious person with Gabe’s dad. The serious person test with his mom would come later, after Christmas tree shopping, by which time Nancy promised to be done airing out the studio.

Leah finally put down her bag next to Gabe’s and they stepped out to buy the tree.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm*

By the time Gabe had dragged the tree up to his parents' apartment, it was starting to feel a little more like Christmas. They borrowed his father's car and drove to a small lot selling off the last few Christmas trees before closing up. The trees still at the lot were drying out after sitting out for so long waiting to be chosen. Some were missing branches in a few places, a few were crooked, but all smelled of winter spice. Leah and Gabe zigzagged through the lot until they found the straightest, fullest tree left that would fit in the apartment. Gabe tied it to the car roof expertly and they drove back while Leah asked about Gabe's Christmas traditions.

Sure, they used to have a big tree in their old house; they hung stockings; but once Gabe left for college it seemed that traditions disappeared year by year. One year they stopped leaving out cookies for Santa, the next, no more opening presents in pajamas. The previous year they'd only had a small electric tree, and Gabe didn't even know if his parents had kept it. "But don't worry," he explained. Christmas dinner would be at his older brother's home and they had the Christmas spirit. They had no choice since they had three children who still believed in its magic.

Sam had managed to find an old box with decorations while Nancy finished airing out the studio, giving the four of them an activity to keep them all busy when they got to know each other. Leah hung ornaments as she answered an unending number of questions about her job (Was she still sure she didn't have an MBA?) and even a few about her personal life, which was apparently much less interesting.

When the tree and the questioning were finished, Gabe showed her the bathroom to shower before they'd go to his brother's home for Christmas dinner. Leah put on her new Christmas dress (the same one she wore to Diamond Media's holiday party. How many new Christmas dresses did a nice Jewish girl with an entry-level salary need?)

and unpacked the gifts she had purchased. She quietly placed them under the tree and waited while everyone else got ready to go. Her eyes were drawn to the artwork around the house. It was all naked people. Fat naked people. Skinny ones. Hairy ones, muscular ones. Leah wondered how long Nancy had been painting, but she knew she would never have the courage to ask Nancy about her outlandish hobby.

Gabe's brother's house looked like Christmas. Lights lined the storm drains and snowmen smiled from the driveway and Leah felt her excitement rise as the real holiday was about to begin. They were invited inside with offers of brandy or eggnog, or brandy with eggnog, and Gabe accepted the latter for both of them. Leah introduced herself and tried to get the names of Gabe's brother and his wife, but it was impossible to hear over the screams of their three children who had had too many chocolate Santas and were excited to see their uncle Gabe and grandparents.

Leah drank her eggnog and brandy, which was starting to grow on her, and was offered another while the dinner table was set and a turkey was carved. She drank quietly, smiled, and listened, while feeling slightly terrified of the wild children who apparently thought Gabe was a jungle gym to be climbed. When ushered to the table, she followed and watched Gabe's brother carve a turkey and serve what Leah believed to be seven different types of fish. There were several types of pasta (no Italian meal was complete without it), and plates of cured meats and crostinis and bread scattered around the table. The volume rose as everyone ate and Gabe politely served Leah a little of everything, including each of the seven fishes, including one shellfish. Leah pushed it around her plate a few times, but in the end decided this shellfish would stay on her plate, rather than enter her mouth.

After dinner, plates were cleared—the clanking only added another level to the noise—and dessert was served. Cheesecakes, fruitcakes, and other colorful cakes that looked a little less inviting. By this time, the roaring noise had calmed down. The children had snuggled on the couch, insisting they weren't tired, yet their eyes were closing in front of the television. Gabe's brother made coffee and the adults savored

the silence.

“Is this anything like Christmas at your home?” Gabe’s sister-in-law (Leah thought her name was Sally or Cindy or something like that) asked. “It’s so loud with the kids.”

It was the first time that evening someone had addressed Leah (other than Gabe who had asked her several times if she had wanted more of the lobster pasta, despite the fact that she hadn’t wanted any of it in the first place. Leah felt herself heating up like the coffee passing through the filter in the next room. She was in the spotlight, how could she answer without making a big deal about not growing up celebrating Christmas?

“We didn’t celebrate Christmas,” she replied meekly, waiting for the onslaught of questions like the one she survived earlier about work. “I’m Jewish.”

Sally or Cindy nodded and then offered everyone another slice of cake to go with their upcoming coffee. Her being Jewish was apparently as uninteresting or unimportant as if she had mentioned she had owned a pair of black shoes .

When everyone had eaten too much cake and drank just enough coffee to overtake the earlier served brandy, Gabe’s parents motioned it was time to go and they piled back in the car back to the apartment. Gabe and Leah brushed their teeth and snuggled into the foldaway bed in the studio/guestroom/storage room/office, which still slightly smelled of aerosol even though the windows had been open, freezing the air so that it was almost as solid as snow.

“Did you enjoy your first Christmas?” Gabe asked as she tucked herself under his arm.

“It was nice. The kids are cute.”

“The kids are loud.” The tone conveyed that Gabe wasn’t their biggest fan. “Four hours is way too long to be around them.”

“You don’t like kids?” Leah asked. She loved kids. She’d been babysitting since 14 and had she hadn’t been afraid of being trampled, she would have tried to play with Gabe’s nieces and nephews.

“No.”

“But you played with them so nice.”

“Did I have a choice? They would have stampeded me otherwise.” There was no trace of affection in Gabe’s voice.

“But don’t you want kids of your own?” Despite having dated for several months now, they had never had any serious discussions about the future. Marriage, kids, all the things that Leah fantasized about and assumed that everyone wanted as much as she did.

“No way,” he smirked. “Kids ruin people’s lives. Look at my brother. You wouldn’t believe it, but he was a competitive cyclist. He also had his own software company. But once kids came, the bike went away and he had to sell his company. Sally said he needed a stable income once they had children. Now, all he talks about is junior swim meets and PTA meetings. He used to be interesting. He used to be fun to talk to. Now he’s just...he’s a dad. And look at my parents; trying to find hobbies to fill their time because they wasted their best years caring for kids who don’t even appreciate it.”

“You appreciate it, don’t you?”

Gabe shrugged. “I want to live for me. I want to pursue my dreams. Not be disappointed in my kids.”

“You think your parents are disappointed in you?”

Gabe sighed or snored. Leah wasn't sure, but she knew the conversation was over. She lay in the creaking bed, afraid to move and make a noise, but also afraid to stay still after learning that Gabe didn't want the same thing she did. A family. Kids who grew up and had bar and bat mitzvahs. But who was she kidding? Even if Gabe did want kids, how would they raise them? With Christmas trees decorated with blue and white lights? Bar mitzvahs and baptisms? These thoughts were too heavy after Christmas, and she hoped that by morning, she'd somehow settle them within herself.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm*

“They didn’t even care!” Leah exclaimed with both joy and bewilderment, almost spilling her bloody mary as she gesticulated her point. She brought the cocktail to her mouth to cover her excitement.

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Maya asked, mirroring Leah’s sipping of her cocktail. The girls had met for brunch the day Leah got back to Manhattan after her Christmas with Gabe, when no one seemed to give two cents about her being Jewish. When no one commented or questioned her about her religious proclamation at dinner, she had expected that someone would mention it the next morning. She had woken up from her fitful sleep in the aerosol-smelling studio/storage room/office/guestroom ready to answer questions about Judaism, the way she generally did with non-Jews who always seemed intrigued by her religion—No, she wasn’t religious, but yes, she followed many traditions, no, she didn’t eat pork or shellfish, and yes, she had been bat mitzvahed—but no one mentioned it again. Not when they opened presents next to the tree which blocked a painting of a severely obese naked woman; nor when they ate French toast and bacon (except for Leah) for breakfast.

“It was just shocking,” Leah responded to Maya as the waiter brought their brunch orders—eggs benedict for Leah and pancakes for Maya. “Like, it was such a big deal for my family.”

“Of course it was.” Maya then went on to explain to Leah the Jewish fear of fading away. Every time a Jew marries a non-Jew, their children become less Jewish. Sure they are half-Jewish, and maybe the next generation, a quarter, but unlike in mathematics, fractions in Judaism didn’t really count. Half-Jews were less likely to uphold traditions and marry other Jews, and their offspring, quarter Jews, even less. “Christians don’t have to worry about this,” Maya continued. By default, everyone in

the US is Christian, unless they make significant efforts otherwise (like Jews do). By default, Americans celebrate Christmas, swear on the bible, and follow Christian ideals. No amount of intermarriage will change this. “There will always be Christians. Even if they marry Jews, by default, they will still be Christians. And their children will be Christians.”

True, thought Leah. Being Jewish took effort. It was not a default option. Like asking for ranch dressing instead of ketchup for a burger or switching off cookies that tracked your activity online. “Well, I guess Gabe doesn’t even have to worry about that.” Leah segued to the even more major thing she discovered during her trip. “He said he doesn’t want children.”

Maya clicked her tongue. “Most guys say they don’t want children. They don’t until they do, until their wives tell them they do.”

“No, Gabe was really serious about it. He doesn’t want kids at all.” Leah hoped Maya had some more enlightening insights about this fact, something that could help Leah understand and accept and maybe even change this pivotal flaw in Gabe. But Maya only shrugged and stuffed pancakes into her mouth.

With their plates and glasses almost empty, Maya turned the conversation to the real important thing that two young single girls in New York needed to discuss after Christmas: “What are we doing for New Year’s?”

Ugh. Leah sighed. She had heard so much about the magic of New Year’s in New York. She’d heard about the parties and the glitter and the celebrations on every street. She’d wanted to be a part of it so badly. But her cousin Rebecca had to go and ruin it for her. Had to go and ruin it for everyone. Who gets married on New Year’s Eve anyway? Only the most selfish person in the world, also known as Leah’s first cousin Rebecca.

“Do I have to go?” Leah asked her mom on the phone sometime after Thanksgiving when invitations were officially sent out. Leah vaguely remembered hearing about a Save the Date sent over the summer and Leah had agreed she would go—that was before she had moved to New York and before she had learned about the epic adventure that only happened at the start of the year.

“Of course you have to go!” her mom insisted. “She’s your cousin and you’ve always been so close!” So close to killing her, Leah wanted to say. There were a few ways to describe their closeness: for one, their age. They were just a few months apart. They had also gone to the same summer camp and slept in beds next to each other until high school when Rebecca joined USY instead of BBYO. “BBYO girls are just a little too promiscuous for me,” Rebecca had said without ever even attending an event. Leah had taken it as a personal attack on herself—she was not promiscuous at all! She had one crush! One boyfriend her entire BBYO experience! Her friends may have kissed a few guys, but they weren’t promiscuous! Especially when all the guys were Jewish!

Their closeness could then only be described as living parallel lives in different universes. Leah went to college where she joined Hillel and Rebecca became active in Chabad. So active, that she started dressing differently and then suddenly became engaged the minute she graduated college .

“She’s a little young to get married,” Leah’s mom commented when the Save the Date arrived, but Leah could read her mom’s real feeling all over her face: disappointment that Rebecca had beat Leah in finding a nice Jewish husband.

“Can I at least bring a date?” Leah asked when her mother insisted she attend the wedding. If she had to miss New Year’s in New York, maybe she could at least still get her midnight kiss from her boyfriend. It was a big maybe though if he would agree to miss New Year’s for a boring Jewish wedding upstate.

But much to Leah's surprise, her mom agreed to her bringing a plus one and Gabe agreed to be that plus one. So for better or for worse, they'd be taking the train upstate while the rest of the world seemed to pile into New York for the celebrations.

Leah told Maya about her plans, trying to make them sound less terrible than they actually were. Weddings could be fun! Surely there would be an open bar! She suggested to Maya they do a fancy dinner when she got back from the wedding and they could gush together over their New Year's adventures. Maya nodded, taking the last bite of her pancakes.

After brunch, Leah zigzagged back to her apartment. She hadn't yet seen Marissa since she got back and she had resolved to avoid her until she could figure out a new living situation. The easy way of avoidance was just to not be home unless she had to be. She could easily sleep and shower at Gabe's, eat at restaurants, and spend her free time walking the endless avenues and streets in Manhattan. Sure it was cold, and her apartment did have heat, but what was a little cold in exchange for avoiding the place she spent half her salary on?

All the walking gave her time to think about what she should do about her apartment. She wasn't ready to gamble with a new roommate and living alone was not in her budget. It may have been the cold freezing the logical parts of her brain, but she was starting to wonder if she could simply move in with Gabe. She already spent so much time there. They could both save money if they split the rent! Better yet, they could find a nicer apartment and move together!

The idea came to her when her nose was burning cold and her toes felt like stones connected to her feet. She found herself just steps away from her apartment and succumbed to the thought of putting her feet on the heater inside, despite the fact that it meant she might be in the same place as Marissa. Should she walk over the few blocks to Gabe's place? Tempting, but she knew he wanted some alone time to finish his book and she didn't want to seem needy or desperate (even if she was).

She quietly snuck into her apartment, took off her boots, and tiptoed into her room to put her feet up on the heater. Her phone buzzed and she was ready to put her boots back on, hoping it was Gabe saying he finished his book and couldn't wait to see her again even though they had been together nonstop for several days already. She grabbed her phone. It wasn't Gabe, it was disappointment.

Hope you had a good Christmas, friend! Chinese food as usual?

Asher. Out of boredom, Leah responded right away. The response would have been too fast if it were to someone she was actually interested in.

Had a real Christmas this year! Was awesome!

Sweet! A partridge in a pear tree and everything? I want to hear about it. BTW do you have New Year's plans? The speediness of his response showed he too held Leah in the same regard she held him. Friend.

Ugh my cousin is getting married! Who gets married on NYE? She tried to sound friendly.

Rebecca? That girl always has to be the center of attention , he responded right away. He knew all about Rebecca from their high school years. Another text came in.

A few people from BBYO are coming to the city to celebrate together. It wouldn't be the same without you! Can you back out?

Who's coming?

Jake, Ryan, Ari, and a bunch of Echad girls, like Jen, Mal, Alli. And you ; )

Echad girls. Her BBYO chapter. Her family. She felt a desire to go. To ring in the

New Year with the people who were her everything before she packed up and went to college. The girls she promised would be her best friends forever, even after college and kids. They were all supposed to move to the same old folks home together. But everyone had gotten busy. Some pledged sororities, others became passionate about their studies. None carried the same flame for BBYO once they were out of the thick of it. But there were fond memories. So many memories. And Leah would have loved to see her old friends.

But she couldn't back out, especially with Gabe already agreeing to be her plus one.

Sounds cool. I'm not sure if I can go ? I'll let you know though.

She got a thumbs up back and that was the end of the quickfire conversation. Leah immediately felt the fear of missing out boil through her.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm*

New Year's is the time to titivate like you've never titivated before. Time for dark lipstick, gold sequins, and glitter. Lots of glitter. Leah took this opportunity very seriously, stepping into a shiny dress that she would never wear on any other night of the year. She didn't care that she'd be wasting this fabulous New Year's dress at a wedding where most of the guests would be related to her or at least one or two generations older. She'd make the most of her New Year's no matter where she was.

She and Gabe arrived at the hotel the morning after the rehearsal dinner, which, according to Leah's mom, was so classy and so beautiful, and such a shame that Leah chose not to attend. But while Leah wanted (sort of) to celebrate her cousin's nuptials, she also wanted to limit Gabe-exposure to her family.

"Well, you need to sow your wild oats sometime," Leah's mom had said when Leah told her who would be her plus one. "This will be a good opportunity for you to realize that he isn't exactly a fit for you."

Leah rolled her eyes but reveled in the victory that her mother agreed to add Gabe to their RSVP, even if her mother thought it just might end their relationship.

She and Gabe were not getting ready in their hotel room where she added dark shades of makeup and glitter to her face. Any more shine and she would have been mistaken for a showgirl or perhaps a disco ball.

"Wow." Gabe stepped back when she walked out of the bathroom. "What did you do with my girlfriend?" Flattered, Leah twirled around, her shiny dress dazzling in the dim hotel room lights. "You look incredible." Gabe, too, looked pretty incredible. He surely didn't titivate like Leah did, but he was wearing a dress shirt so black that it

surely had never been washed and black slacks creased like he knew what he was doing. He put his arms around Leah's waist, stopping her twirl, and pulled her in. "I wish I could show you off to all my friends," he said as he kissed her. Leah too wished she could be shown off, but instead, she'd be showing him off, in a way.

As they were about to leave the room, Leah's phone buzzed. She grabbed it from the counter.

Sure you're not coming? Asher's message included a picture of her friends all scrunched together smiling with red cups framing their faces.

Next time! Tell everyone I miss them! She quickly typed back and shoved the phone into her tiny purse. They held hands as they left their room and walked down the carpeted hall to the elevators where Leah couldn't help but stare at their reflection in the mirror. They were a good-looking couple, she thought.

The elevator came and they sped down to a reception hall where people were already standing around eating passed hors d'oeuvres and ogling the room's décor. A waitress came by with sliders and Leah and Gabe each grabbed one.

"Yum," Gabe said after devouring the tiny burger in two bites. Leah agreed while still chewing her first mouthful. "But it's missing something."

"What?" She tried to say through chews.

"Cheese!" He said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Leah tried to finish her bite so she could explain to him the reason there was no cheese and why there would be absolutely nothing featuring cheese or any other milk product during the entire wedding. Even desserts and coffee would be served with fake milk substitutes and everyone would comment that the wedding cake was "pretty

good considering,” but in truth it would be just a bland dry cake with fake buttercream, ensuring that the entire event was kosher.

In truth, Leah had never even had a slider with cheese on it, and not because she really cared about kosher. Only because she had grown up knowing that cheese on meat was bad and she really didn’t think she was missing anything by eating cheeseless burgers. But maybe she was?

Leah didn’t have time to tell Gabe all these things because by the time she finished her bite, her mom had reached them and wrapped Leah in a big hug before giving Gabe an awkward embrace.

“You let us know if you have any questions about the ceremony,” Savannah said to Gabe. “It might be different than what you’re used to.”

Gabe nodded politely while Savannah continued talking. “Did you see your table assignment? Where are you sitting?”

Leah hadn’t yet looked for their little placard and she shook her head.

“Just pray you aren’t sitting with Bubbe,” she responded. “Have you said hi to your Bubbe yet?”

Again Leah shook her head. She hadn’t seen her grandma yet and in truth, she was a little wary about introducing Gabe to her.

“Just don’t tell her about Gabe,” Savannah said. “Or tell her that Gabe grew up reform. Or maybe that his synagogue was a little progressive or something.”

Leah nodded and tried to shake a conspiring smile with Gabe, who curled half his lips and looked around.

“All right, well have fun!” Savannah suggested. “Go find some of your other cousins! You guys always used to have fun together! By the way, where is Shira?”

Leah shrugged. She knew her sister had arrived the night before and had attended the rehearsal dinner but she hadn’t yet arrived at the wedding. Savannah clicked her tongue and then waved off to some other relative who she was extra excited to see, leaving Leah and Gabe alone again.

“Should we go see what table we’re at?” Leah asked and flicked her head toward the table where the placards were set.

“Is it a problem that I’m not Jewish?” Gabe asked. He was looking around the room, but then his eyes stopped on Leah. She could see what he saw. Most of the men were wearing kippahs. Some were dressed in dark suits and had long beards. A few of the women in the reception had their heads covered.

“It’s just not something my family is used to,” Leah responded while she scanned the placards. “Here we are! Table nine!”

“It seems like it’s a bigger issue than that if you have to lie to your grandma,” he said.

“That’s just her generation!” Leah defended. “It’s OK, don’t worry about it. When they get to know you, they will like you for who you are.” Leah hoped what she said was true, but she didn’t actually believe it herself.

When the reception flowed to the ceremony, she and Gabe grabbed seats in one of the middle rows, just as Shira waltzed in. She waved and shuffled in her heels to sit next to Leah.

“Pretty brave of you to bring Gabe here,” she commented quietly into Leah’s ear. Leah smiled and shrugged, trying to pretend like it was no big deal, but she was

starting to wonder if it was a mistake. Should she have come alone? Sacrificed a New Year's midnight kiss to hide her non-Jewish boyfriend from her family?

The ceremony began with a harp and Leah saw her Bubbe walk down the aisle with one of her cousins. Her Bubbe caught her eye and waved to her. Leah waved back and blew her a kiss. She loved her Bubbe, who made the best matzah ball soup. Her Bubbe who had numbers tattooed on her arm from when she was a little girl in Poland and the Nazis imprisoned her in Auschwitz. Her Bubbe, who hasn't spoken to her own brother since 1964 because he married a shiksa . Her Bubbe, who could never find out that Gabe wasn't Jewish.

No one had to tell Bubbe, Leah reasoned to herself. If no one brought it up, her Bubbe would just assume. With a name like Gabe, there would be no reason to suspect, especially when Leah had always assured her Bubbe that she would only ever date Jewish boys. It was one of the conditions to receive her inheritance.

Leah then turned to watch the bridesmaids and groomsmen parade down the aisle and line up along the edge of the chuppah. She felt like she was watching the wedding as an outsider, an anthropologist studying the bizarre rituals of a hidden tribe. She watched the rabbi sing with a raised kiddush cup. She watched Rebecca circle her new husband seven times.

"Hope he doesn't mess up!" Shira joked when their cousin's new husband stepped on the foil-wrapped glass. Leah chuckled uncomfortably, looking at Gabe. What did he think of these rituals? Did he find them barbaric? Too traditional? Just plain strange?

When the glass shattered, everyone stood up and clapped, while Rebecca and her new husband kissed each other under the chuppah.

"That was beautiful," Gabe said while clapping with the crowd. Leah nodded with relief. Maybe their culture wasn't so foreign after all.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm*

If there is one thing that can be counted on at a Jewish wedding, it's that the first dance will be the hora. Once the entire crowd moved into the reception area, the band began the signature song and Leah and Shira grabbed Gabe and pulled him to the dance floor. Jewish or not, no one at a Jewish wedding gets the steps right, but that's all the fun. Just hold hands and run around in a circle, trying not to step on anyone.

They danced in circles until the band transitioned into more contemporary music and introduced the new husband and wife for the first time. They clapped and watched the couple perform their first dance until the MC told all the couples in love to join in. Leah looked at Shira, who motioned her to go with Gabe, who happily twirled her around and led her to the dance floor.

She and Gabe were in love. It didn't matter that she was Jewish and he was not. It didn't matter what everyone thought about that. He was an amazing guy, sweet, smart, funny, ambitious, and he treated her like a queen. Why was his religion the most important thing ?

"Stay close for the bouquet toss!" One of Leah's aunts winked at her while she danced with Gabe. She smiled, but secretly felt assaulted by the comment. She couldn't have those kinds of eyes on her Gabe. She might be ready to accept Gabe and his non-Jewishness, but she knew her family wasn't. Not yet at least.

When the dance ended and the MC invited everyone to get their first course at their table, Leah navigated to table nine where Shira was already sitting with their Bubbe.

"Leah-chik!" her Bubbe announced when she approached. Leah wrapped her arms around her grandma and kissed her cheek. "How come you didn't say hi to me

beforehand? And who is this handsome young man?"

"Sorry, Bubbe," she apologized, not exactly sure for what. "This is my boyfriend Gabe."

"Gabe? So nice to meet you!" Her Bubbe said holding out her hand to him. "What's your last name?"

"Russo," Gabe responded while he shook Leah's Bubbe's hand.

"Russo? That's an interesting name, where is your family from?" Leah's Bubbe asked. Leah felt her pulse quicken and she felt completely exposed.

"We're Italian," he responded politely.

"There aren't many Jews in Italy," Leah's Bubbe commented .

"No, that's true, there aren't," Gabe said.

"Must have been why they left."

Gabe nodded politely and sat down next to Leah, who breathed a sigh of relief. Had she dodged the bullet?

They were served salad, which was more like a plate of lettuce with a few tomato pieces artfully arranged around the edge of the plate and then stood up again to dance. Gabe held Leah close, but his eyes were wandering.

"Some of the groomsmen are pretty handsome, wouldn't you say?" Leah's mom said as she danced next to Leah. Savannah's eyes stayed focused on her daughter, without acknowledging the man holding onto her hand. "Maybe we can get Rebecca to

introduce Shira, or you.”

“Mom!” Leah exclaimed.

“What!? It’s always nice to make new friends!”

Leah pulled Gabe to the other edge of the dancefloor and tried to smile at him. He looked at her, and while he was still dancing, it felt a little more forced than before. When the song ended and the MC told them that dinner was coming, they went back to their table.

“We were just talking about my dishes that I will pass on to you when I die!” Leah’s Bubbe said. One of her Bubbe’s favorite conversations began with “when I die.” When I die, you’ll get this samovar I brought over from the old country! It belonged to my parents before they were murdered by the Nazis! When I die, you’ll get my wedding china that has real gold plating on it! You’ll have to keep kosher, because the dishes are kosher and they don’t go in the dishwasher! They are beautiful! My most prized possession!

When Leah was little, she liked to play along. Of course, I’ll keep kosher! I love your wedding china! But as she got older, her responses morphed into: Bubbe, I’d rather have you alive than have your dishes! But her Bubbe would wave away those responses and tell her the importance of planning.

“Have you told your boyfriend about the dishes?” she asked while a waiter served her a plate of salmon. Leah shook her head.

“Tell me about the dishes, Leah,” Gabe said.

“My wedding china,” Leah’s Bubbe said proudly. “I am giving them to Leah, as long as she marries a nice Jewish man and they keep a kosher household.”

Gabe nodded and used his napkin to wipe his face. “You know, I think I’m going to get some air,” he said as he stood up.

“Does my wedding china stress you out?” Leah’s Bubbe said and then turned to her granddaughter. “Leah! Is there something you want to tell me? I knew the minute he said he is Italian!” She then turned back to Gabe and rolled up her sleeve.

“You see this!?” She said, pointing at the faded tattoo on her arm. It had been so many years that the tattoo was faded, the ink was almost blue and it was almost impossible to read the numbers on her stretched and wrinkled skin. “This is what non-Jews do to us!”

“Bubbe, Gabe didn’t do that,” Leah started.

“It doesn’t matter who did it! What matters is that we Jews need to stick together. We need to take care of each other. We need to be a strong people! If we marry goyim , we will forget our Jewishness! Our children won’t understand their heritage! Our children will be confused about their identity!”

“I don’t want children anyway,” Gabe said and threw his napkin on his plate. He left the table and went straight for the door.

“Leah! I am disappointed in you!” her Bubbe said. “What happened to Asher? The nice Jewish boy you were dating? What was wrong with him?”

“Nothing was wrong with him,” Leah responded, her eyes at the door. She wanted to chase Gabe, but she couldn’t leave her Bubbe like that.

“Don’t be a fool!” her Bubbe continued. “Don’t get too comfortable with him! He will take everything from you! He will want you to give up your culture and your heritage! He will stop you from passing on your traditions. This is the slow demise of

the Jewish people!”

Leah nodded and then politely excused herself from the table. She tried to find Gabe, but he wasn't out in the lobby. She went to their hotel room, where she found him packing his bag.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Leaving,” he said. “Why did you bring me here?”

“Because you're my boyfriend and I wanted to spend New Year's with you.”

“You make me look like a fool,” he responded. “You're embarrassed that I am not Jewish and everyone in your family wants to break us apart.”

“I'm not embarrassed!” She defended, but she knew how she sounded.

Gabe zipped up his bag and lifted it. “Goodbye Leah,” he said and pushed passed her and out the door. Leah's eyes drifted to the clock in the room. It was almost midnight, almost time for their perfect New Year's kiss.

She followed him out to the hall and chased him to the elevator. “Wait!” she cried, but he didn't. He let the elevator doors close before she could reach him.

As she stood there, she heard the shouts of people counting down in the hotel. “Ten! Nine! Eight! Seven! Six! Five! Four! Three! Two! One! Happy New Year!”

Her phone buzzed and she hoped it was Gabe, saying he wanted to come back, but it wasn't. It was Asher.

Happy New Year! Miss you!

Miss you too , she responded because part of her did miss him. She missed how simple everything could be with him, even if there were no butterflies or passion.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm*

By January 2, it was like New Year's had never happened in New York. The only signs were the busy gyms and the prevalence of advertisements about dieting.

But life went back to normal. But not for Leah, nothing seemed normal to her as she got ready for work that day. She hadn't spoken to Gabe since he left the wedding. He hadn't returned her calls or texts and he didn't seem to be at his apartment. And if that wasn't enough, she had to sit across from Alex, who had passionately kissed her in the elevator at the holiday party.

She wasn't excited to see Alex. In fact, she hoped he'd be sick or still recovering from his New Year's hangover so he'd need a day off from work. Or better yet, maybe Brittany would still be recovering from her New Year's and HR would need Leah to take over her rightful position at Teen Club. She'd get the position she deserved and she'd never have to see Alex again! It was a win-win for everyone (except Brittany, but who cares).

Leah's mind was playing out every possible scenario as she finished getting ready for work. She took the Subway, mindful of seeing Gabe on the commute (which she didn't), but when she got to her office building, she took a minute and stood outside.

"You prefer the cold to your desk? Wow! That says a lot about how you feel about your job!" She heard her boss Tony from behind her. "Happy New Year! How was your break?"

"It was nice," she responded as she walked into the building with him. They waited for the elevator, the same one she and Alex had kissed in opened and she stepped inside with her boss. "How was your break?" She politely asked, trying to avoid the

kiss replaying in her memory. It was definitely a memory. Not a dream.

“Break? I have two kids! It was harder than working! Getting on the commuter rail this morning, I had the same feeling I had when my wife and I boarded a plane for Bermuda on our honeymoon. Finally, some freedom to breathe! I tell you, it’s just, there’s no break when the kids are home. Things break, but there’s no break for the parents.”

The elevator stopped. The doors opened and Tony rushed out to his office, like a horse let loose from his stable. Leah followed behind, but more like a donkey, stubbornly being pulled to its destination.

“Happy New Year!” Leah barely heard the greeting from Malcolm who was at his desk looking like he had probably been there since last year. “How are you doing on your resolutions so far?”

“So far, so good.” She gave an obligatory smile even though she didn’t really have resolutions. “Yours?”

“I don’t make New Year’s resolutions. Why wait until New Year’s to make a change? I make resolutions weekly. This week, I’m learning Esperanto. Last week, I went the entire week without eating any corn. Do you know how hard that is? I’m talking corn syrup too. Everything pre-packaged has high fructose corn syrup, which is poison!” Malcolm’s voice almost rose above conversational level. “I feel so much better without that in my body.”

Leah nodded in agreement. She did actually know how difficult it was to avoid corn syrup. She had also done it for one week annually during Passover. When Ashkenazi Jews didn’t eat any grains including corn. While her Christian friends passed out Easter candy sweetened with you guessed what.

She continued to her desk, holding her breath. As she approached she saw that Alex and Mark were both already there quietly sitting in front of their computers typing away. That was a first. Maybe they both had resolved to become punctual and efficient. She passed Alex and plopped her bag on her desk. Had this happened before the holiday party, she would have made a comment about how they were competing for employee of the year. But since that was then and this was now, she quietly sat down and turned on her computer.

She opened her email, which was overflowing with a week's worth of junk plus the TCR and a few holiday greetings that came in after Diamond Media closed down. She promptly deleted everything that seemed worthless and started going through the old TCRs, but all she could think about was Gabe.

She quickly composed an email in the same format as Club Business' newsletter, which she knew Gabe received.

NEWS ALERT: New terms proposed for PE-backed merger which almost broke down last year

Despite defaulting on a previous agreement, counselor for merger requests second chance to enact deal. Counselor pledges new terms to avoid default. Can they strike a new deal?

Counselor assures that merging party is the first lien.

Leah's heart jumped as she pressed send. She hoped Gabe would get her point with her cutesy message coded in business talk.

"Are you OK?" Alex suddenly said, hovering over the cubicle. "You're making some weird noises. Sort of like a hippo slurping some brackish water."

“What does that even sound like?” She rolled her eyes and snapped back .

“Sort of like the noise you were just making,” Alex smiled and started imitating Leah’s scoffs, which she hadn’t realized had been out loud. “What’s wrong?”

“Everything! Why are you and Mark being so weird?”

“Weird? We’re just working,” Mark stood up and joined. “Alex is going to be a model employee now that he is afraid of losing his job.”

“I’m not afraid of losing my job!”

“No job at Diamond, no girlfriend.” Mark continued.

“What are you talking about?” Leah interrogated, suddenly afraid that Mark knew all about the kiss in the elevator and that maybe it wasn’t just a kiss in the elevator. Did something else happen that she forgot in her drunken state?

“Brittany!” Mark blurted. “Leah, you shouldn’t have left early! You missed all the fun.” Mark detailed how Alex had accosted Brittany at the holiday party. Mark was sure it would be Alex’s last hurrah at Diamond, but apparently Brittany liked being accosted. Can you believe that? Alex somehow charmed her with his perverse jokes and obnoxious demeanor. She thought he was funny! Funny enough that she didn’t stop laughing the entire winter break with Alex. They had even arrived at work together that morning. Early, Mark noted, because Brittany was still new and still believed that arriving at 8:00 am was the way to get ahead at Diamond.

As Mark went on, Alex’s eyes rolled and rolled. Leah wondered how he didn’t get dizzy. “Is that true?” she asked. Could Alex truly have walked away after kissing her, hit on Brittany and already become an item with her? So quickly? Did their elevator kiss mean nothing? Was Leah just the warmup? A practice round? Had Alex and

Brittany also kissed in the elevator? Leah's head was spinning even faster than Alex's eyes.

Alex shrugged, just as Tony screamed, summoning everyone to his office. Mark dashed away first while Alex and Leah stood still, separated by the cubicle. "What about..." Leah wasn't sure what she was going to ask.

"You have a boyfriend," he responded, answering whatever questions could have come out of her mouth.

Before she could respond, she heard Tony yelling from his office. "Leah! Alex! Get in here!"

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm*

During their staff meeting, Tony covered a range of topics from what breaking plates has to do with New Year's (ask people in Denmark!), to the amount of potatoes grown around the world annually (more than 350 million tons!). "Now back on topic!" Tony yelled. "We need to choose our picks for the annual death pool! We can't let Celeb Club beat us again! That was embarrassing! We're supposed to be the most serious of all the Club publications and that means winning the death pool! We have a reputation to keep!"

Leah looked at Alex and Mark for an explanation. "Oprah!" Mark shouted out. "The pope!" Alex contributed. "That's always your guess!" Mark retorted. "J.R.R Tolkien!"

"He's already dead!" Alex responded. "You mean J.R.R. Martin!"

"Whatever, an author with J.R."

"That could also be Rowling."

"Rowling!" Tony exclaimed. "A very bold pick! I'm not sure. People would hate us if we won!"

Leah stood silently, leaning on the end of the desk. Yes, there were chairs in Tony's office, but no one sat during meetings. Meetings were supposed to be quick, Tony insisted, no need to sit for just a few minutes. Science proved that meetings finished faster when people stood. But obviously science didn't realize how off-topic some meetings could veer. She was starting to understand the game, or as they called it, the death pool, and wanted to contribute. "Putin?" she said as though someone could

confirm whether she was right.

“Rosenberg!” Tony clapped loudly. “I like it! He is traveling a very dark road that one! He definitely might die in the next year!” Tony wrote down their department’s top three picks as Mark explained everything to Leah.

Diamond Media had an annual tradition of guessing which celebrities would die in the next year. Every year on the first day back at work each department submitted its guesses. Usually, people picked celebrities from their own domains. Teen Club chose whichever teen celebrities were getting too addicted to partying and drugs. Connoisseur Club often chose gluttons whose cholesterol would likely catch up with them. Fashion Club chose models who hadn’t eaten since before they submitted their picks the previous year. Home Club had been choosing Betty White every year for the last several years and finally got one point. Celeb Club always seemed to be in the know, so much so that it had been rumored they might even be the cause of some celebrity deaths .

“What about departments like HR?” Leah asked.

“Don’t ever mention the death pool to HR!” Tony screamed. “If you do, you can list my name as next year’s pick!” Apparently, HR wasn’t keen on this tradition. It was something all the magazine department heads did together quietly, submitting their picks in a locked Excel spreadsheet. Whenever someone’s pick died (it happened at least a couple times a year, the most it ever happened was eight times a year. That was a scary year, said Tony. Mostly scary for the other selected celebrities whose names would be ticked off next.) the department heads all chipped in (from their personal pockets, so as not to get the finance department, who also wouldn’t approve of this tradition, involved.) and bought the winning department donuts.

“When Anthony Bourdain died, wow,” Tony commented. “We had to buy gourmet donuts for Connoisseur! They insisted the donuts needed to be themed with the

celebrity. I wanted to just give them dirt, like what he used to eat on his traveling food show. He tasted worms! It was a delicacy! But Jim over at Connoisseur insisted we go the Brasserie route. You know how expensive French donuts are? Anyway, this year I want donuts! Russian donuts would be great! Ha! I bet they'll have to search hard if Leah's pick wins!"

With their picks chosen, Tony let out the staff meeting. They had important work to do! Everyone needed to focus so they weren't behind after a week of vacation! Leah let her colleagues out first before following them back to their cubicles.

When she sat down, she saw a reply to her email to Gabe and quickly opened it.

Counselor considering deal and may propose his own terms shortly. Default is not forgiven and breach may be irreconcilable.

It was something. Sure, she wasn't forgiven, but he was considering their relationship. She wondered what his considerations were. In mergers, parties considered financial terms, percentage of ownership, voting rights, and obligations. They negotiated how mergers could be terminated and the consequences of defaulting on agreements.

She spent the rest of her day working mindlessly, barely paying attention to the data entry she did or the stories she wrote. She went to lunch with Alex and Mark and barely listened to their stories about New Year's.

She wondered if Gabe was worth it. She understood that the longer they stayed together the more issues they would face. Her family would always be disappointed by him, they'd never stop making inappropriate comments. They'd never be happy for Leah's relationship with him, no matter how happy she was.

She imagined what would happen in their future. Would her parents come to her

wedding? What kind of wedding would they have? Who would officiate? And what if she did want to keep a kosher home and have her Bubbe's dishes? Was that an option?

She hadn't even thought about children yet. She knew Gabe said he didn't want any, but could his mind be changed? And then what? Would the kids go to Hebrew school? Get B'nai Mitzvahed? And what about BBYO? Would they get the same magical experiences she had growing up?

Was she willing to go through these complicated choices for love? Was their love worth it? Would Gabe even give her the chance to decide?

Things would have been so easy with Asher. She remembered the way she used to feel about him and the fantasies she always had. They'd get married young, have a picket fence, and beautiful babies who'd be blessed at Temple during their baby naming or briss. It would be easy, but did she love Asher? Or had she outgrown him the same way she outgrew her sparkly red Bat Mitzvah dress?

"What's going on?" Alex said over the cubicle wall. "You're off today. It's not because of..."

"No, no!" she assured him, hoping he wouldn't say anything about their encounter that she needed to forget.

"Is the boyfriend being a shmuck?"

She laughed. "Where did you learn that word? "

"I've seen enough movies to know that you want to date a mensch instead of a shmuck."

“He’s a mensch,” she responded. “I think I’m the shmuck in this movie.”

“Well, then you better do something about that,” he responded.

Leah nodded. It was good advice, but she didn’t know what something she had to do.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm*

“When the world ends, who do you want by your side?” Maya asked as she laced up her skates. Leah already had her skates on and was wobbling slowly toward the rink that was nestled between the office buildings in FiDi and the Hudson. It was already dark out; in New York in January there was almost no difference between 5:00 PM and midnight. The sky was black but illuminated by streetlights. People tired from long days at the office or bar straddled the streets in clothes that weren’t nearly as neat as they were meant to be.

Leah stepped onto the rink. It was mostly empty except for a few other enthusiastic skaters who chose ice skating over happy hour. “Does it have to be a guy?” she responded as Maya followed her and they started circling on the ice. Leah wobbled but kept her balance. She hadn’t ice skated in years, not since her mom had taken her for lessons when she was younger, but since the lessons were right after Hebrew school, they were often late. The teacher, a former figure skater, did not appreciate a late arrival on the ice and so Leah was forced to quit before she ever learned how to do an axel jump .

While Rockefeller Center is famous for its ice-skating rink, it’s a little-known fact that there are multiple rinks set up around the city in winter. They are small, no bigger than a tennis court, but big enough that New Yorkers can glide around in the crisp air while avoiding the tourists that flock to Rockefeller.

“It doesn’t, but don’t you want to kiss someone at the end of the world?” Maya continued. “It’s your last moments.”

Leah had just told Maya about the wedding and how Gabe had avoided her except for his short response to her witty email. “Should I pursue him?” Leah had asked before

Maya responded with her question. “Should I try to fix this or should I just accept that it isn’t meant to be?”

Leah was still thinking about Maya’s question when they finished their first circle around the rink. By the entrance was a group of people in suits starting to spill onto the ice. Leah and Maya tried avoiding them, passing the entrance and starting another loop. Leah felt her ankles wobble and she flung her arms around to stop herself from losing her balance. “Leah!” she heard, causing her to startle and end up with her knees on the ice. Her gloved hands saved her from hitting her face. She felt a hand on her back and she looked up.

“Asher? What are you doing here?”

“Intern outing for SIM Holdings.” He held out his hand to help her up. “They do monthly events for us interns, like its compensation since we don’t get paid.” Leah let him help her up to her feet. Her knees ached and she felt even less sure of her footing than before her fall. “Hey Maya,” Asher called out and waved. Maya was standing a few feet in front of them with her hands on her hips. “Kevin was asking about you.”

“He can ask,” Maya responded and then looked at Leah. “Are you OK?” When Leah nodded, Maya gracefully turned around and started gliding around the rink as though she lived her life on ice.

“We missed you on New Year’s,” Asher said as they started skating forward. They were still holding hands as though it felt totally natural. Leah didn’t even notice her hand was still clasped in his. All she noticed was that she suddenly felt a little more balanced on her skates.

“It looked like you guys had fun,” Leah responded.

“We did. It was like old times. Except without you, of course.”

His comment reminded Leah of high school. Of BBYO. Of dressing up and going to dances called Beau Balls. It reminded her of convention weekends and sisterhood events. And late night talks of love and feeling lost. She started spiraling down the drain of nostalgia, back to when she and Asher were the perfect couple. The poster kids for happy Jewish relationships. Then Maya came up from behind them, hitting Leah lightly on the butt as she passed by.

“Hey!” Leah cried out.

“You’re falling behind!” Maya called back as she whizzed around again. Leah did feel like she was falling behind. Back in September, she felt like she had it all figured out. She had her dream job, which turned out to be a little less of a dream, and her dream man, who too had his flaws, and an overabundance of hope that everyone starts out with when they move to New York.

“Asher! Come over here!” “Asher!” The other interns were calling him over to their group where they were laughing as they huddled together and moved like an amoeba over the ice.

“I’ll catch you later, Leah,” he said, letting go of her hand. They’d barely made it one time around the rink. “I’ll call you. We should hang out.”

Leah nodded and looked at Maya who was now twirling in the middle of the rink. Leah slid her feet forward, holding the wall around the rink and she pushed herself. When she made it around again, she stopped by the entrance, contemplating if she should get off the ice. She saw the group of interns on the other side of the rink. She couldn’t spot Asher in the crowd, but she could hear their giggles and loud voices that carried across the ice .

She was startled when Maya collided with the wall in front of her. “You done already?” she asked.

“Yeah. Where did you learn to skate like that?”

“I used to want to be Michelle Kwan,” Maya said. “I’d go to early morning figure skating lessons before school until I realized I’d never make the Olympics.” Maya stepped off the ice as elegantly as if she were in ballet slippers rather than ice skates. “You never answered my question.”

“Huh?”

“End of the world...who’s next to you?” Maya looked at Leah, who looked at the interns rounding the other side of the rink. Before she could answer, Leah’s right leg somehow ended up under her left and before she could steady herself, she hit the ice with a big crack. At first, she thought the noise was the ice breaking. All it took was the electric shock of pain to inform her that she was very wrong.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm*

There's no point to ambulances in Manhattan. The traffic doesn't veer to let them pass, as all New York drivers believe every journey is a matter of life or death.

The clock ticked loudly as Leah waited for theirs to arrive. The last ten minutes were all jumbled in Leah's head. There was Maya asking if she was OK. A man who glided to her and told her not to move. And Asher, calling her name. The three of them helped Leah off the ice as pain pulsed through the limb attached to her shoulder. It wasn't her arm, it was more like a snake, purple and swollen after eating a mouse whole.

They called the ambulance and told Leah to wait. She cradled her broken arm with her other one, holding herself from screaming from the pain. She wanted to curl up and cry. She wanted her mom to hug her. She wanted someone to tell her it was going to be OK.

"You're going to be OK," Asher said, patting her good shoulder. "I'm coming with you."

"I'm going with her," Maya asserted. "You can go back to your intern party. "

"No, it's OK, I'm staying," Asher insisted. Leah saw Maya's eyes on her, asking all the questions she couldn't say out loud. Should I call Gabe? Do you want Asher to come?

Maya and Asher continued arguing until the ambulance arrived an eternity later. "That's a pretty good break," the paramedic said. "You have to be careful out there on the ice." Leah ignored his comment that couldn't have been less helpful.

The paramedic helped her in the back of the ambulance only grazing her broken arm twice, sending two bolts of pain that reached all the way to her fingertips from her neck. “Only one person with her,” he said when Asher and Maya crowded the door. “Boyfriend?” Asher immediately jumped in before Maya could protest the door slammed.

There were three paramedics in the vehicle. The one who helped her in and then sat in the driver’s seat and two others who sat next to her in the back. “Miss, can we ask you a few questions?” one asked and Leah nodded. “Name?”

“Leah Rosenberg.” The second paramedic grabbed Leah’s good arm and wrapped the cuff to check her blood pressure.

“Age?”

“22.” The cuff squeezed her arm as the paramedic felt her wrist and started counting her pulse .

“Are you generally healthy? Any health conditions? Pregnant?”

She shook her head and continued doing so with every question. Allergies? Any medications you take? Have you broken a bone before?

When the paramedic uncuffed her and let go of her arm, she felt another hand grab hers. It wasn’t the strong decisive hand of the paramedic. It was more familiar. Softer. More hesitant and more Asher’s. He rubbed his thumb over the skin on the top of her hand. She tried to focus on the sensation, rather than on the throbbing on her other side.

The ambulance weaved slowly. Stopping. Honking, swerving, honking again. When it finally stopped and the driver popped out, the paramedics were already wheeling

Leah out on the gurney she had been lying on in the back. Another team of paramedics met them, and after an exchange of a few short sentences, the new team wheeled Leah inside.

“Don’t leave me,” she whispered to Asher when she was forced to free her hand from his. She couldn’t see him, but she knew that he was following her and that he would be there if she could turn around. They wheeled her through the emergency room waiting room and to a bed that they awkwardly helped her onto. A nurse came by and checked her blood pressure again while scribbling away on a notepad .

“Nasty fall,” she commented as she clicked her pen.

A doctor came in and took a look at her arm. Gently, yet painfully, poking her arm, and watching as his fingerprints turned her skin from purple to yellow and back to purple again. “We’ll need to get an X-ray and probably reset the bone.”

All this time, there was a ringing in her ears. When the doctor left, she realized it was her cellphone. She tried to fish it from her purse but struggled with the zipper with one arm.

“Let me help you,” Asher appeared and seamlessly unzipped her purse and retrieved her phone from the inside side pocket without even needing to look for where it was. “Shira,” he said reading the name on the screen. “Want me to answer?”

“No!” she exclaimed louder than she had expected. She couldn’t let Shira know she was with Asher now, right after everything with Gabe. She didn’t want anyone making assumptions.

“Brought your shoes,” Maya suddenly said in the doorway, holding up Leah’s black boots. “You left them at the rink.” Maya gave Asher a sideways look and then sat next to Leah on the bed. “What’d they say?”

“Ready for your X-ray?” The nurse popped back in as though in response to Maya. “We’ll be back in a few,” the nurse told Asher and Maya as she wheeled Leah away .

“Your boyfriend’s really cute!” the nurse commented as they walked down the hall. “He looked so concerned. How long have you been together?”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Leah responded, afraid of what would happen with Asher and Maya alone.

“Why not? He’s obviously so in love with you! I thought he would faint when I was taking your blood pressure earlier. He was so pale!”

The nurse brought her to a room where an x-ray technician positioned her arm and raced out of the room to take the scan and then appeared seconds later to release her back to the nurse, who brought her back to the room to wait.

When the nurse wheeled her in, Asher’s face lit up. It was a look that gave Leah relief and she knew she could count on him. She thought about all the times he was there for her, when she ran for regional Vice President of their BBYO region and she lost and how he held her while she cried for days on end. Looking back, it seemed so trivial, so silly that she would have been so heartbroken, but at the time, it had been the worst thing that had happened to her and Asher never made her feel like her tears were frivolous or the disappointment was negligible.

She then remembered when her father had knee surgery and Asher stayed with her family at the hospital. How he brought coffee and bagels to them and helped bring her father home when he couldn’t walk.

Asher was a good man. She’d never thought of him as a man before. They’d always been kids together, high school sweethearts, but maybe he deserved a chance to prove himself as a man. Sure, maybe he didn’t have everything figured out. Maybe he was

still a little immature and still working as an unpaid intern instead of excelling in an ambitious career. But he was only 22 and maybe with the right chance, he could be the guy that Leah wanted. The one who put effort into romance and could challenge her mentally. Maybe he wasn't still the guy who left her to attend college on the other side of the country or returned home after graduation without a thought for his future other than he wanted it with Leah. Maybe he'd grown since then and if Leah gave him the chance, he could surprise her.

She already knew he'd be a perfectly decent husband and they could have a decent life together. He was safe, and he was Jewish. She hoped it wasn't the pain and the trauma of breaking her arm or the painkillers that made her feel that way. She succumbed to the feelings and let Asher hold her hand when the doctor came in with her x-ray images.

The doctor pointed out the multiple places where she broke her arm. Then, he gently wrapped her arm in a cast and set it in plaster. "See you in six weeks," he said and Leah was released with the recommendation to get a bottle of over-the-counter pain medication.

"Want me to accompany you home?" Asher asked when they left the hospital. She nodded and said goodbye to Maya while Asher hailed a cab.

"Do you know how expensive that cab ride will be?" she asked. "Let's take the Subway."

"No way! You just broke your arm, we're not getting on the Subway! Anyway, my treat," he said and he held the door of the car that stopped for them. Leah tried not to look at the cab meter as they rode all the way uptown, but she knew it was probably the most expensive cab ride of her life. She knew Asher wasn't paying for it, with his unpaid internship, he still got help from his parents, but she still appreciated his extravagant gesture.

He helped her into her apartment and then promised to be right back. Leah waited on her couch in front of the TV that still sat on the living room floor and thought about Asher. She thought about Gabe and if this was what was best for everyone. Her family would never accept Gabe in her life—was it fair to expose him to that? Was it selfish of her? Did she just love him for the novelty of his lack of Jewishness?

Before she could try to figure it out, Asher came back into the apartment with a few plastic bags. He held out a bottle of wine and placed it on the table.

“This is the best pain killer,” he said with such authority that Leah thought maybe he was becoming a man. He then pulled out take-out boxes and Leah instantly recognized the smell of matzah ball soup. “A good soup can heal anything,” he laughed and served them both bowls of the world’s best Jewish comfort food. It wasn’t her Bubbe’s soup, but she was sure her Bubbe would approve.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:22 pm*

The beginning of spring in New York is unmistakable. White flowers suddenly appear on trees, happy hour happens during sunlight instead of in the dark, and tights can be forgone under pretty dresses and skirts. Leah loved every minute.

And why shouldn't she? She was living her New York dream. She'd just been promoted to junior reporter at Club Business and had handed off her data entry duties to the new researcher who had joined. She now wrote all day, getting bylines and most importantly, sources who confided in her and gave her scoops so she could break news stories.

She knew where the best happy hours were and which restaurants were trending, and sometimes even got special treatment from bartenders and waiters who she'd gotten to know better.

And who could forget her boyfriend. He spent the first six weeks of the New Year taking perfect care of her while her arm healed. Everyday, he brought her dinner and helped her clean her apartment and herself while she tried to shower without getting her cast wet. He made her laugh and brought her silly presents like a keychain with ice skates on it. When her cast came off, he took her to celebrate at a cute little hotel in Connecticut where they enjoyed white snow without the gray dirt that plagued all the snow in New York.

Even Leah's roommate softened when the snow melted. They weren't exactly friends, but Marissa had agreed to allow Asher to hang up their TV on the wall in front of the couch. She even sometimes pulled out a bean bag chair from her room and watched whatever reality shows Leah and Asher put on while they ate their takeout together.

Everything was going perfectly, until Leah saw the name on the brief the new researcher at Club Business had handed her. It came after their morning standup meeting in Tony's office when Tony insisted that academic institutions did everyone a disfavor by scheduling a spring break— It doesn't prepare you for the real world! —and then he told Alex that the headlines on his articles were getting repetitive and he expected at least a little creativity from people who were trained writers.

“Leah! You're getting the next big story!” he insisted and Leah's heart fluttered with joy. He then told them that rumors of a hostile takeover of a big fast-food chain were heating up. “Check the TCR for any suspicious numbers relating to any restaurant businesses! ”

After the meeting Leah talked to the new researcher who was still wide-eyed and intimidated by the TCR, and she gently explained what to look for. “See if any companies have liabilities greater than their assets, or anyone asking creditors to change repayment terms,” She said. “Or any restaurant business that is in the TCR should come to me.”

The researcher nodded and then got straight to work. A couple of hours later the brief was on her desk. WinterRock Capital was looking to purchase the debt owed by a fast-food chain and who was the lead associate working on the deal? Gabe Russo.

Usually when Leah saw the names of associates working on deals, she would Google their names and find out their office phone number or email. Sometimes, if it was someone she had a good rapport with, she might have their cell phone number. She didn't need to Google Gabe Russo and she did have his cell phone number, but she wasn't sure she had the rapport needed to call him and ask for details for her article.

If she called him, would he answer? Could they be professional and discuss the deals as colleagues? Would he give her the scoop she needed to impress Tony and maybe move up to senior reporter? She held her breath and tried to gather the courage she needed.