

Madeline

Nicole Pangborn

February 10, 2016

Madeline Bochner has spent a large chunk of the past thirty years looking out the living room window of her fourth floor walk-up on East 12th. At any given time, day or night, there's a good chance you'll find her lounging in her flower-patterned armchair by the fire escape, puffing hand-rolled cigarettes and watching the street life on Avenue A. Her oval wire frame glasses and long, bushy gray hair will make her seem almost professor-like as she makes observations about the people on the sidewalk below. She'll probably have her ancient white laptop sitting on the small cherry oak side table next to her, under a yellow 1920s-style floor lamp, open to some 9/11 conspiracy blogs or to her daily horoscope on *astrology.com*. For hours each day she will shift her attention in a triangle — between the blogs, her turquoise bag of Natural American Spirit tobacco, and the world outside.

Madeline is 56 years old. She'll often use this number to remind you about how wise she is. She takes pride in being much wiser than all the young people who have moved into her formerly rough-and-tumble neighborhood, where she's lived since 1978.

"This area, man," she'll sigh. "I used to watch drug busts right here, out this window. But today — this place is *Disneyland!* Look at all these young people running around." She gets particularly annoyed with the students and "finance guys" who take over her beloved streets during their harried commutes. She feels they don't ask enough questions about the authorities that be; they think that banks are like governments, she says, and that everybody has to have a credit card. But she knows the real deal. "Banks are PRIVATE COMPANIES!" she's told me. "I don't have to have a credit card. I mean, *must* I have a TJ Maxx card?" Usually, nobody else is in her living room to hear how much *The World Today* displeases her. But if you happen to be around, she'll let you know all about it.

I first met Madeline when I responded to her Craigslist ad called "Summer in the City," which advertised a 3-month sublet for the spare bedroom in her East Village apartment. In the ad, Madeline described herself as an "engaging 35+ year old native New Yorker" who had a small dog, named Ginger. We spoke on the phone first before meeting. As we talked, she was walking Ginger up and down her street.

"*Jin-jaaah*, stop licking the sidewalk!" she'd yell into the phone in her thick Long Island accent. In between scolding the dog and complaining about the NYU buses that passed her by (she feels they "steal all the funding" from city buses), Madeline told me that she'd lost her last job years back. She has since been trying to take some online and in-person classes at a local CUNY branch - with the help

of a Pell Grant - to eventually get a degree in finance. But her third try at Calculus proved to be challenging. "I just can't figure this crap out," she said, mentioning a particularly tough equation she had to solve for her homework that week. We were still talking when she walked back into her apartment, so I told her to read the problem out to me, and I helped her solve it over the phone. She then agreed to meet in person to see if she'd like living with me for a whole summer. After a two hour inquisition on her couch a week later, she decided that she would.

Madeline gave me my first tour around the place as Ginger barked in short, high-pitched yaps. We started with the kitchen — a small, simple space, directly to the left upon entering her apartment. She is proudest of her solid oak kitchen island, complete with two black stools, and her old cast iron pans, which hang perfectly in a row above the sink, in order from biggest to smallest. A yellow rubber ducky soap dispenser throws a splash of color into the otherwise brown and beige space. She maintains this kitchen with precision and dignity. "Only *clean* hands can use the handtowel by the sink," she instructed me. "Never, EVER chop your food too close to the crack in the island, either. Crumbs can get in there and then it's hard to clean."

The door to her tiny bathroom is right next to the kitchen, and Madeline had similar rules for me as I peeked inside. "Don't step out of the shower right away onto that mat! Dry off first, or it'll get all gross." On a shelf above her bathroom sink stand about 20 plastic figurines, mostly faded Disney characters or superheros. "Those are from my Happy Meals!" she told me, with a little smile. "I kept them." A short bookshelf displays a copy of the Qu'ran, the King James Bible, and *Life's Little Instruction Book*. I was startled to see a life-sized porcelain head — of an old woman, with blanched white skin and hollow cheeks, wearing red lipstick and a purple swimming cap — staring up at me from the tile floor. Madeline noticed me looking. "Oh, that's Ethel. I found her on the sidewalk. Amazing what people will throw away!"

Her spare bedroom was next. It had three items: a bed, covered with a cream-colored quilt, the same shade as the walls; one miniature lamp; and a boxy plywood armoire in the corner, home-stained with walnut. As Madeline and I walked in on our tour, I saw that Ginger had already made her way inside, settled smugly between the bed and armoire. "Y'gotta keep the door shut, or she'll come in here," Madeline explained. "She thinks maybe I'm in here, because sometimes I'll switch and move my stuff into this bedroom. You know, if I get bored."

But the centerpiece of the old apartment - for Madeline, at least - is her living room. Each morning during my three month stay, I'd wake up to find her in

her usual position there, gazing out onto the street, laptop and cigarettes nearby. She's put a lot of care into the living room, often mentioning how many years it has taken her to find *just* the right shade of off-white paint to complement the stark white moulding. "My longest relationship has been with these four walls!" she's said. There are only a few decorations and knick knacks painstakingly placed in her bookshelf, or on her TV stand, which houses a clunky and non-functional tube from the 90s. A small, silver sea shell burns with sage on the coffee table in the middle of the room. With the exception of four neatly hidden photos of her estranged family members behind the television, the rest of the photographs she has on display are of herself — mostly from when she was much younger, and some even of her as a baby. An enormous portrait of Audrey Hepburn in a golden frame looms large on top of the bookcase, beaming with sophistication and independence, watching over Madeline in her flower-patterned chair by the window.

Her space tells her story: Madeline has lived alone in this early 20th century tenement apartment for most of her adult life.

By living alone, Madeline has become part of a larger modern trend: she is one of the millions of Americans who have "gone solo," in sociologist Eric Klinenberg's terms. In *Going Solo* [2012], Klinenberg documents the staggering number of people who have elected to live alone today, both in the U.S. and abroad. In 1950, 22% of American adults were single, and 4 million of them lived alone; but today, over 50% are single, and 31 million live alone. That works out to almost one in seven. Most of those who live alone are women, like Madeline: 17 million women (vs. 14 million men) fall within the total solo population figures. These trends are particularly striking in cities and large metropolitan areas. In New York City especially, where Madeline lives, over 1 million elect a solitary living arrangement.

Klinenberg makes the case that the reason behind this trend is mostly an economic one: more people can afford to live alone today. This is coupled with the fact that it's now socially acceptable — and even desirable — to maintain an independent space through adulthood. Klinenberg claims that single people today "actively reframe living alone as a mark of distinction and success, not social failure." Whatever the cause, it's clear that Americans are adapting, carving out solo spaces in cities across the country, and "crafting new ways of living in the process."

But since Madeline lost her last job in 2007, she hasn't been able to live as "solo" as she would like, the way she did through her 20s, 30s, and 40s. To stay afloat, she rents out her second bedroom short-term and under the table — mostly to foreign, young, professional women who need to stay for three months maximum. She does this 6 to 9 months of the year now, during times when she doesn't feel too "overwhelmed" by life, she says. The girl before me was supposedly an Italian named Roberta who was stationed working at the UN for the spring. (I found some fancy Italian shampoos in the shower one day, so I think this is true.) She claims to have had mostly good luck with her guests - except for the one Greek girl who would shout at her boyfriend on the phone into the wee hours of the morning - but longs for the day she can have the whole space to herself again. For now, she is forced to live with strangers, so she does it on her own terms, after an extensive interview process. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I like you," she told me once. "And I usually don't like Americans. But I need a start date and an end date for everybody. I don't think there is anyone out there I'd want to live with for *forever!*"

This temporary and occasional roommate scheme is sustainable for Madeline because her walk-up is one of New York's 1,030,000 rent-stabilized apartments. As a result, her rent is significantly lower than new or comparable units in the area where she lives. She can charge market value for her short-term visitors, pay the (much lower) actual rent to her landlord, and subsist off of the remainder. In addition to the rent stabilization and rent control policies that make subletting a viable income option for those who live alone in pre-war apartments, new web-based platforms have cropped up to make the process feasible on a large scale. In fact, Madeline used to be among the majority of *Airbnb*¹ users who use the online rental platform as their economic lifeline, according to Chris Lehane, Airbnb's head of global policy and public affairs [Isaac, 2015].

But Airbnb requires that their hosts have bank accounts or the ability to easily process checks. Madeline now has neither. When I tried to pay my first month's rent with a check, she furrowed her brow and turned away. "That's useless to me," she said softly. She's had to switch to Craigslist, where users trust one another to handle payment details, in whatever way they choose.

Her situation is an example of the confluence of four trends particular to her time and place. First, living solo whenever possible has become a socially

¹<https://www.airbnb.com/>. Airbnb is a web platform for finding short term places to stay in other people's homes. The tagline on their website is: "Rent unique places to stay from local hosts in 190+ countries."

acceptable and widespread desire. Second, rent control and rent stabilization policies in New York City have kept rents in pre-war apartments low for long-term residents. Third, a number of web-based platforms have created a space for easy subletting in the new “sharing economy.” Couple these with a fourth trend of high unemployment rates, and we arrive at Madeline’s doorstep.

Hers is a story of adapting to low-income, solo living, in a time and city in which it is possible to do so.

While the easy vantage point of her living room window gives Madeline fodder for her complaints about the world outside, more often than not, our conversations over the summer would actually happen in her kitchen. In the mornings, I would make myself breakfast and prepare my sandwich to take for lunch, and Madeline would join me by the solid birch island next to the stove. She might tell me snippets of what she learned on the Internet the night before (“That guy who invented pink lawn flamingos died yesterday!”), or offer me some of the papaya she bought for cheap in Chinatown on her monthly outings there. Sometimes, she would ask if I wanted to sit and have a cup of coffee, just as I was about to pack up my lunch and head out for the day. I always said yes.

Often, while we sat on her two black wooden stools and sipped our coffees, she would talk about her family. She was born to a Jewish father and Puerto Rican mother in the Bronx, but was raised mostly on Long Island along with her brother and sister. “They’re all jealous of this apartment,” she told me. “I haven’t seen them or talked to them in two years. I cut them off because my shrink² told me the way they treated me was emotional abuse. I asked him, is this abuse? And he said, yep. So that’s it! I don’t want relationships with them. I don’t want to call them. Who needs it!? *To be berated, call this number! To be called names, call this number!* Forget it.” The last time she talked to them was when her brother and sister came to visit, with her brother’s family. “My brother acts all superior to me,” she says. “He’s happy, he’s got a normal life, kids, wife, whatever... you know, all ‘I’m fine, things are good, I’m normal.’ Well good for you.” Madeline has never felt normal, and her mother always reminds her of that fact. “When I talk to my mother all she says is that I’m *too* smart, or *too* tearful... but she has no idea, that’s really an insult! That’s a deviation from normal. Or she’ll say, in her Puerto Rican accent, *Maaaahhhd-a-leeen, you will never get a job!*”

²When Madeline was awarded a Pell Grant to take undergraduate courses at a CUNY branch, the college provided her with some temporary counseling.

Though Madeline claims to be much better off on her own, I can tell that being estranged from her family makes her sad sometimes. Just as I was about to head to the laundromat one morning, Madeline stopped in the middle of a rant — about how Donald Trump’s new wife wouldn’t produce her birth certificate — and said, quietly, “I was sad yesterday.”

I put my hamper down. “Why?”

“My sister hasn’t called me.”

I tried to brainstorm. “What if you tried calling her and telling her—”

“NO! No way,” she interrupted. “I’m done reaching out to her. Why doesn’t she pursue *me*? I deserve to be pursued. I’ve called at least four times and each time she picks up, she’s already annoyed and yelling — ‘*Madeline you know I’m really busy now and I can’t talk!*’ And it’s the same every time. After four times, that’s it! I’m not going to be abused.”

Madeline feels abused by the ways her family lets her know that she isn’t “normal.” She doesn’t have a job, a partner, or children. She is never busy, like her sister, or happy, like her brother. And most of the neighborhood friends she had made ties with over the years have either died or have fallen out of touch.

Madeline doesn’t just *live* alone, then — she *is* alone. In her case, living alone can be dangerous, as Sandra Smith details in her book, *Lone Pursuit* 2007:

“For those with financial security, a busy schedule, and a dense social network, living alone can be productive because it offers access to privacy, restoration, and personal development. But for the vulnerable it more often leads to what Berkeley sociologist Sandra Smith calls ‘defensive individualism,’ a dangerous state that fosters distrust towards other people and institutions, and ultimately toward the self as well.” [quote from Klinenberg 2012]

As predicted by Smith’s theory, Madeline’s distrust of those outside her four walls runs deep. She often tells me the details of all the conspiracy theories she believes in. “These young kids, they have too much faith in politicians and teachers and leaders,” she’ll say. “But I don’t! I’ve been screwed before by people I thought were taking care of me. I think that’s why I believe in conspiracy theories.” Among her favorites to discuss are 9/11, the Boston Marathon bombings, and how Osama Bin Laden probably isn’t actually dead. (“Don’t you think we’d have thrown the SEAL team some sort of party?” she asked me.)

Psychologists have documented a clear association between the belief in conspiracy theories and feelings of loss of personal or societal control [van Prooijen

and Acker, 2015]. Perhaps due to her precarious social and economic situation, Madeline does feel the need to insert her own influence over her life in any way she can. This involves, for example, staying wary of most professionals.

Madeline has a particular fear and dislike of doctors. She would explain to me almost daily how they really make their money. “They just trick you into taking a billion pills!” she says. She also often found going to the doctor’s demeaning, especially during the years she was on public assistance after she lost her job. “I went in there with leg pain, and the first thing they did was to test me for syphilis!” she told me once. “I was like, is leg pain a symptom of syphilis? *No*, the dopey doc said, so I got pissed! Why the fuck are you testing me for syphilis then? I haven’t had sex since 2005!” Her agitation turned into wild laughter. “What, I’m a terrible person, just because I’m poor?” To avoid ever visiting a doctor again, Madeline keeps a constant supply of dandelion tea and Chinese liver herbs, and cures all her ailments at home.

She gets most of her information from the Internet, and sometimes she would send me blog links or show me YouTube videos to justify her alternative views. “Have you ever heard of the *natural man*?” she asked me once. “He talks about all these government loopholes. Like the loophole of capital letters in your name. You know, all these accounts you have, your birth certificate, social security and everything, they’re not really in your name. Did you ever notice how they put your name in all capitals? That’s so they have a loophole if they need to say it’s not really yours. Because your birth certificate isn’t in all capitals. It’s crazy. It’s really not like it should be, according to the Bible. The Bible is all about fairness and morality. Being fair is most important. But nothing is fair! Nobody is fair.”

Distrust of the outside world is a big part of Madeline’s life. Sandra Smith might say that Madeline’s vulnerable economic position and solo lifestyle could also engender a more serious type of distrust — towards her *self*. Those close to us — our friends, family, neighbors, and intimate partners — help us construct ideas of who we are. Early sociologists like Cooley [1902] discussed the “self” as a “looking glass”: we experience ourselves internally and subjectively, but respond to how others define us as well. In this view, our identities are at least partially a product of who those around us perceive us to be. But what happens when we don’t have those constant others around to help us with our self-definitions? Madeline has had to learn to adapt to living alone, with barely any money, in a world bereft of intimates.

One way that Madeline maintains her sense of self is through the constancy of the objects she keeps in her apartment. Her life between 1978 and today seems compressed into these odds and ends, and she delights in carefully pulling them out of their hiding places and telling their stories. Once, she showed me the red toolbox inside her bedroom cabinet, where she lost her fake wedding ring (which she wears because “you’d be surprised how people treat you differently when you’re 56 and not wearing one”). She found it there after phoning one of her trusted psychics, who told her it was near water and red metal. “The red metal must have been the toolbox!” she told me excitedly, and the water was, of course, referring to the old kayak oars she has stored right next to it, which were for her Stearns Cordova inflatable kayak. She would use that kayak on the East River back when she had a job and free time.

That red toolbox contains some of the tools she used to use for her jewelry-making hobby, though most of them are actually housed on a wheeled cart — full of clanging metal wire cutters, beads, and chunks of clay — which she sometimes rolls out from the alcove by the kitchen for short earring tutorials. She hasn’t bought new supplies in ages, but will sometimes take old molding material and repurpose it to make pendants. I received one of these pendants after I interpreted the coffee grounds in the bottom of her mug one morning.

“What do you see?” she asked me, pushing the rim of her plain white coffee mug directly under my nose.

I tried my best to come up with something. “It kinda looks like a hedgehog,” I told her. “But that doesn’t make much sense.”

Her face dropped in disbelief. “Oh, yes *it does*...” Eyes wide, she ran to the jewelry cart, and pulled out a small pendant — made with old white molding, now brown with dirt — which had a tiny hedgehog drawn on it. “It’s a sign,” she said, delicately handing it to me. “It’s for you.”

Madeline endows nearly every object and event with special meaning.

“My grandma has been visiting me,” she told me one evening, as soon as I opened the front door.

“Oh yeah?”

“She’s been flickering my laptop screen off and on. And all of a sudden, earlier this afternoon, this lamp right here turned off, and on again. I try to tell her, ‘Grandma, don’t do that to my laptop screen, because then I start to think it’s broken!’” she laughed.

I laughed along with her. “Wow. Does that kind of stuff happen to you a lot?”

“All the time,” she nodded.

“Are you ever afraid?”

Madeline looked displeased. “What! Of course not,” she said. “Why would I be afraid? I’m not afraid of spirits if they’re my relatives. It’s not like they’re taking the sheets off of me in the middle of the night or anything!”

Madeline feels special even when insects visit her. Once, after I shrieked and ran out of the bathroom for a minute upon finding the largest black cockroach I’d ever seen in my life, she marched right inside and peered at it inquisitively.

“Wow,” she remarked. “I don’t usually see these guys around here.”

I sauntered back, coolly making up for my scream of terror from 30 seconds earlier. “I wonder what he’s doing here.”

“I wonder what it *MEANS*,” she countered.

As the weeks of the summer went on, her search for meaning extended even into *my* life. Whenever I’d tell her about any friend I was meeting up with in the city, the first question out of her mouth would be, “What’s his (or her) birthday?” No matter what date I gave (if I knew), she’d immediately spring back with its accompanying zodiac sign. “VIRGO!” She’d yell decisively, running over to her bookshelf to grab her giant red book called *The Secret Language of Relationships*. She’d furiously flip through the pages until arriving at the spot where the sign was paired with my own. Then she could begin her lecture. “Well, see, you two would make good business partners,” she’d explain, peering out the top of her oval glasses. “So that’s a good sign.”

Some items come with a heavier sort of meaning, reminding Madeline of her loneliness. While I ate my yogurt one morning, she showed me a small handmade leather booklet that an old friend had given her in the early 90s, as he was dying of AIDS. He had written an autobiography with poems and pictures of loved ones. At the end of the booklet was a short paragraph which wished for anyone who was reading to “experience deep love,” as he had. She admitted to me then, as if it was nothing, that she hadn’t experienced any deep love in her life yet. “Well - wait,” she corrected. “I guess for my animals I have.”

Madeline has always loved animals. She keeps a pet whenever she has the money to take care of one. A few years before her dog Ginger, Madeline had a turtle, which she named Splash. “He was just like a dog!” she recounted. “He would lie down halfway under my chair, pull his little arms in, and watch TV with me.” Madeline loved Splash. “One day, though, he was running around the apartment, and fell into one of those floor vents,” she told me. “He came out all covered in black stuff. I cleaned him off, but I took him in to the vet just to make sure he was okay. They gave him some type of shot, and a couple of weeks later,

I found him in the spare bedroom, dead.” She started to cry as she remembered the details. “I still have him,” she whispered, tears streaming, pointing to her bedroom. “In a box. I didn’t know what to do with him. I didn’t have the money to do... what’s the thing you do? When you burn the remains?” I reminded her. “Yes, that, cremation. I didn’t have the money. So I kept him.”

Madeline adores even the animals she can’t keep as her own. She would often gaze at the pigeons on the next roof outside her kitchen window, or at the birds that would perch on her fire escape. She can make the exact same sound as most birds she encounters. Often, she’ll open her window to talk to them through her screen.

“LOOK! That’s a mourning dove,” she explained to me early one day, as she ran from the kitchen to her living room window. “ooooo-OOOOHh Ooh, Ooh, Ooh,” she called out. The dove didn’t acknowledge her, so she felt she needed to dig out her bird noises book – complete with plastic speaker for playing all different types of bird calls – to properly communicate with him. She held the book up to the screen and pointed it at the fire escape while the old speaker played a tinny, muffled version of the coo. Madeline’s expectant eyes and earnest smile led me to remark about how neat I thought it was that she could talk to birds.

“Not just birds!” she said, setting the record straight. “All sorts of animals. I even talk to bugs, you know. The butterflies sometimes fly up here, and they really like being told how pretty they are. Except you have to make sure to do it in a high pitched voice. They need that. Then they float in front of you for a while, as a gift. They never stay too long though.”

For a while, Madeline’s only steady, living companion was her brown long-haired dachshund, Ginger. She’d often brush Ginger’s hair while she sat and talked with her in her armchair. Ginger would give Madeline a reason to leave the apartment at least once a day, when she would take her out on a short walk. But I only got to know Ginger for a week and a half before she started to get sick.

“I’ve been trying to feed her this crushed-up broccoli,” Madeline told me when we both noticed that Ginger was uncharacteristically lethargic, lying in her bed. “That and dandelion tea. But she won’t have any of it.” After a couple of days of home remedies, Ginger seemed to be getting worse, and couldn’t even lift her head up from her bed. With some encouragement, Madeline reluctantly took her to the veterinarian – even though her past episode with Splash had led her to hate vets almost as much as she hates physicians.

The vet didn’t have good news. They had run some blood tests – which

Madeline could barely afford — and said that Ginger had developed a serious bacterial infection. She was now in liver failure. It would be wise to put her down, right then and there. Madeline recounted the story for me that evening. “But I had no time to think! She needs to be home, with me.” She convinced the vets that she would heal Ginger, and that they should let her leave with a bag of saline and some needles to hydrate her. She asked me to help.

As I stood holding the saline drip, over Madeline’s dying dog, surrounded by a vigil of flickering candles, I thought about whether or not I should intervene. The dog was clearly in pain, belly swollen, eyes yellow with jaundice, and yet, Madeline was still hopeful. “*Jin-jaah*,” she’d say, stroking her hair. “She already looks better than she did this afternoon, doesn’t she?”

I didn’t have the heart to be honest, so I nodded. But Madeline later could tell that I was worried. “You’re worried,” she said later in the kitchen. I admitted that, yes, I was. “Can you tell me what you think?” she said, crying. “I don’t really have anyone to bounce opinions off of. And I’m so close to Ginger that I can’t be objective. I just can’t.” I told her then that Ginger didn’t look good at all to me, and that she was probably in a lot of pain. Madeline nodded, thanked me, and we hugged. The next day, Ginger died at the Humane Society, while Madeline held her in her arms.

For two days, we mourned, we watched movies on my computer, and I listened to Madeline tell me stories as she went through photos of Ginger chasing squirrels in Tompkins Square Park. On the third day, while out for a run, I bought her a yellow rose from the bodega on Avenue C, and the flower stayed on her kitchen island for weeks, long after its petals browned and drooped. After the flower had been clearly dead for quite some time, though, it started sprouting little green shoots from the spikes on its stem, and Madeline had switched it to a different vase so that the new plants could keep growing.

“That’s what happens when a gift is given out of love,” Madeline said warmly.

Looking back at the end of the summer, I would come to regret the short, polite smile I gave her then, as I changed the subject.

Madeline’s animals can only provide her with temporary relief from her aloneness. She still feels the need to interact with people. But when she does, she often breaks some of the conversation rules that many of us take for granted. This can sometimes lead to frustration and misunderstanding. Madeline doesn’t always realize this as she tries to fulfill her need for connection through the very occasional visit from a friend or through her interactions with strangers.

The only friend from the pre-Disneyland neighborhood Madeline keeps in touch with is a woman named Gretchen. Madeline sees Gretchen only once every one to two months, even though she lives just around the corner; she's very busy working at a small independent publishing house, Madeline has explained, and she has her sister's family living nextdoor. "She doesn't really need me, you know," Madeline said. "But it's still nice to see her." Gretchen is thin and also in her late 50s. When I first met her, she had her long, dyed-jet-black hair pulled back in a ponytail, scrunched over Madeline's coffee table and squinting at the Tarot cards she was interpreting.

"*Nicole!*" Madeline called out, excitedly, as I walked in the door that evening. "Come meet Gretchen. Gretchen, this is Nicole — she's going to be a professor you know." The two of them giggled, and I noticed that there was an empty bottle of white wine on the table.

"Oh, I've been hearing so much about you, Nicole," Gretchen said, reaching for my hand. "Both of my parents were professors, actually."

After Gretchen and I chatted about her parents and sister (a children's author) for a minute or two, Madeline started laughing. "THE CAAAARDS!" she yelled, throwing her head back with more giggles, in what I assumed was a happy consequence of the wine.

"AH! Yes! I was just reading Madeline's cards," Gretchen remembered, chuckling. I told her to continue as I took a seat on the couch beside her. Madeline looked pleased, sitting tall in her armchair. She struggled to stop smiling, but forced herself to concentrate. She stared at the cards, poised to hear her fate.

Gretchen changed her tone to a solemn one, and her hushed voice and straight face marked the gravity of the situation. She proceeded to read Madeline's cards, and then mine as well. We'd both drawn the King of Pentacles, but it had a different meaning for each of us, Gretchen said. For Madeline, it indicated the possibility of a new business venture. Madeline nodded thoughtfully upon hearing this. But for me, it meant that a good man would appear in my life, one who would guide me towards success along with him. I laughed and quipped something about what a nice change that would be. Gretchen chuckled too, but Madeline did not.

"Heads of State use Tarot readers, you know," Madeline reminded me very seriously.

I was embarrassed. "I believe you!" I told her, making sure to be enthusiastic lest she felt I disrespected the method.

After a moment or two of slightly tense silence, Gretchen gracefully relieved me from my discomfort. "So what have you been up to today, Nicole?"

I mentioned that I'd spent the morning walking around the Lower East Side, and the afternoon reading in the NYU library, just as it had gotten too hot to remain outdoors for long. I told them a bit about the books I was reading for my general exams. Madeline seemed particularly interested in the "role-taking" I described of Mead's description of the self in social interaction. According to his view, I said, we try to imagine the ways in which our actions are perceived in the minds of others we interact with.

"You know what's next!" she gasped. "MIND CONTROL!!!!"

Gretchen looked unconvinced. "That's a bit of a leap, Mad —"

"I'm TELLING you," Madeline interrupted. "Mind control is the next step. It's what the government is working on. And the newspapers."

"She's had some pot, too," Gretchen whispered to me, pointing to Madeline behind her hand.

"I'M TELLING YOU! Look, I'll demonstrate. Nicole, come here." I stood up and wandered over, 80% intrigued, 20% nervous. Madeline stood up, too. "Okay. Now, push me. On my shoulders."

"What?"

"JUST PUSH ME! Not hard or anything. A little. And keep pushing!" I pushed, lightly, on her shoulders, and she began to walk backwards, in the direction of the push. "Now, watch," she said, as she continued to move backwards, but led the push towards the left as well. "See how you think *you're* in power, because you're pushing?? Actually *I'm* in power, because I'm the one leading where the push goes!"

I saw Gretchen look away and take another sip of her wine.

Madeline got a little bit more rowdy, waving her arms in agitation. "People can push back all they want, but the ones in power keep the power. They don't give a *fuck*, they'll take the pushes and guide them!"

Gretchen tried to get her to sit down again. "Madeline, why don't we —"

"— They don't give a FUCK!" Madeline interrupted again. "I'm telling you Gretchen, they really don't. You can push and push and it won't make any difference."

"Well, I think it's getting late," Gretchen said, seeming a little annoyed at the demonstration. She started to gather her things. I thought that maybe I should give the two of them some time to say goodbye, so I quickly told Gretchen it was great to meet her, and retreated into my room.

Madeline's voice softened. Through my bedroom door, I heard her ask Gretchen when she'd visit again. "Well, the next few weeks are pretty busy," she answered. "But I'll keep in touch."

Since Gretchen's visits are infrequent, Madeline must get by without them. She feels sometimes that her most meaningful interactions are instead with strangers. "Ya know what, strangers are the best," she's told me. "They've treated me better than my own family does."

One type of strangers Madeline encounters are the outsiders she rents her spare bedroom to. She welcomes these strangers - from all over the globe - into her home as temporary family, and she often learns about the outside world from them. "The Italian girl Roberta taught me how to make these little filters," she showed me once, pointing at the small, rolled-up pieces of paper she puts in the end of her handmade cigarettes. Another time, she told me that she first heard about the summer "Burning Man" festival from a different renter of hers, a Swiss man named Aaron, who showed her photos and told her about his experience there. Burning man is known for its philosophy of 'radical inclusion' and self-reliance.³ "Sounds pretty perfect to me," was her assessment. "Those are the sorts of young people I like. Sign me up!"

I was one of these strangers, too, and I could tell that Madeline was eager to talk every day. She'd start her monologues in the morning, right after I'd wake up, as soon as I was able to cross the threshold into her living room. She'd often land on one her favorite topics — the youths, conspiracies, the Zionists, college admissions, or how terrible it is that her sister never calls — and remain on it for 15-30 minutes. Frequently, I'd then receive an offer for a meal or coffee just before I was due to head out the door, seemingly so that the conversation could continue. Sometimes her monologues would even carry on through the barrier of the bathroom door when I was on the other side.

But she was also eager to learn from me. Especially towards the second half of the summer, questions became just as frequent as monologues; it seemed that, after her need for talking was fulfilled, she was lighter, freer, and finally able to care about the inner world of someone else. She would begin to ask me questions every morning about the books I had that day in my backpack, or about any dates I had planned. At one point, she became particularly curious about the *okcupid* online dating site I'd mentioned, and ended up even setting one up for herself after hearing about it. (She'd later begin to call it her "okstupid.")

In fact, I found she adjusted to my presence in other, more subtle ways. At the start of the summer, our schedules seemed very different; Madeline would stay up very late, 3 or 4 o'clock, and would wake up around 8 or 9. As I would often wake up earlier (I'd try to sneak a run in before it got too hot, around 6:30 or so),

³<http://burningman.org/>

I noticed that her schedule gradually shifted, so that, by the second month of my stay, she was awake for the entire time I was awake, too. If I happened to stay in for part of the day and work in her living room, she would work alongside me on her ancient white laptop; but if I suddenly switched to reading a book, she would follow suit. I began to feel that she was using me — someone external to herself — to help with her inner regulation. We all do this during the course of social interaction, at the most basic level of informal social control; but in Madeline's case, the changes were more noticeable. "I don't trust my intuition anymore," she told me once, somewhat out of the blue. "I trust conversations. Conversations with other people."

But I learned from her rhythms, too. I learned that baby oil makes a great hair treatment; that you can basically clean anything with lime juice; and that the world is much harder for women than I ever imagined in my 27 years. "If the Buddhists are right, I'm comin' back to this earth as a dude," she told me. "No way am I comin' back as a chick!" Whenever I'd have any troubles with the New York City men I'd go on dates with, she'd want to hear all about it. She gave me some of the best dating advice I've ever received. "Listen, Nicole," she told me. "Just make sure you find a man you can trust holding on to the hand of your kid." One day, she looked up both our signs in her big red book of zodiac relationships and read the friendship portion of our pairing. The book said that we were a lesson in "seeing eye to eye" — we were very different, but learned from each other, like Isaac Newton and Edmond Halley. "Just like Newton and Halley!" Madeline would remind me later, whenever one of us learned something new from the other.

Madeline also makes the most of her interactions with strangers in public. Perhaps two or three times a week, she would slip on her navy blue Sketchers® sneaker clogs, throw on a peasant blouse and a pair of old jeans (complete with silver lacy patterns embroidered on the pockets), and venture out onto the streets she ordinarily watched from her window. Rarely did her interactions with those she encountered there run smoothly; most turned into misunderstandings, or, in some cases, full-blown arguments. I'd often hear the tales when I returned to the apartment in the evenings.

"I almost got into a *fight!*" she told me one night, excitedly, after returning to the apartment at nearly 1am. "I went to get a drink at this Mexican restaurant on Second Avenue, and this young guy was drunk, yelling out insults at waitresses. He even tried to touch one girl's breasts! So I yelled at him and told him to go back to wherever the fuck he came from. I looked around at all the men in the

place, and they all just sat there like lumps! Twenty or thirty years ago, society would have taken care of an asshole like him. But today the men have no balls. No balls!" she laughed. "I almost kicked him in the balls myself! The restaurant called the cops. They wanted to take me to the station, too, but I talked them out of it. The men don't stand up for us anymore, Nicole. So we gotta do it ourselves."

Madeline generally has no trouble intervening with situations she finds to be wrong. Another day, she saw two children sitting on a dirty sidewalk, while their distracted young "hipster" mother chatted on her phone a few feet away. "I told that mother right out," Madeline informed me. "You know, you shouldn't let your kids play on the dirty street like that. But she ignored me. So I turned to one kid — I couldn't tell if he was a boy or girl, long hair is popular now — and said, get up off the ground! And do you know, the little dude listened to me? Ha!" she was delighted. "I told him, you know I gotcho back, right? The mom wasn't too happy, but the kid was!"

I got to accompany her outside on a few of these lucky occasions over the summer. One night, in August, Madeline found a couple of old AMC free movie coupons in her bedroom. She'd mailed in for them after seeing some sort of ad in a magazine. "Let's go see Ricki and The Flash!" she said to me, beaming. "She seems like my kinda chick." I thought it was a great idea, and was hopeful that the night would go smoothly, without arguments or the involvement of cops.

The bus ride up 1st Avenue to Kips Bay on the M15 that night was a seamless one, and my hopes remained high until we saw the line in the movie theater lobby. There were about 20 people ahead of us — with only a few minutes until our movie started. Madeline mumbled something about how the commercials take up a lot of time before every movie, and we made our way to the back of the line. There, one of the AMC employees, a thin, stern-looking woman, was directing each party at the front of the line to either the first available automated ticket machine or to one counter all the way to the left of the lobby, where a young man was working. "Is anyone paying by credit card?" she asked the group.

Madeline stuck her free movie passes into the air from the back of the line and waved them, triumphantly. "I HAVE THESE!" she blurted out.

The woman turned to look at us for a moment, slightly annoyed. "I'll be right with you."

After only a few minutes of anxious waiting, we made it to the front of the line. The woman told us there that we'd have to go to the in-person station, since we had free coupons. Madeline was very happy about this. "GOOD!" she yelled. "I like PEOPLE! Not machines!" She turned to the man behind us in line

and yelled at him, too, chanting while smiling - "People, not machines! People, not machines! People, not machines!" - and proceeded to throw her head back in wild laughter. This sort of yell-joke is one of Madeline's primary means of communicating with strangers; unfortunately, its playfulness is often lost on her audience. This case was no exception. The man she yell-joked at smiled nervously, and I threw in some laughs in an attempt to smooth it over.

In a few minutes, the ticket station all the way to the left - with the young man working - was finally open, and we made our way over to it. Madeline repeated her chant to him. "People, not machines! People, not machines!" and I was relieved by his easy and hearty laughter. But then Madeline noticed something that bothered her. "All these red lights from the machines... they're getting in my eyes!" she told him, wincing.

The man chuckled again. "Those machines are the future!" he joked.

"NO!" Madeline roared back, serious this time. "Machines CANNOT replace people! This is how you gotta get things done, you can't stay quiet, you gotta shout it out! PEOPLE, NOT MACHINES!"

The man's smile diminished into merely a polite one. "Enjoy the show," he said, handing us our tickets.

The yell-joke can sometimes backfire on Madeline in more serious ways, especially when she uses it to stand up for something she believes in, or to preserve her own dignity in a street interaction.

One Sunday morning, mid-summer, we decided to check out a church service in Harlem and explore some soul food restaurants afterwards. We needed to take the M15 *select* bus service — which is sort of like an express, skipping certain stops — to arrive up in Harlem on time. When we got to the bus stop, Madeline was annoyed at the way the select bus service operations run.

"I hate these machines," she said, pointing to one of them. "You need a subway card to get a select bus ticket. How dumb is that?? What about the old people who can't go down and get a subway ticket, they can't use the select bus?" At this point, a bearded middle-aged man approached the machine, and Madeline turned to him to continue her diatribe. "I'll tell ya," she said to him. "This city sometimes, I don't know who's running it anymore! How dumb is this machine. The old people can't use it!"

I noticed then that the man actually had on a gray vest, embroidered with the MTA logo. He worked for the transit authority. In a thick, European accent, he engaged with Madeline. "Well, eh, you use, eh, the card, and then you get the ticket."

“I KNOW!” yelled Madeline. “I’m saying it’s STUPID! S-T-U-P-I-D,” she chanted, laughing.

But the man did not laugh. He raised his voice in return. “What you mean?” he said. “Put the card in, and you can get a bus ticket!”

“BUT THAT’S WHAT I’M SAAAYY-YING,” Madeline continued, raising her voice even louder to match. She made a gesture with her hands, tapping the sides of her head, as if to say, *duh*.

The man, clearly misunderstanding Madeline’s complaints, scowled. “WHAT YA YELLING AT ME FOR!??” he boomed.

Madeline didn’t lower her voice, though, and simply repeated herself. “I’m SAAAY-YIING that the system is STUPID!”

The man gave up, fanning his raised hands out in dismissal. Before either of us could clarify any further, he turned to walk away.

Madeline is fearless in social interaction. Sometimes, she breaks the rules of talk that many of us take for granted; she interrupts, she speaks out of turn, and she raises her voice in ways that could be considered inappropriate in certain situations. Many, like the MTA man, interpret her volume as a personal affront. But as feisty as she can be, sometimes she uses that fearlessness to get things done. One weekend, when we decided at the last minute to go see some jazz acts at the Charlie Parker Jazz Festival in Tompkins Square Park, her brazenness came in very handy.

We walked south along Avenue A for a bit that day to scope out the food truck situation before heading in to the festival. Madeline didn’t spot anything she wanted (it was all “fried crap!”), so we entered the park from the southwest corner, near the artists and stage performances. The park was crowded with hundreds of people; there wasn’t a single bench or patch of grass open for us to lay out our blanket. Soon, though, Madeline noticed that a huge swath of perfect green grass had been fenced off with a temporary fence, right by the stage. “Why the fuck would they put this fence up?” she pointed and yelled. “Look at all these people! They could take the god damn fence down and let them listen to the jazz.” She began to work herself up more and more. “What, like they have to protect the grass? Haven’t they heard of this thing called SEED that you can just plant!?? Come on, let’s go. I’m finding the manager.”

My optimism waned. “Well... do you want me to—”

“—yeah you’re coming with me,” she interrupted. “It’ll be good for you.”

As we walked towards the managers, I thought about what I would do if the police got involved in what I was sure was about to become a rowdy argument.

But when we approached one of the park workers in a dark green work shirt, I was surprised to find that what came out at first was all politeness.

“Excuse me,” Madeline started. “Why is that fence still up? People could go on the grass!”

The woman quickly explained that they had tried to hire a bunch of people to take the fence down, but for some reason it didn’t work out. She would go ask the park manager what was up.

As the woman walked away, Madeline began her yelling — half to the woman’s back, half to me.

“Why would there be a fence there!?? It’s beautiful grass to sit on! They’re just being lazy, I’ll bet you anything. Just lazy. I’ll get some volunteers. That’s what I’ll use *you* for. You can go get us 20 guys to dig up that fence easy. Everyone is afraid to SPEAK UP these days! You and your young people. It’s like a positivity movement or something. I can’t stand it. You all only want to talk about positive, happy things, but there’s nothing to say about positive, happy things! Years ago, the real East Villagers would have never sat back and let that fence stay there. We would have just ripped it out ourselves! You’re all just going to let the world go to shit if you think it’s all happy all the time, and there’s nothing to yell about. I swear — oh, wait a minute, look! They opened the gate!”

I turned to look. The workers didn’t end up taking the fence down, but one of them opened a portion of the metal gate so that people could wander into the patch of grass. We wandered in along with them.

Madeline looked very pleased with herself as we sat on our blanket. “See! New Yorkers, that’s how you GET. SHIT. DONE!” she turned and yelled to a young family of four sitting behind us. “I’m sick of this positivity movement!” (I’m sure that this family had no idea what the “positivity movement” was, but they gracefully smiled and nodded anyway.) I congratulated Madeline on her handiwork.

“Yours too!” she reminded me. “Your first act of East Village activism.”

A few of Madeline’s behaviors, in certain settings, would be considered “pathological.” She escalates quickly, breaks norms of social interaction, and has trouble sometimes envisioning how her behavior might be perceived by others. But the structure of the outside world doesn’t make it any easier for her, either. In particular, navigating the bureaucracy of higher education has proven to be Madeline’s biggest struggle in recent years.

Madeline had decided to go back to school a few years after she lost her last job. Before 2007, she had held mostly positions in restaurants and real-estate offices; but after the financial crisis, she couldn't find any work, and she attributed it to her lack of a bachelor's degree. "I can't keep up with these young finance guys unless I have that degree," she's told me. She settled on trying for a BBA — a Bachelor's of Business Administration — at Baruch College, and began taking courses there, one or two per term.

To finance her studies, she applied for and was awarded federal Pell Grants. But it seemed as though her financial aid situation had generated some misunderstandings. Someone at the aid office had told her that her grant was "unlimited." Madeline thought that sounded fishy, but she took the woman at her word, and signed up for more classes than she could afford. "I was like, are you sure? *Unlimited?*" she recounted. "She said, yep, so I figured, what the heck! I took some Chinese, I took some History, I took a class called *Nature of New York*." None of the advisors had sat her down to explain the limits of her funding. She needed many more courses — core courses, outside of the electives she had been picking on her own — in order to graduate, but was running out of money. On top of this, she'd failed Calculus twice. She still needed to take a minimum of twelve more classes to graduate with a BBA when I looked at her paperwork.

I'd observe Madeline poring over her stacks of papers at least once a week, trying to figure out the complicated transfer credits procedure (she had taken a few courses online at a different branch, and was also trying to transfer some credits from her Associate's degree back in the 80s). I'd gathered bits of what the problems were over the summer, but by the beginning of August, I'd gotten Madeline's blessing to sit down with all her documents myself. As I flipped through the stacks and through the Baruch course handbook, it turned out that she had credits that might transfer over from her Associate's, but she might have to appeal for them. She was also only four classes away from getting other Bachelor's degrees — in either Psychology or Communications, if she'd change her major. I asked her if she'd try going to academic advising again, sitting down with an advisor, and explaining her complicated history.

"That doesn't go so well," she said. "I tried once. But all they do is give me this worksheet. And they say I need to log on to TIPPS⁴ to find out what transfers, but then I do that and they tell me the rules have changed! TIPPS says I already

⁴An unnecessarily complicated online system for making sense of transfer credits between CUNY colleges. The rules on this website are often divergent from the rules present on the major worksheets given to students at Baruch (for example, in which courses count towards minors or majors in different concentrations).

took statistics, that it transfers. AND I already took physics. But those fucks at Baruch won't take them!"

Madeline was right; when she logged in, I saw that the online transfer system was displaying that she'd taken a core science requirement, Physics, during her online coursework, and that she had Statistics from her Associate's degree. The system said that both of these should transfer to her degree work at Baruch. I thought that maybe the misunderstanding arose during the course of Madeline's interactions with advisors at the college. She'd mentioned to me once that she was escorted off the premises by security. So I suggested that I go with her to academic advising and do some interpreting, since I was used to all this transfer and credit nonsense. I could speak the academic jargon.

As we got on the bus together the next morning to meet with some advisors during their walk-in hours, I could tell Madeline was nervous. Her rants were even longer and more wandering than usual. "Look at that young girl over there," she said to me. "I think she's waiting for the NYU bus. Those buses make me so angry. They are special buses that use the MTA stops, and the city bus system probably gets decreased funding because the students all use those other buses instead. They're taking moneys away from our buses! Since they come from other places, they use cars where they live, so they think that only poor people ride city buses. But NO! We're New Yorkers, we use our public transportation! These idiots, thinking only poor people ride buses just because that's what it's like where they come from. New Yorkers know the real deal. We'll tell you the real deal right to your face, too. Other people will talk behind your back. They say New Yorkers are mean, but we're not. We're just not afraid to tell it to your face!"

Eventually, we arrived at Baruch, and our plan was - if necessary - to tell the advisors that I was Madeline's niece, helping with the finances, and that's why I needed to tag along. (It turned out that building security is fairly serious there, so we had to use this story after all.) At 8:50am, we arrived outside the doors of advising, which opened at 9:00 for walk-ins. There were three people ahead of us in line.

"Okay, so, we're number four," Madeline said aloud. She tried to make conversation with some of the other young students, who laughed nervously as they gradually realized how her voice was getting louder and louder. "Hey you, have these guys been helpful for you? Yeah, you get like 15 minutes usually! Ha! What are you here for, you got an appointment?"

As the next ten minutes elapsed, I was surprised to see the steady stream of young students gradually joining us in line. There were about 30 people wait-

ing by the time the metal doors to Advising opened. We checked in without a problem, and a young blonde woman, Stephanie, appearing to be in her mid-20s, agreed to see us within a few minutes. Madeline began her winding story the moment we sat down in Stephanie's office.

"See," she started, "I was at the community college, then online classes, and then I'm trying this BBA now, but they won't take statistics and physics. They should take statistics and physics! The woman told me the Pell grant was unlimited, but it wasn't, and I took courses in English and History that I didn't need. And now I have no money. I'm 56 years old! They should just be reasonable and take the physics and statistics. I just want to graduate and get out of here. I didn't think I was so bad at math. I'm terrible. But you can probably see that." Madeline finally took a breath and looked up at Stephanie, who was scrutinizing Madeline's transcript on her computer screen.

"Yes, I can see that," she told us. But as she swiveled her chair around to face us, she was all smiles. "Okay. Let me see your worksheet," she said, putting her hands together.

For the next hour, we meticulously worked through Madeline's BBA worksheet, which detailed the course requirements she had either fulfilled or not. Stephanie was incredibly patient, even when Madeline got heated. I tried to interpret whenever one of them said (or yelled) something that the other didn't understand. Stephanie worked through all the options, and she concluded that, based on what Madeline had taken already, it would be possible for her to switch to the school of Arts and Sciences for a BA in either communications (3-5 more classes) or Psychology (4 more classes). But she would have to change to the new curriculum, called "Pathways," first, since she entered school under a different curriculum, which had different rules. We would need to talk to the director of Pathways so she could tell us what could transfer and what couldn't under these new rules. Stephanie set us up an appointment with the director for an hour later, at 11am.

We were all smiles as we exited her office. I mentioned something about how great the meeting went, but Madeline wasn't as quick to stay positive. "Yeah, well, let's see what they say when we get back up there," she said. Nevertheless, we spent the hour in between meetings laughing and chatting by the coffee shop on the first floor of the building. Nearby was a large atrium, and Madeline told me a story about how sometimes large birds get in there when she hangs out in between classes. "I always give them some of my potato chips," she said. "Because nobody really pays attention to them — they fly in here, and then they end up starving!"

But when we arrived upstairs again, I could tell immediately that our meeting with the director would be very different than our meeting with Stephanie. “Hi,” the director said, gruffly, as she hurried to wave us in to her office. Her name was Elaine. She was about Madeline’s age, with straight, shoulder-length blonde hair and black glasses.

“Well, Stephanie updated me on your situation,” she told us, without any hint of a smile, as we sat down. “And you still will need to take another science course if you switched to Pathways to study Psychology.”

“What about Communications?” Madeline asked. I clarified that she was also thinking of majoring in Communications, depending on which one would be more feasible.

Elaine looked repulsed. “Why wouldn’t you pick Psychology over Communications?” she asked, glaring at Madeline. Madeline had no response, so I jumped in with some questions about the life science requirements, and why the Physics she’d taken wouldn’t count as her science course.

“Well, the life science requirement needs a lab,” Elaine explained, in a milder tone. “The Physics course she took didn’t have one. So she’ll have to write an appeal to the Pathways committee if she wants to contest this.”

Elaine was much nicer to me in her responses than she was whenever Madeline spoke. I had wondered at this point what put her off about Madeline. Was it her slightly tattered peasant blouse, old jeans, and sneaker clogs? Was it her direct, and loud, manner of speaking? Was it the fact that the two of them were the same age, whereas I was a younger, more “normal” sort of student? Whatever it was, I was sure it was not a valid excuse for what came next.

Madeline looked suspicious. “Why didn’t the TIPPS online system say that, then? It says that Physics will count. Look, here, I printed it out. ‘Will transfer - life science.’ Look at that.”

“DON’T attack *me*,” Elaine yelled in return. “It’s not *my* fault. You can’t argue with me for this, it’s got nothing to do with me. It’s just the rules. When the Pathways curriculum was updated, some courses didn’t count as science anymore. So that’s that.” She threw up her hands, washing them of the matter. “Sorry. You’ll have to write an appeal to the committee. They meet next in October.”

I tried to ask Elaine what the appeal process was like, so that we could figure out how to get started on it. It involved including the syllabus and a one-page description of the reason for the appeal in an online application, in an undoubtedly complicated registration system separate from any of the three Madeline had already been forced to learn how to use during the course of her schooling. Madeline wasn’t pleased with this news.

“Baruch has taken all my money,” she pleaded with Elaine, in a soft voice. “I might have to take some time off.”

Elaine responded without any sympathy whatsoever. “Well, just be warned, if you take time off and the rules change by the Spring, which is likely, you will be subject to the new rules.”

Madeline looked defeated. But I was starting to get angry. I asked Elaine how often these complicated rules changed on students like this. Just as she was about to answer, her computer made a *ding!* that indicated she had a new email. “OH my god,” Elaine said, as she glanced at it. “I absolutely have to answer this email. It’s from the vice president.” But I was within eyeshot of her screen, and I saw that it was nothing more than a community-wide reminder about a change in administrative forms. She never even answered it — she simply sifted through her unread emails, reading them all, and ignoring us in the process.

When she decided she had read enough, she turned back to us. I gave up on my accusatory rule-changing question, and instead I asked her what the steps were that Madeline needed to take next. She turned to open a new Word document, and began typing a summary of Madeline’s situation and concerns. Madeline would have to fill out a contract to switch to the Pathways curriculum, complete a major and minor change form with the registrar, appeal to the Pathways committee for her science courses, and find someone in the Psychology department to discuss which - if any - of the major and minor courses she’d already taken, online or at the business school, could transfer over. Madeline seemed overwhelmed, and asked if Elaine could print out the paragraph summary on paper for her.

“No, you *cannot* have that printed out,” she snapped back. “These are my private notes.” (I turned to Madeline then and told her not to worry — I’d been typing notes into my iPhone this whole time. I showed her my Evernote app, which had everything we talked about written in it.)

Madeline was uncharacteristically speechless. She seemed as though she could not comprehend enough of the situation to even get riled up about it, as she usually does. When Elaine turned to us and asked if we needed anything else from her, I was the one to stand up and quickly thank her for her time. Madeline, still silent, followed me out the door.

The administrative hoops that Madeline has had to jump through are typical of many institutions of higher education. There have been even more complications since the meeting that day: for example, at the registrar’s office, we learned about a rule that no less than 60% of major- and minor-related courses must be

completed in person at the school of Arts and Sciences at Baruch. The rules of the CUNY college system change almost yearly, it seems, and none of this information is available in a centralized place. Academic Advisors do not typically take appointments - only walk-ins, during designated time slots - and it's normal to see a different advisor at each of these meetings. This makes it very difficult for someone like Madeline, with a complicated history, to be known; no advisor is keeping tabs on her progress. On top of this, since Madeline is a "mature student," she was not given access to any of the orientations set up for regular undergraduate students at the beginning of their studies. The system, it seems, is nearly impossible to navigate for those outside the "normal" college trajectory. Madeline has been left to deal with it on her own.

*** **

Whenever I think about my summer with Madeline, one moment stands out as my clearest memory.

On one morning, in late August, a few days before I was to move out, I stood in the bathroom doorway across from Madeline's kitchen island. I'd been standing there for over thirty minutes, towel in hand; I hadn't showered yet, and I was already late for coffee with a friend. I couldn't budge: I had been listening to Madeline talk about Zionists, 9/11 conspiracies, and the college admissions officers and professors that she hated for "fucking her over."

"...But those professors, they're all wrong anyway. They didn't like me in class. They'd roll their eyes, like, here she comes again. But I should be able to ask all the questions I want! Plus their ideas about the media are all wrong. It's the grassroots, the people on the ground. It's always the people on the ground..."

I could barely get a word in this time. When I finally found a lull long enough to wrap up the conversation - and to subtly start closing the bathroom door - she stopped me.

"Oh before you go in there *I* need the bathroom," she said, as if I would of course take no issue with this. This was her space. My \$1500 per month only went so far.

I looked at her for a moment, clutching my towel in silent frustration, then turned and quickly marched out of the bathroom doorway and around the corner.

She closed the door loudly and continued talking, now muffled by the extra layer between us. I paced back and forth a bit to cool down. I always found Madeline interesting, but I had been listening to her for hours each day, for three months straight. Today, I was tired, I was irritated, and I was late.

Just as I was at my angriest, my eyes hit the rack of dinner plates hanging on the wall by one of the kitchen counters. Most of her plates were quite plain – solid, earthy colors, light designs – but there was one with a cartoon of Winnie the Pooh on it. I had talked about this plate with Madeline before: Pooh and Piglet were sitting on the ground, happily gazing at each other, eating some messy jars of honey. Around the edges, it read, “Once upon a yummy hunny time, Pooh was very hungry.”

As I looked the plate over, I remembered the time a month or so before when she told me she’d bought it because it was so cute when she saw it at TJMaxx. In this moment, I pictured her there: standing among the plates in the household items aisle, Winnie the Pooh in her hands. The woman I listened to yell and scream angrily all summer – who was yelling, still, behind the bathroom door, who regularly waved her arms in fits of fury, who got rowdy in a restaurant and was nearly arrested for attempting to kick a misogynistic patron in his crotch, who became quickly and passionately enraged with nearly everyone she met – was the very same woman who stood among the kitchenware in that store, picked up this small plate of Winnie the Pooh, and thought to herself, *oh, isn’t that cute.*

As I pictured this, my heart melted. For a split second I felt I understood something real about Madeline – about everyone I’d ever met, really – whose fragile self lies underneath a few layers of hardened experience. Madeline is by no means an angel: she yells, she swears, and she interrupts people on purpose. But she does these things to preserve her dignity – her sense of self – and to stick up for what she feels is right and fair. Most importantly, her behaviors make sense from up close, given the circumstances she has learned to live with: feeling abnormal, living alone, *being* alone.

For Madeline, and others, living alone in and of itself is not all that problematic. As Hughes and Gove [1981] find, merely living alone isn’t associated with severely pathological behavior. In fact, those who live alone “may compensate in some way for their relative isolation through other behaviors which they find particularly rewarding” – for example, by finding household tasks meaningful, or by protecting their self-sufficiency. Madeline certainly fits this description: she derives pleasure from her clean apartment, finds meaning in every object and experience she can, and takes pride in her jewelry-making and self-healing

practices. But the real problems arise when living alone means *being* alone. This is much more difficult to observe. In everyday life, the pathology of aloneness can be seen in more subtle ways: in situational misunderstandings, feelings of distrust, and difficulties with social interaction.

Sometimes, I wonder about the academic advisors at Baruch, and whether they would treat Madeline any differently if they had the chance to get up close to her story. How might they feel if they could experience a tour of the cherished items in her apartment, or see her struggle with furrowed brow over the piles of paper she's left to deal with, alone, because she feels as though she can't keep up with the young people around her? To know that she is by herself in this world, and is just trying to rejoin it?

I hope that they would feel the way I felt as I stared at that plate of Winnie the Pooh. If they did, the next time she walks into their office, they might listen to her for a few extra minutes, with new ears.

THE END

Bibliography

Charles Horton Cooley. The Social Self—the Meaning of ‘I’. In *On Self and Social Organization*, pages 155–84. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1902.

Michael Hughes and Walter R Gove. Living alone, social integration, and mental health. *American Journal of Sociology*, pages 48–74, 1981.

Mike Isaac. Airbnb Releases Trove of New York City Home-Sharing Data. *The New York Times*, December 2015.

Eric Klinenberg. *Going solo: The extraordinary rise and surprising appeal of living alone*. Penguin, 2012.

Sandra Susan Smith. *Lone pursuit: Distrust and defensive individualism among the black poor*. Russell Sage Foundation, 2007.

Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Michele Acker. The influence of control on belief in conspiracy theories: Conceptual and applied extensions. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 29(5):753–761, 2015.