

PAULINE & RAYMOND

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LARGE SUITCASE

\$20

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GLENDALE

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Pauline had been eager on the phone; she'd begun telling me about her life even before I asked the question or offered the fifty dollars. She lived in a pretty part of Glendale, my ex-boyfriend's neighborhood. As I exited at the familiar exit, I thought what if it was the same street, the same house, what if it was him selling the suitcase, what if the suitcase was mine, something I'd forgotten, and what if I bought it and inside there was myself as a child or my dad as a child, or my child as a child, the one I hadn't found time to have yet? But my ex-boyfriend's name wasn't Pauline, so we drove right past his street and parked on one a few blocks away. The house was big and grand, again. Pauline was in her seventies, and she immediately began showing me pictures and telling me stories about her amateur singing group, the Mellow Tones.

Pauline: We sang "Two Sleepy People," "Hello Dolly"...

Miranda: What's this photo where you're holding the gun?

Pauline: Oh, that's me — oh, yeah. Well, in other words, you could call me a ham. That's my Cohan medley — I forgot the name of what I sang. "Hello My Honey," I guess. I can still sing but I had an operation on my ear because of a little growth and it turned out to be two cancer cells. So they had to dig harder. And somewhere along the line, I lost some of my hearing and so it comes out foggy for me. I don't know what I sound like. So I dropped out of the singing groups I was in.

Miranda: So it's your suitcase that you're selling through the *PennySaver*?

Pauline: The suitcase? Oh, yes, I have it in the hallway. Do you want to see it?

Miranda: Maybe we should see it.

Pauline: Of course, that's what you came for.

I nodded but shrugged, to suggest that my reasons for coming were ever-evolving and expanding.





Miranda: Why are you selling it?

Pauline: Well, when my daughter and grandson moved in, a lot of things had to be sold. She said, "Where are you going to make room for my stuff?" So I had to get rid of a lot of my books and condense everything. I've sold sheets – bedsheets – and mattresses. I've sold paintings. What else did I sell? The bed.

Miranda: How do you place the ads? Do you have a computer?

Pauline: I call it in. I write up an ad – there's a special way of doing it, you get only so many words. The *PennySaver* will advertise your item for free if it's under a hundred dollars. So that's a big boost. But to sell one item at a time, it takes forever.

Miranda: And so when did your daughter and grandson move in?

Pauline: About two or three years already. Or four?

Raymond: Seven years.

This was Pauline's grandson – he had appeared out of nowhere. He was in his mid-thirties and wore a hearing aid. A very skinny dog wearing a striped rugby shirt followed him into the room.



Pauline: Seven years? You're joking. Oh, no. Where has the time gone?

Raymond: I started working a year later.

Miranda: Where do you work?

Raymond: I'm a driver for a company. I deliver mannequins.

Miranda: You deliver mannequins?

Pauline: Naked mannequins.

Miranda: Naked ones. And what company is that?

Raymond: United Galleria. We make them, we sell them, and we rent them. And repair them.

Pauline: He's met a few people, too, haven't you?

Raymond: I've met a lot of people.

Pauline: Celebrities.

Raymond: Not very many.

Pauline: You could name a few.

Raymond: I've met a few. Cameron Diaz – I met her, and Mark Jenkins.

Miranda: Neat. Do you have any pictures of you with mannequins?

Raymond: I have a mannequin upstairs.

Miranda: Okay, maybe we'll go up there.



Raymond: I can bring it down.

Miranda: We can go up there. I don't want you to have to bring it down.

As we climbed the stairs, I began to realize the grandeur of the house was an illusion. These were the poor relations of the former owner. The mother and grandson both kept food and small refrigerators in their rooms, living in them like tiny studio apartments with a shared kitchen and bathroom. Before we looked at the mannequin, Raymond showed me a picture of himself with the actress Elizabeth Hendrickson from *All My Children*.

Raymond: I met her at Disneyland. We had to get in line and we had to wait two hours.

Miranda: What is she like? What do you like about her?

Raymond: She's friendly. And she's beautiful, she's pretty.

Then he showed me the mannequin. It looked just like Elizabeth Hendrickson.





Miranda: So this – I mean, it kind of looks like her. Why does it look so much like her?

Raymond: I took this from this picture here.

Miranda: So did you make her face?

Raymond: My boss.

Miranda: Oh, your boss.

Raymond: Yeah, he made her.

Miranda: From the picture. And did he do that just for you?

Raymond: Yeah.

Miranda: Oh, that's nice.

Raymond: He put it in the mold.

Miranda: Is that expensive? I mean, did you have to buy that?

Raymond: If a regular person would buy it, it would probably be about fifteen hundred dollars. He gave me a discount.

Miranda: I see you have two computers. What do you do on your computers?

Raymond: I email. I email my friends. Sometimes I email my sister if I have a question. And I download music.

Miranda: What kind of music?

Raymond: Dido.

Miranda: She's cool.

Raymond: It's too bad Michael Jackson passed away.

Miranda: Yeah.

Raymond: I'm heartbroken because of it.

Miranda: Right before his big tour.

Raymond: That's my generation.

Miranda: How old are you?

Raymond: I'm thirty-nine.

Miranda: I'm thirty-five.

Raymond: So it's our generation.

Miranda: Right.

It was a relief, meeting someone whom I had anything at all in common with. Michael and Primila and Pauline had exhausted me with their openness and their quaint inefficiency, but Raymond and I were the same generation; we both knew how to click on things, we both had a version of our name with @ in it. As I left his room I said something like "Maybe I'll see you around," as if our generation all liked to congregate at one coffee shop.

But the moment I got back in my car I knew I would never see him again, ever. It suddenly seemed

obvious to me that the whole world, and especially Los Angeles, was designed to protect me from these people I was meeting. There was no law against knowing them, but it wouldn't happen. LA isn't a walking city, or a subway city, so if someone isn't in my house or my car we'll never be together, not even for a moment. And just to be absolutely sure of that, when I leave my car my iPhone escorts me, letting everyone else in the post office know that I'm not really with them, I'm with my own people, who are so hilarious that I can't help smiling to myself as I text them back.

Not that I was meeting one kind of person though the *PennySaver*, or that they all sold things for the same reason. Michael was poor, Pauline was lonelier than she was poor, Primila was just old-fashioned. But so far there was one commonality, something so obvious it had taken me a moment to notice. In the process of trying to reassure the people I was calling, I would occasionally mention that I was somewhat established – not a student, but a published writer. Google "Miranda July," I'd suggest (I do it all day long!). But they weren't googlers. People who place ads in the print edition of the *PennySaver* don't have computers – of course they don't, or they'd just use Craigslist.

And as I circled and crossed out ads, the news-print booklet itself began to seem like some vestigial relic. On one future Tuesday the number of computerless people would become too small, and the booklet would simply not arrive. This made me a little

anxious, so I called up *PennySaver* headquarters and asked them if they would be around forever. “The *PennySaver* in concept will be here forever,” said Loren Dalton, the president of PennySaver USA (which actually serves only California), “but not necessarily in print. That’s why we’ve made pretty heavy investments on the digital side – internet, mobile, we’re getting ready to do some things with the iPad.” But he assured me that nothing would happen right now, not during the recession. The *PennySaver* has always been strongest when the economy is the weakest; the first issue was printed during the Great Depression in someone’s garage. The word was never trademarked, so the *PennySaver* Maryland is unaffiliated with *PennySaver* Florida and *PennySaver* Nevada. They’ve all started online versions of themselves in the last decade, and the print versions of all of them will be discontinued within the next decade.

So this recession was perhaps the last hurrah for the *PennySaver*. The internal slogan of the company in 2009 was “Now Is Our Time.” This seemed like a pretty upbeat approach to the crisis. Just claim it! Own it. Dibs on the recession! The *PennySaver* catered to people for whom ten dollars was worth some trouble – people who saved pennies. Which, right now, was a lot of people.

ANDREW
–
BULLFROG TADPOLES
\$2.50 EACH
–
PARAMOUNT
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Now when friends asked me about how my script was going, I responded with the good news about my new job as a reporter for a newspaper that didn’t exist, interviewing people I found through a soon-to-be-extinct piece of junk mail. And because I was refused by the majority of people I called, the ones I met with did not feel random – we chose each other.

Paramount was completely outside my understanding of LA. I just did what the GPS told me to, and then I was there. It was hotter than where I lived; the blinding new pavement barely concealed the desert. I was much too early, so I drove up and down the streets, past rows of identical new houses. I could picture the man who’d built them, a hammer in one hand and the other hand hitting his forehead for the thousandth time as he stepped back from his newest creation and saw that it was, once again, exactly like the last house he’d built, the one next door. I hate it when I keep having the same bad idea, so I could empathize