

SARA LEVINE

*The Following Fifteen Things, A Love Story*

1.

“Here we are again,” said Jack, “and one of us is naked.”

There was a knock on the door.

The knock on the door was Berger, my personal assistant, whom I paid to act the part of the overwrought throno. “Married man, children, ex-wife in coma, drinking problem,” said Berger. Berger tore his hair. That would be extra. But I was in full flush, deep summer, ocean bottom, whale darkness. Floating above myself like a diatom on the surface of the sea.

“I thought your sister was your conscience,” said Jack. “Since when did you hire him?”

2.

Jack is the sun and the earth and the shards and wrecks of other planetary systems. Like the sun, still blazing; like the earth, slowly rotting. What a man! Eyes like sunken ships, lips like a predicament. I know him pretty well from his shoulders and downwards but he keeps his mind to himself. Don’t you suppose he has to?

3.

“I just want to go over the arc of the affair,” said Berger. “I’ve drawn up some visuals to give a sense of where this thing started. The key in the left-hand corner shows you all the other women we know Jack Hobhouse to be dating. The blue is for women with whom he’s had sexual relations; the green for women he’s simply been sighted with. Tell me, if at any point, you want me to stop—”

“Don’t stop,” I said. “I really want to learn things.”

4.

“It’s time you forget about him. There are limits to shame, below which I won’t have you stoop. You don’t even go out anymore. You live by the phone. You cater to him. You’re always wearing his favorite color, you’re always buying his favorite cookies. If you can’t give him up for your own sake, give him up for the sake of your fam-

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ily. We want you to meet someone and get married. As your sister I can't bear that you're going to give this man the best years of your life."

5.

By this time of course the streets had attracted a number of good friars. I set off to direct words to them but it was a mistake. They had baleful weeds. They had bluff attitudes. They wore little bottles of arsenic clipped to their belts.

6.

Berger is even-toed, swift, and slender. He lives gracefully in another part of town among people I've never met. When alarmed, he bounds off in leaps up to thirty feet in length. He is bounding down the office corridor now. My impala in black trousers! A black tuft behind each hoof. Of course I've thought about falling madly in love with Berger and how his love might save me from Jack. But I can't feel anything for Berger. He is lightly built and carries handkerchiefs. He is on time for meetings. Many coats he has, of varying layers, degrees of thickness, warmth.

7.

"Have you looked at our literature?" said the friar outside the corner store. "We oppose romantic imperialism and support all genuine liberation movements. I've seen you with him, haven't I? Haven't I? I just want to tell you: another world is possible."

"No thank you," I said and flattened myself to get past him.

On the way out, the friar was still there, but he didn't say anything about Jack. He looked at the package under my arm and said, "Good cookies."

8.

Last year Jack left town seventeen times without telling me, but every time he left, our love became stronger. I suffered, of course. Now we have an arrangement. He tells me before he leaves.

After our last big fight Jack made a monument to me and also one to his mother who has never been able to bring him to church. It was petty of me, but I noticed his monument to me was slightly larger. Both black marble, my inscription in verse.

9.

“About the friars,” said Jack. “What are they doing here? Yesterday one came up and tried to give a pamphlet to the girl I was talking to. I refuse to be vilified. But what really gets me is they’re always in my parking space.”

“Kiss me, Jack. I feel my time with you is running out.”

“Time with you is geological, baby,” he said. His mouth and hands beat down on me like rain, eroding my soil, changing the slope of me.

10.

At the goodbye tour Berger insisted on bringing a camera. “You want to come, I want to document,” he said. “It may be useful later.”

This time Jack wasn’t saying goodbye to everybody. Only to those who promised their affection would be unshaken by all of the things he intended to do, with other women, afterwards.

Standing on the platform he looked like an enormous redwood. When the speeches were over and the band had played and every tattoo girl had lifted her needle, Jack told me personally that he wanted me to take care of myself. His wife heard it, and the woman he saw on Sundays started to cry and tried to cut in. Then we kissed, and I saw through the slice of my eyes the leap of Berger. The camera flashed.

Then Jack Hobhouse walked on—a mile of admiration.

We waved and cried and though we might have formed a whole, we were separated, like toes that are being manicured.

“Do you know,” said the Sunday girl, “when Jack Hobhouse sneezes, seven hundred women god bless him?”

11.

Berger said, “This is a teleological romance model, one which afflicts eighty percent of women today. You want to assume you’re getting better at making choices, so you assume the latest boyfriend is the best boyfriend. You attribute to him all the qualities you found lacking in your previous partners. I think one of the reasons you’ve fallen in love so hard is you want to convince yourself that you’re making progress. It’s a common error and not, as these things go, the worst thing.”

“How do you correct it,” I said.

“Mistrust your judgment,” said Berger. “Imagine a future partner, beside whom Jack’s best qualities will pale.”

“I see your point,” I said, but from a long way off, as if it were a bird-speck in the sky.

12.

With Jack gone, the city seemed unable to express itself. The sun didn’t shine and the sky didn’t rain. Even the friars lost their intensity. They went to the fairground and walked around the clamor with cotton in their ears. If you wanted to buy their arsenic, you had to tap them on the shoulder and sign to them.

“Why go to the fair at all, if you’re going to act like that?” my sister said. Or was it Berger?

“Who’s this arsenic even supposed to be for?” I called out angrily.

13.

At long last, Jack came back. We pitched our tents in the fairground and the festival lasted for eighteen days. The friars took the cotton out of their ears and delivered fire-flashing sermons, but nobody paid them much attention. Berger was disappointed that I attended. He said it made no sense for me to throw away my money on souvenirs of Jack and songs about Jack and behavioral management workshops on Jack when I was already paying him, Berger, to sever myself from Jack.

I said, “I wouldn’t count my chickens before they’re hatched.”

14.

Now Jack and I began to make love for hours at a time, sometimes one and a half hours, between his appointments at the federal center. Now I began to lie to Berger about the motels, the receipts, my frequent changes of hairstyle.

“I love that you try to leave me,” said Jack. “I love that you hired that guy and tried to leave me. And those monks and their foolish campaigns! The rabble only makes us stronger.”

“Yes,” I said, breathing in the smell, the sweet smell of Jack rotting uncleanly in the center of my life. “When you were gone I loved you terribly. I think I’ve always loved you, even when you seem like a massive mossy tree across whose limbs I anxiously beetle; even

when Berger does an impressive power point presentation about the ways in which you consistently fail me, still I love you and love you savagely.”

Jack bristled a little at the word “fail.”

“Listen,” he said before his mouth swallowed mine, “no promises.”

15.

What, are we going to go over the numbers again?

One dinner, three gifts, five calls in which Jack did most of the talking, two lunches in which he had to dash off and I was left with the check. Fourteen blow jobs. These are just the figures for the last three weeks, a period in which I was lying. Was the affair getting any closer to ending?

“You resist me at every point,” said Berger.

“I have no choice,” I said, and softly fired him.