

*Kitchen  
Addiction!*

Lizz Lund

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For my wonderful husband, Chef Andrew Mark –  
my knight in shining Armetale.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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And, as always – much love and thanks to Mom, Dad and Pat.



## DISCLAIMER

This is a silly story about silly people with silly problems for readers who want an easy laugh fast. There are no metaphors, symbolism, morals or literary goals contained. English majors: keep out.

The story you are about to read is completely fictitious. All of the characters, groups and events were concocted from my own imagination and too much raw cookie dough. Any similarities to actual people are completely coincidental and/or delusional.

Some of the geographic locations referenced are actual places. Others are completely make-believe. There is a Lancaster Polo Club, and the riders and their patrons are a nice bunch of people. To the best of my knowledge, their Chukker Tent has not been set on fire, but there's always next season. There is also a Lancaster Police Department. I imagine they're a nice bunch of folks, too – although I've never met any of them or visited any of their precincts and sincerely don't plan on it. Same goes for the U.S. Marshal's Department. For the purposes of this story, all persons and groups herein are made up from pixie dust.

Some of the recipes in this book were made and tested. Most were not. If you make any of these recipes, you're on your own. You might want to have a frozen pizza handy as backup.

So grab a beverage, your favorite forbidden food and scrunch down in your comfy chair. Put your feet up, crack open the book and enjoy.



## CHAPTER 1

*(Friday)*

**I leaned my** face against the screen door until my forehead waffled. I smelled onions, peppers and kielbasa cooking in my kitchen. Again.

I come home for lunch every day to feed my cat and my cockatiel and sometimes myself. With the exception of my pets, I live alone. And with the other exception of my neighbor Vito, who's usually here. Like now. Vito's retired, a good guy, and considers himself a bit too much like family. Which means he's in my kitchen more than I am.

I bought the townhouse from Vito over a year ago and still can't summon up the chutzpah to make him relinquish his spare key. Or to change the locks, in case of hurt feelings. But that's mostly for sentimental reasons. Or as Ma puts it, seventy mental reasons.

My half of our adjoined homes belonged to Vito's late wife Marie, who went on her final shopping trip to the HomeWares in the sky long before she could feather the 'Her' part of the 'His and Her' nests they'd bought as retirement presents for each other.

But that's me. Sentiment matters and anything resembling a hard cold fact hangs out in the lunch meat drawer until the fuzzy stuff complains. This outlook sometimes frustrates my executive-style Ma, who's from the no-nonsense style Bronx. Ma scraped her way up, with and without Dad, to pearl-eared Ridgewood,

New Jersey. She lost her Bronx accent long ago and hates it when environmental factors sometimes kick my 'Joisey' into gear. When my sister and I were kids, the only thing that gave Ma away were the occasional screams accompanying a wooden spoon upside our heads. Other than that, she seems perfectly L. L. Bean.

I'm Mina Kitchen – Mina being short for Wilhelmina. I'm named after a great-grandmother I never met and plan to thank in the hereafter by prodding a heavenly fork in her virtual side. Not because of inheriting her weird name, or even weirder nickname. It's mostly for inheriting her oddball catering disorder.

Family legend still regales Fat Friday of '55. Great-Grandma Mina – Dad's grandma – invited neighbors for a dinner that included a 25-pound turkey with all the trimmings. Which would have been fine, except the turkey dinner was prefaced by a ham, hot dogs, lasagna, meat loaf, barbeque ribs, roast beef and Yorkshire puddings, stuffed cabbage, stuffed shells, stuffed grape leaves, moussaka, and a pork and sauerkraut casserole. And three different kinds of bread. And rolls. And salads. And don't forget the carrot Jell-O mold. And never mind the appetizers served with the cocktails and hand-made bar trimmings before that. But I wax foodie; I love this story. It always ends happily ever after with, "And no one was able to roll away from the table until eleven o'clock that night." Although that might have been because Grandma Mina served one pie per guest, just to balance out the trays of blintzes and ice cream and all.

For the record, the legendary guests to Fat Friday included: Mr. and Mrs. DeMicco; Yorgios and Hale Papadopoulos, with their toddler and Gramma Papadopoulos; Bob Dietrich and his secretary Cheryl; and Sid and Sally Klingenbaum with their newly barmitzvahed triplets. Whether Great-Grandma cooked all that food to impress, or because she was diversity sensitive, we'll never know. All we know is that this was the first and last time Bumpa – my great-grandpa – let her cook for large and/or diverse crowds. They still had some humdinger dinner parties post-Fat Friday, Ma says. But Bumpa put the spatula down about Mina's cooking for more than four guests. From then on, only bonafide caterers covered neighborhood parties. Bumpa's heartburn couldn't handle the menus, plural.

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I gritted my teeth, accepted my household and entered. The smoke alarm went off, the cockatiel shrieked and Vito jumped up and down at the smoke detector with a potholder in one hand and a giant Modess pad in the other. I walked to the back of the kitchen and opened the screen door, and turned on the exhaust fan. The air was confettied with cockatiel fluff. I was also pretty sure it was sizzling in the pan alongside the kielbasa. Just another normal lunch in my abnormal household.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry, Toots,” Vito apologized in his usual triplicate. “I just gotta ask you to do this favor for me, so I thought I’d pay up front and make yous a nice, hot lunch.”

Of course that was precisely what I wanted, it being August and feeling like 1,000 degrees. Vito’s heart was in the right place. But I sometimes wondered what occupied the space his brains were supposed to rent.

“Anyways, I got an extra load of dry cleaning I was hoping you’d take over for me,” Vito explained, waving the giant Modess pad at the smoke detector. I looked closer. It was a Swiffer pad. “I was gonna do a quick Swiffer after lunch.” He blushed. I’d finally broken down and bought a Swiffer Wet Jet last April and it was still Vito’s favorite toy. My rugs and furniture might be full of bird fluff and kitty fur but you can eat off my kitchen floor most any day, thanks to Vito.

Sadly, Vito is also a dry cleaning junkie. I don’t know why he owns this many dry clean only clothes. But unquestioning schnook that I am, I make a few runs a week to the dry cleaner for him. I drive past it on the way to work anyway, so it’s no biggie. And what the heck, it accrues bonus Swiffer points for me, too.

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll pick up Monday’s drop-off, too.”

“Well sure, you wouldn’t want to pick something up without dropping something off. It confuses people.”

“Right...” I said and grabbed a bunch of carrots out of the fridge, then went to the sink to wash and slice them. I had to. It was the only available produce.

Vito shook his head. “Tough week?” he asked. I sighed and nodded.

I’m the office manager for Executive Enterprises for Job Intuitive Technologies, otherwise known as EEJIT. This morning was the usual – I’d spent the better part of it listening to a litany of

complaints from my boss Howard, in counterpoint to Roger Stumpf's emailed inventory of grievances. Roger is EEJIT's area rep for our largest client, Buy-A-Lots. Roger spends most of his time in Buy-A-Lots' regional office, which is located near some farmlands outside of York, toward Baltimore. Consequently, Roger emails a lot of requests, and complaints. Roger helps Buy-A-Lots exec folk use EEJIT's sales and marketing software, Predict-O, which is supposed to make lots of little Buy-A-Lots pop up all across the country. Sometimes they even wind up across the street from each other, like a nice tight knit Old World family.

So, at the end of most weeks, I mostly want to forget about my boss and his star employee and sauté something. It's making me become an increasingly reluctant office manager, which could be a problem. The pay is okay; my boss is not. This set up also fuels the maternal fires back in Jersey. Ma just can't understand why I work where I'm "so obviously unappreciated." I keep reminding her there's this little thing called a mortgage, complicated by monthly supplies of Cockatiel Clusters and Kitty Cookies, not to mention the occasional happy hour. And there's also my own inertia.

What this all boils down to is when all is well at EEJIT, I'm invisible and I like it that way. But when anything goes wrong, I'm the goat. As a result, my catering disorder usually peaks by Fridays. Luckily, on some weekends, my friends ask me to cater their parties. So far, it's gone like clockwork. Mostly.

While Great-Grandma Mina's catering crazies tried to please a broad spectrum of people, mine are about soothing a broad spectrum of stress. The more stressed I get, the louder I up the food volume. My familial claim to catering disorders was when my college roommate asked me to give a dinner party for her and her fiancé to celebrate their engagement and new digs. Her mother, father, sister and aunt arrived. His father and mother arrived. I served up 8 trays of canapés, 9 different cheeses, 4 vegetable crudités trays and 3 sushi platters followed by a buffet of beef stroganoff, chicken curry, vegetable risotto, Caesar salad and a jar of homemade pickled beets per person. To this day, I have not lived it down. Especially the pickled beets.

The basement door banged loudly. I glanced across. Two large, furry white paws held the bottom of the door and shook it for all it

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was worth. “I think Vinnie’s hungry,” Vito said, stepping back, armed with his spatula and his trusty Swiffer pad.

Last summer my best friend, Trixie, deposited Vinnie at my front doorstep. Trixie’s an ER nurse who works the graveyard shift and every other shift in-between. Vinnie is a cat who used to belong to the old lady who lived in the apartment upstairs from Trixie. Her neighbor moved onward and upward to what we hoped was a heavenly condo in the sky. Her last wish, which she told Trixie during her final trip to the ER, was for Trixie to find a home for her Vincent if she left the planet before he did.

So now Vincent is my very large orange tabby. To put him in perspective, he looks like a small mountain lion. To keep his ego in perspective, I call him Vinnie. He has white tuxedo markings, white mittens and socks and impossibly large blue eyes. Unfortunately his right eye is slightly crossed, which we figure is the reason for some depth perception issues. Like when he leaps from table to floor and a lamp or toaster gets in the way.

I grabbed some Smackerel Mackerels – Vinnie’s favorite treat – and slid my leg across the door to keep him in the basement for the moment. “Here,” I said, putting some of the treats on the top step in front of a pair of large, glowing eyes.

“Fhwankyoo,” he said, and began crunching.

I closed the door to the basement and poured myself some ginger ale. I figured that would wash down the bird fluffed kielbasa and eggs pretty good. And besides, it was the only cold beverage I had in the fridge except for a few stray beers and a swig of cranberry juice.

The phone rang. Marie screamed, held onto her perch and flapped her wings in a demented attempt to lift off, cage and all. Vito looked frantically for a pan cover, and waved the Swiffer pad at Marie and the cloud of nuclear fluff hovering over the stove.

I coughed and answered the phone.

“Oh, I got you at home!” It was Ma. I’d been coming home for lunch everyday since I bought the place last year and she still acted surprised when I answered the phone. “I just wanted you to know I’m sending some swatches in the mail,” she began.

I gazed at my Technicolor walls reprovingly. Traitors. Ma’s visit last Easter left her horrified when she realized my walls

matched my psychedelic Easter eggs. Ever since then, the walls have been on Ma's side and continue to fink me out.

My walls are lacquered in various nail polish colors – tangerine, lilac, electric blue and some kind of silverish geometric wallpaper – by various flavors of tenants; Vietnamese, Lithuanian, and apparently some kind of Middle Eastern judging by the Arabic lettering on the fuse box in the garage. I also have multiple cable hook-ups in each and every room – including the bathroom and downstairs powder room. Why the powder room is anyone's guess: who watches TV in the potty?

I also wonder if my house might be under some kind of Homeland Security surveillance, because sometimes I hear clicking sounds when I'm on a long distance phone call.

Anyway, from what Vito's told me, it wasn't his sainted Marie's fault that she didn't get around to redecorating after they bought both houses. According to Vito, her last stroll in my backyard ended with a fatal stroke before she could switch her swatch. So I was pretty sure she was forwarding heavenly paint ideas at Ma. You know what they say: those we lose are always with us. I just didn't think they were supposed to be only a paint swatch away.

Ma's been mailing me paint swatches since I've moved in. No notes, no messages. Just swatches. I finally stopped opening them and stashed the envelopes in the bread drawer.

"Thanks, I'll look out for them," I lied. "I gotta go, though, I'll be late back from lunch. Bye." I rang off.

"I can get the clean stuff from you before the Brethren Breakfast tomorrow," Vito continued, setting a dinner plate full of the fluffed egg mess in front of me.

I looked at him blankly.

"You forgot, didn't you?" Vito asked.

He was right. I'd completely forgotten about the Brethren Breakfast. Tomorrow was the third Saturday of the month, which meant it was St. Bart's turn.

St. Bart's Episcopal Church is my godmother's church. Aunt Muriel is a card-carrying Episcopalian. (Really – they honest-to-God give you a card. I guess it's in case you're proofed.)

Aunt Muriel was and is Ma's best friend since they both crawled out of the swamp somewhere around the dawn of time.

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They'd even evolved from the Bronx together soon after high school graduation. Long before I was born, Muriel and Louise slipped into power suits and accent-free white collar voices like second skins. A couple of divorces and a few broken glass ceilings later, they are success stories. Ma belies her years and generation as a freakishly astute techno nerd. There isn't a piece of digital wizardry she hasn't test driven or owned. This explains her fast-tracked VP position at SUZ, a top tier IT company. It also explains her sometimes being slightly embarrassed about me. I'm not quite a Luddite; I just refuse to own a cell phone and still play vinyl.

Aunt Muriel, on the other hand, invested in diamonds: specifically engagement rings. Aunt Muriel married well and divorced better, more than once. This last time she has remained single, much to Uncle Max's chagrin, considering their prenuptial agreement.

What this all means is that I'm the guarded offspring while Ma lives in Jersey and Aunt Muriel paves my way in the land of the Amish, where she moved with poor old Uncle Max. Here's to lucky seven.

Anyway, I'm glad to help with the Brethren Breakfasts, especially since this also keeps my catering disorder at bay. Although I don't usually attend church services, unless Aunt Mu makes me. I usually attend Sunday brunches, with a preference toward New York Times denominations.

Unfortunately, last Easter combined both church and brunch. Since it was my first new homeowner holiday with Ma visiting, I got excited about making brunch for Ma and Mu after Easter services. So I got a little nervous – which was probably why I made enough Chicken Divan crepes to feed a small army, accompanied by mandarin orange and bamboo shoot salad. And Waldorf salad. And a fruit tart. And chocolate mousse in phyllo flowers. And a seven-layer Peach Melba torte. With some Easter egg truffles, Jordan almonds and gourmet jellybeans on the side. By the time Ma and Mu got to the jellybeans, they formed a newly united front designed to make my walls tasteful and dial down my catering disorder. They signed me up for the monthly Brethren Breakfasts: my menu mania would be used for the common good. I also got enrolled in an alternating swatch-of-the-week club.

“I did forget,” I admitted to Vito, looking at the little pieces of fluff and seed hulls in my eggs, “but I’ll be there.”

“7:00, you know.” He stared at me.

“I know, I know.” Happy hour tonight wouldn’t be very happy knowing I’d have to get up at the crack of dawn tomorrow morning. But culinary curiosity always gets the better of me, and I go.

There’s a fierce competition between First Meth and St. Bart’s. First Methodist sponsors the first Saturday of the month for the breakfast, St. Bartholomew does the third. The breakfasts are held at the neutral zone of the downtown Unitarian Church.

The Brethren Breakfast (or Breakfast Wars, as I call them) began innocently enough with some friendly competition about protein-packed breakfasts for the needy. Since then it’s escalated into a full blown rivalry that comes loaded with lots of pork and dairy by-products. If it escalates any further, the winning church will be the one responsible for creating the most new Heavenly memberships caused by arterial blockages.

Those who volunteer for either camp quickly learn you are not simply called upon to serve: you are enlisted in an all-out cholestoric war. I let myself get assigned as principal egg slinger, in the hope that the volume of eggs I cook for others will eventually displace what I cook alone. I read somewhere that people who are on serious diets allow themselves a favorite dessert once in awhile as a reward. So, once a month I scramble eggs for 225 people or so. I also limit my grocery trips to last just 18 minutes. I figure I can’t cook what I don’t have.

I told Vito I’d be there, and offered to drive him. “Thanks anyway, Cookie,” he said. “But I gotta do some errands before I do the breakfast.” Errands? What kind of errands does anyone besides Farmer Brown run before 7:00 a.m. on Saturday morning?

I gave Marie some of my seed-encrusted eggs, poked around the burnt kielbasa and onions and swigged some ginger ale. Then the doorbell rang. Marie shrieked and threw her seed cup upside down. Vinnie stuck both paws out from under the basement door and rattled the door — BANG-BANG-BANG. Marie sent up more hysterical fluff. I walked down the hall shaking my head, opened the front door and gasped to see Evelyn DeSantos.

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Evelyn DeSantos heads the Breakfast Wars. Evelyn whips up the troops to maintain the frenzied rivalry between both denominations. Some call her Evil-yn, but only if they're sure she's visiting her grandkids out of state.

"Come on in," I said carefully.

She stepped in with all the due caution one should muster toward my Disney-puked walls. "Just for a minute," she said, with an askance glance at my electric blue hallway with silver and pink wallpaper borders. Then again, it might not have been the walls: most of her glances usually seem kind of askance because she draws her eyebrows on herself. On good days, she looks like a demented French child ran amuck with a marker. But at least they match her black helmet hair. Today Evelyn's eyebrows sported a cynically bemused look: her right eyebrow arched up, and her left eyebrow sloped down.

Both Evelyn and her eyebrows took in the hallway and smiled at me. I smiled back and wished I had a pot of something to stir.

"Hey, Evie," Vito said, sauntering into the foyer, holding a spatula in one hand and his beloved Swiffer pad in the other. "How's tricks, kid?" Vito sparkled his senior vintage savoir-ick. I shuddered. But Evelyn was made of stronger stuff.

"I came by for my package, Vito, but I didn't find you at home," Evelyn said. "I recalled Wilhelmina was your neighbor. When I saw her door open I thought I'd ask her to remind you. I do need it before the breakfast tomorrow." She smiled and raised her eyebrows, but they waved in opposite directions and scared even Vito. I cringed. Vito was clearly out of his depth.

"Sure, Evie, sure; I was plannin' on gettin' it to yous tomorrow morning. I was just tellin' Mina here I had some errands to run before the breakfast tomorrow, and yous is one of them." Vito smiled enthusiastically, showing off spaces where his molars ought to be.

"I will be seeing you both for the Brethren Breakfast in the morning," Evelyn commanded.

Vito and I exchanged glances and gulped. I was really glad Vito had reminded me. I'd have been a goner otherwise.

"No worries, Evie," Vito said. I smiled and nodded. Evelyn nodded and left. I didn't hear a car start up or drive away, so I figured she re-mounted her broom and left. Vito and I exhaled.

“Ya know, I never mind helping a body out,” Vito said. “But this breakfast thing Evelyn has with First Meth is going a little over the top.”

“Ditto. Even for me.”

“She’s already got me buying her six hams. And now it ends up I also gotta cook three of them, because there’s not enough room in the church ovens, with the sausages and bacon and casseroles and all.” Vito looked at me nervously. “Ya don’t think Evie’s got somethin’ special up her sleeve for this week, do you?”

“Fastnacht French toast?” I ventured.

Vito looked at me. “Fastnacht?”

“You know,” I said, “the fatty donuts they sell right before Lent.”

“Oh,” Vito said thoughtfully.

I pondered, then mused aloud, “Actually, if Evelyn wants to be super authentic, she’ll make sure they’re homemade Fastnachts, made from potato dough with lard, fat and butter and cut into squares.” I paused, then added: “And, of course, dusted with confectioner’s sugar.”

“Huh,” Vito replied. “We better be on our toes next Spring,” he said.

Just then the basement door rattled with the force of what I guessed was Vinnie’s head or a lion-sized battering ram. Marie shrieked. “Guess Vinnie wants out of the basement,” Vito said. “Ya can’t blame the fella. It’s all sunny and bright outside and he’s stuck down there.”

Normally, Vinnie hangs out in the basement until I put Marie upstairs at lunchtime. Then he trots upstairs and hangs out, until eventually he falls asleep on his side of my bed. Some nights I end up sleeping too, when he’s not snoring or talking in his sleep.

Vito was right. Even though the lights were on for Vinnie, I’d felt guilty about this for a while. I checked the time and was my usual late. “C’mon, Marie,” I said, lugging her cage upstairs.

I got Marie tucked in ‘her’ bedroom, and the phone rang. Again.

“I can get it for you,” Vito yelled.

“Thanks,” I yelled back, closing the door to Marie’s room and heading downstairs.

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“Well of course, Muriel, I remember you too,” Vito said. He smiled with his bridge-free grin into the kitchen phone, receiver to his ear, Swiffer hand resting on his hundred pound hip. He was the vision of domesticity. “Yes, ma’am, Mina’s right here.” He handed the phone to me.

“Mina? It’s Aunt Muriel,” the godmother said.

Aunt Muriel usually calls on Fridays, to help steer my weekend social life. As a result, I’ve rubbed shoulders with many of Lancaster’s elite – mostly retired. “I wanted to remind you about the breakfast tomorrow morning.”

Were they really this short-handed? “Yes, I know; Vito and Evelyn reminded me,” I said.

“Oh, good.” Aunt Muriel sounded pleased. “And I have some new paint swatches for you, dear, so I’ll bring them with me. Remember, Sunday we’re having brunch after church. And then we’re off to polo,” Aunt Muriel sang off.

I hung up and sighed. Apparently I would be attending at least one church service before Christmas. Well, my weekend plans were made.

I looked up at the clock and counted. If I drove at 45 mph through the 25 mph streets back to work, and got all green lights, I’d at least make it into the parking garage sort-of-maybe on time.

I opened the door to the basement and Vinnie sprang out and stretched his 48-inch long torso. I put his bowl and a box of Kitty Cookies on the counter while he stood up on his back legs, placed his front paws on top of the counter, and peered into his empty bowl. “Maw-wuphf!” he said.

“I know you want more. It’s coming, it’s coming,” I muttered. Yeeshkabiddle.

“Man, he sure is a big cat,” Vito said. He always says this when he sees Vinnie. Which is a lot. “Ya sure he’s not some kind of special cat, like Maine Coon or somethin’?”

“Mainly mountain lion,” I replied. I emptied a handful of treats on top of Vinnie’s Kitty Cookies and presented his normal lunch to him. Vinnie replied with his usual, “Oh-kahyyye!” I put the bowl down on the floor, hollered my farewells and hurried out.

I was just getting into the van when Vito came running down the driveway after me. “Hey, you almost forgot!” he said, holding

his gym bag full of dirty dry-cleaning. He was right. I had forgot. No wonder people were always calling to remind me about stuff.

He tossed the bag on the front seat next to me. "Sorry, Vito," I said. He gave me a 'fugheddaboudit' wave and I started to take off. I hoped that old ladies, strollers and excitable squirrels stayed off the streets until I got back to my desk.

I drive a dull brown Dodge Caravan, a vehicular hand-me-down from my sister Ethel and her husband Ike. Before the van, which I dubbed The Doo-doo, my '90 Ford Escort gasped its last fumes as it entered the slow lane, just past the entrance ramp near Nutley Street on Route 66, during a visit to Ethel and Ike in Northern Virginia. That night I had my 15 seconds of fame on the 10 o'clock news. Apparently I had single-handedly backed traffic up into downtown DC as well as Route 29 until 8 o'clock that night. At the time, I was more than happy to accept the offer of a used, reliable vehicle. The price – free – was right and the timing was perfect. Even if it was a poop brown van.

My driveway has the approximate pitch and slope of Mt. Everest, so it's a matter of habit while undoing the emergency brake to double-check my rearview for neighbors' cars and smartass kids. But what to my wandering eyes should appear but a galumphing Great Dane and Mr. Perfect, in his baseball cap reading, 'John Deere'?

Okay, he was wearing more than a cap. But not much more. Tanned torso, cut-off jean shorts and the dopey John Deere baseball cap. A minus 4 for the baseball cap but a definite plus-plus-plus for the abs and the rest. I'd seen him before, of course, in one of my more memorable feminine moments hauling my new second-hand club chair out of the back of the Doo-doo. The chair is not a heavy piece of furniture, but it probably made me look like Amazon Woman picking it up all by myself. And of course at the time I was sporting a sweat-drenched T-shirt, soggy pony-tail and no makeup. I also bonked my noggin getting out of the van. (Luckily, I didn't pass out or get concussed.)

By the way, I'm a forty-something and sometimes pass for a less-than-forty-something on my happy days or in dark piano bars. I have shoulder-length mousy brown hair that is thick and straight and without any noticeable amount of grey. I'm also considered to be exceedingly tall by vertically challenged boyfriends: I'm 5'10"

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in my stocking feet. In the spirit of boyfriends past, please do not insert basketball player jokes here. I'm also slightly accident prone which, combined with my kitchen addiction, is generally not a good mix.

Mr. Perfect saw me staring at him in the rearview mirror. I wiggled a 'hello' with my fingers, and he and Marmaduke loped off. Why, oh why, does any female stumble across her Mr. Perfect at the wrong time? Like when we're not perfect? I sighed. And then I burped. Vito's lunch hadn't done much for me except sabotage my insides. The botched opportunity to chat up Mr. Perfect was also not very settling. Urrrp.

Now I was seriously late. So, as Fate would have it, every traffic light turned red on me from Millersville Pike up through Manor Street. The one green light I raced toward at Mulberry I forfeited to a pack of fire engines. When at last I pulled into the Prince Street garage, I came up behind someone entering a parking garage for her very first time. A wizened, woolly, permed head peered out the driver's side window and stared blankly at the huge lettering of the machine's instruction: 'PRESS HERE FOR TICKET'. I sighed. I undid my seat belt, got out and walked up to the 100-year-old would-be parker. I pressed the button and handed her the ticket. She looked up at me confusedly through Coke-bottle lenses. Then she watched the gate go up. A moment later, I saw the light go on over her head. She smiled, waved thank you and floored her Camry for all it was worth, leaving me behind in the fumes.

I coughed, got back into my car and ignored the silent parade behind me that was backed up Prince Street, probably well past Clipper Stadium. I have to admit it: people in Lancaster are super polite. If this kind of thing had happened in New Jersey, horns would be leaned on and various dialects of hand signals would be displayed, not so subtly. As an official Jersey transplant, I've found the hardest thing to get used to about Lancaster – besides the bucolic scenery and fresh air – is how nice everyone is to each other. It's scary.

I found a parking spot then hightailed it into the parking garage elevator. I raced out of the elevator, through the courtyard, and into the lobby to wait for a few thousand years until an elevator showed up. There are only seven floors in the old Armstrong