

THE LIST OF  
*Last Chances*

BY CHRISTINA MYERS



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# 1

THE KEY CLICKED in the lock a split second before the shouting began.

“Ruthie! Hey, Ruthie, get up. You have to look at this.”

Jules slammed the door behind her and dropped her keys on the table, the metal hitting the glass with a bang. I squeezed my eyes shut tighter.

“Ruthie. Jesus, are you still asleep?”

I was under the blanket, head and all, but I knew she was looming over me. Waiting. Vague disapproval in her voice and presumably on her face. I groaned. “Jules, just ... no.”

I had no energy to respond further. My mouth was dry, my head pounded, and my back hurt from having slept on Jules’s lumpy old couch for so many weeks in a row. Somewhere on the floor next to me was an empty bottle of wine; I wasn’t sure if I’d left the wine glass there too. Actually, I couldn’t recall if I’d even used a wine glass. I groaned again.

“I’m not going away this time,” she said. She wasn’t joking; there was a newly enthusiastic level of determination in her voice. “I’m going to stand here till you sit up. I have something important to show you.”

I held out another thirty seconds, but after she cleared her throat several times at increasingly loud volumes, I gave in and pulled the blanket down. I had to squint against the light coming in through the window across the room. The sky was blue,

puffs of cloud rolling on a slow breeze. I imagined it smelled like the ocean, the way a perfect late summer afternoon always does on Prince Edward Island: warm and soothing but with the crisp scent of autumn around the corner.

I didn't actually know how it smelled. I was relying on memory to imagine such a thing. I hadn't left Jules's apartment in at least a week. Maybe ten days.

"I found a job for you," Jules said, jamming a piece of paper into my field of vision, blocking out the blue sky and clouds. "I found *the* job for you. This is *your* job. It's perfect. It's *exactly* what you need."

I struggled to keep from rolling my eyes at her. I'd spent the last six months hearing all about what I "needed" from well-meaning co-workers, a parade of friends, my boss (former boss, now, but he'd done his best to keep me employed as long as he could) and my family—at least when I answered their calls. No one knew what I needed. I didn't even know what I needed, for God's sake.

"Okay, thanks. That's great. I really appreciate it. I'll check it out," I said, nodding a vague thanks in her direction.

But I didn't think it was great, and I didn't appreciate it, and I already knew with utter certainty I definitely was not going to check it out.

Jules knew the same, of course. She pursed her lips and sat down on the far end of the couch, forcing me to pull my feet out of the way.

"I'm not leaving you alone until you read it. The whole thing. And then we're emailing the guy who posted it. I'll sit here all day smelling your funky wine-hangover breath until you do this. I'm not joking," she said. "By the way, you have caveman eyebrows. You need to get them waxed, like, three weeks ago."

She smiled and stared at me, waiting.

"Fine. Hand it over," I sulked. "And I don't care about my eyebrows. In case you hadn't noticed, I don't care about anything. At all."

Appeased, Jules smiled at last. “Find someone else’s couch to have a midlife crisis on, then. But first, read this. It’s perfect, Ruthie. It’s just perfect.”

She said “perfect” slowly, letting it roll off her tongue in a soft but dramatic way: *purrfect*, the “T” at the end like a soft, gentle cap on the sweetest-sounding word of all time. She handed the paper to me, and I glared at it, my eyes still blurry.

WANTED: Experienced care attendant to accompany elderly client by car from New Annan, PEI, to Vancouver, BC. Must have safe driving record and be comfortable driving a minivan. Successful applicant will assist client in packing up residence, then drive client to her family in Vancouver. Accommodation, food and other expenses for trip will be covered, as will return airfare/travel costs. Must be friendly and efficient and must provide good company and support for client prior to travel, during travel and overnight if required. References required; would prefer someone with five-plus years of experience providing in-home care assistance. Apply with resumé to David at [d.march@tripp-engineering.com](mailto:d.march@tripp-engineering.com).

I read it a second time and then skimmed it once more. I bit my lip and noticed again how awful my mouth tasted. I wanted to lie back down on the couch and not think about this job that Jules had deemed was *purrfect*. I couldn’t make my way to the grocery store lately, let alone across the entire country. Jules stood, awaiting a verdict, and I tried to make a face that implied I was giving genuine consideration to the idea.

“I don’t want to do this,” I said at last, handing the paper back without looking at her.

“I know you don’t want to. But you have to.”

“No. I don’t.” I pushed the blankets the rest of the way off and stood up. The wine bottle clattered on the wood floor as my foot swiped against it. I was still wearing the jogging pants and T-shirt I’d put on yesterday. Correction: the day before yesterday. My whole body hurt. My head hurt. Most of all, my heart hurt, not in a poetic way but an actual physical ache through my chest. How could I do anything at all, even the simplest of daily tasks—never mind drive from one side of Canada to the other—when I wanted to just lie down and not get back up ever again?

“I’m not going to do it, Jules.”

“But—”

“I’m not going to do it.”

“But don’t you think—” she started again.

“No, I don’t,” I barked back. “Jesus, just ... leave me alone. Okay?”

I shouldered around her and headed toward the bathroom. “I’m going to take a shower.”

“Good, you stink like my dad’s fishboat,” she said, unfazed. “I’ll start working on your resumé.”

I flipped her the finger, stomped across the small apartment to the bathroom without looking back to see if she’d noticed, and slammed the door behind me. There was no way I was going to apply for that job. Not today. Not ever.



My bones ached as I stepped into the hot water. I felt eighty, not thirty-eight-and-counting: my back sore from sleeping on the couch, my eyes tired and puffy from what had become a daily ritual of drinking too early, staying up too late and sleeping past noon. My skin was hot and tight, a flush still running through me from drinking too much the night before—and all the nights before that, going back to February.

## THE LIST OF LAST CHANCES

It was impossible not to think of *it* when I was in the shower, because I'd been in the shower that day too. I'd just shut the water off and started wrapping my hair in a towel when I heard the faintest noise in my apartment: the clicking of the door opening and then a second click when it was shut. *Jack's come home early*, I'd thought to myself, and then, when I heard low noises: *And he's turned the TV on*.

I'd smiled, adjusting the plan in my head as I quietly towelled off. It was perfect, really. I had come home early myself, part of a little plot I'd come up with to celebrate Valentine's Day. Jack had always hated Valentine's, refusing to go out for dinner or even to a movie, complaining of the long lines and busy crowds on "forced consumerism day." So I'd gone shopping for his favourites (steak and asparagus and mashed potatoes), and I'd come home early to surprise him—I'd be all dressed up, hair done, meal cooked when he got home from work. But now it seemed that he, perhaps, had conjured up the same plan. I'd have to skip the "all dressed up, hair done, meal cooked" part, but that was okay. This might be even more fun. I tiptoed to the bathroom door, turned the knob as slowly and quietly as I could manage, and let the towel drop to the floor. I'm not terribly brave about my naked body in general, but that day I'd thought, *What the hell, it's Valentine's*, and I threw the door open, stepped out, fanning my arms like a showgirl, wiggled my rear end and shimmied to make my breasts bounce—an intentionally semi-comic, semi-sexy manoeuvre.

And there was Jack, on the couch, half-naked himself, flopping about like a convulsing octopus. Complete with extra arms and legs. And the sounds I'd thought were the TV—that I'd imagined were the low chatter of voices on *Law & Order* or *Maury*—were actually moans and giggles. Girly moans and girly giggles. And then it was silent—total, hear-a-pin-drop, not-a-single-sound silent—as two sets of eyes swivelled up at me.

All I could say was: "Fuck. Me."

Fuck, yes. Me, not so much. Jack was midway through shagging the clerk who worked in the flower shop under our apartment.



I stepped out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around my body and a second one on my hair. Jules was at the kitchen table with her laptop open.

“Let me see the job posting again,” I said, without looking at her.

She grinned, and I swear I saw her bounce in the seat as she handed it to me. I avoided looking at her, instead scowling at the paper and grabbing it with more force than required.

She’d folded up my blankets and tidied the couch cushions; the wine bottle was nowhere to be seen, and the sliding door to the balcony was open to let some fresh air in. I could feel the tickle of the breeze over my damp skin, and I shivered as I sat on one end of the couch to reread the job description.

“Where did you get this?” I asked.

“It was on the bulletin board at work.”

Jules and I both worked for Just Like Family, a seniors’ home-care agency that placed care attendants with clients all across the island who needed help in their homes. Well, technically, Jules worked for Just Like Family. I *had* worked there for more than nine years, but I’d phoned in sick so many times in the last six months that my boss finally let me go. Gilbert had looked sad and shamefaced but determined; he’d probably hoped that the shock of being fired (and the sudden loss of income that would come with it) might jolt me out of my funk. It hadn’t worked.

“Gilbert told me about it,” Jules continued. “He said, and I quote, ‘I just got this interesting request; it’s on the board. No one has seen it yet, so no one will realize if you take it down. For Ruthie.’ So I went and looked, and I put it in my purse.”

It made my throat feel tight to hear it. Poor Gilbert, still trying to fix things for me. I could imagine his face as he’d said this to

Jules: *For Ruthie*. Probably with a sad, tired look in his eyes, like a big brother who was worried and disappointed all at the same time.

I scanned the description again. It was hard to argue that it was, as Jules had claimed, perfect. Food and accommodation paid for; several weeks of travel, which would take me away from PEI and Jack (and Jules's couch, though she hadn't yet suggested she minded my presence); and, presumably, a decent paycheque at the end to boost my pennies-away-from-empty savings account.

"I don't know," I said to Jules.

She made an exasperated sound and rolled her eyes. "You don't know what? That you need a job? That you need to get away, maybe, and try something new? That you need to have more to do in a day than watch *Judge Judy* and drink another bottle of wine?"

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Ruthie, something *has* to change. You can't just go on like this forever. Shit happened, it sucked, you've cried, and it's not fair, and it's not easy, but come on already. You're forty. Are you going to spend the rest of your life moping around about the fact that Jack-ass Jack-off Jack did you a favour by letting you know what an asshole he is?"

I didn't know what to say. She was right. About almost everything. "I'm not forty," I said. "I'm thirty-eight."

She just stared at me, one eyebrow raised, expectant, and waited for me to say more.

"Jules," I sighed. "Look, the thing is, I've worked at the same place for, like, a decade. I don't even know where my resumé is, and anyway, it's so outdated by now I'd have to start from scratch. That will take ages. This guy needs someone right now. And I look like hell; I have nothing to wear. I can't do an interview like this. And ... and also, I was thinking of maybe going to visit my parents soon."

I threw in the last point on a whim, but it sounded good coming out of my mouth, as though maybe I had a plan beyond cocooning in this apartment forever.



“You can visit them when you get back. It’s not a six-year journey through the Himalayas, for Pete’s sake. And we’ll find you something to wear for the interview. As for your resumé—ta-da!”

She turned her laptop toward me so I could see the screen, and from my vantage point on the couch, I could make out the rough template of a resumé. She held up a manila folder.

“Gilbert still had your old resumé in your file, along with records of all your clients. He gave me the whole thing. I’m already half-way through writing the new one.”

She grinned at me, pleased with herself, and turned back to the keyboard. I tried to hold on to the scowl on my face, and my brain scrambled for another few good excuses to avoid the entire thing, but I smiled a little in spite of myself and stepped closer. Jules’s enthusiasm on my behalf was hard to resist. I was lucky to still have her. I had basically invited myself to live in her apartment for months, and she’d never once complained, except to point out when I’d really gone past my shower expiry date. She listened when I ranted. And more times than I cared to remember, she’d come out on tiptoe in the middle of the night to check on me, pulled up the blankets, and let her hand rest on my shoulder while I feigned sleep, refusing to let myself cry in front of her.

I swallowed, nervous. “He probably won’t hire me,” I said.

“We’ll see,” she replied.

“I’ve never driven that far,” I added.

“You don’t have to do it without stopping. It’s just one day at a time.”

“I don’t even have a suitcase,” I continued.

“You can borrow mine.”

“I hate you sometimes,” I said, trying not to laugh but failing.

“No, you don’t,” she said. “You love me and always will. Now, get some clothes on and we’ll finish this resumé. I have to be at Mr. Johnson’s by 7:00 p.m. for his medication, and I want this resumé emailed before I go.”

## THE LIST OF LAST CHANCES

I opened my mouth to debate it, to tell her *no*, we could send it another time, tomorrow, next week, next year, never. But I stopped myself, watched her type and flip through my employment file, a small smile on her face. I took a deep breath and stood up to do what she said: get dressed. *Start with that*, I thought to myself, *just that*.



At 6:35 p.m., I hit “send” on an email addressed to d.march@tripp-engineering.com, which had my resumé, a cover letter and a list of references attached. I listened to the computer make the *whoosh* sound of an email heading off into cyberspace and felt a wave of anxiety over my body, like a hot-cold flush rolling over my skin.

I didn’t want this job. I desperately wanted this job. I didn’t care if my resumé wasn’t good enough. I prayed that my resumé would shine. I didn’t want to leave the island. I wanted to get so far away that I couldn’t remember what had happened here.

Jules grabbed her purse, readying for her appointment with Mr. Johnson and his blood pressure medication, and hugged me on her way to the door. “It’s too perfect not to work. It’s meant to be,” she said, winking at me as she disappeared down the apartment hallway.

*Maybe*, I thought to myself. Jules was a fan of woo-woo things, reading her horoscope in the weekend paper for insight into her future. Next to her bed was a stack of books “based on real events” about alien abductions and ghosts, or biographies of famous psychics. She often claimed she had a “feeling” about things: if her teeth ached, it was a sign of something bad on the way; if she saw a black cat, it was a good omen. The last time she’d seen a black cat, she’d announced that something good was coming for me. I argued that *she* had seen the cat; therefore, if it meant anything at all, it surely was for her own good fortune, not mine—and anyway, weren’t black cats supposed to be bad luck? But she insisted: something wonderful was going to happen.

Right about now, I’d have settled for enough money to pay all my bills—wonderful could wait.

I picked up the remote to turn on the TV, but before I could hit the power button, my phone gave a *bing*. I cast my eyes at it, assuming junk mail; all my old co-workers and friends had long since stopped inviting me anywhere.

It was a reply to my email and resumé.

“Jeez. Didn’t take long to decide you didn’t want me,” I said under my breath, clicking on the notification.

Dear Ms. MacInnes, thank you so much for your message. I’ve just taken a look at your resumé and background, and I was hoping I could have a chance to talk to you, so that if we seem to be a good fit, I can start calling your references tomorrow. I wonder if you are available right now? I realize it is short notice, but I would like to move forward with the hiring process ASAP. Sincerely, David March.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. I’d been counting on having a few days’ grace to think about this entire thing, and that was assuming they’d even be interested. He wanted to talk right now? I scrambled for a way to get out of it; I could, I reasoned, just pretend I hadn’t seen his reply. But that wouldn’t look very efficient or professional of me.

I replied: Mr. March, thank you so much for your interest and speedy reply. Yes, I would love to talk to you. My phone number is on the top of my resumé; please feel free to call anytime this evening.

I hit “send.” *Whoosh*.

A moment later, a bing and a reply: Ms. MacInnes, if possible, I would like to do a video interview, via Skype or FaceTime perhaps? Let me know which works best for you and where to contact. Regards, David.

Double and triple shit. A video interview? I looked down at my shirt—I wouldn’t even wear this to the gym. And I hadn’t done a

thing with my hair aside from brushing out the knots while Jules worked on my resumé.

Hi Mr. March, yes, I can do that. My roommate has FaceTime on her laptop, so I will include her contact information at the end of this email. Can we make it for 7:30 p.m.?

I glanced at the clock. That would give me a little more than a half-hour to prepare.

*Bing.*

His reply: Ms. MacInnes, 7:30 your time works for me. Please call me David. Talk to you soon.



A half-hour later, I was minimally presentable: my dark brown hair was pulled back in a bun, and I'd put on a blouse of Jules's that was roomy enough to fit my bigger chest and shoulders, along with small diamond stud earrings (a Christmas gift from Jack-ass five years ago, which I had nearly chucked in the toilet several times over the last few months). I had Jules's laptop arranged at an angle so that the glare from outside wouldn't be too harsh but would still afford a prettier view than simply the back side of the kitchen. FaceTime was open and ready.

And then I waited. I thought about that black cat and sent up a prayer that its omen had been about this moment, even though I was pretty sure that prayer, in general, was as useless as black cats and good omens.

My heart was racing. I checked the time again. I shifted in my seat. And just like that, I realized: I wanted this job, more than I had wanted anything in a very long time.