



# Exiled From Main Street

By Diana Friedman

**The back seat** of a Honda Accord is not the most comfortable place to nap; nonetheless, it's the only place to do so during an eight-hour scrimmage-fest on a dismal March day at Monocacy Middle School. The mid-seat hump pushes my hips up, sending the blood in a dizzying southward rush to my head.

Today is March 14<sup>th</sup>, Pi Day. Get it? March 14<sup>th</sup>, aka 3-14. Across the county yesterday, schools held pie-eating, pie-throwing, pie-baking and pi memorization contests. Some 12-year-old from Burning Lake Elementary won with a high of 196 digits, his surprisingly forlorn face gracing this morning's Metro section.

The rain has not started yet, but it will, the sun helpless to break through the weighty cloud cover. The air smells like boys' sweat.

I am not a tall woman, but my legs are long enough that I have to scrunch my knees to my chest to fit across the seat. No, I am not tall, but like his father, my son, Evan, is lofty and lean, his fists hammering at the back window now. Through his Dee Dee Ramone mop, Evan peeks down the street to make sure none of his teammates has caught his mother passed out in her car like a hobo. Even if it is a 2004 Honda Accord with no dents and only three surface scratches over the left rear tire. As usual, Evan has asked me to park away from the main lot. Given the chance, he carools with his teammates in their BMWs and Toyota minivans, flush with drop-down movie screens, voice-recognition satellite navigation systems and sliding glass moonroofs.

I sit up, and, through the window, Evan recoils in disgust. I had Evan when

I was 36. I was young and I was beautiful. Now I'm 49 and I'm neither. My eyeliner must be off balance, the lipstick lost at the crooked corners of my mouth. I am not alone in this effort to camouflage what I can no longer stand to expose, simply one in an army of women enslaved to the valiant effort to accent the eyes, the one remaining unsplintered frontal trait.

From behind, the situation is not quite so dire. Tucked into the right pair of jeans I still fetch attention. I know this because men follow me down the street with their eyes and tongues. Sometimes they cluck. Until I turn around. Quickly then, their eyes go down, away, anywhere but to mine, the embarrassment too hard to hold.

A man once told me I looked like Ann Coulter. We were at the O'Hare Hilton lounge, surrounded by souped-up businessmen spinning their rings. A few showed brief signs of hesitation—first-timers—but others moved through the crowd with expertise, their accountability surrendered to the autonomy of the hotel room. When I expressed the depths of my dislike for Ann Coulter, the man laughed and asked my name.

Wouldn't this be a lot simpler, I replied, if you just gave me 150 bucks for a quickie in the parking lot?

I said this to get rid of him.

It didn't work.

He laughed again and ordered me a martini.

**I slide into** the front seat to clean myself off. There are no open bathrooms anywhere; why would Monocacy Middle School bother to unlock their doors on

the weekend to provide water or the decency of a flush toilet when the organizers have ordered six Porta-Potties for the hundreds of us camped here for eight hours? With a tissue, I attempt to wipe off the eyeliner, but this only makes the raccoon eyes worse. I roll down the window and motion Evan to hand me his water bottle.

Just now in the car, I dreamed Evan was kissing a girl. She was sad, with thick eyebrows and plump pimples from her chin to her cheekbones. He didn't even know her name, just walked over and started kissing her. I hit him on the head with the cardboard tube from a paper towel roll. "Courtship," I said in my dream. "Do it right. Don't grow up to be an asshole."

Last week I found a wet spot on his bottom sheet. It was almost a perfect circle, except for the edges, where it bled into an oval. When the action becomes voluntary I hope he will learn to use a dirty sock or tissue so no one else will be left to clean up.

No one else? What do I mean by that? Me. Who else would there be?

Evan stands waiting while I scrape my skin clean, readying myself to face the other families raw. The fields are packed with an arsenal of teams from across Maryland: Antietam Red, Bethesda Lions, Freestate Fighters, Mean Green Mutiny. The fathers cluster at the sideline, coaching loudly to their sons, arms folded across their chests, each left hand flashing a gold or silver band signifying possession.

But possession of what? These couples deceive themselves, all of them. Not just those at the O'Hare Hilton, but every airport hotel lounge filled with men who look and stand as these fathers do. These

couples remind me of children who believe everything will last forever. Their grandparents' condo in Miami. Their parents' marriage. Their youth. Their own lives. They have no idea.

Ranier Armstrong waves me over to a group of mothers huddled at the center line. Janet Cordell is complaining loudly about her Audi mechanic. Once or twice a year she drops off extra cleats for Evan, claiming that Ricky outgrew them before he ever used them, despite the mud caked under the eyelets. She nods briefly to me and I return the gesture, but my eyes are on the grass, brown from the winter burn. They all feel sorry for me, I know, and why shouldn't they?

Evan's father, Rick, is 15 years older than me and never had any intention of marrying me. Not even when I told him I was carrying his child. We were well on the way to being done and Evan's impending arrival simply cemented the split. I did not realize that what Rick loved was not just my youth but my seeming unavailability. Rick eventually paid, but the man who insisted he could not be tied down roped himself to another woman a year later, and is now bound by twin girls. Rick is a sportswriter and will write all day about his love for his eldest son, turning his words into butterfly wings to quiver the hearts of others. But he only sees Evan once a year. Do his readers know that?

**The O'Hare Hilton** makes a good martini. It's smooth and light and goes down with ease, although mine did not seem to empty at the rate I thought I was drinking it. At the other end of the bar, a tall German woman with very deep cleavage and fat hair waved a book of drink recipes through the air.

"Can someone please, please, tell me how you make a Screaming Orgasm?"

"It depends on who's doing the screaming," I said quietly.

"Well, then," said my alcohol benefactor, now making no attempt to cover his tracks as he slid another refill in front of me. "What room are you in, Suzanne?"

**At home, Evan** sulks, his words laced with sarcasm, the slumping to such ex-

cess that his chest swallows his shoulders. But on the soccer field he is a joy to watch. Here, he has command. Of the ball. Of the team. This scrimmage-fest is a joke for Evan's team. They won the first game 14-0, and are now winning by at least 10, the subs inflicting all the damage. I can tell by how long they take to get the ball up the field that they've been told not to shoot until they've passed at least six times.

When the boys were younger, we were instructed to tell them to have fun. But this is fun the same way the CEO of Mandell & Sons thinks it is fun to defend a sullied balance sheet, or lawyers believe that arguing a case before the Supreme Court is fun. This is about who is best, who is right and who deserves those priceless starting positions on the field. If Evan were to lose his, he would roll into a fetal position and not unfold for hours. This is not about fun, and I don't know why we pretend it is.

Ranier is now telling the group how her older son boosted his ranking to qualify for a divisional snowboarding team, and the second there is a lull, Gina Kenmore jumps in with yet another long session of horror stories about the contractor redoing her kitchen.

Evan is one of two scholarship kids on this team. The other is a very fast, small boy named Jamar whose parents are from Cameroon. They live in a basement on Wilson Lane. One year, when I gave Jamar a ride to a regional tournament in Virginia, he spent the trip trying to convince Evan that he had a Wii, PS2 and a 65-inch flat screen TV, all in his bedroom.

**The man from** the O'Hare Hilton was reasonably attractive, although he smelled faintly of cigar smoke and minty alcohol. He did not try to kiss me in the elevator, but he walked me to my room and, at the door, whispered he could better my offer and tucked a wad of 20 dollar bills in my hand.

In the beginning, Rick used both hands, his mouth, every surface of his body to make love to me. By the end, he was down to sliding his hand lethargically across the sheets, as if he would



STEPHEN WALKER

Diana Friedman's stories and articles have appeared in numerous publications, including *The Baltimore Sun*, *Newsweek* and the *Whole Earth Review*, and on National Public Radio. She also has published literary essays and opinion pieces in local anthologies and newspapers. Her short story, "Biescas," earned third place in the 2009 *Bethesda Magazine* short story competition. She has just completed her first novel, a contemporary story of desire, dislocation and U2 infatuation set in Washington, D.C., and Dublin. Friedman lives in Takoma Park with her family.

rather be sleeping.

Though our demise was imminent, we took five days we had booked in Mexico anyway. From the bed, I watched the sun rise every morning over the Caribbean, a tiny fist sheltered by palms and a low bank of clouds until it rose high enough to claim its space as a huge orange orb. We were far enough south that the tide never went out; the pools above the broken reef simply shallowed, providing a resting place for stingrays. By 11, the local children would appear, throwing rocks at these quiet creatures.

Three days into the trip I knew I was pregnant. After dinner the first night, I felt nauseous, my stomach abnormally distended. I assumed it was something I'd eaten. But the moment I entered the water at Yal-Ku Lagoon, the life preserver and salt water raised my body straight to the surface, the first relief I'd had from the bulkiness all trip. And when the heaviness reappeared the second I stepped onto shore, I just knew. Never mind that Rick's final shot weeks earlier had been nothing more than a dribble to the outside. One of those weak shots that somehow makes it past the goalie to score a point, or in this case, a child.

**The second half** has started now, Evan back on the field in his home spot at center-mid. The other boys rotate like spokes around him until all of them break loose, except for Evan, still holding the hub. His long hair flies and his heels kick up to his thighs as he sails down the field. Evan manipulates the ball with his feet the way his father manipulates words and I manipulate uninformed customers at Geno Health Care, where I am a supervisor, my days spent deflecting calls from the most desperate clients.

In that way we are all alike. But Evan is a child. His father and I had our chances. It was no one's fault but our own.

**A few months** later, in May, it's raining again, a wet spring rain, but after the game, Evan and his teammates race with a ball to the playground as if they had not just run nonstop for two hours. They have won the semifinals and will go on to the final the next day, as predicted. This is what's expected when you are a Division I team in the top Mid-Atlantic league.

The boys skid around the cement, trying to kick a soccer ball into the basketball hoop. I cross the parking lot all the way to the back end of the auxiliary lot where I have left the car. I climb in and wait alone for Evan as I always do. I am always alone.

Except today I am not, because in the van next to me a man sits in the passenger seat with a young girl on his lap. She must be young, because she is facing him, her head buried in the comfort of his neck, the two of them like swans entwined. They sit motionless for a very long time, silent. A movement then—the door opens, he steps out, and the girl swivels on the seat and pulls down the visor to inspect herself. She's not so, so young, maybe 10 or 11. She wipes her tears away again and again, then straightens her hair, pulls her ears, rubs her nose, and tugs on her bright green jersey until the black stripes line up perfectly. Finally sure that she has erased all evidence of her meltdown, she flips up the visor just before stepping down from the car.

*Honey*, I want to say, don't bother. The visor may stay up but *that mirror will al-*

*ways be down.*

They head back to the field, the man—her father, I suppose—follows a few steps behind, as if he knows exactly how much space to give and how much to take, the same way a vocalist knows when to hang onto a note and when to let it go. How does a father, any father, this father, know?

I don't believe Rick would have been that type of father. He was not the kind of man to hold a child on his lap forever. That's not who he was. But maybe he is now with those two deliciously adorable blond girls.

I can see Evan saying goodbye to his friends at their cars and then glancing around to make sure everyone else has gone. I know this routine—he will circle halfway to the next street before coming here so no one can see our car.

And this is when it becomes hard, almost impossible, not to ask myself:

What if I had not thrown the Coke can at Rick when he told me he was marrying Sarah? I called him an ungracious bastard and clawed at his polo shirt, the top two buttons ripping off in my fingers. He could have tried to take Evan from me. Instead, I took Evan away from him, to North Carolina; by the time the court settled everything for us, Rick had become a stranger to his son.

The last night in Mexico, after I told Rick of the pregnancy, I dreamed of waves so powerful that the only recourse was to give in to them, clawing my way to the sea bottom with nothing left to do but pray I had enough breath to last until the undertow cleared the swells away.

When I woke, though, the waves were light and calm and low. Only the pelicans held height, five of them hovering above the out rush of a cenote, the swirling waters a whirlpool of life, a private pelican all-you-can-eat tidal pool.

I didn't stop that man in Chicago. I should have. I should have dropped the money at his feet and shut the door in his face. But I didn't. The act was less than 15 minutes, him squeezing my breasts like grapefruits, probably imagining me 30 years younger and in a bikini. For hours after he left, his taste was sour in my mouth. Until I knew what I

was going to do with the money.

I arrived home at noon and did not go into work. Instead, I picked up Evan from school early. He was surprised to see me. More so when I took him to Modell's and pointed to the Adidas shelf—a white and gold pair of Predator PowerSwerve Cleats with asymmetrical loop lacing and air mesh lining for \$139, his first pair in the box in years. And then on to ice cream, the acid in my cheeks finally neutralized by the sweetness of a double scoop of vanilla-mocha.

But driving home, Evan cradling the box, the cleats already on, his shoulders slumping as the scowl made its way back in, the what ifs returned, this time too immense to fight, just like those suffocating waves I dreamed of in Mexico.

What if I had not nitpicked every detail in the custody agreement, dragging it out for four years? Would Rick have had more patience with his son, instead of taking out his frustration with me on Evan? With a father, would Evan have grown up able to take on the world the way he does an opposing team? What if Rick had visited once a week as we finally agreed, and as I promised Evan he would, instead of drifting away when his twins arrived? What if once a month, once a season even, Rick had knocked on the door, given Evan a hug, and, with that assured stance of his, taken his son to the field across the street, put on the goalie gloves and let Evan shoot at him?

Shoot and shoot and shoot with that ferocious left foot that will eventually earn Evan a free ride in college—Division II surely, maybe even Division I, Evan's coach tells me. All these years, his father encouraging him to work both feet while blocking the missives to make him fire harder, and then, every so often, like all good fathers, the movement so subtle that even Evan with his eagle eyes could miss it, a dropping of the hand, a sliding too far to the left, pretending to slip on the wet grass, giving in to his son as that father did to that girl, as I could not, as I cannot, one little fall from father to son to give him a measure of self-belief and buoyancy, by letting one, just one—no more, no less—just one big, wet, arched shot slip past the goalie. ■