

Now I Know Everything



A Novel

Andrew Postman

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Andrew Postman

CROWN PUBLISHERS, INC.

NEW YORK

For Mom and Dad: for everything

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events and dialogue are imagined and not intended to represent real people, living or dead.

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Published by Crown Publishers, Inc., 201 East 50th Street,
New York, New York, 10022. Member of the Crown Publishing Group.

Random House, Inc. New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland

CROWN is a trademark of Crown Publishers, Inc.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Postman, Andrew.

Now I know everything : a novel / by Andrew Postman. — 1st ed.

I. Title.

PS3566.0685N68 1995

813'.54—dc20

94-5410

CIP

ISBN 0-517-59940-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

**Now I Know
Everything**

Those who would prolong intercourse can only do so by substituting for the more intense sensations milder ones spread over a longer period. You cannot have it both ways. You have to choose.

—Eustace Chesser, M.D.,
Love Without Fear

Which of us is writing this page I don't know.

—Jorge Luis Borges

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1/The End

HOURS before I'd hoped to be anointed the next Vince of the "Vince: A Man's View" column in a famous women's magazine whose name I prefer not to give here, I found myself not making love inside the Unisphere, the huge sad globe skeleton left over from the '64-'65 Flushing World's Fair.

This is hardly the way to kick off your career as Vince, I thought. Vince needs to be making love for reasons beyond the obvious. Vince needs to be making love for *material*.

With me in the Unisphere was Julie, my partner for the past year on citywide lovemaking safaris, from the Wonder Wheel at Coney Island to the more downtown of the Forty-second Street Library lions, from the Staten Island Ferry (upper deck, bow) to the U.N., just beyond the Chagall stained-glass window with the swirling centaurs and angels; from the Cloisters to a boy's personal favorite, the left-centerfield monument garden at Yankee Stadium. After we'd finished there, I remem-

ber, I tilted my head back in the chill prickly grass and read upside down a plaque with the raised accomplishments of Lawrence Peter “Yogi” Berra on it.

The night I found myself not making love inside the Unisphere, most of New York’s touristy clichés still remained for Julie and me to sanctify and sully: the Rockefeller Center tree vicinity some Christmas, the Empire State Building observation deck (the open-aired 86th, not the cramped 102nd), F.A.O. Schwarz. Julie had once made noise about slipping backstage at *The Fantasticks* during the show-stopping “Follow, Follow, Follow” number. Though we could be clean and astonishingly quick about it when need be, the Pool Room at the Four Seasons would be a bitch. Julie expressed optimism; I said in your dreams. We’d yet to brave St. Patrick’s or Temple Emanu-El, though we’d given each the once-over, casing unattended entrances and sepulchral alcoves. The confession booth, it was agreed, would be truly inspired, right beneath the scowl of God: Julie impaled on my lap, her tea-colored hair fanned out against the grill, the chrism of sex amid all those Bless me Fathers. Where else had we considered? Junior’s on Flatbush Avenue, home of the world’s greatest cheesecake (if you’ve never, try the Black Forest); Grant’s Tomb; International Arrivals at JFK; a box at the Met.

Fun City.

I must point out here and now, without false humility, that these escapades did not reflect any prodigious sexual appetite on my part, nor—if you’ll believe it—bravado. I never set out for this to happen. A few of Julie’s investment banker pals knew about our peculiar brand of sight-seeing; I’d told two friends. Indeed, my history of intercourse and its sister-crimes is a fairly humble one. I came to sex late—late if we’re to believe those polls always being done by CBS/*The New York Times* and ABC/*The Washington Post*, by Roper and Gallup, about how shockingly young American boys and girls get started. So maybe they do; maybe you did. The first time I saw teens necking—fused and rocking they were in the dreamy shade of a huge willow tree in Flushing’s Kissena Park, where I was riding my bike—I immediately wanted to

ask him two questions: Why are you doing that when you could be riding your bike? And, just for the record, How'd you get her to do that? Unable to answer either, from then on I cultivated the talent of *appearing* to know things others my age were only guessing at. When my eighth-grade bio teacher, who doubled as dean, was asked during Human Reproduction Week to sacrifice a student to the principal's office for emergency monitor duties (heart attack, secretary's husband), she tapped me—not because I was so responsible, I believe, but because she figured I already knew about fallopian tubes and fertilization and, more to the point, foams and other preventive measures, not to mention all the hot jokes (“We have a name for people who use the rhythm method of contraception. They're called *parents*”). No, Mrs. Nedball, getting the notes from someone else was *not* sufficient. Who knows the damage wrought by this particular lacuna in my knowledge?

I stayed pure through that five- or six-year boner called adolescence, and like most boys in that predicament, I convinced myself that for all my admirable restraint some bonus would actually accrue to me, like the microwave a bank gives you for opening an account. And when I finally did come to sex, I didn't go mental, either. Don't get me wrong, I loved sex: the jigsaws, the punctuated grazing, the wet sweet, the snug expanse. I just didn't think that's how I would distinguish myself.

Then again, I didn't know I might become Vince.

Inside the Unisphere on this spring night it was almost black. Greasy light from the park lamps below stretched along the longitudes that spined the globe and splashed color across the Rorschachs of inside-out continents. Julie and I removed our shoes. Through my socks I felt the rough cold of the banked metal floor. I spread out a blanket and we lay down in one of the narrow steel wedges. Julie called out her name. It surfed up the side of the bowl and seemed to die somewhere near North Africa. She then began telling me, I seem to recall, more about her phenomenal recent success at work, in the endlessly inspirational field of investment banking. She put up her hand in that absentminded way of hers—swaying it above her head as if she were not so much

having a conversation as conducting one; she might have been drying her nails to some inaudible music. Almost as absentmindedly, I reached up and abducted her hand, kneading its small, oily pad as I brought it to my mouth.

I hadn't seen her in weeks. The humidity was punishing. Julie was on the verge of getting the two things an investment banker desires most: a raise, and a bonus that makes the raise seem pointless by comparison. I was on the verge of becoming Vince, America's most eligible pseudonym. We were down to our underwear and slapping thighs when things suddenly just stopped.

It was an irresponsible cousin—a *second* cousin, my mother would want me to point out, a former shoplifter and street-sign stealer—who inadvertently got Julie and me started. Somehow Stanley had wangled a position at Yankee Stadium that defied job description. "Maintenance-related" was all he'd tell anyone in the family. For this maintenance-related job, Stanley was armed at all times with a jingling lump of keys that opened everything. Once, with the team on the road, I took Julie to the stadium to show off. I wanted her to see Monument Park, the memorial to great old Yankees. As we stood in the shady, penned-off area beyond the 399-foot mark, we could hear whipping around the stadium a patois of noise, as if through a tube: the keen scrape of the El, various breeds of electrical activity, wind, the squall of children, one of the salsa stations at the end of the dial. That afternoon Julie wore a coral pink gingham skirt of a diaphanous cotton and a plain white T with shoulder pads; modest ones, not the kickass epaulets she wore to investment bank in. She had dark shiny hair to just below her shoulders, wide-set eyes the unnerving color of toasted almond, and the hard, high cheekbones of a Slav, which gave her a look of antiquity. The premature creases around her tidy mouth accentuated this quality. All afternoon my fly was stirring like Jiffy Pop popcorn cooking in its crinkly foil pouch.

When the wind came up again, I interrupted my narration of the

decline of the Yankees to hold Julie's hair away from her neck and kiss her there. I nibbled doughy earlobe and now she turned. Behind the most meticulously manicured green in the Bronx, there was much yes I said yes I will yes in the air imploring us to do it, so we did it. We left an imprint in the grass.

It really wasn't particularly Don Juan and Lady Godiva of us. When we met up afterward with my cousin Stanley, who was cradling three cans of Lemon Crush, he narrowed his eyes and began what I can only describe as *sniffing*, suspiciously, sensing we'd just done something unholy, or at least something that could get him fired. Stanley launched an icy can at each of us. Julie and I tipped back our Lemon Crushes simultaneously, like those twins in the gum commercial who do everything together. The soda tasted ambrosial, brassy. Julie held her Lemon Crush high and brashly away from her so that you could see yellow soda braid out of its teardrop opening and briefly into the spring chill, then into her small, strangely commodious mouth, which moments earlier had tasted so oaty and warm. I drank too fast and my head began hurting; lemon ice crystals pinched my brain. A moment later Julie put her hand to her temples and winced and we both started laughing. Only then did I realize that Cousin Stanley had been watching all this and now knew for certain what we'd done. He leered at Julie, then me, as if *I* were the one in the family, not he, with the legacy of truancy and deceit.

On the drive back to Manhattan, Julie smiled, the expressive lines around her mouth arching back deliberately, like curtain-opening at a Broadway show . . . then relaxing again. She folded her hands primly in her pink gingham lap. It may have been the last time I ever saw her shy.

"Yes?" I asked in the haughty tone of a movie butler.

"No, I was just going to say how I couldn't imagine that in my wildest dreams," Julie said. "But I have some wild dreams."

We joked about how—now that we'd chalked up Yankee Stadium—wouldn't it be cool to carve our own unique place in Gotham history by making love, never indecorously, in all the splashy spots. We spent the

next weekend testing out several of our fair city's more memorable waterside locales (Ellis Island, the Ferry, the boat basin at Seventy-ninth), cinches all, really, and an unwritten charter was born. We hit bronzed monuments, commercial venues, transient hot spots *New York* magazine always ruins by raving about them. One by one the sites and edifices of a great metropolis grew more anecdotal to me, more comical, and at the same time, somehow, more sacrosanct now that I (without fail) and my safari partner (usually; at least I *think*) had climaxed inside them.

The sex we had was the best, most urgent I'd ever enjoyed, yet Julie and I realized early on—maybe that first afternoon at Yankee Stadium—that it was pretty much all we shared. My professional focus since college had been standard-issue English major: I hoisted furniture, hawked magazine subscriptions by phone (seven weeks, \$0 in sales), interned in Washington for my congressman, analyzed for Wall Street's Evil Empire, Drexel Burnham Lambert. I taught Sunday school piano and copy-edited computer manuals. I wrote unpublishable stories, while working on a longer, more ambitious unpublishable novel. I hate dogs but I once walked nine of them simultaneously, twice a day. Obviously I gave blood. I landed a four-night-a-week piano gig (no singing) at an Upper East Side fern bar called Scrabbles: okay money, but I'd need a real job to go with it. When I heard about an entry-level opening at a women's magazine, the *éminence grise* of "The Seven Sisters," I applied. I got an interview, then a second, but no offer. —'s called me in for a third interview. I wasn't sure what the problem was.

"There's just one gnawing thing," said Suzanne, the senior editor, briefly looking for support to the managing editor across the sofa. "Please level with us."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Are you absolutely sure," Suzanne asked me, "you'd feel comfortable working in an all-female environment? All kidding aside, we have two dozen editorial assistants and assistant editors your age, and you'd

be the only male of that rank. We're frankly a little worried about that. Can you honestly see yourself getting along in such conditions?"

"I honestly can see myself, yes," I said after waiting the requisite thoughtful couple of seconds.

"You realize why we're being so cautious," the managing editor barked at me. "We're not about to upset the balance of what we've got here, you understand . . ."

"Understand?" I said. "Absolutely I understand. Even if I don't get the job, I feel good just knowing there are still some institutions that . . ."—easy, easy, don't go overboard, they'll hear the Sousa march stirring faintly in the background—"that still care."

Surrounded all day by women, I started thinking like them. More and more I watched my weight, the way I dressed. I dreaded the onset of love handles. For lunch it was salads and only salads. Leafy greens, dark whole breads: five grains, seven grains, nine. In conversation I divulged more, said what I felt more, told the truth more, lied more. My ratio of self-effacing to self-celebrating comments shot up. I wasn't afraid to touch. Psychologically, I got my period around the twenty-fourth of the month, in synch with most of my colleagues. It lasted three to five days.

My first writing assignment for ———'s, two paragraphs about a new treatment for endometriosis, was a disaster. The health editor chewed up my lead, which panted after cleverness ("Healthy uterine linings are all alike. Unhealthy uterine linings are diseased each in their own way . . ."). One morning the food editor marched into my tiny work space and sat on the corner of my desk. I pushed aside my slush pile of unsolicited manuscripts and my egg-white omelette and Nutra-Sweetened Diet Pepsi to make room. "If you were asked to say something about pasta," ventured the food editor, cupping her chin, "then what could you say that hasn't been said a thousand times before?" The dilemma's locution hurtled me back to Philo. 110a, freshman year. "*If Socrates is a man and all men are mortal, then . . .*" I studied the photo-spread-with-recipe she lay before me. "The octopus-ink vermicelli,

buried beneath a scribble of clams and shiitake, writes its name indelibly in your stomach,” I said.

She slapped on my desk a folder bursting with recipes and photos of culinary wonders. “You may just have that rare quality to be a food writer,” said Food Editor.

I’d give her bang-up copy, by God, none of that “medallions of milk-fed veal” and “dollops of creamy butter” crap. By the following week I handed in such melodrama as “pesto-drizzled angel hair, pine nuts honeyed by the strong Tuscan sun” and “Try these summer veggies only a grill could love” and “Salmon, salmon everywhere and not a bone to pick” (a mousse recipe). I became a regular fourteen-thousand-dollar-a-year apprentice *Uebermensch*, lending my ear to everything micro: food copy, cover lines (“Gifts of the Rich and Famous: Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Stewart, Angela Lansbury celebrate birthdays and anniversaries”; “His Intimate Illness: It’s *Your* Business, Too”), short-story blurbs (“Laurence did not know what he would do without Alexandra, nor did he want to”), and, most dreaded of all, tags for reader-written, one-page personal essays (“My daughter Tiffany sent her letter to The Great Pumpkin, fully expecting an answer. I prepared her not to be disappointed—but it was *I* who would be surprised”).

The job at the magazine had its perks; at fourteen thousand dollars a year, I thought, it had better. There were always tickets to movie screenings, which meant that nights I wasn’t playing piano at Scrabbles there were always dates with bright, socially aware, more or less unattached colleagues from Articles or Production or Home Furnishings. Would I recommend this job to any liberal artsy-fartsy guy not long out of college? In a New York minute.

By the following year I thought to myself, Yes, what *can* you say about pasta that hasn’t been said a thousand times before? And, more to the point, who *gives* a shit? My heart went out to victims of osteoporosis and infertility and the often-deadening quotidian existence of the American housewife who was our demographically median reader—honest, it did—but I started feeling like a Venutian forced to write

about Martians. I loved my soul sisters at ———'s but I was not of their kind. I'd been circumcised, I could write my name in snow, they couldn't. They could give birth and milk, I couldn't. Nine out of ten screenings were for movies that stunk, and because my movie partners and I worked together, our dates never attained the status of *date* dates; besides, now there was Julie to explore the city with. In my spare time I wrote short stories, my Early Smartass Period. Legend around the magazine had it that Joseph Heller had written *Catch-22* while working in the ———'s Advertising Department years before, and I hoped the good vibes might rub off on me. Mostly I just concocted clever openings that clearly had nowhere to go.

He started writing this story in the third person but before the opening sentence was even finished I'd changed my mind.

Where does one begin to talk about August Möbius?

Mother lied today. Or maybe it was yesterday.

I actually might have benefited from writer's block. There was "The Blot on Hermann Rorschach's Life." There was "A Coupla Leos," imagining a meeting between Leo Tolstoy and Leo Durocher. Real Pulitzer stuff.

I was riding the ———'s elevator back from lunch when I first heard his name mentioned.

"Brell says they're looking for a new Vince," one woman says to another.

"What happened to this one?" says the second.

"He's tired," shrugs the first woman. "She says the new one has to be young and active. A closet tomcatter, but *sensitive*."

"Good luck," says the second woman. "Who's Vince now?"

"State secret. Brell won't even tell *me*."

That afternoon I tapped on my boss's door. "Suzanne," I asked, "what do you know about Vince?"

In 1956, she told me, the “Vince: A Man’s View” column first appeared in ———r, the famous women’s magazine whose name, as I’ve already told you, I will not say here. Vince Gordon was the full pseudonym but everyone simply says Vince now. The column was a forum to present the “man’s view” on women (or “girls,” as they were known in 1956), relationships (“courtships” back then), marriage, occasionally sex. According to Suzanne, the column flourished because women love nothing more than finding out what a man is really thinking and why. Vince had been written by anonymous men for stints of one or two years, sometimes three. Some very accomplished men, ones whose names you probably know but I am legally not at liberty to share, had written Vince over the years. The column had caught on immediately after it first appeared and by the mid-sixties had become one of the most famous features in any magazine, eventually rivaled for name recognition only by “Can This Marriage Be Saved?,” “They Said It,” “I Am Joe’s/Jane’s Blank (Pancreas; Vena Cava; etc.),” maybe a couple others.

“They’re hunting for a new Vince,” I told Suzanne.

She looked at me a long moment. “I need you,” she said. “You realize you can’t work for them *and* us.”

“Yes, I know,” I said darkly as I handed her my sidebar on chlamydia treatment clinics. If I had to remain in women’s magazines while working on my unpublishable stories and novel, I thought, then it might as well be at one of the cooler, smelly ones, where the real glamour girls worked and wrote about secrets to love and beauty, fashion and health, glass ceilings and cottage cheese-free thighs.

I unearthed back copies of ———r, I asked around. No one knew if the guard was changing because the current Vince had told the magazine he was leaving or because they’d canned him; anyway, it’s irrelevant. He was around forty, I could tell, and had been writing columns about what scoundreling he and his college buddies had done back in the mid-seventies. It was boring stuff (sorry—you know who you are—but it’s true) and outdated; a bit preachy and avuncular. If that wasn’t enough (and it was), I found out he was getting married.

There's an unspoken rule that Vince must be unmarried; in the original column in the February 1956 issue (page 46; check it out if you don't believe me), Vince is introduced as "the most attractive, genial, and worldly bachelor we know." Obviously, no gay men need apply for the job, either.

I called Brell Maclaine, editor of "Vince: A Man's View," and told her I'd like to be considered for the job. In a scratchy voice, she thanked me and said the position had just been filled. "That can't be," I said.

"I'm afraid it is," she said.

"Just for the record," I asked, "what *were* you looking for?"

The new Vince, Brell obliged, was going to keep it very personal, describing what romantic and sexual adventures he and his friends were currently enjoying, what small epiphanies he was having in otherwise private moments.

"Oh, you mean, like, someone young and active," I said. "A closet tomcatter, but *sensitive*."

Silence on her end.

"Listen," Brell said, "if you wanted to write a column by Monday—on spec, of course—I'd certainly look at it . . ."

With the money I made playing piano and being Vince, I could write my novel during the day and the world would open up to me like a great scallop shell, set amid fresh garni and drenched in dollops of creamy butter. I saw, oblivious to my own triteness, foreign sales, three-pic deals, an Aston Martin parked in the driveway of the mock-Tudor getaway in upper Rye, maple leaves floating curled up like hands in the swimming pool that's never used because I'm never home. I faxed Brell a column about bachelor parties and, certain of my impending Vincehood, quit my job at ———'s. The end of my last day there, after a sweet, spectacularly distaff send-off, I walked out of the office building and looked uptown at the city stardust. It was near twilight, that amethyst pause between day and night, the instant in the coin flip after the coin stops going up but before it starts heading back down.

What the hell is a sensitive closet tomcatter? I asked myself.