



On the Verge

Ariella Papa

a novel

To Megan and Mikie for every-day inspiration
and constant support

ARIELLA PAPA

lives and works in the great, courageous city of New York. She has been writing since she was three. When she isn't writing prose or screenplays, she works as a television writer and producer. She'd like to give a shout out to all the assistants out there who'd rather be doing something else. *On the Verge* is her debut novel.

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Prologue

Sometimes I think I should have just had my nervous breakdown and gotten it over with. In high school, okay, maybe it would have been a little dramatic, but in college? I know I could have done it then. Lots of people did. I could have created a small but forgivable scandal. Nothing bad ever really happens to girls who take “time off.” It’s cool. I could have gone from gossip for a week to a point of reference for depressed women in future semesters. I kept waiting for the right time to give in to my depression, but I was too busy holding everyone’s hair as they puked up cafeteria pesto and Natty Lite.

I plan to talk to my bosses about doing a little writing for the magazine. Mind you *Bicycle Boy* is hardly what I had in mind when I spent those four and a half years not breaking down in college, but it’s a start, right? Something for my portfolio. Something my mom could boast about to her cronies who couldn’t care less, “Yeah, a journalism degree and she just did an exposé on helmet straps.”

A few months back I wrote a totally fabricated piece on a man who fell off his bike as a child and refused to ride. In the story, my character, the narrator, had become a surgeon, only to feel something was missing. He had no release after extracting all those hearts, until he returned to his first love—cycling. The fresh air calmed him, he shed pounds and reconnected with the outdoorsman he yearned to be. I wrote it from a thirty-two-year-old guy’s perspective and it was complete bullshit, but I was appealing to the demographic. I mentioned it to my bosses and they said we could talk after that month’s deadline. We never did.

Unfortunately one of our major advertisers, a water bottle manufacturer, is under investigation. Seems some guy in Dearcreek, Montana—no doubt one of our readers—got very sick after a twelve-mile trek. He claims the water tasted funny and some scientists are thinking this brand may not be the most hygienic. Luck-

ily, it hasn't been publicized, but you can well imagine it isn't the best time to broach anything with the big men.

I comfort myself with the knowledge that the interns think I'm cool. They respect my power because I provide the supplies and order lunch. If they're nice to me it's a plethora of Post-it notes and maybe even a slight fat content in the bland vegetarian lunches I am forced to order. Also, one of the interns is exactly a year and three months my senior. She would kill for my job.

I have been working as an assistant for this magazine for almost seven months. I was temping for the large magazine conglomerate that owns this and many others, Prescott Nelson Inc.—I'm sure you know it. Right here in the crossroads of the world, Times Square. Although I harassed the human resources department to let me work for their feminist magazine, *Angry Beavers*, they assured me *Bicycle Boy* was a great place to be. I sucked it up, because I noticed a cosmetic ad or two slipping into the back pages of *Angry Beavers*. This allowed me to create the line, "Well, I wanted to work for *Angry Beavers* but I question their agenda. Fabian Nail Products has some shady investors that smell right wing to me." This usually got the desired nod of understanding to the slackers or barflies I was explaining myself to. I was anything but a sellout.

The barfly I happened to be explaining myself to on the night the water bottle scandal erupted (well I guess "scandal" might be a tad exaggerated, but this is New York and I am all about image) was not just your average white shirt and khaki accountant that dressed down for a night of fun. This guy told me he had perhaps one of the coolest jobs in the city—he was an A&R guy, or at least reported directly to one. He alluded to a lot of things as he plied me with vodka collins (my drink of choice; I had switched from gin and tonics three months ago—too college).

I noticed, as he was explaining the hype over a new trip-hop artist who only pretended to be British, that he had chest hair curling out from his black T-shirt. I found it strangely attractive, a sign that I was indeed maturing. His name was Zeke and we were just beginning to do the drunken lean-in when Tabitha, whose place I was crashing at, staggered over to us and slurred her desire to leave. It was with great reluctance that I agreed.

I knew it would be uncool to do any kind of deed with him so early in our relationship (listen to me naming our children) but I must admit my plan to take over the city wasn't quite going as expected. This might be largely in part to my lack of a power

partner. I needed the kind of man who could help me, support me, be my date to all the too urban charity functions and who secretly aspired to be a filmmaker. I wanted a guy I could feel comfortable referring to in my essay in a trendy online magazine. A guy who, like me, was on the verge.

My head was spinning in the back of the cab. Tabitha was slumped over on my shoulder snoring softly (alliterations are my forte). I wondered if I would have to carry her up the six flights of stairs to her apartment. Maybe she'd do a nap by the toilet and I could snag the bed. I shirked any pleasantries with Yaleek, our driver, who was competently zipping along, and thought of Zeke's promises. He had said we should go out sometime for sushi, sake and cannoli. I knew it was wrong, but I didn't dare hide my delight. This was the life I wanted to be living. Who knew that this midtown watering hole could prove to be so fruitful? In a daring temptress of a move I had taken his number and not offered mine. I was golden, this was the start of it. I was taking Tabitha's bed. There was no stopping me. I was going to be running the magazine soon enough.

September

What you really want to know is what happened with Zeke. Well, so does Tabitha. Although I only met him on Thursday and spent all weekend with her partying, recovering and watching *Valley of the Dolls*, she wants to know if I disobeyed her dating mandates.

“Tab, what was the last thing you said to me on my way home yesterday?”

“First off, I’m Tabitha, not Tab. I’m neither calorie conscious nor from the eighties.” She loves that line. “Secondly, I know what I told you, but who knows, once you crossed state lines the Jersey girl in you may have come out and disobeyed.” Aggh, as always, the Bridge and Tunnel stigma rears its ugly head. If only I lived in Manhattan, I could squelch it once and for all.

“You said wait three days. I’m waiting more than three days. Above and beyond what is required. Although, I know he’s beyond those boyish games.”

“Why, because he wasn’t an ex frat boy? You don’t even know that. He just impressed you by knowing what chopsticks were. The fact that you took his number means he probably thinks you are a feminist, which you are, but as far as he’s concerned that means you like weird sex. The moment you call he is going to start polishing the cuffs and the dog collar, which is fine if you like that sort of thing, but you know you are strictly a first date missionary style ‘take me to a place I’ve never been before’ girl.”

“Do you ever take a breath?”

“Don’t have the time. Oh, shit!”

“What?”

“The Big C has the Prada suit on. She’s going to assert some power today.”

“I thought Prada meant she had her period and was retaining water.”

“That’s the black suit. Don’t call me today. And remember, wait till tomorrow to call the musician.”

“A&R guy...” I say as she hangs up on me.

Lorraine, my supervisor, is standing by my desk when I hang up. She hates the city, but is always asking me where the hot spots are. If only I was as cool in reality as Lorraine's husband and dogs must think I am. Lorraine gives me data to input in the assignment grid. This is what I am paid eighteen fifty an hour to do. Other people stand over hot grills making French fries for a quarter of what I make. I type names into slots of stories that are being published over the next few months. Who is working on the bike of the month, what is the best bike seat, and, for fun, what books have significant cycling scenes in them. (Like any of our readers ever get off their bikes.)

Inputting this data is tearfully boring, and since I have a week until it is supposed to be in the system I put it off as long as possible. I can do it ridiculously quickly and it is my only real responsibility. The Internet only occupies so much of my time. I spend a lot of time staring at my screen saver, which is really just the standard stars that come with Windows. It was left behind from the last temp, whom I'm sure also spent a lot of her time staring at it. I know I could be using this time a lot better. I could be writing. I could be coming up with freelance articles and researching them (I have unlimited phone calls after all), I could be trying to contact other magazines to get a new job. But, for whatever reason, I spend a lot of time just sitting here. But, it's all good—it's New York.

For the past eighteen years, September has meant change. I looked forward to the fall because it meant new clothes, new classes, a new year. There is always that hope from kindergarten to my very last extra semester in college that something new and wonderful was going to happen. That anything bad that had happened in the past year was going to be magically wiped from the slate.

I've been working since February, when I finally graduated and moved home. Despite a couple of storms, it was a mild winter. Mild enough to keep me deluded into thinking that maybe this was all some big summer vacation that was eventually going to end in either another leg of my academic career or fame and fortune. There is no way this, the tedium that is my life as an assistant, could be (gulp!) my life.

As we reach the middle of September and I am still doing this nine-to-five rat race thing, there is no denying it—this is it. I couldn't ignore the fall fashions and back to school sales. My sister, Monica, the perpetual student, returned to Massachusetts for

her third master's degree, this time in Women's Studies. No doubt about it, I'm stuck here for a while, but I intend to work it.

The fact is I love New York. The image. The way my friends from school are envious of me only because I work for Prescott Nelson. The people I meet around my parents' house (someday I *will* have my own place) are always sort of shocked that I commute to the big city. Granted, they're from New Jersey—they're impressed by garage door openers.

When I forget about all the good stuff, the thing that bugs me is the absolute stagnancy of the routine I've fallen into. The fringe benefits are cool, but each week means more of the same. No one else on the crowded elevators really seem to have these thoughts. I suppose it's cool enough for them to be a part of this great publishing empire, even if they are just nothings. They, like my friends from school or the people in my hometown, are impressed by the name and the possibility of something that no one can quite identify.

But I try not to think about it that way.

One of my greatest sources of relief is Tabitha. She is one of the few friends I have at work. Best of all, she lives in the city and knows everything about what's cool and what's not. Tabitha and I met in the temp pool, on our very first day. I arrived, ready to start my career, ready for that lucky break. I was wearing what I like to call my Jackie-O suit; retro yet respectable.

Tabitha is a big girl from Texas. I know that oversimplifies her, and she would hate to be referred to that way. Robust, Rubenesque, statuesque—striking, these are the words Tabitha would use. Tabitha isn't fat, well, maybe she is, but only by Calvin Klein standards. But it doesn't seem to stop her and she has no intention of changing.

I find all kinds of men are attracted to Tabitha, despite her size. She mostly dates foreigners: Italian businessmen, Argentinean soccer players, and I think there was even Kuwaiti royalty. Foreigners are instantly drawn to her. She says they're safe to date because "if they're here, they can afford me."

Everything about Tabitha is image. I have watched her spend a fortune on clothes. I have yet to figure out how she does it, she pays New York City rent and makes the same amount as I do.

"I just know what to prioritize." She always says this at the occasional times when I can't afford to go shopping with her. She always dodges the issue of finance. I wonder if she's got a trust fund? Since she hates to shop alone, she usually tries to bribe me

into going with the promise of presents. If I don't go, she's liable to buy anything she finds in my size that she thinks is cute. Tabitha is generous, but I think it's more about the way she wants her friends to look. She wants to run in stylish circles, so everyone around her must be stylish. (Sadly, I don't think I've ever lived up to the promise of my Jackie-O suit.)

The best part about Tabitha is the perks that come with her job. A lot of the fringies that enable our image making are courtesy of Tabitha's job. The glamour gods were smiling down on her when she got her temp assignment. She is assistant to the editor-in-chief of, if you can believe it, *NY By Night*. Yes, we own that, too. That "we" being Prescott Nelson Inc. Uncle Pres, the founder of our great company, has got his hand in everything. *NY By Night* covers all the N.Y. happenings: film premieres, gallery openings, club life, celeb birthdays, charity functions, and the random publicity events that only people in the "biz" go to so that they can photograph, write and read about how much fun everyone is having being that much hipper than the rest of the population.

Tabitha's boss is Diana Milana. Tabitha likes to call Diana the Big C (and you can imagine what the C stands for). The Big C is very well known in this industry. She told Tabitha, the first day she started, "I like to get things done." But due to the Big C's hectic schedule she has very little time to attend all the events she is supposed to as the head of the "pulse of the heart that never sleeps" or whatever *NY By Night*'s slogan is. So, when the Big C can't get one of her equally pressed employees to attend these events, guess who winds up with several engagements in one evening? Sometimes, we travel for an entire night, staying for exactly an hour and fifteen minutes at each event. (Well, that happened twice.) Tabitha gets to expense all the cab receipts, and on nights when she meets the right immigrant, she sends me home in a company car. Thanks, Uncle Pres!

I would give anything for a job like Tabitha's, but at least I still get to experience the perks. I don't know how I would survive my parents' house in Jersey without it. There are weekends when I basically live with Tabitha in her box of an apartment starting on Thursday. We usually get our nails done on Thursday at lunch to prepare for a night of craziness and bouncer schmoozing. We can barely function through Friday, catching a quick nap before we go out again. Then, everything becomes a blur up until Tabitha is sipping strong coffee and reading me the Styles section of the *New York Times* on Sunday afternoons. If we're lucky, we make a

brunch and have some hair of the dog that bit us. I stumble back to New Jersey and catch *60 Minutes* with the 'rents and wonder how come it always seems like Sunday night and how I am going to get through the next four days.

Monday is a great day to make excuses. I could screw everything up on Monday and shrug it off with a "Monday Morning." No one notices anything on Monday.

On this Monday, at least, I have another distraction—the napkin Zeke wrote his name and numbers on. He wrote Zeke in big bold letters, your standard male handwriting, slightly wobbly from alcohol intake, and then the numbers. The most interesting thing about the napkin is the way his sevens are crossed. My Italian grandmother used to cross her sevens like this. How Euro. I have the urge to call him tonight, but how desperate would that seem? On the other hand, would he be annoyed that I am playing the phone waiting game with him? I'm certain he is above those things, but alas, I cannot be.

But Tuesday, I have an actual dilemma: which number to call and when? If I call him at work, he may be busy promoting some amazing new artist and have to go abruptly, which will sour the whole experience. I also may not have a chance to give him my number, which will mean I have to gauge whether or not he was really busy or if he finds me physically repulsive and whether or not to call him back.

If I call him at home, I will get his answering machine. He might wonder why I'm calling him at home when it's a weekday.

If I beep him, he might not recognize the foreign number and not call, forcing me to beep him again or call another of his numbers, which ruins everything, because again I seem desperate. Or, he might call every number he sees on his beeper because it could be a business beeper, in which case, I'm sort of forcing him to call me, which I don't want to do.

But I definitely don't want to talk to him, so I have to call a number where I think I'll get a voice mail. I can try calling him during lunch—but what if he is too busy to take lunch and answers the phone? Of course, I could always hang up if someone answers, *but* what if he has caller ID and he calls me back and I have to answer and he thinks I'm in junior high? I think about calling Tabitha, but I would no doubt slip from adolescent to pre-pubescent levels.

Okay, I'll call him at home. Now, what to say? I drop my voice an octave. (God, I wish I smoked and drank a fifth of vodka a day

to get a sexy Kim Carnes voice. How can I project sexiness when I sound like your average unattached twenty something?)

Possible messages: "Hey, Zeke, it's Eve, I have an urge for sushi and I was wondering if the offer still stands." But, what if he doesn't remember our supposed date? Does that sound sexual? Might he think I'm comparing his penis to raw fish?

Or: "Zeke, it's Eve. I've been thinking about your chest hair, if you've been thinking about my chest, give me a call." Maybe that's a little much and besides, I want to be loved for my mind.

Or: "Zeke, Eve. We met on Thursday. Here's my number. Give me a call." The Thursday might sound too interested, like I've been thinking too much about that night in the bar. Like I've been x-ing off the days in my Filofax.

Or: "Hi, Zeke. It's Eve. We met this weekend. Please give me a call." Please? How bad is that? I might as well say, "My life depends on you calling. I haven't been on a date in three months, let alone had sex, and I'm about to put out a personal ad under Anything Goes in the *Voice* just to have some human contact."

Or: "Hey, Zeke, it's Eve, from this weekend. Just calling to see how your weekend was. Call me when you get a chance." Reasonably neutral. I write it down and dial. It rings three times and then the wretched voice mail...with a *female* voice. *Hey, Heather and Zeke aren't here right now, but our answering machine is.* Beep.

I hang up. He lives with someone. How could he? Who is this Heather—and what kind of name is Heather?

"An overused one," says Tabitha when I join her on a smoke break.

"All those promises, I was already practicing eating seductively with chopsticks."

"Well," says Tabitha, exhaling, "it might just be his roommate, a platonic friend."

"C'mon 'our answering machine' implies togetherness. Items owned together is surely not a sign of platonian."

"Platonian? Whatever. If they were together, he'd probably leave the message."

"I told you he wasn't like that. He was different, special. Now, he's gone."

"Tragic, really. Look, Eve, just call him at work. It will come up. Don't mention the home phone call and pray he doesn't have Caller ID." She stubs out her cigarette and we start to walk in. "But whatever you do, give him your work number. You don't

want to specify area codes. You don't want him to know you're from Jersey."

I wait another day, and finally I dial the number quickly before I can stop myself. *Voice mail, voice mail, voice mail*, my mantra.

"This is Zeke." Shit.

"Zeke?"

"Yes."

"Hi, it's me, it's Eve, from this weekend."

"Oh, Eve. Hi, Eve. I was hoping you would call." (Hoping? Did he actually hope? The cockles of my heart are warm, my stomach is turning, other parts are reveling in the possibility of finally getting some attention.)

"Well, I meant to call yesterday, but I had a hectic day. You know how it is." I can hear Tabitha applauding me. My weekend was obviously too intense and already full, my job is taxing and challenging.

"Yeah, of course, this is one time I'm actually at my desk." Inferiority alert! His job is actually taxing and challenging. "All weekend I had to check out these horrible new acts and get schmoozed by their wanna-be managers, who are totally clueless types from Long Island or Jersey or something."

"Ick."

"Exactly," he laughs. A nice laugh, a warm, masculine laugh. Heather has to be his sister. When Zeke and I are each established in our careers and ready to make the plunge, I will make her a bridesmaid. "So, Eve, are we going to go out together or what?"

"Sure. I would love to."

"How about tomorrow?" Tomorrow? Probably too short notice, but before I can put him on hold to consult Tabitha, his other line beeps so I agree and he says he'll call me with details.

I arrive at the restaurant five minutes late. I am perfumed, I am blow-dried, I am waxed in all the right places. ("Just to be safe. Don't let it make you a slut," admonished Tabitha.)

The place is exactly what I envisioned—a trendy little East Village spot full of beautiful people. I'm trying not to be impressed but wait a minute, he isn't at the bar. Curses! If he gets here later than me, he'll think I got here early. Maybe he is sitting already. I ask the beautiful woman in the kimono if there is another room and she gestures toward the back into a traditional Japanese dining room where shoes are not allowed. Thank God I let them grate off the dead skin at the pedicure.

He waves me over from one of the low tables. His shirt brings