

WISHFUL THINKING

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Published 2015

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-63152-976-4

Library of Congress Control Number: [LOCCN]

Book design by Stacey Aaronson

For information, address:

She Writes Press

1563 Solano Ave #546

Berkeley, CA 94707

www.shewritespress.com

WISHFUL THINKING

A Novel



BY KAMY WICOFF

SWP

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To Max and Jed. Duh.

one | A MYSTERIOUS
ENVELOPE

JENNIFER SHARPE HAD ALWAYS dreamed of being two people. She had dreamed of being two people when she was a little girl and wanted to be both a stay-at-home mom and the president of the United States when she grew up. She had felt like two people in junior high, when adolescent-girl hormones could send her from the top of the world to the bottom in ten seconds flat. But she had never needed to be two people, or even three, as badly as she did when she woke up one day (or so it seemed) to find herself a thirty-nine-year-old divorced mother of two with a laughable amount of child support, a high-stress, full-time job that didn't pay enough to cover the child care it required, and a cat that constantly threw up on the couch.

It was hard to understand how this had happened.

Jennifer tried to understand it as she prepared dinner (it was a stretch to call boiling pasta and heating up chicken nuggets *cooking*) while coaching her older son, Julien, through his math homework while his little brother, Jack, repeatedly

hit him over the head with an inflatable hammer until she grabbed it, put it up on the highest bookshelf, and sent him to his room wailing. She tried to understand it after the boys fell asleep—sometimes as late as ten o'clock when they were particularly reluctant for the day to end and, in truth, she didn't want them to go to bed, either, because her evening time with them was so precious—poured herself a glass of wine, cleaned up cat vomit, and answered e-mail until crawling into bed to read for ten minutes of “me” time. She tried to understand it when she had to drop her boys off with her out-of-work-actor ex-husband every Saturday for his one night a week with them—a night that, even after a year, she still felt he didn't deserve, since for the first two years after the divorce he'd sometimes gone months without seeing them—and observed that he had gotten a very obvious eye lift, which was apparently more important to him than contributing to Julien's guitar lessons. And she tried to understand it when she arrived for her job as executive vice president for community programs and development at the New York City Housing Authority each morning and confronted a mountain of paperwork only an eighteen-armed, multi-brained superhero could ever make disappear. Fourteen years before, she had been an attractive, accomplished, fresh-faced business school graduate with a hot boyfriend who was starring in a TV pilot. Now she was struggling to keep her bathtub clean.

Somewhere there is a woman, Jennifer had written in a recent e-mail to her best friend, Vinita, also a working—though semi-happily married—mother of three, who, at thirty-nine, has multiple children who play multiple instruments and multiple sports and excel in multiple subjects, who also runs multiple businesses, sits on multiple charitable boards, and can do multiple sit-ups. Thinking of the slew of books and articles she could never stop herself from reading by women who had it all, humble-

bragging about the difficulties of having it all, she'd ruefully gone on: *I, on the other hand, can only do one sit-up and hold down one job (just barely), and yesterday I tried to register Jack, who plays zero sports, for winter soccer, only to be told I was multiple months too late.* Vinita, whom Jennifer had known since college, had written back immediately: *Show me that woman, she replied, and I will give her multiple kicks to the ass.*

Jennifer had appreciated the sisterly support. But part of her had had a hard time laughing about it. This woman was out there. How did Jennifer know it? Because every day, as she vainly attempted to keep up with her, Jennifer was pretty sure she was the one whose ass was getting a kicking.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, began like any other day in Jennifer's life since she and Norman had split up. At 6:45 a.m., her Mr. Coffee programmable coffeemaker, the reigning love of her life, began to burble, emitting piquant caffeinated smells from its perch on a barstool next to the sofa bed she slept on that, when fully deployed, occupied 75 percent of the living room of her apartment. With a groan and a stretch, Jennifer swiveled into an upright position, stood up, and made her way down the hallway to the bathroom, where she stripped off her favorite Beatles *Revolver* T-shirt and pajama bottoms and stepped into the shower. The water pressure was low again, and the shampoo in her hair dripped down her face at the pace of sludge as she stood beneath the trickle flowing weakly from the nozzle. Just as she was beginning to come to, she heard the tap of little-boy feet and smiled. Julien.

"Hey, Mom," he said from outside the shower curtain in his eight-going-on-fourteen, offhandedly cool manner. *Whatever happened to "Mommy"?* she thought. "Can I play a game on your phone?"

“Julien,” she said, pulling the curtain back sharply and sticking her head out, shampoo foam still clinging to her nose, “this cannot be an every-morning thing! If you play, your brother is going to want to play, and you know it’s impossible to get him out of the house in the mornings anyway—”

“But, Mom, I already practiced guitar for twenty minutes and Jack is still asleep and yesterday you said I could if I practiced guitar and did all of my homework but then you came home late again so I haven’t played on your phone for, like, two whole days! Please! *Please?*” Julien’s speech had almost instantly taken on the pressurized whine that made Jennifer’s teeth ache with irritation. But her chest had tightened sharply when she’d heard Julien say he’d been up even earlier than she had, practicing. She worried about his intensity, his inability to relax sometimes, to give himself a break. She’d been the same way when she was a little girl and wasn’t much better about it now.

“I practiced for thirty minutes yesterday,” he said, switching from entreaty to reproach. “Are you *sure* you can’t come to my recital?”

Jennifer shook her head sadly. Julien’s guitar recital was at four o’clock that afternoon. Four o’clock on a weekday. How was any working parent supposed to swing that? She wanted to say as much, but Julien would have protested, because while she’d always been a working mom, until a few months ago she’d been a working mom who could attend afternoon guitar recitals. In fact, her old boss at the New York City Housing Authority had recruited her from a much more lucrative career in management consulting largely by promising her precisely that kind of flexibility. But NYCHA had recently been taken over by a new chairman, handpicked by the mayor as part of his plan to impose a “private-sector work ethic” onto every branch of city government. Which meant that for

months now, leaving work for things like music recitals and even Jack's speech-therapy appointments had been next to impossible.

"Please can I play on your phone, Mommy?" Julien asked again, smiling at her hopefully. *Mommy*. That did it.

"Okay," she said. As his lean, shirtless, little-boy body zipped out the door, she called after him, "But only for ten minutes!"

Alone again in the underwhelming shower, Jennifer looked a little longingly at the space where he'd stood. Then she pulled the curtain closed and began to scrub at the lingering suds in her hair. It was time to wake up for real and tackle the day.

Each morning in the shower, Jennifer composed two mental to-do lists, one for work and one for home. These lists corresponded to her two jobs, first as a city employee and second as personal assistant, cruise director, and waitress (or so motherhood seemed, at times) to young masters Julien and Jack Bideau. Some part of her felt she had the order wrong—shouldn't her *first* checklist be her mommy to-dos and her second checklist be her work to-dos? But the reality was that while work demanded her full attention in order for her to stay employed, playdates, field trips, and pizza days were things she worked hard to stay abreast of but often just plain screwed up, and there was no boss to reprimand her when she did. Jennifer wished her longtime babysitter, Melissa, would make the home to-do list her own, fulfilling a dearly held fantasy Jennifer had of a babysitter who ran her household with the military precision of a housekeeper from a *Masterpiece Theatre* series. But Melissa was a well-meaning twenty-something who had come to work for Jennifer because she lacked direction in life, and she never even did the dishes.

As she began to compile her lists, Jennifer's brain soon

began to scramble. Did the boys have playdates? Did Melissa have to leave early today? What was her first meeting at work? Who was she supposed to call, what was she supposed to order online (a new pair of soccer cleats, supplies for a school project, groceries?), who had she said she would have lunch with, and what time was the spin class she wanted to at least pretend to intend to attend? Jennifer turned off the shower and stepped onto the bath mat. There was only one remedy for the all-too-familiar anxiety that had overtaken her, as it did most mornings: her phone. Or, more specifically, the calendar on her phone, which, with its assiduously kept lists and color-coded entries, was the scaffolding that supported the fragile, absurdly complex, always-near-collapse structure that was her life.

“Julien!” she shouted, mentally adding *wash the towels* to her “home” list as she pulled a damp, faintly sour one from the rack. “I need my phone!”

“I can’t find it!” he yelled back.

Towel wrapped around her head, body still dripping, Jennifer froze like an animal, her ears pricked up, her mind racing. Julien couldn’t find her phone? Julien could always find her phone. She always kept her phone on the end table next to the couch. She always looked at it before she went to sleep. But last night she had fallen asleep with the television on after having finished half—okay, three-quarters—of a bottle of wine. (She’d decided to have more “me” time, as though becoming steadily less conscious while watching *Gilmore Girls* on Netflix was treating herself somehow.) Her phone was her life. Her life was in her phone. How could she not know if it was there?

Jennifer dressed quickly and walked into the living room. She found Julien determinedly searching the crevices of the creaking sofa bed. She began searching, too, starting with her briefcase and moving on to every counter and surface she

could imagine leaving her phone on, but came up empty every time. She soon confirmed that it was in none of the usual places in the boys' room (under the bunk beds, next to Julien's clock radio) or her bathroom (back of the toilet, next to her toothbrush), either. As she reentered the living room empty-handed, Jennifer's heart sank. When was the last time she'd had it? She'd gotten home late the night before and had had to rush through the evening routine with the boys, so she hadn't checked her phone then. Vinita had called her on her landline. And after she'd hung up with Vinita, there'd been the wine, the TV, and the sleep. It wasn't at work, she knew, because she'd texted Melissa from the cab she'd taken in her rush to get home.

It was gone. She was sure of it. She'd lost her phone once before—about as expensive a mistake as you could make, aside from dropping a diamond ring down a grate—and even with the free upgrade she'd had coming, it had cost her \$300 to replace. She didn't want to think about what it was going to cost her to replace it now.

Julien was tugging at her sleeve. Crouching down, she took him by the shoulders and looked him in the eye. "I must have dropped it somewhere," she told him. He let out a cry. "It's a phone!" she said, attempting to be the grown-up, though she couldn't help adding, "And losing it is much worse for me than it is for you."

Julien raised his eyebrows skeptically, like, *Really?* She raised her eyebrows back at him. *Really.* "Sorry, Mom," he said. "Can I have gum on the way to school?"

"No," she answered. Jennifer sat back on her heels. The battery on her dirt-cheap cordless landline was dead (she'd left it off the charger, naturally, after hanging up with Vinita), so she couldn't even try calling her phone until she got to work. She sighed. But part of her wondered, would a morning without her phone be so bad? Yes her phone kept

her life together. But sometimes its chimes, pings and never-ending emails weighed on her like a digital ball and chain.

Suddenly, Julien pointed to her laptop on the kitchen table. "Did you try that thing?" he asked.

"What thing?"

"That thing we installed last time. Find My Phone."

Find My Phone! How could she have been so stupid? Jennifer got quickly to her feet, trying not to be too hopeful but hopeful all the same, ran over to the table, sat down, and booted up her laptop.

She typed the URL and logged in. Julien stood expectantly at her side. A big green button appeared: FIND MY PHONE. Most likely her phone was somewhere in Queens, being prepped for sale on Canal Street, she thought, having been hocked by her opportunistic cab driver. (*Bastard!*) But it was worth a try. She clicked. She watched the wheel spin. LOCATING . . .

A map appeared, and on it a blue dot. Jennifer did a double take. The dot was at 270 West Eleventh Street. "That's our address!" Julien cried. "It's here!"

Could it be? She had looked everywhere, and she could find a Lego head in a box of Playmobil. Maybe she had dropped it in the lobby?

Just then Jack came stumbling in, half crying. "Mama," he said, climbing into her lap and rubbing his eyes. "Do I have school today?" Jack asked this every morning. Unlike his older brother, who had celebrated the first time he'd had "real" homework (though he was now considerably less enamored), Jack liked to cuddle, sleep in, and wear pajamas to the park. "Yes, darling," she said. Glancing at the time on her computer, she saw that it was already seven fifteen. To get both boys to their respective schools and her to work on time, they had to be out the door by 7:40 sharp—a departure

time that was quickly receding from the realm of possibility.

“Play the sound, Mom,” Julien said, reaching over her to the trackpad. He clicked the button that read PLAY SOUND. “Do you hear anything?” he asked. She didn’t.

“Do you want to play a game?” Jennifer asked Jack, nudging him off her lap. “We need to listen for a sound coming from Mommy’s phone so we can find it!”

“You wost your phone *again!*” Jack cried.

“*Lost,*” Jennifer corrected him, deliberately pronouncing the *L*. Correcting Jack’s speech, which she, Jack’s speech therapist, and his preschool teacher worried over constantly these days, had become so automatic she probably would have done it even if he were saying, “Wook out!” as a steel beam fell on her head.

“Llllost,” Jack repeated, pressing his tongue dutifully against the top of his palate.

“Shhh,” Julien said impatiently. “Be quiet.” Julien began canvassing the living room, tiptoeing around it like Elmer Fudd in hunting season. Jack followed suit. Jennifer walked down the hallway into the boys’ room but heard nothing but the sound of her children, fighting in the living room over who would get to play on it first once the phone was found. They were making such a racket she couldn’t hear herself think, let alone hear her phone if it were bleating for help.

“Enough!” Jennifer barked, walking back into the living room. “Jack, get dressed! Julien, pack up your homework!”

The boys skedaddled posthaste. The room was quiet at last. Alone, Jennifer held her breath and listened. This time she heard something. Faint but distinct, it was a reverberating chime, like a prolonged submarine ping. Following the sound of it, she found herself hunching down in front of her own front door. The muffled ping was coming from the other side.

Jennifer fumbled with the locks, then flung the door open

and looked down. To her astonishment, a heavy, cream-colored envelope lay at her feet. *FOR MS. JENNIFER SHARPE, 270 West 11th Street, Apt. 19A, New York, New York, 10014.* There was no postmark and no return address. Jennifer bent down and picked up the envelope. The lettering was extravagant, like a wedding invitation, though on closer inspection she could see it wasn't handwritten but had been printed somehow. She turned the envelope over and opened it, careful not to let the elegant object tear. Its interior was lined with what looked like gold leaf. Her phone, its chiming beacon still sounding, was tucked inside.

It was all Jennifer could do not to kiss it. Sliding her thumb across her phone's smooth face, she silenced the chiming sound and allowed herself a moment of delicious relief, which was immediately interrupted by the boys, who'd heard the pinging and come barreling down the hall, lunging over each other for the phone. Jennifer was about to tell them to shut up and put their shoes on (though not in so many words), when she saw something strange on her home screen: an envelope, the same creamy color as the envelope her phone had been in moments before, addressed in the same elaborate, formal font, to her.

By now the boys were practically climbing up her legs. "Quiet!" she said. It was like screaming into the wind. "*Quiet!*" she roared. Startled, the boys exchanged a glance.

"What is it, Mama?" asked Jack, who had not made it past striped socks and a *Green Lantern* T-shirt in his interrupted efforts to get dressed.

Jennifer, not answering, tapped the envelope once with her thumb. It opened, and a piece of stationery glided out. She had just begun to register that a message was written on it when, at a volume Jennifer had not thought her phone capable of, a clear, ringing female voice filled the room. "Dear Ms.

Sharpe," it began. The boys' eyes went wide. "As you have undoubtedly deduced, your phone came to be in my possession last night. I am sorry not to have returned it to you immediately, but the hour was very late." Jennifer turned her phone over and around, as though its exterior might provide some clue to the adventures it had been through during the night. Her boys stared too. The voice, sonorous and precise, had established a commanding presence in their little living room.

"I have taken a small liberty, however," the voice continued. "I am an inventor, of sorts, and I have been working on an application designed, I now realize, precisely for a person such as you. Last night, in a fit of inspiration, I installed this application on your phone." Upon hearing this, Jennifer held her phone away from her body. The boys took several steps back as well.

"It really is quite a miraculous application; I'm sure you will agree! A word of warning, however. If you choose to use it, please contact me first. It is a very powerful technology and requires some instruction if it is to be used safely. Again, please accept my apologies for any inconvenience this may have caused. I hope to hear from you soon. Ta-ta for now! Sincerely, Dr. Diane Sexton." The message ceased its methodical scroll, slipped back into its envelope, and vanished.

"Whoa," Julien said.

"Double whoa," Jennifer agreed. Then she looked at the time: 7:29. *Seven twenty-nine!*

Snapping out of the spell that had temporarily ensnared them, Jennifer knelt to activate her two still-somewhat-stupefied sons. "Seven twenty-nine!" she cried. "Julien, put on your shoes! Jack, pants, now!"

The boys scattered with shouts of assent, though Jennifer knew she'd soon be in Jack's room, ensuring the execution of

the pants portion of his ensemble. Jennifer quickly crossed to the kitchen and threw turkey slices, an applesauce, and a squeezie yogurt into Jack's Scooby-Doo lunch box (Julien ate lunch at school), then grabbed two breakfast bars for the boys to eat on the train. Gathering her own things, she ran through her mental checklist, grabbing each item as she thought of it: laptop, notebook, lipstick, wallet, keys, phone. *Phone.*

She smiled. *How lucky to have it back*, she thought, as she slipped its slim frame into her coat pocket, the feel of it in her hand as gratifying as a shot of dopamine. The circumstances of its return could hardly have been stranger, to be sure. But it had been returned to her, and for now that was all she needed to know.