

SUMMER OF LOST JOBS

} by *Michelle Tea*

It was the summer I could not keep a job. The summer I discovered vodka, an ancestral beverage wrung from the pale and starchy bodies of potatoes. The summer I wore clown white, the thick and greasy pigment favored by circus performers as actual makeup, melting on my cheeks in the muggy New England heat. The humidity grew thunderstorms and collapsed my gothic hairdo, a coiffure like a house of cards growing improbably higher, higher, unsustainable, hit with blasts from the can, the locks sticky, clumping into a solid mass I could mold with my black-tipped fingers. The dye would stain my neck the color of dirt for a week, drooling down my throat and sternum. I was impatient and unskilled in my style. I was sixteen. I knew how I wanted to appear and it was not how I appeared naturally. I had no time for my own transformation, wanted only to turn to the mirror and behold white, white skin; arsenic white, bloodletting white, anemic. The skin of white girls in fairy tales and horror stories and very old poems. The skin of women who took poison as a beauty tonic or let leeches suck some of their color away.

My technique was clown white, purchased at a beauty supply store in downtown Boston. It sold real beauty products and costume stuff like the clown white, which came in a red tin, stamped with the image of an old-fashioned clown. Unscrew it and behold the puck of shiny white to be smeared over your face like a perverted cold cream. I would blend and blend but still the irrepressible health of my cheek's apples would glow pink under the oily veneer. Then I'd take a palmful of baby powder, somehow get it onto my face. I'd try to be gentle, delicately sprinkling it across my forehead as though dusting a pound cake with powdered sugar, but it would clump in dense patches to the slick of my skin. I looked crazy. A plastic spray bottle of sugar water was meant to make my hair impervious to both gravity and August's water-rich air, but beneath the syrupy weight of the spritz my hairdo collapsed, the locks stuck with winged insects drawn to its sweetness. Egg whites did in fact stiffen your hair, as did the Elmer's Glue the punks used to make their liberty spikes, but

these formulas also made hair rigid — there was no room to fuck up a hairdo like that, and really more than anything my look was *fuck up*. My aesthetic, my nation, my work ethic.

I sat in the car outside the Mystic Mall in Chelsea, Massachusetts, crying. My mother was scared of me because my face was covered in what appeared to be vanilla cake frosting. Nothing had prepared her for having a daughter who wanted to look like this. When I returned home each evening with a litany of the abuses I'd endured — children hurling rocks at me, carloads of boys hollering, *Freak!*, girls who looked at me plainly and inquired, in the accent of the region, *What the fuck are you supposed to be?* — my mother offered little comfort. I *was* a freak; what the fuck *was* I supposed to be?

It's Clown White! I shrieked, belted into the front seat of her Ford Escort. Inside the mall was It's Tops, a store that sold T-shirts and rock pins and the only place in Chelsea that would give me a job. My mother was starting in on me — *You can't go into work like that!* — and *blam* came my tears. And you just can't cry and wear clown white. The salty streams cut through the grease, made the smears smearier. My face reddened horribly beneath it, puffy and bright. Great! I shrieked. Great, Look! I yanked the visor down and stared at the disaster of my face in the tiny mirror. It Had Looked Okay, I lied, And Now It's Ruined! I Hate You! There, I said it. In the powder blue Escort, surging with estrogen and melting with petroleum-based makeup, I expressed my hatred for my mother and her lack of support for my lifestyle choices, and my mother either smacked me, sullyng her hand with greasepaint, or she did not — the blare of emotion distorts memory. Sobbing I took the inside of my long black skirt into my hands and wiped the Clown White from my skin, taking my shaky eyeliner job with it. Oily and fragile, a crust of clown white ringing my hairline, I climbed from the car and stumbled into the mall to be fired from my job.

We like you so much, the owner of It's Tops said. Her voice was a plea; she was not the sort of owner comfortable with firing her employees. *We just don't need you anymore*. She lived out in Gloucester, in a modest castle on the beach. Earlier that summer she had invited me to a barbecue there and had allowed me and my friends to drink beer after beer. With her husband — a doctor who had advised me against piercing my nose lest I hit a particular nerve and become paraplegic — my boss would vanish behind closed doors and emerge with freshly bloodshot eyes and a terribly itchy nose.

I'd known that I was about to be fired from It's Tops. I had been caught reading on the job too many times, totally engrossed in the copies of *Mistral's*

Daughter or *Portnoy's Complaint* I'd found tucked beneath the register. I alienated the customers with my odd appearance and choice of soundtrack — extravagantly gloomy Cure songs, the chant and snarl of Generation X. *I don't want to have what a steady job brings. Don't want security, don't want responsibility — 'cause that's youth!* Under my lazy watch the shop unraveled into disarray; it simply did not occur to me to clean. It was kind of the owner to pretend my termination was not the result of my own shitty work ethic.

It was not possible for me to find work in Chelsea. I could find slurs and an occasional slap, but not a job. A friend from my vocational high school hooked me up with a receptionist position at a hair salon in Boston called Penelope's Place. My friend's sister was the salon's manager. Like all the employees, she answered to Penelope, a skinny woman with fake red hair, frantic with all the stress of running a failing regional chain.

I had initially hoped that Penelope and I would be fabulous friends — I had recently dyed my hair a fake red, too, though a decidedly different shade. It was the loud, cheerful color of the clown on my old tin. The beauty supply store also sold a line of hair dye called Crazy Color, which offered a variety of vivid hues — fuchsia, cyclamen, ruby red. I chose ruby. The color of a can of Coca-Cola. Penelope flinched. She scowled at me, whispered to the manager, then passed through the doors, out onto Boylston Street. The manager shuffled over glumly. *You have to dye your hair*, she said. But It Looks Great, I protested. It did. Especially with a bright red lipstick, it looked excellent. Penelope Doesn't Get It, I explained to the manager. By sitting behind the reception desk in my fabulous hairdo, I would be drawing people into the salon. My hair was like a carnival barker, luring marks with its loud, braying color. The manager chewed her lip and said she would speak to Penelope on my behalf. When the owner returned there was no misunderstanding the judgment in her eyes as they lingered on me. She conferred with the manager and vanished, leaving a powerful perfumed wind in her wake.

You have to wear a scarf, the manager said. She felt a victory had been scored — she had saved my job. My hair just had to be covered at all times, with style. *No baseball hats*, the manager warned. I gasped. Do I Look Like I Wear Baseball Hats? I demanded. I wrapped a long pink scarf around my head, turban-style. Customers looked at me with a new suspicion: Had someone at the salon ruined my hair? What was hiding under the bulbous wrap of fabric?

Penelope seemed unsatisfied with the compromise; her stares grew crueler. Mine was not the face of Penelope's Place.

Saturday night and I was wasted off a half-pint of hundred-proof Smirnoff Vodka, mixed into a bottle of Veryfine Fruit Punch. Having polished off my alcohol too swiftly, I bopped around the line of kids sleeping out for New Order tickets, begging sips: a mouthful of thick, sweet Manischewitz, a shot of something dark and amber, some rum and coke, lots of beer. When my cigarettes were smoked, I bummed them, too. I wasn't sleeping out for tickets — I didn't have the money — but the alley that led to the Orpheum Theater box office was like a deathrock block party. Vinnie, my ride home, lived a city over from me, in East Boston. I had been due home hours earlier and could only pray that my mother had gone to sleep. I frequently didn't make my curfews; Vinnie had no curfew, so could not take mine seriously. He'd get me home when he felt like it.

Meanwhile, I made out with Joshua. Joshua was pink-cheeked and freckled. His hair was bleached the most perfect, barely attainable shade of white and still looked healthy and natural. Most people's hair got kinked from such an effort or stayed stalled at a nicotine hue, but Joshua's was impeccable. In the night alley it gleamed silver as the moon.

Joshua's father owned a chain of photography supply shops. Unbeknownst to me, most of my new Bostonian gothic friends were quite well-to-do; many would inherit trust funds in a few years. We all wore the same shitty thrift store outfits, so I assumed they had grown up swinging between welfare and marginal employment, borrowing occasional shelter from relatives and living on cans of Chef Boyardee. But no.

Joshua and I fell into each other and *boom* his tongue was in my mouth, and I was touching the silky pale bangs that flopped over his eyes. Joshua was a violent kisser, and I interpreted the force of his mouth on mine as a confession of a deep and long-smoldering desire. I pulled back from his face and gazed at him. There were three of him, three Joshuas. I waited, mooning at him, until the triad shimmered back into a single boy. *What?* he asked. Instantly, I was in love with Joshua. I Don't Know, What? I asked back, stupid from kissing. *What?* he insisted. This went on for a moment. *You're just looking at me with those big eyes,* he finally said. Joshua, I said. I grabbed his shoulders. Joshua, What Does This Mean? I asked of him. Are We Going Out Now? Does This Mean We're Going

Out? Joshua stammered. *I don't know, I don't think so...* He looked around as if there were someone standing by, an adult perhaps, who could answer this for us. We drifted away. I had liked being kissed violently like that.

At home, hours later, everyone was asleep. Four little girls dozed in soft lumps across my living room floor; I had forgotten my little cousins were spending the night. Drunkenly, I wound my way around them, careful not to kick a small head or fall onto them in the dark. I climbed into bed and slept for two hours, setting my alarm for my morning shift at Penelope's.

When I woke, I wanted to die. I seemed to have been poisoned. My stomach convulsed like someone unwittingly impregnated by an alien parasite. The walls of my bedroom bent and curved, the floor bobbed like something at sea. And the sweat, I was coated in it, a fine mist of venom. In my closet I leaned against the wall and tried to select an outfit from the rack of swaying black dresses. There was my scarf. I wound it around my hair, which seemed extra crusty. I tried to remember if I had thrown up. The thought made my stomach convulse.

I stumbled through the kaleidoscope of my house, starting at the sight of so many little girls strewn across the living room carpet, cocooned in their sleeping bags. I made it to the bathroom. Into the toilet I vomited. It tasted like rum. It wasn't like when I was a kid and got the stomach flu, puked and felt better. This was different, this was sinister. I imagined feeling this way forever.

Ma! I gurgled weakly for my mother. To shout pulled too much on my body. I rested my sweaty, flushed forehead on the toilet seat. It was one of those puffy toilet seats that warmed when you set your rear onto it. The feeling of it beneath my sweating, poisoned head filled me with new nausea. Ma! I shouted this time, with gusto. My voice shot down into the toilet and bounced around acoustically. Outside in the living room the little girls stirred, then pattered into my mother's bedroom and brought her to me.

What did you drink? she asked. My tongue flailed the cave of my mouth, tasting for a dominant flavor. Yes, rum. Rum, I said. *Rum!* my mother was horrified. *Don't drink rum! I never drink rum!* Michelle, she said sternly. *If you're drinking every weekend, that's a problem. And you should nip it in the bud.* Her warning would become an oft-repeated catchphrase among my friends, akin to Faye Dunaway's *Tina, bring me the ax!* or any number of lines from *Rocky Horror*. *Oh Mary,* my gay friend Bobbie sighed. *The bud has bloomed.*

I knew when I called in sick to Penelope's Place that there would be no second chance. The receptionist does not call in sick on a Sunday. I had been on such thin ice, with my hair and my turban. I was fired.

My next job, at Chuck's Ice Cream at Faneuil Hall, lasted almost the rest of the summer. Chuck's big thing was mix-ins: A customer selected a flavor of ice cream and then requested, oh, crumbled Oreo cookies and mashed up Heath candy bars be added. I would scoop a mound of ice cream onto a slab of countertop, and with a metal spatula I would pound and smash it and beat it until it was soft and flat. I would pour a scoop of cookie, a scoop of candy into the dairy glob and mush it all together. Finally I would scrape it from the counter into a gigantic, chocolate-coated, sprinkle-encrusted waffle cone and hand it off to a tourist.

Faneuil Hall was a great tourist emporium. People flocked from all over the world to eat oysters at The Salty Dog, to have a beer at Cheers, to look at expensive robotic appliances at the Sharper Image. Back then, Banana Republic actually sold weird safari-ish clothes, and a fake jeep was fake-crashed through the store's exterior. If you looked, as I did, like a freak, you could frequently catch a tourist taking your picture and intimidate a dollar from them. There was a gang of postcard punks who hung around specifically for this purpose; clustered by the street performers they would menace, scanning for cameras aimed at their mohawks.

Chuck's was popular even during my shift, which began at eight in the morning. The freezers, shut tight all night long, had frozen the ice cream bins into impossible blocks; my wrists were strained within a week. But it wasn't a bad place to work. The manager was an asshole, a thin, angry man with little eyes and little hair, but he wasn't there often.

Mostly I worked with an Irish girl, Heather, whose hair was lush, long and glossy red, tipped in ringlets like a princess's from a fairytale. She seemed to like me, especially. I liked her brogue. We worked close, smeared in cream. We took turns wearing stickers that read "It's My Birthday!" in magic marker, in an effort to squeeze more tips from the customers. We would make up disgusting ice cream combinations and write them on the chalkboard. Squid Crunch with dehydrated banana mix-in. Roast Beef swirl with tripe nugget mix-in.

Days Heather didn't work were lousy. My wrists ached and my hangovers were more stubborn. I would mix lemon sorbet with pineapple juice in the frappé machine, and still dehydration kept my temples throbbing through my eight-hour shift. I would fix my most favorite treat — a cup of crushed walnuts doused in hot fudge and chased with milk so cold a scrim of ice had formed across the surface. It got to be my phony birthday all day long and the tips accumulated in my jar, but still. Work was better with Heather.

One day my friend Katrina stopped by for my break. I cleared my tips for fries and a coke from The Great American French Fry Co., and together we sat outside, smoking and snacking and staring at the tourists staring at us.

Katrina lived in Brookline and didn't have to work. She got money from her parents. She got booze from them, too. While they were out, Katrina would take a Mason jar and fill it with a bit of everything in the liquor cabinet. The best was a combination that included Triple Sec and tasted exactly like Fruit Loops.

Katrina opened her army bag and showed me the jar, full of amber liquid. The plan was that she would pick me up after work and we would sit in Boston Common, under a willow tree by the pond, and drink 'til drunk. Then we would walk up Newbury Street, to the library at Copley Square where all the goths and punks and skaters hung out. See You Later, I said, back at Chuck's. The time clock bit into my time card with a crunch. Heather turned to me. *Who was that?* she asked, sort of breathless. I looked around Faneuil Hall. Who Was Who?

Your friend, said Heather. *That girl. Who was she? She was beautiful.* You Mean Katrina? I asked, shocked. Katrina was just, she was Katrina, she was regular. I thought her hair was kind of weird, actually. Her bleach job was mediocre, and one half of it was a short bob, with bangs, while the other half was completely shaved, with just a skimpy yellow rattail snaking down her neck. Katrina was beautiful? I felt a punch of emotion. No She's Not, I wanted to say. I didn't know why it bothered me to hear Heather call Katrina beautiful. I smacked and I smacked the ice cream, splattering my apron with chocolate, getting bits of Reese's Pieces in my clumpy red hair.

Katrina came with her jar at four, and we walked quietly to our place in the park. I studied her. I guessed Katrina was beautiful. I liked hanging out with her — her parents went away frequently, giving us a place to congregate. She liked to get drunk, as did I. Katrina's family had a lot of money; their house was really nice, and Katrina spent Sunday afternoons baking cakes from scratch with her mother. I thought there was probably a really great, normal life available to Katrina if she wanted it, and inevitably she would. Beautiful Katrina. I almost told her what Heather had said, but I couldn't.

Towards the end of the summer I bleached my hair. The first day, it was so flat, so straight and pale on my head it looked almost like Joshua's. I wore my new color to work, to show Heather. Was it beautiful? *You bleached your hair!* she exclaimed. And that was it. *You look beautiful,* I'd wanted her to say. *Your hair*

is beautiful. That shade is beautiful. You did a beautiful job. I just wanted to hear that word, *beautiful*, coming out of Heather's mouth, aimed at me.

Swiftly the color turned, became that tarnished yellow. Nobody wanted that color, everyone wanted white, a white so silver it flashed lavender under certain lights. Gay Bobbie, who was in beauty school, told me I had to get a special toner, and then a special shampoo, but I had spent all my money on the plastic bottle of developer, the forty-volume peroxide and the envelopes of Super Blue. I had no more cash for hair dying, not if I wanted to drink vodka and smoke cigarettes. I was stuck with yellow hair.

And it was falling out. It fell into the ice cream, customers complained. One man bellowed, *Forget it! I just saw your hair fall right into my ice cream!* The manager was around for that one. He made everyone start wearing hairnets. My hair looked terrible squished down, dry and frizzing beneath the black web. Katrina sometimes tucked her asymmetrical hairdo into a little crocheted sack pinned to the back of her hair, and it looked good, very elegant, very French, very Goth. I tried to do something creative with my hairnet but it was impossible, the thread was thin and flimsy. Even Heather looked bad, her long, magnificent hair snagged, like a fox shot and bagged on her shoulders.

Vinnie, Gay Bobbie, Joshua, Beautiful Katrina, a new boy named Jesse, who called himself Zebediah, and I went to see The Ramones. We drove down to Providence to see them at an all-ages club. Zebediah was a runaway from Los Angeles who wanted to be my boyfriend. He worked at The Store 24 in Harvard Square and slept on an abandoned mattress in a Cambridge parking lot. Zebediah had run away from a mother who told him all the time how she wished she'd had an abortion. He did a lot of something called crystal meth and set her couch on fire. Then he ran away.

Zebediah was sweet; he drank a lot, as everyone did, and it was hard to imagine him setting his mother's couch on fire. He wore eyeliner and long black prairie skirts, painted his nails black and was into girls. Zebediah spoke in a truly authentic California surfer accent. He didn't seem very bright, but I wondered if such accents made people sound dumb. Because I feared Zebediah was not smart, I resisted his advances. Unless we were both drinking vodka, which was anytime after sundown, and then I would make out with him forever and later pretend it never happened. *Why won't you go out with me?* Zebediah pleaded. I'd make up some intense reason why I couldn't go out with

anyone at all. Something having to do with the deep, dark state of my soul, my impenetrable loneliness, my unfathomable inner pain.

I drank too much at The Ramones. We guzzled our bottles quickly in the parking lot, then stumbled inside. Vinnie and Zebediah went directly into the men's room to barf. I was okay as long as I leaned against the wall at the back of the room. I leaned and waited for the show to start. A man walked up to me. He was luminous, so pale he glowed, and his hair was long, dragging down his rat-like face, a pair of glasses stuck to his nose. It was Joey Ramone. *Do you have an aspirin?* he asked me. I stared at him. I shook my head. No, I Don't, I said weakly. The shaking of my head had made everything spin, and I had only just gotten it all to stay still. He wandered off, was swallowed by his crowd.

Vinnie and Zebediah returned. Joey Ramone Just Asked Me For An Aspirin, I said. It was a magical night. We almost died on the way home, Bobbie was so drunk. The car veered violently to the side of the road. Everyone screamed, then laughed and laughed.

It was late by the time we all got to Katrina's. Her parents were away, so we all stayed over. Most of my new friends had parents who went out of town. My parents never went anywhere.

At Katrina's, we drank an improvised punch siphoned from the liquor cabinet. We Saw The Ramones! Everyone cheered, though I had only seen a mass of throbbing people, a blob, moving as one. Occasionally light would glare off Joey Ramone's glasses, like an SOS sent out across the ocean of moshers. Even the music was an indistinguishably loud, sonic blur. I had spent the concert staving off vomit and Zebediah. Now at Katrina's, I could start anew. Where was Zebediah? I walked around Katrina's roomy house, a mystery cocktail swishing in my crystal goblet.

I found him in a bedroom. His shirt was off, and he was slicing his chest with a razor. His big, black hairdo flopped down over most of his face, all that showed was his mouth, the curl of his lips. Zebediah's body was lean and etched with light scars. White and pink, they rose up from his brown skin. I thought of the marks skate blades left on a rink of ice, or of stone shot through with marble. Blood beaded up along the freshest cut and slowly slid down his body. It was super sexy. I climbed onto his lap. He looked up at me. I took the razor from his hand. Don't, I said dramatically, and touched his scars. No one was going to be locking Zebediah up, not like the other recreational cutters, these kids from Brookline with big houses and vacationing parents. Zebediah was free to slice himself to ribbons.

We made out for a while, until he started trying to get me to suck his dick, ruining everything. Forget It, I said. He looked at me with mournful eyes. I didn't mind touching it but fuck if I was going to put it in my mouth. He put his hands on my shoulders, weighing me down towards his dick. I got up and went back to my goblet of alcohol. Just Put It Away, I said, motioning to his crotch. *If you were my girlfriend I'd treat you like a princess*, he said, zipping up his tight black jeans. Princess Blowjob, I figured. I went looking for Katrina and the others, leaving Zebediah alone with his skin and his razor.

I woke up the next day around noon. I crept out into the bright sun, onto the porch where Katrina and Joshua were smoking cigarettes. I Was Supposed To Be At Work, I said. At Eight. *Oh, no!* Katrina gasped.

I thought about what I should do. I had the next day off, so that gave me an additional twenty-four hours to strategize. It seemed like the simplest thing would be to pretend I'd forgotten. I'd been confused about my schedule. Could happen to anyone.

I spent the day smoking cigarettes and longing for Zebediah, who had walked out into the Brookline night after I declined to blow him. I did love making out with him. I loved the way he walked in his combat boots, especially with a skirt kicking out around his legs. Perhaps if I stuck to making out with him in public I wouldn't have to deal with his dick. But if I was making out with him in public all the time, wouldn't that make him my boyfriend?

Two mornings later I walked into Chuck's with my normal smile on my face, my hairnet scrunched in my hand. The manager stepped into my path, blocking me like I'd come to rob the place. Hey, I said. I said his name, whatever it was. *Sorry*, he said. *This area is employees only*. I laughed. I Work Here, I said. I'm Michelle. *You do not work here. You did not show up for work, so you do not work here*. The tourists waiting for their mix-ins were getting a show. I stayed in character. I Had Yesterday Off! I cried. And The Day Before! *You did not. Two days ago you did not show up*. Oh My God! I feigned shock, feigned apology. You're Going To Fire Me? It's A Mistake! I tried to move past him. I Have Things Back There! I feigned entitlement. Heather stared at me, sadness in her face. She wasn't wearing the "It's My Birthday" sticker; the manager wouldn't allow it. He'd been threatening to take away the tip jars all together. *I have your things*, he said, and thrust the book I'd left behind at me. *The Basketball Diaries*. *Leave*, he said, *or I'll call security*.

Outside I sat on the broad, stone stairs, a few feet away from a clown pulling rolls of rainbow ribbon from his mouth. Tourists lined up to throw money at him, his upturned felt hat glittered with coins. I wondered how much money he made. Wondered if I had any skills that could be performed publicly for change. In a few hours Katrina would come by to share my break with me, and I would not be there but Heather would. Maybe they'd take her break together.

I dug out my cigarettes from my army bag and pulled out the last, my lucky cigarette, upturned in the pack. I lit it with a match and wished for a new job. I smoked it slowly, meditating on my wish. A flash went off, and as the glare cleared my eyes I saw a tourist smiling at me. Uh-uh! I hollered at him, melting the smile from his sunburned face. That's A Dollar! I stood and started toward him. He reached into his pocket.