Lately, I have been reading my cat’s horoscope. I don’t read it to my cat, if that’s what you’re wondering, but to myself, so I generally know what kind of day my cat is going to have. I read her horoscope because I like to know things about her like if she’ll be extra grumpy or if the stars portend a lightness of mood that means she will welcome ear scratches and extra cuddling. She is a Gemini. Today’s horoscope said: “Fresh topics, interesting questions and curious interactions will cause the sparks that lead to exciting relationships.” This let me know that today might be a good day for her to try on the costumes I bought her. I have been waiting all week to break out the saloon girl dress for a while and think today might be it.

People will tell you their pet is no ordinary animal, that their pet has personality and talent galore, but my Nala, who is an orange tabby with a white tail tip, is distinctive only in her dislike of people. Of course, I didn’t know that when I saw the flyer taped on the door of our local bookstore one hot Memorial Day, fifteen years ago. The ad said, “Adorable but mangy kitten needs a family” and figuring it would get my preteen daughter off my back about getting a dog like all her friends had, I jumped at it. Now, of course, my daughter is off running around at college (she’s a Cancer, need I say
more?) and her highness, Nala Regina the Marquise of Queensberry spends most of her day demanding to be let out and then let back in at least five times. Sometimes she brings me mice (“Today will present a unique giving opportunity”), furry lumps of rodent that she may have gnawed a little and she meows so proudly, I stifle my instinct to scream. I’ve seen her decapitate a squirrel (“You’ve dared to want more for yourself than was offered”) and fight off a coyote (“Try something over and over until it becomes natural”).

Now during the quarantine, Her Royal Highness is more demanding than ever, which is where the horoscopes come in. “Disappointment will present an opportunity for reflection” or “Rest and relaxation is the order of the day” give me a sense of where the day might take us. Of course, I read my own Libra horoscope, especially after the one day I missed (“Take care in motion”) happened to to be the day I broke my leg. And the fortune cookie, which isn’t the same thing I know, said, “You will marry your current lover and be happy” and lo and behold, I did. For a few years, anyway. (I knew Virgos were bad news.) So I am a starry-eyed believer, so what? Who’s it hurting?

The best thing about reading my cat’s horoscope is that it is next to the comics page and television listings. So I can check out what that stupid Marmaduke is doing (he’s slobbery, if you ask me) and find out what time Naomi Campbell will be eviscerating some random fashion designer. (oh right, that’s streaming). But I like the sense of control, however tenuous, I get from reading my cat’s and my horoscope. In these times of desperate insanity, it’s nice to know if in store for Nala is “You show up today in a way you can be proud of later when you’re telling the story” or “Your unconventional approach to a conventional activity may make you famous someday.” I see her licking her butt and I think unlikely. But you never know. My own horoscope today said, “Entertain as many new ideas as you can.”
The month I moved to LA, I hit the ground running with the gung-ho attitude of a high ponytail. I was determined to make the most of every opportunity, every little morsel that came my way. I quickly found it was like riding a tidal wave of sheer panic upon realizing you had decided to bet your entire life on black. However, I zestfully pressed forward with fists pumped into the air ready to take on anything: life, debt, water…

I enrolled in Groundlings improv classes upon the advice of a few actors who knew I had excelled in the inadvertent pratfall portion of my theater conservatorship. During the day, I interned for a small production company which searched for heartwarming properties that could be made into Hallmark type films. If anyone sitting in that place was being honest, or willing to break their confidentiality clause to be so, the place was really a vanity production shingle. It was a lark for a very rich housewife, Pamela, of a very rich head of another studio. There were a lot of meetings, lunches, and scripts optioned, but not a lot of production going on.

I wanted to learn as much as I could about the business, so I was happy to be in the middle of everything. I figured it was better than waiting tables or stocking shelves somewhere, even though I was only making two hundred bucks a week. *I was getting paid by Hollywood,* I told myself when I would rock myself to sleep. This 9-5 (8:30ish if I was lucky) set-up made auditions impossible, but I
hadn’t yet landed an agent and I could still make some of my Groundlings classes at night if traffic wasn’t too gnarly. I showed up to work plucky, happy, and smiley and I generally creeped everybody out. They most likely figured I was either A) on a new strong strain of anti-depressant their shrinks hadn’t yet told them about, or B) would one day snap and murder them.

I started out answering phones on a desk until eventually they let me double task as a reader. I thought this meant they trusted me. In reality, they realized they could get me to read for free instead of paying script analysts (unemployed screenwriters) to do it. I quickly learned how to do ‘coverage’, a glorified book report, on the scripts that were dumped at my desk in waist-deep piles. The most interesting one was a film version of Jane Austen’s *Emma*, being pitched by some outside producers. I was excited to eavesdrop on meetings and find out how they were going to make this happen in a town that usually demanded movies with explosions and high body counts. I didn’t get to hear the answer because mostly I filed papers, typed up notes, and ran errands.

I soon learned that the indie film *Swimming with Sharks* with Kevin Spacey was not an exaggeration. The federal crime of, for instance, mistaking Sweet ‘N Low for Equal was grounds for dismissal, if not a humiliating dressing down in front of the entire office. I did my perfectionist best to get every detail perfect. I took copious notes, put post-its everywhere, and arrived to work early to double check that everything was in place. If I forgot to send a memo, it would wake me up in the middle of the night in a blind panic. Alas, I had no *Mission Impossible* way of getting inside the building before morning without tripping the alarm. If a vase of freesia was put on the wrong coffee table, it was on par with a hate crime. If I dropped a call, somewhere in an ICU a baby’s liver failed. It occurred to me that if these idiosyncrasies didn’t get in the way of daily meetings, a movie might have gotten off the ground, but I kept that efficient idea to myself.

It was common knowledge that Pamela had many dietary restrictions. Some were preference, but others were for health reasons. We were never sure which were which, because they tended to shift with the tides, but we knew that under no circumstances were we to bring any lunches or snacks that
violated her food policies. Now there were others in the office that had conflicting food allergy issues, so planning an in-office lunch took the delicate diplomacy of NATO and the calculus skills of someone who, unlike me, actually showed up to math classes in college. I tried keeping charts with different items hi-lighted in different colors. Finally, I realized that my only real job was to keep Pamela alive. Beyond that, if someone turned purple, well, they’d just have to rely on their luck with Beverly Hills 911 emergency services.

One day Pamela had an extended lunch meeting with some producers. They decided to order lunch in which, as she made clear, meant that there was a possibility that she could die on my watch. They selected their entrees from the menus and I called the order in to The Palm and then went to pick it up. Often if an order wasn’t correct, or it lacked pepper, or the dressing wasn’t on the side, or it was on the side and there wasn’t enough of it, or there weren’t enough napkins, or she didn’t like the texture of the napkins that were in the office kitchen, back out I went to the Palm, or Spago, or The Grill, or Mr. Chow, or The Ivy to start over. On this frabjous day, all salads with dressing on the side were consumed without incident. I sat back down at my desk and high-fived myself with the pride of someone who just made peace in the Middle East.

But then…Pamela called out to me. Actually, she didn’t so much call out to me as throw a pen out into the hall at me, which indicated that I was being summoned into her office. I ran back into the office where she informed me that they were going to screen a movie for research and that I was to bring in a round of Perrier and popcorn. I was to make fresh popcorn, but fresh microwave popcorn, and not any that was made with palm oil. Pamela was allergic to palm oil.

I ran into the office kitchen and rifled through the cabinets. There were several boxes of microwave popcorn, but all had palm oil as ingredients. Fuck. I grabbed my keys, ran out the door, and tore out of the garage to the closest supermarket.

At the grocery store, amongst mere civilians, I determinedly set out to complete my important film biz mission with focus and efficiency. In the snack aisle, I scoured the backs of all the microwave
popcorn packages, looking for any brand that didn’t have the nefarious palm oil. I only found one, a Healthy Choice styled version. My reading the back of the package wasn’t good enough proof. I needed a second opinion, lest the words I was looking at with my eye balls weren’t the same words that were being translated by my brain juices. I called for back-up.

“Hi. Does this have palm oil in it?” I shoved the package at the beleaguered grocery store manager. He looked it over, reading the contents.

“No, it doesn’t look like it. No. No palm oil.”

I didn’t budge.

“How can you be sure?” I asked. The manager looked at me like a guy who was not in the mood for my bullshit, but who was used to this type of bullshit hourly.

“Because there is no palm oil listed in the ingredients on the package.”

“I know that. I read it. But how can we be sure that some didn’t get in there anyway? Like some rogue palm oil…” The manager sighed.

“I guess we can’t be one hundred percent sure. Other than sending it to a lab and testing it.”

“Do you do that?” I asked, hopefully.

“No.”

“Oh,” I said disappointed.

“But the chances of rogue palm oil forcing its way into a box of microwave popcorn from other boxes of microwave popcorn is pretty slim. I have yet to see it happen in my seven years here.”

“But you’re not ruling it out,” I said, warily.

“Nope. Anything is possible. I still audition for commercials and I haven’t gotten one job in twenty years. So, I can’t say I rule anything out. But again. Probably not gonna happen.”

I looked at him, comfortable in his supermarket vest, and suddenly I was comfortable in the knowledge that this box was a palm oil free zone. I raced back to the office, zapped the corn and put the fluffy contents into a porcelain bowl. Balancing the bowl on a tray with a group of Perriers, I
entered the office beaming. Pamela gave me an exasperated sigh for interrupting and a hand motion to usher me out.

I sat back down at my desk, sweating and breathing heavily. I was relieved Operation Popcorn had come to a close.

Another pen came flying out of the office into the hall. Then I heard a curdled scream. I stood straight up in a panic. Pamela came out of the office clutching her throat.

“Are you trying to kill me?” she half yelled, half stage whispered through a strained throat. The other women executives in an array of pastel suits gathered around her in concern.

“This popcorn has palm oil in it! You’ve poisoned me!” Pamela grabbed the porcelain bowl and threw it at my head. It whooshed past me, centimeters from my face, smashing into pieces behind me.

“Oh God, my throat is closing up. Someone call 911! Quickly!”

One of her pastel cohorts went to grab the phone. I ran for the kitchen and turned over the trash can, wading through spoiled half-eaten lunches, coffee grinds, and soiled wrappers. I found the bag from the microwave popcorn and looked again on the back. No palm oil. I ran back to the office.

“Pamela! It says no palm oil. I even asked at the store. They said it had no palm oil! I swear. Look!” I frantically pushed the wrapper at her, trying to save myself from a lengthy murder trial. She glanced over at the wrapper. Then her entire body relaxed.

“Oh. I thought I tasted palm oil,” she said. She looked over at the broken shards of porcelain china and popcorn strewn across the Berber carpet.

“Clean that mess up,” she snapped, as she walked back into the office and shut the door. And thus, ended the chances of Melissa Joan Hart playing me in the Lifetime movie of my murder case.

I sat back down, shaking. No matter how much of a glimpse into the film business I thought this was, in reality I was really only learning about catering and PTSD. I could probably sit and answer phones anywhere and learn more about the business with less of a chance of contracting a concussion.
It would be worth it to waitress, or even wear a red vest at the supermarket across the street, if I knew I was safe from having shit thrown at me. I wanted to work where I’d be appreciated. Somewhere where my employer would understand that I’m a creative human being with a life outside the walls of the office. I wanted to be taken seriously and treated humanely.

As luck would have it, that very week a friend referred me to a Hollywood starlet who desperately needed to replace her personal assistant. I felt tingles up and down my spine, like when the universe is trying broadcast something to you. I just knew. This? This would be the perfect job.
When I was two years old, a distant relative died and left my parents with a very small inheritance. Instead of spending it on a much needed roofer, my father opted to do it himself, and used the money to take our family on a holiday to Paris. A week before we left for the much anticipated trip, my dad fell off the roof while fixing it, and found himself in a full-arm cast. The inconvenience was no match for nonrefundable tickets, and before long, I had my first passport stamps.

After that, I remember my parents fantasizing about moving to France. Neither of them spoke a word of French, nor did they have the resources to simply relocate countries, but it was a frequented topic nonetheless.

“What if I was Roman Polanski? Then we would have to move there,” my mother would propose.

“You’re not Roman Polanski,” my father would inform her.

She would toss her hands in the air, “Then how are our children meant to speak with French accents? We can’t afford an *au pair*.”

She had a point. Donning my brother and I with accents would have been the least they could have done to compensate for their dominant genes of average height and propensity for asthma, but no such luck.

Twenty years and two passports later, I decided to move to Paris with my boyfriend John. I was going to become a famous fashion photographer, John was going to write his first of a canon of novels. We were going to live out our days in France, drinking wine, reading books, and inevitably taking extracurricular lovers.
Much like my parents, neither of us spoke French, but I had just spent a year hustling my way through London working odd jobs, and assured him that all of his pedantic concerns were just classic American overthinking.

Despite my confidence, it turned out that the language barrier was more of a logistical hurdle than I had anticipated. Even acquiring an under-the-table job proved to requisite more than just my credulous pointing, and Spanish yelled in a French accent.

Apparently, I was also culturally on par with a giant toddler. Taking up smoking in lieu of exercising, and switching to Pinot Grigio as a teeth whitener did nothing to camouflage my amateurish slips in dog shit, or outward confusion when protests would erupt without warning, like a musical theatre dance number.

But, I was twenty-three, in love, and lived above a boulangerie that provided me with an entire meter of sourdough baguette a day, so I didn’t really care - an attitude, which by the way, was very French of me.

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One winter’s night, John and I went out to meet some friends in Montmartre. It was snowing and magical, and though we couldn’t afford the APR rate on the drinks we were about to consume, we looked at each other with a sense of self-congratulatory accomplishment. We had done what my parents had always dreamt of... we were living in Paris. We were the city, we were the people, we were Parisians.

Just as John leaned over to give me a kiss, a man reeking of Hennessy and testosterone came barreling into our idyllic narrative, and punched him in the face. Unfortunately, John’s instincts were not to fight back, or even attempt escape from this unprovoked act of aggression. Instead, he bent down to retrieve
his broken eyeglasses, positioning himself at an even more convenient angle to have the shit kicked out of him.

As things escalated, unsure what to do, I punched the assailant in the neck. I had aimed for his head, but just the concept of my involvement was apparently effective enough to cause all three of us to pause for a moment to process what just happened, like when too many people play *Rock, Paper, Scissors* at one time.

Finally, it occurred to me to start running, and suddenly a mundane mugging became a chase. I ran down the street screaming at the top of my lungs, and as the man ran after me, in Benny Hill formation, John with crooked, broken glasses, was running after both of us.

As I neared the first corner, I pulled off one of my red high heels, and threw it toward my aggressor like some kind of misguided Larper. I’d pictured it cartoonishly impaling his forehead, but instead it landed weakly in the street nowhere near him. Hearing the formidable crunch of a taxi running over a fake thirty Euro *Louboutin*, I ran into the first open door I saw, and locked it behind me.

It was a fancy restaurant with a *prix fixe* menu, excessive flatware and lots of whispering. The man banged furiously on the door, screaming in French what I assumed were death threats, but could have been an order of Nutella *crêpes* for all I knew.

“Sanctuary! *Sanctuarie!*” I pleaded with the maitre’ d. “*Je suis, Notre Dame Quasi Modo! Necessito Sanctuary,*” gesturing to myself, like a frustrated Jane Goodall explaining Esperanto to a chimp.

The maitre’ d looked at my one shoeless foot, then at the restaurant patrons who had mostly gone back to apathetically sipping their wine. Shaking his head, he then turned to the door and warned my aggressor something about calling the police.
Through the adjacent window, he and I watched in totem pole formation, as the perp’s fervor diffused, and he begrudgingly walked away. Clearly, having bargained for an impromptu fight with an easy target in glasses, and perhaps acquiring a new velcro wallet, but not whatever this was.

“Merci, merci monsieur!” I thanked the maitre d’, shaking. His stoneface never hinting at anything other than the chore of civic duty. “You’re welcome, now please leave,” he said to me in impeccable English.

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Shortly thereafter, my boyfriend and I decided it was time to return to the States. I never became the chic, emaciated fashion photographer that I had assumed I would, and he never finished his novel. In fact, I had gained a winter-bear like layer of bread weight, and when I moved back to Los Angeles, decided to change careers anyway. Similarly, John gave up writing, and moved to Boston to go to law school. Not long after that, we broke up, and amicably went our separate ways.

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We are still in contact once in a while, and last Christmas, he emailed me a holiday card. It was a photo of his wife, baby and himself, posed stiffly on a Chesterfield couch. I assumed it was shot somewhere in their gigantic house, because in the background, their tandem Harvard Law diplomas were prominently framed on the wall.

As I looked past the smile John beamed, proudly holding his daughter, I could see the faintest scar on his left temple. It was where his broken eyeglasses had cut him that one that one night in Paris, when he was a twenty-something aspiring novelist, and got punched in the head.
As I zoomed in on the scar, amplifying it to the point where it was just an assortment of pink pixels, I thought about the enthusiastic narratives we told ourselves about who we were, and our place in the world. Even though nothing had come to fruition in the way we had prescribed, the reverberating effects of that naive idealism echoed somewhere. It had grown faint over the years, but if you really paid attention, you could still hear it - kind of like an accent.