



# Sweet dreams & flying machines



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*(~12 minutes reading time)*

“You sound so authentic, like one of the great big-band singers I used to hear when I was young!”

The white man from Memphis—he’d told me earlier—walked toward me with his meaty hand outstretched, smiling beatifically, as if I’d just converted him to a new religion. I was touched and flattered. He and his wife were DC tourists staying in a hotel near the Cafe Europa in Bethesda, where we had just finished playing three sets of jazz standards.

It was a bitterly cold day in January 2004. We’d started out pretty clunky and disconnected, but finally found the pocket and swung the last two sets hard. We were blessed with an enthusiastic, wine-drunk crowd, but the two Tennesseans had been our superfans, sitting in nearby lounge chairs, leaning forward into the music as if to catch it with their faces. It was actually the guitarist's band, not mine, but it was me on piano and vocals toward whom they leaned. In return, I had dug down into the sound and offered them up any gems I could mine. The best kind of unspoken transaction. These people weren’t captives, they could walk out at any time. But there they stayed, leaning, smiling, waiting for me to sing another song.

Now in the afterglow I put down the mic cable I’d been winding and walked forward to shake this charming man’s hand. Just then he decided to pull me in close and—giggling as if we were old pals—added another observation.

“But you look like you should be working in a falafel stand!”

Nearby, the drummer and bassist let loose the same appalled, incredulous laugh and

sympathetically rolled their eyes. These two were white men suitably shocked to hear weird ethnic insults out of the blue. Our guitarist/bandleader, part Japanese, had a cooler reaction. In my peripheral vision I could see him looking down at his feet and shaking his head, unsurprised.

My smile was frozen in place as I robotically shook the man's hand, although I could feel the edges of my face start to scrunch up in a childish expression of disgust. Something came out of my mouth, I don't remember what. It was along the lines of *That's not a very nice thing to say* when what I really meant was *Are you a fucking moron?*

Whether or not he perceived my discomfort is a fact unregistered by history. I remember him smiling the whole time, his fat hand enclosing my small, cold one.

Earlier that blustery, near-zero evening, as I'd been driving down I-95 from my home in downtown Baltimore, my fingertips, although encased in padded gloves, had gone almost completely numb. I'd always been sensitive to the cold, but this felt extreme. On the bandstand as we were setting up, my fingers were still stiff and wonky. I'd worried aloud about my strange symptoms. "That's a pretty serious parka you're wearing," the guitarist had ventured. "Maybe it's too heavy or the armholes are too tight, cutting off the circulation." I thought I saw a trace of judgment in his face, but maybe I was projecting. That frigid winter I was often bundled up as if for an Arctic expedition. It made me feel weak, pathetic poorly designed for survival. And wasn't there something pathetic about a shivering, benumbed, exhausted woman of nearly 40 to go out on a winter night and do what was still mostly a young man's job? For a measly hundred bucks, at that? This was only my thirtieth or fortieth professional gig ever. My bandmates had been doing this kind of thing since they were pimply teens who couldn't get dates. They welcomed me as a peer—I was skilled beyond what my limited experience might suggest—but I was always dogged by the fear that I didn't quite belong, wasn't quite qualified.

Maybe it was a specifically female type of imposter syndrome. I sometimes noticed myself performing before the performance: making a show of single-handedly hoisting heavy equipment, bustling around with just a touch of theatrically as I unloaded and set up my gear,

then checked sound levels. Who was even watching this rigmarole? I needed to play the role in front of the universe itself. See? No barely competent chick singer here! No canary! Just another cat.

Behind the proverbial curtain, reality was unimpressed by my effortful efforts. Aches and pains competed with the visceral joy I got from playing. My lower back hurt constantly from lugging around a dozen loads of laundry and endless boxes of supersize Costco groceries during the daytime, long before I had to start hauling my heavy semi-weighted keyboard and bench and stand and Carvin PA system out to gigs. After late nights playing, I would wake up in the mornings and hobble to the bathroom on dry, cracked feet, my joints creaking and popping, my eyes swimming. I'd feel like an ancient day-laborer who slept on a grass pallet on a packed mud floor, instead of a member of the so-called creative class launching her days from a firm mattress in a warm house.

Most acutely, whenever I would pick up my 10-month-old baby boy, I'd experience a flaming arrow across my upper back and try to hide my wince from his loving gaze. Theoretically I ought to have been in better shape than most of my fellow new mothers: our son had come to us at four weeks old via adoption. Having delayed parenthood due to ambivalence, fears, and unfulfilled ambitions—having once almost decided to ditch the whole idea of marriage and family in order to become the best musician I could be—I was now a late-bloomer as a mother, too.

In just a few months of sleep deprivation, I'd lost whatever advantage I'd gained from no childbirth trauma. A physical therapist diagnosed my structural pains. By habitually carrying the baby on my right hip, I had created a whopping three-inch height disparity between the right and left sides of my pelvis. The tall, muscular PT—a former college athlete—tried to remedy this by having me lie back on the table and forcibly stretching, pulling, and rolling my legs to various unnatural angles while he rammed against me with his broad chest and shoulders, in a manner that might have felt sexual had it not been so ridiculous.

I was feeling my age in more ways than one. I frequently experienced random mid-cycle uterine cramping, low-grade headaches, and premenstrual insomnia. So why not, on top of all that, some kind of permanent internal cold state, a bizarre, sudden inability to radiate heat from my center to my periphery?

Early in the first set, a different white man, this one pale and unsmiling, seated at the far end of the bar, on a date with a bottle of red and one glass, had yelled out

“Do you do any Sinatra?”

It was such an unfriendly request, almost a dare, that I hesitated before deciding to fill it. But then I was half-hearted about it: I accidentally counted in “Fly Me To The Moon” way too slowly. The band chugged through the chord changes and I sang it like a dirge. Mister Sunshine left without even a nod of thanks. Definitely no tip.

Eventually, though, we found our spot. My voice and fingers grew warmer, more supple. I sang “East of the Sun,” which I liked to do as a bossa nova. We played “Tenderly” as an instrumental feature, with lots of rich piano fills behind the guitarist’s simple, expressive melody. We did a jaunty bebop from Tommy Flanagan called “Freight Train,” and then some Pat Metheny, Joe Henderson, Wayne Shorter. I sang a bluesy swinger called “Baltimore Oriole” and some Jobim. Burt Bachrach’s “The Look of Love.” I sang the little known lyrics to Herbie Hancock's "Maiden Voyage," penned by his wife. I sang at least one thing by Michel LeGrand/Alan Bergman/Marilyn Bergman.

Here was the fun, here was the juice. Fundamental stuff: bassist, drummer, guitarist, and singer intertwined inextricably with pianist. Whatever the audience thought or felt, we certainly were having fun, channeling a groove, building a beautiful flying machine together, entrained and entranced. We were bonded in rhythm. The beat and everything adding to the beat and everything play-fighting against the beat and the beat itself. It takes us out of our heads and bodies, sweeps us away in belongingness. Each of us finds our place in the sound, and once there, it feels like a homecoming. We've been called back someplace we barely remember but it's been there forever. The set ends. We don't walk away so much as dissolve in joy.

Into this bliss machine Mr. Memphis had now thrown his ugly-American monkey wrench. *You should be working a falafel stand.* For a moment I could feel the hollowing out of my center, the hole forming in my solar plexus. I could glimpse the edge of that dark pit at my feet, the bottomless chasm that lived there even on my most optimistic days. This man wounded me but

not for the obvious reason. Some stranger and his dumb, random, bigoted insult? Old news. Big whoop. What was much worse than his presumptuousness was that he had stirred up my self-consciousness, had pulled me out of the musical cloud of bliss and belonging I'd helped make. I had forgotten the specifics of myself. I had forgotten I was anything other than breath, sound, movement, energy: a conduit of joy. I'd achieved a visceral knowledge that everything was going to be okay. I had a job, a purpose. I was a member of the band and I was locked into the groove.

One stupid quip threatened to rob me of all this. Or am I making this more complicated than it needs to be? Maybe it was just my vanity he bruised. My mind was as well furnished with racist stereotypes as any other person's. The phrase *works at a falafel stand* immediately conjured an image of a middle-aged man, a homely one at that.

To be diminished and de-sexed like this was also nothing new. There was that boy I'd met freshman year of college, who instantly killed the crush I had on him by nicknaming me Gandhi. A few years after that, I'd worked as a paralegal for a big corporate practice in midtown Manhattan, where one of my assigning law partners—a jovial arch-conservative Christian zealot from Iowa—liked to refer to me (affectionately, he thought) as Baghwan Sri Ragneeshl. All that had been in the late 1980s-early 1990s. What did it mean in 2004, with 9/11 a wound still distorting the surface of our lives, still dominating the subtext of our politics and culture, still seeping fear into our dreams? What did it mean for me, an American woman born and raised, to be likened to a Middle Eastern man?

None of this occurred to me at the time, of course. I was too busy calling on my vast reserves of having-seen-this-shit-before, too busy ignoring the hole in my chest and pit at my feet. I was a trouper, and I don't mean trooper, a dude in uniform who pulls you over on the highway, but trouper as in "member of an entertainment troupe" for whom the proverbial show must go on. I shook the darkness out of my head and went back to packing my gear.

My fan-emies were still smiling, glowing, beaming at me warmly but perhaps also with a kind of helpless curiosity. I must have seemed like a zoo specimen. A foreign-looking woman with no discernible accent, singing songs they remembered from the blonde blue-eyed babes of the big band era. There would always be people like these out there in the world, strangers going about their business, visiting distant cities, eating their meals in cute trendy cafes with reasonably priced wine lists. They wanted nothing from me. I was the one who had entered the spotlight eagerly, hungrily. I was the one who had asked for the responses of strangers; in fact

I had fought hard for the ability to do so, had fought the still-resonant voices of discouragement and belittlement stored up inside me since childhood, had risked my marriage and the rest of my stable, secure future to do so. Nobody had ordered me to get up on the bandstand. I had put myself there by dint of will. I owned the decision and all of its consequences.

After the gig, back in the car I turned on the ignition and a stream of icy air shot out of the vents. I made my way through the quiet Bethesda streets and onto the DC beltway heading back up to Baltimore. Ten minutes in, I expected the car interior to be warm, but it was still punishingly cold. I looked at my dashboard controls and realized they were set to defrost. In my distractedness and new-parent exhaustion, I had never turned on the heat at all. I must have driven all the way from home to the gig with the air-conditioning blasting onto the windshield, and straight at the tips of my thickly gloved hands. No circulation problems. No terrible health news on the horizon. No indictment of my impractical ambitions. I had simply flash-frozen my own fingers.

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