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EMAILS TO MY AGENT FROM INSIDE THE MALL OF AMERICA'S WRITERS' RESIDENCY

by ELIZABETH EVITTS DICKINSON

DAY 1

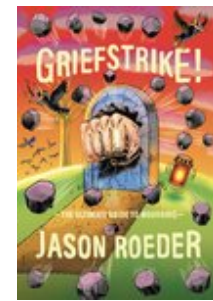
Hello from Bloomington! I know you think I've made a colossal mistake coming to Minnesota, but I need to reassure you that I'm not having "a Fitzgerald in Hollywood" moment. Yes, I'm broke, dispirited, and drying out, just like F. Scott. Yes, I have owed you this manuscript for years. And yes, I've attended residencies in the past, to no great accomplishment (seriously, who can create amidst so much solitude?) But this time it's different. Where better to write this generation's great American novel than inside the cultural cathedral of American life — the mall? I will pierce its glistening displays of capitalist consumerism. I will eat from its courts of food. I will breach its Body Shop and see how man tries to fragrance the quotidian mundanity of suburban life with Mega Mango Body Butter. I

will enter the hungry maw of material greed and write of the planned obsolescence of the American Dream. I will bring back Truth, with a capital T, and it will be epic!

But first, I need to redeem this gift card for unlimited Aunt Annie's.

DAY 2

This is no MacDowell, that's for sure. No quiet cabin for me. I've been ensconced on a public platform outside Sears where they've transformed Santa's Workshop into a kind of writer's garret. There's a roll top desk with a quill and ink jar. There's a typewriter. They do like to mix their metaphors here. My hosts have asked that I write pithy, off-the-cuff observations inspired by the stores in the mall. At first I balked, but now I see the value in this exercise. What about pitching a series of essays? *White House Black Market: The Racial Divide in Middle America* or *Forever Deluding Ourselves: Arresting Feminine Aging and Other Observations on Patriarchy Inside Forever 21*. And I don't mean to be derivative, but remember that time David Foster Wallace tried eating lobster? Imagine that, but at the Smoothie King.



*"This is the hilarious and informative grief handbook I didn't know I needed.
But hopefully not too soon."
—Judd Apatow*

DAY 3

The hotel where I'm staying is connected to the mall, so I haven't breathed fresh air in days. I tried going outside, but the guards say I'm not allowed. Are you getting my emails? I'm worried that I haven't heard from you. I've hit — dare I say it — writer's block. I need inspiration. I bought Molly off some high school kids I met in Spencer's Gifts. I'm going to take it and go to the Crayola Experience. More soon.

DAY 4

I woke up this morning and my eyes were swollen shut from hives. I think it's the mango body butter. My hosts say I'm not allowed to call in sick, so I'm trying to make the best of being blind. I tried channeling Patrick Suskind — a modern day *Perfume*, if you will. I could write volumes on the olfactory assault of Yankee Candle. Then I got lost, and I couldn't find my way back to the hotel, so I curled up and took a nap in a ficus planter. I must have lost the \$400 gift card my hosts gave me for food when the mall cops roused me. But a nice lady gave me her Cheesecake Factory leftovers. She was right! The portions really are generous.

DAY 5

I learned why I'm not receiving any emails. It's a condition of using the free Wi-Fi. No messages from the outside world! I didn't read the fine print on the prompt screen when I clicked "Agree." My hosts say it helps me stay fully immersed in the mall experience. No progress as yet on the novel.

DAY 6

Please disregard the text I sent you at 3 AM pitching a BDSM love story set in a sunglass kiosk. I don't remember sending it. Last thing I recall, I was at the Barnes & Noble scanning the *New York Times* bestsellers shelves and watching people buy copy after copy of that schlock, and I guess I got depressed about my progress (or lack thereof) and I went for happy hour at Tequila Mockingbirds. Strawberry margaritas were on special. Anyway, I'm truly chagrined at that story pitch — I mean the logistics alone are untenable. It's a kiosk for Christ's sake.



*After a half decade away, the award-winning *The Believer* is coming back to McSweeney's beginning in November 2022.*

DAY 7

Holy shit. I've done it. Somehow. Despite it all, I've done it. Yesterday, I finally had enough. I threw the ink-swollen quill to the ground, and refused to sit on that platform any longer. I broke free from my hosts and ran to the Apple Store, where I stole a MacBook from the display, and hid inside the ball pit outside Bubba Gump Shrimp Co. And I wrote. By god, I wrote. I was up all night. I need a few hours of sleep and then I'll send you the draft. This is it, my friend. This is the best work I've ever done.

DAY 8

What. The. Fuck. Is. A. Work. Made. For. Hire. Contract?

I assigned all copyright for everything I wrote on this residency to the mall? A *MALL* owns my novel? That's it. I'm going to the sporting goods place on level 79 for a fast-track gun license.

LATER...

OK, it's me again. I've had a FroYo and some time to calm down and here's the thing. I think I'm staying. At the mall, I mean. What do I have to go back to anyway? A walk-up in Brooklyn I can't afford? An adjunct gig with no hope for tenure? Gastropubs that never put strawberry margaritas on special? I've come to appreciate what I have here. A roof over my head. Food. There's a pop-up health clinic inside the Claire's Boutique Piercing Studio. If you need me, I'll be working at Papyrus. Rumor has it Trump is diverting all NEA funds to their greeting card division.

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