

from *Blowing Smoke*, a Compendium of Everyday Excuses: “The Diet,” “L’Affaire,” “The Spare Room Closet,” & “Las Vegas”

Whoever wants to be a judge of human nature should study people’s excuses

– German poet and dramatist Christian Friedrich Hebbel (1813-1863)

The Diet

Weigh-in first thing. Purge the guilty feelings about what I ate yesterday. Taking a shower sometimes shaves off half a pound. I need a new scale; surely this one can’t be right. What about all those crunches and the twenty minutes of stretches before breakfast? Substitute fat-free Eggbeaters for eggs. No butter ever. Too many carbs in a whole orange. Puffed rice with non-fat milk starting tomorrow. A second bowl won’t hurt and will fill me up. Herb tea. No bread, absolutely none. Rice crackers. More herb tea. At lunch add lettuce to get the satisfaction of chewing. Cheese is definitely out. What about cheese rind? In France they make soup out of cheese rind. Eat less, exercise more. It must be water weight; how else could I have managed to exercise, eat less, and gain two-and-half pounds? No more Starbucks. No second helpings ever. Celery and carrot snacks, if only I’d bought those little trays of pre-cut. Eight glasses of water. The key is staying away from the refrigerator. The key is not buying any packaged food. The key is having someone to talk to on the phone whenever I want to eat between meals. But who wants to miss out on the first strawberry jam of the season? Just a dab on dry toast. One more--so at dinner better forgo dessert. Be sure to jog later; one-half hour equals 300 calories. Isn’t sugar the lesser evil of the fat-sugar-salt triad? Tonight: What to wear if thin is my best color—something black and tight-at-the-waist so as not to overeat. Maybe a snack beforehand so I won’t be hungry. Diet soda. Sugarless cinnamon gum. Stake out the raw vegetable hors d’oeuvres first thing. Bell pepper slivers. Broccoli florets. Creamy mayonnaise dip: not even a fingertip-of-a-taste. Wine, 4 ounces exact measure? Or Vodka, 2 ounces exact measure? More fruit? Too much sugar, which equals carbs. More ice, ice adds crunch. Just one more mini- rice cracker. Talk, don’t eat. Just a spritz more of wine with my

Perrier. What's the difference between this unadorned asparagus spear and one wrapped in a thin sheet of very lean beef? I'll have another. Kale salad with quinoa won't add to my daily limit: 30 fat grams; 2000 sodium grams; and as few carbs as is manageable. Skinless, boneless chicken cubes, no salt. No sausage, no smoked salmon, no pork rinds, no barbeque. Sour cream, cream cheese, egg salad—verboten. Pizza squares—nada. Duck confit cassoulet as a main course; fast tomorrow—clear broth. Another mini rice cracker. Mint tea. Maybe a grape from the garnish on the cheese tray. What about a strawberry dipped in Belgian chocolate? They're small, two couldn't hurt—Mother always said that it wasn't good to lose weight too fast. After dinner brandy—no. Nothing from McDonalds on the way home. Nightcap to hasten sleep—uh-uh. Lock the gift box of hand-crafted bonbons in the trunk of the car. Too late now to jog. Chamomile tea. Two mint flavored Tums makes a good bedtime snack. Hide the dessert liqueur on the top shelf of the hall closet next to the Halloween candy. The key is to go to bed early, get up late, and not eat for twelve hours. Weigh-in first thing. Purge any guilty feelings about what I ate yesterday. Taking a shower sometimes shaves off half a pound. What's wrong with this digital setting? How could my brand new scale already need a fresh battery?

L’Affaire

No, no, no; it’s not you, it’s me. I just need some space. There’s no one else; I would have told you if there was. I just need to live by myself for a while. Maybe take time out and travel. A change of pace would do you good. The separation will help us mellow as a couple. Remember that line from the Fantasticks: *without a hurt the heart is hollow*? I’m not worthy of you. I can’t seem to give you what you want. The job takes all my time; I need to be available 24-7. I need to relocate to another state. My divorce isn’t doing what it was supposed to do. Of course, there’s nobody else. But would it be such a bad thing if we started seeing other people and broadened our horizons? I did so tell you that I was married; you forgot. We’ve drifted apart. I just feel that you’re not there for me. It’s not what you say it’s the way you say it. I feel that our relationship can’t be adjusted. You’ll get over it. You’ll grow. I swear there’s no one else. It’s not what you do; it’s the way you do it. We’re just not right for each other. Tears won’t work this time. You’re not happy; I’m not happy. I know, I know, I know; I can never seem to give you what you need. I know you’re hurting; I’m hurting. Let’s take a step back so that we can see what can be learned from this. How many times do I have to say it: There’s no one else. I hate having to give you all my passwords and always tell you what I’m doing. How can we be together if you don’t trust me? Remember the first time you came to my loft and asked if I had a roommate and I told you I that I traded sex for space; that was me telling you that I was married. No, it’s not why I loaded my ten-speed and gassed up the car. I know you’re struggling; we’re both struggling. I’m struggling with what it is that’s good that I can take away from this. Because I’m in love with you and I don’t want to be in love. It’s like the Cat Steven’s song “The First Cut Is the Deepest.” Threatening is not going to work; if you sleep on it, tomorrow you won’t feel like harming yourself. Getting pregnant is not going to work. Because you’ve backed me into a corner. Because I still love my first wife. Because I want to atone for my sins so that I won’t see you in hell. No, no, no, it’s not you; it’s me. I’ve met someone.

The Spare Room Closet

Should I start right in on cleaning the closet or go through this basket of ski stuff in front of it? Where to put the carryalls hanging from the doorknob and the clothes hanging in the doorway? Should I start on the top shelf or on the floor with the shoe organizer? Why didn't whoever remodeled this house put a light in here? Maybe I need to wait for a sunny day. I hate mousetraps. Poisoning is definitely out. But then there's Hantavirus. Where's the cat? What I need to do is to remove this shoe caddy and vacuum the floor. Are those spiders dead? I thought I just cleaned the cobwebs out of here. Maybe I should sort the hall closet instead. By the time I get all these shoes and clothes out of here, I won't have the energy to try anything on. Where's the best place for the throw-away pile? If I toss one garment a week, this closet could be useable again in no time. What I need is a rule: nothing without stretch. I wonder if this is worth dry-cleaning or if it could be hand-washed? So, who can I give my clothes to, who would appreciate them? What about this suit: I might need it if I ever have an in-person job review. I can't give this away until I've laundered it. I have a theory: there are only so many colors in the world and if you keep something long enough, eventually you'll find something else to match. Where did I used to wear this? I hate to throw away anything that fits. I should hang this in the hall; it's hard to toss something that keeps me so warm. Surely this will come in style again. What I need is a dressing room, a room that's all closets. This was such a great deal. Did I ever actually wear that? This is how I see it: If I get invited out, I'll always find something to wear right here. I can't toss this until I take the buttons off and how can I do that when it took me so long to sew them on? Is that a stain or is that mold? I don't like this jacket but love the pants and I'd hate to break up a set. If I give this to my neighbor, I'll tell her that someone left it here. Is that a moth hole? Maybe my other neighbor's granddaughter could wear this--I can't just give my clothes to anyone. I don't have the energy to try this on right now--too many buckles. My head is starting to hurt. When will I ever wear these shoes? My one friend in the suburb where I moved when I first married gave them to me when she broke her foot. And what about her high-heeled platform brocade sandals that she wore to her cotillion the year I was born, what happened to those? If I throw these pants away, how will I know if I need to go on a diet? I hate to part with anything red, it's such a hard-to-match color --all those off reds that pass for true red these days. I can't throw away this print, these are my colors. I always felt good in this; I wonder if it would look shop-worn at night? I can't throw this away; my friend's sister designed it. And my

mentor gave me this when I visited her in Florida the winter before she died--who would think that white was such a hard color to match. If my upper arm muscles shrink, I could wear this again. If I lost a little weight, this would feel more comfortable. This one's a classic. I can't just donate this stuff to the Goodwill, some of it came from there; this sweater--didn't my high school girlfriend and I fight over it? It wasn't called *vintage* then. I should frame this vest and hang it on the wall--just look at the embroidery. And the applique on this 1940's apron. If I had more wall space I could hang these as textile art--this one, from a country that doesn't exist anymore. Decisions have never been my strong suit--maybe a glass of wine would help. I wish I hadn't given up coffee. I need a stimulant; the dust in here is giving me an allergy attack. And this... I made it using a borrowed sewing machine out of my mother's hand-stitched living-room drapes that got ruined in the hundred-year flood my senior year in high school. My uncle sent the silk from Occupied Japan. My girlfriend lent me her mom's sewing machine. This wrap-around seersucker housedress with the Van Gogh flowers belonged to a wealthy great-aunt, the one with bad taste--in my mother's opinion. I wore it to my first book party held in a North Beach church basement: Nice blowout even though the book never actually got published. Where did I wear this velvet top that I cut out of a dress made before I was born in a country where garment workers were about to be forced to produce munitions? I bought this sundress because it reminded me of a mini-skirt I re-fashioned out of a cabbage-rose curtain the summer before graduate school. And I'd forgotten all about this vintage fitted tweed--they don't make jackets like this anymore. The weave is perfect for mending tiny little moth holes. And the label--made in the country from which my grandfather did not flee (definitely not, he was there working as a tailor's apprentice when mob violence broke out and he suddenly left everything behind including the name he was born with). Maybe for now I should migrate this antique stuff into the writer's conference carryalls hanging on the door knob. Why didn't they put electricity in this closet? It's so hard to see in secondhand light. It'll be easier to sort this in the morning. Definitely, tomorrow. If it's a sunny day.

Las Vegas

If we went to Vegas for the weekend, we could put this behind us. It was just a friendship. I had no idea where it was going. Why can't you forgive me? It wasn't like I asked for this to fall into my lap. He never touched me. I never touched her. It was only emotional. We only kissed. It was only sexual. You weren't enough. He was the man I should have married. She was a good Christian girl. It's impossible to communicate with you when you get like this. I was alone night after night. We met by accident. I was tired of being taken for granted. When I got my hair cut, you never noticed. You weren't there emotionally. You never liked to cuddle. I got tired of eating dinner alone by myself. I thought I'd met a soulmate. She was the kind of girl my mother hoped I'd marry. You're always so moody. Our marriage was broken anyway. I could never please you, no matter how hard I tried. I felt like you never needed me. It was only cocktails. I have a right to my own personal life. He was there when I needed him. She was willing. Not that many; no more than the number of fingers on one hand. Remember all those weekends I said that I was going to Vegas with my brother? She needed a shoulder to cry on. I needed to take care of old business. It just happened, so can we just forget about it? You always had a headache. You were so preoccupied with birth control. You look so emaciated. I didn't reach out for this problem; it reached out for me. He said I made him happy. You were always on a diet. You always came to bed with all that crap on your face and claw curls in your hair. You wore the same pair of sweats 24/7. It was research for my novel. You were always busy with the baby. You were so needy; it was the only way I could get any "me" time. I didn't want to bother you when you were so depressed. You let the kids consume your every moment. She'd kept her girlish figure. I think we should move forward and let bygones be bygones. You'll have to take my word for it. You'll have to take it on faith. I know absolutely that we have the capacity to solve this. I know that Jesus would forgive me. I think we should agree to settle our differences, forgive and forget. It was just a friendship. I had no idea where it was going. It wasn't like I asked for this to fall into my lap. He never touched me. I never touched her. It was only emotional. We only kissed. It was only sexual. He was the man I should have married. She was a good Christian girl. It's impossible to communicate with you when you get like this. Why can't you forgive me? We need to establish neutral ground so that we can iron out our differences. If we went to Vegas for the weekend, we could put this behind us.