

## The Other Mia

Oh. You mad!? You  
quiet now! Where's your money go!?

Damn man let the people have fun.  
Ol' Grinch ass!

For real for real,  
You still mad 'cause Mom wouldn't buy

that Lion-O Sword of Omens joint for you  
from Lionel Toy Warehouse back in the day!

Let them have some fun. Let them  
Be all happy and excited.

Let them  
jump up and down like you be doing at in front of the TV.

### **Bruh #1:**

I'm just sayin . . .

One Monday morning in early June, not long after her husband left for work, Mia rinsed the soap from her hair, opened her eyes, and saw—herself. She was not looking into the mirror. Another Mia was standing at the other end of the bathtub, soaked from the head down, as if she too had been standing under the showerhead. The same wet, small-boned face faced hers, skin slick and flushed with heat. Water streamed down her neck between a pair of breasts identical to those which a certain ex-boyfriend of Mia's had first referred to as nubile and, later, nominal. Mia didn't look down any further. The other Mia blinked. A droplet rolled down her cheek as she looked Mia over, slowly, appraisingly. Mia covered her nominal breasts with her hands. The other Mia pulled back the shower curtain and walked out of the room. By the time Mia grabbed a towel and rushed after her, the other Mia was dressed and on her way to the front door. She was wearing Mia's best suit, a charcoal gray she rarely wore herself: the cut was more sophisticated and showed more leg than she felt she could carry off. Her bob was finished with loose curls, as if she'd just left the salon. Mia pushed back her dripping bangs. She forced out a word that could've been who, what, or how. The other Mia left the apartment without a backward glance.

Mia dressed with haste in a linen button-down and a khaki skirt. She ran down the stairs. Outside, the narrow street was choked with cars, the sidewalks with men and women in business suits and stay-at-home moms in baggy clothes pushing well-engineered prams. Horns sounded at the nearby intersection. Mia glanced right and left. The bright morning light filtered cleanly through the leaves of the trees and shone off the solid brownstones like a rebuke. It was hunger, nothing more, that made her see what she thought she'd seen. Other than in its comforts, her life was not unusual in any way. She understood that. Perceptions that made it seem otherwise could be chalked up to hunger, or hormones. She stopped in a café on Copley Square, ate a muffin, and continued to Broeder's Rare Books and Papers.

Her morning was anything but unusual. She'd spent the past few weeks cataloguing a large, recently acquired collection of Ashworth first editions and related documents. In the quiet

reading room, hands gloved as she shuffled the brittle pages of an unfinished manuscript, she cross-checked dates and deletions, and typed notes into her laptop. All afternoon she worked on the summary in her office. From time to time she checked her e-mail. She'd been expecting to hear from Mrs. Broeder about the Ashworth presentation, tentatively scheduled for Friday, but she didn't. Toward the end of the afternoon, two of her colleagues popped their heads through her door to wish her luck. Deep in concentration, she nodded her thanks, wondering vaguely what they might have meant. At six o'clock she straightened her desk and congratulated herself: the unlikely events of this morning scarcely crossed her mind.

Outside, the yellow sun was turning pink. Commuters poured up the stairs of the green-line station across from Mia's office, young men with skateboards under their arms headed for the square and young women in tight jeans. Women Mia's age with preschool children in tow rushed to finish their errands before their husbands got home. The flow of foot traffic was slowed twice by clusters of rowdy suburbanites in Bruins shirts and Red Sox caps. As Mia approached the corner, the light turned red. Across from her, almost hidden behind two men in running clothes, she caught a glimpse of the face that until this morning she'd only seen in the mirror. It wore a pair of large, gold-rimmed aviator sunglasses, dark lipstick, and no expression. The other Mia was headed away from where Mia herself lived, either toward the T, if she took the T, or toward Newbury Street. The other Mia adjusted her stylish sunglasses. It wouldn't have occurred to Mia to put them on the bridge of her own equally small nose. They looked less at home here on Copley Square than they would have on Newbury. Mia rarely went there herself but she was certain that that was the other Mia's destination. Soon she'd be contemplating Cartier's glittering window display. Her elegance assured that she'd be welcomed if she went inside. A woman like the other Mia could sit alone with confidence at an intimate restaurant, unfolding her napkin with a single shake at a table laid with flowers and heavy silverware. The light changed. The other Mia came toward her through the crowd. Slung over her shoulder was the glossy black

leather briefcase Mia carried when she went with Mrs. Broeder to acquisitions meetings.

Mia's heart rate jumped. She readjusted the strap of her well-worn canvas summer bag and crossed the intersection with the crowd, legs numb. Mia held two degrees in literature. She understood that she was dealing with a double, a doppelganger, but did not remember the best course of action when faced with one. As the other Mia pushed her sunglasses back on her head, Mia reached for her cell phone. She needed Annie's advice. The other Mia was coming closer. She walked with her shoulders back, not so much as a glance in Mia's direction. As she passed, the arm of the jacket that should've been on Mia's arm brushed against her skin. A sensory memory of the smooth silk lining flashed through her mind. She walked on, breath short, and slipped her phone back in her purse. Annie had been distant lately, preoccupied with what she should expect while she was expecting, and at the moment she was with her husband in Paris, on a last getaway. Questions that might better go unasked weren't worth the roaming charges. Mia looked over her shoulder, but the other Mia, no taller than she was after all, had disappeared into the crowd.

At home, Mia dressed two chicken breasts and put them in the oven. She'd serve them with asparagus and new potatoes. A simple, sensible dinner. Mia poured iced tea and held the cool glass to her forehead. She took a long breath and on the exhale counted to ten, as recommended by the anxiety management brochure her doctor had given her. She repeated the exercise, pushing the last of the air from her lungs, and put her tea on the counter. She went to the bedroom and rifled through her closet. The charcoal gray suit was missing, and the glossy briefcase.

Donnelly got home as the chicken finished cooking. Entering the kitchen, he kissed her briefly but on the lips. He was a tall man, blond hair thinning, with pleasant features and rimless eyeglasses that sat crookedly on his nose. She poured wine and they brought their plates to the chrome and lacquer table in the next room. She asked about the progress of the interrelated algorithms that the teams he managed were working on, not because she found his work interesting but because she knew he did. He showed her the same consideration when talk turned to

the Ashworth papers.

When they'd bought their condo five years ago, right after their wedding, Donnelly had been surprised by Mia's insistence on sleek, dark, chrome-accented furniture and cold steel lighting fixtures that resembled upside down ice cream cones—the look was at odds with the way she presented herself—but he'd deferred to it. She'd recently proven herself capable of sitting through a game at Fenway Park. They shared a taste for traveling to new cities in the summer and warm seas in the winter. They did the Times crossword puzzle together every Sunday afternoon, and had long shared the hope that there would someday be a reason to spend that afternoon at the playground instead. At first, they'd tried spending extra time in bed together, when they wanted, doing what they wanted. Then came the mating schedule and recommended positions. Then came supplements of the necessary female hormones. Then their doctor suggested IVF. Four months ago, Mia's faulty uterus had rejected a fourth egg. They were currently taking what they called a break. A few weeks ago, one after the other, they'd turned thirty-eight.

After dinner they chose a playlist made up of songs popular when they were in college and took their wine to the living room. On the glass coffee table were three sets of brochures: Paris, Vancouver, and Barcelona. The three options had been chosen by Mia. They had to book tickets soon, but Donnelly was still considering. Tonight he lingered over a glossy photograph of Vancouver's skyscrapers and snow-covered mountains. Mia thought that the style of the clothes she wore would be better suited to Vancouver than Barcelona or Paris. The gray charcoal suit purloined by the other Mia would have worked well in Manhattan. Mia would have liked to wear it there, on a weekday. It was a weekday suit. In the pause between the soft finish of "Fields of Gold" and the drumbeats of "Heavy Cloud No Rain," she thought she heard a door close on the bedroom end of the apartment. Then came barely audible footsteps on the runner in the hallway. She looked up and saw the other Mia at the far end of the room. She was wearing the silver, floor-length, raw-silk sheath dress that Mia had been compelled to wear four years ago as the bridesmaid to a friend she hadn't seen since. The other Mia's face was in shadow but Mia could sense that she was looking at her the

way she had in the shower, as if weighing the question of whether she was a seven or an eight. Mia shrunk back against the sofa. The other Mia turned and left.

At the sound of the front door closing, Donnelly looked up. "It's nothing," Mia said.

The next day after work, and the next, Mia found herself heading away from home toward Newbury Street. She went there with her teenaged niece every year to pick out a Christmas present, with Annie when Annie insisted, and with Donnelly about once a month, to eat. She couldn't think of a time she'd gone by herself. As she passed into the shopping district, men evaporated, along with tourists in Bruins t-shirts, and baby carriages. The young girls' tight jeans were expensive tight jeans. Women Mia's age wore clothes designed to show off shapes younger-looking than they were. They strode the sidewalk at a fast pace, as if they knew exactly where they meant to go and which items they meant to demand of the clerk. Mia drifted from one store to the next. She surprised herself by making a few purchases: scarves, a stylish pink skirt, a pair of orange espadrilles. She tried on wide-brimmed summer hats and sleek sunglasses like the other Mia wore.

Both days, she headed last to the shop that called itself Let's Go Upstairs and lingered several minutes on the sidewalk outside. The place was almost as narrow as its bay window, which was in fact one flight upstairs from the street. The second day, when Mia looked up, she saw the other Mia move out of the shadows and into the light of the displays. She held up a creamy, low-cut nightgown and measured it against her body. It barely fell past the hips. She held up a flesh-colored bra that consisted of nothing but lace.

Mia turned on her heels and headed in the other direction. The department store down the street from the public library had been familiar territory for several generations of local women. It was a big, solid place, with gleaming escalators and well-lit parades of mannequins. A soothing blend of smells hung in the air: sweet perfumes and linen dust and new leather. Mia went floor to floor, hunting down sensible, pastel summer blouses and final-markdown winter skirts that she brought to the check-out without trying on. She smiled at the clerks. Both nights, she headed home in

the failing light with the jute handles of several bags rubbing her fingers, too late to cook dinner. She stopped for Asian fusion take-out. Donnelly rubbed splinters from his chopsticks and drew his eyebrows together, glancing from her face to the bags she'd left by the entrance to the kitchen, but he asked no questions. She looked past him, listening for the sound of the door.

Thursday was stormy. After her first paper bag nearly soaked through, Mia found herself in a small, patchouli-scented shop, purchasing an oversized hemp tote bag. By the time she was on her way home, it was lumpy and heavy. Donnelly was waiting in the kitchen, holding several sheets of paper in a grip that had already crinkled them. His thinning blond hair stood up on top, as if he'd been raking his hand through it. His posture was tense. He did not say hello. She deposited the Asian fusion on the counter, then scooped up the paper bags she'd left by the kitchen doorway last night and the night before. She took them with the tote down the hallway to the bedroom. When she opened the door to her closet, she found several more bags, larger ones. Through the openings, Mia glimpsed deep-colored silks, and a boot-sized designer-labeled shoebox. Mia dumped the others on top of them.

Back in the kitchen, Donnelly was pacing. Mia dodged him on her way back and forth to the cabinet for serving bowls. She spooned out the food. Holding her hand over the pad thai, she sensed no warmth. Donnelly continued pacing behind her. Vaguely, she registered both the sound of his finger flicking the papers and the lack of talk that meant he was angry. They rarely argued—neither of them would've stayed in that sort of marriage. She stared down at the sticky-looking, reddish-brown, peanut-studded noodles, wondering how fusion pad thai differed from Thai pad thai. She was sure that the other Mia would've known. As she headed for the microwave, Donnelly side-stepped and blocked her way. She sensed the increased tension in his body, like a cat about to spring. He shook the papers in her face.

She took a half step back.

“Don’t you think you should’ve asked me before you booked the tickets?”

“Tickets?”

“Tickets!”

She supposed that meant that the papers he held in hand were e-tickets. They looked like any other sheets of paper.

He held out to her. She examined them. Logan to SFO. SFO to Tokyo. Tokyo to Hong Kong International.

Mia’s pulse sounded in her ears.

“Hong Kong!”

Hong Kong.

“Mia, they’re nonrefundable! Nonexchangeable!”

She managed to say that she didn’t book them.

“No?”

She shook her head.

“Who did?”

She took the fusion pad thai to the microwave. She told her hand to open the door, told her finger to press the buttons. Even if she got her most stylish suit back from the other Mia, she couldn’t wear it in ultra-stylish Hong Kong. It would already be out of date. She told herself to breathe and count. She breathed and counted.

Donnelly took her by the elbow and turned her around.

“I’m sure I didn’t book the tickets,” she said.

“They’re charged to my card.”

“Maybe a hacker booked them?”

“And had them sent to me?”

She couldn’t claim that that made sense.

“They’re business class!”

The microwave dinged.

“On top of all those clothes! How much have you spent these past few days?”

She had no idea.

“Whatever you bought, it had better be what you want to wear in Hong Kong.”

Mia said, in the loudest voice she could manage, that they didn’t have to go.

“What did you say?”

“We don’t have to go.”

“You want to waste all that money?”

The microwave dinged again.

“We’ll go, all right,” Donnelly said.

Mia foresaw an untidy avalanche of travel guides on the coffee table.

He laughed harshly. "We might even have fun. But don't you think you should've talked to me?"

"I'm sorry," Mia said.

"You should've talked to me!"

"I'm sorry."

Donnelly waved his arm.

Mia thought of telling him that she'd done it without meaning to. Or without wanting to. She thought of telling him who booked them.

"You're not yourself!" Donnelly said.

They ate without speaking. They pulled up *30 Rock* on Netflix and watched without laughing. They changed their clothes without looking at each other and laid in bed with their backs turned, a foot apart. Annie would've advised Mia to tell Donnelly about the other Mia. Annie would've told Harris if she'd had a doppelganger. She was a believer in open communication. Mia knew better than to tell Donnelly. He'd say that Mrs. Broeder was putting her under too much pressure. He'd stroke her back. He'd suggest and then insist that she see the doctor who'd prescribed her anti-anxiety medication, careful never to mention the source of that anxiety. Then at two in the morning, she'd find him pacing the room where they'd set up the crib, and the mobile overhead, its brightly colored stars and animals leached of color in the dark, his shoulders hunched as he wept in silence.

The other Mia was wearing the charcoal gray again when she paused outside Mia's open office door. It was quarter to nine on Friday morning and Mia was just about to sit down at her desk. The other Mia was studying something inside a black portfolio. Her frown of concentration, square black eyeglasses and perfect French twist gave her the look of someone used to being taken seriously. She moved on quickly, her footsteps firm and light. Mia bolted after her, but when she got out to the hallway she found it empty. The scent of an unfamiliar, spicy perfume hung in the air. Returning to her office, Mia caught another whiff. She turned to her desk. The Ashworth summary was gone. A heavy-looking fountain pen she'd never seen sat to the right of her laptop, precisely aligned, as if it had been left as a gift.

Mia sat, breathed, and counted.

She worked through lunch. At two o'clock, Mrs. Broeder emailed to say how pleased the client had been with her Ashworth presentation.

Hunger, Mia thought, blinking at the screen.

She arrived at Ho's Chinese feeling sweaty and rumpled. She blinked, her eyes adjusting to the dim, red-tinted light. A smiling waiter she'd never seen led her to a table near the back. She placed her usual order. Tea arrived. She drank, breathed, and counted. Three leaves settled to the bottom of the cup, one apart from the others. She looked up. The other Mia was sitting on the window side of the room, her body lit in silhouette.

Mia found herself standing at the other Mia's table.

The other Mia looked straight ahead.

Mia sat.

The other Mia picked up a chunk of vegetable Mia didn't recognize and chewed. The space around her bowl was clear. She hadn't spilled so much as a grain of rice.

"What are you doing here?" Mia said.

The other Mia continued chewing.

"Don't tell me doppelgangers need to eat," Mia said, a harsh note entering her voice, as if she was arguing with her mother. She glanced around to make sure no one was watching. "Do doppelgangers keep themselves informed about Samuel Ashworth? Listen! I know all there is to know about the Ashworth collection. What made you think I needed help with that presentation?"

The other Mia smiled faintly.

"What's your plan? You must have a plan."

"I've been planning for a long time now," the other Mia said.

As Mia came through the door that night, Donnelly took her by the wrist and led her to the bedroom at a rapid pace. Her closet door stood open. The bags that had been piled on top of each other inside were lined up neatly outside. They filled a great deal of floor space. He took the five she held in her hand and added them to the group. Mia breathed and counted. Then she counted the bags.

"Thirty-one!" Donnelly said.

She'd counted twenty-seven.

"Thirty-one!" He picked up a black bag emblazoned with

white script and shook it. Its contents thudded softly. It was the bag that held the boots. “Since when do you shop at Saks?”

The other Mia was the one who shopped at Saks.

“I thought you said that place was for Paris Hilton wannabes.”

Annie was the one who said that.

“Are you buying more interview clothes?”

“More?”

He waved his hand at what she was wearing.

She looked down. She saw a suit she didn’t recognize. It was cobalt blue, a modern, short-skirted version of the classic Chanel. Sheer plum-colored stockings ran in ribs down her legs. The one inch platform on the soles of her shoes, combined with the three inch heel, explained why her feet had hurt all day.

“I thought you loved your job.”

“I do.”

“I’ve been asking you all week what’s wrong.”

She didn’t remember that.

“Did you have a run-in with Mrs. Broeder?”

“Mrs. Broeder likes me.”

“Mia,” Donnelly said, letting out his breath. “I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s going on.”

The defeated tone of his words hung in the air. He was blinking rapidly. He raked his hand back through his sparse blond hair. She noticed that he was wearing the Neil Young concert t-shirt, once black, that she’d bought him on one of their first dates. The collar was ragged. He ran his hand back through his hair again, waiting, as if he could sense that she wanted to say something. She told her arm to reach out to him. Her arm hung limp at her side. Donnelly threw his into the air.

“You don’t tell me anything!”

Mia glanced away. Across the room, scattered on top of their austere, metal-framed bed, were bags twenty-eight through thirty-one. Let’s Go Upstairs, said the labels. Donnelly was saying something else. *I’ve been planning for a long time now.* Through the throbbing of the pulse in her ears, she heard him say secretive. She heard him say deceitful. Donnelly had never used the word deceitful to describe her. Whatever reason he might’ve claimed had moved him to use the word now—the suspected job interviews or the half-hidden bags of clothing or the Hong Kong tickets purchased without

his knowledge—he was in fact referring to her behavior during her fourth and most recent pregnancy, the one he hadn’t heard of until month four, day six, when she called him from the hospital. Blood again. Her faulty uterus had said no again.

*I’ve been planning.*

“Too many secrets, Mia.”

“I’m sorry.”

Donnelly sighed.

Mia wondered for the first time why she wasn’t angry with the other Mia.

“Look,” he said. “The hormones from the shots from the last time, they’re still affecting you—right? They must be.”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think you maybe—somehow?”

“No.”

“Did you lose—?”

“No.”

He stared.

Recently, when she’d told him she was starting to like baseball, he believed her. He believed every lie she told to cover up her elaborate plans for the surprise party she threw when he turned thirty. On a certain night that she should’ve spent at home, getting plenty of rest—the night after the fourth time her faulty uterus said no—she went out on the town with Annie and came home with her clothes reeking of cigarette smoke and her breath of bourbon. Donnelly believed her when she told him that it was Annie who’d lit up a cigarette in the car, not her, Annie who’d insisted on going to that seedy bar in Fields Corner, that, no, she hadn’t danced with anyone. She followed up her last denial with an advance onto his side of the bed. After that, he seemed to believe her.

He did not believe her now.

Donnelly tilted his head to the side, as if he’d just come in and found her, a stranger, in his bedroom. He turned and walked down the hallway.

Shortly afterward, she heard the front door close.

Mia spent several minutes examining the other Mia’s purchases before she left the house in pursuit of Donnelly. She discovered quickly that her shoes weren’t designed for running down a brick

sidewalk undulating with frost heaves. The street was quiet for a Friday night, no one out but dogs and walkers, and it was dark underneath the trees. Lights glowed in the windows. Silverware clinked against dishware. Babies squalled and their parents cooed. She hurried on, heading north, and soon she was rushing through the restaurant crowd on the square, past Newbury Street, and onto the long finger of the Common called the mall. As she knew from Donnelly, this was where he took his hours-long walks following each of the times her faulty uterus said no. Mia glanced left and right, breathing and counting. Her left ankle throbbed. She saw more dogs and walkers ambling from one pool of lamplight to the next. She saw groups of teenagers, giggling as if they were high, and lovers leaning into each other. Not far to her left, the bronze statue of Phillis Wheatley sat thoughtfully inclined toward her writing desk. Donnelly was nowhere in sight.

Further on, past the bronze poet, was the other Mia.

She wore a well-cut buff trench coat and was heading toward the common, rolling an umber-colored leather suitcase Mia had once admired in a travel-shop window behind her. Her free arm swung. In that hand, she held a small, dark booklet that might have been a passport. Mia reached into her bag for her phone. She had to call Annie. She should have called her days ago. Her hand fell onto something flat and smooth. She fished it out: her passport. She looked left and right. Donnelly was elsewhere, walking and brooding. He had used the word deceit. Mia's faulty uterus was an expert in deceit. Up ahead, the other Mia strode on, sure of her destination. Mia found herself racing after her, her impossible pumps bearing her on now like running shoes, and came up behind her as she reached the taxi stand outside of Park Street Station. The other Mia approached a cab. She rested her hand confidently against the back window as she leaned down to confer with the driver, who popped the trunk and put the other Mia's umber-colored leather suitcase inside. Mia rushed to the next cab in line. The driver nodded. She slammed the door as the other Mia's driver took off.

“Follow that car,” Mia said, delivering the line as breathlessly as any actor she’d ever heard.

“Any idea where they’re going?”

“Logan.”

The driver jerked the car into gear.

As they sped off after their target, Mia slipped her passport into the inside pocket of what, she registered vaguely, seemed to be a buff trench coat. Mia leaned forward, intent on the cab ahead as her own trailed it through the well lit theater district. Next came the faintly green fluorescents of the tunnel under the harbor. On the other side were the floodlights of the airport. The cab screeched to a halt, and by the time her driver had retrieved her umber-colored leather suitcase from the trunk, she had the fare ready. Wheeling her suitcase behind her, she caught sight of the other Mia’s cobalt blue interview suit as she entered the international terminal among a group of women in saris. Inside there were more saris, there were smartly dressed Japanese teenagers snapping selfies, and there were men in business attire speaking languages that originated on all corners of the globe, all of them weaving around each other. The airlines made departure announcements. Mia caught up with the other Mia near an electronic kiosk that issued boarding passes. The other Mia stepped back. The machine whirred as the passes shot out. Mia retrieved them and slipped them into the inside pocket of her buff trench coat with her passport. She nodded thanks to the other Mia when she handed her baggage claim tags, and affixed them to the umber-colored suitcase. The other Mia indicated a line, already moving, at the far end of the cavernous room. Through the blur of voices and distant engines, Mia heard her own firm, light footsteps crossing the concrete floor.