

Trimnings from the Editorial Floor
122 Rules – Monica’s Youth Chapter
by Deek Rhew

A breeze, carrying the familiar tang of ocean, ruffled the young woman’s graduation gown as she gazed over the podium at the sea of familiar faces. Every seat in the audience had been taken, save for one. The vacant chair didn’t surprise her, though she had still held out hope.

She glanced down one last time, tapped her notecards, and began speaking about the journey ahead and the path behind. Her voice rang cool and calm, though, had anyone been able to look beneath the billowy robe, her body would have betrayed her nerves as she hopped from one foot to the other.

In the distance, the lulling crash of waves against the shore helped keep her anxiety under control. With the exception of six months in L.A., she’d never been without the constant rhythm. The sea served as the back beat of her small southern California town. It harmonized with her heart’s lubb-dubb as the life muscle pumped the blood through her veins. The young woman unconsciously matched the cadence of her speech to this slow and steady tempo.

She resisted the urge to reach into her pocket, as she had done a thousand times already, and feel the reassuring crinkle of the envelope delivered that afternoon. Touching it, the equivalent of pinching herself, reaffirmed to her that her dream had, in fact, come true.

Every day for months, she ran home from school and flipped through the mail looking for the letter that now sat in her pocket. It had taken so long to arrive; she thought rejection inevitable. Every day it didn’t come, she became a little more dejected, a little more despondent, certain no news meant bad news.

“Bad news comes quickly; good news takes longer,” Angel told her over and over. More sister than friend, Angel the Pillar, helped sort through the myriad of required paperwork: grants,

financial aid, copies of transcripts, letters of recommendation...the list never seemed to end.

The bundle, over an inch thick when she sent it months and months ago, contained more than a college application; it held her only hope of a real future. Monica had applied to other schools, but those efforts were made only to appease her counselor. She had decided she either attended NYU or nothing at all.

Monica had days of great hope and expectation, reasoning it took time to go through the application process: committees to review, checkboxes to be checked, data to be entered, and numbers to be crunched. She knew the school had more than triple the number of applicants it needed. But if they had found an excuse to move her form to the “declined” pile, wouldn’t the rejection letter have already arrived? Other times, the constant anticipation wore her down. On those nights, when the ghosts haunted her dreams and the demons mocked her failures, she’d leave her empty home long after the sun had disappeared beneath the inky blackness of the Pacific. She’d spend hours walking the beach barefoot, with only the moonlight for illumination and the surf and stars for company.

On her way back from these late night therapy sessions, she often diverted from the path leading to the empty apartment she shared with her mother. Instead, she hopped the fence, crossing the yard she knew very well, scaled the reinforced trellis covered in fragrant purple flowers, and shimmied through the unlocked window of the second floor bedroom. Angel always heard her as she entered and opened the thick blankets so her friend, usually smelling of salt water and seaweed, could crawl in next to her. Sometimes Monica needed to talk about a fight she and her mom had; other times, she felt dejected and depressed. But usually she just needed her “sister’s” companionship to alleviate the overwhelming loneliness.

After *the incident* in L.A., the court gave her mother an ultimatum: get your shit together or child services will take your daughter. Somewhere deep inside the alcohol abuser, a sliver of the former loving, caring, and responsible person still existed. Rather than let the state raise her

child, she packed up the furniture of an apartment and moved them both back to Alabaster Cove. Her mom found work. They might have had some semblance of a normal relationship, but the fragile trust of the parent/child bond had been broken and their roles reversed.

Monica ran the house, paid the bills, and bought the groceries. The two women shared an apartment but lived separately, almost never interacting, and when they did, it resulted in an argument. When they were together, her mom still felt the need to be in charge, the old instinct rearing its head, turning the scene ugly. So Monica avoided the woman whenever possible, and the two became virtual strangers.

When Monica woke that morning, she felt certain today would be the day her letter would arrive, but instead of excited anticipation, the notion filled her with dread. She didn't fear the rejection letter as much as one that started with "Congratulations!" but went on to explain there would be no or only partial financial support. That would be worse, much worse. To be so close to victory but not be allowed to savor its sweet succulence after years of hard work, and months of waiting, would sting like a cruel slap in the face from the gods of fate.

She ran home after school but stopped on her stoop, her key hovering just short of the lock as the knots in her stomach flip-flopped. She considered turning around and leaving, going to get a soda or, even better, one of the beers Angel kept in a secret stash in the back of her closet. Instead, she took a deep breath and slid the key home. Teeth and tumbler meshed, and she pushed open the door.

In the entryway, just beneath the little mail slot, lay a single, thick envelope, face down—exactly where she knew it would be.

With trembling fingers, she picked it up and flipped it over. The New York return address glared up at her as if to say, *well, aren't you going to open me?* She walked, zombie-like, into the little kitchen. Monica tried to set her keys on the counter but missed, and they clattered indignantly to the floor.

She pried open a corner of the glued flap then, sucking in her breath, ran her finger the length of the envelope, and pulled out the contents.

It's very thick for a rejection letter.

Mustering her courage, she unfolded the sheaf of documents and started reading. Try as she might though, the words jumbled in her mind, and she couldn't make sense of the sharp, black typescript. As though the letter were written in some exotic foreign language she scarcely knew, she had to force herself to re-read it from the beginning, at times sounding out some of the words. After the third time through, the overcharged synapses in her brain sorted out the text and comprehension dawned. A plump tear rolled down her cheek as shock and understanding replaced the feelings of confusion.

Then she screamed.

Monica tore out of the house, running the three blocks to Angel's in record time. She burst through the front door without knocking. Mrs. Humbolt, Angel's mother, who had become a surrogate parent to the girl over the years, sat in the living room and looked up, startled, as the wild-eyed child rushed through her house. Monica flew down the hallway and barged into her friend's room, all the manners of a polite society cast aside.

Angel stood in the center of her room, a large pair of purple headphones wrapped around her head, as if a giant, enraged, two-legged spider were trying to consume her from the top down. The crazed, sobbing girl flew into the room and sailed into Angel's arms, knocking the purple headphones to the floor. Angel always seemed able to ride the peaks and valleys of Monica's emotional life and didn't hesitate to return the fierce hug, holding her friend as Monica cried.

"Did it...?" Angel asked.

Monica didn't answer but instead held up the stack of documents.

"Did you?"

Monica nodded.

“Are they going to...?”

Monica nodded again.

“All of it?” she asked.

Monica just cried harder. She soaked the shoulder of Angel’s She-Ra, Princess of Power t-shirt.

She felt Angel’s answering tears wet her own shirt, and they stood in the stuffy little room holding each other as they wept.

Later that day, Monica and Angel stood in the school bathroom, adjusting their graduation caps.

Monica leaned against the sink and lit a cigarette. She took a deep pull, trying to calm her nerves. “I still can’t believe it,” she said.

“Believe it,” Angel replied, helping herself to Monica’s cigarette. She took a hit then blew three perfect grey smoke rings.

“Show off.”

Angel wagged her eyebrows.

“It’s one thing to get in, but I have to maintain my grade point to keep the scholarship. I don’t know if I can do that. There are so many things that could go wrong. What if I can’t handle the load? I could lose everything.”

Angel looked at her. “Okay, bitch, we’re going to do this just once then I don’t want to hear about it again.” She took her friend’s hand in her own, the cigarette clinging to the edge of her lip. “Look honey, your perfect 4.0 is the reason you’re the one giving the valedictorian speech, and it’s the reason NYU let you in. But they’re giving you a full ride because you. Kick.

Ass. Letters of recommendation, community service, top of your class. All that shit. Everyone seems to know how hard you rock except for you.”

Monica looked at her. “Yes, but—”

Angel cut her off. “No, dear.” She took the cigarette from her own mouth and put it in Monica’s. “This is the smoke of silence. Now puff and shut up. Mon, there are no ‘Yes, buts.’ I’ve been listening to you go on and on about this place until I thought I’d puke. Now all the effort I put into you is paying off. You’re about to start this exciting new life, and I’m so jealous I’m shitting green. The thing is, I couldn’t hack it there, but you can. You will go, and you’ll squash that school with your super mega-brain. What I want to hear is ‘Thank you, Angel for putting up with me all these years.’ What I don’t want to hear is any more of this self-doubt crap. If you say one more word about not being able to handle it, I’ll kick your ass so hard your grandchildren will walk funny. Is that clear?”

Monica nodded. “Just one thing.”

“What?” Angel asked, a look of impatience on her face.

“You. I won’t have *you* there. How can I get by without my Angel?”

Angel pulled her into her arms. “Unlike some people, I’m not going anywhere. Call me. Email. Skype. Smoke signals. Whatever. I’m always going to be here.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

A voice drifted in from the hall, “Monica?”

“Shit, it’s Ms. Filch.” Monica stamped out the cigarette and started waving the smoke away.

“Seriously?” Angel asked. “What’s she going to do? Give you detention?”

“Whatever. Help me.”

Both girls tried to coax the grey cloud to dissipate but stopped as Ms. Filch, her silver hair tied back in its customary severe bun, popped her head through the door. They pretended to be leaning against the sinks while a cloud of smoke drifted lazily through the sunshine streaming in the frosted windows.

The old woman's eyes narrowed in disapproval as they appraised the scene. She looked as though she might launch into one of her lectures then she softened. To Monica, it seemed as if the Terror of Alabaster High teetered on the verge of an actual smile. That would be a first, but then the look disappeared. "Two minutes, girls."

Monica nodded, and the stern woman left.

"Come on, honey. It's your big moment." Angel took Monica's hand, leading her outside.

Monica fidgeted with her cards and forced herself to be calm. She paused as Angel's words echoed back in her mind. Looking out over the crowd of expectant faces, realization dawned. She had succeeded. Time to celebrate her victory and her last days in this little town before her new life began.

She smiled, took a deep breath, and continued her speech. "Congratulations, class of Alabaster Cove High. We've made it!"