

Excerpt from *A Crack in Everything*
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On that Friday morning, during an April heat wave that L.A. natives didn't notice, I still believed that I had seen the limit of what would go wrong in my life, and so I didn't have any particular dread about going to work. I found a clean pair of jeans and enough milk for cereal, folded a To-Do list into my bag, and switched the extra-gel shoe inserts from my sneakers to my black platform boots. I left my roommate Janet a note about meeting me for lunch and overcame the impulse to scribble "we need to talk" at the end. The sun had already baked the Honda's upholstery, so I steered down Sunset Boulevard with my fingertips. On the radio, an over-excited traffic reporter described in loving detail a three-car-pile-up that wouldn't get in my way. Arriving at the clinic on time to pick up Todd and the school assembly kit, I honked twice and waved through the front window.

We worked at the Silver Lake Life Center, known by its acronym as "The Slick." The SLLC was a privately funded, youth-focused, outpatient treatment facility that specialized in sexually transmitted infections. We saw patients in the clinic and also did sex education classes and assemblies in L.A. city high schools. Although technically we were both medical assistants, Todd worked reception and billing and I spent more time with patients. He didn't like blood. Our office attracted young ones with secrets or no insurance: sexually active high school kids, under-age strippers, drop-outs, and porn stars who were intimidated by the big Kaiser building and Planned Parenthood. Our school programs attempted to fix alarming deficiencies in young people's knowledge of sex and sexuality. Todd and I wore our matching SLLC T-shirts to school assemblies. I loved it when we matched.

The problem of misinformation about sex was undeniably widespread. Even professional sex workers were often surprisingly ignorant about their bodies. Once, a 19-year-old hardcore actress who'd seen her own vulva magnified on a TV screen came into the clinic worried that her labia were too big. When her exam came back clear, she asked if maybe she should cut down on fatty food.

"Labia don't gain weight," I had to tell her. "Some swelling during sex is natural." I told her to buy a hand mirror and check herself out before, during, and after masturbating, to see her own normal changes. When she left, I wrote "normal exam" on her chart. I had no idea how to indicate "so uninformed it's as funny as it is sad."

We handed out free condoms both at the clinic and at the schools, which made us a few quiet friends and some very noisy enemies. Students and patients trusted me and Todd, because we were still in our twenties. Parents and school administrators tended to be more suspicious. Conservative demonstrators liked to patrol our sidewalk with outrageous pictures of dead fetuses holding crosses.

That Friday, Todd and I were off to do a Basic Sex Ed. assembly at a high school in the San Fernando Valley, where over half the students got bussed in from downtown L.A.

Todd sang his hello and loaded our box of assembly props—condoms, lube, female condoms, dental dams, bananas, pamphlets, overheads, worksheets, and pens—into the trunk.

He opened the door, leaned in, and begged for a Starbucks stop.

I looked at my watch. "If there's fewer than three people in line," I said.

He flopped into my front seat and sighed. "Another packed house today. They're giving us all the tenth graders. Follow-up." Meaning, these kids had Sex Ed. in ninth grade, but an administrator decided it wasn't enough. He pulled out the folder for Greenvale High School. "Are you sure you want to do the opening bit for this one?"

"I'm sure," I said.

"You don't have to prove anything to me," he said.

I told him I knew that. I was proving something to myself.

This was the first visit I'd made to Greenvale since a student physically attacked me in the parking lot six months ago. I hadn't been talking about it.

Todd asked if there was a chance Nathan would be on campus.

"He probably is," I said, "but he's not a tenth grader. There's also a chance I'm wrong about his name."

"What will you do if you see him?"

I said I didn't know.

"Can I kill him?"

"I don't want to discuss it," I said.