

GOOD APPLE

TALES OF A SOUTHERN
EVANGELICAL IN
NEW YORK

ELIZABETH PASSARELLA



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Good Apple

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INTRODUCTION

THE THING ABOUT BEING AN EVANGELICAL Christian and also a Southerner living in New York City, raising your children in an apartment where one of them sleeps in a closet, is that there are a lot of people in your life to disappoint.

This is a shame, because I spend an inordinate amount of my time trying to get everyone on my side.

I want my mother to be proud of the life I've built, even though it looks so different from what she imagined for me. She is, on most days, proud of me—I truly believe that—but then a friend will casually ask her if I *still* live in New York, and where in the world am I going to put that third baby I just had; or I'll remind her, again, that my children remain in school until the end of June, when most children in the South are returning from a month at sleepaway camp, and she'll shake her head and start to chew the inside of her cheek. My dad was always an easier sell, something I attribute to the fact that his ancestors came through Ellis Island and lived for

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a stint on the Lower East Side before migrating south. He was grateful I landed somewhere with decent bagels and pastrami. (He was Jewish. We'll get to that.) But even so, no matter how much they love ~~having a free place to stay in the city~~ me, they are still disappointed. They are disappointed because I'm a Democrat.

Almost all of my friends in New York are very happy I'm a Democrat, even if I'm kind of a baby, centrist Democrat, which I am. There are some that are even okay with the fact that I go to church every Sunday. But toss out a word like *evangelical*, especially these days, and you will render people speechless. Which is why, after telling people in New York the subtitle of this book, I immediately start my song and dance about being aligned with them politically, the Democrat being a spoonful of sugar for the Jesus.

It's dicey.

There may be some of you—most of you—reading this who think you can't be both an evangelical Christian and a Democrat or be fervently in love with God and also New York City, which, by some accounts, is being destroyed (along with the state of California, of course) by liberal nutjobs. I wrote this book for you too. I wrote the book for all of you—not to get everyone on my side, although nothing would make me happier, but to give you a perspective you may not have. From someone living in both worlds.

Before we get into the details of how I ended up in this position, however, it's important for me to speak directly to some of you.

To those who are still hung up on the evangelical business and can't really get past it: I understand. I grew up in a church

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that had “evangelical” in its name, and I still didn’t fully get what the word meant until recently. And the word has become more culturally charged in the past decade or so, which is why many Christians who, technically, are evangelical never say the word. Here’s how I—and others I’ve read—think of it: There are little-e evangelicals and Big-E Evangelicals. The first term, which is what I’m talking about, is a theological term. Little-e evangelicals believe in the authority of the whole Bible (not just à la carte parts of it), that Jesus is the Son of God, born of a virgin, who died and rose from the dead, and that believers have become believers through a life-changing encounter with God. Big-E Evangelical is a largely white, Republican voting bloc of people who, in my opinion, probably place their identities in their political beliefs more than in their religious ones. Little-e evangelicals are simply Christians who adhere to a few core theological beliefs. And some of us care about a lot of the same (liberal!) social issues that you do. The way society has co-opted *evangelical* as a political term has made things extremely messy, to the point that the word has become radioactive. I’m not attempting to revive it or take it back from the Republicans, exactly. I’d even support a movement where we decide on a new designation, something completely innocuous, like triangle Christians or corduroy Christians. But no matter what you call us, we are around. There are evangelical Presbyterians, evangelical Baptists, and evangelical Anglicans. Some of us are standing beside you at protests. We are passionate about racial justice and public schools and fighting homelessness.

To those of you who are Christians in the South or Midwest and think I’ve been brainwashed by the coastal elite: well, my husband did go to Harvard, so it’s entirely possible. But my hope

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is that, through humor and persuasive editorializing that I learned in journalism school (at a southern state university, calm down), I can soften your view of liberal urbanites. So many of us live in cities precisely because we feel called, and because we see cities as beautifully reflecting the kingdom of God. Plus, if you're weary of reading Christian Living books where women talk about their failures in sonnet form and gloss right over the ugly sin part, please know that I once threw a remote control at my husband's head. Chapter five is devoted to my penchant for fighting outside, on street corners.

To those who think I'm making myself out to be some sort of unicorn, when in fact there are a lot of urban, Christian Democrats out there, and I really should look around and stop acting like I'm special: You're right! I know! And there are a lot of Christian Republicans who also care about racial justice and public schools and fighting homelessness and are as wary of the word *evangelical* as I am. I wrote this book for all of us, so that we know we're not alone.

Whether you're a Democrat or a Republican, Evangelical or evangelical or none of the above, I wrote this book mainly to make you laugh. And cry (good cry!). And realize that, in the midst of marriage or trying to get a job or parenting or trying to grow up and figure out who you are already, we have more in common than not. Some of you are mothers and churchgoers and part-time employees. You will see yourself here. Some of you are mothers and agnostics and women's marchers and CEOs. You will see yourself here. Some of you are single and dating and wondering if *your* mother is going to be super disappointed if you stay in New York and marry that guy. You will see yourself here. (And don't worry. It all works out.)

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I've learned that I can't please everyone. I'll be a disappointment sooner or later, maybe even to you. But I'm not a disappointment to God, and knowing that gives me the confidence to admit all of these embarrassing details publicly. Trust me, it'll be fun.

ONE

THE VIRGIN SURPRISE

WHEN I WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL, I spent a lot of time at youth group at a Methodist church. I wasn't Methodist, and it wasn't the church I went to on Sunday mornings. But it was the most popular youth group with my friends and the boys we hung around, and it is where, one school night in front of those friends and boys and the goofy twentysomething youth director, crammed into a carpeted room somewhere in the fellowship hall, I sobbed because I was afraid I wouldn't get to have sex before the rapture.

Now, I didn't know the first thing about sex. In fact, I thought much too late into adolescence that sex happened at night (always) and took all night, meaning if you decided to have sex, you were forgoing sleep. It was one or the other. And I didn't know much about the rapture either. My Sunday school teachers talked about it a lot, although I've heard from some more theologically sophisticated friends that the version of the rapture that I learned as a kid—Jesus returning as saved souls are beamed to

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heaven with a war between good and evil raging on earth—may not be exactly what the Bible depicts. The precise events of the end times are hard for us laypeople to decipher, because the book of Revelation seems to have been written by a disciple on mushrooms. But what I do understand is that Jesus' return will usher in a new heaven and a new earth: we get both, like a two-for-one deal. Eternity won't be all clouds and angels. It will be cities and families and jobs, just perfect ones, without sin. No cancer, no loneliness, no heartburn. I *think*. Again, I've read the Bible in its entirety, and I'm still mystified. What I did know for certain in 1992 was that I did not want all of that to go down before I'd done sex all night.

Of all the concerns a fifteen-year-old might have about Jesus' return, mine was pretty memorable. Another youth pastor, the boss of the guy who was in the room at the time, even brought it up many years later when I saw him at a Christmas party (at that point, I'd had sex—doesn't take all night—and two children, so I had chilled out). Why was I so concerned I'd miss something that I didn't know anything about? I remember the crying, specifically, how I couldn't keep it from happening. I was half laughing, too, knowing I sounded insane, but also red-faced and genuinely choked up, wondering if someone was going to give me a satisfying answer. In a room full of virgin youth group kids and one pastor who was surely thinking, *This is above my pay grade*, it was tough sledding, and I'm guessing that one of my girlfriends took me into the bathroom and told me to get a grip. The real answer is that if there's no more sadness in the new heaven and earth, then there's probably no existential regret over having never lost your virginity. But it was years later that I realized the thing I was really despairing about was



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missing out on a husband. The two went hand in hand. Sex was designed by God for marriage. I knew I wasn't going to have sex until I was married, and I certainly didn't want Jesus showing up before a boy loved me.

Boys didn't really love me in high school. Even though I had a group of nice, funny, good-looking guy friends, none of them were angling to make out with me on a deserted football field or underwater in the pool in his backyard (I had very specific kissing fantasies). I had my first kiss with my first boyfriend after junior prom when I was seventeen. Seventeen. We once made out for an hour in a cornfield on a friend's family farm, which wasn't underwater, but it felt extremely romantic at the time. That all ended the following year when my boyfriend went to college, started dating another girl, and didn't tell me about it until I showed up to visit him. Then I didn't kiss anyone else until my junior year of college. There was a quote, or more like a short letter, that circulated among Christian high school girls I knew, called the "Ultimate Relationship." It was like the "Footprints in the Sand" story. Do you know that one? Where the writer is deceased and in heaven, talking to God, noting the two sets of footprints in the sand as he walks through life, God by his side, and then during the hard times, there's only one set. The writer accuses God of abandoning him in his time of need, and God answers, "It was then that I carried you." Chills. Every time. Kickers like that were catnip to me. In the "Ultimate Relationship," God is writing to me, a girl who desperately wants a boy to like her and cries in front of dozens of teenagers at youth group because she might not find love before the second coming of Christ. God talks about a Great Love, about being cherished and adored, full-on, final-scene-in-*Sixteen-Candles* stuff. And



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then, the kicker: God is that Great Love. You already have it. Jesus is your boyfriend. I kept that piece of paper folded in my teal, faux-leather-bound Bible for years and years, and as cheesy and dated as that little inspirational missive was, the general idea holds up. If I wasn't putting God first in my life and finding my value in the fact that he loved me, I would be putting pressure on a human man to meet a need he couldn't. You know, God-shaped hole and all. The message is actually kind of feminist, if you ignore some of the pandering language (it calls you "dear one"): I could be fully confident in my awesomeness because God made me in his image and loved me enough to die for me, even if I were the only person on earth. In other words, *I don't need a man to make me feel worthy*. Right? Right?! Of course, I'm writing that in 2020, a wise forty-three-year-old with hindsight. Holy crap did I want a man to make me feel worthy in 1995.

. . .

My mom felt bad for me. You have to understand, my mother was a beauty queen in her youth. Growing up in Ripley, Mississippi, she was crowned Miss Tippah County and went to the Miss Mississippi pageant, one step below Miss America. She was beautiful and pleasant and didn't talk about sex in front of her youth group friends. Plenty of men wanted to date her. So I honestly think she was perplexed by my sister and me, who seemed pretty enough if we'd "just put on a little lipstick" but who never got a critical mass of male attention. My sister had more self-confidence than I did. I think she called bull on the juvenile high school social scene and knew college was where it's at, which turned out to be true; she met her husband freshman



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year. I was the one sobbing on the pink shag carpeting of my bedroom because a boy I liked ended up kissing my best friend. My mother would kneel by my bed and pray with me every night, asking God for patience and contentment, praying that I wouldn't be bitter toward my best friend. It must have been exhausting. Eventually she just started buying me books. One of them was called *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, and it was written by a man—yes, a man, who, in my world, held all the power to make the dating happen in the first place, so how nice for you to have the *choice* to kiss dating goodbye, you jerk. The cover showed a guy, his face turned down and obscured, tipping a black fedora. As if to say, “And a good day to *you*, dating!” Ugh.* The other book I remember reading in college, during a particularly fallow and depressing time, was *Quest for Love* by Elisabeth Elliot. Elisabeth Elliot wrote more than twenty books about Christianity before she died in 2015, but I remember her most as the voice behind a radio program my mother would listen to called *Gateway to Joy*, where she'd open with “You are loved with an everlasting love.” She was strong and smart and reassuring. Her first husband was killed by a tribe in Ecuador while he was a missionary, and after his death, she moved there—not yet thirty years old and with her infant daughter—to live with the tribe, which eventually welcomed her, and continued to preach the gospel to them. That's a powerful female role model. But you wouldn't necessarily think that, reading *Quest for Love*. It's the kind of book that people point to as Exhibit A for traditional Christians being sexist. Each chapter in the book is a story about frustrations with dating and

* This man, years later, divorced his wife, left the church, and became an outspoken critic of Christianity. Maybe he should have just made out with a few people in high school.

marriage, how a woman pursuing a man ended in flames, how physical intimacy led to disaster. There were uplifting stories about honorable young men asking a father's permission to date his daughter and sweeping her off her feet in a first kiss that came after a marriage proposal (I loved those). In her defense, Elisabeth Elliot was of a different time. But still, when I read modern-day advice columns or listen to single coworkers talking next to me in the office, the gripes are things like, "We're hanging out as friends, but I don't know what the status is," or, "We've been living together for three years and he still won't talk to me about marriage." And I'm going to say it: the answers, the truth, aren't far-off from what Elisabeth Elliot would have told these women. It came wrapped in a quaint and old-fashioned package, but the message was the same: stop wasting your time with that clown and hold out for someone who respects you.

I wanted to be the woman who waited for a man to pursue her, but I was a) obnoxiously forward and talkative, and b) desperate. When I moved to New York in 1999, I employed a strategy in my crusade to find a boyfriend that I would call "the virgin surprise." Any man reading this who thinks it's a fun sexual adventure is going to be utterly disappointed—just like basically every man I met between August 1999 and August 2000. It went like this: On Saturday nights, my roommate Catherine and I would head to the West Village from our apartment on East 52nd Street. We didn't have much of a dining out budget, and we knew we might need money for a cab home late at night, so instead of spending money on dinner, we would park ourselves at the bar of Tortilla Flats, a gaudy Mexican joint on Washington Street, buy a margarita, then fill up on free chips and salsa. Afterward we would head to Automatic Slims a couple of blocks down,



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where they played a steady stream of '80s music and, depending on if the management or the cabaret police had come by lately to reprimand him for it or not, the bartender would let us dance on the bar. I would frequently wear a pair of snakeskin-print pants that I bought in the European section of the discount department store Century 21. I thought I was the stuff. And to be fair, in New York, I was slightly more the stuff than I'd been in high school and college, thanks to increased self-confidence (I had a good job; also, obnoxiously forward and talkative people were the norm here) and a Southern accent that some guys thought was cute. When a young man would show some interest, maybe buy me a drink or have a flirty conversation in a corner away from the speakers, I would play along until it got to the point where I thought he might kiss me, and I'd say, "But I'm not going to have sex with you." And then I'd explain I was waiting for marriage. *As if he asked.* As I write this, I am newly amazed that I actually went on to have a few dates with several of these men—they surely thought this was a game, that they'd wear me down—but honestly, I thought the virgin surprise was like a shield, a force field of protection against any harm, physical or emotional.** Or maybe just a slim vestige of what Elisabeth Elliot would have wanted for me, which disintegrated the moment I climbed onto the bar at Automatic Slims and gyrated to "Livin' on a Prayer." One night, I went to a guy's apartment. Correction: sublet; he was in the city for the summer working as an intern at an investment bank. I met him at the bar at Tortilla Flats, naturally, and felt immediately like we could be soulmates because he went to

** Looking back now, I feel so lucky to have never been sexually assaulted. I truly believe that God protected me for some reason, and no, I don't know why, considering the many women who haven't been so lucky and probably had more brains than I did.

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the University of Virginia (Southern!) and his name was Hunter, which was my roommate's last name (kismet!). I followed him back to his sublet, waited while he *took a shower* (ew), and then, when he came out and I dropped the virgin surprise, he promptly walked me outside and put me in a cab. I wrote my number down with the only thing I could find in my purse: a lipliner. Note: he didn't ask for my number.

Eventually, one year after arriving in New York, a decent man did pursue me. He heard me telling an awkward dating story in the kitchen of a mutual friend's apartment and noticed my hot pink pants—ridiculous pants were obviously my signature back then. He bought me a gin and tonic at the bar later, which I handed back to him to say there wasn't enough gin in it (obnoxious). He offered to share a cab home with me, and when I turned to him and said, "I am not having sex with you," he politely answered, "I wasn't trying to." Then, in the backseat, somewhere south of East 52nd Street, in defiance of Elisabeth Elliot and my mother and everything I thought I was supposed to do in letting a man make the first move, I leaned over and kissed him. Five years later we got married.



TWO

HOW I BECAME A DEMOCRAT: PART 1

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND HOW BIG a deal it is that I'm a Democrat, I need you to know that in college, I interned for Ralph Reed at the Christian Coalition. It was the summer after my sophomore year of college. I'd spent the previous summer living at home, working at a day camp while preparing for my older sister's wedding (I was a terrible day camp counselor; I had the kids give me back rubs during quiet time), and I felt like I needed to do something exceptional that year that marked my path forward as an Important Journalist. Unfortunately, CNN didn't answer any of my letters.

What I should have done—and eventually did, a few years later—was go to New York. Wait, back up a little bit. What I should have done was applied for internships six months before, when most eager journalism students were scouring bulletin

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boards outside their classrooms to find opportunities as, say, copyediting interns at the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. The following summer, after I had a year of my undergraduate journalism degree under my belt, I got my act together, but as a sophomore, I was still better suited to be a lazy day camp counselor than anything beyond a coffee-fetcher at a newspaper. Plus, New York was still fairly terrifying to me. I never saw myself living there and even made a dumb proclamation when applying to colleges that I'd "never go anywhere above the Mason-Dixon Line." Really. What IS the Mason-Dixon Line anyway? Where does it hit? Who are Mason and Dixon? I definitely didn't know when I made that statement. I applied to the University of Virginia. Was that above the Mason-Dixon? Other than being an amorphous boundary between North and South that took on a fabled aura, like the seventh circle of Hell, somewhere my people knew wasn't a place you wanted to go, the exact location of the Mason-Dixon Line could have curved around Lexington, Kentucky, or gone all the way to Baltimore or stopped right above Dyersburg, Tennessee, for all I knew.

I went to Washington, DC, to find a job for the summer because it was a big city that wasn't New York, and it was where my dad's friend Louis owned an adorable little house that he said I could stay in until I found an apartment. Louis's house was a colonial-era, former post office in Falls Church, Virginia. The original portion, before someone added on to the back, was one room deep, and the stairs were so creaky that I'd try to skip as many as possible coming down in the morning in an attempt to be a polite, noiseless houseguest. Louis and my dad grew up together in Memphis, and Louis took care of me like I was his own daughter, which included him sitting in the kitchen every morning for



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a week or two saying things like, “*The Washington Flyer* would be crazy not to hire you,” and “Don’t be afraid to knock on doors.” And, God bless me, I did. At that time email was still relatively new, so I communicated with my would-be employers by writing letters and making cold calls and, finally, showing up at their doors. After getting nowhere—again, most internships had filled up months before, and I had zero connections—I decided that maybe I could take a slight sidestep from newspapers or television and, instead, put my skills to work at a nonprofit or political organization. What happened next was, in my memory, like Eddie Murphy in *Coming to America* deciding that the place to find a girlfriend fit for the throne was Queens, New York. It was as if I thumbed through the Yellow Pages . . . “Chick-fil-A . . . Chocolate Heaven . . . Christian Coalition! That’s me!” The next day, I showed up at the townhouse where their offices were with a backpack full of résumés and a sandwich Louis had packed for me. The woman who answered the door said an intern had just quit a few days in, and they could probably use me.

When anyone asks me about that summer of my life, even now, the first thoughts that pop into my head are of the clothes I would wear (a lot of wide-legged, rayon pants) and the feeling of sweat pooling underneath my backpack straps as I walked from the Union Station Metro stop to work in the Washington, DC, heat. I would arrive every morning with pit stains the length of bananas—only, the right was always bigger, because I sweat more out of my right armpit than my left, always have—and slightly damp hair. My other vivid memory: I once walked into Ralph Reed’s office to deliver a phone message and found him with his bare foot propped up on the desk, clipping his toenails. But overall, my job was pretty boring. I’d cut out and photocopy news



articles mentioning the Christian Coalition, staple things into piles. I don't remember any of my fellow interns' names—was there a Gary?—but I remember my boss, who was petite with long, poofy, curly black hair and reminded me of Elaine Benes from *Seinfeld*. Oh, and she was Jewish. Jewish! At the Christian Coalition! My dad was Jewish, and somehow this confluence of Old and New Testament folk, of God's chosen people working alongside gospel believers like me, felt inclusive and right. I was not yet aware of the close connection between certain Jews and the agenda of the Republican Party, and I was fervently on board with whatever Elaine was pushing, which, that summer, was trying to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts. There was a lot of office outrage over the perceived obscenity of Andres Serrano's photograph *Piss Christ*, which had a crucifix submerged in Serrano's urine. (Later that summer, I'd have dinner with a friend of a friend who was, if you can believe it, interning at the NEA. I started an argument about government-funded pornography—cribbed straight from my coworkers' talking points—an argument I'd forgotten about until years later, when that woman and I both moved to New York and became good friends, and she used the story to introduce me to a room of women at her baby shower.)

One might assume that at twenty years old, working at an extremely partisan organization like the Christian Coalition, I was into politics. That I had joined a young Republicans club on campus or at least read up on the partial birth abortion ban that went through Congress in 1995 and was eventually vetoed by President Bill Clinton. But I really wasn't. I just liked to argue. In third grade my class took a personality test that was supposed to give you suggestions about your future profession. I don't



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remember if it was to jump-start a discussion of careers or if the company was prototyping a new quiz and needed nine-year-old subjects; it definitely seems strange in hindsight. The test felt like a typical Myers-Briggs-ish thing, only it gave you actual, concrete jobs at the end, things like nurse or librarian or vacuum salesman. I got a split between two possible paths: lawyer or stand-up comedian. It tracks. My need to have my voice heard was unquenchable, and I would argue you up one wall and down the other, regardless of how passionate I felt about my position. For example, I remember having the following exchange with my friend Olivia, sitting in the breezeway of our high school, during a study hall senior year.

ME: I don't think I will have a career. I'll stay home and raise my kids.

OLIVIA: So why do you care about where you're going to college? Why apply to the best place you can get into? Why go at all?

ME: Because raising children is the most important job on earth, you are *raising human beings*, and you need to be knowledgeable about the world to do that. How could you believe that any job is more important than being a *mother*? (I mean, that's true, but still, I was insufferable.)

OLIVIA: What if you don't get married?

ME: What? Not get married? *What do you even mean?*

With that, I huffed and walked to the senior den, a lounge reserved for, and whimsically decorated by, the graduating class, where a group was watching *Days of Our Lives*—the season when

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Marlena was possessed by the devil—during our lunch hour. The funny thing is, I wanted to have a career, maybe even as a lawyer or a stand-up comedian. I cared very much about where I got into college. And to this day, despite being a mother of three, I'm ambivalent about children. The point is, I saw in Olivia, our valedictorian, a worthy foe and got into it.

. . .

At eighteen years old, I wasn't a diehard political partisan. What I was—and remained for many years after—was what so many Americans are: someone living in a sociopolitical bubble, where their family and friends and neighbors think pretty much like they do.* My parents didn't put signs in our yard or bumper stickers on their cars; no one was especially politically active in our family. But we did watch a lot of *Crossfire* with Pat Buchanan and Michael Kinsley. For some reason, I take pride in the fact that I was watching *Crossfire* before lightweights like Tucker Carlson became part of the lineup. I got this from my dad, who didn't acknowledge anything beyond the Jerry Orbach years of *Law & Order*. It's starting to sound like my family actually *was* kind of political, isn't it? Okay, let me just say this: my dad also religiously listened to NPR's *Morning Edition* in the car on the way

* Lest you think I'm talking only about Republicans in the South, I present one of my favorite morning news show clips of all time: In 2008, a few days before the presidential election, Willie Geist of MSNBC stood outside Zabar's market on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in a McCain-Palin T-shirt, asking passersby if they supported the Republican ticket. One person yelled at him that he was in the wrong neighborhood. Another asked if it was his Halloween costume. People looked at him like he was handing out used tissues. By the end, he found one couple—one!—willing to say they were voting for McCain over Obama. (And this was *John McCain*, everyone. Ah, simpler times.) New York is a bubble too.

to school. Can you say that in 2020? A Republican listening to NPR every morning? The kids we carpooled with would have to endure not only the news, instead of the pop anthems of FM 100, but also long discussions between me and my dad in the front seat, wondering whether reporter Mara Liasson's name was Mar Aliasson, Maralei Eson, or some other iteration. This was before everyone had a smartphone where they could look it up.

So. That's where I was coming from. I grew up in a conservative circle in Memphis, Tennessee, with parents (and friends' parents) who voted Republican, and I worked for the Christian Coalition. Like most teenagers—and slightly fewer but still a lot of college students—I followed along with what my parents and community believed, like a lemming. I went to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, proving my lemming-ness, because I followed my sister without weighing a ton of options. There, it was more of the same: a general apathy toward politics, with the understanding that most of my friends came from similar backgrounds and had similar views. I voted for Bob Dole in 1996—I *think*; there's a chance I may have been hungover or it was chicken fingers and Derby pie day at my sorority house and that bumped all other activities—and took a bioethics class where I wrote a paper on the right to life that I got an A minus on. Getting from there to where I am now was a gradual shift. My mother blames my slide into liberalism on two people: my childhood friend Vanessa and my husband. Vanessa went to Harvard Law School and became a civil rights attorney, working with the Southern Center for Human Rights in Atlanta and trying to get people off death row in states like Alabama and Arizona. My husband just grew up with a left-leaning family in New York City. Both of them were, in fact, steady influences on

my political views, opening my eyes to issues and ideas that never crossed the transom, so to speak, growing up. But the person my mom should really blame is the internship coordinator for *Newsday*, the newspaper on Long Island, New York, who offered me the job that got me, finally, above the Mason-Dixon Line.

How I decided, after my asinine declarations as a teenager, that New York City was the place for me is another story. The point is that I was going to Manhattan, and I was going to work for a magazine, and life could take off or . . . something. As Sally says in the first few minutes of *When Harry Met Sally*, “I mean, nothing’s happened to me yet. That’s why I’m going to New York.” During my senior year I applied for a lot of different summer internships at magazines, hoping that would turn into a job, but anyone who has worked in magazines knows that approximately 12,742 people apply for every one position in the internship program at places like Condé Nast and Hearst. And in terms of applying for an actual job, the Human Resources directors would always say that it’s better if you’re already living in the city, you know, so you’d be available ASAP should something come up. And, unbelievably, there are 12,742 people who can afford to put a deposit down and pay rent in New York City without a job, waiting for that call. My parents were willing to help me out a little, but I needed a concrete assignment. Applying for the internship at *Newsday* was an afterthought. It wasn’t a magazine, and it wasn’t in Manhattan, but the man who came down to Chapel Hill to interview the applicants had lived in Memphis, and we really hit it off. I got the job. Then, because I was stubborn and convinced a suburban newspaper wasn’t quite grand enough for me, I turned it down. It was a temporary gig, I reasoned. I’d land something permanent in Manhattan once I



HOW I BECAME A DEMOCRAT: PART 1

was up there. The internship coordinator, because he is a blessed saint who cared more about a twenty-two-year-old's career path than he should have and definitely deserved a raise, called to tell me that I was making a mistake. He said I was one of two people chosen to work on the magazine section of the paper (think *Parade*), and was I absolutely sure? I said okay, I'd take it. It's here I should note that I thought Long Island was like Hoboken, a small enclave just across the river, a tiny button of civilization, a quick ferry or subway ride from the city. I repeat: I had no idea Long Island was an enormous landmass consisting of two whole counties that jutted out into the Atlantic Ocean, complete with the Hamptons dangling on the end. You can imagine how confused I was when the *Newsday* people set me up to live with a family in a town that they said was a twenty- to thirty-minute drive from the offices and that I would need a car.

That summer was the beginning of my realization that I was a very, very naive little flower. With terrible geography skills. (A few months later, when I did live in Manhattan, my dad bought me a compass so that, when I popped up out of an underground subway station, I'd know which way was north.) I rented a room, which came with a kitchen efficiency, in a house belonging to a woman whose sister worked at *Newsday*. The husband worked for the sanitation department in Queens and was gone early every morning. I dated a man at the paper who was eight years older than I was and an avid swing dancer; I remember being at his apartment the night JFK Jr. died and wondering if we should go in to the office. I wrote a story about Itzhak and Toby Perlman's summer music camp on Shelter Island, where, the entire time I was interviewing him over lunch, Itzhak sat balancing a spoon on his nose.

GOOD APPLE

Moving to New York—to Long Island—was like pulling the first wisp of a string that ends up unraveling the entire rug down the road. Long Island was suspiciously similar to the suburban South, with its four-lane highways lined with Home Depots and Michaels stores, and *Newsday* was known to be a pretty conservative newspaper. But I couldn't be a lemming anymore; there weren't that many people like me to follow around. I had to grow some legs (lemmings technically have legs, guys, but they are extremely short) and figure out my own path. Spiritually, culturally, politically. I was starting to see that there was a big world out there. Bigger than Hoboken, I assure you. Is that clichéd and simplistic? Yes. It's also absolutely true. I was so terrified of stepping out of the warm bath of my life and onto the cold tile of the unknown that I'd knocked on the door of the Christian Coalition in not-New York City because I knew I could speak the language, and my mom would be proud. Left to my own devices, I chose to plant myself smack-dab in the middle of people who weren't going to challenge any of the assumptions I brought with me. I should have been tipped off by the fact that my boss was Jewish that following Jesus wasn't the common denominator for the staff of the Christian Coalition. Passing conservative legislation was—and those aren't the same thing. But, eventually, through a job I thought I was too good for, in a place that was across the East River from where I *really* wanted to go, God led me to New York, where I found my true voice. Sometimes he works like that, with twists and turns and the Midtown Tunnel. You just have to follow.

