

What You Can't Give Me



Incidents from
an Unexpected Era

R.C. Binstock

What You Can't Give Me



Incidents from an Unexpected Era

R.C. Binstock

cover painting by Katarzyna Maciak

R.C. Binstock Books
copyright R.C. Binstock, 2022
all rights reserved

ISBN: 9798353520788

Kindle Direct Publishing, North Charleston, SC

copyright R.C. Binstock 2022

for the dead and the living
the sick and the healthy
the jobless and the waged
the homeless and the housed
the brave and the fearful
the endangered and the safe

and in memoriam
John Robert Seybold, 1945-2022
a true and beautiful friend

Contents

Year Zero		
April	Where the Heart Is	1
June	At the Riverside	25
July	Falling	49
August	What You Can't Give Me	65
October	I AM NOT ASYMPTOMATIC	85
November	Flight	101
Year One		
January	The Druggist	121
February	The Boy Who Cried Pandemic	141
May	Learning to Dive	165
July	Fast	189
August	Reunion	207
September	The Uses of Time	229

Learning to Dive



“Jumping is way better than that inch by inch thing,” says Rosetta. “Just get it over with.”

They all tread water following their coordinated leap, Emma to her right and Rosetta to her left, for maybe half a minute before Emma grabs one rail of a nearby ladder and Rosetta swims to the other, leaving Grace with three options: keep her head above water, fit herself between them, or drown.

“I like to dive in from up there,” says Emma, pointing to the deck at the deep end of the pool, a few yards away. “But it’s too crowded now. It’s against the rules, but Janice said it’s okay as long as it’s not crowded and I’m careful.”

“She used to sit for you, right?”

“Yes she did, Rosie, and if I wasn’t too old for it she still would, but that doesn’t mean she lets me do things other kids can’t.”

“I know, I was just curious.”

“She would *never* do anything unfair like that.”

“I said I *know*.”

The sun seems brighter all the time; it's such a relief to be in the pool in the surreal (well, climate change) heat of Memorial Day 2021, a real holiday at last instead of calling it one while everybody hides at home. She can hear Janice doing a swim class, a very young class at the "blowing bubbles" stage. She can even make out the radio Aurea, the other lifeguard, is listening to at their table with the big red umbrella down at the shallow end.

"Curious why?"

"Oh *Emma*," says Rosetta with risky annoyance, "why do you *think*? Oh my god. She's totally snatched, she starred in like six high school shows when they still did them, she's going to *Princeton* in the fall. Nobody in their right mind would not want to be her and nobody normal wouldn't be curious."

"So why don't you ask me about her sex life?" says Emma, with the troublemaking grin they all know so well.

"What? What sex life?"

"What sex life? I dunno, Rosie, but I'm gonna say if she's sitting on our sofa with a guy when she thinks we're asleep a couple years ago and he's got his arm around her and they're making out and me and Boomer can see she's doing something with her hand and it's getting faster and faster that's called, um, *sex*."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"You let Boomer watch?"

Emma snorts in disgust. "Be real. If I'd so much as touched him he'd have screeched and then what?"

"Did the guy, um—"

"Well he sure was breathing heavy when she bent down—"

"Holy crap!"

"And in about half a minute there was a whole bunch of groaning and then she sat up again. So like I say I *think* that's what they mean by 'sex' and 'sex life'. Since you asked."

"Holy crap," Rosetta says again, but more quietly than before. Thoughtfully, in fact.

Hanging between them during that exchange was pretty funny. Not that she isn't as jazzed by Emma's play by play as Rosetta seems to be. "Was he good looking?" she asks.

"Well of course, speed bump. Janice can have her pick."

Rosetta winces but she doesn't mind a bit. She and Emma were practically in the womb together. She isn't even tempted to point out that a girl who is headed to Princeton might maybe pick for something other than looks.

"I never learned to dive," she says.

"You, Gracious? You're, like, a really *good* swimmer," says Rosetta, who seems very OK with the change of topic.

"Maybe. But I can't dive."

"I could ask Janice to teach you."

"That's a nice offer, Emma. I could probably even ask her myself. But I doubt she's going to teach me something against the rules."

"Oh, hell, I can teach you. It's the same as jumping except you get your feet right on the edge and jump forward instead of up."

"Thanks, Rosetta. Maybe the next time we're here when Emma thinks it's not too crowded the two of you can show me. If I watch you guys I can probably pick it up." She is well aware that she is "doing it again" as her big sister would say—that is, "sounding like a grownup throwing shade"—but her friends don't care and neither does she.

"Sure, Grace. Absolutely. You know, Rosie, it's true. This girl can pick up just about anything. *Like a used condom*," she shouts, joined in unison by Rosetta. They are both instantly wild despite that was way back in early October, when they were only two days in-person, and should have been used up long since. But she's not bothered and it's nice to watch her friends laugh without masks, which she really missed all those months. As their giggles run down they look at her like she's flat dope and that's nice too.

"Emma!" calls Janice. They turn to see her shaking her head and the babies all staring at them. Janice scolding them for shouting the word "condom" after their recent discussion sets them off again, of course—Grace is chuckling herself—although they try desperately to stifle because having Janice say "Aurea, watch the students for a minute please" and come stalking toward them would be an *epic* disaster. They'd end up in the emergency room, declared dead on account of being dead.

Amazingly the condom thing made her sick (as sick as she would ever be, anyway) rather than hurt, like she kind of expected. She still feels like a child for not simply letting it lie there but instead picking it up in her gloved hand and walking it across the asphalt to the garbage can, not noticing how all alone in the middle she was until it was way too late; by the time she was halfway there they were all watching her and shortly after that shrieking with laughter. Ms. Weaver was chill enough to let the whole thing ride but made her private joke—“Well, Grace, I’d say you’re a pretty good citizen to take *that* job on”—a little too loudly, which got them all going again. Later she wondered why Ms. Weaver, of all people, had used the word “citizen” and if that was part of what put everyone on repeat.

“Good times,” says Emma, finally winding down. “Sorry, Gracette. You totally slay, no cap.” Rosetta is nodding. She just smiles, though they hang there waiting. She can hear her father telling her *chénmò shì jīn*, silence is gold; she hears it maybe five times a day, but that is a big gain from when it was fifty and she practically never said anything at all. Esther can criticize what she “sounds like” all she wants, but life is a lot better now that she does *some* talking that people are always pretty much OK with and still knows the right times to keep quiet. In fact the only reason Condom Day could have worked out so well instead of setting her way back was that she said nothing whatever from the moment the first kid laughed until she raised her hand in class, half an hour after they came back inside, to answer a question about leaf

structure. And mostly kept her mouth shut at school for a couple weeks after that so she wouldn't accidentally say the wrong word, like "hat", and start the whole thing up again. And never, ever replied to anything anybody said about it, nasty or nice, except by smiling, either way. So score one for her dad, plus Confucius or whoever was the first of the ten billion Chinese people who said that in the last thousand years.

The worst thing, truly, about last spring—topping even the lockdown and panic shortages and graphs getting scarier every day and people practically throwing themselves across the street when they saw each other coming—was not being with her friends *at all* except in the stupid, lame, ridiculous zoom classes. Or on the phone, which quickly seemed even more pointless than ever. Class had minus zero in common with actual life; even kids like her who were normally fine with being called on didn't want to stand out on remote and the ones whose usual was barely paying attention refused altogether on zoom, sometimes blatantly. (Even some good students; she'd never been madder at Emma than the time she caught her scrolling her phone—right there on video!—while Ms. Monsky was talking about Ahmaud and Brionna. What kind of crap was that for Little Miss Lefty, whose granddad had been in something called SDS and was always ranting about fascists and capitalist warmongers and white supremacy?) But it was part of the special situation, she came to understand; they all sat there like dolls, like crash test

dummies, protecting their secrets about whatever was happening at home while Ms. Monsky went on and on, day after day, and it gradually turned them into worse and worse versions of themselves. Sitting there hating their teachers for pretending this was school, hating the parents and siblings they were trapped with and couldn't rush on to their buds, hating each other for the distance and themselves for all that hate. Getting further and further apart. Because they were alone, really *alone*, and not zoom or instagram or tiktok or snapchat or *anything* could change that.

"So what are we doing for lunch?" asks Rosetta.

"Angelo's?"

"Oh, Emma, haven't you had enough?"

"I suppose *you* want to hit Macca's, Rosie."

"Anything would be better than watching you try to eat cheese fries again."

This time Rosetta *has* gone too far. And will pay the price if not rescued. Dropping half an order of Angelo's bacon cheese fries, the rankest food known to humankind, into the lap of her favorite short skirt and all over her legs had definitely not enhanced Emma's cred. Fortunately Emma can take the hit but she sure doesn't want to be reminded.

"Well, *Rosetta*, if you—"

"I bet my mom would make us something," she says as loudly as she can manage.

They look at her. "You mean one of her Chinese things?" asks Emma.

"Well, yeah, I think so."

"Awesome!" says Rosetta.

At this moment being wedged between them deeply sucks, because she has no clue why she's hesitating and can't even look left or right without being literally in their faces. So she pretends she has something in her eye.

Truth, since Atlanta she's been surprised to find herself a little more nicked about words like "Chinese" and "Asian" (what does "Asian" even *mean*?) but it's never been a big thing in her particular life. Sure, now and then a white kid will be all weird or keep their distance but she's old enough to get that some white people are always handing out the shit and that others take a lot more and a lot worse than she does.

Anyway there's nothing wrong with Emma saying "Chinese things". That's exactly what the dishes are and her mother always calls them by their Chinese names, which of course Emma has no hope of ever learning. Her mother loves to cook for her daughters' friends, even if she and Es have their reasons for rarely asking her to, and they all love her and gobble down her food when they can. She is as certain that Emma thinks Chinese is dank as she is that Ms. Weaver, who probably doesn't know her parents were never naturalized, is pro-immigrant and meant nothing by her "citizen" remark.

What really matters is that it's a nice, not a nasty, that Emma and Rosetta have so much fun shouting about the condom and that she actually believes they think she slays in some basic way. She also knows how much better it is to

have an OG like Emma as fam than to actually be one; she is spared no end of bs from other kids but has no rep to keep up, except as GOAT of the wordless smile, which she feeds by making sure she does sometimes speak, but never in disapproval.

Esther often tries to bug her by calling her “sensitive” but it never works because she just isn’t. The condom lift proves that, and other stories out of her life. She once overheard a girl say “Oh Grace doesn’t get salty about *anything*” and that is exactly the way she wants it.

“Let’s do it,” she says, climbing the ladder at last. “She’ll be way glad to see you.”

The crappiest wasn’t until October, though. Summer was a little better because they could get together outside. With the masks and everyone stupid jumpy and nothing to discuss except fear and complaint and not being able to do any of what they actually wanted it sure as fuck wasn’t “normal”, but at least she could see and hear them for real instead of on the damn phone and have actual proof they were OK and not about to drop dead.

For a while she wanted to suggest that they all ask their parents—her, Rosetta, Emma, Somayeh, Ebo, maybe Julie—could they please go together to one of the cheaper places in the gallery district downtown and sit in the new outdoor space at a slow time on a weekday, maybe calling ahead to nicely request a big table set up as far apart as possible, if they promised to stop eating and put up their double masks

the moment the server or anyone else came anywhere near them and if families would give several rides each way so there were no more than two girls per car, with the windows open. But having thought it over for a couple of days she realized that the odds of her mother approving this were, like, way past forget it. And after another day she wondered what she'd been thinking; what a totally shit idea. Still, they could be together.

But then they started with “hybrid” and were pandemic-slapped all over again by the discovery that it was maybe a *little* better than all remote, the way getting your teeth cleaned was a little better than having cavities filled. And then it got too cold to sit shouting at each other from eight feet apart on benches at the park or playground equipment or the library steps. And when they realized there would be no trick-or-treating—not that they would have gone, they weren't babies anymore but they'd had such wicked fun together for so many years, it was just uber-sad—and that the holidays coming up would be way worse than that because for parents the “festive season” was like Halloween on PEDs and it would be awful for them to miss the usual family and friends (never mind if there was someone who would be missing forever), it was tough to find comfort in anything. Except when it rained hard on a remote day so you could hope it would be nice for in-person the next, which was pretty fucking pathetic, or when another week went by without someone you knew getting it, which while truly

wonderful was actually no comfort at all.

“So Gracious,” says Rosetta, as they wait for the walk signal at the crossing by the little music store—Guitar Lessons Offered Here!—that must be some kind of front or laundering op because it has been there since like 1960 and looks it, and no one ever goes inside, “is Jason around this weekend?”

She shakes her head almost invisibly. *Still* doesn’t like the name.

Emma laughs. “Don’t be that way, *Rosacious*,” she says, “you know perfectly well he’s not.”

How do they know? She sure didn’t tell them.

“He said they *might*, Emma.”

“Nuh uh. He said they *would*. And they did, right Grace?”

“Sorry, Emma, who did what?”

Emma looks a little embarrassed, yes, but also sly. “Um, a couple of weeks ago I was thinking maybe a function this weekend, remember?”

“Yeah, kinda.”

“Well all it was, was me and Rosie eyeballed Jasie at the mall and I knew you’d want him there so—”

A horn honks nearby, startling them. The signal says WALK and an annoyed-looking woman with silver hair in a gigantic silver SUV really wants them to cross, judging by her urgent gestures. Emma goes instantly from embarrassed-

but-sly to GO-FUCK-YOURSELF and turns her back on the driver.

"We'll cross when we fucking *want* to cross," she says, folding her arms. "What a tool."

Grace likes this Emma particularly. "That's straight," she says, reorienting in solidarity. Rosetta glances at the SUV and joins them.

Despite the heat the woman puts a window down to shout "I was trying to be *nice* to you little bitches!" and roars off.

She and Rosetta are totally dying but Emma runs a few yards after the SUV, shouting "*Whoa! Nice flex, Karen!*" She is already laughing harder than she has in many months when the victory bird Emma flips the woman as she turns into a side street, holding the pose for a couple seconds in case there's anyone else around to see, pushes her into a whole other zone, the one where you think you might pass out. It feels *good*. Rosetta is already on the sidewalk, passing out down there apparently, so she sits next to her, the two of them leaning on each other as they try to recover. Emma skips happily toward them.

Rosetta holds up her hand. "Please, Emma," she manages to gasp, "*don't say anything funny.*" Emma sits facing them and smiles delightedly. "I was trying to be *boujee* to you little bitches," she says.

When it's over at last, when they have helped each other up and limped across the street and are walking towards the corner her house is four doors down from, Grace reboots. "So

you asked him if you staged could he show and he said they were going to visit his mom's sister, right bff?"

"Right. They haven't seen her since last summer."

"And that's why no throwdown. Because you wouldn't have the power couple to headline. High key?"

Rosetta shakes her head to say she'd laugh if she weren't still flat out but Emma's eyes get big. "Damn Gina!" she says. "Gracette, you are finally developing some sass. Our little girl is growing up."

She'd been told his name was Jason but still could hardly believe it when Ms. Weaver wrote it on the board, his first day in class. It was *so* YA. As was the fact that he arrived two-plus months in, not only practically at Thanksgiving (a shit ton of boring books and movies had that setup) but smack in this big adult emergency when all the kids were still shook because if their teachers and parents were actually *fighting* over them—Ebo's mom, who used to teach high school, led them through the touchy questions all fall, including why almost every teacher over fifty was all-remote—who knew what could happen?

So it would have been chickenshit not to admit, once she hippped to herself, that the way she felt when she saw him was just as stale. Maybe more so.

It was important not to trip about it and especially to be totally 100—not to tell him or anyone else, no, that was the fast route to hell, but also not to put on or go extra or do anything any different than she would if she didn't care. This

was trickier than it seemed because it's not so easy to hang chill, she found out, when the guy walks up while you are squadding. The Smile is one thing as her ticket to keeping her mouth shut and another as cover. She had a really close call when he stopped by their table at lunch and as he was walking away—he might still have been near enough to hear, even—Emma said “Goals, huh Grace?” and Ebo snorted soda all over herself. Knowing she had to do *something* she asked “So what do you like most about him, Emma?”, a pretty good shot that made the whole table go weak as Emma insisted “Yo, you *know* I'm tight with Tommy” and eyed her. As if it hadn't been Luke before Tommy and Mario before that. When they quieted down she said “Sorry, just me being all fomo” which of course made Rosetta say “Don't stress, Gracious, your turn's any time” so mission accomplished. Later on, hanging on the library steps with Emma she was *very* tempted to spill. But she got a grip when she thought about how Emma—who probably, no definitely knew it was the shit in the first place and decided to cut her a break—could keep something low for about a day and a half max and told herself, as she so often did, that if you zip you always have the option of spilling, but once you spill there is no getting it back.

As they come up to the house she sees at the top of the driveway the lawnmower no one will touch, not even Sally who now cuts their grass every two weeks, and snarls inside. Almost a year! Impossible, she thinks for the trillionth time as

she leads them up the walkway and around the house to the kitchen door. It's more like ten thousand. Or maybe one day. She is very much *not* looking forward in any way to *jì chén*, to being dragged backwards into something she can't defend herself against, and though they haven't discussed it she knows her sister feels the same. Even her mother would probably agree, if she were honest, but Grace understands that for her parents and people like them that stands for nothing compared to ritual. Her mother talked a bunch about heaven and all that a year ago (although she believes none of it) and will soon, she knows, start talking about it again, and they will have to take food and whisky and leave it there for the staff to clear away within hours, she is sure, and burn money which must be *majorly* against the rules. The whole thing will be humiliating as well as unbearable. A twofer.

God damn. It was almost too hot to hold.

"Jesus, Gracie," said Jason, in a tone that confused her. Wasn't this what guys wanted?

It was April and blessedly no longer 2020 and the backyard was warm, at least warm enough to sit there with someone other than family for the first time since the horrible shit began and it was dark because her mom was still thrown off by the time change so had not yet hit item seven on her nightly Paranoia Checklist by turning on the too-bright, too-sensitive motion detector light, the one her dad had repeatedly promised to install a timer on but never had, and hearing through a window that was somehow still open her

sister and mother washing up in the kitchen meant they would not be interrupted. The first time had been so awkward, *brutally* awkward—really it was no wonder, she had last spring to get past plus a couple weeks this March sneaking around with him at her own whack insistence, holding hands when no one could see because why? something wrong with her having a boyfriend? and then going pub and everyone *smiling* at them all the time like *oh*, how *sweet*—and it was kind of a miracle they were trying again but tonight the warmth in his voice and the soft kissing and his arm around her shoulders and gentle hand on her breasts were so nice, *so nice*. It was definitely what *she* wanted right now, even if he didn't; she was totally into it and wasn't about to stop.

"*Fuck*, Gracie," he whispered. His hand got less gentle but she liked that too.

"Want me to stop?"

"Shit no."

"Thank you for making us lunch today, Mama," she says, in the careful way she's heard herself talking to her mother for quite a while. Her mother looks a little sharply at her, which also happens a lot. As if she suspects, but barely, a problem she doesn't know how to approach.

"You can bring them any time, *qiān jīn*, you know that. I wish you would bring them more."

"Mama, at my age in America you don't usually bring your friends home all the time."

“At my age in America! Do you know how often you say that to me now?” Her mother is cooking dinner. She is *talking to the stove*, her father’s phrase of years ago that stuck with her and Esther. “What age is that, girl? And where is this ‘America’ you keep telling me about? And how did you learn so much about what every single child there does and does not do? Set the table.” When she was younger she would say *Don’t talk to the stove, Mama* but now it’s easier to just let her.

“I say that because I’m older, I’m not a baby anymore,” she says as she gathers the placemats and plates. “And being older here means different things than it meant for you in China thirty years ago.”

“I know very well you are not a baby,” says her mother, suddenly turning her head and smiling, brightly but briefly, before attending to her pan again. “Like you should know I am not an idiot. I understand it’s different and that I don’t know much about it. Which is one reason I want you to bring Emma and the others.”

“We don’t say in front of parents what we say when we’re by ourselves.”

Her mother stamps her foot. “You *do* think I’m an idiot! Go set the table, Grace.”

She does as she’s told, lost in thought about Janice and the guy on the couch and her near certainty that Emma’s gossip, for all she tried to make it about Miss Princeton, was a tell that she is getting down heavy herself now. She’s certainly been holding Tommy’s string long enough. Maybe Rosetta (who mostly moves cautiously) was thinking not of her own

future but Emma's present. About her Gracious she can't possibly be wondering. Can she?

When she returns to the kitchen for the chopsticks and water glasses her mother is standing there watching her come in, holding the pan, on the verge of tears or rage which have never been that different for her anyway.

"How can you not understand me? Are you too stupid to know I was a girl myself? Can you tell me the wrong in a mother in my position doing her best to be close to her daughters? Your sister is the same. I would be ashamed to have anyone hear what you say to me."

No, she is the one who is ashamed, who hangs her head, whose gut suddenly hurts, a lot, who feels like she's dropped nine or ten years in a moment and is a child being scolded for putting something in the toilet. She stares at the floor. No, she would not want anyone to hear it either.

"I'm so sorry, Mama. You're right. I am so sorry to be disrespectful." When she looks up her mother's tears have started but are already stopping. Gathering her every bit of courage she approaches and opens her arms, closes her eyes. *Oh please. Please.* She stands there like a cormorant with its wings out to dry on a rock in the pond by the cabin they used to rent from her dad's work friend. She has no real idea how long it is before the pan hits the burner and she feels the precious relief of her mother's arms going around her, but it seems a long time. Or how long they stand that way, except it's even longer.

“When was it?”

A warmish early March afternoon and they were finally alone, after several months of her hiding and Jason seeking more or less every day, the poor guy. They were sitting together on a low wall, his suggestion as he was walking her home after she’d finally agreed to it (though she had no intention of letting him get anywhere near the house). The situation was far from a surprise, she’d been imagining it forever, but she was panicking anyway and really it didn’t help for him to ask that. She’d have thought he was playing except for the respectful way he said it.

“What? I mean, what it?” She was squirrely as fuck. She had never sounded like such a fool.

“My old man,” he said, sighing and pausing, looking up at the sky, “went down before we hardly knew what a coronavirus was.”

“Oh,” she said. “Was he sick for a while?”

He shook his head. “Not really. Less than a week. Four days with my sister and me in one part of the house and my mom and dad in the other, one day in the hospital thinking now everything will be okay, one day of this nurse trying to get my sister on facetime so we could say goodbye.”

She was already crying.

“I guess it was a lot easier than him getting cancer and suffering for months and all that,” he said. Then shook his head. “No, it wasn’t. It was like being kicked in the face. Kicked hard.”

He looked at her like he was still waiting for her to answer and all she could do was sit and cry. She didn't know who'd told him. She didn't know if she was crying for his father or her own or for all the days she'd spent pretending whatever, she couldn't even *remember*, just so she could get through them. She wasn't sure whether sitting so close to someone who'd been dealing with the same thing all the while was intolerable or some kind of opening or maybe both. She wanted to speak but knew for sure that if she tried she would sob so loud the whole town would hear. Which would be OK with the town, probably, but not with her.

To her major shock he sighed again and took her hand. He was crying too. They sat crying together, holding hands and she thought, *this is beyond*. Whether it was that or his warm hand and endless (it seemed) patience or the minutes steadily passing she was finally able to speak. They were both still crying, but not in the helpless way.

"It was totally like that, Jason," she said. "I mean it was June and it was different, he went to the hospital right away and was there almost two weeks and about ten days in they said he would get better and then he didn't. But the facetime thing. And what you said about the kick?"

"Ever make you want to hurt someone?"

Shaking her head, she was surprised not by the question but by her willingness to answer. "I just wanted to forget him."

"But it doesn't work like that."

“No,” she said, hopefully, her head resting lightly on his shoulder, “it doesn’t.”