

Imaginary Advice, Episode 70

# Sex and the City: The Return (Part 1)

Episode written & produced by Ross Sutherland

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Transcribed by Sathya Honey Victoria

**Dan:** We met on Tinder. Her name was Joy Peck. Joy Peck. You don't forget a name like that.

[Quiet piano music]

Joy's profile photo was her swigging from a bottle of champagne whilst flipping her middle finger at the camera. I thought she looked fun.

My photo was um, it was a black and white photo of me dressed as a caveman taken at the company Christmas party last year. Not the one here in New York. I was still at JP Morgan back then. I'm still a high-yield trader but, uh, that was back in the London branch. In the photo I'm holding up my caveman club like I'm just about to bludgeon the photographer with it. Big grin on my face. I look pretty happy actually. Which makes it, as an artefact, quite rare I suppose.

I didn't think I was particularly well-liked in the London office but all values are relative. Everyone in the New York office was [sigh] so young. It gets harder to socialise when you get older. That's why I started using the dating apps. I'd never used one before I came to New York. But...I couldn't spend all my time on my own. All I did was work and sleep.

I uh, optimised my Tinder profile for good return. I wrote [typing] "Dan. Thirty." Yeah, I didn't really feel like I'd changed much between the age of thirty and forty. You always have to game the system, right? That's Data Strategy 101.

[typing] "Loves theatre, techno music and carpentry." Now I don't actually have strong feelings about any of those categories, but my research

suggested that they were good data sub-sets to combine. A bit of whimsy:  
[typing] “Uncredited inventor of the Muller Fruit Corner.”

Best to avoid mentioning my work at a multinational investment bank or um, you know, the fact that I spend most nights doing loops of my block, secretly listening to Minnie Mouse ASMR. It’s not a kink thing. It’s more self-care. It just um, just helps me get to sleep.

[Steps on a sidewalk, quiet piano music]

**Minnie Mouse:** [whispering] Hey. Do you wanna hear about the time me and Mickey went camping? It rained every day. Pitter patter on the canvas. Pitter patter. It smelled a little bit because we hadn’t aired it out and we were supposed to, and some moisture had got trapped in the bag. There was some damage to the polyurethane waterproof coating... coating... coating...

[Steps, music continue]

**Dan:** Joy Peck listed her interests in block caps: “THE THREE T’S,” she wrote. “THEATRE, TOAST, PTERODACTYLS.”

I got this image in my head of the two of us sitting in a dive bar, drinking tequila, dissecting a play we’d just seen, then spilling out onto a snowy New York street for our first kiss. I wanted that to happen so badly. If getting it meant that I had to pretend to like theatre, I mean, so be it.

Me and Joy messaged for a long time before we finally met in person. Of course, I uh, hit the theatre angle hard, asking her if she’d been to see this play or that play, what she thought of the latest Tennessee revival at the Belasco...All of which was completely meaningless to me. I mean, I just recycled my opinions from a bunch of theatre blogs.

I didn’t feel bad about it. It’s just part of the game of life. If you want to make a connection with someone, y-you have to be prepared to care about things that you don’t really care about. In many ways...that’s love.

Joy had actually gone quiet for a couple of weeks when the date finally came through.

[Smartphone notification sound]

“Emergency!” said the message. “I have one spare ticket for *ICHBW* tonight! Friend had to cancel. Have you been yet? Starting in two hours!” Exclamation point.

You might find this hard to believe but I had never heard the initials *ICHBW* strung together before. You have to remember, you know, I was brand-new to the city. Less than two months.

I hadn’t even bought curtains for my room yet. My boss still referred to me as “The Australian Guy.”

Also [cough] and I really can’t stress this enough, I did not give two microscopic shits about contemporary theatre, even a play as famous as I now recognise this to be.

[Synth pattern continues; rain, thunder]

Regardless, I said yes. Of course I did. In retrospect, it was probably the best decision I ever made. Best decision of my life. Although maybe not for the reason you’re thinking.

[Car door shuts, music stops]

With only two hours to the event, I barely had any time to change or get myself across town.

[Typing on phone, windshield wipers]

From the back seat of my Uber I did a bit of cursory Googling. “*ICHBW*” I discovered stood for “*I Couldn’t Help but Wonder*,” which is, as you almost certainly already know, an immersive theatre production based on the hit HBO show *Sex and the City*.

[Ominous slow electronic music, windshield wipers]

I learnt that the production was a “non-linear” promenade piece occupying all 59 floors of what used to be known as the MetLife Building on Park Avenue. Once upon a time home to Merrill Lynch, Korn Ferry and a murderer’s row of law firms, the entire MetLife Building, top to bottom had been sold, gutted and

lovingly converted into a huge perambulatory theatre set recreating famous locations from the popular rom-comedy sex drama.

According to one theatre blogger, the production was spread across “nearly 3 million square-feet of floor area, making *I Couldn't Help but Wonder*, by a significant margin, the largest self-contained set in the entire history of theatre.”

Another blogger referred to the production as “a Biodome of 90’s fantasy materialism. There is some credence to the show’s snarky nickname “Sex No More,” a reference to “Sleep No More,” the immersive sandbox adaptation of Macbeth in Hell’s Kitchen from which *Wonder* steals most of its ideas. But the nickname “Sex No More” fits in more ways than one. Whether by design or by accident, *I Couldn't Help but Wonder*, is a living breathing monument to a version of New York that simply no longer exists. An eerily analogue New York, practically pre-Internet, a time when “social networking” required physical bodies-in-the room, strict hierarchies of invites, guest-lists, velvet ropes. This is a pre-financial crash New York. A New York unconcerned with the ethics of Wall Street.”

“Despite the fact that 9/11 occurred during the TV’s shows original air-time the show-makers made the conscious decision to never mention the attack on-screen, instead simply removing the skyline-shot from the opening credits. Which maybe suggests that the New York of *Sex and the City* was always a fantasy, even when it originally aired. Perhaps this is a New York that never really existed. That is, until the creation of *I Couldn't Help but Wonder*. Now, at long last, the fantasy has been actualised. That long-lost dream has been given flesh and steel and salt. A second New York, hidden inside the first.”

[Music rises and falls]

**Dan:** My Uber turned onto West 44th street, rain pixelating the traffic, blurring out the faces of tourists as they skittered between shelters. I barely knew *this* New York, the New York of the year two-thousand and twenty-[REDACTED], let alone the New York of 1998. I was just a baby back then. I didn’t know if I’d be able to appreciate the nostalgia.

I was starting to feel nervous, I remember. I mean, really, this was my first proper date since moving to America. And actually, I don’t know, maybe only

about my third or fourth date of all time. I mean, I blamed the 2020 pandemic for punching such a huge hole in my romantic life. It somewhat delayed my entrance into the dating world.

Just thank God that we ended up with President [REDACTED] or this country wouldn't have bounced back so quickly! It's-it's kinda crazy, really, seeing as [REDACTED] wasn't even on the ballot until the last possible moment. And then, yeah, out of nowhere, in came [REDACTED], dismantled every obstacle, won over every heart, led the way for the whole world to follow. It's remarkable really, seeing as [REDACTED] wasn't even a politician six months earlier. They were probably most famous for making [REDACTED] and doing [REDACTED] [REDACTED] on [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] promoting [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] with little dogs in.

[Ominous electronic music returns; windshield wipers]

Man, I thought to myself, the world sure does move fast. I don't know, maybe...maybe I won't recognise the New York of Sex and the City at all.

[Smartphone notification sound]

Joy messaged me to say that the bar we were going to meet in had changed owners and was now volcel only, so instead we'd just meet at a deconstructed Starbucks around the corner.

**Dan, to driver:** "Hey, can I change the destination?"

I went back to my first blogger and skipped to the end of the review:

[Garbled sound of audio fast-forwarding]

**Vapability:** "The production makes clever use of the MetLife Building's 85 elevators. By programming each elevator to only serve a small number of floors, the audience are forced to move continually back and forth across the building, looking for paths, secrets, hidden storylines, mapping as much of the vast landscape as they can within their three-hour time slot. Simply find a character you love and follow them into the night.

Go with an open mind and a brave heart. Step out of your comfort zone. Love favours the bold, after all. Don't settle for anything less than butterflies."

**Dan:** Joy and I had time for a quick coffee before the show. "Now, I hope you realise," she said, "That whole thing about there being a secret room where you can watch Samantha have sex, that's not real, OK? I know someone who works behind the scenes and they told me categorically that that is not true."

[fake laugh] "Hahaha! OK."

I'd been laughing a lot since Joy arrived. I laughed when she apologised for being late, when she told me that she was a software engineer, when she asked me if I'd seen the bathroom. I must have come across like some sort of malfunctioning robot clown. But it had just been too long since I'd had a normal conversation. I just couldn't quite get my brain around it.

For some reason I told Joy that I was a software engineer too. I told her I worked for Twitter. I-I don't know why I did that. I just didn't want to tell her about being a trader, not yet. Even if it was cool to work in finance back in the era of Sex and the City, it's different today. That blogger was right: most people I know in the business tend to disguise it behind some jargon, at least until they know it's safe to reveal themselves. My old colleague Richard back in the UK, he used to tell people in the pub that he worked in a slaughterhouse. I don't really remember the logic behind that.

[Piano music begins]

Joy asked me about England. I uh, I coached her on her English accent. I told her what "the dog's bollocks" meant. You know, classic UK-US relations stuff.

The combination of straight hair and immaculate white boiler suit made Joy look like she might be the messiah of some kind of post-apocalyptic cult. I gave her my lip balm. She had a tattoo on her wrist of a clock, kinda like a stopwatch.

I think she was just too polite to mention that I was clearly ten years older than my profile photo, even though it was an unmistakable flagrant piece of deception on my part. She showed real discretion. And I appreciated that. I remember thinking “She must really care about my feelings.”

“I’m sorry that the ticket is so expensive,” she said. It was \$450 dollars.

“No shit,” I said. “I can understand why you were so desperate to find a buyer.”

She smiled at me, like I’d actually told a joke. And for a second it was like...it was like I was seeing the whole scene from the outside, like I was telling someone the story of how I met my wife.

We were both so... fucking cool, you know? Like two time travelers getting ready to step into this time machine together, getting ready to step through the TV screen and find a new life for ourselves back in this turn of the century New York.

[Steps on sidewalk] As we made the short walk to the venue I was so excited, I think I just started cackling to myself.

“So, were you a fan of the show?” asked Joy.

“No!” I said, in a spasm of honesty that, uh, took me by surprise, quite frankly. “No,” I said, “I’ve never seen it. But, one of the characters is called Samantha, right? And it was about Sex, I know that. It was all a kind of 90’s fantasy materialism, wasn’t it?”

“You’re gonna be fine,” said Joy, squeezing my arm. “Just go with it.”

[Echoing footsteps, piano music, transition into sounds of voices in a building]

**Dan:** The lobby of the building was so dimly lit I nearly lost Joy in the queue. I couldn’t even see the walls; the hall just seemed to go on forever. The box-office attendant made me hand over my mobile. They gave me something called a “flip-phone.”

“This is how we track you,” they said. “It automatically stores the tasks you complete during the show. As well as the numbers of any eligible bachelors you meet along the way.”

“Also,” said the cashier, “you have to wear this mask at all times.” The mask was black and featureless. Just eyeholes and a thin slot mouth.

[Muffled through mask] “Hmm,” said Joy. “This is going to make it a lot harder to drink Cosmopolitans.”

[Through mask] I laughed. “Hahaha!” I guessed ‘Cosmopolitans’ was a show reference and I was right.

The attendant directed me towards an elevator on the left side of the room and directed Joy towards an elevator on the right.

[Through mask] “Uh,” I said, “But we came together? You know, as a pair?”

“Well,” said the attendant, “The play is best experienced on your own. You see, in New York, everyone has to find their own way to become their own person.”

[Through mask] “...OK,” I said.

“We recommend a post-show brunch. That way you and all your gal-pals can share stories, compare notes—”

[Through mask] “OK, we got it,” said Joy. Then, turning her big empty face towards me, “Look,” she said, “I’ll just see you after the show, OK?”

[Shouting, through mask] “Where?” I called after her. [Steps walking away]

[Through mask] “I dunno, just...out the front.” said Joy.

Five strangers and I shuffled into the waiting lift.

[Lift doors open and close; tinny SATC theme song plays]

**Crackling, distorted voice:** “From now on, there is to be no talking,” said a disembodied voice over the tannoy. “Please do not touch any of the actors unless they touch you first. Keep your flip-phone, handy



—you never know who might call. After all, anyone can make it in New York, as long as you know who to talk to! Remember: in a city where ambition is prevalent as pashmina, everyone needs to find a way to stand out from the crowd. Welcome to New York!”

[Lift doors open and close, mysterious music begins]

**Dan:** We stepped out into...Madison Avenue? At least, it looked like it. I knew that in reality we must still be indoors, but somehow there was sky above us. And a breeze. It felt about 2pm? Someone had winched actual cars up here to line the road.

[Screaming]

Someone was screaming. I turned to see a woman in a newsie cap running along the roofs of the parked cars.

[Bang-bang-bang on the car roofs; screaming gets closer]

About ten cars on the woman did a backwards somersault into the middle of the road. [Slow acoustic jazz begins] Looking at her reflection in a shop window the woman began an expressive dance routine. The cement beneath her was wet. I noticed that she was wearing mis-matched shoes. After a couple of seconds one of the cars nearest the dancer rolled down its window releasing an endless flow of red balloons. Seeing the balloons, the woman froze. Then she started dancing again but angrier this time, punching the balloons as she danced.

I didn't have the faintest clue what was happening. Before I could get any closer a roaming crowd of audience swarmed in on the dancer from all sides. My view became a wall of sweaty backs. Rather than fight through the crowd to watch the rest of the number I decided to wander the other way down the road into what I thought was an empty coffee shop. I didn't see the actor hiding behind the door. When he put his hand on my shoulder I nearly jumped out of my skin.

[Slow acoustic jazz continues]

“Are you the food critic from Bon Appétit?” he whispered, handing me his card. I didn’t know what I was supposed to say so I told him I needed the toilet. Only when I entered the cafe bathroom I found that the whole thing wasn’t plumbed in—it was just, you know, theatrical aids. However, the bathroom mirror was a reflective tunnel that I could crawl through which led me into a room filled with strobe light where I believe a naked woman with scarlet pubic hair was dancing aggressively with a clown. But again, there were so many masks straining to see this scene, I found myself pushed backwards out of the room into a service elevator.

[Lift doors; jazz stops]

For some reason the elevator only seemed to travel between my current floor and the floor above: Floor 4.

[Lift doors; jazz resumes]

Now I was in a restaurant. Four women were eating lunch at the only table while at least five hundred audience members surrounded them, straining to catch the dialogue. All I could make out were the words “TGI fuckday.” For a second, I thought I recognised Joy from her white boiler suit but it was just a giant white vase shaped like Alanis Morissette.

Once the cafe scene was over, the four actors separated, each heading to a different exit, each accompanied by their own cloud of ambulatory audience; swarms protecting their queen bee. I didn’t want to scurry after an actor, jockeying with a hundred other people for a good sightline. It made me think of those old movies where the executive strides about the office hallways, followed by a gang of brill-creamed bespectacled subordinates all trying to get their boss’ signature on a clipboard.

One thing, at least, that my job has taught me is that you don’t win big by running with the crowd. You have to step back from the data to recognise its shape. Only then can you work out how best to get ahead of it.

Once the room was clear I went my own way, avoiding the exit routes of the cast members. I thought if I avoided the crowds, if I stayed loose if I let intuition lead the way, maybe I’d discover something special. I might even bump into Joy. “It could happen,” I thought. I mean, I could tell we thought the

same way. And if the two of us somehow did re-connect in some cool secret room after being separated—that’s a meet-cute from the Gods! You can’t ignore a data correlation like that. That’d buy me a six-month dating window, minimum.

And yet, no matter how hard I tried to steer away from the pack and follow my gut every new room I came to was as over-subscribed as the last. Just more dance routines hidden in a crowd of masked faces: a lady in a white dress dancing with a cardboard baby, whatever the fuck that was about; a bald naked man doing poi with, I think, used teabags? I could never get close enough to tell.

I begrudgingly joined the queue for what I thought was a five-star restaurant but then after queueing for about forty-five minutes, I realised I’d gone in a complete circle and was back where I started. The queue, it seemed, was the attraction. I just hadn’t been paying attention.

“God,” I thought to myself, “Why do people like this? Am I actually going to see any scenes of this supposed play that I’ve paid all this money for?”

In that moment, almost as if summoned, an actor wearing a giant dog head and a bowling shirt pulled me into a stairwell.

[Heavy doors open]

The dog man grabbed me by the scruff of my shirt.

**Dog man:** [Through dog head] “Just because trees are bare, that doesn’t mean they’re dead.”

[Through mask] “What?” I said. I think he was a King Charles Spaniel.

**Dog man:** “Thirteen years of dating in Manhattan...who are we?”

**Dan** [panicked]: “I don’t know, I don’t know!”

**Dog man:** “How did we get here!?”

I felt metal poking into my ribs. It was a gun.

[Ominous sound builds]

**Dog man:** “Gimme your fuckin’ shoes.”

[Sound cuts out]

**Dan:** [Steps] Shoeless, I uh, went back down to the lobby. The box-office cashier explained to me that the Dog Man, whose name as it turned out, was “Elizabeth Taylor” was part of the production.

“You were supposed to follow him and get your shoes back,” she said. “If you wanna go get them now, all the collected shoes, they all end up in Charlotte’s bathroom on Floor 5.”

Even though I still had my mask on, I think the cashier could read my expression.

“OK,” she said, “If you give me a description, I’ll call someone and get your shoes brought down to you. Would you like a glass of water?”

[Through mask] “Yes, please,” I said. I took off the mask and handed it to her.

“You keep it,” she said.

“I don’t want it,” I said. “I’m not going back in there.”

“You have to keep the mask,” she said. “Sorry, it’s a germ thing.”

[Outside]

**Dan:** I hung around for the remaining forty-five minutes so I could reconnect with Joy after the show. “Reconnect with Joy.” Huh. I just heard it. God, that sounds so fucking corny.

I stood outside the venue and tried to spot Joy in the exit crowd. I tried messaging Joy too— nothing. I thought maybe her phone might have died before she collected it but, I didn’t get a response when I messaged the day after, either. After that, I knew I couldn’t try her again. It would be too creepy. So that was that.

[Soft jazz begins, rain]

The following week I got hit by a bicycle courier. Ended up getting twelve stitches in my leg. The docs put me on some pain medication which in turn brought back my insomnia. Days I went without sleep. It didn't matter how many blocks I walked, how much Minnie Mouse ASMR I listened to.

I started forgetting things. Like, whether or not I'd taken my pain medication... which meant I took double.

At work, trade after trade started to go against me. I had my worst spell in eight years. Somehow, I managed to lose three hundred grand in a single day. I watched as the numbers on my twin screen blinking green to red, green to red, melted together into Christmas lights, swirling empty patterns.

I started to worry that my boss might not renew my visa. I could feel people looking at me behind my back.

In the evenings I found myself—how to put this?—very...alone.

I uh, tried swiping right on every girl to try and get a match but then uh...I think maybe the app flags guys that do that. Once again, I had that feeling of being algorithmed. Of being glitched out, somehow. Whatever move I made, it was always the wrong one. It was like I was...cursed.

One night I even forgot the way home to my own apartment. Like for some reason I thought I was back in London so when I left the office I walked in completely the wrong direction for the best part of an hour. That night I decided to throw out the rest of my pain medication.

But actually, rather than throw away my medication I so-somehow threw away my passport? The following day, like, my pills, they were just there on the side just where they'd been before. And yet my drawer with all my important legal stuff in it was totally cleaned out. I looked through the bin but I couldn't find any of it.

I spent a lot of sleepless nights thinking about Joy Peck and whether or not I could have done things differently. Wondering if it was something I said, or if something had happened to her during the play. It was almost as if the

building just ate her up. I used to joke that she was still in there somewhere, lost inside it as if she'd become a part of it, in some way. It was impossible to think about Joy Peck without thinking about that play. The two things had kinda fused together in my mind.

I often found myself reliving it at four a.m., wandering aimlessly through those crowded corridors, shuttling between incomprehensible expressive dance set-pieces, no idea what a Bitzy Von Muffling was or how I was supposed to feel about "getting Monkfished at Moomba."

Ever since the play I'd felt...knocked off-balance. The play had done something to me. It detuned me somehow and now I-I couldn't get right again. Not that I believed in anything supernatural. But if I *had* been cursed, that was the night it happened. I was sure of it.

[Siren going by outside; jazz continues]

In retrospect, with a clearer head, maybe the play just got to me because it amplified how lost I felt in the real city. But now everything, every moment of every day in this place, it felt just as frantic, just as inscrutable as the New York of that play. [Scoffs] So much for escapism. Maybe, I thought, maybe I don't belong in either version of this city. But, you know, where else was I going to go? Particularly now that I'd fucking lost my passport.

[Music stops; rain]

[Quietly] I watched raindrops smear themselves across my bedroom window like tiny little liquid metal terminators congealing around the edges of the frame. "New York hates me," I thought, "both of them. And I don't know which one scares me more." I mean, at least the New York of the play is something contained. At least The New York of the play is something that could potentially be studied. Its data could be mapped, at least, in a way that the real New York could never be.

In fact...

[Exciting, tense electronic music begins]

Maybe, I thought, maybe there's an opportunity here. Something that's been staring me in the face and I've just been too stubborn to see it: wouldn't it feel good to have at least one New York that I understood?

All I saw of the inside of that building was like, what, four or so floors? Out of fifty-nine! There was so much more to discover; a huge network of interconnected stories. Of course I didn't understand it all on my first attempt!

But, you know, do you give up a video-game the first time you die? No! Death and resurrection are the twin principles of learning. Die! Die Again! Die Better! Until eventually, you die and resurrect so many times that you become a God. One hundred percent completion rate. All time-lines mastered. All dialogue-trees exhausted. Omnipotent, all-seeing.

And maybe none of that matters in the real world, but if I could master the inner New York of that play, at least I'd have *some* place of shelter. Even if the rest of the world feels like it's disintegrating under my feet I'd still have somewhere to retreat to.

[HBO opening sound]

I started with the original series, watching three episodes a night, making notes as I went. Some of my more surreal experiences from the play immediately came into focus. I mean there was no dog-man sticking guns in people's ribs but I came to better understand the play's figurative interpretation of the series.

[HBO opening sound repeats, becomes part of the music]

Rather than a literal retelling it was more as if the MetLife Building contained a kind of shared dream generated by the series' four main protagonists. The dog-man, being an amalgamation of Charlotte's pregnant dog and Carrie's mugger, therefore probably representing fears of losing one's identity through having a child. It actually kind of made sense.

[HBO opening sound music continues]

Also, I finally understood why the queue to the restaurant was just a never-ending ouroboros loop because, quote: "life is what happens when you're waiting for a table." Like, I got it now!

[HBO opening sound music continues]

I understood why red birthday balloons passed through a car window was a classic example of Big's emotional distancing, the character completely disappearing behind another vapid gesture of wealth and why Carrie's reaction to the balloons was more one of self-recognition. The fear that Big was the partner she deserved, even if he wasn't the partner she needed.

[Music ends; clicking on keyboard]

I returned to the theatre blogs that I'd skimmed through on the way to the show that night. One blogger, writing under the pen-name, "Vapability Brown," had written over twelve articles on the play, plus about another forty hidden behind a paywall.

**Vapability:** "I've been to see *I Couldn't Help but Wonder* at least twice a week since opening night. Still finding new secrets after all this time. #StillObsessed #ChildOfMiranda"

[Curious piano music begins]

Through Vapability's blog I began to understand the mechanics that shaped the show. Apparently, multiple actors simultaneously play the same character in different parts of the building. There are five Carries, four Charlottes, a whopping forty Samanthas, although strangely, only two Mirandas, one of which—known colloquially to fans as "Night Miranda"—remains exclusively on the 58th floor where she participates in an ultra-rare storyline only known to hardcore followers. The other Miranda (aka "Day Miranda") roams throughout the building but is most commonly found at the "Brunch scene," a variation of which happens on the hour on Floor 4.

**Vapability:** "Newbies often complain that *I Couldn't Help but Wonder* has an 'accessibility problem,'" one blog-post begins, "when in actual fact, the play itself is making the same point, intentionally highlighting its prejudicial asymmetries as a comment on closed power systems everywhere. At its heart this is a play *about* access: who has it, who doesn't, how to get it, how to use it. It rewards insider knowledge, it refuses to play fair with its audience, trapping newcomers on the



lower floors—“BB Levels”, as we call them in the community. BB for ‘Basic Bitches.’”

“Fucking knew it,” I thought.

I decided to sign up for Vapability’s most expensive newsletter package: complete access to their archive, an exclusive weekly newsletter and a lip pencil duo in Pale Nectar by Fresh which Miranda apparently wore on her wedding day on the show.

**Vapability:** “This colour has been discontinued and is rare as rocking horse shit.”

All in for \$300 dollars a week, which, I know, sounds like a lot, but that money meant when the time came to re-enter the building I would be coming in at grandmaster level. I was buying the collected experience of over a hundred journeys through that show. And I would happily pay to skip all that grind and go straight to the VIP rooms. To quote Carrie Bradshaw herself, “this is New York City: here you can hire someone to do anything.”

[Mouse click; music stops]

**Vapability:** “Just like the original Sex and the City TV show, *I Couldn’t Help but Wonder* is all about the journey of self-discovery actuated through the collection of interpersonal relationships. In the play, these relationships are represented through interactions between audience members and unmasked members of the cast.

However, just like the guest-list culture of the original show, the meaningfulness of these interactions is directly proportional to their exclusivity. Only once you’ve had a one-on-one interaction with a character will you begin to appreciate just what this play is capable of.

[Mysterious plaintive string music begins]

I personally believe the one-on-one experiences in this play have shaped me as a person—perhaps even changed the course of my life.

The night where it was just me and Charlotte in her bathroom, me in the bath, her sitting on the edge, both of us just talking about our love lives for half an hour, watching out her window as the snow fell on Park Avenue...It was an experience that I will never forget. In fact, it was this conversation that led to me proposing to my best friend from high-school! I may never have had the courage if it wasn't for Charlotte."

Maybe hidden somewhere in that huge building was the key to unlocking who I really was. Not just Dan, the short British guy who spends his days losing money for a multinational and his nights limping around the block listening to Minnie Mouse ASMR, but the real Dan. The Dan that some woman somewhere might want to...swipe right with. A little clarity of mind, clarity of purpose...Maybe Charlotte could help me become that Dan.

[String music continues]

**Vapability:** "Each one-on-one experience triggers a new opening: a hidden room unlocked, a potential new experience revealed... although the route of progress isn't always obvious. It took me nearly a year to realise that because I had accessed the lap-dance with the man in the hot-dog costume my profile had been updated to allow me into Miranda's gym for the hardcore Ricky Martin workout with Day Miranda. (See my list of top ten interactions for more about that one.)

The most exclusive interactions only unlock after the completion of multiple other tasks. For example, in order to get the one-on-one scene with Samantha crying in the lift, first you have to have logged at least one solo interaction with each one of the Big Four. This in turn means you can get on the VIP list for the Backroom Bar behind the Salsa band on Floor 18. Which means you can order the secret cocktail, the Platinum Rabbit. Order seven or more of those and your flip-phone will automatically be updated with the "Fabulous Pass." Which means if you come back to the play the next night (and it *has* to be the very next night) you'll immediately get a stressed phone-call from Stanford Blatch. He'll give you the elevator code-number for Floor 20 so you can get into the Single and Fabulous photoshoot.

Having your photo taken means your face will end up on the cover of the New York Post which you can usually pick up within the hour from the news-stand outside Ray's Pizza on Floor 21. Then, you need to bring that magazine to the sushi restaurant on Floor 26. Of course, you'll also need a reservation password, which you can get from listening to Trey MacDougal talking in his sleep. However, rather than the usual scenario, where your meal gets gate-crashed by a drunk Amalita who gives you sex advice, if you put the New York Post magazine on the table your meal gets gate-crashed by a totally different cast member, some un-named gorgeous Wall Street guy who is the nastiest piece of shit in the whole production.

Clearly the actor researches you in advance because he knows your job, your salary, your family, whatever your weakness is, he knows it and he goes after it mercilessly. Nevertheless, if you get through this encounter and you *don't* cry, then Samantha will appear and personally escort you to Richard Wright's office on Floor 52, where you get to watch an entirely private rendition of the scene where Samantha calls Richard a sexist prick. (Except the whole thing is rendered as an incredible breath-taking duet dance.) At the end of which Samantha flings you back into the elevator and that's when...it happens: she bursts into tears. And you'll cry too! I guarantee it.

The mix of the hangover and the dance routine and the asshole in the sushi restaurant and Samantha just holding you with tears running down her face...You will just cry and cry. And Samantha will stay in there, crying with you, for the rest of the performance if you want to. I didn't know I had so much sadness built up inside me but once I started, I just couldn't stop.

[Slow jazz begins]

There is a rumour that if you *give* something to Samantha during this scene she will take you up in the lift up onto the roof, where supposedly there is a swimming pool and you can swim naked and listen to Sade. Some other blogger who will not be named claims that the MetLife Building's old helipad is still functional, and that if you can get up onto the roof you can get a chopper ride to a whole other

building, featuring the mythical “Dubai suite” as well as the fabled “Samantha sex party” room, only accessible to celebrities and the audience who have reached one hundred percent completion.

[Music distorts then continues]

All of which is utter nonsense.”

**Dan:** As a platinum subscriber, I had access to Vapability’s most recent, most exclusive discoveries. Vapability had pretty much exhausted every single floor of the building, from 1 to 59. And yet, Vapability was convinced that there were one or two secrets still to unlock. Ultra-rare experiences that no one had seen.

Perhaps even a secret ending. Of course, there was the Basic Bitch generic ending available to all tiers of audience activated every night at midnight: a party scene at Club Chaos where all the actors converge for a dance montage. But Vapability was now looking for closure elsewhere, rounding on some other ending, a final one-on-one experience that had been sitting dormant since the play opened, waiting for someone worthy. Finding this particular experience had clearly become the obsession of many theatre bloggers.

After all, whoever found it first and claimed that invisible one hundred percent completion trophy would be forever known as the grandmaster of Sex and the City, God of the second New York. Who knew what incredible privileges that title would bestow on them.

**Vapability:** “Personally, I believe the final mystery of the building is connected to Lexi Featherston. Lexi comes up again and again in the stories told by cast members. Her presence haunts the building, even if she has never been seen within the play itself. The curtains of the exclusive Gucci bar on Floor 59 are the exact same purple colour as Lexi’s dress when she falls out the window in season six, episode eighteen. Surely this can’t be a coincidence?”

[Tape click]

**Dan:** OK. Vapability Brown's blog assumes a certain degree of familiarity with Sex and the City, but um—

**Lexi** [excerpt from SATC]: “Oh, God, Carrie, I'm forty years old. Can you fuckin' believe it? [Chuckles] Don't answer that! [Laughs]”

Just in case you don't recognise the name Lexi Featherston, she was a one-off character appearing in one of the final episodes of the show—

**Lexi:** “What ever happened to *fun!*? Oh God, I'm so bored I could die.”

—appearing briefly at a party, being boorish before accidentally falling out a high-rise window whilst trying to smoke a cigarette.

[Startled voices, sounds of falling]

Her character feels like a kind of unflattering fun-house mirror image of Carrie Bradshaw. She's like some sort of ghost of Christmas future sent back to scare Carrie onto a different path.

**Lexi:** “When did everyone stop smoking? When did everybody *pair off?*”

You know, I appreciate that I was new to the show and maybe I was missing something, but it seemed a bit unfair for the writers to suggest that Lexi was this inevitable endgame for anyone in New York who chose not to settle down.

**Carrie:** “It was the first time Lexi had ever left a party early.”

Just never really understood why her death got played as a joke. My best guess is that Lexi was included within the show for the same reason that an artistic manifesto often includes one article that completely undermines everything else that came before it. It's a kind of ironic get-out clause.

**Vapability:** “Despite the fact that most Triple-A VIP experiences tend to be grouped on the top three floors, from the evidence I have

collected I believe Lexi Featherston is actually most likely to be hiding in the deepest basement level of the building. Whatever room Lexi is in it must only be accessible by an audience member who's experienced every single other interaction in the production.

My research suggests the experience itself will most likely involve doing cocaine with Lexi (or some sort of cocaine substitute) before the two of you travel in a private elevator all the way to the roof where you parachute hand in hand off the top of the building, base-jumping down onto Park Avenue. In doing so, the pair of you get to rewrite the Lexi Featherston story together, transforming her fall into something beautiful, reclaiming her pain and giving her character, at long last, the happy ending she always deserved."

[Mysterious music begins]

I read those words again:—"the happy ending she always deserved"—and felt...something moving in me. Like a magnet drawing iron filings across my chest. My hands were shaking. I felt like I was burning up. I had to open a window and let the cold air work its way through me.

[Music, city sounds]

Minutes later I was on the street outside, my Minnie Mouse ASMR in my ears as always. But I still couldn't bring myself down. I was just too excited.

For the first time in such a long time I could see the road ahead of me. A plotted path. I could already *feel* every step of it. Using the research I had collected I would plan a series of highly coordinated run-throughs of the play.

Vapability said it took months to collect all the experiences. Still, if I optimised every single second I spent in the building, seven days would be enough. I could do it. I knew I could.

I would use that time to master every single one of the play's secrets including, last of all, the play's deepest final mystery, therefore beating Vapability to the prize of being the first to reach God-level of the play. And when I reached that end...By the time I was standing on the roof with Lexi Featherston everything would make sense to me. Everything below me, every

word, every dance move, every splinter of furniture, all present and correct, all data points predicted.

I would complete the city and the city would complete me.

[Music rises, then stops; city sounds]

Right then across the road sitting outside a bar, smoking with some friends, wearing the exact same white boiler suit she's worn on our date...it was Joy Peck. At least I think it was her. Her eyes connecting with mine, just for a second.

[Spare, eerie music, city sounds]

Was I surprised that I didn't stop, didn't wave? That I just turned up my headphones and kept walking? Maybe she called after me, trying to tell me how she'd lost her phone that night, how she'd wanted to see me but couldn't. Maybe it wasn't her at all. Either way, I kept walking.

The lights of the city were blurring together, melting into one.

[Music; street sounds]

[Imaginary Advice]

[Sad piano music]

**Ross Sutherland:** Checky-check-check. OK. Uh, so that is the end of Part 1 of this two-part story. Um, this episode was written and produced by me, Ross Sutherland. There were two other voices: Lizzy Denning and Tim Clare. Huge thanks to both of them.

Tim Clare hosts the creative writing podcast *Death of 1000 Cuts*. He's recently finished a special mini-series on his podcast, a one hundred day-writing course: one hundred short podcasts with writing exercises intended to be listened to over a hundred days. *Death of 1000 Cuts* is a fantastic space to work on your writing. I whole-heartedly recommend it.

Um, sorry this episode is going up a little bit late and uh, it's a bit overlong as well. I went slightly mad.

I'll be back very soon with the second part of this story, featuring an epic one hundred percent speed-run of Sex and the City, all glitches permitted. Maybe even some death warping. Also, we'll get to find out what really is lurking in the basement of Sex and the City. And uh, whether or not anyone has any business going down there.

That's all to come next time on the podcast. I'll be seeing you.

[Silence: 30 seconds]

[Ominous sound builds]