

Imaginary Advice, Episode 71

Sex and the City: The Return (Part 2)

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Last time on Imaginary Advice:

[Slowed down version of Sex and the City theme song, city sounds]

Dan: ...An immersive theatre production based on the hit HBO series Sex and the City, occupying all fifty-nine floors of what used to be known as the MetLife Building on Park Avenue...

“So, were you a fan of the show?” asked Joy. “No!” I said, “but one of the characters is called Samantha, right? And it’s about sex, I know that...”

[Heavy metal door closing] An actor wearing a giant dog head pulled me into a stairwell.
[Muffled, through dog head:] “Gimme your fucking shoes.”

...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 much Minnie Mouse ASMR I listened to...

[Thunder] ...Trade against 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....

[Mouse click]

Vapability Brown: I’ve been to see *I Couldn’t Help but Wonder* at least twice a week since opening night.

...Through Vapability’s blog I began to understand the mechanics that shaped the show....

Vapability: From the evidence I’ve collected, Lexi Featherston is most likely to be hiding in the deepest basement level of the building. The experience itself will most likely involve doing cocaine with Lexi 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.

Dan: Using the research I had collected, I would plan a series of highly-coordinated run-throughs of the play. Seven days would be enough. 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. [Echoing] God-level...God-level...

[Heavily distorted] Imaginary Advice

[city sounds]

[Steps]

They were waiting for me lined up on the steps of The Church of the Holy Trinity, each with a bouquet of tea roses in their hands. [Church bells tolling]

Dan, muffled through mask, panting: I'm sorry I'm so late.

Charlotte hugged me, her wedding dress hitting me like surf against the rocks.

Charlotte: I'm just glad you're here.

I noticed she was wearing Trey's great-grandmother's necklace. The level of detail was phenomenal.

Dan: Jeez, you look perfect.

Charlotte: Honestly?

I knew my role here. I touched her cheek.

Dan: Honestly. [Church bells tolling]

From inside the church, we heard the skirl of the pipes. [Bagpipes start playing]

"We should go," said Samantha, handing me my bouquet. Miranda and I awkwardly grabbed the train of Charlotte's wedding dress, the four of us hurrying to the vestibule, ready for our final cue. I peeked around the corner. There must have been four hundred wedding guests all waiting for our entrance.

The MacDougal Clan were already by the altar wrapped in those starchy red tartan sashes, their watery eyes flickering in the candle-light. I tried to adjust Charlotte's veil. I didn't really know what I was doing.

Through the illusion, Charlotte's eyes met mine and I could see that she was terrified. More terrified than I'd ever seen Charlotte before. I thought about something Samantha said to me over drinks the other night, how "marriage doesn't guarantee a happy ending, just an ending."

I looked around to see Samantha, ready in position. With a nod from Charlotte, Samantha began her walk down the aisle. After a deep breath, Miranda followed. Charlotte squeezed my hand. It was my turn to join the bridesmaids' procession. I straightened my mask and stepped into the aisle, synchronising my walk to the same stop-start chicken-strut as Miranda and Samantha ahead of me. Thankfully, I'd been practicing in my apartment.

Right on cue, I heard a voice whisper “Dan.”

I stopped and turned. Charlotte, teeth gritted, was beckoning me back to the vestibule.

Charlotte, whispering: I have to tell you something.

Dan, whispering: Right now?

Charlotte, whispering: Yah.

I trotted back into the shadow of the vestibule. Charlotte lifted her veil.

Charlotte, whispering: Trey can't get it up.

Dan: What?

Charlotte, whispering: We slept together last night and...he couldn't get it up. I was drunk, but *he* was fine. He says it happens sometimes.

I could tell my face was turning red under the mask.

Charlotte, whispering: I *do* love him...But...what if...what if...Am I doing the right thing here?

I'd been to a couple of weddings back in England but I'd never been a member of the inner circle and certainly never the head bridesmaid. Thankfully TV had taught me everything I needed to know to act out this scene.

Dan: Look, if you want to, like, fuck this whole thing off right now, like, you and me, we can leave. If you want to. [Stiffly, without feeling] We're friends, Charlotte. Whatever you want to do, we'll do it.

Charlotte nodded sending a single tear down her cheek. She pulled me in for another hug. A long one this time. I closed my eyes and gave into it.

Although, as we embraced, I noticed Charlotte was using the hug to adjust where we were standing, moving us both out of the shadow of the vestibule in line with the church aisle so the entire congregation could see us.

I felt a spotlight slowly fading up on me.

“Oh,” I thought. “She's really good.”

[Bagpipe music ends]

Charlotte, voice amplified on PA system: Thank you, Dan.

I noticed Charlotte had a tiny clip mic hidden in her wedding veil. Her voice was being amplified over the Holy Trinity's PA.

Charlotte, tenderly: You're a good friend.

Dan, through mask, awkward: Uh, thanks.

Charlotte, on PA: But sex *is* important, right? I just...I need to know that I'm not making a mistake.

[Score: mysterious organ music]

It had taken so much money to get myself into this position. So much preparation too: about a month of planning followed by six consecutive nights in the play itself, collecting achievement trophies, cultivating a VIP-level membership from the ground up. I had fought long and hard to be in this scene right here.

Although, maybe...I wasn't quite so sure what exactly it was I'd let myself in for—in their blog Vapability Brown picked Charlotte's wedding for the number two slot in her list of *Top Ten Scenes That Changed Me Forever*.

She described the VIP audience interaction as “a hilarious examination of the power of trust and friendship.” Still, maybe I hadn't properly understood what this “examination” was going to entail.

Charlotte, on PA: Things go wrong during sex, I know that. I just...

She grabbed my hand.

Charlotte, on PA: Dan...

It was always creepy how they knew your name without asking for it.

Charlotte, on PA: Can you tell me a story about something that happened to you? You know, like a time during sex when...something went wrong—would you do that for me? If you can do that, then I'll walk down the aisle right now, I promise.
[Anxiously] I just...I just need to feel normal. I need to know it's OK.”

Her hand gently pulled me back to the centre of the spotlight.

Charlotte, on PA: Come on Dan. Have you ever, you know, not been able to perform? What's the most embarrassing sex you've ever had?

A pageboy ran up and thrust a cordless mic into my hand. [Coughing in the background] I lifted the mic to my lips.

Dan, on PA: Uhhh.

[Feedback noise from microphone; long pause]

Dan, on PA: Well. [Words echoing around silent church] Um. [Pause; haltingly:] I am...as yet...to have sex. [Pause]

[Uncomfortable laugh; in a nervous rush:] So, yeah, sorry, I don't know what to tell you. Nothing to report! Uh, yet. Yet. Uhh, yeah. Sorry.

Maybe this moment was inevitable. I dunno. I mean, the source material was *Sex and the City*...I knew there would be plenty of opportunities to bring up my sex life, as it were. I just didn't know if I'd have the guts tell anyone the truth.

Whenever sex had come up so far, I'd just taken the easy way out. For example, when Samantha cornered me at her I'm Not Having a Baby Shower party and asked me "who was I schlepping right now" I just said, "who aren't I schlepping?" and we laughed. And then, when Samantha realised there was gonna be no further information from me, she just filled in the rest of our interaction time with a prewritten monologue, something about "what if an orgasm was a horse?" I got my achievement trophy [Videogame sound - Ding!] and uh, that was the end of it.

But this moment was slightly different. [Cough in the background] Not just because it was in a church—because I've lied in churches many times. It was different because...well, even though my personal situation didn't *quite* match the brief of the scene, there was still a thematic connection between the question and my answer: they wanted a scene about shameful secrets and this was my...shameful secret.

On an average night, yeah, I can imagine this scene probably feels quite cathartic. A kind of public cleansing, right? Washing one's anxieties away in the laughter of recognition. I can picture that, completely. [Smiles]

So maybe that's why I told the church the truth. On some level I thought I could still make the scene work for me. Plus, the fact that it was Charlotte I was talking to. I mean, if I had to choose one cast member to trust with my feelings, it would be Charlotte. Unthreatening, optimistic Charlotte.

She put her arm around me. And oxygen flooded back into my lungs. I didn't even realise I was holding my breath.

Charlotte, on PA: Oh, honey! [Quiet laughter in the background] It's OK! [In a sing-song tone] We've all been there! [Turning to the audience:] It happens to the best of us, doesn't it?

Which didn't really make sense, given the circumstance. [Clapping in background] Maybe it was part of her standard script response.

Charlotte, on PA: That's, uh... Come here!

Charlotte hugged me again. Maybe to buy herself some extra thinking time.

Charlotte, on PA: Well...[Pause] You know. Life begins at 40, right? [Laughter in background] You still have plenty of time for embarrassing sex! Doesn't he? I mean, presuming you want to— you *want* to have sex, right?

“Oh, fuck this,” I thought, and started walking up the aisle.

There was no point hanging around to be further humiliated. I had the Maid of Honour Achievement Trophy now anyway. [Ding!] There was nothing else for me to do on this level.

Charlotte's voice continued over the PA.

Charlotte, on PA: Dan, you're a true friend. You know, I feel ready to go through with the wedding now! Thank you so much, Dan. Everyone, give him a round of applause!”

[Applause, bagpipes]

As soon as I left the aisle the applause died away, the congregation re-setting for the next performance cycle. Now a new audience member would get to play maid of honour, and share an embarrassing secret, the cycle repeating every ten minutes for the duration of the play.

“It's not a bad job for an actor,” I thought, “just to sit in a fake church and applaud sexual failings thirty times a night.”

Once I was sure no one was looking at me I opened the door to the church's confession box.

[Wooden door closes, bagpipes die away]

Just as my research had predicted, the back of the confession box was actually a hidden door leading me through into a backstage area.

[Muffled speech on walkie-talkie; piano music]

I took off my audience mask and hid it in my jacket. At least that way, any passing member of staff wouldn't immediately clock me as a punter.

Now on the other side I could see the exposed timbers of the set construction. The tall spire of the Church of the Holy Trinity was actually an optical illusion. The roof was a shallow dome, no more than ten-foot deep.

Stagehands with clipboards rushed silently around the area. Everyone back here seemed too busy to notice me. The only time anyone ever looked up from their notes was to check the huge digital clock that covered the far wall. [Door closing in the distance]

Soon I found myself in a corridor with pigeon hole cabinets on both sides, in every hole a tiny prop, marked with a timecode and a room number: salt-shakers, paper coffee-cups with lipstick stains, police hats, a statue of the Virgin Mary.

I didn't want to think about what just happened in the church. I didn't have time to feel embarrassed. If I was going to reach my goal of 100% show completion by tomorrow night I couldn't spare even a second to feel sorry for myself. Tonight's production was nearly over, ending the sixth night of my speed-run. Only one more night to go. It was going to be close. There was so much of *Sex and the City* still to reconstruct. So many achievement trophies still to collect.

I'd already wasted far too much time trying to give myself space to *feel* something. Three nights ago I watched the entire dance routine between Aidan and Naked-Miranda-in-the-Bath-Mat because... [Sigh] Well, in the TV show it's a sad and complicated scene and I thought maybe sitting through a thirty-five-minute exploration of the moment... might [Casting around for the words to explain:] I-I dunno, would *nourish* me, in some way. Make me...bigger, richer emotionally. In retrospect, all it had got me was behind schedule.

Yesterday Vapability Brown had posted a new blog entry that sounded as if they were scarily close to unlocking the secret ending of the play. Something about how they had "found a very special key that I think belongs in a very special lock..."

There was no more time on the clock. No more chances. Either I found that hidden ending tomorrow night or it was all over.

[Elevator door closes]

Just as Vapability's blog promised, I found the staff service elevator on the northeast corner of the building [Elevator ding] and took it up to the secret library bar run by Justin Theroux on Floor 43.

[Elevator door opens; upbeat jazz in the distance]

This little backstage hack was essential to my speed-run schedule. Normally, this bar was only available to New York Times gold card holders, or you can get an invite once you've racked up attendance at *thirty* reading series events at Berger's Bookshop on Floor 10. Obviously I didn't have time for any of that.

So, my mask back on, I ordered a dram from Theroux's own whisky distillery, [Sets empty glass on bar, whisky pouring] exclusive to this bar: Glen-Boonie's Five Year Reserve. [Whisky pouring; slams empty glass on bar]

Followed by a shot of the Ten Year. [Whisky pouring; slams empty glass on bar]

The Fifteen. [Whisky pouring; slams empty glass on bar]

And the Twenty Year. [Gasps, slams glass; music in background starting to sound distorted]

Which cost uh, five hundred dollars a pop and tasted like...well, shit out the bum of a diseased frog.

“Hey,” I said to the barman, whose left half was dressed like Justin Theroux’s character from Season 2 while his right side was dressed like the totally different character he played in Season 3.

Dan: Hey. I did the Scottish wedding tonight.

Barman: Congratulations.

[Music growing more distorted and carnivalesque]

Dan, drunk now, in halting speech: And...I have now drunk a dram of every whisky brand in the building, yeah? So, those two things together...they um, unlock something new, right?

The barman paused.

Dan: I already know it does. I just wanna to hear you say it.

The barman pulled out a tablet and looked up my audience profile.

Barman: ...Yah. System says you have the Auld Lang Syne Achievement. Congrats, man. Very rare.

Dan: Right. And that means I can now finally get into Miranda’s apartment on New Year’s Eve, right?

The barman rubbed the buzz-cut side of his head.

Dan: Blink once for yes...

The barman leant in close to me.

Barman: Listen, the whole trophy thing is-is more of an internal, behind-the-scenes thing? We don’t usually tell the audience when they get a trophy because it encourages meta-gaming...And all that stuff, it just takes you out of the whole... immersive experience.

The barman clapped his hand on my shoulder.

Barman: Look, Dan. The building knows who you are. If it owes you something, eventually, it’s going to give it you, OK? It’s all programmed into the system. You’ve just got to keep coming back to see us, OK, Dan? Just be patient and I promise when the time is right, sure! I could totally see you getting a lonely phone-call from Miranda asking you to come and watch the New Year’s ball drop on TV with her... Yeah, I can totally see that in your future, dude.

[Music getting more fun-house and queasy]

I probably shouldn't have been drinking on top of all the pain medication. The whisky had given me pins and needles in the face. I felt like I was being stung by loads of little bugs.

Dan: You know wha? [Speech slow, draggy] You look fuckin' stupid.

Barman: I know.

Dan: No! You look *fuuuucking stuuuuupid*.

Barman: Ok.

Dan: So, don't tell me to be patient, alright? [Still slamming a beer onto the bar]

Barman, humouring him: Alright.

I lifted my mask to sip my lager chaser.

Dan: I'm not here on *your* clock, alright mate? [Slurps beer] I got my own clock going on. And my clock says tomorrow night I'm doin' the ball drop with Miranda, OK?

Barman: Yeah, it's not gonna—

Dan, yelling over him: —A-la-la-la! [Speaking loudly and slowly like the barman doesn't understand English] Tomorrow night / am ball-dropping with Miranda Hobbes. [Wheeze-laughing]

Barman: Dude, doesn't work like that.

Dan: Me! Miranda Hobbes. Baaaall-dropping.

Barman: Scene only happens once a night, right? And there's a biiig back—

Dan, yelling over him: —A-la-la-la! Just tell Miranda...OK? Just tell her I'm coming to see her.

Barman: There's a big backlog of-

Dan, interrupting him again: —A-la-la!

[Bell clanging loudly]

The barman had rung the twelve o'clock bell.

Dan: Uhh...A-fuck you. [Dropping a hundred-dollar tip onto the bar; stool scraping]

Dan, singing drunkenly: Should oold acquaintance beee forgot!

I'm not proud of this.

Dan, still singing: **And never brought! To! Mind!**

I danced backwards towards the elevator, one finger still pointing at the barman.

Dan: Should old acquaintance be forgot, a-and--

[Elevator ding, motor whirring quietly; mysterious music]

The lift took me back to the lobby, along with a couple of other VIPs. Hard to tell under the mask but I think one of them was Jonathan Franzen.

I always got a kind of rush of anger at this time of night. Every night of the speed-run so far, I'd felt it. This...quite strong inclination to punch the elevator wall. I guess it was usually just frustration at my progress, feeling those missed nightly targets, angry with myself for slipping behind...

That night, though, the anger, it felt darker, from somewhere deeper in me. I closed my eyes and I was back in the church again standing in front of the congregation going:

Dan, amplified on PA: Yeah, I've never had sex.

[Laughter]

Dan: I'm basically a freak.

[Laughter]

Dan: I'm a *lonely* freak.

[Laughter gets louder, cuts off suddenly]

[Elevator motor whirring quietly]

I had to open my eyes again. The lift was starting to spin, and I didn't want to puke on Franzen.

"You know what," I thought, "Fuck Charlotte, and her fucking pre-written script."

You know, so what if I've never had sex! What's sex got to do with *anything* in here anymore? Oh, I know the original TV show was called Sex and the City but all that's just window dressing now, and they know it.

[Mocking sing-song] "Oh, we don't talk about trophies because we don't like to encourage metagaming." Fuck off! Metagaming is *all* this play is.

[Elevator getting louder]

Deep down that's what everything is. And the only way to win a game is to admit you're playing one.

So, for the record, if we're keeping score here—and I know we are—yeah, alright, I've never had sex. But, I'll tell you what I do have...

[Sudden cut to DJ Assault - Ass-N-Titties]

Ass, titties, ass-n-titties
Ass ass titties titties, ass-n-titties
Ass, titties, ass-n-titties
Ass ass titties titties, ass-n-titties...

The strip club was only a couple of blocks from my apartment. I'd only been to a strip club once before back in England, a stag do for my old school friend Julian. The girl had come on in dungarees and undressed to *Come on Eileen*. It was a little sad.

The way that *Come on Eileen* continually speeds up made the finale feel increasingly like a Benny Hill sketch. Very British. It was a little bit like she was trying to fast-forward herself off the stage as quickly as possible, and who could blame her.

I didn't really know why I'd come to this place, particularly seeing as I was on my own. *Maybe* it had something to do with announcing my virginity to a church full of Scotsmen. I mean, I can't say for certain.

I paid a lady for a private dance. Her name was Jessica. She had a PVC Mad Max kind of thing going on. After a couple of minutes of the dance I started um, I started to feel embarrassed, so I took the mask from the play out of my bag and put it on again.

"No fucking way! Get that off," said the dancer. "That is some serial killer shit right there."

I took the mask off again. "Sorry," I said.

The dance continued. I sat there and took it, trying my hardest to imagine I was someone else. Like...Samantha, maybe. Would Samantha get shitfaced on whisky and pain pills, fall asleep for a minute in the middle of a lap dance, then wake to discover she'd peed herself a little?

Y-yes? She'd probably call attention to it. Style it out like a fucking icon. She'd make it next year's look.

Jessica: Are you crying?

My dancer was looking at me.

Dan: What?

Jessica: I said, are you crying?

Dan: No. I'm just...on a very high dose of medication right now.

Jessica: Don't be fucking ridiculous.

Presumably she thought I said something else.

[Electronic dance music cuts out]

[Coughing, retching]

I got back to my apartment around 4 a.m.

[Melancholy piano music]

I'd filled every available wall in my place with blueprints of the MetLife Building. The schematics were technically labelled the Pan Am Building. That's how old they were. Drawn up in 1959. So, they were probably originals.

[Toilet flushes]

I'd been using the blueprints to map my progress, drawing the new rooms over the old ones, tacking Vapability's notes to the relevant areas as I plotted each of my speed-runs through the play. The theatre company had removed a floor here, knocked a wall through there. The changes were substantial, but the schematics still helped give me a sense of scale.

Whenever I was inside the building, the space just seemed endless with its digital projection mapping, artificial weather systems, all that indoors/outdoors fakery, all designed to obscure the building that held it.

However, through the blueprints, the limits of their world were revealed to me. The "story container" was exposed, and yeah, it was a big container—2,400,000 square feet—but it was not infinite. The building was knowable. Conquerable. All it took was a bit of strategizing, bit of vision, and money, of course—lots of money: about eight grand and counting.

That's not that much, really. A reasonable price to become a God.

[Door shuts; more coughing]

I'd put the blueprint for the second sub-basement level directly opposite my bed. My own research seemed to support Vapability's theory: something big remained hidden on this floor. A large area of sub-basement two remained uncharted. The location didn't appear on any theatre blog. No audience member had ever been down there.

I seriously doubted the second sub-basement was a backstage area either. As part of Vapability Brown's platinum package I had the opportunity to purchase 12 GB of stolen in-house documents from the show: actor call sheets, stage management schedules. Whenever the second sub-basement was listed in the staff documents, the floor description was always redacted.

[Ominous music]

The evidence was enough for me. No doubt in my mind: hidden within this black box was the show's final, deepest mystery. The True Ending. Where Lexi Featherston was waiting for me.

I opened the window. It was already tomorrow. The dawn had a strange colour to it. It was like the colour of a 70's corporate boardroom. It almost seemed to wooden-panel the streets. [Sighs]

I went back to my laptop and reported Vapability Brown's blog to the police for containing child pornography.

[Typing on keyboard; electronic beat over continuing music]

I logged into a couple of my other email addresses and made complaints under their names as well. [Pleased with himself, showing off:] Then, just for good measure, I went onto the dark web and hired a guy to DDoS attack her web host.

[Typing continues]

Vapability thought they could get rich selling the play's secrets. Nothing wrong with that as a strategy, but, you know, by exposing themselves to people like me...they knew the risk. I *have* to shut them down to protect my investment. Otherwise, you know, someone might try to follow in my footsteps.

[Ominous electronic music continues]

Minnie Mouse, whispering: You really should've done this days ago.

Dan: I know, I know. I just wanted to make sure I'd mined the site for all useful assets before I shut it down.

Minnie Mouse, whispering: You gotta close that door behind you!

Dan: Gotta do it! Got to.

And hopefully this was gonna be enough drama to keep Vapability away from the show tomorrow night. So, they won't get in my way either.

[Electronic beat stops, ominous chord continues]

Minnie Mouse, whispering: Did I tell you about the time me and Mickey had our house burgled and I made a false insurance claim saying that the burglars had taken four hundred thousand dollars' worth of my jewellery?

I lay down on the bed. I was still wearing my Roberto Cavalli suit. I couldn't be bothered to change, really. I was gonna be back there soon enough.

Minnie Mouse, whispering: The jewellery wasn't really stolen. Listen, I've got it right here. This is it, listen. [Jewellery jingling] That's a fourteen-karat diamond cut rope chain. [Jewellery jingling] It's pretty heavy.

The city was awake now, streets filling with morning traffic. At least I could sleep through the day. I'd told my office that my uh, "Aunt Flo" had died, so as far as they were concerned I was back in England for a funeral. I wasn't due back in the office 'til Monday.

Minnie Mouse, whispering: Listen to me drag the necklace across the case. It sounds nice, doesn't it?

Dan: It does sound nice.

Minnie Mouse, whispering: I mean, Mickey said it was fraud but, end of the day, who are the victims here? You know what I'm saying.

I knew you'd understand.

Friday 6:45 p.m.

Tonight's starting position is critical: Queue at the right-most ticket desk, adjusting your queue position to make sure when you finally reach the front desk you get directed to enter the production via Elevator 4 [Elevator ding]; that's the furthest from the desk on the right side. [Elevator motor whirring] Taking Elevator 4 means you can save pissing around on all the lower levels and go straight in at the gift shop on Floor 7.

Once you arrive, go straight to the till and buy the neck massager. Then immediately take the purchase to the next desk and return it. You'll automatically pick up the Personal Shopping Trophy. [Ding!]

And we're off to the races.

Sprint across 10th Street into the Sean Kelly Gallery. [Bell rings as door opens and closes] On Fridays the gallery exhibits the paintings of Maria Diega Reyes. Find the one painting that, though abstract, is clearly supposed to be a nude portrait of Samantha.

Now if you've got there fast enough you should be able to quietly hear a song by Steely Dan playing in some other part of the building. You've gotta be quick cos if you miss it, you'll have to wait half an hour before the sound cue comes round again.

For the duration of that Steely Dan song, the abstract painting of Samantha is actually a secret door. The magnetic locks are temporarily deactivated. Go through the painting. [Ding!]

You should now be standing in the waiting room of the cancer clinic. Quick as you can put on the nun costume hanging on the clothes rack. Time is of the essence here. The production team will have already scrambled a Samantha to meet you there, but rather than wait around for the whole interaction you can actually just bail straight away and still get the trophy.

Speaking of glitches, rather than exiting the office through the door go through the window.

[Window opens, street sounds]

It's a real window and will take you for real onto the MetLife Building's fire-escape. You can take the exterior stairs all the way up to Floor 48. [Steps on the metal stairs] Most of these windows are sealed shut, but the window on Floor 48 is left permanently open, probably because of the paint fumes from Mr. Big's bedroom. Simply entering this room automatically gives you the Red Wall Trophy. [Ding!]

Not only that but whatever computer system the production uses to track your achievements will retroactively give you all the other trophies you should have already collected to be allowed into this room in the first place, basically negating all the fucking tedious Mr. Big interactions that occupy the middle floors, including that three-hour marina sauce ordeal [Ding!]. Also, that means that you don't have to sit with him quietly while he listens to all of Turnstiles by Billy Joel [Ding!]. Or endure that slapstick dance routine with him and Carrie both trying to fart without the other one hearing [Ding!]. Or sit with him in the hospital trying to decipher his weird half-conscious love poetry [Ding!].

Nope! Fuck all that. This way you can skip all the pathetic soul-searching will-they-wont-they crap and go straight to the best Big interaction of the whole production.

So, walk into Big's front room, pick up the fillet of fish, wang it at the back of his head. Done! He's meant to do a whole monologue but if you fish him straight away you can just collect the Bonjour Trophy [Ding!] and, you know, that's that.

Big's front door will take you out onto West 20th and, because you're already wearing the nun's habit, you can go to the Limelight now and cut straight to the front of the queue. Also, an extra achievement because this is the final church of the four giant church sets they built for this play. [Ding!]

The nun's habit is also one of five sanctioned outfits that allow you into the top-tier VIP room of the Limelight club where you can smoke a joint with Carrie.

[Lighter clicks]

You can have a heart-to-heart with Carrie here if you want but, let's be honest, what fucking difference does it make? Just take the trophy [Ding!] and keep moving.

Remember to pocket the end of the joint. Take it, along with Brady's first birthday candle to the vast Magnolia Bakery that occupies the entirety of Floor 20. Hand them both over at the lost and found desk, they'll give you a little hash-cupcake. I don't know whether it works or whether it's just a prop but eat it just in case you get an achievement. [Ding!]

They will also give you an invite to Steve and Aidan's bar on Floor 44. Go straight to the bar and order a large glass of Côtes du Rhône from Steve. Do not say please no matter how many times he asks [Ding!]. This is also the only bar in the building where you can order a Staten Island Ice Tea. Sadly, you have to order two to get the trophy [Ding!] Hopefully the booze will help counter-balance some of the effects of the hash cake. Also, your pain medication is probably need topping up by this point of the night, so you can wash that down too.

Next, find the biggest, hardest looking audience member in the bar, slap their drink out of their hand then punch them in the face.

[Punch, crash, glass breaks, people yell]

You're not a big guy so you're gonna have to throw your weight into it. If they get back up, you might have to hit them again.

[Still yelling in background]

Round about now we should expect to see some security. Standard in-house bouncers tend to look like generic Sex and the City date interests—divorced architects, real estate wunderkinds. You should be able to spot them by their bluetooth headsets.

When security arrives they're going to ask you to come with them. Here's what I want you to do: I want you to sit down and refuse to acknowledge their presence. No matter what they say, you just sit there and ignore it. Pretend that they're not even talking to you, like this is all some kind of bad dream.

Eventually security's gonna make a grab for you. [Muffled struggle] Once they've got you on your feet they'll escort you up to the security office on Floor 48. [Elevator whirring, ding]

There's an interview room in back where security can lock you up until the police arrive. This should take about ten to twelve minutes. When the police finally come into the room start crying. Try to articulate to the arresting officers that you are just a pathetic drunk dude who had a burst of uncontrollable anger and immediately regretted his actions.

The police will put you in handcuffs. Again, more crying.

The officers will escort you to the staff elevator on the southeast corner. This elevator will take you and the police officers all the way back to the lobby, then out to the police car outside.

However, just before the elevator arrives, head-butt one of the policemen right in the nose [Muffled blow] and run fast as you can the other way down the corridor. [Running] After fifteen steps, fall over your shoelace. [Thud, air rushing out of lungs] Land right on your face.

The policemen will quickly catch up with you. They'll try to pick you up. Just keep wriggling and cry. [Muffled struggle]

Dan, this is the point where you *really* need to start begging. Try to bribe them. Try to explain to the officers that finishing this play is literally the only thing you have. That if you can't see this thing through...you have nothing else to live for. Beg them to let you go. Tell the officers that you think you might be having some kind of nervous breakdown. Tell them about your pain medication. That some nights, it sounds as if your Minnie Mouse ASMR is directly addressing you, even though you know that's completely insane. Tell them you are scared. Tell them you need help. [Heavy breathing] Eventually, one of the officers will manage to pick you up off the floor.

Again, headbutt him in the nose. [Muffled blow] Again, run down the corridor as fast as you can. [Running] Again, trip over your shoelaces and fall flat on your face. [Air rushing out of lungs]

Blood will geyser from your nose. [Sobbing pitifully] Sob profusely into the floor. This time do *not* move. Stay completely still. Even when they kick you.

The officer will pick you up again, although wary of you headbutting him a third time. He will immediately flip you around and push you face-first into the wall.

[In a rush, excited again:] But this wall is actually the backstage door to Miranda's apartment—

[Videogame sounds, upbeat electronic music]

Run, kicking the door. You will find yourself in Miranda's bedroom.

Though the police can follow you through the backstage door, they won't be able to pass through into the rest of Miranda's apartment without the Auld Lang Syne Trophy. So, make sure you close the bedroom door behind you.

At this moment you should find Night Miranda sitting in the dark watching TV with another audience member. It's supposed to be this intimate contemplative monologue about friendship while also functioning as a bit of a retrospective of the play. Miranda goes back over some of the things that the audience member has done over their various visits to the production.

Of course, *you* weren't booked in for the experience tonight, that's why there's already someone in the room with her. Also, don't forget, you're currently dressed in a nun's habit with blood streaming down your face So, for several reasons this scene is probably not going to play out as it traditionally would.

You just need to activate the remaining achievement trophies in here and then get out as quick as you can. So, leave Miranda on the couch. Go to her kitchen. There's a cake in her bin, take it out and eat a bit. [Ding!] Use her phone to order Chinese takeaway. [Ding!] This is going to be hard in handcuffs, but you should be able to muddle through.

Now, go back to Miranda. If you've done everything right and your backstage blubbing to the police was timed precisely long enough, you *should* be right on time to see the New Year's ball drop on Miranda's TV...[Voice counting down on TV]

["Happy New Year!" on TV] And as that final achievement trophy automatically updates onto your flip-phone [Ding!], you now have every single one of the achievement trophies detailed in Vapability Brown's blog. [Sound from HBO opening]

Exit through Miranda's front door and take the elevator [Elevator whirring] all the way back down to Floor 8.

It might already be midnight on Miranda's TV but thankfully, Miranda's apartment runs thirty minutes fast. That means you still have half an hour to find the True Ending before the production closes for the night.

[Elevator doors open]

When you get to Floor 8 you'll be in the Italian Restaurant, the one where there's a Mr. Big permanently singing Frank Sinatra. It's too dark for security cameras to pick you out in there so you should be able to scoot through to the rear toilet. Lift off the cistern [Cistern grinds off its place] and retrieve the vacuum-packed bag you hid there on Wednesday night [Water dripping] containing a lockpick, plus a spare show mask and Roberto Cavalli suit.

Take a quick look at yourself in the mirror. Make sure you look presentable. No one knows you just assaulted a police officer and resisted arrest. No one knows you're 1% from God Mode. Look ignorant; look humble. As long as you stay cool, you're just going to vanish back into the crowd, OK? By the time the police catch up with you, you'll be base-jumping off the roof of this place, floating off over New York like a cocaine Mary Poppins. Good luck, Dan!

Your pre-planned speed-run strategy ends here. Whatever lies between now and the finale, you're on your own: no more clues, no more maps, just a hunch. I hope it's right. If you feel like you need a little bit of a spirit boost and you can spare the additional five seconds, why not give your reflection a little bit of the old Fonzie-thumbs? Just a thought.

And that's that. That's all I've got. Good luck, Dan. Best wishes, Dan.

[Music cuts out]

Oh, yeah. Uh, PS. Before you leave the bathroom don't forget to put this notebook in the bin and set it on—

[Drops notebook in the bin, lighter clicks a few times]

[A door opens and closes in the distance]

[Footsteps, eerie vocal music]

Because I'd already picked up the Berger Time Trophy on my Monday night run-through I already had access to the Post-it note factory on Floor 15.

A vast warehouse space. Dazzling industrial lighting. Row after row of pallets of Post-it notes, huge multicoloured towers of the stuff. Around the edge of the room, a conveyor belt trundled further boxes around in an endless loop.

[Footsteps, music continues]

At this point in the evening the majority of the audience were in the huge club space three floors below. The "generic ending" as I called it. Not particularly inspired, just a kind of vague celebration of friendship. I'd done it, of course. Got the trophy. It was a pretty boring event to attend on your own. I preferred to be here, really. Here at least, I was literally on my own. Just me and about ten million Post-its.

I just couldn't shake the feeling that the key to the True Ending was located somewhere in this area. This whole floor...it seemed simultaneously too expensive and also too empty to have no further purpose. Last and only other time I'd come to this floor, it was just me and about seven other slightly restless audience members watching Jack Berger do a two-minute solo expressive dance routine with a motorbike helmet. As far as I was aware, that dance was the only theatrical moment that happened on this entire level. That's a lot of set dressing for such a small attraction.

Of course, there was no Post-it note factory scene in the original Sex and the City TV show. But still, it made perfect sense to me as a location in the play. The set was clearly built as a kind of extended reference to the episode where Jack Berger infamously breaks up with Carrie simply by leaving a Post-it note on her computer and fucking off in the night.

The play's decision to scale up the symbolism, from one Post-it note to millions upon millions of them, seemed like some sort of comment on the ubiquity of this kind of breakup. Maybe not actually millions of guys breaking up via Post-it note but with the same kind of callousness. The play seemed to be suggesting the heartless emptiness of that ending was in fact something utterly ordinary. As if every second of every day people were walking out of each other's lives with barely any words spoken at all. Hearts smashing themselves over and over against a wall of blank indifference. Love annihilating itself on an industrial scale.

[Cello joins in]

The room was just so bright—no shadows at all. I'd always thought of nihilism as...a dark thing, some kind of unseen endless dread. But in fact, the opposite was true. Nihilism was a light so bright that there was nowhere to hide. It's the moment you see the world for what it really is. A conveyor belt.

I'd thought about this room a lot since my visit at the start of the week. Not the dance with the bike helmet bit, you know—that was very much a two-star cast interaction. But the set design itself. I just couldn't let it go. I couldn't shake the thought that if I was going to hide

the True Ending of Sex and The City somewhere in this play...this factory, this is where I would start it. You know, this would be the beginning of the end.

[Footsteps, eerie vocal music again]

I walked the factory floor to see if anything had changed since my last visit. Now that I'd collected every achievement trophy, maybe something had shifted, a hidden door might have opened...

Beyond the warehouse area was a huge empty expanse. I think this was the area where I had watched Berger dance last time I was here. Now though, in the spot where Berger once stood, a single isolated computer terminal, just sitting there right in the centre of the space. This was definitely something new. The monitor screen was completely papered over with Post-its.

I took off one of the notes. [Music stops] On it, handwritten, were the words JULIANDICKS, all one word, in caps.

[Uncomfortable, confused] Um, Julian Dicks was West Ham player of the year four times between 1990 and 1997. He was also...my Yahoo email password.

[Music returns]

I pulled off another one. This one said JULIANDICKS85 (the i's were exclamation points)—this was my Netflix password.

I pulled off another [Paper rustling] and another [Paper rustling]. Every single Post-it on the monitor was a password of mine. Social media accounts, [Rustle] streaming websites, [Rustle] my bank account, [Rustle] my pin number, [Rustle] my security code. [Rustle]

After clearing [Rustle] a few more notes from the terminal I finally noticed what the image was playing on the screen beneath. It was a webcam recording of my apartment. There was my bed. My rowing machine. My collection fine brandies. My framed poster of Zack Snyder's Sucker Punch, the best film ever made. [Through gritted teeth] And now, on screen, here I came...wandering into frame wearing nothing but my underpants, bottle of prosecco in one hand, notebook in the other. I looked like some sort of hairless ape. I watched as I shuffled back and forth across my apartment scribbling notes on my blueprints, drunkenly planning my speed-run strategy.

Suddenly the me on the video feed pulled down his underpants and pressed his nuts against the fridge. "Oh yeah", I thought, the night immediately coming back to me. This was about two weeks ago. It had been a hot night, I-I was trying to cool down, so I...yeah.

I looked at the screen. There I was. The *real* me. Not the guy I pretended to be on my date with Joy Peck, or the guy I pretended to be with Samantha in the anti-baby shower, or the guy I pretended to be in the office, or the guy I pretended to be online.

No. *That, there*. That was the real me. A forty-year old virgin pressing his testicles against a fridge.

I felt sick. The events of the last few months began to rearrange themselves, cause and effect turning over in my mind. My heart was pounding. I had to take off my mask just to breathe.

[Music stops, buzzing sound]

I could feel someone looking at me, their eyes fixed on the back of my head. Slowly, I turned.

Standing ten paces behind me was the man with the giant dog head.

Dan: Naw. You have to be...fucking kidding me.

Dog Man slowly shook his head. His gun was hanging loose in his right hand.

Dan: Holy shit. There is no Vapability Brown, is there? It's all part of the theatre production. You guys write those blogs!

Dog Man slowly nodded.

Dan, working it out: So...when I signed up...to Vapability's newsletter...I... downloaded your spyware onto my laptop? You hacked my laptop!

Dog Man nodded again, his felt tongue dancing back and forth in that huge slack jaw of his.

Dan: I get it. [Excited, talking faster:] You're doing an ironic riff on Episode 6, Season 4, when Carrie got an email address for the first time? And she hid under her desk because she thought that the person emailing her could *see her* through the email client. Which is fucking insane because she's a professional journalist at the turn of the century! But [Sigh] you flipped it. You flipped it so this time Carrie's right and I'm the fucking idiot.

Dog Man shrugged. Then, after a pause, conceded with a nod.

Dan: So, you're robbing me? Again?

He nodded. I gestured to the passwords scattered on the floor around me.

Dan: Well, you seem to know everything. Did you clean me out?

He nodded.

Dan: [Exasperated sigh] There is *no* way that this is the True Ending of the show.

Dog Man, muffled through dog head: No. It's the Bad Ending.

Dan, baffled: I don't get it. How did you know that I'd end up here? In this room? Like, there was no mention of this room on Vapability's blog.

[Buzzing music]

Dog Man: Guys like you...they always end up here. In fact, we made this whole room just to appeal to guys like you.

Dan: Oh, come on. Are you seriously gonna stand there and, like, judge *me* for having a cynical world view? You're a dog man with a gun!

He didn't flinch.

Dan: Ok, I uh, yeah, I like this room. It's bleak as fuck. That's why I like it. I just-I don't think it means that I've *failed* some kind of basic humanity test just because on some level I relate to Jack Berger.

Dog Man: No, that is *exactly* what it means. Berger's the worst!

Dan, exasperated: Everybody's the worst!! Every single man in here *is the worst*.

I could hear Dog Man sigh inside that huge fake head of his.

Dog Man: If that's what you really think... [Raising his gun] then you still haven't learnt your lesson.

[Music like a heartbeat]

Gesturing with the gun, Dog Man directed me over to a nearby wall panel. He hit a button and the wall slid open. There was a stairwell behind it.

Dog Man: Come on.

Dan: Come on where?

Dog Man: Sub-basement...level 2.

With the Dog Man's gun in my back we descended.

Dog Man: What I'm about to show you, it's um, it isn't a standard part of the theatrical experience. Usually we just use SB2 as a MacGuffin. It's not actually part of the show. Just a fake mystery for all the Wall Street guys to obsess over. However, seeing as you're a bit of a special case, Dan, I uh, thought you might get a kick out of seeing what we actually keep in there.

Seventeen flights of stairs later we reached the door.

Dog Man: It's open.

[Door opens, light switch flicked on, lights buzz to life]

Flickering out of the shadows: vast display screens, computer units stacked floor to ceiling like strange cubist sculptures, everything covered in a thick layer of dust.

Dan, whispering in awe: My God. It's a spaceship.

Dog Man: It's not a spaceship! It's a store-room. This is all the stuff Merrill Lynch left behind when we took over the building. They just never came back to collect it.

Dan: Oh.

I wiped some dust off a mouse-mat. On the mat it said "Occupy Wall Street" which I guess was some trader's idea of a joke.

Dog Man: So, Dan, how does it feel to reach the innermost room of your desires and discover that it's basically just your office at JP Morgan?

Dan: Ahh...yeah. [Flat:] Yeah, that's good.

Dog Man: Go on.

Dan: Well, I, um...I don't really like talking about my job? But, yeah, I do see the irony. [Humouring him, not meaning it:] It's...clever. Yeah, it's um, it's very affecting.

Dog Man slammed his gun onto a desk [Thud] then stepped in close to me, nose-to-nose, just like we were the first time we met.

Dog Man: You tried to buy your way to the top. You thought you could use money to just brute-force your way through the play. But the play isn't *about* money.

Because of the mask, I couldn't tell if he managed to say those words with a straight face.

Dog Man: It's a play about opening your heart. It's a play about friendship, community, about having the courage to grow as a person. That's why you failed, Dan. Really, you brought this on yourself.

Maybe now that we've taken all your money... [Chuckling] Maybe this'll be a good thing for you. Maybe at long last you'll finally start to understand the value of things.

Dan: I'm sorry. Look, I get what you're saying but...I just don't think it's going to work.

Dog Man: We already emptied your account, Dan. It's done. Legally, we're untouchable, too. Look, you signed a waiver when you—

Dan: —No, no, no. I mean, you can take my money. That's fine. What I mean is, taking my money doesn't work as a teaching device.

I mean, symbolically, I get the message. But the problem is, [Regretful:] I always have more money coming in. Like, my next payday rolls around in like two days'

time? I have a good salary. Also, my parents are rich. I'm sorry, but there's just no way to teach me a lesson by taking away my money. I wish there was. Really, I do. But [Sigh] sadly, I'm just...always going to have money.

It's a-it's a shame, really. [Picking up Dog Man's gun]

Cos, when I first decided to commit to this thing I...I really was hoping it would end in some kind of learning moment, you know, some kind of personal epiphany. Even if that required learning something bad about myself, I was ready for it. You know, I wanted to grow! But...

I put the gun in my mouth.

[Click, click, click]

Dan: But it's just a show, innit? It's like a big videogame, really.

I gave Dog Man back his gun.

Dan: Now, that's not to say I didn't enjoy it. [Flatly] It was... it was cool. And uh, lots of fun. And, yeah, some genuinely surprising twists at the end. So, uh, cheers, man.

[Cheerful nostalgic 50's song]

I turned and started up the stairs.

Dog Man, shouting up the stairwell: Hey! The building's closed now, so can you please head straight to the lobby? [Receding:] Thank you!

As I climbed the stairs I realised I was smiling. Yeah, I might have got the Bad Ending, but still... Not a lot of people get to experience that, right? I got "Scrooged"! It takes a helluva lot of work to "Scrooge" someone.

Maybe not a life-changing epiphany but it was hands-down the best interactive experience in the show. And actually, totally worth the money, I thought.

In terms of thrills, I didn't know how it compared to contemporary theatre, but it was definitely better than the Pepsi Max Rollercoaster in Blackpool. Probably better than Alien War in the Trocadero and that's saying something. Some genuinely shocking moments.

The first time I entered this building Sex and the City made no sense to me at all. Later on, for a couple of months at least, Sex and the City *did* make sense. Completely, it did! I knew what it *meant*. I understood what it was trying to say.

But now that I'd seen every room, met every character, memorised every single piece of trivia... I felt like I was back where I started: I had no fucking idea what the show was about again!

It's like that old song. You know, "First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is."

Maybe, I thought to myself, maybe this is just what God Mode feels like. Now that you've seen the whole world you can finally stop caring about it. You get to live out the rest of your days in complete indifference. It was kinda nice, actually.

Somewhere above me I could hear sirens, police cars arriving outside the building. Two cars, maybe three. I remembered the policeman that I repeatedly headbutted earlier in the evening. Had those police been actual real NYPD? Or were they just actors, employed by the play? I hadn't given it a lot of thought at the time. Even now, I reasoned, it didn't really matter if they were real or not.

[Sirens over the music]

The lobby was empty by this point, the rest of the audience had long left the building. At the other end of the hall, red and blue lights flickered through the front windows. The "police" were waiting for me.

I slipped my mask back down over my face. The show wasn't over yet.

[Sirens come closer and stop]

[IMAGINARY ADVICE]

[Music]

Ross: So, that is the end of the Imaginary Advice podcast for another month. This episode's story was written and produced by me, Ross Sutherland. Thanks again to Lizzy Denning for reprising her role as the voice of Vapability Brown.

If you're new to Imaginary Advice, this podcast takes a variety of different forms. Some episodes are short fiction, some are true stories, some are essays, some poetry. I try to experiment with the form in a different way every time I come back. And, yeah, you can listen to the episodes in any order.

If you want to hear other episodes in a similar genre to this one, maybe check out Episode 52, The Man Who Saw Tomorrow, that's like a rewrite of a short story I wrote when I was five. Episode 62, that's a story about a time-travelling boxer featuring poet and comedian Rob Auton. Uh, if you want more weird revisions of 90's pop culture, maybe Episode 50. That's a horror story set behind the scenes of the film Four Weddings and a Funeral. Also, Episode 33, Exorcist Dave Stewart. That's a two-part reality-bending ghost story about the line between hauntings and installation art.

So yeah, maybe check some of those out if you liked this one.

If you have donated money to my Patreon page you are...you're a fucking saint! Thank you so much. The lockdown erased all my live work, all of the funding streams except for this podcast, so I appreciate any support during this time, even if it's just signing up for a month or two. If your income is secure and you like the show and you want to help out, you can go to patreon.com/RossGSutherland. Otherwise, a review on iTunes is also a really nice thing to do and it helps make me visible to new listeners.

Ok, awkward begging section over.

Lots of cool weird stuff coming up on the podcast very soon. I'll be back in a month's time.

In the meantime: Stay sane. Do what needs to be done. The normal rules of life and work and love no longer apply. Make new rules. I love you, by the way.

Um, thanks for listening. I'll be back soon.