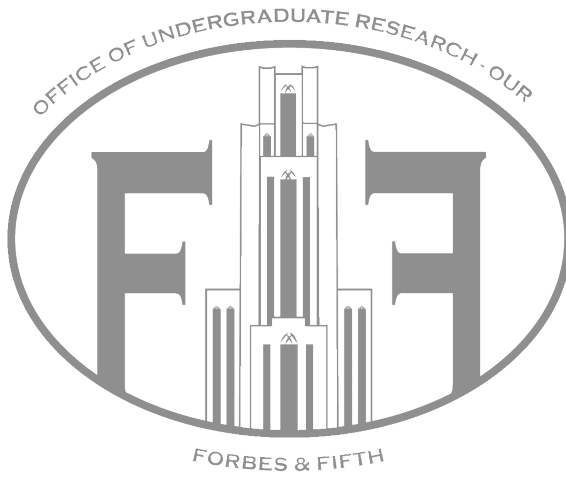




## LAURA BRITTON

Laura Britton was born and raised right outside of New York City. Her interests include listening to A Tribe Called Quest and trying on different shades of lipstick. In her writing, Laura strives to create characters so relatable, and scenarios that hit so close to home, that she makes the reader uncomfortable. She also writes in hopes of being a good role model to her younger brother, and making her parents proud.

FORBES & FIFTH



## Shelter

I have a hundred cans of Spam. I have two hundred pounds of long grain white rice, four fifty-gallon drums of grain, flour, dried beans, and nuts. A hundred gallons of water. I have thirty pounds of various vacuum sealed cured meats, and eighty cans of various treated fruits. I have a twenty-pack of batteries, three flashlights, a battery powered lamp, and four survival books. I have dug out my basement and fashioned a respectable fallout shelter for myself, and I am not coming out until it's all over.

Channel 4 has called for flooding and softball-sized hail, Channel 6 for winds that could uproot redwoods. Local public access news has reported that dogs all over our neighborhood are slipping out of their owners' leashes and heading for higher ground. I am beginning to think it will be everything described in the good book, short of Noah floating around, collecting tigers and elephants by the twos. Scientists at MIT and Carnegie Mellon had been predicting this storm for a week but I had heard about this storm months ago at an odd hour on my short wave radio from a host I've always trusted. I am prepared. In my beautifully stocked shelter, I will wait out this storm, alone and in silence. Even though I do have enough rations for two, and I opted to spend an extra two hundred dollars on a king-sized bed for the shelter, even though Dana was supposed to bring the CDs for the stereo I pulled out of the hallway closet.

Dana broke up with me two weeks ago. Her reasons were suspect, but I guess I can see where she was coming from. She hated how much time I was spending on the shelter. I do miss her plays, her dinner parties, her voice recitals, all for a cutout of space behind my unused weight lifting bench. She hated having to talk about "the big storm," as I referred to it; she hated talking about real issues. She was that way since that guy broke my nose the day I met her.

We met at a concert at Garfield Artworks, in the audience waiting to see some pop-punk band that cranked out two hits then slipped away, later becoming a cult-hit with a younger generation. "The Cartographers" or something. I was alone. I again had been stood up by a friend of mine. He decided that the *possibility* of acid was more interesting

than the very real promise of attending a show with me, and I was beginning to understand his thought process. When I wasn't sobbing over my

ex-girlfriend's new, extreme dislike of me, I was calling every contact in my address book threatening suicide—a threat no one, including myself, took seriously. “Cut it out, Jim, you're fine,” my friend Alex would say over the phone. “And I know you didn't take a whole fucking bottle of aspirin. I took your bottle when I left yesterday, and you don't have any vodka either, took that too.”

And so there I was, standing alone, on the outskirts of the crowd, unshaven, reeking of beer and my own ripe body odor, staring at a beautiful girl wrapped in the thick arms of a man wearing surgical steel in his face, a thug of a boyfriend. Only—no. The boyfriend was gone now, the product of a dispute I must not have noticed. She was sulking. She was standing alone, like me. I remember having the feeling of solidarity. “Yeah, I just got dumped too. I know your pain,” I thought, nodding. “Right on.”

I don't know where I found the motivation. Maybe it was an image I had of myself, lying naked and alone in an unfurnished apartment, eating overripe bananas and deep dish pizza for the rest of my life, but somehow I was moved forward. My feet were self-governing, a sovereign nation, making decisions without my consent. Those independent, fleshy legs brought me over to Dana.

I mumbled something about the band. Something lame, something she probably would've ignored if my crusty lips hadn't been inches from her perfect ear. But I couldn't even hear myself, so it was no surprise when she cupped her ear with heavily ringed fingers and squawked, “What?” I opened my mouth wider, a gaping hole in a pitiable face, and yelled directly at her.

“I LIKE THIS BAND.”

A fist slammed the bridge of my nose, my eye socket, my bladder. I was on the floor, being trampled by thick rubber boots. I saw from

the depths Dana pushing the guy, rings pounding into his chest, mouthing “fuck you” into his face. She crouched, meeting my eye line for just a second, then she snaked her arms behind my back and knees and—with a strength that has faded since her punk days—lifted me, fully, off the ground. My blood made a home in her sleeves. Embarrassed, I shook my wiry body from her arms. She told me her name was Dana. She said she liked my earring.

She walked me back to my house a few blocks away, sopping up my blood with her cardigan. But not delicately, like nurses do in movies. I cried the whole way.

I was sure my nose was broken. Up in my bathroom, she convinced me to let her pop my nose back into place; she said she had done it before. A year later she told me that had been a lie.

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My nose did snap back in to place. My tank top had turned into a saturated paper towel, covered in blood and sweat. I imagined I smelled like one of those animal enthusiasts, the type who rubs feces on their necks and under their arms to disguise their human scent as not to confuse feral beasts, to be one with their carnal ways. What I am trying to tell you is: I smelled like shit. Dana had sex with me anyway.

But she was gone by nine the next morning. She left a note on the condom wrapper written in permanent marker: *See you around.*

Whenever I brought up the story of how we met, Dana would deny that the guy she was with, the guy I’d seen inching his tattooed fingers up her thighs and under her dress, was her boyfriend. And I always told her that after she fixed my nose I asked around, that the two months between that incident and the next Cartographers concert were full of taps on vaguely identical girls’ shoulders followed by defeated apologies. I told her I looked for her in hair dye aisles of corner stores and ambiance-punk-folk shows all over Pittsburgh, but I couldn’t find her. I didn’t even know her last name.

It wasn’t until a show in May that I saw her again, standing near a drumset, drinking malt liquor from a 40 ounce bottle. I rushed over, an eager schoolboy seeing his celebrity idol on the street, but by the

time I reached her she was gone up the stairs to the stage. The familiar twanging of guitar strings, tuning, a mic check too. Up there, on stage, there she was, behind a red bass guitar, slapping and pulling at the thick strings. She was astonishing. She was Athena, and that Ibanez was her spear. When I chased her down after the show, she said she recognized me. My nose too. She asked if I wanted to get drinks after the show, apologized for leaving that day before either of us actually became acquaintances. She took me to a gay bar; she later told me she was just “feeling me out.”

She fell asleep in my arms that night, her heavy drunken breath on my chest. Her hair was matted inside my armpit, but I didn’t want to move, I didn’t want her to move. I fell in love with the upward curve of her nose, her sunken cheeks, the slight lisp she had after a few drinks. I marveled at her ability to pick up any instrument and play it instantly, as if she grew up taking lessons. It was months of bliss.

A year later we had moved out of my soiled apartment, bought a town house together, and sold out. But I was happy to do so. I had Dana. I got a job at an advertising agency. Dana moved her way up the corporate ladder at a company that puts out sheet music of top 40 hits. We sorted our recycling on Sunday night, after dinner and before *The Simpsons*, and she would take it out Monday morning before work. We shopped at locally owned stores, and whatever we couldn’t find in town, we secretly bought at Whole Foods. Our friends stopped calling to invite us to their gigs, but we hardly noticed. We spent most weekends at Dana’s parents’ cabin in Western Pennsylvania, or at my sister’s house visiting my niece and nephew. Dana got rid of her eyebrow ring and had her hair bleached back to its natural blonde in a salon. I took out my earring and went down to The Exchange and traded my Misfits t-shirts for button downs. Our stick and poke tattoos, now hidden under cardigans and blazers, were the only reminders of our past life.

I was ready to ask her to marry me, I really was, but when news of the storm came around, I found myself dipping into my savings for the ring in order to build the shelter. I

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could see Dana becoming anxious, scared that if I didn't pop the question soon, she would grow too old, miss the boat of marriage, and die an old maid. I tried to explain to her that I just wanted to finish this project, that the shelter was important to both of us, that I loved her but the ring had to wait.

Dana wasn't going to wait any longer. She had her things packed and was at her parent's house within three days. She left a note on the back of a receipt: *Call when the storm passes*. This was before the earthquake tore up Fifth Avenue.

I was sitting in our half empty bedroom, finishing a bottle of whiskey, when the wind threw open the French doors, blowing through our room, taking down the pictures Dana had hung on the wall meticulously when we moved in. I closed the doors, picked the frames up, and pulled out the photos inside, tacking them up on the walls again with pieces of tape. A few days later, when the roof came down, the photographs were crushed in the rubble. I stood out in the grey of the morning in my boxers with a mug of whiskey and dusted off the glass and dirt and looked at the photos—Dana and my smiles now morphed and mangled by the flood—and decided it was time to take shelter in the basement.

That was two hours ago, and now from my shelter I can hear the wind kicking up pieces of other people's lives, wreckage. Throwing it into the air and catching it in a spiral of dust and debris, just a tunnel of ruins, the lives of others moving through the city at 130 miles per hour, as I sit in silence, in my shelter, alone.

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