

The Fictional Supplement to the Nonfiction Book *Encyclopedia of an Ordinary Life*

Amy Krouse Rosenthal never would have seen Birmingham magazine in the first place had it not been for her desire to get a new massage therapist. Her previous massage therapist, Shioh Jian-Yu, simply applied too much pressure. And although it was unlike Amy to stay quiet while receiving a beating, she found it impossible to tell Shioh to please just stop pushing so hard. So Amy would just lie there, week after week, becoming slowly and inexorably bruised, gritting her teeth as Shioh repeated, over and over again, "Relax. Relax. Relax." For the duration of each massage, AmyKR would formulate in her mind all the possible ways she might broach the subject ("Do you ever shake people's hands and feel bones breaking?"), but could never bring herself to say a word.

Shioh's primary recommending feature as a massage therapist was her habit of yelling "ROSENDAL!" with great pleasure every time she saw AmyKR. Something about Shioh's fervent excitement made Amy feel as if she and her immediate family were part of a five-person team, The Fighting Rosendals, with Shioh being the Rosendals' only fan.

Nonetheless, after her husband, Jason, noted a greenish blue bruise just above her left elbow, Amy decided to call a new massage therapist, one recommended by her friend Dana. (Not paleontologist-from-Iowa Dana, but-once-wrote-a-letter-to-the-Editor-of-the-OED-asking-if-something-could-be-done-about-the-p-in-raspberry-to-which-the-Editor-never-replied Dana.)

And this new massage therapist, a late-20s man named Frank who was not handsome so much as muscular, happened to be from Birmingham, Alabama, although Amy did not know as much when she sat down in his waiting room and noticed an issue of Birmingham magazine, "a guide to Birmingham and its surrounding metropolitan area." AmyKR, who did not realize that Birmingham was even the sort of town to have a metropolitan area, and who initially believed (until reading the cover teaser, "Southern Hospitality—Fact or Fiction?") that the magazine must be about Birmingham, England, picked up the issue. The cover featured a mansion with the words "Birmingham's Best" superimposed on its roof, and Amy couldn't help but wonder whether the owner of Birmingham's Best Mansion, in a fit of glee at having beaten out all of the other mansion-owners in his neighborhood, had painted the words "Birmingham's Best" in giant, pink letters on the roof of the house.

Flipping through the magazine in search of the mansion, Amy's eyes stopped briefly at an article with the headline, "Putting on Airs." Reading the first sentence of the story, Amy could have sworn it said, "Nydia Neubauer caused quite a stir in Birmingham society this year—especially once her cheeks started bouncing." Incredulous, Amy looked over at the picture of an aging Mrs. Neubauer, who looked familiar in the way that all older people do. Nydia wore a floppy hat and had the sort of full, dimpled cheeks that could definitely bounce. It wasn't until the second paragraph that Amy looked back at the first sentence and noticed: the article didn't claim that Mrs. Neubauer was bouncing her cheeks, but rather her checks.

Whereupon Frank, who was not attractive so much as magnificently constructed, walked out into the waiting room and said, "Miss Rosenthal?" AmyKR rushed up to Frank and by way of introduction pushed the article in his face (again, she could be quite bold when not lying partly naked on a massage table) and said, "Read this!" Frank read, shook his (slightly too big for his body) head, laughed, looked at Mrs. Neubauer, and laughed again.

"Did you read cheeks?" Amy asked, excited.

"Oh! It's cheeks! Well, it sure does look like cheeks when ya glance at it."

The massage itself, neither too soft nor too hard, was nice enough, although Frank could not stop talking about his 9-year-old daughter's new boyfriend. Frank seemed to think that his daughter's romantic entanglement portended the apocalypse, whereas Amy recalled emerging from her own 3rd grade heartbreak quite nicely, so well in fact that she could no longer remember the name of her 3rd grade boyfriend. She was pretty sure it started with a "Rah," like Robert or Raphael. Years ago, she had devoted an entire 3-minute NPR piece to pondering the potential metaphorical significance of this forgotten name. Amy did remember the name of her third grade teacher, who comforted her when Rahsomething dumped her in the spring of third grade: Mrs. Gotchalk, who had the sort of name that more or less contractually obligates a person to a life of teaching.

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Needing gas on the way home, AmyKR stopped at the gas station at Diversey and Ashland, because she was a big fan of Hassan, who was not only the owner of the gas station, but also its sole employee.

Every. Single. Solitary. Time. Amy Krouse Rosenthal goes to get gas she has to lean out the window to double-check which side the tank is on (passenger). After pumping, Amy went inside (not being the type of person to pay outside unless she was in a hurry or the kids were with her). Hassan had already grabbed her a turkey sandwich, knowing that Amy harbored a great, guilty fondness for gas station sandwiches.

"Hi, Miss Katie!" Hassan said.

"Amy."

"Oh yes, I know Miss Amy. But so pretty—just like Katie Holmes!"

Huh? Well, whatever. Amy showed the Birmingham magazine article to Hassan, and sure enough, he read, "bouncing cheeks," laughed, and then said, "Her cheeks are bouncing like they are to bounce." He smiled broadly, and Amy knew it was a joke, but couldn't tease out the meaning from the mangled sentence. But back in the car, homeward bound, she realized: Mrs. Neubauer had the sort of cheeks that looked bounceable, and Hassan wanted to make a joke about it. I could not be funny in Spanish, Amy realized, and she was a little sad about it until she changed the tape and put on something peppy.

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Amy stomped into the house that afternoon. She stomped on the front porch as she fiddled with the keys, and then she stomped through the entryway, singing, "Just for a minute / Please go and Hi-ide! / That'll make your presence / Easier to abide-bye-bide YEAH!" Team Rosendal had reached stage 3 of an acute mouse situation, Stage 3. being acceptance, which followed Stage 1. Freaking out, and Stage 2. Determination to rid home of non-human mammals. The kids came home, ParisMilesJustin (they stomped, too). Jason came home (usually the last to arrive, he always figured previous stompings had been adequate).

The reunited Rosendals—nothing beat the daily congregation. There were so many things to talk about: what everyone had for lunch, what they did at school, whether

the mice were really gone or just pretending to be gone. In bed, Amy gave the article to Jason.

"What is this from?" he asked.

"Birmingham magazine."

"Like England?"

"Like Alabama," Amy replied.

"Birmingham, Alabama has a magazine?"

"I know! Exactly! But just read the first sentence."

He read it, laughed, shook his head, and said, "I don't guess they have copyeditors down there. It should say checks."

"Look again," she smiled, loving this. Was it the font? The second c in checks did look a bit like an e, but not enough to justify a universal misreading.

"Oh yeah. Ha! That's weird."

"Yeah."

"God, that's hilarious," he said, although he did not laugh. "You read it wrong, too?"

"Yeah. So did Hassan. And my new massage therapist guy."

And then the talk turned to the new, bruiseless, post-massage AmyKR, and then they started reading. She never tired of being in bed and reading with Jason—this had been her image of marriage from a very early age, and it always felt a little fairy-tale.

And then later—considerably later—AmyKR started wondering. If. Just hypothetically if. If her life depended on finding Ms. Nydia Neubauer and getting her to jump up and down so her cheeks bounced, would she be able to do it? Like, literally, if masked terrorists were like, "Get Nydia Neubauer's cheeks to bounce or we'll shoot you in the knees," could she do it? She would have to go to Birmingham, of course, but maybe Nydia Neubauer had already left Birmingham, what with all the check-bouncing. Amy imagined posting flyers of Nydia Neubauer's cheeky face. "Have you seen this woman? Last seen bouncing checks and wearing a floppy hat. Please call. BIG REWARD."

She would talk to many people about Ms. Nydia Neubauer. She would become an expert in the field of Neubauerology. No, finding Nydia Neubauer would not be easy.

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"Are there even children in Alabama?" Charise Mericle Harper laughed.

"This is so weird," Amy said. She was wearing cotton pajamas and it was early. Her coffee was not quite hot enough, so she cradled the phone between ear and shoulder and walked the coffee to the microwave to nuke it for another 15 seconds.

"Apparently there is some conference there, some conference for children's librarians," Charise said. "So here's my travel itinerary. New York. Philadelphia. Chicago. San Francisco. Birmingham, Alabama."

Amy had not heard the word "Alabama" four times in the previous ten years, and here she had heard it twice within 24 hours.

"I mean, it's terrible, but I can't stop thinking about *Deliverance*," Charise said.

"This is really weird because I just read this story about Birmingham."

"Well, I'll only be there for 32 hours is what I keep telling myself. I can be anywhere for 32 hours."

The coffee was so hot—so magnificently, perfectly hot. One of the terrible facts of AmyKR's existence was that it was hard for her to drink perfectly hot coffee quickly, and yet if she did not drink it quickly, it soon became too cool, and Amy worried that microwaving every cup of coffee nine times couldn't possibly be good for her.

The phone line was quiet for a while, as Amy sipped the so-hot coffee and thought thought thought, calculating calculating.

"Tuesday the 23rd?" Amy asked.

"Alabama, you mean? Yeah. Leave Tuesday. Back Wednesday afternoon."

"Can I come?" Amy asked.

"Are you kidding?"

"No."

"Well, yeah. You can come."

"Awesome."

The coffee was already—just like that—not quite as hot as coffee ought to be.

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On the flight, which was so uncrowded that she and Charise had an empty middle seat between them, Amy Krouse Rosenthal indulged one of her more compulsive literary habits: writing a list of unlikely happenings.

1. It is unlikely that a woman named Nydia Neubauer would live in Birmingham, Alabama. It is sort of a—well—a sort of Jewish name for an Alabaman to have. Not that I completely disbelieve in the concept of Jews in Alabama. But a Birmingham socialite Jew?
2. It is unlikely that not-quite-handsome massage man would be from Birmingham, and it is further unlikely that he would have an issue of Birmingham magazine (one six months old, no less), and it is also so unlikely as to be almost inconceivable that I would have picked up Birmingham magazine rather than, say, Esquire, which I am pretty sure was also in the office.
3. While Charise has just published a book, and while she is the sort of widely admired writer and illustrator of picture books who gets asked to speak at conferences and the like, it strains credulity to even imagine that Charise would learn of her booking at a conference in Birmingham the same day that I read of Ms. Neubauer and her cheek-bouncing exploits.

Clearly, Amy must find Nydia Neubauer. Nydia Neubauer obviously had something capital-i Important to tell Amy. And Amy Krouse Rosenthal, being a first-rate Private Investigator type of literary humorist, had come prepared. She had photocopied Ms. Nydia Neubauer's face onto 100 sheets of pink construction paper (borrowed from her son Justin, who uses only the light-blue and the dark-blue, or, when the situation really calls for something exciting, the orange). She had done extensive Neubauer research, learning that there are zero Google hits for "Nydia Neubauer," and that there are no phone numbers in the city of Birmingham listed under "Neubauer." But Amy knew that the center of any Private Investigation is foot work. Or possibly legwork. Or maybe wearin' out shoe leather. It depended on which detective novel you read.

And so at 9:47 on a Tuesday morning, Amy Krouse Rosenthal entered the Birmingham International Airport and stretched her legs with each step, so as to match the much-longer strides of her much-taller friend Charise, and together they made Alabama's acquaintance.

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The Birmingham International Airport (International being something of an exaggeration, truth be told) featured a single baggage claim area. Between the baggage claim and the door, a circular desk offered visitors—and there were precious few of them, it rather goes without saying—information. Owing to a burnt-out R, Amy's propensity for misreading, and the gray light endemic to airports worldwide, the fluorescent sign above the circular desk seemed, to Amy, to read "INFO NATION."

Clearly, this circular desk was the place. The sovereign nation of Info (population: one white-haired white lady) was a magnificent starting point. The President of Info Nation deftly answered Charise's question about how much it would cost to get to the Best Western, and then turned to Amy.

"Where can I find the socialites?" Amy asked.

"Well!" the woman, who was not old so much as weathered, announced. Amy waited for her to finish. And waited. But apparently the woman was finished.

"Like, this woman," Amy said, holding a pink flyer. "Rich people," Amy went on. "Country club people. Where is the country club?"

"Well, dear! We do have several. But you's after Mantin Bruck. You'n tell by that hat. That lady's Mantin Bruck."

Turns out that Birmingham keeps its socialites in a suburb called Mountain Brook, which is pronounced Mantin Bruck.

Charise needed to go—her conference was near the airport, which was naturally nowhere near Mantin Bruck, so Charise took Amy's (smallish) bag after Amy moved a dozen of the pink flyers from suitcase to purse, and they split up with hugs and mutual assurances.

"They's a gonna love you," Amy smiled, doing her level best to feign Southern aristocracy.

"And you'll get those Neubauer cheeks to bounce." There was no Neubauer in the phone book, which didn't surprise Amy at all, since she had already searched extensively on the Internet for a Birminghamian Neubauer. But when she called Information, Amy Krouse Rosenthal got a plum clue. While no Neubauer lived in Birmingham, one did live in Mountain Brook. Amy felt a tinge of sadness. She had sort of wanted to run around Birmingham taping up her flyers.

At 205.832.7138, a woman answered with a voice like sweet iced tea spiked with whiskey. This lady, Amy thought excitedly, is most definitely a Birmingham socialite. But she was no Nydia Neubauer.

"Ms. Neubauer no longer leeves at this address," the woman said, as if anyone could live at an address, but you have to be someone indeed if you want to leeve somewhere.

"I believe," the woman finished, "she is now a puh-fume lady at Macy's."

Amy got the address of Macy's (they have a Macy's!) out of the phone book and took a cab to the mall, a seven-story monstrosity rising out of an otherwise unremarkable suburb named Hoover, a suburb that despite all its pine trees and subtle hills reminded her not-a-little of Northbrook, Illinois, her mostly flat, predominantly oak hometown. The similarity was in the driveways. The wide, pitched driveways of Hoover reminded Amy of her friend Rosalie's driveway, where Amy had spent a good portion of her childhood. Amy remembered how steep the driveway had seemed—adventurously steep.

Amy has forgotten so much: old phone numbers, Rahwhomever's name, the age of Miles when he first slept in a bed. But, in the cab, she remembers this: sleeping in the car on the way home from dinner or whatever in the City and always waking up just when the car got close to Northbrook, and quietly wondering at the miracle of her sleeping body sensing home. She was intent on keeping it secret—as a child, she always connected magic and secrecy. And she remembers this, too: Realizing one day that it wasn't magic at all, that she awoke when the car slowed down for traffic and red lights after the smooth, soporific ride on the highway.

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Amy walks to the food court to stake out Macy's, knowing that no self-respecting private investigator who has traveled thousands of miles to inspect a pair of bouncing cheeks just waltzes right into Macy's unprepared. Amy must figure out exactly what she needs to say to Ms. Neubauer, and also she needs to eat, although she is not hungry. Amy has long been a believer in preparatory eating. If, for instance, one is going to a movie at 7, it's necessary to move up dinner so as to avoid the horrible fate of having to count a jumbo bucket of popcorn as a meal, even though a body cannot possibly be expected to process popcorn into anything useful, like muscles or mitochondria.

Since Amy does not know how long she will be speaking to Ms. Neubauer, or even when she will next come across a restaurant, she must eat in advance of her hunger. It is only eleven in the morning and the Hoover Mall food court's only open restaurants are A. Burger King and B. Wai Chi's Famous "Chinese" Restaurant (NO "MSG," it promises), and though Amy is terrorized by the ill-advised quotation marks, she must eat, so she gets a vegetables-n-rice dish and then sits at a table for two, facing the Macy's entrance.

As she eats, she writes introductions. Preparing the introduction is important because when approaching someone with a question, even something silly, Amy will always find a way to dance around the question for several minutes by just talking ceaselessly, sort of an all-talk-no-content, morning-radio-show babble, while the person of whom she is asking the favor just sits there awkwardly, waiting to get some glimpse of why it's necessary to have such a lengthy preamble for what is, finally, a pretty mundane question like, "Can I borrow an egg?"

Half-full on what sure tastes like MSG, Amy jots down a final list:

Walk into Macy's.

Find the perfume lady.

Get her to jump up and down.

Amy pulls out a Nydia Neubauer flyer a final time, cataloging the details. Her smile shows a little too much gum. Broad nose. Brown eyes. Bottle-blonde hair, but an expensive bottle. Wrinkled. And those fat, pinchable, dimpled, prone-to-bouncing cheeks.

But none of the perfume ladies matches the description. They are younger. Sallow-faced with long-toothed smiles and sorority-girl-blue eyes. Amy is just going to customer service, to ask if Ms. Neubauer will be working today, when in her peripheral vision . . .

There!

Behind the fine jewelry counter! Wearing a floppy hat!

Ms. Nydia. Neubauer.

She is recognizable, but looks older and less sophisticated than she did in Birmingham magazine, owing partly to the fact that she is standing behind the fine jewelry counter at the Hoover, Alabama Macy's. From ten yards away, her cheeks look bouncy, but as Amy gets closer, the cheeks look increasingly—well—saggy. Perhaps they will not bounce so much as jiggle. Maybe, Amy thinks, it's best just to let Nydia Neubauer be. But even as she worries, Amy walks closer and closer until only a case of sapphire necklaces stands between them.

"Ms. Neubauer, I presume," Amy says, her stomach disproportionately butterfly-ey.

"May I help you, dear?"

"My name is Amy Krouse Rosenthal. I'm from Chicago. I read the article."

"Amy Krouse Rosenthal?"

"Yeah," Amy said. "So I know this is going to sound crazy. God, it will actually sound really crazy, but hear me out. What happened is that when I read the article—well, look," she says, pulling out the story. "It looked like bouncing cheeks. I read bouncing cheeks. And then Charise Mericle Harper, who is a friend of mine," and Amy realizes that the rambling nervousness is unavoidable. The emphasis with which Nydia said Amy's name, as if having found a long lost kindred-Jew spirit, has unnerved her, and when unnerved . . . "Charise had to come here for a conference so I came with her because I'd read this article and wanted to see you. Just because, like, it's an adventure, and also I'm a writer and I thought it would be funny if I tracked you down and got a good look to see whether your cheeks actually bounce, wait, that sounds condescending, but not at all, I've bounced checks, whatever, I just—wanted—I just—thought it would be sweet."

"Amy Krouse from Hickory Point?"

"Yeah," Amy says, and then realizes: this woman explained to me that boys were no darn good in third grade, that Rod Homer didn't know what he was missing. Her third grade boyfriend: Rod Homer.

"Mrs. Gotchalk," Amy says. "Well, I'll be."

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They hugged awkwardly, separated by sapphires, before Mrs. Neubauer nee Gotchalk nee (as it turned out) Stein walked out from behind her square of jewelry cases and led Amy to a double-mirrored break room. To the people walking by, it was a mirror. To Amy and Mrs. Gotchalk, it was a window. Magic.

Amy heard the story while watching Macy's patrons walk by, and took a small thrill from their anonymity—feeling a little like she was interviewing Ms. Neubauer in a police interrogation room, except Nydia—“who knew Mrs. Gotchalk was a Nydia?” she thought—did all the talking.

Her second (“and final,” Nydia laughed) husband was a small-time Chicago scion of frozen foods with Southern roots, slightly older than herself but still handsome. He eventually retired (“quite early; too early, as it happened”) to Birmingham so as to be able to care for his nearly centenarian mother. Whereupon they lived well (“and well beyond our means”) for a number of years in a fine house in Mountain Brook (“the 1997 runner-up for Birmingham's Best Home,” Nydia noted with some nostalgia). And then with money short and her husband creeping toward a senility that has since worsened considerably, Nydia took control of the family finances, and found herself woeful at balancing such a complicated checkbook. Checks were bounced, and a story was written, although such a story would never have been written about one of Birmingham's old money (“that is,” Nydia said, “Christian”) families, and the scandal left Nydia disenchanted enough with Mountain Brook to leave (“besides, the house was too big for us”). Macy's was more to be out of the house than for the money, she insisted, and Mr. Neubauer's son now lived in Birmingham and helped her with financial matters.

All of this was of great interest to Amy, but she couldn't stop thinking about flipping through that issue of Birmingham magazine, wondering what part of her brain—if any—had recognized Mrs. Gotchalk. Even now, she could not create a mental portrait of Mrs. Gotchalk, third grade teacher, except to think she must have looked a lot like Nydia Neubauer, Birmingham Jew socialite, only less round and less wrinkly.

Ms. Neubauer finally asked about Amy, and Amy told her enough: married, Chicago, three kids, and writing.

"You write books?" Nydia asked.

"I've written three."

"Novels?"

"No. Nonfiction. Memoiry stuff."

"Oh. Oh," Nydia said. "Well. That's nice, too."

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Even as she exchanged email addresses and phone numbers with Mrs. Gotchalk, she imagined telling Jason. AmyKR speed-walked to the food court, pulled out her cell phone, and called Jason, because meeting Mrs. Gotchalk was one of those things that doesn't really happen until you tell someone about it.

"It was Mrs. freaking Gotchalk."

"Neubauer?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes!"

"No," said Jason.

"Yes!"

And even though it wasn't really that funny, Jason laughed and said, "Impossible things keep happening to you."



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