

What It's Like to Attend a Jewish Singles Dance on Christmas Eve

My parents met at the first annual Matzo Ball on Christmas Eve in 1987. Twenty-eight years later, I'm following in their footsteps.



By Hannah Orenstein



Getty

At 11 p.m. on Christmas Eve, when most people were stashing last-minute Christmas presents under the tree or spending time with their families, I was waiting in line outside a New York City club to meet my future husband. Or something like that. Let me explain.

Back in 1986, a Boston University senior named Andy Rudnick wound up at a gathering of young Jewish people on Christmas Eve at a local hotel. The night was going like a bad middle school dance: guys on one side of the room, girls on the other. The event was awkward, the conversation was stilted, and he was bored. So for Christmas Eve in 1987, Rudnick decided to throw a party at a Boston club called the Metro, where he was a bartender. This wouldn't be just any party. It would be the Matzo Ball, a night for single Jews to actually have fun on an otherwise uneventful evening, and maybe even meet someone cute in the process. He spread the word on local radio stations, handed out flyers, and news traveled fast throughout the close-knit Boston Jewish community. Two thousand people showed up, and the Matzo Ball was born.

One of those people was a 23-year-old software engineer named Audrey. While disco music blared in the background, she hung out with friends. She spotted a vaguely familiar face in the crowd looming a head above everyone else — a professor named Jack who taught computer science at her alma mater, UMass Amherst. She had never taken his class, but knew who he was.

She strode over to him. "Don't I know you?" she asked.

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He recognized her right away. He had always thought she was cute, and wondered why she was hanging out with her loser nerd circle of guy friends. The spark between them was instant, and she left that same circle of nerds behind to follow him to the bar. He bought her a drink, they sat down at a booth to talk, and at the end of the night, he drove her home and nervously asked for her number. Two years later, they got married, and four years after that, I was born.



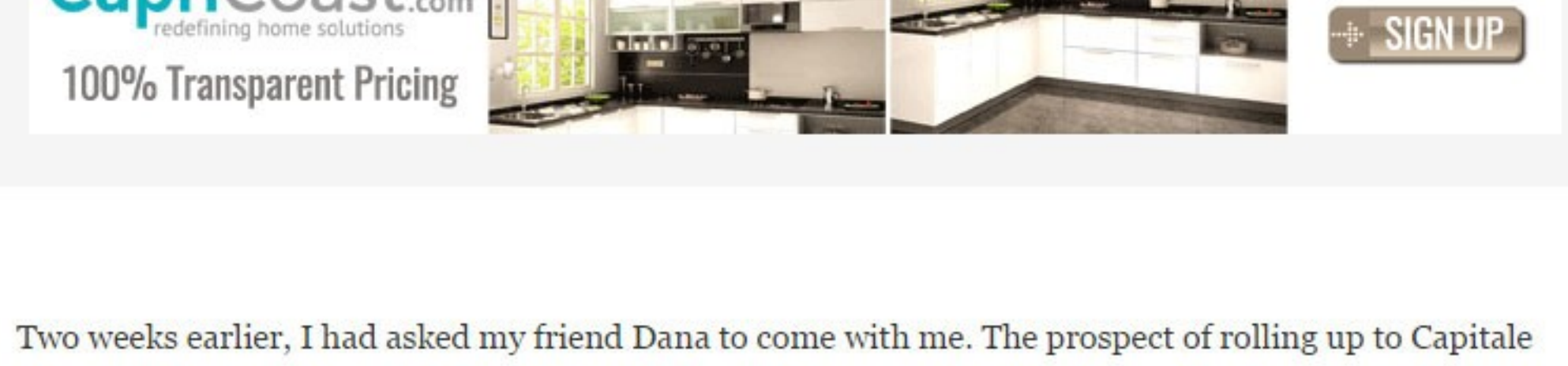
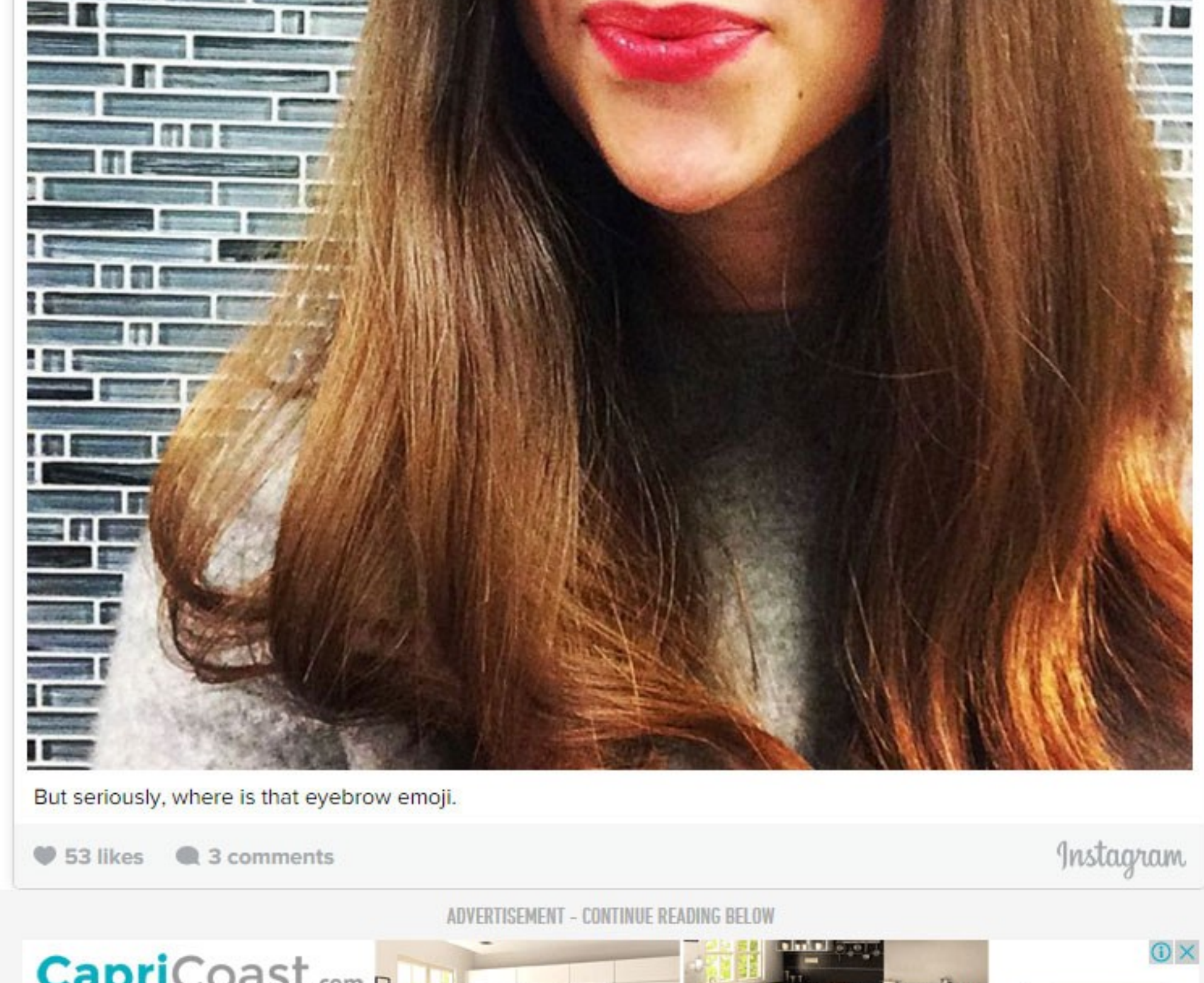
Courtesy of Hannah Orenstein

I never cared much for Cinderella when I was a kid, maybe because I knew of a real-life story about a beautiful blonde girl meeting the love of her life at a ball. Instead of an ice blue gown, my Cinderella wore a purple leopard print pantsuit; her pumpkin was a 1987 Toyota Celica; her prince owned a two-bedroom suburban apartment, not a castle.



In the 28 years since the Matzo Ball debuted in Boston, it's become an annual rite of passage for single Jews in their twenties and thirties. The parties now happen in more than a dozen cities, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Miami, and it's estimated that 25,000 people across the country attended this year's events. While there's no official tally of how many marriages the Matzo Ball has spawned, here's an adorable tidbit for you: Over the past few years, second generation attendees — the kids of couples who met at the Matzo Balls of the late '80s — have started to attend. I'm proud to join their ranks.

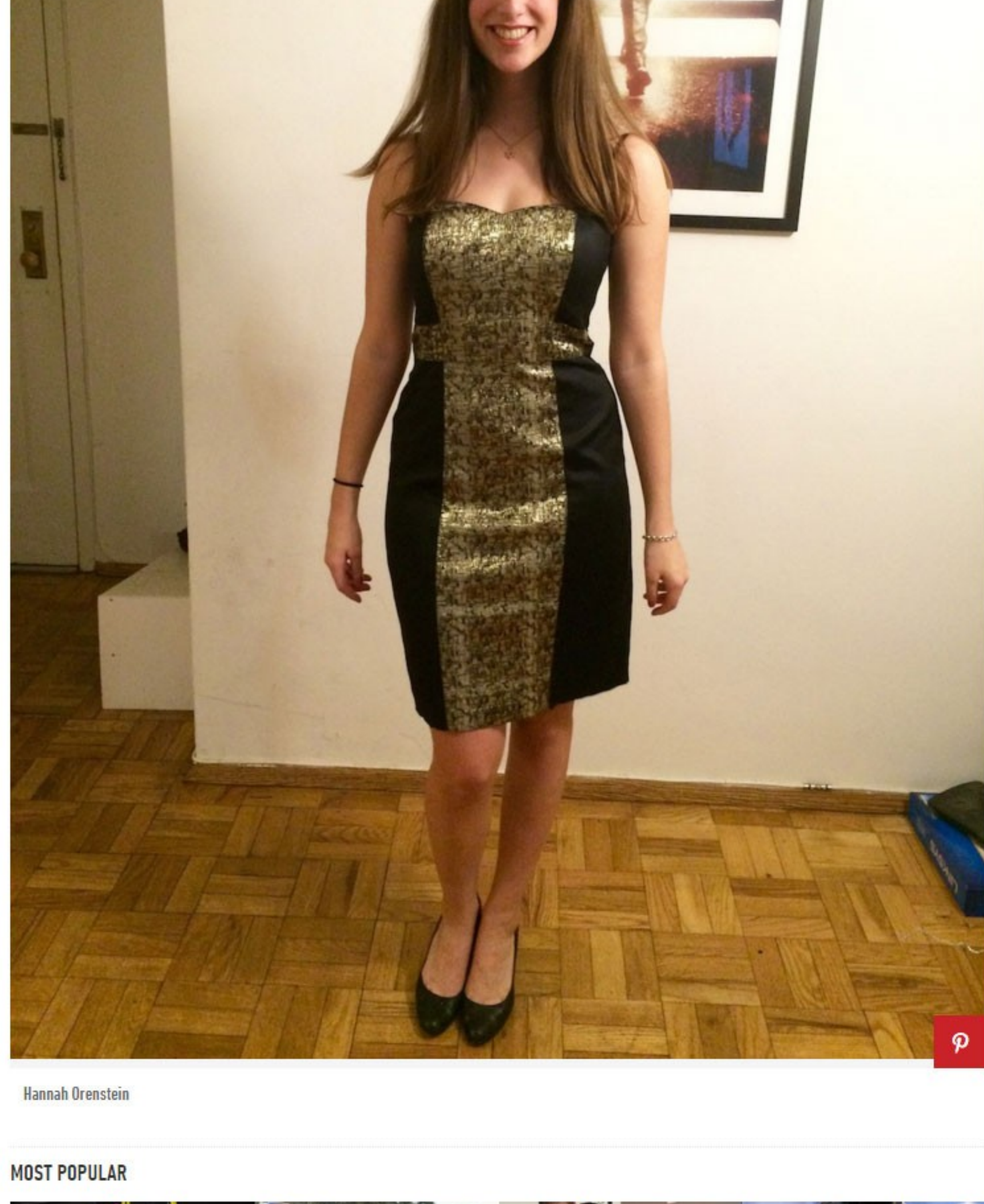
About me: I'm 22, single, live in Manhattan, and own an iPhone, but I've been on a dozen Tinder dates this year alone. I'm not looking to get married any time soon, but I'm not opposed to a relationship, either. Which brings me to this Christmas Eve, the night I followed in my parents' footsteps and attended my first Matzo Ball.



Two weeks earlier, I had asked my friend Dana to come with me. The prospect of rolling up to Capitale solo sounded terrifying, and I figured even if the night was a bust, we'd have each other. But a few hours before the dance, Dana texted with me bad news. She was dog-sitting for a legendary comedian, and the dog somehow ate an entire roll of toilet paper. A FedEx box, and a bunch of pretty macarons. The dog was wheezing and vomiting, and she couldn't leave him alone. She had to cancel. I laughed until the magnitude of her words hit me: I was going to the Matzo Ball by myself.

Stupid dog.

I zipped into a black and gold cocktail dress, downed two large glasses of wine, and hailed a cab to Capitale, this year's venue. The line to enter stretched halfway down the block. Every single girl there wore a black cocktail dress, black pumps, and had a long, dark blow-out and expertly-groomed eyebrows. I could have seamlessly pulled off a *Parent Trap*-style switcheroo with any of them. The guys' outfits varied from full suit to fashion-y gray sweats, but their unifying theme was that they were all a head shorter than I was. (I'm 5-foot-8, or 6 feet in heels. I'm aware that getting into Harvard is probably easier than finding a tall Jewish boyfriend, but I hate wearing flats.)

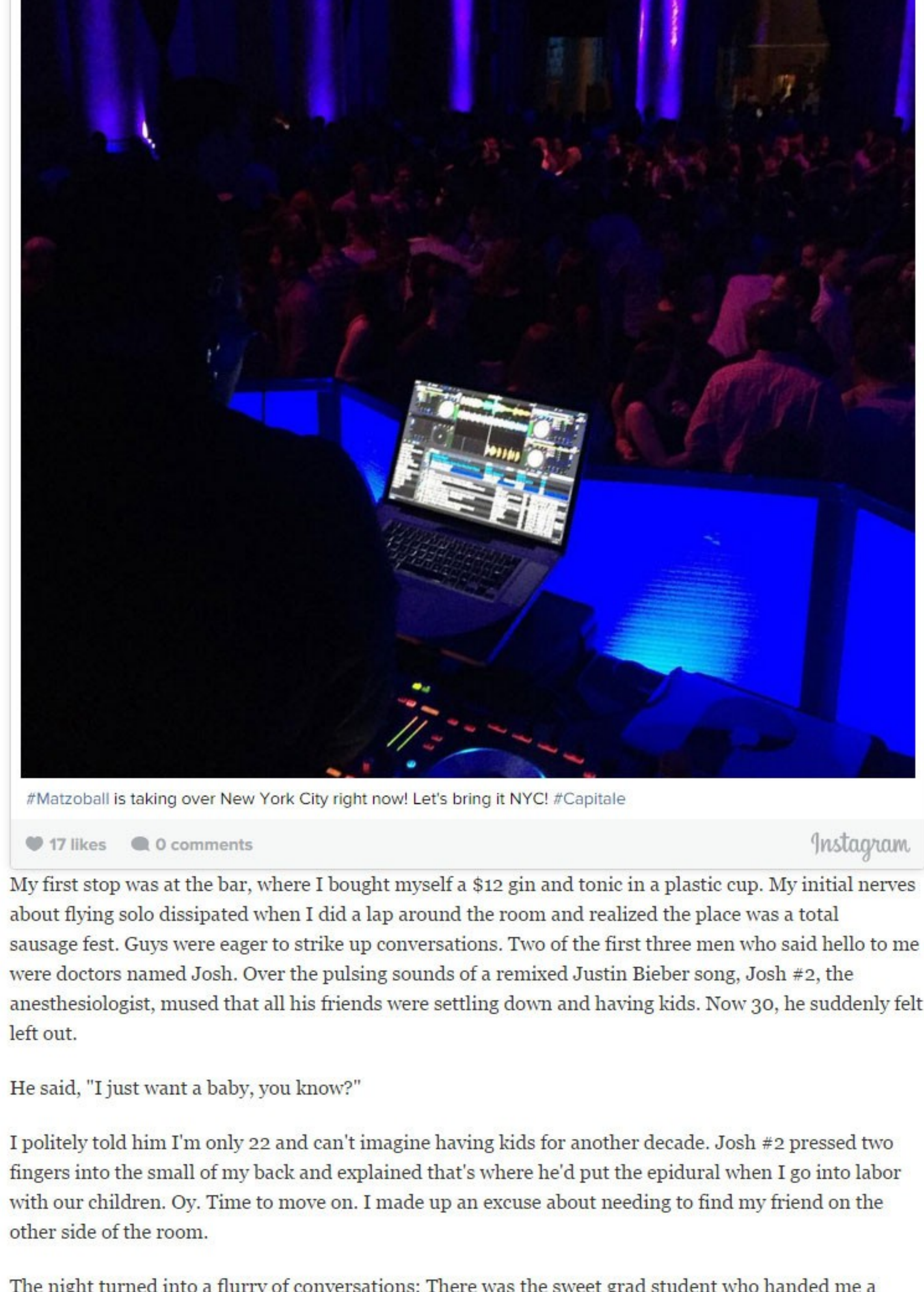


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When I got inside, I was impressed. Capitale is a 19th-century Beaux Arts bank that was converted into an ostentatious private ballroom in 2002. The main room was flanked by Corinthian columns and washed in blue and purple lights. In the center of it all, there was a DJ and a dance floor. Imagine a Bar Mitzvah at a tricked-out Gringotts exclusively populated with tipsy Millennials, and you get the picture.



My first stop was at the bar, where I bought myself a \$12 gin and tonic in a plastic cup. My initial nerves about flying solo dissipated when I did a lap around the room and realized the place was a total sausage fest. Guys were eager to strike up conversations. Two of the first three men who said hello to me were doctors named Josh. Over the pulsing sounds of a remixed Justin Bieber song, Josh #2, the anesthesiologist, mused that all his friends were settling down and having kids. Now 30, he suddenly felt left out.

He said, "I just want a baby, you know?"

I politely told him I'm only 22 and can't imagine having kids for another decade. Josh #2 pressed two fingers into the small of my back and explained that's where he'd put the epidural when I go into labor with our children. Oy. Time to move on. I made up an excuse about needing to find my friend on the other side of the room.

The night turned into a flurry of conversations: There was the sweet grad student who handed me a business card with the words "you're cute, call me" scrawled on the back; there was the leery Twitter who groped my ass instead of saying hello; there was my friend who runs the pitch-perfect parody Twitter account @JewBoyProblems. The energy in the room felt like Tinder IRL — everyone there was hoping to leave with a phone number or a one-night stand or a future spouse or whatever.

I was walking past the dance floor when I felt a hand on my elbow. I looked up and, oh, hi. He was just my type: 6-foot-4, dark-haired, wearing a gorgeous navy blazer. His square jaw made him look like a Disney prince. He introduced himself as Dave and we hit it off right away. When he made a crude joke about Justin Timberlake and Britney Spears, I actually cackled out loud. We danced for a few songs, and eventually, he suggested we get another drink outside.

As I retrieved my leather jacket from the coat check, there was a little nugget of good vibes in the pit of my stomach. I'm not some marriage-obsessed Charlotte York wannabe, but after two decades of hearing about the power of the Matzo Ball, it was hard not to wonder if this would be a night I'd want to remember forever.

Dave and I wound up at Rebelle, a cozy bar with exposed brick in Nolita. It was mostly empty. The bartender noticed our white Matzo Ball wristbands and told us he's Jewish too. Talking to Dave was easy. The conversation flowed smoothly from music to family to life in the city.

Eventually, we got into politics. Dave visibly squirmed when he explained he's conservative. In Manhattan, that's like copping to kicking puppies for fun. For as long as I can remember, my dad's one simple dating rule for me has been *no Republicans*. I told Dave politics aren't all that important to me. I think I did a bad job of lying.

Got it, I thought. *This isn't going to work out.* I was momentarily sad.

Maybe it's because I believe in the Matzo Ball's life-altering magic more than I believe in politics. Or maybe it's because I'd feel like a failure if I didn't come home from the dance with a sweet story to relay to my parents. Or maybe it's just the easy charm of his smile. For whatever reason, when he kissed me that night, I kissed back.

We didn't need any mistletoe — just the Matzo Ball.

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