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"What the He'll??"

by Alison Grambs

Like most Americans, I like to complain.

Whatever has irked me – be it a problem at work, a squabble with my parents, a politician's latest scandal, a friend's thoughtless remark, or just a spontaneous burst of exasperation with my life in general, I relish in the rant. Also like most Americans, when I'm having a bad day, I think it only fair to let everyone know it - a goal readily met thanks to the wonders of text messaging technology. Within seconds I am able to disseminate my missives of misery to anyone I deem worthy, invoking references to Satan's domain to get my point across effectively.

"WHO THE HELL DOES HE THINK HE IS?!"

"WELL, SHE CAN JUST GO TO HELL AS FAR AS I'M CONCERNED!"

"WHAT THE HELL DOES THAT MEAN?!"

Yes, it feels good to vent with the tip of my finger. Only trouble is, I have the new iPhone and it doesn't believe in Hell.

No matter how I attempt to manipulate my elitist 4G's virtual keyboard – be it by capping the letters, or placing them in quotation marks, or adding a space bar, or tucking them in parentheses – my iPhone simply will not allow me to write the word "Hell". Instead, without explanation, this Puritanical pest, for which I paid a great deal of money, routinely modifies the most important word in my lexicon of lividness to "He'll".



"WHY THE HELL WOULD YOU DO THAT?!?" I've inadvertently texted my husband when he uses our dishwasher to wash his socket wrenches.

"WHEN HELL FREEZES OVER!!!!!" my tirades to friends have belted when I'm asked to do something unpleasant like wear taffeta to a party or baby-sit their kids.

"I LOOK LIKE HELL!!!!!" I've spewed to my mother when my attempts at cutting my own hair result in me looking like Caligula's twin sister.

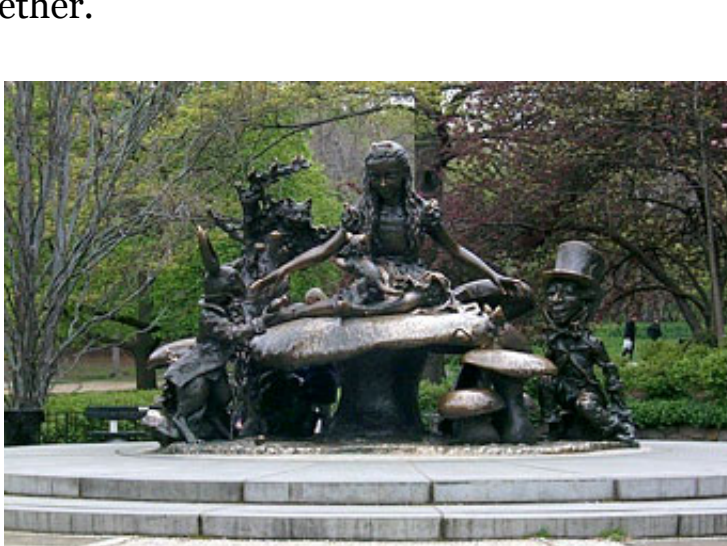
Once, I even sent a hapless friend searching high and low on iTunes for a song by AC/DC called, "Highway

To He'll".

Yes, it seems my 'smart' phone has no interest in acknowledging the existence of that most Southern region where the sin-ridden burn for eternity. I have been robbed of my Constitutional right to type one of my favorite expletives. Needless to say, it is frustrating as all he'll.

After weeks of trying to annihilate this loathsome punctuation mark that was haunting all my texts, I decided it was time to take action. No longer willing to be censored by a 4.8 ounce brick of bossiness, I made an appointment at the Apple Store in Manhattan. Come hell or high water, I was going to force one of those Genius dudes to perform a reverse exorcism. Put the devil back into my iPhone, so to speak. Or, if that could not be accomplished, I'd do my best Norma Rae impression - leaping onto the Genius bar, cardboard "SET ME FREE FROM THE APOSTROPHE!!!" sign held high over my head, and demand a less opinionated iPhone altogether.

"TRAFFIC IS HELL!!!" I texted my husband as I stormed off the downtown bus and began hoofing it through Central Park towards the Apple Store on Fifth Avenue.



"THIS STUPID PHONE CAN GO TO HELL!!!!!" I seethed, as I moved my way through the crowds on the pathway, through the Meadow, and the Boat House, past the Alice In Wonderland statue and the playground.

"DAMMIT ALL TO HELL!!!!!" I tapped and, quickening my pace as I wound my way around half-naked sun worshippers, map-wielding tourists, and the hot dog vendor who charges customers for napkins.

With every "Hell" I attempted to type... and every "He'll" my iPhone spit back...I got angrier and angrier.

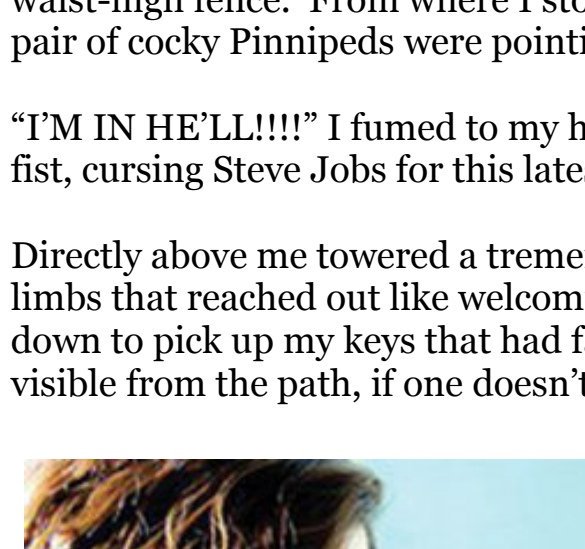
And then it happened.

Head bent down and eyes too consumed with texting rage to focus on the trail, I plowed smack into the wrought-iron fence of the Central Park Zoo.

"OUCH!" I texted my husband, rubbing my bruised knee as I steadied myself against the waist-high fence. From where I stood, I had a clear view of the sea lion exhibit where a pair of cocky Pinnipeds were pointing and laughing at me.

"I'M IN HELL!!!!!" I fumed to my husband as I glared up at the heavens, and shook my fist, cursing Steve Jobs for this latest injustice.

Directly above me towered a tremendous tree. Majestic, with lush, green leaves and thick limbs that reached out like welcoming arms. How had I never noticed it before? I bent down to pick up my keys that had fallen from my hand, and spotted something – barely visible from the path, if one doesn't, say, walk into the fence.

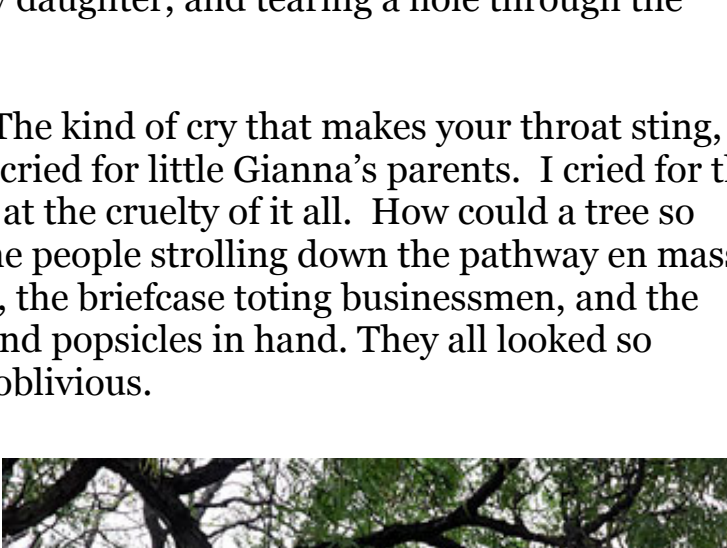


Propped up against the base of the tree was an 8 x 10 photograph sealed in a plastic sheath. The photo was of a beautiful young woman with wavy, brown hair, cradling a smiling baby over her bare shoulder. With her head turned to the right, tilted just slightly downward, she was nuzzling the tip of her nose just shy of the baby's cheek, and I was instantly struck by her smile. So spontaneous and organic that, for a moment, I envied the sheer contentment with life that woman was feeling at that very moment. Her joy simply could not be concealed and she wanted the world to know it. The baby's face caught my eye next. The toothless smile so wide and her eyes looking right at the camera as if she was ready to take on the world, one tiny giggle at a time.

I must have read the handwritten note tacked to the upper right corner of the photo a dozen times, mouthing the words with quivering lips because they suddenly felt like the most important words ever written. Next to the snapshot lay a bouquet of petite pink, white and yellow roses and two plush teddy bears that were showing their wear from being laid out in the open air since June 26th, 2010 – the day six month-old Gianna Ricciutti and her mother posed for a photograph – the day a limb broke off that majestic tree, robbing two young parents of their new baby daughter, and tearing a hole through the city's collective heart.

Perching myself on a nearby bench, I cried. The kind of cry that makes your throat sting, and your ears itch, and your tummy burn. I cried for little Gianna's parents. I cried for the woman she will never grow up to be. I cried at the cruelty of it all. How could a tree so beautiful take the life of a child? I studied the people strolling down the pathway en masse – the cooing couples, the chattering nannies, the briefcase toting businessmen, and the scrambling children giggling with balloons and popsicles in hand. They all looked so ridiculous to me suddenly. So unforgivably oblivious.

"Dammit, people. Look at that tree!" I pleaded with all of them telepathically. "Don't you see what happened here?"



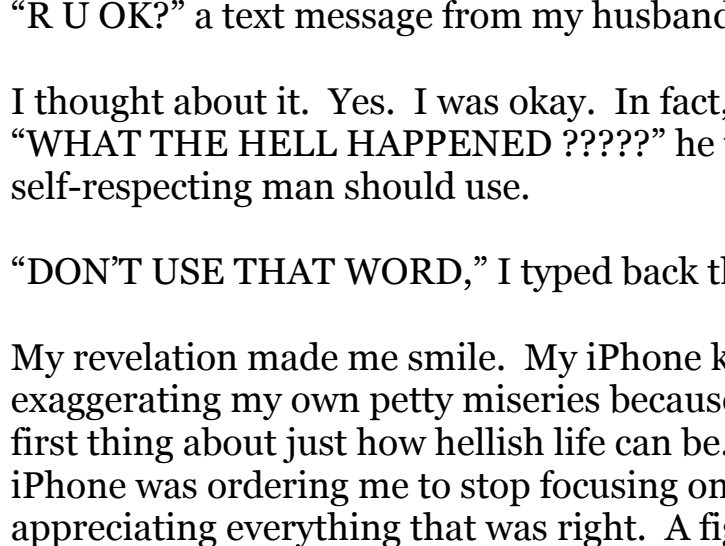
For some reason, I wanted, no, I needed everyone to see what I was seeing. Feel what I was feeling. But they didn't. The crowds just kept walking by that tree – locked in their own realities – just as I had been so many times before. As the crowds bustled past me, I kept staring at that tree. And as I did, something began to happen. I suddenly felt as though I was in on a big secret. Somehow fortunate to be noticing what no one else was.

"R U OK?" a text message from my husband glowed on my iPhone screen.

I thought about it. Yes. I was okay. In fact, I was better than okay. "WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED?????" he texted next with more question marks than any self-respecting man should use.

"DON'T USE THAT WORD." I typed back thoughtfully. "I LUV U."

My revelation made me smile. My iPhone knew something I didn't. It was time to stop exaggerating my own petty miseries because, compared to some people, I didn't know the first thing about just how hellish life can be. In its own, mysterious 4G network way, my iPhone was ordering me to stop focusing on everything that was wrong in my life, and start appreciating everything that was right. A fight with my parents? I was lucky to have them around at all. A bad day at work? How fortunate I am to have a job. A friend did something stupid for the eighth time this week? Well, I'd done some colossally stupid things, too, and she kept me around.



As the orange hue of dusk rolled in over the Manhattan sky and the park cleared out to an eerie state of emptiness, I knelt down in front of that tree and whispered a silent prayer for the Ricciutti family. I vowed to focus on the blessings in my life. Look for the proverbial apostrophe, so to speak.

Since that day, I visit that tree a few times a week. I cry every time. Funny how it can feel so good to feel so sad sometimes. The photograph and note are both still there, just as obscured by the fence as they were before. So are the

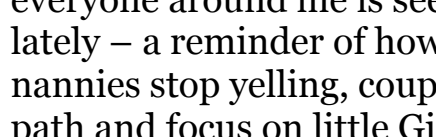
petite pink, white and yellow roses, and the two teddy bears.

But I noticed one thing has changed.

Maybe something has shifted in the universe. Or perhaps I'm just seeing the world a bit differently. But I swear each time I sit at that bench and look at that tree, it seems everyone around me is seeing that tree, too. It's as though that tree is drawing people to it lately – a reminder of how our lives can change in an instant. Children stop running, nannies stop yelling, couples stop chatting. They all take a moment to step off the beaten path and focus on little Gianna's photo. Sometimes the people cry. Sometimes they hug. Sometimes they just shake their heads and walk away. But they all notice that tree, and look just a little bit different when they walk away from it. And man, that makes me really happy.

As for my iPhone, I never went to the Genius Bar at Apple that day. Turns out my 4.8 ounce brick of bossiness is the best thing that's happened to me in a while. It made me appreciate life's apostrophes.

Alison is the author of *"The Man Translator: Your Essential Guide to Manland"* and *"The Smart Girl's Guide To Getting Even"*, a couple of children's joke books and works at the *Friars Club in New York City*.



Comments

#2 **Max King** 2010-09-03 08:26
Opss; deus ex machina...the god in this machine made me type wrong. Wrongly?

#1 **Max King** 2010-09-03 08:21
You're kidding, right? All you have to do is punch the "He'll" in the little bubble and your "Hell" will break loose. You were kidding, right? Deux es machina at least!

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Search One for the Table...

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Happy Thanksgiving!

Duckhorn Merlot
Veuve Clicquot Pink Champagne

Caviar Pie & Salted Crackers
Assorted French Cheeses & Sliced Apples

Perfect Roast Turkey
Smokey Sweet Potato Souffle
Mashed Potatoes
Green Beans with Almonds
Brussels Sprouts with Bacon
Corn Bread Stuffing
French Meat Stuffing
Apricot Jello Mold
POM Cranberry Sauce
Old Fashioned Cranberry Sauce

Pumpkin Pie
Deep Dish Apple Pie
Cherry Pie
Gingersnaps

Brandy & Coffee

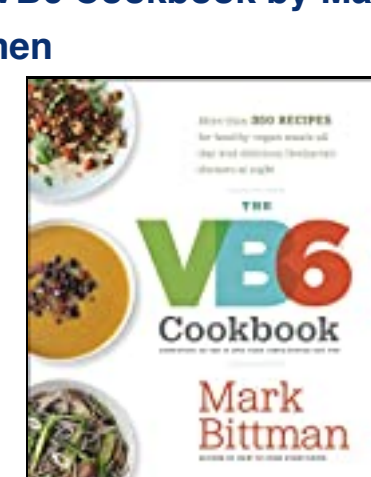
Senator Biden's Favorite Oatmeal Raisin Cookies

- 1 cup shortening or butter
- 1 cup firmly packed brown sugar
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 2 eggs
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup baking powder
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 3 cups old fashioned oats
- 1 cup raisins
- nuts (optional)

Read recipe...

Favorite Things

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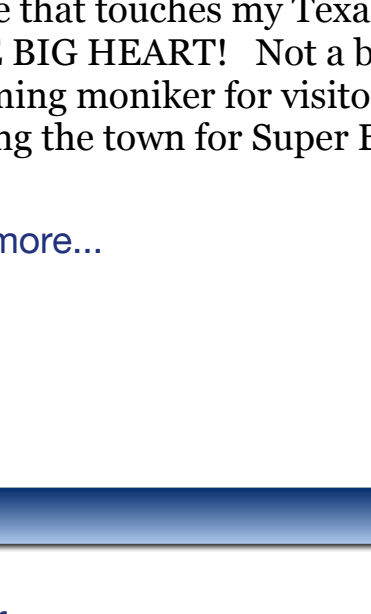
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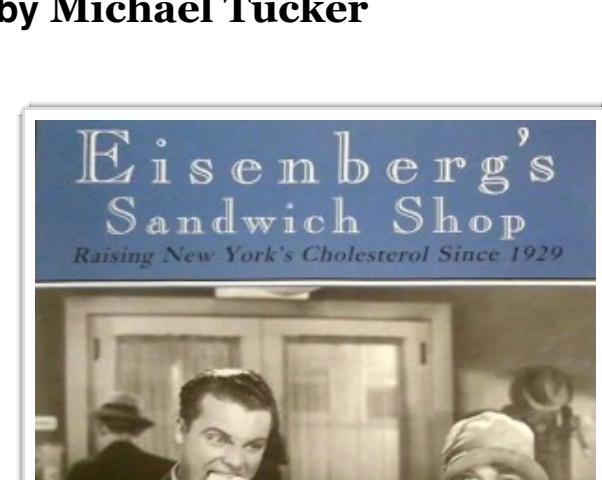
POM Cocktail Recipes.



Restaurant News

Reuben, Reuben, I've Been Thinking

New York
by Michael Tucker



"Have you ever been to Eisenberg's?" This question from my daughter, Alison. "Shannon and I went after the gym the other day," she says. "Best Reuben I've had in a long time. You should check it..."

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Beehive Restaurant

Texas
by David Latt



If you're in Texas, you'll be tossing your fears about high cholesterol levels out the car window. This is cattle country, after all, and nothing is as good as a steak cooked on a hot-as-hell...

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Hidden Treasures at Tacos Por Favor

Los Angeles
by David Latt



Driving on the freeway, looking at the streets and neighborhoods below, I often wonder what fabulous restaurants I'm missing. Tacos Por Favor is one of those places that I had heard about for...

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Super Dining in H-Town during Super Bowl

Texas
by Nancy Ellison



Houston, it seems, has many nicknames as it does oil wells, but the one that touches my Texas DNA is THE BIG HEART! Not a bad welcoming moniker for visitors invading the town for Super Bowl ...

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- St. Felix Bar
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