

10 WAYS TO MAKE YOUR TINY PLACE FEEL HUGE

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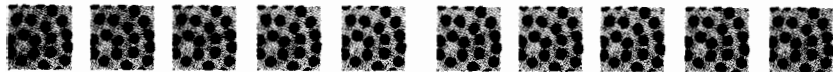
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WHILE
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YOU CAN
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AFFORD**

**MANDY
MOORE**

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AND
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WE FIND
THE BEST
ONLINE
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SITES**




My soul mate barely knows my name. By Liza Monroy

I'm a memoir junkie. I've devoured every chronicle of difficult childhood: *Running With Scissors*, *The Glass Castle*, *Jesus Land*, even *A Million Little Pieces*, before it scooted over to fiction shelves. I love having a window into different lives and the traumatic events that made the authors who they became. I drooled all over the phone when James Frey read to me from a chapter he was working on (he'd called for my boss, who happened to be out at lunch). And don't get me started on the time Dave Eggers cut my hair at a reading-slash-happening at Bergamot Station in Santa Monica.

But from all of my literary flings, one true love emerged. He kept me occupied for an entire day on a European vacation, a day I ecstatically spent with his dysfunctional family rather than my own. After hours holed up with Nick Flynn's *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, a poetic account of his father's homelessness, I felt like I had entered into a very serious relationship—one that was entirely one-sided, of course.

Maybe it was the way Nick evoked my own memories. My father had been homeless and struggled with alcoholism, too. "If I went to the drowning man, the drowning man would pull me under," Nick wrote. I, too, had resisted trying to save a troubled parent. "You seem like a regular guy, how'd you end up here?" "Where?" my father asks. "My father didn't know either. I was aware of things about Nick that took years to come out in real relationships. And with every page I turned, there were more similarities: I'd spent many nights during college within the walls of the Boston bars where Nick drank. We'd both experimented with illicit substances and concealed a sense of loss beneath bravado. Did I mention that he grew up in Boston and lived in Rome, and I grew up in Rome and lived in Boston? As far as I was concerned, we were soul mates, kept apart only by the fact that we'd never met.

When I found out that Nick was teaching a one-night seminar at a university near my apartment in downtown Manhattan, I immediately signed 

back stories

▶ up. The black-and-white photo on his book jacket had hidden the intense blue of his eyes, the rich texture of his slightly wavy hair. It was instant-breakfast love; after all, I already knew everything about the guy.

"We have such a short time together," he addressed the class. "There's an urgency in the room, can you feel it?"

I could. I had bees in my stomach. Instead of concentrating on the lecture, I fantasized about the two of us overcoming our similarly dysfunctional backgrounds, moving into a country house with a white picket fence and producing 2.4 mini poet laureates. One of the few moments in society when you have complete license to stare is when someone is teaching. I'd gone Flynn-sane (sorry).

At the end of the night, after we had critiqued one another's work, I slid my paperback across the table for Nick to sign. He smiled and wrote, "Your words shine." He'd noticed the story I handed in!

The following Sunday I was waiting in line at a Greenwich Village copy shop with my mentor Susan, who has published two memoirs, with a third on the way. "What do you know about Nick Flynn?" I asked.

"I met him at a reading," she said. "He's cute, right?"

"It's ridiculous. I'm obsessed." Since the class, I had logged countless hours online, reading every interview, every review of *Another Bullshit Night* and his two poetry books before that. I'd even e-mailed Nick a casual note and spent days compulsively checking for a reply. (He got back to me three months later: "Thanks, and best of luck!")

"Watch out," Susan warned. "A memoir is like posing for the camera. You tell the story in a way that benefits you. It's a false sense of intimacy."

I started to wonder whether Nick's in-person lady-killer-poet persona was as much a creation as the memoir itself, something he'd edited to create the perfect flawed self whom the ladies would vie for. Had he done certain things—like living on a boat, working at a homeless shelter, smoking crack at a South End party—fully aware of their potential as material? He did say that writing should be distilled to its essence. Maybe

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Still, I carried his book with me everywhere I went. In moments of self-doubt, I'd glance at his inscription and my confidence would reboot. *Your words shine.*

Then one day I got together with Anna, a girl from the seminar. She mentioned that she'd gotten him to sign her paperback, too. "What did he write?" I asked.

"'Your words shine' or something like that," she said.

"Oh, really?" I replied. I tried to sound casual, but my illusion of personal connection was quickly fading. I had entered Nick's mind, his family, his relationships. I remembered the details of his childhood. He didn't know anything about me—he was a dedication player.

I can vividly remember the main lesson Nick taught us in the seminar: The success of your work rides on exposing your humiliating secrets in all their ugly detail. I hope he doesn't mind that I took his advice. ♦

Liza Monroy is a researcher at Jane. Her stories have appeared in *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek* and *The Village Voice*. Her first novel, *Mexican High*, will be out next year. And she's still Flynn's No. 1 fan.