

exploration

[Jackie O's Dress](#)

[Ruby Gets an Exam](#)

[Imaginary Voices](#)

[Sitting on the Front Porch at the Farm](#)

[Zine Home](#)

Imaginary Voices

by Lockie Hunter

I hear imaginary voices of real people. The people—my parents for instance, or that smarmy woman at the Registry of Motor Vehicles, or my first college roommate, or Hal Linden as Captain Barney Miller—are real, and I have had actual conversations with them. Okay, so I have never actually spoken to Hal Linden. What makes the conversations imaginary is that the people I am talking to are not, strictly speaking, in the room at the moment. They may be, for example, in the other room, or in another country, or possibly dead.

One night—a Tuesday night while I was home from college for Christmas break—I came downstairs to grab a snack. It was early in the morning, two-ish, and there was a vigorous conversation going on in our living room. It was my father. He was "monologuizing" to the board of directors of his company—something about profit, something about new equipment, something about real growth. He was making an impressive point as both hands were soaring in the air, fingers spread. I cleared my throat and he put his arms down.

Dad said, "Well hello, Baby."

"Who ya talking to, Dad?" I asked.

"The board of directors, Baby."

Concerned, I asked him gingerly, "Do you see the board of directors here in this living room?"

Equally worried, he answered, "No, do *you*?"

And so we established a family pattern of talking to real people—Barney Miller being the sole exception—in imaginary situations.

The conversations I have are constant. When I am not engaged in real exchanges, I am engaged in imaginary ones. Like many people, I relive past conversations. I can change the outcome so that the smarmy Registry of Motor Vehicles woman sees my point and renews my registration regardless of my outstanding parking tickets. After all, in my imagination, she agrees with me.

"I did make an effort to put money in the meters, but on that particular day I just happened to be out of change," I say. She understands. I continue. "And those meter maids; they can be quite vigilant, can't they?"

We share a laugh. She renews my registration and even waives the fee because I am the most pleasant person she has met all day. I really understand her, not like her boyfriend Mike, who can be a real asshole at times. I nod my head and place a loving hand on her shoulder.

"I've had my share of Mikes," I say. "We all have, sweetie. You're obviously too good for Mike. Best to break it off and find a man worthy of you. I say this as a friend."

I often replay conversations with my parents. Not the one with my father and the board of directors. That would simply be too confusing, as I would be imagining the replay of an imaginary conversation that my dad was having that was rooted in a real conversation with the board of directors. Just keeping up the dialogue with its various tense changes (he said, he had said, he would have said, he would have to have said) ... exhausting. No. Instead I choose a recent one: the crumb conversation. My mom had called me back into the kitchen after I made a sandwich.

"Baby," she said. "Why don't you come on over here so I can show you how to wipe crumbs up off a counter top?"

"Mom," I replied. "I believe I know how to wipe crumbs off the counter." I was 32.

"No," she said. "I don't believe you do."

I went to the counter where she had a sponge ready and patiently showed me that with a neat back-and-forth motion, the offensive crumbs could be removed. My comeback in the original conversation was, "Oh." Since then, however, in hypothetical exchanges, I have had many comebacks, some of them not involving expletives.

I do worry that these imaginary tête-à-têtes are not healthy. Recently I asked my friend, a licensed therapist, "Is this healthy? Is there some sort of psychosis going on here?" She simply said, "Psychosis can be defined so broadly." This was not very encouraging.

Oh, and Barney, you should really tell Detective Sergeant Fish to get a physical. He's looking a little pale.

A longtime resident of the American South and San Francisco, Lockie Hunter is currently an MFA student in Massachusetts. She received an EVVY award for her story, "Conversations Our Parents Aren't Having." Her fiction and essays can be found in the *Emerson Review*, *The Morning News*, and upcoming issues of *Southern Hum* and *Muscadine Lines: A Southern Journal*. She can be reached at lockie_hunter@emerson.edu.

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