

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

MINDY KALING

**PLEASE
LIKE ME**

(But Keep Away)

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LIKE ME**
(But Keep Away)

**NOTHING LIKE
I IMAGINED**
(Except for Sometimes)

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Happy Birthday, Little Mindy

When I was nine years old, my parents volunteered to throw my birthday party at our home. I was so nervous I wanted to die. Because my parents are from India, I instantly worried that we would accidentally mess up some important aspect of the quintessential American birthday party: hot dogs and hamburgers, balloons, an ice cream cake, a pointy birthday hat, and most importantly, a party favor bag. Party favor bags were the whole reason kids showed up to these things. Despite being filled with junk (packs of puffy stickers, a yo-yo, novelty pencil erasers, hard-as-rock Bazooka gum), party favor bags were cherished treasures for all. If your parents gave out a party favor bag filled with anything healthy or educational—like a little box of raisins or a ruler—you were *done*. I was also worried about my house. I loved it, of course, but was it *too* Indian? Other classmates' homes were decorated with framed paintings of mild New England-y things, like trees

with leaves changing colors along the Charles River. In our living room, we had large framed tapestries of buxom Indian women dancing in saris. You could see the crests of their breasts in the tiny sari tops they wore. As I looked around my home with the critical eye of an all-American fourth grader, it began to feel very sensual and ethnic. How would that go over?

I worried for weeks before the party—that it wouldn't be inherently American enough, that I would be mercilessly teased as a result, and that my fragile social standing among my fellow nine-year-olds would crumble. Let's face it, I was never popular, but I was friendly and chubby (therefore harmless), and that went a long way. I didn't sleep the night before. What was going to go wrong?

What happened was beyond my wildest nightmares. My mom returned from her trip to Stop & Shop without Kraft Singles—the centerpiece of any tasteful hamburger bar—having opted to buy the much more gourmet white cheese from the deli instead. This was unacceptable. Cheese, as I understood from other people's parties and repeated trips to McDonald's, absolutely had to be orange.

"Haven't you ever *seen* burgers in commercials?" I asked my mom incredulously. "They *always* have orange cheese!" I expected her to realize the grave error and immediately return to the grocery store to correct her mistake.

"No, they don't," my mom said. "And your father likes the Swiss cheese."

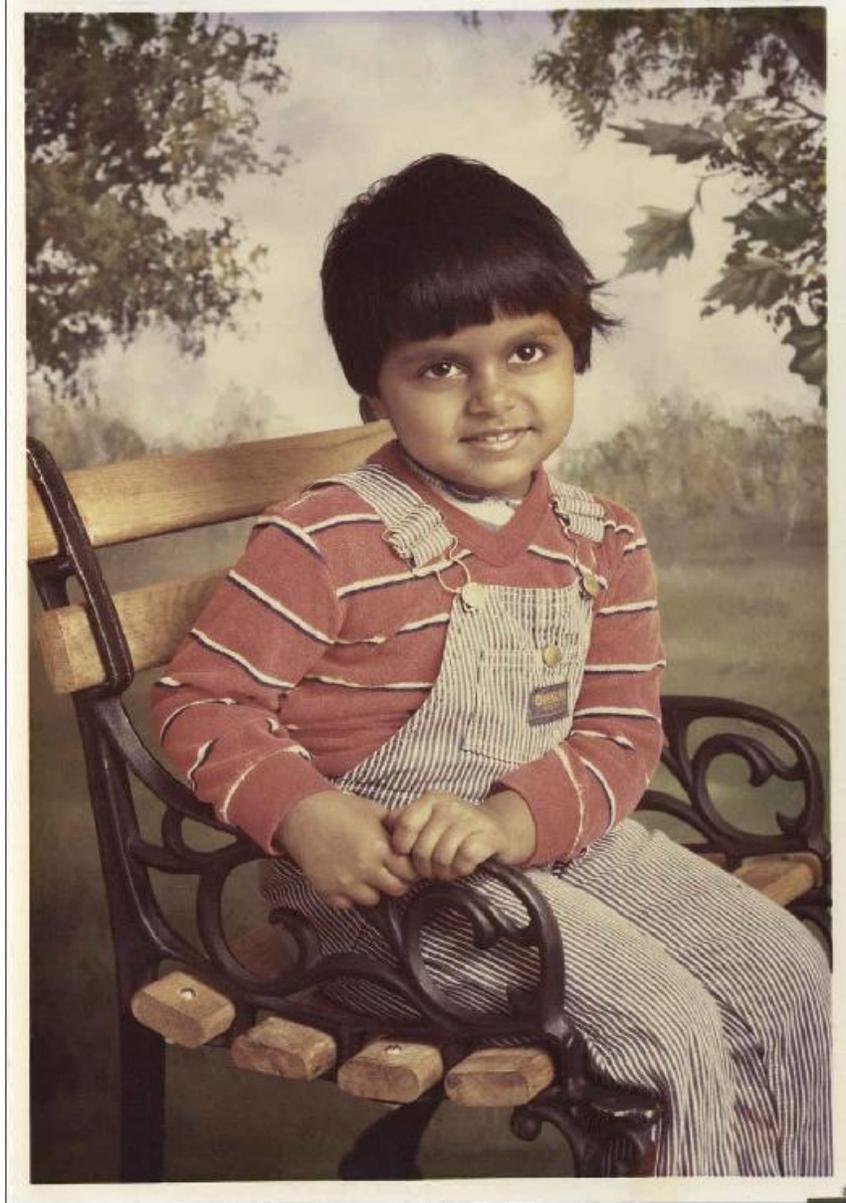
Tears filled my eyes, and my mom stared at me, dumbfounded. *Swiss cheese*? So now not only was it not orange, it was foreign cheese? This was the worst.

"Don't worry so much, Mindy. Cheese is cheese."

The phrase "cheese is cheese" was playing in a loop in my head as I retreated to my room, where I shut the door and cried. Cheese is *not* cheese. Orange cheese wrapped in cellophane is all-American, proud, and confident. White

cheese is cowardly and fraudulent. I contemplated sneaking out to the nearest grocery store, but I had no money and no idea how to get there. I paced my room, going down every path and permutation of a disastrous party, all of them ending with my social banishment *forever*. Would people go back to school and say how “immigrant-y” my house was and that it smelled like curry? Would people complain about being titillated by sexy tapestries? Would anyone come to a party I threw ever again?

In the end? Nobody cared what color the cheese was except me. Swiss cheese burgers were devoured without comment. Nobody noticed the scantily clad Indian women on our walls, or if they did, they enjoyed them privately. The Slip 'N Slide in the backyard was a hit all afternoon, and even though it utterly destroyed our lawn, my wonderful parents said nothing. The party was such a big success that nobody spoke of it even once at school. It was perfectly me: pleasant enough, and then receding from immediate concern.



I loved this hairstyle so much, I had it for fifteen consecutive years.

That party was more than thirty years ago, but my reaction was eerily typical of the kind of social anxiety that I would experience throughout the rest of my life. I *sincerely* believed that my social life was over forever because my mom put white cheese on the burgers instead of orange cheese. I also genuinely believed that my classmates' like or dislike of white cheese would determine their overall judgment of my total being. *Forever.*

Part of it is that I am pretty judgmental myself, and always have been. If I went to a party with food I didn't like, I would immediately sour on the whole experience and make a mental note to complain about it later to my parents. Sure, I was young and stupid then. But weirdly, this problem hasn't gone away as I've gotten older and smarter. I still battle social anxiety. Yes, me, Mindy Kaling, the girl who posts about twelve photos on her Instagram from a single Oscar party. Me, the woman who speaks about feminism and empowerment at conferences in front of thousands of people. Me, the actress whom random women on the street routinely ask to be their best friend.

For a socially anxious person, it is both flattering and disconcerting to be asked into the holy sacrament of best friendship by a total stranger. When I'm approached at an airport by a smiling thirtysomething woman who says she wishes I was her best friend, I hug her, take a selfie, and think to myself, *Oh, sweetie, you have no idea. I don't leave my house.*

There's a misconception that celebrities must love socializing, because all we ever see them do is get dressed up, go to fancy parties, and wait for people to take their picture. But you can be famous and still be shy, a plain old introvert, or even a person with social anxiety. I once read somewhere that what Chrissy Teigen and John Legend feel the most comfortable doing is "sitting on the sofa and watching Netflix." I felt seen. It proved to me that you can be funny, glamorous, and smart and still never want to leave your home. But then, a few months later, I saw them on Instagram hosting an elaborate Halloween bash with hundreds of attendees, and I felt so betrayed. "You lied to me!" I seethed. "I'm the only one who *really* loves to sit on the sofa watching Netflix!"

The truth is that, even now, I hate being invited to parties or, worse, asked to speak at an event or toast somebody. It's confusing, because I love, even crave, the

company of my friends and family. But if I don't know the people well or have control over the situation, I feel uncomfortable and tense.

I'm always so impressed by my friends who can just throw together a last-minute gathering. Once my best friend Jocelyn threw a kids' Halloween party for a group of a dozen or so people at her home in Brooklyn. The party started at 5:00 p.m. I was attending with my baby, and I said I would be over at 3:00 to help. "Oh, we won't be home until 4:00," she replied sunnily. "*You won't be there until 4:00?*" I exclaimed. Her plan, she said, was to arrive an hour before the party started, tidy up, decorate, order pizzas, and wait for guests. I almost fainted. Arrive at home an *hour* before you are expecting guests for a party? What about the twenty minutes of nervous pacing before people arrived? What about hanging decorations and then photographing them to make sure they seemed homespun and not too store-bought-looking? What about brainstorming conversation topics tailored to each guest to prevent awkward pauses? Catastrophizing is my general approach to all social events: how, when, and why it will implode are the first things I think about when I'm throwing a party. And that all takes time!

This same friend, Jocelyn, is absolutely unafraid to go to social gatherings with people she doesn't know. She just gets a glass of wine and strikes up a conversation with people about an article she read in the *Economist*. I don't even read articles! What's the *Economist*? And she doesn't fall back on being obsequious, like I do. I'm always complimenting someone's phone case or something in order to get them to like me. "Wow, that's such an unusual phone case. I bet it really protects your phone."



Lonely in LA

One of the last times I made the mistake of hanging out with strangers on purpose was in 2005. I had moved to Los Angeles and gotten hired on *The Office*. I didn't know anybody, and I was desperately lonely. The kind of lonely where I dreaded when the workday ended because I knew I had no family, no friends, and only syndicated *Seinfelds* to come home to. Sometimes I sat in my office late on a Friday night, surfing the internet until the late-shift cleaning crew arrived. Other times I would go alone to Canter's Deli to get dinner, where the waiters would refill my glass while asking, "Are we waiting for anyone?" before I shook my head pitifully and ordered my plate of corned beef.

I cried every night. Loneliness was crushing me. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and so I did something I had never done before and have not done since: I emailed a few acquaintances from college who I

knew were in LA, letting them know I was trying to make friends. I literally wrote the phrase “trying to make friends” in the email. We hadn’t exactly been friends in college, but these people were harmless and nice seeming, and out of the kindness of their hearts, they invited me to the opening of an art gallery in Culver City. As someone who does not understand visual art and actively tries to avoid situations where I have to talk about it, this was a challenge. I spent hours finding the best outfit for an “art gallery opening” (off-the-shoulder black sweater, dark jeans, leopard flats, obviously). I spent \$100 to get my hair blown out at a salon called Privé I read Gwyneth Paltrow had been to once. I read up on the artists online to seem smart. (“This reminds me of Ed Ruscha. Do you know him? *I definitely do.*”) And I walked into that gallery space confident and hopeful.

But after an hour or so, the experience of making small talk with acquaintances and strangers was too painful to bear. It became clear why we hadn’t actually been friends when we had the chance: I had *nothing* in common with them, except that we attended the same college. And somehow, even though we did nothing but stand around and chitchat, the experience was exhausting. Why is it that chatting with friends is energizing, but making small talk with acquaintances takes such monumental effort? And you know what’s even worse than engaging in small talk? Ending a conversation. I can’t bring myself to do the normal thing and say, “Well, cool talking to you, I’m going to go mingle now.” I’m so worried I will mortally offend someone with the mere suggestion that I think our conversation has come to its natural conclusion. So I end up engaging in these lengthy conversations where I just keep talking and talking—often not even aware of what I’m saying—until the person I’m talking to thinks I’m obsessed with them and excuses themselves. If you’re ever stuck talking to me at a party, please just do yourself a favor and walk away. I promise we’ll both be happy you did.

The problem was I didn't want just *anyone's* company. I wanted the company of funny, smart, like-minded people. That's when I realized something about myself: I would rather be lonely than bored.

Eventually, I did develop real friendships with the other *Office* writers, but they were all men. I was suddenly that *guy's girl* you see on bad TV shows from the '90s. And that's not me. I'm a person who feels most comfortable in the company of women. I wanted to have hours-long text conversations littered with emoticons (this was the 2000s) in which we dissected a social interaction. I wanted women to watch *Grey's Anatomy* with me. I wanted us all to go shopping at the Grove, hit the Cheesecake Factory for bucket-size salads, and then go to my place to watch *You've Got Mail*. I had dreams of conquering my social anxiety and being a part of an inseparable group of girlfriends in Los Angeles. We would have stylish Sunday brunches with free-flowing Bellinis and, when one of us got engaged, a bachelorette night spent cruising down Sunset screaming *woo-hoo* from the back of a long white limousine. We would help each other through breakups and be instrumental to setups, but men would never be as important to us as one another. If that all seems basic, it's because it is! It's a basic human right for women to have female friends.

Instead, I had B.J. He is my genuine best friend, and actually pretty in touch with his feminine side, but he would never do any of that stuff. B.J. doesn't have much social anxiety (I'll get into that later), and he'd rather die than ride in a white limo, but for some reason he's the person who gets me the most.

During those early years, B.J. would take me to Hollywood parties. Because of his roots in stand-up, these parties were often hosted by a moderately successful male comedian in his late thirties and populated with pretty girls ages eighteen to twenty-four, in a pretty transparent effort to get one or more of them to have sex with him. Not

exactly my comfort zone. At one of these parties, however, I discovered the Women. While drinking a vodka soda in a living room in the hills above Beachwood Canyon (where every male comedian lives for some reason), I heard the raucous sounds of women laughing somewhere on the patio. A group of women sharing a laugh? Was I imagining this?

I tracked the laughter to the firepit, where I met a stylish group of white female friends sharing a joint on a U-shaped outdoor sofa and cackling about a private joke. It was the most dynamic clique of young women I had seen in LA. They were all working actresses in their midtwenties (you would recognize some of them now), yet each had carved out an individual identity so that no two seemed alike. There was a stand-up comedian, a girl on a teen drama about vampires, another I recognized from her notable guest arc on a popular HBO drama, a professional entertainment news host who wanted to be a singer, and a girl who was aspiring to be a wellness expert slash celebrity chef. None of them were married. They were employed, they were well dressed and confident, and I wanted in.

“Can you guys keep it down, please? Some of us are being socially awkward inside,” I said, faux annoyed. It was a big, confident swing with total strangers, very unlike me. To my surprise, for some reason they laughed like I was Kevin Hart. They invited me to join them on the sofa, and I introduced myself. Though none of them had heard of *The Office* (it hadn’t aired yet), they were impressed I had a job as a television writer and, if I’m being honest, I think excited that I was Indian. I was different enough to not be in any of their lanes but the same enough to get along with.

My first invitation to hang with them was Sunday brunch at Cheebo, a place on Sunset whose crowd was composed almost entirely of other twentysomething working actresses out to brunch. I should have recognized the first warning sign when we ordered. There were no

Bellinis in sight. Everyone was drinking room-temperature flat water or green tea. Afternoon alcohol contained unnecessary calories that caused puffiness. The second was how we ordered food. I'm a big eater and decisive, so I started. I ordered a burger, medium, with fries on the side. It took, no exaggeration, twenty minutes for the other six girls to communicate a satisfactory level of detail to the waiter about their very picky individual brunch orders. I noticed that each one was waiting for the other to order so she could choose something even healthier and tinier than the previous person. Then the previous person would revise her order to compete with the healthiness and tininess of the new order. When brunch came, there we were: me with my delicious and greasy cheeseburger, and six girls with plates of grilled root vegetables. I felt huge and crass like the Kool-Aid Man, loudly breaking the unspoken food etiquette walls of this friend group. As much as I wanted to fit in, to be content with a healthy and punishing lunch, I just couldn't do it. Eating in an ascetic way at a Sunday brunch brings me no relaxation or pleasure, and isn't that what Sunday brunches with friends are for?

Besides the weird food stuff, the fantasy friendship I believed they had wasn't exactly real. I was surprised by how none of the women spoke truly candidly about anything. My barometer for making friends is that you can't get to know someone by hearing about everything they like—you need to hear about what they *don't* like. It's only when you are willing to go out on a limb by admitting you're not a fan of something that you're vulnerable enough to earn my trust. My suspicion was that they were worried their honest opinions would somehow be leaked by their friends and get them into trouble. All we talked about was new workouts and Hollywood romance gossip; I remember discussing Matthew Perry's love life a great deal, for some reason.

But because I was so lonely, I kept trying to just *make it work* with these girls, even if I didn't totally trust or understand them. We would go to the Hollywood Bowl to see Arcade Fire, or out to Katsu-ya, or to a comedy show, and somehow conversations never got easier for me. My mind would race nervously with questions: *What is she thinking about me? Does she secretly not like me? Does she think I don't like her? Does she not respect me? Does she know I don't respect her?* It was even more exhausting than the small talk with my college acquaintances. I needed female friendships, not just women to surround me to make me feel not alone. So I did what any self-respecting twentysomething does to get out of social situations: I kept saying I was too busy with work to hang out, or claimed I was sick, until they stopped inviting me out. I was Casper the Flaky Ghost. Months went by, and eventually I would see them at a party and we wouldn't even say hi to each other. It didn't bother me. So my second realization was that I would rather be lonely than be friends with non-friends. Losing friends is hard, but losing fake friends, as it turns out, is pretty damn easy.

Eventually, I did find those female friends in Los Angeles that I longed for. They aren't aspiring wellness experts or actresses who may or may not have been romantically interested in Matthew Perry. They're my TV writer friends Lang Fisher and Tracey Wigfield, who are wonderfully funny and normal comedy writers who don't order a small plate of steamed asparagus as dinner.



With real friends I don't smize; you get to see all my teeth.

Between Tracey, Lang, B.J., and a few other writers and actors I've met through work, I now have about seven great friends, which isn't a lot but is more than a sad Tennessee Williams character has. That, as it turns out, is good enough for me.



Let's Turn Forty Quietly

B .J. understands my social anxiety. He knows I crave company but don't like most people. Even though I appear to be the more easygoing of the two of us, the truth is, I'm just better at seeming cheerful than he is. And B.J. knows that I would definitely try to get away with not having a fortieth birthday party. And why didn't I want one? Well, like I just admitted, I have fewer than ten friends, so that was a deterrent. Also, the bar for a successful fortieth birthday had been set so high in my social group. For Reese Witherspoon's fortieth birthday party, she and her husband rented out a classy nightclub in Hollywood. It was packed to capacity with A-list movie stars who are legitimately her close friends—I couldn't walk two feet without bumping into Robert Downey Jr. or Jen Aniston. I didn't want to try to throw my version of that and have three people show up who weren't even *Avengers* or *Friends*.

I decided to sit out my fortieth entirely. My birthday plan was to Postmates expensive sushi, watch *Dateline*, and cap the night off by eating half of a birthday cake I ordered for myself. I thought it was a great birthday plan! But B.J. disagreed, calling it, and I'm quoting him here, "extremely sad."

That's why I agreed to let B.J. host my fortieth birthday celebration for me, with just my closest friends, at San Vicente Bungalows (a fancy members-only club where I am not a member). It turned out to be one of the best nights of my time in LA. It was such a relief celebrating with people I love and love talking to, being 100 percent myself because I knew nobody was there to judge me for not getting my makeup professionally done, or for eating three slices of birthday cake. There was no scary unknown factor and absolutely *no* small talk. It was perfect.



No Robert Downey Jr. but still fun.

Here's the catch. B.J. *also* turned forty that year, and unfortunately for me, his idea of a good birthday party is very different from mine. Like me, he has a small group of close friends, but unlike me, he also has an enormous stable of casual friends and acquaintances that he seems to be accumulating nonstop. They are authors and tech billionaires, stand-up comics, musicians, professional foodies, actors. To a normal person, that might sound fun and exciting; but knowing I had to go to a party with all these strangers, who all claimed to be friends with my very

best friend, made me ill. The party would be held at the Chateau Marmont, B.J.'s favorite place in LA, where he even lived once for a few months during a dramatic phase. The Chateau has an unmistakably masculine energy tinged with a melancholy Lana Del Rey vibe. It's a hard-lived place—glamorous, for sure—but I'm always aware that I don't exactly belong there.

But okay, fine, I thought, I'll leave my car running on Marmont Lane, say hi to two people, give B.J. a big hug, then head out before the tow truck has time to show up. This is my plan for most social events, and honestly, most of the time it works. But my plan was thwarted when B.J. asked me for two favors: (1) Could I be in charge of the birthday cakes, and (2) could I make a birthday toast?

Cakes, fine, it's clearly a passion of mine. But a *toast*? On some level, I think B.J. intuited my plan and thought that me being toastmaster would be a great opportunity for me to show some social courage. The cakes were to arrive at the beginning of the party, while the toasts were to take place at the end, which, if you do the math, means he was tricking me into being there for the entire party. You can't Irish Exit a party if you need to stay to give a toast at the very end of it. On the chessboard of life, B.J. is Kasparov and I'm . . . still me.

Since he's my very best friend, and this was his fortieth, and because we were both very aware that a month earlier he had been the hero of my own fortieth birthday, I, of course, could not say no. (A diabolical checkmate if I've ever seen one.) Saying no would've put a severe dent in our friendship, and anyone who heard the story would correctly take his side and cast me as the villain. But if there's one thing I've learned in this business, it's how to negotiate. So I said, "Fine, B.J., I'll come to your party, and I'll take care of the cakes, and I'll make a birthday toast, but I will need you to give me a plus-five, which includes my friend Tracey, her husband, my other friend Lang, and my two assistants." I

wanted to be surrounded by my allies, like the Kardashians whenever they attend an event. A group of people who would make it so I never needed to socialize, and we could take over a sofa and I could drink without ever having to speak to a new person: heaven. He agreed right away, and for once we didn't even have to get our lawyers involved.

People who know I have social anxiety like to say things like: "You may not want to go out, but you should just force yourself. You'll be glad you did!" That is a lie. I enter the party with my heart racing, scrambling to find the nearest bar, and ultimately wind up talking for hours to the teenage daughters of the host, who love *The Office*. After answering all the girls' questions about John Krasinski, I say I need to use the restroom, secretly exit through the back, and sprint to my car, never to be heard from again.

But first, I must acknowledge the grandeur of B.J.'s party. It was one of the most spectacular and elaborate parties I've ever been to. It made me think of Stefon from *SNL*: "*LA's hottest club is B.J. Novak's fortieth birthday party!*" It was held in the largest bungalow at the Chateau and spilled out into a huge outdoor area by the pool. He had two bars with specialty cocktails; THC gummies (not for me, but undeniably cool); prerolled joints (again, not for me, but cool); a magician (very for me, but maybe a better experience if you had a gummy or a joint); John Mayer singing a song that isn't even a John Mayer song; an astronomer who could show you the stars; Red Sox Hall of Famer Wade Boggs available to play catch; and even a special appearance by Eric Garcetti, the literal mayor of Los Angeles. We were like Roman emperors being entertained in every way imaginable; every time I turned my head, there was some new and exciting spectacle to behold. I honestly wouldn't have been surprised to see two men locked in gladiatorial combat for B.J.'s pleasure as he gave a thumbs-down and chose which one had to die. For everyone there, it was absolutely the best party they'd ever been to. For me, it

was a total stimulus overload as I tried to avoid every person I've ever met in the past sixteen years.

Finally, it was time for my toast. I'd spent months preparing a speech. I treated it like I was hosting the Academy Awards. The speech was riddled with killer jokes and Teflon observations about B.J. that I had tested on his friends, my assistants, and my writing staff. And man, did I practice. In the shower, in the car, to my trainer. I knew it so well—and I knew how to deliver it like I was coming up with it on the spot and just happened to be a brilliant off-the-cuff public-speaking genius. I knew that the only way to triumph over my crippling social anxiety was with hard work and preparation. It was my moment.



Moments before Wade Boggs commandeered my microphone.

But just as I was handed the microphone and started talking about B.J., a massively drunk Wade Boggs marched over, took the mic out of my hand, and began a toast himself. The crowd was thrilled—a former Red Sox Hall of Famer giving an impromptu speech? Wade’s enormous body barged in front of me, and he began talking . . . and didn’t stop. Every time I thought he was finished, he started on a new train of thought. Wade Boggs, who had met B.J. a mere three hours earlier, had taken the microphone from me, one of B.J.’s closest friends, and was now giving a very drunk, rambling, and sentimental speech—about B.J., sure, but

mostly about his own life. I could see that Wade had forgotten about my existence and I would not be getting the microphone back. So I slowly inched back into the crowd of guests. That's right, I was Kanye West'd by Wade Boggs. Was I surprised? Yes. Was it kind of aggro and slightly misogynist? Definitely. Was I mad? Hell no. In fact, Wade Boggs is my new favorite person because of it. He saved me from my toast with one perfect swing, which is the only baseball analogy I know. And because all of my best material is still unused, I can recycle that birthday speech for B.J.'s funeral. I edged my way out of the party just as John Mayer began to sing. His beautiful voice was the soundtrack of my escape. My car engine was still warm.

About The Author



Photo 2020 by Mike Rosenthal

Mindy Kaling is an actor, writer, producer, director, and the author of two *New York Times* bestselling memoirs. She is the creator and executive producer of the Netflix original series *Never Have I Ever*, which is based partly on her teen years. She also created and starred in *The Mindy Project* and the Amazon Original film *Late Night*. Previously, she was a writer, producer, director, and costar of the Emmy Award-winning sitcom *The Office*.