

Excerpt of *Camelot & Vine* by Petrea Burchard • [PetreaBurchard.com](http://PetreaBurchard.com)

The day before my fortieth birthday was my last day as Mrs. Gone. For nine years, every American who turned on a television set knew me as their wacky neighbor with the solution to their household cleaning problems. They're *Gone!* That's right! *Gone* cleans everything! Which it didn't. I bought it once (not that the *Gone!* company would ever give me a free bottle) and never bought it again. That didn't mean I wouldn't endorse it heartily on national television for a cut above union scale.

Being a product spokesperson was good work. I owned a sunny condo, with a balcony and all the latest appliances, in the fashionable Los Angeles suburb of Toluca Lake. I drove a relatively new BMW coupe. The cleaning lady came on Tuesdays. I ate take-out or in restaurants. I never cooked. I took yoga and occasionally showed up at acting class. I auditioned for and sometimes got parts in low-budget films.

I thought of it as a career until the day before my fortieth birthday on the set of my last *Gone!* commercial when the director shouted, as usual, "That's a wrap!"

As usual, I handed over the empty product bottle to the props guy, returned my earrings to the costume girl and, avoiding the craft services table, strode directly out the studio doors to my trailer. (If you do not pass the craft services table as quickly as possible you get stuck there eating M&Ms and you become a tubbo, and you will never work in Hollywood again.)

Bill, the director, followed me outside and stopped me at the door to my trailer. "Casey." He kicked the toe of his Nike into the asphalt and stared at his feet, like a kid who's afraid to tell his mom he got a bad report card. He cleared his throat. "This is our last spot. They're firing us."

"Wow. What'd you do?"

He squinted, making his three little hairs sprout from his forehead like lonely weeds. "*All* of us. The client's 're-thinking' the campaign."

My empty stomach flinched. "Can we talk to them?"

"They left already. Whaddaya gonna do, call 'em?"

Actors don't call clients. Actors call their agents, agents call casting directors, casting directors call producers and producers call clients. Or nobody calls anybody.

"I'll work for scale."

"It's not about money. They want to appeal to a new demographic." He rubbed his temples, unable to meet my eyes. "You gonna be all right?"

"Sure," I lied, the acid level building in my stomach inch by inch. "I've got irons in the fire."

"Yeah, irons," he grumbled as he slumped away. "That's what I feed my family on."

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I gripped the handrail that ran alongside the trailer's metal steps. I knew what it meant to re-think a campaign. I knew what a "new demographic" was. It was younger. I'd been lying about my age but it didn't matter anymore. Hollywood had discovered the truth and lost interest in me. Or maybe Hollywood had never been interested in the first place.

Inside the trailer my hands shook while I changed from Mrs. Gone's flowered, cotton blouse and pressed khakis into my long-sleeved t-shirt and jeans. Hoping to get away without talking to anyone I slung my giant, lime green purse/bag thing over my shoulder and stepped out into the Hollywood sun.

Someone called after me, "Happy birthday, Casey!"

I didn't respond. I was in a hurry to get lost.

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Blasting the air conditioner, I turned the BMW north on Highland Avenue. Traffic was heavy so I cut over on Fountain to take Vine Street to the freeway. Vine wasn't much better. Forced to wait at light after light, I gazed out of my tinted windows at billboards advertising Hollywood blockbusters to the trapped traffic. Windowless strip clubs, plunked between copy shops and laundromats, served as a backdrop for beggars who stepped out among the cars shaking their 7-11 cups half full of coins.

I inched the car uphill toward Hollywood Boulevard. Out-of-towners cruised the streets, hoping to spot a movie star. It amused my cynical side that among the tourists a girl--always a girl--teetered in tight pants and high heels, glancing from side to side to see who was seeing her. Girls like her paraded through Hollywood every day, hoping to be discovered.

I had not been prey on the streets of Hollywood. I'd been smart. Being born on Independence Day was significant to me only in that I depended on no one. I had my condo. I had savings and investments. But Hollywood was a business and my only current credit was Mrs. Gone. Soon that would be as valid as last year's box office flop. If nothing else came up I'd eventually have to get a real job. I didn't know how to do anything except act and I'd proven to be less than stellar at that. Could I make mortgage payments waiting tables? People would recognize me, and the thought of Mrs. Gone saying, "Would you like fresh ground pepper on that?" was too horrible to contemplate.

My nose tingled as the BMW finally burst onto the freeway. Would a normal person cry? I refused. Mike was returning from Mexico City that afternoon from the set of his reality show. He might stop by on his way home from the airport. A forty-year-old woman whose boyfriend thinks she's thirty-seven doesn't need puffy eyes.

I grabbed a tissue from the box on the console and blew my nose. Then I had a great idea: surprise Mike at the airport! Even if he couldn't get away that evening, we'd have a few minutes together. I hadn't seen him in a week. I'd just lost my job. I deserved a dose of comfort before he went home to his wife.