

2013

The Days Are Gods

Liz Stephens

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LIZ STEPHENS

The Days Are Gods

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Portions of “So Manifest It, Man” and “The Magic Trick”
first appeared as “Ten Years I’ll Never Get Back,” *Fourth
Genre* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 27–37. © 2010 by Liz Stephens.

“Utah Looked Like This to Me” first appeared in
South Dakota Review 43, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 27–38.
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Manufactured in the United States of America



Publication of this volume was assisted by a grant from
the Friends of the University of Nebraska Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Stephens, Liz, 1968–

The days are gods / Liz Stephens.

p. cm. — (American lives)

ISBN 978-0-8032-4354-5 (pbk.: alk. paper) 1. Stephens, Liz,

1968– 2. Community life—Utah—Wellsville. 3. Wellsville

(Utah)—Social life and customs. 4. Wellsville (Utah)—

Biography. 5. West (U.S.)—Social life and customs. I. Title.

F834.W45S74 2013

979.2'12—dc23 2012035999

Set in Minion by Laura Wellington.

No one expects the days to be gods.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

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PROLOGUE

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Our real estate agent, Brady, tells me he'll have a kid go by to water our lawn until we move up, since there is a month between when we bought the house in Utah and when we'll be moving in. I'm standing in the kitchen of our Los Angeles house listening to passing traffic, traditional Mexican polka music on car radios waa-waaing closer to us and then waa-waaing away, and I'm picturing a patchy lawn we've bought in the Rocky Mountains, where there is no traffic, no fence, no edge, which just peters out into a gravel road crossed by cows. "He's real dependable," Brady tells me. How much, I ask. "Free," he says.

I tell Christopher when I hang up the phone. "He says a kid will water the lawn. For free."

"Huh," Chris says.

The day we drive in, a snarling mess of dog hair and snack wrappers, four men stand in our front lawn. In Los Angeles before we left I'd spent a day haggling with movers on the phone long distance, unable to figure out why no major moving companies worked in Cache Valley, Utah, abutting Idaho and Wyoming. "They're here to help," Brady says on moving day. "Just friendly."

Christopher and I have no prepared facial expression for this. We must look as we feel: blank. "I called the bishop of the

local ward, and he put the date of your move into the church bulletin, and these gentlemen came to help,” Brady says. I have barely enough energy reserved for the translation this requires into my own language, where Episcopalian bishops preside over whole sections of states and one never meets them and one is never sure what they do. And wards are in hospitals. And the word *church* often makes people walk away. And “help,” from strangers? Forget about it, there was nearly no translation.

By the time these men are talking among themselves about how to get someone over with a pulley to raise our mattress into the tiny upstairs bedroom, as it will not fit up the narrow hundred-year-old staircase, talking about this as if it were fun, Christopher and I are just doing whatever they tell us to. It is not the last time we will feel like ineffectual children here. By the time they leave, the truck is only holding hot L.A. air, and we have been offered breakfast next door at our neighbor’s house. When that neighbor had come by to offer breakfast, we’d said conversationally, “Nice cat,” of the tabby winding around her ankles. “Ah, no,” she said, looking pointedly at the hole cut into the back door of our garage. “That’s your cat.”

“Is this weird?” I ask Christopher.

The men had looked out of the corner of their eyes at us, no doubt about it. What do they see? Here’s me: All direct eye contact and rambling sentences, conversation that veers toward the overly familiar. Secondhand boys’ clothes. (Stuff they can’t see: tattoos, a constant battle against hermeticism that borders on misanthropic, a mean interrupting streak.) Here’s Christopher: Visible tattoos. Jeans trod right out at the heel. Stained T-shirt perfect for moving day. Aggressive niceness. (What they can’t see: juvenile delinquency, innumerable bar fights, member of AA.) We know the open-handed generosity of these people must not be as simple as it seems. It must come

with the kind of judgments people always give other people, once they are at home at their own kitchen tables. But while they are standing there with us, it's welcoming, and calming. And it got our truck unloaded. A new Utah Mormon friend will in fact remind us in the near future that even Mormons can be mean behind your back, but Chris only snorts. "Being nice to our face is great." He won't be there to listen, he points out, the rest of the time.

Brady gave us a key to the house as he left.

We will never use the key once.

That evening standing in our own backyard, gaga at all the stars we haven't seen since childhood, I jump out of my skin when a horse across the road floats up to the fence in the blackness, scratching her side against the wire. "Holy mother of God," I snap, throwing my hands in front of myself in the dark. The ease and size and silence of her moving in the near-pitch dark reminds me of sharks in mile-deep water, bogeymen in children's books. And then there is the spit of a sole ATV crunching gravel as it passes, and then nothing. Our heartbeats.

1

LOS ANGELES

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HOT AIR

.....

I kept wondering when that tiny Mexican dog would show up. Perhaps it was too hot, even for him. One hundred and ten degrees, out in prime Southern California wildfire country under a crud-brown smoggy sky, was certainly the kind of weather the news anchors told you to stay out of unless absolutely necessary. But here we were, a crew of about eighty grown-ups all too dumb to quit a job that forced us to carry heavy equipment in the heat under the direction of yelling despots, for the ultimate higher purpose of selling Taco Bell food to apathetic gringos.

The set was on Melody Ranch, which I'd been told was built for Gene Autry's horse in the 1940s. Though I wanted this to be true, that Autry had built an actual Old West town for the horse to wander through, a sort of Marie Antoinette of animals, the only part of the story that turned out to be right was the connection to Autry. He had purchased the place after filming his movie *Tumbling Tumbleweeds* there in 1935, and then rented it out for filming to other companies. *Gunsmoke* was filmed there, along with many of John Wayne's movies, dozens of other lesser-known projects, and (after I'd been there) *Deadwood*. And now here we sat, the production crew for a Taco Bell commercial, and at the end of the experience we'd have a T-shirt to show for it that read "This town ain't big enough

for the all of us: Taco Bell.” A little magenta-and-orange bell logo sits haphazardly next to a brown bucking bronco on the back of the shirt.

My jobs on television commercial sets changed regularly, and I did craft service on this shoot, which means I was in charge of snacks. This job is just as grand as it sounds: lots of good perks (dog food and laundry detergent on Taco Bell’s tab when I went shopping) but decidedly “below the line.” In ten years, I never knew just what people in Los Angeles meant by this phrase — I think it may be a reference to the way names are displayed on movie posters — but I knew I was below it for sure. On the other hand, because most people who work “in the industry” are fairly sure that people who don’t talk loud enough can’t hear either, and so many people in Hollywood don’t eat anyway, I often loved my nearly invisible position, tucked behind a chip- and chocolate-laden table, which was behind, in this case, the false front of a circa 1850s post office.

Though I couldn’t find the sombrero-clad Chihuahua on the set (I pictured him in a director’s chair near a fan somewhere in the shade), I was drawn each day to the Western extras. Always separate from everyone else, surrounded by gear that is all their own and they supply for a price — huge sheepskin chaps, extra saddles, stiff reining ropes hanging coiled on trees and trailers — they glided at a remove from our sweaty, petty work-a-day reality. Add to this the fact that these men (almost always men) were tending to their horses at all times, exotic and threatening animals to nearly everyone else on the set. High girlish shrieks and giggles were heard regularly from this side of the “town” whenever anyone else, with their cell phones clamped to one ear, wandered unwittingly too near the back end of these dusty generic brown animals, their other hand thrown up in defense against a calmly grazing horse.

And this, it seemed to me, as a newcomer from Chicago, was the West.

It took a day to set up the main stunt. Men are fighting in the saloon, in predirtied reproduction clothes, over a card game. One man pushes another during a fight, with enough force to send him flying out of the front plate-glass window, where he lands in the hard pack of the street. Somehow this has something to do with tacos.

What most people who watch commercials or movies don't think about is that chances are if you are — if the camera is — in front of a building, that building has no insides. From Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* to *High Noon*, these warmly lit homes and well-lived-in towns are empty shells, each shell filled with scaffolding on which to hang lights meant to fill the space with a warm and inhabited glow. Grips and electricians crouch on the catwalks drinking Mountain Dew, waiting for their cues.

Not so this saloon. Over the past fifty years, art departments assigned to previous film and commercial projects had hung Mason jar chandeliers, meticulously faux-aged the mirrors, left smoky oil lamps on hardy old wooden tables. Surrounded by these props, our Western extras were set in place, with the stunt men and fight choreographers whispering from a low out-of-sight spot. If you squinted your eyes, it was pretty great. Not perfect, but effective.

Of course, I was barely allowed into the saloon, below the line as I was (only allowed in to bring the actors bottles of water between takes), and I was generally consigned to sneaking up behind the director and the clients (the Taco Bell advertising people) where they sat in their tent, attended by production assistants who moved fans ever nearer their above-the-line faces. As I stood holding trays of fruit smoothies, or tiny quiches, I could crane my neck around the script supervisor's

shoulder to watch the action, not as it actually happened in front of me ten yards away, but on the monitor. Here we all focused, twenty of us or so, leaning intently in to watch the flickering video screen, twelve or fourteen inches of perfect Old Western reproduction.

The Western extras were apparently worth every dime. So authentically grizzled, so slouchy and yet quick-draw-alert in their body language, they instantly brought to mind an entire body of work, often because they had themselves appeared in whatever Western in which you might imagine them. Sure, of course they brought to mind the real Old West too, where a man's saddle might be the most expensive single thing he ever owned, and he might never marry, due to lack of funds and, well, women. In addition, those historical cowboys were mostly transient (a word that in Los Angeles now means "homeless schizophrenic people that roam downtown"). But these modern Hollywood cowboys almost certainly lived in one place, and most likely it was one of three: Shadow Hills, Chatsworth, or Burbank itself, the only places within easy working distance of Los Angeles with horse property. Though in Burbank now you couldn't have your horse with you, naturally — this would be roughly equivalent in Angelenos minds' with having a jet plane, or a merry-go-round, the stuff of fantasies. No, horses are kept at the Burbank Equestrian Center; the smell of horse manure wafting in the air made one particular intersection near the freeway seem downright rural. I had cause to remember this often after moving away, then transient myself, in part because of the stark contrast between my later actual rural life and the former weekends I'd spent roaming horsey parts of the city, but not least because I myself owed (still owe) the Burbank Equestrian Center seventy dollars.

The hard-packed dirt in front of the saloon had been cov-

ered unobtrusively with what production art departments the world over know as Fuller's Earth, a dun-colored man-made mineral powder so light it catches the air at the slightest provocation. This creates magical billowing clouds of dust — in this case, creating the effect that the man thrown from the window has hit the ground seriously hard, hard enough to scatter the horses tied out front. But the horses were in fact pulled out of frame by trainers, since show horses are inevitably trained to stand still for anything, even their natural flight instinct duplicated on cue when required.

Similarly, no one was throwing an expensive, insured, and union-protected featured extra (that's the person himself, carefully not called an actor because then he has to be paid more) out any window. In one shot, the camera captures the well-worn hands of a man grabbing the coat of another, a close-up of dirty fingernails curling around the rough "home-spun" cloth. There is a jerk, one shake of a fight. In the next shot, the camera has moved much closer to the director's tent to reveal a medium-wide angle of the plate-glass window. Not too many takes can be done of such a setup, since the time-intensive replacing of plate glass in a large window frame is prohibitive. So for one take, I watch as stunt men pull, with measured force, the Western stunt extra (double pay for this one, with double specialties, Western and stunt — yes, "Western" distilled down to a payable skill) from inside the window by a rope, giving his body just the right jerk of surprise, just the right extra velocity of a real body throw. He leaps into the air to assist the movement, throwing himself with the trained grace of a ballet dancer into a jackknife, out of a glass window backward, into the deceptively soft-looking puff of Fuller's Earth on earth.

The second take I watch through the monitor, over the direc-

tor's shoulder. This is the true entertainment on a boring set, to jockey into viewing position, to watch a shot on the set, and then to see "how it works" on the monitor.

It works perfectly. I have no idea what it has to do with tacos, but it looks completely real, as Old West bar fights go. Or rather went. Supposedly, according to movies I have seen. I have been given a rare glimpse of history with dust, grunting, clanking spurs, and the smell of sweat, a sort of virtual reality blip of history. I marvel at how well we do what we do; how given hundreds of thousands of dollars, the manpower of about a hundred people, three or four weeks of preproduction, and a day in the desert in a well-constructed ghost town, and snacks, Hollywood can make thirty seconds of (revisionist, reductive) history happen again.

Some days, I remember as if it's a dream the days I worked on sets. Sometimes I even worked on sets within sets — Paramount, Warner Brothers, Universal. On the Universal lot, a trolley takes tourists on a trek through the sound stages, away from the themed rides and candy. I'm sure for a visitor it feels so, well, real, to be back away from the hubbub, watching extras in nurse costumes, zombie outfits, flapper dresses, spilling from the elephant doors of the stages out into the sunlight for lunch. Sometimes these tourists would point at me, sweaty and exhausted, hovering at the flashing red "cameras rolling" light outside a sound stage door as their trolley breezed by, and I'd find myself suddenly self-conscious, studiously attentive to performing my mundane job, as being viewed can make one do, for people who saw it as magical, one of the cogs of the movie system. Not an important cog, of course, or else why would I be carrying a twenty-pound bag of dripping ice and a tray of lattes?

...

Long hills of late-season hay roll away from me. I squint at this largess from under my shady canopy. I am surrounded by tables of food. Sun-hot food that I've been shooing flies off of for hours. Nobody should want this food. And yet, here I sit, just in case somebody can't find the protein bars or the chips. What a ridiculous business television commercial making is. Everyone is so serious on the job, you'd think it was brain surgery.

But we shoot in beautiful locations. This is a ranch in Malibu, the kind of place my cattle-raising relatives in Oklahoma might dream about. I've worked here on shoots intended to sell music, razors, medication, television shows. We have all been here, with a variety of film crews, over and over again. Apparently, this view sells a lot. The ranch manager comes by on his horse while I sit glaring at the traveling circus I came in with: camera vans, props trucks, "honey wagons" (semi-trucks full of toilets), tables and chairs, plus couches and fans and espresso machines. I know I got there with the mess, but I judge us. "It's lovely here," I tell him, about everything up there on the ranch besides us. "Oh, yes," he agrees. "And you should be here in the early evening, when the coyotes are howling while the wind picks up."

"Wow," I say. "There are coyotes out here?" I am encircled by miles of open range, light shade cover, the occasional clear stream, hundreds and thousands of field mice, and small perfect foods for coyotes. *Miles of open land.*

He looks at me like I'm a child. And maybe not a smart one. "Uh, yeah."

I am standing in a dim bar in Shadow Hills, California, and the owner is sitting on a bar stool looking away from me. This would be unremarkable except for one thing: I have just asked him a question. The half dozen locals who sit with him at the

bar go silent. He stares pointedly away. I look at the bartender. “Really?” I say out loud, to her, to him, to all of them. It’s the best I can muster.

Back at our table, I look at the three friends with whom I rode motorcycles out to this place. My boyfriend, Christopher, and I have been looking into renting a house out here, one of the last bastions of country within regular driving distance of Los Angeles. We drive through the area nearly every weekend gazing in something like disbelief at the trailers and log homes perched like an after-thought next to dusty paddocks and horse barns. We want in.

But apparently, even though rental agents and real estate agents are happy to talk, this guy isn’t having it. I’ve asked him for directions and it’s perfectly fitting, actually, that he won’t give them to me. Ripe for metaphor, he literally won’t tell me how to get around this place where he lives, how to get deeper in. He’s just going to ignore that the question is out there.

Sadly, it won’t matter that he, one individual, won’t help me, one individual. The city slickers are coming anyway. This is not the kind of place that Angelenos, hungry for something novel, won’t find, too inexpensive to ignore, too scenic to leave alone.

I wish he could see me for what I *feel* I am, someone who values what he’s trying to protect, someone who just wants to live quietly on her own little dusty horsy corner. Not build a huge show house, or try to change zoning when I realize belatedly I don’t like the smell of manure, or whatever his fears are. But the fact is, we’re both right. I can come out here if I want to, with or without his blessing. And he can dislike me for it, just on sight, on principle.

Nevertheless. It’s a little disheartening to know I’ve got city, don’t-know-what-I’m talking-about, and unwelcome written

all over me. He'll never know the irony of how hard I worked to get that city shine, relatively small-town girl that I was, and how happy I'd be now to give it up, how tired I am of carrying it. I try to simultaneously see myself from outside and inside my skin, from my hurry-up and pay-your-way-in paradigm to an alternate don't-hurry-but-don't-rest and pay-your-dues mind.

The road I was looking for, by the way, was the one on which the bar sat.

The blast of cold air that hits us as we enter this place that calls itself “the last honky-tonk in the San Fernando Valley,” distracts us for a second from noticing we have walked into the middle of the dance floor during a two-step lesson. The instructor, balding, heavy-set, but only thirty, pauses the music on the boom box set on the edge of the stage, which leaves the bar silent except for the shuffle of shoes. “Hiya,” he says, his finger hovering over the pause button. We are surrounded by old people, and they are all looking at us. The women wear frilly skirts that look as if they were made for dolls. The gentlemen hitch their slacks under their belt buckles, and the swinging begins again. We are obviously in the way, so we move back to the free buffet of meatballs and chicken wings.

Again, sensory overload, this time of dealing with lukewarm food on a bendy paper plate while trying to look as if we do this every happy hour, distracts us momentarily from looking out the propped-open back door where a few hardened gals smoke on the cement parking lot, milling about the handicap spot. Distantly, across the dimming evening tarmac, we hear and then see a mule, tied to a hitching post.

It's hard work, being country in Los Angeles.

But we're committed. We start to drive out there a lot; we

become familiar with the aloof rich Mexican woman of a certain age who wears boots that cost what most of us make in a week, familiar with the strangely optimistic dance instructor, and the man who comes alone to dance quickly and indiscriminately with young ladies. We can almost get out of the way, after a while, as we all two-step madly around the wooden floor. The night the mule's rider brings him in the back door for a drink by the buffet, we are there.

Other friends begin to wonder why in the world we drive out to the valley so often. They are playing pool in West Hollywood, but we are square dancing with people older than their parents.

But nobody out there ever asks us what we do, or how successfully we're doing it. They don't care who we know, or tell us who they know. Mostly, they grab our hands and make us dance, or refill our Mason jars with more iced tea and whiskey. There's a lot of nodding hello — not waving, nodding; I am reminded of a line from a memoir I've just read on ranch life: "I never saw a man raise his arms above his shoulders unless it was to ward off a blow."

As such, when other younger whippersnappers like ourselves show up, other couples in just the right snap-front shirts and down-at-the-heel boots, driving up on a kitsch-and-irony-hunt from Hollywood, we eye each other accordingly. I might pat the mule possessively, scratch its neck like I know what it likes. "We belong here," I realize I want to tell them. "Look at me talking to this old fogey. Look at me drinking my whiskey out of my Mason jar. Look at my man: yes, that's him, hanging out with the good old boys plugging chew on the back stoop."

Originally, I'd moved to Los Angeles for the same reason everyone does. I wanted excitement. I also wanted to officially join

the club of the other people who'd been too weird for high school, but not weird enough to drop out. All the personalities who were too awkward to be convenient or too eccentric or loud or bossy for anywhere else, the people in each of their families who'd seen too many movies and believed too many magazines, often at the high price of paying more attention to actual events. I'd always felt a little odd in the Midwest. It didn't seem to want me any more than I wanted it. But I fit right in, in California.

Still, years after that initial relief, immersed and immured in the isolated Nag Champa-incense-scented ocean-lulled island that is Los Angeles, I was out of touch. I'd stayed in the sun too long. There was a lot of life outside in the big wide world, which I was missing sitting in Thai restaurants, chatting at dog parks, and navigating dense traffic, caught up completely in Hollywood's mythology of itself as the center of the universe.

Los Angeles was a town where I'd heard waiters talk about their movie deals with Paramount, carpet shampooers brag about their auditions with Scorsese. Let me not mislead you — I loved it the whole time. I do love that California welcomes all comers, the odd and eccentric, the dreamers, from high schools, local colleges, and video-store jobs all over America. Nevertheless I felt like I was cheating. Living in a place where I could get away with anything. Pretend there were no seasons, and thus no time passing.

But now I wanted to be somewhere where what people did was what they did. I was tired of glib. I was tired of ironic. I was tired of feeling like life was going to start just as soon as I got an agent (when, in fact, I wasn't even searching for one, but I always felt like I should be). After all, we each only have so much time, and I don't mean that in the sense that trends and the personalities that attend them live and die, or we are only

hireable before a certain age, both very Los Angeles notions. I mean it in the big sense: humans die. We only have so much time.

I had lived ten whole years in California as if these were one year, on a loop. But I gradually began to disdain my most steady job, its patent unreality or disconnection with anything that mattered and the way it made me feel like Hollywood's version of the salty gal waitress who would age with admirable resignation, doling wisdom to others without making huge and wonderful decisions about herself: "Sit down, kid, you need a green tea, is what you need." Dilettante visits to the vaguely ruralish parts of the valley were just not going to cut it anymore. I ran my hands over my first gray hairs. I watched toddlers at parks with capable moms who looked like they knew a thing or two. I watched friends of mine take over whole companies, or drop out of acting to follow other more personal dreams, or become celebrities, or dog walkers, or cancer survivors. But the most vivid sign of time passing in my life was the aging of my dogs. Ten years of being twenty-four was enough. I wanted out.