

My Mother Has Agoraphobia

by Robert Gately

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CHAPTER ONE

The summer morning bustled with wake-up noises of a typical Brooklyn residential street. Cars honked in the distance. Birds, hidden in trees planted a long time ago, chirped eloquently in a continuous stream of bauds and bits, like they were sending Morse code messages. A police siren echoed from Flatbush Avenue, which was three blocks away. A mother's voice yelled in the distance. A breeze suddenly marched through street, rustling the leaves, then stopped as quickly as it started, leaving in its wake, a brief stillness.

The sun's rays ricocheted off parked cars, like lasers beams. A car passed by, a little bit fast for a neighborhood with children. A sparrow vaulted from a tree and landed onto a lawn for an early-bird special. A white butterfly breezed by and briefly gave chase to a small cone-like feather, which floated in the air, downward, like a parachute.

These sights and sounds were primarily ignored by a person who lived here. The mind blocked them out, processing more important data, like a baby crying, or the sound of a car crashing into a stop sign down the street. However, for someone like an agoraphobic, for example, that person would take notice of everything at once, the loud as well as the soft sounds; the bright sights as well as the barely visible. Perhaps one sight or sound would be amplified over the other, and a person like that would be scared of an oncoming car, or an overhead airplane. Or maybe that person might observe everything at once: those sights and sounds that have substance, as well as the insignificant. These sights and sounds could take on a very surreal, even a menacing, tone.



Debbie Hammel was at an age when she announced her birthday, not by how many years she has spent on this earth, but by the anniversary of her thirty-ninth birthday. She felt that she was getting old, so she celebrated her recent birthday as her thirteenth anniversary of her thirty-ninth birthday, which meant she was fifty-two years old if you add thirteen to thirty-nine. To her, it just sounded better than advertising her age. It didn't make her feel so old.

She lived in Brooklyn where a beauty parlor sign was prominently displayed on her front lawn and gave away what she did for a living. A *Hammel's Happy Beauty Parlor* sign dominated a manicured front lawn. People raved about the sign mainly because of its subtitle that said, *Where People Go To Curl Up and Dye*. Everyone who saw the sign had a comment, good or bad. It was either stupid or a great way to express what was going on inside. It was a good advertising tool, Debbie thought. It also made people look at the lawn, which was once a faultless masterpiece. The subtitle, however, was Harry's idea. He was married to Debbie and taught her how to run the business. But he passed away a long time ago.



“Okay. You can do this,” Debbie whispered to herself as she carefully stepped down the stoop while looking directly in front of her like a robot. She just said this. She didn't really believe she could do it. She heard an engine noise down the street, so she knew it was going to end up the way it usually did.. It had to be a car, she thought. She squinted and started to step forward. Of course, it was a car. What else would it be? It was going 45 about miles per hour; she surmised by the noise it was making. That was about 5 miles too fast in a neighborhood like this one. The car took a sharp right turn and the revved engine sounded more like a jet airplane to her. She kept her head straight. She wasn't going to let anyone know she was scared as hell to get the mail. Thirty steps forward and thirty steps back was what she counted the last time she

got the mail. Down the street, a car's front window shot an intense, blinding ray at her, and she had to balance herself on the porch pillar.

“Why, dear God. Why must I live this way,” she asked as if she was starting a philosophical conversation with someone near her. But no one was there to listen to her. She was alone.

Debbie shivered a bit, then cautiously stepped forward. “One,” she counted, and didn't stop until she got to four. She heard another car turning onto the street, and the sound of the engine became louder and louder until it whizzed by her like a streaking Batmobile. The sight of the passing car caused Debbie's vision to warp – a surreal image like special effects in a movie. She looked skyward to avoid falling down from this warped image, the exact opposite of what one might expect if a person had Vertigo.

She held out her arms like a gymnast trying to balance herself. It was not working so she hustled back to the porch and braced herself on the steps.

Slowly, she took a few, deep breaths. In. Out. In. Out. “You can do this,” she told herself.

She put a blindfold on her head, and pulled it over her eyes, and hoped the outside world would vanish. But, of course, it didn't, and she began walking and counted her steps as she went along. “One ... two ... three ...” Her intent was to go much farther than the mailbox. She wanted to get several copies of the newspaper down the street at the local deli because she saw an advertisement in the TV section that told her the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra was going to play at Carnegie Hall in New York City. This meant her daughter would be coming to town since she played for the orchestra – first chair in the cello section. But whom was she kidding? She hadn't seen her play in years.

The sound of another car engine from down the street caused Debbie to stop. She faced the sound without her sight this time. Still, her mind raced with visions that made no sense at all, like streaking lines of moving light. A honking horn became a sonorous, rip-roaring sound echoing in the chambers of her mind. Visions, streaks, sounds morphed into each other producing greater flashes and louder noises. Her synapses were working overtime, spilling atomic images, a kaleidoscope of colorful explosions that made little sense. Mental chaos. Terror.

But the noise subsided as the car moved in the opposite direction. She was safe for for the moment, so she pulled the blindfold up so she could see and and just then, the mail carrier acknowledged her.

“Good morning, Ralph,” she said.

“Good morning, Mrs. Hammel.”

“What do you have for me today?” she said.

“Well, let’s go see. I put it in the mailbox already.”

“I know,” she said. “I saw you. Don’t forget. You don’t want to step on the cracks.”

“I know. You’ll break your mother’s back. We got this, Mrs. Hammel.”

Ralph learned a long time ago that Debbie had the ‘stay at home disease’, and he sensed her apprehension because of her condition, so he took her hand and guided her to the mailbox, like he did so many times before.

“Mrs. Aldrich isn’t looking, is she?” Debbie asked.

Ralph looked up and saw Mrs. Aldrich staring at them out of the window of her house, but he pretended not to see her.

“No. Not today, Mrs. Hammel,” he said.

“Good,” Debbie responded. “I’d hate to have the neighbors gossiping that we’re ... you know, an item.”

“Oh, good heaven’s, no.” Ralph chuckled just as they approached a large crack in their path causing Debbie to hesitate, as she had done so many times in the past at the same crack. “We’ll jump on three, okay? One. Two, Threeeeeee.” They hopped over the crack and continued their slow trek.

“Okay. Let’s see what we got?” Ralph said as he reached in the mailbox and pulled out the mail. He flipped through it. “Bills. Bills. Garbage. Garbage. Oo! What’s this? From your daughter! Overnight mail. Wow!” He just stared at it.

“Would you open it for me, Ralph?” she whispered, apprehensively.

Ralph opened the envelope and unfolded the one-page letter. A photo fell out and he picked it up and was surprised at the photo of Wendy wearing a Yankee hat. He handed the photo to Debbie who just gawked at it with no emotion. “She looks good,” he said. “Haven’t seen her in what...two years?” Ralph looked at the return address. “She’s wearing a Yankee hat in Boston. She lives dangerously. ”

“Yes, she does. Would you read the letter to me, please?” Debbie asked.

Ralph opened the letter and read. “Hi, Mom. The three tickets I’m holding in my hand in the photo are for a Boston Philharmonic concert this Friday night at Carnegie Hall. I’m coming home Thursday to deliver them personally so you and two others can go to the Carnegie concert for free. You can see me play my cello solo, which, by the way, is mentioned in a personal interview I had with the Brooklyn Tribune, which should run in Thursday’s paper. Don’t be too upset with me for not calling or writing earlier. I know we have not spoken in a while, but maybe

now is time to discuss the reason why I haven't been more open. Talking this weekend is better than not talking at all, right? See you soon. Wendy.”

“Yes,” Debbie said. “I heard about that in the local news report, and I was going to get the paper at the local deli down the street but ... but...” Debbie appeared stoic, unable to complete the sentence.

“Are you OK, Mrs. Hammel?”

“Yes. Yes. I'm fine.”

“It's wonderful news, isn't it?”

“Yeah. Absolutely,” Debbie said politely.

“Are you ready to go back?”

“I'll manage, Ralph, thank you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. See you tomorrow.”

Debbie waited for Ralph to leave then she grabbed the mailbox for support, took the blindfold off her head, and stared at the photo.

Then Debbie heard a noise. It wasn't a car, a truck, or even a motorcycle. The noise was distinguishable. Ah, yes. The tiny, distant roar of a jet plane flying thirty thousand feet above her. Once her mind decoded the noise, the sound got louder and louder as the plane approached overhead. Way overhead.

She looked up and saw the winged speck flying across the sky high above her. Then, as if her mind was a camera with infinite zoom-in technology, the plane became larger and larger until it looked like an alien ship hovering over her. She found her bearings and bolted to the porch while mumbling to herself. “Hurry. Quick. It's coming. AAAAGH!!!”

Debbie went inside her house, slammed the door shut and leaned against it as if there was a mugger chasing her. She took short, rapid breaths, trying to calm her raucous heart, which caused thumping noises in her ear. It was hard to tell which noises were louder, those from her body, or those from the outside world.

Today's feelings seemed excessive, she thought, compared to other days. It was always hard for her to explain to people what she went through when she was outside the house, or inside, like now, as she was trying hard to overcome the effects of her *condition*.

Agoraphobia is totally misunderstood, she thought to herself. Hell, she really didn't understand her handicap all that much herself. It wasn't that the home provided any great comfort. The boredom was the price she paid being cooped up inside the same rooms, the same walls of a house that had served as her thirty-year, 24-hour sanctuary. minus these quick jaunts to the mailbox, of course, and her infrequent attempts at bigger, more dangerous journeys to get a newspaper downtown, or to customers' houses when her next-door neighbor, Pat, felt industrious enough to handle her ... condition. Of course, the beauty parlor provided a safe haven for her during the workday.

Still, thirty years ago she could at least venture outside on occasion without a paralyzing incident like the one that she experienced today. But time, instead of dulling the agoraphobic incidents, seemed to have no effect on the frequency of her episodes. Although she had this condition all her life, she felt it worsened with Wendy's birth. Debbie got more fearful of the challenges presented by the outside world. That's why she hired Pat to help with the outside demands of the business. She was one of the few people who knew how incapacitated Debbie was. As Pat's business sense grew, she realized they needed help and had recently hired Kate to

pick up the slack. Pat knew Kate for years, and it seemed like a good match. Still, if it weren't for Pat, Debbie might've lost her mind a long time ago.

She continued with a series of breathing maneuvers and started to repeat to herself, "This is not real, this is not real, this is not real...." over and over. She was instructed to do that by the self-help tapes she recently began to use.

Slowly, she reached in the drawer for her portable tape player and turned it on as she sat down. The tape played: "*The deep breathing exercises I taught you in tape one will help counteract irrational thoughts that sometimes provoke feelings of panic and helplessness in our daily lives...*"

Debbie rose and let out with a humongous puff of air and went back upstairs to freshen up for the coming day. She hadn't noticed that she left Wendy's letter on top of the desk. She meant to put it in the drawer, but she forgot.

Debbie came downstairs with the other mail in her hand. She still had that thumping noise in her ear, but the outside world was not going to intrude on her life because her home protected her.

She continued with a series of breathing maneuvers which quickly transformed into her singing.

♪ *Zip-a-dee do dah, zip-a-dee yea* ♪

Now calmed, she reviewed the mail more closely while walking into the kitchen, still singing, as if nothing had happened. "There will be no more complaining," she said to herself. I will not give power to my 'condition'.

Pat and Kate worked in the beauty parlor in Debbie's converted living room. Debbie shared the duties with Pat for close to 30 years now. Kate started working there this month, and both were presently performing one of their duties, which was to shop for food or office supplies. Pat went shopping for beauty supplies and Kate had carte blanche for the food Debbie needed in the house. Kate liked shopping for food and was a job Pat had before they hired Kate. However, they all decided what was needed in the house, just like Pat had for the past decades. Debbie relied on her and now Kate for understanding and emotional comfort. It was Pat, after all, who came up with the secret signal when Debbie would freak out in front of customers, not that it would happen often, because it didn't. Only when Debbie got severely stressed did she become "OCDish", like when couldn't share the same air she breathed with her customers, or when she wouldn't touch the doorknobs because of the germs she might catch from other people. She would ramble, clean fastidiously, or be overcome with desire for the perfect alignment of things, like combs on the counter, or bottles of shampoo and hair conditioner. Pat would say a phrase or single word, like stinkbug, that warned her that she was behaving irrationally. Hopefully, Debbie would calm down and be more ... functional.

Debbie didn't know what caused her agoraphobic condition. She didn't think it was chemical. Her trip to the mailbox everyday was a deal she made with Pat. Her, and now Kate, would do her errands if Debbie would try to overcome her 'condition' by behavior modification. Slow walks to the mailbox, for example, and her slow walks back were supposed to slow down her anxiety, not worsen it.

In any event, her friends urged her to escape the confines of the house at times. Debbie conceded to make her daily runs to the mailbox to prove to Pat that she didn't need medication. Still, every day, a few minutes before taking those thirty steps to the mailbox, her body would

have a funny feeling, a nervous twitch in her stomach. A tightening of the stomach wall. Her body would tense up and her mind would yell out the mantra ‘this is not real’. And if Pat was around, Debbie would hear ‘stinkbug’ over and over, which all led to a bizarre reality that was very hard to unravel. At least in Debbie’s mind.

Except for the letter, she tossed the mail on the kitchen table. “Now, that wasn’t so bad, was it?” she told herself. She walked to the counter and poured herself a cup of coffee.

♪ My oh my, what a wonderful day. Plenty of sunshine, plenty of ... of ... ♪

“What the heck comes next?”

The doorbell rang. Debbie walked to the door and opened it. A frail, elderly woman stood in front of her.

“Hi, I’m Claudette Bauer,” she said.

Debbie looked at her watch and, trying her hand at humor, proclaimed Mrs. Bauer was two minutes early. The frail lady tried to apologize for being early, but Debbie slammed the door closed before Mrs. Bauer could complete her sentence.

Just as Debbie closed the door, she remembered what Kate and Pat had told her. Debbie’s brand of humor, although funny to herself, if only abstractly, was often not funny to others, especially new customers like Mrs. Bauer. Pat suggested if Debbie needed to stroke her humor muse, then tell jokes, like ‘A man goes into the diner with a horse and they both sit down in a booth. A waitress comes over and says, ‘Hey. What’s with the long face?’”

Debbie thought that was hilarious, but Mrs. Bauer didn’t. Maybe it was because of the way she told it – like she was reading the ingredients of a ketchup bottle.

Debbie swung the door open. “That was funny,” she said. “I’m the one who lost track of time. Please, come in.”

“I see what they mean,” Mrs. Bauer said. “I’m very glad you do hair and you’re not a stand-up comic.” She cautiously stepped into the house.

“I shouldn’t kid like that with my new customers. The parlor’s this way.”

As Debbie directed her new customer past the living room and into the parlor, Debbie said, “I have a weak back. I have a weak back.” Mrs. Bauer seemed lost because she didn’t know what to say.

“You’re supposed to say say, ‘When did you get it.’”

“Oh, okay,” Mrs. Bauer said. “When did you get it?”

“Oh, about a week back,” Debbie said, then laughed, giving greater credit to the joke than it really deserved.

Mrs. Bauer laughed as if she really thought it was funny. She then mentioned she just moved to Brooklyn and her neighbor, Mrs. Mondale, who Debbie knew very well, told her to seek out Debbie’s service. Mrs. Bauer just wanted a wash and set, then maybe a cut later on in the month if Debbie proved to be as good as Mrs. Mondale said.

They stepped into the beauty parlor. Mrs. Bauer stopped short and inspected the place without moving her head, like a wild-eyed gecko might.

“This was a living room at one time,” Debbie said. “Now it’s the beauty parlor.”

“Wow,” Mrs. Bauer finally said as she looked around the room, which had two parlor chairs, a deep sink to wash hair, an industrial overhead hair dryer, and all the accoutrements of a professional beauty parlor. There was also a small kitchen with a small refrigerator, a toaster and

coffee maker. Comfortable chairs and a couch lined one wall. A magazine rack filled with periodicals and newspapers were placed on a coffee table next to the couch.

Photographs of Debbie's daughter, Wendy, Debbie's late husband and her friends, filled the dead area between the mirrors. A large picture of Wendy playing the cello was centered on one wall. Next to it was a smaller picture of Debbie and her late husband, Harry.

"I must admit, I had preconceived ideas."

"Why is that?" Debbie asked.

"Mrs. Mondale told me I was in for a treat. I didn't realize you were set up so professionally. This looks so much like a real beauty parlor, yet it's so homey."

Mrs. Bauer pointed to a plaque on the wall by the door, which stated, BEAUTY PARLOR: *A place where women curl up and dye.* "That's funny," Mrs. Bauer said. "That's what you say on the sign outside, right?"

"Well, we try and keep the humor flowing around here," Debbie said. "Please, take a seat. Make yourself comfortable. I'll make us coffee."

"No, no thank you. I'm fine." Mrs. Bauer sat in one of the parlor chairs. She inspected the photos on the wall. Her gaze stopped at one in particular.

"That's my daughter, Wendy," Debbie informed Mrs. Bauer. "She plays the cello for the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra."

Mrs. Bauer continued staring at the photo while Debbie told her the story of the many awards her daughter had won, including the many scholarships to college, Debbie proudly told Mrs. Bauer that Wendy played with the Boston Philharmonic for a couple of years now. They not only traveled overseas, but now they were coming to New York City to play at Carnegie Hall, and Wendy was going to do a solo.

But there was a feeling of angst mixed in with all that pride. Although Mrs. Bauer sensed it, she didn't say anything, Debbie didn't want to tell her new customer too much else she might think there was something wrong with her relationship with her daughter when, in reality, there wasn't anything wrong. *Not really.*

Debbie went on to explain how she had worked for many years in the parlor and how her customer base was almost exclusively women forty or older. Once the customers got to know Debbie, they came regularly for a wash and set. Every couple of months they came in for a cut, and on a special occasion a perm. Word of mouth was her advertising tool. And the price was cheaper than any commercial beauty parlor because of the lower expenses. She owned her home, so she didn't have any realty overhead, except taxes.

Debbie told Mrs. Bauer she made enough money to support herself now, even after her husband had died and left her with a young girl who had aspired to be a musician. She rambled a bit while working on Mrs. Bauer's hair but kept a close eye on her while talking. Debbie interpreted Mrs. Bauer's body language for boredom: the polite nods and grunts that could be a sign that Debbie was talking too much. Pat had warned Debbie about that. Since she wanted to make a good impression on her new customer, she kept quiet and concentrated on her matted hair, which was difficult to maneuver, anyway. It seemed more likely to be on a head of a teenage girl, not someone whose hair was gray and falling out. She had to be diligent, she felt, but careful not to tug too hard and, most importantly, not to talk too much.

She secretly removed strands from the comb and tossed them into the garbage behind her. She pointed to a bottle of conditioner and recommended that brand to Mrs. Bauer. For now, she wasn't going to say anything about hair loss. If she used the bottle Debbie was going to give her, Mrs. Bauer would be okay. Debbie didn't want to tell her that she was recommending the

conditioner because her hair was falling out, but she did suggest massaging her head to help prevent that malady. Mrs. Bauer sat perfectly still, listened politely, and nodded.

CHAPTER TWO

Outside, meanwhile, Pat O'Neil turned her car onto Debbie's street from one end while Kate Devine turned her car onto the same street at the other end. The two vehicles traveled towards each other, like jousters ready to do battle.

Pat appeared tall while sitting down. She was a thin and graying and was an imposing figure even for her age.

She focused her attention on the opposing car coming at her, like a professor eyeing a cheating student in the back of the room. Her eyebrows were up, and she squirmed in her seat, gripped the steering wheel at the ten and two positions, and concentrated on the approaching car. "Okay, you little pipsqueak," Pat whispered to no one in particular, "get ready to meet your Maker."

Kate, on the other hand, was a much more reserved character, and watched Pat heading towards her and appeared to accept her fate in this joust. She was going to die, she felt, so, win or lose, she was going all the way.

Still, she was nervous not knowing whether Pat was going to back down. "You're going a little fast, Pat," she said to herself. Kate, a little hefty across the beam, squirmed, and nervously fiddled with her hair as she drove towards Debbie's house. She eased her foot off the accelerator and tapped her brakes a few times. Her car veered to the left a little, and she allowed the car to roll on its own momentum, as if she didn't know whether to stop or just hug her side of the road. "She won't hit me," she said, more of a prayer than a proclamation.

Pat peered over the steering wheel while her car gathered more speed. "Okay, you little wimp, let's see if this makes you piss in your pants."

Kate looked like she might pee her pants while she watched Pat's car head right at her. "What are you doing, Pat?" Kate yelled. She closed her eyes and was ready for the worst.

As they approached Debbie's house, Kate slammed on her breaks while screaming incoherently. Her car stalled and came to a stop right in front of Debbie's house. Kate blessed herself quickly and hung onto the steering wheel, bracing herself for the shock of a head-on collision. However, Pat pulled into Debbie's driveway missing Mrs. Bauer's car by inches.

Kate started the car and pulled in behind Pat. "You're a crazy lunatic," she yelled.

"That's redundant. A lunatic is always crazy. You never met a reasonable lunatic, have you?"

"You're crazy nut, driving like that."

"And you're a wimp," Pat quickly replied. "We had a race and you lost."

She looked to the sky and said, "Dear Dorothy, help me," and then pointed her finger at Pat. "I wasn't racing. You were racing. And why in-the-Dickens did you park in Debbie's driveway when you live right next door? Park in your own driveway."

Pat retrieved a bag of beauty supplies from her car while Kate retrieved a grocery bag from her car. "Why, indeed," Pat said. "Why does anyone do anything in this sick, crazy world?" She pointed to Mrs. Bauer's car. "You recognize this car?"

"Must be a new customer," Kate chimed.

They both headed into Debbie's house, each one eyeing the other, avoiding physical contact, like two wrestlers circling each other, each cautious in making the first move. Pat opened the door and extended her arm. "Age before beauty."

They entered the house and as Kate headed for the kitchen she said, "You scared the Dickens out of me. I started this day in a very good mood."

“Hey. Some days you're the bug; some days you're the windshield,” Pat said as she headed for the beauty parlor.

Kate plopped the grocery bag on the counter. “I don't know why she has to be such a ... bossy witch,” she said to herself as she put several Twinkies away in the cupboard.

She took one back as if it were talking to her. Kate put it back and stared at it. She took back again, this time she smelled it. The Twinkie was goading her. Tempting. Tantalizing. She stuffed it in her pocket.



Debbie worked on Mrs. Bauer's hair while Pat walked in and put away the beauty supplies she had just bought. Mrs. Bauer didn't seem to be paying attention to the idle chatter between Debbie and Pat. Instead, she was looking at the pictures on the wall saying things like 'really' and 'no fooling' to Debbie's and Pat's prattling comments about the close call with the cars.

“So, you shouldn't've scared her,” Debbie said to Pat. “You know how she is. She's ...”

Kate walked in interrupting Debbie and stood in front of everyone as if she had something very important to say but was being coy about it. Debbie eyed Kate for a few seconds while Kate just stood there waiting for someone to ask her what she was smirking about.

“Okay, I'll bite,” Debbie said. “You look like you swallowed the canary. What's up, Kate?”

“I met a man last night,” she said.

“At bingo,” Pat interjected. The tone of sarcasm was unmistakable.

“He’s very charming,” Kate said, seemingly needing a defense, as if meeting a man at bingo might be similar to meeting someone at a sleazy bar. “And he’s a nice dresser,” Kate said, not too convincingly.

“You said he was a good dancer,” Pat said. “How did you know he was a good dancer at bingo?”

“Because he told me. And I told you he was a nice dresser.”

As Kate and Pat bantered, Mrs. Bauer leaned into Debbie and motioned her to come closer. A secret was about to be divulged. “Who are they?” Mrs. Bauer whispered to Debbie.

“They’re friends of mine,” Debbie whispered back, equally secretive. “They work here.”

“I was told that you put on a show while you do your customer’s hair.”

“What?” Debbie asked with a little attitude and more volume in her voice.

“Mrs. Mondale told me that you put on a little skit once in awhile. Is this a show now?”

Debbie let out with a howl, much above the level of a whisper. “You mean, with these two characters?” Debbie waved her hand seeking Kate and Pat’s attention. “Hey, you two. This is Mrs. Bauer.” She leaned in to Mrs. Bauer. “The skinny one over there, you met already. Her name is Pat, and…” Debbie cupped her hand in front of her left breast as if she was going to say ‘buxom lady’. Instead, she said, “The other woman is Kate.”

“Are they professional actors?” Mrs. Bauer asked.

Pat finished putting the supplies away and sat down on the couch, eyeing Mrs. Bauer as if she were a little touched in the head.

“Mrs. Bauer thinks we put on a show while my customers get their hair done.”

“Now, who told you that?” Pat asked.

“Mrs. Mondale,” Mrs. Bauer said.

“Elaine Mondale, the newspaper reporter?”

“She’s my neighbor. She said that you ladies put on a show while ...”

“You don’t have to repeat the entire sentence,” Pat scolded.

Debbie went on to explain to Mrs. Bauer that Mrs. Mondale had interviewed Pat several times and all of them were very good friends. Debbie pointed to the *Newsday* article hanging on the wall whose headline read: *Oldest Woman in Brooklyn Skydiving Club Tells All*, by Elaine Mondale. Debbie took the article off the wall and showed it to Mrs. Bauer but put it back without letting her read it. Debbie told Mrs. Bauer that Elaine wrote stylistically about Pat’s achievements in life, like the skydiving exploit, which was the main topic of the article.

“What does Mrs. Mondale know?” Pat asked. “She’s old as the hills and doesn’t know her ass from her elbow. The last interview she did was with Haystacks Calhoun and all they talked about was a tag team he was on when he wrestled against Andre the Giant and Bruno Sammartino.”

Debbie leaned down to Mrs. Bauer. “She’s only acting. It’s all part of the show.”

Pat rolled her eyes and handed Debbie a receipt for the items she just brought in. “Bite me,” she said to Debbie. “Honest to God,” she said to Mrs. Bauer. “It’s the truth.”

“Pat,” Debbie said. “Bite me. Really? That’s not very nice.”

“Oh, but it’s in the script. I have to keep true to the written word, don’t I? Now look what you’ve all done. I’ve lost the moment before. I’ve lost my focus.” Pat curled her fingers together, extended her arms, and drifted into a Zen moment.

Kate handed Debbie a receipt for the supplies she bought. “She’s incorrigible today.”

Debbie withdrew cash from the register and handed Pat some money. “Knock it off,” Debbie said. “Wendy’s coming home today. I want everything to be nice. You know how

important this is to me. I haven't seen her for over a year. So stop. Just stop your ... whatever it is you're doing!"

Debbie waved her hand over her face, as if magically summoning a more pleasant disposition, then turned to Kate and handed her some money. "Thanks for shopping for me. Now, tell me. Who's this man you met at bingo last night?"

"He's really very charming ..." Kate started to say, but she quickly turned to Pat. "I saw that," Kate hollered. "You rolled your eyes."

She then turned to Debbie. "She rolled her eyes at me," Kate said.

"You've been divorced for twenty-five years," Pat said. "And I've never known you to have a relationship with any man for more than a week. What makes you think this guy is different than the others. Because he's a snappy dresser?" Pat looked to Debbie. "I'm sorry. But it's true."

"As God is my witness, I don't know what's the matter with you is today. You're behaving like an ... idiot!" Kate plopped on the couch, slouching. She took out the Twinkie from her pocket and stared at it, like it was saying something to her.

"Okay, I deserve that," Pat said. "I didn't have a good morning with my son, okay? So, I'm a jerk. Are you going to eat that thing? You're fondling it like a sex toy."

Debbie groaned loudly carrying a message for Pat to bring the theatrics down several notches.

"I'm sorry you're having a rough time with Trevor," Debbie said, "but before you criticize someone, you should walk a mile in their shoes."

"Really, now," Pat said. "Why is that, pray tell?"

"That way, when you criticize them, you're a mile away and you have their shoes."

Pat gritted her teeth, then looked at Mrs. Bauer and said, “Don’t worry, Mrs. Bauer, she’s not going to give up her day job.”

Debbie looked at Pat that suggested that she ‘cool her jets’, all the while trying to control Mrs. Bauer’s head, which followed the ‘theatrics’ in the room, like she was watching a tennis match.

“I’m sorry, Debbie” Pat said, “Kate’s a good-looking woman. But she doesn’t take care of herself.” Pat threw a look at Kate who was still eyeing the Twinkie. “She’s a pretty woman, but she eats too much.”

“What are you saying?” Kate asked. “You saying I look like shit?”

Pat’s mouth dropped. She queried Debbie with a look, as if to say *did you hear what I just heard?*

Mrs. Bauer seemed confused at the quizzical looks between Debbie and Pat. “Kate said *shit*,” Debbie explained. “Kate never curses.”

The phone rang and Kate said, “That’s Mike. The guy in the wheelchair from the VA. He’s not going to make it tonight. It’s unclear to me why.

“Oh, I didn’t tell you, Mrs. Bauer. Kate is a bit of a clairvoyant. She knows who’s ringing on the phone; can see the future, that sort of thing.”

Mrs. Bauer seemed impressed.

Pat answered the phone. “Oh, hello Mr. Simpson.” Pat waited for a beat then said, “I’m so sorry to hear that. Are you okay?” Pat paused listening to the reply. “Well, we’ll just have to manage without you. Goodbye.”

Pat hung up, then faced Kate and took a deep breath. “You dress with clothes from Goodwill, Kate. You have a pretty face, but you never wear makeup. Why is that?”

Pat pointed to the Twinkie and Kate quickly put it in her pocket.

“I eat merely to keep my mind off food,” Kate whined. “And I don’t want to wear makeup because I don’t want to look like a sleazebag, like you.”

“Oh, good grief,” Pat exclaimed.

Kate stood up. “Shut up. Shut up. SHUT UP.” Then she sat back down.

Mrs. Bauer struggled to keep her head where Debbie wanted it. Mrs. Bauer snuck a peak at Pat through the mirror. Pat winked at her, and then asked, “You want a part in this play?”

Mrs. Bauer thought for a second then nodded.

“Okay, improvise a line.” Pat said. “Say something. You’re on, Mrs. Bauer.”

Mrs. Bauer hesitated for a second then said, “Never, under any circumstances, take a sleeping pill and a laxative on the same night. I learned that the hard way.”

“Very good,” Pat said. She turned to Kate. “Wasn’t that good?”

Kate nodded, then she took out the Twinkie again and this time gobbled the whole thing in two gulps.

Debbie tried hard to work on Mrs. Bauer’s hair while she was moving. It was like trying to thread a needle on a sailboat during rough seas. “Please stop moving your head,” Debbie finally said, sounding a little agitated.

Pat and Kate picked up magazines and began reading. Kate snapped through the pages as she read.

“I’m just trying to get her off her butt to take care of herself,” Pat said. “Do I get gratitude? Nooooo!”

Trying to change the subject, Debbie pointed to the wall. “That’s my daughter, Wendy, over there.”

“Yes, you told me,” Mrs. Bauer said. “She’s very pretty.”

“Thank you. She gets her looks from her father.” Debbie pointed to the picture of herself and her late husband. “He died when she was twelve.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“Wendy went to Cambridge on a scholarship. Got a job with the Boston Philharmonic after graduating. They’re playing at Carnegie this week. She’ll be here any minute, in fact.”

Debbie looked at Pat in a way as to suggest that she wanted everything to be nice for this homecoming. Tapping Mrs. Bauer on the shoulder and pointed to the MS Magazine picture of Pat on the wall. “Do you know who that is?”

Mrs. Bauer looked at the picture, then at Pat.

“Wow. It’s her,” Mrs. Bauer said.

“Why don’t you tell Mrs. Bauer why you’re on the cover?” Debbie said to Pat.

Pat kept her head buried in her magazine. “Because I was the oldest woman in the country to get goosed by the President of the United States.”

Mrs. Bauer put her hand to her mouth.

“Pat!” Debbie yelled.

Pat kept her head buried in her magazine, and while Kate did the same, she said,. “She’s incorrigible. Don’t waste your breath.”

“Pat!!!” Debbie said, “I want you to stop it, right now. What is Mrs. Bauer going to think?”

Pat put the magazine down on her lap and looked Mrs. Bauer right in the eye. “That’s me on the cover Ms. Magazine, Issue Nine. September of last year. I was the first women to receive

a lifetime achievement award for my volunteer work at the New York City VA hospital.” Pat then went back to reading.

“Impressive, huh?” Debbie removed the bib off Mrs. Bauer. “Okay, Mrs. Bauer. Finished. That’ll be twenty dollars.”

Mrs. Bauer got up and took a long look in the mirror.

“Give it a couple of days,” Debbie said. “Let it live a bit. If you think it's too long after that, then come in and I'll trim it. On the house.”

Mrs. Bauer nodded her approval of what she saw in the mirror. She reached in her pocketbook and paid Debbie. “Thank you. I like it. Keep the change. I’ll show myself out.”

Debbie put the money in the register, then slammed it shut. She waited, silently, until she heard the front door close, then groaned loudly and sat in the chair previously occupied by Mrs. Bauer. Debbie, Pat and Kate were quiet, pretending to ignore each other, but Debbie wanted to scream.

She looked alternately at Kate and Pat. Neither of her friends appeared ready to speak. They knew there was little advantage in speaking up, not if they wanted to avoid having a verbal joust with Debbie. So, they just silently sat where they were moving papers around as if they were busy.

Finally, Debbie could not hold it in any longer. “I want to thank you both for acting so mature in front of a *NEW* customer of mine. I wouldn’t be surprised if she never came back here again. And, you know, that’s not even the point. I asked both of you to keep the drama down because Wendy is coming. Could you do that? Nooooo...”

Kate and Pat just sat there, like scolded children, pretending to read while Debbie went on about their indiscretions. Finally, Debbie fell into a silence, but she wanted to scream.

Pat moved closer to Debbie. "I'm happy that Wendy's staying here while she plays at Carnegie. It will be nice to see her again."

"Me too," Kate added. "I'm sure your daughter wants to iron things out."

Exasperated, Debbie just shook her head and said, "I don't know if she's staying here." She waited a few seconds, then told them she wanted to set things right with Wendy, but she was afraid that all Wendy wanted was to see her perform live at Carnegie.

"I can't do it," Debbie said. "I can't even take thirty steps to get the mail without falling down, so how am I going to go to New York City? I just can't do it. And then we'll get into an argument and we'll be right back where we started two years ago."

"Now...now. That's negative projection," Kate said.

"For once, I agree with Kate," Pat said. "Let's just enjoy her company while she's here."

Debbie didn't know what to say, so she talked about Wendy's birth. It was a life experience she was not going to forget. She started to hallucinate and relived the experience as she told the story of how Harry drove like a maniac that stormy night to the hospital in their old Ford '67 Bronco wagon. An ambulance's siren was blaring in front of them, as they both were rushing down a road to the Brooklyn hospital. Another car turned onto the same road from a side street and almost ran into them. She remembered seeing how the storm affected all of them. Their car swerved because it was pushed by the raging winds and torrential rain. Lighting bolts stabbed at the darkness like daggers. A tree was uprooted just as they passed by a parked car, missing it by inches. Harry swerved to miss a windblown garbage can – another close call.

She remembered the flashing lights and the sounds of fire trucks. They were everywhere and it was unbearable," she said. The rehashing of events brought on a great amount of anxiety in Debbie. "Oh, Pat...Wendy...She's...She's..."

“Take a breath,” Pat commanded. “Easy. In...out”

Debbie did as instructed. Feeling better, she took her last deep breath. “Ok. Ok. I’m okay now. Wendy...Wendy...She's...”

“We read the letter,” Kate said. “Wonderful news about your daughter.”

Pat threw a look of disdain towards Kate, as if to tell her to ‘shut up’. Pat leaned into Kate and, while she forced her out of the beauty parlor, she told Kate to go get the paper down at the deli. “Or you can steal one from Mrs. Aldrich’s porch or mailbox if you want.”

Pat turned to Debbie and said, “Okay. Go ahead.”

“So.” Debbie continued. “When Harry arrived at the hospital he pulled up on the lawn because the emergency vehicles took up so much space. The ambulances were everywhere. Hundreds it seemed. Harry finally they got me a gurney and I remember being wheeled into the hospital and the lights flickered because the generator was faulty. There was a power failure and something was wrong with the emergency power. I remember ... the lights flickered at first then they went out totally, and I panicked as blood trickled down my leg.”

Debbie scratched her leg thinking she was back in the hospital. Pat had to fight with Debbie because the dream, or hallucination, was so powerful she scratched her leg until it bled.

“All I could hear was the the footsteps and people while they pulled me into the delivery room. Push, PUSH, somebody yelled, so I pushed.”

Pat got some napkins and as she wiped the streak of blood that was running down Debbie’s leg because of her scratching, Debbie continued pushing and grunting and moaning. She babbled about being rushed to the delivery room and seeing the overhead lights flickering while being pushed along - one set of lights after the other. Still, Pat managed to lead Debbie to her desk then opened the window for some fresh air.

“Help me,” Debbie moaned. “My baby is bleeding.”

“Hang on, Debbie,” Pat responded. “Breathe in.”

“Where’s the doctor?”

“You're okay,” Pat consoled. “You're here with me.”

“All these people ... screaming ... too much noise. Someone help me.”

“Look! See. It's me. Pat. You're safe with me.”

“No. The neon lights... Flickering... Stabbing my eyes. Where’s my baby? Where’s my baby?”

“Wendy probably wasn’t born yet.”

“What? What do you mean she wasn’t born already? Of course she was born. See.”

Debbie moved her leg to show Pat the blood running down her leg.

“That’s from you scratching your leg.”

Debbie moaned loudly and laboriously pushed herself up from her seat. She retreated into her flashback where a crowded hospital was lit by flickering emergency lights with people running and screaming orders while Debbie was giving birth on a gurney.

“Push. The doctor is telling me to PUSH”

Pat went to the coffee table and got some napkins and wiped Debbie’s leg clean. Debbie let out with a humongous moan and began to babbling again about being in a hospital, but this time Pat realized that Debbie was in a full-blown panic attack and hallucinating badly. Pat managed to half carry Debbie outside to the porch for fresh air.

“Help me,” Debbie moaned. “My baby is bleeding.”

“Hang on, Debbie. We’re almost there.”

Having reached the door, Pat directed Debbie to the settee bench on the porch.

“Where’s the doctor?” Debbie asked.

“You’re okay,” Pat consoled. “You’re here with me. Breath. In ... out.”

“All these people ... screaming ... too much noise. Someone help me.”

“Look! See. It’s me. Pat. You’re safe with me.”

“No. The neon lights... Flickering... Stabbing my eyes. Where’s my baby? Where’s my baby?”

“Get the paper,” Debbie said. “there’s an interview of her. She has tickets...”

“Relax,” Pat said, “We’ll get you a paper. Don’t worry.”

Pat looked for Kate and saw her going up to Mrs. Aldrich’s porch, then told Debbie she hadn’t gone past the mailbox in ages. “So, what make you think you can do it now?”

“I have to try...to see if I could make it. But I can’t. It’s too hard.”

Just then, Kate came running up on the porch and handed the paper to Debbie.

“Compliments of Mrs. Aldrich,” Kate said.

“Wendy ... Wendy ... she’s ...”

“You must be so proud of her.”

Pat grabbed Kate and pulled her aside.

“I’m sure you mean well with your comments, but Debbie is uncomfortable having you see her this way. Let me handle this. You disappear.”

“I want to help,” Kate said. “I know I’m only here for a few weeks but...”

“You’ve already helped by stealing Mrs. Aldrich’s paper. You can get Debbie some hot tea if you want to really help.”

“I’m okay now,” Debbie said as she stood up.

Kate left, then Pat asked Debbie if she was okay to go back inside.

“Yes,” Debbie said as they headed back into the office, Debbie retrieved the photo from her pocket and handed it to Pat.

“What's this?”

“It came in the letter.”

Pat took a long look. “Finally.” she said, a little reserved, “She looks good.”

There was a tone of nostalgia in her voice since her son, Trevor, and Wendy had been in love since they were kids. In fact, they were to marry when she graduated from college. At least that was the plan, but something happened in their senior year in high school that neither Debbie nor Pat could explain. Their attitude towards each other changed, and nobody heard from Wendy once she went to Cambridge and was offered the job at the Boston Philharmonic while attending school. But why didn't Wendy call or text while she was in Boston, Debbie wondered many times. She didn't even call Trevor, which she thought Wendy would have since they were going to be married. But she didn't, and Debbie threw blame on herself for missing her recitals and softball games and even her graduation because of her ... condition.

And Pat stood by not knowing what to do as Trevor sulked over the absence of Wendy.

“She looks good,” Pat said softly as she handed the photo back. “I can't wait to see her.”

“Ha. You know how many times I've seen her since she left for Boston? Zip. Zero.

Goose egg. We never talk.”

“So this visit will change all that, perhaps. Be happy she wants you at her concert. Will you go?”

“Will I go? Are you serious? I can't even get the mail without an incident.”

Wendy pulled up in a taxi curbside right outside Debbie's house. The anxiety Wendy felt was measureable.

The taxicab driver smiled and said, "Just go in there and talk to her. You'll feel a hundred percent better. Just say what's on your mind."

"Would you mind terribly if we just sit here a bit. I have to find my courage. I lost it, I think."

The taxi driver nodded and turned off the engine.

Debbie and Pat were quiet at the moment when Kate walked in with Debbie's tea.

"You make the best tea," Debbie said.

"I heat up two tea bags in a cup of water and put it in the microwave for 3 minutes. Then I put three tablespoons of sugar in another cup. When the tea is done, I let the two tea bags steep in the hot water for 3 minutes before I pour it in a colder cup. That's the way you like it. I hope Wendy knows how to make good tea." Kate picked up a magazine to read. "But we know Wendy is going to be too busy to look after you that way"

"Please," Debbie said. "Let's not get into that. If you were more like my daughter, I would starve to death."

Kate looked at the Twinkie wrapper and said, "Yeah, I know how that feels."

Pat glanced at Kate's stomach then rubbed her own belly. "It looks like you've never had that feeling," she said.

"You're being very snooty today," Kate accused Pat.

"Oh, no! I'm snooty! I'll be losing sleep on that one tonight."

Kate threw down her magazine. Obviously, she had enough. “You’re just a saucy, brazen...impudent person,” she said. “You have no ... couth.”

“Now I’m really going to lose sleep tonight.”

“Girls! Stop it!” Debbie said. “I’ve had enough of this ... bickering ... or whatever this is. Here, Kate. Help me with this bracelet. I need two hands to put it on.”

“It’s very nice,” Kate said. “Where did you get it?”

“From my Harry. A gift on our tenth anniversary.”

Debbie looked up to the ceiling and said, “Thanks, Harry.”

“Is that your dead husband?”

“Oh, that’s just ducky,” Pat said. “Now you two have something in common. You both talk to dead people.”

“I don’t talk to the dead,” Kate said. “I feel their presence. There’s a difference.”

“Okay,” Debbie said being the arbitrator. “Before it gets out of hand, stop it.”

Pat pointed to Kate and said, “She’s a good-looking woman, Debbie.”

“It’s your big mouth that’s so annoying.”

“I’m just trying to be helpful, Kate. Look at yourself. You always give a big warm welcome to anything edible.”

“See what I mean, Debbie? She’s just a snippy person. Snip, snip, snip.”

“Pat. Kate. Please!!!”

“She doesn’t have the right to insult me just because she’s in a bad mood.” Kate got up and stood over Pat. “You’re a meddling, vulgar...blabbermouth. Ooo! Look at me. I’m on the cover of Ms. Magazine.”

Kate looked for something to throw at Pat and spotted a powder puff sitting in a box of face powder. She picked it up and threw it at Pat, which resulted in a big, circular white stain on Pat's shirt. A cloud of powder floated in the air, like a puff of smoke from a gun barrel.

“Feel better?” Pat asked.

“Much.”

Pat got up, sauntered over to the parlor table, reached for a powder puff, dabbed it in the box and threw it at Kate, hitting her smack in the face. “Oh, yeah!” she said with gusto. “I see what you mean. Feels very satisfying.”

Kate picked up the powder puff at her feet and began hitting Pat on the head.

“Girls ... stop it,” Debbie yelled.

Instead of hitting Kate, Pat turned on Debbie and hit her with a powder puff square in the head. And before long, all three women were slinging powder puffs at each other like they were Frisbees. The whole room became a cloud of smoke and their hair, eyebrows and clothes were enshrouded with white powder.

When the dust settled, Kate seemed to have gotten the worst of it. Debbie and Pat belly-laughed at the sight of her face, totally covered with powder.

Debbie and Pat collapse on the sofa laughing at the sight of Kate's face. Just as they calm down, Kate started to speak and a puff of powder came out of her mouth, which started another round of laughter.

The taxicab driver followed Wendy into the house towing her two suitcases. She put her Yankee hat on to make sure if anyone saw her they knew where her allegiances were.

The laughter in the beauty parlor told Wendy where her mother was. She turned to the driver and told him that she would only be a few minutes and asked him to wait. He set the suitcases down and went back in the taxi.

Wendy followed the laughter and slowly approached the parlor door. Cautiously, she reached for the doorknob. The cold, brass metal sent chills up her arm causing her hand to retreat. She had plenty of time to prepare for this moment, so why was it so hard for her to go in?

CHAPTER THREE

Wendy appeared at the door and Pat ran to her for an embrace. The dust flew off Patricia's shoulders as if she was on fire.

"Looks like you got the worst of it," Wendy said.

"Nonsense. So good to see you, Wendy," Pat said. "It's been way too long."

"Good to see you too, Pat," Wendy said.

"Come in. Come in. Let me introduce you. This is Kate who really got the worst of all this. She's the new member of our team. She's a cat-lover, so pardon the smell, and she's a bit on the clairvoyant side, so watch what you think."

"Nice to meet you, Wendy," Kate said. "I heard so much about you." She took an extra long look at the hat Wendy was wearing.

"A Yankee fan living in Boston! Isn't that a little dangerous?" Kate said.

"People are nice in Bean Town, but it is a tough place to be a Yankee fan, for sure. Especially since they beat the Red Sox for the pennant this year. By the way, did you know how Boston got it's nickname, *Bean Town*. Back in the colonial days, the Boston people loved baked beans – beans slow-baked in molasses. I looked it up on the internet. That was a staple food in their diet."

Everyone nodded, as if it appeared on the internet then it had to be true.

Wendy faced Debbie, and both were reluctant to make the first move.

"Dear, why didn't you tell me earlier you were coming?" Debbie said, trying to break the awkward silence. "I have to read about your concert in the paper?"

"Glad to see you too, Mom!"

“Are you, really?”

“Ok. Let’s try this.” Wendy pulled three tickets from her purse and handed them to her mother. “Here,” Wendy said. “They’re for tomorrow night. We have a rehearsal in an hour and the taxi’s waiting outside, so I don’t have much time.”

“Oh, you can’t visit?” Pat said.

“I’ll be back later on. Early evening, perhaps. I just wanted to drop off the tickets now and later I wanted to explain why I’ve been missing in action for so long. I want so much to know how Trevor is doing, but I just don’t have the time right now. Please understand.”

“I do,” Pat said, but Debbie just pursed her lips and gave a nonchalant shrug.

“Do you have a problem with that, Mom?”

“No. No. You gotta do what you gotta do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Stop it, you two. Listen, Wendy, Trevor will be so happy you’re home. You should call him and...”

“Yes. Yes. I will. We haven’t talked in a while. I’m looking forward to seeing him.”

“Do you need his number? I have his number, if you need it.”

“Unless he changed it. I have it, Pat. I’ll call.”

“Imagine! Carnegie Hall!” Kate said. “Isn’t this exciting?”

“Yes, indeed,” Pat added. “Isn’t all of this very exciting.”

Just then Trevor barged in with a box in his hand, and his jogger’s suit on.

“Mom, I brought over...,” Trevor started to say but stopped at the sight of Wendy. He obviously didn’t know she was there. “Wendy...” was all he could say on such sudden notice.

Actually, he had to blink a couple of times because he couldn't believe he was seeing her in the flesh.

"Wendy," he repeated.

"Trevor..." she replied.

"Did you lose your cell phone?"

"I'm sorry. We'll do this later, if you don't mind."

Wendy exited just as Debbie collapsed in a chair.

Everyone in the parlor remained silent.

"What the hell was that? 'Did you lose your cell phone?'" Pat said, "Really, Trevor? That's the first thing you ask after not hearing from her all this time?"

"It just came over to..." Trevor started to say. "Never mind. Leave me alone."

"Did you see the way she looked at me?" Debbie said.

"I felt it too," Kate said. "Bad vibes all around."

"Everyone just shut up," Pat said. "There was no vibe."

"Dear Dorothy, give me patience," Kate said. She turned to Patricia and told her that Wendy's eyes judged Debbie as well as her voice. "Didn't you hear it?" Kate asked Patricia.

"Most definitely," Debbie chimed in. "I heard it. Her voice was so tense and..."

"SHUT UP," Pat yelled. "There were no vibes and no tension in her voice. So everyone just shut up."

"I'm going to the porch to sit down," Debbie said. "I need quiet to think." Debbie exited outside to the porch and maneuvered her way to the bench.

Inside, there was an awkward silence. Finally, Pat spoke up. "I should go buy a lottery ticket. My luck has got to turn." She noticed Trevor was looking rather somber.

“Are you OK?”

“I’m fine.

“So, what’s in the box?”

“I wanted to drop this off before I went out for a jog.” Trevor handed the box to his mother. “It’s a peace offering for this morning. Homemade fudge. I made it myself. Some for you too, Kate. And Debbie if she wants it.”

“Yummy. How come you’re not teaching? Today’s a school day, isn’t it?”

“I have an appointment with the Army recruiter, so I called in sick.”

“Kate,” Pat said, “some tea would go well with this, if you please.”

Pat stared wide-eyed at Kate. “The water is already hot on the stove,” Pat added.

Kate grabbed a piece of fudge and ate it. “Hmm, this is delicious,” she said and exited but stood close to the door to eavesdrop.

“I know you’re upset, Dear, but is it so hard to understand I don’t want you in the military? I’m afraid of you lying dead in a ditch somewhere in Afghanistan or some other God-forsaken place. No one to give you comforting words when you need it. No one to help you when you need help.”

“I know there are risks, but why aren’t you proud of me?”

“My God, Trevor. Will you listen to yourself? If you don’t sound just like your father.”

“That’s not such a bad thing. I think he’d be proud of me if he were alive.”

“God, this is déjà vu all over again.”

As Kate stepped back in, she said, “Did you want milk and sugar with that, Trevor?”

“I’m not staying, Kate” Trevor said. “Thanks, anyway. Maybe next time.” Then he turned his attention back to his mother. “What did Wendy want?”

“She's in town with the philharmonic for a concert tomorrow. She just came by to drop off these tickets.”

“Is there a ticket in there for me?”

Pat didn't answer.

“I see,” was all Trevor said.

Pat waited for Trevor's exit. “Well, that went well, don't you think?” Pat said with a sarcastic tone. She expected an answer but didn't get one. “I have to prepare for that at-home shampoo. Help me with the shampoos and conditioners.” Just then the phone rang.

“That's Mrs. Johnson. Her dog died and she wants to cancel.”

Pat picked up the phone and listened. After a beat Pat said, “I'm so sorry, Mrs. Johnson. I hope you're okay.” She waited for a second, then said, “Oh, you bought a goldfish and you're feeling much better. That's good. Well, you call back when you're feeling better.” Pat then hung up the phone.

“Ooo! I don't trust animals without eyelids. Creepy.”

“Yeah, well, you're creepy,” then Pat said quickly, so Kate didn't have time to answer, “Go check the advertisements in the paper. Come on. Let's go. Chop, chop.”

“I'm not moving until you tell me why you never told Trevor about his father.”

“I swear, Kate. Keep your nose out of my business.”

“He needs to know his father's alive.”

“Now how do you know that, and what gives you the right to tell me what to do? Having a houseful of cats doesn't make you an expert on anything. And you know nothing about how to raise a son.”

“I agree, and thank God I don’t have to raise one, but I feel how much you’re aching inside to find Joey. I can help. I’m good at finding people.”

“The only man in your life is this mysterious man who knows how to tap dance. Big deal. So get away from me with that psychic crap.” Pat sits and buries her face in her hands.

Debbie comes in with a bouquet of flowers. She reads the card and hands the flowers to Kate.

“A delivery man just came and gave me this. At first I thought they were for me. But the card says these are for you. It’s from Dan. I’m going upstairs to change.”

Kate reads the card, then sets the flowers on the table between their desks.

“You might not believe this,” Kate said, “and I hesitate even saying this, but you’re not the only one who was in love. I was in love at one time. I even remember his name. The guy’s name was Frank.”

“You? In love?”

“Yeah, really, to a part-time acting coach. He loved the fact that I did a Kramer versus Kramer monologue one time in school. When I told him that, he took my hand and we danced. We danced all night. He’s a great dancer. And when I told him I had more than one cat, he told me he has two cats, and we fell in love from that moment on.”

Pat reminisced. “Joey was a wonderful dancer.”

“Really! Tell me more.”

Pat growled a little.

“Come on,” Kate said. “Loosen up. Talk to me. I’m not an ogre.”

“It was so long ago. I think I was like twenty-three, and we both had a little too much to drink. We met at a church social. I went over and introduced myself, and he was out for a

romantic gig, he told me. One thing led to another...I mean we spent our first night together on a beach blanket at Jones Beach. It was spectacular! That's when I lived in Long Island. Anyway, tell me how long you and Frank were together?"

"For one orgasm."

"That was it? One orgasm."

"Don't start," Kate warned. "This conversation is going nicely so far."

Both were searching for something to say. Finally, Kate spoke.

"So, did that 'spectacular' moment continue with Joey?"

Pat bit her lip. "That's none o your business," she finally said.

"Come one. Loosen up, for crying out loud. I'm not taking your blood."

"Ah, what the heck. That first night led to one long, hot, passionate summer, right out of one of those romance novels. We screwed like gerbils. By the end of August, we had marriage on our agendas. Then Grenada happened."

"Granada. That sounds like a vacation resort, doesn't it? What the hell happened in Granada?"

"It was no vacation, believe me," Pat said. "There were 19 US casualties, and 116 more troops were wounded. One of them was Joey."

"Was that how you lost touch?"

"Yeah, I guess it was."

"Why is this so hard for you?"

"Because I wanted to get married before he shipped out and we didn't."

Kate sat back, and just folded her arms. She waited for more and got it.

“We argued over it and he left without even saying goodbye. If he loved me, he could've given me a ring. Or some kind of hope. But he didn't.”

“Why not wait until he got back?” Kate asked.

“I just couldn't do that.”

“Why the hell not?”

“You see,” Pat said. “This is why I didn't want to start this conversation. Now I have to tell you everything, “BECAUSE I WAS PREGNANT, damn it.” Pat took a single rose from the bouquet and snapped it in half. “The last thing I told him was marry me or leave. God, Kate, if I could only take those words back.”

“So, he left?”

“Yes. I guess I should've told him I was pregnant when I had the chance. He was gone before I could even say anything. And I didn't know that was the last time I was going to see him.” Pat unlocked a desk drawer, took out a photo and held it to her breast.

She walked slowly over to Kate. “Actually, that's not true. I started volunteering at the VA Hospital in Manhattan after he left. A year later he shows up as a patient. His convoy was caught in a fire fight. His face was mangled pretty bad by a grenade. He couldn't even talk. As time passed I realized we were never going to get back together, and as Trevor got older, it was just easier to tell him his father died in Granada.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mrs. Mondale appeared on the porch and walked in, as she had done so many times before. She had been Debbie's customer for what seemed like eons. She had interviewed Debbie about Pat concerning one of the articles she was writing and that led to using a neutralizer to relax the perming process on Mrs. Mondale's hair. She liked the results and before long Debbie was Elaine Mondale's permanent hairdresser, which everyone knew once you've chosen a permanent hairdresser that person became a life-long friend.

Mrs. Mondale walked at the parlor's door and peeked in without being seen or heard. She felt comfortable listening while the ladies inside the room talked. That was how she got most of her scoops, anyway, so she felt right at home eavesdropping. This time the conversation seemed interesting and she decided to wait a few minutes before entering. At times like this Mrs. Mondale felt she should branch out and become a gossip columnist. *The Mondale Tattler*, perhaps. Or maybe *The Invisible Woman*. She'd have to think more about a proper name.



Although they had cleaned up pretty well from the powder fight, each still bore the tell-tale signs of the earlier skirmish. Pat noticed Kate still had some powder on her shoulders and neck, and she took a tissue and stroked Kate's face.

"I guess I was a little hard on you today," Pat said to her, trying to smooth out differences between them. "You're not fat. Just a little plump, that's all. And a touch naive, maybe." Pat groaned knowing she overstepped her bounds again.

"Oh, so now you're calling me stupid?" Kate retorted, pushing Pat away.

"I didn't say that," Pat said. She turned to Debbie. "Did I say that?"

“You two just can’t stop yourself, today, can you?” Debbie said. “Well, for punishment you have to hear a new joke I’ve learned. So, listen up.”

“Please don’t do that,” Pat pleaded with Debbie.

Kate rolled her eyes, then faced the mirror and inspected her face.

“A little old lady was running up and down the halls in a nursing home,” Debbie began telling the joke anyway. “As she walked, she would flip up the hem of her nightgown and say ‘supersex’. She walked up to an elderly man in a wheelchair. Flipping her gown at him, she said, ‘supersex’. He sat silently for a moment or two and finally answered, ‘I’ll take the soup’.”

Pat stared at Debbie for a couple of seconds, then said, “I wish you wouldn’t do that. You talk too fast. And the punch line requires more ... passion. And please don’t quit your day job.”

Pat directed her attention back to Kate. “You haven’t been very lucky with men, is all I’m trying to say. Maybe that’s a better way to put it. Twenty-plus years is a long time to go without sex. The chemical buildup is probably enormous. The pores of your skin become volcanic eruption points. It screws up your mind somehow.”

“Oh, so now I’m sexually deprived?” Kate said with a confrontational tone. “At least I’m not a floozy.” Kate added. “Why do you volunteer at the VA hospital, huh?”

Pat was not used to Kate standing toe-to-toe once the topic of sex was brought up. Normally, she would just throw in the towel and make a comment like, ‘I’m sorry you feel that way’ or throw in a simple ‘oh, that’s nice’ or something like that. But this day she was different, probably because Kate knew Mrs. Mondale was hiding behind the parlor door.

“I volunteer at the VA because I love men in uniform,” Pat said.

“Bull! You surround yourself with a lot of men so you don't have to get close to any one in particular.”

Pat felt a little dagger from Kate's last statement. Kate forced a laugh, sat down on the couch and picked up a magazine. “Boo Hoo. The only man I ever loved got injured in Granada. Boo Hoo. Poor me.”

“Kate!” Debbie yelled.

“Well, tell her to stop calling me naive and insinuating I'm frigid. She still loves someone who disappeared from her life thirty years ago. How emotionally stable is that?” Kate turned to Pat and said, “Well, get over it. He's disabled and he's not coming back.”

“Kate,” Debbie yelled again. “Stop it.”

“It's okay, I deserved that,” Pat conceded. She had mentioned Joey a thousand times over the couple of weeks, so she figured she did deserve it. Yes, she loved him very much. *There is always something about the first love, Pat thought, which leaves an indelible mark on the soul.* For her, no man ever came close to providing the sensual feelings Joey stirred. He treated her with dignity and equality and humor. She felt alive with him, and he had much to do with the adventurous spirit that became part of her personhood over the years. She learned how to water ski with him. They got stuck in a raging river and almost died together. For a whole summer they were together every moment, then he went to war, and when their relationship was over, Patricia found it hard to come to closure. She still had an open wound, which she covered with a lot of bravado. She knew that, but she didn't want anyone else to know.

And, yes, Kate was right, Pat supposed. Every man she met was compared with Joey. Over time, he had become this perfect model which no man could ever achieve. In fact, Joey

himself would never be able to achieve this fictitious figure of manhood that had been contrived in Pat's mind. So, Pat let Kate have her say.

Because, mostly, it was true.

Mrs. Mondale took a bold step into the parlor and announced herself by outstretching her arms. There was no need for introductions. Everyone knew Mrs. Mondale.

"Hello, Elaine," Kate said.

"Hello, ladies," Elaine responded. "Up to your usual banter, I see. I got an earful at the door."

Debbie patted the sink, but Elaine stepped up to the parlor chair instead. "And I agree with Pat, Debbie. Don't give up your day job. No wash today. I just want you to trim a couple of inches off the back."

As Debbie worked on her hair, Kate sat next to Pat and read a magazine. All four were very quiet for a while. No one was talking. They looked at each other briefly, like they were a little leery of one another. Pat turned a page with a force that almost ripped it out of the magazine. Not to be outdone, Kate flipped the page and made a loud snap.

"Well, if no one is talking," Elaine said, "I guess I'll read, too. Kate, how about a magazine?"

Before Kate had a chance to respond, Pat grabbed one and threw it to Elaine like a Frisbee.

"Well, Kate," Elaine said while reading, "what's new with you? Are you still frigid?" Elaine let out with a hardy chuckle. "Now that's funny," she said to Debbie.

"MRS. MONDALE," Kate bellowed.

“That was so wrong,” Elaine immediately conceded. “I’m sorry. I was just trying to lighten the mood. I’m never this way unless I’m here with you guys. Pat, you’re the devil incarnate. You’re a bad influence on me.” She paused, then turned to Kate “But the last time I was here, I did hear Pat say...”

“Yeah...Yeah,” Pat chimed in. “Blah, Blah, Blah! Pat said shit.” She gave a 'no way' face to Kate.

Debbie stopped cutting Elaine’s hair and pointed the pair of scissors at Pat. “Can we keep this low key, please? I don’t think I can go another round like this morning.”

Pat nodded and went back to reading. She gave up a few moments of silence, then said, “So what’s this about telling your neighbor that we do staged plays for Debbie’s customers.”

Elaine smiled. She weighed her words carefully. “I’ve done enough interviews on you to write a biography. And I’ve seen plenty here to know that everything is an act with you.”

“Bingo,” Debbie agreed.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Elaine continued. “I love you dearly. I consider you a friend. Nothing wrong with having fun in life, I say.”

“What’s your point, Elaine?” Pat asked. “You can always tell when you’re talking to a writer. They give you several paragraphs of bullshit before they get to the point.”

“That’s assuming I have a point.”

“No. No,” Kate said. “We’re among friends. You have a point. I’d like to hear it.”

Elaine eyed Pat who nodded, gestured for her to 'go for it'. Elaine rolled her eyes and took a deep breath. She might’ve gotten in a little deeper than she wanted to, but she continued anyway. “Well. It’s my opinion that you felt abandoned when you thought Joey died in Granada.

You haven't forgotten that, and you haven't forgiven him either. You're mad at the world. Hence, you use it as a stage. No commitments. No risks. In and out, so to speak.”

“YES,” Kate yelled out.

“Oh, aren't we the all-wise,” Pat said.

“Observant, is all,” Elaine responded.

“Intrusive, you mean,” Pat added.

“You have an opinion,” Mr. Mondale said, “I have mine.”

“Good for you, Elaine,” Kate bellowed. “That's one for the home team.”

“Really?” Pat said. “Well, let me tell you both something. I've chosen my lifestyle and I like it. I'm proud at what I've accomplished, and I'm not embarrassed by my failures. I am a real person, Elaine. I consider you a friend, too, albeit a mouthy bitch who opts for wordy sentences as a defense for being honest. And hence, I'm not very moved by your rhetorical honesty, but I accept it.”

Pat turned to Kate and, as if she needed a bold statement to finish her dissertation, she said, “And you are one of my best friends as well. And I don't care if you're frigid.”

Kate gasped. “That's it. I'm taking you off my speed dial. And I'm leaving.” She got up to walk out.

“Hey,” Pat said. “Elaine was the one who called you frigid first.”

“You're just jealous because I met a man,” Kate said. “And you haven't been with one in decades.”

After Kate left, there was silence, A self-imposed, impenetrable silence. Pat looked at Elaine and Debbie. “That's not true,” she said. “I had sex last week, in fact. In a wheelchair. Don't knock if you haven't tried it.”

Debbie sighed while Elaine's face hid a deeper understanding of Pat.

CHAPTER FIVE

Debbie shook out the apron she was using on Mrs. Clark, one of her customers, and told her to look into the mirror to see if she liked perm just given her. Mrs. Clark liked it, and gave a twenty dollar bill and told her to keep the change. Debbie deposited the money in the register as Mrs. Clark thanked her and left

Meanwhile, Kate was just finishing up styling the hair of another customer who looked into the mirror long and hard at what Kate had just done. She took the scissors that were on the counter and snipped a cowlick that was sticking out of the side of her head.

“There. That should do it,” the customer said.

The customer handed Kate money and made an appointment in a couple of weeks to get a trim.

Pat waited for the customers to leave then told Debbie to hurry up and change because Pat and her were going to Mrs. Nelson’s house to style her hair.

“I can’t go,” Debbie said.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Pat said. “I’m driving. Come on. Let’s get a move on. Bring the curling iron and the shampoo. We’re going and that’s that.”

While Pat waited in her car, she called Mrs. Nelson to tell her they were on their way. When Debbie finally came out and got into the car, she told Pat that she was nervous and to be easy on her.

“Have I ever steered you wrong?” Pat asked. “Trust me, okay? Checklist: bottled water.”

Debbie opens her gym bag. “Got it,” Debbie said.

“Cold compress? Tissues? Towels”

“Check. Check and check.”

“How about blindfolds?”

Debbie pulled out a few blindfolds from her purse. She put one on her forehead as Pat started the car.

“All right. Now, Mrs. Nelson owns two apartment complexes that she rents out. She's very particular. And very rich.”

“Why does Nelson sound so familiar?”

“Her husband's a plumber. The name is on your toilet bowl. By the way, her cat just died, so be sensitive about talking about pets.

“Okay. What's she looking for?”

“Just a shampoo and style. That's it for now. I've been to her house a few times. She's very rich and gives hefty tips. Don't mention the dead cat, though. Okay. We're off to see the wizard. Pull your blindfold over your eyes.”

Debbie pulled the blindfold down as Pat started down the driveway.”Oh, God! Slow down,” she said.

“Ease up girl. I haven't gone ten feet yet.”

Debbie peeked over her blindfold, then reset it. “Oh, my God. I don't think I can do this, Pat.”

“You can, and you will. If all goes well, maybe tomorrow...”

“First things first. Now, slow down for crying out loud.”

“Let me make this traffic light first.” Pat gunned it and Debbie yelped.

“This is so unfair! Why am I being punished like this?”

Pat jammed on the brakes and pulled Debbie's blindfold up. "Look at me, dammit!" Pat yelled. "Look at me."

Debbie took her time looking at Pat and when she did, Pat slapped her in the face.

"Ouch," Debbie squealed. "What the hell was that for?"

"A slap in the face is punishment for being a pain in my ass. Your phobia is not punishment. God has not given you this affliction. What the hell do you think you've done to deserve this? What?"

"Oh, sweet mother of God," Debbie wailed. Pat slapped her harder than before.

"Ouch! Stop it. Have you lost your mind?"

"Now you have someone to blame for being hurt. Not yourself, not Wendy, not God. Blame me. See if that helps. Now put your blindfold back on. We don't want to be late."

Debbie slipped the blindfold back on as Pat continued driving. After a couple of seconds, Debbie sang Jingle Bells in a high pitch voice.

"Debbie, will you please stop?" Pat asked politely.

Debbie groped for the radio and turned it on. She changed the station repeatedly until polka music played. Pat reached over and turned the radio off.

After a beat, Debbie turned it back on, and found a country western station and turned the sound level to its max. Debbie shrieked out the lyrics and Pat quickly turned the radio off. Before Debbie reached for the radio again, Pat said, "I swear if you touch that button one more time I'll beat you silly. You think my slaps in the face were hard, I'll shove your stomach to your backbone with one punch. I'll show you what hard is."

Debbie decided not to fiddle with the radio anymore. "Wise choice," Pat said.

Instead, Debbie turned her attention to the window controls and started flipping the windows up and down.

“Stop it!” Pat yelled.

Debbie ignored her and Pat reached over to smack her hand away from the controls, and while doing so lost control of the car.

“OH, MY GOD!” Pat said as they smacked into a tree. Anyone close by could hear the impact sounds of smashing metal and glass being broken, it was that bad.

Wendy walked in from the foyer and Kate waved her in while talking into the phone. She put her pocketbook down on the chair and waited for Kate to get off the phone.

“Maybe we will,” Kate said into the phone. “Thanks for calling.” Kate hung up and was all smiles.

“What did he say that’s making you blush so?” Wendy asked.

“He dialed the wrong number, but he said I had a bedroom voice.”

“He dialed the wrong number, and we got to talk. He said I had a bedroom voice.”

“So he was flirtatious, huh? Or you were. Do you do that often?”

“I would never do that. It’s not professional.”

“Oh. Okay. Is my mom upstairs?”

“She went with Pat to a customer’s house.”

“Really. Hmm. If she’s okay to go out to a customer’s house, maybe she’ll be okay to go tomorrow night then,”

“Maybe. Who knows?”

“Well, anyway, I promised the percussionist I’d have his car back by six.”

“I don't know if she'll be back in time,” Kate said. “She'll be very disappointed.”

“Me too. To be honest, I'm a little nervous about seeing her again.”

“Yes. I sense that. Confused might be a better word.”

“I haven't told you the news yet.”

“I sense it's deep. It's bigger than just apologies.”

“Oh, that's right. You're a clairvoyant. That's scary sometimes, isn't it?”

Just then, Debbie and Pat walked into the office.

“Oh, my God, Debbie,” Kate exclaimed, “what happened to you? What's with the bandage?”

“She's ok,” Pat said. “But my car isn't. She was playing with the radio and windows. I sideswiped a huge tree while I was trying to deal with this crazy lady, here. I broke my rearview mirror, lost my bumper. We naturally didn't make it to Mrs. Nelson's house.”

“Well then,” Kate said. “I see there's no reason for me to stay. Let me take my leave. My furry friends need to be fed and Wendy has something very important to tell you Debbie.”

Kate exited to an awkward silence.

Finally, Debbie broke the silence. “I'm glad you stopped back, Wendy.”

“Are you, mother?”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Listen. If the accident becomes an excuse to miss my solo, you'll be pleased to know that PBS has a more holistic approach and will be broadcasting the concert live.”

“Why do you have to be so damn...” Debbie said but stopped.

After a brief silence, Wendy said, “Well, are you going to make it to the city tomorrow?” Wendy got no response. “I didn't think so. So, what do you want from me? I thought you might be pleasantly surprised you can hunker down here and watch it on TV with a bowl of popcorn and a box of Juicy Fruits. Aren't you happy about that, Mother?”

“Why can't you be a little more ...” again Debbie couldn't finish the statement, so Wendy finished it for her. “Compassionate?” she said.

“No. Optimistic.”

“Optimistic!?! Hmm. Let's rewind the clock and replay my softball championship when I was very optimistic you'd be there.”

“You have no idea what I've done so you could have a good education.”

“Oh, no. Here we go again. Don't start Mother or...”

“Or what? Going to leave for another two years? You have no gratitude. This is your senior class recital all over again.”

“You've gotta be kidding me.”

“You never told me about that performance either.”

“Oh, boy,” Pat interjected. “I think I better go.”

“Stay, Pat,” Wendy said. “She may need emotional support after I'm finished.”

“You don't understand, Wendy. My day just isn't getting any better.”

“Well, hang tight, your ride is about to get a little bumpier.” Wendy then faced her mother squarely, as if what she was about to say is directed to her only. “Let me tell you what it was like in high school with everyone talking behind my back.”

“Oh, really, Wendy,” Debbie said. “You're gonna go there? You were a musical savant, for chrissakes. If they were talking behind your back it was because twenty colleges were

tripping over each other to give you a scholarship. Five orchestras were offering you a full-time position before you even graduated. *Oh, poor me, people are talking about me because I'm so wonderful.*”

“Really, Mother? How did you get so enlightened being a recluse? You never came to one single Parent-Teachers meeting because of your,” and with finger quotes she said ‘condition’. Not one recital in four years because of your condition. Not one softball game because of your condition. Not even graduation. You were the talk of the town, so let me tell you, if they were talking about anyone, it was you, not me.”

“Wendy,” Pat interjected, “all this is a bit unfair; don’t you think?”

“Is it fair my own mother blames me for her...‘condition’?”

“I told you your birth was difficult. That’s all. I don’t blame you for anything.”

“Not even a year of therapy has convinced me of that.”

Debbie was aghast. “Therapy,” she said. “Therapy!?! Why would my daughter need therapy?”

“Oh, my shrink warned me I might not be ready for this. He was right.”

“Ready for what? To tell your mother the truth. After all I’ve done for you...you spoiled brat.”

“The truth, Mother? I’ll tell you the truth. Here comes the whole nine yards of truth. It about one of those many performances you missed.”

And Wendy told her mother the story that had been haunting her for years. It was a time in high school after she gave a solo performance at the Centennial Concert in the auditorium of the high school. People were getting into their cars and any one of them would’ve taken her

home, but she didn't ask. She was going to experience the full pain of walking home alone then pass it along to her mother.

"I was too embarrassed to let people know I didn't have a ride home, so I snuck away," she said. "I figured the walk home was only a mile because I knew which yard to cut through and which dark alleys to take. Maybe you remember that night, Mom? My pants were torn and I had black and blues all over my legs and I said I fell off a fence on the way home."

"I remember," Debbie said softly as she dreaded what was to follow.

"I was in a hurry to get home to finish my book report. So, I cut through Davidson Street, past the Cherrywood Lounge. I heard noises and hesitated."

She continued and explained that night she got raped. It was a shadow of a figure who came out of Cherrywood Lounge and followed her to the picket fence that had a slat missing. That missing slat gave her hope, but behind it was a busy street, and she waited a little bit too long. She ripped her pants while she was yanked to the ground.

She remembered watching a cloud drift in front of the moon when she started to scream, but he stuffed her mouth with grass. Then he punched her twice in the stomach to silence her. In a gravelly, horrifying voice he said, "I'll kill you if you scream."

So, she didn't scream, and then, as he rubbed her cheek with one hand, he unbuckled his filthy jeans with his other.

"I inhaled quickly as I tried to scream," she said, "but nothing came out. My chin banged my chest again...and again...and again, until I realized I was being raped. Then he finished with a sickly whimper, and he laid on top of me for a few seconds, enjoying his conquest, I suppose. He finally got up and buckled up his pants, and walked away, whistling while I lay there feeling like I was dying."

Debbie waved her arms as if she didn't want to hear anything more. She covered her ears, but Wendy removed Debbie's hands so she could hear.

"Today, when a stranger enters the room, I still smell the stink of cigarettes and beer.

Debbie yelled and then a stunned silence filled the room.

"Nothing to say, Mom?"

"I told you to never go near the Cherrywood Lounge..."

"Really. That's what you want to say after what I told you?"

"What do you want me to say?"

Debbie tried to speak her feelings through her sobs, but she couldn't. She wanted to hug Wendy, but she couldn't do that either. She wanted to tell her that she was going to try and go to Carnegie Hall tomorrow but couldn't. Finally, she just said, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I was scared, Mother. I was scared that if I whispered a word of it to anyone he might come back and do it again. Or something worse."

No one spoke for a moment, then Pat stood and said, "Is this the news you wanted to share with us, Wendy?"

"Partly. Yes."

"What else, then?"

"I realized I was pregnant two months later, and the Maestro, instead of firing me, took me in his home. I got an abortion. It was a boy, mother. The boy that you've always wanted."

"Oh my God. You killed my grandson? Oh, God. This is all my fault." Debbie stood and waved her hands as if there's nothing else to say. She faced the wall and sobbed.

"Cat got your tongue, Mother?"

"Who's the...Who's...Who's..."

Wendy wanted her mother to say the word, but Debbie couldn't bring herself to say it, so Wendy said it, "The father? Well, that's a good question. Could be Trevor's, I guess, or..." she got very close to her mother's face and said, "...the rapist's." She felt she would throw that in as one of her last stinging statements before she left.

Pat cleared her throat and said, "Does Trevor know about this?"

"He's always known about the rape, but not about the pregnancy. That's why I stayed away for so long and didn't write or call. I was ashamed. I felt guilty. I know I should've told Trevor. I know I should've gotten a DNA test, but I was so distraught, and I didn't know what to do. So, I didn't call anyone"

"But you told the Maestro."

"Yes."

"Wendy," Pat said, "I'm very sorry about what happened to you. What you just told us explains a lot. I could've been a grandmother, I guess. That would've been nice, but...I think you did the right thing under the circumstances."

"I haven't called because I didn't know what to say. I haven't worked everything out yet, Mom. This is my first step. My doctor assures me one step at a time is the way to go."

As Wendy started to leave, she said, "One thing hasn't changed, Mom. I can still leave the house knowing you won't follow me." Wendy waited for a response but got none.

"But I do love you, Wendy. I want us to have a relationship. I want us to be close. I feel so lost without you."

"Yeah, me too. That will all change if I see you in the audience tomorrow night, then I'll know we can have a relationship. No more missed opportunities. Until then." Wendy exits.

Trevor sat at a small desk next to his bed correcting students' papers. Pat appeared at the door, waited a second or two, then entered and sat on the bed. Trevor handed her a folder with the US Army crest on the cover. She skimmed through it and looked up at Trevor. He shrugged his shoulders as if to say "maybe".

“We have to talk,” she said.

CHAPTER SIX

Wendy sat in the string section on stage of the prestigious Isaac Stern Concert Hall at Carnegie Hall. As usual, the musicians who played string instruments were divided into four sections: the violins, second violins, violas, and the cellos and double basses. There were several cello players to the right of the Maestro, in the front row, and Wendy occupied the far seat, next to Damian, one of the double bass players.

The members of the orchestra sat in full view of the chamber, strumming their instruments, looking around as if mesmerized by the ambiance of the room. This was the first outing to the famous Carnegie Hall for most of the members of the orchestra. It was certainly Wendy's first visit; her eyes took in the hall in one glance. In awe of its beauty, she was lost in its splendor, and its history.

"That last set wasn't too bad," the Maestro finally said, breaking the spell the Hall had on most of his performers. "But I sense that some of you are a little intimidated by this place." The Maestro held his hands out and swirled around as if to say, *Behold, Carnegie Hall*. He stood before them with arms outstretched, like an evangelist. "This is just another hall," he said.

The performers laughed, appropriately. He took a few seconds himself to weigh in on the ambiance of the hall. "Hey, you people are the best," he said to them. "So...everyone, close your eyes and take a deep breath."

The musicians closed their eyes and took deep breaths while the Maestro lectured them not be distracted. Still, their leader didn't seem to be all that happy with the way they sounded,

and he told them so. “The way you sound now,” he said, “I wouldn't schedule you to play at a high school graduation.”

Damian leaned over slightly to Wendy and whispered without moving a muscle on his face – a ventriloquist extraordinaire. “He always gets this way close to opening night. Have you noticed that?”

The Maestro jerked his head in several directions, as if he heard the whispering but couldn't determine exactly where it was coming from. He listened with his right ear, then his left, triangulating the source.

Wendy leaned slightly towards Damian and spoke with a frozen face, also a very good ventriloquist. “I know. I think he hears talking but he doesn't know where it's coming from.”

The Maestro struck his stick on the dais. The baton broke in two, sending half it flying into the violin section. He bent down and picked up another baton from his case and continued his banging.

“QUIET,” he yelled, then paused. “Will everyone please move to the Fifth Concerto.”

The musicians turned their sheets to the Fifth Concerto while Damian leaned slightly to Wendy, and with no lip movement said, “You're his pet, you know.”

“QUIET,” the Maestro yelled again. “I don't know who is talking, but I want QUIET!” The Maestro waved his wand a few times and the musicians began playing. The sound coming from the orchestra took on a splendid quality. The breath of the sound, for the normal ear, was captivating, entrancing.

The Maestro's eyes flicked back and forth picking up the off tones and miscreant notes. He was positioned in the center and he could hear all the musicians at once. He looked in several directions and finally rapped his baton furiously on the dais.

“No ... no ... no,” he said, pointing at Wendy. “You have the most splendid tool in front of you and all you can do is pluck on it. And Damian, don’t lean in so far when you speak. You are giving yourself up by doing that.”

He looks to the rest of the orchestra. “Remember, people. If the cello sounds like a cello, and a viola sounds like a viola and a trumpet sounds like a trumpet, then this orchestra will sound like an orchestra. Well, ladies and gentlemen, I’m here to tell you that you are not just an orchestra. You are much more than that. You are one organism playing your soul. You are as much an instrument as the ‘thing’ you are playing. Unless you can become one with the instrument ... Unless you can let your soul play and not your fingers or hand or mouth, then I have taught you nothing.”

The Maestro hit his baton on the dais again and the orchestra played with much more zest and vigor than before. He silently motioned for everyone to stop, except for Wendy. She played on, alone, a flowing movement. Mesmerizing! She burst into a Gothic chamber rock, and then settled into a more contemporary, solemn music.

The members of the orchestra rested their instruments while Wendy played on. The Maestro looked across the stage and noticed everyone seemed bewitched by the beautiful sounds coming from her cello.

Damian’s head swerved back and forth as if he were having a spiritual experience. The Maestro watched the effect Wendy was having on the entire orchestra, then he closed his eyes and enjoyed the moment as she played with great zest, almost as if taking hostility out on the instrument.

Then the entire orchestra played towards a finale with an energy that was very physical. The sweat and fatigued faces were tell-tale signs the night-long rehearsal was nearing half-time.

They played with robustness to the movement's conclusion. Out of breath, the ensemble put their instruments down and nodded to each other. They knew they had performed well.

“That's more like it. Okay. Now, let's take a break and I want you back in 15 minutes. Now turn to page ten. That's what we'll do when you come back. I want reserve, clarity, patience.”

Moans echoed throughout the stage. Even the security guard in the back of the hall groaned since he was waiting to lock up so he could leave. The Maestro raised his stick and waited a beat. “This is the last piece for tonight. I promise. In 15 minutes.”



Wendy sat alone in the basement rehearsal studio playing her cello. The sound coming from her cello wasn't anything like the angelic music she played before. It was as if she was auditioning for a soundtrack of the 'Rocky Horror Picture Show'. Pitchy! Screeching! She started and stopped several times, having difficulty with a particular piece, when Trevor entered, unnoticed. Wendy, frustrated, curses, then sees Trevor.

“I remember that temper...” Trevor said.

Startled, Wendy gasped at the sight him. “Trevor, my God!” she exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

“Hello, Wendy. I couldn't sleep.”

They met in the center of the room in an awkward embrace. It was soft with a built-in memory that normally ended in a kiss. Trevor felt her energies shoot through him like a change of seasons.

“How did you find me?” Wendy asked.

“A guy at the desk said you were rehearsing downstairs. I listened for the cello and saw the baseball cap. Having trouble with the piece?”

“The Maestro wants a tempo change and I'm trying to improvise a little.”

“Ah, yes. The Maestro! Heard he's one hell of a great guy. Let you stay with him for a while, I understand.”

“A year.” Wendy returned to her seat. “Don't make this any more difficult than it is, Trevor. There's a lot you don't understand.”

“Why would I make things more difficult? Except for our chance meeting yesterday, I haven't heard a word from you in two years. All my phone calls and letters were ignored. Birthdays and holidays? Not a peep. No reason for me to be upset, right? Shit, Wendy, you couldn't let me know you got pregnant?”

“This isn't the time, Trevor.”

“You're right. Two years ago would've been better.”

“Don't use that tone with me.”

“I came home late yesterday and my mother bombards me with a thousand questions. She asks me if I got you pregnant. I'm in the twilight zone wondering what the hell was she talking about. What universe was I in? So, excuse me if I seem upset.”

“You'd better go.”

“Sorry I bothered you before your big gig. I just thought we had something important to discuss.”

Trevor turned and had every intention to leave, but Wendy told him to wait and patted the seat next to her. So, he wallowed his pride, and sat next to her.

“I'm sorry I didn't call you.”

“I would’ve been there for you, Wendy.”

“I know. That’s the very reason why I didn’t call. You would’ve married me right away even if the baby wasn’t yours. And both of us would have paid the price years later.”

Trevor reached in his pocket and took out a man’s wristwatch. “Your prom gift to me? Remember?”

“Yes,” Wendy said, remembering.

“You’re lucky it’s still in one piece. I almost ripped this thing apart more than once. I’ve kept it because it represents what could’ve been. I was content, more or less, before yesterday. I was even ready to find someone new, but ... but ...”

“It’d be better to find someone else, Trevor.”

“I gave it a try, actually.”

“That’s good. Keep trying.”

“I have. My last endeavor was Sharon. She wasn’t a good kisser, though. She’s a fashion designer. Loves to shop. She saw this evening dress in a store window that caught her eye one night as we passed by. She was so vibrant and alive at that moment. I thought of you and how you looked when you’re playing on stage, so I grabbed her and kissed her right there, and...Well, I opened my eyes and saw it wasn’t you. There was nothing in that kiss. No excitement. We sort of rubbed lips and she smiled in the middle of it, like I was doing her a favor.”

“When things end badly, you move on. It’s not hard to figure out.”

“It didn’t end badly for her. She bought the dress.”

They both laughed, then an awkward silence ensued.

“So,” Trevor said, breaking the silence. “I’m just a fond memory?”

“I’m not the same person, Trevor. Don’t expect me to have the same feelings.”

“All I expect are some answers.”

“What will that change?”

“You’re right. But what right do you have to make decisions for me? That could’ve been my child.”

“What about my rights? What rights did I have when I was thrown on the ground, violated? You can't understand the darkness that hides in my soul. Sometimes, when I'm in the subway, or in a crowded elevator, I smell his sweat and my stomach turns. I feel his weight pressing into me and I can't breathe. That horror won't leave. Until it does...”

“So, the lesson about moving on applies just to me?” Trevor immediately regretted saying that, so he said he was sorry and added, “I would’ve been there for you, just like I was before you left for college.”

“I know. And that’s the very reason why I didn’t call. I remember your allegiance, but would you have married me if I told you I was pregnant? Out of pity, perhaps? I was too broken, Trevor. I didn't have a direction. I didn’t know what to do. Now I do.”

“You've worked it all out. I'm happy for you.”

Static on the LOUDSPEAKER interrupted them, and then a voice came barreling through. “Five minute call. Musicians back on stage in five minutes.”

“Rehearsal’s starting again. I have to go.”

“Wendy, for God's sake. Don't leave me like this. What do I do?”

“I can't tell you what to do. Two years of silence is unforgivable. I will apologize to you and my mother for that, but not right now? No apologies today!”

Wendy began to collect her things: music sheets, backpack, water bottle, jacket, etc. and as she picked up her bow that she threw across the room, she added, “I'm not asking for

forgiveness, Trevor. I worked too hard to get here to start feeling sorry for myself now. I concentrate on my music, and I move forward. I suggest you do what's best for yourself, same as I did."

"This isn't fair."

"Fair!?! Ha. My rape isn't fair. My mother's agoraphobia isn't fair. My solo isn't fair to the percussionist who wants one as well. And so it goes on."

"So, that's it? It's over between us? Officially."

"I didn't say that."

"Well, let me tell you. You don't have to worry about me, Wendy. I'll get through this. Being alone is something I've gotten good at. But before I leave, I need to tell you something."

"Make it quick. I have to go."

"Last night, after my mom demanded to know if I was a father to your...baby, she told me my father wasn't dead. Can you believe that? Yes, he got injured in the Granada conflict, but he didn't die. He's alive somewhere and obviously never wanted a son in his life. So, you run back to Boston after your solo here, and go feel sorry for yourself. You're not the only one in this world who rejected a son."

Wendy covered her face and sobbed. Trevor placed the wristwatch on a music stand and left without looking back. Wendy was unaware of his exit. She covered her face with her hands.

"I'm so sorry, Trevor. I never meant to push you away. I was just scared I'd lose you forever if the baby wasn't yours. What if it wasn't yours and I told you? What if it was yours and you said...?" She uncovered her face and saw that Trevor had left.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kate and Pat entered Debbie's beauty parlor with filled shopping bags: one with office supplies and one with groceries. Kate was putting the office items away.

"Will you be quiet, for crying out loud," Pat said. "Debbie's sleeping."

"Sorry. I don't want to wake Debbie, what with all she's been through." Kate was extra quiet while putting away the items.

"She took a sleeping pill. She'll be up soon. When she comes down let's not talk about Wendy or the abortion. Let's be upbeat today. Ok?"

"Let's talk about that gorgeous hunk who came in a week ago. He wanted to know if we did men's hair. You remember. He was the guy who was looking to rent an apartment by Yankee Stadium so he could watch the World Series from his window."

"How could I forget? He was a younger Sean Connery with bushy hair. You stammered like a schoolgirl. You got all flushed and mumbly. How could I forget?"

"At least I wasn't drooling all over myself like a puppy-dog," Kate fired back.

"I was not," Pat said. "But did you notice his big hands? And you know what they say about men with big hands?"

Kate's inquisitive look gave her away. She didn't know.

"You see? This is why we don't have sex talks. Your sex life is like you owning a dachshund."

"I don't own a dachshund."

"Exactly." Pat took a sip from her teacup. "Ew! This tea is not doing anything for me. Follow me."

Kate grabbed her purse and followed Pat outside.

In the backyard, by the swing set, Pat walked to the fence post, took off the top, reached down deep, pulled out a bottle of booze and walked to the table outside.

“How long has that been there?”

“Since the Yankees won the pennant two years ago. Want some?”

Pat filled her cup, took a swig and passed the cup to Kate. Kate took a sip then pulled out a joint from her purse.

“Is that what I think it is?” Pat inquired.

“My next-door neighbor grows his own. I don't do this very often.” Kate lit it up, took a 'hit' and handed the joint to Pat. They exchanged the joint and cup.

“May I ask you something without you getting upset?”

“Go for it, Pat said.

“How can you stay attached to a man you've only seen once in 30 years?”

“The memories make me feel good, I guess.” She took another toke and was feeling no pain. “Oh, who am I kidding,” Pat said. “I never came to closure with him emotionally. I haven't allowed myself to feel for a man ever since Joey. I wanted us to marry, Kate. So much.”

“He probably loved you too much to get married. He didn't want to make you a widow if he never came back.”

They continue to smoke and drink, and if either one of them had to give you an account of what they talked about, they wouldn't be able to. They wouldn't remember.

“I would've taken that risk. I don't know why he couldn't.”

“I bet if you had told him you were pregnant, he would've married you to provide for Trevor if something did happen to him in Granada.”

“You could be right, Kate. I messed up, didn't I? Screwed it all up. Let's not talk about him.” Pat poured a drink in the cup and raised it. “A toast to your bingo man.”

Pat took a quick drink and offered the cup to Kate, but she refused it.

“Come on! Why don't you just go for it?” Pat suggested.

“I don't know how to just ‘go for it’. I'm not like you, Pat.”

“I think your man needs a bit of encouragement. Maybe the fourth move.”

Kate didn't know what to say, so she kept silent.

“Okay,” Pat started out, “The first move is tongue in the mouth. Second move is take off your bra. Third move is Clinton sex. You know, Cunnilingus...”

“Oh, my cousin works for Aer Lingus.”

They both laugh, and they both take a swig.

“I'm just not good with men, Pat. Every damn time I feel something, you know, the “twang”, it never works out. I can't seem to survive the courtship. At first I lose my power, but when it eventually returns it just seems to get in the way. Like the time I was being courted by Tim, the lawyer. That could've amounted to something.”

“A lawyer.” Pat was impressed. “So, what happened?”

“Well, we dated for a while. Once my estrogen levels were normal, my psychic abilities returned. I did a reading on him and found out he was overcharging a client. When I called him on it he freaked out because he didn't know how to handle me after that. So, he split. I never saw him again.”

“So, you keep quiet with the new guy.”

Neither say anything for a couple of seconds.

“Oh, Pat. I don't know what to do,” Kate said. “What should I do?”

“Relax. Be yourself. You're a good-looking woman, although you should dress better. Accent your assets.”

“When you compliment me, which is not often, mind you, you always give me a shit-sandwich.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“You compliment me a couple of times,” Kate said, “then you stick shit in the middle.”

“Shit? Really?” Pat queried. “You normally don't use vulgar language.”

“Oh, Kate, ‘you're so good-looking - you dress like crap - you're very lady-like.’ Shit sandwich.” house

“I didn't say you were 'sooo' good looking. I said you were good looking. If you were 'sooo' good looking men would be tripping over themselves to ask you out.”

A noise from the house startled Pat.

“I hear Debbie coming,” Pat said. “Get rid of this stuff.”

Pat ran to the fence post and jammed the bottle back in. Kate tossed the joint, fanned the air, and ran to catch up to Pat.

Pat and Kate entered the office just as Debbie did.

“Good morning, ladies. Or is it afternoon.”

“I don't know,” Pat said. “It's hard to tell when you're having fun.”

“Okay. I've cried half the night, so I'm not having fun, and I have no more tears left. But I'm better this morning. You don't have to tip-toe around me. Understood? Pat, I assume you told Kate everything.”

Pat nodded.

“Good. Now I have something to say. I've decided to go tonight. I want to see Wendy's performance. I'll let the chips fall where they may. If I die, I die.”

Debbie waited for Pat's response. She finally gave one. “Good. I'll take you. But if I drive you I'll have to tie your hands and feet to the armrest, and put duct tape over your mouth.”

“I promise I won't touch anything. I'll just sing and hum. And you can wear earplugs.”

“Good. I can't do another day like yesterday.”

“And neither can I.”

Pat flicked her fingers off her temple indicating a bomb was exploding.

“Good,” Debbie said, “There's nothing left to say right now, so let's try and...”

Debbie searches for the right word.

“Make merry!” Kate said.

“'Make merry?'” Pat echoes. “What are we, in 18th Century England?”

“Yes, I like that. Let's 'make merry'. Let's keep things low on the Richter Scale today, okay?” Debbie said as she sniffed. “Pat, you look like you've been drinking. Have you been drinking? And that smell. What is that smell?”

“Make no mistake about it. The answer is a resounding, ‘Yes’. But just a little bit.” Pat pointed to Kate and giggled, then added, “She's been smoking pot.”

“Hey,” Kate said, feeling betrayed. “So has she.”

Debbie threw both hands to her face in disbelief.

“You should join us,” Pat suggested.

“Just sober up,” Debbie scolded. “Both of you. This is a business, not Woodstock.”

The three fall silent.

“I think I want to get my realty license,” Kate said, breaking the silence.

“People are not going to buy homes from someone who smells like kitty-poop all the time?”

“Don't start, Pat.”

“Then stick to what you do best. Answer phones, poop-head.”

“Ladies, please stop your bickering,” Debbie said.

The doorbell rang. After a brief pause Debbie chimed in, “Is someone going to get the door?”

The doorbell rang again. Pat and Kate stared at each other.

“You're the office flunkie,” Pat said, “so answer the door. Ooo. You don't know who it is? That can mean only one thing.”

The doorbell rang again.

“I'm counting to three,” Debbie said with authority, “and if somebody isn't hauling ass to the front door, you'll both lose a day's pay, I swear. One ...”

“One-and-a-half,” Pat inserted.

“Two ...”

“Better get it, Kate, or I swear, I'll sneak in your basement and sterilize your cats.”

“You do that, and I'll tell your gynecologist that you're thinking of leaving her because her cheek wart is driving you crazy.”

“Three...” Debbie moved to get up, but Kate got up first and said, “Excuse me. I have to get the door.”

Kate opened the front door and was met by Dan who stood there holding a magnificent display of flowers.

“These will need water right away,” Dan said.

“They're heavenly, Dan. The colors are dazzling. Is it your arrangement?”

“Yes,” Dan said. “I bought them with the bingo money I won the other night.”

“Nice. Thank you. Say, how would you like to go to see my boss's daughter play in the Boston Philharmonic tomorrow night at Carnegie Hall? I'll buy if you fly.”

“I'd love to,” he said. “She's an artist, aye? I'm sort of an artist too, you know. I wrote an article for the Mystery Writer's Magazine.”

“Really. Who's your favorite author?”

“Agatha Christie. No one matches her intrigue and suspense in a story.”

“Yes, I agree.”

“Ms. Devine, tell me something about you.”

“There's not much to tell. Have a stable of cats. A few more since yesterday. Love to read plays. I collect autographs of writers. Have a Thornton Wilder, a John Steinbeck.”

“What's your favorite play?”

“Cyrano de Bergerac! The romance and noble sentiment in that play always give me chills.”

The moment of silence is savored by both of them. Dan moved in and gave Kate a Rhett Butler kind of kiss. Kate noticed Pat by the door while Dan started nibbling on her neck.

“Stop it, you two,” Pat said.

“He's so romantic, isn't he?” Kate said to Pat.

“Romantic my ass. He's gnawing at your neck like it's a hot dog. A little advice, Kate. Better practice safe sex with this guy.”

“We’ve already discussed that.” Kate elbowed Dan in his ribs. “Dan is going to install handrails around my bed.”

Pat didn’t know how to respond to that with Dan standing right there. So, she just said, “Funny! Where did you hide the conditioner?”

“You’re busy. I’ll go,” Dan said. “I’ll pick you up at six, tomorrow.”

Kate reached into her pocket and withdrew a business card and handed it to Dan. “Here. My address is on there.”

Dan took the card and left.

The next day, as Pat took the rollers out of Mrs. Hennessy hair, Mrs. Hennessy wanted to know where Debbie was because she normally did her hair. Pat told Mrs. Hennessy that today was Wendy’s solo at Carnegie Hall, and Debbie was upstairs getting ready for that event.

“I’m taking her there, so I’m going to. How do I look.” Pat modeled her dress to Mrs. Hennessey.

“You look marvelous,” she said with a little bit of Billy Crystal thrown in.

Mrs. Hennessy got up from her chair and looked at herself in the wall mirror.

“Tell Debbie to have a good time,” she said. “I’m just glad you had the time to do what you did. You have a good time too. Too-da-loo.”

And with that she paid Pat and left. Pat immediately sat down to read a magazine while she waited for Debbie to get ready. After a few seconds, she yelled, “Let’s get a move on it, Debbie. Carnegie Hall is waiting.”

Just then a man with a mangled face came in, “I’m sorry,” the man said. ‘I used to live around here, so you think I wouldn’t be so lost. I’m looking for the donut shop that I thought was

close by. The lady who just left said you might be able to help me. Your voice, though. You sound like someone I used to know. Wait a second.”

Stunned, Pat slowly rose. They looked at each other and Pat knew instantly who it was.

A slow realization overcame Joey. “I didn’t know...I...I...Gotta go.”

“You just can’t drop into my life like this and then leave!” Pat said. “Again!”

Joey backs up, as if he's going to run.

“Wait! I need to tell you something. You’re a father, Joey. You have a son.”

Joey hesitated on his exit. “No. That’s impossible. I didn’t hear you say that. I can’t do this.” Joey bolted away just as Debbie entered almost knocking her over. Pat ran to Debbie.

“Whatever did you say to that man?” Debbie asked.

“Debbie! That was Joey. He came in here wanting to know directions.”

“You mean, Joey as in Trevor’s father?”

They both heard the sound of a car peeling out. “Well, what are you waiting for, girl? Jump in your car and go after him.”

“But what about you? I’m supposed to take you to the concert.”

“Don't worry about me. I'll find a way. I'll call Kate on her cell or take a cab. Or something. Now, go before you lose him again. Just go! You'll spend the rest of your life regretting it if you don't.”

“Don't forget to bring Wendy's pocketbook. She left it here yesterday.”

“Okay. Okay. Go.”

Pat kissed her, gave her thanks, and left.

Debbie ran to her desk, picked up the phone and dialed. "Hello," she said into the phone. "I need a taxi. Quick..." She listened a bit and then said into the phone, "World Series, my ass. I can't wait that long. Never mind."

Debbie hung up, and reached over to the recorder, and turned it on.

'Disease and illness are preventable afflictions when your primary response to a tense situation is stress and anxiety. You need to relax physically and mentally...'

Debbie dialed another number and turned off the recorder.

"Damn you, Kate. Pick up. Pick up."

After a couple of seconds, she hung up. "Dear God, not the bus," she said to herself.

Debbie stood and paced back and forth trying to figure out what to do. She looked to the ceiling and said, "Dear God, help me."

Just as she said this, Wendy entered, but Debbie's back was to her and she didn't see Wendy enter.

"What am I going to tell Wendy? No...No. I gotta go to Carnegie. I'll take the bus. I'll take the bus. That's what I'll do."

Debbie turned quickly and saw Wendy with her hand over her mouth ready to cry.

"I wanted it to be a surprise."

"I don't know what to say, Mom. After thirty years..."

"Yes. Yes. Now don't make a big deal of it. Let's go."

Wendy spotted her pocketbook on Pat's desk and grabbed it.

"I left my pocketbook here yesterday," Wendy said. "That's why I'm here. Come on. My taxi is outside. We'll take it together."

“No taxis. Too close to the ground. Things speed by too fast. The bus is better. Bigger. Less claustrophobic.”

“I don't have time to argue, Mom. I'm going to miss first call. The taxi's right outside. Let's go.”

Debbie ran into the vestibule area, retrieved her shawl and an umbrella from the alcove area. “In case it rains,” Debbie spit out, then opened the front door just as a car whizzed by. A kaleidoscope of images caused her to falter. She slammed the door shut, then opened it again, and everything appeared normal.

“See,” Wendy said. “Everything's going to be okay. It's nice outside.”

Wendy escorted her mother to the taxi while Debbie moaned and groaned all the way.

Wendy slid in the back seat, pulled Debbie in next to her. Wendy reached over and slammed the door. To Debbie, the sound was like cell doors closing.

“Please hurry,” Wendy said to the taxi driver. “I'm going to be late.”

The airplane flying overhead, the motor scooter buzzing by, the voice of the taxi driver, all intensified and showed Debbie's full range of agoraphobia as she reacted to the onslaught of the outside world. After a brief period of traveling in the taxi, she repeated several times, “The bus is better. The bus is better...”

Debbie saw a church and grabbed her shawl and umbrella and bolted out of the taxi while it was still moving. She stumbled as she ran up the steps to the front door and headed right for the confessional booths, as if she knew where she was going.

Back at the taxi, Wendy handed the driver money and said, “Wait five minutes then go if we're not here by then.”

The front doors opened, and Wendy walked into the church. “I haven't got time for this. Okay, Mother. You win. We'll take the bus.”

Wendy moved toward the sobbing, which was coming from the confessional. Wendy turned the knob to the other chamber; it was locked, so she moved the shawl and umbrella that was leaning against the booth and ducked into the center confessional. Her mother continued sobbing in the next booth over.

“Mom...stop.”

“I'm sorry, sweetheart. I can't help this,” Debbie said through her sobs. “I know you don't believe me, but I really can't help it.”

“At this point, it doesn't matter what I believe. Can we just get focused so we can go to the bus stop? Please.”

“See. You don't care, do you?”

“I don't have time for this circular crap, Mother.” She let out with a deep sigh and then said, “Okay. You want absolution. I absolve you from your sins. Say three Our Fathers and three Hail Mary's.”

“What are you doing?”

“I'm giving you ... what do you call it? Absolution of your sins.”

“But you're not even Catholic.”

“Forgiveness is a human trait, not a religious one. I forgive you, Mom.”

“Then tell me to drink two cups of arsenic, but don't tell me to say the rosary.”

There was silence, then a groan from Wendy.

“You don't sound too forgiving.”

“What do you want me to say, Mom?”

“Tell me you love me and it doesn’t matter if I go to Carnegie Hall.”

Debbie started weeping again – this time it was more of a wail, which made Wendy scream. The echo of Wendy's scream was followed by total silence, which accentuated the echo of that scream throughout the church.

“Why did you do that?” Debbie asked.

“Why is the sky blue, Mommy? Why is there evil in the world, Mommy? Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? I suppose you wish I were more grateful, don't you?”

“That would help. Gratefulness is a quality that you’re missing. Yes.”

“Well, I've tried to get close to you, Mother. And when I did, your issues seemed to get in the way. I can't stifle this thing that happens inside me, no matter how much I try. It’s like someone's stoking coals in my soul. A chemical pumps through my body and I can't look at you without wanting to scream. You should understand that feeling, right?”

“Yeah, well...I'm sorry you feel that way.”

“I bare my soul to you, and that's all you want to say, some psycho-crap your doctor tells you to say when things aren’t going exactly the way you want it.”

“You act as if I'm responsible for what someone else did to you. Well, I'm sorry, Wendy. As terrible as this may sound, you’re not the only one who has hardships.”

Debbie puffed out a lungful of air and continued. “Okay. I'm ready, now,” and with that her confessional door flew open and Debbie bolted from the confessional and out of the church. As Wendy hustled out of the center door of the confessional, she said, “I bet Norman Bates' mother was never like this.” xx

Wendy grabbed the umbrella that Debbie left behind and began singing and tapping the umbrella’s tip on the floor as she walked out.

♪Zip a-dee-doo-dah, zip-a-dee-ay

My, oh, my, what a wonderful day♪

Meanwhile, Debbie ran down the church's steps and stopped. She tightened the shawl around her shoulders, then turned and saw Wendy heading towards her, so she ran towards the bus stop. "You can't get good help these days," Wendy said in response to seeing the taxi gone. She had to make it to Carnegie Hall. That was her primary objective at the moment. And it was increasingly doubtful she was going to make it on time.

All the movements, sounds and lights hit Debbie at once, so she stopped and froze. As Wendy approached, Debbie repeated, "Close your eyes."

Debbie closed her eyes. A car passed by, and the Doppler Effect of the engine sound started out loud but ended in a normal tone. Debbie's panic subsided.

"Okay, the car is gone," Wendy said as she approached her mother. "Now look both ways. Anything coming?"

"No."

"Then let's cross the street."

Before they started to cross the street, Debbie said, "Dear God, you get me through this and I'll never use another four-letter word. I promise."

"Don't make promises you can't keep," was the only response Debbie heard.

"It's getting dark."

"It's okay. They're just shadows, Mom. The bus stop is only a couple of blocks down the street."

"What am I going to do when the bus moves, and things go flying by the window? I'll get dizzy. I'll go ballistic. I'll faint."

“You'll close your eyes and take deep breaths is what you'll do. Like you're giving birth. Oh, that's right. You don't want to do that.”

Debbie approached a corner and heard people talking. Debbie stopped. She heard voices no one else could hear except her. The voices got stronger, more menacing, as if Debbie was watching a Hitchcock movie. To her, the sounds were incoherent and seemed to be coming from everywhere. Maybe they were voices of muggers or thieves in the night.

Debbie grabbed the umbrella from Wendy and readied herself, as if it were a weapon.

Whispering, she called out her daughter's name and said, “I hear voices.”

“What are they saying to you?”

“They're not in my head. They're real. Don't you hear them?”

Maybe Wendy shouldn't have said that she heard them, but she was going to be late for the show if she didn't do something that would move them forward. Still, for Debbie, the voices got louder, and more menacing as they get closer to the corner. The voices sounded wicked.

“Elephant ... watermelon.” Debbie forgot the word Pat told her to recite when things got unbearable. Then she finally remembered. “Stinkbug,” she kept on yelling.

At the edge of the corner the voices sounded their worst. Debbie jumped ahead and looked, scared she was going to see the Phantom of the Opera, or someone like that. Instead, there was nothing. She was ready to do battle, but no one was there.

“See,” Wendy said. “It's all in your head.”

Still, Debbie screamed at the top of her lungs, dropped her umbrella, threw her shawl over her face and ran across the side street. Wendy picked up the umbrella then walked briskly after her mother who slowed down but continued walking with the shawl on her head.

Wendy caught up to her and took the shawl off her head so she could see again.

“This is so hard,” Debbie said.

“Let's just focus. It's getting late. I don't want to miss my solo.”

Wendy handed the umbrella back to Debbie and they continued walking to the bus stop. The engine sound of someone traveling down the street in a motor scooter unnerved Debbie. To her it sounded like a jet engine.

Once again, she looked up and saw a plane high above her at 30,000 feet up in the sky. She gave a hardy blink and saw the plane again, this time it was flying overhead 100 feet and it roared by her at the same time a car passed them. She went into a full-fledged anxiety attack and fell.

Debbie got up screaming. She ran into a bag lady and they both went flying. Debbie quickly got up and pointed the umbrella at the bag lady, as if it were a sword.

“Hey, I was walkin' here,” the bag lady said in her best Dustin Hoffman impersonation.

“One false move and you're dead,” Debbie said.

Debbie reacted to the sounds of the cars that were zooming by, as if they were cannons being shot on a battlefield. In response, she threw the shawl over her head and hugged the Bag Lady who tried to free herself from Debbie's grip.

“Wendy. Wendy,” Debbie called out. “Where are you?”

Wendy peeled Debbie off the Bag Lady and stood between them to prevent an altercation. “I'm right here, Mom. I know this is difficult, but it's only a block to the bus stop. You're almost there.”

“Hey,” the Bag Lady said loud and clear. “This is my territory. Go find your own street.”

Wendy held her mother's arm and they gingerly continued forward with the shawl over Debbie's head. She peeked out a few times to see where she was. The Bag Lady followed them.

“I can't see. I can't see,” Debbie bellowed when the shawl was covering her head.

“Mom. That’s probably because you have the shawl over your head. Take it off. People will think you're a nut cake.”

“Too fast. Things move too fast, if I take it off.”

“Then walk slower.” Debbie removed the shawl from her head and walked slower. Surprisingly, her vision returned to normal.

“We're at the bus stop,” Wendy said.

The Bag Lady stopped a few feet away.

“We made it,” Debbie shrieked.

Wendy pulled at Debbie and they both sat down on the bench at the bus stop.

“You did really well, Mom. I'm proud of you. So, now we just wait for the bus. It'll take us to the bus terminal in New York City and from there we'll take a taxi and go to the hall.”

Debbie dropped her umbrella and the Bag Lady picked it up.

“Give it to me,” Debbie said.

“Finders, keepers.”

Wendy rose from the bench and faced the Bag Lady who pointed the umbrella at her. Debbie rose as well.

“What's the matter with you?” the Bag Lady said to Debbie.

“I could ask the same question.”

The Bag Lady pointed the umbrella at Debbie just as a car zoomed by.

Debbie went to one knee and covered her ears with her hands to block out the noise.

“Too fast. Things move too fast. Everything gets ... discombobulated.”

“Whoa. Dis-cooom-boob-ulated. Oo! Aren’t we the grown-up person using big words that twist the tongue.”

Debbie gets up and asked the Bag Lady for the umbrella.

“You want it back?” the Bag Lady said. “Come and get it.”

“Mom,” Wendy interjected, “it’s not going to rain tonight. I’ll get you another umbrella. Leave her be.”

Debbie sat back down and threw the shawl over her head.

“What’s her problem?” the Bag Lady asked Wendy.

“She doesn’t get out very often. What’s your problem, lady?”

The Bag Lady poked Debbie in the arm with the umbrella. “Hey, dis-cooom-boob-ulated lady?” she said. She poked Debbie again. “You sick in the head, or something?”

She poked Debbie again, and again, and with each stab she said, “Hey you,” and ended with, “What’s the matter with you?”

Debbie started pounding her fists into her lap in a fit of hysteria. As the Bag Lady went to poke Debbie again, Wendy intercepted the umbrella, and a tug-of-war began. Wendy yanked the umbrella out of the Bag Lady’s hand and whacked her with it.

Meanwhile, Debbie tried to get up, but the Bag Lady pushed her back down with her foot. Wendy grabbed the Bag Lady by her collar and the Bag Lady growled.

“Pipe down, lady,” Wendy said. “Now, you sit here and be a good little girl, or I’ll take your eyeballs out with a corkscrew and stuff them up your butt.”

The Bag Lady backed off, sat down and remained quiet the whole time before the bus arrived.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A fat lady sat next to the bag lady pinning her in the entire ride to the NYC bus terminal. Although the bus driver noticed the animosity and awkwardness of both Debbie and the bag lady, he just looked in his mirror and kept an eye on both of them throughout the ride. Debbie ducked down when the driver arrived at the bus terminal to avoid his stare, and then ran off the bus, down the escalator and to the second-floor woman's room. She ducked into a stall and refused to leave. Wendy, of course, followed her and within seconds she appeared in front of the closed door while Debbie was going to the bathroom. Wendy looked at her watch.

"Mom, are you going to come out any time soon?"

"No. I can't go if you're standing there."

"Well, I want you to know that I called Kate on her cell. She's coming here and will take you to the hall while I go to Carnegie. I should at least make intermission is my guess. My solo is in the second half, anyway, so I think I'm okay. I also wanted to let you know that ... Nevermind."

Just then, Kate entered the Woman's Room.

"Oh, thank God you're here," Wendy said.

Kate pointed and said, "She's in there?"

"Yes. And I have to go, I'm sorry, but I'm in a hurry."

"Go, go. Intermission is in a couple of minutes."

"I don't know you well, but...Thanks."

“You’re welcome. Now, go. Go! We’ll have plenty of time to connect. You’ll make the second half if you hurry.”

Wendy left while Kate sat in the chair next to the stall. She fumbled with her jacket and pulled out a flask. “You in there.”

“Yes.” Debbie said. She could be heard, but not seen.

“You want a swig. It’s whiskey.”

After a short pause Debbie slowly comes out and without hesitation grabbed the flask and took a healthy drink. She handed the flask back to Kate who also took a healthy swig.

“Thanks. I can’t go. I’m too scared.”

“Come on, Debbie. You gotten this far, another mile or two won’t matter. We can take a cab home. I don’t want to miss the second half. I’m leaving. Bye.”

As Kate started to leave, Debbie pulled her back, grabbed the flask and took another swig. She handed it back to Kate who also took a swig. “You want some more,” Kate said, “you gotta follow me.”

Kate turned to see that the woman’s door was opened.

“Open doors scare the shit out of me,” Debbie said.

“Me too. Let’s face our fears together. Join me in a toast to our daughters.” Kate took another swig.

“What? You have a daughter?”

“Yup,” Kate gave out a hearty reply. “And today’s her birthday. To Wendy and Dorothy.

Kate takes a swig; Debbie does the same.

“I’d like to meet her,” Debbie said.

“One reunion at a time. Let’s go.” And they both left.

“What? You and Dorothy aren’t close?” Debbie asked.

“We are. In fact, she’s with me all the time.”

They slow-stepped to the center of the bus depot where they finally reached the escalator. A crowd of people were riding the escalator to descend to the main floor.

“You look confused,” Kate said “Let me explain. My little girl, Dorothy, she had a sparkle in her eyes that told you she was going to be someone special when she grew up: a writer, perhaps, or a doctor, a philosopher, someone worth knowing. She was so inquisitive, a thousand questions about the simplest things. I saw her once gently pick up an ant between her fingers. She put it real close to her face and said in a deep gravelly voice Wow! Then she stared at it for minutes on end. When she finally put it down, it scurried away, better off for its encounter. She was that intense sometimes. She’d look into my eyes and see straight into my heart, and I’d say in a deep gravelly voice, Wow!

I would feel worthy by the simple stare that caught me off-guard. I wondered who or what this child was who could see so far into my soul like that. A smile from her gave me the confidence that God lived. When she started talking, there was no end to her questions. Her adventure became my adventure. She’d look in wonderment at the birds in the tree branches and demand to know their names. “Wutsdat”...“Wutsdat”, she would always ask about everything. Sticks, leaves, birds, cement, cars, the wind against her face. She’d wander off after anything that caught her eye. She never stayed in one place for very long. She was always chasing a bug or something. Those precious eyes that saw such a fascinating world we all take for granted like a butterfly, or a floating feather.”

By the time they were on the main floor, Debbie was more than interested in what Kate was saying, and less distracted by the crowds of people. Kate took another swig, and gave the flask to Debbie, who also took a swig.

“Continue,” Debbie said.

“One day I was sitting on the couch, exhausted from trying to keep pace with her as she darted from room to room. She was wearing a pair of pink sneakers with pale blue laces. Those sneakers were so worn from all the miles she ran in them. Anyway, unless the laces were firmly tied, Dorothy would put up a fuss and sit on the floor saying, “Pleeeese, Pleeeese” until they were fastened. That day I found myself falling asleep just as she tugged on my sleeve to tie up the lace on her left sneaker that had become undone. The room was barricaded, and I was so sleepy. I tied the lace, watched her turn on the TV, and I fell asleep. But the child-gate was loose. And the kitchen door was unlocked. And the street was...busy. And my child with her inquisitive mind and voice calling out ‘Wutsdat...Wutsdat’ to a slumbering mother, found her way into the unknown. That’s the day God died for me.”

Debbie didn’t even realize she had hustled her way through a crowd of busy people bumping her way to the bottom floor of the terminal and well on her way to the 8th Avenue line of taxis.

“For years,” Kate continued, “I thought about the shoelace I tied and the gate I left loose. Drove myself insane with grief and blame.”

“Sweet Jesus! I thought I had it bad.”

Debbie grabbed Kate’s wrist.

“No offense taken,” Kate said.

“What do I do, Kate. Wendy won’t forgive me.”

“Agh, forgiveness? Hardest thing to do in life. Spent years seeking it. You can’t forgive, especially yourself, unless you change something inside yourself.” Kate pounded on her chest.

“After Dorothy was gone, I couldn’t move, went nowhere, saw no one. Dorothy’s father died in a car accident before she was born, so...no help there. Anyway, one morning after she died an emaciated alley cat crept into my kitchen and wouldn’t leave. Poor thing was starving, and I had to do something. So, I left the house to buy some milk and when I got back the cat had curled up asleep between Dorothy’s pink sneakers. Dorothy was trying to tell me something.”

“You think Dorothy forgave you?”

“It’s not about forgiveness, Debbie. It’s about acceptance. Accept your daughter for who she is and you for who you are. Do that and then you’ll have the heart to forgive yourself, and once you do that, you’ll be able to forgive her.”

They reached the 8th Avenue exit and the line of cabs outside.

“Wait,” Debbie commanded. “You’re the psychic. Tell me if I make it in one piece to Carnegie.”

“Yes. You make it in one piece. But it’s a bit of a walk to Carnegie. One more test. You have to take a cab to finish this.”

“Oh, good grief. Is this day ever going to end?”

CHAPTER NINE

A few minutes later, outside of Carnegie Hall, Trevor came out just as Joey meandered slowly towards him. Wendy came buzzing through like a chain saw.

“You coming out because of intermission?”

Trevor nodded.

“Good. We’ll talk later,” she said to Trevor. “I gotta go.” Then she hustled inside

“Excuse me,” Joey said. “Did you say intermission just started?”

“Yes. You missed about half of it. Best part is coming up, though. My ex-fiance ... I guess I can say that ... well, she is doing a solo. That was her you just saw. Where are you sitting, may I ask?”

“I don’t actually have a ticket,” Joey admitted. “I know it’s a sold-out house, but standing room is fine.”

“Well, this must be your lucky day. The guy sitting next to me is a doctor and he got called out on an emergency.”

“Oh, wow! Thank you,” Joey said. “I have a friend inside as well. We met today after a very long time apart. I didn’t handle it very well I’m afraid. She followed me in her car. Caught up with me at a stop light. Motioned for me to pull over, but I didn’t. She yelled at me to come here tonight then I sped away. I was afraid, I guess. I’m here to apologize if I can. She’s in the audience, somewhere. I thought I’d surprise her.”

“It’s that kind of a night, I guess. My soloist friend was...oh, never mind. It’s a long story. You from around here?”

“Born and raised in Brooklyn.”

An awkward silence ensued. Neither knew what to say. Finally, Joey spoke up. “The soloist. She’s a close friend?”

“We were engaged once. I’ve been trying to get our relationship back on track. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be so personal.”

“Oh, no, no. That’s okay. Really, it’s okay. I came here to settle a piece of the past as well. I let a relationship die a long time ago because I felt...unworthy, I guess.”

Just then, a buzzer sounded indicating intermission was over and everyone was to return to their seats.

Trevor and Joey entered the Hall just as Kate and Debbie stepped out of the cab. “I can tell you more stories,” Kate said as if she had been talking non-stop since Debbie was in the woman’s room. “I got a slew of them, like why I named two of our cats Enki-Du and Gilgamesh, and how they terrorize any mice that make the unfortunate decision to visit our kitchen. And then there was Missy. She scratched her way through the screen door and it took me five days to find her. And then there were the cutest munchkin kittens under my seat of the bus...” Kate stopped talking because she saw the anxiety in Debbie’s face. “What’s the matter,” Kate asked.

“You go in. I can’t. I’ll stay out here.

Debbie listened to the music by the doorway as the orchestra played The William Tell Overture. The music stopped abruptly and tapping sounds followed as if the Maestro was banging his baton against the music stand bringing the orchestra and the audience to attention.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” the unseen Maestro said. “Please put your hands together for a wonderful cellist doing her very first solo. Please welcome Wendy Hammel who will play her rendition of Amazing Grace in G minor.

Debbie leaned against the wall and listened. She got very emotional, then took a deep breath and vanished into the hall.

THE END