

Spring 2021

The Party's Cancelled

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Recommended Citation

Watson, John M., "The Party's Cancelled" (2021). *Senior Projects Spring 2021*. 197.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2021/197

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The Party's Cancelled

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2021

Chapter 1

It had seemed to happen in the space of a breath. She had been doing the shopping for a party she was throwing at the end of the week. Jacqueline, the family baby-sitter who now did the cooking for her since her daughter was a teenager, never knew how to pick out good meat. Susanna didn't know how much longer the relationship with Jacqueline would last. "She's getting so down," Susanna thought to herself. She couldn't stand having sad people around her. There was no point. There is always a way out of an unhappy situation. She had even gone so far as to get Jacqueline a gym membership. When Susanna had given birth to her own daughter Sherry, she had suffered from post-partum depression. Exercise had helped her get through that time and if it had helped her, surely it should help Jacqueline, but Jacqueline hadn't seemed to take to it. Susanna had invested in helping her as much as she could: checking in to make sure she had done the exercises and even doing them with her sometimes – but exercise hadn't seemed to bring Jacqueline the same joy it had brought Susanna. "Oh well," she thought, "A few more months won't hurt and I can't let her go until I have someone new."

She decided not to tell Sherry until she let Jacqueline go. Sherry was quite sentimental about the staff and had wept for weeks after Susanna had switched cleaning women a few years back. Better to break it to her after the die had been cast. As Susanna entered the apartment she noticed that Jacqueline was in the walk-in closet in the vestibule. She realized the dry-cleaning must have come and Jacqueline would be switching her clothes to the wooden hangers from the flimsy wire ones that dry cleaners used and disposing of all that messy plastic and paper. Susanna therefore carried the meat to the kitchen herself and put it down on the counter.

Susanna then pulled out her computer to check her email. The charity she had been most involved with as of late was one devoted to preserving the architectural integrity of her neighborhood. It was simply and aptly named Preserving the Integrity of the Upper East Side. A friend had nominated her for the Board and she was excited for it. They had had their first full meeting the night before and she was interested in which committee they were going to put her on. The email was in her box. It was from Stan and Imelda. They both worked with her husband Martin:

Dear Susanna,

Due to the rising Covid crisis, we do not feel comfortable attending an in person fund raising event. As you know Stan had a pacemaker put in last year and I, myself, have never been of strong stock and get bronchitis almost every year. Therefore we will not be able to attend the party this Friday. We know you will understand. Hopefully, we will be able to get together in person later this year, perhaps we can grab dinner just the two of us.

Two emojis were inserted at the end. A winky face and a smiley face.

Could this woman be more juvenile? She signed it “Sincerely Imelda” and a bracketed (and Sam, of course).

So they weren't coming. Who cared? They both drank too much anyway, which made Imelda talk too much and Stan wander off and brood in the corner looking like he regretted every decision he had ever made in his life. She had only invited them because Martin said Stan was *important* at the Firm. Nothing had come in from the committee yet. She put away the meat and then went back over the seating chart. The party was an annual event she threw for Martin, his partners at the investment firm and all of their top clients. Martin told her – and she liked to believe him – that clients vied among themselves to be invited. Because it was her crowning social achievement of the year, she liked to make sure it went off without a hitch; she went over

every detail multiple times. Let's see, she said to herself: "Roger can't sit next to Cathy, they had an affair that broke off last year and supposedly are still not on speaking terms. Marvin got caught with his pants down, literally, two months ago and Phillip, when he drinks, brings up everything, no holes barred, so they can't be together. I suppose I could switch that. Damn. There's Cedric. Single at fifty. I suppose I could call up and ask if he is bringing a plus one. If he is not, then there is no chance of having pairs at the table and everything's off. Is it rude to call and ask if he's bringing a plus one? Well, she thought to herself, it's rude of him *not* to bring a plus one and screw up my seating arrangement, but all the same I'll call and find out one way or another.

Then, for the menu: it would have to be small. There was no point in serving large portions any more. The men were all on exercise regimes and had their phones out all the time, counting the calories and the exercise they would have to do to burn off what they ate, and the women were mostly old school anorexics and a few bulimics – not too many. She had learned long ago the many disadvantages of having bulimics to dinner. So the food should be good but little. Maybe the meat was a bad idea altogether. She had envisioned small kebabs but maybe shrimp would look better, lighter. She could just call and have some delivered tomorrow. She'd have to tell them to find a way to present the kebabs so they wouldn't look *too* little, too...*Long Island*. The presentation would be very important but the caterer could handle that.

She checked her email again. She couldn't understand why Ruth hadn't sent her her committee assignment yet. That was when it happened really. Two more emails. Different couples this time. Writing with the same excuse. By the time she finished reading them, a third. And then by the time she finished reading that one, a fourth. It was like a virus was attacking her computer. When she looked back on it, she was surprised her initial reaction had not been one of

fear or trepidation but of pure infantile rage: How dare they? Who cancels at the last minute? She read the *New York Times* every morning and had been keeping up on Covid 19. There had been multiple cases in the U.S., including in the City but it was nothing people relatively fit couldn't overcome. Beyond that, were we supposed to let fear govern our actions? My God! These people can't really be serious. Had there been only one or two, she might have thought they were going somewhere else, merely blowing the event off – or perhaps she had offended someone or said something at the last party – but no, *this* many. They all seriously seemed worried for their own health. Each one was more likely to suffer an embolism from the amount of hours they put in at the office than anything they could catch from socializing!

She went into the bathroom to wash her face and cool off. She looked at her face in the mirror and tried to remember the pod cast she had been listening to on meditation. And what it said about straightening out your thought process. What was it that it said? “Push out the chaos with the exhale and breathe in the simple truth.” The ‘simple truth,’ she thought, is that I am not going to have a party at the rate that these people are pulling out. She looked at herself again. She was getting red-faced. This always happened when she was stressed. Worse, her black roots were coming in underneath the blonde. She had intended to go to the salon the other night but Ruth had called to tell her she had been able to get her on the landmark committee and that the first meeting was that night, so she had had to cancel with Che. I have to do it soon though, she thought, I can't let it go on like this. The truth was there was only about a millimeter of dark root showing but she had been keeping it blonde for so long; most people she knew thought of her as a blonde and it had become a part of how she saw herself. Plus, that in-between look just shouted “hot mess/ not in control.” First order of business was Che; next on

the list was to call Cedric, see if he is bringing a plus one. No, just tell him to bring a plus one – at this point it is another body in the room so it doesn't look so abandoned!

She picked up the phone to call Che's salon only to get a busy signal. She tried four more times with the same result, finally getting through to a breathless, irritated assistant who answered with a very uncharacteristic "What?" Susanna took a deep breath and spoke very slowly in a very modulated voice: "I'd like to make an appointment to see Che."

"He's not working after today," the girl at the salon snapped. Susanna was taken aback.

"What do you mean he's not working after today? It's his salon, isn't it? He can't be fired from his own salon, can he?" Instantly her mind had raced to some sexual indiscretion. What could he possibly have said to someone that could have gotten him into this much trouble?

"No," said the assistant, as if reading her mind, "he has not been fired. He is going on leave for his health. He is getting out of the city."

"What?" she asked, perplexed.

"He is getting out of the city. He doesn't want to get sick. Now, if you'll excuse me, since we posted that announcement on our website, our phones have been ringing off the hook. I have to go. Good-Bye." She hung up the phone abruptly.

"Has the world gone mad?" Elizabeth asked herself. She put down the phone in disbelief. Was there nothing left? What would go next? The supermarkets? The clothing stores? It was then that her daughter Sherry walked into the room. Sherry was more graceful than her mother. She had a slimmer frame and more delicate features, which she got from her father. Her long black hair went down her back. At seventeen, she had already begun

scrupulously grooming, waxing her arms and legs and wearing her mother's hand-me-downs, giving her the appearance of someone at least ten years senior.

“What are you doing home? I thought you had lacrosse?” Susanna asked. It was Wednesday, wasn't it?

“Coach Nicole cancelled practice. She said she was pretty sure there wouldn't be any more games this season and therefore she didn't see any reason for us to keep practicing.”

“Why wouldn't there be any more games?”

“Mom, haven't you read the papers or seen the news? They are saying we are days away from shutting down the public schools. My friend Cynthia said there is a good chance Principal Herman will do the same.”

“Shut down the schools? For how long?” Sherry shrugged.

“Until the situation is under control, I guess. Whatever that looks like. I don't know.”

“I didn't even realize we were at the stage of a 'situation'.” Suddenly, Susanna's latent maternal instincts kicked in.

“How did you get home? They should have called me?”

“They sent you an email. Anyways, don't worry about it. José was there to pick me up.” Their driver José had been with them for over a year. He was always very sweet to Sherry. He seemed to drive her around more than he did Susanna, but he drove all the members of the family around at one time or another, even Martin when he wasn't away on business.

“Oh, well, if José was there, I suppose that's fine.” She paused. There was an awkward silence that had begun to emerge at the beginning of Sherry's teen years and had only grown wider with time.

“What are your plans for tonight?” Susanna asked, more indignantly than she intended.

“I have some homework to do,” Sherry responded, nonchalantly, “then I was going to go over and spend the night at Cynthia’s, if that’s ok?”

“Sure, of course.” Susanna responded. Again, the silence continued. Then Sherry turned and walked out without saying anything. I wonder if I offended her, Susanna thought. Oh well, who knows why teenagers hate their mothers? Half-heartedly, she began to wonder if the reverse were true as well.

Cedric! Cedric! That’s who she had meant to call. She picked up the phone and decided to try him at home first. The number rang an inordinate amount of times before his housekeeper, Loretta, finally picked up.

“Hello?” This was strange, Susanna thought. In her experience housekeepers rarely picked up the phone, and Loretta was exceedingly shy, so even less likely than most to take this step on her own.

“Loretta, it is Susanna Fein, I’m calling to talk to Cedric, is he there?” Loretta took a deep audible inhale.

“Oh, Miss Susanna, you have not heard?”

“Heard what?”

“Mr. Cedric, . . .he . . .he got the virus . . . he . . .in the hospital . . .very sick . . .very bad. I pray for him every night. I try to visit him but they not let me in his room but they let me see him through plastic. He can hardly breathe. He breathe like he is drowning.”

(Loretta was crying at this point and it was harder than usual for Susanna to understand her.)

Miss Lydia called this morning to say they are going to put him on a machine that will breathe

for him, but it means putting a tube into his throat. She is scared he would not want that but that is all they can do. Oh, Miss Susanna h, it is so awful!” Now, Loretta just broke down into sobs.

Susanna was stunned. She had known Cedric for ages, since Martin was just starting out at the firm. He couldn't really be sick with this – what was this? The flu, nothing more, really? Cedric had beaten prostate cancer several years ago and now this virus? No, a virus could not do this to Cedric, it could not be the end of him. She hung up on poor Loretta without even saying goodbye.

The weight of all of this was beginning to register with her. Martin was away in Greece doing business of some sort or other. She thought she should maybe call him and tell him about Cedric and the increasing reality that they were not going to have the party this year.

Chapter 2

Martin's day had not been going well. After his business had finished up in Athens, he was hoping he could hop the first plane to Mykonos. It was not until twenty minutes before the meeting, however, that the client called to say that he would rather just talk by phone. By then it was too late to move up his plane reservations. He was left waiting in the hotel room, trapped in limbo.

Just as he had finished his call and picked up his bags in order to check out and jump in a taxi to the airport, he received an alert that his flight had been cancelled. He was able to book a spot on one of the high-speed ferries, but he was not a good sea traveler and already he was weighing whether it was worth dosing himself with Dramamine for such a short trip. He decided initially to do without, checked out of his hotel and jumped into a taxi for Piraeus. Consistent with the day he had been having, the taxi just sat in traffic motionless and by the time they got to Piraeus his high speed ferry had not only departed, it was likely reaching its destination. His taxi driver saw the exhaustion and confusion on his face and directed him to one of the more conventional ferries that was just beginning to board. The driver managed to convey that although the conventional ferry took a little longer, it had a bar. Martin boarded and bought a ticket once he had gotten on the ship.

However, after an hour on the ferry, Martin's empty stomach was so wretched and the boat's rocking was so violent that several people started praying. In his many trips to Greece, Martin had never learned to tell the difference between Worry beads and Rosary beads, but either way, several women were standing outside the restroom, clutching one or the other and frantically working them.

“God,” he thought to himself, “it's like being trapped aboard with the Fates. He chose to take the Dramamine. Fortunately he was sitting on a bench. He was awakened and helped off the boat two hours later, where he was placed in a taxi, and somehow taken to his hotel. He did not remember checking in. This sort of arrival was not uncommon for him when he took Dramamine. He had once made the mistake of taking four and had awoken eighteen hours later in a hotel which was not the one in which he had made a reservation. He had also discovered himself changed out of his travelling clothes and into a pair of pajamas, which were not his own. This time, however, the transformation was not so drastic, and as he left the hotel room the next morning and began walking on the beach, he felt that his mood had moderately improved from the day before.

When he returned to the hotel, however, he was shocked to find the place, which was usually filled to capacity, nearly empty. As he sat down at the small deck area which the hotel had set up for its patrons facing the beach, he asked his waiter, "Where is everybody?" The waiter smiled politely but did not speak any English and pointed towards the menu. When he repeated his question this time with more agitation in his voice, the waiter brought the concierge over.

"Is there something I can help you with, sir?"

"I just wanted to know where everyone is. It is usually so crowded this time of year."

"Yes, sir but with the virus, many have cancelled their trips. We're mainly a tourist destination, of course. Are you here on business or for..." The concierge paused, not sure of the word.

“Pleasure,” Martin interrupted before the concierge could say anything else. He requested black coffee. His stomach still remembered too well the night before and he was wary of putting anything new into it.

Martin was a wiry thin man with a hairline that was retreating swiftly. While he was quite tall, he never knew how to use his height to his own advantage and found himself gangly with his shoulders hunched over like a giraffe. As for his digestion, his stomach had never been his ally. Even as a child, Pepto-Bismol had been his constant companion.

"It's so disappointing," he said to himself as the waiter brought his coffee.

The waiter paused at this, at first worrying that he meant the coffee but he waved him off. A deserted Mykonos was not at all what he wanted. He came to Mykonos twice a year or so for the blessed escape that it brought him. It was the opposite of New York, not constrained, not suffocating with dinner parties where no one moved and you could hardly tell if anyone breathed. It was a place perpetually pulsing with life and with youth; no one ever seemed to grow old in Mykonos.

He knew the youthful feeling a fantasy but he was hard-pressed to ever remember seeing an aged face in the times he had been there. Perhaps along the coastline, some fishermen, but that too seemed in its right place. It never seemed that the aged, when they did appear on Mykonos, were trying to be something they were not. They were not grasping at youth, which had long ago slipped away — youth itself was of much lower value here than in Martin's world — They let life take its course and didn't fight it.

Of course, he'd wanted to see the boys too. He wouldn't lie to himself about that part. He never dared to ask himself what it was that made him so hungry. He would just feel a calling from within him and then follow it, bewitched like one of the sailors under the spell of

the Sirens. The images would stay in his head for months afterwards, haunt him but not frighten him in an unpleasant sense. To the contrary, they were like dreams of a previous life: twenty-year-old men, their shirts wet with sweat, well built, smiling with a look of sheer joy in their eyes.

He talked very little in his interactions with them; he paid some of them but not all. From what he knew from talking to them, they were not usually exceptionally bright but he thought that perhaps that was part of the appeal. Intelligence he found often did not bring happiness; he was living proof of this. A card-carrying Mensa member and a National Merit Scholar to Harvard, his whole life people had told him how bright he was, how he'd get ahead in the world. And he had, at least as it would appear in an obituary or on a spreadsheet, and yet he felt so utterly the same as when he was the eight-year-old scrawny asthmatic from Flushing, Queens. In fact, if it weren't for the color of his credit card he honestly wouldn't know if he'd gone anywhere at all.

Martin looked at his phone. There were four messages from Susanna. He would call her back after he'd finished his coffee. If the island were deserted like this, there would be no point in staying; he might as well go home. He had been away for what seemed like an eternity. He missed her and Sherry; he missed home. Although it was true, he had been hoping to avoid the pre-party anxieties which always flourish around this time.

"Oh God," he thought. "She wants to talk to me about the fucking seating chart." Still he thought it better to be with her at home than sticking around this island when it was deserted. "It's really too sad," he thought to himself. He couldn't bear seeing the island like this.

As he picked up the phone to call home, he saw a young man across from him sitting on the opposite end of the deck. His hair was wet like he had recently dunked it into the

sea. His skin was that even olive complexion, which never seemed to burn or change no matter how much sun it got. The man saw Martin looking at him and looked back. He smiled. The concierge was sitting at the bar smoking a cigarette, apparently on a break. Martin motioned him over.

"Who is that man?" he asked. The concierge smiled and nodded in a way that annoyed Martin. It demonstrated too clearly that he knew where this was going. "That, sir, is Mister Marcello, he is a regular."

A regular. It was annoying how vague the staff at places like this could be, especially when they made it so obnoxiously clear that they knew exactly what you were after, or so Martin thought. Did "regular" mean he stopped by here often or did it mean he had to pay for it? It didn't matter to him one way or the other, but it was always easier going into these things if he knew what was expected.

Martin could still recall one painfully embarrassing incident of a boy whom he had spent the night with in Bushwick. He had felt sure from the way the kid had come on to him that he was a professional and therefore had thrown money down on the dresser when dawn came around without thinking about it. The boy's reaction was brutal. He slapped the bills against Martin's face. Martin remembered being surprised at the physical pain, which had accompanied the embarrassment. He had also known a boy or two, however, who even though they were not technically prostitutes didn't turn down money when it was handed to them.

He rose and walked right over to Marcello's table. "May I sit here?" he asked. Marcello smiled. His teeth were very white, particularly for a European. "*Si si*," he said. Martin sat down anxiously, too quickly. Too eagerly, he thought. I mustn't look like I am desperate.

Desperation is never wanted. "Do you speak English?" he said, too briskly. I mustn't come off as aggressive either.

"Yes," Marcello said, "but only a little bit." This made Martin nervous. He was unsure how to proceed. If the man was a prostitute, arranging things would be difficult enough, but a language barrier would certainly not help. If he wasn't, well, it could be disastrous and the thing could be dead before it started.

Better to start with small talk, he thought.

"I hear you come here often." Martin offered.

"Yes, every year. I like to come for my birthday."

"Your birthday?" Martin responded. "Congratulations. How old?" As soon as he spoke Martin realized this was a stupid question very likely to get himself asked the reciprocal. He had no desire to share that number with anyone.

"I am twenty-seven," Marcello responded.

"Twenty-seven, twenty-seven," Martin thought. He looked much younger – more like twenty-two, twenty-three. Twenty-seven meant he was almost out of those years of youthful stupidity, which are so common to the boys Martin would usually meet.

"And you?" Marcello asked in a perfectly even tone. "Where are you from?"

"New York." Martin smiled. He hated talking about himself. He tried lying, but he could never keep the facts straight and then it just made him look insane or worse, like an idiot. In general, he shared as little about himself as possible.

"What about you?" he said, desperately trying to pivot back to Marcello.

"Rome."

"Ah," Martin responded. He had been to Rome. "Rome is a beautiful city, so much to see."

Marcello scoffed a little at this, although not terribly unkindly.

"If you are a tourist. For the rest of us, we just live and die in the history. We do not feel a need to examine it the same way you do. We are part of this, it's part of us."

"Maybe this man is nearer thirty than I thought," Martin said to himself. Martin wanted to turn the conversation in a different direction. He had no interest in continuing with this philosophizing. What was the best way to convey to Marcello what he wanted – what he hoped Marcello wanted too?

"The view is nice," Martin began.

"The view is nice," Marcello echoed.

"I have a very nice view from my room," Martin offered next. Oh, good God. Had that just slipped from his mouth? That was far too bold. Marcello turned to him, his eyebrows high on his forehead.

"I am sure you do," he said. Martin looked down at the table. He couldn't face him, not after having said that. "I'm a fool," he thought. "I'm such a fool."

"Excuse me," he said and got up. As he was a few steps away from the table, he heard Marcello say,

"Dinner?"

Martin turned around.

"Excuse me?" Martin stuttered.

"Would you care for dinner?" Marcello repeated.

"Oh," said Martin. "That sounds lovely. We could meet in the lobby and then maybe have dinner here."

"I'm looking forward to it," Marcello replied much to Martin's surprise.

As Martin walked away he looked at his phone. When he had not called her back, Susanna had started to text him. The party was cancelled. They were thinking about shutting down schools. She wondered if she should go to the house on Fire Island. He thought about her questions. He agreed. If they shut the schools, she should go to Fire Island. That would be good. He would call and send his best and explain that unavoidable business had kept him, and he would be unable to come home.

Chapter 3

Cynthia was beginning to get annoying. When Sherry had first asked her to cover, she had been all too eager, excited even. As time wore on and things with José got more advanced, Cynthia became nervous. "I just want to make sure I have the story straight," said Cynthia, her voice tense and anxious over the bad cell phone connection.

"I'm at your place. We're studying for a project. If she calls, which she won't, say I'm in the shower. Call me and I'll call her back from my cell phone. It's easy."

"Okay, okay. What if she calls my mom?"

"She doesn't have your mother's cell phone," Sherry replied, tired and irritated with having to explain this to Cynthia once again. "If she calls the house phone, you'll be there to pick it up, right?"

"Right, right," Cynthia said. "All right. How are things with you?"

"Wonderful," said Sherry. "Oh, The connection is really bad. I'm going to have to call you back." She hung up the phone.

For Sherry, Cynthia was typical of all the girls with whom she went to school. Prim and proper Upper East Siders who were delighted by their parents' wealth. It provided for them the set pieces that would follow their entire lives. Growing up, Cynthia had never felt quite right in this world. Perhaps it was because she was Jewish and her hair was black and curly and not blonde like the rest of those girls.

This is not to say that they were all blondes. It should be noted that most of them were not even naturally blonde, but they were groomed to be and often altered their appearances to be so. Sherry still had her original nose. She did not think her parents would have objected if she had wanted rhinoplasty, but she had never asked. As Sherry got older, it only got worse.

Everyone she was surrounded by, all of the girls and boys she had grown up with, just seemed to get up and, happily and seamlessly, move to the next set piece.

They'd all memorized the scripts and knew the direction their lives were going to take. It often seemed to her that it was inconsequential to them whether they liked that direction or not. They didn't think of it. For them, their parents' money led to a predetermined life. That way of thinking made Sherry feel trapped like she was drowning in a sea of wallpaper and expensive light fixtures.

She had begun to have panic attacks in middle school. She had started down the path of anorexia as well but ironically was saved by the realization that all of her classmates were anorexic as well. Therefore some part of herself compelled her to eat so that she would not continue the pattern they had laid out. Until her sophomore year of high school, she had felt completely lost, unsure where she belonged. Everything she considered doing seemed utterly predictable.

There was some rebellion among the bleachers. A few kids went goth, got tattooed or piercings in exotic places. This seemed so hopelessly trivial that even the other students didn't take it seriously. The dark makeup would eventually come off; the piercings would come out; and these kids would end up on the stock exchange just like their fathers before them.

It was around this time that Sherry's mother had hired José.

Her mother had just joined her fifth nonprofit board and was beginning to feel overburdened. Sherry's father had recommended hiring a driver to help and her mother finally relented. José was unlike anyone Sherry had met before. He was kind, sweet, and sympathetic.

At twenty-five, he was the first in his class at the police academy but had to leave in the first year of the job because he had been shot in the knee when chasing a suspect.

His serving, protecting, and driving was now limited to one family. She had noticed him the moment her mother had hired him. At first, she wrote it off as a foolish fantasy, but as the months dwindled on, she thought she noticed him paying attention to her. He always smiled when he saw her and seemed genuinely happier to have her in the car than her mother or father. Slowly, the size of the fantasy grew, as did the role it played in her life.

If she had one drive with him, one moment alone in the car with him, just talking about nothing, something on the radio, or something in the tabloids or the news, she wouldn't have a panic attack that day. At night, she dreamed of him. Often erotically, but not always.

One dream she had with more and more frequency was that the two of them lived in a small studio apartment. He would come in from work and find her at home. Then he would put the radio on. It would be playing the Frankie Valli song, which shared her name, and they would begin to dance barefoot, with him slowly kissing the back of her neck.

The moment when she realized she was in love with him, however, was one day when he picked her up from outside of school. Steven Bingley was walking her to her car. They were having a conversation about another boy in their class, Dylan O'Flaherty, who had made a rather obnoxious pass at Sherry during PE.

Sherry had not responded. Now, Steven wanted to make sure that she was not thinking of accepting. "You know he's a phony," he said as they were standing outside of the car. "He's got this goal to sleep with every girl in the class by the time we all graduate next year and he is just desperate to get you because... well, you don't go out with anyone."

Sherry introduced Steven to José, who was standing patiently by the car.

José extended his hand, but Steven looked her directly in the eye and ignored José completely.

"Why *don't* you go out with anyone?" Steven asked

Sherry shrugged, "I suppose I don't really see the point."

"That's bloody unfair of you," Steven replied, taking a step back. "Why?" he said, speaking in hushed tones even though only José was near. "What if the right sort of man asked you? Not someone like Dylan, but someone like me?"

"You already have a girlfriend," Sherry responded, losing more and more interest by the second. "Remember?"

Steven looked genuinely confused at this.

"Sherry, come on," he replied, his face turning into an unattractive grimace at this last comment. "Martha Powell is loose and lives on St. Mark's Place. That's not a real relationship, we've shared a tryst now and then. But..."

"More than that from what I've heard," Sherry replied. "Listen, Steven. I have to go. I suggest you look elsewhere for a *mate*." She emphasized the last word to demonstrate her disgust at what he had just said, but this subtlety seemed to be lost on Steven, who only now turned to José.

"Thanks for waiting, old sport. We really appreciate it." Steven turned to Sherry once more and said, "He's your driver, not an Uber, correct?"

"Yes," Sherry said.

"All right," said Stephen, who had a five-dollar bill in his hand but was beginning to place it back in his pocket now. There was, after all, no need to tip staff.

They were no sooner in the car when Sherry sighed. "It's like they're breeding horses the way they talk." She expected José to laugh at this but was surprised when he did more.

"It's worse. Horses are less judgmental, and you get more useful specimens than that," he said nodding his head back toward the school. "God, that kid was a douchebag. It was like he was trying to sound like a novel. "Sport." "Bloody unfair." "Phoney." Sherry laughed at how perfectly he mimicked the inflections of her classmate. Finally, someone who saw this world as absurdly as she did. Just when she thought she couldn't be happier, José went on. "Honestly, it's a miracle that despite growing up around all those people, you didn't turn out like that. You're the only sane one around here." From that moment on, she knew she wanted to be with him. She waited until the right moment – until one day after school when they were alone in the car.

She had planned a long seduction like she had seen in the movies. She would try to pick something out of his hair, a piece of fuzz, and then say how much she admired him. All this had gone wrong so quickly. When she went to pick something out of his hair, he quickly grabbed at where she was putting her hand and asked if he had gotten it. When she said how much she enjoyed being with him, he laughed and told her he knew he was boring, but he appreciated her kindness.

Just when he was parking the car and there were tears in her eyes at the point of defeat, she leaned over and kissed him quickly: a sharp peck on the lips, but not without tenderness. They both sat there in silence for what felt like forever, when her shoulders started to rise, and the tears rolled down her face.

"I made such a mess of it," she cried. "I wanted you to know how much I needed you and how I thought you were like me: misunderstood. I just wanted you to like me." Even

now, as she looked back at it, she almost couldn't believe it happened like it did. It seemed too perfect. He had wrapped his arm around her, had taken his other hand and placed her chin between his thumb and finger, turned her weeping eyes up to him, and then brought his face so close to hers that she could smell the mint from his gum as he placed a kiss firmly on her mouth. She couldn't believe it was real.

A kiss, which was nothing like she had ever experienced before. This was not Spin the Bottle with a few awkward 14-year-old boys who didn't know their ass from their elbows and were incapable of seeing a person they were with. This was a kiss out of her dreams. This was a kiss that she had always wanted but better, because with this kiss, he said he saw her for what she really was and loved her for it. No one had ever done that before.

Her parents thought they loved her and maybe they did, but they had no idea who she really was. She was just another cutout of the Norman Rockwell painting they wanted to live in. No different really at the heart of it than the dog. José knew her dark sides and sharp angles and loved her for it. Not in spite of it, but *for* it. When they got out of the car an hour later, she was the happiest she had ever been in her short life. From there, things progressed relatively quickly.

Sherry almost immediately enlisted Cynthia to help in deceiving her parents and she would spend afternoons with José. He didn't like to be seen on the Upper East Side, so he started taking her to his neighborhood in Brooklyn. They almost never missed a day together, except for the occasional weekend when Cynthia's family was going out of town. Then after a few months, Sherry came out of school one day to find her mother picking her up instead.

"Where's José?" she asked.

"Oh, apparently one of his daughters had the flu," her mother responded. "It's a shame. It could be the damp where they live. You read such horrible stories in *The Times* about landlords not taking the proper care of their buildings, especially in East New York." Sherry did not bother to point out to her mother that José lived in Gowanus and not in East New York.

"It's a pity too," her mother continued. "I had to cancel my book club and it was our last session on *The Goldfinch*."

That night, she called José. "What happened? I missed you."

"I know," he said. "Tina was sick and when her fever gets high, I don't like to leave her with my mother. I won't be in tomorrow," he said. "The fever still hasn't broken."

The next day after school, she told her mother she was going to Cynthia's and hopped in a cab, which she took straight to José's house. She had yet to meet his daughters, but she loved children and she was sure they'd get on. José was more than surprised when she showed up at his door. But she came every day for a week and helped him take care of the girls, first Tina, than Rosie as they suffered through the flu. By the end of that week, both girls loved Sherry, and she felt more a part of José's life than ever. After just one week, she felt more comfortable and less anxious at José's apartment.

This afternoon was no different. Sherry had promised the girls they could all go fly a kite in the park. The girls were excited about it and the timing was perfect, since soccer was cancelled. As she hung up the phone with Cynthia, they were just crossing the Brooklyn Bridge. She reached over and grabbed José's hand. "Cynthia can be such a bother," she said.

José smiled and nodded. "She's doing us as a real solid though," he replied. As an afterthought, "Does your mother ever ask you about her? I mean, you seem to spend most of the week with her as far as she's concerned."

"My mother isn't concerned," Sherry responded, "At least not about me. I doubt she ever thinks of me and when she does, well, it's certainly not about my relationship with Cynthia. I hope there's enough wind to get the kite going. Do you think we'll have alone time together after?" she said smiling. "The girls are with my mother till 4:00. We might get some alone time before." He leaned over and placed his hand on the back of her neck. She knew how things would proceed from here and trembled with excitement at the thought of him pulling her in to a tight embrace and his lips slowly unfolding on hers like a flower opening to the world. Her phone dinged. She picked it up and read the text.

"Is Cynthia calling you again?" José asked, "How many times do you need to explain the procedure to her?"

"It's not that," Sherry nodded, "It's worse. The party's cancelled. I think Mom's beginning to freak out about this whole coronavirus thing."

"A little late," José said.

"I know, but still."

He looked over at her. "Do you need to go back?" he said.

"No," she responded.

"It just means I'll have to keep my eye out in case she reaches out to use me to fill the void." José sat up a little straighter. He was clearly nervous. Sherry leaned over. "Relax, will you. My mother has thirteen stupendously stupid charities to worry about before me. I'm not worried about her calling and certainly not worried about her asking where I am." Sherry pushed her seat back and closed her eyes, planning to get in a little nap for the rest of the drive.

Chapter 4

José was beginning to feel overwhelmed. When had things gotten so out of hand? Initially, this had seemed like an easy gig, something to help him get over the letdown of having a life in the police force shattered. His biggest concern at the start had been boredom. Now that seemed so far from everything he was encountering. When he first met the family, he did not care for them. He still did not care for them.

He found Susanna to be obnoxious and entitled. She had two tones of voice when she spoke to him. The first was a tone that imitated the one she used for speaking with either Siri, or Alexa, or any of the other computer-operated slaves that lived in their apartment. The second tone was laden with the condescension with which she probably spoke to a small and not terribly bright child. He knew that she looked at him as something sad and tragic. He once said to Sherry in passing, "For your mother, class is not a matter of wealth, it's a matter of breeding." He had been surprised when Sherry told him that her mother was not born to money. In fact, according to Sherry, her mother had supported Martin as he had built up his brokerage firm. He couldn't imagine Susanna living in a one-bedroom apartment without a cleaning woman.

As for Martin, well, he was certainly a man of contradictions. José had never told Sherry about the times he would drive with Martin to different gay bars in the city and on rare occasions pick him up from small studio apartments, where Martin was walked out by scrawny young 20-year-olds, with the vacant look in their eyes that José recognized as the effect of their having been on ecstasy. José was never quite sure what the arrangement was: Had Martin paid for sex? Were the young men with him because of some charm, or other attribute that José could not see or was it, as José suspected, that Martin paid without paying, did he pick up drinks, maybe dinner or pay for the cab back to the apartment; maybe he even left some money the

morning after. Martin probably came up with some poor excuse, "I'm sure I deprived you of a night's work. I ruined your sheets when I..." something like that. This paradox was the first of several José had encountered on his new supposedly low-stress job that baffled him. How did Martin manage it with such ease? The man was no James Bond, far from it. He was a speckled and nervous, fidgety man. Nothing about him said that he was the kind of man to lead a double life and yet, José saw it right before him. José would watch as before his eyes Martin would longingly and yet tenderly kiss some twenty-year-old and then go home to a wife his own age.

The second thing of course, which had thrown José for a loop, was Sherry. He really wasn't sure how it had happened. It seemed a blur. Everything was still images. The moment she had gotten into his car for the first time without her parents, and he had looked at her in the rearview mirror, sitting alone in the backseat looking out the window unaware of his gaze, he felt he saw her as she really was: not a spoiled little rich girl, but a driven and frustrated young woman who felt trapped. Trapped like he did. She seemed to know he was trapped, sensed it, although he never spoke of it.

He never spoke of how his knee hurt him when it rained or how he hated his wife for leaving him the moment she realized that she was no longer married to a cop but a driver. He never really spoke of this, how could he? One doesn't tell one's employer these things. You can't tell your employer that there are days when you lean your head up against the tile in the shower and wonder how you went from something as prestigious as being one of New York's finest to something as simple as a chauffeur for the world's overly indulged. Not to mention that he was fairly certain he'd only gotten this job because Sherry's father had been attracted to him. José remembered the way Martin looked at him when he told José that he'd gotten the job. It was almost as if Martin wanted to devour him. José had seen the subtle glances which Martin would

give him when they were alone in the car together. The situation, of course, had been complicated and awkward to begin with. Now that he was sleeping with the man's daughter these furtive glances seemed quaint in comparison.

Then there was the second still image that resonated in his head — when he had looked briefly at Sherry in the rear-view mirror one day, and saw her looking at him. She did not know he'd seen her, but that was the moment he realized that she felt something for him. That was not strictly true. He only knew at that moment that she fancied him, but he hoped and believed that it would turn into something stronger. José did not think Sherry's feelings for him were anything like her father's. José felt from Martin a lust mingled with possession that could never quite be equal. This attraction from Sherry bore no resemblance to that; instead it was attractive because he felt that he did not have to be embarrassed in front of it. From that point on, he'd had fantasies, not sexual — well, not *just* sexual — well, more than sexual — of them together locked in each other's warm embrace. These fantasies were not merely pornographic. Sherry was not some fantasy of a young girl come to life for him. No, these fantasies stretched far beyond that into the realm of someone who could be an actual partner to him. Someone who could see him as the flawed man that he was, and still manage to love him.

After his ex-wife had left, he had noticed how little they had been together. Not in terms of being in the same room; that had happened often enough — particularly near the end, too often — but actually present in the same space, being aware of one another. She had been on her phone half the time. He had been either thinking about work or having to cut back on finances. It was so rare that they spoke to one another about anything meaningful, that when she left, he found he didn't miss her, didn't think about her. With Sherry, he saw the chance for that to be completely different, to be with someone who would see him completely.

Each one of these fantasies, of course, would end the same way, with him mentally slapping himself. There were so many things wrong with this situation. She was his boss' daughter. She was eight years younger than he was. Of course, there was the money, but more than the money, there was the class. He had known rich people before. Money alone did not get you acceptance. Knowing what wine you had with fish and knowing to get a box at the opera so you could leave before the last act. Even if he won the lottery tomorrow, he knew he would never manage the rest of it. In the two worlds in which they lived failure looked completely different: for him it meant not having a union job. For her it meant only having a single piece of real estate.

The third image he had of Sherry was the day she'd actually told him how she felt, and they'd kissed. It had been rash and stupid of him to do it, to lean over and to kiss her like that without stopping and thinking, letting his desire get the better of him like that. Yet in that moment, it had seemed too good to be true. What he'd wanted so desperately, what he'd wanted but never could pursue on his own, she had brought to him. She had opened the door, and he then needed only to step through it.

Afterwards, he was filled with anxiety, sure that it would fall apart in a million ways. She would not really like him, not really know who he was. She would expect him to be something else. She would treat him badly, like a new toy she played with and then got tired of. She would regret what they had done and blame him, but none of it happened. It was not a fantasy of course, reality never is, but she was genuinely interested in who he was and seemed to care for him with real affection. She never scoffed at the way he lived or reminded him that her bedroom was bigger than his apartment. When he spoke, she listened and was genuinely interested in what he had to say.

The final image which stuck in his mind was her at his door with a basket filled with goodies in her arms, coming to help him nurse the girls. That was the moment their relationship had cleaved in two for him. One large voice in his head was continually screaming, "You have to get out of this. It's all gone too far now; she's met your children. She's in your life. What future can there be for this? The best-case scenario is you get fired. The worst is you go to prison. No one will pity you for this. Not your friends who will say you got involved with a stupid little rich girl and people from her world will look at you as their worst nightmare come to life. A frightening predator from the ghetto coming after our precious young virgins." (He had been surprised to find she was a virgin.) Another voice equally loud in his head was always calling, this is it, this is a sign from God. No, *Mary above*. She sees you for who you are, and she doesn't see any negatives. His own wife had not had as much interest in their children as Sherry did. She was tender, affectionate and kind with the girls. She genuinely enjoyed spending time with them. They loved her with an equal fervor and passion. Hadn't he always wanted someone like this? Someone who would love his children and him, see him for who he was.

Then why? Why on earth did it have to come in the form of a seventeen-year-old Park Avenue princess who could get him killed on a whim? It kept him up at night, thinking about it. Fearing that every knock on the door was either her father or the police coming for him or coming for his children. That he would be slapped on some registry. Eventually though, when he did go to sleep, all he could do was dream of her. Peaceful dreams, in them she was older than the age she was now, dressed in a black cocktail dress. They would laugh. He could always hear the girls off playing somewhere. She was smiling and looking at him with those burning bright eyes that made him feel sure that if there was such a thing as reincarnation, her soul had been around for centuries longer than his. Part of him also worried about the secrets he kept from her

about her father. He thought that she wouldn't care, but he was already tap dancing on a floor covered in nitroglycerin. He felt he couldn't afford to risk adding one more tap.

All these things were running through his head as he pulled into the parking space he had found – just five blocks from his apartment. She looked at him after hanging up on her mother and smiled. “We should definitely have time to fly the kite before it rains,” she said and got out of the car. As he watched her walk slowly towards the house, he was struck at having his chest close from a panic attack. His balls turned blue from the hardest erection he'd ever had. His heart jumped, not, he thought from the panic attack, but from the fact that he felt he was closer to happiness than he'd ever been before.

“I wonder which one will kill me first,” he asked himself, then locked the car and rushed quickly to follow her.

Chapter 5

As Susanna opened the door, she was pleased to see it did not stick. This had been happening far too often the previous summer. Now that she would be spending the foreseeable future here alone, she did not like the idea of its becoming a constant hindrance. Susanna had gone down to Fire Island without Sherry per her daughter's request.

"It's just easier if I stay with Cynthia. We both have to work remotely for classes. Since we work together on so many projects, it will be simpler just to be in the same place. Her parents really don't mind." Susanna had asked Sherry to have Cynthia's mother call her, but she wasn't surprised when the call never came. That woman was so forgetful. She wouldn't be able to find her own head if it wasn't screwed on right.

She had also been unable to bring Jacqueline up with her. Jacqueline had explained that she did not want to leave her husband because the virus had been going around their apartment building. Susanna realized that she was solo for the first time since she had bought the house. She had talked with Martin who said he was going to try to fly back but flights were being cancelled left and right. It had already been two days and he was unsure how long it would be before they closed the borders. While initially this uncertainty about the length of his absence had frustrated her, she and Martin had had a long understanding with each other about the role work, particularly his work, had played in their lives. She had made her peace with that a long time ago, yet still she pushed back on this separation.

"You really don't think you'll be able to get back?" she had asked.

"You make it sound so catastrophic," Martin had responded. "It's just that flights aren't really going in and out now. Anyway, don't worry about it. I'm fine here and safe and nothing's really wrong on your end, is it?"

"No, nothing's really wrong."

"All right," he had said, "then we'll make do, right?" She had eventually come around to his way of seeing things. Still, now that she was up here on her own, she had to confess to herself that she felt more than a little bit small.

The house was so large. When it was just her, really just her, nobody else, she couldn't help but feel out of place. She sat on her bed for a moment and then a thought occurred to her, "I'll call Gabriel and Anne, and I could call Kelly and George as well. We could all get together and have a sort of backyard party. We wouldn't have to touch each other. We could stay far apart. That would be nice," she thought.

Before she even unpacked she went to the phone and dialed Kelly and George. Their line was disconnected. She remembered that they only ever came down for the season and to save money they disconnected their phone line for the remaining nine months of the year. "Gabriel and Anne are seasonal too, aren't they?" she thought. She tried them all the same on the off-chance that they too had fled the city. They did not disconnect their phone but the fact that their voicemail was full did not suggest that they had been out any time recently.

She finished unpacking her suitcase and began to look around the house. Normally she would have sent Jacqueline up a week early to give it a spring cleaning — but circumstances being what they were she was seeing it in its unvarnished state. "Well, I'll have to do some cleaning myself, I suppose," she thought.

First, however, she decided she would go to the store. She didn't want to have too much food in. She knew that when people had to spend long periods of time indoors they could gain excessive weight by snacking. "No," she thought. "I'll just get in the necessities." Fire Island supermarket, if it could be called that, was small. Almost closer in size to a New York bodega.

The husband and wife owners were pleasant enough, and it was usually a painless procedure to go in and pick up the essentials for the week to come. But when she approached the supermarket, she was surprised to see a line around the block. She was even more surprised to see Peter, the son of the couple who ran the store, step out and announce:

"Because of the incoming storm, we are allowing two rolls of toilet paper to each customer."

It was not a good sign, Susanna thought, that this was met with applause. She tapped Peter before he could go back in the store. "Oh, hello Mrs. Fein. It's so good to see you. It's so nice that you came up early this year. I'm sorry, I really can't chat; I have to help my dad at the register."

"Of course," Susanna said, "But Peter, is this the line to get in?"

Peter looked at her as if somewhat dumbfounded. "Yes. Mrs. Fein. This is the line."

"What did you mean about toilet paper?"

"Haven't you heard there are shortages? People are panicking, they're stocking up on the essentials. Although why toilet paper, I can't imagine." For some reason, Peter paused here and looked at Susanna as if *she* were the one out of place, as opposed to all of *this*. "Are you all right, Mrs. Fein?"

"What?" she asked "Yes, I'm O.K.. Sorry to bother you, Peter."

Susanna went home without buying anything. She couldn't imagine waiting on that line. She walked home in somewhat of a daze so that when she reached her front door, she was surprised, having almost forgotten where she was walking to. When she entered, she wandered upstairs and pulled out her laptop. She opened it and began to look up the virus. She

saw the odd pictures which had been drawn of it, which appeared to be a strange mix of frightening and beautiful at the same time. Also, Susanna realized it was somewhat absurd; as she herself could not tell the difference between this virus or any other bacteria that they chose to shove under a microscope and photograph. She saw photographs of people on ventilators. Not merely the elderly, as she had expected, but younger people as well. She saw videos of nurses crying at the overflow of patients whom they could not manage and could do so little to help. She read and she read about it until the sun had set. She realized the only light in the room was coming from her computer screen.

She read through the CDC page and as many official websites as she could find. She scoured the articles in the New York Times about it up to the point where she was at bizarre cultural pieces, such as case studies of cults that had seized upon the virus as the beginning of the end of the world and cried out that death was the great equalizer. Finally, she slammed the computer shut, still somewhat frozen at all the information she had taken in and then suddenly struck with panic. A panic that manifest itself as a desire to be clean. No, not clean, beyond clean — sterile. She got up and walked to her kitchen and fished out from underneath her sink a bucket, some Ajax, and an old cloth. She filled the bucket with steaming hot water from her shower; and began to scrub her bedroom on her hands and knees from corner to corner.

She would vacuum downstairs before she scrubbed the floors, but there was a sense of urgency to her bedroom, a feeling that it could not wait to be cleaned. She needed to get on her hands and knees and remove as much dirt, a layer of the floor itself if possible, to rid it of whatever might be lurking underneath it: around the room over and over again until her arms ached — only then getting up to refill the bucket and move on to another room.

Chapter 6

The phone call with Susanna had been good. It had helped reassure Martin that he was all right in staying a little longer abroad. Overall, she was fine. Worried, of course – who wouldn't be? – but fine. From what Susanna had reported of Sherry, it had hardly affected her. No, Martin rationalized to himself, he was sure that if he were there, he would just be getting underfoot.

He had already begun getting ready for his dinner date. On first dates, he was always meticulous about his appearance. At first, he had tried on a tux but that seemed absurdly formal. Then he tried on a suit. Even this seemed to be overdoing it, particularly on a night like this one where there was a humid kind of heat caking the air which made it seem at times almost unbearable. Now, he decided just to go with a blazer and slacks, and a polo shirt underneath. That would do, that would be more than adequate.

He still had his doubts as he meandered down the large – and in his mind, overly grand – staircase, when he ran into Marcello in the lobby and his heart sank. Marcello was dressed in a tight t-shirt and capri shorts, wearing loafers with no socks. The dinner had not yet begun and already he felt he looked the fool. Marcello saw him almost instantly, but his facial expression did not change, much to Martin's surprise.

He walked over to him. "I thought we'd dine al fresco tonight if that's all right? There's a lovely restaurant not too far from here. It's really more of a cafe. It gets a beautiful breeze from the ocean. It's a real mom-and-pop place," he explained. "They actually let you into the kitchen to pick what you want from the different pots, based on what looks most appetizing. They'll cut the legs right off the octopus in front of you if you want." This couldn't have sounded more dreadful to Martin, but he was intrigued, and so he said yes.

As they walked, Martin began to apologize, "I'm so sorry I'm overdressed. I wasn't quite sure what the attire would be. You look lovely," he added quickly, fearing that Marcello would mistake his genuine embarrassment for a passive aggression aimed at him.

"Why do you do that?" Marcello asked, suddenly interrupting Martin.

"Do what?" Martin responded, looking around him as if he had been performing some tic or action, which would appear odd.

"Apologize, as if you are some fool who is constantly in error. You're simply peculiar and that— particularly in this day and age — is not at all something to be ashamed of. " This last remark by Marcello was not said with malice but with a smile.

"Oh," Martin said, rubbing his hand across his balding head. "I suppose you're right."

"I know I am," added Marcello, now looking almost boyish, and picking up his pace slightly as they neared the cafe. The restaurant was all that Marcello had described and more. The proprietors spoke no English, which made Martin nervous. More than that, it made him feel like a fool, because when they would nod and point to things, all he could do was smile and nod in return. He ended up having octopus and some kind of pasta while Marcello simply had a grilled fish, which Martin didn't catch the name of. The fish was served as it lived with its body, skin, and even head completely intact. This did not seem to be an issue for Marcello who dexterously separated fish from bone with his knife and fork. Although much to Martin's surprise Marcello seemed to have no qualms about removing the edible substance from the bones with his own teeth. With a certain amount of stupefaction Martin realized that he enjoyed Marcello's picking the bones with his teeth. He was less content with the fish head, which seemed to be staring at him in a state of awe.

Martin was about to begin small talk about Rome, when Marcello said, "Your tan line is showing." Martin responded by initially reaching for the waistline of his pants before he saw that Marcello was pointing to his finger: there was a pale narrow band in the place where his wedding ring usually was.

He remembered one day early in his marriage, when he and Susanna were on the beach and Susanna had seen the white untanned line and joked: "That's when you know you're really married. It's the wedding ring you can never take off."

Now it had given him away. He tried to read Marcello and see what his response would be to this, but before he could think of anything to say, Marcello looked down and began dissecting his food.

"Does your wife know about what you do when you're away?"

The debate had to be quick, but it did take place in Martin's mind. "The truth or a lie?" Martin thought, "What makes more sense? What was less damning?"

"I don't know," he responded. Marcello smiled.

"Then you haven't told her?"

"No," Martin answered, "but I can't believe that she hasn't wondered."

"That sounds like the excuse of a man living a double life."

Martin didn't respond to this. It stung more than Marcello had probably meant it to, he told himself. After what felt like a long period of silence, Marcello looked up.

"I'm sorry, I have offended you. How is your food?"

"Fine," Martin said, but he knew Marcello could see he was lying. He had never eaten tentacles before, and he couldn't say that the prospect agreed too well with his digestion now.

"Perhaps this is not what you had in mind when you proposed dinner this afternoon. Perhaps you thought we'd eat in your room?"

Martin was surprised by the tone in Marcello's voice. He had clearly offended Marcello at some point. He had somehow sent the message that he thought of him as an amenity of the hotel, like an extra chocolate on the pillow. Martin had not meant to send that message although, in truth, often at hotels, the young men with whom he dined . . . might fall into that category. The prospect of Marcello just standing up and walking away was frightening to Martin. That feeling was unfamiliar, so he piped up before Marcello could wander too far down the wrong path.

"No, this is lovely, better than what I thought. To be honest, I didn't know what to expect. You are very different from the usual people one meets travelling."

For a moment, Martin thought that the evening would end before it had really begun. Marcello looked at him harshly.

"Who are the usual people you meet travelling and do you ever get to know them?" Marcello's voice was both accusatory and wounded at the same time. He turned his head towards the water as he finished.

"No. But I'd like to know you," Martin said slowly.

Marcello began to turn back to Martin as the latter said this. Martin, feeling just a little encouraged, continued. "You're right. You make me think in a way I usually try to avoid. I'm not proud of the way I've had to compartmentalize my life. But I'm sincere when I say I really want to know you."

Marcello looked him squarely in the eye as he said the last part, as if he were measuring the veracity of his words. Silence lingered for some time after this. Then suddenly,

Marcello broke it with a question about Martin's business. Martin, relieved that his interlocutor had not gotten up from the table, avidly answered the question, and the small talk which Martin had assumed would start the meal commenced and carried it through to its closure. The meal from that point on was extremely pleasant, with the one exception of the owners trying to convince Martin to eat the eye of Marcello's fish for good luck. Martin was always open to getting luck where he could, but everything had its limits.

As they walked back to the hotel, Martin thought to himself, "Even though I certainly won't get to sleep with him tonight, it was worth it still. It was better to be with him like this than in some club with some twink, sweating and off his head on Ecstasy."

This encounter, he felt, was better than any of those would have been. It was this train of thought that was running through Martin's mind when they got to the hotel lobby. As he thanked Marcello for a wonderful meal—an unnecessary gesture given that he had paid for it—he was surprised when Marcello turned to him and smiled:

"Is now when I see that view from your room?"

Martin paused here, surprised. He had been so sure that this was not how the evening was going to go, but he recovered quickly enough and said: "Of course, if you want to. It's right up the staircase," which suddenly didn't seem too grand at all.

Chapter 7

"Not too much glue on the kite, sweetheart, we don't want to weigh it down."

Sherry was happy, the twins were happy. The whole thing seemed too good to be true. Her mother was away for the foreseeable future. She knew she could only keep up the charade with Cynthia for so long, but at the same time, she had the fantasy of keeping it up forever, her mother living permanently on the island while she and José lived comfortably with the girls in Gowanus, all the while her mother thinking that she had seamlessly melded into Cynthia's family.

Really, in some ways, what would be the difference to her mother? She could go out to Fire Island every now and then, see her and tell her about how well Cynthia was treating her. Her mother could be happy doing "whatever it is she's happy doing," Sherry said aloud.

"What?" one of the twins asked.

"Oh, nothing, Rosie. The kite looks great. Do you want to add the glitter?"

She hadn't done anything like this growing up. The few things she had done that were at all unstructured, there were not piano lessons, or tennis, were always with one of the nannies her mother had employed. She had always assumed that it was out of some dislike for her that her mother didn't engage with her. Now, as Sherry laid the glue down in lines that looked like a cat and the twins amply applied glitter to the point where Sherry was worried it would be too heavy to fly, she wondered if her mother was capable of enjoying herself like this.

Lord knows she had seen her mother at enough parties, but Susanna had never seemed to Sherry to be enjoying herself at these events, in fact she never even seemed to be relaxing. Au contraire, she'd seemed like a general in the prime of battle. When Sherry had read *War and Peace* for school, she felt like she'd found her mother in Anna Pavlova, the busy salon keeper who seemed to deal and trade in secrets, and was a harbinger of the rules of society.

Sherry could still recall her mother walking up and down the long rectangular tables her mother would rent out for dinner parties, inspecting meticulously for any errors, the way she would pace back and forth when talking to the staff, and the ferocity that was in her voice when she did so.

So much of her mother's life had seemed determined by expectations. Sherry couldn't imagine living like that, with expectations as the guideposts to your life. It would be like being in a hamster's cage.

She shuddered at this thought not just because she was imagining herself as a rodent, but because she remembered what her mother had done to the pet gerbils that they used to keep. She had been all too excited when she'd gotten a dog, until a few days later when she realized her pet gerbils were missing. "I can't find Miffy and Spots, did you move their cage?" she'd said to her mother. Initially, her mother had avoided the question, but then she finally broke down.

"You can't have two pets. That's simply too much."

"Well, what did you do with them?" Sherry had asked.

"I set them free. Now they get to be in the wild where they belong," she had said with a smile as if it was something to be happy about.

They were domesticated hamsters and had been hand-fed almost their entire lives. Sherry wondered if Susanna had turned her back before they'd been snatched up by a hawk. Sherry didn't realize it till now, but it had been moments like this that had always made her want to stay out of her mother's way. Her mother had hated the hamsters because they made too much noise when they ran on their wheels. "They made too much noise and she dumped them out in the cold," Sherry thought. "What would she do if she found me here?" Of course, on some level,

Sherry knew that this was not true, that her mother loved her with all her heart. Sherry was just unsure of how big that heart really was. Her father, on the other hand, was the reverse. He adored her when he was around.

His affection was overpowering and yet...at the same time insufficient. Sherry knew she was being nitpicky here, and hated herself for it, but there was something about his fondness that was almost contrived. She wondered if he loved the idea of a daughter more than he loved her: his actual daughter. It was as if he were following some instruction manual. She wondered sometimes if he only loved her because he was supposed to. All of his love was imposed onto her, the pretty, curly-black-haired girl, whom he loved simply for her title “daughter.” Sherry wasn't sure where she would rank with him without that title.

When they got to the park, there was a good breeze and the park was nearly empty. The girls ran into the field with the kite and immediately it took off. She hung to the side and watched with José. He put one arm gently around her waist and she leaned into him. She felt painful pricks at the back of her eyes and was mad at herself when she felt the tears start to come. At first, José didn't see. Then when he did, he grew concerned. "What's wrong? Do you not feel well? Did something happen with the girls? Do you want me to drive you out to see your mother?"

"No, no, no," she shrugged him off. It was the opposite. She felt really happy. She hoped he knew that. Then she felt like an idiot for saying it. She could tell by the look on his face, he didn't understand what she meant. He thought she was having some sort of breakdown, but she felt it was so rare, that you know in the moment that you're experiencing it, how truly lucky you are. She had been perceived as lucky her whole life — and she was, she wouldn't deny that — she'd had every advantage and had been denied almost nothing.

And yet, here with his arm around her, as she watched the girls play with the kite they'd built together — she felt really safe. More than that, she knew he loved her for her, not because of any roles she had in his life — indeed she did not have any comfortable role in his life. He loved her because of who she was on the very level of her soul. When he looked at her, he saw a person and despite the numerous flaws and complications which she brought into his life, he still wanted to be with her. She wanted to say all of this to him, but all that ended up coming out was, "I just hope you know how happy you make me." He smiled, pulled her closer, and kissed her head.

"Right back at you," he said. "Right back at you."

Chapter 8

The walk back from the park was quiet and the girls seemed tired from the adventure. "They will probably go to bed early tonight," José mused and grinned to himself. He was happy that he was in the stage of his relationship with Sherry where they could explore one another and still be excited, eagerly waiting for the moments they were alone together. He sometimes worried that if they were ever able to be open about their relationship, this part would recede. The rush of adrenaline and lust which came from having to hide their affection for one another was a more potent part of the cocktail between them than he had at first anticipated.

Today, for the first time in a while, that thought had not crossed his mind. Now he was more confident in his feelings for her – they were different from anything he had experienced before. He had loved his wife. He was certain of that, but it had been a love on autopilot. Diet love, he thought to himself. When she had eventually left him, his sadness was as much a feeling of failure as it was the omission of her presence. When he looked at Sherry, it seemed like something utterly different.

He was infatuated with aspects of her that would annoy him in anyone else: the way she always lied when she was backed into a corner in an argument; the way that she made a huge racket whenever she was frustrated, but not saying it. It was these momentary half-connections that were forming in the back of José's mind when they entered the apartment and found the landline ringing. "I'll grab it," Tina shouted before picking it up. Then José heard a squeal of excitement from the young girl's mouth. "Grandma," she said. José groaned inwardly.

Of late, his conversations with his mother had not been happy ones. She did not approve of Sherry, and the tactic which she had taken with José was to wear him down. He was fairly confident that today would be no exception. "She wants to talk to you," Tina called across

the kitchen, extending her hand with the phone. He wondered if it was too early to teach her how to pretend convincingly that her parents weren't home.

He took the phone out of her hand.

"Hey, mom. How are you?"

"I'm fine. How are you?"

"I'm doing well," he responded, resigned.

Although Sherry had met his mother once briefly, she was unaware of the extent of his mother's hatred. Sherry could now be heard on the floor with the two girls in her arms, all of them laughing hysterically. She had invented a new game with them, where she was a combination of the wicked witch of the west and the flying monkeys from Oz and the two girls were both Dorothy. He knew if he could hear her voice saying "I'll get you my little pretty," his mother could too. He was fairly certain of where the conversation would go from there and braced himself.

"Is that girl there with you?"

"Yes," he said, not wanting Sherry to know that they were talking about her.

"I told you to break it off with her."

He laughed. "Well, as much as I value your opinion..." he began, hoping to shrug off her comments as humorous, but his mother had no interest in any other subject.

"No good can come from that. Do you want to end up in jail like your cousin Marco?"

"Marco stole from his employer, Mom. I don't think..."

"No, you don't think! That's exactly how they'll see it. You took something that's theirs. You took their daughter."

"Look, Mom, I don't expect you to understand. It's complicated. I'm not even sure I understand completely."

"Oh, I understand," she said. "She's young, she's pretty, and you have bad taste in women. Suddenly you get swept up in this young girl's fantasy, you think you're her knight in shining armor," she shouted through the phone. "You may think you're in love but you're the only one who will ever see it like that. The rest of the world will make you out like some pervert. Is that how you want to be seen by people?"

He grabbed the phone cord and twisted it around his hand as if trying to pull the words out of the wall. He stepped behind the kitchen door and closed it. "I'm not having this conversation with you again," he said, his voice now hushed. "This is my life. Stay out of it."

His mother was silent for a moment. When she spoke again, her tone was softer. "You're not a child anymore. It's your life, but the mistakes you make have consequences. On top of that, your life is not your own. You have those two girls. Do you want to lose them?" He didn't respond to this and the two of them just sat in silence. "I'm sorry," she said. "How are things, otherwise?"

"Fine, fine," he said, "Listen, Ma, I have to go. I'll talk to you later." He hung up the phone without waiting for a response. He'd abhorred what she'd said. He resisted how much truth was in her words.

He looked over at Sherry playing house with the girls. They seemed so content. More so every day. From this vantage, everything seemed right. Yet, his mother's voice clawed inside his mind. He knew that if the roof were pried away from its eaves and the world could glance inside at this scene of domestic frolic, it would look horribly *unright* to them, and the

disapproving judges would come down on him with the wrath of God. "God has a hell of a sense of humor," he thought to himself, and then went out to join Sherry and the girls.

"How was your mom?" Sherry asked looking up at him. "I hope you gave her my best."

"I sure did," he chirped, disliking how easily falsehoods came to him now.