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Anniversary

The first phone call came at nine sharp. It was Wanda, quondam mayoral secretary. Wanda never forgot a date no matter how much you wanted her to.

"Hi- i-i." The greeting sounded like a pound of keening with a quart molasses in it. "You know, I just couldn't let the day go by without calling. I was up all last night, thinking of you. How *are* you, honey? You okay?" There was a big dollop of undigested Georgia in Wanda who could slice up some woman for being a moron, too fat or too common and then say "bless her heart" which was supposed to make it all right.

"I'm fine, Wanda. It comes once a year, every year."

"You're a marvel. So *brave*. But still—would you care to have some company today? I can be there in half an hour."

"Oh, I'll be busy. Don't you worry about me."

"I'll never forget it. Never get over it. There I was blubbering and you. . . well, you weren't. So brave."

"We'll get together soon, Wanda."

"But not *today*, right?" Wanda had her insights.

"No, not today."

"Right then, boss."

I'm not your boss and never was, she thought, but didn't say so.

"Thanks, Wanda. I appreciate it. I'm really touched."

"Remember, I'm going to be home all day except for when I have to go pick Jeannie up, which won't be until four-thirty. Just so you know."

"I'm making a note," she said impatiently.

"I'll let that go because of what day this is. Bye-bye, then." Boss. Honey. Madam Mayor.



It wasn't just any morning but *the* morning which was why Wanda phoned and why other people were going to, the ones who called every year. Nine years now. Nearly a decade. She had to concentrate to recollect anything that happened two weeks ago but that day felt like it was still be happening; it was etched that deeply. She'd been in the office for only half an hour when the phone call came from Chief Santucci. Wanda had put him straight through and Wanda never put anybody through until she'd put them through her wringer. Must have been Bill's tone. Then he told her, kindly but straight. The news spread and a pall fell over the building. Because she had to go somewhere, she went to the police station though there was no point in it. There was the way everybody looked at her and, for that matter, still did and apparently always would, unless she

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moved to Arizona or married a movie star. To her the look meant, "You screwed up somewhere, screwed up big time, didn't you? Must have, poor thing. Oh, and we *didn't*."

That first night she had made up her mind how she was going to behave. She told herself that to be called stoical is never an insult.

Lots of people still called her Madam Mayor: the cashiers at the Rite-Aid and Stop and Shop, the older saleswomen in Klein's and Elaine's, the servers at The Blue Barn and in Rosie's Café. It was still a small town and the length of a main street is indirectly proportional to that of its memory. People seemed to get a kick out of using the title, as if her former career were an intimate joke or as though showing her even ironic deference could make her feel better. Her fellow citizens always wanted that she should feel better; for a while, some actually said so. But about what, exactly? Of course, that was a question it would have been too rude to ask.



She was up at 7:15, as usual. After stretching over to switch on the clock-radio, she threw on her robe, put her feet in her slippers, headed for the bathroom, peed, then it was downstairs to put on the coffee, the bagel in the toaster oven, to turn on another radio. Morning Edition. Then she trudged back upstairs, brushed her teeth and dressed. She still laid out her clothes the night before going to bed, a now pointless efficiency. Oxford shirt, sweater, underwear, socks, slacks. Nothing feminine. I've become simply a bundle of habits, she thought—some good, some bad—but then, who wasn't? No dirty dishes in the sink. She kept the house tidy, checkbook balanced, never ate take-out, kept the gas tank at least half full, and didn't let the geraniums die. Now that she'd given up her volunteering at the old folks' home and the elementary school—feeling she'd grown too old for both—what was there except to wait for a decisive diagnosis? *Othello's occupation's gone*. When, at bad moments, that line popped into her head, she wondered how, were she asked, she might deliver it—melancholy? despairing? incensed? whining?

Back down in the kitchen, she consumed, in the customary order, orange juice and pills, bagel and banana, coffee with a soupcon of milk, and glanced over the list of errands she had made the night before. This was another habit left over from the days when she was really alive. It was getting hard to think of something that would get her out of the house every day, but she made the effort.

All the while, the radio kept her company with its bodiless familiar voices familiar. Over breakfast, it was the newscasters. Early evening was reserved for music without which, Nietzsche claimed, life would be a mistake. In the afternoons she sometimes tuned into talk shows, the kind where the interviewer gets the best out of select articulate poobahs promoting books, movies, lifestyles, cosmologies, gadgets or just their own former lives and inflexible opinions. Then came the callers and the precious illusion of interactivity. This formula could stretch to any topic, from healthcare to terrorism, the latest infectious disease to the oldest metaphysical conundrum. First the experts answer prepared questions, a sort of establishing shot to lay out the territory with a degree of objectivity.

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But, as every producer knows it's controversy that grabs, debate is encouraged—even provoked—by the interviewer, our everyman, our surrogate. Then the callers whom she imagines as unemployed cranks like herself, only worse. Still, some are actually well informed, intelligent, even capable of nuance. These get short shrift because it's the knuckleheads with the bumper-sticker opinions we want to hear. The experts use them to shore up their own views or have fun demolishing their clichés with exquisite courtesy; it's especially effective when they can remember the callers' first names. "Well, Jill, that's a common misconception." "Some people *do* think that, Warren, but it may surprise you to hear the evidence indicates exactly the opposite."



After lunch, she turned off the radio and took out the albums.

The first picture she looked at was a glossy black and white wedding shot. Look at me, she thought, back in the Triassic Period: Smiling, happy, teeny tiny brain. She looked at him. So young and sober and sane.

Then it started.



"First Kimmy, now the goddamned tin pot City Council. I'm sick of being your last priority. It's humiliating."

"That why you drink so much, is it?"

"Damn it. I don't drink—"

"You going to put the bourbon down and hit me again?"

"Christ. I said I was sorry about that. I said it about a *thousand* times. You ever going to stop going on about it, using it against me?"

"You know, let's—"

"Let's what?"

"It's more than time. Let's call it quits."

"Quits? *Quits*? Wouldn't that hurt your precious career? A divorce. Jesus."

"I really don't care."

"You're not kidding?"

"I've made an executive decision. I don't want you. Neither does Kimmy."

"Why would you say that? What'd Kimmy say?"

"She says she doesn't like you and wishes you were gone. She says she's afraid of you."

"Afraid of me? You mean because of that time? That was literally nothing. Shit."

"I think you ought to call your brother, stay with him for a while."

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"You do, do you? You mean you want me out starting like what?—tonight?"

"You always know just what a girl wants."

"You bitch. She's half mine and she'll never forget that and I'll sure as hell make sure *you* won't."



There was the picture of the three of them in Rheinach park, Kimmy on a swing. July. Then one taken by the lake; he's holding up his line with a sunfish at the end of it. She snapped that and they were laughing because the fish was so tiny. Then one of Kim's birthday parties. Fifth? Sixth? Pictures from her first campaign for mayor, all taken by Kimmy. After that it was pretty much just Kim. There she was with her four best friends, graduating from high school. In front of vineyards, on beaches. Their trip to California. Giving the thumbs-up with her college roommate, Alexis. Kim in cap and gown. Then just beautiful Kim with her ugly used car. A picture of the inside of her first apartment. Then nothing. Nothing at all.

Stuck between the two last pages was a long, charmingly handwritten letter Kim had sent her freshman year. It burst with ideas, the joy of discovery, of feeling new things. She loved her philosophy course and was enthusiastic the class in music—her electives. She had put this letter aside because this exalted, intelligent, exhilarated stream of consciousness was unlike anything else and made her wonder: "This came out of me?"



Beethoven's last movements can be so jolly. It's as if he sometimes decided that maybe things aren't so tough after all, lightened up, shrugged his shoulders and sighed, "What the hell?" The world has beautiful people in it, and forests, and the good soups he said only the pure in heart can make. The variations that wind up the Opus 20 Septet and the rondo of the Violin Concerto make me think of Mozart and Mozart was a real master of jolly. But Mozart's so often in high spirits that we expect it of him, while the joviality the deaf, brooding titan is such a surprise that it's impossible to resist. It's as if the closed eyelids on that death mask had flown open and the set mouth widened into this Dionysian grin. You never know what tricks the great might play. Even a tragic poet can turn out epigrams. Kant stuck by his rigid, masculinist absolutism almost to the point of stupidity; he cleaved to consistency like an idol until it led him into contradiction, insisting almost stupidly to Benjamin Constant that yeah, sure, if asked, he'd show a murderer exactly where to find his victim so as not to add the sin of lying to that of murder. I guess he was pretty old by then; senility was just around the corner—perhaps even closer. What's as heavy as thought, or as light? A guillotine maybe? Aristotle, joking that he wouldn't give the Athenians a second chance to sin against philosophy, fled to Chalcis and was dead in a year. I can't see how they know, but my textbook says it was a disease of the alimentary organs that carried off the man who believed the foundation of happiness is a

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sound digestion. Maybe if he'd stayed on in Athens, at Athenian food, and imitated the guy his teacher never stopped talking about, he'd also have lived to be seventy. Right now I'm listening to Iberia, Mom. A dozen long piano pieces. The composer, Isaac Albéniz, died younger than Aristotle; he didn't make it to fifty. It's been frigid this week and this music warms up my toes and my stomach. Spanish music is so universally appealing that a lot of it was written by Frenchmen and Russians. Maybe the more Spanish it is, the more universal. Does that make any sense? Anyway, the warmth of Seville is pretty welcome in this cold snap. We're in the middle also of a flu epidemic too; and if there was ever life on Mars, it died out. Beethoven's high spirits and Albéniz's distilled Spanish sun, even Kant's rigidity and Aristotle's middle-aged common sense are somehow encouraging. We need our consolations, don't we: cups of Earl Grey and comedies with Hugh Grant in them and tight playoff games, innocent children and aspirin and black German fountain pens with golden nibs. I really love the Pelikan, Mom. Best Christmas present ever. It makes me want to write something worthy of it. Thanks again. Are you okay? I'll call Sunday. Love you.

Yours down to the bottom of my bottle of Quink.

Kim.



She turned back through the album. There was her daughter, radiant on prom night, posing beside a frightened ectomorph—Kyle? Kieran? She was always so cautious about boys. Never crazy, never less than prudent—at least so far as she knew. She'd always thought this was because of her father but sometimes she wondered whether it might be down to her. She hadn't gone looking for another man after the divorce and hadn't welcomed any of those who tried to infiltrate her life.

She was been driving Kim to the airport.

"Mom, can I ask you something? It's kind of an awkward question."

"Shoot."

"Have you like given up, you know—on sex?"

"Not just that, Kim. On intimacy. Any kind."

Extended pause, the highway streaming under them.

Then, in a small voice, as if anxious about the answer: "Except with me?"

"Oh, yes. Definitely. Except with *you*."



In spite of the advice of her staff, who seemed astonished that she would even consider such a thing, she decided to run for a second term. By rights, she shouldn't have; it was irresponsible. Who could have confidence in her, under the circumstances? But she didn't care. She wanted to save her position—or her routine. Because Karl McFadden, so well

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qualified, such an up-and-comer, was too decent even to hint at why she shouldn't, she had won. The so-called sympathy vote. In her opinion, what her constituents really wanted was for her to bury herself in some hole and take the reek of catastrophe with her. But they were trapped by their own feelings so, ironically, they had to keep her in public life—out of sympathy. But was it really sympathy at all, feeling what they imagined she was feeling? Maybe sympathy just comes down to the fear of making things even worse for somebody whose been stricken. Rightly named, she won because of pity. It was a sort of tax the electorate paid to fate because it didn't happen to them (not that it ever could!).

Now Karl McFadden was in the state senate, making a name for himself. Congress next. Sky's the limit, they say.



Why had he gone to the apartment? What was said? Even drunk, which the medical examiner insisted he was, how could he do it? Had she said something that drove him berserk? How can you come to terms with something when all you know is aftermaths? No trials, only funerals. Easier to picture him, galvanized by horror, leaping into his pickup, speeding to his motel room, reaching for the overhead fan and fumbling with that belt.