Sight / Bites

Dorothy Linick

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Introduction

It has long been my ambition to share with others some of the written work by my late wife, Dorothy. She began to devote much time to the writing in fiction in the mid-90's and at the time of her death, in 2007, she had compiled an impressive dossier. I hesitate to use the verb "completed" because Dorothy never seemed to be totally satisfied with any of her efforts and she was constantly undertaking tasks of revision. The job of preparing editions of her work, even for this website, was immensely complicated by this habit – but there were other problems as well.

I would have to say that Dorothy was never completely comfortable with computer technology and she never adopted a coherent system of handling her many projects and their revision. When she died there were four files on her desktop, 62 on her hard drive, 183 in her documents folder – and that was only the beginning. I discovered a total of 79 storage disks, mostly in the old three and a half inch square floppy format, but also including some zip disks and some CD's. Of these 19 belonged to the world of work, her role as special projects coordinator at the American School in London, and four (with literary titles) were by now blank. Of the remaining 56 disks, some nine were in word processing formats so ancient they could not be read by modern machines and I had to have these professionally recovered. Even those that could be read could often be opened only in a text edit format and required further manipulation to make them at all useful. In all, there were over 1600 files containing materials of a literary import!

Of course many of the files were merely copies or duplicates of earlier work – though there were true revisions as well. Indeed, one of the chief tasks undertaken by her sister Naomi, who has had a major hand in editing this manuscript, was attempting to discover which draft represented Dorothy's most complete (I won't say final) intention.

The problem was complicated by Dorothy's habit of adopting new titles for existing works – without getting rid of the original. As an example I discovered that *Learning Curves*, which was one of her first attempts at novel writing, also later appeared in her electronic archive as *Mimi Marcus*, *SightBites*, *Love Can Drive A Normal Woman To Extremes*, *Getting Over Gerry*, and *Getting Over Barry*. In all, Dorothy worked on some twenty-five projects, leaving only fragments or outlines in some cases, and offering full-length versions in others. I remember urging her to try her hand at the short story format but I believe she intended all of her efforts to grow into novellength proportions.

She offered some of her projects to publishers and had at one time an agent in New York and then one in London – but nothing came of these efforts. I read only one of these works during her lifetime but I knew the direction and tone of many of the others. For a wider audience, this website can now reveal some of what she left behind for us.

Anthony Linick

Chapter 1

The little blue bow on the card gave the game away – Rosie Farquhar and Gerald Marcus were the proud parents of a baby boy, William Harry Nathanial, born the First of August of this year, weight seven pounds, nine ounces. By return mail I sent a turd weighing two ounces, deposited by my Miniature Schnauzer, Otto, born the Eighteenth of June, 1993. I had no grievance against William Harry, but I wasn't best pleased with his parents, to be perfectly honest. Gerald was still my husband – whether he wanted to be or not – and Rosie was the poacher who had bagged my property.

I'm Miriam Marcus, Mimi ever since I can remember. Yes, the American. I write about television for anyone who'll pay me. A pundit, if you'll excuse the expression. Appeared on *The Late Show* recently. Now you place me, right? I've written two books, the most successful being a retrospective on the decline of television standards in America – *Mickey Mouse Club* come back! All Is forgiven. Dark red hair, medium height, good bone structure, dress well, could lose five pounds (mostly water weight, of course). Condemned to single status, that's Miriam Marcus.

Gerry and I were together for nineteen years, three months and four days in total. For the last two years, three months and two days of these years we lived here in England because Gerald had opted for a transfer to the London office of his law firm, Bernstein, Fine, Youngstein and Marcus (us). Neither one of us having lived anywhere else but L.A., this would be our last chance at 'adventure, Gerry persuaded me, that if you count moving from one supremely successful law practice and life in an expensive suburb to another successful law practice, etc., this can count as an adventure. Not like fleeing the Cossacks with one blanket and a beat-up cooking pot, but you play the hand you're dealt.

Gerry is an Anglophile, a paid-up member of that pathetic species who actually get off on the condescension meted out by the British to such mutants. He bought into the whole schmear, persisting in seeing this weird country as a theme park designed by Ralph Lauren.

I have never made my peace with the plumbing, the risible heating system, the weather or the lousy service. "Give an American a problem," the

wife of one of Gerry's colleagues whined, "and they'll tell you ten ways they can solve it, but give that same problem to the English and they'll tell you ten ways they can't."

On the other hand, the British make a point of not being "positive," an attitude valued far beyond its worth in the land of my birth. I may have been born to a society that believes a smile and a gun can get you anything, but, like Al Capone, I recognize the hypocrisy for what it is.

Life was bumpy from the start. Gerry wanted us to live in Chelsea, but the toney neighborhood was too ur-goy; I feel most comfortable surrounded by enough Jews to huddle together in case of trouble, but *landsmen* are not easy to find in England and just about impossible to unearth in Chelsea, trust me. I mean, if you figure there are less than half a million known Jews in the whole of Great Britain, how can they possibly be in the national face the way they are in America? They're not keen on making an impact of any kind actually and either go the assimilated route, Anglicizing their names and their attitudes, or opt for the polar opposite by hiding out in the grimmest ghettos north of Warsaw, all with one giant kosher butcher shop and a Volvo dealership.

I needed to establish a base camp somewhere between these two extremes, to find a community of my co-religionists (as Jews are often known here) with my priorities. I needed a decent deli, a good patisserie, a first-rate hairdresser, and a convenient temple so the walk on the High Holy Days would not be a drag. A neighborhood where cleaning women were easy to import.

"You want Saint John's Wood," I was told by the maven at the relocation company. Besides, she went on, there was an American school which would be useful. When I told her we had no children, she was embarrassed – as people usually were by such a domestic lapse. I am not, but more of that later.

Wealthy Victorians kept their mistresses in St John's Wood, now wealthy Jewish, Japanese, and American expat businessmen installed their wives and children in the overpriced residences. There are enough gentiles around to keep the place respectable, so you don't expect the Gestapo to drop by in the middle of the night. "Not too Jewish," as my new friend Marlene Greene told me, which is the way Jews here talk about themselves.

Gerry was not happy. Being north of Regent's Park did nothing for him; he wanted to be in Chelsea, well south of the only park that mattered, Hyde Park. He wanted to be in strolling distance of restaurants so smart and expensive that paying the bill felt like being mugged by a bunch of crackheads in the Bronx. He wanted to meet the kind of people he'd seen in *Four Weddings and A Funeral*. That was his idea of England, honestly.

I spent a fortune on the house in St. John's Wood, of course. "I want the English country house look, and don't spare the expense," Gerry instructed,

and who was I to argue? He made a fortune and we hardly had to save for the dog's college education. Besides, I spend money well.

I set about chintzing and festooning us to death. When Thomas Goode came up with some crap excuse about why our ginger-jar-based-lamps were not delivered on time, I told them: "By five this afternoon or forget it." They arrived. My cleaner. Mrs. O'Farrell, who insisted on being music hall Irish to satisfy what she took to be a universal American sympathy for her compatriots, said with relish: "You surely know how to get the bloody English to pull their finger out, Mrs. Marcus."

Otto was an acquisition frowned on at first by Gerry, but when Harrods promised the dog would be housetrained prior to arrival and thus no threat to our new apricot-colored carpets, he thawed out. Our dog in L.A. – Karl, also a schnauzer – had died a year before the move and truth was, Gerry missed him. In theory Gerry fancied owning something big, slavering and vaguely countryish, but after the neighbors' Labrador slobbered all over his Tommy Nutter cavalry twill trousers, he changed his mind. After a check by Harrods to determine we were the kind of people judged appropriate for the onerous duties of pet ownership – Gerry sweating that one out, I'll tell you! – Otto arrived and Gerry was fine.

Priorities properly in place, I found a hairdresser, Paco, on the highstreet, which is what they called the main drag in England. Paco had long, grubby blond extensions and a fake tan, but he knew his way around a pair of scissors and a blow dryer, and my lowlights had never looked better. Which brings me back to Marlene Greene.

We sat next to each other in the "color pit" and started a conversation that has gone on ever since. Marlene was in her late forties, as I am – but exactly where, as she put it, could "only be found out at the point of a gun, darling." Marl is a large woman, emphatically brunette with great tits, two ex-husbands and a teenage son, Isaac, who had body parts pierced fore and aft. Isaac was in the midst of his GCSE's, she told me, part of the arcane and convoluted British exam system about which I don't care enough to fathom. She owns a house to kill for, a lot of important jewelry and has very well looked-after teeth. As a bonus of our friendship I came by the name of a good dentist, an asset as rare as goodwill in this country. Vindra Patel, "A gonif on Harley Street, but up to American standards," she swore. Marl's high maintenance – and not ashamed of it. A girl after my own heart.

Unfortunately, the same could said by Gerry of Rosie Farquhar. Smitten from the first by the *goyishe* princess of his fantasies, Gerry sat next to her at a dinner party in Fulham (a drab former working class neighborhood of cramped

terrace houses crowded by Chelsea wannabees), one given by an obnoxious client, Mungo Jacks, and his dopey wife, Caroline.

"Hello! You must be that nice American Caroline told me about," Rosie fluttered, and he fell. Suckered by a twenty-something gnat brain, swinging a lot of blonde hair about, chattering on about "the country" and "the season," hinting about hanging out with "the Royals." She reeked of overdrafts at Coutts and social connections – the latter being the Achilles tendon of the heel I married. It was the voice that did it most of all: swallowed consonants and flattened vowels fumed by centuries of breeding, reducing that dope Gerry to a series of lustful "Uh huhs" in response.

"She roped him in like a steer," I told Marlene later. "She grabbed him by the balls and his heart and mind followed."

"Just make sure you get the house," Marlene shrugged.

It was in my name for tax purposes, anyway.

Chapter 2

Let's cut to the chase. Three months after meeting Rosie Gerry told me that he was "totally in love," that he "couldn't help it," that he "felt like a kid again" and that wanted to know what I "wanted to do about it?" I told him I wanted to cut his nuts off, preserve them like lemons, wrap them in *prosciutto* and serve them up to his lady-love on a nest of lettuce – but I would settle for a profitable divorce. In short, I threw him out. News of that baby came later, which was just as well for all of us.

Counselor Marcus was in *shtuck*, divorce-wise. Greedy had put a lot of stuff in my name and, as I was in no mood to return very much of it, he had to sweeten the pot. Six months later, with the coming event as leverage, I had the house, of course, healthy bank account(s), custody of Otto (Gerry got generous visitation rights - why should the dog suffer?), and the family Gold Card. Gerry still didn't have a divorce, but as I told him in my lawyer's office, some things are worth waiting for.

I still had a 'kinda' career, Marlene, and Paco the hairdresser – but no friends to speak of because most of them owed an oath of fealty to Gerry, What I didn't have was a regular supply of sex, especially good sex and, to be honest, I was used to getting it on, then getting off, if you know what I mean.

To the last, Gerry and I liked being in bed together. We didn't like each other a whole lot of the time, but good sex is a powerful bonding agent and from our first date – which ended up lasting a weekend – we fucked like bunnies. He even told me about Rosie after a quickie (oh yes!) – just before going to the theatre: like Mrs. Lincoln, I don't remember much about the performance.

I discussed this gap in my life with Marl.

"Well, darling you're in the wrong country to get much action."

"You must know some guys," I begged.

"Yes sweetie, but they're either married or gay and more often than not, both." Marlene laughed fit to bust, then went on, "Anyway, the ones who would be interested in us are so ancient, they never go anywhere without a resuscitator."

I must have looked crushed, because she tried to cheer me up: "Maybe you'd have better luck in L.A.?"

I shut the door on that idea. "I'd have better luck in a tank full of sharks, besides there's all that political correctness shit and I can't face that right now. Anyway, if I go back home right now, Beverly will drive me crazy."

Beyond crazy, berserk. Beverly Fine, my younger sister, still burst into tears over my shady status every time we talked on the phone. She and my brother-in-law Hershel, an accountant who could bore for the U.S. in the Olympics, couldn't get over "that *schmuck* Gerry." I should "come back home, get away from the chance of running into embarrassing situations," as Beverly delicately described the optimum humiliation in her eyes, that of my tripping over my ex and the lovely Rosie proudly *schlepping* their offspring around Harrods. I could always stay with Beverly and Hershel while I got over "it," an option that appealed as much as moving in with Newt Gingrich. No, I was better toughing it out where I was for the meantime, the threat of running into the happy couple notwithstanding.

Actually, I'm being a little hard on Bev and Herschel. Sure, part of their outrage was genuine, but there were elements of *schadenfreude* as well: in Beverly's overheated imagination, I had done better than her in life. Since she is – ditto in her overheated imagination – a more worthy person than I am and has two kids whose futures were her responsibility, this is not fair. My shattered marriage demonstrated to that harpy that there *is* universal justice, but Beverly has never had the courage of her convictions about anything – so if I'd gone to L.A. I'd have been smothered by her guilt in the form of bogus sympathy. You can see why I preferred to stay out of the Southland for a while, even if it meant blowing my chance to bewitch Clint Eastwood.

Which brings me back to sex. One gray November afternoon, icy drizzle doing little for Paco's handiwork, I needed something to take my mind off my own troubles and went to Leicester Square to see the current Quentin Tarantino bloodfest.

Still trembling and looking over my shoulder, I headed home on the tube at Piccadilly Circus; then remembered my offer of supper to Marlene and Isaac. I doubled back to Lina's Italian deli on Brewer Street. I already had sun-dried tomatoes and plenty of salad at home, so I picked up a jar of olive paste, a packet of mozzarella, fresh basil and a loaf of *ciabatta*. On reflection, I picked up a second loaf, remembering Isaac and Otto.

Heading along Brewer, I came to a branch of Ann Summers. The chain of sex shops, windows cluttered with red nylon nighties and dubious leather gear, roused my curiosity. What the fuck? I thought appropriately, and went in for the first time in my life. The shop was big, well-lit and there was a large

crowd of jolly, quite unembarrassed shoppers browsing among the displays of crotch-less panties and flavored condoms. More party joke than S and M. Then I reached a display of vibrators in different shapes and sizes, kind of like the prototype but as someone once said, "The best ideas are the simple ones."

I was attracted to a large black one – once a liberal, always a liberal – but settled on one with proportions similar to Gerry's: better the devil you know.

I checked out my cash supply, I didn't feel like lingering over a charge, but it was fine. I was a bit embarrassed. to be honest – whether over buying such a thing, or needing it, I'm not sure which. Anyway, I waited until up the female clerk at the cash desk was freed up and then made my move. Everything was going fine, that is to say in silence, without eye contact, when we hit a snag.

"You don't want to use this without lubricant. It's for sale over there," she said, pointing to a display to the left of the desk, with powers of projection well up to Royal Shakespeare Company standard.

"It's for a friend, I'm sure she already has some," I whispered, experiencing what I took to be my very first hot flash. She shrugged, put the vibrator in a gaudy plastic bag and handed it to me. I buried it deep among the deli and lit out of there. I couldn't wait to tell Marlene.

I had a go later, using enough KY jelly to lubricate one of those legendary orgies hosted by Catherine the Great. But you know? This sexual self-sufficiency business is just a load of crap, really. Next time it was on offer I decided to take the real thing, regardless of size, creed, color, or age. I could always rent a resuscitator.

Chapter 3

Marlene and I were having our lowlights done when this grand old dame with attitude swept into Paco's and the joint came to life.

"Who's that?"

"Nina Wolfe," Marlene told me.

"Do you know her?"

Paco was prancing around her with his hip-hop version of a courtly flourish. He chattered on obsequiously, cooing "Mrs. Wolfe" this and "Mrs. Wolfe" that, running his hands through her short, thick white hair as if it was a cache of doubloons.

"I know who she is, but how would I know someone like Nina Wolfe?" Marlene shook her head at my apparent naiveté.

"Well, I'm just a little girl from the country, fill me in."

"Nina Wolfe used to have an arts program on television years ago, when I was a kid. You know, where creative types sit around talking about their latest book or film? Can't remember the name of it, but believe me, everyone used to watch it on a Saturday night."

I tried to imagine the American public spending Saturday night curled up in front of the box to watch a bunch of talking heads, but failed. "She must have made some impression."

"God, yes. Everyone wanted to look like her, wear her clothes. Did she ever have charm ..." Marlene shook her head just at the memory of the devastating Nina in full flow, then went on, "She was married to some famous journalist or other, I can't remember his name . . ."

"Mr Wolfe?"

Marlene rolled her eyes. "Anyway, her son is on television as well and, as if that isn't enough, she writes detective novels and there's a TV series based on them with a character . . ."

"Whose name you can't remember?"

"Daphne something," Marlene shrugged. "Anyway, the program stars her grand-daughter, something or other Wolfe."

"Hedy Wolfe," I filled in, "the show is *Daphne Steele*, by the way." Naturally I knew the program: television is my field of expertise, as they say. Granddaughter Hedy was a star in the making with a fashionably long, thin body, a signature braid of waist-length dark hair, and a husky voice. And the apple didn't fall far from the tree: Hedy didn't appear to be short on attitude, either.

"Who's the son?"

"Hedy's father, Daniel Wolfe." *His* name she remembered, but then again who wouldn't? A tall, dark dish, fiftyish, host of the long-running arts magazine, 'See/Hear' on Channel Four. The program was prestigious as well as popular; quite a hat trick for a medium spewing mostly junk, I tell you. I would then have sacrificed Gerald's first born (okay, okay! easy enough for me) to appear on "See/Hear".

"She's something isn't she?" I meant Nina Wolfe of course. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but the vocal quality was the vintage version of her granddaughter's - a laugh-y, sexy voice. The bones were still there, and the slim build. Not bad for someone who had to be rising eighty and I didn't think she was holding in her stomach, either. "Does she live around here?"

"Next to you ... uh ..."

"Acacia Road?" We – I – was on Acacia Circle.

"Yes, of course."

I hoped Marlene's aphasia was temporary. I made up my mind to introduce myself (Yes, Jewish and American, so I'm not afraid to be pushy), but Drusilla, Paco's starveling junior, dragged herself over to give me a strand test, pronouncing me "Ready." By the time she'd finished removing the aluminum doodahs in slow motion, then shampooed the evil smelling gunk out my hair with just as much enthusiasm, Mrs. Wolfe was breezing out, thick white hair looking mighty stylish, yelling back at Paco that as much as she hated to rush there was "a crowd coming for tea," and she had promised someone called "Ilona" to "pick up something wicked with chocolate" at Richoux next door and she was late already.

All of which would have blown my first chance to meet the departing Nina Wolfe, but fortunately there was Otto.

Almost a week later, five days and three hours to be exact, I was watching a taped episode of *Geraldo* – with panelists who looked and behaved as if they had been born with tattoos. The doorbell rang and God proved his/her indisputable existence.

My visitor was Daniel Wolfe. He had the manners to introduce himself as if he wasn't a nationally known media celebrity, then he spoiled it by

threatening to bring a paternity suit against Otto. The culprit gazed up, looking as innocent as anyone could with bushy eyebrows and a beard trimmed like his namesake, the father of the modern German state.

Acting as though I was used to celebrities knocking at my door and accusing my dog of sating his appetites illicitly, I invited him in. I had not changed the Nicole Farhi suit worn earlier in the day while grazing at Harvey Nichols with Marlene and I was aware that Mr. Wolfe had noticed how smart I looked. Otto bustled around us, saying nothing.

I led "Mr. Wolfe" – I was trying to sound English – into the sensory deprivation tank of chintz and repro that gave the television room its cozy ambiance. I offered him a drink, having to assume the sun to be well over the yardarm, since there had been little sighting of it in several days. He declined in that wintry way the English have as if you've insulted them by such an offer at such a time. He also refused the invitation to sit, preferring to station himself by the fireplace, hands behind his back. He looked the perfect prat in a Ralph Lauren, tweedy sort of a way. I put the VCR on hold, arranged myself prettily in the corner of the sofa and cut to the chase

"What is this about, Mr. Wolfe?"

"Impregnated Tilly."

"A close member of your family, I take it?"

His lips stretched, indicating a sense of humor, but nothing you could count on. "My mother's dog. She lives on Acacia Road."

I knew that, but didn't let on. Anyway, I had no reason to be nervous. "What sort of dog is Tillie?"

"A West Highland, actually. Three years old. Pedigree of course, and you know how breeders feel about this sort of thing."

Miscegenation! Thank God this hadn't happened in Mississippi. "When did the uh ... uh ... take place?"

He studied his Gucci loafers. "She was in season three weeks ago."

"What makes you come to me?" This was going to be fun. This already was fun. A good lawyer always knows the answer to questions before asking – I hadn't been married to one of the best without learning something.

He performed a funny, twisting thing with his mouth, fair indication of how uncomfortable he was feeling by this time. I could tell Daniel Wolfe regretted this visit and deserved to, in my opinion. I mean, come on! What kind of middle-aged man calls on a perfect stranger about this kind of crap because his *mother* tells him to? The kind of man that I was dying to meet, so I put the critique on hold.

"Well, Ilona" – I assumed he was talking about the Ilona of the Richoux errand, I mean no one outside of Budapest knows more than one – "mother's housekeeper, thought she saw a Schnauzer hovering around the garden in the back."

"Not this one."

"Are you sure?"

"Yep, I sure am."

"How can you be so sure?" My confidence was making Mr. Wolfe testy, which looked good on him.

I crossed one leg over the other, swinging an ankle, calling attention to my sheer black stockings and high heels. It worked.

"Because Otto's been neutered." Otto looked up on cue with murder in his eyes – as if to confirm the truth of what I said.

Daniel Wolfe stared back at me for a long moment then laughed, as much from relief as anything else, I suspected.

"Very clever. What a barrister you would make, Mrs. Marcus."

"How do you know I'm not one?"

Again he laughed. "I give in, I can't apologize enough. That hag Ilona always gets it wrong."

I shrugged my willingness to accept his dumping on the hired help the responsibility for making him a fool. "There are other Schnauzers around the neighborhood; she could have seen one of them . . ."

"Do you know any of *their* owners?" He was all eagerness, Wolfe of Scotland Yard.

"Not well enough to ask about their sex lives."

He took the hint and smiled. "If that drink is still on offer ...?" His eyes were dark blue, very nice against the greying hair. I wondered about Hedy's mother.

I gave him a Scarlett O'Hara "Fie on you, sir!" smirk and sashayed over to the pretentious Georgian silver drinks tray bought at Asprey's by Gerry in his "Marcus of the Manor" phase. "Good. You look like a whisky man to me."

"Why, yes! I am, as a matter of fact." He looked amazed by my cleverness, adding, "And it's Daniel, please."

I poured a generous measure of scotch and held up the glass. "No ice?"

"No thanks, just 'straight up' as you Americans say." We both had a good chuckle over the quaintness of foreigners.

I was just debating whether or not I wanted to join him in downing warm booze, when he asked: "Didn't I see you on the *Late Show*, talking about the latest spate of dreary American sitcoms that seem to be all over the box here?"

I paused, decided to play it straight instead of bruising him up a little over his English condescending shit about all things "American." "Yes, that's me."

"God, how odd that we should meet like this." He shook his head.

"Why?" My antennae almost burst through my blow-dry.

"Well, as you may know, I host and produce an arts show on television ...?"

"Uh, huh." God, would he ever to get to the point?

"Well," he was all enthusiasm now and it was becoming. "We've scheduled a program for this season about American situation comedy in the nineties and your name has come up. Tell me Mrs. Marcus, would you be interested in sharing an idea or two?"

I zapped off Geraldo with one hand, handing Daniel his drink with the other. "Call me Mimi ..."

Daniel left an hour later, having secured my promise to have dinner with him so that we could discuss our business further, no definite date on offer. I planned to ask Paco, who knew and told all at the mildest of provocations, what he knew about Daniel Wolfe.

For instance, what was the story on Mrs. Wolfe junior?

Chapter 4

The phone rang while I was working on an article for *The Independent* on post-modernist elements in British, Australian and American soap opera. It was my sister Beverly putting the pressure on me to attend my nephew Aaron's forthcoming *bar mitzvah* in Los Angeles. Saying I would do just that is how Rupert Thornton came back in my life.

Not that he had been in it for long. I forgot to mention that while Rosie was first putting the ring through my husband's nose, right under mine so to speak, I was not lonely. I was seated next to a bozo introduced by Caroline, during the pre-dinner drinks scrum, as Rupert Thornton. He was fleshy in that attractive way that some Englishman have, fortyish, and in serious need of a barber to trim the extravagance of hair in flight from his brow.

We shot the breeze for a few minutes, general dinner party stuff. "Where do you live?" he wanted to know, which is the English way of finding out who you are. Before I got the chance to answer, however, he roller-coastered on, saying he lived in Holland Park, a rarefied hemisphere of London. Gerry would endure having his foreskin being sewn back on without anesthetic to live in Holland Park — which is just about what it would take for that to happen if the rumors of low ethnic body count in that regal west London area are true.

Rupert babbled on about "getting away to my wife Shona's family place near Dumfries," waving his napkin at the unkempt number with terminally dry skin across the table and doing her duty by a strange little dude with a squint sitting to her right. She looked up, her glance as sharp as the tip of her nose.

I unfurled my own napkin to the intelligence that he was an "Old Etonian." The preening tone indicating that in his mind at least, this was achievement enough for any one lifetime. I felt it my egalitarian duty to let a little of the air out.

"And what did you do after you finished high school?" I asked, trying to keep an eye on my husband whose tongue was hovering in the region of Rosie's mean cleavage. Of course, Rupert's eyes were not far from the dip between the lapels of my Calvin Klein dinner suit, either.

"Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho!" he roared and I mean roared. Marlene confirmed later that the sub-species to which Rupert Thornton belonged was

known as "Hooray Henrys" – upper class yobs convinced that any space is all the better for being overwhelmed by their presence and, God, was this guy out to prove it. He finally calmed down enough to splutter, "You Americans are so droll."

"Well, they'd be flattered to hear that I'm sure, not that most Americans know what droll means, and only half those who do could use it in a sentence."

"Christ!" His face was scarlet, hopefully from mirth as much as from the large amount of whisky he'd downed during the interminable wait to be seated for dinner. "I think American women are marvelous! Funny and beautiful! What a bloody wonderful country!"

I warmed to him, but even that rise in temperature only added to what was happening across the table between Gerry and Rosie and this put all of us in danger of meltdown. Time for a new subject to cool things off.

"You know the U.S. well ... eh . . . ?"

"Go there on business, all the time and it's Rupert," he supplied tactfully.

"Rupert, of course." I fluttered my eyelashes over the rim of my wine glass as apology. "What do you do?"

"Own a gallery on Bond Street, actually. I'm the sole agent for"

He named a sculptor and two painters of such status that my regard went up a notch or two – we were talking big bucks: MOMA, the Guggenheim, Jack Nicholson. I was just thinking Rupert was less of a clown than he looked and sounded when he spoiled it.

"Beat out all of those Jewish Johnnys in New York, you know. They were all after him and there was a lot of weeping around the deli that day! That lot hate to be outwitted, you know."

I knocked my wine glass into his lap. Gerry was distracted from Rosie long enough to hiss something at me as we all watched the Cabernet spread over Rupert's pinstriped lap. From across the table, Shona shrieked at him for being so careless. Throwing his napkin on the table, he glared at me, jumped up and went off with his hostess to be tidied up.

Rupert's big ugly mouth gone, if not forgotten, I took up with the dullard to my left who needed nothing but grunts to punctuate his wrong-headed ruminations on the European Union. I pretended not to mind the sight of my husband returning to his devotions. Rosie started posturing about being lucky – or wonderful – enough to get into some aggressively fashionable restaurant without a reservation. Gerry blushed to say he had never been there.

"Oh you must go!" Rosie shrilled.

"Lunch, maybe," Gerry murmured, not even bothering to sneak a peek to see whether or not Dumbelina had caught the invite.

I knew it was a done deed even then, Gerry and Rosie. I don't know how wives know, but they do. Oh, he'd messed around before and I've lived out the odd fantasy away from home, but this was the end of the line and don't ask how I knew, I just did. Maybe because nobody knew Gerry the way I did – probably still do – so I knew. I sat staring at them, my marriage gurgling down the drain. History. Dust motes. For a minute or two I felt like a victim, but victims have to go on twelve-step programs toward recovery and that's not for me – I like short-term solutions and in this case the more Draconian the raid on Gerry's wallet, the better.

Anyway, Beverly swore that my failure to attend the *bar mitzvah* "would have killed mommy and daddy!" so I gave in. I booked into first class on BA as usual – no way can I travel for twelve hours in a seat so small you'd tell the secrets of your country to escape after the first five hours.

The really difficult part was not being able to stay at my own house. We had rented it to a 20-something couple who did something or other "in the industry." He had the charm of a python, but less dress sense; she had a butt like two handballs in an elastic sack and Rodeo Drive hair. They shared an overweening sense of self-regard that begged for three witches to fuck everything up with bad advice.

I refused to stay at Beverly and Herschel's in Sherman Oaks, a pretentious section of the San Fernando Valley full of West Los Angeles wannabees. Not surprised, Beverly suggested I stay at the Century City Hotel, where the bar mitzvah boy's assumption of the responsibilities of manhood was to be celebrated lavishly by 200 of his parent's closest friends. I consoled myself that, for the few days I was to be in L.A., I could at least catch up on old friends. Anyway, I liked Aaron, even if I could live without his bitch-intraining of a sister, Melissa.

Otto – sulking – went to Marlene and Isaac's. I called Gerry to tell him about my trip, mostly so that he would know where Otto was. I had not actually spoken to him since the turd episode so let sleeping dogs lie so to speak, leaving a message with his secretary.

Finally allowed to board my noon flight, I had almost forgotten the actual business at hand it had been so long since my arrival at the airport. I ate too many nibbles in the VIP lounge, drank two expensive and almost unrecognizable martinis and flirted with a suit who dumped me for the ding! ding! signaling the latest reading of the Dow on CNN. I bought some hand-dipped, Belgian chocolates at duty free to piss off Beverly, a high-ranking member of the food police.

We were squeezed into the plane and the usual flurry took place as hand luggage was maneuvered under seats and the odd Harrods shopping bag

stowed up above. I checked my black satin packet of goodies, given to all first class travelers as compensation for the extortionate cost of our passage, discovering a razor, a miniature jar of moisturizer suitable for a sixteen-year-old complexion, a tiny nail file, a shoe horn, surprisingly substantial eyeshades and other bits and pieces doomed for the wastebasket after several months of gathering dust at the back of a bathroom cupboard. I had stowed the freebie in my Prada bag, buckled up, opened the current copy of *Vanity Fair*, Hollywood's newest *nebbish* gracing its aggressively glossy cover, when - wham!

"I think this is my seat," a voice boomed to a steward who probably didn't care and Rupert Thornton flung himself down next to me. 'Oh," he said, when he saw his companion for the next twelve hours.

"You can always change your seat."

"Why in the bloody hell should I?"

"Stay then."

"You could move."

"I could also pretend you're not here, which might work if you were very, very quiet."

He put this idea to the test for a nanosecond. "Look here," he turned toward me as well as he could within the confines of his seatbelt. "Why did you spill your wine all over me, for Christ sake? And don't bother telling me it was an accident, either"

"It wasn't and I wouldn't."

"Well bloody strange behavior, I have to say."

We were interrupted by the usual video demonstrating the correct protocol for saving your life while trapped in a plummeting fireball. The trick was in securing the lifebelt with a neat double knot, as you struggled simultaneously to place an oxygen mask over your face. If you still had a face, that is.

"No, really?" Rupert persisted.

Oh, what the hell, I thought. "Maybe you should be more careful what you say about Jews."

The bastard looked genuinely puzzled. "What are you talking about? I don't have anything against Jews ..."

"In fact, some of your best friends are Jews, I bet."

Rupert shook his head. "No, I wouldn't say that."

How to get through to this thicko? "I was being sarcastic."

"Why?"

"Because ..." I paused as the steward, identified by his British Airways name tag as Rodney Jones, turned up and languidly checked out seatbelts. I returned to educating Rupert. "You're anti-Semitic and I'm Jewish."

"Oh ..." Rupert slowly put the two ideas together, looking increasingly shocked. But not embarrassed, that would be a step too far. He turned and looked me up and down.

"And don't say I don't look Jewish." I anticipated.

"No, no, I wasn't going to actually," he assured me. We set off on our dash down the runway. His face was screwed up in a parody of thoughtfulness, so I assumed some intellectual process was going on. "I suppose I just say the sort of things I hear other people saying. Know what I mean? I don't think you should take it personally, anyway."

"Why not?"

"Oh, because it doesn't mean anything to us"

"Us?" My stomach jumped as BA893 hit the skies with enthusiasm.

"The English, of course. And the Scots and the Welsh for all I know. God knows what the Irish think about anything."

"Well, it's offensive to us." I insisted. "And let me remind you that when my people were writing a set of laws, yours were painting themselves blue."

"Oh for Christ's sake!" He unbuckled his seatbelt and said, "Anyway, I apologize, is that good enough for you? I didn't think, but I bloody will from now on that's for fucking certain!"

He hardly looked replete with rue, nevertheless his apology seemed sincere enough. Anyway, there was something about his expression, part sheepish, part pissed off, that I found ingratiating. Altitude often gives me the emotional bends.

"Okay, I accept your apology."

"Thank God," he muttered.

It was time to make nice-nice. "Well?" I demanded. "Who does a girl have to fuck to get a drink around here? How's that for droll, Rupert?"

He loved it, gasping out grunts of appreciation, helpless with hilarity – God, what an audience. He swept a hand through fair hair still in need of a trim and roared for Rodney.

"Sir?"

"Champagne?" Rupert managed through his wheezes, turning to me. "You all right with that?"

"Sure." Who cared if I arrived in Los Angeles with a crap headache? Rodney took the order, managing a tiny smile.

"So Mimi," Rupert turned back to me. "Why are you going to Los Angeles, then?"

"My nephew's *bar mitzvah* - no honestly!" I protested, laughing at the look on his face. "It's not a setup, it's the truth!"

"I believe you, the timing's too exquisite not to be." Rupert smiled, showing off good upper-class teeth in need of a flossing. "Ah good," he murmured happily as the bubbly arrived, served with efficiency, if not enthusiasm, by Rodney.

"Why are you going to Los Angeles?" I took a first sip.

"Actually, I'm on my way to San Francisco – business. The direct flight was full." He looked at me, rather nice brown eyes, speculative. "Will you get up to San Francisco?"

I shook my head. "No reason to."

"Well, you could meet me there."

"Why?" Who cared?

"Well ...?" Rupert smiled. "You did ask who a girl had to fuck around here to get a drink, didn't you?'

Chapter 5

Dr. Kildare smiled adorably, but Dr. Gillespie looked troubled – which alerted me to problems. I asked if anything was wrong and they exchanged significant glances, so you can imagine how I felt. Then Dr. K, blond hair shimmering, opened his gorgeous mouth to explain – but the phone rang. Dr. G answered, said it was for me.

The caller was Beverly, who wanted to check on my safe arrival. "I woke you! I'm so sorry."

"Don't worry, I was watching a bunch of interior decorators on *Oprah* work miracles on twenty bucks and I nodded off." Sitting up, I rearranged the pile of pillows behind my back. "So, *nu*? Everything ready for tomorrow?"

"Oy! Don't ask!" Beverly mound and went on to tell me anyway. After keening over the apparent intention of the hotel catering staff to sabotage the meal: "Crap!" and decrying the hired band's "totally pathetic" repertoire, she got down to the heavy stuff.

"The guy who's supposed to do the ice sculpture may be delayed in San Francisco because of some fancy wedding."

"So hire someone else."

"Oh, you think any Tom, Dick or Harry can sculpt the Ten Commandments out of ice?"

"Didn't Moses do something like that in stone, how much different could it be?"

"He's in New York; he doesn't work the Coast."

I thanked God Beverly hadn't lost her sense of humor, but wasted my prayers apparently.

"Now Aaron is panicking. Melissa wants to wear what Hershel says looks like half a dress to the dinner and they had a fight." Beverly paused and I've known her for long enough that I know when she's about say something that will irritate me.

"I'm being selfish, just talking about *our* problems. How are things with you? How are you, you know, adjusting?" See what I mean?

"Relax, I'll talk sense to Melissa." I stonewalled, enjoying the disappointed intake of breath on the other end of the line at my tactic. What I planned was a bribe, remembering how well that worked on her mother at the same age. "And as for Aaron, so he forgets," – there was a strangled cry, so I hurried on – "The rabbi will put him back on track."

"I guess." Beverly didn't sound convinced. She tried once more to butt into my affairs. "How does it feel to be here for the first time without Gerry?"

I left her hanging, choosing to bore her with the details of my twelveand-a-half-hour plane trip. I included my meeting with Rupert, omitting his proposition. I told her Otto was "fine," although I left out the turd business, knowing I'd have my face rubbed in it (metaphorically, of course) forever. I brought her up to date on the doings of Marlene, whom Beverly had taken to on a recent visit to London – one which was intended to console me but had achieved almost exactly the opposite.

"So, nu, what are you wearing to the dinner?" I finished.

"Don't ask," Beverly answered and told me, of course. "My outfit looks like shit. God why did I buy it? Gray, for Christ's sake."

"Oh, you can't wear gray," I confirmed.

"I know, I know," she whined. "It doesn't look right for the *bar mitzvah* boy's mother, does it?"

"But it's perfect for the little guy's aunt."

"What?"

"I'm wearing my new gray Armani and we aren't going to look like twinsies."

"What? Are you telling me I can't wear gray because you are?"

"What's the problem? I thought you didn't want to, anyway?" I was puzzled. Really.

"Because you're the aunt and I'm the mother! What I want to wear takes precedence."

"But you don't want to wear gray," I got off the bed and started pacing, getting irritated, "and I don't have anything else! Shit, you have a closet stuffed with clothes."

"That's not the point!" Upset to start with, Beverly started hyperventilating – which I took as a sympathy ploy. "I should get first choice on what to wear."

"Why?"

"Because it's my day."

"It's Aaron's day."

"Shut up!" Beverly screamed as she had done since our first childhood argument, when outwitted by logic. "Wear the fucking Armani, then! To hell with me ..."

We hammered on, working through the quarrel as Beverly and I always have when we need to clear the air. What we said over the next few minutes had nothing to do with clothes, with the *bar mitzvah* boy's nerves, nor with recalcitrant daughters. Rather it was our way of working around tensions that could never be resolved: in this case, our differing view of how I should feel about the end of my marriage. I didn't feel sorry enough for myself, and this left Beverly doing double time – which was hard on her.

We finally drew breath and I relented. "Tell you what. We'll go shopping this afternoon and find you something. My treat," I added, prodigal as ever with Gerry's gold card.

"Why don't we buy *you* something, then?"

She had me there, so I opted for guilt leavened by truth. "Because, one, I've just got off a plane after a twelve-hour flight and, two, I don't want to."

"Jesus Christ," Beverly muttered. "You never change, do you?"

"Sure I do, I just don't change in ways you like."

"You got that one right." I could sense her eyes rolling, as she gave in. "We'll go to Saks and I don't want that fuck Gerry paying for anything for me!"

"Neither does he – all the more reason."

"Mimi you are so bad," Beverly preached, but she was only paying lip service.

"That's why you love me," I told her.

"Who says?" Beverly laughed. There was a pause. "Mimi?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad you're here. It's time."

"Yes, I know," I agreed. "So don't make me regret it by spending my visit sitting *shiva* for my dead marriage, okay?"

"I don't even know what you mean," Beverly sniffed, but she did.

Chapter 6

From his position of honor at the head table, the *bar mitzvah* boy stood and started his speech. It was nothing new: "Now I am a man ..."

Aaron had performed wonderfully during the morning practice. "There's nothing to worry about, Aunt Mimi, I'm just a little nervous. Anyway," he added, patting my arm, "if there's any problem the rabbi will help, that's why he's there, right?"

Melissa was reconciled to the prospect of attending a family party in the disguise of a normal teenager by my offer of the Azzedine Alaia of her choice. This evening she elected to wear a bottle green taffeta number from Laura Ashley, a retailer still taken seriously in the U.S. Apart from the venal expression on her face, she looked quite pretty.

Her mother lit up the room – literally – in a heavily sequined number in eye-popping crimson. Beverly and her friends went in for the $pi\tilde{n}ata$ effect and tonight was no exception. My own failure to glitter - we were after all in Los Angeles where even the sidewalk sparkles – did not go without comment.

"Mimi! Sweetheart! I love your dress it's so ...so ..." I assumed Marilyn Rose, Beverly's best friend, was searching out a euphemism for "drab" from her limited vocabulary. She was leaning across Herschel as we took our places at the head table, her surgically-lifted face moving slightly, indication she'd come up with something. "It's so European to dress down, isn't it?"

"Oh I don't know." I smiled sweetly. "I just don't have the courage of my convictions in taking a chance on being overdressed. I wish I was as brave as you, Marilyn"

Her turquoise plumage quivered, but she took it like a champ. "Nice to see you back in town," Marilyn had said and probably meant it, short term memory loss being an asset in this case. She turned her charms on an uncertain Herschel.

Actually, the tact quotient was high amongst my family and friends that entire day, all things considered. They dodged the subject of my new status as one avoids noticing the residual stumps on the proffered hand of a leper – greeting me cheerfully without reference to Gerry's absence. That is, if you

excluded the elders of the clan, Aunts Rose, Veda and Celia, my late mother's distant cousins of cousins by marriage, the *mishpocheh*.

Hecate and her minions cornered me in the vestibule of the temple well before the *bar mitzvah* ceremony was scheduled to begin. Permed, corseted, traces of carmine lipstick seeping into the cracks surrounding their wizened, ever-open mouths, they gave me the benefit of their non-existent experience – Monday morning quarterbacks confident they knew how to shut the barn door.

"I told her."

"So did I."

"Was I ever that crazy for him?"

"You should have given him a baby."

"All men want a son."

"Don't I always say that?"

"You're still young."

"You'll meet someone."

"You expect her to believe that?"

"Rose, Vida, Celia! That's enough! Go inside and sit down." Beverly had appeared – smart wide-brimmed hat, stunning navy pinstripe suit – to rescue me. They vanished, leaving a scent of drugstore perfume and decay. "You all right?" she wanted to know, adjusting the collar of my silk shirt to a more correct angle against the lapels of my black jacket.

"Christ, what a pain in the ass they are," I complained. The *bar mitzvah* boy and his sullen sister entered, Herschel in tow, tugging nervously at his *yarmulke*.

Beverly linked her arm through mine, grabbed her son's navy serge sleeve, commanding: "Okay everybody, let's get this show on the road!" We marched into the temple toward a stern rabbi and grinning cantor with Rose, Vida and Celia muttering between themselves as we passed. I gave them the finger behind my back and I heard a collective intake of breath and a curse spat out in a spray of *Yiddish*.

They gave me filthy looks in triplicate as I walked past their table in the back of the room before dinner, but kept their counsel —except for Rose telling me that it was a good job considering the catastrophe to my marriage "that your parents are dead *ave shalom*."

Now, as my thirteen-year-old nephew earnestly told us of his plans for perfecting the world, having reached the august status of know-it-all conferred on all Jewish men who complete the ancient initiation right, I watched Celia inspecting the contents of her doggie bag — a terrific skinless lime chicken, the

ubiquitous steamed broccoli – already delivered to the table by a contemptuous waiter. Vida and Rose, meanwhile, made noisy joint claim to the flower arrangement in the middle of the table, oblivious to Beverly's furious gesturing for them to stop. The other unfortunates assigned to their table looked mortified, as well they might.

Aaron finally spoke my favorite word of any speech, "Finally," and got on with it, thanking his parents and his sister, pausing for a round of applause for the little people who had made everything possible. He thanked Rabbi Abrahams: "I couldn't have got through without him" – more applause and a rabbinical smirk, "he was a real help."

Then came the *boffo* finish. "I want to thank all my friends and family for coming today, but I really want to thank my Aunt Miriam for coming all the way from London, England, to be with us on this, one of the most important days of my life." Aaron leaned forward slightly to make eye contact with me. "Thank you, Aunt Miriam," he added gravely. Thunderous applause rewarded this tribute, accompanied by a delighted "Oy! What a little man!" from Uncle Sidney at Table 2.

The first chords of *Hava'nagila* set to the sexy beat of the *lambada* (Beverly had a point about the band) boomed through the room and the party was really on. My sister leaned over and gave me a hug. "I didn't tell him to say that, you know. He must have thought of it all on his own."

I didn't really believe that, but what the hell, I was still glad I'd come. And I looked the business in the Armani, I'll tell you.

Chapter 7

The parking attendant, assessing me correctly as someone without importance in showbiz, wasted little effort in *schmoozing* me, or in coddling the brakes of my rental BMW. I stood for a second before entering Le Dome, removed my sunglasses and went temporarily sunblind; this was a forgotten pleasure. My armpits felt sticky for the first time in ages – after being in temperatures where the mercury often just swooped above freezing. I stumbled into the restaurant and Maureen Flynn rushed up, hugged me, pushed me away, looked me up and down, hugged me again, and then offered her brand of comfort.

"He's scum, honey, you're better off without him. Don't worry about being lonely, you'll get used to it and if you're lucky, you'll get laid occasionally. At least you will for a few more years, anyway; nobody will touch you after you turn fifty."

Maureen and I usually met for lunch at Le Dome, the Westside joint full of charter members of the Hollywood A-list. Most of the women were ageing less than gracefully, and had fought for their skinny bodies with a regime of starvation assisted by the skillful application of the scalpel by the gods of L.A., the plastic surgeons who clogged the medical suites lining Wilshire Boulevard. The men were too tanned and had mean eyes. We loved it and always chowed down here so that we could ogle and, in Maureen's case, do a little business.

Maureen Flynn and I had been good friends from the moment she hit me on the head with her pink plastic purse on the first ever day of school. I had refused to give up the desk she had staked out, so she tried bullying me into cooperating. I bit her leg as I went down and she knew she'd met her match.

Maureen was a grown-up bully now, useful when you run a production company supplying slick, forgettable TV movies starring slick, forgettable actors on hiatus from slick, forgettable prime-time series. She was divorced from the drunk from hell, Harold Dwybwa and had two teenage sons, Tom and Pat, both redheaded like their mother. Both also had vile tempers like hers.

Maureen had a mind as narrow as a gnat's dick, possessed a wickedly funny tongue, was competent in a ferocious way, and had the loyalty of a wolf. I loved her - a challenge at times, let me tell you.

She refused to attend the *bar mitzvah* festivities, claiming "a problem" with "religious stuff." Cataloguing Maureen's "problems with stuff" was a favorite after-dinner game for her friends. Her information on most issues was gleaned from the various scabrous tabloids decorating supermarket checkout counters, which she read as voraciously as Luther read his Bible. As a rule, Maureen's preoccupations were parochial (actors' inflated salaries, the cancercausing threat of sugar-free soft drinks to her digestive system) but today greater issues drew her enlightened analysis.

"Asshole calls himself a President. Shit!" she had muttered of our incumbent national leader as we were being seated. "Goddamn lazy bastards living off social security and he does diddly squat."

"He could call out the National Guard and have all of them shot." I gestured to the horrified waiter – a flamboyant beauty and, no doubt, an out-of-work actor – that he should return for our order. He took off like a rocket and who could blame him?

"Oh pul-eeze," Maureen elongated the word, rolling her well-made-up eyes for emphasis. "Don't try liberal sarcasm with me. You know I'm right."

"Right about what?"

"About a bunch of deadbeats who sponge off people like me."

"They aren't all deadbeats"

"No. but they're mostly ethnic." The waiter approached, but hearing this, turned tail.

"Don't start that," I warned, but when it came to expressing her prejudices she wasn't to be stopped.

"I don't get it, I just don't get it." Maureen shook her head in pained wonder.

"What is it you don't get?"

"Why don't they give up on behaving the way they do?"

Jet lag made me reckless. "Does it ever occur to you that much of their antisocial behavior is symptomatic of their conflicted feelings over ethnic pride and the need to imitate the white man?" Jet lag also makes me pompous.

"That's crazy! Why wouldn't they want to be more like us?"

She sounded puzzled.

"Why wouldn't they? Why wouldn't anyone want to be more like you?"

Maureen stared at me, shrugged and waved impatiently for the waiter. "Beats the shit out of me."

See what I mean? Anyway, tact had no place on her agenda, We ordered a celebratory bottle of California Chardonnay, decided on the grilled chicken

 after Maureen's applying similar grilling methods on our waiter in order to determine the fat levels of everything on the menu. Maureen watched the waiter's delicious ass cruise away.

"What a babe."

"Isn't he a little young for you?"

She grinned. "I can do a lot for out-of-work actors, narrows the age gap. Know what I mean?"

We caught up on gossip - friends, enemies and Maureen's clients battling age, disease, flagging careers – punctuated by Maureen's critical commentary on various diners around us. "Will you look at Dinah Holmes? Talk about a facelift that didn't work! Guess she's not ready for her close-up, Mr. DeMille."

"They're gay, marriage is a cover-up," she whispered behind her hand of two famous faces, snuggling up to one another.

"Kid over there," she indicated with her head that I should look at a stunning young man walking through the restaurant with a desiccated older man oozing influence, "Gives the best blowjob in town."

I didn't bother asking how she knew. Maureen avoided what she referred to in a television talk show sort of way as "committed relationships," preferring to bribe handsome young hopefuls like our waiter into acting as her current squeeze.

The wine arrived accompanied by a meager basket of therapeutic-looking dark bread. Our waiter, ears flapping to hear Maureen's latest revelation, poured generous portions of the Chardonnay and, in turn, we made the appropriate, lip smacking noises. He rushed off to satisfy the needs of a snake of a man waving angrily for attention. I took a slice of granary bread, my knife poised to attack a sliver of unsalted butter. Maureen shook her head. "You know how many fat grams there are in that?"

"Why don't you tell me?"

She did so, sitting back with a disapproving look on her face. I risked arterial sclerosis, a heart attack, or worse (!) cellulite, all for the sake of instant gratification and I didn't care.

"We have to start being careful at our age. Everything's a risk"

"Even sex?"

Maureen grinned. "Okay, okay! Let's change the subject." She took a sip of wine. "So *nu*? When do think you'll be able to come back here to live?"

This was a common question, as if I'd been sent into exile. "I think I'll stay in the UK for a while, actually."

"You sure? You don't need me to come stay for a while?" This offer was the supreme sacrifice: Maureen's one trip to London, soon after our taking up residence there, had not gone well. She had liked little about the weather, shopping, food or the natives. Maureen had a problem with England.

"No." I shook my head. "Anyway, things are looking up." I went on to tell her (as well as the wide-eyed waiter serving our chicken) about Daniel and Rupert.

"So this Daniel guy, he could help you get a real foothold?" News of any career contact got her juices flowing. She was astonished by Rupert's San Francisco offer. "He actually propositioned you? An Englishman actually seemed interested in sex with a grown woman? What did you say?"

"I said no."

A forkful of salsa clattered back on Maureen's plate. "Don't just throw him back! At our age the sea isn't as full as it used to be."

"What's this sudden preoccupation with our age?"

"Look around you," was the answer.

I did. I looked at the toned bodies, the unlined faces, the great teeth, the smooth skin. I was in Los Angeles, where you were your looks. I said nothing, not needing to. "Well, you still seem to look just fine," I said.

"Liposuction."

"When?" I was shocked.

"Last month." Maureen sat back. "Thighs and stomach. Had an eye job, too." She thrust forward her newly tightened eyelids for me to admire, then looked me over carefully. "I could introduce you to my man."

"What?" I had until that moment thought I looked fine and told her so.

"Okay, okay, don't get huffy." She shrugged. "Actually, you hair looks better than it did before you went to London and you do have a sort of different look, sort of ..."

"European?" I helped her out, pleased by the dubious compliment.

"Right, right," she nodded. "Course, it might be nice if they designed clothes in a few real colors - don't you get sick of monochrome?"

"No, motley was never to my taste."

"Well, you look like an extra in an Ingmar Bergman film." Maureen was moved to laughter by her own insults, oblivious to my covert attack on the orange and lime green patterned suit she had chosen to wear today. We're old friends.

I divided the rest of the wine between us. "Well, anyway, I know what I'm going to do with this tired old body as soon as possible."

"What?"

"I'm going to fuck Rupert Thornton as soon as I get back to London." Maureen grinned and clinked her glass with mine. "And why not?"

Chapter 8

I arrived back in London, mid-morning, to gray skies and matching faces. The meter on the black cab ticked away the family fortune while I dashed into Marlene's to deliver thank-you gifts for her dog-sitting chores, and to pick up an aloof Otto – taking him home for some quality time with his coming-home present, a low sodium, vegetarian chewy. I got the electric kettle going for a cup of instant coffee, then checked the answering machine to discover that I was the hottest ticket in town.

Daniel Wolfe had left three messages over a period of as many days. First, he needed to know if I would dine with him next week on the evening of my choice. He would call back the next day for my answer.

His encore asked that I contact him at his office ASAP to discuss my contribution to a projected program. The number was rattled off at speed, of course; the English are miserly with even the most banal information, so deciphering a phone number in this country is as challenging as checking into the President's financial affairs in the USA.

The final call expressed anxiety at my silence, then he asked if I could come to his mother's for tea, so that she could apologize for her "idiotic" suspicions over Otto.

Rupert's message was short, but marzipan-sweet to my ears. What about "noshing down" for lunch at the Savoy, then taking it from there? I was to call back (another jumble of digits), "right sharpish," because he'd been giving me a lot of thought. Wow!

Gerry's message had to do with Otto's pickup time for the following weekend, and he hoped the *bar mitzvah* had gone well – he had sent a check to Aaron, was that alright? He didn't mention anything about turds, which showed restraint. I was touched by his sending the check and liked him for this, but not long enough to make a difference.

"Well, Otto? Things are looking up and I have you to thank for some of that." Otto looked up at the sound of his name, beard decorated by gobs of chewy, then got on with the business at hand – as did his mistress.

Taking a sip of coffee, I called Daniel first, responsibly putting business before ego strokes. It took me several replays of Daniel's messages to break

the code, but finally I managed and dialed what I was reasonably sure was his office number. A bossy-boots answered after the obligatory fifty rings necessary to attract attention in Jolly Olde, then tried to put me off, also obligatory. Her poorly developed native-trained telephonic skills stood no chance against epic American techniques and with little grace she caved in. I was getting older just from the wait when Daniel got on the line, expressing delight at my resurfacing.

I explained my failure to return his calls, figuring an intimate connection with a *bar mitzvah* was a useful signal to anyone called Daniel Wolfe – takes one to know one, you know. Being English he didn't acknowledge the connection, but instead dithered on about this, that, and the state of the nation. Just as I was snoozing off, he got to the point.

"So do we combine business with pleasure? Dinner on Monday evening, next? I have lots of ideas to discuss with you."

"Me, too, let me get my diary." I put the phone down on the kitchen counter as if to do just that, but actually punched the air in a triumphant "Yes! Yes!" instead. I counted to three then murmured: "Hmm, looks good. Let's make that a definite." As in you can engrave that in stone, Danny boy.

"Now about mummy's (*mummy's?*) invitation. She always has a crowd in on Sunday afternoons, sort of a hangover from all the years she and my father held court. Why don't we look for you this weekend?"

"Lovely," I agreed. The English use that word a lot instead of "great."

Daniel excused himself then, critical matters awaiting his attention. He would see me at Nina's ... an improvement on "at mummy's" that was for sure "... three thirty for four." The fabulous Nina was looking forward to meeting me and I might even get to meet the just as fabulous daughter, Hedy, good fortune prevailing, of course.

He ran the address by me, we did the goodbye routine and hung up. I was too tired to look for my Buck Rogers decoding ring to decipher Rupert's telephone number, so called information instead. I asked for the number at the gallery, dialed and eventually a plummy voiced, child-woman answered, swanning off without protest to get Rupert: breeding tells. He was on the line in three beat's time.

"Hello old girl!" That took a little of the gloss off, but it's a fairly standard national form of salutation, so not to be taken personally.

"I'm returning your call. Is there a problem?"

"Oh, aren't we prim and proper? You know perfectly well why I'm calling so let's not bother about that rubbish."

My affections for Rupert needed a kick-start, so I hung up and started counting. The phone rang on five and I picked it up, satisfied.

"What the hell was that for?"

"The same reason you called back."

"Whatever that means," he grumbled, but went on. "Anyway, what about lunch?"

"Cut to the chase, don't we?"

"Yes. How about it?" Patience wasn't a virtue in Thornton land, apparently.

How could I resist? "Is this the kind of courtship routine you learned at Eton?"

"Yes or no?" he insisted. Boy, was this guy goal-oriented.

"Yes. When?"

"Thank God, at last! I don't have time to waste today, I'm too busy trying to make some dosh out of the Pacific Rim to waste time on chat-up lines." I hoped his sales technique was better than his seduction routine but kept my mouth shut – after all, a girl doesn't get invited to the Savoy every day by a semi-eligible man, right? My silence spurred him on to demand further commitment to our joint project. "This Friday at one? I'll book the River Room."

"Good." I was already planning what to wear, layer by layer, from top to bottom with special attention to the bottom. I wasn't born yesterday – his suggestion of a hotel restaurant was probably neither as coincidental nor as casual as it appeared, so best be prepared. I opened my mouth to say something pretty and encouraging, but Rupert was not one for faffing on during business hours apparently.

"Have to run, big day here. Japanese invasion. Bye for now, sweetie," he told me and hung up.

I did the same, drained my coffee and gave matters a little thought. Did I really want to sleep with Rupert Thornton, or was I leading with my bruised ego – more flattered than lustful? Did it matter? Horny is as horny does, satisfaction an end in itself for the new woman. Was this the first day of the rest of my life? Did I really think the meaning of my life could be reduced to a Sixties junk aphorism inked in calligraphy on coffee mugs?

Sure, why not?

Chapter 9

Rupert lay back among the Savoy's linen-sheets-to-die-for, well pleased with himself, as he had every right to be. "God!" he groaned, "give me enough bangers and mash and a decent Cabernet Sauvignon and I'm up for anything and a lot of it."

He wouldn't get any argument from me about that. If this was what overpriced nursery food did for him I was beginning to see the point in that national predilection for overcooked meat and spotted dick.

When I had told Marlene about Rupert's coming on to me, she wasn't all that surprised. "Englishmen either have the finesse of a rugby player, or they're so elliptical neither one of you can be sure what he wants."

"I thought the English were more reticent. You know, more shy about sex."

"Darling, don't be silly," she scoffed. "Englishmen of Rupert Thornton's background think of women as nanny, wife or bonk. You're the latter so you don't need to be courted, just grabbed."

"Yes, but he's taking me out to a nice place for lunch; that's courtship in my book."

"Where do you want him to eat his lunch, MacDonald's?" Marlene cut in with impatience. "The Savoy's for him, not you." Listen to twice-divorced women about men. They know."

We had no sooner been seated at our table than Rupert started demanding service from personnel apparently used to his imperious ways. He seemed to know at least half the occupants of the River Room that day and did not hesitate to introduce me to each and every one as we made the royal progress to our table. I asked if he wasn't worried about being seen so publicly with a woman who wasn't his wife.

"None of their fucking business."

I know for a fact that American men are not as impervious to public censure in such circumstances. Cowering puritans, they went in for places where anonymity was ensured by poor location or lousy quality. I shared this intelligence with Rupert.

"Not enough confidence, that's their problem."

"I think that's an attitude people label as 'arrogant' in the English, rather than 'confident."

He shrugged his indifference to the opinion of others, proving a point that I, in turn, wasn't confident enough to push. I picked up the menu and took a recce of the goodies on offer.

"Bangers and mash for me." Rupert bothered neither looking at the menu, nor at the waiter taking his order. "Same for you?" he suggested, adding his desire for the smoked salmon as starter.

"Why not?" I sensed my arteries straining in anticipation, but comforted myself with the thought that I had little option other than to go native since the menu offered dubious opportunities for the cholesterol-conscious tourist in this fat-saturated hell. I also knew how highly the English rate a good sport and was out to make points.

"A bottle of my Cabernet," Rupert instructed the hovering wine steward who dashed off to the cellar to crack open a case marked Thornton.

I was impressed. Gerry would have eaten his heart out over this kind of suck at the Savoy and I'd find the right moment to rub his nose in what swell new friends I hung out with – after laundering the circumstances, of course.

Rupert rambled on, talking about nothing – which is something the English do well – while I looked around. My surroundings impressed without being overbearing; another thing the English do well. Great flower arrangements, lots of heavy silverware and boisterous braying from men with pink faces and good tailoring, relaxing with one another. Dotted around the room was the self-regarding business-type woman, dressed to impress, but with a just a whiff of sex to undercut the implied threat of their presence. I was wearing a Donna Karan dress in charcoal cashmere, chunky pewter earrings and cerise La Perla undies for a touch of color – so I fit right in. A chap strutted through the room whom I thought might be Jeffrey Archer, but it was just somebody else who looked as if his face had been shaped by a duck press. I shared my mistake with Rupert.

"Writer chap?" I nodded at the well-informed graduate of one of England's best educational institutions. "I read one of his books on a plane, once. Not bad, good story. Don't remember it though."

I opened my mouth to add a little bile to flavor this critique but the wine arrived. Nectar. Then the ambrosia was served and I'm here to tell you that Nate and Al's in Beverly Hills would kill for salmon like that. The bangers and mash that followed was good, if you go for sausages and potatoes cooked to lethal effect. The sweet trolley rumbled along and, pledging an hour of

swimming at Swiss Cottage as penance, I ordered chocolate mousse, served in a cauldron-sized dish.

I didn't have to wait an hour for exercise, nor did I have to go as far or as plebeian as the baths at Swiss Cottage. What we did was go upstairs to a room my thoughtful escort had booked, then bonk our brains out for the next couple of hours. A country boy at heart, Rupert took his pleasures straight and with staying power. No whips, chains or weird positions, just a long fuck with plenty of laughs and excitement at the right moments – and plenty of those, as well.

"So?" Rupert asked. "Some other time, huh?"

I've had more daintily phrased offers, but beggars can't be choosers. Slithering out of bed, careful to show off my best angles, I headed for a shower in the green marble dream of a bathroom, calling out over my shoulder, "Sure thing. I'll give you a call." I mean, when you have them by the balls, who gives a shit about their hearts or minds?

Chapter 10

The ancient standing in the doorway looked like the late Boris Karloff in drag, aubergine hair arranged in a scrolled pyramid of rigid curls. The look on her face was no welcome mat.

I wondered if I had the right house, then spotted Daniel waving at me from the end of the long, dark, crowded hall. He mouthed a welcome – not necessary really, for he could have whispered and still have been heard above the murmurings passing for spirited conversation from the cast of thousands milling and jostling around him: muted excitement in the English style.

The gale force wind (not unusual for this time of year) was battering at a Paco's blow dry – already fighting for freedom from the restraints of half a liter of hair spray. I maneuvered past Boris into the novelty of a properly heated house, patting at my hair as I elbowed my way toward my host and past a lot of people taking no notice of me at all.

"God, I'm glad you could make it." Daniel took my hand, kissing a cheek still warm, metaphorically speaking, from Rupert's more thorough attentions.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world." I looked around. "You didn't tell me most of London was going to be here."

Daniel laughed, a soothing rumble which complemented his dark, blue eyes. "Just a few of mummy's dearest friends." He led me through the crowd, my hand still in his.

I scanned the chattering rabble. "She must be popular, I couldn't get this many people together if I was giving my house away."

"She's well-liked," her son admitted in a manner as close as the English get to "Aw shucks." "I doubt Mummy ever met anyone who didn't become a friend. Hedy's like that to some extent, at least."

I was as curious about this qualification, as I was about Daniel's actress daughter. "Is Hedy here?"

"Not yet, but she'll show. Always does. Hedy would die rather than disappoint Nina." I was pretty certain her father was just as devoted to his

old mum, but kept my suspicions to myself, snuffling an innocuous response instead.

We struggled through a large sitting room as stuffed with people as it was with heavily brocaded furniture and photographs of our hostess in chummy poses with most of the great and good of the galaxy. We were stopped repeatedly by guests clearly more interested in schmoozing my escort than acknowledging his introductions to me: "How lovely to meet you, er ... Now Daniel you did promise, do let's get together at Groucho's/Mezzo/Atlantic and work the idea/plan/project through."

We reached the dining room which was hot enough to cultivate orchids. There was a table large enough to seat at least twenty with plenty of elbow room, its generous contours shrouded by a yellowing lace table cloth woven prior to at least two world wars and loaded with tea things: breathtaking china, enough silver to finance a cosmetic surgical makeover for a family of four, and the odd ton of fancy sandwiches and pastries drooling cream. Merchant Ivory territory with a whiff of Viennese *fin de siècle* excess.

Daniel gave a half-hearted "Hello again," to a woman with a Paloma Picasso mouth, piled a plate with one billion calories and handed it to me. I nibbled on a cuke sarny, playing the culinary sport for the second time in a week by accepting his offer of a cup of lapsang souchong (no PG Tips here), knowing this smoky brew would constipate me clear into next week. I sipped away without enthusiasm, catching my breath – which I needed as my hostess cruised up with all the powerful purpose of Concorde landing.

"We know each other, don't we?" Nina Wolfe asked in her husky voice, easily heard over the low hum of the freeloaders chowing down around her. I guessed she knew exactly who I was, and wondered how much the "knows all, tells all" queen of north London had already told her about me.

"We both go to Paco." I answered, playing it straight.

"Of course!" She made a pass at a "silly me" *moue*, but neither of us took it seriously. Silently we admired one another's outfits: I was in cream TKS cashmere slacks and a sweater set just purchased at Gerry's expense for the occasion. Nina was wearing a beautifully cut gray gabardine dress, dark hose and white high heels. It worked. On her. Anyone else would have looked like Minnie Mouse on duty at a women's prison.

Her son formally introduced us, and we chatted about my projected appearance on Daniel's program, touching on Nina's familiarity with the medium of my expertise. "I was a pioneer on the box, darling, I dread to think what a fool I must have made of myself in the early days!"

I didn't protest because how the hell would I know? But the clutch of courtiers gathered about us made all the appropriate noise necessary.

"Nina you know you were splendid –"

"Fabulous - "

"Divine! - "

"You were a dream darling, always, the prototype for a generation of wannabes!" a podgy chap managed through a mouthful of pastry. Nina laughed, delighted and why not?

"You know better, mummy," Daniel added in a no-nonsense tone of voice, tinged nevertheless with adoration. He tactfully brought the conversation back to me, refreshing her memory over the canine mix-up that had brought me into her orbit in the first place. Nina smote her brow.

"I should have known that hag Ilona had it wrong!"

"Ilona?" I recognized the name, who wouldn't?

"She fingered your Otto?" Daniel supplied, adding, "I'm afraid she can usually be counted on to get things cocked up."

Then why had he and Nina listened to her in the first place? But then again, who was I to question the integrity of people who could do me some good? I kept *stumm*.

Nina returned to the business at hand. "My dear girl, to send over an emissary with such an accusation. If I could be embarrassed any more that I am already, I would be."

Leaving that alone, I enquired after the well-being of the mother-to-be.

"Termination, darling ..." Nina paused to exchange a "mwa mwa" with a tall, imposing red-headed woman who looked like Dame Maggie Smith standing across the table, talking to a tiny, bald man with sequined pixie spectacles. She turned back to me. "My dear little Tilly is past it, I'm afraid. Some truths have to be faced, especially in view of the little mystery concerning paternity."

"Best that way," I nodded. "Avoids heartbreak later. Especially when you don't even know who to sue for child support."

While my audience split a gut over a cheap shot at a heartbroken little dog, I pondered the foot-wide umbilical cord linking this mother-son act. I know team spirit when I see it.

The captain of the hockey team linked her arm though mine instructing her deputy to go and chat with their guests. "I want to get to know the enchanting Mimi a little better."

"Don't blame you, so do I." Daniel agreed which didn't hurt, especially as I was still preening over all of this flattery —even if I had reservations about the sincerity quotient of the flatterers. He promised to be "Back in a flash,"

adding for my benefit, "If she gets on your nerves, just tell her to piss off." Squeezing "mummy's" shoulder to assure us he hadn't meant what he had just said, he took his flat stomach and long legs off to work the room.

"Now my dear," Nina's blue eyes bored into mine, the Wolfe charm operating at full throttle. I was suckered, down for the count. "I want you to tell me everything about yourself ..."

Warmed by the Wolfe glow I babbled away, starting with my birth at Cedars of Lebanon and reaching the saga of family sacrifices necessary for the correction of my pre-adolescent overbite, when I was upstaged by, of course (!) another Wolfe.

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