

WISE CHILD



Dee West



An "Adult Tv" Novel



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Wise Child

By Dee West

Chapter 1

For the longest time the only thing about my dad I thought I could grab hold of was a faded old photo of a sailor, duffel bag slung over a shoulder, turning to look backwards for a moment before continuing to hurry down Granby Street in Norfolk to catch his ship. His face is blurred, perhaps because the camera caught him as he glanced back, or perhaps because the picture-taker's hand was shaking. I think the photo is from sometime in '44 or '45, and he was headed across the Atlantic. There's something, maybe in what I think I can see in the set of his mouth or the tense way his shoulders twist, that always made me sure he wasn't headed for his first

convoy run through the U-boat packs. No one would ever tell me if it was taken as he set off on his last.

He's so young in the photo, younger than I am now. He almost seems lost inside his pea coat. The duffel bag slung over his shoulder nearly dwarfs him.

I used to say I wanted to be like him when I grew up, and be a sailor on the sea.

I have a picture of my mom from somewhere back then, but it's also hard for me to read. Actually, it's a photo of a crowd of young women, in those close-cut skirts and nipped-at-the-waist jackets of the time, elaborately curled hair flying as they stride to the shipyard, smiling and eager to do their bit for the war effort. I think she's the third from the left, in the second or third rank of the group. It's hard to tell, though. Like all the girls in photo, and like my dad, she was very young, too. I'm guessing she was just 18 and that it's the spring or summer of '44, since there's no sign that she's pregnant yet, though I suppose it would be hard to read in such a small photo. And if that is indeed her, third from the left.

These days, when from time to time I turn down Granby Street on my way back to the office and the pile of typing waiting there for me, or when I happen to drive past the shipyard where my mother worked during the war years, I cannot spot where the photos were taken. I know that they were there only because of the penciled notes on the back of the photos. My mom never shared stories from those days, nor did my grandparents. Though other kids in the town

where I grew up knew stories about fathers or uncles who died during the war, and told them to each other as we waited on the bench at Little League, or played a soldier in the cornfields before they built the shopping mall, all I had was silence.

It was as if my family's loss was somehow deeper, as if something even worse had happened and that the only way to cope was simply to draw a thick soundproof curtain. The little I thought I knew for many years came in briefly-overheard but soon cut-short conversation between the grown-ups, tense silences at family gatherings, and obscure hints. From them, I wove a story together. Not the right one, as it happens, though so far everything I've said so far about them is pretty much exactly so. I'll have to fudge a few things just a bit going forward here, but eventually it will all come clear. Sitting here before the mirror, brushing my hair my 100 before-bedtime strokes, that little fellow in the baseball cap and jeans wondering over a couple of photographs seems so far away. I'd like to tell you about the path from there to here. It involves all kinds of new understandings, but you do need to go slow. I did.

I grew up in the same town as my dad and mom, far from the sea. My mom didn't want to stay in Norfolk after he disappeared. So, after we lost him, she headed home and my grandparents took us in for a time. When the new subdivisions went up on the edge of town, we moved in to the place Uncle Jack bought and where he lived with us for a time. Jack wasn't really my uncle. He was, instead, the kind of

friend who kids are told to call 'uncle'. In my family, we didn't do a lot of talking about that, either, though apparently there was plenty enough whispered elsewhere.

We lived like everybody else there, in a small house that looked like all the others on its curving street, and all the others on the next street over and the next. Those were days, after the war, when people wanted nothing more than to hurry back to what they thought was the way things had been, the way they ought to be. They wanted traditional ways and to be with other people who, like them, clung to traditional ways. My mom busied herself with the house, the cooking, with fussing over me. Jack worked downtown, leaving early, coming back late, slumping in the big overstuffed armchair reserved for him as if the sheer physical work of being the breadwinner that day had been like running a marathon or bench-pressing 500 pounds. He worked in an office, like I do now. I don't act like that.

Anyway, that's what he did until he started staying over in town from time to time, then for days at a time, and, after a while, only coming by to take me to a ball game or for a visit to his place in town. My mom was all flounces, flowers, light brushes of fingers, delicate tweaking of stray strands of hair and collars gone askew. Jack always seemed gruff and growling. Where she lightly nudged anything out-of-place back to where it belonged, he yanked, or shoved or simply said the hell with it. He led, she followed, at least as long as he was around. He, always direct and to the point; she almost seeming to enjoy to dither, laugh-

ing at how easily she was distracted. Always picture perfect in her heels and flowery dress, you'd never guess she'd been up for nights to make the outfit that she couldn't afford, patient with the yards and yards of fabric that the styles of the day demanded.

In the '60s, when the T.V. and the picture magazines showed us the long hair and tight-cut clothes just coming into fashion, I was among the first in high school to follow, as if wearing what famous musicians wore would make me a better one myself. It didn't. Also, of course, to dress like the Beats and Rockers on the coast was a kind of gesture to a town and to a way of life I had already sensed wasn't for me.

My provocation only made her sigh, and barely that. She'd hint from time to time that girls found a neat trim quite attractive, or how handsome this classmate of mine or that looked in his chinos or new Sunday suit. I'd never rise to the bait, either form. She was never one for engaging in a test of wills, and so she'd sigh and let her searching eyes peer into mine for a bit before simply leaving the matter lie. Jack, in our increasingly infrequent visits, was much blunter: "You look like a nancy-boy," he snapped, starting an argument that ranged from how I ought to join the Navy so it could make a man of me, to angry shouts and a barely-withheld blow when I asked him why he abandoned us.

As for the neighbors, the murmurings – "well, what would you expect?" — would only start to dawn on me several years later.

Well, to be precise, at the funeral. The wake was at my grandparents', old country style. I'd come in that morning from the distant city where I was living when my mother passed away. The woman I had always been told to call my Aunt Amelia, after a careful instruction that she really was a cousin of the once- or twice-removed variety, had flown in the day before, and was at our home making the arrangements. She'd picked me up at the airport, held me tightly for the longest time, with an unexpected intensity that I didn't then understand.

Amelia kept the service private, but my grandparents apparently had said if there would be no visitation at the funeral home, we had at least to let people pay their respects afterwards.

And so, in their way, our neighbors did.

"Poor dear," a woman whose name escaped me told me, cornering me in dining room, where my grandmother had set out some sandwiches and soft drinks. "Still, peace at last."

Puzzled, I didn't ask her why on earth she thought my mother's tranquil life had not brought peace.

"Such a lovely person," interjected another, whose tone suggested that she didn't mean a word.

I mumbled answers to questions about where I lived, and what I did and had I married yet, and really, are you still in school? Smug little nods and tight lips told me, after an hour or so, that low expecta-

tions were confirmed. A question or two about Jack, with knowing sidewise glances, as husbands glared at my ponytail.

My grandparents sat, shrunken and devastated, in the dark, familiar parlor, as the murmured condolences and the sickly smell of lilies filled the air. Amelia stood behind them, probably where I should have, her hands laid gently on their shoulders.

The overheated room, the whisperings, the smell of lilies, were dizzying. My suit, the one I used to have to wear for church, was too tight; I had not bothered with anything like that for several years — no one did in the college town I hid myself away in or library where I worked daytime shelving books and nights on a thesis that never seemed to jell.

I stayed as long as I could bear, but snuck off well before the last well-wishers finally left.

I drove my rent-a-car through well-remembered streets, past remembered saplings now grown to trees, past my old grade school, back to the house.

Nothing much had changed. The old piano, still in tune, the sentimental Tin Pan Alley music still piled neatly on the bench. The serious stuff — the Bach, Beethoven and Debussy that she used to say she always meant to get back to — was, as always, still buried at the bottom of the stack. The porcelain animals and figurines were still lined up neatly on the mantle, the crocheted antimacassars were still precisely centered on the sofa and the chairs. I felt, again, that air

of prim reserve, of slightly too many frills and flounces to fuss over, as if what she chose to decorate her space, just like the airy, somewhat distant way she had of talking, was meant to keep any man at a distance. Yet it wasn't completely uncomfortable for me. I, too, tended to keep others at a distance.

I ambled through the house, put away the dishes on the drying rack where she had left them, glanced into my old room with the bed so neatly made, familiar storybooks still lined up on my shelves. Only one of my posters, not racing cars or football team ones Jack had given me, but the Renoir print of a happy couple dancing, still stuck to the wall.

In her room, too, everything was just as neatly put away as ever. She was proud of her housekeeping, of the clothes that she made for herself — as stylish as anything in those downtown stores, she sometimes would relax enough to say. Not too often, though. She was too poised, or else preoccupied too much with this or that little thing, to talk about herself or what she wanted or what she dreamed. If I asked, she'd just laugh in that silvery and distant way of hers and said not to worry about her.

Who were you really, Mom? I asked myself, peering round her room.

I found no clues in the little bottles of perfume and cosmetics lined up on her dressing table. There was one picture of me on the night stand, no others photos there or on her dresser. Her dresses almost filled one half of her closet, skirts and blouses the other. I

riffled my hands through, spotted one familiar flowered pattern I remembered from so many years back.

I lifted it out, held it up against the window light, as if that might help me recall her presence.

The light was fading. It had been a long day. I yawned, then couldn't stop yawning. I slumped into the small, overstuffed armchair where she used to sit and gaze out beyond the houses to the fields beyond, perhaps even to the far-off sea.

Her dress fell across me, like a blanket, as I dozed.

I slept uneasily, in that half-awake, half-day-dreaming state you sometimes find yourself when the need to simply rest is overwhelming, and from which a memory, a dream-image, or a small sound will startle you back awake. Startled so, I saw I was no longer alone.

"Hi," I heard a deep and almost familiar voice say, "I saw the car, thought I'd check if you were OK."

I felt a heavy hand rest on my shoulder

"Don't get up, I didn't mean to bother you," as recognition dawned and I realized it was an old friend from school, who I had not seen for many years. I'll call him Andrew.

It had been years since I had seen him, or, to be honest, thought much about the days when we'd wait together at the bus stop, headed off to school. He

was a year or two ahead of me, so we didn't have classes in common, but those years of shared morning waits and idle chat made for what we both likely would call a sort-of friendship. We didn't hang around together after school or in the summers, but we'd stop and spend a minute to ask how things were going when our paths crossed. I think the fact that that would happen kept me from getting some of the grief that longhairs in the day often suffered — Andrew was a football player, and that was kind of a big deal at our school.

Feeling his hand on my shoulder now, the weight of it suddenly recalled one odd and long-forgotten moment. His big triumph, his senior year: the long pass wobbling, high and apparently out of reach, an oddly graceful leap that captured it, against all expectation, the long run to the goal. Then, as our cheerleaders danced and classmates' shouted glee swelled to fill the air, he stood for a long moment, stunned as if only then realizing that he'd finally lived every second-stringer's dream, before trotting back to the bench. But before he reached it though, he paused by me, where I stood on the sideline with the school band. He laid his hand on my shoulder and for a moment, I thought he was going to grab me, and swing me to the sky in triumph. Just then, though, his teammates surrounded him with their congratulations, and swept him away.

"Sorry I missed you at the wake," he said now. "Sorry for your loss."

His hand still lay there on my shoulder. He seemed to loom over me, from where I slipped while dozing deeper into the chair, my mother's dress still lying along my body. Lying there, I felt almost trapped by his sympathetic gaze, the pity of an almost-stranger. Embarrassed too, as if caught out at something secret, because my mother's dress lay over me, as if I'd tried it on.

He leaned closer.

"Are you OK?" he asked. "Can I do anything?"

I shook my head.

He peered into my eyes for another endless moment, lifted his hand as if to pat my shoulder.

Then, so naturally that I barely realized, he touched the top of my head.

Then, I felt him start to stroke my too-long hair.

Felt him lean still closer.

Felt his lips touch my forehead.

Brush my lips.

Press.

And kiss me.

Chapter 2

Before I could do anything, or even think of what to do, we heard the front door open and Amelia's voice calling out for me.

By the time I managed a reply, and pushed Andrew off, she had started up the stairs. I was just hanging my mother's dress back up, Andrew standing close behind me, when she entered the room.

"Everything OK?" she asked,

I flushed.

I saw her eyes dart from my face to his, and down then back to me. Her eyebrow arched.

Andrew backed away, moving behind the arm-chair.

"Let me know if there's anything you need," he said. "I'm right nearby."

"Oh?" Amelia asked.

"Just down the street," he said, then turning to me, "Back with my folks. After the divorce, you know. Just til I'm back on my feet. Anyway, just ask."

He sidled out, eyes on Amelia.

"I'm an old friend," he said. "From high school, you know."

“Ah,” she said, drawing a half-question, the barest hint of skepticism, or of laughter, in her tone.

“Yes. A close friend?”

“I’ll see myself out,” Andrew said. “You must have lots to talk about.”

“Yes,” Amelia drawled. “Lots to catch up on. Though perhaps you two do as well?”

She turned to me.

“I’ve the impression that you haven’t been back all that much,” she said. “At least, that’s what I gathered from your mother — but you know mothers, no visit’s long enough when the nestlings leave.”

She smiled.

“I’d really better go now,” Andrew said.

“Yes,” she nodded. “Yes, perhaps you’d better.”

And then to me: “You should hang that up, now. It was one of her favorites, you know. A little out-of-fashion now, that big full skirt, those flowers. Still, she always loved that style. It was so her.”

I pushed the dress into the mass of fabric in her closet, groping blindly for the rod to hook the hanger on. Tsking, she stepped over, gently smoothed the dress, touched the others into place, and closed the closet door.

“Come downstairs,” she said. “I’ll make us tea.”

We sat at the small table on the back porch, one of my mother’s favorite spots, where surrounded by her potted flowers, she could look beyond the two apple trees in our tiny yard and see the next street over, and the next, the rows of neat houses, just washed clothing dancing on the lines, the distant shouts of playing children, the reassuring domesticity of getting on with living, because that’s what the living have to do.

That was the view I had since Amelia sat me in my mom’s usual spot. She sat across from me, sipped her tea and peered at me, appraisingly, for long minutes that began to feel a bit uncomfortable..

“You look so alike,” she said.

“Alike?”

“I see your parents in you,” she said. “It’s very clear, to me.”

No one had ever told me that before. No one in our family liked to talk about the past. It made me wonder, sometimes, when I heard others talk — so many tales, about generations on a farm, or landings at Ellis Island, about camping with their fathers, or crowds of cousins at family reunions.

“Did you know my father very well?” I asked

She nodded.

“Very well,” she said, with just the slightest emphasis on the “very.”

“And my mom?”

For a moment, it seemed to me as if a memory or memories clouded her eyes.

“We were very close,” she said, at last. “As close as sisters. Maybe closer.”

It seemed the kind of thing you say at moments like that, an easy sentiment of connection when the subject is now gone forever, with all regrets and hurts and unrequited love never to be resolved. I felt as if I’d heard an awful lot of that the past few days, but still had lots of that stew of unsettled feelings roiling away in side. Impatience made me rude.

“I never saw that much of you,” I said.

“Ah?” she said. “Well, perhaps. I saw you. But after all, when you are little, what’s another adult visitor to you? And when your mother tucks you into bed, how could you know who might be downstairs, talking late into the night?”

“You?” I said.

She nodded.

“Yes, me. When I could. And when I couldn’t, there were letters — lots and lots of letters, especially at first,” she said. “I know the day you took your first

steps, what your first word was. When I could make it back, I baby-sat. Later, when it wasn't so easy for me to make it back here, I had the letters and the calls. I think I knew about every recital, each time you made the honor roll. I knew everything about you that made her proud. Everything that worried her."

"Sometimes, she seemed so very much alone," I said. "I never realized."

"Sometimes," she said, "She was."

She sighed.

"Not the easiest path, the way she chose," she said. "A very brave one, very loving one, though."

I thought: more funeral talk, more sentiment. She must have seen in it my eyes.

"Oh yes," she said. "Beneath the fluff and flounce, someone very brave. Braver than me, at any rate. She stayed, after all."

"You didn't? You're from here, too?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Born and bred," she said. "I left not long after you were born."

"I couldn't wait to leave," I said.

"I know," she said. "I heard all about it."

I thought we were heading into deeper waters now. Maybe deeper than I cared to go. My mother had never complained out loud when I left home — she rarely did anything out loud — but I had always felt a sour tendril of guilt over leaving. Impatient with her too, since there seemed so little tying her there. She didn't spend that much time with my grandparents for all they lived so close. There was a strain, unvoiced, that I sensed but could not explain. I never had the feeling she had many friends, and there were fewer and fewer children coming for piano lessons. I'd ask, only half-joking, why she didn't move — the college town I lived in was pleasant enough, or there was always Florida. When I would ask, she'd just answer with her usual: "Oh I don't know." And leave the guilt with me.

"You knew my dad?" I asked, to change the subject.

"Oh yes," she said.

I waited.

"I knew your parents very well," she said. "We couldn't have been closer, really."

"Nobody ever talks about him," I said.

"Yes," she said. "Nobody ever does."

She poured another cup of tea. Stalling, I thought.

"I'd like to know," I said.

“Of course,” she answered. “Natural enough, really. Did you ask?”

“Many times.”

“And?”

“You know my mother. Ever try to pin her down?”

She laughed at that.

After a moment, I did too. My mother could drift off to vagueness, an almost cartoon-like empty-headedness, that she could switch on whenever she wanted to get her way. It could be maddening at times, it could be charming, and often ended with her laughing at herself and making you laugh with her as the memory now made me laugh, for the first time in days.

“Well, you know,” she said, “Like Homer said, it’s a wise child who knows its father. But I’ve always thought it was an even wiser man who knows his mother.”

“I don’t think I ever came close to that,” I said.

“No,” she said. “I don’t think you ever did.”

I flushed, seeing her half-mocking, half-tender smile, a hint of pity in her eyes. I wondered if that smile was comment about me and my mother; then, because it wasn’t only tender, if she’d seen or sensed something when she’d come in. I worried that she

somehow caught a glimpse of Andrew's lips on mine. Wondered, too, about exactly how long that moment before I could do anything about Andrew's weight trapping me beneath my mother's dress had really lasted. And wondering about what it was I meant to do, before I didn't do it. .

"Maybe I can help," she said.

She reached down to her bag, pulled out a manila folder, and laid it on the table. Inside, was one of those ancient white on black photostats. A birth certificate.

"Before you look," she said. "Remember this: we're only human, all of us. You understand? If what we've done seems wrong, or like a mistake, remember that nobody's perfect. OK? Nobody wants to hurt anyone here. You understand me ? You believe me?"

"I believe you," I replied.

"OK, then," she said. "Why don't you take a look."

It was my birth certificate. Or sort of mine. My name there, on the top line. My birthday, but the year was off. It made me younger than I'd thought, put me at the right age for high school, instead of off by the year I'd been told was due to the scarlet fever that left me smaller and frailer than other boys. It was issued by Virginia, in Norfolk, not the state we lived in and the place I had always thought was where I was born. My mother's name was there, including a middle name I'd never known she had.

“Amelia, it’s a family name,” my aunt said, seeing my eyes stop there.

The next box over was for the father.

It was blank.

Stunned, I shot a glance at her.

“No,” she said, “It’s not that simple.”

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Amelia said she found the birth certificate in some papers in my mother’s room. That wasn’t quite the case, as things turned out, and I really should have guessed it from the first. It was the house I grew up in, after all. I knew every inch of it. It was a small house. There wasn’t much to know, really. But then, it turns out there’s always much to know that we don’t understand at first. Or won’t admit.

Anyway, here’s where I suppose things could feel a little awkward. I knew my mom’s room as well as any other. I had explored every corner, peered into every drawer. I knew the view out of her windows, the way her dresses filled her closet and seemed to fluff out, expanding cloud-like, when I opened the closet door. I knew the neat little lines of shoes set out next to her bedroom door, perfume and lipsticks by the mirror on her dresser. I knew the dressmaker’s dummy where her latest project hung — one there even now,



never to be completed, I guessed. I'd searched the night stand drawer where I had found those old photos of my parents. I knew, but didn't really know anything.

So, the birth certificate in hand, I left Amelia sipping tea, and went back to my mother's room. I sat on her bed, just thinking — trying to think — for a time. Downstairs, the front door creaked. I heard the murmuring of conversation, but couldn't make out the words. Didn't really care.

As I looked around the room, the dress pinned to the dummy caught my eye again. It looked more finished that I'd thought at first. It was black with a simpler, easier cut than my mother favored, with none of the pleats or folds or trimming that showed off the skills she had so patiently acquired over the years. The skirt was shorter than she liked. I stood and stepped closer for a better look. Suddenly, I realized the dress wasn't for her. Something about the proportions — the bust, maybe? the length of the waist?, I couldn't tell — made clear it was meant for someone else. I laid a hand on it, feeling the soft jersey, wondering. I lifted it gently from the dummy, watched the cloth of the skirt sway as I did.

On the dresser, to my left, I spotted another manila folder. Still holding the dress, I bent to look.

Inside, I found a photo: a snapshot, browning into sepia, the way that photos from the 40s turn. A couple, teenagers really, stood before a porch that could have been my grandparents', or any of a hundred dif-

ferent houses in the town, or any town. The boy looked the way my father would have if that other photo weren't blurred. He was the same height, same slight build, though smiling easily here. In focus now, I saw how much we looked alike. The girl next to him was Amelia.

On the back, in fading ink, the date, 1943 and a simple note: "Recital."

My father wore a white shirt and bow-tie. He'd tucked a sheaf of music under an arm. Amelia wore what looked like her Sunday best, a ribbon in her hair, a violin cradled against her chest.

I stared for quite a while at the photo, trying, I guess, to reach back across the years and understand. When I laid it back onto the dresser, I saw some other bits of paper in the folder.

One was a brittle newspaper clipping, a brief report from a school concert. Someone had written a date in 1943. Skimming, I spotted Amelia's name.

In a small envelope was a letter. Addressed to Amelia at a boarding house in Norfolk, a smeared postmark showed it was mailed in 1944. The stamp was Canadian.

"Made it back again," the letter said. "A rough time this trip, don't tell the folks. I think we're going to form up another convoy here in Halifax. I keep hoping it will end soon, then I think that's awfully bad luck to think that way. I ship with Jack again, and

he's good luck for me. I seem to lean on him a lot, and I'm glad that when you met, you liked him, too."

A telegram flimsy, addressed to my grandparents. "A boy. All well. Taking train home 16th." Sent from Norfolk, dated in June, 1947.

I read them through once, then again. They felt like hints I couldn't put together, pointing to something I didn't think I wanted to know about my mother, my father, and Jack. My Uncle Jack? I set the papers down and thought perhaps I'd put my mother's last project away.

I had just eased it off the dummy when I heard the clump of heavy steps on the stairs.

"Jack!" my aunt's voice called.

"I don't understand what the hell you think you're doing, Amelia," he shouted back, just as he pushed the door open and the shock of seeing him made me clutch the dress tightly to my chest.

"No!" he bellowed, when he saw me.

I heard my aunt clattering up the stairs now.

"Jack," she called. "Not now, this isn't the time."

"It's never the time," he shouted. "Never, ever the time."

I couldn't move, except to shake. I'd never seen Jack so angry.

He stood glaring at me, clutching the dress, immobile as if I'd be caught at something, before spinning on his heels towards Amelia.

"You couldn't just leave things along, could you?" he shouted. "Just couldn't. Had to interfere."

He took a step towards her, lifted his hand.

Then, more footsteps pounding up the stairs.

Andrew burst in, grabbed Jack's arm.

"Enough of that," he said, still breathing hard.

"I think you'd better leave now," he told Jack.

"I have a right," Jack started.

"No," Amelia said. "Not anymore. Not really."

Jack nodded at me.

"He's ..."

"Not the issue," Andrew said, stepping between us. Still clutching the dress. I edged a little closer to him. I was the center of a scene I was powerless to do anything about, and I moved unconsciously for help, for protection. I didn't understand then what those few small steps could signify, though I think I may have

been the only one still in the dark. Jack snorted, spun on his heels and stomped down the stairs. We heard the front door slam behind him, tires squeal as he pulled out.

“He’s gone,” Amelia said. “We’ll be fine.” She stepped towards us, touched Andrew lightly on his shoulder, reached over to brush an invisible wrinkle or two from the dress, pressing it against my body. From the corner of my eye, I saw Andrew’s gaze following the movement of her hand, watching the cloth flow against me.

“It could almost be your size,” she said, then, to Andrew: “Do you know who she was making it for?”

He nodded.

“Same as the others,” he said. “Supposed to be picked up soon, I think.”

“Well,” she said. “There’s no room here. Why don’t you go hang it up with the others. I’ll make us some tea.”

“OK,” he said. He reached down, and took my hand in his, leading me into my old room. I kept the dress clutched tight.

In my closet, a dozen other outfits hung, dresses and skirts I’d never seen my mother wear. One long, dark zippered bag, way at the end, They seemed somehow intended for a younger woman, something

in the color, or the cut or trim. I riffled my hand along, inspecting each, and wondering.

I smoothed the black dress, stroking it against myself, in that un-self-conscious way of mother's when she was thinking something she didn't want to talk about, before reaching for a hanger and hooking it onto the rod.

Andrew watched, intently, silent. I'd thought I was alone, and flushed when I turned from the closet and saw him there.

"Do you know who they are for?" I asked.

Andrew nodded.

"Lovely, aren't they," he said. "She had a real eye."

It seemed a odd thing for a man like him to say, I thought.

"She worked on them quite intensely towards the — over the past few months," he said. "Sort of a testament, I think."

I couldn't imagine how he'd know something like that, not from someone who had always used a change of subject, or a bit of silver laughter or a hand reaching to tweak a piece of clothing straight in order to protect her from ever having to tell another what she really thought.

“We talked some, after my divorce,” Andrew said. “Actually, we talked a lot, when I moved back. It was a rough patch, for me. She really helped. I’ll tell you someday, if you want.”

“And those things in my closet, was she going to sell them?” I asked. “I used to think, when money got tight, that that was something she might do.”

“No,” he said. “They’re meant to be something more special, I believe. There’s other stuff, too, I think. Look in the dresser.”

“And for who?” I asked again.

“Well,” he said. “Now that she’s gone, I suppose that’s for you to say.”

Chapter 3

He looked into my eyes for a long moment, weighing what he’d said and my reaction to it. What I thought I saw in his gaze was something like what shot between us in that moment before his teammates surged to him to share his triumph, and the memory flashed to life again. For an instant, I thought that he was going to grab me, as he almost did back then, and swing me — where?

Instead, he simply smiled.

“Tea, I think Amelia offered,” he said. “I’m going to have some. You?”

I nodded.

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll be right down.”

As he went down the stairs, I stepped over to my old dresser and saw that someone had, in fact, had filled the drawers. Fingering the silk and satin bits, I flushed, realizing that they were someone’s lingerie. She’d obviously run out of space in her room. I walked back to the closet, stepped in, between the dresses and the zipper bag, and tugged it part-way open. Inside, a cloud of white, a gauzy mass of skirt spilled out, the kind of thing you find with an old-fashioned wedding dress. I wondered if it were hers, then I knelt and gently tucked it back in place.

The skirts of the other dresses swirled round my head and shoulders, hiding me from the world outside. Or, maybe, the world outside from me.

I suppose I should have noticed that Amelia nor Andrew left me alone for quite some time. In a carton, on the floor of the closet, looking as if it sat there for years, was a cardboard box, the kind some people use for storing files. I might never have spotted it if I hadn’t knelt just there, by the zipper bag.

Inside, I found a dusty photo album, a string-tied stack of letters, some loose sheets of browning paper.

There was just light enough to read as I sat there, sheltered by the fabric rustling around my shoulders.

The first loose sheet was a letter, addressed to Jack, care of a shipping company office in Liverpool signed by a captain in the Royal Navy, copied to an acronym that I didn't recognize. In the stilted, formal language of a naval dispatch, it reported the sinking of an American Liberty ship. It said that Jack had somehow made his way through the flames about to engulf the forecastle to haul a last survivor free. My father. Though the others already had pushed the lifeboat free of the dying ship, Jack, the letter continued, despite the continued danger to himself, wrapped his arm 'round my father's chest, and dived with him into the dark and frigid sea. They clung for what must have seemed hours to a piece of wreckage — or, to be exact, Jack clung to the chunk of wooden crate with one arm, the other keeping my barely-conscious father's head above the waves. That's how the lookout from one of the convoy's frigates spotted them. Jack was to get a medal.

The next sheet, on paper with a British hospital's letterhead, advised that while my father was to be discharged, the doctors believed he needed time to recover fully, if he could.

Something bothered me as I re-read it, a piece that didn't seem to fit. It took another moment, before I saw the date. November, 1945. The war had ended. The last convoy had been attacked. My father had survived.

Or perhaps to perish doesn't only mean to die.

Does a blank line on a birth certificate only and always mean nobody knows the father? Or that nobody wants to say? Or simply that dad is a blank, himself?

My father, my poor father, I thought, setting the papers down, reaching for the photo album.

I leafed through casually until, just like the date on the hospital note, I began to feel something just a little out of place. Turning the thick black paper pages slowly now, trying to understand, I found it.

A small, square snapshot. In the background was the odd rock outcrop and lazy river of a favorite state park, the one my grandparents used to take us to for picnics in the summer. .

The dresses in the closet rustled round my head as I bent to peer more closely. My grandparents, decades younger, undefeated as yet by time and what life brought for them, stood side-by-side, a boy and a girl standing before them. The children were no more than eight or 10 years old. My grandma's hand lay on the boy's shoulder, my grandpa's arms protectively encircling his wife and the little girl.

Something in the girl's impish little smile made me wonder if she was Amelia.

And something made me wonder what she was doing there.

I turned back to the first page of the album. There was a wedding portrait of my grandparents, snapshots from a picnic and a trip to a big city. Baby photos. A group around a table set up under some trees, my grandparents on one side, the older couple — great-grandparents? — at the table's head, another couple on the other side. Kids caught in mid-wriggle, looking like they wanted to run and chase each other through the cornfield in the distance.

Then, the photo that had stopped me of my grandparents and the boy and girl.

I turned the page to find another, though the kids looked to be two or three years older. Then high school graduation photos of my father — and, on the next page, Amelia. Turning the page again, a photo by the seashore: my father, Amelia and Jack; all three in bathing suits. Her arms were around both of their waists, their arms lay across her shoulders. I found a photo of my dad standing on a wharf, his pea coat buttoned tight against the wind. Then there was one of Amelia, smiling shyly by a car, violin case in hand.

Another page: Amelia and Jack — she's looking ill at ease, had put on some weight, it seemed.

Several missing pages now.

But then, at last, a photo of my mother. The first one in the album. She's holding a toddler — me — propped on her hip, and smiles shyly. I can tell she's in my grandparents' home; perhaps that's why her

posture seems a little tense — who wouldn't be, I guess, living with in-laws, but without your husband?

There were only a few more pages. Mostly baby photos of me. None of my father. There was a photo of our own house, with my mom, me — I look to be about five there, which would make it around the time we moved — and Jack. Some empty spots on the next pages, where I could see the flecks of glue that held pictures someone had apparently removed. Then, a photo of the neighborhood kids, all in a line. I look to be about 10. I'm standing next to Andrew.

The last page had a photo of Andrew's famous catch; bigger and sharper than the snapshots, it looked like the kind of photo a newspaper uses, and maybe sells copies of later. Also a snapshot, taken from the stands, just afterwards, of Andrew and me, eyes locked, poised on the edge in that moment before his teammates thundered up to carry him away.

I wondered why there were so many photos of Amelia, about the missing pages between the last one of my father and the one of my mother and me. It was almost as if he stepped out of the world, and she stepped in.

I closed the album, laid it gently back in the box, and stood. One of the dresses clung, as if static electricity drew it to me, though I felt no sting of sparks.

My aunt was standing at my bedroom door.

“You found it?” she asked.

“I still don’t understand,” I said. “Why you’re in all those photos. Why the photos in the front are all of you and him and my grandparents, but in the back, it’s just my mom and me.”

“Not just you two,” she said. “Not all of them.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Just remember,” she said. “Not just your mom and you.”

I heard Andrew clattering the dishes in kitchen.

He called out something, but I didn’t understand.

“Not yet,” Amelia replied, raising her voice. “Give us a little while longer.”

She sat down on my bed, patted the cover beside her, inviting me to sit.

“Come, bring the album,” she said.

I brushed the dress aside, and sat, uneasily beside her. She spread the album across our laps, and turned the pages slowly, finally stopping at one of my grandparents, father and her.

“Mother and father, two kids,” she said. “Tell me, what’s the simplest explanation? What you’d say this

picture showed if you weren't sure you knew the people in it?"

"A family," I said. "Mom and dad, brother and sister."

"Yes," she said. "That's it." She pointed at the girl: "That's me." At the boy: "my brother," the adults: "Mom and Dad."

"You are my aunt?"

"No," she said, turning the pages, til she found the photo of her and Jack.

"Look closely," she said, "Look at my stomach."

I didn't want to say, just looked at the image, then at her.

"Yes," she said. "I was pregnant. Autumn 1946, to be precise."

She sighed.

"I was just 19, and pregnant. He wouldn't marry me. My parents told me not to come home. I was alone and very scared. If it hadn't been for my brother, I don't want to think what would have happened."

"What did happen then?" I whispered.

"I had the baby," she said. "I had you."

There's nothing you can say, at such a moment. Only the unvoiced, urgent question: why?

"We were very close, my brother and me," she said. "When he came out of the hospital that winter, it was me he came to; me who took care of him. It was like something had drained out of him during those hours in the sea. It never had been all that strong before, I guess — he'd always been content to kind of drift along, let others lead, decide for him. A bit like you, my dear."

"And he's my — ?" I couldn't finish.

"No," she smiled. "Not your father. That was Jack. My brother was your rescuer. I couldn't face going home, he could. I couldn't take care of a baby — I thought I couldn't, it was my shame — but my brother wanted nothing more than to take care of you."

She turned back to the high school photo of her brother, then flipped forward to the photo I'd thought was of my mother and me, and back again, and again.

"Look closely," she said. "Look at the eyes, the nose. Wipe the lipstick from her lips; imagine him smiling the way he used to when he listened to me play the violin, Can you see?"

I stared.

And saw, for the first time, they could have been brother and sister. They could have been twins. They could have been — the thought too bizarre, too inevitable.

“I bore you, I gave birth to you,” Amelia said. “My brother, my dear brother, my brother who was lost at sea, became your mom.”

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They worked it out over the first weeks of Amelia’s pregnancy. She gave her brother — my mom, as I will now continue saying — all of what they thought was needed to take up a new life; the life they thought his piano might give him, would now be where her violin, and his careful planning, would take her. She gave my mom the gift of giving love. In exchange my mom gave her a gift of freedom.

I think, now, that the key to understanding their exchange is the idea of sacrifice.

It is something I have come to feel because the story doesn’t end here, there’s still a part for me to play, and it’s why I want to tell you all the story of my mother and me.

Sacrifice. Or, let’s call it offering, so that instead of thinking of lambs under a knife, we might imagine maidens bowing at a shrine as they place their flowers there. Or let’s say that moment when love leads her — one of our maidens, say — to turn her face to

his for a kiss. Or to lay herself out before him on the bed, so he can take the gift of her.

As Amelia had.

My mom offered a kind of life to her sister. If you like, my mom sacrificed what she'd been born to be, giving a different kind of gift, both to her sister and to me.

But it's important here not to call any of these offerings a loss. Perhaps because it grew from an earlier surrender: the hours that tie all of us in this story together, those hours in the sea, Jack clinging to a chunk of floating wreckage with one strong arm, and to his shipmate with another. Jack had offered up his life when he chose not to jump into the lifeboat, but instead leapt through the flames to save a friend. He did again, when he spent nearly all his strength to keep that friend from slipping beneath the waves into the frigid sea. His friend, Amelia's brother, had surrendered something too. I think of it as kind of a will to action, a way of looking at the world as something to be shaped, rather than something that shaped you. I think that in his fury to survive, to insure that they both survived, Jack surrendered whatever talent for acceptance he had had. And I think that somehow, the insistent drumming of the waves that nudged them towards their rescuers, infused what Jack gave up into the emptiness left by his friend's quite different sacrifice. The one refused from that time on to ever, ever give up on what he wanted, the other was ever content to yield to another's wants.

I came to see this, because of a sacrifice of my own I would make.

If I've pieced it together correctly from what Amelia hinted at and what I read between the lines in the packet of letters I found in the box with the photo album, the idea that her brother would take care of me was entirely his own, an almost angry, uncharacteristically decisive response to her idea that she should leave me with Childrens Services, to be adopted. Their parents, she said, would die of shame if she came home unmarried and with child. I'll go home with our child, he said. A baby needs a mother, she said. He nodded. Have you someone in mind? she asked.

Someone special, they agreed. It had to be someone special. She would be — and here, they found their way to an answer by telling one another stories, fictions of the baby's mother. They wrote some of them down — they are enough to make me blush now, for the womanly ideals who they envisioned were meant for ordinary little me. Since the answer that emerged was something so hard to say, even for two as close as they were, they wrote each other little notes to hint at where they thought they ought to go. One letter, sent while she had made a quick trip back home and hoping that their parents didn't notice her swelling belly, tells of slipping on one of her dresses, the feel of the hem tickling the backs of a knee, the way that clothes could make you feel open to sensation, to the world. One note, in Amelia's handwriting, sets out some rules for how to sit; another, in his, muses about about what it is like to feel you are a

new person when walking familiar streets or as that sixth sense of ours kicks in to let you know someone is watching, wondering, as you sway past. It was, I guess, a kind of mental experiment with venturing outside the safety of their apartment. I thought I could see how thrilled, and how frightened, the prospect was. I found torn-out pages from Sears catalogues and fashion magazines, with jottings asking if this look would work, if that color suited. “Read this if you want to understand,” Amelia wrote on one sugary romantic tale from a woman’s magazine.

In the months that followed, two new beings grew. Me and my mother. The next time Jack was back in town, Amelia was too far along to want an evening on the town. Her brother stepped into her place on Jack’s arm. They didn’t come back to the apartment until morning.

Jack was back at sea when I was born. It was two siblings who rushed to the hospital that night, and because the nurses saw two sisters, Amelia was less alone than if it had been Jack who called the taxi and waited, pacing, in the corridor.

Amelia’s pay was not enough to support we three, and so the story the family all agreed on was that my grandparents were taking care of their missing son’s widow and child. I found a letter that mom wrote from that time — sacrifice, at least for my grandparents, isn’t always painless.

But there were other letters, too.

“Spring here,” one of the letters started. “Remember how it is? I took the baby to the park today to see the tulips by the fountain. I wore that white eyelet dress we made, though it was a little chilly when we were in the shade. When I held him up to see the flowers and the splashing water, he cooed and laughed and I felt that same old flood of warmth and love that made me hug him tight and want to spin together in the sun.”

Or:

“It is completely shameless of me, I know, the way I love to feel their eyes on me after I walk by — I always swing my hips that little bit extra. Tell me, do you, too? I love to be a girl.”

Gushing when Jack came to the town, more when he bought the house and we moved in. She wrote about how she wanted to decorate, about new dishes that she learned to cook. Once it was clear Amelia wasn't jealous, there were occasional circumlocutions about men. Advice from the women's magazines didn't help, it seemed. Jack strayed, then left. We eked by with help from Amelia and eventually from the piano lessons my mom began to offer.

Throw a stone in a pond, the water's roiled, then the ripples flow, then spread, then sink back peacefully and all is calm. So with the letters as the years passed. There was a kind of reserve, affectionate to be sure, but still a sense of pushing away, of a retreat behind a well-kept house, the well-cooked meals, the home-sewn dresses in the latest, carefully described,

style, the quiet pride in school reports. The tone is of contented acceptance.

“She was,” Amelia told me, “happier than is given most of us to be.”

“I see.” I said. “I see now.”

“That’s what she wanted you to have,” Amelia said. “To be happy.”

I set the packet of letters to one side, leaving the last few unread.

“Are you?” she said. “Are you happy?”

Even as she asked, I knew the answer. I knew that there was something missing, something the letters told me that anyone might find, if only they knew where to look.

“You know,” Amelia said. “You are very like her. Did you know you went to the same school we did? Your third grade classroom was the same, the same teacher even. In high school, you both were in the band, you both took French and trigonometry, both volunteered to tutor after school. The athletes always had such trouble keeping their grades up enough to play. Remember?”

I did. And once again, the memory of that moment on the sidelines flashed.

“There is a chance,” Amelia said, as if she understood what I was seeing in my mind’s eye, “There is a chance that the path that she found could be the one for you. Would you like to try?”

I felt a trembling deep inside me.

“She thought so, too,” Amelia said. “That’s why she made those things.” She nodded in the direction of the closet. “Made them for you. She wanted so for you to understand, at last. Perhaps for you to share. Would you try, please. For her. For you.”

Chapter 4

My guess is that most of us don’t remember the first time we put on a dress. What could a toddler understand about the meaning of a clip-on bow tie or a cascade of pink tulle, after all? Yet once your mother finishes her final, small adjustments to the clothing and steps back to beam proudly at her work, you are defined. Something that happens to you, without deliberation, without consent.

Perhaps that’s why what my mom forebode pink for me back then. To understand yourself, to willing accept, to (if you’re lucky) exult in being who you are is a gift that all too few parents know how to give. A gift that I, at last, received..

Does it seem superficial that a dozen bits of cloth, each cut in defiance of Euclid’s insistence that the shortest distance is a straight line, assembled with

stitches too small to see, once slipped on over your head and shoulders, touched into place around your hips, tickling the curves just below your knees, could change so much? If so, consider that she who made the dress, and she who helped me in, had spent much of their lives turning symbols — the tailed dots on sheets of music — into listeners' emotions.

The dress hugged my ribcage snugly, flared out (through artifice, if you must know) at my hips. Sinking into its embrace, I felt — well, the best word I can think of is: relief.

It washed over me, like a wave, that sense that at last, I'd arrived.

Sometimes, even now, as I almost without a thought tug my skirt back over my knees, I wonder at the power of the symbol of a dress. Some of it, I think, is because it is so carefully crafted to be pretty — as I've since crafted myself, as my mom had done for herself. Whether in fact pretty or not may not really matter so much. It's not given to everyone. But the careful effort tells the world the aspiration matters. It matters to delight another's eye.

Some of a dress's power is about being open. The way a neckline dips, that sleeves (if there are sleeves) leave slender wrists and arms exposed, the airiness beneath a skirt. There is a kind of bravery, to wear a dress. You become more available to the world around, whether it is a breeze brushing your skins or the gaze of a passer-by. It makes you ask yourself: shall I accept, shall I yield, or just retreat? It is a dif-

ferent question than the one, in the armor of my older clothing, I'd thought I had to ask: Do I act? Do I take, or just walk past and not engage the world here? I used to walk on far too often.

I curtsied for Amelia, twirled for her, so that the skirt floated up around me. She bowed and took me in her arms, waltzing me for a moment, and then, with another exuberant spin, let Andrew cut in.

I have no idea, still don't, how long he'd been there. We danced, at first elbows crooked, one pair of hands held high and formal, his other barely on my waist to guide me. But, perhaps it was the music that Amelia hummed for us, or simply the geometry of three steps and a turn, the distance between us closed. I felt his arm across my lower back, I felt our hips touch, and touch again, and press together so that I felt how he had swelled and stiffened with desire.

There's something about letting another take the lead, isn't there? To step and turn and spin when a slight pressure of his hand or shift a weight signals the time. Something about not needing to watch for obstacles because he is, and you can simply let sensation come flooding in: melody and harmony, lights and shadow, that momentary loss of gravity when you twirl and the way you almost return to the earth in the calmness following.

I wondered as we danced what might have happened on that day that now seemed not that long ago if his teammates had not carried him away, if he had in fact grabbed hold of me, swung me high into the



air to celebrate. If perhaps the sheer power of exhilaration might have carried us both up towards the center of the dome of sky, far from our cloying little suburb. Dim as we were back then, we might well have sensed the message that my mom's exaggerated femininity whispered, in defiance of anatomy, that our world could be what we would make of it, if we only dared. But at the instant that we just possibly might have understood, others crowded round him, stepped into the narrowing space between us, and the moment passed.

Between us now, in what had been the space between us, was a different kind of invitation, as I said. This one, not to come away, but come together, this one not calling him to follow, but calling me.

Well, really, what are you supposed to do?

I had no clue. I'd never felt the pressing of another's desire for me. Never felt that upward, outward-thrusting need against my belly, nor that inflowing flux of trembling warmth that blooms in response.

I felt as virginal as a bride, as ignorant as if I'd just departed from a convent school. Whatever theory I thought I knew about what men take and what we yield to them was merely theory for I'd never taken myself, and never yet been so directly asked if I would accept.

We danced, after a while to music that only we could hear, for Amelia had slipped out while we,

oblivious, spun in, our ever-closing orbits round one another. I rested my head on Andrew's shoulder, felt the hand resting in the shallow bowl of my lower back slide down to cup my rear and take my weight, so that I felt even more as if I danced on air. I felt his warm breath in my ear, as he bent close to touch my temple with his lips and then to whisper.

He asked no question, posed no demand, had no need to say the words to tell me what we both already knew. Instead, he murmured memories to me: a school bus stop, a high school corridor, a smile when paths cross unexpectedly, all stories of that mix of friendliness and reserve that says we might be friends — or might be more. He told me of the moments when his teammates took him away, of a hollowness he felt inside in the midst of celebration. Told me of a different empty place when his marriage failed, and about coming back to the street where we'd grown up. Of chores done for my mom, and what he'd tell her, and what she knew, and what he'd finally realized was missing.

We'd stopped dancing by then. I lifted my head, tilted my face up to his. I felt his lips touch my forehead, then my cheek. Felt the butterfly brush of lips along my jaw, reaching my chin. Felt them touching my throat and then the hollow between my collarbones, as if to sense my pulse. And then, at last, felt his lips on mine, just touching.

His hands cupping my rear, held me close. Mine cupped the back of his head, holding him to me.

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It was intuition that steered us back to a path we had never understood that we could take, the intuition of someone who was not there but who had so carefully measured and cut and assembled the soft, dark jersey to make the dress I was wearing, just as she had measured and shaped me. Perhaps because she knew I was her child, no matter what the dictates of biology might hold, she sensed what I could not, picked up the subtle signals of unspoken words and uncompleted gestures, and let intuition lead us forward.

Surely there was nothing rational going on here. What she had offered her sister so many years before, just like what the dress she sewed for me, the conversations she had had with Andrew, made no sense — unless, that is, you think that sometimes it is your heart that leads you on, and not a clear, cool draft of reason.

It was heart that, when hugging a frightened, pregnant sister, found a way to let three souls flourish. Heart that understood the ache of missed connection from a moment on the sidelines of a silly game. Heart that understood the risk of stepping off a prescribed path, the hurt that can be the price of being open to accepting what the man standing before you wants to take.

Jack, after all, had come, perhaps for her, perhaps for the child he had — it is still hard now for me to fathom, since he would not stay. Whatever it was that

kept his arm so firmly round a shipmate to save them both from drowning faded as the years passed by. Jack reached deep into a shipmate's spirit and wrought a transformation, but in the end, having offered that gift, could not keep taking what a transformed spirit wanted to give. I think the hurt she refused to let the world see kept her from hinting to her child about the path the echoes of her intuition now pointed out to me. I know, because of the arguments I heard when I was little, that she and Jack battled over what to do with me; I know, remembering the stinging of my palms when fielding Jack's fast balls in a game of catch, or the different sting of words with the more common case of missing the ball altogether, how fiercely he wanted me to change.

That I didn't, though — not then, at any rate — was not so much from anything she did, raising me. Jack, with all the furious energy of a man who knows exactly what he wants, would act; she, more open to accept the wants of another, would be content with a hint, a nudge so that the other might find his own heart's path. A hint, rather like the hand with which I held Andrew's head close to mine. Or like the gift she'd left for me in my closet.

My mom's hints, now that we know some of her story, were not as silly as I (and maybe you, at first meeting) had thought. That exaggerated femininity, the way she could absorb herself in details of a dress or makeup, the way she'd dither when a man would try to push her to decide, her well-studied and much-practiced fluidity of gesture. Looking back now, I see her always in a dress or skirt and blouse,

when other women opted for slacks. Always in heels, except when she would kick them off to rub her feet and sigh about what women had to do to look their best. Goodness knows, I do it often enough myself, though it always makes him roll his eyes and laugh.

She did all this because she understood that symbols matter. She had accepted that she would stand on one side of the great dividing line, and anchored herself there with all the symbolism of style and stereotype. These days, so many decades later — so long, indeed, after Andrew's kiss — you may be inclined to put down those who joyfully accept the role that stereotypes impose. I'm not. I am not sure I can tell you everything about what the acceptance meant for my mother, other than to recall evenings in our living room listening to her playing the piano, or looking at the feeling expressed in every tiny stitch of the dresses that she made. I can, however, tell you about the joys I would come to feel.

So, I come back to being in Andrew's arms.

Strong arms, they were (and are). He is taller than I am, even when I wear heels. In order to reach my lips after our dance, he lifted me from the ground; as I say, I felt as if I floated in the air. I could feel his biceps bulge when I stroked one palm up and down his arm.

His lips brushed mine, then, almost as if questioning, pressed. Mine parted and I touched his with the tip of my tongue. I felt him leaning forward, felt his tongue touch mine, then my lips, then probe deeply

into me, surging forward with his desire, just as the way his forward lean, my arching back, pressed his erection even more firmly against my belly so that it, too, seemed to thrust towards me with its need.

I felt a trembling deep within, a kind of glow, almost electric, filling the space between my hips, beginning to flow like warm, thick oil down my legs, behind my knees. Dizzy, I eased my lips from his to catch my breath and as I did, he slipped one arm down along the back of my thighs, hooked his forearm behind my knees. With his other arm now round my shoulders, he swung me up into the air, holding me so securely that I barely needed to wrap my own arms around his neck to hang on to him..

With a step or two, we were by the bed. He kissed me again and laid me down. I felt the mattress dip to one side as he lay down beside me, then to the other, as he swung one leg over to my other side. He straddled me, kneeling, running his hands up and down my body, as the glow inside me seemed to grow warmer, larger, filling me so that there was no room for disbelief, fear, or questioning. When he bent down to kiss me once again and gently eased himself on me, it felt as if it was only the weight of his hips that kept me from floating up into the sky.

I wrapped my calves around his thighs, just about his knees, as his kisses grew ever more urgent and his hips began to rock. I felt how his erection grew up and out and hard and seeking, and how the dizzying, trembling glow growing inside me yearned for him.

Now I kissed urgently and as I pressed myself to him, we rolled so that it was me who straddled him now. I reached down to unbutton his shirt and with each loosened button, bent to touch my lips to him, tasting the salt sweat on his chest, feeling the firm muscles of his stomach. Kissing him just below his navel, my fingers blindly, knowingly, undid his pants, eased down the zipper, so that, when I straightened my back so I could see my work, he rose, thick and empurpled, straining to me.

I reached down with both hands to hold him, as if to sense the weight of what I'd wrought in him, then so light that I barely seemed to touch, let my hands travel up and down his shaft, as if measuring, considering.

Once I had savored that a time or two or three, I cupped his balls with one hand, and encircling his shaft with the forefinger and thumb of the other, slowly stroked, feeling the velvet skin and iron beneath.

I bent to touch the burning edge of his glans with my tongue, just one touch first, then slowly circling, tasting, exploring — exploring him, exploring something inside me, as well.

I nestled him between my lips, still lightly stroking, feeling him burn hotter, hotter. I felt his balls shifting in my cupped hand, heard him moan and let my lips slip down his shaft, my tongue making a soft, wet bed for him to slide against.

I breathed, inhaling him a little farther, as if the gentle suction might bring him still closer, then let him slip slowly out. I pressed his shaft against my cheek for a moment, then once again nestled him in my lips, and drank him in.

I felt the muscles of his tensing, his balls move closer to his body.

And then, felt the throbbing and the pumping, pumping, pumping as he came.

Chapter 5

When you think about it, or at least when I did, as I snuggled under his arm and watched as he drifted off into that day-dreaming state it is so easy to slip into after making love, a man's seed has the power to transform. My heart was still pounding, thinking of how he'd surged into me, feeling as if the wave on wave of him still rolled towards the farthest reaches of myself, I felt an ease I had never felt before, as if I'd found myself, as if the dress she'd made for me, as if her story, finally told, allowed me to relax myself into the person I was always meant to be.

The boundaries that you're never supposed to cross, the ones that clothing signals and that others' censure patrols, turn out to be as easy to slip past as taking a breath. My mom, so that she might hold a baby in her arms and keep it safe and sheltered, had

slipped across; her sister eased her way — and both had sensed that baby, too, might someday want the passport that allows the border guards to lift the gate and let you pass. I'd slipped into the embrace of the clothing they'd offered me, and I, accepting what I might become, was then taken that way by a man.

Once across the border, then, Andrew (once he awakened in an hour or two) would hand me over to Amelia so I could get my green card, as it were.

There is a fair amount to learn, even once you've got the essential point. The way a bra hugs and the feel of the new weight it contains. The slick feel of a lipstick, the powdery touch of rosy color on your cheeks. The sweep of hand under a skirt when sitting down, the way knees press together when you bend, the feel of someone's lingering glance traveling the length of your body as you walk by, the up-from-under look when you catch a special someone's eye. I learned about the cuts of clothing and of hair that flatter most, about the patience you need to make sure you look just so, about the flush you feel when a stranger at a bar begins his pass, about the silver laugh and well-deployed non sequitur that win you space when someone wants to press uncomfortably close.

Or the moment when you decide it is not so uncomfortable after all.

I was downtown, taking a moment in the small park by the courthouse to enjoy the sun, bags of shopping at my feet, thinking I had better head back

to the bus stop before rush hour started, when he sat down about two inches over that invisible line that says “my space”. Not touching, you understand. Just ambivalent enough so that a slight shifting of weight one way might continue the campaign towards conquest, or might allow face-saving retreat after an initial rebuff.

I didn’t want to turn my head, not yet, for I wasn’t sure of the signal I would send, but glancing from the corner of my eye at him, saw just enough to feel I didn’t want to slide that critical inch or two away to tell him not to bother. He wore a dark, neat suit, white shirt, silk tie that, like the square jaw, neatly clipped hair and not-quite smirking smile radiated confidence in his place on top of the world, a place from which he had the utmost certainty in his power to define what those around were and did. So, a heavy thigh sprawled two inches over that unseen line, a hand-span from the prim blue wool of my skirt. My bags from shopping were on my other side, and could not be a wall. I swear I felt his eyes tracing the curves of calves and thigh and rear.

“Nice day,” he said. And so it started.

By the time we had agreed that yes, indeed, it was a lovely day, and that the city did a nice job with the plantings in the park, that he was a lawyer whose hearing in the courthouse had ended early and that I was done with my shopping, he’d crossed the final inches. A stretch, as if to ease a crick in his back, and his arm was lying along the back of the bench, as if he just forgot and left it there. His thigh touched

mine. I felt the heat of his body, the firmness of his muscles: he was thinking of heading to the gym, he said. And I?

And I, indeed?

There is something about being desired, even if the spark is as casual as a glance across a park bench from a smug stranger who you know has made his moves a score of times before, and is sure than once again he can take what he wants, this time from you. There is something about that that brushes aside any reservation of your own, memories of sound advice or knowledge of proprieties to be observed. Something that doesn't care about that tiny voice inside that warns that you might not be what he expected.

So, he did not head to the gym. I did not beat the rush hour commuters to the bus. There is a quiet bar in the hotel on the far side of the park; the booths are lit by golden candlelight, configured so that knees can touch, with waiters who understand a confident fellow's quiet nod that another drink is now in order, and when they need to turn their backs.

My skirt was long enough and tight enough so that, once his hand was on my knee, it couldn't travel too far up my thigh. Far enough, that is, for me to want to let my guard down, not far enough from his fingers to find what I am sure he wouldn't have wanted to discover.

Above us, several stories of hotel room seemed to beckon. Leaning back on the thickly padded seat to try to keep my head from spinning from the last drink that I should not have taken, his hand beneath my skirt, seeking, stroking, making me feel still dizzy, I let my arm slip down onto his leg. Then, instead of dropping to the space between our legs, it eased the other way, to the valley between his — and touched the straining bulge of his erection.

At such a point, there's not a lot of conversation needed. We'd passed the point of talking about how much we liked walking along a beach or in a gentle rain; of trading names of favorite books and movies, of tales masking as biography. This was no date, but about his need and my own, of his urge to thrust into me, and mine to open myself and yield.

He bent to kiss me then, tongue pushing, demanding, between my lips, fingers combing through my hair. I touched my palm to his bulge, and felt him throbbing, felt how he wanted to burst out and up.

Alcohol, especially when it is enough to make you head spin, to make you tilt you head back against the back of a leather-padded booth in a quiet bar, has other effects, too — no matter if you're boy or girl.

With a pause for breath, a small laugh, and a finger to his lips, I slipped out to the ladies' room. Inside, unwrapped inside a booth, confronted with the fact that I was not what he expected, that a part of me was in the way of what he meant (and what I wanted) to happen next, I felt a sense of fear about the path I'd

started walking. For the first time since I'd slipped on the dress my mom had made for me, I was chilled by the risk that I was daring to assume. Others, as Andrew had, as the man waiting outside for me was doing now, could see me as I seemed to be, as I wanted to be. The girl they saw before them, the girl that at my core I sensed, could still so easily be lost at the instant of connection with another. It hadn't been, that time with Andrew. Somehow, I sensed, that once I laid myself upon one of those vast soft beds upstairs, and the man waiting outside for me unwrapped the gift I so wanted to offer, things wouldn't work out quite that way.

My eyes teared.

I could, I knew, re-do my lipstick, brush my hair back in order, walk back into the bar and, murmuring about the time of month, suggest an option that I was sure would satisfy.

Yet, though I knew, again from that time with Andrew, that to satisfy a man that way could satisfy a yearning inside me as well, I didn't think it would just then. I had no problem with the idea of having him between my newly-reddened lips, nor with the thought of drinking him as he pumped himself into me. I think what bothered me was that, when he would then ask me for my number and I gave it, I'd either be too busy or else would have to suffer the world's longest period in order to ensure that he'd never be disillusioned by the girl he saw, the girl who was before him.

I thought perhaps the answer might be at what back in those days we were just starting to call gay bars. Waiting for Andrew, wondering if the dance that led us to my bed that day was about that variety of desire, I steeled myself to go. In those days, in towns like mine, bars like that were fairly discreet. It took a careful ear out when sitting with the other, gossiping, secretaries at lunch — well, I had to eat — to get my lead.

It had a bit of the air of a speakeasy. You stepped down a half-flight of steps below the sidewalk of a short, downtown street, huddled by the side entrance to one of the bank towers lining East Main. The air was smoky, the small space between the bar and the few booths along one wall was packed with men in loosened ties and suits creased by long hours sitting at a desk, waiting for their few hours of ease before slipping home to tell the wife and kids about the hours of extra work the boss dumped on them. A few younger men, more casually dressed in tight jeans and T-shirts, lounged at one end of the bar. On the stage a six-foot drag queen, blonde curls piled so high I thought they'd brush the ceiling, stomped through a grinding dance on five-inch heels, her mouth a red-rimmed "O" of mocking, daring invitation. I went from work, as they had, no bothering to change from my secretarial white blouse and dark skirt, drawing only a glance or two, as if in fear that work had somehow tracked them here.

I squirmed my way to the bar, a passage made without a wink, or pat upon my rear, or offer of a drink. It took forever to catch the barman's eye. I

tried to see if I could spot Andrew, tried not to stare at the man from work the secretaries' gossip hinted might come here. In the crowd, one or two men had slipped arms around another's waist and started to sway with the music from an unseen jukebox.

I felt a presence at my side, and turned.

Like me, she hadn't taken time to change. Like the smoke-shrouded crowd behind us, her prim office clothes hung almost wearily. Unlike them, but like me, she'd have only a empty bed and half-finished novel awaiting her at home; no need to tell a fable to a waiting partner.

She said she hadn't seen me there before, I told her that I'd never been. New in town? she asked, and I said that in a way I was. She navigated cautiously around the questions that you go to bars to ask or answer. You interested? What do you like? Might we? Drinks came, we fake-argued over the bill and settled it by agreeing to a second round on me. The press of others at the bar pushed us closer; at some point, her arm had settled around my waist, she was murmuring in my ear.

Buses in my town stopped running after midnight, and when I told that I needed to leave, she came out to the fresh, cool air of night, and walked with me. A few steps before I'd need to turn the corner onto East Main, she pulled me close and kissed me.

"A nightcap?" she whispered, "You could always call a cab."

Before I could reply, she kissed again. Her hands roamed up and down my side, around my hips, stroking my thighs.

And paused, her palm pressed firm where my legs met.

“You’re very good,” she said. “Very convincing. But no one is going to bite in a place like that.”

She sighed.

“Oh well,” she said. “You’d better catch your bus.”

ooo

Those were the days when men sat in their offices, too preoccupied with grander things to type their letters or fetch themselves a coffee. I didn’t mind the typing or the step-and-fetch-it chores, at least I didn’t let myself mind them much. There was a kind of relief in letting someone else command, not having any real need to try to shape events the way you wanted; in the context of the office, my opinion didn’t really matter and I really didn’t care.

It left me time, it left all the office girls the time, to consider other matters more important to us, the issues and events of what must have seemed a smaller, tamer world to the men we worked for, but that had a richness and complexity that required time to contemplate and care to navigate. They were also the days, after all, when there was no one you could complain to about, hand upon your heart, or those un-



wanted and repeated invitations for a drink on nights a wife was out. How to respond, so that you didn't lose your job, or reputation, or any options you might want to leave open, was no simple matter, and much chewed over during lunch.

Playing it safe, I went out a couple of times with one of the accountants. Dinner and a moonlight stroll, a concert by the symphony and an awkward kiss. Lunchtime opinion was that I was not missing much when he waited two weeks to ask again. I was busy that night, maybe another? The verdict was more enthusiastic when a lawyer from across the hall asked. Tall, obviously prospering, he was what the others called a catch, and I have to say I liked the idea of being caught myself. We ended up one date in the hotel bar next to the park but this time, when I emerged dry-eyed from the ladies' room with lipstick freshened and hair re-brushed, I turned back to the bar, took my seat beside his, and traced the line of his jaw as he leaned close to whisper his invitation to go with him to a room upstairs. Accepting my excuse about a monthly problem that I didn't really have, he didn't push to take my clothes off before I knelt before him. When we were done, he asked me for my number I gave him one I made up on the spot.

I suppose it's clear to you what I was missing. At the time, I would have put it this way: Where the hell was Andrew? And the answer that I thought I'd found was that Andrew wanted someone else than who I had become — that Andrew was at loose ends, and that a lust remembered was what had led him to dance me to my bed that day. That Andrew wanted

the schoolmate he remembered, the boy standing on the sidelines who watched his triumph, but not the me who wore the dress my mom had made and let his seed surge through my body to bring its transformation.

But I was wrong.

The neighbors who ignored my mom barely noticed that I'd moved in after the funeral; I left early for work and came back late from, well, whatever. A kid whose family moved in after I'd left home came round to mow the lawn. On weekends I stuck close to home. And so I didn't hear that Andrew had moved out and found a place of his own, in one of those neighborhoods downtown where singles and the divorced perched, with trendy restaurants and shops, and evening sidewalks crammed with people, seeking, wanting, finding.

It was a short walk from my office and after work, I took to heading there, to the apparent dismay of my would-be suitor from accounting. I didn't want to admit I was looking, but I also wanted very much to look, and so, swimming in the ambivalence that keeps so many of us always second guessing ourselves, I spend my evenings as the spring warmed into summer.

I savored sidelong glances from the passers-by, both the lingering once-overs from the men or the sharp, jealous glances from their companions. There were store windows to browse, courting couples to

observe, sometimes an offer of a drink, an un-asked-for question about my plans for later.

I didn't find him there. Instead, one Saturday, he came knocking at my door. He had a toddler perched on his hip, a little girl held his hand.

Andrew.

"I have them for the weekend," he said. "I thought I'd take them to the playground, would you like to come along?"

We walked, all four of us, to our old school, and the swings and slide behind it. About halfway there, his little girl took my hand; I felt the sudden thrill of unexpected contact, that another sought connection, had simply by wrapping small fingers around my own declared: You're nice.

They played for hours, so it seemed. Swings had to be pushed, toddler held tight in a pretend-ride down the slide. Sandbox constructions to be carefully observed while sitting side-by-side with Andrew on the bench. A sleepy toddler and a too-tired-to-walk little girl to be carried back.

We made a nest of pillows and sofa cushions in my living room for them to nap on, plopped down on the floor beside to watch them. I listened, through the lingering glow that was their gift to me, as Andrew told me those parents' tales about their kids that mean so much inside a family, and that I found

meant so much to me. I leant my head upon his shoulder, felt his arm encircle me.

I could have stayed like that forever, basking in that glow. But of course, you can't. The moment has to be enough. The funny thing, that ends up being so. The moment, and later the memory, is everything.

I made them dinner, mac and cheese, and, despite a stern injunction from the little girl that she never ate vegetables, gave her and her dad salads, and some string beans that her little brother mashed into his face and that she dutifully ate. I didn't eat much myself; the little boy sat in my lap and let me feed him before snuggling close and plopped a fat, wet gooey kiss on my cheek. When it was time to leave, I gave them each a hug and got an extra tight squeeze back from Andrew's daughter and another kiss from his son before they set out into the dark back to his mother's. where they were to spend the night.

"Their mother picks them tomorrow afternoon," he said. "Would you mind if I came by afterwards?"

And of course I said I wouldn't mind at all.

I burned the chicken, over-cooked the asparagus and was in a complete state when he arrived. He held me close, told me it didn't matter, and after dabbing my eyes dry, drove us down to the Chinese take-out by our old high school. An old teammate was waiting there, as well. They chatted for a bit, and after Andrew introduced me as a new friend — managing with an tone of voice or arched eyebrow to suggest I

was a particular kind of friend — his teammate said that he was glad to see Andrew moving on after his divorce. I blushed. The two men chuckled.

“What kind of friend am I then?” I asked, as we drove back to my place.

He didn’t answer right away, frowning at the traffic on the boulevard. His left-turn signal ticked, the stream of cars blocking our way seemed unrelenting.

What kind of friend do I want to be? I asked myself.

But we were moving then.

“What kind of friend,” he said, “depends on you, I guess.”

“You, too,” I said.

“Me, too,” he said, laying his hand on my thigh and patting me gently.

There is, I think, a kind of web of our desires and obligations that we weave in tandem with the people who surround us. Sometimes, it is what constrains us, tells us what we can do and what we can’t; sometimes, it is more in the nature of a safety net so that we can dare to walk the high wire, swing boldly on a trapeze and let go to twirl for an exhilarating midair moment before strong arms grab to hold us secure. In tandem, I say. What I found woven around me, soft and snug sometimes as the jersey in that dress my mom made for me, as cloudy and confusing as that

mass of white tulle that spilled out from the garment bag I found in my closet after the funeral, was part of desire and obligation made for Andrew. I had woven, she had, Andrew had. So too had Amelia, who had given me life. So too, as it turned out, had Andrew's little girl, with the hand she placed in mine, and so too had his little boy, sleepily draped over my shoulder on the walk back from the playground.

We shared food from our folded cardboard cartons, laughed at our failures with the chopsticks, talked carefully around the central question. When we were done, and as I hustled to clean up, he stretched and stepped into the living room, easing himself onto the sofa, patting a hand on the cushion by side, inviting me to join.

Gingerly, I did.

What kind of friend?

His arm, lying along the sofa back, slipped down to my shoulder. I kicked my shoes off, tucked my legs up, feet

beneath my rear and leaned into his side. His arm cradled my back, his hand rested on my rear.

It was then, I think, that I understood that what I wanted was what he did too. We didn't need to talk about divorce, the women he had had since, the woman he wanted now. We didn't need to talk about the trapeze I'd been swinging on since the day that my mom — my two mothers, really — and he had let

me know there was a turning on my path in life that I might want to take.

Instead of talking, his arm along my back gently pressed me closer. His hand fanned out on the stretched cloth of my skirt, cupping me; his other hand beneath my chin, tilted my face up for a kiss.

His lips brushed mine, so lightly that it could have been a dream. Perhaps he pulled back, checking to see if kisses were OK, but then I felt his lips more clearly now, still lightly touching, so that I sensed the contrast between my own, lush and smooth with lipstick, and his. Our lips parted, we breathed together. His hand combed through my hair, his tongue tasted me, his arm pressed me close.

Tucked under his arm, pressed to his side, I found myself stroking his chest, his stomach, not realizing that I was until my palm was on warm skin and my fingers plucked his buttons loose. I plowed fingers through his chest hair, pressed the tense, firm muscles of his stomach. When he moaned as I toyed with his nipple, breaking our kiss, I bent to press my lips there, looking with satisfaction at the red mark my lipstick left, and deciding to plant a line of them down the center of his body.

Stroking still, my palm touched the bulge of his erection, pushing blindly, seeking me. I rested my hand there for a moment, feeling him throb, then, as I lifted my face back to his for another kiss, unzipped his pants and let him spring free. His tongue pushed,

more urgent now, into my mouth, and I, my fingers barely encircling his shaft, slowly stroked.

When he moaned again, I lifted my lips from his and again, kissed my way down his body. When my cheek touched his erection, I ran just the tip of a finger along the bottom of his shaft, along the path his seed would surge down when it came time to pump himself into me.

For I knew that was what I wanted.

When my fingertip traced a slow path up and then back down his shaft, I let my thumb join in to make a circle around his shaft. I stroked up slowly, then down. Then, holding him steady, I turned my head and with the tip of my tongue, touched the purple edge of his glans.

I touched another spot on that purple, then another. I felt how he burned, and licked, as if to soothe, to cool. Then my lips parted so I could nestle him softly there.

I felt completely his at that point, wanted him to have me. I inhaled, as if to drink him in, to let him take me in the only way I thought he could, the way the secretaries where I worked assured me that men liked to have their women, when the usual way was not convenient.

The intimacy of the moment when I held deep as he could go made me weak.

Then, as I parted lips to exhale and lifted my head up along his shaft so that I could once again inhale him, he reached a hand under my chin and gently guided my mouth back to his. He kissed me deeply, I laid a hand on each of his temples to hold him to my lips. I felt him place his hands on my waist, lift me until I straddled him. My skirt rode up, he stroked along my inner thigh and then along my rear, until a finger found the elastic of my panties and yanked them down and clear. I felt his shaft sliding between my cheeks. I moaned.

Then, with one hand cupping my rear, his other hand between my shoulder blades, he stood and lifted me into the air. I wrapped my legs around his hips.

He held me there like that, his erection still throbbing between my cheeks, as he told me that he wanted me.

He carried me upstairs, laid me down on my bed. He found, or brought, I never asked, something that felt like lotion as he slowly stroked it around and in my rectum, as I imagined he had stroked between the legs of many a woman in the day, until she was as wet as he'd made me.

I felt him press and enter as I gasped, He lifted my legs wide and high, and eased into me, deeper, deeper. When he was as deep in me as he could be, he paused there for a time, throbbing, before retreating slowly, only to impale me once again, a little

faster, little more urgently this time. And again. And again.

Then as my own trembling inside turned into pulsing joy, urging him on, and his thrusts came faster and faster still, I felt him stiffen in me, felt his thighs as they pushed against my rear tense. Then he was pumping into me, and I was exploding into bliss.

ooo

He stayed the night. In the morning, he watched me so hungrily as I sat in my slip to do my make-up that I couldn't resist. I knelt before him, stroking his thighs, his shaft, kissing him there in little tastes that turned into deep draughts of desires, until again he was filling me with his seed.

I managed not to be late for work because he drove me in, his hand on my knee all the way. When I came back from lunch, there was a vase of flowers on my desk, and a sour look from one of the men who was particularly prone to let his hands linger on the secretaries' rears. At the end of the day, he was waiting for me on the street outside my building.

"I'd like you to come home with me," he said. "I'd like you to come and stay with me. I want you with me, want to see you when I come home, feel you beside me when I awaken, feel you beneath me when we make love, watch my children take your hand when we walk to the playground or to the store for ice cream. You are the one for me, and I want to be the one for you."

I didn't know what else to say except: yes.

I gave my notice the next day, went home to pack a few more clothes and take them back to Andrew's place. I called Amelia with the news and after we laughed and cried together, she insisted on flying back for the weekend. We gathered, all of us, a small enough band; Andrew, his children, his mother, me and Amelia for a dinner that Amelia cooked. Later, Andrew's son sleeping in my arms, his daughter leaning against him, losing her battle to stay awake, we listened as Amelia told us stories about my mom, my moms, my dad, my dads.

"There's one more thing I'd like for us to do," she said after we'd settled the children to sleep upstairs. "One thing my sister always hoped for, and I think it's time."

Andrew nodded.

"Tomorrow?" he said.

"Can you get everything ready by then?" Amelia asked.

"I can," he said. "And you?"

"Yes," she said, and then, to me: "Come upstairs, for a minute," taking my hand.

"Andrew," she continued, "This is just for us two; a question of good luck."

He laughed.

“Of course,” he said.

She led me up to my room, to the closet and the zippered garment bag, the gauzy mass of tulle I’d never managed to push back into place peeking out.

“Your mom made this,” Amelia said, easing the zipper up to unveil a froth of lace and silvery-white satin. She pushed the opened garment bag out of her way, lifted the dress from the hanger rod, and held it up for me to see.

“A wedding dress,” she said. “She wanted one, when she decided. Wanted to make one for me, but it was a gift I never needed.”

She smiled.

“Though I came close,” she said.

She held the dress so that it brushed against my body, turned me so that I faced the mirror.

“A perfect fit,” she said. “If you want it.”

“I do,” I said.

“There won’t be many of us,” she said. “I’ll be there, of course. Mother of the bride; the dress is always frumpy and I promise that I’ll get all teary. Andrew and the kids His mom. Jack has said he’ll come to give the bride away, if you would like.”

She paused.

“There are joys that a woman knows,” she said. “I’ve known most, my sister too, and also what she’d never had a chance to have. I hope, she hoped, you’ll have what we missed. He is the kind of man I always wanted, but never had the luck to find. The children, well, I missed that, too; my sister was much luckier than I. You’ve felt, I think, some of what I’ve known, the delight of being in a man’s strong arms, of feeling his desire for you, feeling him fill you, change you as he pours himself into you. I think you’ll know what I never have, nor my sister either, which is the joy of waking up each morning with him beside you. That’s what tomorrow’s about, if you want it.”

“I do,” I said.

“And he does, too,” she said. “Remember this: he’s known his share of women. And he picked you. Now, let’s try on the dress.”

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