

*Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
signifying nothing. —William Shakespeare*

*The life which men praise and regard successful is but
one kind. Why should we exaggerate any one kind at the
expense of the others?
—Henry David Thoreau*

Walking with Elephants

Karen S. Bell

Chapter One

I have always believed life is a mysterious journey through chaos. And so far, for me, chaos has brought forth nothing extraordinary. I haven't been thrust into fabulous wealth by marrying someone who became a serendipitous millionaire. I haven't blossomed into a beauty of the ages. No, I am just the result of nature's accidents and my own silly choices. Working together, these forces have brought me to dwell among the mundane, and I accept it... for now. My unremarkable existence, how-ever, is also noble. For I have come to understand that the big questions such as, *What is my purpose in life?* and *Why am I here?* converge with the little questions like, *Where is my other shoe?* and *When will pot roast go on sale?* Big questions, little questions, big thoughts, little thoughts, even famous people have them. So, we're not so different.

Except for the limos.

Although I live an ordinary life, I've deluded myself into believing that I'm capable of greatness. But not right now. Right now, distractions, reactions, predilections, and trying to catch five more minutes of sleep rule my world. In fact, although cocooned in sleep, I can hear the alarm buzzer sounding and automatically, my trained finger hits "Snooze." Stealing those extra minutes to snuggle under the covers and pretend I really don't have to get up is nourishment for my soul. Today, however, it seems that before I get my spirit-lifting five, a sonic boom explodes in my ears.

"Sooooooz, oh, Suze, Saaaaooooz, time to get up, hon. Hey, sleepy head!"

It never fails, just when a titillating and erotic dream is about to take shape, just when I'm about to feel the beating of a taut chest pressing against mine—fantasy interruptus

and I am yanked into consciousness. That intrusion on my *I Can't Believe it's Not Butter* fantasy and assault on my auditory nerves would be from my husband, Bob. Every day he jumps out of bed on some adrenaline rush, but I require a gentler, quieter approach that has escaped his observation, for these many years. As if bellowing weren't enough, now he's shaking my arm. Erotica quickly transforms into a ride down the rapids.

The sleep-drenched mind is a curious phenomenon. That's it. I'm done. *Finis*. I'm up. Who wants to ride the rapids at this hour? I open my eyes and...whoa! My startled, but still paralyzed, self sees Bob's face eyeball to eyeball with mine. When he's satisfied that I'm awake, he stands back up and I can see he's nearly dressed in one of his two dress-for-less suits. His professorial uniform of jeans and corduroy blazer with leather arm patches is *de rigueur* on campus. Something must be special about today, hmmm...can't remember.

"I have a special meeting this morning with my book publisher, I told you, remember?" he says answering my unvoiced question.

My groggy, slow-witted brain tries to comprehend what he's saying. But numbed by his chatter, I stare at him empty-headed while he puts on his tie. It feels late. I look at the clock. Yup. I'm screwed.

"You really overslept today, Suze. I thought you'd have gotten up when I jumped in the shower. Hey...lazy, you're still not moving. Aren't you getting up? Look, hey, open... don't close your eyes again...is this tie alright?" I nod, "yes." "And hon, would you mind taking my blue slacks to the cleaners? I'm kinda in a rush now." I nod, "yes." "One more thing, can you make a haircut appointment for me? Make it with Donny...for tomorrow...and oh, we're out of Scotch. So, please don't forget to pick up a bottle on your way home. Okay?"

I keep nodding like I'm listening. He kisses the air and mumbles something like, "Love ya," but I know it's probably, "See ya," and he dashes out.

Lumbering out of bed, I make my way to the bathroom sink and look in the mirror. I've got to wake myself out of this groggy stupor, and looking in the mirror first thing out of bed usually shocks me wide-eyed.

It works.

I'm shocked.

And fully awake now.

It didn't always work. Why just a few, maybe a mere twenty years ago, my fresh from sleep sag-free face took on a pink glow, my used-to-be-thick hair stayed neat and silky, and my bifocal-free eyes sparkled. But now, well, the get-going-in-the-morning mirror trick works. As I keep blinking at the mirror to get my reflection into focus, four gray hairs pop into view. Those suckers are coming out right now.

Ouch!

That tactic for staving off gray, rather than using dye, is not so smart because in certain lighting, you can see right through to my scalp. I turn on the shower and continue my morning routine, trying to enjoy the moment and not think about dashing here and there, doing this and that, scheduling where and when.

My focus on the spray of water as it pounds my aching back and the tile walls of the shower stall can't fully block a muffled sound coming from the far reaches of the house.

"Mahhhm! Mahhhm!" Okay. Which kid is that? It's hard to distinguish whose voice it is above the rush of water. Think. Ilana is riding to the high school with her boyfriend... Skip goes to the university with Bob...so that leaves...David. David. Damn! He's missed the bus again!

"Mom," he yells louder, "I missed the bus!"

Great. Now I have to drive David to school and I barely have time myself. Slapping soap on the important spots, I hop out of the shower in no time flat. A blast of cold air

greet me—how did I not know it was freezing? But hey, the house is always freezing. Dear Bob says, “Feels perfect to me.” I look longingly at my feather blanket that I keep on the bed even in summer, but I have no time to jump under it to warm up. That kid, why can’t he be on time? Last week I had to drive him three times. Doing jumping jacks in my walk-in closet to get warm, I spy my purple Liz Claiborne with the elastic waist skirt and grab it. A spitefully devoured pint of Ben and Jerry’s made its way into my mouth and hips last night after Bob said, “Getting a little broad in the butt aren’t you, hon?”

“Mom! Why don’t you answer me?”

“Because I can’t stand screaming,” I scream. David barges into my room without knocking as I hop around yanking up my pantyhose. “Geez, David, can’t I have any privacy around here?”

“Sorry, Mom,” he says, backing out of the room embarrassed. “Dad’s right ya know,” he laughs from the hall.

“What does that mean?” I yell.

“Your butt is pretty broad!”

I slam the door. Do I need this?

Rushing around like a crazy person, I pull on my outfit, and take two seconds to blow-dry my hair. Makeup. Oh no. Now I’m perspiring. Or am I having a hot flash? My biological thermostat has a major bug. Either I’m freezing or I’m hot. But one thing’s for sure, I can’t put makeup on a damp face.

No makeup.

I’ll face the world *au naturale*, their problem not mine. After all, vanity is for wimps. A real woman is measured by her inner beauty. I run downstairs. As soon as I get to the bottom, I run back up and grab my makeup bag.

“I’ll pick you up outside,” I yell to David as I race down the stairs again. Screeching out of the garage, I hardly stop while he jumps in.

“Are you trying to kill me?” he asks while fastening his seat belt. With no cops in sight, we get to his middle school in record time. David jumps out of the car as it jolts to a stop. “Hey, ever thought of qualifying at Indy?” he asks pretending to fall on the ground.

I peel away, rear wheels spinning, and race down Central Ave only to catch the light. Time to take a breath. It’s lucky I live so close to work. The corporate park is just the next turn. It’s 8:56, a cool four minutes to spare as my car, on automatic pilot, turns into the parking lot.

Nodding at the receptionist, I scoot right into the ladies room and slap on my makeup. As I pass the coffee station it emits the scent of a fresh brew and I pour a cup, hop into the elevator to my second floor office, kick the door shut, and sit down at my desk. A sip of the hot and bitter stimulant and I am transformed. Ah. No longer frazzled wife and super mom, but career woman, Suze Hall, associate editor for Marcus & Stern, publishers of business books, trade magazines, and some general-interest nonfiction. I’m in the book division, books on all the mind-numbing facets of business. Unfortunately for Bob, we don’t publish textbooks, so he had to peddle his business management book elsewhere.

Lousy pay and office politics don’t make this my dream job. With my previous brief youthful experience as an editor (the comma was invented but not desktop computers), I thought I could negotiate a better salary at my offer meeting with the human resources manager. But as soon as I laid eyes on her, my only thought was *don’t you have to be human to be in human resources?* She was, needless to say, intimidating. As tall as a tree, she towered over me and instead of saying “hello” with a pleasant smile her mole-laden, greenish-toned death mask face said, “Have a seat.”

Everything about her was scary. Her hair was the texture of a bird’s nest and dyed the color of endless night, a color so black that light couldn’t escape. I still get the willies

when I think of her pale, unholy mouth saying, “You realize of course that editors don’t make much money?” Nodding like a lunatic, I took the job, and got out of there fast as I could with a vision of her moving intently toward my neck flashing in my mind.

But given there is probably no dream job at least I have an office with a window. The office is unexceptional except for the view. My desk is adorned with a few family photos and some motel room/office art hangs on my walls. As in most corporate buildings, no one knows how these prints got there, how long they’ve been there, or why they’re considered art. Most of the time, I try to keep my eyes diverted.

The window definitely helps.

Also on my desk are my computer, a continuously replenished stack of direct mail garbage, and my current project, *Finding Spiritual Enlightenment Through Wealth*, a disturbing but apparently marketable title that will know the wrath of my sharpened red pencil.

This manuscript came to me by default when one editor (female) quit in a flurry and another (female) got promoted out and up to small-business magazines. Working with women is a minefield of deception and intrigue. I never realized how the workplace turns women into competitive paranoid schizophrenics that hustle opportunities and manipulate the men in charge.

Tell that to Gloria Steinem.

I know that when there’s a sale at the mall most women would trample their own mothers, but you expect that. At work, it’s more subtle, unseen, like a virus. The virus usually breaks out when more than two women work on the same project. One day a coworker is fine and then wham, she gets the virus. This behavior continues until the project is finished and totally screwed up. And so, projects sometimes come to me by default.

I'm just about to pick up the manuscript when there's a soft knock on the door.

"Yes?"

The door is partially pushed open. It's Elliott. "Are you very busy?" he asks.

I shake my head "no" as I take another sip of coffee. Elliott is my best friend at work. Before I started this job my friend, Marcia, warned me that women can be downright evil, and as just recounted, she was dead on. She told me, "Beware of women who don't befriend you, or talk to you, or smile—they're sizing you up for the kill. Also, be careful of women who first befriend you—they're sizing you up for the kill." So I made friends with Elliott.

Thank God for Elliott!

Elliott also knows all the gossip before anyone and whatever he tells me always happens. He's either psychic or a dedicated snoop. I'm glad he's on *my* side. He's also a walking database of trivia. He knows the name of every character in every Hitchcock movie (or any other movie for that matter), the actors who played the characters, and the year the movie was made. He can recite the title of every composer's, artist's, and writer's work from the Renaissance to modern day. Historic figures and their place in history are at his fingertips. I could go on and on. It's an awe inspiring and obviously totally worthless skill because he works here. Elliott adds a refreshing glamour to this place. I love the way he habitually tosses his head and flings his thick black hair out of his eyes. His sideburns have a hint of gray, his eyes are steel blue, and his olive skin enhances his strong jaw line and straight nose. In short, Elliott is gorgeous.

Gorgeous and gay.

"Hey Suze," he says as he slips into my office shutting the door gently. "How's it going? Did you have a good weekend? Get a chance to catch the new Woody Allen on DVD?"

"The what?"

“This weekend, did you rent any movies?”

“Oh, this weekend? Movies? No I didn’t rent any movies. No time. David was in two soccer games and after that Ilana needed a dress for the fall dance. She tried on every dress in her size in every single store in a twenty-five mile radius.

When I finally got home, Bob surprised me with dinner guests, two Ph.D. students. I had to race through the house shoving everything into closets and then I ran to the grocery store to get something for us to eat. When we sat down to dinner, Skip called and said he needed a ride home. I ran out and got him and we had a flat tire. Luckily he could put the spare one on. I’m hopeless! When we got back, Bob and the guests were enjoying dessert. We went to the living room to talk and I actually fell asleep with my eyes open. I’ve never done that before.”

“Ugh, that’s worse than awful. It’s pitiful. At least there’s one person on this planet I don’t envy.”

“Thanks! I really appreciate your sympathy! Soooo... what’s the dirt. What’s going on?”

“Boy, you’re really something. You must be a mind reader.”

“Not really. I saw your door shut, which means you were making investigative phone calls. And whenever you make investigative phone calls you sniff out some dirt. So what is it?”

He laughs, “You’re right. But this news is big! Really big. Could mean a lot of changes.”

“Oookay.” Nervous, I gulp down the rest of my coffee. Now what?

“It seems we’re being bought out by a communications mega-company.”

“Uh, oh.” My stomach did a tailspin.

“And wait ’til you hear this part,” he continues in a voice that belies his obvious concern, “they’re bringing in someone from the outside to help jumpstart our department.

Giving ol' Binder the boot. Can you believe it? He's being made to retire. Finally! He's soooo incompetent. Yesterday, he called me in and repeatedly asked me the same question about our spreadsheet program. When it finally sank in that I was giving him the same answer over and over, he just looked at me with that wide-eyed stupido expression. He didn't get it. He *never* gets it. I don't know if it's age or if he's always been dumb. It always amazes me that he got this far."

Harry Binder is associate publisher of the business book division, my boss, and...a buffoon. But buffoon or not, I'm disturbed by the news. I know I won't miss his grating, high-pitched hyena laugh that echoes in the hallways during his frequent social wanderings. Even with the door shut, his laugh makes my skin crawl. That guy's first response to anything is an eardrum-piercing squeal. But Harry Binder... ousted. Huh! What a shock! It's odd how some people's last name define what they'll become in life. Binder in publishing. Kinda funny, right? But it happens a lot. I once knew a dentist named Drillman, a veterinarian named Katz, and a jeweler named Diamond. Thank goodness Bob's karma didn't propel him into being a janitor. You know, *Hall* and *cleaning* halls. Whew!

It's times like this, when I'm feeling unsettled, that I wonder what my life would have been like had I become a doctor, which was what I thought I wanted to be when I went to college. Something stable with a good salary. Something important with status. But as soon as I entered college, I realized that all that studying took me off course from my real vocation—dating. I changed my major to journalism and decided to *marry* a doctor instead. And I did. But he was the wrong kind of doctor. Oh it's true that Bob's called Dr. Hall, but only on a university campus and on stationary. And he pays a lot less income tax than an orthopedic surgeon—get my drift? So working is not an option for me. Even with my working, Bob's salary and mine aren't enough to cover the

cars, car insurance (that costs more than the cars), increasing property and income taxes, credit cards...you name it, we owe money on it. In fact, I got a letter yesterday and owed postage! I've moved from being a '60s liberal, to a '70s conservative democrat, to an '80s republican, to a person who'd like to take all the members of government and place them before a firing squad. So what does that make me now—a '90s psycho libertarian?

Anyway, now I've got to make another adjustment in my life. Binder was the first victim of change. *Who's next?* But maybe it's because Binder has been sliding lately. Perhaps his brain blockages/low voltage synapses/intellectually challenged thought processes come from a fondness for alcohol rather than his DNA. I've never seen him drink but his red-toned, vein-gorged potato nose is a giveaway. Sometimes, after he shuts himself in his office, I notice a slight stagger to his walk. I suspect that he's got a bottle hidden in his desk.

And I'm not alone.

It's quite comical to see people in the office take an imaginary swig as they watch an oblivious Binder saunter down the hall. This type of behavior doesn't normally make one a candidate for promotion. How he became associate publisher is a tribute to mediocrity. Apparently, there was a salary freeze several years ago and the best people left in droves for better paying jobs. The rumor is that Binder couldn't land another position, so he stayed on and got promoted by default. To his credit, though, he's good with titles. One time he came up with a clever one for a book on tax loopholes. He called it, *Trick, Tax, Dough*, and it sold well. But the era of Harry Binder has now come to an end. I guess he's been old enough to retire for several years, so this turn of events probably won't be so terrible for him. I feel a little sad about Binder leaving. I'm used to him. With all his faults (he stills calls me, Mary, the woman I replaced) he's the one who hired me.

The idea of someone from the outside taking Binder's place is unnerving. I'd counted on Elliott being Binder's replacement when and if the time came. Elliott would take good care of me.

"You mean they're not even going to interview for that job with anyone on staff?" I ask disgruntled.

"Did you think *you'd* be considered?"

"Me? For heaven sake, not me, I'm too low on the totem pole. *You!* Why not you?"

"*Me?* What would I want with all that stress? There's enough stress in my life already. Like this morning, I couldn't decide whether to wear my Armani or Zegna. Then of course later on I'll be on the phone for hours trying to get tickets for *La Bohème*. And while I was browsing in the paper, I saw the Nouvelle Beaujolais was just put on sale, after I bought a case yesterday. So, I've got to take care of that. Anyway, I just wanted to warn you about what's happening. I've got to get back to work. My deadline was yesterday and that bitch printer is acting like a gay man who caught his lover with a woman. And the author? She's like a transvestite with a hard on. I've really got to get out of this business. See you later."

"Wait, where's he coming from?"

"Warner Books. Later." He leaves. I wish I could be as cheerful as Elliott. It must be nice to be Elliot. His lifestyle is totally self-indulgent. He comes from one of those pedigree families, a trust-fund baby, so money isn't a problem. This job gives him credibility and health insurance. He loves to go to parties and say he's senior editor for a boutique publishing house. That's how we refer to ourselves. It's much more sophisticated then saying we work in the suburbs. He loves the city, but he inherited a house nearby. I could never figure the fit of him and the dry material that we publish. He really should be an art gallery owner or theater critic.

An email memo pops up on my screen telling me there will be a meeting at three o'clock to welcome our new boss. Elliot is right as usual, but normally his information has far more lead-time. It must have been tough to uncover the secrecy surrounding *this* change. The memo goes on to say that Binder will be retiring in two months after thirty-five years of service. Geez, thirty-five years at the same job. Today, most people don't stay at the same job for more than a few years, especially the good ones.

Suddenly I'm depressed. Life is throwing me yet another curve in the road. I feel helpless against the forces that are constantly moving forward. Just yesterday, I was a teenager whose biggest worry was my hair. Or was that a million years ago? Or a dream? An illusion? One truth is certain, just when I think I know what I look like, I change. Just when I think I know what I am supposed to do, my world changes. It's like a helium balloon that you try to hold down but instead floats beyond your reach... and then disappears.

By lunchtime I'm starving. My depression over the impending shift of power has changed to stress. Stress. Food. *There goes the diet*, I whisper to myself as I envision my friend Marcia and me eating a juicy burger and fries at Corrigan's. Marcia is my best friend. And given the feelings I have about women in the workplace this must seem a bit schizophrenic—it is. But when it comes to friendships, I'd feel lost without a close, female friend. When a woman decides to be your friend, the friendship is fierce and familial. Marcia is that kind of friend. She's saved me thousands of dollars in psychotherapy. It's especially wonderful to have an *unmarried* friend like Marcia. She's always available for talks, dinner, or what have you. But it's important that if you're lucky enough to have an unmarried friend you must find one whose chances of hooking up with a boyfriend are slim. A boyfriend turns a perfectly good friend into a babbling, cooing idiot. Conversations become glowing diatribes about the fantastic attention and great sex

she's getting. Before long she's no longer available when you need her. I know that sounds selfish. But the surest way to lose a female friend who's single is when a male enters the picture.

I've been lucky with Marcia, her lovers are few and far between. Unlike me, she's high maintenance. The men she usually falls for are overwhelmed by her demands and get frightened in about six weeks time.

She also gets bored easily.

I've gotten used to the pattern, so I'm no longer threatened by a new romance. Besides, she goes into such explicit detail about her sex life that I get turned on vicariously. Bob should thank her, but he thinks my erratic wanton behavior is due to premenopause.

Marcia and I have been close friends since high school. We liked to call ourselves the "gruesome twosome." And we still do. When I think of those days, the opening jingle for *Father Knows Best* hums through my head. And wasn't Ricky Nelson the dreamiest heartthrob on *Ozzie and Harriet*? I grew up watching those long-running TV shows and many others depicting families where everyone had a dog, a lovely house and yard, and a mother who wore heels and pearls while doing the dishes. Even though father was extremely successful he was always there at dinnertime to enjoy the home-cooked meal where lively family discussions ensued.

I can take myself right back to the 1960s as if it were yesterday. The portable hi fi played vinyl LPs or forty-fives that sang "Surfin' U.S.A" or "Blowin' in the Wind." You had to go to theaters to see movies. Computers were so big you could walk inside them. It was a time when drinking water came from your kitchen sink, milk was delivered, and a slice of pizza cost twenty-five cents. Adhesive menstrual pads weren't invented, and wearing white clothes was just not appropriate before Memorial Day or after Labor Day.

Skirts or dresses were the only acceptable attire for girls at school, no matter how cold or snowy the weather.

In those days, one of the most important rules for girls was to never call boys! Never! Period! Never! Don't even think about it! And boys usually called for a reason—to ask us out on a date. But it was only permissible to accept a date from Sunday night to Wednesday night. And good girls never had sex. Having sex got you a “reputation” and everyone knew that those girls never got married. For unmarried women, being allowed to get the “pill” was on the horizon and soon to change the rules.

Steeped in this culture, Marcia and I began our stint in high school. The first day of the first week of school the secret sisters of the outlawed sororities, which were more like glorified cliques, would choose their freshman pledges. Our high school was huge because it was the dumping ground for several large junior highs forcing the student body to be divided into shifts and the two sororities were very small. The selection process was not only extremely competitive because of the sheer numbers but because being selected to pledge one of the sororities would guarantee your future. You'd be popular, become a cheerleader, date the captain of the football team, marry rich, never get old, and never get fat.

It was that powerful.

All incoming freshman knew that if a Rhonette (they wore green and white) or a Bumble Bee (they were yellow and black) gave you an invitation, it would have to happen before 2:00 p.m. because that was when most upper classmen were through for the day. At lunchtime, I was able to escape to the bathroom. As I stood in front of the mirror, I realized I looked...goofy! Walking to school in the pouring rain had ruined my careful grooming. My hair had arranged itself in odd angles that bunched around my ears. My wrinkled skirt puffed out and made me look huge. My mascara had moved from my eyes to streak along my cheeks.

No sorority for me! I washed my face and said goodbye to happiness.

In my depressed and preoccupied state, I hadn't realized that someone had come into the ladies room. There, at the next sink busily setting up an entire beauty kit, is a girl I recognize from homeroom. I notice that she is quite short and that her pleated skirt doesn't flatter her slightly plump figure. But she has a cute face, like a pixie—round with soft features. I watch jealously as she expertly applies eyeliner, rouge, and lipstick. I am amazed at the professional gear she carries with her when she whips out an eyelash curler! Then she pulls a huge can of hairspray from her bag and starts teasing the life out of her long, brown hair that she piles into some kind of beehive on top of her head. She alternately teases and sprays and I begin to choke from the fumes. At that moment, her attention is turned to me staring at her in the mirror.

"What a day," she says in a friendly manner. "You're in my home-room aren't you? Want to borrow some makeup?"

I can't believe my good fortune and her generosity.

"Could I really? That's so nice of you!" I say as I begin rummaging through her stuff looking for something suitable. With each item I find I ask her if it is okay.

"Take whatever you want," she says preoccupied with her hair. When she is done with it she hands me the spray.

"Here do something with *your* hair. I heard that Rhonda herself is walking around the cafeteria and picking pledges."

Wow! Rhonda herself. I would actually see Rhonda the leader and founder of the Rhonettes. I mimic my new friend's application of eyeliner and draw thick lines on my upper and lower lids until they meet in a point. I put white lipstick on my lips. I try to do something with my hair but it is no use. My new friend notices my plight and offers to help. With the panache of a hairdresser, she takes her teasing comb to my hair and teases my poor head until it hurts. I try

to seem pleased with the outcome, but I secretly want to throw up because my hair still looks like shit but now it is very, very, very... large.

“Er, thanks, this is so nice of you to help like this. But I hate to trouble you,” I say hoping that she would leave so that I could flatten my hair. I also realize that my heavy eye-makeup and pale lipstick make me look like a prostitute.

“Glad to help. I think we ought to get out of here now before we miss Rhonda. Do you want to sit with me in the caf? I’m kinda nervous. My name’s Marcia. What’s yours?”

“I’m Suze.”

Seeing the pleading look in her eyes, I decide to forego the urge to brush out my hair and wash my face and I accompany her to the cafeteria. Just as we exit the bathroom we spy Rhonda. She is all decked out in green and white and hard to miss. Her hair is in a perfect flip, all thick and bouncy. Her white sweater outlines her mythological breasts and her tight green skirt hugs her nice round rump and small waist. A cadre of males surrounds her—and no wonder! I know I am way out of my league, but my new friend Marcia says, “So that’s Rhonda! She’s not that great! C’mon let’s get closer so that she can see us.” I don’t see Rhonda handing out any invitations but I do see Rhonettes walking around. Then I figure out the system. Rhonda picks the pledges and sends her army to follow-through.

The trick is to catch Rhonda’s attention.

Marcia is running ahead and keeps turning around to make sure that I’m behind her. I dread this whole charade. There is no way I’m going to be picked—or Marcia either. We clearly are not the type. But that doesn’t seem to faze Marcia. She forges ahead and finds seats facing Rhonda and her suitors. For an instant, Rhonda looks right at us. But actually, look, is not the right word. Rhonda *digests* us. First she tastes us. Then she chews and breaks us down into nutrients and waste. We become biologically intertwined with her at the cellular level and just when I think she is

satisfied (hope against hope)—she spits us out! Rhonda's attention moves on, never to return. In a flash, we are dismissed as unworthy disciples. Marcia is totally unaware of the rejection. She thinks Rhonda has picked us.

"We've got it, Suze! Try not to look too excited. It's not cool. Oh look, here they come. See! We're in! And you know, I really look good in green. I was gonna wear green today but I thought that was pushing it, don't you agree?"

Marcia has gone manic. I watch the Rhonettes stop at the table in front of us. Marcia still is babbling but her eyes are riveted, her chest is heaving. She is really into this. The Rhonettes hand out the last invitation. Their hands are empty! They turn to Rhonda without so much as a look in our direction.

"Hey!" says Marcia. "What's going on, Rhonda picked us. I saw it. Or at least she picked *me*. Wait a minute." She gets up and starts walking over to the sisters who have now joined Rhonda and her hunks.

"Marcia, don't," I yell out too late. "She didn't pick us. Don't."

But Marcia has already reached the group. My thoughts immediately become self-centered and I wonder if I'll have to transfer to another high school. I didn't know this person before today. How could I know she would be such a loose cannon? I should have stayed far away. Now she will ruin me through association. I watch the interaction. I see Rhonda actually speak to Marcia. Rhonda looks stunned and then walks out of the cafeteria. Marcia makes her way back to our table and sits down laughing softly.

"What happened?" I ask.

"Well, as I walked up there, I thought maybe she really didn't pick us and that made me mad. So when I approached her I decided to tell her that I was Ricky's cousin and that I thought she might like to know that he just got engaged."

Everyone knew the story of how Rhonda was betrayed by her little sister when she was a Bumble Bee. How her

little sister stole her boyfriend. “You mean *the* Ricky that broke her heart and caused her to leave the Bumble Bees and start the Rhonettes? He’s *engaged*?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“But...wait...I don’t understand.” Now I’m quite nervous. “You just told Rhonda that he got engaged. You lied about the love of her life? How could you do that?”

“I said my cousin Ricky just got engaged. And he did...my cousin Ricky Miller. She never even asked me if it was *her* Ricky. She went white!” she laughs. “I was just having a little fun. No one should have the power that Rhonda has. Look how nuts it made us all day! She’ll get over it as soon as she makes a phone call and finds out the truth. But listen, I just got a great idea. Let’s join the band. There’s a gorgeous guy that lives across the street from me that plays the tuba. All you have to do to get in the band is sign up. There’s no bullshit beauty contest. And Rhonda stays far away from band geeks. Wanna?”

And so we did.

After high school, our families couldn’t afford sending us away, so we both went to the local university. In college, we called ourselves Yin and Yang emphasizing how *opposite* we were. I grew taller than Marcia, slimmer (but not by much), and bleached my hair blonde and straightened it. Sort of the Mary Travers look, as in Peter Paul and Mary. Marcia stayed very short (now the correct term is *petite*) and cuddly and went with a curly look, kind of a modified Afro. I dated quite a lot. Marcia always had a *friend*—a guy she had a crush on who liked someone else. Poor Marcia, things haven’t changed much for her as far as her love life goes. Men have come and gone—and even she would like the pun. For Marcia, there is no real buy-in to a relationship. Her emotions don’t run deep. I think the longest recovery after a broken romance was two days. The recovery period is filled with ice cream and cookies so she can’t mourn for too long or she would have to buy new clothes. Sometimes, she gets

wistful about not being married, but after she spends a day with my family I know she's relieved to go back to her quiet and totally self-indulgent lifestyle.

We're still Yin and Yang and I need that. Apparently, so does Marcia. She's impulsive where I'm cautious and levelheaded. She's the eternal optimist, and I'm well, cautious and levelheaded. She travels at the speed of light and I'm...you get the picture. But even with our differences, we're closer than sisters. So when I moved to the suburbs, Marcia soon followed. One thing is for sure, if not for Marcia, I'd have missed out on a lot of fun in college—or right now for that matter. I tend to get encased in cement. I hope she's free for lunch. As I reach for the phone, it rings.

“Suze Hall speaking.”

“Suze, it's Marcia, I just got an urge for a hamburger at Corrigan's. Let's have lunch.”

“I was just about to call you. I've got the same urge. See you in ten?”

“Great! ...Oh wait, make it fifteen, my eyelash just fell off.”

“Oh don't tell me that you're starting to wear eyelashes now? Who wears false eyelashes anymore? They're so Marlo Thomas in “That Girl.” Do you realize how long ago we're talking about? Where in the world can you buy them?

“Well, I have them don't I? Did you think I saved them in my drawer with my thirty year-old bell-bottoms? They sell them in every drugstore. If you bought makeup, you'd know that. I bet Zsa Zsa and Liz wear them. Remember, I'm single and always have to look beautiful. I don't have the luxury of looking mousey.”

“Mousey! Are you referring to me? You think I'm mousey?”

“We'll talk about it at lunch.”

“I can't wait,” I say dryly.

Corrigan's Irish Pub is always crowded at lunch. It had been a sleepy little bar at one time, but now that several

major corporations have moved to the suburbs, Corrigan's is booming. This is where you go when you pay for your own lunch. When the company pays, you go over to Chez Philippe. Not too many people know that it is the same owner as Corrigan's. Same hamburgers, different prices, except at Philippe's it's called chopped sirloin.

The electricity of Corrigan's hits me as soon as I walk in. Everyone is draped around the polished mahogany bar while waiting for the few tables. People seemed charged, chatting away, yelling their drink orders to the bartenders. Bernie, the owner, loves to work the crowd and he grabs me when I walk in and gives me a giant hug. "What a woman!" he says as he winks and moves on. The first time Bernie attacked me like that I was slightly embarrassed. But then Marcia pointed out that he only picks attractive women to hit on. I decided I liked being part of that group.

I see Marcia at the bar. She's flirting with some guy who looks like he's trying his best to ignore her. She waves me over.

"Suze, dahling, I'd like you to meet my friend, er what did you say your name was?"

"I didn't," he says awkwardly. And then in a rush he says, "Will you excuse me, my table's ready." He leaves and I take his barstool.

"Wasn't he just adorable?" Marcia coos.

"Cut it, Marcia, you know how I hate it when you act like some fading celebrity."

"Fading celebrity? I was going for sophisticated."

"Just act natural, you might surprise yourself and finally meet someone."

"That's easy for you to say, you're married while I'm out here single, forty-something, and scratching out a living. Do you realize how few single men there are?"

"Since when does a man have to be single? I thought the only requirement was being hetero and breathing?"

“I’ve told you before, I don’t go after married men, but they’re the only ones that seem to be interested in taking me out,” she says defensively.

Marcia’s plump little hand grabs her drink, her bangle bracelets clink against the glass as she brings it to her lips. Sipping daintily, she shakes her short, curly hair and looks at me with slightly glazed brown eyes, reflecting her mild inebriation. I smile as I study her once cute features that are now swollen with those extra forty pounds that won’t come off. The weight makes her skin look young and the alcohol gives it a warm glow.

What she really needs is eye makeup remover.

“Let’s change the subject,” she says, “you and I have talked about this so much that I could have the conversation without you. You say, so and so is using you for a sexual diversion. I say, so and so is sincere and unhappy ...”

“Okay, I give,” I cut in, “You’re right,” I sigh, “the topic is tired and overused.”

“Good,” Marcia takes over, “What a morning I’ve had. The bastards want me to rewrite the script for tomorrow. I’ll be up all night. That’s why I ordered this drink, to steady my nerves. Do you want one?”

I shake my head “no.”

“I know, you think it’s glamorous to write soaps. But let me tell you, not when your characters are getting laid everyday by some hunk, and you’re just getting hornier while you write it!”

Just then, Bernie comes over and says, “Your table is ready, ladies. It’s so good to see you two. Marcia, that last episode, tell me the truth, the restaurateur who seduces Marla, that was me, wasn’t it? Marla is you, right?”

Marcia winks, “Could be Bernie, but I think the storyline needs some research. What are you doing later, dahling?”

“You’re fantastic,” he laughs as he leads us to the table, strutting and looking spectacular in his custom-tailored suit

and Gucci shoes. The men in my daytime life sure know how to dress.

Thinking of Marcia's mousey statement, I start to feel self-conscious as we walk to our table. Elastic waist skirts are comfortable, but it would be nice to feel sexy, hot, and young in a black leather micro-mini and spike heels causing a stir as I walk through a room. I used to be able to turn heads about 100 years ago. One of the harsher realities about growing middle-aged is becoming invisible to men. Oh, I get my share of men coming over to me in bars, but now they say things like, "Ma'am can you take your coat off that seat?" I shouldn't complain, though, I still get hit on by drunken faculty members at stupid departmental dinners.

Bernie pulls out our chairs as we sit down. "Kisses," he says as he rushes off. I take the chair facing the window overlooking the pond. Marcia faces the crowd. We laugh at each other and our unconscious choices.

"He's gay," says Marcia. "Definitely!"

"No way! We keep going around about this. He's just, ya know, European, effeminate. You should have seen the hot blonde he had with him at Philippe's."

"When did ya go there?"

"Last month, for my anniversary, you remember."

"Oh yeah, gee, Happy Anniversary. Wow, a lot of years together. Do you think maybe he's bi?"

"*Bob?*"

"No dingbat—*Bernie!* If you don't think he's gay, maybe he's bi? Mmm, maybe I can use that in my storyline, I could..."

"Marcia, drop it. I want to talk seriously."

"In a minute. I think that guy over there is trying to get my eye—what a doll—oh foo, some teenager just sat down with him. Must be his daughter!"

"Marcia," I sigh, "do you always have to be on the make? Can't you relax? I don't even have to look around to know that the guy is probably fifteen years younger than you

and that's not his daughter. You always think some guy is looking at you. Why is that?"

"I don't know, indulge me. It's just for fun and games. I'm just an old, fat, horny broad. And sometimes they *are* looking at me. Remember, Frank? I met him right here. You should look up once in a while and make some eye contact. There's no harm, it's all in fun."

"You know, Marcia, you're like a character in a bad soap opera."

"Very funny, I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

The waiter comes to take our orders. Corrigan's moves the customers in and out fast, especially at lunch. We order our hamburgers and Marcia spontaneously adds a portion of loaded potato skins. I already can feel the elastic stretching on my waistband. I look out at the overwhelming colors of autumn and the stillness of the pond. The trees are on fire, a show of strength as death looms.

"Look at the colors this year, aren't they glorious?"

"To me fall means winter and winter means writing the stupid holiday scripts the producers force on me."

"I thought you liked your job."

"I like the money and the flexibility of working at home, but this soap opera game is just copycat city. We're doing an amnesia sequence again. It seems to have caught an audience for *The Young and the Restless*, our biggest rival. Tell me, Suze, have you ever met anyone in your whole life that suffered from total amnesia?"

"No."

"My point. And this show prides itself on being relevant."

"There's news at *my* job," I say tentatively. "They're retiring Binder and bringing in a guy from Warner Books." My concern bleeds through the calm delivery.

"I wouldn't worry, Suze, your salary is so small they could afford you even if they only had one book in print," Marcia says cheerfully staring directly into my eyes.

“Somehow I don’t think things will be good for me now. I’m the only one in the department who doesn’t work overtime or on weekends, and I don’t want to start.”

“That’s not all that’s bothering you.”

That’s why I love Marcia, she knows things before I do.

“Well, I don’t know...it’s nothing. Probably just a midlife thing.” I shrug, feeling self-conscious. “I miss feeling sexy. The other day, when I was in the drugstore, I had an urge to buy a trashy novel. I used to think the guys on the covers looked like bimbo males, all long hair, muscles, and stupid. I’ve never been turned on by stupid. But lately, those hard chests mesmerize me. They’re so seductive.”

“I like this, Suze, we are going to pursue this emerging lust in great detail. First of all, it’s giving me a storyline idea for Miranda. She’s the one whose daughter stabbed and killed her second husband. This sexual arousal thing could work.”

Even though Marcia can get a bead on my emotions, sometimes she’s just too wrapped up in herself.

“Marcia, I’m not interested in becoming a storyline.”

“No, this is important. It’s about time you started waking up, Suze. You’re not dead *yet*. And if you wanted to, you can still look sexy. I was wondering when your lifestyle as everybody’s grunt would start to get to you.

You never say no to Bob or anyone else in your family. Can’t you just say no when you’re asked to do something? I mean really, Suze, I act like I’m jealous of your life, but in reality the way you run around scares me. After watching what’s happened to you, I’ll never get married.”

Okay, so Marcia *can* focus on my problems, but at what cost to my ego?

“My life’s not that awful. And don’t you need to be asked to get married before you turn it down?” I say stung by her words.

“Attack me all you want, but lately I’ve been hanging out in the New Age section in *Barnes & Noble*. I followed

this gorgeous guy there and got interested in the titles. I've begun reading some fascinating stuff."

"You're too much."

Our lunch is served and we gobble it down as if it were our last meal. Our conversation is hampered by ketchup oozing out of our buns and onto our hands, face, and fingers. I eat lustily, earthy, and with abandon. Hunger does that to me. Hunger, and a good juicy burger. The meal devoured, I glance at my watch.

"I'd better get back. I've got a few things to do before the meeting."

"What meeting?"

"The meeting where they're going to introduce the new boss."

"That's today? Well, you'd better wash that big gob of ketchup from the front of your blouse."

I look down in horror. That's all I need. Meet the new boss looking like a slob. There's no stain. I look up pissed.

"Just trying to rile ya!" she says laughing. "Try and relax! He's not going to fire you because you don't know how to eat a hamburger like a lady. I'd better get going also, though I dread facing that computer."

We get up and make our way through the thinning crowd. Glancing down at a table I'm surprised to lock into the gaze of a pleasant-looking man. Our eyes hold for a split second longer than is polite. The tingling sensation of this contact embarrasses me. But it makes me feel alive. Marcia is right, there's no harm in looking.

* * *

Elliott and I sit together at the meeting. You could cut the nervous tension with a knife. We wait. Finally, Binder walks in laughing as usual with our new boss who's nodding his nearly bald head, his mouth set in a grimace. He is teeny, tiny, short—couldn't be more than five feet. Napoleon probably was taller. Binder introduces him. His name is

Nathan Price. But he would like everyone to call him Nat. *Nat for short.* Ha ha!

Elliot snickers at my whispered joke.

Then Nat smiles at us and his extra-long front teeth pop out and glisten in the light. This guy looks like a chipmunk—big, buck teeth, weak chin, round floppy jowls. Or maybe it's a beaver. It's fun to find a person's animal image. I think of Bob as a bear, Elliot as a swan, and Marcia as a raccoon. I don't really want to know my animal doppelganger because it's probably some bred and caged farm animal. I study Nat and picture him in a Bugs Bunny costume—he's a natural. I can't decide, beaver, chipmunk, bunny. Bugs Bunny wins. His walk has a hop.

The carrot chomping bunny, however, is quickly replaced with Hitler. Nat's hop becomes a parody of a goose step. And as he goose steps back and forth, he begins to spit out drivel in the manner of a drill sergeant. It's kind of comical—Bugs Bunny as Hitler. His choice of words also has a military ring to them. He keeps repeating the phrase, "Ground Zero" as he hands out cards with that phrase printed on it. The point he's trying to make has something to do with developing our market share and beating our new competitors. I look at Elliott and my eyes say, *is this for real?* And then it gets worse. Just as my mind starts to drift, I am jolted back when I hear Nat mention the name, Wanda Walsh. What did I miss? And then he says it again.

"Congratulations Wanda on becoming managing editor and my right hand. Please come up."

Wanda! Oh no! Even though I have tried to stay away from the women here, somehow I managed to have an enemy, and it's Wanda. My nemesis. She is what I call a workforce warrior or gladiator, if that paints a better picture. She has an arrogance prevalent among the childless-by-choice workforce warriors, who scratched, kicked, and sacrificed their feminine side so they could have careers and rise to, at best, middle management with shit pay—

compared to men. But when these women bump into someone like me, a middle-aged homemaker-mother-turned-career woman, I hit a nerve. I personify what they're afraid to think about—that the battle to get where they are is bullshit. That their old age will not be a tribute to their work, and that it will be the first time they have to address who they are outside of their jobs. There will be no grandbabies, and no loving children to visit. Old age will be a total alienation from any connection with humanity.

These women have bought the feminist movement hook, line, and sinker. And so, if a woman like me can have a successful career late in life, then what were their sacrifices all about? Wanda is no exception. I've had a few run ins with her. She's very territorial and took a dislike to me right from the get go. I'll never understand why women in the workplace don't band together naturally. After all, we share the same perils and oppression. Maybe it's because women are allowed so few slots in the corporate ladder. I guess if we don't have a problem stealing each other's husbands to gain power, then being rivals in the workplace seems natural.

Enough thumb sucking, I have to pay attention to what's going on—I might be in jeopardy here. Wanda stands up awkwardly, walks with her head down, and faces the group smiling weakly. Her toothy grin reminds me of an old TV show about a talking horse that I watched as a kid. With her equine, Mr. Ed smile, I can almost hear “Wilbur” whinny out of her mouth. As usual, she is dressed in some awful combination of clothing and today it's worse than ever. She's wearing a light-blue shirtwaist dress with a big, black bow at the neck. For some unknown reason she's also wearing a necklace of black and white beads. A wide, black belt cinches her waist and emphasizes her sagging butt. The outfit is topped off with black hose and light-blue heels with laces in front, a style I know I wore in high school. (I would bet ten dollars that hanging in her closet are thirty-year-old bell-bottoms.) Her black hair is coifed in a bouffant so that

no hair moves—a hair helmet. (I’m convinced it’s a wig.) Big, black glasses (another outdated look) with a powerful prescription magnify her pale brown eyes encased in heavy, blue eye shadow. She’s a mix of ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s, like an oldies radio station. Any minute she’ll be arrested by the fashion police.

But so what? So what if she can’t dress. My life is over. This woman hates me. Okay, so I don’t like her too much either. Elliott notices my horrified expression. He squeezes my hand and follows me back to my office when Nat adjourns.

“Look,” he says, “I’m in trouble too. I bet that guy has a problem with gays.”

“You don’t know that for sure, but I know for sure that Wanda hates me. I’ve stayed out of her way since I started working here, but whenever I’ve had to interact with her she zings it to me. She misinterprets everything I say.

“It’s not that,” says Elliott with authority, “she hates Northerners. She moved from the South to the big city in the North, but she resents the natives. I bump into that all the time. People from other parts of the country, but especially Southerners, who move here, want to take over our city and think we, who really belong here, are so crass. If it weren’t for the great Southern writers like Welty and Faulkner I’d say let them secede.”

“Is that still in debate? I thought that was decided by a war a few years ago,” I say lightening up. I love Elliott. Before he floats out of the office he assures me that we will reconnoiter.

I guess we’re in the army now.

On the way home I decide, on impulse, to stop by the town lake. I feel like giving myself ten minutes before the deluge of dinner and the unexpected homework crisis. I walk over to a bench and sit down. I love this lake, but its charm is slightly tarnished by the signs posted everywhere. No Swimming. No Boating. No Picnicking. These warnings

scream out wherever I look— nature as a roped-off museum exhibit. What jerk is responsible for that? But still, it is a beautiful spot, especially at this time of year.

Looking around, I feel so connected with the earth, with the eternity of it all. When I sit among the trees, I am replenished. The sharp rustle of the leaves as they whisk across the paved walkway comforts me. The trees glisten as they catch the fading sunlight and burrow their fiery glow into my spirit.

Fall has always been magical to me. Even as a child, I loved the fall. I would paste all the varieties of leaves on colored papers and adorn my room with these gifts of nature. All winter, I held onto the wonder of autumn.

My connection to quiet wooded areas is rather odd. It's like there was a mistake when I was born into a city family. Every time my dad crossed the bridge that separated the city from the road to the mountains, my reaction was physical. I would get uncontrollably excited, like a kid does at an amusement park. I've never lost that wonder.

The calming effect of my surroundings lasts only for a few minutes. When I let my mind wander to what I should fix for dinner, I realize I'd lost the moment and it was time to go home.

* * *

Once home I'm caught in the whirlwind of defrosting meat in the microwave (I'd forgotten to take it out this morning), opening the mail, and answering the phone every time it rings. My kids wait for the answering machine to pick up so they can monitor the calls. I'm so used to answering the phone at work that I can't stand listening to it ring. I should take the cue from my kids though. The calls are usually for one of them or from some poor person who believes a living can be made by telemarketing. I usually hang up before the spiel is finished. A job like that must attract masochists.

Bob breezes in the front door, paper in hand, and strolls into the living room to the liquor cabinet.

“Did you forget the Scotch, Suze?”

“What Scotch? Oh yeah, I guess I did, sorry,” I yell from the kitchen.

“Geez, hon, you know how I like to have a drink before dinner,” he says as he pops his head into the kitchen. “I guess I’ll have to drink wine.” He walks back to the living room. “We outta wine too, hon?” he yells.

The microwave oven beeps and my attention is turned to the meat that has not only defrosted but has cooked just enough that hamburger patties are out of the question. Spaghetti! I’m relieved that I’ve quickly thought of an alternative. I hear Bob yell something, but I am too engrossed in my chef role to pay much attention. Bob saunters into the kitchen, finds some open wine in the refrigerator, and serves himself a glass. I notice his displeased expression as he goes back in the living room. He makes quite a fuss of unfolding his paper, trying hard to show his displeasure. His routine works. I feel guilty about the Scotch, but I don’t say anything.

The evening progresses in the usual way: I serve dinner, the kids fight over whose turn it is to clean up the mess, and I help David with math. Bob watches TV. At 10:30 I go to bed. Bob stays up to watch his late night talk shows. The next morning the alarm rings at seven and I start all over again.

* * *

It’s a quiet day at work. Wanda and Nat spend the day behind closed doors. I try not to think about their agenda. Elliott is meeting with an author in the city, so I can’t find out what the restructuring will be like, but I’m sure there will be one. Perhaps some employees will get canned. I try not to worry about it. After all, I’ve done a good job. Trying to calm myself doesn’t work. I keep picturing miss fashion-school

dropout slicing me up. At quitting time, I remember to buy the Johnny Walker. Tonight, *I* need a drink.

Once home, I sit on the deck, sip the drink I've poured and start to relax. The kids are occupied, so I've slipped in unnoticed. After twenty minutes or so, David finds me and asks the question I hate.

"What's for dinner, Mom? I'm starving!"

"I don't know, I don't feel like cooking tonight."

"Are you okay?" he asks concerned.

"Sure, just tired." I look at him and smile. I love to look at him, my beautiful young son. His punk hairdo, spiked with gel, only seems to emphasize his beautiful blue-green eyes and wide smile. He is built muscular and tight. In fact, all my children, though remarkably different, possess unusual physical beauty. It's strange sometimes how two ordinary-looking people can produce extraordinary-looking offspring. At least we could do one thing right.

"Where's the paper?" Bob asks as he walks out to the deck and then he takes a good look at me. "Hey, what's going on, hon? Are you all right?" he asks. I must look really dejected. And then *he* says those dreadful words.

"What are you doing about dinner?"

"I'm too tired, let's go out."

Somehow the marriage ceremony must have slipped in some language about who's responsible for dinner. I must have said 'I do' cook dinner and 'I will, forever and ever 'til death do us part.'

"No, let's order in a pizza," David says excited. He loves pizza and can eat it without ever growing bored. Once for a joke we made him eat the leftovers from one of Ilana's mega-parties. There was enough pizza for one person for a week. Stale, hard, pizza. He ate every slice and then on the weekend we ordered a pie and he dug in like a Russian eating caviar.

Skip comes out and says, "I don't want pizza. I had it for lunch."

Ilana yells from her bedroom window, "Let's go for Chinese." She always knows when we're talking about food. She's at the stage where she starves herself for one week and then gorges for two. This must be the gorge phase.

"No! Pizza!" David yells back, and they all get in a shouting match, while Bob goes back into the house and fixes himself a drink.

My quiet time on the deck is over. I get up and walk into the house. "Bob, maybe you and I could go out alone and Skip can take David and Ilana over to Burger King."

"I tell you, Suze, I had a big lunch today with the Dean. I'm not really that hungry."

I give up, "O.K. then, let's just order a pizza."

"All right!" David yells over his siblings' complaints.

I go upstairs and draw a bath, sipping on the new drink I've poured. I feel somewhat better than I had earlier, but I still need some private time. I can hear the kids downstairs snapping at each other, arguing over what toppings to put on the pie. I sigh to myself wondering when Skip would mature. Having him commute to the university saved money, but at what cost to Skip? Sure, he spent most weekends in the city with friends who lived off campus, but I hadn't noticed any change in his maturity while he was at home. He'd always been late at everything, walking, talking even losing his teeth.

I guess his time will come, I muse as I ease myself into the hot bath. Ah, this is great! I soak myself for a half-hour. Then, Bob comes in and sits down at the edge of the tub.

"Anything the matter, hon?"

"I'm probably worrying for nothing, but there's been some changes at work and more to come. Some evil woman has been promoted and I think some sort of restructuring is going on. Sometimes, I really hate that place."

"Hey, just relax. Don't worry. Things have a way of working out. You know there's no such thing as the perfect job. We all have to grin and bear it from time to time...roll

with the punches,” he says as if reciting from *Clichés for Dummies*. “But Suze, I hope you’re not thinking of leaving.” He admonishes me, “Promise me you won’t quit until you find something else. Your salary really helps.” His concern for me has switched off like the pause between movements in a symphony.

I look at him. “When did I say I was quitting? Did I say I was quitting?” I repeat this with annoyed emphasis. “Don’t worry, I’m not quitting. Even if they demote me to janitor, I won’t quit, okay?”

Yeah, thanks, I think to myself, I feel better now; appreciate your coming up for this little chat.

“Changing the subject, I’ve got something to tell you,” he says in a serious tone. Immediately, I get slightly worried. Is he sick? Something awful?

“A fantastic opportunity has materialized for me. In fact, it’s unbelievable! You know that I’m up for a six-month sabbatical?”

“Uh huh.” Okay, he’s not sick. I breathe easier.

“Well,” he starts slowly, “You know I had been toying with the notion of visiting another university?”

“Yes, but then *we* decided it would be too disruptive to the family. So you decided to look for a consulting job. Have you found one?” I ask. That’s good news, I think to myself, so what’s with the caution? I’m totally unprepared for what comes next.

“Well, something...else has come up...” He continues slowly and then in one gulp he says, “I’ve been asked to visit the University of Sydney.” Now he becomes animated as if he just took a snort of cocaine. Rushing the sentences together, he skis over, “Don’t you think that’s fantastic? I’ve been reading the papers coming out of there and they’re really cutting edge. One of their faculty wrote a paper on the biology of business dynamics that blew me away.”

“You mean Sydney, *Australia*?” I ask.

“Yeah! Isn’t that something? It’s an opportunity of a lifetime. I can’t believe they want me.”

“For how long?”

“Well, you know...for the six months...the sabbatical.”

“Well, I don’t know. I couldn’t take off six months from work. I’d probably have to quit.” (Not a bad option, at this point. But wait! Didn’t he say for me *not* to quit my job?) “And what about the kids? Ilana would never agree to leave her boyfriend.”

“Yeah, I know. So, I thought that...I could...that I would... go alone. Be less disruptive.” There’s a long pause. “It’s only six months.” A shorter pause. “You could come and visit,” he says with unnatural enthusiasm. Then he looks away and says, “It’s a great opportunity, but if you don’t want me to...I won’t.”

I can see in his face, as I study him, that he has already accepted. With this realization, all my muscles tighten up. My throat becomes dry. My heart starts to pound. Somehow even though what he has told me has nothing to do with his being sick, it *feels* as if he has just told me that he’s dying, that he has a terminal disease. By my physical reaction, my complete fear, I know something definitely is dying.

“Six months, huh?” I say more to myself than to him. Then I go quiet and my mind races as I slowly sponge myself, look past him, and concentrate. Let’s see, he goes off to Australia, has no cares, no family responsibilities, and I get to... stay here. Sounds fair. Well, isn’t that just like him? But part of me also is thinking—no Bob to cater to, no real cooking, no boring faculty events. Why, I could even go to exhibits at the museum in the city, to the opera, rent movies in the middle of the week. I’d be in control of the remote and could turn off the bedroom light when it suited *me*.

Maybe it won’t be so bad.

I finally look at him. “I really could come for a visit at some point? You don’t think it would be too expensive? I’ve always dreamed of going to Australia.”

He relaxes, knowing he's won. Joy spills through his words. "We'll plan for it. Maybe take everyone, our last vacation as a family before Ilana goes to college. Wouldn't that be terrific?"

"When would you go?"

"Right after New Year's. John Mathers, from Sydney, you remember him from the annual meeting last summer? He'll arrange my apartment rental...says I can walk to campus."

I try to picture John Mathers, seems like he was rather stout with a big, gray beard, but what's the difference? I hate this man! He's probably the villain—the one who invited him. *I can walk to campus*. Waltz out of here, leave us...me... and walk to campus. How wonderful for you. I've given permission, but what else can I do? Dread and anger fill my soul.

"Right after New Year's?"

"Yeah, it's their summer vacation and I can get a head start on my proj....."

"Mahmm! Mahm!" The shout makes its way to my bath. "Skip won't let me finish my game!" David is obviously hogging the TV playing his Nintendo.

"What?" I ask Bob.

"It'll be sum..."

"Mahm! Mahhhhhhm!"

Bob senses I've gone quiet again and makes his exit saying we'll talk about it some more. Dealing with real feelings takes energy, and apparently he's used his up planning his new life in Australia—be it just for six months. This turn of events spotlights an injustice that I have rarely let myself think about. It's not the jealousy concerning his stay in Australia—though there is that. It's that while Bob was growing in his career, I raised the kids. Now he has status, business trips around the world and throughout the United States, and two month's vacation. But I went into the workforce just a few years ago. And not by choice. But

where am I? A low-level editor, with a two-week vacation, and I'm never sent anywhere on business. Okay, I have a window office...but for how long? The bath has stopped being relaxing. I get out, dry off, put on a bathrobe, and knock on Ilana's door.

"Yeah?" she yells.

I open the door. I always try and knock before entering a child's room, respecting his or her privacy. I started this behavior hoping it would rub off when I'm in *my* bedroom—it hasn't. My daughter's room is in its usual state of disarray. Piles of laundry impede a straight path to a sitting place. She can tell the clean piles from the dirty—I hope. Music is blasting and the TV is on. She's on the phone. The normality of this scene comforts me.

"What is it, Mom?" she says looking at me slightly irritated. I have invaded her space.

My daughter has my figure and will always battle her weight, but she has a startling beauty. The features of her face viewed separately are not exceptional but together they become mesmerizing. I think it has something to do with symmetry. Her hazel eyes are almost green and contrast with her dark-blonde hair. She thinks she's ugly.

She sees my expression and tells her friend to hold on. Ilana is slowly coming back to me. Before she turned ten she stuck to me like glue, hugged me, kissed me. After that she became possessed by Satan. Now she's terminally embarrassed to be seen with me, thinks I have no taste. And sometimes I even get the feeling she thinks I'm repulsive. She told me once that I breathe funny.

Despite all that, whenever she gets hurt or sick, who is the first person she calls for comfort? Thank God for fevers and twisted ankles. Lately, however, I've noticed Satan's power is weakening. We even laughed together recently... let's see it was three weeks ago on Sunday. I guess we're due for more bonding.

I sit down on the edge of her bed, mainly because her schoolbooks are spread over most of it. She wanted a desk, but never uses it. She's on the floor and is in the middle of painting her toenails while she juggles the phone. I try not to think of nail polish dripping on the carpet or remover removing its color. But I do. I'm immediately obsessed with the possibility of nail polish ruining the expensive carpet I can't replace. My mouth speaks before my mind can stop it.

"Why don't you paint your toes in the bathroom?" I ask. The minute it pops out I regret it. I'm worrying about ruining the carpet, but what I'm doing is ruining the moment.

"Is that what you came in here for? I thought you were going to say something important!" Her annoyance is in full bloom.

"Well, you're right. I'm sorry I got distracted with the nail polish," I say as I hunt for the cap to the remover. At that point I've lost my courage to unload on her. After all, she's just a kid. "It's nothing really. It's just that your dad has an opportunity to teach in Australia for six months."

"Oh no!" she almost screams. "Well, I'm not going, Mom. I'll stay with Ken's family." And then into the phone she says, "I'll call you back." And hangs up.

I look into her cat-like hazel eyes that are now filled with dread. "Don't worry, you don't have to go. It's only Dad that's going."

Then it hits her.

"Dad's not taking you and David? Is everything okay?"

"Of course!" Now I'm making *her* feel better. "It's a wonderful opportunity for him." I'm choking on the words. "It's just not practical for us to go as a family. But maybe we'll go for a visit." She senses something and gets up and puts her arm around me.

"Six months will go quickly, Mom. And we'll all help! Does Skip know?" I shrug my shoulders. Bob probably told Skip while they rode home together. My thoughts turn to Skip now. He commutes with Bob, now what? Faculty

parking was free, and was there any student parking left? The thoughts start racing. Ilana brings me back. She hugs me. Wow!

“We’ll all be here for you, Mom. Now leave! I have to call Sarah back.” Well, it wasn’t much, but it was something. I feel just a tinge better.

