

ONE

“Sister?” It was my mother, who has called me Sister ever since my brother was born, phoning from Ohio. No respect for time zones, as usual. If it was 8:15 in Edgecliff, it must be 8:15 everywhere. But it was 6:15 in Santa Fe, and I’d been dead asleep.

“Hi,” I said. “Are you all right?” Next to me in the bed Sam hadn’t even stirred.

“Did I wake you, Eliza? I hope not.”

“No. It’s okay. But what’s wrong?”

“Bates Barker,” my mother said and paused. “Bates died yesterday. I’m in shock.”

“Mother, that’s terrible.” It *was* terrible, of course, but selfishly, I was immensely relieved that nothing was wrong with her or my kids. “I’m so sorry.” By then I was fully alert.

Bates Barker had been my mother’s neighbor, a retired State Department functionary who had spent years on the Arabian Peninsula. When he retired, he moved back to Edgecliff to join his unmarried sister, Dorothea, who had died two years ago, just a week before my father.

“Had he been ill?”

“Not at all. We went to the symphony together the other night. It was a stroke apparently.” She began telling me the details.

After Dorothea and my father died, my mother and Bates began keeping company. My father had always referred to Bates as an “odd bird,” and I had never heard my mother contradict him. Yet when death struck them at the same time, she and Bates started taking walks together, going to museums and lectures and plays. At seventy-eight, my mother was still passionate about politics and history, and so was Bates.

I’d been gone for years by the time he returned to Edgecliff, so I scarcely knew Bates. But he had been kind to my mother. According to her, Bates had been writing a book, something about the way settlement policies in various Middle Eastern states had affected Bedouin tribes. He was a scholarly man, a life-long bachelor, and he’d been stiff and formal the few times I’d seen him.

“...Bates’ cousin is overseeing things,” my mother was saying. “Someone he seldom spoke about. I don’t know what he’s planning.”

“Would you like me to come?” It wasn’t as if I was doing anything else at the moment.

“Oh, no, Eliza. I wouldn’t want to disturb your work. You’re busy, and I’ll be fine.”

“Not so busy, no.” I’m a writer and illustrator of children’s books. *Once upon a time* is the world I’ve inhabited for years. *Happily ever after*. But since our youngest

child, Anna, left for college a few months earlier, I'd been stuck, as if I'd run smack into a creative wall.

“Really,” I added, “Think about it. I could be there tomorrow. Have you called Mary?” Mary Talbot had been a good friend of both my parents since before I was born.

“Mary just left for Italy, remember?” my mother replied, “On her annual jaunt. She won't be home for weeks.”

I was still on the phone when Sam sprang out of bed. He strode toward the windows, a tall, rangy man with broad shoulders and long, muscular legs. He jacked up the thermostat and opened the drapes, then left the room. A few minutes later he came back carrying a mug of coffee for me, something he'd taken to doing. Every night before we went to bed, he would grind the beans and set the timer – a gesture that when it began, almost floored me it was so uncharacteristic.

“Your mother?” he mouthed.

I nodded and said, “Thanks,” as he set the mug down on my bedside table. Then he disappeared into the bathroom.

My mother replayed Bates' death again, “Right there in his vestibule, Eliza, discovered by Bea who cleans for him. Tragic. Poor woman, she was quite beside herself.”

We talked for a few more minutes, and eventually, nothing decided, we hung up. I sat in bed, sipping my coffee, staring out the window at the cottonwood trees tossing in the November wind. Off in the distance, I spotted fresh snow on the mountains. In recent years, my mother had lost her husband, as well as a number of friends. Now

Bates. I vowed to visit her more often, something I could easily do now that the kids were gone.

Showered and dressed, Sam came back into the bedroom and began packing. He was flying to Houston on business and would be gone for the week.

“What’s wrong with your mother?” he asked. “Why so early?”

“Her neighbor, Bates Barker? He died yesterday.”

“Peculiar little guy.”

“But they enjoyed each other.”

“Well, sure, but your mother could talk to a doorstep, don’t forget. She’ll find someone else.”

“Maybe I’ll go to Edgecliff,” I said. “She sounds like she could use some company.”

“Yeah, it might do you good to get out of this house.”

I nodded. “It might.”

“And after you’re back, why don’t you come with me when I go duck hunting? How about that?” He looked hopeful. For weeks, he’d been trying to jolly me out of missing the kids.

Late autumn mornings, as the sun was coming up and the mist was rising, were achingly beautiful in northern New Mexico. But I didn’t enjoy slogging through marshes in the waders he’d given me a few Christmases ago, a gift that sent our kids into tailspins of giggles. Squeamishly, I hated watching him kill birds, detested the bloody mess he made as he breasted the ducks he’d bagged. But this was his idea of a pleasant outing

for the two of us. The weekend before, he'd invited me to ride up to Colorado on his Harley, even though he knew I was not fond of motorcycles.

"Come on, Eliza," he'd said. "You can't go moping around about the kids forever. Let's enjoy our freedom."

I wound up seeing him off as he rumbled out of the garage.

"Maybe," I said about duck hunting. "We'll see." Then I paused. "Is that a new tie?" He was wearing a tie with sunflowers all over it, unlike any other tie he owned.

He nodded. "I got it the other day. What do you think?"

"It's pretty," I said.

"Pretty?" He recoiled ever so slightly.

"Good looking," I amended. "Smart."

"I'm glad you like it. It reminded me of you. You like sunflowers a lot." He hesitated. "Don't you?"

"I do." I nodded. "I love sunflowers."

"I thought so." He smiled and zipped up his suitcase.

"Have a good trip."

"Thanks," he said, kissing me on the top of my head. "I will."

Since Anna left for college, I'd been sleeping too late. I had been trying to accommodate myself to an empty house, or rather, a house to which no one came home but Sam, and I was having trouble getting the hang of it. When the children were around, I had worked religiously from eight in the morning until one or two o'clock, but lately all I'd been able to do was putter. I'd cleaned closets and cupboards, even ironed. I read

anything I could get my hands on. I fixed elaborate dinners, which Sam adored, and gave several dinner parties, something I hadn't done for years. I was acting like someone I didn't know.

When the children left, I had anticipated feeling relief. Instead, I experienced bouts of melancholy, sentimental episodes that sent me poking around their empty rooms, examining their leavings – drawers of mismatched socks, bandanas and tie-died T-shirts. I would stare at the twins' collection of toy cars, or Anna's dolls, as if I expected a consoling message to materialize.

I didn't miss the chaos or the telephone's endless ringing. What I missed was some sweet image of my children, pre-adolescent and lit with a radiant innocence they hadn't possessed for years. Scenes from their infancy flashed through my mind, and I would have to catch my breath. I was haunted by their lovely talcum smells, their tiny hands and feet. Some days I could feel the heft of their small bodies on my hip so solidly that it frightened me. For twenty years, my children had been the measure of my days, no matter what else I was doing. Now the only thing measuring my days was the annoying tick of my late mother-in-law's banjo clock in the hall. My good spirits appeared to have deserted me; I felt mired in an unfamiliar gloom.

The other women I knew whose children had left home – a few friends and those who volunteered at the AIDS clinic with me one afternoon a week – never spoke about it, but one day, I could no longer keep it in.

“I miss my kids,” I ventured in a voice I hardly recognized.

“Come now,” one of my friends said. “Aren't you glad to have them out of your hair?”

“Of course, Eliza,” another said. “You always liked your kids more than I liked mine.”

“I did?”

“Well, you all seemed to have a lot of fun together. I always felt like a policeman, but you....”

“Your problem, Eliza,” someone else said, “Is that you always say what the rest of us are thinking and won’t say.” She laughed.

Then, like confessions of peculiar bereavements – when your dog dies, for instance, and you are utterly grief-stricken – stories began slipping out, the tellers often perplexed or embarrassed. One of the women confided that sometimes she missed her daughter so much she would sit on the floor of the girl’s closet amidst her old jacket and prom dresses and shoes. Another woman said she often drove to the athletic fields of her son’s high school, pretending she was on her way to one of his soccer games.

It was as if we hadn’t known from the start that our children would grow up and leave home, just as we had. All of us were around the same age and had lived through a time when motherhood was not something you were supposed to admit was central to your life. Whatever we may have wanted to feel, or thought we should feel the fact was, your children leave home and you miss them. It didn’t matter that you always knew they were on loan, or that you could recall days when you would have been glad to get rid of them any legal way you could. It didn’t matter that you were mostly content to hear only the general outlines of their worlds without the details.

“A year,” one of these women said to me. She is a bankruptcy lawyer and was the first woman in her firm. A year to get her life back together after her daughter left.

“Maybe two,” a painter with work in museums around the country chimed in.

Two years didn’t appeal to me. I wanted to sign up for the short course and get on with things. I wanted to work, I wanted to laugh.

“Frankly,” someone said, “I’m surprised at you, Eliza. You have so much to keep you busy, I wouldn’t think you’d have time to miss your kids!”

“That’s right,” another woman said. “Look at you. You’re the picture of success.”

“Brother,” I said, “These days you could fool me.”

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