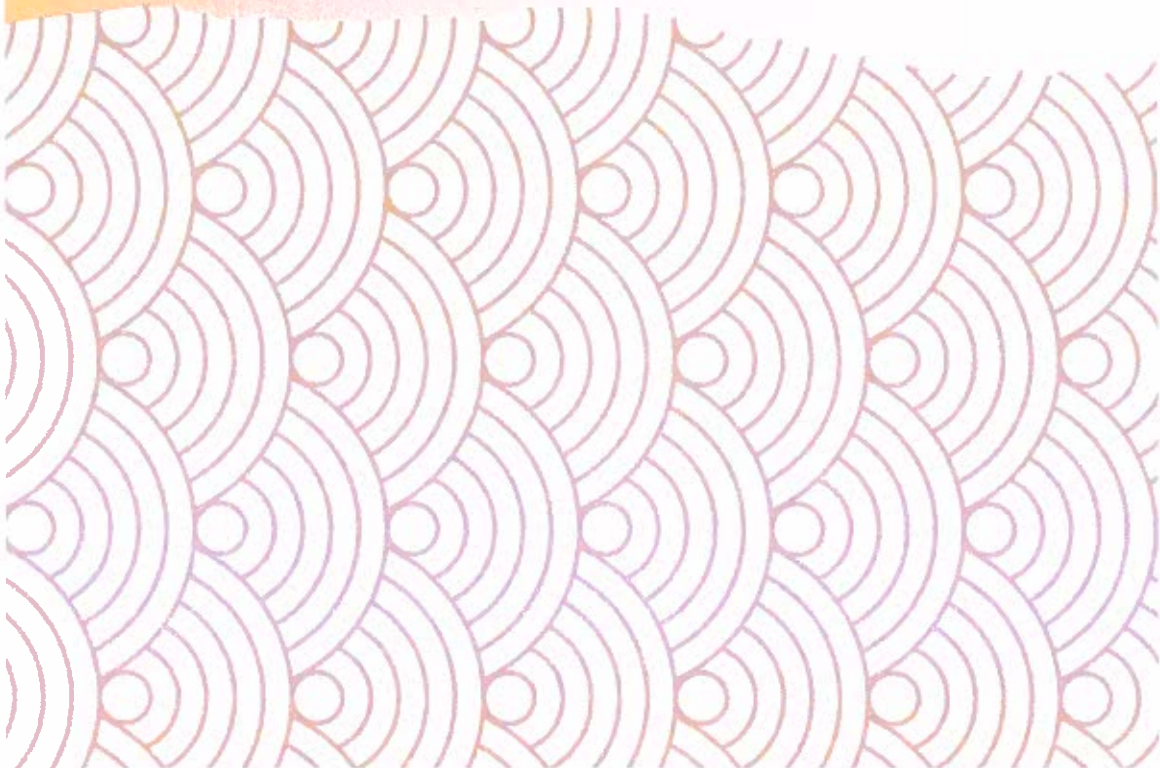




Reception



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This would be the only time she would put today's groom's relatives in their rightful places. After the reception, she would certainly be in no position to do so. She knew most of them. Others she had only heard about in picnic lore and holiday dessert recollections. As she hand-lettered the few remaining place cards, she continued to recall what she knew. Once these were finished, that would be all there was in the cards for her.

She was up to the groom's uncles and aunts and the song in the static-staccatoed office speaker was "There Will Never Be Another You." There were the McAdams boys and their sister. And the one Coltman spinster. She'd met them all, but not all their children.

Robert McAdams, with his full head of mid-forties white hair, was her favorite. He seemed to welcome her the most, was most cordial at Thanksgivings and Christmases. Worked in real estate and seemed fair and pleasant. Drank a little too much at Thanksgiving, but not at Christmas. She could never figure that out, but had seen it all three of the years she had been around for those holidays. His wife, Clair, was somewhat more reserved, she recalled as she lettered the "C" and the "I" with the proper calligraphic spacing in between. One Christmas, she now remembered, Clair had been apprehensive when "Uncle Robert" was called away for a "showing." She wondered back now if Clair had been worried about Uncle Robert showing more than just a rental property to the prospective tenant.

Nevertheless, Robert had always been a perfect gentleman to her. Especially the time he inadvertently walked in on her when she was using one of the family bathrooms to shower after a long, hot day down at the shore. Robert didn't really "overstay" the time it took to make his apology. And he did look somewhat embarrassed as he thoughtfully reached her a towel. She paused, now, with a scratchy rendition of "Suddenly" in the background, before setting the place card aside to dry. She was wondering why he hadn't heard the shower running and why he just didn't back up and walk out of the room. Oh, well. She had no reason then to suspect Uncle Robert of any wrongdoing. Why start now, just before this reception?

Aunt Clair, on the other hand, always seemed to put an edge on even what should have been the most innocent of questions. One Thanksgiving Clair was asking about their date to a concert across the Island. Clair had heard that she and the groom-about-to-be had gotten in very late. So, Clair's inquiry was a three-part masterpiece. She recalled it now as the melody of Little Eva's "Chapel of Love" crackled like so many gnats around the room:

"You know. I've never been to the Nassau County Coliseum. How did you kids get there from here? How long does it take?" Asked and answered, involving both the Southern State and Meadowbrook Parkways, under an hour. No problem. Then circling but not yet on the attack.

"I've heard those music groups are giving shorter and shorter concerts. That they're not even singing live. Did your group last night give you a long enough show for the money you shelled out to see them?" Not wanting to appear taken advantage of by the rock world,

her date assured his aunt of the show's length. They played all the way through to 11:30. He affirmed they had gotten their full two and a half hours as expected.

Then came the killer, hardly a coup de grâce. *"Good God. The traffic must have been horrible. Three and a half hours for an hour's drive."* And that was all. It was done. Clair sashayed off into the kitchen for another glass of water. The concert-going couple was stranded before the guillotines of everyone's dinnertime eyes; waiting for the blades of their eyelids to blink them into oblivion.

The other two brothers, Stephan and William, were less successful than their brother-in-law, Robert. They were always involved with their own kids more than being interested in what the rest of the family was doing. Thinking back as she lettered the next card on the desk in front of her, she figured maybe if their sister, Clair, and Robert had kids of their own, they too would have been around less often on the holidays back in the years she was there.

As the speaker in the office wall tore the quiet voice of Elton John singing "Friends" to shreds, she recalled her first meeting with Stephan. She didn't even know who Stephan was at first. She was at Jones Beach, with the groom-about-to-be, but alone on their blanket at the time. Two kids came charging fast and their running kicked feetfuls of sand in her face. She was about to yell at them, but a louder, firmer voice swore at them to stop. The voice's owner was their father. He apologized and disarmed her annoyance quickly. It wasn't until a half hour later when her date came in from the surf that he introduced her to his uncle Stephan and his family. They all spent the rest of the day on the beach together.

Even shared lunch. She smiled now, remembering how glad she was she hadn't gotten into an argument with Stephan. She looked down at his place card, double checked to make sure she spelled his name with an "a" and not an "e." She reviewed the list to see what table to ink onto the folded ivory card, marked it with an "8," and set it aside so it could dry.

Stephan's boys had turned out to be fun to play with at get-togethers and picnics. Roger, the youngest, could really run fast and was great at games like ping-pong and darts. Edward, the older brother, was slightly better at wide-ranging games like two-hand touch football and softball. Their mother, Lucy, was an avid tennis and field hockey player in high school and college. Stephan played an average game of soccer and moderately well at baseball for his high school and in pick-up games overseas when his aircraft carrier put into port.

When she knew them, Stephan was working long hours as a machinist in a factory on the middle of Long Island, near the Nassau-Suffolk line and did auto repairs a few nights a week and Saturdays at the local Texaco station. Lucy used to tend bar at night, and still had been on some occasions. But Lucy's fulltime work later on was as a file clerk and office aide at the County Courthouse.

To the tune of "Fire & Rain," though James Taylor's voice was hardly recognizable over the zapping and vibrating speaker, she remembered how Roger and Edward would talk about getting their licenses so they could start driving race cars on the tracks at Freeport and Southampton. They'd laugh to say their dad could fix their cars and their mom

could fix their tickets. Today they were at table 10 with their cousins and away from the grown-ups at table 8. Table 10 was closer to the band, so that was probably why the kids were being put there.

That left just “Aunt Mel.” Melody. It was a good name. It fit. Melody seemed to get along with all the family. Mel was the youngest—born later in the marriage. Mel was trying to get established as a professional businesswoman. “Aunt Mel” had brought different dates to family gatherings. Mel still wasn’t serious about any of them enough to put a career on hold. The status of Mel’s living arrangements with these dates was usually unclear. What had been clear was that Melody never intended moving back into their parents’ home. That was most likely truer than ever today, the calligrapher guessed as she lettered the ‘y’ with an exquisite curl, now that Melody’s nephew was about to get married before Mel was a bride. They were close in age, just five years separated Mel and her. As the ink on the card dried by her waving it in the air, she guessed that at the reception Mel would similarly wave away personal question after question about future marriage plans.

Setting Mel’s card down dry, she went to Miss Regina Coltman, Table 1. She had known the spinster would be perceived as a foreshadowing omen of bad times ahead if Mel couldn’t snag a guy soon. At least that’s how many of the older people of Miss Coltman’s generation, who were coming to the reception from Connecticut and New Jersey, would undoubtedly see it. Mel saw it differently though. Every Coltman urge to subvert Mel’s independence had failed. Now, wiping the nib off her special pen to make sure Regina’s

card was crisply written, she could only imagine today's new bride would inherit any of that unspent regal attention.

Miss Regina Coltman. Even at birth and naming somehow the family knew. This female baby was destined to be a queen with any other name, but as the letters formed under her pen, the young woman calligrapher knew how the sovereign Miss Coltman would dress. The tallest of all the siblings—at six-foot-two back then—Regina stood erect, broad-shouldered, and firm of torso. Miss Coltman was solid, what no one would call fat or overweight, even if they so dared. Regina would wear a print dress. The pattern would be bold and repetitive, but no set image would form the pattern. Never flowers or animals. Always a print. Always with a full-busted support brassiere, girdle, and slip. Always stockings. Never panty hose. Never unfettered. Always in control. North Shore money was like that. As she printed the large flourished “R”, she knew this—she herself being from the South Shore, then and still.

The calligrapher flashbaked a whole host of images of Regina Coltman as she spelled out the last name and lettered Table 1 on the place card: at the groom-about-to-be's graduations, in his family portraits, at birthday celebrations, amid holiday gatherings, and after many dates they returned from to find her visiting his parents for no apparent reason.

Regina was always “over” on every other Sunday afternoon for dinner. And no one knew where the queen spent the alternate Sabbaths. Couldn't be reached by phone. Wasn't there to answer the security guard's call for anyone to get near the condominium door to

press an ear against to hear. This afternoon's groom and she had tried to see Miss Colton at the condo once, after getting particularly bored when bad weather cancelled their beach plans one weekend. They had had no luck.

Regina Coltman never sized you up. Oh, no. The queen dressed you down. That withering look would be outlawed in half the states of the Union if they passed a law for intent to kill with a malicious body part. Regina never said much. When those eyes were done with you, there simply wasn't enough of you left to tongue lash.

Miss Coltman had despised her tank tops and tube tops. Her bathing suits had been immediately scorned. Her shorts were denied credibility. Everything the young woman wore to get the blood simmering in this man to be married today was exactly what it took to crank Regina's to the boiling point.

The images and memories were flooding in on her now, momentarily as blurry as the music in the broken speaker. Quickly she lettered the last two cards. The parents of today's groom, Table 1.

She was certain she hadn't been seen by any of them today, her work all being done behind the scenes. She doubted they would recognize her anyway. She was lost to them but found to herself. Since they departed one another's company, courtesy of Miss Coltman she suspected, she wore her black hair five inches shorter and up off her shoulders. It had

regained its curl since she had discarded her flat iron. She also carried fifteen fewer pounds than some years ago. And today, she might even have been standing taller than before.

She cleaned and broke down the calligraphy set. The “click” of the brass cap of the pen had been audible. She put all the components into their proper, felt-lined indentations within the ebony wooden box, and closed its highly polished light brown lid. The speaker sputtered, crackled, and went dead. She heard the “snap” of the flat, taupe, rubber band she used to bundle the place cards neatly together.

She walked across the oriental carpet from the polished cherry secretary to the bay windows, with their bangs of Swedish ivy in her face. With thoughts of the spinster Coltman pressing against her temples, she looked out of the shaded windows, out over the top of the blooming azaleas, and across the lawn to the glassed-in veranda along the curved drive. She never heard the hushed footsteps of the young man, dressed in caterer’s black slacks and white dress shirt, as he entered the office, picked up the place cards, left the room, and crossed the lawn. She first saw him before he entered the veranda, to set out the place cards onto the table in the reception foyer by the coat room.

The limousines arrived. White. Sleek. Seductive. A bride stepped out. A groom followed. Eyes directed to the car at the end of the procession. From the last Cadillac the groom’s parents alit. Behind them a print dress arose from within to marshal the entourage without needing to be in the lead.

The intercom buzzed. "Yes, boss?" she answered.

"I know you haven't taken setup calls alone yet, but there's a new call on the second line. Since you've finished the place cards for the one o'clock reception, could you please take this call and start to record the arrangements for this one? You can use the pad on the desk and ask the same questions on the information sheet I showed you last month when you started. It's for next Spring. They've got the church for April 5 . . . "