



Custody

Installment Three
December 2023

Part 1

Custody

When last we were with Linda Lowry and her mother, Rosalyn, they were fleeing their New Jersey apartment clandestinely in the early morning hours of August 31, 1992, in order to avoid participating in a custody hearing to be held in New York City that afternoon.

Rosalyn's absence triggered her lawyer, Godfrey Mellon, to dispatch Investigator Danny Hart to discover where they were, and if they were safe and in good health. Hart only arrived at their apartment mid-morning. He was not successful on either count.

Meanwhile, by the time evening of that same Monday settled on the metropolitan area, Linda's father, Myles Lowry, and his legal team of Attorney Ned Hegerman and Karidja Soro had negotiated a conflict resolution before Judge Eoin McCarver. The court agreed to two provisions of the resolution. The judge vacated any penalties to either parent for infractions against the Lowrys' expiring custody agreement. He also permitted Myles to approach the court subsequently to file for a new arrangement granting him permanent custody. Sadly, during the night, Myles's lawyer and longtime friend, Ned Hegerman, suffered a coronary episode and was rushed to the hospital.

*As we open upon the third installment of **Custody**, before we see what Myles and his lawyers are going to do on Tuesday, we need first to see what Linda and Rosalyn were doing on Monday and how they managed to disappear. So, we'll have to turn back the clock a day to see what they were up to.*

Then we can weave back and forth to navigate Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of the first week of September 1992 with the runaway mother and child—and with Myles and all the others we have met, and even some newcomers.

Ready?

Here we go!

Diners were certainly Linda Lowry's very favorite places to have breakfast. She had never been to this one before. They had been driving in her mother's friend's car for quite some time, this last Monday in August. And Linda was surely hungry.

A lady in a pleated black skirt and white button-down blouse met them at the hostess station and cash register by the door. She wore a grey half-apron tied around her waist. Its two pockets were filled, with paper napkins draped over out of one and an order pad and pens standing erect in the other. Linda's six-year-old mind pictured a slender storybook stuffed rabbit, with one ear floppily bent over and the other standing straight up and alert. She saw the word—MILDRED—spelled out in white letters on a thin black plastic name tag, pinned above the left breast pocket of the blouse.

Across from where Mildred greeted them was an expansive glass counter and display case. Its shelves were filled with long trays of oversized cookies. There were pastries and cakes on glass pedestals. The front of the case protected the treats from being touched, but nothing held in their tempting aromas. Atop the counter were silver metal stands with glass dome covers preserving the freshness of muffins, imbedded with chocolate chips or nuts or raisins, and whose rounded crests were wider than a baker's palm. One stand had large round cookies with half the top iced in chocolate and the other half iced in vanilla frosting. The line between the colors was straight and neat.

Next to the stands was a row of folded white bags, resting on their sides. There were three long, gleaming tongs, too, for the diner people to use for picking up the tempting baked goods patrons wanted to take home, and to place them into one of those bags.

Linda looked over her shoulder to see all the goodies, while she, her mother, and her mother's lady friend, still wearing her sunglasses from driving, followed the waitress to their booth. Mildred had on very clean white sneakers that were so quiet on the floor that Linda did not hear her coming back to take their order after they looked at the menu.

Linda liked diner menus. They were easy to wipe clean, shielded with plastic covers, and they didn't flop over when you tried to read them. They were wonderfully big and tall. They had so many full pages and also thinner ones you could flip to see specials or drinks and lists of so many kinds of pancakes. The pictures made the food look so good to eat that your mouth could water if you were hungry enough. And this morning, Linda was just that. Because back at their apartment her mother had loaded up their two suitcases, and the two of them, into her friend's car without serving any breakfast, not even a glass of juice or milk.

However, that was going to be remedied right away, as Mildred brought them back two cups of coffee, three glasses of orange juice and a tall glass of cold milk. She set out straws and napkins all around. And three shorter glasses of water. Mildred said she'd return soon to take their food order.

To get from the parking lot door to their table, Linda walked along an aisle that passed between two mirrors that faced each other. She had been fascinated by the way she could see herself, over and over again, back into a seemingly magical space far away 'inside' each mirror. But sitting in their booth now there was just one mirror behind her and one across the aisle. It wasn't as easy to see that repeating image as it was when they were making their way to their seats. So, Linda went back to the menu and its tasty-looking pictures.

Elsewhere and elsewhere, it was fully daytime Tuesday morning and Karidja walked as fast as she could without running down the hospital hallway. She lost time going to the CCU before learning that Ned Hegerman was in a private room on the recovery ward two floors below. She set aside her worries about being on time for her morning's events and realized she should be more focused on her boss and how happy she was that the attorney hadn't needed to be in the critical care unit. Nevertheless, turning into the room through its open door still gave her a shock.

Sitting in the corner between the window and the bed in a hospital armchair was a woman Karidja had not met before. Ned Hegerman was in

bed, supine beneath the warming electric blanket and additional layers of cotton sheets, woven with a square-on-square waffle-iron pattern. Bedside machines on rolling stands were attached to the patient somehow and somewhere beneath the sheets. They featured visual displays that were graphing multicolored lines or numbers, and they were beeping occasionally. What Karidja could see of Ned's skin was pallid, his eyes were closed, and his mouth was slightly opened. He appeared definitely to be asleep.

"Good morning, I am from Attorney Hegerman's office," she said as she made her way quietly across the room. "My name is Karidja Soro." Before she could offer her handshake, Karidja stopped at the seated woman's nod. The lady was not going to rise. And she was not offering her name, let alone her hand. Soro was all too familiar with the grief of illness and the cold reality of multicultural social awkwardness. Only time would proffer a correct diagnosis in this case.

Before she could make the evaluation, a voice behind Karidja came into the room surrounded by a doctor in green operating room scrubs. "Is either of you next of kin?" When the seated relative nodded once more, the doctor assessed Karidja, who shook her head side to side. "May I excuse myself, then, to speak to family?" he inquired. Karidja said, "Goodbye," to the woman in her corner. She went over to the hallway side of Ned's bed, placed her hand on his covers, said "Be well, my friend," and went out into the hall. She was hardly over the threshold when the door closed behind her.

The door was opened and closed again. The same doctor stood before Karidja, facing her directly. "I am sorry. That was very uncomfortable for me, so I can only guess it was so much moreso for you. I am Mr. Hegerman's cardiac surgeon, part of his cardiologist's team. Isadore Aronsen."

"I am Ned's law partner, Karidja Soro." This time she was able to shake hands. "Can you tell me anything about his condition? His friends at the practice and I are very worried for him."

"In general, I can tell you that Attorney Hegerman seems to have had a heart attack. Sometime last night. It was not severe enough to require surgery. Normally we would keep him in the cardiac care unit, but the people there taking up all the beds are a lot sicker than he is. So, we moved him down here to recovery—in a private room—for close observation and monitoring." Aronsen stopped talking and looked directly at Soro.

"Can he have visitors?" asked Karidja.

"Medically, preferably just family members at this time." Aronsen paused and then continued. "And the family has just made it known to me they insist on our enforcing that. Sorry." Again, Aronsen was not excusing himself, nor dismissing Soro.

"Do you have a recommendation concerning how we may stay up-to-date on his condition?" asked Karidja.

"Designate one person at the legal offices to call over to the cardiology practice mid-morning and just before our seven o'clock closing for the evening. That should approximate when our staff member has written up rounds and filed a report. Your contact person will learn from ours whom to ask for when that call is made. I'm afraid that's the best I can offer. And I hope it works with some amount of reliability." Aronsen waited for a pair of nurses to pass in the hallway, leading Karidja to realize the doctor was making an accommodation.

The surgeon continued when the nurses were out of earshot, "Calling the hospital will just yield an 'information for family only' reply. Phoning our practice in a disorderly or overabundant manner will result in a 'call the hospital' answer. That will just create a futile cycle for everyone. Best to avoid at times like these, yes?"

"Definitely yes. Thank you, Dr. Aronsen. I know Ned and all his colleagues greatly appreciate what you have done for him and for us." Karidja's smile was one that Aronsen would remember for quite some time.

She found a pay phone in the lobby. She checked in with the office and told Eleanor Quatrane what Aronsen had said. "Would it be okay if I made those calls each day, do you think?" Eleanor asked. When Karidja affirmed that she thought Ned would be pleased Ms. Quatrane would do that, Eleanor replied, "Of course. I wouldn't hear of anyone else doing it. And then I will put a report on our answering machine on the staff's dedicated number, so our people can call in and get the latest report any time of day."

A warm camaraderie had grown between Karidja and Eleanor in the past few weeks, as Ned had brought the resolutionist into a more publicly visible involvement with the Lowry's case. Standing there in the phone booth,

Karidja wondered if Ned had had this in mind. Had he been feeling poorly? Was he preparing a personal departure and a transition of representation for Myles? Thinking such thoughts brought her back to the morning's business at hand.

She asked the administrative assistant, "Eleanor, is there any word about what I am supposed to do this morning about Mr. Lowry?"

"As a matter of fact, there is," replied Eleanor. One of the partners left me a co-signed note from them. I am to call you and ask you to continue representing Myles Lowry, beginning with his scheduled appearance this morning to seek custodial designation. You can read the rest of it, but that's the gist, as Ned was, is, fond of saying." There was a pause as Eleanor regrouped. "Can you take care of that? Do you need anything from me?"

Karidja answered gently. "No, I'm all set. I held on to all the papers from yesterday, to give over to whomever showed up at court this morning. I called Mr. Lowry overnight, after you called me, and left him a message to look for me rather than Mr. Hegerman this morning. So, I guess we're as ready to handle this for Mr. Lowry as we can be."

"Okay, then," stated Mrs. Quatrane. "And . . . Attorney Soro?"

"Yes?" Karidja was struck by Eleanor's formality.

"I know you'll do just fine. Mr. Lowry is in good hands."

"Thank you, Ms. Quatrane," was all a surprised Karidja could bring herself to say.

Linda Lowry was underway again after her Monday diner breakfast of dollar-sized pancakes immersed within a lake of maple syrup. She was surprised and happy to see the familiar yellow and black road sign. It was a circle with sideways crossed lines and two upper case letter Rs placed alongside, between the outstretched arms of the letter "x." As her mother, Rosalyn, had said when they left home earlier that Monday morning, this was

now an adventure. Her mother had called this country road a “two-lane blacktop” ten minutes earlier, reading the directions out loud for her daughter. Linda thought it sounded like a storybook name. Much better than Main Street or Second Avenue. The driver already knew the way from the diner to the school.

There were no whistles washing the air but the car’s quick rise and drop accompanying the double thump-ta-dump she felt in her chest and her ears was glorious. Linda snapped her lap belt off, spun around to kneel up on the back seat and look out the rear window. She was quick enough to see the sun glinting off the rails. There were two pair curving away into the promise of there being a “somewhere” to come from at the same time someone else had a different “somewhere” to be going to. And, in the clickety-clack and stroboscopic spell of two trains passing by in opposite directions, both of those “someones” would each sense that another person could still see enough to realize their presence speeding by, without knowing who that other “someone” was, or even very much about her.

“Linda,” was all her mother needed to say. Linda smoothly rotated and slid down into her seated position, faced forward, and smiled inside and out as she re-buckled her lap restraint. She happily swung her red sneakers to keep time to the song in her head, careful not to bang her heels against the seat front or her toes into the seat back in front of her.

Her mother’s friend spoke to Linda from the driver’s seat. Still wearing the sunglasses, she looked at the girl in the rearview mirror. They could see one another like in a regular mirror—not like in the double mirror at the diner. It was more like Linda and her mother saw one another brushing their teeth together before bedtime at the bathroom vanity. “We’ll be there in about another ten minutes. Are you excited, Linda?”

“Mom said it was a surprise. I always am excited about surprises. Until I find out what they are, and they aren’t surprises anymore. Then they have to be pretty good things to keep me excited.” Linda replied and spoke a deep truth, with a child’s simplicity.

Further down the two-lane blacktop, Linda was looking out the open side window of the car. The woods and bushy fields opened out into very green open spaces. Linda would have called them lawns if they were at people’s houses. But from her books she knew to call them meadows or

pastures of mowed grass. They were not as flat as a person's lawn. They went up and down, and the rounded hills they made were long and low. Her mother and the driver were busy talking and didn't seem to notice, or mind, that Linda again loosened her lap belt and knelt up on the seat so she could see out better.

As they came around a curve in the road Linda saw a long, white fence. It followed along the same line as the edge of the road, but it was back off from the road. There was enough room between the road and the fence to park a big school bus straight in, without hitting the fence and without it sticking out in the road. There were no school buses there, though. It was just that the space was exactly big enough for one to fit. It was different from any fence she had seen before, except in one book. It was made of wood. It had posts that were square and were about as tall as her mother's friend, Mr. Meadows, Annie's dad. She realized she must have been thinking of home, if Mr. Meadows came to her mind as she looked out at a meadow.

But the other thing that caught Linda's eye was that the fence was not straight or level at the top. If the ground rose, the fence did too. If the ground went down, the fence did too. But the fence was always the same height, like Annie's dad. Linda remembered a picture from a book back at school.

It was a story about a girl a little older than she and Annie. The storybook girl lived in a part of New York City called Chinatown. Every year there was a parade to celebrate the Chinese New Year. But the date was different each year. It wasn't always a week after Christmas. The story told about making a big dragon for that New Year's Day parade. It was covered in colorful paper—green and white and yellow and red—and there were men and women who walked along under the dragon's skin. Each held upright a long stick of a different length than their neighbor. Together they supported the dragon's back and gave it a spine. The dragon's back went higher and lower as they raised and lowered the sticks from inside and walked along the streets of Chinatown. Linda saw that the wooden fence was curved like that dragon's back. The white painted top rail went up and down as the ground did, following along the small hills and valleys along the side of the road. Behind it the green grass looked spectacular. Linda put her arm out the open window and with her hand flat and pointed frontwards, she began to raise and lower it at the wrist, so the wind would push it up or down as if she were the wing of a plane, to imitate and mirror the rising and the falling of the fence rail.

The air rushing on her face felt so exhilarating to the young girl. She closed her eyes and bobbed her head back and forth to feel a part of the wind. The longer strands of her hair tickled her cheeks and nose as they flowed in the movement of the air and the car. It seemed perfect to Linda, until she heard from behind her Rosalyn's insistent and impatient voice harshly breaking into her fun, "How many times?"

Linda lowered herself again into the car's back seat, without doing up the lap belt. But she kept looking at this thrilling experience as it moved past. In some places, new sections of the fence started to cut across the fields and make squares and rectangles in the meadows. Suddenly, Linda saw movement on the grass. There were horses running inside the fenced-in areas. Some were jumping and others were running fast. In a book called *Black Beauty* she had learned this running fast was called "galloping." It was the same book where she read about meadows and pastures. These horses seemed loose and able to race all around within the fenced-in spaces. They seemed happy and free. Some were drinking water from a big metal bathtub. Others were chomping on grass. And there were some pulling at hay bales to get big mouthfuls to chew. What a place this was!

Linda finally turned sideways and looked at her mother and then up at the rearview mirror. As the car was slowing down, she cried out, "If this is the surprise, I am really excited."

She sat up and forward onto the edge of her seat, pulling herself closer to her mother's seatback. Linda looked out the front window as the car was turning into a long driveway. It was made of crushed white stone and not the same blacktop of the "two-lane." The same fence followed along both sides of the driveway. But the driveway was flat, so the top of the fence line was now very level. It was a little higher than the roof of the car. At an open gate at the end of the fence along the driveway, there was a sign. Linda could read the first and last words. In fancy letters the words on the sign were: **HAPPYDALE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL.**

It was eleven-thirty on their first Monday morning away from home. Linda and her mother took their suitcases out of the car. Rosalyn and her friend, the driver, stood in the driveway by the front door of **HAPPYDALE.** Linda watched them kiss one another on the cheek, as she had seen grownups who weren't married do many times when they were saying hello

or goodbye. The embrace loosened her sunglasses, but the lady caught them before they fell to the driveway.

Linda heard the lady driver say to her mother, "I've got to go if I'm going to be on time for those proceedings. I'll see you tonight." When she turned to say goodbye to her excited back seat passenger, Linda noticed something about the lady's face. She had one eye that was brown and one eye that was blue.

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Myles Lowry paced nervously, his second consecutive day in this courthouse. But this Tuesday morning, he and his lawyer would be in a different part of the family court. And they may be before a judge with whom he was not familiar. He did not know what to expect, except he knew he could not expect Ned Hegerman to be at his side. Karidja's overnight phone message had made that clear.

When he saw Karidja coming toward him, he was relieved enough that his shoulder blades stopped clenching in toward his spine. "Good morning," he greeted her. "Do you know anything more about Ned?"

"I am just coming from the hospital. He's in a private room recovering from what appears to be a heart attack. But he's not taking visitors. Only family. There's a woman there now. But I do not know who she is, and we were not introduced." Karidja wanted to get on with the hearing, but she also respected the long friendship Lowry had with Hegerman.

She took his upper arm in one hand and led him toward a doorway. "Let's go in and see what we can see. And do what we can do."

They each opened the door in front of them, as entry to the courtroom was through a pair of double doors. The venue was more of a familiar looking courtroom than the hearing space from the day before. A rotund Black man in a bailiff's uniform motioned with a massive hand and five bratwurst-sized fingers to receive their papers identifying Myles's custody motion. The lady lawyer presented the papers, while her client saw a room crowded to the point of being three-quarters full already. "You're not on this docket, ma'am,"

said the bailiff. "You were. But you're crossed off. See?" he showed her the list for the day on a brown wooden clipboard with a metal clamp at the top. He looked at her deferentially and said, "Let me see what I can find out, please." In a few moments he was back. "Ma'am, your case has been moved to a hearing room upstairs. Judge McCarver. I can show you where that is," he spoke and reached around her shoulder to push open the door for Karidja. "Just go down to that alcove, turn left, and then take the stairs or elevator up two flights. Good luck."

Myles followed her out and down the hall. He wanted to know from his lawyer, "Why didn't you tell him you knew where it was? That you were just there yesterday?"

Karidja stopped walking. She looked at him eye to eye. "Myles, when someone is being nice to you, it's impolite and lacking grace to interrupt them. It's telling them they don't need to be nice. That you don't care to be grateful." She paused. "That's not the way we want to get used to behaving now, is it, Myles?"

He was ashamed. "You have many things to teach me, don't you, Ms. Soro?" He looked at her smile and her eyes. "I only hope to be around long enough to have the chance for that to be so."

They chose the stairs.

The same bailiff as Monday was posted at the door to the hearing room. Karidja saw he was again spectacularly neatly dressed. He greeted them with recognition. "You'll be up second this morning. You can go in and sit in the back or use the lounge down the hall. There's a vending machine. I'll find you when the time comes, if you'd like."

They chose to use the lounge. They could talk there without disturbing the court. As they sat on the hard vinyl blue, armless seats, Myles said, "I should make sure to go more places with you. People just seem to know to treat you nicely." She smiled in reply but said nothing. He went on, "Do you think we will win custody today?"

Before she could answer, his lawyer noticed Godfrey Mellon walking down the hall toward them. "Well, hello and good morning. Ms. Soro, have

you any news about Ned? I just heard downstairs that he was taken to the hospital during the night."

Myles began to stand up and blast Mellon for all the stress the lawyer put his friend through the day before. Then he saw the knowing and scolding face of Karidja Soro looking right at him. But he was up too far to sit back down, so he morphed into offering Mellon his chair so he could talk to Karidja. She gave them both big smiles, as Myles moved over to look out the window. She shook Mellon's hand. "Thank you, sir. When I saw him this morning, he was sedated and asleep. His physicians are hopeful he will recover. I was told he had a heart attack."

"Damn. I'm sorry. For him and for you both. I know you have more than just professional relationships with Ned. He has spoken very highly of you both in our more . . . quiet . . . moments together. Ms. Soro, please tell all the Hegerman associates that I, personally, and our firm, corporately, express our best wishes and prayers for him and his family." Mellon appeared as genuine as could be, or was he just polished by practice over the years? Karidja couldn't decide. Myles didn't care to bother figuring it out.

"Thank you, I certainly will, sir." Was all she replied.

The bailiff saved them from having to venture into small talk.

Mellon responded to the bailiff by rising and making his way down the hall toward the hearing room. Myles was taken aback. He asked when the two others were far enough down the hall not to hear. "Karidja, why is he here? And why are we back upstairs?"

"Myles, I assure you I am as in the dark as you are about these matters. Let us go and see and make the best of it, please." Myles didn't perceive it, but Karidya's mind had begun racing for answers to the same two questions before he voiced them. She wondered what Ned would do. Then she gave up on that and worked on what it was that she going to do. Had Eleanor Quatrane somehow been privy to that mental switch, she would have smiled.

Because their item was second on the docket, when Myles entered the hearing room, Judge McCarver was already at the bench. Godfrey Mellon occupied the table they were at the day before, on the judge's right. So, Myles

moved to the judge's left, the side of the room with the judge's chamber's door. Attorney Soro followed in behind him and sat at the table in the aisle seat. To Myles, it felt somewhat odd, but apparently that was the order of decorum when your attorney was bringing the motion.

There was a different court recorder and front-of-the-room bailiff from Monday's hearing. The judge spoke out in advance of anything being said by the bailiff or the court recorder. "Good morning, to you all." As if in one continuous ballet move, the three of them all stood up and nodded a return greeting. "Mr. Lowry, I intervened with my colleague downstairs and asked to have your motion brought up here this morning. My motivation to do so was to make certain your motion was addressed without prejudice." He did not explain himself any further.

"Mr. Mellon, I did not expect to see you here today. But I welcome you just the same." McCarver moved a few papers to the center of his bench. "Having you here will make this even more neatly handled. I will not ask the attorneys to come forward, for the same reasons I did not toward the end of the day yesterday. I have asked the bailiff to restrict entry for the time we need together." McCarver signaled the bailiff, who then opened the door and went out into the hall.

"Mr. Lowry, your attorney and Mrs. Lowry's attorney reached a substantial and equitable proposition yesterday. You are aware I accepted it on behalf of the family court. I did not see any point in involving another judge at this time, as that would have occasioned a significant amount of the court's time . . . and a major effort for the three of you to reconstitute the case for presentation to a judge unfamiliar with the proceedings of two years ago and yesterday." The judge looked at all parties in front of him and knew they understood what he said.

"Also, Mr. Lowry, if there were to be a full hearing in front of another judge this morning, it is likely the efforts of the attorneys yesterday might have been rendered moot and been thrown out. In legal terms, a full hearing today would prejudice your motion and require it to be brought at another time. Unfortunately for you, your agreement in place allows you to bring only one motion a year."

Judge McCarver scanned their faces and found the attorneys sensed where he was taking the proceeding, even though his explanation was lost on

Myles. He forged forward anyway, "Yesterday evening you all agreed that no pertinent discussions or decisions could occur unless both of Linda Lowry's living parents were present before the court. When the court contacted Mr. Mellon early today, he affirmed that he still had not heard from Mrs. Lowry. He also indicated it was highly improbable that she even had knowledge that this motion was scheduled to come before the court this morning." They all looked at Mellon and he nodded agreement with what the judge had just related.

"And so, I am calling this court to recess for five minutes. In that time, as you demonstrated yesterday, I invite the attorneys to work together. In particular, I would hope they could decide that they would like to ask the court for an indefinite postponement in bringing this motion forward. Such a postponement would make it still possible to bring this motion when both living parents are present, without its being denied today, and without the parents having to wait a year to bring it forward, when the required conditions allow." The lawyers agreed tacitly.

Judge Eoin McCarver rose and left the courtroom for his chambers.

He returned to reconvene the court five minutes later. Both attorneys agreed to a postponement. Myles Lowry and the two lawyers thanked the judge and left. On the way out, the bailiff wished them well.

As they began to part company, Karidja directing her client toward the stairs and Mellon opting for the elevator, the lawyer spoke to her, "You are something else, lady." She stopped and faced him, her arms at her sides and slightly raised, palms up in a questioning gesture. "I just can't get over how deferential that judge has been to you, yesterday and today. I've never seen that man go out of his way to look out for a lawyer's client the way McCarver has taken an interest in Mr. Lowry."

All she could think to say was, "I think the one he's taken with is his—their—daughter. She doesn't have much else going for her. I think he wants to keep her from being a ward of the state, which she could easily turn out to be. He saw her quite a bit two years ago as a four-year-old during the divorce proceedings. The notes I got back from Ned Hegerman at the time indicated Judge McCarver even interviewed her in his chambers for ten minutes at one point, when the courtroom got pretty heated."

"Yes, I recall. You're right about that." Mellon stood silently, then said what he was considering. "But you are wrong about saying little Linda doesn't have much going for her." Before Myles's lawyer could reply, Mellon pointed at her and said, "She's got you." Then they each went their own way to exit the courthouse and return to the streets of Manhattan.

Myles and Karidja were delayed in the lobby for an extra moment or two. There was a fuss going on in an entry line to one of the metal detectors. A man was told to remove his belt and place it in a plastic bin. His low riding pants slipped down to his knees as a result. Fortunately, his boxer shorts had a snug enough elastic waistband to prevent an even more embarrassing situation for all involved. Nevertheless, there was no shortage of gawkers, hoots, and howls from others waiting their turn to pass the security barrier.

Upstairs in his chambers, unaware of the underwear escapade, the judge prepared the appropriate papers for filing. One file folder, in which he put most of the material, was tabbed with the family name: LOWRY. He placed two sheets of hand-written notes into another that was simply tabbed: LINDA.

He passed them over to his clerk, Ramona, and went to use his bathroom before asking the bailiff to open the courtroom for those remaining items on his Tuesday morning docket.

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A half day earlier, on the prior Monday evening, Rosalyn Lowry and her *ad hoc* chauffeur shared a drink in the living room of Valerie's residential unit at **HAPPYDALE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL**.

Valerie asked, "So how was your first Monday here at **HAPPYDALE**?"

"Mostly physical orientation. First, showing us the unit across the way. We had an hour on our own to unpack and get organized. The school provided temporary bed linens, towels, and the like until I can get some of my own from home or buy some. We'll eat at the dining hall for staff and students until we put in some pantry items." Rosalyn shrugged her shoulders

and took a long pull on her drink. She wasn't concerned about asking for a refill quite soon.

"Then we had a drive around in one of the four-seater golf carts to see the layout of the school grounds. Linda loved that, for sure." She laughed and sipped. "We saw the classroom building and common spaces for Linda's age group. She's in a good spot from grades one to four. Almost right in the middle. She won't feel like she's being treated like a baby or that she has to act too grown up. She liked that there was an open area where kids could gather that wasn't a classroom or where she'd have to stay too quiet, as she will in the library."

Valerie stood up and asked, "Can I freshen that? I'm ready, after all that driving today."

"I'm anxious to hear what you found out." Rosalyn did not want to appear pushy, but her anxiety was peaking.

Valerie handed Rosalyn a refill with new ice. Her own glass was topped off as well. She had been gone longer than Rosalyn expected, probably because her phone rang.

As soon as she sat, Valerie started talking. "I didn't know your phone number, so Taylor and I had set up a signal. She had your kitchen light turned out. I shone a light into your kitchen window for her to see, and Taylor called me. Linda is in bed asleep. Taylor is doing her reading homework in your sitting room. We have an hour before Taylor's bedtime."

"It's very reassuring knowing that I have a responsible person right nearby." Rosalyn tried to sound grateful, without disclosing her selfish pleasure.

"Taylor can use the money. Saving up for college, you know," Valerie affirmed. Wary as a mother hen of the nearby fox, Valerie tried to sound helpful, while keeping an eye out for what she remembered from their college years about Rosalyn's inclination to take advantage of the people around her.

Rosalyn began, breaking the not-so-pregnant pause. "I can't tell you how much this means. I simply could not have gone to that hearing."

Valerie replied, "I only spent a few moments inside. I pretended to have the wrong room. I saw a red-and-grey haired Irish judge, maybe the one you told me about, I couldn't be sure. When they turned around, I saw your lawyer . . . and the one you said would be representing Myles. I recognized both of them, from their pictures you gave me from the newspaper clippings about the divorce hearings."

Rosalyn pressed, "Could you hear anything of what was said?"

Valerie told her, "No. I heard nothing when I opened the door. And when I came in, they all stopped and everyone but Myles turned to look. I was not as unobtrusive as I'd hoped."

Rosalyn tried to ameliorate her concerns, but she was disappointed in what she heard. "Well, you didn't want them to notice you enough to give them any idea you were interested in what they were doing. Or to be curious enough to remember something about you to help them discover later on who you are."

What she heard next didn't make Rosalyn feel any better. Valerie spoke, "About that," she hesitated.

It was Rosalyn's turn. And she didn't handle it well. Typical Rosalyn. She said, "What? Oh no, don't tell me"

Valerie was offended amid her apology. "I'm a goddamn teacher, who used a personal day off to help a friend, Rosalyn, not a freaking spy!" She took such a long sip that the ice was uncovered and it struck the side of her glass. "I was in such a rush, Rosalyn. I didn't expect you to call me yesterday morning and ask me to get you out of your apartment, bring you here, and then go to court for you. I—"

Rosalyn was not able to help herself. "Oh, Valerie, what did you do? What happened?"

Valerie was short with her retort, nowhere near as apologetic as she had expected to be when she sat down with her fresh drink. "I forgot to put in my contacts, Rosalyn."

Rosalyn eased herself back, but only because she misunderstood. She changed to a consoling tone, as deeply felt as a puddle on a frozen lake. "Don't worry, I'm sure you saw well enough."

Valerie pushed on. Half eager to be sorry, half to be forgiven. "No, you're not understanding." She paused and finished what was left in her glass. "With my contacts both my eyes are brown. So, today anyone who looked closely enough would remember that the lady who was lost had one blue eye and one brown eye." She looked right at Rosalyn, bowed her head to slip out a lens, and then looked up at Rosalyn with her heterochromatic blue and brown eyes.

Rosalyn feigned a retreat to make them each feel better. "Hey, Valerie. They're all guys. Remember what we always said about guys back at school? 'Guys tell you lies and don't look at your eyes.'"

Then her one-time college friend nuked Rosalyn's dirigible. "But there was a woman with Myles."

Rosalyn's manicured ego sprouted jealous claws. "A what?"

"A woman." It was a plain and simple answer.

"A lawyer?" Rosalyn wanted to know.

"I don't know. She was sitting to his left. His lawyer was on his right."

Rosalyn almost demanded, "What did she look like? Tall, short?"

Rosalyn's courtroom rescuer of the present day now felt like she was being treated as she had been when they were college friends back in the past, by 'it's-all-about-me Rosalyn.' So, she spoke bluntly. "Rosalyn, they were all sitting. No one stood up."

Rosalyn persisted, "Can you tell me anything about her?"

Exasperated, Valerie said, "She was Black. Pretty face. All I could tell."

Nothing seemed to please Rosalyn. "Did they look intimate, she and Myles?"

Feeling like the community well pump in a Middle Ages town square by the pillory, Valerie stood, waited, extended her arms scarecrow-like, with lowered head and bent arms. "I am not a medieval witch." She went to pour herself another drink. She offered none to Rosalyn. From the kitchen counter she called in, "Rosalyn I stood there for less than two minutes. C'mon!"

Rosalyn finally got a grip on herself. The mimicry of public disgrace and torture were barely enough to break through. "Okay. Sorry. But look, did it seem like they were going to have the hearing without me there? Or cancel it? That's why I asked you to go ten minutes or so after the starting time, just to get an idea if it was actually going forward."

Remembering the pointlessness of arguing with Rosalyn in college, Valerie resigned herself simply to answering. "I couldn't hear what they were saying. But they were definitely underway and carrying on the hearing, from the way things looked and how engaged they all were. They weren't just standing around or nothing. And I most certainly interrupted something by the way the judge seemed a little impatient when he looked my way."

Rosalyn started to ask something else. Valerie had had all she was taking. "Look, my daughter has to get home. So just listen. Don't ask me anything else. Or I'm done." Valerie looked at Rosalyn firmly. Her houseguest relented, however temporarily. But that was enough to get this over with as far as Valerie was concerned.

"The only person in that courtroom who would know who I am was Myles. If he even would remember me. Hell, I don't know. It was a lifetime ago. But he had his back to the door where I stood, and he did not turn around. He was looking at some stuffed animal or something in front of him on the table." Rosalyn leaned forward. "Shut it, don't ask, I told you already." She paced herself.

"The only person in the whole place who could say anything about me, as far as I could figure, is the bailiff at that door. He had a good look at me. We were a few feet apart from each other. We looked at each other directly. If he paid attention. If the light was right. And if he recalls such things. He would know I had one blue and one brown eye. Other than him . . . and other than that . . . I was a ghost at the courthouse today for you."

Rosalyn stood up. She was about to apologize. Valerie didn't let her. "Forget it. Let's just have you go home. Pay my daughter and send her home. She has school tomorrow." They walked toward the door.

Lastly, at the door. "Listen, Rosalyn. You need a good sleep. Go get one. Go to the dining hall tomorrow for some breakfast with Linda. Get there at seven-thirty so Linda can eat before her eight o'clock line up to go to class. And you'll be ready for your eight-fifteen meeting also."

They exchanged good nights. No hugs or kisses this time.

45

Tuesday morning found Linda and Rosalyn busy beginning their September while at the same time in New York Karidja visited the hospital and then made her way to court.

Choosing from their reduced wardrobes still in their suitcases, laid open on the floor of each bedroom, **HAPPYDALE'S** newest mother-and-daughter arrivals dressed as reasonably as possible. They and made their way from their bare-cupboard residence to the school's dining hall.

Fortunately, their television's morning weather report declared this first week of September promised temperatures in the low eighties, somewhat more mild than seasonally expected. And the dry weather to begin this week was welcomed by the pair who had no room on their Monday exodus for winter coats or rain gear. As well as the blue sky that morning, it was clear to Rosalyn that she would need to plan on retrieving clothes and other necessities left behind in their apartment. That would be second in priority to stocking some household staples and groceries in their new kitchen-away-from-home.

On the previous day's tour, Linda learned the new word, "quad." There were two of these grassy rectangular swarths at **HAPPYDALE**. One was bordered with two dormitories, one each for older and younger residential students, and two classroom buildings also grouped into four grade levels apiece. These each took a side of one quad, closing off the block. The second quad fronted faculty residences, one in which they would now live, and the

school's administrative departments and faculty common rooms and offices. All four structures were red-bricked, slate-roofed, white window-framed, and brown wooden-doored. Away from these, off-quad, were two smaller buildings set aside for high school classes and dorms, for a lesser-sized enrollment.

Linda and Rosalyn now walked across the second quad. There was a light dew on the soft, recently mowed grass. Linda smelled the sweetness in the air and was excited for a new day and a new place, even if a bit apprehensive. Rosalyn let the water on her shoes dampen her spirits as well as her feet. The mother and daughter cut a diagonal path across the lawn rather than following the two right-angled red brick walkways that crossed as they bisected the quad. Judging by the crushed grass underfoot, Rosalyn would acknowledge in their defense, if the need arose, that they were not the first that morning to use such a shortcut to the dining hall. It was formally labeled "refectory" on the campus map taped to the refrigerator door in their residential unit. Rosalyn made sure they walked toward the nearby panoply of children's waking and hungry voices.

Along the way, Linda was thrilled to hear so many various birds singing in the new day. Smaller wrens and sparrows darted low to the ground, right across the walkway where people were about to step. Larger crows and jays screeched to attract attention and fellow birds. They perched in mature trees that were grouped and spaced strategically within the sub-squares the cross walks formed in the larger quad. In their copse, maples, elms, beech, and tulip trees offered shade to anyone who might sit under them on dry grass or picnic blankets later in the day. Linda liked all these trees. But what she really looked forward to walking through were the wild woods surrounding the meadows inside the white fences that she saw from the two-lane blacktop the day before. Her mother saw the quad as a green felt tabletop with four melds of playing cards gathered into a pile of spades, a pile of clubs, a pile of diamonds, and a pile of hearts.

Linda and Rosalyn now walked across this second quad. There was a light dew on the soft, recently mowed grass. Linda smelled the sweetness in the air and was excited for a new day and a new place. Rosalyn let the water on her shoes dampen her spirits as well as her feet. They cut a diagonal path through the lawn rather than following the right-angled, red brick walkway, set off by low trimmed, still-green boxwoods. Judging by the crushed grass underfoot, Rosalyn acknowledged they were not the first to use such a

shortcut that morning to the dining hall, formally labelled 'refectory' on the campus map taped to the refrigerator door in their residential unit.

Rosalyn made sure they walked toward the nearby panoply of children's waking and hungry voices. Along the way, Linda was thrilled to hear so many various birds singing in the new day. Some darted in and out of the boxwoods right in front of where people taking the brick walkway were about to step. Other larger birds perched in the different types of trees spaced evenly along the edge of an imaginary square, centered within the quad and complementing the rectangle traced by brick walkway. In a set of four copse, these maples, elms, beech, and tulip trees offered shade to anyone who might sit under them on dry grass, or on a picnic blanket, later in the day. They thrived in a formed array midway between the bordering boxwoods and the walking path through the quad. The young girl liked all the trees, but looked forward to walking through the wild woods she saw from the two-lane blacktop the day before, around the meadows inside the white fence. Her mother saw it all as a green felt tabletop with four suits of cards gathered into a pile of spades, a pile of clubs, a pile of diamonds, and a pile of hearts.

The birdsong waned and the children's vocalizing crescendoed as the mother and child walked up the granite stairs, pulled open the heavy oaken doors by their wrought iron handles, and entered the wide-open space of the dining hall. The sound of young voices clashed with the rattling of forks and knives and spoons the students dropped on aluminum trays. At the far end of the hall, they saw the breakfast line advance, with hungry students sliding trays along the ledge in front of the food buffet counter.

This was nothing like first grade breakfast last year. Back then, Linda remembered she went to her classroom. There was a cafeteria lady who came into the room with a cart. You could pick a small container of milk or juice. You could choose a carton of cereal that would hold the milk you poured into it. She liked the Sugar Pops she ate with a plastic spoon. And some days you could help yourself to one muffin and other days to one doughnut. Those you placed on a napkin big enough to cover the space on your desk to collect the crumbs when you were finished. Everything you needed to throw away went into a plastic bag lining the special waste basket in front of the room. It was collected by the janitors after the morning snack break.

But here at **HAPPYDALE**, Linda was amazed. There were long tables and chairs. A chair you could pull out and sit on without someone leaning against you while you tried to open your lunchbox. Back in first grade the lunchroom had a plastic bench attached to each side of every table. The whole thing was folded up together and rolled against the wall after lunch, so the space would be ready for afternoon gym classes.

Linda hoped this would mean at **HAPPYDALE** bigger kids, like fourth graders, couldn't crowd in and nudge you aside and help themselves to what was packed and wrapped in a napkin by your mom at home and meant for you to have.

Linda did not see other kids sitting with their moms. But there was a table midway up the room, along the wall without windows. Half its chairs were taken by woman talking and drinking coffee. Linda figured this to be the mom's table. Another adult table had men and women not talking to each other. They were looking at papers and folders. She guessed these were teachers. She had seen her mother working with such folders at their kitchen table when she was a teacher, back when her dad still lived with them.

Off to the side, near the beginning of the long counter with the breakfast food there was an adult serving station with four tall metal urns, and neatly stacked white cups and saucers. Each urn had a metal nameplate hanging from a little silver chain draped around the top of the container. Linda was able to read them all. Two said **COFFEE**, one said **DECAF**, and the other **HOT WATER**. The white tablecloth spread on the table had some brown stains below the spouts for the coffee to come out. There was a flat saucer under each, but they still had some spills around them. To the side were a few bottles of marked for milk and cream and something named half-and-half. Linda laughed to herself, thinking it wasn't only she who couldn't make up her mind about what she would have for breakfast.

Rosalyn poured a coffee and told Linda, "This is all I'm having. Pick out what you want and see if you remember any second graders you met yesterday and go sit with them. I'm going to ask the mothers where the grocery stores are around here. We are going to need to get some food to put in the kitchen for ourselves." And with that, her mother left Linda to fend for herself.

Linda watched her mom walk away. She felt about as alone as she did on so many Sunday mornings at home. She had known her mom was upstairs sleeping, but she had been on her own to explore the freight trains. She smiled thinking about the friendly train man she met just two days ago on her birthday. She remembered raiding her refrigerator to have a Sunday breakfast, and more, for him to share. Linda took a deep breath and told herself to go raid the dining hall counter, find a table, and see with whom she could share a Tuesday breakfast. "After all," she said to herself, "I'm six years old and I'm going to be in the second grade now."

46

Some of the other women were casually attired, so Rosalyn felt overdressed, even if her dress was of such a simple style. But other women looked ready to work at **HAPPYDALE** service jobs. Most were finishing up their coffee and a small breakfast. Some looked ready to stay and socialize. They were apparently seated in two groups, the larger of the two being the service workers. Rosalyn chose to ease out a chair within the three empty seats on each side of the table that separated the groups. Everyone smiled, but no one spoke up. They did. However, look up to see what would happen next.

"Good morning, I'm new here. My name is Rosalyn Lowry. My daughter, Linda, is a second grader. May I sit?" She kept her saucer and coffee in hand so as not to presume.

A woman on her right was sitting with her back against the wall, across the table width from Rosalyn. She wore a forest green uniform with the white school lettering showing partially from under a light brown sweater. This woman was the only one to respond. "Well, Rosalyn Lowry. Welcome to **HAPPYDALE**. I'm on the way out to work, as are some of the other sisters here. But a few of these ladies will stay here until the children depart for class, so we'll leave you in their capable hands." At that, the cadre on Rosalyn's right stood, gathered their things, and began leaving. The clear majority of them were persons of color, Black and Latin, she thought.

The cohort who would remain had no persons of color in its ranks. And none wore uniforms or lettered clothing, as casual as their dress was.

Rosalyn was stymied. She could not tell if the departing spokeswoman was being sarcastic. And if so, she could not tell if she had been her target or the remaining table sitters were.

"We're the mothers," offered a slim woman, probably in her late twenties, with straight brown hair, round-lensed eyeglasses with light blue frames. She wore a housedress of lavender colored fabric that Rosalyn thought was a little too lightweight for dawn's cool temperature, but that she guessed would be very appropriate for the heat expected to settle in by ten in the morning. No one said anything else. No one extended an invitation to sit. Nor did anyone seem to object if she did.

So, Rosalyn sat and tried again. "I guess I'm a hybrid. I am a mom. But I am here for an interview to assume the librarian's position.

A serious-looking older woman in her early forties asked with a straight face, "And what position does a librarian assume that leads to her becoming a mom?"

Rosalyn blinked and involuntarily her head shook back and forth twice, as if to make the words echo in her ears so she could realize if she had truly heard the crass thing she thought the woman said.

And then all the woman at the table exploded in laughter, stood up, reached out to shake hands and were introducing themselves to Rosalyn by their first names. "She's just yanking your chain, Rosalyn Lowry," said the slim first speaker. "Margie's like that. She thinks she's allowed to take liberties as the senior citizen of the group."

Rosalyn let a smile slip onto her face. She used it to cover her true emotions just like her frost-burned saran wrap made it impossible for her ex-husband to know what leftovers were stuck solid in the freezer compartment of their home refrigerator. She adjusted her coffee cup and saucer where she sat and slipped a paper napkin underneath. She was sure the others took it as a precaution not to spill her drink on the table. But Rosalyn just needed their momentary distraction to have time to formulate her game plan.

Having done so, she asked the table, "Will anyone here be going grocery shopping after school hours today? I sure could use a ride and help finding the store."

"Since I owe you one anyway, I'd be happy to take you," spoke Margie in a conciliatory voice. "I'll meet you here at four, if that works for you."

And that was that. Because the children were starting to get up to go to class, it was dismissal time for the mothers' table as well, it seemed.

There were no real goodbyes. Rosalyn nodded to affirm the four o'clock meet-up. The ladies left and Rosalyn sat with her cold coffee and took out the campus map to see how best to walk to her appointment in fifteen minutes.

47

Linda stood up and gathered the corrugated paper wrapper from her chocolate chip muffin, the pat of butter that came with it that she didn't use, her napkin, and her metal tray and utensils. She followed some others she saw throw their papers away in a round rubber grey trash bin and then stack the tray and utensils inside a large wall opening. Looking through the space, Linda saw the conveyor belt and dishwasher that fascinated her during the previous day's facility "familiarity walk-through" as it was called. She hoped someone would be willing to sit with her the next time she came here to eat.

48

Completely unbeknownst to Linda and her mother, a little bit later that morning a medical man named Dr. Isadore Aronsen stood in a hospital hallway, with one leg bent stork-like and propped against the wall. He asked a few questions of the three medical students he had taken on early morning rounds. They all thought that Ned Hegerman's skin coloration and relaxed breathing suggested he was doing well. The vital signs they woke him to take were encouraging. The irregularities in his EKG printout were not remarkable or signifying any dire problem, though they still demonstrated his heartbeat was not back to a standard, strong sinus rhythm. Aronsen excused the trio and went back into Ned's room. The woman in the side chair stood at his approach.

"How is he coming along, Doctor Aronsen? When do you think he can return home?"

"It's still a bit too early to tell," was his non-committal assessment. "I'd like Attorney Hegerman to have at least two more days here for rest and observation. And then I'd like to make repeat tests for comparisons. I'm still not completely sure what brought on his emergency. It's only going on twelve or so hours since the event, as best as we can tell. Before signing his release, I'd like to be more sure of the cause, and then develop a prognosis and care plan so that such an event is not likely to be repeated."

She sat back down and thanked him without pressing for any further information. The doctor noticed she hardly glanced Ned's way before returning to her reading.

Some distance down the floor, at the nurses' station, the physician used a hospital phone. "This is Doctor Aronsen. Is Eleanor Quatrane available, please?"

"Yes. I'm Eleanor," answered a quaking voice.

"You can relax, Ms. Quatrane," assured Aronsen. "Has Ms. Soro been able to contact you? I know she was off to court after seeing me this morning."

Eleanor tried to calm down. She realized she was speaking faster than usual. "Yes, she did. She gave me the numbers to call, just twice a day. And no one else from here should be making any calls, as you directed." She inhaled. "Excuse me, doctor. I just need a moment to catch a breath. Your call got me thinking that something bad had happened. I could use one of those phone hook-ups I see on TV hospital shows, so you could take my blood pressure." She allowed herself a nervous laugh.

"I see you do have a sense of humor as Ms. Soro told me," said the physician. "I just wanted to make our first contact together a personal call. I can assure you that Attorney Hegerman is resting this morning. I think he is comfortable. The monitors are providing good indications of his vital signs and heart rhythms. I expect he'll be with us at least two more days." He

caught himself. "That is, I mean here in the hospital. I hope he'll be with you for quite some time still after that."

They expressed mutual thanks cordially with no heightened emotion. The schedule of calls and recordings to learn and convey Ned's condition was now in Eleanor Quatrane's hands, as she knew everyone would prefer.

49

Linda had been told at her last school that second grade was different from first grade. More work, less play. More reading by yourself, not just listening to books the teacher read to the class at story time. Fewer sheets to color with pictures and lines already drawn, more blank pages to start on your own. For Linda this was welcome news.

She was already reading some of the words in *Black Beauty* at home, even if it was because she had memorized the words her mother spoke over and over in her first and most favorite "chapter book." Favorite enough to have found its way into the suitcase with her clothes her mother had packed so quickly to leave on this adventure to be their own persons. Linda also could draw figures that looked enough like people to be recognized as a dad and a mom and a little girl by a tree and a house, even if those papers kept getting misplaced when her mom straightened up the apartment. And, of course, she knew the letters on the sides of boxcars and could draw the moons and cats and shapes. Her numbers came from the markings on those train cars. She copied them out on Sunday mornings into her first-grade practice tablet while she sat on the embankment behind the apartment, if it wasn't raining. She knew how to use a number line to add them together if they weren't too big or too long or came to more than ten.

Linda joined in the line of girls who stood and gathered in the dining hall when the monitor asked for all second graders to assemble. She recalled some faces she saw in her quick visit yesterday, even though she had not recognized them at breakfast tables in the dining hall. She saw some sidelong glances thrown by girls nudging shoulders and nodding to their next in line classmates. Linda bravely put on a friendly face. That ages-old palimpsest children master momentarily, sublimating their quivering lips and watery

eyes with the film of an innocent smile, as she had taught herself to crayon on a happy girl in her family pictures drawn at home.

Linda hoped there was a bathroom in the second-grade classroom, like the one in her old first grade. A small room in the corner. One person at a time. She would ask to go in there before class started and catch her breath to settle down. Then she knew she would be ready to be in the second grade.

50

Left alone at the table by the departing mothers, Rosalyn looked at the empty hallway recently evacuated by lines of grade-level-assigned students beginning their school day. She decided to use the ladies' room before her appointment. The toilets seats and stalls were kid-sized and there were bits of torn perforated paper square edges speckling the floor, left by first-of-the-day visitors anxious to be on time for either food or class. Rosalyn felt as if she were Brownie scout camping again and she was squatting over a log in the woods, near a reeking outhouse she refused to use. Today she had no choice. It was **HAPPYDALE**, or who-knew-where, that they could blend into the woodwork of civilization for the time being.

51

Linda had her moment to collect herself in the private bathroom in the corner, as she had hoped. She stepped out into the classroom while everyone was busy in a far corner at the front of the room. No one noticed she had quietly re-entered the room. She made her way over to the windows, looked outside, and then saw a large aquarium on the window ledge atop the knee-high 'cubbies,' each with a Dyno-labeled name on its front edge. She saw her name on the bottom lip of an empty space.

Then she saw it. Linda was captivated by this second-grade aquarium. The uneven floor of the watery realm was littered with a sunken storybook pirate ship, broken in two large pieces and countless smaller shards by unseen, apparently hostile, forces. From recesses within the smaller stern portion, a column of bubbles escaped with a timed regularity. Some popped

open under the pressure and dissipated. Others rose to the surface, where they burst out into the invisible sea of air above. A precious few maintained equilibrium and danced on the water's surface for quite some time, imitating the wriggling tadpoles below developing amphibious survival skills. Linda would soon discover she was one of these precious few.

The assembly in the front of the room started shifting, and voices began to be raised.

"Betty has the day. Laura has the date. Amanda has the month." Those young female voices spoke out in a practiced unison. As they moved apart, the girls with the Velcro-backed placards walked one at a time to the wall poster and covered the words printed there—DAY. . . MONTH. . . DATE—by affixing their assigned placard. They stepped away and all twelve voices recited as one, "Tuesday . . . September . . . First."

Mrs. Steadman then announced, "And now, class. . ." as she faced the flag on a short staff, angled out from the wall above the writing board. Without further prompting, the girls recited, "I pledge allegiance . . ."

Linda finally recognized something she could be part of. She placed her hand over her heart, as she had done every morning in first grade, and recited The Pledge of Allegiance in her classroom voice. At the end of the Pledge, there was a shuffle of feet as a dozen young ladies made their way to the assigned seats.

There had been twelve students, therefore twelve desks, up to the day before, in Ms. Steadman's second-grade classroom. The desktops were not rectangles like Linda knew from first grade. She thought these were more like STOP signs a heavy circus elephant sat upon and squished. They were wider and more squat than the red signs she knew made drivers wait for her to cross the street. And the desks did not stand alone in rows. The angled top corners of each were matched against the adjacent desk, so they fit almost like jigsaw puzzle pieces. They were arranged in two groups of six, facing the front of the room, where Mrs. Steadman's desk was placed, with the flag to her right and the calendar poster further still to the right. The twelve desks formed the sides of a horseshoe shape that did not close at the bottom before this morning. A new desk had been set out in that space before class today. Besides having the cleanest desktop, two other things Linda saw made her sure the desk was new. There were no personal papers or books stored

under the desktop, on the shelf whose front and sides were closed in. And her name was neatly printed on both sides of a V-shaped eased place card, set facing front on the desk, so the girls in each set of six desks along the horseshoe sides, could see it.

But her desk was not touching those next to it. There was a space for passing through on each side of her desk, so Mrs. Steadman could still walk from outside the horseshoe and into its center. The smiling teacher pointed to the place and Linda sat and understood that she was not quite part of the horseshoe yet. She was in the midst of everything, but connected to nothing.

The teacher crossed over the front of the room, stood by her desk, and told the twelve assembled second graders, "Class, this is Linda Lowry. She will be joining us beginning this morning." To herself, Linda imagined these twelve girls thought she was about as joined in as her desk was.

52

Rosalyn did not have long to sit and wait for her interview. The head mistress was punctual. She dressed as if she were too. Her white blouse was a mock turtle, and it came up to form a neckline a little lower than her ear lobes, as Rosalyn looked at her. The unwrinkled, viewable white extended to her solar plexus, a perfect vee target if she ever needed a Heimlich maneuver. The white insert was low and just wide enough, to cover a daring décolletage, when her jacket was worn without the blouse, as she hoped would be the case later that evening. Her jacket's lapels currently framed the daytime top without being too severe or outrageously wide, and were complemented by a single button fastener, centered three inches lower than where they neatly ended. Other than over her modest-sized bust, the lines of the jacket lay flat on the front, sides, and back, with no exaggerated shoulders or vent pleat over the matching green skirt. The suit's skirt fell nicely straight from its jacket-covered waist and hemmed out parallel to the floor at about the bottom of her patella. The green of the suit was not as dark as the working women's forest green uniforms Rosalyn had just seen in the dining hall, but the administrator's palette choice led Rosalyn to imagine that green was the school color. Stockings and a modest closed-toe heel completed the ensemble for now, but would have substitutes that evening.

Ironically, the headmistress's name was Grey, Beatriz Grey. She was a second-generation Spaniard, the first in her family to graduate college. And not by coincidence that college was Barnard, Rosalyn's Alma Mater. She was born in Philadelphia, however, not in New York. Ms. Grey was partial to hiring Barnard graduates and maintained contact with administrators from the college over the years.

After leading Rosalyn into her office and the chair before her desk, Ms. Grey began, "Tell me, please, Mrs. Lowry, how did you hear about us here at HAPPYDALE?"

"I was researching boarding schools for young girls of elementary school age in the Northeast. My daughter, Linda, was five at the time. We just had her birthday Sunday. She's six now." Rosalyn was wary of saying too much, too soon. She was happy to have Ms. Grey pace the discussion, for two reasons. The second reason was that Rosalyn wanted to know the rank order of importance of information the administrator wanted about her. But the more important reason was that Rosalyn sensed that was the way Beatriz Grey went about her business.

If her desktop were any indication, Ms. Grey was single-minded and not prone to suffer distractions lightly. There was one item on the leather-bordered green felt blotter, itself carefully centered on the carved wooden desk's perfectly measured, beveled, and form-fit glass protective top. It was a green manilla file folder with Rosalyn's name typed on the red color-coded label, designed to fit within the folder's three-cut center tab. On the credenza behind the desk and under the office window that looked out onto the grassy quad, were a moderately sized wooden inlaid globe of the world and an orderly line of spine-out books supported by two large brass bookends. Nearby was a matching brass rack for holding file folders. There were two other folders in the rack. One was yellow and one was blue. Each had a red edged label with one, typed individual name apiece. She could not read the names without calling attention to herself, but Rosalyn presumed these belonged to her competing interviewees. Their names were respectively on a right end folder cut-out and a left end folder cut-out.

These were the items in the direct line of sight Rosalyn was afforded from the chair she was directed to sit in. Instinctively, she thought Ms. Grey would consider it a telling trait of a personality lacking focus were Rosalyn to

shift her gaze to other parts of the room. Looking straight ahead seemed to be the thing to do to be successful in this interview.

Realizing Ms. Grey was dressed so impeccably, Rosalyn hoped success was not going to depend on her own wardrobe selection. In her mind's eye she could see better dresses hanging back in her Jersey apartment. But these would have been useless and not presentable after being stuffed in an impromptu escape suitcase.

"What led you to look for such a school for your daughter, Mrs. Lowry?" was question number two. Ms. Grey stayed on a topic that was of interest and logically followed. Her questions did not wander. There was no small talk. No first name basis interest.

"I've been divorced two years. I have full custody. That arrangement is currently being contested, so I decided to leave our current address and get Linda's schooling set up in a place the lawyers don't know about."

Since Ms. Grey did not offer a reply, Rosalyn took it to mean she had more to tell to satisfy the question. And so, she continued, "This school appeared to be very suitable to those needs. Ironically, I discovered that there was a position open I might qualify to hold. It seemed serendipitous when I further learned a former classmate of mine from years ago was also living here at HAPPYDALE with her high school daughter. In renewing our acquaintance and talking to her, I learned of the school's tendency to favor applications from divorced, working mothers with school age children. It all seemed to fit. I allowed myself to think it might work for Linda and I."

"The position you reference is that of librarian. Your experience is in teaching language arts and literature. I fail to see a 'fit' as you call it." Administrator Grey's tone was flat and offered no insight into her feelings on the matter.

Rosalyn had been in these tight spots before. She had taught herself the skills necessary to succeed in such an interview. She just had to keep those parts of her hidden that would decide the contest against her. She eased forward in the chair and the conversation. "When I was teaching, I sometimes felt uneasy when a librarian unaware of our curriculum and academic reading program did not highlight or acquire suitable books.

When I found myself divorced, and forced into home teaching two years ago, I signed up for an accelerated accreditation program in library sciences from Rutgers. I completed the program in sixteen months, mostly working from home."

"I see," was all Beatriz Grey allowed.

Rosalyn felt she had nothing more to say that could help her cause, because she did not know what the headmistress was thinking. So, she waited and just maintained as much eye contact as she could. It would all be up to her interviewer for now.

"How is it that your daughter completed first grade as a five-year-old, Mrs. Lowry?" The eye contact was returned, unbroken.

Rosalyn blinked. That was all she permitted as a response to this unexpected change of direction in the interview. Forcing herself not to look down at the floor, or her hands clasped in her lap, Linda's mother spoke up. "Linda has been influenced by living with a teacher. Learning has always been of interest to her. Sitting at our kitchen table as I graded papers provided her with a chance to draw, color, trace letters and numbers since she was two. Very early on, her father took her to parks and zoos and museums to show her many things that excited her about the world. She loved picture books when she was two, and we each read her stories when she woke from her afternoon naps and at her bedtime by her third birthday." Again, judging by her lack of response, Ms. Grey seemed to find the answer somehow incomplete, so Rosalyn went back to it.

"I approached our local school district. I presented my background and how Linda was homeschooled. At first, they were not impressed enough to even consider a five-year-old first grader. But I pressed a bit. I explained I was trying to finish the library accreditation and needed mornings more available to write papers and occasionally to get the bus into Newark in the latter stages of the program. I pled my case as a divorcee out of work without daycare options. I felt badly doing that, but I considered our situation to be desperate." Rosalyn paused to change the pace, and to elicit Ms. Grey's attention that might have been waning. "But what capped it off was the principal there asking if I was willing to have Linda take the placement exam that was typically given to six-year-olds who had not attended their kindergarten program. Long story short, Linda took the test and

demonstrated a grade readiness. They insisted I still homeschool for verification that Linda was following the lessons and understanding the work. And they said there would be an in-school evaluation each trimester of the grade year." Rosalyn sat back a bit in the chair, and then finished, "And with all that, they accepted Linda into first grade. She was able to meet all their requirements and specifications as the year progressed."

"Would you be willing to do the same here at HAPPYDALE . . . Have your daughter take placement tests . . . Shadow her progress with some sort of involvement, if not precisely homeschooling . . . and accept a trimester staff evaluation?" Beatriz Grey was closing Rosalyn's green manilla file folder as she stated her conditions and asked for Rosalyn's commitment.

"I most certainly would. Happily. Very happily." That was about as genuine a reply that Rosalyn could muster, hoping she was convincing.

"Fine then. Step back outside to the waiting room, please. My assistant will bring you over to Human Resources. They have everything you'll need to complete the job status information as librarian. You'll meet the librarian this afternoon for an orientation. The documents from Human Resources will include a few questions and a request to write an essay about the librarian's job. I'll look at that Thursday morning in hopes that we can sign a contract for a one-year term, with Linda as a 'dependent second-grader,' with all that entails regarding waiver of fees and tuition. I hope you will find this a suitable way to proceed. It has produced favorable results with other new hires who are Barnard graduates." She stood to signal the interview was over.

Rosalyn rose from her chair, expressed her thanks, and headed out to the waiting room before Ms. Grey could change her mind.

Lunchtime would have been challenging for Linda, had not her mother been there to take her aside, so they could eat together. Rosalyn needed to arrange their afternoon before class resumed. She knew Linda would be happy with a pint container of white milk with a straw, a sandwich of smooth

peanut butter and grape jelly on white bread, cut in half. The brownie for a dessert was a welcomed surprise.

"Linda. I have good news. **HAPPYDALE** would like me to be their new librarian. So, we can stay here for the whole school year. You can do second grade in one school from now until summertime. And we can live right here with your new friends. What do you think about that?"

"Mom. I didn't make any friends yet," was the important thing the six-year-old wanted her mother to know.

Rosalyn was stopped mid-chew into her forkful of apple pie. "Oh, but I'm sure you will, honey. It's just our second day here—and you've only had one morning of class." That asserted, Rosalyn continued so as not to lose the momentum she wanted to build. "I have to ask Valerie to have her daughter, Taylor, stay with you this afternoon after school. One of the other mothers is willing to drive me to the store so I can get us some food for the refrigerator." Rosalyn could not see behind Linda's bite of sandwich to know if there was a smile there or something else. That didn't stop her. "What would you like for dinner tonight, Linda?"

"What do the stores here have for dinner food?" asked the child reasonably. "I don't think I want tomato soup and grilled cheese for dinner again tonight in the dining hall."

Rosalyn attributed the question to Linda's passive aggressiveness. She told herself she was too good a homeschooler. From some lessons she had taught her daughter, Rosalyn knew she couldn't avoid inheriting the results. Rosalyn allowed herself to take this as affirmation. Rosalyn begrudgingly appreciated that Myles inculcated Linda's manners before the divorce. Even their daughter's soup-and-sandwich complaint had been made politely.

In truth, her daughter was only asking about shopping for dinner in a new supermarket. If Linda had asked the same question about a restaurant they had not been to before, Rosalyn would not have tossed the inquiry on the same parental ash heap. Her maternal shopping list reply enumerated: "Hot dogs, burgers, chicken tenders, French fries, mashed potatoes, broccoli, cauliflower, tomatoes, pickles, and frozen pizza, I bet."

"If you get pizza, will the others maybe eat with us, too?" Linda was trying to ask several questions at once, as only children can. She knew her mother only wanted to know about dinner. But Linda wanted to let her know she was uneasy in this new place. But she didn't want to discuss or argue about how she felt. Some familiar people—even after only one night—were as important to her as any entrée.

"I'll ask. If they come, we'll see about take out instead of frozen pies." Rosalyn paused and tilted her head down to see if Linda would look at her. When their eyes met, Rosalyn asked, "Would that be okay?"

Linda nodded, because she didn't know how to talk around the lump in her throat.

Rosalyn was off again. And she was finished with wanting to sit with Linda in this dining hall for lunch. "Okay, then. It's settled. I'll find Valerie and Taylor to get it set up. You finish and have a good afternoon."

As she walked away, Rosalyn looked over her shoulder and told her daughter, "I want to hear all about your first day later."

Linda nodded so her voice would not betray that she knew her mother really did not want to hear about anything but her mother's own first day new hire.

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It was after lunch by the time that Karidja Soro returned to the law office. She carried her briefcase from the morning's postponed hearing and a brown bag holding whatever was wrapped in white deli paper she picked up on the way back from court. The pickle juice from the spear tucked in the fold of the white paper had stained the outer bag and threatened to do the same to whatever Karidja placed the bag upon in the conference room.

Close on her heels, Eleanor Quatrane and Gabriella Costa, entered the room. "Tell us. Tell us," urged Gaby. "Give her a minute," pleaded Eleanor.

Karidja sat. "First of all, is this room scheduled for anything? Can I use it for a while?" The ladies nodded. "Okay." She went over to the small refrigerator and removed a bottle of cold water. The first sips felt good going down. "Alright, then. Eleanor, have you heard from the hospital?"

Ms. Quatrane was happy to report. "That nice Doctor Aronsen called me before it was time for me to call the hospital. He said he wanted the first report to be directly from him to us."

She gave Karidja a moment as she sat down and spread a protective placemat on the table and then opened her lunch bag. After a politely small bite of some kind of sandwich, Karidja looked up expectedly, eyes asking her to go on. "The Doctor said Ned was resting. He presumed 'well' from the monitors in the room. So, I took that to mean he was sedated. Right?" Karidja nodded and Eleanor continued, "The doctor said he'd probably keep Ned for at least two days and then run some tests again before releasing him." Karidja looked back across to her after another sip of water. "That was it. For now," was the full report Eleanor delivered.

"Thank you. And thank God," was Karidja's reply.

Gabriella could not contain herself. "What about you," she demanded of Karidja.

Surprised, she said, "What about me?"

"The case. What about the custody case?" she paused. "I still feel terrible about that cassette recorder. Like my bringing it up cost Mr. Lowry the award of custody." She wrung the hands that were so skilled at capturing the spoken word on paper.

"You should be feeling no such thing," Karidja consoled the distraught stenographer. "Your instinct about the recording was not only correct. It kept our client from losing his case outright. We may never have suspected Mrs. Lowry willfully fled her apartment with her daughter to avoid the hearing. The other side wanted him thrown in jail for kidnapping to distract from her leaving the jurisdiction and avoiding the court's review of the case. The mere chance that there was a recording of their argument made it possible for us to reach a favorable settlement for Myles Lowry—and hopefully for his

daughter too." Karidja saw Gabriella was trying to let herself be convinced. She even pushed her eyeglasses back up to the bridge of her nose.

"If you'll give me a half hour to regroup, have this lunch, make a phone call and put all the documents from yesterday and this morning together, I'll be ready, with your help, to make a presentation to the partners by three-thirty." She hesitated. "That's the time you told me they wanted to be briefed, wasn't it Eleanor?" Quatrane nodded, placed her hand on Gaby's shoulder, and led them both out the door to leave Attorney Soro to her business.

Karidja found the phone number she wanted among the papers from Monday afternoon's hearing. She was pleased the phone was picked up after only three rings.

"Hello?" He was always careful when the caller identification message on the office phone had a New York number he did not recognize.

"Is this Mr. Hart?" was all she allowed.

"Yes, Ms. Soro. It is. Apparently, we are both very skeptical of phone callers we don't recognize or expect." Danny Hart was pleased to hear from Karidja, but waited until he heard what she had to say before being too effusive.

Karidja answered in kind. "It would appear to be so. I wanted to tell you that Attorney Hegerman had a heart attack during the night and is now in the hospital recovering."

"That's horrible. I am genuinely sorry. Is there anything I can do?" It was something of an automatic response, but genuine, nonetheless.

"Well, yes. It's about the weather actually," she said with a little lilt in her voice.

"I see," was his reply. "I think I heard storms might come through on Thursday. But that's all I know." Said the investigator.

"Well, since it's going to be dry tonight, what do you think about cashing in a rain check for dinner?" was her reply.

"Cashing in?" was all he said.

"Yes, before he went to the hospital, I believe Ned said you should have a nice lawyer buy you a dinner. And since he's from this law firm, I feel it is only right to make good on his prediction." Karidja hadn't permitted herself to feel this playful for quite some days.

"As an investigator I believe my notes say something about a job offer over dessert. But that wasn't Ned speaking. Unfortunately, I can't read my writing. I must have gotten excited or something and scribbled the name of the person who made that proposition." Danny Hart knew it was now or never. He would not ask again, directly or indirectly.

"I have the exact same recollection, Mr. Hart. In fact, all that's missing in my notes is the after-dinner menu to accompany that arrangement." She also was out of time to keep up the repartee. There were things to do.

"I'm game." Hart replied.

"As am I," she said. "If you leave me a phone message with our service about where to meet you in Manhattan for dinner at seven-thirty, I'll be there. How does that sound? You pick, I'll pay."

"Done. See you at seven-thirty, then." He was almost finished, but he added, "And Ms. Soro, thank you very much."

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Rosalyn caught up to Valerie on the quad. "Hey. I got a ride into town to go food shopping after classes at four o'clock. Can Taylor stay at my place with Linda until I get back?" Rosalyn was quick because she saw Valerie was in a hurry to get to her next class. "In fact, Linda wants to know if you and Taylor will stay if I also order in some pizzas for the four of us. Say, for around five-thirty?"

Valerie agreed. She figured she could leave as soon as she and Taylor wanted to, and she could avoid any drawn-out conversations she'd like to avoid having two nights in a row.

Linda did not know that her mother had lied to Mr. Meadows about school starting the day before, the last day of August. Her classmates had already learned several of Mrs. Steadman's routines over four days of school the week before. From the completed pages Linda saw other kids turn in their books, and the teacher reminding her class of last Wednesday's and Thursday's lessons, Linda knew for sure that she was a week behind.

Mrs. Steadman started in after lunch. "Okay class. Remember on Friday I asked you to think about your favorite book?" There were muffled agreements around the curved horseshoe of desks. "Let's start here at the top of the horseshoe. We'll go back and forth, left side to right side, one at a time. So Linda gets to know some of your names, I'd like you to say your name and tell us the name of your favorite book, and a little about it. That way, Linda will go last. She'll also have time to think of her answer, since she wasn't here to know about the assignment for as long as the rest of you did."

As Linda listened to the names and tried to match them to faces, or clothes, or color hair and style, it seemed to her that Mrs. Steadman was trying to be fair. Linda's parents had read to her some of the books that the other girls mentioned. But they read them maybe only once or twice—certainly not enough for any of those books to become Linda's favorite.

There was *If You Give A Mouse A Cookie*. There were two girls who liked the poetry in *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. One girl who Linda saw sitting by herself and looking a little lonely in the dining hall especially liked *Just Me and My Little Sister*. The two tallest girls, who looked older and were called on a few times in the morning for answers, seemed to like *The Baby-Sitters Club*. When Linda heard more than one girl liked the same book, she wondered if the second girl was telling the truth or was just being a copycat.

Then there were just two more girls to speak before it was going to be Linda's turn.

The first to go was the girl who Linda remembered was nudging her friend in line and making a face about Linda in the dining hall line-up. She had been squirming in her chair and looking over at the bookcase in the reading corner while the other girls introduced themselves and their books.

She spoke up loudly and said, "I like the *Choose Your Own Adventure Books* since I can tell my mother how I want the story to go."

The last classmate was one of the smallest members of the class. "My dad used to read me *Winnie-the-Pooh*. I liked Roo the most because he was small and hopped around the forest. But my mom doesn't like those stories, so she says she will find something else." Linda saw in her scrunched-up face, and the way she twisted her hair in her two fingers when she spoke, that the girl wasn't so happy about the end-of-Pooh.

And then it was her turn. She started to stand up to speak, like they did in first grade. Halfway up, she realized no one else had done that. Everyone spoke sitting down. At first, only the *Choose Your Own Adventure* girl snickered at Linda. Then a few of the girls who seemed to watch her closely all the time, joined in the laughing.

Linda sat down. She looked at her not-so-square desktop and it helped her remember she was in a new school. She took a deep breath and told herself these girls were not going to make her cry. So, she didn't. Instead, she kept looking at her desk as she told them, "My favorite book is *Black Beauty*. It's about a horse. My mom reads it to me over and over. I know the story so well, that she even lets me read some of the pages to her out loud by myself."

Linda looked up. She saw a different horseshoe than the one Beauty lost one day when a man was treating her badly. Four of the faces stared at her in wonder. Faces of girls who were looking forward to learning how to read in second grade. Linda saw, too, that the *Choose Your Own Adventure* girl was no longer the center of attention. And she had stopped laughing at Linda.

In fact, for a few moments, the only sound in the classroom came from the aquarium pump making bubbles over by the closed windows. And then, Mrs. Steadman broke the silence.

"Well class, if your parents will let you bring your book to school tomorrow, we can start looking at them together." And that was the end of the reading part of the afternoon. Next would be math, after quiet time.

In quiet time, everyone put her head down on her arms, folded on her desk.

If anyone needed the bathroom, the routine Linda was beginning to learn was to move your arm out from under your head and to raise your hand.

Linda just closed her eyes and thought of Black Beauty grazing in a grassy meadow with her friend Ginger, as they were resting from hard work and recovering from being treated badly by mean and nasty carriage drivers.

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Linda's father had been thinking of her all morning. While he sat before Judge McCarver, he had wondered how he could gain custody of Linda. As he parted company with his lawyer outside the courthouse, he tried to imagine ways to bring her back into his life every day.

Now he was entering his place of work after the court session was over and he had eaten his lunch at a soda fountain counter. He had not wanted a fancy restaurant. He had not wanted to eat in his place of work. But he did need to eat something. He'd had no breakfast. His stomach was much too nervous to eat before he met Karidja at the courthouse.

He was remembering the lunch counter as he came into the office lobby. The image in his mind was as vivid as the taste of dill pickle still on his tongue.

He sat on a revolving stool, with its red leather, plump circular seat cover, perched like a mushroom atop a silver metal stand. The sides of the red cushion were wrapped and set in a rim of the same silver metal, with three encircling, curved beveled flutes reflecting the daylight onto the floor below. He picked the counter because he and Linda used to eat at such a counter when she was three years old, back when . . . In her honor, he had a grilled cheese sandwich on white bread with a pickle spear on the side of the plate, and a small, pleated paper cup of coleslaw.

The images from the morning had faded within the letters on the glass door in front of him: Easton International Medical Supplies. In his office, he laid out copies of the court papers Karidja had given him that morning.

First, he read and re-read and further studied every word of the court agreement from the prior evening. He particularly dwelled on the things he was to do and the things he was not to do.

Second, he made himself a brief list, key points only. He made it on a small index card he could fold and put in his wallet. He would read it every morning when he awoke, every night as he went to bed, every time he ate, and every time he wanted a drink, so he could get a push to decide not to have that drink. It was the way he worked. It was the way he did everything important: **No contact with Linda. Stay ten feet away from Rosalyn. Pay rent by 15th to Mellon.**

Third, he walked over to the family heirloom grandfather clock, opened the glass door front, reached in, and put his hand on the pendulum to steady it and then bring it to a stop. He taped a small note on a different index card to the inside of the door, so no office cleaning or exterior dusting would disturb it. The message was clear. **Do not restart clock until Linda is home with Myles.**

Fourth, he went over to the wet bar. He took each decanter from the counter and each bottle from the cabinet below. One at time, he poured the fluid from them into his private bathroom toilet. The water turned a more offensive color than that in a dysentery ward. And then he flushed it. Twice. He used a small brush on a handle standing in a white plastic conical floor stand beside of the toilet to swish out the toilet after the flushes. And then he flushed it again. He disposed the handle and brush, intact, in a plastic bag liner in a garbage basket from his office. He placed the empty bottles in that bag as well, twisted the bag with a few spins so he could tie a knot in the top of the bag. He left it in the basket in the bathroom rather than returning it into the office. He rinsed the decanters at the wet bar sink and then left them in the sink, resting at angle on their sides, with the tops off.

Then, he sat at his desk and began to draft a staff memo by hand. When he finished with all the cross outs and rewrites, he took a fresh piece of paper and neatly hand wrote a good, final copy. He used the intercom to ask for his assistant. When she came in, she knew from years of experience that he was not in a mood for talking or socializing. He handed her the paper and asked her to keyboard a copy and then print it, so he could rework the typed message.

Ten minutes later, she returned and handed him a single page in a manilla file folder. He asked her to sit and wait a moment. He read the note, made two changes, and then placed it on the conference table where she was sitting. He asked her to give him a good copy for signing, which she did in a matter of minutes. He signed the paper and asked her to distribute the memo in the usual fashion. When she was just two steps from the office door, Myles spoke her name. She stopped and turned. He thanked her and apologized for the formality. He promised that things would be better the following morning. He wished her a good night and said it was not necessary to stay late and that she could leave after she sent out the memo. He said everything else could wait until the morning, when he would be back at the usual Wednesday morning start time. She smiled, nodded, went out, and quietly closed the door behind her. She was not at her desk when Myles Lowry left two hours later.

Myles did not get any calls or visitors in those two hours. Not even from any of his closest associates who read the following memo:

September 1, 1992

4:00 pm

To: Associates, Staff and Friends
From: Myles Lowry, Executive VP / Markets
Subj: Personal

I have been involved with Family Court these past few days and regret missing any important matters or meetings in which you may have wished my involvement. I assure you, I have not dismissed you, or these, lightly.

The court declared a cease-and-desist order last evening, indicating that I am not to have any contact with Linda, my daughter, until further notice.

The court issued a protective order that prohibits me from being any closer than ten feet from Rosalyn, my former wife. I am not to have any communications with her until further notice. It does not matter if I initiate an action or not, the order stands.

I am to continue child support and I am to take on paying rent on an apartment where Linda and Rosalyn were residing in New Jersey, until further notice.

The court made no financial attachments that will negatively impact the business or anyone's livelihood who works for, or does business with, our company.

I regret any inconvenience these court orders may present to you personally or corporately. Needless to say, I ask your cooperation in making certain that neither my daughter nor my former wife are allowed into our offices or even on to these premises. Please do not hesitate to contact our corporate counsel, building security, or even the NYC police department if either tries to enter. Unless, of course, if my daughter comes here in distress or unaccompanied. Please do not turn her away. Contact security immediately so they can be of assistance to her, as she is only six years old.

Security will contact my lawyer, as directed separately.

I intend to be back in the office promptly tomorrow morning, Wednesday September 2, to carry on my/our business as usual.

Beginning this week, the start of Labor Day weekend, I will habitually be out of the office on Fridays, until further notice. On those days I will be working with my legal team. This should minimize weekday interruptions to our business operations. Please adjust your meeting calendars accordingly.

I want you to know before any news organizations release information: As of noon today, neither my wife's nor daughter's whereabouts are known to the Court, or to Rosalyn's law firm. The Police and the Court do not suspect any harm has come to them. I am not implicated in any such considerations.

Should it be that you have such information, please contact Rosalyn's lawyer, Mr. Godfrey Mellon, directly. He is at Mellon and Son, Attorneys at Law, here in Manhattan. Do not pass this information on to me or anyone in the company, please.

Lastly, both lawyers have recommended I say that it would be prudent to ignore and refuse to reply to any overtures by news organizations who might contact you for comment or information.

I thank you for your understanding, concern, and patience during this trying time for me and my family.

Myles Lowry

The last thing he did from his office was to call the recording number he received from Karidja Soro to get an update on Ned Hegerman's condition. He heard Eleanor Quatrane's voice from that morning's message:

"Thank you for your interest in Attorney Hegerman. The indication from his medical team this morning, Tuesday September 1, is that Ned is resting comfortably. His vital signs are good, and the monitoring devices suggest he is recovering from a heart attack suffered in the early morning hours. You can call this number after ten in the morning and seven in the evening each day for the current update. Your cooperation in not calling the hospital directly or our offices on main phone lines is greatly appreciated."

Myles would have to call again from his apartment in a few hours to get the evening's information. Right now, he would go home directly and take a long, hot shower and have something light to eat. His appetite was still not the best.

After that, he'd sit and look out at the lights of the night, first those of New York City and then those of whatever was going on in the dark skies above. In those lights, he'd look for ideas about what to do next.

As Myles Lowry made his way home, his daughter and former wife were sharing two wonderful pizzas with their new neighbors in **HAPPYDALE**. It would shock Myles were he to realize he knew the older of those two neighbors, from many years before.

Margie had Rosalyn back home from food shopping in time for the newcomer to have her groceries put away just as the pizza delivery arrived at five-thirty. Rosalyn used a hefty amount of the cash on hand she still had from the Jersey apartment to pay for her groceries, the two pies, tip the driver, and to give Taylor her "companion pay." Rosalyn refused to call the arrangement "baby sitting."

Rosalyn needed to get back to the apartment to replenish her resources. She would continue to avoid using any plastic or writing any checks here that could be used to trace her presence to the school. She had a plan, but she needed Valerie's help, at least this one last time. Thus, the pizza dinner, conveniently laid at Linda's doorstep.

The two schoolgirls excused themselves from the crowded kitchen table after they had their fill of plain and pepperoni slices, washed down with Dr. Pepper. Taylor enticed Linda to watch the evening's episode of *Star Trek: Next Generation*. Linda had seen some of the shows in New Jersey recently when Mr. Meadows left the TV on and went into the kitchen to talk to Rosalyn. She liked the man who looked and acted like a robot, Data.

For her part, Taylor told Linda that she liked the handsome Wesley Crusher and had bad dreams sometimes about the villains, The Borg. She was frightened by the cube that moved like a spaceship, though she said she couldn't see how it could do that without wings. She told Linda it terrified her so much that she had given up puzzling with her Rubik's Cube because it made her think too much of The Borg. Suddenly one of the Enterprise crew passed across the television screen like he was sleepwalking. Taylor let out a scream and shouted, "Oh no! He's been assimilated!"

Her voice carried into the kitchen and Rosalyn called into the living room, "Taylor, please find something more suitable for Linda on the television. Please."

Rosalyn turned to Valerie, making a sweeping gesture with her drooping plain slice in her hand, as if it were an uncloaked Romulan Bird-of-Prey. “Just what I need for Linda to see before bedtime, futuristic vampires taking over in space. What will they think of next? Wasn’t that a show that kids could watch? Wasn’t NASA excited about its recruitment value?”

“Older kids, maybe. It makes me remember rushing over to the Student Union TV lounge after class to see what evil Barnaby Collins on *Dark Shadows* was up to. We both did that at Barnard, right?” Valerie was bringing them back to the same old college days that Rosalyn wanted to rekindle. She wanted to exploit that memory to ask the favor she needed, and smooth over the prior night’s disagreement. What were the chances she would have *Star Trek* to thank—for going where she had not gone before?

Rosalyn wasted no time. She did not want the moment to pass or get interrupted by the kids or the television again. “I remember *Dark Shadows* for sure. We’d watch and then we’d go get something to eat and talk about what we thought would happen the next day. And a few times on a Friday, you’d even drive us across the bridge to get something to eat in Jersey to start the weekend.”

Valerie was energized, ignoring the promise she made herself earlier in the day to eat fast and leave. “Those were crazy times. Who’d ever think we’d be here doing this so many years later?” She smiled and bit the end off a slice, just managing to catch the sliding circle of pepperoni with her front teeth.

Rosalyn jumped in, trying to appear to be spontaneous, “Hey, how about we go back to my place Thursday after the girls go to bed? Taylor and Linda can sleep here together. There’s no classes Friday—they have a four-day weekend for Labor Day. I’ll cover it for Taylor as an overnight because we’ll get back so late. We can drive up there together and I can get the stuff from the place that Linda and I need to finish getting set up here over the weekend. What do you say?” Rosalyn poured on the emoting skill Valerie knew from back in their school days. And despite herself, she agreed.

The pizza dinner was over at **HAPPYDALE** about the time that Danny Hart was greeting Karidja Soro for their seven-thirty dinner date. He was waiting in the mild night air on the curb in front of the mid-block French restaurant. She stepped out from the yellow cab that brought her right to the front door.

He saw she had on a loose fitting, flowing ensemble of many colors. It looked like a dress, but he couldn't tell at first if the bottom was split as a pant suit might be. The upper right side was curved and cut so it partially fell off her shoulder, without exposing her torso. As she raised her left leg to pass from the street to the sidewalk, he could see her outfit was indeed a dress, with a slightly curved hem offset on that side, to complement the line of fabric off her right shoulder. And her footwear looked more like a soft ballet slipper than a hard-soled shoe. Her necklace was a string of brightly colored oversized beads in two loops, one slightly below her neck and the other almost to her waist. It was festive and he wondered how much of it was culturally reflective of her homeland.

Karidja was happy Danny had worn a jacket and tie, dispensing with the formality of a suit. His choice was more in keeping with her desire to make the evening more relaxed than a formal business dinner. He was a handsome man. Despite his age, his core was firm and flat under the jacket, with strong looking arms that were not overly muscular from mornings at the gym. His evening stubble-free face suggested he had taken the time to shave a second time that day.

She spoke first. "I thought the crowds along the sidewalks were going to make me late. I've not been here before."

"This is a good time to make a reservation here. The early seating is getting out so the patrons can make their eight o'clock theater curtain time. That's why all those people were in line in the street and along the sidewalks as you came across town. And the second seating usually starts at eight o'clock, so we fit right in between perfectly." Danny Hart was happy to display his familiarity. He also picked a neighborhood in which his cronies and nemeses would not be expecting to find him.

"You seem to have this down pretty well." Karidja wanted to compliment him to start off the evening properly.

"I'd hate to tell you how many times I was following someone up here and lost them in this time shift over the years." He placed his hand on her back and led her, single file, down the two steps from the sidewalk and into the narrow foyer. They sidestepped a couple coming out and up to the street, who also knew it was a single file thoroughfare.

Karidja was surprised at how far back the dining room extended and how narrow the room appeared to be. There were lines of tables against each side wall, most set for two persons. The center of the room was set with tables for four or six guests. The space between the three ranks of tables was used by patrons and wait staff alike to make their way from back to front in the restaurant. Tables were decked out in white table linens and cloth napkins at each place setting. Each table had a bud vase with one of two alternating flowers from front to back. Miniature red rose buds with white baby's breath at every other table, while the offset tables featured a yellow sweetheart rosebud with fronded greenery. Next to each flower arrangement was a votive candle for lighting the table.

As they were led down the aisle to a side table, Danny whispered to her over her shoulder, "Karidja, if you take the seat against the wall, you'll see more and get bumped less." So, she followed the hostess's nod and took the inside chair, relishing that Danny Hart addressed her by her first name.

When they were seated and awaiting the sommelier to inquire about their drink preferences, they scanned the menu so they did not need to start a conversation right away, or devolve to small talk, either. The listings were mostly in French, with some English subtexts, quite different from Linda Lowry's picturesque diner menu of the prior morning. Similar to hers, though, it did group foods into courses and types of entrees.

"It has been a while since I read a French menu," said Karidja. "The food was native to Côte d'Ivoire as well. I may need some help with these selections."

Danny Hart replied, "We're quite a team. I know the foods and can't read the French."

The sommelier came to the table and asked if they would like to choose a wine. Danny said, "Perhaps after we decide on our entrées, you could suggest a wine?"

"It would be my pleasure, sir. I'll give you some time to go over the menu with your waiter. He will let me know when to return."

"Ms. Soro. Would you care for a cocktail before wine, or instead of wine?" Danny asked. "I could tell the waiter."

"I'm fine with just wine pairings. But you go ahead, please." She said, "Oh, and one other thing about the language for the evening . . ."

Because she paused without saying, Danny asked, "What is that?"

"I was pleased to hear you use my first name. It sounded well off your tongue. Perhaps you could continue leaving Ms. Soro on her own for some other time or workplace." Her smile almost knocked Danny into the waiter as he came up behind the investigator in the narrow passageway between tables.

"May I offer you a drink before dinner and answer any questions from the menu?" His accent was that of a person definitely not native born in the States. But it was hard to identify it much more accurately, as he was learning how to accommodate the ears of New York diners.

"We'll stick to wine with the food, thank you. Are there off-menu items you are recommending tonight?" Karidja joined the waiter in learning that Hart knew his way around both dining and people. He knew that everything at a fine restaurant was considered special, so using that term for a few daily offerings might be offensive.

"Tonight, the chef has prepared three dishes I could tell you about. One is veal, one fish, and one vegan. Introducing the autumn menu, the veal is a blanquette, a veal shoulder with root vegetables in a white wine reduction. A tender sea bass is presented on a bed of basmati rice with papaya and cilantro relish. Lastly, a vegan surprise is a fresh take on Coquilles St. Jacques based off vegan meat balls, hearts of palm, artichoke hearts, and mushrooms, with appropriate herbs and spices. And, of course, our full menu is available

now that our satisfied prix fixe theater goers have left for the night." He stood a moment. And then. "I'll give you a few minutes with the menu, then, yes?"

Karidja spoke up. "That would be fine, thank you." She resisted speaking in French. But the waiter did not miss her accent. And for sure, from his pleased eyes, her smile did not go unnoticed either.

A bit of time passed, and Hart asked, "So, what do you think? Menu or off-menu?" He did not reveal by tone or movement what his choice was going to be.

Karidja replied, "I would like to try the sea bass he described." She did not say anything else right away. But then, "If he suggests a compatible salad, I might be convinced. But otherwise, not," she added.

And Danny told her, "I am going to ask for the veal dinner. And that will be enough for me. I usually do not eat this late when I am home or alone on the road." He smiled, "I hope you'll find the meal fees suitable on my future expense account submittals, if we do work together."

"I, too, do not eat as late. And sweets this late will do me in by the middle of the night. So, perhaps I won't need to wait until dessert to make you that offer." She smiled warmly and looked right into his eyes. If he had any reservation about accepting her job offer, it vanished like the neon green grease pen circle around number 14 up front on the tableboard at the hostess station, after they had been seated at their table.

The waiter was pleased to take their order. He did not upsell to any other food and sent the sommelier as promised. The steward suggested a white wine to share once he knew their entrees and preference for sweet or dry wine. As he walked away to obtain the proper glasses and the bottle, Hart and Soro noticed more and more diners arriving for the second seating. Time went by pleasantly as they 'people-watched' and were served their dinners. Danny was happy there were no ghosts from his past partaking of French cuisine that evening.

Gradually the dinner discussion got around to the business at hand. Karidja took the lead. "I checked with the powers that be at the law firm. I had to get an idea of where my proper place was on Myles Lowry's case, now that Ned is out of action. They seem okay—for the time being at least—with

my handling matters." She paused some to have another bite of fish, which she was enjoying. "I can't make my mind up about this papaya relish yet, but the bass is very nicely prepared." She swallowed. "At any rate, I'd like to see if you would be willing to assist us, me, with the Lowry family situation."

"What do you have in mind?" Hart wasn't in too much of a rush to seem to run the show.

"First things first, I think. I'd really like to know where Linda is, and to be sure she is safe and sound. Myles is our client. And I know that's the first thing on his mind." She mulled over the ideas some more, and gave the relish another try. That made her think of something else she didn't relish. "I suppose that means we also have to discover what we can about her mother."

"In the past, I've learned it's easier to track an adult than a kid for a time." Danny wanted to encourage a shared set of priorities. He didn't want to be off doing something a client didn't want, especially this client. He was going slowly instead of just rushing into the conversation.

Karidja was still a good listener, even when eating and thinking on her own. "What do mean by saying 'for a time?'"

Danny explained. "Well, adults who move around are more trackable than kids because they leave traces—phone calls, credit card charges, cars remembered by collection agents at toll booths, impressions made on store clerks . . . those sorts of things." He paused. He was liking the veal enough to let it melt in his mouth without talking. "But then when someone does see that adult, they start noticing other things. And that's how kids help." He gave her a chance to follow his train of thought and then keep going down that track.

"People forget adults. There are too many of them to keep track of. They keep coming and going and doing the same repetitive things. But not kids. First of all, they are cute or nasty. Nothing in between from a quick glance. Both are memorable traits. Next, they're out of place. What's a kid doing out of school, if they're old enough. What's an adult doing with a kid, especially if they are uncomfortable and it doesn't look like their own kid. You don't hear names. Just 'hey,' or 'boy,' or 'kid.' And you don't hear 'mom' or 'dad'—you just see sullen looks. Or no looks at all. No eye contact. Lots of looking at the ground or the floor."

"Are you suggesting posters and pictures of them in newspapers?" Karidja wanted to know.

"Nope. That's the last thing I'd suggest in this case," he said.

"Why?" she asked.

"Roselyn's not done anything overtly criminal. The police don't want her. She isn't a kidnapper. She's a mom. We don't know if someone's taken them. Or if they need help." He waited a little. "In such a case, if you start showing pictures, they will run. Far away. And you'll be far less likely to find them. Ever. They'll cut hair. They'll change clothes. Maybe even make Linda look like a boy for a time as they need to do." He pushed his fork at his food. "No. Pictures will be bad. We've got to keep them around here."

She could hear absolute certainty in his voice. "What makes you so sure of that?" And then it dawned on her. "What do you know? Do you know something you can't tell me? Or won't?" And then it horrified her to think it and say it. "Is there a reason I shouldn't be asking you for help? If there is, please tell me now, before we get involved together." Karidja did not care for the edge of nervousness slipping into her voice.

Danny Hart laughed. He needed to relieve his tension and her anxiety. She did not seem to appreciate his laughing. So, he spoke up quickly to keep this dinner date from being ruined. "Please, Karidja, wait. Take a breath. I'll explain." She looked as if she did. So, he took up again, "I laughed because something jumped out at me when you said 'before we get involved together.' I know that's not what you meant. But despite of our age difference, I have become fond of you, so it took on another meaning. One I'm sure you did not intend. And one I am certainly not looking to act upon in any way." He looked at her to make sure she was understanding. But he did not want to give her a chance to think he wanted her to answer him.

"First of all, I have rules." He set down his utensils, folded his napkin and straightened his plate, with half his dinner still on it. "The biggest one is not to get emotionally, or romantically, involved with clients. So, when I heard you speak those words, I laughed. You don't know me enough to know my nervous laugh. But that was it. That's what it sounds like." He took a sip of wine.

The waiter approached, "Is the meal okay, sir?"

Danny realized his pause in eating was misinterpreted. "My meal is fine. And I'm way far away from finishing. I am savoring it. But we are at a crucial point in our discussion, so I didn't want to have to pay attention to great food and great conversation at the same time."

The waiter was instantly apologetic. "I am sorry. I did not mean to interrupt. I —"

"You didn't. For sure. All is good. Thank you." Danny assured him sufficiently that the waiter excused himself to each of them and moved on to another station.

Danny picked up where he left off, noticing that Karidja also sought out a sip of wine to settle herself. And that, ironically, brought the sommelier to refresh their glasses with the bottle he withdrew from the marble cooler stand set beside their table. He placed the empty bottle upside down in the cooler, picked it up, and carried it off. As he left, they each looked at one another and shared a laugh.

Karidja said, "You were saying trouble starts when kids get seen, and not heard." She paused. "Well, all that activity tableside just now must be what it feels like when kids, who were supposed to be in bed for the night, start crashing a parental date-night kiss on the couch during a television commercial break." They each nodded and then shook their heads.

"Let me start again, please," said Danny. "Rules. I was talking about rules. Hopefully, we've gotten the first one out there. But I'll tell you this. There is one reason I will regret taking your firm on as a client. And that is because of my first rule. The only thing better than working with you, Karidja Soro, would be not working for you," he blushed and took a sip of the newly re-chilled wine in his glass.

"That being said . . . there is another rule. And that's what we were getting next to before all the commotion. I do know some things I learned about Myles and Rosalyn and Linda while in Mellon's employ. I will have to be vigilant about disclosing those things. I will have to create an entirely new context in which to discover whether those things still exist—and then verify them going forward." By habit when in a public place, Danny allowed himself

to take a sweeping look around the room to make certain no newcomers had entered he needed to be concerned about. Since there weren't any, he could keep on talking to Karidja.

"Now there are two good reasons for this. One is the ethics of not breaking the confidences with a client. I won't do that—notwithstanding that 'officer of the court' dance you and Hegerman orchestrated in the courtroom. But the other is good investigative diligence. What I knew as you entered court and I showed up with that cassette recorder, may now not be current information, or even correct information any longer. As a result, if you hire me, I will have to ask you to be patient as I review each thing I have seen so far to assess it for current value and truth. Can you do that?" he asked her.

Karidja felt she was listening to a third language of the evening. One was English, and one was French, and one was speaking the truth to power. It rocked her to think of herself as the power. That was very different for her. She was not accustomed to being on that side of the unsolved, quadratic equation of life. But it bolstered her sense of well-being to know that Danny Hart would be that voice of truth. Without Ned around, she was gradually becoming aware of her need to have such a voice, at the same time she was exhilarated to have found it.

From somewhere in her heritage, an unsummoned image arose about power. Karidja felt as if she were a young castaway escaping from seagoing bandits who had kidnapped her. And in her first hundred steps along the storm-tossed beach, she tripped on the emerging corner of a treasure chest uncovered by the surging riptides that sank their ship and had broken it apart on the sandy sea floor.

"Then where do we go from here, Danny?" she asked him. "Because I'm authorized to secure your services and I would certainly like to do that."

"Tomorrow's Wednesday. I would like to drive over to Mellon's place of business when he's in court—I can check his schedule. I'll deliver him his final report and all the originals of my notes made during the time I was under contract with him. And I'll leave my final bill." At that he smiled and sipped some of the nice wine. He also picked up his fork and took up an already cut piece of his veal. It was not yet cold, but its warmth was fading.

"Tonight, I will make a redacted recap of those notes and bring them by your office tomorrow at a time of your choosing after my Mellon visit. By that time, I suspect your office can have your usual contracts made up for us to review and sign. And then we can start in together. How does that sound to you?"

He looked her way and knew he had nothing more to say about the Lowery family business for the evening.

Karidja answered by raising her glass and saying nothing more than, "Welcome aboard."

They ate a little more, neither finishing their entire entrée. And neither caring to take the remaining portion home with them when offered. They were glad to finish their wine slowly as they exchanged pleasantries about the food and dining out in general. When it came time, Karidja asked for the bill. The waiter was urbane enough to process the bill without flinching or any second guessing. He returned to thank her for the generous tip and the additional gratuity entered on the line designated for the sommelier.

Karidja then asked Danny, "Are we good? Ready to go?"

"Well, sort of." Danny looked around the restaurant. It was again about half-filled with late diners of the second seating. Many others had come and gone since he and Karidja had begun their time together at table fourteen. "I do have a question and something to explain" he ventured.

"Go ahead, then, please." Karidja sat back in her chair.

"First of all, the question. May I ask if you feel safe going back home without me in your cab? Safe both while in the cab and when you get out of the vehicle at your destination?" He was straightforward and not playing any games or surreptitiously employing some type of 'line' at the end of a date.

"Yes. I will be fine. I may have the restaurant call a car from the service the firm uses instead of hailing a cab, though," she allowed.

"Okay, good. Here's why. There are still people in New York City who are not happy with my work because it cost them money or their reputation

or resulted in some jail time for them. Mostly embezzlers and insurance cheats. Some spouse abusers—of both sexes. In case I am being followed by some of these nefarious persons, or their associates, I always am careful not to be seen with people I have socially spent time with, especially if they are on their way to their homes at night alone. This is both for their security and safety, and for my peace of mind. You understand what I'm saying, right?"

"Sounds fair—and quite thoughtful, actually," was all she could muster.

"It's why I'm based in Jersey. But I didn't want to ask you to go to Jersey for dinner. At least not the first da . . . I mean, time." He stumbled on that word, and she smiled, at least to herself, she hoped. "So, here's what I'd like to do. We can ask the hostess to use their phone so you can call your car. I'll stay inside until you are safely in the car. And then I'll wait my usual ten minutes before I leave." He saw her nod agreement. She made the call, and they waited inside the foyer at the bottom of the two steps up.

Lastly, as they stood waiting, Danny inquired, "And if it's not too chauvinistic, I'd ask you to leave a phone message to say you got into your destination safely. The number I've written on the back of this restaurant card is my unidentifiable answering service number." He handed her the card. "Consider it a souvenir of our dinner, untraceable to me unless I answer the phone. You can claim it is a reservation number if you are asked about it." He smiled, and sheepishly shrugged his shoulders.

Some time passed before a car horn sounded. She looked out. "That's me," she said. "And yes, I'll call. And I look forward to tomorrow." They faced each other. No kiss, no handshake. Just an older man with streaked black and silver hair and a young Black woman with a beautiful smile, smooth skin, and electrifying eyes saying good night in New York City.

And lastly before she turned to go, "I had a very nice time tonight. Thank you." With that, she was up the stairs and gone. As he was ten minutes later.

The Tuesday night lights of the city were not too bright, muted by the mylar film darkening the window in Ned Hegerman's hospital room. They kept the room cooler during the midday sunshine. For that, the woman in Ned's companion armchair was grateful. Now she was thankful just for the sleep that she had fallen into finally and mercifully. This day of waiting and uncertainty had been exhausting.

Ned awoke without stirring. He heard the beeps and clicks and saw the glow of colored lights and lines on machines near his bed. He moved his arms slightly and felt the resistance of the wires and tubes. He gained the realization that he was unmistakably in a hospital room. He also became aware that, unfortunately, he was the primary occupant of that space. He looked over and saw that the extra wide door to the room was slightly ajar. There were softened lights and quiet voices on the other side of the door.

He turned to look out the large flat window. The draperies were pulled back to the ends of the curtain rods. A blue-grey hue emitted from a silent, flat-screen television in the corner of the room away from the door. He could not tell if its mount was wall-attached or ceiling-hung. The screen was angled more toward the window than to his bed. Below the window was a human figure, apparently asleep in the big padded reclining chair. The hospital had provided a blanket for either privacy or warmth or comfort. He could not tell.

Ned's eyes slowly adjusted to being opened after almost twenty hours, not that the time could be proven by him. Gradually, his eyesight sharpened. He was able to recognize the face resting on its side above the white hospital blanket. He was immersed in a mixture of feelings. The predominant emotion that rose within the injured interior of his heart, was remorse. For here, just seven feet or so away from his weakened self, was the one indiscretion of his otherwise long and honorable life.

Hegerman had no idea of how this woman knew he was here. Had Rosalyn somehow reached her? It was still a lingering mystery to him. How had these two women, who were the bane of his late-in-life existence, come to know one another in the first place? And were they here to curse him and stain his integrity once again over the fate of little Linda Lowry?

He was thankful she slept. He had no need for a confrontation in his current condition. He moved as much as he could, which was only to turn his head on his pillow, away from her direction. He looked out the small space in the doorway. Maybe there would be something out there in that light or from those voices to provide him with a saving grace. He could only hope.

He brought the image of Linda Lowry's face to his mind. He closed his eyes. As he eased back to sleep, the first dream vision he saw was the smiling Black face and sparkling eyes of Karidja Soro. She was holding a little stuffed elephant mascot in an orange and green uniform football jersey.

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Separately before retiring for the night, Karidja Soro and Danny Hart listened to Eleanor Quatrane's voice over their phones. Just as Myles Lowry had done an hour earlier.

"Good Tuesday evening. Ned Hegerman's doctors say he spent most of today sleeping. After reviewing his vital signs and monitoring devices in the morning tomorrow, Wednesday, they will rouse him if he does not awake on his own. If his health will sustain activity, the physical therapists will begin his regimen of walking twice or three times a day with assistance in the hallways. It will be essential to prevent any fluid build-up in his legs and will start the process of strengthening his breathing and heart rhythms. Goodnight and thank you for checking in."

To Be Continued in Installment Three

December 2, 2023

Part 2