

A MATTER OF RESPECT

1980

When George found out, he started yelling as usual. Forgot his arthritis and swung in here, right past the nurses, stood over me, and started yelling. “I’ll be broke, in debt, in disgrace. You did it, but I’ll take the consequences!”

Well, George, life is full of surprises, most of them unpleasant. When I married you, twenty years older than I, everyone said I’d end up nursing a senile old man and then become a widow when I’m too old to find another husband. But the things you worry about usually don’t happen. Worse things do.

“Revenge! You never forgave me for Emmy, even though that was fifteen years ago and I never saw her again!”

We never saw her again, George. We. I’m sure I’ve missed her more than you have. She was my friend, after all. As for revenge—that’s silly. How did I know I was going to die of cancer at forty-nine. If I hadn’t gotten sick, no one would have found out. You’d have died happy a few years from now, fulfilled and content, knowing I’d give you a fine funeral.

He started yelling again. The nurse came in and said he was disturbing the other patients. Not a word about disturbing me. And she never looks me in the eye. None of them do. That’s how I knew before the doctor told me. The minute I woke up from the surgery, the way the nurse in the recovery room looked at me, I knew I was a dead woman.

“I don’t know you,” he said, a little quieter. “Married twenty-seven years, and I never knew you.”

So you thought you knew me? Everybody thought they knew me, what’s to know? It used to bother me until these last few years when I started enjoying what you didn’t know, they didn’t know, would never dream of. Otherwise I’d have died of boredom instead of cancer, long ago, knowing you and them inside out like I do.

“How could you do this to me?”

George, I didn’t do anything to you. I did the work, and you got to enjoy the money, guilt free. No one will blame you, no one will make you pay it back to them.

They'll feel sorry for you in your reduced circumstances. No more country club membership. You have your Social Security, the house. Oh, and a little nest-egg just in your name, so they can't touch it. You'll find a bankbook in the safe deposit box. See, I thought of you, just in case I ever got caught. Just like I was thinking of you when I leased the house in Tahoe and the Mercedes. You can't afford them. You'll still have the old pickup—no one would lend me money on that. Think of it this way, you enjoyed those luxuries for a while and nothing lasts forever. Don't forget the cruise to Tahiti, flying to Italy, Mexico—twice. How do you think we paid for all that? All for you. I never cared much for travel, and I didn't like being away too long in case somebody spotted something.

So then he went to his next stage, predictable, after the yelling. He sagged and winced and sat down, looking at the floor and sighing the way he always did, helpless whenever there was a problem. Like when Susie, at 17, announced she was having a baby, and no, she didn't know who the father was and wouldn't marry any of the jerks it could be, even if they asked. As usual, he was helpless, and I had to get the money, and make the arrangements, while she fought me all the way, but not very hard, because she just wanted to make trouble and worry for us and didn't have any intention of having any baby slow her down. More sighing, as if he thought I could fix things this time. Nothing I can do, George.

Dying is full time, and I can't take time out to comfort you. You've already had twenty more years than I'm going to have, and you'll probably have many more. Thin years, granted, but there's always one of our widowed friends who might decide to rescue you. The casserole parade starts now, before I'm even dead.

Finally he got up and started inching toward the door. "I won't leave you to die alone."

What's that supposed to mean? I opened my eyes. Alone, I said, is the only way anyone dies. I was just telling him something I learned, now that I'm an authority, just passing on information for the future. He acted like I insulted him, opened his mouth, ready to start yelling again, so I closed my eyes, and pretty soon I heard the door open and close.

The phone rang. It took me a while, but I managed to get it to my ear. It was Susie. I guess George or Brenda let her know. I haven't heard from her since our twenty-fifth anniversary party at the Holiday Inn, for which occasion she showed up with a seven-foot black wrestler, and with her head shaved, half naked, tattooed on the bare spots, and a pound of hardware dangling from her nose and mouth. She walked around introducing herself as our only daughter while the two of them got falling-down drunk. Why? I still can't answer that question. But now I know the answer to another question: how do you get a friendly phone call from your twenty-five-year-old daughter? Drop dead.

"How'd you do it, Mom?"

Do what? Oh, the money. I just borrowed, re-financed property. Apartment houses I started managing, as a favor to old clients and friends who had owned them free and clear. I took out mortgages.

"You forged the owner's signature?"

And then there were some who gave me money to invest for them. Who knows more about property, about investments, in this town, in the whole state?

"And nobody ever suspected . . ."

What was there to suspect? I was keeping up the payments on all the loans. I gave twelve percent on the money people gave me to invest. You get twelve percent, you don't ask a lot of questions. Everybody was happy. If I hadn't gotten sick . . .

"Simple as that?" A new tone in Susie's voice. A tone of respect? About time. Will wonders never cease? "Is it really that easy?"

For me, yes. It wouldn't work for you, or for your friends. You have to be a stable person, with a business built up year by year. A respectable person, with manners, proper dress. Willing to do extra favors, extra services without charging for them, just being generous, accommodating, friendly. Oh, you don't know what I'm talking about. No decent person in this town would question a signature on a contract I brought in. It takes full time, day and night, the best years of your life, to build trust like that. And I gave them. I was voted chair of the Ethics Committee of the Real Estate Board three times.

She started laughing, and that didn't bother me because from my new point of view I see the irony of many things. It would have been nice to laugh with my daughter

for the first time since her twelfth birthday party, but I held back because I knew laughing would wake up the pain sleeping in the fog left by that last injection they gave me. Then her laugh choked off and there was a little sob and she said, "I could come and see you, as soon as I can book a flight."

"All right."

The connection broke off, as usual, without even a goodbye. If I know her, she'll get here too late for any deathbed reconciliation. I hope so. Haven't I got enough pain?

I bet George didn't yell at that dumpy little mouse who worked in his office. She did everything but brush his teeth for him. He called her Miss Indispensable, and she'd blush and squint behind her glasses. I never liked her, the few times I saw her. Never knew she was gone until I happened to come in and saw a new girl. What had happened to Miss Indispensable? George turned red, wouldn't talk. His partner went into his office and shut the door, while the new girl went to the rest room. Even left alone, I had to pry it out of George. Turned out she took about two hundred a month out of petty cash for more than ten years until, just by accident, he caught her. Cornered, she brazened it out. *She* yelled at *him*. She hadn't gotten a raise for ten years, so she was just taking what she had coming to her. They didn't call the police. They just fired her, and George complained he could never find anyone as efficient.

I wonder if George thought of her when all this started coming out. I wouldn't like being compared to her. There's no comparison. She just gave herself the raise that George should have given her. She did it for the money. I never cared about the money.

Somebody here. Whiff of bourbon. Brenda again, faithful as ever. In a minute she'll start crying again. Twenty years we worked together, talked together, drank together. How many times she told me that when her husband died she would have killed herself if it hadn't been for me. She was the one who put me up for the Ethics Committee. I opened my eyes. Listen, Brenda, we always wore the same size. I've got that new two-hundred-dollar pant suit. Go and take it before George's sisters descent on the place.

"So far I've traced seventeen of them." Not crying. Her voice is steady, for once. "Here's a complete list of our clients. Take a look. Which ones don't I know about?"

I closed my eyes again.

That got her crying again, and I really did feel sorry. She's not young anymore, and this was a big shock to her. She smells of liquor every time she comes, even in the morning. Yesterday I told her if she keeps it up, she won't last long after I'm gone. I told her she's in the clear, not to worry. She's got a few clients of her own, and I never touched those accounts. Brenda is a hard worker, but not very bright. I thought she'd never catch on. She kept coming to the hospital every day, asking me questions. "Shall I call Gleason? Their loan payment hasn't come in and it's already the tenth." And I'd say, don't worry, they'll pay, don't bother them. I knew it was only a matter of days, hours, before she finally found out. Maybe I should have broken the bad news to her myself, saved her from such a shock. But I was still dealing with my own bad news.

"Why won't you tell me about the others?"

What's the hurry? She'll find out, one at a time, when they start calling, especially the ones who gave me money to invest, and they're waiting for the latest dividend check. Maybe some of them won't call. Some of our old friends, for George's sake. What's a few thousand to them? Some of them might write off the money they gave me, or pay off the loans I took in their names, and just keep quiet. Out of shame at how stupid they'd been.

I wonder if, when the news spreads, some people have the nerve to step forward and claim they gave me money, and try to collect from Brenda. I wouldn't put it past that guy Lee who already owns half the apartment houses in town. I never went near him, the crook. And I wouldn't put it past prissy little Abigail Jenks either, knowing the way she dipped into her father's trust. Some people are just born greedy and dishonest. Brenda ought to be able to see through them. Thieves, that's what they are. No intention to pay back. I never missed a monthly payment to a bank or to an investor.

"You never thought about getting caught and ending up in prison?"

All the time. The possibility was always there, like background music in an old suspense movie. A heightened sense of danger, of risk, like a gambler, kind of exciting, a rush, Susie would say. A sense of power, like a spy surrounded by enemies too stupid to see through her disguise.

No sooner is Brenda gone than Reverend Elsworthy comes in. He starts rambling about how God decides how long we live and when we die and—I interrupted him and

asked if George told him what I did. “Yes, but my concern is with your immortal soul, not with money.” Well, if I’d known he was so casual about money, I wouldn’t have made that contribution toward the new stained glass window. I start to ask if he’s going to give it all back, but he’s already into the prayers. We say a few prayers together out loud, then silently while he just holds my hand in both of his. Then he gets up and says, “I’m sure people will remember you only for the good things you did.”

Forgive and forget? Possible. With their embarrassment, and the Reverend preaching Christian forgiveness, and George’s fear of disgrace, and Brenda’s fear for the business, the whole thing might just be hushed up. Now wait just a minute here. If I were not a dying woman, if I just got caught, if I was going to live—

But I’m not, and since I’m dying, the least they can do is give me credit for outsmarting all of them, for my being a lot more than they thought I was, for making fools of them. And for getting away with it. Escaping. I want everyone to know. I want the world to know. I want it in all the newspapers, with the names of my “victims” who never asked questions while the money was coming in.

Maybe Susie will tell everyone. But no one will believe her. It’ll have to be Brenda. I’ll have to count on her hitting the bottle hard enough to spill it all some day. Maybe soon. Maybe even at my funeral.

It’s a matter of respect.