

The Saving Graces

Chapter One

Emma

If half of all marriages end in divorce, how long does the average marriage last? This isn't a math problem; I'd really like to know. I bet it's less than nine and a half years. That's how long the Saving Graces have been going strong, and we're not even getting restless. We still talk, still notice things about each other, weight loss, haircuts, new boots. As far as I know, nobody's looking around for a younger, firmer member.

Truthfully, I never thought we'd last this long. I only joined because Rudy made me. The other three, Lee, Isabel, and--Joan? Joanne? She didn't last; moved to Detroit with her urologist boyfriend, and we didn't keep up--the other three didn't strike me at that first meeting as bosom buddy material, frankly. I thought Lee was bossy and Isabel was old--thirty-nine. Well, I'll be forty next year, enough said there, and Lee is bossy, but she can't help it because she's always right. She really is, and it's a tribute to her exceptional nature that we don't all loathe her for it.

The first meeting went badly. We had it at Isabel's house--this was back when she was still married to Gary. God, these people are straight, I remember thinking. Straight and rich, that's what really got me--but I'd just moved into a dank little basement apartment in Georgetown for eleven hundred a month because of the address, so I was a little touchy about money. Lee looked as if she'd just come from spa day at Neiman's. Plus she was single, still in graduate school, and teaching special ed. part-time--you know how much money there is in that--and yet she lived around the block from Isabel in snooty Chevy Chase, in a house she wasn't renting but owned. Naturally I had it in for these people.

All the way home I explained to Rudy, with much wit and sarcasm and disdain, what was wrong with everybody, and why I couldn't possibly join a women's group whose members owned electric hedge trimmers, wore Ellen Tracy, remembered Eisenhower, dated urologists. "But they're nice," Rudy insisted. Which, of course, missed the point. Lots of people are nice, but you don't want to have dinner with them every other Thursday and exchange secrets.

The other thing was jealousy. I was small enough to mind that Rudy had a good friend other than me. One night a week she and Lee volunteered to teach reading to inner-city illiterates, and had gotten to know each other during the training. I never worried, then or now, that they would become best friends; I mean, if ever there were two people with nothing in common, it's Lee and Rudy. But I was

my old insecure self (then and now), and too neurotic to recognize the potential beauty of the Saving Graces even when it was staring me in the face.

We weren't the Saving Graces yet, of course. Even now, we don't go around calling ourselves that in public. It's corny; it sounds like a TV sit-com. Doesn't it? "The Saving Graces," starring Valerie Bertinelli, Susan Dey, and Cybill Shepherd. Notice these are all attractive, smart, funny women who happen to be a little long in the tooth. Anyway, the genesis of our name is a private matter. Not for any particular reason--it's kind of funny, and it reflects well on us all. But we just don't talk about it. It's personal. We were driving back from dinner at a restaurant in Great Falls (we eat out when the person whose turn it is doesn't feel like cooking), taking the long way because Rudy missed the Beltway turnoff. We'd been a group for about a year by then; we'd just lost Joan/Joanne but hadn't yet acquired Marsha, transient member number two, so it was just the four of us. I was sitting in the back seat. Rudy turned around to catch my impersonation of the waitress, who we all thought looked and sounded just like Emma Thompson. Isabel yelled, "Look out!" and a split second later we hit the dog. I can still see the expression on that yellow mutt face in the instant before the fender caught her on the shoulder and flipped her over the hood of Rudy's Saab--quizzical, curious, just mildly concerned. As if she were thinking, "Well, hm, isn't this interesting."

Everybody screamed. I kept saying, "It's dead, it's dead, it's got to be dead," while Rudy jerked the car off the pavement. To tell the truth, if I'd been driving by myself, I might've kept going: I was sure it was dead, and I didn't want to see. When I was twelve I ran over a frog with my bike, and I'm still not over it. But Rudy killed the engine and everybody piled out, so I had to get out with them.

It wasn't dead. But we didn't know that until Lee suddenly metamorphosed, right there on MacArthur Boulevard, into Cherry Ames, Highway Nurse. Have you ever seen a human being give CPR to a dog? It's funny, but only in retrospect. While it's happening it's sort of thrilling and revolting, like something that's still illegal in most of New England. Rudy whipped off her black cashmere cloak, which I have always coveted, and wrapped it around the dog because Lee said it was going into shock. "A vet, we need a vet," Isabel fretted, but there wasn't a house in sight, no store, no nothing except a darkened church on the other side of the road. Isabel jumped up and waved her arms at a car coming on our side. When it pulled over, she ran up and had a conversation with the driver. I stood there and wrung my hands.

Between them, Rudy and Lee got the dog in the back seat of the Saab. Blood spotted its muzzle, I noticed in my peripheral vision, the only vision I was capable of looking at it in. "Curtis will have a fit," I remember muttering, watching a dark stain seep into the 900 Turbo's honey-colored leather. But Rudy, the one who would pay for it if Curtis had a fit, never batted an eye.

"Okay, there's a vet in Glen Echo," Isabel reported, sliding into the front seat next to Rudy so she could give directions. I had to get in back with Lee and the dog. I'm not good with the bleeding and possibly dying: they make me sick. Literally; once I saw a man, a neighbor of mine, pull an electric lawnmower over his own foot, and I doubled up and vomited on the sidewalk. This is true. So I stared out the window, concentrating on the way the car headlights illuminated the sign in front of the church across the way, OUR LADY OF GRACE--and if you're wondering what the punchline of this story is and if I'll ever get to it, that's pretty much it. Rudy drove like a stock car racer to the vet's in Glen Echo.

He wasn't there--it was eleven o'clock at night--but he came when the sleepy-faced night guy called him. Grace, the dog, had a collapsed lung, a broken leg, and a dislocated shoulder, but she lived, and the bill was only eleven hundred and forty dollars. Nobody claimed her--quel surprise!--but after she got out of the hospital Lee and Isabel had a fight over which one would get to keep her. Ernie, Isabel's old beagle, had just died, so she won, or lost, depending on your point of view, and has Grace to this day. She's old and grizzled, like us, and her highway-running days are over, but she is the sweetest dog, and I'm not even that much of a dog person. I've always thought she could hold it against us for hitting her, but instead she adores us for saving her. When we celebrate our group anniversaries, we say it's Grace's birthday, too, and regale her with lots of toys and edible gifts.

So that's it, the story of how we got our name. You've noticed I'm the only one who didn't actually do anything, who performed no semi-heroic act whatsoever. The group, like Grace in its benevolence and generosity, chose to overlook this. Nobody's ever pointed it out even for a joke (something I myself couldn't have resisted, at least once in nine and a half years). No, I've always been unquestioningly accepted as a Saving Grace, and that alone, even if there were no other instances of support and love, kindness, fidelity, sympathy, comfort, and solidarity, would have guaranteed my loyalty for life.

But there are. A thousand. And since I didn't join an order of nuns, I should mention there have also been instances of jealousy, pettiness, pigheadedness, and let us not forget the occasional nervous breakdown. But they're nothing, and now I find it scary to think that prejudice against the upper middle class almost persuaded me to beg off with a polite excuse after that first meeting at Isabel's.

Good old Rudy, she kept me on the straight and narrow. Which is funny when you think about it. Because of us all, Rudy's by far the one who comes closest to being genuinely certifiable. Lee's the normal one. We even call her that--she takes it as a compliment. Which sort of says it all about Lee.

Lee

The women's group held its first meeting on June 14, 1988, at Isabel's house on Meadow Street. She made Thai chicken in peanut sauce with cellophane noodles. There were five of us that first time--Isabel, Rudy, Emma, Joanne Karlewski, and me. At my suggestion, we made the rule about pot luck contributions that night, after four of us showed up with salads. We said that, unless you were making the main dish because the meeting was at your house, the assignments would be: Rudy, hors d'oeuvres; Emma, salad; Joanne, bread; Isabel, fruit; me, dessert. Except for Rudy's, the assignments have stayed the same ever since. (We had to switch her from hors d'oeuvres to desserts because she's never on time.) Meetings were on the first and third Wednesdays of the month until September of '91, when I went back to school and had a conflict with an evening class. So we switched to Thursdays, and we've pretty much stuck with them ever since. We begin at seven-thirty and break up around ten or ten-fifteen...

It was when Susan Geiser was a member (February of '94 to April of '95) that we instituted the fifteen-minute rule, and it's still in effect, although we don't need it now that Susan is gone. The Saving Graces had been without a fifth member for quite a while when Isabel met Susan and proposed her for membership. She had some lovely qualities, Susan did, and she could be quite interesting and funny. But she had one flaw: she never shut up. I didn't mind it that much, but it drove Emma and Rudy wild.

So one night Isabel suggested the fifteen-minute rule--in some wonderfully tactful way, as only Isabel could--and from that time on we've each taken fifteen minutes at dinner to tell how we are, what we've been doing or thinking lately. We're not rigid about it, nobody looks at her watch or anything; it's simply a guideline. I'm usually finished in five minutes, whereas Rudy needs at least twenty, so it works out very well.

Emma and Rudy always say I'm the one who thought up the idea for the group and did the original planning and organizing, but in truth it was Isabel at least as much as me. We'd been friends for about a year and a half, Isabel and I, ever since that Halloween night when Terry, her son, threw up on my new shoes. It was my first Halloween in the Chevy Chase house, and I was having the nicest time giving out popcorn and candy apples I'd made myself to all the little trick-or-treaters. Dozens and dozens of them--I'd moved from a high-rise in College Park, and I couldn't get over how many children lived in my new neighborhood. And they were so dear, so sweet in their little costumes, the tiny princesses and Power Rangers. I'll admit I was having what Emma calls a "kid Jones." By eight-thirty the doorbell had almost stopped ringing, though, and by nine o'clock, Halloween seemed to be over.

I was turning out the porch light, getting ready to go up and take my shower, when something fell against the door. A heavy thud--I thought someone had thrown something, perhaps one of the pumpkins I'd carved and set out on the steps. I looked through the peep hole and saw a boy. Two boys. One I recognized, so I opened the door.

"Trick or treat."

That cracked them up; both boys, neither of whom was wearing a costume, bumped against each other and bent over double, convulsed with laughter. Drunken laughter.

"Are you clowns?" I asked.

"No, we're thugs," said the one whose name, I later learned, was Kevin.

That sent them into more gales. They were holding pillowcases weighted down with candy, evidence of a long, successful night of trick-or-treating. Which meant no one had taken them in hand. And people wonder why today's youth is in trouble.

These two had finally come to the wrong house. "I know you," I said, pointing my finger in Terry's face. "You live on Meadow Street, the white house on the corner. Does your mother know what you and your friend are up to tonight?"

"Sure," he said. But he stopped laughing. The chilly, drizzly night had spiked his blond hair and reddened his cheeks. Terry was fifteen then, but he looked much younger in his slouchy, cocky, too-big clothes, like a little boy playing dress-up.

I whipped around on Kevin. "Where do you live?"

"Leland Street," he muttered, backing away toward the steps. I have this effect on children: when I'm

stern with them, they sober up. (In this case, literally.) But it's not fear, I assure you; it's a way I have of making them see reality the way I see it: sensibly.

"Which side of Connecticut?"

"This side," said Kevin.

"Good." I didn't want him crossing that busy street drunk. "You go home, right now. And whatever you're drinking, I'll take it." I held out my hand.

Kevin looked like a baby, too, but not a very nice one. He had a buzz cut and a fake tattoo of a skull on his cheek; going for the Nazi look, I supposed. "Fuck you," he said, "and anyway, Terry's got it," while he tottered down the steps and wove a crooked route to the sidewalk. I turned my back on him. "See ya, T! See ya when the bitch is gone!"

"Nice talk."

Terry backed up and hit the screen door with a thump. He was trying to smile carelessly, but it wasn't working. "Kev's an asshole," he slurred.

"S'cuse me." The pillowcase slipped out of his slack fingers and thunked on the porch floor.

I picked it up. An almost-empty pint bottle of vodka sagged at the bottom under the candy. I moved a pumpkin and set the bottle on top of the newell post.

"Can you make it home by yourself?"

"Sure." But he didn't move, and all that kept him from sliding to the floor were his locked knees.

I sighed. "All right, let's go."

I took his arm to get him moving. We were about the same height then--now he's over six feet, and burly--but I was stronger, and it was no effort to take half his weight as we staggered and tacked down the empty sidewalk to the corner. He protested at first, but said less and less the closer we got to his house. The porch light was out; otherwise I might have noticed Terry getting paler, greener, and the dots of perspiration popping out on his whiskerless upper lip. He hung back at the front door--reluctant to face the music, I thought.

I knocked, and almost immediately Isabel pulled open the door, smiling, holding out a bowl of bite-size Snickers. I recognized her, and couldn't help smiling back. She was that pleasant-faced older woman who walked her beagle in the same vacant lot--"the dog park," we call it in our neighborhood--where I walked Lettice, my Brittany spaniel.

"Terry?" She saw her son behind me and frowned in puzzlement.

"Mom?" Well, no, what he actually said was, "Mo--?" If he'd gotten his mouth closed in time, my shoes could have been saved. But up came a disgusting stream of half-digested M & M's, Mounds, Milky Ways, and vodka, and most of it landed on my one-day-old, dove-gray suede Ferragamos.

Isabel rushed outside. Right behind her came Gary. I can't remember what I thought of him that first time. Not much--husband, older, short and stocky, nondescript. He ended up taking care of Terry and Isabel ended up taking care of me.

I've sat in her kitchen a thousand times since that night. Isabel isn't like any friend I've ever made, and, at first, even though I was drawn to her and liked her a lot, I couldn't imagine us ever being close. She was older, for one thing--only eight years, but it seemed like much more. It's because she's from another generation, Isabel says, but I think it's something else as well. Some people are born knowing things the rest of us spend our lives trying to learn. Then, too, she looked so much older, with her streaky-gray hair in a bun, of all things, and no fashion sense whatsoever. (I've helped her a lot with her sense of style over the years.) But she was still beautiful. To me, that night, she looked like an aging Madonna--I don't mean the singer. This was in 1987, so her real troubles hadn't even begun, but already there was sadness in Isabel's face, and serenity, and that lit-from-within quality that's so extraordinary to me.

And I ... well, my life was busy and full with part-time teaching and a full course load, as well as a thesis to write for my M.Ed., but I was still a bit lonely. And maybe ... in the market for a mother. Not that I haven't got a mother. As my husband says, Oy, have I got a mother. What I mean is--I might have been in the market for a little mothering.

Emma says I don't understand irony, but I believe this is the definition of it: Except for Isabel, none of the Saving Graces has ever had children, and the only one who wants any is me. And I can't. Plus--this is ironic, too--I think Isabel and I were born to be mothers, and yet we both had rather cold parents. I'm dying to be a mother, to be mothered. And she mothers everybody, but who mothered her? No one.

On second thought, perhaps this isn't ironic. Perhaps it's just pathetic.

She made me take off my pantyhose and put on a pair of clean socks--Terry's-- and she gave me a mug of hot mulled cider to sip while she cleaned my shoes in her powder room sink. When she came back, we had the nicest, most comfortable conversation. She asked me all about myself. In particular, I remember telling her about some of the scrapes my two brothers used to get into as teenagers, and how they've both turned into pillars of the community, as the saying goes. I said that so she wouldn't worry too much about Terry being on the road to ruin. I didn't stay long, but as I was leaving, it occurred to me that she'd found out a lot more about me than I had about her.

Terry came over the next day with a very nice apology, and also an invitation to dinner. So that's how it started. Isabel and I became friends. When we weren't visiting in each other's house, we were walking Lettice and Ernie in the dog park, or playing tennis together, or going for drives in the country. I cried with her when Terry decided to go to college at McGill in Montreal. She listened to every detail of my husband's long, shy courtship. After she walked out on Gary, she and Grace lived in my spare room for three weeks, and when she got cancer I felt as if it had happened to me. I can't imagine not knowing

Isabel, can barely remember what my life was like before I met her.

A year or so after Terry's Halloween escapade, we were sitting on the linoleum floor, drying our dogs after their last bath of the summer, when Isabel said, "Leah Pavlik, you spend too much time with me in this kitchen. You ought to go out and play with friends your own age." I said, "You ought to go out and play with friends my own age." We laughed, and then--I'm not sure who said what, but before we knew it we were talking about starting a women's group.

All my life I've had a lot of girlfriends, and I admit I enjoy organizing them. I founded a girls-only club that met in my basement during sixth and seventh grades, and in high school I was co-captain of the pom-pom squad, then president of my sorority in college. But since moving to Washington, I guess because I was so busy, except for Isabel I hadn't made that many women friends. I loved the idea of starting a group. It wouldn't be a book club, and not a political group, not a feminist organization. Just women we liked and respected and thought we could learn something from, meeting every so often to talk about issues of interest to us. Quite a modest agenda. Little did we know we were planting the first seeds of a beautiful garden.

Isabel said that, not me, years later. She said we were growing wholesome vegetables for sustenance and gorgeous flowers for joy. I asked her which one I was, certain she'd say a wholesome vegetable, but she said I was both. "We're all both, you dolt," were her exact words.

First impressions. After we'd been a group for about a year, we had a meeting at which the topic (at my suggestion) was what we had all thought of each other--those of us who didn't know each other already--at the first Graces' meeting. I started us off, saying I'd thought Emma looked like someone in the arts, or the fringes of the arts, possibly a rock star. (More of a fading rock star, I really meant, because of the sort of blase, world-weary air Emma likes to project. In reality she's not jaded in the least, and I don't understand why it's so important to her to look "cool" all the time.) Well, she was thrilled to hear that she looked like a rock star. She wanted to know which one, and I came up with Bonnie Raitt--thinking they both have pretty, sharp-featured faces and (it must be said) the same slightly snotty expression at times. Also the same hair--long, reddish-blond, and, to put it charitably, self-styled. (I am dying to introduce Emma to Harold, my hairdresser, but she says she can't be bothered.)

Rudy and Emma both said they had loved Isabel on sight, thought she was wonderful, although maybe a little old-fashioned, just a tad conservative. "Matronly, but in a good way," Emma said, and Rudy said, "No, motherly." I do remember that during that first meeting Isabel wore a red denim apron over her sweater and slacks--kept it on the whole evening, just forgot to take it off. That's how lacking in vanity she is. But conservative? No, no, no, no. Here is obvious proof that first impressions can be wildly inaccurate.

Isabel said she thought Rudy was one of the most beautiful women she'd ever seen in real life, and of course Emma and I agreed. The rest of us are fairly attractive women in a normal, average way, I would say. But Rudy's special. Everybody notices her; we can't go anywhere together and not attract attention. She has skin like an angel, a cover model's body, shiny, perfect, blue-black hair that does anything she wants it to. If she had only a gorgeous face, you could hate her, but behind the classic features there's

such a sweetness, so much innocence and vulnerability, she brings out everybody's protective instincts. Everyone wants to save Rudy--men especially, she says. But so far, I'm sorry to say, I don't think anyone has.

As for me, Emma claimed she thought I looked like a rock star, too. Who? I asked eagerly. (Once an old beau told me I reminded him of Marie Osmond; "the perkiness," he'd said.) But Emma said, "Sinead O'Connor." What? "Oh, not the baldness, although your hair was pretty short, Lee. More that, you know, humorless, self-righteous schtick of yours." Oh, thank you very much! I was offended, but Emma added, "No, Sinead O'Connor's gorgeous, haven't you ever noticed her eyes?" No. "She's a beautiful woman, Lee, I meant that as a compliment." Oh, really. I doubt that, but in any case, I look nothing like Sinead O'Connor. I look like my mother: small, wiry, dark, and intense. And I am never self-righteous, although it's true that I'm frequently right. So, again, so much for first impressions.

When I married Henry, it crossed my mind that I might not need the group as much anymore, or that my enthusiasm would slack off, I might not have the same time and energy for it. None of that happened. There was a period of seven or eight months when I was so fixated on sleeping with Henry, very little else registered on my consciousness, but that was an across-the-board phenomenon, and didn't reflect on the Saving Graces specifically.

Emma and Rudy got a great deal of amusement out of this time in my life, I must say. I don't know what they thought I was like before I met Henry--a prude, I suppose. Which I am not, and never have been. I don't happen to swear, and I do like to keep certain thoughts to myself, not share them with the world at large. Or if I do share them, apparently I put them in terms that sound old-fashioned, even quaint to certain people. So when I met Henry and suddenly the only thing on my notoriously rational and unimaginative mind was sex, they thought this was hilarious. I could have put a lid on their fun by simply keeping quiet, but for some reason, I guess the hormone circus going on inside, I couldn't stop talking about it. Could not keep my mouth closed. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before, and I was thirty-seven years old. One Thursday night, I made the mistake of telling the group how Henry looked in his blue cotton uniform, with his name in gold over the front pocket, and PATTERSON & SON HEATING, PLUMBING & A.C. on the back. And he wore a tool belt. A tool belt. Who knew? Rudy and Emma said they knew about tool belts--I'm talking about the ultimate in male allure, that irresistible combination of sexuality and visible evidence of problem-solving capability--and even Isabel allowed that the concept wasn't new to her. I wonder where I've been.

Then I made an even bigger mistake. I told them about the first time he came to my house (which at that point was only to fix a stopped-up toilet; I hadn't hired him yet to replace the old pipes and put in new heating ducts), and he showed me a diagram in a plumbing book so that I could see exactly what was wrong and how he was going to fix it. "It's pawd o' the suhvice," he told me in his low, thrilling, solicitous southern accent. "An infawmed customah is a satisfahed one." He had his sleeves rolled up, and the sun through the bathroom window illuminated every golden hair on his--well, I believe in this case the word really is "sinewy"--forearms. You would have to see the diagram he showed me to understand what I mean, but believe me when I say that the drawing of the "closet auger" angling its long, tubular way into the narrow, back-slanted overflow passage of the toilet looked exactly, exactly like a man's penis in a woman's vagina. You can imagine the "plumbing" jokes I've had to put up with for the last four years.

Here is some more irony. In addition to the clean, liberating lust I've felt for Henry since almost the moment we met, I also knew he would make the world's most wonderful father. My genes called to his genes, I used to say, in a joking way. Together we were going to make beautiful Jewish/Protestant, intellectual/blue collar babies (the intellectual component coming from my parents, not me; my father teaches quantum physics at Brandeis and my mother is a stockbroker). But things are not looking hopeful in the baby-making department nowadays. Something seems to be wrong with my plumber's plumbing. Or maybe it's me, they're not quite sure.

I try not to think about the worst that could happen to us: childlessness. Such a forlorn word. And alien. I've never associated it with myself before. I feel mocked now by all the years I religiously took the pill or used foam, an IUD, a diaphragm, scrupulously making sure I kept myself barren.

I've managed to hide the worst of my fears from the group better than I hid my oh-so-funny libido, but I probably won't be able to for much longer. And why would I want to? To preserve their image of me as the sober, sensible, coolheaded one, I suppose.

But Isabel knows already. As usual. Once she told me she couldn't have gotten through her divorce and then the cancer and chemo and all that without me--which is very kind, very typical of her, but not true. But it will be in my case. If the worst happens--if Henry and I can't conceive a child--I'm quite sure that, without Isabel, I won't be able to bear it.

Rudy

I don't know why my friends bother with me, I'm so high-maintenance. I would run if I saw me coming. But they're always so patient and supportive. They put their arms around me and say, "Oh, Rudy, you are doing so well." That's code; it means, since nobody's put me in a straitjacket yet, I must be all right. I agree, but I always feel like knocking on wood after they say that.

What I don't tell anybody, not even Emma who thinks she knows everything about me, is how large a part norpramine and diazepam have been playing in my mental health. And before them, amitriptyline and alprazolam. And meprobamate. I could go on.

Nobody knows this about me except Curtis, my husband, and Eric, my therapist. I'm frank about the rest, my family's total dysfunction, the decades I've spent in counseling, my fights with depression and melancholia and mania. Everybody in the world is on Prozac or Zoloft, so there's no shock value there anymore, no shame, as Emma says, in better living through chemistry.

But I keep it to myself. The thing is, I need my friends to believe that what I do, how I behave, is real. Because it is real--but if they knew about my secret army of psychopharmaceuticals, anything I did right would be "because of the drugs," and anything wrong--same thing. Nothing about me would be authentic. In their minds, there would be no real Rudy.

Wait till I tell them what I did today. I already know what their reactions are going to be: Emma will laugh, Isabel will sympathize and console, and Lee will disapprove (gently). And all of them will be

wondering in private, Well, what were they thinking of when they hired her in the first place? But it's not their judgments I'm worried about. It's Curtis's.

What happened was, I got fired from the Call for Help Hotline. I'm ashamed to say I only lasted a week. Mrs. Phillips, my supervisor, said I got too personal with one of the callers, in direct violation of training guidelines. I know I handled it wrong, I know there have to be rules, but the truth is, if this girl--Stephanie--if she called again, I know I would do the same thing.

They tell us to be cautious at first, and already I had taken some prank calls from teenagers. But Stephanie's young, thin, strung-out voice gave her away so quickly, I was sure after only a few seconds that this was no game.

"Call for Help Hotline, this is Rudy speaking. Hello? This is Rudy, is somebody there?"

"Hi, yeah. I'm, um, calling for a friend."

"Hi. Okay. What's your friend's name?"

Long pause. "Stephanie."

"Stephanie. Does Stephanie have a problem?"

"Yeah, you could say that. She's got a lotta problems."

"A lot of problems. Okay, which one is the worst? The one that's making her the most unhappy."

"Oh, God, I don't know. She cries a lot. You know. Over, you know, a lot of stuff. Like, her family. Her friends."

"What's wrong with her family?"

Snort. "What isn't?"

I waited.

"Her mother, okay, she's a real mess."

"In what way?"

Silence.

"In what way is she a real mess?"

No answer.

"I bet she drinks too much."

"What?"

"Does Stephanie's mother drink too much?"

"Jeez. Yeah. She does. So--did you just, like, guess that?"

"Well, my mother drinks too much. So, yeah, I guess I just guessed it."

Why did I say that? Why?

"Really? So she's a drunk? My mother's a total drunk, it's so awful, I don't see how I can ... Oh, man. Oh, shit."

"No, wait, that's okay. Hey, Stephanie? Listen, it's okay, really. About ninety percent of the people I talk to start out telling me they're calling for a friend. But, you know, I think it's good--you probably would call for a friend, because you're a nice person." (This is not exactly how I usually talk; I mean, it's not quite my voice. But whoever I'm talking to on the Hotline, I find myself--found myself--falling into their idiom. Mrs. Phillips, before she fired me, said it was one of my most effective counseling strategies.)

"Right," Stephanie said skeptically.

"No, you are, I can tell."

"How old are you?"

"Me? Forty-one."

Scoffing sounds. "Yeah, so like, what do you know about teenage angst?"

"Teenage angst." I laughed, and Stephanie started to laugh with me--I thought she was laughing, but then I realized she was crying.

"Oh, man ..." I heard her fingers slide on the receiver--she was going to hang up.

I said very quickly, "Yeah, my mother was a drunk, she tried to kill herself when I was twelve. When I was eleven, my father did kill himself."

Long, long silence. I had plenty of time to ponder what made me blurt that out. I knew it was against the rules, but at the time, I couldn't think of any other way to keep her on the line.

Anyway, it worked. She started talking. "My mother ... almost every day when I come home from school she's, like, plastered. Or else she's sick. And I have to take care of her. I can't bring anybody

over, so I don't have any friends. Well, one, I have one friend, Jill. But she doesn't ... you know, I can't tell her what's going on, so ..."

"I know what that's like. I didn't have any friends, either, the whole time I was growing up. But that was a mistake. I made that mistake."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I mean, I did it all to myself, because I couldn't stop feeling ashamed. Like I was the one with the problem. But, Stephanie, listen to me, you didn't do anything, you really didn't. You're innocent. You're a baby. You don't deserve what's happening to you."

She burst into tears then. I did, too. Neither of us could speak for quite some time. I'm not sure, but I think this was when Mrs. Phillips started listening in.

"And, you know, this isn't even the main thing," Stephanie went on when she could talk. "Except it is, it's like over everything, you know?"

"I know."

"But right now it's something else, something even ..."

"What? What, Steph?"

"God." She started to cry again. I just waited. I was crying, too, but silently now. I thought of Eric, my therapist, and how he never cries, no matter how badly I go to pieces in his office. And yet I never think he's cold or indifferent--oh, no, just the opposite. But he doesn't cry. Which is good, thank God, because somebody's got to stay composed.

So I tried to pull myself together for Stephanie. "What happened?" I finally asked her. "I know it's something bad."

"It's bad. Something I did."

"With a boy?"

Stunned silence. Then, "Well, shit."

I had to laugh again. "It's okay, really, just another wild guess. What did you do? You can tell me if you want to."

"Are you married? What was your name, again?"

"Rudy. Am I married? Yes."

"For how long?"

"Four and a half years, almost five."

"So you were, like, thirty-seven?"

"Yes. Old," I said, before she could. I could tell that's what she was thinking.

"So did you ever, like ... do anything with a guy that ..."

"That I felt ashamed of afterward?"

"Yeah."

We're not supposed to tell parallel stories. We're trained to listen and ask questions, and refer callers to the appropriate social service agencies. So all I said--and I don't really think this was so bad--was, "Steph, I've done things with men that I haven't even told my therapist about."

She gave a nervous, relieved laugh. "So you mean, like, you go to a shrink?"

"I'll give you his name. Eric Greenburg, he's in Maryland--"

"Hey, wait--"

"No, write it down. Just in case." I gave her his phone number, too.

I think she wrote it down. Needless to say, this is something else we're not allowed to do.

"Okay," Stephanie said, clearing her throat, "this guy, he's in my math class. His name is George but everybody calls him Spider, Spider Man, I don't know why. I don't even like him that much, I mean, he's not my boyfriend or anything, but he was in the mall with these other guys last night, and I was with Jill, and we started talking and everything, and pretty soon Spider said why don't we come out to his car because he's got some stuff, you know, and we can smoke it. So Jill goes, no way, we're leaving, and--okay, this was really, really stupid, I know, but I told her to go on, because I was staying."

"Uh huh."

"So she left, and I went out in the parking lot with Spider and these two other guys and got high."

"Uh huh."

"I've smoked before, it wasn't the first time or anything. I think it was my mood or something. And, you know..."

"Not wanting to go home."

"Yeah."

"Wanting to shake things up a little. Bust out."

"Yeah. Oh God, Rudy."

"I know. So ..."

"So ... you know what I did after that."

"I guess so. How was it?"

She giggled--but then she started to cry again. My telephone is on a table with two fiberglass panels on either side that are about chin height. If I don't want anyone to see me, I have to hunch over, practically put my face on the table. I covered the back of my head with my hand and listened to Stephanie cry and cry. "It's okay. It's okay. You're all right," I told her over and over. "You're still yourself. You're still you."

"It was awful, Rudy, it was so awful. Oh, God, and I don't even like him! And he'll tell everybody, all his friends, and then ..."

"Who cares? You're not like that and you know it. Screw them."

"Jill's not even talking to me!"

"Well, she's angry, but--"

"No, she hates me, my best friend hates me."

"No, she doesn't."

"Yes, she does."

"She's confused and she's mad at you, but she doesn't hate you, Steph. Is she really your best friend? For how long?"

"Since sixth grade. Four years." She said that like I would say forty years. "Oh, what am I going to do?"

"Well, I guess you have to talk to her."

"She won't talk to me! And anyway, I can't tell her all this stuff."

"Well, you can. You told me. It'll just be really hard."

"I can't. She's so straight. And she's good, she's always been good. Sometimes I think if I had a sister, it wouldn't be so awful. Or even a brother, if I just had someone--"

"Well, not necessarily."

"No, I mean, if I had a sister or something, then at least there would be somebody to share it with, all this crap."

"Well, you'd think so."

"No, I think it would be a lot easier. A lot. You know, being lonely and everything ..."

I did it again. I said, "Well, I'll tell you, I've got siblings, and they just made everything worse. When I was your age."

"I don't get that."

"You know how your mother's drinking makes you feel like a failure?"

"Yeah?"

"Well--think if you had a brother and sister, and you felt as if you were failing them, too. Instead of one person to worry about, you had three. I'm just saying, it doesn't necessarily make anything better."

"I still wish I had someone."

Why couldn't I just leave it at that? "Listen, Stephanie--Claire, my sister, ran away when I was sixteen and she was eighteen and joined a religious cult. She still belongs to it."

"Huh."

"Yeah. This is a cult that believes we should revere cats because they're the direct descendants of Yahweh. Cats."

"Who? Yahweh?"

"God--Yahweh means God."

Stephanie burst out laughing.

"I'm not kidding. And this is just one thing they believe. And my brother Allen, well, he's just lost, he's gone. This is my family, Steph. My father committed suicide and my mother was a lush, my sister joined a cult, my brother's a lost soul--and here I am at this crisis center, acting like a sane person! So--no, listen--" she was still snickering--"I think the first thing you should do is call Dr. Greenburg, and

the second thing is, call Jill. Because you really need her right now."

"Yeah, but I don't know ..."

A little red light on the telephone starts blinking when the supervisor wants to break in. We're supposed to put the caller on hold, hit the button, and see what she wants. My red light had been blinking for about two minutes.

"I'm just saying, I think you should probably go for it with Jill. That's what I'd do if I were you. Do you really love her?"

"Yeah. I guess." She started to cry again. Really cry--she was sobbing. What a nerve I'd touched that time.

"Hey, Stephanie, it's all right. Oh, baby, it's okay, it's okay. Shhh, you're all right." The red light kept flashing, flashing.

"Rudy?"

"What, baby."

"Are you really okay now?"

"I am, I really am." We're allowed to lie. And if we're not, we should be.

"Well, but ... what about your mother?" Stephanie asked in a small voice.

"She's around. We both survived. She lives in Rhode Island with my stepfather, and we talk on the phone sometimes." No point in mentioning I haven't seen her in almost five years, not since my wedding. "She says she's sorry. Well, she said that once."

"She did?"

"Yeah. That meant a lot to me."

"God, Rudy." She heaved a sigh. "It sounds like your family's more fucked up than mine is. Oh--I'm sorry--can I say that?"

Oh, sweet Stephanie. "My family. Steph, if I started to tell you about my family, you'd be late for school tomorrow." Tickled laughter. I liked her so much. I had an idea. "Hey, do you live in the District?"

"Yeah, Tenley Circle. I go to Wilson."

"You know, if you wanted to, I could meet you sometime and we could talk some more. Would you

like to? It's just an idea--"

"I'd like it. Like some Saturday or something?"

"That would be great. My husband usually works on Saturdays, so we could have lunch--"

"Oh, Jeez, I forgot you were married."

"Yeah, I'm married."

"So is that cool?"

"Being married? Very cool. You know. Usually."

"Yeah, usually." Her voice dropped one whole, cynical octave. It broke my heart.

"So," I said, "how about Saturday? Do you want to meet?"

"Oh, that would--"

Click.

"Hello? Steph? Stephanie? Hello?"

I stared at the dead receiver in my hand. On my console, six or seven green lights flickered, indicating callers talking to volunteers. Had they transferred Stephanie to somebody else? I pushed a button at random.

"...coming out at this particular time, it's inconvenient, and that queen knew--"

Click.

"Mrs. Lloyd."

I jolted up straight. Mrs. Phillips never called me "Mrs. Lloyd"--I called her Mrs. Phillips and she called me Rudy. She's a large, beautiful, statuesque black woman, and she scares the hell out of me. She was standing over me, looming, really, her intimidating bosom heaving. I couldn't do anything but stare up at her. I felt like a guilty child.

"Mrs. Lloyd, hang up that phone, get your things, and get the hell out of this office."

"Wait, I know I was--"

"Out." She pivoted sideways and pointed through the window to the street. She had painted, one-inch fingernails and a lot of rings, a lot of clattering bracelets. She reminded me of a goddess, an

Amazon.

"Please, Mrs. Phillips, if I could just talk to that girl for two more minutes, I think she--"

"Lady," she said, incredulous, "you are fired. What were you thinking of?" She wasn't indignant, she was furious. Until now I'd never even heard her raise her voice.

"Mrs. Phillips, I was wrong, I know that, and I'll never--"

"We serve clients, Mrs. Lloyd. What do you think we're here for, to give you therapy?"

"No, I--"

"You're lucky if I don't decide to have charges brought against you."

"Charges!"

It was every nightmare come true. Access your anger, Eric tells me--but if I had any, it was buried too deeply, under too much guilt and remorse and misery and mortification. This was--this was one of the most classic failures of my life.

Poor Stephanie, I agonized all the way home. What would happen to her now? What if she went back to Spider Man? If I could find her somehow--she lived in Tenley Circle, she went to Wilson High, she was fifteen years old...

What made me think I could help her? All I'd done was tell her about myself, my alcoholic mother, my screwed up family. Mrs. Phillips was right about everything. I deserved this disgrace, and much more.

Well, I would get more. The worst punishment hadn't started yet, but it was about to. As soon as I tried to explain all this to Curtis.

Isabel

I've been reading a book by a woman who believes that, in her most recent past life, she was a Nazi sympathizer. She collaborated with the SS, she says, spied on her neighbors, and made herself rich (or rather himself rich; she's positive she was a man in this life) by shameless war profiteering. She bases this conviction not only on past-life regression therapy, but also on the circumstances of her current life. Poor woman, she's a quadriplegic; she lost the use of all but her facial muscles in a horrific automobile accident when she was sixteen. She says the suffering she endures now is in payment for the sins she committed in Germany in the 1940s.

Karma. What goes around comes around.

I have never been hypnotized or regressed, and if I've lived past lives, I've lost track of them. But I

would not rule out the possibility. Skepticism is a luxury I don't indulge anymore--I leave that to the young and immortal. But if it's true that the yin and yang are always counterbalancing one another, I'd like to think they're doing it within me now, in this life. I even know where I'd place the fulcrum for the most perfect equilibrium: at the center of my forty-sixth year. Before and after that dubious milestone, the halves of my life fall away like wings, like a heart broken in two. I am reborn. Here in the third year of my new life, I try to balance the old one with hope and love, sympathy, warmth and superfluous kindnesses, gratuitous outbursts of delight. There is so much to counterweigh (although nothing so heinous as the erstwhile Nazi's sins); I only hope I have time. It would help if I could live to ninety-two.

Forty-six and forty-six.

*

Among good friends, ten years isn't much of an age difference, and yet sometimes I feel as if the Saving Graces and I come from different centuries. I'm not quite fifty; technically I'm a boomer. My father was a missionary, though, and I spent half my childhood in Cameroon and Gabon, the other half in Iowa. Then too, my husband's job kept us stationed in Turkey for the first six years of our marriage; our son was born there, in fact. These are the most obvious explanations for my lifelong uneasiness with the popular culture, but I think something else is also at work. Something in me. Terminal unhipness, Emma would call it. That's as good an explanation as any.

We're all productive, tolerably sane, functioning adults, we Graces, with no more emotional baggage--well, except for Rudy--than you would expect in a random sample of aging yuppie women. And yet our childhoods were disasters. Some more than others, of course. Rudy could write a book; Emma probably will write a book. Lee's family and mine have in common an outward appearance of normalcy, a very different reality inside. Occasionally we four play the intriguing "What keeps us together?" game, and the fact that we all survived our childhoods is mentioned early and often. I wonder if I could have survived my cancer without their lovingkindness. Survived--yes, probably. But only that: barest survival. Nothing, no other experience has ever leveled me to such an extent. I believed I would never recover, that I was forever changed. And I was, but not in the way I expected. I'd read all the pamphlets and books on the disease, as many as I could find. The first-person stories of women who claimed that cancer changed their lives, turned them into different people, was a blessing in disguise--oh God, these stories infuriated me. I felt cheated and betrayed, lied to, and deeply, personally offended. And now--now I'm one of those women. It's been two years since I lost my breast, and I hear myself uttering the very same sentiment that used to make me grind my teeth: "Not that I'd wish it on anyone, but it was good that this happened to me. It's turned my life around."

Well, it needed turning around. It had taken a little detour, my life, occasioned by, among other things, the discovery of my husband's chronic unfaithfulness. I don't know why, but I've been thinking about Gary quite a lot these days. I've been wondering if I was right to turn his last act of betrayal into the catalyst for our breakup. If we were still married and it happened today, would I forgive him? I believe I would. I hope so.

Because I'm not the same person; I don't have that anger inside me anymore. Thank God. Oh, but

what would Lee say if I told her this? Or Emma, or Rudy? It doesn't bear thinking about! The only bright spot in the long horror of my divorce was their friendship, the way they rallied around, united in loathing of Gary. In the space of one women's group meeting, they went from being rather fond of him to wishing him dead, and at the time I found that enormously comforting.

To this day, I haven't told the Graces the whole story of his infidelities. Too embarrassed, I guess; it's shameful, Gary's behavior, and some of the shame has stuck to me, as if part of the blame were mine. Perhaps it is--I'm sure it is. But I'll never forget and I'll always be grateful for their savage, righteous fury when I told them how I discovered his first peccadillo. It happened on the night of our nineteenth wedding anniversary--which, in retrospect, seems fitting; as long as I've known Gary, he's always had terrible timing.

He took me to a new Turkish restaurant in Bethesda--a little gift of nostalgia for the good old days, when we were first married and lived in Ankara. I was surprised and touched. We drank raki and ate skewered lamb with eggplant, and went home and made love on the couch. Most unlike us, but Terry was in Richmond on a glee club overnight, and for once the house was ours. I fell asleep afterward, and woke up in the dark. Carrying my clothes, I wandered upstairs, feeling cosy and smug because my marriage was nineteen years old and I still had sex on the sofa. Gary's voice, low and confidential, came to me from the half-closed bedroom door, and I paused on the landing, nothing but curious. Who could he be talking to on the telephone at midnight? In that voice?

Betty Cunnilefski--a name that didn't amuse me in the slightest until much, much later. She worked as an administrative assistant in his office. I'd met her once, recalled her vaguely: small, wispy, beige, the sort of woman you see dining alone in restaurants, who's careful to keep the cover of the book she's reading face-down on the table.

Gary confessed everything that night in a rush. He wouldn't see her again, he swore, and he'd have her transferred to another office. Even in the midst of my hurt and anger, I felt a pang for Betty--who, true to his word, Gary moved to a different department within the week. And presumably never saw again. I believed him at the time, he wept so convincingly, begged my forgiveness so sincerely. He seemed almost as shocked as I was, and unable to explain why he'd done it. Which was just as well, because if he'd claimed he was lonely, misunderstood, sexually deprived, drunk, seduced, in midlife crisis--any excuse would have ignited the silent, seething volcano of anger in me. I was barely aware of it, frankly thought myself incapable of it. And Gary would have been flabbergasted if he'd guessed at a fraction of it.

It took three years for the volcano to erupt. Betty may or may not have been his first mistress, but she wasn't his last. How did he get these women? That's all I want to know, now that the fury has burned itself out. Gary is short, jowly, on the stocky side; he has a full beard, and still plenty of salt-and-pepper hair. He's bull-chested, thick-necked, and short-legged. In bed he's ramlike, a batterer. Fine if you like that sort of thing, but over the years I grew to hate it. Behind a friendly smile, he's really quite cool and measuring, predatory. He flirts energetically and ineptly; it's impossible--was impossible--to imagine him scoring with any woman. But he does. What is it about him?

For one thing, he's an earthy, passionate man--that's why I fell in love with him. And for another, he

chooses needy, lonely, awkward girls, the pathetic sure things of this world--girls exactly like I used to be. I can't say if it's deliberate on his part, and therefore cruel and calculating, or only blind, unerring instinct. I've never been able to decide. I want to give him the benefit of the doubt. I want to forgive.

This is not altruism, not saintliness. There's no room inside for bitterness anymore--it's that simple. At the risk of sounding fatuous, I'll make an observation that life is full of Bettys. I don't know whom I have to thank for this new, sanguine attitude, and it's amusing to think it may be, in part, my minister father's Lutheran God. But only in part. I'm equally drawn nowadays to what Emma calls woo-woo, meaning crystals and rocks, the Tarot, reincarnation, past lives, astrology, numerology, meditation, hypnotherapy--anything and everything under the rubric of New Age (anything spiritual other than orthodox Protestantism, according to Emma). I believe in them all. My friend's scorn knows no bounds, and yet she teases me so gently, so affectionately. It's a lovely form of play between us. Emma and I are closer than we've ever been.

I could tell her how purely delighted I am to see God in so many new places. The dual burdens of conventionality and rationality fell away when I realized I might die, I really might die. Now I'm free. Free and forty-nine, and so grateful to be starting life over again. Yin and yang. I've gone back to school, I've moved from Chevy Chase to Burleigh to Adams-Morgan--a progression that speaks volumes all by itself. I color my hair. I might take a lover. Waking up in the morning isn't a tedious and dutiful act, it's the start of a possible adventure. I've recreated myself. No, that's not it. I have been recreated, by a new definition of mortality forced on me by circumstances. And it was worth it: all I had to give in return was a breast.

The deal of a lifetime.

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