

The Sun in Cannes

By Sara Baker

Caroline takes her coffee out to the deck and lifts her face to the morning sun. She sips the black coffee, savoring the hot bitterness, thinking of that old joke—*I like my coffee like I like my men, hot, black and strong*. Why did she ever think that was funny? She cradles the cup, rolling it back and forth in her hands, warming the ache from the incipient arthritis in her fingers. She should give up coffee, she knows, the acid doesn't agree with her. But it is so good! She dips her head and inhales the fragrant steam. She can no more give up coffee than she could give up sex.

She angles her chair to get the best view of the garden. A pair of house finches swoops over her head and lands on the birdfeeder. Sparring and complaining, they vie for the plentiful seed. Such pretty birds, Caroline thinks, but such thugs.

She becomes aware of Jerry calling her—bellowing is more like it. It cuts through her early morning calm. Why can't he come find her? she thinks for the millionth time.

“Caroline!”

No use wondering, he's not going to change at this late date. Reluctantly, she leaves the bright deck, the fighting finches, and goes to find Jerry in his dark office.

“Caroline!”

“I'm right here, Jer,” she says softly.

“Oh, sorry,” he says sheepishly, swiveling away from the computer screen. She doesn't need her eyes to adjust to the dim light to know that his face is red, his jaw clenched.

“What is it?” She can’t keep the irritation out of her voice.

“I’m telling you, Caroline, I am so fed up with that kid.”

A cold stone drops in her stomach. Jen.

“What is it now?”

“What do you think?” He sighs heavily. “She wants another “loan.” She’s got a part in some movie. Thinks it’ll be the “big break.” It means she’ll have to quit her job and go on location for a month.”

Caroline’s heart speeds up a bit. “What movie?”

“Caroline, who cares what movie? Some Indie crap. God, it couldn’t be worse than the last one.”

“Where would she go?” Caroline can’t help herself, can’t help the rising blip of hope.

He lets out a moan. “You are not getting it. You’ve encouraged her in this, this magical thinking.” He leans forward in his chair, his face in the dim light anguished.

Caroline’s face and neck feel hot. The endless argument. As if they inhabit a place in Dante’s Inferno.

As calmly as she can she says, “I encouraged her to be herself, Jerry.”

Jen’s seven-year-old face, pale and fragile as she bends over her coloring, floats in front of Caroline, and with it, the nameless anxiety of those years. Jen had been so imaginative, so much in her own world, but so lost in the bigger world.

As if reading her mind, he says, “She’s not a little kid anymore.” He rubs his hands over his face, and she can feel his weariness. “She’s got to come to terms with reality. She’s twenty-six years old.”

“I know how old she is, Jerry.”

They were in it now. Everything garbled, as if a diabolical translator stands between them, deliberately twisting their words, so that each retreats into his respective bunker, the land between them no man's land. It is her reflex to shield Jen, to give her the benefit of the doubt. She says, as she always does, "It's a tough business."

"She's not that talented. Face it. You've got to come to terms with it." He sits back in his chair, sighing loudly.

It is true. Jen has neither the talent nor the nerve to succeed in Hollywood, a conclusion Caroline has come to reluctantly. The last movie was dismal—an earnest indie in which she played a barely clad call-girl. Her brief part a paltry three minutes. It certainly wasn't the kind of role Caroline had envisioned for Jen. Ibsen, O'Neal, Shakespeare, even Stoppard—she had hoped her daughter's interest in acting would bend that way. But it had bent in another. Still, she can't discourage her daughter.

"I know, Jer. I know. But she has to come to terms with it *herself*."

He shakes his head vehemently. "You've always say that and she never does, Caroline. We can't afford to keep her on the dole. What about us? Huh? We've postponed our trip to Italy for years. What about early retirement?" He looks at her, and the despair there makes her flinch.

"You have to level with her."

"Don't tell me what I have to do, Jer."

She turns on her heel and leaves, needing to cool off. Jer talks big, but only to her. Another bone of contention. Tell her yourself, she wants to say to him. But he won't. He doesn't know how. He loves Jen mightily, but he doesn't know how to talk to her. They should have had a son.

She refills her coffee cup and goes outside again. She gulps the coffee now, surveying her drooping planters, and then leaves the cup on the deck rail as she steps barefoot onto the dewy grass. She yanks on the hose, cursing its knots and twists, then turns on the water full blast.

She can hear Jer yelling for her again, but decides to ignore him. She knows she made mistakes with Jen, OK, she wants to tell him, but it is now that worries her. How to help her now.

Jer yells again, but this time there is an urgency to his voice which she registers. Reluctantly, puts down her hose and trudges up the steps, taking one more sip of her cooling coffee as she enters his office.

He is curled in a fetal position, clutching his chest. It is unreal, like a bad movie. She wants to tell him to get up and quit scaring her. As if in a dream she dials 911, then sinks down on the floor, her arms around him, breathing for him, saying his name over and over and over, saying, “stay with me, Baby, stay with me.” He is ashen and still, but breathing-- she hangs on to that.

The EMTs have him on a stretcher, hooked up to oxygen and in the ambulance in a quick blur. She whimpers with relief. She holds his hand all the way to the hospital.

She can't get used to seeing him inert. She is becoming accustomed to the rest of it—the sight of the blood pressure cuff, the blinking monitor, the airless room—but she can't get used to his stillness. His prognosis is good, the young surgeon had said—so handsome, so godlike, Caroline couldn't help noticing—then wondered at herself for noticing. The surgeon had hesitated, had shifted his weight to the other foot. “The surgery went fine, no

complications,” he said. “But the attack was massive,” he said, pausing, waiting, she now realizes, to see if she was taking in what he said. “There could be damage, we have to wait and see how he does.” So here they are in CCU, where she has spent the night, unwilling to leave him.

She takes Jer’s large, square fingered hand in hers, stroking it, her fingers running over the rough IV tape. He’ll hate this when he wakes up, she thinks, hate being tethered here.

“I’m sorry, Jer, I’m so sorry,” she whispers. If she’d gone the first time he’d called, if she hadn’t let the fight escalate, if she’d been a better mother, a better wife. If, if, if. She thinks of the Tuscan Villa brochure they’ve had by the bedside for, yes, years, so that the terra cotta walls, the dark lines of cypress, the vineyards, were burned into her mind. They’d planned a bicycle tour, but now—

Time passes. The striped sunlight tracks across the green wall. She works her way through the newspaper she picked up in the ER, skimming the latest carnage in Syria, the latest scandals in Washington. She opens the Arts section. The crop of movies at Cannes, the reviewer enthuses, has never been better. Caroline admires a photo of Julianne Moore draped in peach silk. She is in a new movie by a Swedish director, someone Caroline had never heard of, some moody, dark postmodern sort of thing. Something that deals with Turks in Germany, the tensions there. Something she is only barely aware of. She closes her eyes and imagines the sun in Cannes, the bright bougainvillea, the salty smell of the sea air.

There is a cough and a gurgle from the bed. Jerry’s face is less ashen, pinker with the oxygen, but his breathing still sounds uneven to her. She checks the monitor, checks his heart rate—a little fast, not too bad. He coughs again, and spit dribbles out of the corner of his

mouth. She wipes it with a tissue. His eyelids flick and open. Unfocused and glazed at first, he stares past her, and then finds her. He gives her a weak smile. “Sor-ry,” he says in raspy voice.

“Oh, Jer, don’t speak. Save your strength.”

He frowns the way he does when he is formulating a retort, his ingrained habit of splitting hairs with her. It actually cheers her to see it. Then he nods, acquiescing. She smooths his forehead, watches him as he sinks back into unconsciousness. Gray stubble has sprouted on his sagging cheeks. How old he looks! It is as if time has been foreshortened, as if the future has come to meet them too quickly, before she is ready. She stands listening to his breathing, which seems more even now. She has to learn not to react to every sound, to every event, with an adrenaline surge.

The nurse bustles in. Caroline tells her about the cough and gurgle, and the nurse says it is to be expected, that she will suction some of the fluid, not to worry.

“Don’t you want something to eat, Ms. Murphy? Maybe you should go to the cafeteria—they’re still open. I promise you, I’ll take good care of him. You are going to be in it for the long haul, so you need to keep up your strength.”

The nurse smiles, her face dimpling up. She is appealing, this girl. She looks barely out of high school, with her trim figure, her swinging pony tail, but Caroline is impressed by her knowledge, her calmness.

Caroline hesitates. She is afraid to leave him.

Lauren Marie, the nurse, busies herself checking his vitals, and then says again, “It is a beautiful day, Ms. Murphy, it would be a shame to miss it. There’s an outdoor patio.”

If she could get to the sun....Caroline nods. “I know you’ll take good care of him. Oh, my daughter is coming. Just so you know.”

The girl smiles and nods. A good profession, nursing, Caroline thinks as she leaves, trying and failing to picture Jen in Lauren's place.

Out on the cafeteria patio, Caroline marvels that she is in the same building. Surrounded by planters overflowing with oleander blossoms, the sun warm on her arm, the fountain muffling the sounds of the traffic outside, some rigid vigilance in her softens. She is hungrier than she'd thought. She inhales a chicken salad croissant, and still hungry, lingers, scavenging the last crumbs from her plate. It is the kind of day she used to spend at the neighborhood pool with Jen when she was little—Caroline reading novels, Jen old enough to swim and play with the other kids. She had thought those days would go on forever, those days of Coppertone and chlorine hair and popsicles. She hadn't quite believed it when Jen sprouted so tall that year after sixth grade, so lovely, her hair always glistening, and her clothes carefully selected. How quickly she changed, suddenly eyeing her mother with a certain cool detachment, startling and unnerving to Caroline. Caroline kept expecting the little girl with knobby knees and flying pigtails to come running into the kitchen breathless, slamming the screen door behind her, but she never did.

Caroline goes back for a piece of cheesecake and coffee, and settles down to the Arts section again. She has only taken a few bites when her cell phone vibrates.

"Mom!" Her daughter's voice, equal parts aggrieved and demanding. "Where are you? Why aren't you here?"

Caroline puts down her fork. "Honey, I had to get something to eat."

"God, how can you eat at a time like this?"

Caroline takes a deep breath. Back in the saddle. “Hey, kiddo, this is not some movie you’re in. Calm down. I’m coming right up.”

“OK.” Jen’s voice sounds small now, like a little girl’s.

Caroline abandons her cake, stuffs her paper in her bag, and hurries through the mazelike building. As she gets off the elevator, she sees Jen standing at the end of the corridor, looking out the window. Even from the back, her thinness cuts into Caroline.

“Jen, Honey.”

Jen turns. She has a new haircut and color, a slightly darker blonde, and her carefully made-up face startles Caroline in its perfection and foreignness. Her tight jeans cling to her hollowed-out pelvic bones and her small tee-shirt rides up exposing Jen’s flat, tan stomach. Caroline tries not to wince at that strip of vulnerable flesh.

“He’s going to be OK, isn’t he, Mom?” Now it is the little girl voice, the helpless, fragile voice. Her large blue eyes slowly fill with tears. Caroline knows this expression—she’s seen it hundreds of times: after breakups with boyfriends, fights with friends, stresses at school or work.

Caroline wants to say, “I don’t know. It isn’t clear.” She wants to say, ‘come join me in the grown-up world, girl. He might not make it. He might be compromised. And yes, I know he’s your father, but you still have it all before you—your own husband, children, a life. I don’t. And we haven’t had enough of each other yet.’

Instead she says, “The operation went well.”

Jen looks at her, waiting, her eyes narrowed.

“He’s got wonderful care, honey.” Caroline pats Jen’s arm and Jen puts her head on her mother’s shoulder.

“There’s something you are not telling me,” Jen mutters into her shoulder. It sounds like a line from a movie. Caroline puts her hand on her daughter’s head, smoothing her hair, inhaling the strong perfume Jen favors. She is always tentative when touching Jen; as a child Jen had been chary of caresses.

Caroline hesitates. “With something like this, they never really know how much damage has been done. We have to wait and see. The doctor is cautiously optimistic. Your father has a good constitution.”

Jen raises her head. “I couldn’t stand it if he died, Mom. You know I couldn’t bear it.”

It irritates Caroline that Jen always manages to sound theatrical. She doesn’t want to be irritated with her now.

“I know, honey, I know. Look, let’s go in the room. Have you seen him yet?”

Jen shakes her head, stares at the floor. “I was waiting for you.”

“It will help to see him, Honey. Make it less scary.” Caroline turns and pushes open the heavy door. The scene is just as she left it, but it still startles her. She looks back to see Jen’s reaction. Jen stands motionless in the doorway.

Jen’s face pales under her makeup. “I need a diet Coke first.”

“Those things are terrible for you.”

Jen looks at her with disgust. “Spare me, Mom, for the hundredth time, and don’t tell me to take my vitamins.”

“I’ll never stop telling you that,” Caroline answers

Jen scowls, and then catches her mother’s eye, and they both laugh.

“Look, why don’t you go over and squeeze Dad’s hand. He might come to when he hears your voice.”

Jen glances at the bed, and then looks away. “I definitely need a Coke first.” She turns and marches down the hall.

She probably needs a smoke, too, and who can blame her? Caroline thinks. But the old pang is there, that somehow things should be different than they are, that something is missing.

When she comes back, Jen reeks of tobacco. She has reapplied her lipstick and eye shadow. She carefully puts her designer bag on the chair next to Caroline and turns towards the bed. Caroline watches her square her thin shoulders.

Jen leans over and whispers in her father’s ear, then looks back at Caroline, panic in her eyes.

“Touch him, Honey.”

Jen strokes his arm gingerly.

“You might need to put a little more pressure, there, and just speak to him.”

Jen murmurs something, but Caroline hears only, “Daddy?” At first there is no response, but then she sees him struggle to open his eyes. Just as he had with her, his eyes look unfocused. “Daddy?” Jen says again, and this time he takes her in. His slack face approximates a smile, and he fastens on his daughter’s face without blinking.

“Jen?” he says hoarsely.

“Yes, Daddy, it’s me.”

He continues staring at Jen, then says her name again.

Jen glances at her mother, her eyes wide.

Caroline winces, knows every effort costs him.

Jen says in a wavering voice, “Dad, as soon as you get better, I’m going to beat your ass in scrabble.”

He nods, grins weakly.

“He’s tired; we’ll let him sleep now.”

Jen gets up stiffly and comes over to the chair next to her mother. Caroline sees her face is wet. She reaches out and wipes a tear off her daughter’s face.

Jen flinches. “I’m OK, Mom. Have you got Kleenex?” Caroline digs and finds one, handing it to her like an offering, a tissue flower. What would Jen do without her father? It had always been the three of them, like a three-legged stool.

They tiptoe into the hall.

“Do you need something to eat, Jen?” Caroline asks.

Jen shrugs, doesn’t look at her. “I’m not hungry.”

Caroline feels the awkwardness creep up on her again. She casts around for something to talk about, something to ease the tension. When Jen was a young teen, she and Caroline had watched the Oscars together; they’d had fun commenting on the gowns, the stars. Caroline had missed it when Jen began to watch with her friends. The Arts section is still in her bag; she pulls it out, smooths it, and shows Jen the picture of Julian Moore.

“Look at this. Cannes. When I was a teenager, I promised myself I’d go to Cannes. I was going to be a star or director or screenwriter. I pictured myself in one of those navy and white boat-necked sweaters and white capris, frolicking on the Cote d’ Azur.”

Jen snorts. “You?”

“Why is that so hard for you to imagine?”

Jen tosses back her lovely hair. Jen's beauty has always enchanted Caroline, but today it seems aggressive, like a form of armor, or a weapon.

Jen rests her face in her hand, her elbow on her knee, and grins, a familiar grin. "Oh, Mom, come on. I mean, you are a librarian." There is a mocking, hard edge to her voice that Caroline doesn't like.

Caroline feels herself flush. "I wasn't always." It hurts, being dismissed. "Anyway, I thought you might like to look at this."

Jen grabs the paper, scowling. "Yeah, she looks *great*. Must be nice to get all the breaks." She tosses the paper, her eyes darting around the room nervously.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, come on, Mom, you know what I mean. Look, are you trying to rub it in? I know my so-called brilliant career is in the toilet. I don't need to be reminded. I need a smoke."

"That's not what I meant at all—"

There are tears in Jen's eyes. "And don't tell me not to smoke, either." She slings the bag over her shoulder, and totters down the hall on her high-heeled sandals.

Caroline presses her hands to her temples, pushing the pain back. She is tired, so tired. She feels as if she could lie down next to Jen and never get up. She pushes open the heavy door and resumes her vigil.

There is a sudden sharp beeping. The door opens and Lauren Marie, serious and undimpled now, checks the monitors, presses some buttons and then several more nurses run in with a machine and then the doctor, his white coat flapping. Lauren Marie comes over to Caroline.

"You'll need to step outside, Ms. Murphy."

“What is it?” She allows herself to be steered towards the door.

“His heart rate is too high and irregular, we’re going to have to shock it back into normal rhythm—he’ll be OK—it’ll be over in a minute. You can wait in the waiting area.”

Then the door closes. Caroline wanders down to the waiting room, her own heart beating very fast. No one is there. Bewildered, she stands staring at the chairs, the sofa. She is like an actor who has wandered onto the wrong stage without a script. Too much! She wants to yell. I can’t do this!

Gingerly, she stretches out on the sofa. The fact that something is wrong with Jer, maybe something serious, floats just out of reach. She should feel something about that, but she can’t. Not just now. Not yet.

She drifts. She is somewhere with Jerry, in some terra cotta city. Laughter floats over them, and the smell of flowers.

“Mom!” Jen stands over her. “I couldn’t find you! They wouldn’t let me in! What’s going on?”

Caroline gazes up at Jen, the last wisps of her dream lingering. Jen’s anxiety radiates off of her in waves. But Caroline doesn’t have the energy to sit up, to take her in her arms, to reassure her.

“Mom?” Jen sits on the couch and her voice is softer this time. “Are you OK?”

Caroline stares up at her. She shakes her head--no. Very slowly she raises her head, then pushes herself into a seated position, raking her hair back from her face. She is still half asleep. She just wants Jen to go away. But Jen sits there, fidgeting with the pull on her Coach bag, tapping her feet, looking resentfully out the window.

“It’s so weird how nothing ever changes here. It kind of gives me the creeps.”

“Here?”

“This town. It’s like, I went out for a smoke and walked down to McGregor’s and it’s still Mr. McGregor and Junior there, like they’ve been in suspended animation or something, but they are fatter and grayer. I mean, what can it be like, dispensing medicine day in and day out in that dark hole in the wall place, year after year? This place is like *Pleasantville*.”

“*Pleasantville*?”

“The movie, Mom. You know—well, I guess you don’t.”

Jen gets up, walks to the window, and looks down at the street below. She is framed by the green oak branches outside. Her down-tilted face in the dim light looks fragile to Caroline.

“It’s so different here, so quiet. LA is so alive, there’s so much happening. So much energy……” she trails off.

Caroline thinks that Jen sounds like she is trying to convince herself.

Jen looks at her. “You should visit me more, Mom. Why don’t you?”

Caroline shrugs. “I don’t know. Time. Money.” She knows it wasn’t a very good answer. She has gone once. She should go. But does she want to know about Jen’s life there? The drugs she imagines are the reason for the thinness, the revolving door boyfriends. They talk on the phone a good bit, but Caroline feels there was something rehearsed about those talks, as if Jen only feeds her information she thinks her mother can handle. Maybe, she thinks, and this was a new thought, maybe Jen doesn’t really want her to visit. Maybe it is just one more way to make her mother feel guilty.

Jen rolls her eyes. “You could if you wanted to. It would be good for you to get out of here, shake things up a bit.” She saunters over to where Caroline is sitting, still in her stupor.

Jen cocks her head at Caroline, assessing her. “We could get you a new haircut, some new clothes. Get you styln’.” Caroline smiles up at Jen. She is charming when she is like this, painting rosy pictures of anticipated pleasures. She is less good at the follow through. Still, it warms Caroline.

Caroline puts her hands to her hair and laughs, “My god, I must look a sight. I didn’t even bring a comb with me.”

Jen smiles, reaches in her bag and brings out her comb. “Here, let me do it. I’ll make you up, too, so that when Dad sees you don’t give him another heart attack.”

Caroline is about to protest--Jen’s style was not hers. But when Jen puts the comb in her hair, it feels good. She closes her eyes and lets Jen groom her. It doesn’t really matter what she looks like, she thinks, it just matters that they are together, enjoying each other’s company. She holds her breath, afraid of scaring Jen out of this mood.

“So, did Dad tell you I got a part in a movie?”

Caroline opens her eyes. “Yes, he said something about it. What is it, Honey?”

“It’s a small—well, by Hollywood standards—budget movie. But it’s going to be filmed in Sicily, something about the origin of the Mafia families. Takes place in the twenties. The clothes are gorgeous.”

“Is it a good script, Jen? A good story?”

Jen has a make-up brush to her lips now, is holding her mother’s eyelid. “Don’t move, Mom, I’m putting on eyeliner. Well, I don’t know, I haven’t read the whole script, but I get the gist. Anyway, I’d have to take off work a while to do it....it looks like it could lead to some big things.” This is said, as it has been said before, with a brightness meant to stymie any negative response.

Jen has her other eye now. Close up, Caroline sees a certain fierce desperation in her daughter's expression. Wearily, she asked what the role was, bracing for the answer.

"Oh, you know, one of the gangsters' girls. Here, let me put a little lipstick on and voila!" She fishes out a mirror and gives it to Caroline.

Caroline hesitates. She's been more or less avoiding mirrors lately. Every time she examines her face, there is one more line, one more sag in her neck. Squinting gingerly, she looks in the mirror. She has sold Jen short; she doesn't look like a dragon lady. She looks, well, decent. She looks, actually, quite lovely.

She lowers the mirror, feeling shy. "My goodness, Jen, you are amazing."

Jen laughs, "Yes, I know."

"Dad--I think it will cheer him up."

Jen's face becomes stretched, pale. "What's taking them so long?"

Caroline checks her watch. "It really hasn't been that long. It just seems that way in the hospital. I'm sure if it were bad news, we would have heard." But she isn't so sure.

"So, Mom, what do you think?"

"About what?"

"About the film—in Sicily?"

Caroline looks at her daughter, at her eager, tired face, the cheekbones painfully prominent.

"Do you mean whether Dad and I will give you the money?"

Jen nods her head, her eyes intensely latched onto her mother's, in their most pleading, affecting way.

Caroline cocks her head, and sighs. Her stomach contracts, she feels nauseated.

“Honey,” she begins, but already Jen is beginning to tear up, already she is shrinking from her mother’s touch.

“I see. He doesn’t want me to have it. He thinks I’m a loser, that this is just like the other times. But it’s not, it’s different.”

Caroline sits unmoving. Her arms and legs are bags of wet sand. She feels as if she is watching Jen from a great distance. The problem with the girl’s acting, she thinks, is it’s just, well, acting. A sadness comes over her. A sadness for her and Jen, for all of them. But at the same time, it feels as if something in her is breaking free.

She stands up, goes over to Jen and puts her arms around her. Jen tries to push her away, but she holds on.

“No Jen, it is not Daddy. It’s me. I don’t want to give you the money. We are not doing you any favors—“

Jen pale, pushes her mother away now. “You!? I don’t believe it, you are covering for him.”

“Nope.”

“But, Mom, if you don’t believe in me....”

“I do believe in you. That’s the point.”

Jen looks at her, startled, her expression for a moment naked and unrehearsed. Then her shoulders begin to shake. “How can you do this to me at a time like this? When Daddy could, I don’t know....”

Caroline reaches over and gently touches Jen’s rigid shoulder. “You’ll be all right.” And she believes her own words. “I’m going to go see how he is now.” She leaves through the open door, not looking back.

Coming down the corridor toward her is Lauren Marie, smiling.

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