



## *The wind parted for her*

*Papa oom mow mow.* Diane timed her steps up the mansion's limestone stairs to the Rivington's tune from 1962 playing in her head. Pretty sure it was '62. Early in her academic career. Third grade. Her doctors approved of her devotion to doowop-dooowop over Dopamine. If it didn't do as good a job regulating her emotional responses and curbing an ever-so-slight tendency toward addiction, at least it kept her humming along in the here and now.

Her feet beat a do-the-locomotion motion up the century-old stairs of the oldest building on her former college campus in Chicago.

*All things considered, we're both in decent shape,* she thought, and she gave herself points for seeing the bright side.

*Papa oom mow mow.*

Each step toward her meeting with Sister Francis Mark and three of the women she went to college with thirty-five years ago was thick with memory. A minefield of memory. A recall tsunami. No single memory was terrible by itself. But, in toto, this trip in response to Sister Mark's request triggered reverie of her college years. That experience was of such uncertainty it had to wait until memory stepped in years later to give it any sort of form at all.

Now the waves of the past were upon her, unbidden.

This would be less problematic if her grasp upon today was less, *how should she phrase it?* Of a less fragile mien.

Her therapist warned her that wallowing in psychological time kept her from enjoying real time. He said, "Un-forgiveness naturally imposes a heavy burden of psychological time, keeping you in regret and guilt and penitential mode."

Of course, he was not a Catholic; so he ill-understood that this described her general sense of self. Guilt. Regret. Penitential. Her

uncomfortable, comfort zone. She wore it like an ill-fitting coat, ratty—but all she had. She made do.

He also couldn't be expected to comprehend her need to please, which admittedly might be more an issue of gender than of religion, though it might be some combo thereof.

Diane intended to be her therapist's primo success experience. She wouldn't wallow. She would please. She was a pleaser.

Humming tunes from carefree kidhood often worked to yank her dawdling psyche out of her bedridden past and plunk her semi-upright in the here and now. However, as "Papa Oom Mow Mow" slunk from chipper cheer-me-up into the ditty of a nitwit, she scrounged for a new tune, maybe something from *The King and I*. She liked how Deborah Kerr talked in that movie and especially liked how Yul Brynner looked.

"Diane! Diane! Diane!"

In Sister Mark's voice, Diane's name became a sing-a-ling, a singsong, a lilt of a lyric, a toot from a toy trumpet. It came from the top of seventeen steps, on the veranda of the mansion. Herself stood there with arms open as wide as her voice was, in a word, loud.

Sister Mark had a boomer of a voice that suited her square body. She was a woman of heft, brickish and solid and as upright this evening at age eighty-one as she was when Diane first saw her more than three decades ago, on her first day here at Shorelake College for Women—the private college then under Sister Mark's command.

"Sister! Sister!" Their hug was genuine, a little awkward, a respectful distance maintained.

With typical military precision, Sister Mark got to it, leading the way through the mansion's huge mahogany doorway that was just large enough to admit all of her.

"Ruth is here. And June. Pat will join us soon."

*Former fellow students as unlike me, as unlike each other as, as...*

Diane failed to find a simile drastic enough to describe their differences.

She wondered why, in heaven's name, Sister Mark invited the four of them to meet her at the mansion today. It couldn't be similarities. They had none.

As her anxiety schlumped itself off to pout for a while, Diane followed Sister Mark, and hummed.

*Shall we dance?*

*Boom boom boom.*

Her high heels on hardwood announced her presence to Ruth and June, already seated in the softly lit library to the left of the mansion's foyer. Diane thought the foyer's size, larger than a two-car garage, suggested the original owners of this mansion had excessively high expectations regarding the volume of visitors they anticipated.

Diane's heels echoed.

It occurred to her she might have sounded less conspicuous in sneakers but didn't own any. *Thank you, Jesus.*

"Diane! Diane! Still shackled to a chauvinist fantasy of womanhood, I see." June Magee glanced at what was on Diane's feet as if her black pumps harbored *E. coli* spores.

Diane felt old-dude memory reach out a gnarly claw to grab her. *This from a woman who would be me if she could. But she can't, so she blames me for having the bad grace to be me instead.*

"Love you, too, JunieMoon!" Two could play the bad-memory card. June hated that nickname.

Diane clickety-clicked across the room to hug her, exerting considerable stretch to get her arms around June's ampleness. She was determined if she couldn't squeeze out a civil welcome, at least she might impair June's ability to speak.

It worked. June's bravado had the staying power of an eye blink in the sandstorm of her self-doubt.

June was a woman ever in search of the piece of herself she thought was missing. Trouble was, she didn't know what the piece looked like and she didn't know where to look for it. All she knew was other women had it, whatever it was. It was a connection of some sort that fit other women neatly into place among themselves, in concert with the world that housed them, and within families that loved them. She wanted to fit in the woman puzzle.

Instead, she sighed. Air went out of her like spent bellows. Diane sensed her resignation but felt no pleasure in it.

“Diane. Diane Jonasen.” Ruth stood and glided, like furniture on a wheeled dolly, toward Diane and June in mid-hug. A ship in full sail. A woman on a mission.

Diane wondered whether duplicating her name held some relevancy for her former classmates, such as trying to remember it.

Tripping off Ruth's glossed lips, Diane's name assumed a chummy yet plaintive sound, as if she and Ruth shared a past sprinkled with wise laughter amid life's pathos.

They had. Sort of. Diane hadn't been on campus, nor had she seen these women more than once during the last thirty-five years, with the exception of Ruth.

Well, “seen” was editorially misleading. *Once*, during the three weeks Diane was tucked under the protective wing of Elmhurst Hospital's psychiatric ward miles west of Chicago, she had watched from the doorway of her room as a well-groomed, red-headed, bossy woman delivered a profanity-laced vituperation to a doctor on the ward. Something about being denied access to the “imbeciles in charge.” Diane thought it was Ruth. Hoped it was. She found the thought of there being more than one Ruth Fortune on the planet scary.

However, at the time, Diane was imbibing certain antidepressants in elephantine doses. This state allowed her to see quite a bit of what wasn't necessarily there and not so much of what was.

When Ruth sidled in and looked deep into Diane's eyes, it confirmed the Ruth-sighting a few months ago must have been real.

“How are you, dear?” Ruth stopped short of touching her, as if Diane might be a contagion.

For some reason, Diane was reminded of a history-channel show she'd watched. It featured a laser tool that sliced solid steel.

*If this woman pats me, I will have to smack her.*

Ruth patted her. She engulfed Diane's shoulder in a comradely vise that permitted repeated, random pats. Retribution was impossible. Diane was reminded of another history-channel show she'd watched. It featured karate chops hapless females should employ when in the death grip of a bad guy. *Hiii-yaaa!*

She had not invited Ruth into her psyche.

If earth were peopled with happy folk, Diane considered that Ruth would be bereft. She'd have no *raison d'être*. No life to chase a reason in the first place. She had lurked along the edges of conversations days and nights in the college dorm, ferreting emotional trauma the way children shovel in the sandbox to reach China. Aloof and probing, like an alien. *Spooky*. Plus, she was very tall. Also a spook factor.

Of course, she had fertile ground to ferret around in.

They had been teenagers during the decade whimsically labeled “turbulent.” They were on their own in Chicago, city of burly shoulders. They were female born of women who didn't know raising children was an optional career choice. They were Catholic female.

Diane met Ruth's arm tourniquet and up close gaze with the grin of an imbecile and the insincere sincerity that came from years of practice among gatherings of their gender. An air-kiss was not out of the question.

“Well, my dear MisFortune, hello!” Ruth hated that nickname.

*Zip a dee doo dah.*

Diane was pretty sure she had hummed in-toto-silence-eo.

With airbrush artistry, Ruth's deftly rearranged her expression into neutral, masking her annoyance at being reminded how Diane had, in the past, often challenged her superiority in ways Ruth failed to anticipate.

Ruth's pats eased abruptly, mid-pat. No leavening trauma to knead. She cruised back to sit in a big leather armchair, crossed her long legs. Crossed her arms. Both Diane and June took note that Ruth hadn't offered the best seat in the library to Sister Mark.

Sister Mark stood near the library entry ready to welcome Pat when she arrived. June sat silent in a stiff backed chair near a bookcase, fisted hands in her lap, attempting to look relaxed, failing. Diane fidgeted with the neckline of her pink cardigan and looked around the room to sort of catch her breath. The room was lit by the afternoon light that played through Tiffany-style windows, illustrating the dreamy effect stained glass must have been invented to achieve.

Diane hummed a little. Nothing catchy.

She thought their quartet, briefly motionless in various poses, were like figures etched upon a Grecian urn or like floating dust motes under a colored-glass lampshade, all of them adrift amid the scent of lemon imposed on wainscoted walls from years of industrious rubbing by the downstairs maid.

Each of them was connected to the mansion by personal and collective memory. It was a space conducive to remembering, as if it knew, when it was built more than a century ago that its function would always be to inspire memory, to house and preserve memory, and to patiently await the return of those who had made them here.

The mansion had many rooms, some private, most public. This library, in particular, spoke volumes, no levity intended, about its lengthy social life: first, as drawing room to its turn-of-the-last-century homeowners who took a fancy to literature and added heavy mahogany bookshelves. Later, sold to the religious order that built a women's college on its manicured grounds in 1929, it became haven to lady scholars bettering themselves during the devastating economic depression that poetically inclined historians festooned with the adjective "Great."

Later, it served as coffee shop during the kooky-man late 1950s, which preceded the aforementioned turbulent decade. During that era, whilst there was civil disobedience abroad in the land, protesters of many ilk were welcomed here by the college community for discourse and tea.

Currently, having outgrown its rambunctious youth, the mansion was graciously resigned to be of service as a gathering space for nearby Rockbridge University. These folk found its stately if aging confines conducive to thought leadership and decision-making about donors; about curricula and faculty who delivered curricula; about taking over Shorelake College for Women from the Sisters of Benevolence, who had kept it solvent for its first seventy years, and such like.

Diane glanced through the library windows, these featuring ripened grapes, verdant leaves and the occasional floral bud, watching for Pat Conelli. She was Diane's closest approximation to a sister three decades ago and, hopefully, an approximation of an ally now.

God, apparently distracted during Diane's youth, forgot to provide Diane a sister. She was philosophical about it, if "philosophical" implied she got over it. She got two brothers instead, and, while she cherished the fact that two people on earth vaguely resembled her, she'd always wished for just one sister of her very own.

She got over it when she met Pat Navarro, who roomed with her in the college's Madison Hall dormitory for three of four years, the last year being the year Pat married the blatherskite Lance Conelli. And so, of course, Diane couldn't expect Pat to stay with her in the dorm after that. And so, of course, she couldn't go live off-campus with the two of them. *Of course not.*

Diane considered Pat a better sister than the real thing. In her company, Diane felt wily and smart and likeable and wise, none of which had indisputable evidence in fact. But she liked who she was with Pat. They never ran out of things to talk about.

Diane and her sister-sub never argued over the stuff Mom left when she died. They never competed for the smile of a shared Dad, never compared who got the better end of the gene pool. They never competed.

Pat didn't know how.

June waited for Pat to arrive with a mix of emotions that ranged from pleasant to sad. She remembered that Pat never overlooked her and that was pleasant; but June hadn't known how to be Pat's friend and that was sad.

Ruth's melon-tinted lips threatened to reveal an ever-so-slight, but decidedly unattractive grimace. Ruth could not abide tardiness. Pat was late. Only the very important or the very wealthy had dispensation to be late. Pat was neither.

"Deedledum Deedledee! It's me!"

Diane heard Pat trumpet her nickname before she saw her. These days, no one, except her brothers, and then only when very drunk, called Diane "Deedledum." She just wasn't a "Deedledum" or "Deedledee" to most. She didn't tend to bring out the kooky in others.

Pat was the exception.

At the far end of the foyer near the front doorway, Pat slid her stocking feet out of primeval mule clogs, took a running start and

slid across the waxed floor, thumping into Diane, a living tennis ball thumping off a garage door. Having two brothers had provided Diane with a wealth of sporty metaphors, a perk for a journalist.

"Do I know you?" Diane reached out both her arms to keep Pat upright.

"Nobody does! That's the fun of it, yes?"

They hugged a big double-arm hug with rocking involved.

Pat was a fifty-six-year-old child without particular reason to be otherwise. It was one reason why Diane loved her. It seemed to Diane reason enough to love her.

Diane was one of few among the world populace who bothered to know that Pat was lighthearted, but not lightheaded. Pat's IQ was stratospheric, higher certainly than any of them here in the library, with the exception of Sister Mark's. Pat was an artist. She was an academic. She was intuitive. She was logical. She might follow. She could lead. That she chose innocence over cynicism, friendship over fame, and pleasure over prestige was a measure of either her gift or evidence of her weakness, depending on one's perception.

Diane thought Pat was a gift.

A gift she needed. Diane found in Pat one motivation for keeping her sanity more than a year ago when the alternative legitimately seemed like a much saner course of action. Diane's therapist called this her period of trauma-induced depression but a period that she called nothing at all. She had been content to slip deep into despair, finding a certain fascination with its depths and its offer of the intriguing adventure of never moving out of bed again. Ever.

When she got bored with despair, which she understood was pretty much a dead end, she contemplated moving on to "the big bye-bye."

That's when Pat visited her, metaphorically, as in Diane's memories.

She remembered Pat wearing a chapeau the size of a turkey platter overloaded with fake flowers to their first college mixer because she wished to attract "a proper gentleman." Everyone else wore jeans.

Pat, forgotten somewhere in the middle of a farm family with

thirteen children, cruised through her impoverished child years, trailing only joy in her wake.

Pat, who was spotted and befriended forty-odd years ago during a Sunday Mass in Chicago's Old Saint Pat's church by Sister Mark, who was in the congregation for a First Holy Communion ceremony.

Pat, who stood out as the only fourteen-year-old communicant among a sea of second graders who wore cupcake dresses and mini-men suits. Seems her parents had forgotten she was due to receive the sacrament earlier. She was singing the Beatles' "Love Me Do" with a lot of gusto down the processional aisle, wearing a veil that looked suspiciously like one of her Mom's lace doilies.

Once, some years later, Sister Mark remarked she was of the opinion God could have written that song Himself.

In a world that had Pat in it, Diane found leaving it less appealing. She might miss something good.

Un-thumping from Diane and offering one grin that was extra wide, to encompass both Ruth and June, Pat flipped her silver, excessively-long-by-anyone's-standard hair over her shoulders, pivoted toward Sister Mark, dropped to her knees at the nun's feet, and reverently placed Sister's big, capable hand atop her own bowed head.

"Your majesty," Pat whispered with reverence.

Sister Mark looked down. Shook her head. Smiled. Patted the head.

"Arise, dear." She turned to address them all. "My good girls, come with me. We have business."

As one, they put aside three decades and reverted to form, marched single file quietly into the mansion's sunlit breakfast room on the other side of the foyer. Sister led the way.

The room was shaped like a stop sign, one of its eight sides the entry through French doors. Another side led to the kitchen and each of the remaining sides framed windows overlooking Lake Michigan. On this spring afternoon, waves were persistent and swift and tossed the fishy-but-fresh scent only a fresh water lake can carry off, through the windows and around the room's large round table.

With a slight wince, almost unnoticeable, Sister Mark settled into a chair and motioned for the others to join her. Only Ruth hesitated. Diane had the passing notion that Ruth found it challenging to locate the most important spot at a table that had no head.

Sister opened her arms, wrists up, like somebody ready to lift one end of furniture and waited. Then, "Today, I signed the final papers that officially incorporate Shorelake College for Women into our coeducational neighbor, Rockbridge University."

This wasn't news to any of them. They knew the closing of women's colleges had been going on nationally in recent decades, their number early in the twenty-first century fewer than sixty, reduced from hundreds in the '50s. Shorelake College, too, would finally close its doors, doors battered by the winds of change: decline in the number of nuns to staff them, a strong trend toward secular education, rising operating expenses, declining private support. All perfectly logical, perfectly sad reasons.

Knowing the inevitable and hearing their former president confirm it were two different things. The women remained quiet, waiting for what came next.

Sister continued. "As such, all operations, facilities, curriculum and all financial holdings will no longer be administered by the Sisters of Benevolence. Instead we are now a special component of our neighboring Jesuit university."

"Oh, Sister, Jesuits! We've been overtaken by the Jesuits!" Ruth interrupted in what the other women immediately remembered as her bossypants voice. June shrunk a bit in her chair as if reprimanded and Pat sighed. Diane wondered what Ruth had against the Jesuit order, that is, specifically. *Marginally stuffy? Yes. A wee too smart for their own good? Sure. Paternally inclined, which some might label anti-feminist? Yup and yup.*

But, basically, things could be worse, she thought. Shorelake College for Women might have been sold to a condo developer or sold to the grand order of some fraternal organization whose members wore odd headgear.

Sister Mark answered. "Yes, Ruth. Jesuits. Would you have preferred someone else?"

She had a way of listening first, speaking later—of guiding without a hint of reprimand.

Pat thought, and not for the first time, that "mother" was both a noun and a verb. *Sister Mark mothered. She was a good mom.*

June wondered why changes that affected her very much, like this one, almost always came about because people, other than herself, decided something.

Ruth was just warming up. "No, Sister. No. But Shorelake College for Women is gone forever. Kaput! That's what's bothering me."

"Ruth, what is bothering you is, perhaps, not of critical import at this juncture. I acknowledge your feelings. In fact, it is because of feelings such as yours that I've asked you here today."

"What's up, Sister?" Pat slid her chair a little closer.

Sister Mark smiled an innocent smile, bordering on the beatific. "I am *conspiring* and need your assistance. I am confident I've selected the right women, if you are willing."

Ruth was what one would call a first responder at any meeting she attended. "Sister, you never ask for help."

"Not from you. That is correct. That is not, however, to assume I never ask for help. In fact, I do so with great frequency. However, I tend to go straight to the top." Her eyebrows lifted toward heaven.

"Wow. I bet you get right through." Pat breathed admiration.

Sister Mark smiled but stuck to matters at hand.

"The administration and trustees of the university are eager to see this mansion restored and have graciously agreed to match any funds raised by Shorelake College alumnae to do so."

Sister Mark gazed someplace above their heads to where visions are seen by those with the right set of eyes. "This home. This space. I see women gathering here and becoming..."

June the literal, June the blunt, asked, "Becoming what?"

Sister Mark had a patience born of a lifetime among young women. She knew the power of waiting. She didn't reply.

"Something like a women's center?" Diane suggested.

"Something like that, yes."

"But, why us, Sister?" Ruth interrupted before Sister could say more. June thought that Ruth had an interesting way of grabbing