

TUSCAN HOLIDAY

by

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Chapter 1

Motherhood and prostitution have a lot more in common than one might assume. Both are largely thankless professions into which many women unwittingly fall and out of which they rarely, if ever, are able to extricate themselves. Doomed to a life of service to others, most of whom have little if any understanding of the depth of commitment involved in such service, women of these professions are never properly appreciated or decently compensated, and are doomed to be tossed aside like so much refuse once their perceived usefulness has expired.

– The Utter Folly of a Life of Service: Women
and the Trap of Selflessness

“You shouldn’t have spent the money, Elizabeth.”

My mother sniffed delicately at the bouquet of Purple Moon Carnations. They were her favorite, a fact she often mentioned in the weeks before a holiday.

“You’re welcome, Mom.”

“Of course I love them. Thank you, honey. But you know I don’t need any gifts from you.”

In spite of the frequent hints about favorite flowers, fragrant beauty creams, and scented candles?

“But I need to give you gifts, okay?” I said. “So bear with me.”

“But still, they must have cost you a fortune!”

My God, I thought, you’d think I’d given her a diamond-encrusted evening bag! What ever happened to the art of gracious receiving?

“It’s rude to talk about the price of a gift, Mom,” I reminded.

“Oh, I’m sorry. The flowers are lovely. Thank you again, dear.”

My mother—Jane Caldwell, still teaching high-school English though nearing retirement—went off to put the flowers in a vase. I glanced casually at the mantel on the far side of the living room. No Mother’s Day card other than the one from me. So, Marina had forgotten or neglected to give her grandmother a card...Or, a charitable thought, maybe she had one for me and one for her grandmother in that monstrous bag she’d taken to lugging around, a metallic sack with grommets and fringe and buckles too numerous to count.

“This is a very popular style,” she told me, defensively, I thought, when I asked her where she’d gotten it.

“I know that,” I said. “I read *InStyle*. I read *Vogue*. I just asked where you got it.”

“It wasn’t expensive, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Uh, no. What I’m asking—for the third time—is where you bought the bag.”

I swear, sometimes talking to one’s child is like negotiating a minefield. You didn’t ask to be in the middle of a minefield, you have no idea how you got there, and all you want to do is survive said minefield with your limbs intact.

I did finally learn that Marina had bought the bag at Marshall’s. I’d taught her well when it came to bargain hunting.

The doorbell rang, interrupting the mostly critical thoughts about my daughter. “I’ll get it,” I said. It was Rob. He hadn’t been at the graduation ceremony; Marina had been limited to three tickets.

“Where are Jotham’s parents?” Rob asked when he’d taken a survey of the guests: my father, Tom; Marina; her long-time boyfriend, now fiancé, Jotham Grandin, who’d also graduated earlier that day from Graham College in Boston; my mother, back with the carnations in a cut-glass vase; and me.

“Invited,” I explained, “but they said they had a previous engagement. Whatever. They took the kids out to dinner last night.”

“A pricey steak house, no doubt.”

“Now, Rob.”

“What? So, where did they go?”

“Capitol Grille. A pricey steak house.”

“Hey, it’s a celebration,” he said. A time for indulgence.”

“Now you’re defending them?”

“What’s defending?”

“Anyway,” I said, “you’re right. This is a celebration, so I got a Carvel ice-cream cake. You know it’s Marina’s favorite. And considerably less expensive than a specialty cake from Patisserie Claude.”

“Mmm, Carvel ice-cream cake. Gotta love the crunchy chocolate layer.”

We joined the rest of the party in time to hear my father relating to a bored-looking Jotham his latest home-repair triumph, a tale involving the installation of a brand-new air conditioner in his tool room in the basement.

Rob hugged Marina and handed her a small, prettily wrapped gift.

“Oh, Rob, thank you,” she said. “Should I open it now?”

Rob shrugged. “If you want. And there’s a gift receipt inside in case you want to exchange it.”

Marina carefully sliced one taped end and slid a plastic-encased electronic device into her palm.

“Wow, it’s the new iPhone! Thanks, Rob.” She gave him another hug and handed the plastic case to Jotham, who immediately set to the difficult work of opening it with his Swiss Army knife.

“What exactly does the new iPhone do?” I asked, *sotto voce*.

“I’m not entirely sure. I think it has something to do with being able to use any service, not just AT&T. Or something.”

I looked hard at Rob. “You’re an engineer. You’re supposed to know how these things work. You’re even supposed to know why they work.”

“True. But the world is changing awfully fast...”

“Now you sound like an old man.”

“I am fifty.”

“Hardly old. And you can prove it to me later.”

“Really?” he said, with a grin. “Ice-cream and sex in one day? Who’s got it better than me?”

Rob Wayne and I had been together on and off for about thirteen years at that point, long enough to be comfortable with each other’s flaws, foibles, and weaknesses but still, amazingly, excited by each other. When we weren’t too tired or too busy or too hungry.

The buzz over Rob’s gift had died down enough for me to feel that it was time to present my gift. I retrieved a rather bulky envelope from the credenza in the front hall and brought it to my daughter.

“From me,” I said, struggling not to cry. Your child’s graduation from college—especially a graduation capping a successful four years of study—is a very proud moment.

Marina smiled, and if she was eager to see what was inside, you couldn’t tell by the way she carefully opened the envelope, barely ripping the sealed flap. With a questioning look at Jotham—what had she expected, snakes to pop out?—she extracted my present, two round-trip tickets to Florence.

“Oh my God!” she cried, turning once again to her fiancé. “We’re going to Italy, Jotham, you and me!”

I was painfully aware of the awkward glances shooting among the other three adults in the room, my mother to my father to Rob and back again. None of them looked directly at me: I was thankful for the small favor.

“Um, no, Marina, I said. “Actually, you and I are going to Italy. I bought those tickets for us. You know, as”

I hesitated; I was embarrassed at having to explain what I had hoped would be obvious.

“As what?” Marina asked, clearly disappointed and just as clearly trying to hide her disappointment.

“Well, you’ve graduated college, and you’re getting married next spring, and, well, I just thought this would be my send-off present to you, you know, as you venture out into the world.”

“Oh,” Marina said with about as much expression as a turnip. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Yes,” I said. “I mean you’re welcome.”

Well, I thought, that big surprise fell flat. At least there was the Carvel cake.

“But Mom,” Marina said suddenly, “I have no idea what I did with my passport!”

Was that relief I heard in her voice, or was I just projecting? “Remember I asked you to give it to me? It’s in the safety-deposit box, at the bank.”

“Oh,” she said. “That’s good. Because I know you can’t get on a plane to Europe without a passport.

Jotham winked at Rob and put his arm around Marina’s shoulders. “My dad knows some people. He could probably get things speeded up if you needed a passport right away.”

No doubt Frank Grandin did know “some people”—i.e., the “right people”—but did his son have to be such a self-important little—

“How about we cut the cake!” my mother exclaimed.

Rob took my mother’s elbow. “I’ll help, Jane,” he said and led her off to the kitchen. As they passed, I heard my mother say:

“I don’t know why Elizabeth got such a big cake. I just can’t imagine what she was thinking, spending all that money. Really, she can be such a spendthrift.”

Over his shoulder, Rob offered a consoling little smile.

Chapter 2

Dear Answer Lady

I have this little problem. I've been married for six years now to this really nice guy (that's not the problem part), and we have two kids, a boy and a girl, five and three. See, the thing is, I'm pretty sure that if I'd thought about it before just getting pregnant because I could (being married and all), I would have decided not to have any kids. I mean, sometimes, when I look at them, and I think: What? Who are these people? I'd never hurt my kids or anything, I mean I play by the rules and provide clothes and food and a place to live and all, but..I don't know. I just can't seem to work up any feeling for them. Am I some kind of Weirdo?

Dear Latent Sociopath:

Lady, you're one kind of weirdo, all right. What sort of mother can't even work up enough emotion to hate her kids? Indifference towards one's offspring is a far more egregious and potentially poisoning stance that will no doubt cause your children endless years in therapy—and result in your being stashed away in a filthy, state-run nursing home. Do your children—and your future self—a favor and run away now. Disappear, hit the high road, leave no forwarding address, and make no effort to contact them, ever. Hopefully your husband will get over his grief in a timely fashion and provide the children with a step-mother who care enough to loathe them.

“Marina didn’t seem very happy to be going to Italy with her mother.”

That was the understatement of the year. She and Jotham had made off immediately after cake and coffee, with only a “See you later, Mom” and a wave.

I tossed my bag on the hall table. Rob shut the door of my apartment behind him.

“She’ll have a great time once she’s there, you’ll see. Plus, you know she loves to shop. She’s a professional bargain hunter. She’ll get into buying clothes for the trip.”

“She does love to shop, but she’s so damned finicky. It takes her hours to find the perfect T-shirt. It drives me nuts. What’s so special about a T-shirt?”

“Rob gave me a look. “Good thing she’s old enough to shop on her own.”

“Okay,” I said, “so I’m being grumpy. But I don’t know, Rob. Maybe this trip is a stupid idea after all. Maybe I should cash in my ticket and buy one for Jotham instead.”

“No, Elizabeth.” Rob took me by my shoulders and looked into my eyes. “You deserve this vacation. And Marina deserves some time alone with her mother. Besides, we agreed it would do her good to spend some time away from Jotham. She’s attached to that boy like white is attached to rice.”

“That boy,” I pointed out, “is a young man. And that young man is going to be her husband this time next year.”

“Maybe.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked quickly.

Rob shrugged and stepped away. “Just that anything can happen.”

“Do you know something I don’t know?” I asked. “Did Marina talk to you?”

“Of course not. Look, just go to Italy and have a great time. Promise?”

“I promise to try. A glass of wine?”

“Sure.”

I went off to the kitchen for the wine and glasses. When I returned to the living room, Rob was frowning in the direction of the end table. The end table, a dubious antique I’d bought at a local garage sale, was where I’d been displaying holiday cards since long before Rob and I met.

“I see there’s no Mother’s Day card,” he said.

“She’s got a lot on her mind,” I replied, defending the unthankful child I’d been condemning earlier.

“She could have gotten you a card. Sorry, I know I shouldn’t comment.”

I handed Rob a glass of wine. “No, that’s okay. After all this time, you have a right to speak up.”

Honestly, it didn’t matter much to me that Marina had forgotten Mother’s Day, though I did feel bad on my mother’s behalf. As any parent can tell you, what hurts far more than no card on a Hallmark holiday are the casual slights, the eye rolls your child thinks you don’t see, the muttered “whatevers,” the unasked for-and-unwanted criticism of your clothing, your speech habits, your existence.

Rob left in about an hour—after having gotten his cake and eaten it, too—and I busied myself straightening up. I’d rushed out of the house that morning, not wanting to be late for the graduation ceremony, uncharacteristically leaving breakfast dishes in the sink and several rejected outfits strewn across my bedroom.

I didn’t expect Marina to be home until much later that evening; I assumed she and Jotham would meet up with their bosom buddies, two other engaged couples who’d met during high school and who’d also graduated that day. The six of them were inseparable, a little club of eager-to-be-marrieds who were already planning how to save for their as-yet-to-be-born children’s college educations.

Not that there was anything wrong with that; it was just that sometimes Marina and her crew seemed even older than Rob and me, without the sense of adventure we assume the young should possess.

Of course, the flip side of my daughter's ostensible maturity was that she didn't do drugs or drive without a license or have serial abortions, all of which a mother seriously appreciates.

Teeth brushed and face washed, I settled into bed; next to me sat the stack of guidebooks I'd been studying in preparation for the trip. On the small nightstand to my right stood a framed picture of Rob and me taken a few years ago at Sturbridge Village. The two of us are cheek to cheek, arms slung around each other, laughing happily into the camera, oblivious to the goat that had snuck up on us and taken a mouthful of Rob's sweater into his mouth.

I smiled, remembering Rob's response to discovering the hem of his sweater in the mouth of a mad-eyed goat. He turned around to me with a sigh. "Why didn't I wear the red sweater today?" he said. "I've never really liked that sweater."

Two of the best things about Rob are his sense of humor and even temper; traits I found appealing right from the start. He doesn't have a tendency toward frenzied action or manic speech; he doesn't need to be the center of attention. Rob is the sort who can engage in intelligent conversation without either the need to dominate or the tendency to lose ground. In short he's mature and stable without being narrow-minded or rigid. I suspect he was pretty much always this way, though his parents are long gone, so I've no way of confirming this. It's not that Rob won't talk about himself if pressed; it's just that he's self-effacing enough not to indulge in details. This can be frustrating, but, the advice of women's magazines notwithstanding, when you really think about it, reticence is hardly a major failing in a romantic partner.

I reached for one of the guidebooks and suddenly realized just how tired I was, too tired to read. Instead, I thought back over the day, remembered how immensely proud I'd felt when Marina had received her diploma. It had seemed a great culminating moment. I'd guided my daughter, my only child, through day care and kindergarten, through grade school, middle school, the relative hell that is high school, and finally, through college. And through it all, Marina had

thrived. You could even say that Marina's life had been charmed, to the extent that any life lived without tragedy is charmed.

Yes, it had been a good day. It had made me happy to see my daughter surrounded by the people who meant the most to her—and to me; her grandparents, Rob, Jotham. The only person of importance—if one could call him that—in Marina's life that hadn't been present for the occasion was her father.

But he'd never been present for any of Marina's important events, not even her birth. One would think I'd have been used to Peter Duncan's absence by then, his utter lack of concern. One would think, but one would be wrong.

Chapter 3

You've tried cajoling. You've tried giving elaborate gifts. You've even feigned illness in an effort to get the attention, care, and respect of your adult child. But every effort has met with failure. Don't despair. Simply announce that if your son or daughter doesn't pay more attention to you, he or she summarily will be cut out of your will. Then watch the adult child come running.

—"How Sharper Than a Serpent's Tooth: How to Handle the Thankless Child"

After the party at my grandparents'—complete with Carvel ice-cream cake; I swear, it wouldn't have been a special occasion in my family if we didn't have that cake! I hadn't really liked it since I was about twelve, but I never had the heart to say anything to my mother

—Jotham and I stopped at the Cherry Pit. It was kind of “our place.” At least once a week we met our friends Allison, and her fiancé, Jordan, and Jessica, and her fiancé, Jason, there. We’d all gone to college together. And we were all planning to be married within eighteen months of graduation, first Allison and Jordan, then Jessica and Jason, and finally Jotham and me.

The Cherry Pit was nothing fancy, just a chain pub/restaurant. We liked it because of the usual things people like chain restaurants for—consistency and relatively low prices. And pretty decent food, though a lot of it wasn’t exactly what you’d call diet or health food. Anyway, we knew we could always get a table or snag a place in the bar. Being sort of a family place, the bar emptied out after nine, except for Saturday night, which was still date night in our suburb of Boston. That night, a Sunday, the bar area was almost empty. Once I’d heard my mother call the Cherry Pit “one of those bloodless generic suburban holes”, and her tone was anything but complimentary. It didn’t bother me. It wasn’t like Jotham and I ever asked her to hang out with us there.

We perched on high stools at a smallish, round table and ordered drinks; a basket of popcorn was already waiting.

“So, what do you think of mom’s gift?” I asked. “Pretty unexpected, right?” I was a bit nervous about Jotham’s reaction to my going away without him, and for two whole weeks.

“I think it’s great,” he said, squeezing my hand. “It’s good for family to do stuff together.”

I searched his face for a sign that he was fibbing, but as usual, Jotham’s expression was inscrutable. He wasn’t a guy to give anything away easily. “You’re not upset my mother didn’t invite you, too?”

“No, no,” he said, dropping my hand. “It’s fine. Besides, what would I do while you girls shopped and sat around in cafes, or whatever they have over there, drinking wine? I hate shopping, and I don’t drink wine unless it’s from California.”

“You could spend time in museums,” I teased.

“Yeah, that would happen. Look, you should go and enjoy and buy yourself something. I hear you can get good leather in Italy pretty cheap. Treat yourself. You only graduate from college once, right?”

I smiled and kissed his cheek as if I believed he was fine with the trip. But I didn't really believe it, not after the Paris incident. But this was different, I argued with myself. This time my mother would be with me. What possible trouble could I get into traveling with my mother?

“Let's talk about our honeymoon,” he said suddenly.

“But we haven't even planned the wedding yet,” I pointed out reasonably. “I haven't figured out how much the reception is going to cost, and I want to check out buying a used dress, and since we have a budget to consider—“

“Don't worry about the budget right now. Let's just talk pie in the sky. I bet I know where you want to go.”

I laughed. “I bet you don't.”

“If I get it right, will you share some jalapeno peppers with me, no complaining about fat and cholesterol?”

“You're on.”

“Hawaii.”

I laughed. “You are so totally wrong.”

“I don't believe you.”

“No really,” I said. “I have no interest in going to Hawaii. You really have no idea where I want to go?”

Jotham shrugged. “You got me.”

“The Grand Canyon! And maybe other parts of the Southwest, too: New Mexico, the Mojave Desert, Sedona with those big red rocks. Joshua trees. All those big open skies and Indian stuff and turquoise jewelry and a totally different landscape from New England. Doesn't it sound exotic?”

Jotham looked puzzled. “Hawaii isn't exotic?”

“Well sure,” I said, “I guess. But everybody does a beach resort for the honeymoon. Jamaica, Bermuda, the Caribbean. I just thought we could do something a bit different, try something new.

“What, like go camping? We’ve never been camping,” Jotham pointed out. “You know I’m not a big fan of the outdoors. And since when have you become Miss Crunchy Nature Girl?”

“Well, we wouldn’t necessarily have to camp,” I said, though a vision of a vast starry night sky had come to mind. “There are spas in the Southwest, Jotham, and I’m sure there are plenty of nice hotels. Santa Fe is supposed to have some great places to stay. I’m sure we could find something within our budget.” The look on Jotham’s face stopped me. “What? You don’t like the idea of the Southwest?”

“No, I didn’t say I don’t like the idea, exactly. But it is our honeymoon, Marina. Not just some silly vacation.”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

Jotham glanced around the almost empty room and then leaned in as if he were about to impart a big, important secret. “What if I told you I’ve already arranged for us to spend two weeks in a five-star hotel in Maui? Award-winning restaurant, exclusive day spa, personal trainers on hand, Vegas-style shows every night. Sounds good, huh?”

I knew it was a disloyal thought, but it occurred to me that the only reason Jotham wanted us to go on an expensive honeymoon was because he could be a bit of a snob. It was just possible that he cared less about pleasing me than about impressing our friends.

“What do you mean you already arranged it?” I demanded. “How are we supposed to pay for that?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve taken care of it,” Jotham replied in that condescending way that had been getting on my nerves since our junior year of college, when Jotham won a big prize for the debate team. I don’t know why his attitude should have suddenly started to bother me: he’d always been the same way, ever since (and probably before) I met him in sophomore year of high school.

“How have you taken care of it? What are you talking about?”

“Look, before I say anything, I want you to promise not to jump down my throat, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” I lied. “Just tell me. And you’d better not have taken out some crazy high-interest loan.”

Jotham frowned. “Please, Marina.”

“Okay, okay,” I said. “I’m sorry.” Jotham was nothing if not fiscally responsible.

“My parents are paying for our honeymoon. It’s our wedding gift. Well, part of it. They’ll be picking up the tab for the rehearsal dinner, of course. That’s traditionally the responsibility of the groom’s family.”

This news stunned me. When I recovered, my voice was unusually high. “But I thought the plan was to pay for everything on our own.”

I wasn’t used to what I saw as charity, and I had no desire to get used to it. True, while I had been known to complain about not driving a better car and not having enough money to buy the latest Coach bag for spring, I had lived a pretty good life, and I knew it. My mother and I were not poor; we had never really suffered or done without. It wasn’t as if we’d been forced to rely on food stamps or welfare; it wasn’t as if my mother had to work two or three jobs to put me through college. I was proud of what my family had achieved—we’d earned it after all, me included—and I wasn’t about to take a handout from anyone, especially not my future in-laws.

“A gift,” Jotham pointed out when I’d made my big statement, “is not a handout.”

“A gift,” I argued, “can be inappropriate. This is just too much.”

“We can’t say no to them,” Jotham said with maddening calm. “It would be rude.”

“But it’s our honeymoon, Jotham. It’s our wedding and our marriage. It’s supposed to be all about us. No one else can tell us what to do.”

Jotham gave me the look that was meant to shame. “I can’t believe you’re being so ungrateful,” he said. “Look, you’re taking a trip to

Italy with your mom. It's not like you're opposed to accepting big gifts."

"I'm not being ungrateful," I argued. "How can you say that? And the trip to Italy is not the same thing as our honeymoon. My mother isn't—interfering—with our relationship."

"How is giving us a trip to Hawaii interfering? It's not like my parents are coming with us. Come on, Marina, be reasonable."

And just like that, I caved. What was the point of arguing. In the end Jotham always got what he wanted. "All right," I said. "Fine. Your parents aren't interfering. We'll go to Hawaii. I'm sure it will be very nice."

Jotham straightened his shoulders and smiled the smile of the victor. "Good. Now, how about an order of poppers."

I didn't bother to point out that he'd lost the bet. "Sure," I said. "Whatever you want."

"Ah, here comes the gang!" Jotham waved over to Allison, Jordan, Jessica, and Jason. Jason still wore his mortarboard; I cringed and at the same time wondered why this should embarrass me.

Jotham dropped me home about eleven that night. My mother had left a light on in the kitchen and a note to say that she'd gone to bed. The next day she'd be up at six, out the door at seven-thirty, and at her desk by eight. My mother has always been a hard worker, as well as a very sound and easy sleeper.

I wish I could say the same for myself, in terms of sleep, that is. I've always had trouble sleeping, even when I was very young. Things had gotten really bad in the last months before graduation. I'd lie awake for hours before finally falling into a restless doze. And then, come morning, I'd have a terrible time waking up.

Now that the actual graduation ceremony was over, I hoped for a long and restorative rest. But that night, as had been my habit for months, I lay in my bed in my room down the hall from my mother's, staring at the ceiling, my mind unable or unwilling to let go.

I wondered if Jotham's parents would be so eager to pay for a trip to the Grand Canyon. I doubted it. With his parents, too, Jotham got what Jotham wanted. I was pretty sure his parents didn't even have a clue as to my desires. But then again, why should they?

Because they were going to be my family, and I was going to be theirs. And family was supposed to care about each other. Anyone could tell you that.

Unless, I thought, in-laws weren't family, not the way blood relatives were. I thought about my father's parents. From what I knew, they'd been no more accepting of my mother and me than my father had been. But maybe Mr. and Mrs. Duncan had just been showing loyalty to their own blood. Maybe they'd no doubt whatsoever that their son was telling the truth when he told them I wasn't his child.

Because I'd always found it hard to imagine that Mr. and Mrs. Duncan wouldn't have approached my mother with an offer of financial help or maybe even just with an apology if they had doubts that their son was telling the truth. I found it hard to imagine that they wouldn't have shown some concern, which, to my mind, meant that they believed in their son one hundred percent.

I'd often wondered if my mother believed me one hundred percent, even when I disappointed her, like when I turned down that trip to France after she'd already paid for the ticket, or when I got detention that time in middle school for talking back to my history teacher. Was maternal love absolute? Was it even supposed to be? Could it be, or was that just a fiction found in silly poems and tearjerker movies?

I figured I wouldn't know for sure until I became a mother. But what I did know for sure was that love between a husband and wife was supposed to be totally supportive. Love, honor, and cherish, in sickness and in health, forever and ever. And so, I thought, shouldn't Jotham support my choice of a honeymoon? Shouldn't he at least agree on a compromise, a third place, not Hawaii or the Grand Canyon, but someplace we would choose together?

I flipped to my right side, hoping a change of position would magically bring about a change of disposition. I wasn't happy thinking along such grumpy lines. So I set my mind to another task: counting my blessings. My grandmother had taught me to do that back when I was a kid, and though for a time in high school I'd found the exercise silly and embarrassing, once I got to college I'd taken it up again. At least for the time it takes you to list your blessings, your mind isn't dwelling on the negative.

So, my blessings. I'd graduated from college with honors. I had a good job lined up. I was going to Italy for two weeks, and even though it was with my mother, I was beginning to feel oddly pleased about the prospect.

And, most importantly, I was engaged to Jotham. He was who he was, which was a pretty nice guy, and overall I feel pretty lucky to have avoided all the jerks and losers and all the messiness of falling in love with the wrong guy and having my heart broken. Since sophomore year of high school I hadn't spent one night alone wishing I had a boyfriend or wishing my boyfriend hadn't dumped me for a cheerleader or wondering if I'd ever meet my one true love. Because since the age of fifteen, I'd been Jotham Grandin's girlfriend.

I pulled the covers up tighter around my neck, making what I hoped would be a comforting cocoon that would induce sleep. Big deal, I told myself. So we'd go to Hawaii for our honeymoon. I'd be gracious to Mr. and Mrs. Grandin, and Jotham would be happy. It could be my gift to him. That's what I told myself on that long night of lying awake, watching the moon traverse the sky, wondering what it would be like to sleep beneath the Arizona skies.

Chapter 4

Dear Answer Lady:

I'm a forty-eight-year-old wreck. The skin on my neck looks like a day-old baked apple. It seems that every week a new weird growth appears somewhere on my body. My once-flat stomach is as round as a muffin top in spite of almost daily trips to the gym. You could put a sandwich in the bags under my eyes. My hair is thinning, my butt is drooping, and my bunions are causing me to walk with a limp. But the worst thing about the aging process is that I suspect my daughter, who's only twenty, sees me as a decrepit monster. Am I being paranoid?

Dear Saggy:

It's inevitable that younger people view older people, particularly those they love, as in some sense grotesque. The reasons for this are many, and I'm not being paid to illuminate the psyche of Youth Culture, so suffice it to say that you are probably correct in your assumption regarding the light in which your daughter regards you. Your aging body is to her a dismal glance into her own future (okay: I'm giving you that one bit of illumination), and, naturally, she reacts against the grim inevitability you embody. Relax. There's nothing you can do about her disgust. Still, for the sake of your husband and the public in general, you might want to get some of those repulsive skin growths lopped off.

Friday, June 2

“You’re sure you have your passport? And a copy of it in another place in case the original gets stolen?”

“Yes,” Marina said, her voice betraying not the least bit of annoyance. “Jotham, you already asked me that three times on the way here.”

How did my daughter stand it, I wondered: the patronizing tone, the frown meant to convey responsibility.

“Just making sure. You can’t be too careful these days, with the lax airport security and those crazy stories of—“

“Now, no talk like that today,” my father interrupted with a meaningful glance to his wife, whose eyes had widened in alarm for the third or fourth time since we’d arrived at Logan Airport.

Rob gave me a hug and spoke softly into my ear. “Have a wonderful time, Elizabeth. Try not to think of work or anything else stressful.”

“Impossible,” I said, “but thanks for the suggestion. I’ll try.”

My mother took this moment to clap her hands to her face and cry, “Oh, my two little girls going off to Italy together! I just can’t believe you’re going all that way for two long weeks!”

My father put his arm around my mother’s shoulders. “Now, Jane, it’s not like they’re shipping off to Iraq or Afghanistan. There are probably more Americans in Tuscany at this time of the year than there are Italians. They won’t even know they’re out of the good old U.S. of A.”

“Uh, thanks, Dad,” I said.

Marina laughed. “Yeah, thanks, Grandpa.”

“What?” My father looked utterly perplexed, assuming as he did that the overwhelming presence of Americans abroad was a consoling notion.

Rob spoke up before Marina and I would be forced to explain our reaction. “Let’s let these women get on with their vacation, okay? And

Jane, don't I have to get you home before nine so you can watch your show?"

"Those girls in Celtic Women are something," my father said with a sudden sly smile.

There was another round of hearty farewells from my father and cautionary advice from Jotham and more tears from my mother and a secret smile from Rob to me, and then Marina and I were alone, finally, about to begin our big Italian adventure.

Once through the nightmare that is security, an experience that seems to sober even the most chatty and carefree travelers, Marina and I walked to our gate and settled in two seats at the end of an already-crowded row.

"Why does Grandma always have to make such a big fuss?" Marina asked. "It's not like we're going away for a year. I mean, did she have to cry?"

My daughter, I thought, is too young for sentimentality, too young, or just one of those people immune to it.

"It's her generation," I said stupidly.

"Watch my bag? I'm going to buy some magazines for the flight. Do you want anything?"

I said no, having a good selection of guidebooks in my carry-on, and watched my daughter walk back down to the concourse, seemingly oblivious to the interested glances of almost all the men she passed.

Idly, I wondered if Peter would have been an overly protective father, the kind to grill his daughter's dates, to subtly threaten them with bodily harm and worse if they laid a hand on his daughter, the sort of father to spoil his little girl rotten with affection and gifts and a sense of her own true worthiness.

I doubted it. Any man who could do what Peter had done was unlikely to have the real Daddy gene. About a month after I told him I was pregnant, he'd gone off to law school in California as planned, and even the pleas to his parents by my own parents had fallen on deaf

ears. No, I decided, Peter hadn't been and maybe still wasn't real Daddy material.

My parents had suggested an abortion when it was clear that Peter was not going to accept responsibility for his child. Rather, my mother had suggested it, speaking, she assured me, on behalf of my father, too. I remember being horrified at the idea and also being terribly upset that my own parents would suggest that their daughter put an end to the burgeoning life of their grandchild.

Later, I came to understand their reasoning. First, of course, they were concerned about my future, about the life I would live as a single parent. And second, they were concerned about themselves. They knew their life would drastically change with the arrival of a baby. After all, I wasn't "settled" with a job and a husband. I would be living in their home with my child, a continuing financial burden for some time to come, and an additional responsibility, because it would be absurd to think that they wouldn't be called upon to help me care for Marina.

Eventually, I enrolled Marina in day care, and I hired a babysitter for special occasions, but for a while it was tough on my mother, who was teaching full time, and on my father, who hadn't yet retired and would come home at the end of the day exhausted and looking forward to a quiet dinner and his favorite TV show only to be met by the cries of a cranky baby, an overworked wife, and an occasionally frantic daughter.

Sometimes I wonder if could have done it without my parents, could have raised Marina entirely on my own, and of course I would have done it—what choice would I have had? But there's no doubt that my mother and father made it a lot easier for me and for Marina, and for that I'm forever grateful.

Well, I thought, my daughter might not have a sentimental bone in her body, but I certainly do, indulging in what amounted to nostalgia, that most distorting of states, in which we "remember," i.e., create, a false past and pine for it.

I decided to blame my mood on the situation. There's something about travel that makes one so aware of the awful possibility, always lurking, of never seeing loved ones again, of disaster, of permanent change. Travel reminds one of just how ephemeral life is: at least, travel does that for people like me who spend very little time away from home.

Maybe I could have traveled more had I not been a young, single parent. Our disposable income had never been hefty, just one of the difficulties Marina and I encountered as we pretty much grew up together. The relative lack of funds, of course, was nothing compared with an absent father and husband.

Well, I thought, and not for the first time, Peter might not have been there to read her bedtime stories and listen attentively to my work woes, but on the plus side, Marina didn't have to come home from school each afternoon to a set of feuding parents. Our home was a peaceful place, except for the usual, mostly manageable tensions that occasionally arise between any mother and daughter.

Not only did Marina have the benefit of a peaceful home, she also had the benefit of living in a sort of extended family. She'd spent time with her grandparents almost every day of her life, and that's something special. If I wasn't able to give her the specific kind of support or comfort or attention she needed, there was always Grandma and Grandpa available just upstairs—and later, just a few blocks away—to boost her confidence with a hug or soothe her anxiety with a trip to the old-fashioned ice-cream parlor (now a cell-phone store) or to encourage her reading with a visit to the library. We were three generations of family caring for each other, and though at times it felt stultifying, I was always aware of and grateful for the benefits.

I watched my daughter walking back toward me, a frown of annoyance on her pretty face.

“Can you believe there's not one copy of *People* left in any of the stands on this concourse? How insane is that?”

“That’s pretty darn insane.”

“Mom, please,” she said, flopping down next to me.

“Well, it’s not the end of the world, Marina.”

“I know that. I’m fully aware of that. It’s just that I had my heart set on reading *People*. Funny thing about life. You can have your heart set on any number of things, big or small, and you can be pretty sure you’re not going to get half of them.

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