There came a time when the risk to remain tight in the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.

—Anaïs Nin
Prologue

It’s been more than three years since my husband died, yet in many ways he’s more useful than ever. True, he’s not around to take out the trash, but he’s great to bitch at while I’m doing it myself, and he’s generally excellent company, invisibility notwithstanding. And as someone to blame he’s unparalleled, because he isn’t there to contradict me, on account of being cremated. I talk to him a lot, though our conversations have devolved from metaphysical explorations of the meaning of death to generic married conversations about what to have for dinner, or who’s on the hook for the lost tax returns.

When he died in a car accident, fifty feet from our front door, I seriously considered dying, too. Not because my heart was broken, though that was true, but because my mind was completely boggled by the logistical challenges of living without him. However, it’s just as well I didn’t, because he would have been waiting for me in heaven, and man, would he have been pissed. He’d have made eternity feel like forever, I can promise you that.

I was driving along, letting my brain spiral aimlessly, when my phone rang. It was my sister, Rachel.

“Hey, Lil, are you on your way to get the kids?” Just the sound of her voice made me smile.
“I am. Your knowledge of my daily schedule is embarrassing for both of us.” I flicked on the indicator, slowed a little for the light, and made a turn. All with the phone illegally wedged under my ear. Sometimes I astound even myself.

“Can you pick something up for me on your way back?”

“Am I coming to your house?” Maybe I’d forgotten. It wasn’t impossible.

“Well, you might have been. How do I know? Anyway, I haven’t seen the kids for a couple of days, and you know how they pine.”

I laughed. “I can honestly say they haven’t mentioned you once.”

She laughed back at me. “You know, one day you’ll accept they love me more than you, and your denial of it isn’t helping any of us move forward.”

I pulled into the carpool line, doing the silent eyebrow raise and smile of greeting through the windshield at the teacher on duty. “Look, I’ll admit they’re fond of you. What is it you need, anyway? Something fundamental, like milk, or something more typical, like lubricant and a Duraflame?”

Suddenly a small palm smacked the window, making me jump and leaving a smear. Its owner, Annabel, peered in and narrowed her eyes. Her younger sister, Clare, stood behind her, gazing spacially around. Behind both of them, the teacher smiled tightly, telegraphing long-suffering patience with an undercurrent of threat if I didn’t get my ass in gear. I hurriedly hit the door-open button. I’d hate for her to drag out the death ray on my account.

My sister was answering me. “I need a pound of bacon, some Parmesan cheese, spaghetti, eggs, a loaf of bread, and a bottle of red wine. And butter, of course.”
“I’ll call you back.” I straightened my head, dropping the phone on the floor. “Do you need help or can you get her in, Bel?”

“I got it.”

Annabel was only seven but had the gravitas of a forty-year-old career diplomat. She’d been born that way, calmly mastering breast-feeding, crawling, eating solids, and whatever else I threw at her. She regarded the world resignedly, as if we were exactly as we’d been described in the brochure: a little underwhelming, but what can you do? She buckled Clare in, struggling with the straps.

“Too tight?”

Clare shook her head.

“Too loose?”

Clare shook her head, her large brown eyes fastened trustingly on her older sister. Annabel nodded at her, turning to climb into her own seat, fastening her own harness with the self-assurance of a test pilot on his fiftieth run, rather than someone with no front teeth and a Dora barrette in her hair.

“Good to go,” she informed me.

“Clare?” I wanted to make sure the little one hadn’t lost the power of speech since breakfast. Presumably, I’d have gotten a call from the teacher, but with all these budget cuts . . .

“Good to go, cheerio.” OK, smallest planet heard from.

I scrabbled around on the floor for my phone and called Rachel back. I put it on speaker this time and yelled at it as it lay in my lap. After all, now I had the kids in the car. Safety first, people. Rachel picked up before it even rang on my end. She’s a very busy woman.

I watched for a gap in the traffic as I yelled at the phone. “Hey, why didn’t you say bring me the fixings for pasta carbonara? And why can’t you stop on your way home?”
“Because I like to give you little riddles to solve, little challenges that keep you on your toes. Otherwise, your brain will atrophy, and then who will help the kids with their homework?”

“Are you cooking for us, too?”

“I certainly can. I’d be happy to. Why are you shouting at me?”

“I’m not shouting at you, the Bluetooth’s broken. But I’m glad you’re making dinner.” I took a left.

“Are we going to the store?” asked Annabel. I knew she found the store irritating but was balancing that against the possibility of sudden candy.

I nodded.

“One other thing,” added my sister. “You’ll have to tell me how to make it.”

“And then are we going to Aunty Rachel’s?” asked Clare.

I nodded and then shook my head. My sister was doing her Jedi-mind-trick “These aren’t the droids you’re looking for” thing.

“Wait, Rach, let me ask you this: If I’m buying the groceries and making the dinner, why aren’t you coming to my house?”

There was a pause.

“Oh, that’s a much better idea. Thanks! I’ll see you later on.” She started to hang up.

“Stop,” I interrupted. “If you’re coming over, you can pick up the groceries. I’ve got the kids, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. OK.” She hung up.

I looked at Clare in the rearview mirror. “No, honey, Aunty Rachel is coming to our place.”

Both kids looked happy to hear it. They really did like her better than me. And why not? She could turn a request for a favor into an invitation to dinner and make you feel good about it.
PREPARING YOUR GARDEN

As soon as your soil is soft enough to work, turn it over with a fork and leave it alone for several days.

- Cover the soil with a 1-inch-thick layer of compost. Don’t skimp.
- Use a spading fork to loosen up the soil. Mix in the compost. Rake out stones and other crap, leaving the soil smooth.
- A 10 x 16 foot plot is a good size for a beginner. If that’s too daunting, start smaller. Remember, one pot on a balcony is still a garden.
- Your seed packets have a world of information. They’ll tell you best conditions and times to plant. Not sure? Ask someone at the garden center, or call your local agricultural extension. Gardeners love to grow other gardeners.
I’m an illustrator, which sounds romantic, as if I spend my days under a spreading tree, dapple-splashed with sunshine, a watercolor tablet steady on my knee. Actually, I spend my days slumped in an office chair, destroying my posture and working on a computer. There is sunshine, of course, this being Southern California.

I love doing traditional illustration, the pencil and paint stuff, and I wish I had more time to do it, but when I left college, the job I found was illustrating school textbooks. I took the job expecting it to be a good starting place, but it turned out to be a great big comfy chair of a job, with a good salary, benefits, free coffee, and all the second-grade textbooks I could ever want. Eighty-two percent of American school children use Poplar Press products, and have done so for nearly a century. I love it. I learn all kinds of interesting stuff, and I draw and create things kids look at and, presumably, doodle little hats and mustaches on. Once, Annabel brought home one of my textbooks—Kids in History, Fourth Edition—and I saw that dozens of kids had used it, each of them adding new details to my historical figures I never would have imagined. Who knew Martin Van Buren was so well hung?
There are four of us in the creative department, plus a full-time writer, three fact-checkers, and a general assistant who's been there forever and who actually runs the whole place. She looked at me as I walked through the door that morning, and pursed her lips.

“Checking sent back your whale penis, Lilian.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Rose, how long have you been waiting to say that?”

She didn't flicker. “I got in at seven, so a couple of hours, I guess.”

I kept walking. “Tell them they'll have their penis back in the morning.”

She coughed. “I already told them they could have it back later.”

I stopped and turned. “Why did you do that?”

She was looking at the magazine she'd hidden beneath her desk. “Because then I could say, ‘We’ll have your penis back at the end of the day, but it will be hard.’”

“I can see how that would be difficult to pass up.”

She shrugged. “In the maelstrom of tedium that is my day, I grab what rays of sunshine I can.”

My office mate Sasha looked up as I walked in. “Hey, did Rose tell you about the penis?”

“Yes, she did. Did you still need me to help you with your biology book?”

“The development of the chicken egg? It can wait.”

“OK, thanks.”

Sasha shrugged. “The chicken should probably come first anyway . . .”

Let me be clear: The creative department of Poplar Press is
not usually a comedy mecca. Often it is very dull, especially if we’re updating a chemistry text or something. But it does have its moments, and there is the coffee.

I sat down, opened up the whale-penis file, and stared at it. It’s not a whole file of whale penises (penii?); it’s just one relatively small illustration in a veterinary-medicine textbook, and I’d been a little suspicious of why it was even included. Yes, it was important to be thorough, but how many vets were going to need to operate on a whale penis? It’s not like the last time you took your parakeet to the vet you couldn’t get into the waiting room on account of the impotent whale sitting nervously on several hard chairs. Or a young whale couple, holding hands and looking enviously at the baby animals in cardboard boxes all around them, occasionally shooting each other supportive glances and clearing their throats. I checked my e-mail: The fact-checkers had sent it back simply because one of the labels was misspelled. How did they even catch that? I picked up the phone and punched in a number.

“Fact-checking, Al here.”

“Al, it’s Lili.”

“Hey, Lili, sorry about your penis.”

I shifted in my chair. “Jesus, what is it with everyone this morning? You’re all beside yourselves about the penis.”

“As it were.”

“So here’s my question, Al. Are you sure there’s a mistake? My input from the editor agrees with what I have, so what do you have there, an encyclopedia of penises? PenisCheck 2000?”

I could hear him grinning. “I cannot divulge the sources of the fact-checking department, you know that. I’d have to kill you, and then we’d lose our best illustrator.”
I turned to Sasha. “Your boyfriend just said I’m the best illustrator.”

We could both hear Al yelping. Sasha shrugged without turning around.

“Tell him now I’ve seen Moby’s gear, I’ve lost all interest in him anyway.”

“Al, she’s leaving you for a cetacean.”

“Again? That whore. No, but seriously, our guy at the aquarium caught the typo, and we checked with the editor, and his original content was wrong. No big deal, just checking the facts. We see a fact, we check it. It’s our job.”

“Oh, well, OK, then. I didn’t know you had a tame whale guy on call.”

“Again, I cannot reveal my sources, but how else do you think two scruffy guys with liberal-arts degrees proof all this stuff, if not for a fat, fat Rolodex of smart people with very narrow fields of focus?”

“You make a good point, Al.” I hung up, fixed the word, and re-sent the document to Rose. In the cover note, I wrote she could stick the penis in fact-checking’s in-box, which I knew she would appreciate.

My phone rang. Rose. “Upstairs wants to see you.”

I frowned. “Am I getting fired?”

She clicked her tongue. “No clue. Why don’t you gather your balls in your right hand and go upstairs and find out for yourself?”

Rumor has it Rose was the mistress of the first Mr. Poplar, and was installed in the art department, as it was originally called, to hide her from his wife. Seeing as that would make her around eighty, and she is not that, I doubt it, but clearly she has embarrassing info on somebody. Otherwise, they would have fired her.
long ago. She has people skills like lions have gazelle skills. I sighed and headed upstairs to face Roberta King, my general manager.

Roberta King was probably around my age, but we had as much in common as a roller skate and a race car. (This isn’t the best analogy for either of us but was something my dad always said and it springs to mind. He died last year, but I am keeping him alive by stealing his best material.) Roberta and I had met maybe half a dozen times, at work activities that sought to build community through trust falls and other excruciating experiences, and all I could remember about her was that she had looked as uncomfortable as I had felt.

I was wearing my working-mother-at-work ensemble, consisting of a long skirt over boots (with two different socks underneath, but the skirt covered them), a long-sleeve T-shirt that I had slept in, and a V-necked and somewhat stretched sweater from Target. Roberta was wearing a suit. She smelled of flowers. I smelled of waffles.

However, she was smiling at me as if we were old friends, which of course meant I was about to get fired.

“How are the kids?” Ooh, a personal question.

“Hi, Roberta. Rose said you wanted to see me?”

“Yeah, hi, Lili, come on in. Take a seat.” She pushed her chair back from her desk and crossed her legs, indicating that this was a casual, girl-to-girl type of thing. I sat at an angle, like you do, and crossed my legs, too.

“How are the kids?” Ooh, a personal question.

“They’re good, thanks. You know . . .” Shit, I had trailed off. Why was this difficult? I was a woman, she was a woman, we both worked in publishing, ovulated, perspired, ate ice cream
and felt guilty about it, read *People* at the checkout, wondered what people thought of us. We should be able to be relaxed.

“Two little girls, right?”

I nodded.

“And one dead husband?” OK, she didn’t say that. I just added it in my head. People often ask, when they don’t know you, “Oh, and where’s your husband?” Or, “And what does your husband do?” And it’s very hard not to reply, “In heaven, hopefully.” Or, “Oh, he mostly just rots.” But anyway, she didn’t mention him, which meant she remembered he was dead and was being polite and thoughtful. Bitch.

“So, Lili. As you know, things are a little tight in publishing right now. Education budgets are getting cut all over the country, and that’s having a direct impact on our business, of course. Poplar’s trying to stay ahead by branching out a bit.”

I laughed. She paused, frowning a little. I blushed. “Sorry . . . I thought you were making a pun . . . Poplar . . . branch . . .” I swear a tumbleweed blew through the office and bounced over a ridge in the carpet.

Roberta cleared her throat. “Fortunately, an opportunity has presented itself. The Bloem Company is one of the largest seed and flower corporations in the world.” I nodded. Even I had heard of them, and I don’t know a daisy from a doorknob. “They produced a series of flower guides, and they’re going to add a series on vegetables. They’ve asked us to publish them, because the small press who released the flower guides has gone out of business.”

I nodded and put on my intelligent listening face, adding a little between-the-eyebrows frown for extra focus. I was actually just waiting to hear my name, like a dog.
“We’d like you to illustrate them.”
I nodded again, but she had stopped talking.
“Well, that will be . . . fun.” I was puzzled. What was the fuss about? Why was she pulling me into her office to tell me about a job? Normally we get briefed on new projects downstairs, in a short meeting, and then they arrive via e-mail.
Roberta started up again. “It’s a very big job.”
“Well, there are lots of vegetables in the world.”
“Yes. And the Bloem people want to cover all of them. There will be several volumes, plus an addendum.”
“I love an addendum.”
“And we want you to do it by hand, not computer. Watercolors, pen-and-ink, charcoal, whatever you like. Bloem wants to create something artistic and lasting. While at the same time capitalizing on the rebirth of interest in slow food, organic gardening, and the back-to-the-land movement.” She was nervous about something, I could hear it in her voice. She suddenly looked at me and blurted out, “I’m afraid I did something terrible. Truly, truly terrible.”
I was surprised, because I hadn’t thought she was that kind of girl, but I got ready to be shocked.
“I said you’d take a gardening class.” She cleared her throat.
“A vegetable gardening class.”
“I’m sorry?” I frowned. “Did you say a gardening class?”
Roberta blushed. “I was on the phone with the woman from Bloem, and she mentioned that one of the Bloem family sons was teaching a class on vegetable gardening, here in Los Angeles, and I said you’d take it.”
“The class?”
“Yes.”
“On vegetable gardening?”

“Yes.” She spoke more slowly, as apparently I wasn’t getting it. “I said you’d take a class on vegetable gardening.” She said it the way someone else might have said, “And you’ll be slowly dipped in battery acid, toes first.”

“I don’t mind taking a gardening class. It sounds like fun.” I paused. “Unless it’s a three-year commitment and requires a lot of heavy lifting?”

She shook her head quickly. “It’s Saturday mornings, for six weeks. We would of course be compensating you for your time.” I half shrugged, and she leapt on it. “And giving you extra vacation days.”

I would have done it for nothing, but there was no need to tell her that. “Sounds fair.”

She shuddered. “I would have taken the course myself, but I simply couldn’t.”

I altered my opinion of her, subtly. “Why?”

“I hate worms.” She visibly shivered, and may even have gone pale. It was hard to tell under her perfect makeup. “I had a bad experience as a child. I can’t even stand too close to soil, you know, just in case.”

I had to bite my lip not to ask for details. What qualifies as a bad worm experience? I imagined her running along, tiny and cute in coordinated Baby Gap, tripping, falling, her little braids twisting in slow motion as she hit the ground, skidding, coming face-to-face with a worm . . . that pulled out a gun and shot her? That bit her on the nose? I mean, honestly, they don’t even have mouths. But you can’t say that kind of thing to people. You can’t mock their fears openly. But I made a note to do it later, in private.
She still looked worried. “So will you do it?”

I shrugged. “Of course, happy to. I’m sure it will inspire my illustrations.” I didn’t add that I could always get up close and personal with a carrot in the produce department, but she seemed to think this class would help the project, and who was I to argue?

She relaxed, visibly, and stood up. Her clothes fell perfectly, not a wrinkle. Maybe she had some little guy under the desk, steaming her as she sat. Mine kind of stuck where they were, as if someone had wadded them into a ball and thrown them at me.

“Excellent. The class starts this Saturday. You can bring your kids.”

I said thanks, and she said thanks, and we both shook hands and said thanks again, and then she added something.

“We’re very worried about the future of Poplar. But I know you’ll make a good impression, do wonderful work, and save the company.”

“No pressure, then.” I tried to soften my sarcasm with a small smile.

Her first genuine smile since I’d entered her office appeared.

“I know you’re up to the task.”

I tottered out and headed back downstairs.

I went to the tiny kitchen and poured an enormous coffee. My mug said, WORLDS GREATEST DAD, which I supposed was applicable, although I picked it because it was the size of a bucket. Rose had put a sign above the coffeemaker: IF YOU TAKE THE LAST OF THE COFFEE, PUT ON A NEW POT, OR I WILL MAKE YOUR LIFE . . . CHALLENGING. She meant it, too. Sasha forgot once, and Rose connected
all her outward-bound calls to the CEO’s office, which meant five times in a row the guy picked up the phone and there was Sasha. Eventually the CEO suggested she not forget to put on more coffee next time.

Back at my desk, I called my sister.

“Can you babysit the kids every Saturday morning for the next six weeks?”

There was a pause. Then she said, “Yes, if you don’t mind dropping them at my house and running the risk that naked people might be there. Or trained animals.”

I laughed. “Come on, your private life isn’t that exciting.”

“That’s what you think. Note the use of the word private.”

“So that’s a no, then?”

“Do I have to commit to the full series? Can’t I do it as needed?”

“This is as needed. Work has asked me to do a gardening class, and it’s every Saturday for the next month and a half. I’m illustrating a book on vegetables, and they think it will help if I learn how to grow them.”

“They might be right.”

“I doubt it. I did a great job on Monasteries of 14th Century Europe, and I’m not a monk, nor French, nor dead for five hundred years.”

“Good point. Can’t you take them with you?”

“I could, but I thought they’d rather hang with you.”

“How about I come to the class, too, and help you with the kids there?”

I actually took the phone away from my ear and looked at it.

“Are you OK? Gardening? Really?”

She sighed. ”I’m feeling oppressed by my job today. I have
spent the last two hours on the phone, yelling at people I will
never meet, but who hold the fate of my company in their slip-
pery hands. A very important item has been lost in transit, which
I am having a hard time with.”

“Wow, you really are pissed. You just ended a sentence with
a preposition.”

“Eat me.”

“What was it?”

“Oh, you know, the usual. A priceless, thousand-year-old
statue of a horse.”

“Well, maybe it’s just in the wrong box or something.”

“It’s life-size. And on its back is a naked woman holding aloft
the headless body of an eagle. But apart from those minor dis-
tinguishing features, it’s easily missed.”

“OK.” I paused. “I have no response to that at all. Good luck
with your missing horse.” We hung up. Honestly, our conver-
sations were getting more and more like an old married couple’s
every day. Apart from the headless-eagle part, although I always
say you never really know what goes on in someone else’s
marriage.

“We’re what?” Annabel looked skeptical in the rearview
mirror.

Yet again, back in the car. I should buy myself one of those
beaded seat covers that are supposed to be good for your back,
but I’d end up with the pattern permanently embedded in my
ass, and the last thing I need back there is more texture.

We were heading home after school. Or at least we would be,
once the carpool line inched its way out of the school parking
lot. The thing about carpool lines is that teachers use them to indicate how much they like your kids, and, by extension, you. I might be reading too much into it, but how else can I explain the fact that I might be at the front of the line and able to see my kid sitting there, picking her nose with all the subtlety of Howard Carter in a pyramid, and have teachers hunt high and low for children to take to cars way behind me? Cars containing parents who send in cookies more frequently, or even at all. Parents who remember to send thank you cards after birthday parties, or put clean clothes on their kids more than once a week. They’re always nice to my face, these teachers, but they say things like, “Oh, Annabel is so unique.” Or, “Clare said the funniest thing again in class today.” Or, “She has an amazing vocabulary, Mrs. Girvan. Honestly, I’m not even certain a tiger has a clitoris.”

I answered the question calmly. “We’re going to learn how to grow a garden.”

“I already know how to grow things.” Clare was excited. “We do it at school.”

I looked at her, quickly, over my shoulder. “You do?”

She nodded. Annabel confirmed. “The little kids have a garden in the playground. We see them out there digging in the dirt.”

“I kissed a worm.” That’s the thing about Clare, she’s shy. “Did he kiss you back?”

She laughed. “Mom! Worms aren’t he’s. They’re both girls and boys!”

Huh. Score one for the Los Angeles public school system. “Yes, they’re hermaphrodites,” Annabel clarified.

“No, they’re boys and girls.” Clare wasn’t going to let her sister one-up her.
We were nearly at the street. “Well, anyway, we’re starting this weekend, and it’s going to be fun. Aunty Rachel is going to take the class with us.”

“Can I get back to you?” Annabel apparently needed to consult with her people.

“Well, I’m doing it.” Clare didn’t need permission from anyone.

We parked in front of the house, and I let the kids out, stepping back to avoid the small cascade of car crap that fell out when the door slid back. You could always tell where I’d parked: granola-bar wrappers, a small, bent straw from a juice box, a grubby wipe. Mommy droppings. I imagined a Native American tracker crouching low on the sidewalk: “Middle-aged, plump woman, heading south, surrounded by young.” He would straighten and shake his majestic head pityingly. “Moving slowly.”

As I shut the car door, I noticed broken car-window glass in the gutter and instantly wondered if it had been there since my husband’s accident. It hadn’t, of course, but images of that day often flickered into my mind without being invited. Broken glass. A car door slamming suddenly. Coffee spilled on the street, still steaming. The sound of emergency voices distorted by static.

They had come very quickly when Dan had been killed, although I hadn’t heard the sirens. I was standing in the kitchen, replaying the argument we had been in the middle of, as it happened, saying all the things I had meant to say. It had been a hissing morning argument, where we’d gone to bed angry, woken up still angry, and then had to put it on infuriating hold while he took the kids to school.

“I’ll be back,” were his last words, but not in a pleasant, don’t-worry way, but more in a Terminator, this-argument-isn’t-done
way. Not that it mattered. It wasn’t true anyway, and never would be.

I cut back to today and watched the kids get out of the car in that jumping-falling way little kids do, then I reached into the backseat to get backpacks, art projects, and stray shoes. I could hear our Labrador, Frank, barking as I walked to the door, and he greeted us enthusiastically, checking the kids for food, then scooting his fat butt across the rug.

“Frank has worms again, Mom,” announced Annabel, Child Veterinarian, turning on the TV.

“Maybe he just has an itchy bottom,” suggested Clare. “It happens.”

I sighed and started emptying the dishwasher. The dog has worms. Clare needs a filling in a baby tooth because I’m a bad mother and give her sugar. My sister wants dinner. Meanwhile, I haven’t had a haircut in five months and have started to resemble Cousin Itt. Cousin Itt was a blonde, of course, whereas I am more of an indeterminate brown, but still. I caught sight of my reflection in the kitchen window and for a minute thought I was my mother. Fantastic.

An hour or so later, my sister walked in. “You’re starting to look a little like Cousin Itt, did you know that?” She put the grocery bags on the counter and picked up Clare, who was squealing about the dog and his worms. “Wait, who has worms? You have worms?” She looked at Annabel. “Do you have worms, too?”

“Yes.” Annabel was expressionless, engrossed in the TV. “Hundreds of worms.”

I put water on for the pasta and started making dinner. I thought about the times I’d watched my mother chopping onions, the radio playing, an empty tomato can holding her wooden spoon
on the counter, the smell of melting butter permeating the air. I wondered if she’d been as underwhelmed as I was. Every day around four o’clock I would start making dinner for the kids, which meant for me, too, because otherwise I would eat alone, or not at all, and then they would eat (if I was lucky), take a bath, get into their jammies, have stories, and go to bed. When Dan had been alive, he would arrive in the middle of it, full of adult thoughts and complaints about his work, which at least provided some visual interest and the possibility of polysyllabic words. Now Rachel was often here, which worked, too, but sometimes I found myself singing the *Curious George* theme song under my breath in a way that probably indicated brain-cell death.

Rachel leaned against the counter and examined me. “You’re pissed about the Cousin Itt thing, right? I’m sorry. That was thoughtless. Besides, it’s not Itt so much as it is Morticia. I can still see a slice of your face. And it’s a good slice.”

I looked at her silently, poking my wooden spoon at the bacon, breaking it apart. She was lovely, my sister, both to look at and as a person. She was single, but not celibate, largely by choice. She had been married once, very young, and had taken a pledge not to do that again. Taller than me, thinner than me (which was forgivable, seeing as she didn’t have kids), with better hair and firmer thighs, she nonetheless made it clear that she put the kids and me above her own plans. I worried sometimes that the sad circumstances of my life had curtailed her freedom. I said as much, once, and she pointed out that the sad circumstances of my life were also the sad circumstances of her life.

“Hey, my brother-in-law, who I really loved, got killed in a car accident, and my sister went insane for a while, so I had to take care of her kids. That happened to me, remember? You are
just a bit player in the drama that is Rachel Anderby’s Life, starring Rachel Anderby, written by Rachel Anderby, directed by Rachel Anderby. In my life, you’re simply a supporting character. Lili, the kids are billed above you.”

But I knew it had cost her something, to be available for me, and I knew that she knew that I knew, and that if it ever came to kidney donation or taking a bullet, I was her girl. Mind you, she did have a hectic social life these days, and was even, on occasion, busy for an entire weekend.

I drained the spaghetti.

“So, what are you doing on Saturday afternoon?” I asked her. “After our thrilling new gardening class.”

“A date, what else?” She was folding the napkins into swans, a trick she had learned one summer waitressing at a theme-park restaurant. At the time, it had seemed as though the entire three months had been one long, drunken orgy of seasonal workers in the sun, but the napkin origami had made it all worth it. Otherwise, it would just have been fantastic and frequent guilt-free sex with other happy young people, and who needs that?

“With whom?” I raised my eyebrows but kept my tone neutral, a trick I had learned one summer interning at a publishing house (no sex, no origami, but loads of free irony and all the bookmarks you could carry).

“A new guy.”

“From work?” Rachel worked at an international import-export firm that specialized in art and artifacts. She was the head of logistics for them, and could routinely be overheard on the phone saying things like, “Well, the sarcophagus can overnight in Cairo, then, but it better be in Budapest before Tuesday, or
the Pope’s going to throw a shitter.” She often met men through her work, but she never dated anyone who worked for her company. She was a bit of a slut, to be honest, but a slut with rules.

“Kind of. I met him at an opening.”

“Cute?”

She grinned at me. “No, repulsive, with knock-knees and a squint. I thought it was time to broaden my horizons.”

“Nice.”

“Mommy?”

I looked down. Clare had appeared. “Yes, honey?” I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, smoothing her cheek. The physical perfection of a small child is sometimes too much to deal with. Did the kid even have pores?

“I want to paint.”

“Not now, sweetie. Dinner’s ready.”

“But I really, really want to.” Sadly, the physical perfection is often paired with immense self-interest. The strand of hair popped out, and I started to reach for it again.

“I hear you, honey, but now is not a good time. Maybe in the morning.”

“No. Now.” Clare was hungry, apparently. She ducked her head away, not letting me tidy her hair.

“Go tell your sister to come and sit down for dinner, OK?”

She debated throwing a fit about the painting, the struggle between hunger and rage apparent in her puckered brow. Rachel intervened, picking her up and carrying her, upside down, to get Annabel. I tossed the drained spaghetti; threw in the egg, cheese, bacon, butter, and onions; and stirred it fast to cook the egg. Carrying the pan across to the table, I beat the kids to it, and by
the time they sat, their dinner was steaming on their plates. I gave myself a small round of applause because no one else was going to do it.

Rachel looked up at me. “You can join me on my date, if you like. I’m sure this guy has a friend.” She put a forkful of food in her mouth. “Actually, I hope he has more than one, but the squint could be putting people off.”

I frowned at her. “Don’t be silly.” I never talked about dating in front of the kids, which made it easy to avoid the topic completely, as they were always there. I wasn’t ready to date, the kids weren’t ready for me to date, and, in fact, I was planning on not dating until they finished college. I would encourage them to take a year off first, to tour Europe. Plus there was the strong possibility of several years of postgraduate studies. I was safe for at least two decades, at which point my lady parts would have fused together like Barbie’s anyway.

I got drinks for everyone, a plate for myself, and finally sat down.

“Mommy,” Annabel said. She was twirling spaghetti around her fork, a freshly acquired skill. Often the twirling went on much longer than it needed to, but these things take practice.

“Yes, sweets?” I reached for extra cheese.

“Did I tell you I have a boyfriend?”

I flicked a glance at Rachel. “Nope. Who’s that?”

“James.”

OK, at least it was a kid I knew. An actual kid, not an imaginary kid.

“Really? I like James. He’s nice.” I filled my mouth with spaghetti and thanked God for the Italians. Spaghetti, pizza, ice
cream. If they weren’t so busy making love and whizzing around on Vespas, they’d probably rule the world.

Annabel made a face.
“He’s silly. But he’s my boyfriend.”
“Does he know it?”
She looked scandalized. “No! Of course not!”
Rachel looked at Clare.
“Do you have a boyfriend, too?”
“No, I’m married.” Clare had a mouthful of spaghetti, but she smiled around it.
“Oh yeah?” Rachel kept eating. “Who are you married to?”
“Frank.”
Frank banged his tail on the ground, hearing his name.
“Huh. Did you know your husband has worms?”
Clare nodded.
Annabel was patient but firm. “Clare, you can’t marry the dog.” She put down her fork.
“I did. It’s done.” This was one of Clare’s favorite things to say. “It’s done” covered a lot of things, like drawing on the wall, peeing on the floor, eating candy. It’s done, nothing can be changed, it’s over. She was all about closure, that one.
“But people can’t marry dogs.”
“Why not? I love Frank.”
Annabel nodded. “Yes, so do I.”
“And people who love each other get married.”
Annabel nodded again, although Rachel opened her mouth to object. I frowned at my sister, and shook my head, subtly.
“So the dog is your husband?” Annabel was skeptical and turned to me. “She can’t marry the dog, Mom.”
“Bel, she’s too young to really marry anyone. But if she wants to say that she and Frank are husband and wife rather than mutt and kindergartner, who are we to rain on her parade?”

She looked at me, thinking.

“Look,” I continued. “Last week she spent three days pretending the bathtub was a coral reef infested with deadly eels, and you let that one slide.” I smiled at Annabel. “She’s only five, after all.”

“Although,” Rachel chimed in, “Frank’s nearly eight, a much older man.”

I looked at her. “Yeah, that’s the worrying part, the age difference.”

“But it’s silly.” Annabel was really not having it.

“So? Lots of things are silly, honey, and usually that’s a good thing.”

Clare misinterpreted her sister’s unhappiness. “Hey, you can marry Henry if you like.” Henry was our rabbit. He lived in the garden, in a hutch, and I have to admit that more than once I totally forgot he existed.

Rachel laughed. “Wait, I want to marry Henry, he’s super-cute.” This was undeniable.

“He’s a bit short for you, isn’t he?”

“He’s very fluffy.” Annabel was entering into the spirit of the thing, finally. “He has very big ears, like that boyfriend you had at Christmas.”

Rachel snorted. “How do you remember these things? I barely remember that guy.”

Clare was on a roll. “And Mommy can marry Jane.” The cat.

Annabel lost her smile again. “Mommy can’t marry Jane. One thing, Jane is a girl, and girls don’t marry girls...” Rachel opened
her mouth to correct her, but Annabel was getting louder. “Two, Jane is a cat, and cats don’t ever get married, and three, Mom is already married to Dad, and you can’t marry two people at once.”

“Who wants dessert?” I said, chirpily, getting to my feet.

“But Dad is dead,” said Clare, firmly.

I started clearing plates, noisily. “How about ice cream?”

“Yes, but they’re still married.” I pulled open the freezer in a hurry.

“But he’s dead. It’s done.”

Annabel started to flush, which was not a good sign. “Yes, but they’re still married, so she can’t marry anyone else. Ever.”

I gave it another shot. “Ooh, who wants chocolate sauce?”

Clare frowned back at her. “But what if she loves someone? She can marry them.”

“Marshmallows?”

Annabel stood up, and I realized this was about to go south. Luckily, so did Rachel.

“Bath!” she yelled, leaping up and grabbing Clare.

I picked up Annabel, who was starting to shake. Often weeks would pass when she wouldn’t mention her dad at all. But other days she would just crumple. Clare often set her off, because the whole thing meant less to her. She’d been less than a year old when Dan died. To her, Dad was just a word, something other people had, like a horse, or measles.

As Rachel headed to the bathroom, blowing raspberries on Clare’s tummy, I sat down with Annabel on my lap.

“Honey, I love you and Clare and Aunty Rachel. I’m never going to marry anyone else, OK?”

She was crying a bit now, and just nodded. I rested her head against my shoulder and stroked her head.
“I’m always going to love your daddy, OK? No one else will ever be your daddy—just him. And I will always be your mommy.”
“And Aunty Rachel will always be my aunty?”
I nodded, against her hair.
“And grandma . . .”
“Will always be your grandma, yes.”
“And Frank?” More tail banging under the table.
I smiled. “Will always be Clare’s husband, yes.”
She laughed, finally, and I carried her to the bathroom.
the Garden of Small Beginnings

by Abbi Waxman

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