

*Our Time is Up*

by

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*This is a book of memory...of how I became who I am. Some of it is untrue by design, after all it is a novel, and part of it is untrue due to the prism of time.*

## Prologue

The weather in our house was stormy with the promise of thunder and lightning. I walked on the balls of my feet, as if to prepare for the thunderclaps that would slam me across the room. Before I started elementary school, I was alone with my mother when my father left for work at the Hunter Coal Company on Flatbush Avenue. As usual on Wednesdays, she put on her *shmata*, a sleeveless cotton housedress that tied across the front. The pink and green flowers on the dress accentuated the scowl on her face. She hated cleaning. But it was her life sentence. She filled a brown plastic bucket with hot water and added Ivory soap flakes and Jane Parker ammonia. Putting on her yellow plastic gloves to protect her nail polish, she dropped the wooden brush with stiff bristles into the bucket. Then she turned to me and said, "Go out on the porch so I can wash the floor."

She ushered me down the narrow hall with her gloved hand on the small of my back and shut the door behind me. Once exiled, peering through the glass panes in the front door, I watched her on her hands and knees scrubbing the linoleum floor. Her breasts peeked out of her *shmata* with each forward movement of the brush and an occasional smile crossed her face as she listened to Rayburn and Finch on the radio

Outside the trees tossed in the wind and clouds scudded across the sky. The porch shook from the elevated train that stopped half a block from our house on its way to Coney Island. At the foot of the concrete steps, there were three large dogs -- a dirty German shepherd, a dark gray mutt with a wrinkled face and a black snout, and a long-haired white mongrel. They lived in an empty lot on McDonald Avenue around the corner from our house, and roamed the streets looking for food early each morning. Saliva dripped from the German shepherd's mouth as he bared his teeth and snarled.

I ran back to the front door. "Ma, Ma the dogs are out here! Let me in! Please, Ma!" I pleaded.

"Be quiet," she yelled, red-faced with sweat dripping, "and wait on the porch!"

I whimpered, "Mommy please, I'm scared of the dogs..."

The white mongrel growled. I pulled one of the rusted metal chairs as far from the stoop and the dogs as I could get it and crouched behind it. I watched the dogs at the bottom of the stairs jumping up on each other and barking loudly. They could run up the steps at any moment and I would be cornered. Then I imagined there was an invisible fence at the steps, but it only worked if I kept my eyes firmly fixed on the dogs. I stared at the dogs and chanted, "A hundred bottles of beer on the wall, a hundred bottles of beer, take one down and pass it around, ninety-nine bottles of beer..."

When my mother finished, she poured the brown sudsy water in the kitchen sink; rinsed the bucket and brush; carefully turned the brush upside down to air dry; untied her *shmata*; and turned on the faucet for her bath. I heard the water running. The dogs moved on down the block and the terror passed. I stood up and sat in the chair, breathing heavily and staring into space. She did not come out to get me when she was finished. She just took her bath and went to lie down on her bed. I could see her pull down the quilted bedspread as I stood on my tip-toes peering through her bedroom window that faced the porch. It was safe to go back in the house. The floor must be dry, but I had to be quiet. I was crossing a mine field and had to hold my breath, tip toe slowly, and not jostle anything. Opening and closing the door could cause an explosion. I smelled the light citrus of Jean Nate toilet water as I passed the steamy bathroom on the way to my room. I closed the door carefully behind me and exhaled.

# **PART I**

## **MEETING JOAN**

## January 26, 1967

Sitting in the waiting room of the Washington Square Consultation Center trying to read *The New York Times*, I couldn't concentrate. I couldn't care less about Apollo 1 orbiting the earth; I was focused on a different kind of gravitational pull. I had been having anxiety attacks for months at Berkeley -- dreams about being raped and episodes of terror with a rapid heartbeat during the day. To the utter amazement of my friends, I had taken extra credits in the last quarter to graduate early. I hoped that moving back to my parents' house in Brooklyn would make me feel safe. But I didn't confess that to anyone. And it did not work. I wanted to find a therapist as soon as I could.

It had taken over a month to set up an intake interview, be assigned a therapist and then set up an appointment. Now, finally, I greeted the receptionist and gave her a check for \$25. She looked different than I had imagined on the phone. I expected a middle-aged Jewish woman with dyed blond hair -- pretty but a little chubby. Instead, Barbara was a tall thin redhead; she looked Irish.

I thought she had too much makeup on, but then again, I didn't wear *any* makeup at that time, not even lipstick. My brown hair was short and a little frizzy from the rain outside. I was 21 years old, but still wished an adult would hold my head to stop the throbbing.

It was Thursday morning at 9:50, so I imagined the people sitting in the waiting room didn't have regular jobs with set hours. No teachers, lawyers, or businessmen. There was a hall with doors adjoining the waiting room. I laughed to myself imagining a Marx brothers or Three Stooges comedy: doors opening and closing in random patterns with eccentric and wildly gesticulating characters exchanging places, all the while babbling incoherent phrases.

A woman emerged from one of the doors and called my name, "Rose." I smiled to myself. No last names because of confidentiality, I thought. The therapist beckoning me was about 5'1", just a little shorter than me. She was a pretty woman, not the kind that you turn around to look at, but her eyes radiated warmth. Her blue dress matched her sensible navy blue heels. I thought she looked in her early thirties. When I walked toward her, she introduced herself at the door of the therapy room. "Hello, I'm Joan Wiseman."

I had imagined how her voice would sound. I didn't want a therapist exuding WASP elitism like Katherine Hepburn. I knew I'd never feel comfortable talking to someone who seemed so superior in social background -- my Brooklyn accent would intensify and I'd feel like a *shlep*. A husky, sexy voice like Lauren Bacall, on other hand, would render me mute from envy. A high-pitched or nasal voice would evoke my contempt and I wouldn't be able to take her seriously. I sighed with relief when I heard Joan's voice. It was intelligent and engaging, but mellow and warm. The kind of voice you could snuggle up to.

"Please come in," Joan said. She stood next to a Danish modern desk with a black vinyl swivel chair that was turned to face a deep-seated chair across the small room. It was a chair you might find in a dorm room -- a piece of coarse cloth hung on a curved metal base. It had no arms and I imagined that when I sank into it, my behind was going to be inches from the floor. The room was designed to be innocuous, probably to encourage patients to experience it in any way they needed, but I felt humiliated by it. There were a few prints on the wall: Picasso's "The Old Guitarist," a Miro abstract, and a farm with haystacks by Van Gogh. They looked familiar, I'd seen prints just like them in dorm rooms. Pleased that I recognized them, I felt cultured. Joan was quiet.

Shifting around, I finally settled into the bottomless chair and folded my hands on my lap; my shoulders sagged.

"Well, I'm an only child and I grew up in Brooklyn. I just got back to New York after graduating from the University of California. Berkeley had the best Political Science department in the United States so I decided to major in that."

"Yes?" she beckoned me to continue.

"When I left Brooklyn to begin college, I got the cheapest ticket to San Francisco -- a chartered propeller plane that had to refuel on the way. The flight took ten hours. I sat next to a girl named Maria who was returning from her junior year abroad in Florence on the same airplane, so she had been crunched up in her seat by the window for almost two days."

The part of me that wanted to entertain Joan gained steam. Joan was playing with her gold hoop earrings while she listened.

"She had pieces of a smelly tuna fish sandwich under her seat and a bent and tattered version of Dante's *Inferno* in Italian." The words came in a torrent. "She was lovely, but her body odor was overwhelming. I guess I got used to it. We had one of those intense conversations you only have with people you will never see again. By the time we were over Michigan, we knew each other intimately."

Joan's blue eyes reflected the light. The more intently she listened, the more I embellished the story.

"She told me about her boyfriend from Oakland, who was going to pick her up at the airport." My Brooklyn accent got thicker, my "r's" were dropping like flies and my voice kept rising. "I told her all about my mother and why I had to get away from her."

Joan sat with her legs crossed at the ankles. I noticed they were not the kind of ankles with protruding bones like I have. They were thicker; you could barely see the bones on the side. Joan switched from playing with her earrings to playing with a tussle of her hair as she listened.

“When the pilot announced we were landing in San Francisco in twenty minutes, Maria asked me if I was taking a cab to Berkeley. I told her I planned to walk over the Bay Bridge to Berkeley and stay at the Y. Can you imagine? She laughed and I felt really embarrassed. There was something stupid about walking over the bridge to Berkeley, but I didn’t know what it was.” I wondered if Joan knew how stupid it was to think of walking over the Bay Bridge. “From the map I just assumed the airport was near the bridge and I could walk over it. Isn’t that incredible? It’s over twenty miles from the airport to the campus. Luckily, she and Johnny took me to the co-op dorm.”

Waiting for her to respond, I worried that she might think I was just babbling.

“Didn’t your parents go over your plans with you?” Joan asked. There was something concealed in a fold in her voice. Her tone implied that my parents *should* have gone over the plans with me.

“No, my parents never asked about my plans.” I sighed. “Once they decided to let me go they had no interest in my accommodations or the cost.” I glanced at Joan to see if she was surprised, but she just looked concerned. “I had never seen a real palm tree,” I continued, “only pictures of them on post cards my parents’ friends sent while on vacation in Florida. And I had never seen a eucalyptus tree; I thought it was a type of cough drop. They’re so weird-looking, strings of hanging bark and joints like armpits or crotches.”

Joan smiled.

"When I got to the girls co-operative dormitory, Stebbins Hall, I stood on the steps with my bag, having sent my trunk ahead of time, and knocked on the door. I had no idea it wasn't open yet for the fall semester!" I wanted to emphasize the strangeness of what I did. "Luckily, the housemother succumbed to my pleas and let me stay in one of the empty rooms. I had no place else to go." I pictured the white-haired housemother wearing a skirt and silk blouse although she was just spending the day in the co-op. "She had a bloodless elegance that Jews don't have." I rubbed my palms on my thighs. "When she gave me two sheets to make my bed, I asked her if it was one for each week." I hoped Joan would laugh, but she only smiled. "In Brooklyn we didn't sleep between two sheets. My mother had a duvet cover on the comforter and we used a fitted bottom sheet. The housemother informed me, in a loud voice, slowly enunciating as if I didn't understand English, 'One is the bot-tom sheet and one is the top sheet.'"

Now Joan was laughing. I liked the idea that she was trying to contain herself but couldn't help it.

I thought about the first time I saw my roommate Bonnie. She emerged from her brand new 1963 Volkswagen Beetle and dragged her matched luggage up the front steps. She wore tight black pants with stirrups under her feet to keep them securely in her black pant boots, and a stylish, low cut sexy blouse. She walked into my room with the confident swagger of an Isadora Duncan without the scarf. I knew immediately that she was someone who knew the ways of the world that were unknown to me. Within a couple of hours of meeting her, I found out that both her parents had died before she finished high school and she had lived in an apartment with her sister Phyllis during high school. During those same years I was holed up in my room in

Brooklyn with the kitchen phone cord stretched to the breaking point talking to my friend Linda in a whisper so as to not be heard by my parents.

When Joan stopped laughing, we were both quiet for a minute. Then Joan said, "So you went far away to college, but you've come back."

"Yes." I bit my lip.

"Yes?" she prodded.

"I don't know what to tell you," I said. I took off my glasses and cleaned them with my shirt.

"Why don't you tell me what brought you here?" Joan asked, tilting her head slightly.

She was asking for a "presenting problem." I knew that because I had been planning this since I was twelve years old and recently re-read *The Fifty Minute Hour*.

Joan sat smiling just enough to indicate interest, but not so much as to seem eager. I noticed she had dimples.

"In my junior year my friends were all paired off with boyfriends and I felt lonely," I said, slouching in the bottomless chair.

"Yes?"

"I want to see you three times a week," I said.

Joan smiled again and I didn't know if the smile was pleasure at my request or skepticism about whether I knew what I was getting into. I took a deep breath.

"That's good," she said, pausing like a comma in a sentence, then continued, "but what brought you here, now?" Joan asked.

"My presenting problem," I said with a grin, "is that I'm the only college graduate who's still a virgin in the city of New York, or maybe the whole country."

Joan chuckled.

In college I had developed a habit of regaling Bonnie and the other girls in my suite with tales of Brooklyn. I had loved the laughs, but when it was over, I felt distant from my audience. I had come to the clinic because I felt isolated and cut off from people, an observer watching myself interacting, one step removed from the experience. I called it my “Colgate shield.” It was invisible and protected me from something, but I didn’t know what.

Now, the hinges of my jaw tightened. “I started getting these terrible anxiety attacks in Berkeley.”

“What were they like?” Joan asked.

I hadn’t described the episodes to anyone before. My right eyelid twitched. I inhaled and sat silently for a moment.

“I was afraid of being alone,” I whispered. I waited a few moments before continuing. “I kept imagining a rapist coming through the window. I didn’t feel safe. Everyone thought it was crazy to want to come home to New York. I’d been telling them stories about my mother for years. But I wanted to be in my parents’ house. But now that I’m in a fellowship program at NYU, I’m living in an apartment on East 12th Street.”

“Yes?”

“All my friends had boyfriends,” I said. “Some are even married already.” I thought of Bonnie and Phil. She met him when she started working at Pizza Hut soon after the beginning of our first semester. Phil was the manager. He was shorter than Bonnie and wore his brown hair slicked back like a muscular Sal Mineo. He wore tight tee shirts with the sleeves rolled up to show his bulging biceps and looked like a gang member with a cigarette balanced behind his ear, but he didn’t smoke. Phil was pre-med and also a varsity wrestler. My impression of wrestling

was from “Friday Night Wrestling” on television: two obese men dressed in some silly outfit with names like “Animal” or “The Chief” trying to cause each other as much pain as possible. I never thought of it as a “sport” until I met Phil.

“If all of your friends had boyfriends or were married, maybe you were afraid of having sex if you stayed in Berkeley,” she said flatly.

My head jerked, I felt like a child caught picking her nose and wiping it under a piece of furniture. I stared at the floor.

"Are you saying... I wanted to be raped?" Eyes bulging, I tried to sit up in the cloth chair.

“No, I’m sure you don’t *want* to be raped,” Joan said softly.

My temples pounded.

“But rape means you didn’t choose it,” she leaned forward in her chair and continued, “you didn’t want it. You’re overpowered so it’s not your fault.”

I covered my eyes.

"Coming home to live in your parents' apartment might have felt safe because you wouldn't have sex as long as you were living with them," she said.

"But now I have my own apartment..."

"So maybe that's what brought you here," she said.

"Yes," I said, nodding. "I think that's true."

"Unfortunately, our time is up for now, but why don’t we set up our next appointment.”

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I walked out of Joan's office in a daze. Walking home from the clinic, I thought about Bonnie. I remembered the regular reports from Adrienne about Bonnie and Phil’s relationship.

Adrienne worked at Pizza Hut with Bonnie and Phil. She was a Los Angeles Jew like Bonnie, but she was short and pudgy and, although she wore her long black hair in a flip, she seemed like a pre-pubescent boy. I thought about the first time Adrienne told me her suspicions about Phil.

“He’s talking to “Blondie” on the phone all the time,” she said.

“Does Bonnie know?”

“No, they’re not on the same shift. I think he leaves the shift and meets her while Bonnie’s working her shift.”

“Are you going to tell her?” I had asked.

“No, she’s going to go ape-shit when she finds out.”

“But that’s why you need to tell her, ” I said. “He’s cheating on her. You have to tell her.”

But Adrienne did not tell her. She didn’t *need* to tell her. I did. It was like a stone in my shoe, I couldn't wait to get it out. I always said what was better left unsaid.

“If he cheats on you now, he will cheat on you later.” I pleaded with her as we sat eating our salami and cheese subs at La Val’s on Euclid Avenue. “How can you keep seeing him when he’s still going out with “Blondie” on the side?”

“Her name is not ‘Blondie,’” Bonnie said stiffly. “Stop calling her that. Her name is Jennifer.”

“Who gives a shit what her name is -- he’s sleeping with her,” I said, crossing my arms.

I had wanted to warn her. I was stepping over the line with my eyes wide open. I was jealous of her attention to him, but I was also genuinely concerned about her. I thought it was a matter of principle.

Increasingly Bonnie felt there was nothing to talk to me about. The more questions I asked the more silent she became. I was confused. Asking questions was my way of expressing my interest in a person, but Bonnie experienced it as prying, intrusive and critical. And she was right. I could not understand how she could have sex with someone who was having sex with someone else. Afraid of having sex with *anyone*, even if monogamous, it was incomprehensible to me.

“So, did you see Phil today?” I asked on one of the occasions she came back to our room to change her clothes.

“Yes, he was working lunch when I was there.”

“Was Jennifer there too?”

“No, but she called him while we were both working,” she said.

I waited for more. But she did not continue. I wanted to ask her myriad questions: Is he still seeing her? How can you stand it? But I contained myself. I just sat there in the awkward silence. She picked up her bag and walked toward the door.

“Oh, no, please don’t do that. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry,” I cried.

She walked out and slammed the door behind her.

Three months into the first semester, Bonnie told me she was moving out at the end of the semester and she was going to room with Adrienne.

Bonnie and Adrienne moved to a three-bedroom house on Parker Street on the South side of campus. It was on a tree-lined street and the house had a fireplace and a big eat-in kitchen. They invited another girl from the co-op, Laurie, to be the third roommate and I felt abandoned and devastated. Bonnie bought a queen-sized bed in expectation of an ongoing relationship with

Phil. It was the kind of house a family could live in; they were living like adults. It was a half-hour walk from the co-op where I continued to live, but to me she had left the country.