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GATHERING

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Prologue

The small group of strangers wandered through the small thicket of trees. It was a lovely path in the woods with the scent of salt promising to reveal the ocean. When the woods cleared, their eyes widened with wonder and awe. Large boulders, big enough to hold several people, were perched at the end of the path, their edges scoured and licked by ocean waves. The solidness of granite and erratic movement of waves against it were a stunning contrast against an azure sky.

Only one of them, Samantha, had been here before. For the rest of the group, this site was as wonderful and mysterious as the woman they had come to honor. Smiles crossed their faces, as they realized, even in their grief, they were still learning about Asta, their dear departed friend. They had ventured to this place to honor her wish to spread her ashes into the swirling, white capped sea. The waves seemed to dance in anticipation of receiving one of their biggest admirers. Sam was overcome with emotion and memories of the languid afternoons spent with Asta on these boulders. Here they had discussed the very intimate details of their lives and worked through many seeming challenges. Sam's tears left dark splashes on the granite boulders as she pondered the fact that she would never be here in person with her friend again.

The group wrapped their coats and scarves a little tighter around themselves as the wind rushed at them beyond the cover of the trees. They stepped gingerly over the boulders, navigating carefully so as not to slip. Since none of them had experienced this type of ritual before, they looked to Gerry for guidance. Gerry was the perfect person to lead the group. A funeral director by trade and a dear friend to the departed, he took his role very seriously, making sure to gently guide the group through his friend's last wishes for burial.

Gerry chose a place that was behind a boulder big enough to shelter them from the wind. He encouraged everyone to spend a few moments in silent reverie. The mystical, magical atmosphere of this place certainly lent itself to reflection. Although Sam had been here with Asta, the rest of the group could certainly imagine why this place would be so special to her. They felt her presence in the grounding quality of the granite and her spirit in the frolic of the waves darting through the boulders. It was so much like her, this place. Solid yet spirited. The earthiness of the granite was like the warm, grounded feeling one experienced after a conversation with Asta. The playfulness of the waves was like the smile she put on a face with her wit. The boulders were warm and the ocean cold, much like the polarity of Asta.

Gerry instructed everyone to face away from the wind while sending Asta's remains on their journey. He opened the beautiful urn and offered Samantha the first scoop. Samantha did as Gerry instructed and watched as her friend sailed away through the sky and skipped into the waves. The lobster buoys seemed to dance in anticipation of her arrival. Each one of the group followed suit until the urn was empty. Gerry then asked for a moment of silence respect as they each thought their own thoughts about Asta. Human nature prevailed however, as each one of them also thought about the individuals in the group. "Who are these people?", they thought, "and what did they know about Asta?"

Introduction

Introduction

Gerry arrived early and unlocked the doors to his familiar place of employment. It was hard to believe it was the tenth anniversary of today's event. It started ten years ago as a typical service, one he had presided over many times. Of course, it was different in that this service was for a dear friend. Her instructions were very specific and Gerry doubted even she would have expected the event to turn into the annual rite that was considered required in many of the attendees calendars.

This event was unique for the funeral home. Most rituals occurred once and at the time of passing. When Asta passed, her instructions required the typical wake hours to be extended so that everyone had the opportunity to relate their experiences. These experiences were not meant to be tributes to Asta, but experiences that occurred as a result of conversations or brief meetings with her. The first wake went on for so many hours that the decision was made to hold another event on the first anniversary. This accommodated both the terms of the will and the need for the funeral home to conduct other business.

Gerry realized that he looked forward to this event, much more than the other

services in the funeral home. Asta was a woman who appreciated life and had created this event so that others would stop their daily routines and think about what they had to appreciate for a small amount of time. It was meant to be a reflective time, one in which you could gain perspective, take a look at the bigger picture and, in some cases, be inspired by others.

Asta was not a religious person, although she was very spiritual. She thought religion resided within each one of us. She recognized that social pressures sometimes undermined spirituality. Spirituality, or more definitively, compassion and tolerance, were a daily discipline that most forgot to attend to. As her final contribution, she wanted to create the time and space for others to practice that discipline. She knew that, at least in the beginning, she would have personally known all the attendees. She knew that over time it would be possible that she might not have ever met some of the attendees. This was fine by her. If the event dwindled to the point of extinction, her mission would have been no less fulfilled.

The other mission was to create an event at which people with very diverse backgrounds and personalities co-mingled. She knew that if these people were in a room together for a different purpose they probably would not move out of their comfort zone and speak to one another. The structure of the wake allowed them a way to learn about each other in a less conspicuous manner. She wanted to create an intimate experience among strangers that would let them experience something they could define themselves. The event was meant to be thought provoking and transformational. Typically, one goes to an event and is inspired for a short period of time until life's woes and over scheduling make the impact fall off the radar. Asta's event created a series of little impacts over time. It was like a series of little baby steps over a long period of time instead of a huge leap in a single event. Gerry had loved the idea when she told him about it and intended to carry out her wishes for as long as he was able. It gave him a unique opportunity to honor her and a new perspective on the rituals around one's passing.

Asta

Asta

The tall, lithesome adolescent sprinted across the sand to the ocean's edge. She stuck one toe in and then dove head first under the surf. "Ah", she thought, "heaven." Asta was in her sophomore year of college, studying humanities. She attended a small school in the mountains and could not wait for the end of each Spring semester to return to her home by the ocean. She was rejuvenated by the ocean air and its negative ionic emanations. She would try to conjure up the sounds of surf while away at school. She had collections of professional ocean sounds recordings but none were enough like the real thing to comfort her. She had tried making her own recordings but, as the saying goes, there was nothing like the real thing. She was home for the summer and relished it. She would work at her usual summer job in the small town library. She loved this job as an avid reader and one who loved to discuss the books everyone else was reading. She particularly liked talking to the children about the books they were reading.

Asta came home from her swim and knew immediately something was up. Her mother had a concerned and faraway look on her face. "What's up?", Asta asked. "We got news that my brother has passed away", her mother replied. Asta knew very little about her mother's brother. He had moved away long ago after achieving success with a software package he had developed. As far as Asta knew, he just roamed the world. "Where was he?", Asta asked. Asta's mother explained that her brother Joe was in the Philippines when he contracted malaria. He was ill for a few weeks and didn't recover. "When was the last time you heard from him?" "A few months ago, he sent me a letter saying he was leaving the Samoan islands for the Philippines. "He was good about letting me know his whereabouts. I guess I never really accepted the fact that I wouldn't see him again." He wrote once or twice a year and always, expressed happiness, contentment and gratitude that he was able to spend his life in contribution. Asta's mother was sad and reflective. She and Joe had been close as kids and, with no other siblings, she felt a little alone, even though she had her husband and Asta. "I'm really sorry, Mom," Asta said as she hugged her mother. "I know," her mother said. Joe's will stipulated that he would be cremated and his ashes spread in the ocean by their home. After years of being away from his only family members, he wanted to be close to them for eternity.

"Let's make a real celebration out of this," Asta said to her parents. "Even though I hardly knew him, I want to be sure he gets a proper send off and we acknowledge the contributions he made to the world." "Who should we invite?" she asked. Her mother wasn't sure. They had some mutual friends from childhood but she wasn't sure who he kept in touch with. They decided to go to the local funeral home and ask for advice. This is where Asta's family met Gerry. He was the funeral director. They were a little embarrassed that they didn't know who to invite to the funeral of a family member, but Gerry made them feel comfortable about it. "You never know who will appear at these times," he said. He recommended posting the details of the arrangements in several newspapers so that people could find them.

Asta went through her room and collected all of the gifts her uncle Joe had sent her over the years. She wanted to feel some sense of this man, who was mostly mysterious. She had never been involved in this type of event and she was both happy to learn and confused and sad. She really would have loved to know her uncle in a more personal way rather than as a package that arrived with gifts from faraway places.

The service was full of surprises. Asta and her parents hardly knew anyone that came. Many people had known Joe through the development of his software, Circulation. Even though he hadn't actively updated it in years, the developers who worked on it still had a very healthy respect, even awe, for the brilliance of the original package. Many of the people who worked at software re-sellers came to pay respects. They seemed to be a network all their own, many of them anxious to talk to Joe's family about the applications of his software.

Asta learned that Joe's software would allow for sharing of texts and periodicals between universities and libraries. Although this was the main use for the software, Joe had traveled to remote regions to see if he could apply the basics of the software to

other uses. He had found some farming villages in the Sudan that had little connection to each other. One village would overproduce eggs yet have a deficit of greens, while another village had an abundance of meat and others an overabundance of produce with a short shelf life. He first went to South America and worked with indigenous people in the Andes. Theirs was an agricultural society and the sharing of crops was not organized at all. The result was a tendency toward malnutrition since each farmer was not aware of the crops harvested by the others. Joe provided cheap computers for the villages to use. Most of the villages ran generators for electricity for a few hours each day, so he set the computers up in the village center and taught the village leaders how to use Circulation to share news of what products they were abundant or deficient in. Circulation would allow them to set up a sharing arrangement so they could provide more balanced products in each village. Joe was somewhat of a hero in these remote locations as most people had never met anyone like him, never mind seen computers or sophisticated software.

Asta pried as much information from the software developers that she could. In the back of her mind, she was thinking about the little library she worked in. They had no such sharing software and she wanted to know as much about it to see if it would be feasible for them. Surely, her uncle would want her to have it in her own library, she thought.

"I'm surprised we never knew the details about Uncle Joe's software," she said to her parents when they returned home from the services. "I know," mused her father, "that stuff always seemed mysterious to me. I never thought about what it was actually used for." While Asta's parents were very bright, they were not very technical. Asta was the one who had to set the clock on the VCR for them. Whenever she was away for a few months, she would return to find it flashing "12:00" again. If they wanted to record a program, she did it for them. They were okay with using the remote to play it back but the rest of the aspects of the VCR did not interest them.

Asta's family met with the lawyers who were executing her uncle's will. He had left them the rights to the Circulation patents, stipulating that they use the funds to pay for Asta's education first and then equally divide the remainder of his assets. "We knew that I would need to go to graduate school to be able to work in the humanities, and now he has provided the means for me to do so," she said to her parents. "I just wish I knew more about him to decide how to apply the education he is funding. I really wish I had the chance to meet him and tell him what my life is like," she said to her parents in the car on the way home. "I feel like he was living the humanities, while I am only studying them in books." Over the course of that summer she reflected on what she knew to be her uncle's life. Her mother had pulled out earlier pictures of him as a young boy, an adolescent and as a young man. Asta tried to imagine what motivated him, what made him leave a stable life to venture into the unknown and try to solve problems for strangers in remote areas of the world. "What made him think of that?", she wondered. "Where did these ideas come from?", she would ask her mother. Her mother had little insight into this aspect of her brother's life, only saying that he always thought big, was very creative and loved problem solving. Software development, they had learned from some of the engineers at the service, was all about taking a problem,

creating a solution and discovering problems within the solution in order to develop a truly useful product. "Fascinating and frustrating," thought Asta. "However, how brilliant and humbling to develop something that would teach a life lesson," she marveled to her mother.

Asta went back to her mountain school for her final year of undergraduate work. She was thinking about her graduation and the next steps. Her uncle's generosity meant she could continue her education and complete her doctoral degree. Although she loved the humanities, she had loved her job at the library and thought she should consider a dual degree with library science. This would allow her to continue working in the environment that she loved. She was young and inspired to create a life that would emulate Joe's and find a path that was as satisfying as his had been. Asta decided to go ahead with the plan for a dual degree, thinking she would be able to work in her home town library when her degree was complete. She wanted to stay close to home and, although she wasn't completely admitting it to herself, she wanted to have access to the Circulation software re-sellers.

Asta's family lived in a small New England town on the seashore. It was a small enough town to feel at home but big enough to ensure privacy. People tended to look out for each other but did not necessarily snoop. You could feel at one with the community but still feel that you had your own space. Asta loved the town because it was surrounded by historic attractions. She felt the area provided the best of everything, you could live in present day with all of its technologies yet immerse yourself in another era by visiting the historic sites. Their town was home to one of the oldest homes in the country, surrounding towns had parks dedicated to events in American history. Asta never tired of these places, there was always something new to learn and do. For that reason, she wanted to return home after she completed her education. When she completed her doctorate degree, her inheritance from her uncle was released. She bought a house, intent on making a home for herself.

Asta felt fortunate that there was a position available at the library when she returned home. The position did not require the doctorate degree she had just earned, but she was okay with that. In essence, she was a homebody and did not want to have to relocate in order to get a job. She wanted to be at home and she wanted to be a bigger part of her community. It wasn't that she wasn't adventurous. It was more that she needed a place to come home to, a place where she had roots. Every time she traveled, she appreciated her home base more. Asta was curious and respectful of cultures other than her own. She just needed to have roots firmly planted in order to feel grounded.

She wanted to be able to share her knowledge. She started a series of lectures in the library. Anyone who had a story to tell that was educational and informative was invited to present in the lecture series. She decided to charge a small sum for the series. She gave each lecturer the option of accepting a stipend for their work or donating it to upgrading the library infrastructure. Almost all of the lecturers donated to the library. Asta worked with the town computer technician, Doug, to put together an upgrade proposal. She worked with the library director to determine the time line in terms of a budget. They determined how much funding they would have to raise. As expected,

there was quite a gap in the earnings from the lecture series and the required budget to upgrade. Asta was determined to make this happen so she deferred her salary and created a development team to determine creative ways to raise the rest of the funding.

Asta knew that the library was an integral aspect of young lives. She wanted the young children and adolescents to participate in the upgrade project. She knew they couldn't contribute cash but she wanted to figure out a way to allow them to have a significant impact on the upgrade. She posed this question to the team in their brainstorming sessions. She wanted to demonstrate that community efforts could be successful with every degree of effort, not just cash. While they needed cold, hard cash, she also wanted contributions that could provide meaning for those who could not contribute cash. Several ideas were put on the table and dissected for their effectiveness and opportunity for a realistic outcome.

Although Asta's inheritance from her uncle could, over time, support the entire cost of the upgrade, she wanted to create an opportunity for more people to contribute. She approached local small businesses, banks and corporations to determine interest and funding level. She also approached the software company that sold her uncle's software. The ownership of the patent had fallen to her mother after his passing. Asta had discovered the application for his software when she took her journey that followed in his footsteps. He had developed the code that allowed for sharing from different locations. This was the basis of the sharing networks that many libraries were using. In the remote villages, they had used the sharing application to allow them to share resources and provisions. In one instance, one village had cattle farmers, while a nearby village used their cows for milk. They used the system to trade milk and dairy products for milk. This was the vision her uncle had been making a reality. She was extremely proud of him and was determined to continue that effort, even if it was for books in her small town. She adopted his sharing and compassion as her own mission.

When Asta contacted the software company, they asked her to visit in person. Although her uncle had never worked for the company and there was no one there that had ever met him, his name was very important to them. He had sold them the rights to use the code and update it, but had kept a portion of the residual earnings to fund his mission. They were very curious about Asta, as they knew nothing about their benefactor and his family. They were a bit disappointed that Asta could not provide slews of information about her uncle. She brought pictures of him as a young adult and young man so they would at least have a visual reference of him. She explained her mission. Although donating the latest version of the software appealed to them, they had, in accordance with her uncle's wishes, set up a community outreach arm of the company. There was a process that had to be followed and it was often years before donations could be approved. They were torn between granting her wish as a tribute to her uncle and being perceived as playing favorites by allowing her to circumvent the process. Asta understood the quandary. If she applied through the normal channel, her request could be delayed by several years. If they circumvented the process, they might be liable for playing unfairly. Although it was a conundrum, they left the meeting committed to figuring it out.

Asta presented the situations to the development team as part of their challenge. They wanted to create a campaign based around sharing. They came up with several solutions. Asta would need to go back to the software company with further questions but they thought they might be on the right track. The first phase of the sharing campaign would be the development of an essay contest for children. There would be several entry levels, depending on age. The submissions were to be essays written on the benefits of sharing with examples of real-life sharing that had inspired them. The prize would be their names in a plaque on the library wall and their essays posted on the library website. Asta approached the software company with the concept of contributing the software as a gift to the library in return for the use of the essays in their marketing. The development team kept their fingers crossed until Asta could arrange the meeting.

The management at the software company loved the idea but felt it might be too narrow in its scope. They had not been in the practice of contributing to individual communities. The idea behind sharing was to create an open channel that encouraged team work. If the essay contest was open to other communities, they thought that would better fit their mission. By awarding the software, they reasoned, they were allowing them to share with other communities so they wanted the other communities to be able to contribute to the contest. Asta understood this and thought it was a good agreement. She knew that the software license was only one part of the big picture. They still needed up-to-date hardware to run the software. Leveraging the numbers of other communities gave her hope that they might be able to enroll a corporation to assist with the necessary hardware.

The library upgrade project energized Asta and also put her in a position to meet new people. As part of the fund raising campaign, she was required to attend many other community events. It was necessary to see and be seen. Although she was more comfortable in the company of one or two friends, she enjoyed the challenge of networking at bigger events. She had become the poster child for the library upgrade, whether she had wanted that role or not.

Asta ran into Gerry again at one of the community events. He was interested in participating in civic projects and inquired about a seat on the committee. Asta had created a development team consisting of members of the library staff and board. It had not occurred to her to include people outside of the library. She brought this up at the next development team meeting. Some of the topics the team discussed were considered confidential. They had all agreed to keep budget figures private and felt that it would be necessary to continue that practice. They did like the idea of enrolling other interested parties in the project. They could see the benefit of community members advocating for their project. It also might alleviate the crunch on Asta's time if they could represent the project at other meetings and events.

The development team decided to create a community partnership team. They advertised for members. Their goal was to create a team that included some youth members, some corporate members and some members that were advanced in age. Their hope was that the corporate and senior members would mentor the youth members, giving them access at a young age to the types of processes and tasks

needed to complete a project of this magnitude. The youth members would also be very helpful as advocates for the essay contest. Asta and the development team attended the first meeting of the community partnership team. The first order of business was to elect officers. Asta's new friend Gerry was elected Chairperson and a young woman in her senior year of high school was elected Vice Chairperson. Asta and the development team could not have been more pleased. They had not participated in the vote as they wanted this team to operate independently but the outcome of the election was exactly in line with how they would have voted. They decided that one member of the development team would attend their meetings and report back. They would rotate development team members so that the community partnership team had access to all of its members. The first task assigned to them was to develop a plan for the essay contest that included its inception, implementation and conclusion. They would need a project plan, a communications plan and an advertising campaign. Those plans were the only requirement from the development team, anything else they decided upon was entirely up to them. Everyone left the meeting satisfied, happy and inspired.

Asta loved attending the community partnership team meetings. She would have attended all of them but that would have denied other members of the development team of their opportunity. She did find that, although the development team was kept up to date on their activities, she thought it necessary to have more frequent briefings. She approached Gerry on this topic and he agreed. Although some of the information was minimal in importance, he wanted to be sure, from a financial perspective, that they did not go down any rat holes with their concepts. He wanted to be sure that all ideas were respected and addressed, but knew that some of them would not be realistic. If there was enough in their budget to allow for some of these ideas, he wanted to know sooner rather than later.

The update project required a lot of community interaction and Asta was pleased that they had created the partnership team to help with that endeavor. She had certainly met a lot of people through the project and she was humbled and pleased that there were so many people interested and willing to put effort toward the success of the project. They were never at a loss for ideas as everyone seemed to have viable suggestions. She loved the fact that the community was stepping up to the plate and couldn't help feel that it was an anonymous honoring of her uncle. She felt pleased that she had found a way to bring his work home.

The essay contest was advertised in regional media outlets as well as through modern social media. Asta wanted to be sure that the publicity campaign reflected the modern technologies, much as the sharing technology did. The students on the community partnership team wanted to start a website for people to keep in touch with the latest happenings of the project. Since the library was a non-profit and a town department, they researched avenues for non-profit and government agencies to obtain free website templates and hosting. The students were very motivated and excited to have their work in such public channels. They decided to run a logo design contest as well. The logo design contest preceded the essay contest so that they could use the logo and make it recognizable as the sign of their project. One of the community

partners was a woman who owned a graphic design company so she mentored the students. She gave them access to her graphic design computer programs. She had one of her staff train them on the basics so that the winning design could be rendered in all of the formats they would need; print, electronic and broadcast. She encouraged them to partner with the local cable television company to create a public service announcement for the project. They contacted the drama club in the high school for help with the script writing and acting. The excitement snowballed as more and more community members got involved.

When the public service announcement was complete, they sent it to all of the local cable channels in the surrounding region and to the local broadcast television stations. They sent a print version to every local newspaper and magazine they could find. Asta was so proud of the community partnership group for exceeding all expectations of a volunteer committee.

The development team continued to focus on the financial requirements. If the software company was not able to provide a license as a gift, they estimated the project would take four years to reach full funding. With the software gift, they hoped to have full funding in two years. They hoped that they could maintain the current level of excitement over that period of time. The funding estimates did not include installation. They were hoping that Doug could train some community members to assist. He took that responsibility very seriously and had started planning basic computer skills classes to develop his team. He had expected the enrollees to be computer geeks and nerds and was quite surprised at the diversity of volunteers. One man was an electrician that was expert in wiring but didn't know the infrastructure for computers. Another volunteer was a young stay at home mother that wanted to develop marketable skills to help her when her children were old enough for her to re-enter the work force. He was glad he had enough time to develop his team before the actual installation began. All of these teams started creating a much higher volume of traffic in their little town library. The traffic generated a lot of positive and fun energy and everyone admitted it was a much more exciting place to work these days.

The library update project was getting a lot of positive attention in the media. The local paper was doing weekly updates about each of the committees. These articles brought about a surprising result in the form of hardware help from far away. One day at the library, Asta received a phone call from a man who said he had read about their project in the regional paper and he wanted to help. He explained that he was in the Sudan and had known Asta's uncle. "You are in the Sudan?" she exclaimed; "how did you read our regional paper?" "Your uncle had a paid subscription sent here when he was living here," he explained, "I have enjoyed reading about American life so I read it when it arrives. Thankfully, the subscription had not run out when I read about your ambitious project. I could tell that you have the same DNA as him." He went on to explain that the Sudan had been in a period of rapid growth, in particular expansion of the state media program, when civil war hit the country. "We have stockpiled computer hardware for the roll out of our new media centers. Since reading about your project, I have spoken to some of our project managers. We all have great respect for your uncle and his work. We have been able to employ his software in many of our installations.

We are certain that our project is on indefinite hold. We will not be able to use these computers for the foreseeable future. We would like to donate them to our library as a small token of our appreciation for your uncle. We only ask that you help with the shipping and customs costs." Asta was both surprised and dumbfounded. She never would have expected such a generous offer to come from around her region, never mind from the Sudan! He told her he would send her a list of the excess computer equipment. She should ask her technical person to review the list and let him know what components he could actually use. He didn't want to send her technology that wasn't useful to her. She thanked him profusely and hung up. She called an immediate meeting of the development team and included Doug. Most of them were at lunch but she told them this was more important than lunch and to bring it with them. When Asta had finished recounting her phone conversation, they all agreed that the lunch interruption was worth it. They were shocked, surprised and happy. Doug cautioned them on being too optimistic. It could be possible that none of the hardware is compatible. He tended to think that it would work since some of it's intended use was the sharing software. "Let's just keep our fingers crossed until I can go through the list. When we get it, I will make it my top priority."

Asta called Gerry and met him for coffee. She told him the news but asked him to keep it confidential. They didn't want to set expectations that may not be able to be met. Needless to say, Gerry was excited and he decided to encourage more of the young people involved to take the computer training.

Doug got the list and analyzed it for quite some time. He had already made a list of required hardware and accessories. He was going to have to compare the lists and make some adjustments. He was amazed at the amount of hardware available and its sophistication. He was able to determine that most of their needs would be met with some of the hardware from their Sudanese benefactor. They did not need everything he was offering so Doug provided him with a detailed list. Asta wired him the funds for shipping and customs and their boxes of gifts were on their way. The hardware donation put the project schedule firmly within the two year range. With that affirmed, they gave the green light to begin the essay contest.

Asta and Gerry soon ended up meeting for coffee or to exchange papers and information on a weekly basis. It was easily done as Asta spent the majority of her time at the library and Gerry's employment was only a few blocks away. Gerry was a funeral director, a position that required a very understanding demeanor and also gave him a flexible schedule. He would meet Asta in between services. He had created a schedule for his Vice Chairperson that essentially created an identical back up for him. His was a business that was unpredictable in scheduling. After all, there were not a large number of passings that could be predicted ahead of time. People passed when they passed, and Gerry had learned that most of them passed not a minute before or after they were meant to go. Of course, accidents were unpredictable but those with illnesses or age-related passings usually chose their time. At least this is how Gerry saw it.

Gerry was the kind of person that didn't put a lot of thought or process into his unique line of employment. It was just his way to be quiet when needed, talkative

when needed and always compassionate. He had known when he was a teenager that he wanted to be a funeral director. He had seen the men in their sharp dark suits walking around his neighborhood funeral home. He didn't venture into a funeral home until he was ten years old and that experience sealed the deal. Gerry had not met anyone who had the job of being nice all of the time since he sat on Santa's knee when he was younger. He had learned the truth about Santa Claus when he was eight years old. Two years later he found the perfect version of the Santa Claus demeanor that would not turn out to be a lie. He had made his decision and he never wavered. It didn't bother him that people would be upset around him all of the time. He had always wanted to help people and this was the perfect job for that - plus he would get to wear the sharp black suit everyday. Funeral directors did not work in offices, they worked in rooms that looked like living rooms. They also drove really cool cars. When his family left the funeral home, he announced his intention. His family chuckled and told him it was a nice idea. Of course, they did not realize the intensity of his commitment.

When he entered his teens and other teenagers were getting jobs at shopping malls, Gerry rang the bell at the funeral home one day and asked to speak to the boss. He was granted an audience with the funeral director and asked for a job. "What type of job are you interested in?", the funeral director asked, amused but curious. "I don't know what I can do yet, but I want to work here." The funeral director told Gerry he wasn't sure they had any openings for a man of his age but he liked the boys spunk and asked him to return in a few days to see if he had been able to find a place for him.

The funeral director recalled his interesting encounter with the youngster at the next staff meeting. The staff chuckled at Gerry's earnestness but had concerns about safety, liability and privacy if they had someone of that age in their environment. They were concerned that Gerry was too young to understand the human emotions and commotions around mortality and death. They questioned what his reaction would be to dressing the deceased and all of the processes around that. Still, with all of their reservations, they wanted to find some way to allow the boy to achieve his dream. Even if it meant he worked there for a few months and then went on to a different career, they wanted to provide him with the opportunity to decide that on his own. Some of the staff questioned whether Gerry's parents knew of his job application. They decided that the next step was to ask Gerry to bring his parents in for a formal interview with all three of them. If Gerry's parents did not support the idea, that would be the end of it.

When Gerry returned a few days later, he was wide eyed with anticipation. Even though he had only spent a few minutes with the funeral director during their first conversation, he had confirmed Gerry's thoughts. There was no one kinder than a funeral director and that was to be Gerry's dream occupation. The funeral director explained that they had a lot of rules in funeral homes, most of which make it impossible to hire a person under the age of twenty one. He was not ruling anything out yet, however, but he needed permission from Gerry's parents. He asked Gerry if his parents knew of his application. Gerry explained that, although they knew he wanted to be a funeral director, they did not know that he has asked for work. The funeral director smiled in understanding. He gave Gerry his business card and told him to tell his

parents. If his parents approved the idea, they were to call him and make an appointment for the three of them to discuss the possibilities.

Gerry went home with mixed emotions. He wasn't exactly sure his parents would want him working at a funeral home yet. They seemed to chuckle when he brought it up but he wasn't sure they realized how serious he was about his chosen career path. He decided to tell them at the dinner table that evening. Gerry's dad sputtered his drink and his mother's mouth dropped open. "You rang the bell and asked for a job", they both asked. It was hard to believe he had that much poise, confidence and determination for this occupation. Neither one of them knew what to say. "Exactly what kind of job are you talking about? What would you be doing there?" his parents asked. "I am not sure," he replied, "he wants you both to come and discuss it." His parents felt a little relief that the funeral director would display enough understanding to realize that they needed to be included in the discussion. If he had just hired Gerry without their knowledge, they would not have been able to support the situation. "We will discuss this further and let you know," his father said. Gerry mustered up the courage to ask "and just when will you know?" "I promise you it will be soon," his father replied.

When Gerry went to bed that night his parents sat down to discuss this development. "How and why in the world did he come up with this?", they wondered. On the one hand, they admired his courage and resourcefulness. On the other hand, they were concerned, as parents, about the effect of working with dead people on their young son. They wanted to be encouraging parents and certainly wanted their children to achieve their dreams. This was a dream that had never crossed their minds. Even though Gerry had told them he wanted to be a funeral director, they had passed it off to youthful dreams like every young boy who wants to be their Halloween costume when they grow up, usually a fireman or a cowboy. They still weren't sure how they felt about it when they spoke to Gerry about it again but they had decided the least they could do was to take the next step and set up the meeting with the three of them and the funeral director. They called and made an appointment for the following week. When they told Gerry they had an appointment with the funeral director, he got very excited and asked if he could get a black suit to wear to his interview. "I want to look nice and serious," he told them. They told him they would think about the suit but they wanted to have the interview and see what the results were before investing in the suit. "I am going to need one eventually," he told them. His mother replied that she was afraid that he was growing so fast if they bought the suit before their meeting, it might not fit him when they went to the meeting. They all had a chuckle over this and Gerry was convinced to wear something else for the meeting. He chose his "serious" clothes for the occasion. He asked both his parents to wear serious clothes as well. This was, after all, his first serious job interview. Although his father did not have to wear a suit to work, he decided to go along with his son's wishes and wore a charcoal grey suit to the meeting. His mother wore a conservative navy blue dress. They decided that, depending on the results of the meeting, they would go out to a nice restaurant for dinner after the meeting to celebrate the milestone. No matter what the outcome, they were very proud and pleased at Gerry's maturity and resourcefulness. It had taken

courage to ring that bell and courage to approach them with the idea. They want to be sure he knew that he had displayed maturity and thoughtfulness in his actions.

When they arrived at the funeral home, Gerry rang the bell. His parents had not been to the funeral home since their dear friend had been killed in a car accident. In their minds, it was a very sad place and one they did not relish going to. They were surprised by Gerry's excitement and the spring in his step as he ventured toward the door. When the funeral director answered the door, he greeted them with a warm smile. He guided them to his office. He had chosen this time of day because it would be between wakes and quiet in the building. Gerry's parents took care to keep their eyes straight ahead. They did not want to mistakenly see someone's loved one laid out. The office was designed to be a place of comfort as this is where the bereaved came to make arrangements for their lost loved one. He offered them comfortable chairs and asked if they needed a drink of coffee, tea or water. Gerry took him up on his offer of a glass of water. His parents declined. Gerry continued to be impressed by the funeral director's kindness. Although he couldn't be sure of this, he didn't think people in regular office jobs offered you comfortable chairs and drinks when you went to meet with them. The funeral director began the conversation. He told Gerry's parents that he was impressed by their young man. He liked a man who was able to identify his goals and pursue them. He asked Gerry to explain to everyone what his goals were and why he wanted to work in a funeral home. Gerry began by apologizing for not wearing a black suit. He gave his mother's explanation for their hesitance to purchase the suit before he had an interview or a job. The funeral director smiled broadly at his apology and explanation. Although he had been impressed with Gerry from the start, the young man continued to grow on him. The more time he spent with Gerry, the more he wanted to make his dream of a job in a funeral home come true.

Gerry explained that he liked the feeling of home in the funeral home. He felt that funeral directors were better than Santa Claus because they were real and got to be nice to people all year long. Their job was to help people who were sad, not give presents to people because they were good. The funeral director asked him if he knew any more details about the job. Gerry said he wasn't sure but he thought that they took care of the dead person's clothes. He looked a little uncertain when he said this. It was as if he wanted confirmation but didn't want it at the same time. The funeral director confirmed his suspicions and explained that people experience lots of love and happiness when they are alive and should be treated with love and respect when they pass on. He chose his words carefully. He was quite sure that Gerry had not yet thought of the embalming process and all that it entailed. He was trying to think back to his first experience with that process. Had he been scared? He had been doing it for so long now that it was difficult to recall. He also kept a close eye on the reactions of Gerry's parents. He explained that, although there were no jobs at his funeral home, he did want to find a way for Gerry to work there in some capacity.

He then asked Gerry's parents about their thoughts, encouraging them to communicate any fears they might have. Gerry's parents answered in the way the funeral director had expected. They were proud of Gerry for being brave and taking the lead. They were fearful that Gerry might not know all that was involved. Gerry's parents

and the funeral director nodded at each other in secret agreement at this statement. There was no need to describe the details of embalming. When Gerry was ready, they were sure he would find out for himself but they didn't want to scare him with those thoughts right now. The funeral director offered to give them a tour of the funeral home so they could see where some of the activity happened and get more comfortable. He gave Gerry's parents a knowing look which conveyed the message that they would not be exposing him to anything private or confidential. He showed them some empty wake rooms and then brought them downstairs to the show room. Gerry's parents had to admit to themselves that they hadn't thought about the aspects of working in a funeral home that did not involve dead bodies. It was explained that the bereaved (Gerry had learned this word from the funeral director and was working on including it in his vocabulary) visited the show room at several different junctures when they knew someone was preparing to pass on. Sometimes people came weeks or months before the actual passing to make their decisions. There were several decisions that did not involve the actual preparation of the body. They got to choose a casket style, material, color, lining and lining color as well as many styles of memorial cards. The showroom needed its stock levels kept up and inventory counted so they could order more materials when needed. There was a refrigerator with bottles of water and soda that needed to be stocked and a coffee station that needed its supply of cups, lids, stirrers, sugar and creamer stocked. The showroom could be entered through a side doorway so that anyone working there would not interrupt any of the services upstairs. Gerry's parents started to understand that there were possibilities that would allow Gerry to work there but protect him from any situations he might not be mature enough to handle. Perhaps because he was a kind man or perhaps because he was a funeral director who spent most of his time helping people make difficult decisions, the funeral director knew there needed to be a few more steps before Gerry's dream was a reality. He suggested that they discuss the possibility as a family but also told Gerry's parents that he wanted a private meeting with them before any further progress or decisions were made. Everyone was in agreement with this plan.

Gerry's parents made good on their promise to take him to a nice restaurant as a reward for being so responsible. He read the menu and ordered his own meal. They were beginning to realize that their young man was indeed growing up. They were both humbled and proud of him. He ordered an adult meal and a coke. It was time to give up kids drinks like Shirley Temples. He was sure the funeral director did not drink Shirley Temples. He had seen coke in his refrigerator and figured he better get used to drinking like a funeral director. He explained his reasoning to his parents when they expressed surprise at his beverage choice. They smiled and laughed at his explanation but warned him that coke was not a beverage to drink on a regular basis. It was okay on special occasions, like this evening but not as an everyday drink. Gerry thanked them for the explanation and promised them he would limit his cokes if he got the job. Of course, he thought, when I am old enough to wear the black suit, I will be old enough to drink as many cokes as the funeral director does. He kept this thought to himself. He knew his parents still had concerns and he was not going to say anything that would add to the list. They had a wonderful meal and Gerry was allowed to order

whatever dessert he wanted. If nothing else comes of this, at least I got this great dessert, he thought and smiled to himself.

Gerry's parents scheduled their private meeting with the funeral director the next week. They dressed casually this time as Gerry was not aware of the exact time of their meeting so he couldn't insist on formal attire. Many things about Gerry's seriousness in this situation amused them, but his enforced dress code had to be at the top of the list. The funeral director guided them into the same office as before. He started out by complementing them on the wonderful parenting job they had done with Gerry. He had rarely met a young man with so much poise, promise and direction. He had spent some time since their last meeting going through some old note books to try to recall his motivation to pursue a funeral director position. He explained that he was much older than Gerry when he had made his decision. His friend had gotten him a summer job in a funeral home during their break between sophomore and junior year of college. He was intent on finishing college and pursuing a career. He had enjoyed his summer job at the funeral home and they offered him a similar job upon graduation. A college degree was not required in his state but it helped. If he was serious about a career in the funeral industry, he would need to get a certification from the state. They had promised him financial aid toward the certification fees after he had been employed by them for one year and had proved his genuine interest and capability. Of course, he had followed that path to be in his position today. He was impressed that Gerry had committed himself to a calling that could best be termed unusual at an early age. His comparison to Santa Claus was both charming and endearing. He had never thought of his role with such benevolence. Gerry's parents agreed.

"Let's discuss the elephant in the room," he encouraged. "I am sure you have some concerns about your son working in this environment. Let's just put them all on the table and decide if there are any real concerns that could be considered show stoppers. I don't want to encourage or discourage your son any further until we have an intelligent explanation for him." They were very grateful for this opportunity. They had to know, they explained, whether or not Gerry would be exposed to cadavers. How could he be sure that Gerry would not wander into the wrong room inadvertently? He explained that this was commonly dealt with by keeping locks on all embalming room doors that only specific personnel could open. Even loved ones were not allowed to view the corpse. They found it opened up too many opportunities for upset and emotional responses. The funeral directors job is to create one lasting vision of a loved one which presented as much as they were during life as possible. Years of experience taught him that there was no benefit to loved ones seeing a corpse.

His answer brought up another question. How would he ensure that Gerry was not exposed to people acting out in their grief? They did not want him exposed to people at a time in their life when they were angry or distraught. "Gerry will only be allowed to enter by the side entrance and will not be allowed upstairs at any time. He will not be allowed in the show room during appointments. We will assign him to a desk and closely monitor his movements. Somehow, because of the way he has handled himself so far, I am confident he will obey the rules. He seems to want this so much that he will not do anything to jeopardize his chances. You do need to know that, if

there are any issues whatsoever, if he is ever caught in an area that he does not belong, he will be terminated immediately, no questions asked. The biggest burden is on the funeral home in this instance, as we are tasked and committed to serving the bereaved."

Gerry's parents had only been thinking about the situation from Gerry's perspective. It was only natural, since they were his parents. This explanation opened up the perspective from the funeral home point of view. The funeral director had made it very clear that they could be risking their liability if Gerry did anything out of line. They considered this and decided that, of the funeral director and the rest of the staff were willing to take that risk with Gerry, they would be okay with it. They wanted one more discussion with Gerry, however, before giving their blessing. They wanted to explain to him the enormous responsibility this job entailed. They wanted to make sure he was serious enough to follow all the rules the funeral director would require before he hired him. They wanted to let him know that there would be no second chances, if he broke the rules in any way, he would be out of a job and would have to consider another career. This was a once in a lifetime chance and there were no second chances in this case. The funeral director expressed his gratitude that they would lay the groundwork for his requirements. "While I think that Gerry will do what's right naturally, it will be very helpful if he hears it from you first and then I re-iterate the rules to him. It will help him to understand the discipline that will be required."

At dinner that night, the discussion revolved around Gerry's responsibilities at the funeral home. When Gerry had convinced his parents that he fully understood, they granted him permission to work for the funeral director. Gerry jumped up from his seat at the table and let out a big whoop. He was so excited that his parents did not admonish him for poor table manners. So that is how Gerry's career as a funeral director began. He did attend college and then earn his certificate. He went to a local college so he could continue to work at the funeral home part time. Although in later years he could admit to himself that he had had no idea of all that working as a funeral director entails, he never regretted his decision. The entire staff at the funeral home never regretted hiring Gerry and his parents were always grateful that he had found his calling in such a supportive atmosphere.

Aaron

Asta met Aaron in a wine bar one weekday night. She was there having drinks with a girl friend she hadn't seen in a while. They were catching up and laughing about their recent experiences when a classically good looking man plopped down in the empty chair at their table. He had a friend with him who took the fourth chair at the table. Both women were surprised at the bold move but, being adventurous, thought they would at least give the guys a shot. It seemed they had already decided on their approach as Aaron dove right into a conversation with Asta and his friend, John, cornered her friend Alice.

Aaron asked a million questions. It seemed he had a prepared list so that he would appear interested but didn't want to take the chance for the conversation to lag. Asta found out little about him that night but she was interested enough to give him

her phone number. He was a classical music composer. Asta had thought that classical music composers were extinct or old. It would not have occurred to her that a young person would compose classical music. Once she met Aaron, she realized that was a foolish notion, she should have known better. She felt she could learn a lot from Aaron and wanted to get to know him better. He was not the kind of man she would meet in her regular social circles. Her friends were all involved in the current trends and didn't think much beyond what was hot right now. She thought Aaron would broaden her horizons and she welcomed that. She also found him extremely intriguing - she had to figure out what made him tick.

The next evening Aaron called and asked to see her again. Her friends thought his quick action was a good sign. Most guys had the "three-day rule." You never called a woman you just met until three days after the first meeting. If you called any sooner, you appeared almost desperate and would certainly not have the upper hand or any kind of control over the relationship. Men always felt that they needed to be in control, mostly because falling in love with the mysteries of a woman seemed to require losing all control. Aaron was out of touch with the current thinking. He acted on his emotions. He was fascinated and attracted to Asta and he wanted to see her again as soon as possible. He didn't think much beyond knowing when he would be able to see her again. Asta found this approach very refreshing.

They agreed to meet at the same wine bar a few nights later. Asta was aware that she knew nothing about Aaron other than his name and profession so she drove herself there. She wasn't ready to give him her address - just yet. She was a bit nervous as she entered the bar. She wasn't used to entering by herself unless she knew her friends were already there. Here she was going into a bar by herself to meet an almost perfect stranger. Her nervousness abated a bit when she saw that he was already there. He jumped up to greet her and pulled out her chair - a gentleman, she thought. She wasn't exactly sure what his level of manners was given that he had boldly jumped into the seat at her table the other night. He had ordered her favorite wine, he explained, hoping that she would have wanted the same wine she was drinking the night they met. She told him she always drank the same wine and thanked him for his thoughtfulness. "This is going to be great," he thought.

The evening flew by. Asta was fascinated by Aaron. He spoke about the inspirations for his music. He was also a music professor at a local college of music. He taught three days a week and wrote the other four. Every school day morning, he woke and wrote for two hours before heading to teach class. His students inspired him and provided him with a social outlet. Aaron was not an overly social person. His work meant spending many hours alone, focusing on composing. Going to class got him out of the house on a regularly scheduled basis and provided him the means of conversation with his students and the other faculty. He was animated in his conversation. Asta did not know if this came from date anxiety or the fact that he didn't have as many opportunities for conversation as most people.

The chemistry between them went from a slow sizzle to outright sparks that carried through to the next morning. The excitement between them was palpable and they couldn't wait to spend the night together again. They went very quickly from

dating one or two nights a week to five nights. Their schedules were ideal. Asta worked until 10 or 11pm and Aaron wrote until 9:30 every evening. The bartenders and regulars at the wine bar got used to the attractive couple who were so wrapped up in their conversation and each other that they barely noticed anyone else. They were both Aquarians, in fact, their birthdays were four days apart. It wasn't long before their relationship was exclusive. Both Asta and Aaron were wondering about a long term future. After a particularly intimate evening, Aaron started talking about making babies. Asta was a bit taken aback by his baby longings - she was way too young to be thinking about motherhood. She was in her mid-twenties but she always felt that babies would come later. She had too many things to do before settling down. Their lovemaking was intimate but also very playful. Aaron would sing the song "Wild Thing" by the Troggs to Asta - wild thing, you make my heart sing... She felt their relationship was perfect for where they were in their lives. Asta still had a lot of experiences to go through before she married. She felt a bit stifled by the idea of marriage and was in no hurry. It's not that Aaron was sold on marriage either. He had had a long term relationship that had ended without the marriage that was expected. It's just that he was fascinated and infatuated with Asta. He dreamed of how beautiful their babies would be.

Asta loved spending time with Aaron. They did things together that her friends were not interested in. They went to many of the historical sites in the area. Aaron was a student of history. He used it for inspiration for his music. He was researching the Micmac language to write a libretto. The Micmacs are a tribe indigenous to New England. He was fascinated by the melody he heard in their language. Asta knew she would never date anyone else who spent their time the way Aaron did. How he came up with his ideas was beyond her. The libretto would have to wait, however, since he was busy completing his symphony. Aaron did not write just any symphony. His was seven hours long when Asta met him. She asked him many times how he expected to have the symphony played in concert at that length. He just laughed and said he would figure it out. Completing the symphony seemed to stress him out. His publisher was waiting for it. Aaron placated him by sending small portions of it and promising it would be completed soon. The reality of it was that Aaron was spending time with Asta that he would have spent composing the symphony. He was so inspired by Asta that he was secretly writing a whole section about her. She was his lover, companion and muse and he wanted to dedicate something to her. He appreciated the contributions she made in his life and he wanted to give her something that she would always cherish, no matter what.

Asta began to wonder about her future with Aaron. She enjoyed every moment with him. It was just that he didn't mesh with the rest of her world. Although she appreciated all the different and unique things they did together, there were certain social events that she would have liked him to participate in. For instance, Asta was always invited to many holiday parties. Aaron was uncomfortable at parties. He preferred smaller groups. He had no problem with her attending the parties without him and usually they would rendezvous afterward. It started to bother Asta that they had to keep parts of their lives separate. It wasn't like Aaron hadn't tried. He had come out several times with Asta and her friends. They had a fine time but both parties thought

that they shouldn't continue. Aaron liked her friends and he was gracious with them but he didn't feel that they had anything in common. Asta's friends, although very intellectual, generally couldn't follow Aaron's train of thought and didn't understand what he was talking about most of the time. Asta realized it was best to spend time with everyone separately. It was okay, she really loved Aaron and their time together. As long as he was okay with her spending time with her friends, she was happy.

Aaron's mother came for her annual visit. Asta was not officially living with Aaron at the time. She still had her own apartment. They decided it would be best if Asta stay at her place while his mother visited. Asta had not met her yet and wanted her to feel comfortable. She also knew that Aaron and his mother would want private time. They agreed their first meeting would be at a restaurant so there was common ground with no one stepping on the other's toes. Aaron hadn't told Asta much about his mother other than that she and his father divorced and she was very dependent on him. He loved his mother and liked the geographical distance between them. Otherwise, she would smother him. Asta wanted to be extra sure that his mother did not feel threatened in any way by their relationship.

Although she visited once every year, her visit was earlier this year than most. Aaron had told her about Asta and she wanted to come out and review the situation. Aaron was raised in the Jewish faith and his mother was determined that he would marry a good Jewish woman. Asta was raised Christian. Aaron's mother, in her old fashioned ways, wanted to be sure this relationship would not result in a mixed marriage. She thought Aaron was wasting time with Asta since she was not eligible wife material. She knew Aaron wasn't getting any younger and she wanted beautiful Jewish grandchildren. Aaron and Asta had joked about her status as "forbidden fruit" but didn't let it get in their way. Aaron was understandably tense about her visit. He had told her he was serious about his relationship with Asta but he wasn't planning a future yet. Although he kept having the baby dreams, he knew it wasn't the right time for Asta and he was beginning to wonder if he was barking up the wrong tree. If in fact, their relationship had no future, he wanted it to be because he and Asta made this decision. He did not want his mother to impact the future of this relationship.

The visit went much better than expected. Asta quickly charmed Aaron's mother with her genuine compassion and her interest in her activities. They avoided the topic of religion and spent some quality times entertaining her in ways that interested her, even if they were not interested at all. Aaron's mother liked to shop so they shopped several times. They went out for meals and coffee. Asta asked Aaron if he thought it would be appropriate for her to cook a meal but Aaron thought they should leave well enough alone. Things were actually going quite smoothly so it was best to continue as they were until her departure. Aaron's mother was leaving late Saturday afternoon so Asta said her farewells on Friday evening. She wanted to give them plenty of time and space alone before she left. He called her when he returned from bringing her to the airport. "Well", he said, "things certainly went better than either of us could have expected. She adores you and wants us to get married - mixed religion or not." Asta had a good chuckle over this. "She apparently is much more serious about marrying you off and getting grandchildren that either one of us realized!"

The relationship changed after the visit. It wasn't immediately apparent but both Aaron and Asta became more introspective and a bit distant. They continued seeing each other often and made good on their visits to his elderly neighbor but the spark and intensity had ebbed. Perhaps this is just part of every relationship with their ebbs and flows but both knew that the new pressure to be married and making babies was creating tension. Aaron was particularly upset because he felt that, once again, his mother had impacted his relationship with a woman. He truly cared about Asta and wanted it to work out, but he regretted telling her about his mother's opinion on marriage. It was a good thing, he thought, that his mother approved of Asta enough to disregard her religious background. He knew the intent of his mother's visit was to intervene and break up the relationship. He wondered if her approval and encouragement to marry Asta was a tactic. She clearly recognized that her son was smitten and deeply involved with this woman. If she disapproved, he might react by digging deeper into the relationship. He convinced himself that it was just a manipulative tactic. But something kept gnawing at him. Did he want to marry Asta? He realized he wasn't sure. He wasn't sure he ever really wanted to get married, he just wanted to be with Asta forever. He couldn't imagine being separated from her or losing her as a conversation partner. He certainly would never imagine a time when they wouldn't be sexual partners. She inspired him in so many ways, he just wanted to be around her forever.

Asta was also affected by his mother's decision. She had felt safe in this relationship to just enjoy it for what it was and experience a relationship with no pressure. He was off limits as marriage material and she had accepted that. It worked well for her since she had to keep her time with him separate from her other social activities. She hadn't given much thought to what marriage to Aaron would really be like since it was not a possibility - until now. Her inner musings required a visit to the granite with her friend Samantha. Sam was married. She would have insight into Asta's query. Sam was a bit amused by her friend's confusion. She knew that Asta had enjoyed the relationship with Aaron because there were no big questions to ask herself about a future. Now that the future had presented itself, it had thrown her for a loop. Sam asked Asta to visualize married life with Aaron. How was he around children? Asta realized that she had never seen him around children. Their lives revolved around spending time exclusively with each other. She had seen him around his elderly neighbor but never children. He did often fantasize that their lovemaking had created a child but they both knew that was not a possibility because Asta took birth control pills. Asta began to wonder if he really did want children with her. She tried to imagine living with him with two or three children in the house. It put Aaron's lifestyle in a whole new perspective. She had considered his discipline around writing admirable. He never changed his schedule. Every day he got up, ate the same exact breakfast, wrote for the same amount of time and left for school at exactly the same time. When he got home, he wrote again for exactly the same amount of time. He would allow nothing to interfere with his schedule - even Asta. She never went over until his writing time was done. They ate dinner late to accommodate his writing schedule. This was fine with Asta, but she wondered how that would work with children and she knew that it

wouldn't work at all. She envisioned living in a two family house with one side of the house a sanctuary for his writing. His children were never to visit that side of the house. He would visit the children on a fixed schedule, like he did everything in his life. This was the price of his artistry. But did Asta want to raise her children this way?

While they both questioned the relationship, both of them really knew the answer deep down. Aaron was in the last stages of completing his symphony so they avoided the topic. The tension increased, however, to the point that made Asta bring it up. Aaron's mother had called and he was unusually tense. "What's new with her?", Asta asked. Aaron replied, "nothing", and left the room. Asta followed and said "it's time to talk". "I'm need to work", he replied. "It's time to talk now," Asta replied. He was sullen but sat down. "What do you want from this relationship?" "Nothing," he replied. "Really, really, really", she replied. He was silent. "Okay then, it's nothing you have. I can't keep waiting for your symphony to be complete to start enjoying life again." "My symphony is complete," he replied. "I finished it a month ago. I couldn't tell you because I knew you would have expectations. The final hour is dedicated to you and I knew when that was done there would be a very good chance I would lose you. To be honest, I'm not sure what I want. I do know that I want a relationship with less pressure." "The pressure is coming from you and your mother, I am not the one pressuring you. I've done a lot to accommodate your schedule and lifestyle but I'm not sure that is what I want to do in the future." They both knew what had to be done. It was just a matter of who was going to be the one to say it. Asta started. "I think it's time to start seeing other people, to broaden our horizons. If we realize we made a mistake, we can discuss it but neither of us wants the other to be unhappy and we are clearly unhappy. Aaron reluctantly agreed saying, "as long as we can still have sex." Asta laughed at this and replied - "don't count on it."

It wasn't the worst break up and it wasn't the best. Both of them were quite paralyzed in the decision. If there had not been so much pressure to marry, they probably would still be together. But, did either one of them want to spend any more time in a relationship that clearly had no future? Both of them had ignored that fact during the relationship but, sooner or later, it was bound to come to a head.

A few weeks later, Aaron called Asta and told her he needed to talk to her. When she hesitated, he explained that he had lied to her and needed to come clean. Asta was still hesitant. She had thought through her decision about their relationship and didn't want to change anything. Aaron was insistent and Asta relented. She was not able to contain her curiosity about the lie. She asked several people what they thought he could possibly be lying about. Was he married? She knew that wasn't possible or his mother would never have entertained her. Was he gay? She was certain this could not be the case since she had first hand knowledge of his sexual preferences. She just could not stop trying to figure it out.

They met for coffee early one evening. "I have lied to you," he started. He was very antsy and uncomfortable. "I know you lied about completing your symphony." "No, it's not that, it's something else." Asta waited. He was silent and jumpy. "Well, you may as well put your cards on the table," she finally said. "It's difficult to admit to, I never wanted to lie to you." "Well, you did and you called me here to tell me so spill the

beans." He continued to hem and haw until Asta said, "Look, we had a great relationship. It ended when it ended and I have no hard feelings. Let's just leave it at that." She started to leave. "No, he cried, I will tell you." "I am older than you think, older than I told you I was." "Is that it?" she asked. He was sheepish and just nodded. Asta laughed out loud. "How much older?" "Ten, no five, no eight years." "Which one is it?", she laughed. "Ten," he said so quietly that she made him repeat it. This meant that, in actuality, he was seventeen years older than Asta. Her only reaction was to laugh. Obviously, it had made no difference since she had never questioned his age. "I have felt guilty this whole time and I didn't want to let you go without cleaning up my dishonesty." Asta told him it was no big deal and that she could forgive him. His relief was evident. It was obviously hard for him to be living a lie, harder on him than her and she thought he probably had learned a lesson. When she thought about it later, a lot of things became obvious. He was always a little off around his birthday. He never wanted a cake or a party. She had given him presents but he was always awkward about accepting them. Although if he had never confessed she never would have put it together, it made sense now. She had just thought that he was worried about aging and, knowing his true age, she could understand it more.

Asta kept in touch with Faith. She and Faith planned outings together. Asta was more comfortable picking Faith up and going somewhere. She wasn't sure how Aaron would feel if he saw her car parked in front of Faith's house and she wanted to give him his independence. Regardless of how the relationship ended, she still loved Aaron in a certain way and wanted him to be happy.

Several years later, it was Faith that called Asta with the news. Aaron had been killed in a car accident. Asta was not sure how to feel about it. It just seemed so final and her own mortality came to mind. When she read the obituary, she felt honored to have known him and to be close to him. He had accomplished so much in his short life. It was the very discipline that had made her decide there was no future for their relationship that had enabled him to create a very impressive body of work. She said a little prayer for him over the next few weeks and spent more time with Faith to keep her company. She was very shook up by the news and extremely sad. Aaron had not left a will but his mother saw to it that Faith received something from his possessions. When his mother asked Asta if she wanted anything, Asta replied that she had been the fortunate recipient of his company and she would always have her section of the symphony as his gift to her. The three women stuck together for the few days that Aaron's mother was there to clean out his belongings. Asta wanted to comfort his mother but also knew that she had disappointed her when they broke up so wanted to give her space as well. It was all so sad. Asta tried to comfort herself by focusing on Aaron's accomplishments but she knew deep down that she would have wanted him to live a long life. Even though they hadn't seen each other in years, she would not have minded seeing him or going to one of his concerts. With that possibility gone, she struggled to make sense of her feelings and sadness. Time would heal, she told herself and at least she still had Faith in her life, another gift Aaron had given her.

Faith

Faith had the weather beaten look of a woman who had spent much time in the sun. It wasn't that she was old looking. It was that she looked a bit worn out. It was no wonder as her early years were fairly challenging. She came from a much different time than Asta and had an old world outlook. Faith was raised to believe young women should behave as cultured pearls - quiet, shimmery and beautiful. They were to keep themselves looking like the perfect adornment. This was the place for fine women in the world. She was taught that, one day, a fine man would come along who would take care of her every needs so that she could live an elegant lifestyle. A woman never has a hair out of place, her attire completely matches - from her toe nail color to her headdress. A woman always wore a hat and gloves. Her wardrobe and her presentation were of utmost importance.

Faith was amused by the ways of the more modern women of the day. She appreciated some of the razzle dazzle and the independence and freedom they enjoyed. She didn't really think it gained them all that much in the way of a better life, but she was an understanding and tolerant person and liked to learn about other lifestyles.

Faith and Asta met when Asta was in a relationship with Aaron, Faith's neighbor. Although Faith was still a fairly young woman at the time, she was widowed and lived alone. Aaron was a good neighbor to her and kept an eye on her. He did little things for her like taking out her trash and shoveling her walk. He would sit and have tea with her every so often and she would bake her delicious shortbread cookies for him. When Asta and Aaron started spending the majority of their time together, Aaron treated Faith like a second Mom and asked her to meet Asta. He wasn't really looking for her approval, he just thought it would make her feel a little more like family. Aaron's family lived 1500 miles away so he looked at Faith as his local mother or, more like a local grandmother. He enjoyed her stories and their little visits. It made him feel like he was in a time machine.

Aaron was always looking for inspiration and Faith definitely provided that. Aaron was a composer and music professor at a local college. His compositions were very modern and progressive but he used Faith as a muse to incorporate elements from her generation. Faith was positively tickled when Aaron would play something on the piano that he claimed was due to her inspiration. She really did not understand his music but she thought he was a delightful young man and admired his work ethic. She worried that he hadn't married and always hoped he would meet a nice woman. So, when Aaron told her about Asta, she was thrilled and extremely curious. He asked if Faith would be interested in meeting Asta. Faith jumped at the chance and invited them to tea the next Saturday afternoon.

Asta had reservations about going to the tea. She was concerned that it would be a lot of work for Faith. She felt that she and Aaron should do the work and host. Aaron told her it had already been decided and that Faith was too excited about it to discuss it any further. Asta then asked Aaron to spy on Faith to find out what they could bring as a hostess gift. This type of assignment did not fall into any of Aaron's considerable skill sets. This left Asta to come up with something on her own. She decided that a nice bouquet of white roses would be appropriate but she also wanted

something unique. She decided to give Faith a deck of "promise" cards - cards on which there were errands and chores that Aaron "promised" he would help her with. There were a few trips to the library, a Sunday dinner and other types of "promises" that would require Aaron to spend alone time with Faith. Asta had a feeling that the amount of time Aaron was spending with her might be limiting the amount of time he spent with Faith. These cards were symbolic of the respect she had for their relationship. She got some index cards and hand wrote the promises out, adding stickers to make them pretty. Aaron agreed to the gift and admitted he would never have thought of something so special and compassionate. It did not occur to him that Faith might be a little concerned that he would have less time for her.

Asta and Aaron arrived at Faith's at the agreed upon time. It was as Asta had expected. She did tons of work in preparation. She had laid out linen table cloths and napkins and pulled out the fine china from her wedding. She had baked Aaron's favorite shortbread cookies along with at least a half dozen other delights. Asta had to hold back from expressing her horror at how much work the woman had done. Faith claimed that she loved every minute of it and that she was delighted to have such wonderful company. "I seldom get a chance to use my finery so that is part of the loveliness of entertaining the two of you." Asta did recognize that Faith was very excited to have company so that assuaged her guilt a bit. Asta did fall instantly in love with Faith and knew they would get along swimmingly. The two seemed to have so much to talk about. Although Asta was a very modern woman, she had an innate understanding of old world standards and she valued and cherished them. She loved hearing Faith's stories about her upbringing. Even though Asta would not have wanted to live in that era, she did appreciate the simpleness of it.

Faith told Asta that she was raised to be a wife to a prominent man and entertain in society. When she didn't meet her Mr. Right at her coming out ball, she studied and got her teaching license. She taught for two years before meeting her Mr. Right, Edmond. Edmond seemed to be the perfect gentleman and he put Faith up on a pedestal. Faith actually enjoyed teaching and wasn't in any real hurry to marry. Edmond, however, had found his perfect wife and was not interested in waiting. He asked several times for her hand but she told him she wasn't ready. It wasn't that she didn't care for Edmond and she knew he would be a good provider, but there was something that made her hesitate. He told her she really didn't have to concern herself with the decision. It was up to the man to make the decisions anyway. Faith bought some time by saying she wasn't sure her parents would approve. Edmond took matters into his own hands and set up a meeting with her father with the intention of asking for her hand, thereby sealing the deal.

Faith's parents were thrilled at Edmond's proposal. Even though they knew Faith would eventually find a husband, they were a little concerned that she was not actively searching. Her mother and her sister had met their husbands at their cotillions. When Faith didn't make a match at hers, they chalked it up to rotten luck. Teaching was an admirable profession for a woman until she married. Although Edmond thought there was no way Faith could refuse his proposal again, he decided to take no chances. He proposed again on Saturday night. Faith, once again, said she would prefer to wait.

"That's not an option, Edmond replied, I have the blessing of your parents and I put our engagement announcement in tomorrow's newspaper." Faith was stunned to hear this. She thought that she might have underestimated his passion for her. If he loved her so much that he wanted to announce it to the world, it must be right. If her parents had agreed, this must be a good thing. Faith did not really know how she was supposed to feel at her engagement so she took Edmond's word for it and thought it must be the right thing to do. Of course, since it would be in the newspaper in the morning, it wasn't like she had any choice. One thing Faith did not do was to cause trouble and refusing this proposal would cause scandal and shame for her family. "Oh well, she thought, I guess he is right."

Edmond attended church on Sunday with Faith and her parents. Everyone congratulated them on their engagement and told Faith how wonderful her life would be now. Faith responded to all of this positive feedback by growing more comfortable with the whole idea. Her mother wanted to start planning the wedding and a date was set for the upcoming Summer, as soon as school was out. Faith was overwhelmed by thoughts of all of the planning that would need to happen in such a short period of time. She begged to move the wedding to late Summer so she had more time. As it turned out, she would have plenty of time for planning. Faith was greeted as school on Monday morning by her principal. "We've taken care of everything", her principal told her, "there is no need for you to be here anymore." Faith's mouth dropped open. "But I work here," she exclaimed, "I have classes today." "Not any more", said the principal, "we don't employ married women." "But I'm NOT married, I'm not getting married until after the school session." "Well, it's close enough to being married, why don't you just go home and prepare to be a wife." "I'm not ready to quit," Faith cried, "I have a responsibility to my students." "We'll take responsibility for your students, you have the responsibilities of a wife now." There was no negotiation. The principal himself would take her classes until a suitable replacement could be found. None of this was meant in any way to penalize Faith. This was common practice at the time and the principal was sure he was being helpful and supportive. He was quite surprised that Faith did not see it that way but thought it must just be the strain of being newly engaged and preparing for the upcoming wedding. "She will thank me one day," he thought, "this will make her life easier."

Faith returned home in an angry state and told her mother the horrible news. "That's wonderful, dear, how thoughtful of him to let you go so that you can devote your entire attention to your wedding." "But, he FIRED me," she cried. Her mother smiled and said it wasn't like being fired, it was showing consideration for your new life. It doesn't matter if a woman gets fired when she gets engaged, it's not like you will ever need another job. Faith sulked for several days and even refused to see Edmond. Eventually, she realized that this was just the way the world was and she should consider herself lucky that she had Edmond as there were some women who would never have a man as passionate about them as he was about her.

Wedding planning took top precedence in Faith's home for the next few months. Edmond was also busy buying a house for them to live in. He wanted her to start making decisions about the decor, or so it seemed. Whenever he asked Faith her

opinion, he chided her with comments that she shouldn't worry her pretty face about it, he could afford the best and he would be sure they had it. It seemed he asked her opinion just so he could contradict it. It didn't really matter much to Faith, she would be fine with whatever decor he liked. Their house was going to be a showcase. It would be a little over the top for Faith but she had to remind herself how lucky she was to be so well taken care of.

The wedding festivities carried on for four days. There was the hen party for the women and the bachelor party for the men. Faith and Edmond planned these on the same evening to accommodate their out of town guests. They didn't want anyone to miss out on the festivities. Edmond did not show his face the day after the bachelor party. When Faith saw him at the rehearsal the next day, he explained that he was busy with his own planning. He was supposed to be at the luncheon that day and Faith felt quite awkward sitting at the head of the table by herself.

The wedding itself was quite spectacular and was the talk of the town for months to come. Faith was a stunning bride and Edmond had spared no expense to make his guests feel pampered. He was determined to make a statement with their wedding. The opulence of the wedding was symbolic of their union. Edmond felt a lot more important with a beauty like Faith on his arm. He was quite opinionated about her wardrobe and appearance. She was his wife, after all, and therefore a reflection of his success and place in society. He wanted to show her off and often paraded her around to social events like his prize trophy. People thought Faith must feel like a princess. They thought she must be the happiest woman in the world and the luckiest to have such a husband.

Asta was both surprised and intrigued by Faith's story. It never would have occurred to her that it would be legal to fire a woman because she got engaged. She felt relieved that she live in a different time than Faith. Asta and Aaron helped Faith clean up and promised to get together more often. On the short walk to Aaron's house, Asta suggested that they make visits with Faith a regular event. They could swap hosting duties so it wasn't too much for her. Asta felt that Faith was a gem and, knowing her age, did not want to miss out on spending any time with her.

Aaron checked in on Faith a few days later. It seemed his women thought alike as Faith also suggested getting together on a regular basis. She didn't want to monopolize their time, however, since a young relationship needs private time for nurturing. Faith expressed her extreme delight at meeting Asta and made sure Aaron knew how lucky he was to have her in his life. He was going to enjoy his time with his women, that he knew.

Asta and Aaron kept true to their promise to visit with his elderly Faith regularly. Faith was beginning to wonder what the future held for her dear friends. She envied Asta's independence. She knew that Asta would not be pressured into marriage like she had been. She knew that modern women had many more choices than she had had in her younger days. She really hoped that Asta and Aaron would have a happy and long future together. She kept her thoughts to herself, however. It wasn't polite to interfere in other people's lives.

Asta wondered why Faith was single and childless. Faith always waved off

questions about her marriage. She simply said that her husband had "gone off with the angels". The truth was that Faith did not want to think about the experience of her marriage. She had made a huge mistake and was left to deal with her husband on her own. Everyone envied her and thought she had a great married life. She soon learned that Edmond was a social climber and his intention was to be successful on his own terms no matter what he needed to do to get there. Edmond's expectations of his wife were that she always looked perfect and acted subservient. It was his job to provide. It was hers to make him seem more attractive and successful. He bought all of her clothes and picked her wardrobe out every day. She was not to worry her pretty little face over what she had to wear. He wanted to be in control in the marriage and made sure that Faith had no decisions to make. Once a week, he made out the menu for their meals and there could be no deviation. He left in the morning for work although she had no idea where he went. She didn't even know if he had an office. She asked once but his reply made it clear it was none of her business. They entertained business associates but business was never discussed. If you asked Faith what type of business her husband was in, she could tell you. Her reply was always "his business." She didn't think she had any right to complain. It was true that he was a great provider. She had everything she could have wanted. They had a beautiful house, she had a beautiful wardrobe and they had many friends and social engagements.

Edmond, who had always been the perfect gentleman, started to show another side a few months after their wedding. He wanted to know what Faith was doing every hour of her day. He insisted that she fill out a written calendar so he could monitor her time. He wanted to know who she spent her time with. He became more and more demanding. When she complained, he told her he was stressed about business and she should just do what she was told. He became angry if she asked any questions. He expected his hot meal to be ready the minute he entered the house, even though he never told her what time he could be expected. When she needed to heat up his dinner, he would explode. He also insisted that she set the table with fine china and linens every night and that she could not have her dinner until he arrived. His arrival times varied greatly. Some nights he came home around 5pm and other nights not until 9pm. It was difficult for Faith to keep up with his demands. The more she tried, the more he demanded. She wondered what kind of stress he was under to make him so demanding and she wondered when the stressful times would end.

Faith also knew that their families were expecting children from the marriage. She did not enjoy sex with Edmond. There was nothing romantic about it. He made her feel like it was her duty as a wife but that she could have no expectations of her own. She secretly hoped that she would not conceive but this was the days before birth control. She knew it was only a matter of time. Edmond started pressuring her for sex more often explaining that it was time to start a family. He knew exactly how many children he wanted and their sexes. He wanted his first born to be a boy to carry on his name and legacy. Since they were having sex regularly and she had not conceived, he took Faith to the doctor to test for pregnancy. The doctor tested Faith and gave her a clean bill of health. He said it was only a matter of time. Edmond started belittling Faith for her slowness in conceiving. He thought she should be able to conceive as long as

she believed it. This was Edmond's way of looking at everything. If you believe in it, can make it happen. When Faith began her menstrual cycle after a month of sexual activity, Edmond got furious and struck her. He yelled at her for being useless. Faith was shocked at his violence. She didn't dare leave the house for three days because of the bruises on her face. There was no amount of makeup that would cover them up. She didn't know why she didn't conceive. She actually hoped that she would so she could get a break from the non-satisfying sex.

The months continued without conception and Edmond's moods got even darker. He told her he was having a slump in his business and that she should watch her spending. In reality, Faith did not spend much since he insisted on buying her clothes and household items. She only spent money at the grocery store on the menus that he chose. There was no sense in pointing this out as everything she said made him more unpleasant. Faith started getting phone calls from strangers. They always asked for Edmond. When she explained that he wasn't home, they questioned her and demanded to know where he was. One night, there was a knock at the door and two mean looking men demanded that she produce her husband or his whereabouts. Faith had no idea where he was. She let them into the house so they could search it themselves, hoping to satisfy them that he, indeed, was not home. One of the men struck her, calling her insulting names, and threatened to come back and "give her a real beating" if she couldn't tell him where Edmond was.

When Edmond came home, the frightened Faith told him what had happened. Edmond was furious that she let the men into the house and struck her. She cried out in pain and told him to leave her alone. "I've already been beaten tonight, keep your hands off of me." He told her that she had deserved it and more. She demanded to know where he had been and told him she needed to know in case the men came back. "My business is none of your business. Your business is to have a baby." He then forced himself on her, leaving her beaten and bloody. Faith stopped visiting her friends and family. It was easier this way, she wouldn't have to lie about her miserable marriage, her troubles conceiving and her bruises. She was downright miserable. When there was a knock at the door, she hid in the basement, hoping they would go away. She started turning all of the lights off so it appeared that she wasn't home. Of course, this infuriated Edmond. He wanted to come home to a brightly lit home with a hot dinner waiting. The beatings became a regular occurrence.

A few months later, Edmond did not come home one night. Faith waited up all evening in the dark house, ready to put dinner out when he arrived. She was starving but didn't dare eat dinner until he came home. He showed up at 11am the next day, looking haggard and mad. He told her not to ask questions so she didn't. He did come home at dinner time the next night so she thought it was just an unusual occurrence. However, over the course of the next few weeks, he did not come home several times. Each time he came home in the morning, he looked worse. One morning he came home holding his side. He had obviously gotten into a fight and was bruised badly in the ribs. He made her bandage him, cursing her every time it hurt. "At least he knows how it feels," she thought. She was increasingly worried about his behavior. She knew she needed to conceive soon but his erratic behavior terrified her and the thought of

having a baby in the house concerned her even more. She was receiving more and more threatening phone calls. She knew he was in trouble, figured it was of his own making, and prayed for a solution. She couldn't eat or sleep and was looking gaunt. "You look terrible", Edmond screamed, "no wife of mine is going to look like a waif." He counted her forkfuls of food at each meal telling her it was good for her and that she needed to put on weight if she was going to carry a baby. They went to the doctor again. Again, he told them she was fine but he was concerned with her weight loss. He suggested that she drink heavy cream and ginger ale twice a day while sitting down. He told her to walk as little as possible so that she wasn't working off her calories. Edmond made her drink the heavy cream and ginger ale before he left in the morning and again after dinner. She felt like vomiting from the heaviness of the drink. When she became nauseous, he secretly hoped it meant she was pregnant.

One night there was a knock at the door. The two men had returned. Faith hid in the basement. They yelled out to her. "You have nothing to worry about, we have your husband. He won't be causing you any more trouble." She heard a thud and then waited a full hour to sneak upstairs to be sure they were gone. She opened the door and found Edmond. He seemed to be beaten pretty badly. When Faith turned him over to administer to him, she realized there was nothing more that could be done for him. Edmond was dead, beaten and strangled. Faith called the police immediately. The police had lots of questions for Faith but, of course, she had no answers. The next day a man came over to the house, introduced himself as Peter, and told Faith that he was her husband's business manager. He told her that her husband had left a will, leaving everything to her. He would be going over the documents in the next few weeks and then setting up a meeting to explain everything to her. He asked her if she needed anything. Faith explained that her husband had her on a budget so she had no money unless he gave it to her. He had calculated the cost of groceries every week and gave her just enough to cover them. Peter gave her some cash and told her he would bring cash to her every week so that she could get by until all the details were worked out.

Edmond's funeral was one he would have liked. It was attended by over 200 people. Everyone who was anyone showed up, expressing condolences to Faith and making sure they were seen. The funeral procession stopped traffic for miles. His funeral was so big that it made it into the newspapers. Edmond liked to be the center of attention and his funeral certainly generated lots of attention. The police had questioned Faith but concluded early in their investigation that she was not a suspect in his demise. She was far too small to have administered the violent attack on Edmond. She told them about the earlier beating and the fact that there were some nights when he didn't come home but she knew no more than that. Although Edmond's death was being officially investigated by the police, most people knew that they would never find his murderers. Certainly, this is what was being whispered at his funeral. Faith did not know many of the people that offered her condolences. She knew her husband had a secret life but had no idea he was involved with so many people. Two visitors aroused her curiosity. She thought they were the two men who had come looking for Edmond. However, they were wearing dark glasses and their hair seemed different. They also were dressed in suits. She could have sworn it was them but they gave her threatening

glances when she asked how they knew her husband. She realized that those men knew where she lived and would know that she was there alone. She decided to call Peter, Edmond's business manager the next day to see about moving out of the house.

She told Peter that she was afraid to stay in the house. She had no idea what these men had wanted with Edmond and was terrified to think that they might return as promised and beat her. Peter told her it would be difficult to move out of the house because the funds in Edmond's accounts had been frozen. He understood her fears and offered to have someone watch the house. He would pay for the security out of his own pocket until Edmond's accounts could be used for reimbursement.

A few months later, Peter called Faith and arranged for a meeting in his office. The good news is that Edmond's accounts are no longer frozen and it will be in your best interest to move out of the house. Faith breathed a sigh of relief. She was exhausted from lack of sleep and worry although at least she didn't have to worry about Edmond showing up and giving her a hard time. She would feel completely free of him once she could move out of that house. Peter truly felt for Faith and had given a great deal of thought about how to deliver the rest of the news. "Your husband", he started, keeping a close eye on her face and reactions, was in business with a great deal of other people. He had a bad streak that he never recovered from and he held everything in his name." Peter paused to see if Faith knew what that meant. When she was silent, he continued. "Edmond owed money to his business associates and, with the documents being in his name, they have the right to his assets." "What does that mean, exactly?", Faith asked. Peter explained that he had spent the past few months paying off Edmond's debts. He had challenged some of them and they would be going to court to let a judge decide if they were legitimate. Some of Edmond's associates had settled for lesser sums in order to avoid court and lawyers. Peter was hoping that they would win in court so that Faith would be able to have access to some of Edmond's assets. Currently, though, you will need to sell the house to lower Edmond's debt. Peter estimated that, if the house sold well, the proceeds would eliminate most of the remaining debt. If we win in court, you may end up with some of the proceeds. He did not tell her that he was doing all of this work for her gratis. She was a woman of conscience and would want to pay him for his services. He knew that she would never have the means. He also had a lot of compassion for Faith. He thought it was unconscionable that Edmond had not taken care of the needs of his wife. Peter was thankful that, at least, he had not left her with children to raise on her own.

Faith went home from the meeting with Peter and immediately poured herself a brandy. She was penniless and virtually homeless. She had been pressured into marrying Edmond because he would be such a good provider. She was supposed to be set for life. She felt deceived, worried and angry. The next day she started packing. If she needed to sell the house to pay off his debts, she would at least sell some possessions so that she would have some money. She took Edmond's clothes to the second hand store. They paid her in cash and she requested that there would be no receipt or record of the transaction. She had no idea how ruthless these associates were and she was going to have to survive somehow. She went through her own clothes and did the same. She couldn't imagine that she would be needing fur coats or

gowns when she was living in the poor house. Faith was determined to find her own way and she soon found resources to make cash from as many of their belongings that she could without a paper trail. She chose items that were obscure and could not be traced back to her. Their bedroom had been festooned with Tiffany lamps that no one but she and Edmond had ever seen. It was these types of items that she chose to generate cash.

Faith had gone from living at home with her parents to living with Edmond. She had never imagined that she would have to find a place to live on her own. She had no idea what the current cost of real estate was, she had never paid a mortgage or rent. She decided that she was too overwhelmed to take on everything at once. She approached her parents with her issues and asked if she could move back in. Her parents were horrified that Edmond had turned out to be such an unreliable husband. Faith never told them about the beatings, her humiliation was thorough enough without people knowing about the abuse. She could never really be sure if other people would side with Edmond and think that she deserved to be beat. Her parents secretly felt guilty about their role in the marriage. They had believed Edmond would be a respectful husband and businessman. They had a hard time believing Faith's version of the story, but it could not be argued that she was left with nothing. They had contacted Peter to confirm the worst. Peter told Faith's parents that there would be little hope of any substantial benefit from Edmond's accounts. He told them he was painting a rosier picture in order to protect Faith and provide her with some comfort. He was proud of Faith for her resourcefulness and was comforted that she had decided to move in with her parents. It was the most sensible move right now and one that provided her with security and some peace of mind. It wasn't that Peter didn't know about Edmond's financial crisis before he was killed. It was that he just didn't know the extent of it. To a certain extent, he felt responsible for Faith's future. He should have protected Edmond's assets so that she could be provided for. Peter learned a tough lesson working for Edmond and he resolved to find a more responsible business person to manage once he closed Edmond's books. He wondered about Faith's future and promised himself he would never let another widow be in the position that Faith was in. She was a beautiful woman and he hoped that she would meet someone who had more integrity than Edmond and that would treat her in the manner that she deserved. If he hadn't been happily married, he would have entertained the notion of dating Faith. She was a wonderful woman and deserved a wonderful husband.

No one could have predicted Faith's reaction to being a widow and being broke financially. Everyone thought she should find a better man and move on. Faith had definitively decided that marriage was not for her and she would never entertain the notion again. It wasn't only marriage that she now opposed. It was a relationship of any kind with another man. Faith failed to see any value or benefit from keeping company with a man. She had been badly deceived once and she was determined that it would never happen again.

Faith learned a valuable life lesson from her marriage - you can never depend on anyone but yourself. Although her teaching career had ended badly, she decided to renew her teaching certificate. They could not fire you for being a widow. She went to

school and studied for the exam. She was so determined that she passed with flying colors the first time she took it. She decided to look for a teaching position in a different school district, one that might be more progressive. It took two years, but she finally found a position in a charter school. The program was very advanced and she dug right into her work. This time, her students would be her highest priority and no one would take them away from her. She had worked as a cashier in a drug store for two years waiting for this position to open up and she was not going to squander this opportunity. Her parents did not give any indication if they approved or disapproved. They had decided that her happiness should be their highest priority. It would take years for them to get over how wrongly they had steered her with Edmond, and they hardly knew the whole story.

Within a few years of Edmond's death, Faith had made a nice life for herself. Peter had managed to handle all of Edmond's debt, assuming some of it himself. Faith never knew how much Peter had invested of his own money to lessen her worries. He managed to get signed contracts that absolved her of all Edmond's responsibilities. He did not want any of these shady characters showing up years later with demands.

After a few years of teaching, Faith had enough saved to move into her own house. She was extremely proud of this accomplishment. Her parents had continually told her they wanted her to stay with them but Faith wanted her own life. Her parents really did not understand and did not approve. They felt it was improper for a woman to live on her own. Faith told them it was time to come to grips with modern behavior. She would be perfectly fine on her own and they should be proud of her. Of course, this was too big a leap for them but they had learned their lesson and, for the most part, kept their disapproval to themselves.

Faith was still a very beautiful woman and was quite popular with men. She had joined some local clubs and made many friends. She was a member of a bridge club, a ladies golf club and a book club. The women in these clubs were always trying to fix her up with a man. Faith always thanked them and laughed, telling them there was no room in her life for a man. Sometimes, when her clubs would meet, there would be a guest member, always an eligible bachelor, and Faith knew what they were up to. She did venture out on a few dates but her lack of trust got in the way of repeats. She always found something wrong with the men right away. It wasn't that they weren't nice or attentive, she just felt that they had to have an ulterior motive. She resisted any man who actively pursued her. If they continued to ask her out on a date after her first refusal, she found a way to avoid them altogether. Edmond had been an insistent pursuer and look how that turned out. She viewed persistence as controlling and obsessive. If a man did not hear her say no the first time, it was doubtful he would hear anything else she had to say. People were puzzled by Faith's lack of interest in a relationship. They thought that she would eventually get over Edmond and move on. They didn't think she would want to be a widow forever. If only they knew the true story, they would understand. However, the true story was something that nice polished women didn't speak about in public. An honorable woman kept her bedroom stories secret. Once the doors to the house were closed, everything that went on inside stayed inside.

Paul

Paul

Asta and Paul had a long time Sunday morning tradition of reading the New York Times. They called it their "Sunday religion". The cooking section was read last for inspiration. Whenever they could, they would get together and cook a traditional Sunday dinner with the goal of leftovers for their weekday lunches. Asta and Paul had met through cooking. They were on the kitchen crew at a community service project. They just hit it off and chatted and compared culinary experiences throughout the day. The pairing was so successful that they became known as the ultimate kitchen and were asked to do many events. They both loved it and loved working together. Community events seem to run in seasons so Asta and Paul got into the habit of getting together outside of the community events.

Most Sunday mornings Paul would call Asta with his supermarket sale report. Paul's job was to provide the protein. He would report what he had procured so she could plan the rest of the meal. Asta went every week to the country store in her town where she could buy freshly picked produce and herbs. Her trip to the country store was one of the highlights of the week. The country store was only open on Sundays and, although they listed what they would be offering each Thursday, Asta always felt that it was more of an adventure if she decided on the produce once she got there. Buying produce is a creative outlet for Asta. She may go in to the country store thinking beets but then see the carrots and go in a different direction. She also liked the laid back pace in the country store. She would often run into friends and catch up or meet new friends. If she and Paul were not cooking that day, she might end up going for coffee with someone she bumped into at the store. She rarely shopped at supermarkets any more. Paul would get what they needed from the supermarket so she could enjoy the country store.

Cooking was an art form for Paul and Asta. They considered the ingredients their pallet and loved to work with different combinations each week. Although one of the goals was to prepare food for the week, they also enjoyed the experience and challenge of trying new foods and recipes. For a time Paul would just show up with the protein and they would wing it. While this worked more often than not, he had fallen into the habit of calling her so that the meal would go together more easily.

Each one had different skills. Asta was the herbalist. She just knew what flavors would work together. She made fresh herbal butter each week with whatever herbs were left over from cooking. Of course, they both loved basil and this was frequently the most dominant herb in their cooking. Basil seemed to have year-round appeal. It was fresh and bright enough for summer cooking yet had a hearty enough flavor for winter stews. For Asta, rosemary would be her second favorite, but only in the winter.

Paul would arrive at Asta's house around one o'clock and the culinary adventure would begin. This week they were planning and prepping the menu for a community event the next week. There would be approximately 200 volunteers at the site from

8am to 4pm so breakfast, lunch and afternoon snack were required. The challenge to preparing the menu for these events was that you were never sure what the dietary requirements might be. Paul and Asta felt that people who volunteered their time should be treated well and that meant being fed well. They wanted to be sure that every dietary concern was taken into consideration. They were careful to include enough items on the menu for vegetarians, vegans and lactose and wheat intolerant folks. Each serving had to contain enough items to cover all tastes and provide sustenance for the long day of work. They accepted this challenge with verve and made sure that all of the food was fresh and tasty. The rule was that nothing came out of a can. One of their most popular dishes was their vegetable soup. Asta would get fresh kidney beans and soak them overnight. They would go to the wholesale food store and pile up on fresh vegetables. Sometimes they could purchase vegetables already chopped which saved tons of time. They would get 5 pound bags of chopped celery, onions and carrots as their base. Sometimes they used a vegetable stock base and sometimes they used a tomato base. The soup was rounded out with large bunches of freshly chopped parsley, basil and oregano or rosemary. They made the soup very thick to make it easy to transport. Once on site, they would thin the soup down to a better consistency with more stock or tomatoes. They brought multiple crock pots so that steaming hot soup was always available.

For breakfast they were preparing frittatas, egg and potato casseroles loaded with vegetables and cheese. There would be spinach with monterey jack cheese and nutmeg; broccoli with onions and cheddar and sweet red peppers with swiss cheese. There would be sides of fresh breads, rolls and a never-ending fruit salad. They planned to have most of the prep work done prior to the event so that the kitchen volunteers that day could focus on chopping fruit to keep the fruit salad full all day long, minding tables and serving. They decided to keep the watermelon out of the fruit salad and serve it separately with squeezes of fresh lime. This was an Asta classic dish, the lime diminished the sweetness of the watermelon a bit and brought out more of its refreshing flavor. The lime added layers of flavor to the watermelon. Asta and Paul always enjoyed watching someone take a bite for the first time, it was always as if they were tasting watermelon for the first time. As foodies, they loved finding such great ingredient marriages.

Although their vegetable soup was very popular, they wanted to mix it up a bit. They decide to offer two soups for this event. Asta had been perfecting a roasted cauliflower soup. It was a simple soup to make and it took advantage of the nutty flavor of roasted cauliflower, which was then infused with chicken stock and herbs. Although it was a bit daunting to think of making it in such big quantities, she wanted to try it. In order to be sure that the menu was still flexible, they decided to add a lentil soup for folks who did not care for cauliflower. On Sunday they roasted cauliflower and pureed it in the food processor. This went on for most of the day. In between batches, they soaked lentils and focused on the rest of the menu.

The lunch spread would include sliced loaf breads of rye and wheat as well as lavash and pita for roll-ups. There would be trays of sandwiches vegetables - lettuce, tomato, sprouts and avocado. The sandwich fillings would be mostly spreads such as

peanut butter, jellies and jams, cream cheese, several types of hummus, eggplant spread, black bean spread and white bean garlic spread (with parsley to neutralize the garlic).

There would be three types of tossed salad - a chopped salad with zucchini, red pepper and corn; a romaine salad with celery, carrots and tomatoes; and a mixed green salad with peaches, yellow squash and artichokes. All of the salad recipes were created for a mix of color and flavors. Asta always made fresh dressings and, for this event, there were six types. Paul was the gardener so he brought his herbs over for the "creative dressing" session. He presented Asta with lime basil, lemon basil, sweet basil, Thai basil, cilantro, mint, oregano, rosemary and parsley. "This is when the fun begins", they thought. Asta had made fresh juice from lemons, limes and oranges. She also had a variety of vinegars and oils. The first dressing was very traditional with light vegetable oil, white vinegar, salt and pepper. They called this "The Basic". Next they worked with the citruses. They wanted a nice tang but not too much tartness. They started with lemon juice, added a good olive oil and some pepper. Next they combined a small amount of lemon basil and parsley in the mortar and pestle. They ground down the fresh spices until the mix of flavors was just right. They added the spices to the liquid ingredients in a blender. This dressing they named "Lemon Zest". They combined mint and oregano with olive oil and red wine vinegar for "The Greek". Thai basil was ground with red chili pepper and combined with olive oil and apple cider vinegar for "The Zesty". Cilantro and lime basil were mixed with canola oil and lime juice for "Ceviche Dressing". Orange juice, rosemary and olive oil were fused in the blender for the last dressing, "Sunshine". Making fresh dressings was one of the most fun culinary activities that Asta and Paul engaged in. They loved the diversity of ingredients and never ending possibility of combinations. Each time they made dressings, they invented something new. They had experimented with warm dressings as well to complement chopped vegetable salads. The warm dressings were used to coax the hidden flavors out of very freshly picked produce. One of the reasons their salads were so popular was that most people had forgotten how great fresh vegetables taste. Supermarket produce is weeks old by the time it is consumed and it loses most of its flavor. Asta had grown up in a farming community and had not bought vegetables in a supermarket until she went to college. The localvore movement had made fresh produce much more accessible and she and Paul embraced it.

Paul and Asta worked together like a well-oiled machine. Some people described their camaraderie like a happily married couple, yin and yang. In fact, Paul and Asta had no romance in their relationship. They were simply friends and they preferred it that way. Neither one of them wanted to feel obligated to the other for that would ruin the fun and spontaneity. Sometimes they were together every Sunday, mostly in the winter, at other times, months would go by without a cooking session. They kept their private lives just that - private from each other. If Paul wanted to confide in Asta, she would not have minded and she was equally happy that he didn't. There was no drama in their relationship unless a dish that they worked on for a long time failed so miserable as to be inedible. Many people in the community service committee thought they were married. This was probably due to the seamless way they moved around

each other in the kitchen. If people didn't think they were married, they thought they must run a restaurant together. Most of these people only saw them at community events and very few of them knew what their lives were like outside of these events.

Paul, for the most part, preferred to be in relationships of a mid-term nature. He usually was happy for the first two to three years and then found the level of interest waning. At one point in his life he had contemplated marriage but he hadn't thought about it for a long time. He was happy with the companionship of a relationship but didn't need or want the full commitment. He felt that things were fine as they were. In this way, Asta and Paul were very similar. Asta enjoyed the company of men but hadn't wanted to cohabitate since she had a live in relationship when she was very young that didn't work out. She valued her privacy and her space. It would take someone really spectacular for her to want to live with them every day.

Things between Paul and Asta changed a bit after one particular event. It was a beautiful summer day when they were on hand to run the kitchen at a project in a community that faced several challenges. The elementary school had been in disrepair when a freak thunderstorm hit, collapsing part of the roof, breaking windows and flooding the outdoor playground. The school had to be closed for safety reasons. It had looked like it would take at least six months to repair the damage. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had assessed the damage and divided the project into two phases. The first phase would need to be completed by professionals since it involved repairing structural damage. They did some demolition work and then the repair work. This did turn out to be a blessing in disguise since the buildings were in disrepair before the storm.

The second phase of the project was spearheaded by the parent association for the school. They decided to take a shot at a unique approach of hiring professional contractors to instruct volunteers in the basics of the remaining repair work and beautification. Habitat for Humanity had been successfully involved in some of the neighborhoods in their community so they thought that approach would work well. A local television station continued to cover the event after the storm. They decided to create a series about the school and the community and their approach to the event. It was meant to be a heartwarming story about a community coming together to solve a daunting challenge. Paul and Asta had both been following the coverage and had hoped they would be called upon to serve. When Paul got the call, he jumped for joy and told them he would take it from here. He immediately called Asta and they put the word out for volunteers for a two day community service project. Mary, the volunteer project manager, had called Paul. She had heard of him from the Habitat for Humanity foremen. Mary was the overall project manager. Paul was the culinary manager, as he preferred to be called, mostly in jest.

Mary and Paul did all the planning over the phone. She had been told not to worry about his end, that he could be counted on to handle everything. Mary had enough on her plate managing the rest of the project. The parents association had some great ideas but they needed to be culled into a project plan that was achievable. Mary's goal was to choose project ideas that could be accomplished in the two day volunteer effort. She did not want to leave anything left undone. Mary was extremely

grateful for this opportunity and knew that a second volunteer effort could be challenging to pull off. She treated every day as if it was the last day the television station would be there. She needed to leverage the coverage in order to solicit donations and volunteers. Mary was a commando in the organizational realm. She always broke projects down into manageable tasks with multiple stakeholders. She inspired her crews so that they would meet or exceed expectations. She had broken the school project down into three main objectives. The first objective was to replace the wall board in all of the interior spaces. Some of it had been damaged from the storm and some of it had to be taken down in the demolition in order to run wiring and pipes. She knew that the school would get its occupancy permit back as soon as the interior was complete. The second objective was to repair the exterior windows and playground. The third objective had the lowest priority. This included plantings and painting a mural on the playground side of the building. Although Mary kept this as an objective, she knew it would have a minor impact in terms of the occupancy permit that would enable the students to return to their own school. The students had been divided into groups and transported to other schools in the closest communities that could accommodate them. The sooner they could come back to their home school, the better for the entire community. They had suffered enough and the school's re-opening would allow them to move forward, leaving only memories of the destruction.

Mary and her core team arrived at the school on the Friday before the weekend event. This was a unique bonus as most projects took place in buildings that had to remain in operation during the project. They had the run of the place on Friday which allowed them to put all of their signage and equipment in place. They set up a check-in booth with badges that identified the different crews: wallboard, tape & spackle, paint, windows, playground and kitchen. She would assess their progress late Saturday to determine whether the third objective was possible. It definitely was a benefit to have all day Friday to set up so that Saturday morning they could jump right into the work.

Paul and Asta arrived early Saturday morning to get the kitchen set up. The professional crews had outfitted the kitchen with all new wiring, plumbing and appliances. Mary and her crews had cleaned it on Friday so Paul and Asta walked into a sparkling clean new kitchen. This certainly was a pleasure and they were psyched. Mary came in to greet them and to make sure that all of their needs were met. She was particularly pleased to have them on board since they had gathered and organized all of their own volunteers. The entire kitchen effort had been handled with less than a dozen phone calls. She was intrigued and impressed. Although Mary's resume was impressive in her skill set, culinary skills did not and would not, have been on her list. Paul went over their menu and plans. Mary thought he must be a miracle worker as she could not imagine cooking for two-hundred plus people over two days any more than he could imagine renovating a building in two days. There was an instant curiosity and connection. Asta, knowing Paul as well as she did, noticed it immediately. There was an intensity there that she had not seen in Paul. She wasn't sure how she felt about it and this surprised her. She certainly did not have any interest in Paul other than cooking together. She had to take a deep breath and reflect on what she was feeling. Asta was good at digging deep into her feelings when she felt she didn't have too much at stake.

Of course, she had wonderful feelings for Paul and appreciated their friendship. It's just that she had never seen him flirt with anyone. In fact, neither one of them had ever flirted or flirted with someone else while they were in each other's company. When she reflected deeply, she realized that, although it was awkward to see Paul light up around Mary and openly flirt with her, she could be happy for him if he made a connection. Mary was oblivious to any connection between Paul and Asta and why would she be otherwise? When Mary was in the room, it was as if Asta was not on the planet. Asta decided to reach out to Mary so that she would appear friendly and supportive. She wanted Paul to enjoy himself. It only helped a little as Paul kept leaving the kitchen workspace to tour the project with Mary. At one point, when he had been away for two hours, Asta questioned him when he returned. She asked him why he kept leaving his post, he got a bit defensive. Asta pulled him aside and asked him to try to be more conscious of their crew and how his absentee style was impacting them. She explained that she counted on him for certain tasks and it was not easy for her to fill his shoes. He apologized and said he understood but he was very quiet for the rest of the day. When they were done for the day, Paul quickly waved bye and left the kitchen. Asta was perplexed. He always wanted to go over plans for day two before he left on Saturday. She wondered whether he had taken her comments the wrong way. She wondered if asking him to honor his commitment to the crew was out of line. They had never had any real disagreement before so she was confused as to the best way to handle it. She drove home alone and a bit worried. She wondered if it really was worry or hurt and disappointment. Did she really want Paul to flirt with her? Hell, no, she thought. She still had a very tough time sleeping that night.

In the morning, she drove back to the project site with a combination of concern and excitement to see the project completion. Asta was greeted in the parking lot by a couple of women she knew from other projects. They were all wondering what had happened between her and Paul. Apparently, Paul and Mary had gone to an after party and seemed very cozy. Since most people had incorrectly assumed they were married, it had caused some concern and quite a lot of gossip. The women who greeted Asta were a combination of solidarity, incredulity and curiosity. They wanted to know if Asta and Paul had separated. When Asta explained that they were not married and were not even in a relationship, they wondered aloud why not. Asta laughed and said that a platonic relationship with a man was most times a lot simpler than a romantic one. They all chuckled and agreed with that but challenged her to be honest with herself about her feelings for him. She said she had thought it threw and knew that they were a great pair in the kitchen and nowhere else. She still had a twinge of anxiety about seeing him for the first time this morning. She had never seen him in love, never mind in love. Paul arrived with a relaxed glow on his face. He seemed happy and ready to take on the day. Asta decided to keep quiet and let him approach her if he had anything he felt was appropriate to report. Paul said nothing but, even more interesting, Mary did not come into the kitchen all day and Paul never left. Okay, now Asta was really curious but she kept telling herself to respect his privacy and treat him as a respected co-worker. She had to admit all of the extra emotion was draining. She was always energized working around Paul and usually had enough energy to stay up for the after

parties. This was not the case on this project. She was drained and exhausted. Oh well, she thought, life is interesting.

Asta's friend Sam and her husband Rick were joining the effort on Sunday. Asta was relieved to have her good friend around but wasn't sure how to explain the circumstances. Sam knew little about Paul or their relationship, she only knew that they cooked at these events together. Since Asta spoke so little of him, she really hadn't thought about him much. Sam and her husband were trying to prepare themselves for parenthood and Asta had invited them to volunteer as there would be several families with young children involved. Sam and Rick were pleased to be invited and anxious to volunteer. They were both assigned to the kitchen crew but the crew from Saturday had returned so they offered to step in another capacity. Rick worked on installing windows while Sam worked on some plantings. Sam worked with a group of women who were discussing the "Asta and Paul" situation. Sam overheard some talk about Paul breaking up their home. When she had a break, she confronted Asta. "What are they talking about?" Asta said it was a long story but that people mistakenly thought they were married because they worked so well together. She briefly told Sam about Mary and the confusion. Sam said she would observe as much as she could and keep her ear to the ground but that she wanted the full story when the day was done.

Sam felt very indebted to her loyal and loving friend. Asta always had everyone else's needs in mind. She was being extremely supportive of Sam while she worked out her fears and concerns over the addition of a child into her life. She was surprised to hear of the depth of the relationship with Paul and also the complexity of it since Asta talked about him only in passing.

When the kitchen work was done on Sunday, Asta suggested they tour the project to see the progress. They hadn't spoken much that day and Asta suggested this as a peace offering. Paul was a bit hesitant but agreed. He had met her friends Sam and Rick earlier in the day. Asta suggested they bring them on the tour so that they could explain how much progress had been made in two days. When they went to find them, Asta had to smile to see Sam engaged with a group of young children planting flowers in garden beds. She knew that Sam needed exposure to children as she and Rick were thinking through that life-changing decision. Sam seemed truly engaged with the tots and very happy. When Paul and Asta approached, she beamed with happiness and love for her wise friend. Asta introduced Sam and Paul and suggested she join them on the tour once they found Rick. Rick was shooting the breeze with a young father. Although it all seemed very casual, Asta knew he was working on his research project and she felt a sense of pride that she was able to help them.

The progress at the school was astounding. There was no question that they would pass inspection on Monday for their occupancy permit. The interior looked clean, polished and safe. Although they had only seen pictures of the building before the storm and after the damage, the difference was amazing. The volunteer crews had gone above and beyond to ensure the children could be back in their home school. Mary had done such an amazing job that the third objective was well on its way. They approached her and Asta complimented her on a spectacular job. She explained that she had a fresh perspective due to staying in the kitchen all day and only seeing the

progress once or twice a day. Mary seemed pleased but a bit hesitant to accept the praise. She was worried about the progress on the mural. She wasn't sure the people working on it had the stamina left after two hard days and the creativity necessary to pull off the dreams of the parents association. Asta offered to take a look at the project and jump in if she thought she would be any help. Before she ventured over to the mural wall, she grabbed a cup of hot coffee to give her the caffeine jolt she felt she would need. She left Mary and Paul together and felt proud of herself for the way she handled the situation.

The mural project was in a bit of a quagmire and Asta offered her assistance. The project manager looked at her wearily and accepted. She realized that they had not broken down the project and there was not enough guidance for the volunteers, some of which were the young children who attended the school. She quickly re-assigned the youngsters to the solid wall color at the bottom of the mural. This was within their reach and she felt that, being it was at their eye level, they would be able to enjoy it at close range when they returned to school. She asked Sam to work with the younger children and even encouraged her to get messy. Sam was always in so much control it might be fun if she got paint on herself, Asta mused.

She assigned teenagers to the easier, large color blocks of the mural. Rick worked with the teenagers, instructing them on ladder safety and how to manage their tasks. He seemed at ease with them and they were very attentive. Whew, thought Asta, at least the teenagers are keeping their hormones in check for now. She knew that Rick needed a positive experience with that age group and so many times they were reacting to the variants of their age. Within an hour, the design of the mural was more evident and the volunteers were humming along harmoniously, happy that they were making such swift progress. Asta took on some of the more detailed work along with some volunteers that had identified themselves as artists. Mary walked by a while later and beamed at their progress. Asta just winked at her and smiled.

Asta, Sam and Rick made plans for dinner at the end of the day Sunday. When they were leaving, Asta took a quick look around for Paul. She caught his eye as they made their way to the parking lot. He was alone but just waved her off clumsily and moved away. This definitely hurt Asta. They had never closed an event this way. They had always gathered their team and had a group hug. They had then had their own private debrief with a glass of wine or two. This behavior made her feel awkward and unsure. Had she done something to offend him? She guessed that, if you leave a relationship undefined then that was the way it would be. They had never made any promises about staying friends forever. Asta needed a good talk with Sam. She was beginning to re-think the no-strings friendship approach. Women totally got it. They would never abandon each other without a discussion. Asta had just learned that men would behave very differently in such a situation. Although Asta was very much aware that men were wired differently, she had felt that she knew Paul better than that. She was beginning to think that, because there was no romantic attachment, she must have been thinking of him differently. She was in denial that, no matter what, he was still a man with male tendencies.

When Asta did not hear from Paul for two weeks, she called and left a message.

She waited a week and, when he did not return the call, she sent him an email. "Can we talk?", she wrote, "I miss our menu sessions." Paul responded a few days later and said that he was swamped and would get back to her once he had some free time. Asta was crushed at the brush off. She called a few of the women who had been at the event and that she felt were trustworthy and asked them if they had heard anything. Only one of them had any information. She had seen Paul and Mary at a local restaurant at lunchtime. She reported that they did not look cozy. It looked more like a business meeting. Asta was extremely curious but would have to bide her time. In the meantime, she thought she should look for a new cooking partner. She wasn't as interested in a cooking partner for Sundays at home. Sure, she missed that very much and Sundays seemed lonely but she really needed a partner for the community volunteer events. Managing the kitchen at those events was not a one-person job. She tried to keep a positive outlook that she would find someone as easy to work with and interested in food as Paul.

Paul's began playing basketball on Sundays to fill the void. His buddies asked him why he wasn't cooking with Asta anymore and he replied, "It's complicated. I want to be friends with her but it doesn't seem to lead anywhere. I want to be in a relationship but I'm not sure if she is the one I want to be in a relationship with. I had always hoped that we would find other people and remain friends but I botched it up a bit, I'm afraid. As forgiving as she is, I'm not so sure she wants me around. Besides, she makes friends so easily, I am sure she found someone else to cook with." His buddies just shook their heads and threw the basketball at his head. "Thinking with your head never works when your heart is involved," they said. "How are things with Mary?" "Okay," said Paul, "she is definitely less threatening than Asta and she makes it clear she wants to be a relationship. With Asta, I was never sure enough to bring it up. Someday, I will clean it up but right now, I'm just not into it."

Samantha

Samantha was very grounded and liked things plain and simple. She never craved excitement or thrills. She loved company, conversation and intellectual stimulation but had no patience for drama. Drama bored her to tears. If a situation couldn't be handled in a straight forward manner, she just dismissed it. Of course, she was an engineer and that was how engineers were wired. Performing tasks in a routine manner, following a process is what made Sam tick. She quickly saw through all of the unnecessary elements and could strip any project down to the bare essentials very quickly. This attribute is what made her so successful as an engineer but certainly never made her the life of the party. Spending time with Sam was like spending time on granite rocks by the ocean - plenty of swirling movement but heavily grounded. Asta and Sam, as a matter of fact, had their favorite place to visit which was a granite quarry on the ocean. Both felt solace and inspiration from the dichotomy of the violently smashing waves and the unmoving granite. They had been coming here for years so they had an appreciation for the painfully slow erosion of the granite at the hands of the ocean waves. It was as if both were doing an enticing dance - the granite yielding every so slightly while the ocean slowly etched a new design on the granite. The place

was a reflection of their deep friendship. Sam was usually the granite, while Asta was usually the ocean. The roles might switch from time to time but it was unusual for Sam to be in a state of swirl.

Asta loved the fact that Sam wore a scarf when they went to the quarry. It would not work for Sam to have the wind blow her hair out of place. In Sam's world, everything ran like energy through a circuit board with a defined path and a defined outcome. Form followed function. Any break or deviation would result in failure. This analytical outlook fascinated Asta. Since Asta spent a lot of time around people with randomness as their guide, Sam's simpler outlook provided solace for Asta. There were no deviations. The path was always defined and clear. There was a certain amount of comfort in this outlook. When Asta's glass, which usually was full or ran over started to dip from evaporation, a good dose of Sam would replenish the glass and revive Asta.

The conversations between Asta and Sam were like conversations with long lost relatives. They updated each other on everyone else in their lives and their comings and goings. Asta spoke about people that Sam had never met and Sam spoke about people that Asta would not run into. This was extremely liberating and provided great perspective. It was these conversations that allowed Asta to see things more clearly with the people she took on as projects. The relationship with Sam and the ability to converse meaningfully was invaluable to Asta.

It's not to say that they always engaged in deep, meaningful conversation. Both women loved trashy gossip but didn't really have anyone else in their lives that embraced the humor in it. They would laugh till their sides split over the ironies and insanities of the current gossip columns. This was particularly fun for Sam, who could never imagine running your life in a manner that would create such drama and hilarity. Of course, the particular people involved in the gossip could never see the humor. All that drama was extremely serious. It was a form of comic relief for Sam who dotted every i and crossed every t.

Sam could only live with a schedule that allowed time to organize and clean. Everything ran by that schedule. Saturday morning she re-cleaned the house that the house cleaners had cleaned earlier in the week. They did a great job but a few days use by Sam and her husband Rick required a pick up and wipe down of everything again. If Sam's husband had left a few things laying around, they were back where they belonged by 9:30am Saturday morning. At 9:45 every Saturday morning, Sam and her husband were at the gym. By 11 they were having breakfast at their favorite deli where they discussed their menu and clothing requirements for the week. Early Saturday afternoon consisted of grocery shopping and kitchen organization. This schedule left them with a few hours to play - either hike or bike until it was time for their Saturday date with their friends Kate and Bill. Bill worked with Rick. They were both accountants at the same firm. The friendship between the couples was natural. They all enjoyed the same rigor and organized structure. They had reservations at the same cafe every Saturday, at the same time and, most of the time, at the same table. They ordered a combination of the same dishes every week. Sometimes Sam had soup and salad, other times she had the catch of the day fish dinner. It was always one or the other. Kate and Sam usually ordered the same meal. Rick and Bill also ordered

similarly - beef or chicken with vegetables on the side. The only manner in which the four were dissimilar were in their beverage choices. Rick only drank Sprite while Bill enjoyed beer. Sam was a specialty cocktail lover and Kate only drank red wine. The fact that there was little variation was what made the friendship so nice for both of them. They never discussed politics. They usually discussed the newest tech products or some new design concept that could simplify life. Kate and Bill had two children in college so they could contribute all of the latest topics of interest to the younger generation. Kate and Bill's children were in their late teens and early twenties, so this bridged the conversation gap with Sam and Rick, who were in their early thirties and beginning to contemplate parent hood. They really wanted children but listening to the trials and tribulations of college-aged children sometimes made them wonder. Could they really handle that amount of what seemed like chaos?

Sam could not imagine changing their living space as many times as would be required to accommodate children. First, you would need a nursery which would have to be changed to a child's room but not until you were sure you wouldn't have another baby. This was a lot of change in Sam's living space and she did not like change, most importantly in her living space. If it drove her crazy that Rick left a few things hanging around, what would it be like with children's toys everywhere? How would she organize them? How could she keep her schedule? Would she really have to change her schedule? What if she couldn't clean on Saturday morning because she had to take care of her children? When she and Rick discussed children, he promised her that he would be a hands-on father and that they would make sure that everyone's needs would be met. She envisioned Rick taking care of the children's needs while she cleaned but then, would she miss out on baby bonding time? How did people like her do it?

Sam was very solutions oriented so she came up with a plan that would support her as she contemplated this decision. She decided to start a support group for organizers that were about to embark on parent hood. The group would include both expectant mothers and fathers and those considering it. This was how Sam dealt with most challenges. She would set up a task force to comb through every possible angle for the challenge until a comprehensive solution was reached.

Sam asked Asta what she thought of her idea for a support group. Asta was always in favor of support from other people and generally in favor of support groups. However, in this case, she felt that Sam's fears and ambiguity were in the way. She smiled at her friend and asked, "What are you really afraid of? Of course, a support group is a great idea but what are you bringing to the table?" Sam was never the person in a group to be needy. She was always the one who contributed the most so the idea of a support group in which she had no experience with the topic and nothing to add was unusual. Asta suspected there was something much more going on.

Sam hesitated and seemed to ponder the question for a long time. "I guess, she said, I am afraid of the change. It is a really big step. Marrying Rick was a huge move but she loved him and was comfortable with two adults in the mix. She had a choice with Rick. Although having a child was a choice, she couldn't help but feel there were too many variables in the personality of a child. What if she her child did not value structure as much as Sam? What if her child was a free spirit or a messy kid? Although

Asta had no children of her own, she thought there was still more to Sam's fears. Perhaps, she suggested, it's just not the right time for you. Have you accomplished enough as a non-parent to be willing to give up your aspirations for a while? It's a long while, Asta remarked, at least twenty years. Asta did not wait for a response. She asked Sam to think of the ways a child would benefit her marriage, what kind of contribution a child would make. Sam excitedly responded to this line of questioning. A child would complete our family, we would be able to provide a stable, loving environment for a child to grow and learn. Sam loved to watch people learn and she would be overjoyed to be a part of the process of her own child's learning. It is something she always knew she wanted, but she just didn't know if she wanted it now.

Asta asked about Rick's feelings about fatherhood. Sam said Rick would be ready at any time. He put no pressure on Sam and wanted it to be on her time line since she was the one who would carry the child. She knew Rick wanted to be a father in the worst way and loved him all the more for his understanding and sensitive approach to the topic.

Sam trusted Asta's instincts, even though she had no experience as a parent. Asta suggested scrapping the "parent task force" concept and adopting a task force of two- Sam and Rick. She suggested going to places that had activities for children to witness first hand how parents and children interacted. If you go to an amusement park or a kiddie matinee, you will see parents and children in all different states. There will be children who are enchanted by the environment and there will be children in states of total melt down. Notice how the parents handle each situation and how the children respond. Pay attention to how the parents and children speak to each other. This will give you a window into what your life might be like. Remember, Asta gently said, that your wish is to teach your child. You have a lot more control in this situation than you realize. A loving mother, which I am positive you will be, can greatly influence a child's behavior by noticing how their child responds and reacts. If you feed your child sugar, you know what behavior to expect. If you teach your child that sugar is a treat for special occasions after they have had healthy food, different behavior can be expected. These are all rational decisions that you and Rick, as parents can make.

As you do your reconnaissance visits to children's arenas, take notes and make a list of what you appreciated and what you thought would be disruptive. Discuss everything on the list with Rick to be sure you are both on the same page, or at least compatible. Sam loved these ideas. She couldn't wait to start her little mission. Besides, she and Rick had not done any activities around children in a few years. This mission would be fun and let them act like kids as well. Sam also knew that Rick would definitely be much more in favor of this idea than the support group.

Asta invited Sam and Rick to a volunteer community event that she knew would incorporate several family activities. She had worked at many of these activities in the past and knew it would be a good opportunity for them to hang out with parents of children of many age groups. This was the event that had introduced them to her friend Paul. At the end of the weekend, Sam and Asta knew they needed a trip to the rock quarry. They planned to go the following weekend.

Sam and Rick decided to go to a local cafe to plan out their research project.

They ate their dinner and then pulled out their laptops and schedules. They had just started to plan when they heard a child scream. It sounded like it came from the counter where you would order food. Seconds later and adorable little boy ran over and plopped down on a seat at the table next to them. He screamed "Mommy!" but then sat quietly. His mother and another young boy, a few years older, came over with trays full of food. They sat down and the mother spread all of their food out for them. All seemed well, both boys were quietly eating and she was engaging them in conversation. Sam's initial fears seemed unfounded, or so she thought. A few minutes later, the little boy started screaming again. His mother explained that he had said he didn't want any more food so she was granting his wish. He screamed again. She asked him to be quiet. He reacted to this by stomping around the table and screaming even louder. "Please sit down," she asked. He came over to her seat and threw himself on the floor, pounding his fists and feet. His older brother looked both embarrassed and scared. "Okay," his mother said, "you can stay there but you have to be quiet." Nothing changed. A staff member came over to help. He offered to take the little boy on a tour of the restaurant on his shoulders. The little boy was wide-eyed and scared at the thought but he was quiet. The staff member offered to bring him a cookie. His mother thanked him and explained that there would be no cookies without dinner. The screaming continued. The mother calmly finished her dinner. She tried to engage her older boy in conversation but the young one would have none of that. He ran around the table and threw the remainder of his dinner at his brother. His mother picked him up and put him in his seat. Another diner offered her some comfort, telling her that he had twins that were twice as loud when they had meltdowns. She said that it was past his bedtime and he was very tired but that she had wanted him to have dinner before going to sleep. His older brother had a very scared look on his face. He continued to scream for another five minutes until his mother was finished eating and announced that it was time to go. The staff person returned with a cookie for the boys. The little boy first said he wanted a cookie and then screamed "NO!". His older brother was now upset. He asked his mother three times for a piece of cookie before she heard him over his brother's screams. You could tell he was confused. He had been good, he had been quiet and eaten his dinner but his brother, who had been bad, was getting the cookie. When his mother finally heard him and gave him the cookie, he seemed relieved but still a bit quizzical.

"Wow," Sam and Rick said, "lesson number one just presented itself right in front of our eyes." Rick and Sam decided to analyze the situation right then, rather than thinking about it for too long and letting it scare them. "First of all", Sam said, "I would not expect to be on my own in a restaurant with two children." "Okay", said Rick, "although I understand it may just be that it has to be that way sometimes. Of course, I wouldn't let that happen unless absolutely necessary especially since I would not have wanted to be in her shoes either." "How different do you think it would have been if her husband was here?", Rick asked. Sam had to admit it would be hard to predict but that, at the very least, one of them could have taken the boy out of the restaurant. It just seemed like too much for one person to handle. For Sam, her heart went out to the older boy. Although his mother worked hard at engaging him in conversation, his

younger brother got the lions share of attention. He seemed very curious about the situation and a little left out. There was very little reward for his good behavior. Okay, they decided, rule number one: unless absolutely necessary, they would always venture out together with their little ones.

They went back to their calendars and scheduling when another mother came in with her two children. This time it was a boy and a girl, older than the first two little boys. They seemed engaged with each other. They shared all of the parts of their meals. At one point, the mother took a phone call, leaving the children to occupy themselves. They kicked around a bit in their chairs but ended up giggling with each other. When the mother got off the phone she noticed that her son had gone up to the counter to ask for a napkin. He explained that he had spilled some of his drink and wanted to clean it up. The same friendly staff member responded by coming over with a damp cloth to clean up the spill. He explained that they had a special rule for spills in their restaurant. "If anyone spills and offers to clean it up themselves, they get a special cookie." The young boy was wide-eyed and didn't seem to know how to react except to say thank you. His mothers mouth was wide open. "Come over here", she said, "do you see what happens when you are big and brave?" "You weren't shy, you were brave to ask for something from a stranger, that isn't easy." She hugged him very hard and seemed really pleased and relieved. She wouldn't stop hugging him until he broke out a big, loving smile. Apparently, shyness had been an issue she had been working on with him. Sam and Rick smiled and Sam had to wipe away a few tears as they left.

"I wonder if we need to create this daunting schedule," Rick mused, "this place seems to present plenty of lessons for us." They both agreed they needed more diverse options but that they would return to the cafe often to see who showed up with a lesson for them.

When Sam and Asta arrived at the rock quarry, they said in unison "Who first?" and smiled. Asta asked Sam to begin. Sam thanked Asta for inviting them to the volunteer event. She then regaled Asta with the stories from the cafe. Asta laughed and was thankful she wasn't there for the scream fest. Sam and Asta both agreed that, although the mother with the screaming child had stayed too long after the melt down started, at least she had kept her cool. Asta thought that these types of melt downs could be avoided with better planning. If you know when your child gets tired, you should respect that and not expect them to have enough energy to be running around. These are their growing years and their little bodies are doing a lot of work to develop. Sam agreed and added that she did think there were times when these situations could not be avoided. Asta reminded her of her advanced discipline and scheduling skills. "I can't imagine that you wouldn't be able to set up a schedule that would honor both your needs and your child's needs. There is a very short time span that they are this young and Asta was sure that Sam would excel in keeping the schedule up until they were old enough to have a little extra steam.

Although the screaming child had caused Sam concern, she had witnessed plenty of good examples at the volunteer event. She had even felt comfortable enough with some of the mothers to express her concerns and solicit advice. They were extremely

helpful, especially because most of them were professional career women. They had varying ways of dealing with a career path and a mommy path but all of their options had a certain amount of appeal to Sam. She was starting to feel more confident about motherhood.

The next topic of conversation was, of course, Paul. Sam was curious and was going to stop at nothing until she got all the details. Asta explained that they had met at an event similar to the one that Samantha attended. They had hit it off and worked really well together. Sam understood all of this but there seemed to be more. When Asta told her about their Sunday cooking sessions, Sam remarked, "That's an entirely different picture than teaming up at community events. Once you have entered each other's private space, it takes the relationship to a different level." Asta realized that, although this may be true, it was always her private space they worked in. She had never been to Paul's place. Sam pointed out that this made the relationship a bit one-sided. He wanted to be in her private space, but didn't want to reciprocate. He wanted to have some level of control that would allow him freedom and, to a lesser degree, secrecy. He never discussed his private life so that got to be a big mystery. The big question was why did it get so awkward when he showed interest in another woman? Why did Asta feel so confused? And, more importantly, why did Paul behave like a bit of a cad?

Sam felt there was something that neither Asta or Paul wanted to admit to. Did Asta ever give him any romantic signals? "Well, cooking together could be construed as romantic, but it never seemed so in our case." "Are you sure Paul felt the same way? Were you sending him mixed signals?" Asta said she had tried to figure out if that had been the case but she just couldn't see it. The more she questioned herself, the more she was sure she had not misled him. She wanted to hold on to the belief that a man and a woman could have a platonic friendship. She also felt sad that there seemed to be a hole in their relationship. She wasn't sure if she should take the first step and contact Paul or wait for him to contact her. Asta was a doer and letting things that were unsettling sit did not work for her. On the other hand, she wanted to respect Paul's privacy, which evidently was critical to him. She did admit that she had wondered what about Mary was so attractive to him. It wasn't that she thought Mary wasn't attractive. It was just that she had never seen Paul in flirt mode and in very obvious flirt mode at that. She threw her questions out to the rocks at the quarry. She had done this many times, trusting that the aura of the place would make things clearer for her. Sam suggested giving herself a deadline. If she hadn't heard from Paul by that deadline, make the move. She felt one to two weeks was the max. After all, they had been used to talking every week so an absence any longer than that would exacerbate the issue. Sam knew Asta well enough to know that she didn't like to keep uncomfortable feelings around for long. She was the best person she knew for keeping things clean and always handled herself with integrity. Asta was fearless in her loyalty and commitment to her real friends and it was obvious Paul fell into this category.

Sam wondered how many other people there were that fell into that category. Asta always amazed her in her ability to juggle people while making every one of them feel unique and special in her world. Sam always believed it was because Asta was

genuine in her interest and compassion for people. No doubt some of that had come from adopting her uncle's mission. Asta always recognized that she enjoyed a life of privilege provided by her uncle's generosity, not in the financial sense, but in the ability to see the deeper sense of people and engage with people who were very unlike her but had value and the ability to contribute themselves. Asta could look at a thief and work to understand what had brought the person to this level of deceit. She was non-judgmental. She felt that, except in the rare cases of mental disease, everyone had a good nugget within that they wanted to express.

Bella

Bella

Bella's name reflected her looks - she was beautiful. Her beauty was the type that caused heads to turn everywhere she went. She had a natural beauty - she wore little make up. She dressed in a classic style that accentuated her physical beauty. Her looks made people want to know her. When she was at a social gathering, everyone wanted to talk to her. The people that did get the pleasure of a conversation felt a particular status had been achieved.

Conversations with Bella were long and circuitous. People felt she was fascinating due to being mesmerized by her looks. The majority of her friendships were superficial - people who wanted to be seen with her. After several of these circuitous conversations, most felt fatigued and the dazzle of her beauty wore off.

Bella did not recognize her beauty. In fact, Bella was plagued by self doubt and insecurity. She enjoyed the attention her looks brought her and tried to capitalize on it by talking non-stop about anything that she hoped would keep her from being alone. The insecurities were crippling at times and she would ramble just to keep conversations growing.

Bella met Asta at a social gathering. The gathering was a thinly disguised singles meet up in the form of a community service project. Bella thought that attaching herself to someone's cause would give her more stature - make her seem more serious and intelligent. Bella knew that she would meet men there - she always did. Although she wasn't looking for "Mr. Right" at the moment, she continually went to singles meet ups because that is what she thought was expected. Everyone single woman was looking for a man so she thought there must be some merit to it.

Most women liked Bella enough but none of them ever wanted to compete against her for a man. She mesmerized them and, it seemed, she could pick and choose whoever she wanted. In fact, Bella did not have many close women friends because they were intimidated by her. It was ironic that Bella's coping mechanism for her lack of confidence was the exact reason she could not achieve the confidence a close friend would recognize.

When Bella met Asta, she was entirely grateful that Asta did not seem to shy away from her. Asta welcomed Bella into the community and enrolled her in the concept

of the cause they were working for. Bella had never met anyone like Asta - warm, genuine and real. Asta represented a woman who spoke little because each word had meaning. For the first time in a long time, Bella was comfortable with some silence and pauses in conversation. It seemed to Bella that Asta said more in silence than in words.

Bella was smitten with Asta's confidence and commitment. She was also curious about these mystery qualities. How did she do it? How did she remain fascinating to everyone without constantly being the one talking? People hung around Asta just to be in her presence - not to listen or to look at her. It was fascinating - this aura she had. Bella had to know how she did it. Did she practice in front of a mirror as Bella often did? What did she read that gave her such authority? Bella wanted to become Asta's student so she could have the same effect on people.

Bella felt that her life would have more meaning, she would feel like a special person, if only she could be like Asta. Bella decided to spend as much time with Asta as Asta could give her. She suggested meeting for coffee once a week to "discuss their community project". For Bella, the community project was the successful reinvention of Bella. Certainly, if she was more like Asta, she would be a better person for the community. It all made sense to her. She never told Asta her real motivation - she was too afraid and she was in such awe that she didn't want to do anything that would make Asta disapprove.

When the two had their first coffee, Bella did what she did best to keep her in her comfort zone - she chatted incessantly. "What have you been up to? I have been out every night this week. It's amazing how hard it is to find time to relax. You know what I mean? I went to the movies, bowling, dinner one night and a walk on the beach another night. It's a lot of fun but I never get to relax. I was thinking, do you think there is a way to schedule relaxation? Do you ever relax? I want to be sure that I take good care of myself. I think I need to pace myself a little better but, what the heck, you are only young once. I may as well enjoy it. Who knows how long I will be able to keep this schedule up? I just enjoy being out with people and listening to what their lives are like. I am fascinated by other people's lives. I learn so much from them. I try to learn a little something about everyone I meet. I hope my brain can keep it all in - there's just so much. Don't you feel the same way? I am sure you do, you seem to know a lot of people and have a lot of friends. How many friends do you think you have? I just don't think I could count up how many friends I have. I sure am glad that we are friends."

What a crazy creature, thought Asta. She doesn't stop talking enough to hear herself. She chatted for at least an hour while Asta politely listened. Asta realized some people just needed someone to listen to them. But did they realize that, if they said nothing, people might listen more? Asta had been around others with Bella's affliction, she just hadn't committed to weekly coffee with them. What did this poor soul need? She had physical beauty but was a scared ugly duckling inside. How do you balance out the two? Eventually, Asta said she needed to go. Bella pleaded with her to stay, saying she hadn't given her an opportunity to talk at all. Asta acknowledged this as well but said they could get to that next week. Asta needed to figure out a way to set boundaries as well as providing an environment in which Bella could actually converse rather than just chat. It was an interesting project for Asta. Why she took these things

on she would never understand but it made life interesting. Asta certainly did not need any more friends or acquaintances. It was just that she felt compassion for people who were confused, uncertain, seemingly lost at sea. Bella certainly fell into this category but a lot was expected of her because of her looks. People who look beautiful must be entirely beautiful and fascinating all the time. People with ordinary looks that did not create the stir of beautiful people could get away with being less than sparkling in their conversations.

The next week Asta explained to Bella that she could only stay one hour and that Bella could decide what they talked about. Bella was still apologizing profusely for commanding the conversation last week. Bella asked Asta what her life was like. Bella really wanted to know but she wasn't prepared to listen to anyone - yet. Asta said she felt her life was interesting and then she paused. The pause was all it took for Bella to start chatting away again. For Bella, a moment of silence meant she must be expected to fill it with chatter. "What a week I had! I had so much fun! I met a few new friends and went for some hikes. I love hikes, especially along the ocean. You must love the ocean as well. It's so calming although, sometimes a bit too quiet for me. I love to be in the middle of the action. I love to be around five or six people so the conversation just flows, you know what I mean?" Bella never paused after a question. It was as if there was a period instead of a question mark at the end. Pausing meant silence and that was too awkward. "We went to see this movie, it was so good. It really made me think about things like life and friends and things. We had a very deep conversation afterward about the importance of conversation and communication.

Asta decided to make Bella be a real project for her - one with measurable results. She wasn't connected to any particular outcome but she was just interested in what would happen if she made a record of these meetings. The first metric for Asta was to time how long it took each week for Bella to start chatting again. She thought that if, over time, Bella's chatting time decreased and her conversation time increased, it might turn out to be an enjoyable relationship. It also gave Asta some reason to show up. Otherwise, it would be time spent idly and Asta had little appreciation for that. Asta also realized that she could learn some things by hanging out with Bella in public. People reacted differently when she was with the beautiful Bella. Waiters and waitresses were more attentive. People stopped them and asked inane questions, presumably to get face time with that beautiful face. Asta found the attention interesting and appealing. She wasn't sure if she would appreciate that much attention all of the time. There certainly was something to be said for the ability to be the wallflower at times. Asta appreciated down time as much as anyone. Bella never got down time unless she was home alone - a rare occurrence. Bella hated being alone - who would do the talking? Would she have to talk to herself? That prospect scared her to the point that she made sure she was only alone on the rare nights when she slept alone. On those nights, she went to the gym as soon as she woke up so she would have immediate company.

The first week of Asta's project, the second week of her coffee dates with Bella, Bella took 3 minutes before she launched into her chatter. Her chatter with Asta always revolved entirely around herself. I think I would be happy if... was the start of most of

her sentences. What followed was never anything realistic or attainable. Asta would just smile and feel fatigue for her friend. The energy it took to be so self absorbed with a spotlight on you all the time was overwhelming. Bella would never have a weight problem, Asta thought, because she could never relax. Something was always in motion - whether it was physical or mental. The third week Asta asked Bella about her sleeping habits - did she ever rest? Bella laughed and said that, of course, she slept. She slept at least six hours every night. She only slept because she knew it would impact her looks if she didn't. She would prefer to not sleep at all. If Bella had her way, she would spend all night in a club or an all night supermarket so she could always be with people. "I'm a people person - I love to be around them all the time. I love to meet all kinds of people. She explained. They are so fascinating. I learn so much with every person I know." Asta asked how she got to know people. "What kinds of questions do you ask them?"

Bella was confused by this question. Am I supposed to ask them about themselves? I thought they would tell me things. If they are not comfortable telling me things, I just keep the conversation going so that they are comfortable. "Do you make any longterm friends with this approach?", Asta asked. Well, of course, Bella replied. I am friends with you, aren't I? "Are you?", Asta asked. What do I bring to this relationship for you? Well, we have coffee and I like seeing you. I like to have meetings with friends on my schedule so that I know when I am free to meet other people. "How many people do you generally meet in a week?", Asta asked. "Oh, it must be hundreds", Bella replied. "Hundreds?", Asta exclaimed. "How many of these are your friends?" Bella was stumped. "Good question - I will have to think about that." Then the chatter began. I like to think of everyone as my friend so I guess the number of friends is limitless. I love all people so I can be friends with everyone. People seem to want to be my friend and I want to make them happy. Yeah, that's it, I make friends so other people can feel happy. Bella then went on to recount the dozens of new "friends" she made just that week. Well, the gas station attendant talked about the weather so he became a friend. I was in the drug store buying lotion when a woman remarked that she loved the lotion I picked and the fragrance was divine, so we became friends. I was stopped at a red light and an elderly gentleman in the car next to me asked if he could cut in front of me. I let him go ahead of me so he is a friend. I think these little acts of kindness bring you friends. Asta smiled and excused herself, saying their time was up and she looked forward to next week's meeting.

Bella couldn't help but think of her coffee conversation with Asta all week. She wondered how Asta got friends. She wondered if Asta considered her a friend. She wondered who Asta considered a friend and why. Certainly, Bella was impressed by Asta's popularity, especially because it wasn't due to her physical appearance. Asta was not bad looking. Physically she was a bit plain but her personality and something that came from inside her made her beautiful. She didn't spend as much time at the gym or primping herself as Bella did. It all just seemed to be natural. It intrigued Bella and she decided she would delve deeper into getting to know Asta by asking her questions at their next meeting.

Asta was still timing Bella to see how long it would be until she launched into her

chatter. She was making progress. It was now seven minutes before she couldn't help herself and started. Sometimes Asta would just look the other way to see if Bella even noticed that she wasn't listening. This week Asta actually thought that Bella might make a milestone leap to ten minutes. She started by asking Asta how she got so many friends. When Asta replied that she really did not have a lot of friends, Bella looked puzzled. Asta explained that she had many acquaintances but few people she considered real friends. Bella asked her to explain the difference. Asta paused. Bella looked at her quizzically but said nothing. Real friends, Asta said, showed an innate compassion for your well-being. Acquaintances were interested in what you might say that will make them feel better about themselves. Bella thought this was stunning news and at exactly nine minutes and thirty seconds, she started chatting. I get it. I am everyone's friend but they are my acquaintances. Asta summoned up her patience and smiled until the hour was up and she could excuse herself. Baby steps are baby steps and denote progress as long as they are in the right direction. Some days she wondered why she was spending time with Bella and this was certainly one of those days. When Asta had one of those days, she did one of two things. She went home and cocooned with a cup of tea and a silly movie or she called on her friend Samantha.

Bella told Asta that she was determined to get into a long term relationship. "I really know that is what I want now." "Really?", replied Asta, "How do you know that?" "Well", she explained, "I just think it's time and so many other people are doing it." "What type of man are you looking for?" "Oh, you know, stable, handsome and I wouldn't mind rich." Asta asked her to describe the types of men she was dating. Bella described them as tons of fun, fit and great looking. She figured she was currently dating seven men and most of them had jobs. "Why so many?" "Well", Bella replied, "because they asked." Asta asked her to think about each man and what she enjoyed about them. Bella was a bit stumped. She described each man and realized that each one of them could be counted on to take her someplace fun. One man always wanted to go to the movies, another one liked upscale restaurants, while another one liked to take her bowling. "Do you like bowling?" "Well, no, but it's a night out." I'd prefer to do something I'm not crazy about than spend a night home alone. "How much time do you spend alone?" "Oh, hardly any because I have so many friends and, of course I learned this from you, I also have acquaintances." "How do you intend to whittle down your seven men to just one?" Bella didn't think any of the men she was currently dating were long term relationship material. She enjoyed them but wouldn't want to spend any more time with any of them. Asta remarked that if she continued to spend her time with men that were not relationship material, she may not have the time to find the long term guy. Bella was sure she would make the time when she knew who was "the one." She had joined several dating clubs and was sure she would find the right kind of man there. Asta asked her if she had defined the qualities of the right man for her. Bella was sure she would know him when she met him. In the meantime, she would continue experimenting. At least she could figure out what she didn't want from dating these men.

The next week, Bella was all excited when they met. She was sure she had met "the one." She had gone to her first event with one of her singles dating clubs and met

Stu. Stu was tall, handsome and very confident. He whisked her off her feet. He was an archaeologist and traveled extensively. Even though they had only had one date, he had promised her he would take her on one of his archaeological trips. He showed her pictures of places he had been. They were all very exotic locales. Bella was smitten. He had taken her to his favorite diner for dinner. He must be serious if he is already taking me to his favorite place, she thought. His cell phone went off all night. He explained that he always got calls at all hours since his business was global and people never knew what time zone he was in. Even though she had been warned to wait at least three dates before sex, Bella was so sure about Stu that she spent the night. He called her two days later and explained that he suddenly got called to a dig in Argentina. He promised he would call her as soon as he was back in town.

Asta was skeptical about the sudden trip. Archaeological digs have been sitting around for centuries and don't usually require a last minute trip. She kept her thoughts to herself as Bella was so sure that he would call and she seemed genuinely so happy. The next week, Bella said she had tried the on-line version of her dating club. She was going to wait for Stu but she thought she may as well have some dates until he returned. She immediately met Nate, a college professor. Bella liked the fact that this dating club seemed to have so many smart and intellectual men. She met Nate for coffee. He opened the conversation by asking what level of education Bella had completed. When she replied that she was a college graduate, he asked her if she had any intentions of doing graduate work. Bella had never thought of it. He couldn't understand why she didn't want to "better" herself by becoming more educated. He quoted her Horace Mann, "A human being is not attaining his full heights until he is educated." "Well", she explained, "I am educated. I have a college education and I am educated in life." Heights meant a doctorate degree, according to Nate. Bella just smiled her way through the rest of the conversation. She didn't understand much of what Nate was saying and didn't know the many people he quoted. After an hour and a half, she smiled brightly and said she must leave. Nate looked a bit taken back but was gracious. Bella told Asta that he made her feel stupid and she would wait for Stu to return. He never made her feel stupid.

When Asta met Bella the next week, she knew something was up. Bella seemed so sad that she decided not to ask but to let Bella tell her when she was ready. Bella just chatted away about mundane little things. She never even got to conversation mode, she just rambled. Asta knew she must be very upset since she was using her chatter mode which kept her in her comfort zone. There was no mention of Stu or anyone else. She asked Asta what she had done all week. Asta had a very fulfilling week. She got a lot of work done and had a nice visit with her elderly friend Faith. "Is that all?", Bella asked. She thought Asta must spend her time doing fascinating things and she wanted to know what they were. She wanted to do some fascinating things and she was sure Asta could give her some ideas. "Well, I find Faith fascinating and I am truly happy when I spend time with her. We have known each other a long time and have been through some good and some bad experiences together." Bella chatted along and then suddenly said time was up and she had to fly. "Fascinating times await", she declared. Asta could only wonder what was wrong but she wanted Bella to tell her on

her own terms.

The next week Bella seemed brighter. She had met John. He was very nice to her and made her feel special. Asta asked if she was going to date him until Stu came home. Bella hadn't heard from Stu - nothing, not even an email to say he was safe. She wasn't sure what to do about him. Asta asked if she had his email or phone number. Bella confessed that she only had his email. She had emailed him every day since he left and he had not responded. She had decided to give some other guys a chance until he came back and explained. She was sure it was nothing, he probably didn't have an Internet connection in Argentina. Asta knew Bella was lying to herself. She was sure she had regretted sleeping with him on the first date but Asta did not need to remind her that she had broken the rules. She was hurt enough.

Asta was always amazed at Bella's stamina when it came to dating. Even when they met for coffee, Bella was in full flirt mode. She never wanted to be seen in any other way than alluring. It was a learned behavior and Asta was sure that Bella was hardly even aware of it. She wanted to attract everyone to her. Asta thought it was both confusing and sad. Bella was beautiful enough to not have to constantly bat her eyelashes and lick her lips. She didn't even realize when she was doing it. Asta thought that, when Bella finally got into a meaningful relationship that fulfilled her, she would calm down and her own serene beauty would be more evident. She just didn't know how that could happen with Bella's dating habits and strategy. She felt badly for her lost friend and frustrated as well. Bella just couldn't hear certain things, even if she was the one who said them. She had started reading self help books to assist her in finding her long term relationship. She could quote from the books and she knew their lessons well enough that she seemed like an expert. It was just that there is a whole lot of difference in talking the talk than walking the walk. No matter how many times Bella read which behaviors would not lead to a long term relationship, she couldn't absorb their meaning. She didn't correlate her actions to the results. These books promised certain results from certain behaviors. Bella continually behaved in ways that would not lead to a relationship. She said she completely understood but her true talent was in rationalizing why her behavior did not match the "do not" behaviors in the books.

Asta was very curious about Bella's upbringing. Even though Bella could have learned to flirt in school or with girlfriends, there must have been some support at home. She decided to delve a little deeper into Bella's family life. Bella had grown up in a wealthy family and there were certain expectations. She was to be educated and then marry a man from their social circles and start a family. She was to join the country club like her parents and play tennis. She would join a garden club even though she employed a gardener. Her older sister had met these expectations and there was pressure on Bella to do the same. She moved away from her family in order to have more independence. She wasn't ready to be a clone of her mother. She really wanted to have fun first. Asta asked her how often she visited her family. Bella only went when required, which meant holidays, weddings and funerals. "Do they ever visit you here?", she asked. "Not yet, but I don't have enough room to put them up." "They could stay in a hotel." "I guess so. I just haven't made it happen." Asta had to admit to herself that there was something fishy about Bella's reluctance to spend time with her family. It

could be true that she was just an independent spirit, but then why the obsession with being in a relationship and spending any time alone? It wasn't like she was going to grill Bella for more information, she was just curious about the dichotomy in thinking.

At one point, Bella was in a relationship for six months. This was the longest any of her relationships had lasted since Asta had met her. His name was Daniel and he was from a very wealthy family. He was well-mannered but a bit eccentric. He was educated in private schools and had not socialized much. He seemed unaware of most of the everyday realities of most of the human race. He also seemed a bit frail emotionally. Since Bella was not in his social circles, she seemed exotic to him, even though her upbringing was privileged. It was just that he was in a class all his own. He took Bella to all sorts of society events. Of course, Bella's beauty drew a lot of attention and she was regularly photographed for the society columns in the newspapers. Daniel's reality dazzled Bella. He thought nothing of flying down to Palm Beach for an afternoon in his private jet. He wanted to be seen with Bella so the awkward, shy Daniel took her everywhere. Some people were even surprised to see Daniel as he was not in the habit of playing the social circuit. Although Bella was enthralled with the idea of living Daniel's lifestyle, she wasn't so sure how she felt about him. When they were at social events, he was easy to be with because there was always someone else to talk to. When they were alone, he was quiet and withdrawn and this bored her. Asta could not help but draw a parallel between the two of them; Bella who avoided her family but always wanted to be with people and Daniel who stayed close to his family and did not necessarily want to be around people all the time. Asta had a hunch that he was wooing Bella with his social circuit but that, once he had closed the deal, he would prefer to be homebodies.

One day when they met for coffee, Bella told Asta that she had broken off her relationship with Daniel. She explained that she felt like his jewelry. He wanted to wear her when they went out but he wanted to take her off and store her away in a box when they were alone. She had felt lonely in their relationship. She admitted that this was the first time that she was the instigator in a breakup. She felt sad but also happy that she had the courage to do it. It might have been easier to wait until Daniel got tired of the social whirl. Bella realized that she wanted to get back to a normal life. Asta was proud of Bella for taking the initiative. She noticed that there had been a bit of a bump in her self-esteem and that she seemed to enjoy taking circumstances into her own hands. Perhaps she is maturing, Asta thought, or perhaps she is starting to be ready to make some real decisions on how her life goes. Either way, Asta was impressed and happy for Bella.

Jake

Jake woke and went to the calendar to cross off and number another day - 27 days now. He had been clean for 27 days. Being clean was easier than being sober.

Smack was expensive and had a much longer recuperation time. He also had lost much more control of his actions when he was high. He used to be able to get high, have a great time and function the next day. Nowadays, he would get high and continue getting high for days, often spending money he didn't have to keep it up.

Of course, it was easier for Jake now that his wife had moved on and he had the perfect job. He was a field sales person so he worked by himself and made his own hours. He would get up, go to his appointments, sell some product and have the rest of the day to play. He would go home on weekends and visit his kids in the morning so he could keep up his schedule of activities in the morning and being wasted the rest of the day.

Being clean meant no drugs but alcohol and smoking cigarettes was okay. It just meant he went to different meetings to proclaim his success over substances. He would go to his meeting in the afternoon and proclaim 27 days of no drugs. These days he "missed" the meetings for alcoholics but it didn't matter because he was clean and successful in the narc meetings.

His family life was easier to handle now - everything was under his control. He could schedule meetings with the kids and his responsibilities were clear - write a check once a month and show up weekend mornings. This left the rest of the time for himself and he could still have the impression that he was a family man. He could always pretend that Deb left him for her new husband. He wanted to be around people all the time. He enjoyed sharing the house with his wife and kids. Jake had found that stifling. He needed his space. He wanted to get up to a quiet house. He didn't want to be nagged about walking the dog or chauffeuring the kids around to their multiple activities. He was happy that Deb had found someone to do that with her.

For Jake, life was perfect. He had done all the normal things men of his age do - graduated college, married, had a family and gotten divorced. He could cross those things off his list. He had been through a number of jobs but this one had stuck. He didn't have to work in an office around other people. He didn't have to report to work at a certain time and he made good money. He made an excuse every time there was an office social event so he didn't have to mingle with the rest of the office. People in the office liked Jake well enough. He was always funny and he made his numbers. He was very easy going with his support staff, never demanding and made sure they all got their piece of the action. This was how he liked it. He figured the easiest way to work with other people was to give them what they wanted so they would leave him alone.

He used his sense of humor to make people think he was more sociable. He never went to social events and spent most of his time alone. Since he never attended events and was so funny, most people thought he couldn't get to parties because he had so many to go to. The truth was he never attended any. Everyone thought he was at another party so that is why he wasn't at theirs. It didn't stop people from inviting him. He had many invitations every weekend. There were the other Dads who thought he would like the company. They thought that, since their kids were friends, they would have something in common. Little did they know they had absolutely nothing in common with Jake's secret life. If they had any idea, there would be no more invitations. There were invitations from women who thought they could fix him up with

another single parent. Little did they know the only type of fix Jake would be interested in.

Most people thought that Jake just needed the "right" woman - strong and pretty - to complete his life. They all figured he was dating and they just needed to find the right one. He could get married again and be happy. No one thought the worst of Deb for marrying him. They didn't blame her for the divorce. Sometimes things just don't work out. They could have been too young when they married. There is a lot of stress a first marriage - developing a career and having children can be overwhelming. It was true that Jake lost a few jobs when his children were first born but he had his footing now.

Deb just wanted stability and she worried about his absence. He would always be physically present but he was not there. She was lonely around him and he did not participate in family activities. It got to the point that he would not spend any time with them. Divorce was the last thing she wanted. She loved Jake and loved their family but something was missing. When Deb went to counseling to figure out what she could do, the therapist suggested she go to group meetings for people living with alcoholics. Deb was flabbergasted. Jake wasn't an alcoholic. He liked his cocktails like she did but he was responsible about it. The therapist explained that one doesn't need to be actively drinking like an alcoholic to be engaging in the social behavior of an alcoholic.

Deb did as suggested and went to the meetings. She was completely taken by surprise to meet other spouses, men and women, who were living in relationships that were like hers. In her mind, the ones who were living with people who were drinking "like an alcoholic" had it easier. It was easier when they were out drinking all night and getting arrested for driving under the influence because it was more obvious and events like arrests and being kicked out of bars provided proof of the problem as well as witnesses. Deb wasn't exactly sure what to do with this new information. She studied all of the pamphlets and read as much material as she could. She learned a lot but what she didn't learn was what to do with this information. How should she present it to Jake? How could she present it so that he wouldn't react or overreact? She didn't really have the tools to know how to communicate so that Jake could feel safe enough to respond in a manner that might present a solution.

When she finally did speak to Jake, she did it when they were alone. She planned sleep overs for the kids at their friends homes on Friday night. She planned a long hike on Saturday morning with Jake. He seemed okay with the hike although he was very quiet and a bit sullen on Friday night. He drank some wine and went to sleep early, saying he wanted to be rested for the hike.

Jake surprised Deb the first few months of his plan. He decided he would go to meetings for alcoholics and would plan his sobriety around what he learned there. Jake actually found it easy to abstain from alcohol and it seemed to make Deb happy so all seemed well again. He certainly wasn't ready for any other solution. They all seemed too stringent, too constrained. Deb had suggested counseling. Jake was certain he wanted to avoid that.

The problem with Jake's sobriety was that his behavior really didn't change. He was still remote and uninterested in family activities. He spent time at meetings instead

of with the family. He seemed to be a super star at his alcoholic meetings. This seemed to supersede any need to be a super star family man.

Of course, Jake was sober in the alcoholic sense but he found another way to compress his feelings and escape. Jake was now doing drugs on the road Monday through Thursday and sweating it out Friday through Sunday until his next trip. He explained to Deb that he should really leave on Sunday to get a jump start on his Monday appointments, which always seemed to be on the other side of the state. This schedule left only Friday and Saturday to live the lie.

It was on one of his Sunday afternoon flights that Jake met Asta. He was getting a coffee at the airport and she was getting tea. They left the kiosk and walked to the same gate. She instigated the conversation, remarking how a nice warm drink always made the flight easier. She hated flying on Sunday afternoon, she remarked, as Sunday should be a day of rest and reflection. Jake certainly believed in the reflection, as he contemplated where he would score drugs when he landed. He had suppliers in most of his territories but this trip was to a new client so he would have to do some searching.

There was something about Asta that made Jake feel comfortable. He, of course, didn't have to discuss his life of lies but he did want to tell her about himself. There was something about her that made this seem not only possible but appealing. Asta had recognized the sadness in his eyes, the stature of someone very ill at ease in their own skin. People who travel on Sunday afternoon, Asta believed, were people who didn't want to stay home. They didn't want to spend the afternoon with their loved ones and fly in the evening. It was an escape from home to leave early if you didn't have to. Asta was doing the same thing herself. She had ended her relationship with Aaron and didn't want to feel alone at home on a Sunday afternoon when they used to be together.

Asta wasn't interested in starting a new relationship just yet. She had noticed Jake's wedding ring. She just couldn't help but see the lost soul look on his face. She had no idea just how lost Jake was but thought a casual conversation in the airport was better than sitting there listening to her depressing book on her iPod. The conversation was easy enough. He was a bright, funny man and he seemed to love to talk. When they boarded the plane, Jake moved his seat to continue talking with her.

Asta intrigued Jake. It wasn't that he was attracted to her. He was married and intended to be faithful to Deb. It's just that Asta seemed to understand something about him. She seemed to know what he was thinking. She was a great conversationalist and he enjoyed speaking with her. At this point in his life, Jake enjoyed talking to no one so this woman really held his interest. How did she do it? He wanted to know everything about her but she steered the conversation to focus on him.

They discussed art, culture, politics, mortality and just about anything else that Jake could conjure up. Jake felt that he had a million conversations in his head that he had never spoke out loud and that Asta was the perfect person to partake in these conversations. She had no judgment about his views, seemed to accept all of his premises and was open to everything. It's not that she agreed with every one of Jake's viewpoints, but she challenged them from an intellectual stand point which seemed non-threatening, even inspiring. Most of the people in Jake's world never thought about the things that Asta seemed to think about all of the time. How amazing that getting a

cup of coffee at the airport would result in some of the most interesting conversations Jake had had in years. When their flight landed, Jake made a bold move by asking Asta for some contact information. She was continuing on the next leg of the flight so this was his only chance. He would be okay with email, but he really enjoyed the conversation and was hoping she would be comfortable enough to give him her phone number.

Asta really didn't mind giving him her home phone. She had enjoyed his rambling thoughts and felt that he had a lot more to say. As long as it remained a phone relationship, she was okay with it. She told him she would not meet him in person because he was married and should be spending face time with his wife instead of in the air on Sunday afternoons. Jake didn't mind the mild rebuke. He appreciated her honesty. He decided it was best to tell her about his children as well so she would know he meant to be honest. Although Asta recognized this as an honest gesture, she felt there was a lot more dishonesty about Jake than honesty. Her best guess was that Jake practiced honesty by omission. He would tell you things so that you thought he was being revealing. He revealed enough about himself to allow him to omit some of the more important matters.

Jake started calling Asta every Friday morning. Asta tried to generate excitement about going home for the weekend in these phone calls. She asked him what his children would be doing and how he would be participating. He mainly recited some activities he thought his kids enjoyed. He wasn't really sure what they did or where Deb took them on weekend days. He had avoided these activities for long enough that he was out of touch. The fact that Asta asked made Jake want to re-connect with the kids and to learn about their activities. It wasn't that he was interested in participating. He just wanted to be able to report to Asta so that she would think he was a good father. His motivation was purely to feel the appreciation and insight Asta would provide if he reported on their activities. Asta seemed to know a lot about kids activities. She didn't have children of her own but she seemed to be surrounded by children of all ages through friends and family. Asta hoped that making Jake's children a topic of conversation, he might actually make the effort to get to know them. It wasn't that he didn't love his children, he just hadn't bothered to know them once they were a little more independent. Jake's priorities, as always, was keeping up appearances just enough so that he could get to his escapes.

Deb noticed the seemingly renewed interest in the children on Jake's part. She encouraged him to come see for himself what the kids did on weekends. He drew the line at participation. He seemed to just want to hear about it. Deb had become increasingly unsure about the relationship. Although Jake had stopped drinking, he still didn't participate in the family. Deb was sure there was more to it. He refused to go to counseling, saying there wasn't enough time on weekends. Deb started to confront Jake more about their marriage. He insisted he was happy and didn't want to change anything. He insisted he didn't know what would make Deb happy. He thought she should be happy. Didn't he provide for them? He had stopped drinking to make her happy - wasn't that enough?

Deb finally decided she needed to dig deeper. She started by combing through

his credit card statements. She told him she would prepare his expense reports so that he didn't need to spend so much time on weekends doing them. He gladly handed over his receipts. Deb checked and re-checked the stubs for a clue into what he was doing when he was traveling. She found nothing that seemed out of the ordinary. The one item that did stand out was the amount of cash he carried. He explained that he didn't want to look for an ATM all the time. It was easier and faster to carry cash. This made Deb sure there was something else going on. She decided to check his phone records. It took several months of checking to see the Friday morning pattern. This phone number was not an office number. The calls were at least an hour long each week. Who could this be?

Deb finally decided to ask Jake about the phone calls. He got furious and told her it was none of her business. At this point, and with a lot of support from her friends at the meetings, Deb had realized that Jake was just not present and that she wanted someone who would participate. Who did he spend an hour on the phone with every week instead of talking to her? The confrontation was not pleasant and Jake felt guilty about it. He decided to give up his conversations with Asta for a while until Deb calmed down. Deb did not relent in her questioning. When she saw the phone calls stop, her suspicions grew. Finally, she confronted Jake, told him she was not happy in the marriage. She gave him a choice - counseling or divorce. Jake said he would have to think about it. That was enough for Deb to realize her marriage was in serious jeopardy. Would she really divorce Jake? She had to think of the children but they seemed to hardly know Jake. In fact, they never even asked if he was coming home any more. Everyone had compromised to allow Jake to continue his lifestyle. Deb had met people who had successfully moved on after divorce and created new relationships between their children and their ex. She wondered if she could make that happen. It wasn't that she was looking to be with another man. She just wanted to be in a relationship. Jake and she had very different ideas about relationships. When they married, they seemed to be in agreement but he had changed over the years. She began to wonder if he wasn't hiding some homosexual tendencies as he was far from interested in intimacy.

Jake took a week to respond to Deb's ultimatum. He told her he was truly sorry she wasn't happy but there was nothing more he could give her. He said he didn't understand her unhappiness and probably just wasn't good enough for her. He told her he loved her and would provide financially for her and their children but there wasn't much more he could do.

Deb decide to try one more tactic. She asked him if the issues were sexual. It was obvious that they were not an intimate couple. Were those phone calls to a male love interest? Jake reacted with disbelief. Didn't I father two children with you? In Jake's irate reactionary state, he told Deb that those calls were to a female friend. Deb could not believe the vehemence of Jake's reaction. She had not seen this much passion or excitement from him in more than a year. She demanded to know everything about this woman. And so, Jake told Deb about Asta. He explained that it was completely platonic and that Asta had insisted they refrain from meeting in person so as not to jeopardize his marriage. Deb told Jake that there were other ways to carry out an affair that did not include actual sexual contact. He had used Asta for his emotional

needs rather than confiding in his wife. Deb said she was filing for divorce on the grounds of infidelity. Jake exploded and dared her to try it. Deb was so convinced he had had an affair because of his furious denial.

Jake left the house and went to a hotel. The first thing he did was call Asta but she didn't answer. He left her a message. He realized that Asta had never called him. He was always the instigator. He wasn't even sure if she still had his number. Although she could read it off the caller id, he decided to call and leave another message with his cell phone number. He was desperate to talk to her. He felt that Deb had denied him the pleasure of his conversations with Asta and, now that she knew about them, he would be damned if he would refrain to keep her happy. Hadn't he done enough to keep her happy? Hadn't he quit drinking to make her happy? Didn't he keep out of her hair so she and the kids could do whatever they wanted? He had never demanded anything from them. He kept them warm and fed and they should appreciate that. It wasn't easy facing prospects every day and trying to sell them something in order to allow them to live the lifestyle they wanted. Didn't he do enough? Wasn't he enough? What more could he do?

The frustration boiled over so that Jake went out on a real binge. He stayed high for days, calling in sick to work. He just stayed in that hotel and stayed high. This was his comfort zone. He was tired of trying to appease everyone else and make them comfortable. This was where he felt good, felt adequate, felt appreciated and felt completely alone.

When he finally talked to Asta he was over his binge. He did not want to talk to her when he was high. She mustn't know about his drug habit. Although she had called him back, he didn't return the call until he was in a more stable place. He certainly did not want to disappoint her. He told her about Deb's accusations and the impending divorce. Asta listened and challenged Jake. What did he want? More importantly, what did he want from Deb? What kind of relationship did he want with his children? Did he want his relationship with his children to be similar to his relationship with his father? From what Asta knew, Jake's father was a warm and loving man. He supported Jake in most everything he did. Wasn't this a great role model?

Jake broke down and said he didn't know how to be a father or a husband. He didn't really think he wanted to be either. He did it because it was expected. Asta told Jake that he was lying to himself and, until he was honest with himself, no relationship would work. Asta's suspicions were growing stronger that Jake had a secret life.

Asta, being Asta, decided it would be the right move to contact Deb and see if she was open to a conversation. If Deb wanted to believe that Asta was the cause of the failure of the marriage, Asta wanted her to know that there was more to it than that. They both had suspicions about Jake's behavior. It was just that Deb was married to him and she might want to make more of a commitment to finding out the truth. Asta knew it would be easier if Deb just gave up and divorced him but there had been a time when Deb had truly loved Jake enough to commit her life to him. Perhaps she shouldn't give up so easily.

Asta tracked down Deb by doing an on-line search. She chose a time of day when she knew the children would not be home. She calmly dialed the number and

crossed her fingers that Deb would answer and want to talk. Deb did answer. Asta introduced herself and apologized for calling out of the blue. She explained that she knew from what Jake had told her that Deb was invested in her marriage. Asta expressed compassion for Deb's predicament and offered any help one woman could provide to another in a relationship crisis.

Deb was not sure what to think about Asta. She certainly had to hand it to her - she was gutsy to call a woman who was accusing her of having an affair with her husband. Asta gave Deb a lot more explicit details about her relationship with Jake. She explained that Jake was a lost soul to her and that her hope was that, in giving him an audience, he would learn how to communicate with his family better. Her deep regret was that it only seemed to worsen. Asta expressed her suspicions about Jake's secret life. She couldn't put her finger on it, but there was something that was driving him that he guarded with all his life. Deb started to feel comfortable with the conversation with Asta so they decided to meet for coffee the next week. Both agreed that Jake was to be kept in the dark about their conversations and meeting.

Over the first few months, the meetings between Deb and Asta centered around Jake and an understanding of his addictions. Deb really did not want to divorce him, but she was determined for her children to have an active father. If Jake was not going to fill those shoes, she was going to find a way for them. She did not want them to come from a single parent home. She was angry that Jake would be able to get off the hook and avoid his responsibilities. However, her first responsibility was to provide a safe and stable home for her children. Asta noticed that Deb had already started calling them "her children" as opposed to "their children." When she mentioned this to Deb, she sighed and said, "In some ways, I guess I already know the answer but it is difficult to swallow. I wish I had known more before I had children with him."

Eventually, Deb went through with the divorce. She found a family therapist to help the three of them through whatever hurdles they ran into. Deb's biggest quandary was whether or not to reveal to the children that their father was an addict. Certainly, they were too young now but at some point she may have to delicately broach the subject. She wasn't sure what Jake's level of involvement would be after the divorce. He had been generous in his financial support of the children. She couldn't tell how long he would continue to show up for visitations. All she could do was keep her fingers crossed and a smile on her face for the children.

When Deb met Charlie at a meeting one night, she was surprised at her reaction. She knew she wanted to be involved in another committed relationship but she didn't remember how it felt when you first met. She immediately noticed Charlie, but avoided him. She was taken with an attack of shyness, an almost teenager like fear. He was outgoing and confident and she felt like a wall flower. When the meeting ended, she quickly gathered her purse and ran out the door, red faced. "Why do I feel like this?" she asked herself out loud when she was safely alone in her car. She was sure he hadn't noticed her and she scolded herself for overreacting. She decided to go to a different meeting the next week, convincing herself that her regular meeting didn't fit her schedule that week. When she returned to her regular meeting two weeks later, she was heartily greeted. "Where were you last week?" several people asked. "Oh, busy so

I went to another meeting. Of course, I missed you all and am glad to be back." There was no sign of Charlie and she wasn't sure if she was relieved or disappointed. He showed up towards the end of the meeting and quietly sat down so as not to disturb the proceedings. Okay, Deb thought, do I avoid him or take this head on? He's just a man and I shouldn't be such a ninny about it. She thought if she at least acknowledged him, it might take the spell off. "Was it a spell or was she just crazy?" The butterflies in her stomach told her that she was not responding to him in the way that she responded to all of the other men in all of the other meetings she had attended. Oh well, she thought, I may as well break the curse.

When the meeting ended, Charlie made a bee line for another woman in the group. Deb knew her and knew she had just finalized her divorce. Oh well, she thought, I've just been silly about this. He is clearly interested in her. She chuckled to herself and headed to her car. When she exited the elevator in the parking garage, she almost bumped into him as he exited from the stairwell. "Oh, hi!", he said, "sorry I was doing my stair jogging." "Hello, that's okay," Deb said but she appeared startled. Charlie apologized again, saying he was usually going too fast and should be more careful. "Well, that's okay," Deb said again. "I'm Charlie," he said and offered a hand energetically. "Deb here," she said. "Well, it's nice to be introduced to you. Will I see you at the meeting next week?", Charlie offered. "Sure thing," Deb said trying to sound effortless and confident. "Good," Charlie said, "everyone really missed you last week." Deb reddened at this knowing that she had blown off the meeting in order to avoid him. "Well," she said hesitantly, "see you then." She started to walk to her car and Charlie stood there with an interesting look on his face. "I would like to walk you to your car, just to be safe." "Okay," she agreed. Her car was about ten steps away. When Charlie realized this, he laughed. "Well, so much for chivalry, I could have watched you walk to your car." Something in his lightness made Deb relax enough to sass him a bit. "Chivalry is not counted in steps, but in intention," she said and winked at him. He laughed in an embarrassed manner, waved and said, "See ya." "See ya," she replied.

Deb started seeing Charlie on the sly for a few months before she was ready to go public. They told the people in their meeting about their intensified friendship and asked them to keep it confidential. Deb needed more time before she told her children. Charlie was happy to be patient about meeting her children. He was someone who believed that children came first and that adults needed to make sacrifices in order for them to enjoy a fulfilling childhood. Charlie did not have much of a childhood, he had had to grow up fast and early and, if he were to have children, he had vowed that they would be able to enjoy being a kid for as long as it was appropriate. After six months, Deb and Charlie were ready to make enough of a commitment to introduce him to her children. They had discussed marriage in a casual manner, but everything depended on the response from the kids. They adopted a very patient "wait and see" strategy for their relationship. Deb was extremely anxious as she knew that she really wanted to be with Charlie. If her children objected, she knew deep down that she wasn't ready to give up the relationship in order to appease them.

Once it was decided, Deb talked to her children over the dinner table one evening. She specifically chose this evening because she knew their homework was

done and neither of them had big projects on the horizon for a few days. If there was upset, she wanted to minimize the impact on their school and activities. Deb was surprised at their reaction. They didn't get upset but they definitely became pensive. Her daughter screwed up her nose and asked if Charlie knew Daddy. "No, he doesn't know Daddy." Her son asked if they were going to get to meet Charlie. "Whenever you want to," replied Deb. "Well, let's meet him and see what he is like." Charlie came over the next Sunday in the morning. They had breakfast together and then went to an amusement park. These were Charlie's suggestions. He wanted to give them time to spend in a quiet setting as well in an environment with plenty of distraction. Besides, Charlie loved to do kid activities and was relishing the thought of taking kids to an amusement park. Deb had prepared the kids and they had chosen which amusement park they wanted to go to. The day went as well as could be expected. After Charlie had left, Deb and the kids sat down for dinner and she waited for any kind of reaction and feedback. They actually seemed excited and asked when Charlie was coming over again. Deb breathed a big sigh of relief and couldn't wait to tell Charlie. Three years and many trips to the amusement park later, Deb and Charlie married. The kids were the wedding party and everyone, including Asta, had a great time. Deb hadn't realized just how much the absence of a father in the house had weighed on her. She felt completely happy and thankful that she had found a great man to be a father to her children.

Jake took Deb's remarriage in stride. He was isolating more and more. He continued with his financial support but was relieved in a way that Charlie took on the weekly activities. It was getting harder and harder to clean up before his scheduled visits. He was glad the kids seemed to like Charlie and wished them all well. His meetings with Asta became more sporadic. He was starting to lose his grip and she knew only he could make a difference. She continued her friendship with Deb and the two of them prayed that someday Jake would wake up and see what he was missing in life. In the meantime, they had their friendship and both were grateful to Jake for that.

The Gathering

Asta took the news in stride. Although it was not the news she had wanted to hear, she had had suspicions about her doctor's report. She was indeed in a health challenge and she needed to get her affairs in order. One is never really prepared for news of their mortality, she supposed, but she wanted to face it and address it with the grace and compassion she had experienced throughout her life. Asta had made a practice, even a discipline, of finding ways to contribute, mostly to individual people and, to a lesser degree, to organizations. She was an avid volunteer for community causes which provided her with a means of meeting many people with diverse personalities and backgrounds. This was her passion, meeting people, listening to people, learning from people and contributing to people. Asta would never bear a child but she would nurture many as if they were her own children, no matter what their age or maturity level.

Asta spent her last months making the rounds of people in her life. She told

them all of her plans so there would be few surprises. Although everyone dreaded the day, they were as prepared as one could be. Asta had faced the situation with grace and acceptance and she wanted them to do the same. When the time came it was swift and painless and Asta looked very peaceful and happy. She actually had teased them with a few clues about who they would meet at her services so that they would be looking forward to them. Although everyone always felt that they knew Asta, they were all about to find there were several facets to her that they did not know about.

Over the years the attendees had changed but the originals still came. It was as if, although Asta was gone, they were still unearthing information and qualities about her as if she was still alive and generating new inspirations. Anyone who knew Asta knew she was unique and loving, they just couldn't seem to find the bottom of her limitless well of compassion and good will towards others.

Gerry presided over the event each year much as he did the first year. He had a montage of pictures of Asta spread around the room. He simply stated that they were there to learn from each other through the common thread of having had some exposure to Asta. It didn't matter if you actually knew her personally. Everyone was invited to speak about anything that came to mind when they were reminded of her.

Sam spoke first. She told of the incredible strength and loyalty she had bestowed upon her by Asta. Sam thought that one of the best ways to show respect for the essence of life was to create. Creation could take place in any medium. For Sam and Rick, the creation that Asta inspired was their two children. She explained that they were unsure of themselves in the realm of parent hood and Asta, although not a mother herself, had shown wisdom, patience and compassion for their quandary. Asta knew, Sam explained, that Rick and I were meant to be parents, that the fact that we had questions before making a life long commitment to children was indicative of how serious we were about the responsibility. I never saw Asta happier than when Rick and I first conceived. She was like a doting grandmother to our first child and made double the amount of fuss when we had our second child. Our children knew Asta as a loving aunt and they would squeal with delight when she arrived.

One day, our children asked us what Asta did for a living. We live in the next town over so we use a different library than the one Asta worked in. We decided we would take a field trip to Asta's library. I warned Asta ahead of time so she could make arrangements to join us for dinner afterward. Asta made such a big deal out of their arrival that they felt they were in Disneyland. She impressed them with the importance of reading and learning. She made the day so special that our kids wanted to go to her library all the time. She explained to them that , through the sharing system they had been able to install, they would have access to everything in her library by signing up for it from their library. They thought this was terrific. They were suddenly much more interested in going to the library. In fact, our youngest is now studying library science. Her dream is to work in Asta's library.

Gerry then led Faith up to the front of the room. Gerry remembered Faith from her husband's memorial. He had been an assistant funeral director when her husband died. Although he did not know the specifics of her circumstances, it was obvious her husband had suffered a violent death. He had felt compassion for the young widow

who seemed to have lived a troubled life. He was also impressed at her grace and spirit through a few very tough days. The visitors to her husband's service had been quite colorful. Although they were respectful and humble, some of them seemed quite threatening. Gerry was happy to meet Faith again and wondered how it was that she had become close with Asta. Gerry stayed in the front of the room with Faith. He knew this would be difficult for her and he felt some of the same protectiveness as he had years before. "I can't believe they are both gone before me," Faith began. Of course, everyone wondered who she might be referring to in the other person. She spoke of the day when she met a wonderful young man as her new neighbor. She told them how he had taken her under his wing and helped her around the yard. She recounted their Sunday dinners and the stories of the women he dated. "None of these women seemed to suit him, they were either not smart enough or not serious enough. He had plenty of choices but he never seemed happy with any of them until he met Asta. I remember the look on his face when he told me he had met her. I knew then that she was special because, even though they had just met, it was obvious he felt quite deeply about her." She spoke of her initial meeting with Asta and the lovely gift she had brought with her. "Asta was a well-mannered woman. She was deeply concerned that I had gone to too much trouble at our first meeting. Although I had gone to a great deal of trouble, I never regretted it. She was more than worth it. I remember the way Aaron looked at her and acted around her. His eyes shone with a sparkle that I had not seen. Aaron was a composer and I would see his lights on when he worked. After he met Asta, those lights stayed on late into the night and sometimes into the early morning. He confessed to me that he was composing a movement in his symphony to her and was deeply inspired."

"Asta and Aaron had a wonderful relationship and I was happy to benefit from it as I gained another deep, loyal friendship with Asta that endured for years after she and Aaron parted ways". There were many people in the room that did not know about Asta's love for Aaron. "When they decided to go their separate ways, Aaron was distraught. I continued to see his lights on late at night. When I asked him about it, he said that he had decided to complete the movement for Asta even though they would not be a part of each other's lives. He would always love her in some way and he had a great deal of respect and admiration for her. He said she still inspired him so he was going to use that energy in his work." Gerry could see many in the audience looking around to see if anyone else knew about this relationship. He certainly had not known about Aaron. He had a friendship with Asta that was a little bit more than their professional relationship but he had never asked her about her personal life. It did not seem appropriate. He could tell by the expressions on the faces in the room that many others did not know about her relationship with Aaron either.

Faith went on to explain her joy when Asta contacted her a few weeks later. She had loved Asta as a dear friend and did not want to lose that friendship. She could understand, under the circumstances, if Asta did not want to see Aaron, but she hoped that those feelings were not true for her. She had not had the chance to speak to Asta before the break up about what their friendship might be like. It didn't seem right to think that way. When Asta called, Faith almost jumped for joy. She had missed her

terribly. She understood if Faith did not want to visit but she wanted to find a way to see her. Asta knew Aaron's teaching schedule so they chose a time when they knew he wouldn't be home and Asta picked Faith up. Asta did not want to upset Aaron by hanging around his house so this seemed to be a workable solution. The two women continued to meet about once a month for years. Their relationship was based on their friendship now, it did not depend on Aaron. Asta said many times that one of the great benefits of her relationship with Aaron was her friendship with Faith. Faith paused and seemed a bit hesitant but then continued, "If they were not going to marry one another, I suppose they would not marry anyone, but I had hoped for both of them that they would find someone who could make them each as happy as they seemed to make each other."

Faith looked hesitantly at Gerry and he nodded understanding. He invited everyone to take a break and enjoy some refreshments before continuing. He escorted Faith to a comfortable chair and brought her the coffee and cookies she requested. Sam immediately went to Faith's side and took her hand. She didn't know why she felt such a strong connection to this woman but she had a hunch that the conversations between Faith and Asta were as meaningful as the ones she had enjoyed with Asta.

Bella also flew to Faith's side. She bombarded her with questions about Aaron until Sam asked her to please give Faith some space. Bella said she understood and then reverted back to her old habit of chattering. She really had gotten better about it but Asta's passing had thrown her for a loop. She just did not know how she was going to survive without Asta. She said that she never realized that Asta could have had a broken heart, Asta never spoke about it. Of course, she knew a little bit about Paul but didn't think it was that big of a deal. "Who's Paul?", asked Faith. "Why he was your neighbor," replied Bella. "You must be mistaken, I was speaking about Aaron, I don't know anything about someone named Paul." "Oh," said Bella, "well Paul is here. I knew him from community events. He must feel really badly about Asta." "Well, we don't know about that," said Sam defensively. She didn't know who Bella was but she wanted her to leave Faith alone. Bella said she was going to find Paul and get to the bottom of this.

When Bella found Paul, she blurted out "How could you have done this to Asta?" Paul replied, "Excuse me, I don't recall meeting you." "Of course you've met me, we met when I met Asta. I just don't know what I am going to do without her. Don't you feel guilty for breaking her heart?" "I'm afraid you are mistaking me for Aaron," replied Paul. "Asta and I were just friends, good friends, but only friends." "I am so upset about this, I will never meet anyone like her again. She was the best friend I could ever have, and she listened to me. No one listens to me, but she did." Paul wasn't sure if she wanted a response or just wanted to talk as she continued right into her next random thought. Bella was not exactly soft spoken so when she approached Paul, Sam noticed him for the first time since that weekend many years ago. Sam's feelings toward Paul softened when she saw his face. Even though she knew that Asta was unhappy with the way their friendship had ended, she could see that Paul was bereft. Sam hoped that, at some point, she would get the chance to speak with Paul about his feelings for Asta. In her mind, there was much more to this story. She wanted to get Paul's side of

things. She wanted to get some peace of mind about them even if it was too late for Asta to understand what went on in Paul's mind. Sam knew her friend well enough to know that she would have wanted to make peace with Paul. Asta was only interested in the best for her friends, no matter what. She had enjoyed her time with Paul and would want him to know how grateful she was for those days. She had missed him, to be sure, but she wanted him to be happy.

Bella moved on from Paul and Gerry had come to comfort Faith so Sam approached Paul. "Do you remember me?, she asked. "I was at the volunteer event years ago with Asta. We were contemplating parent hood and she had recommended we come and observe families first hand. We didn't work in the kitchen but we did take a tour together at the end of the weekend." Paul hesitated. He wasn't sure how much she knew about the disruption in his friendship with Asta. Sam put her hand on his arm and said, "This isn't easy for any one of us. I knew Asta well and I am sure she would be happy that you are here. She really enjoyed her time with you." Paul smiled a little sheepishly. "I've missed her so much, I just kept thinking that one day I would bump into her to make things right. She didn't deserve to be left without answers." His voice was shaky and his eyes moist. If there was one thing that Asta always did, it was to lose no time in making things right with people. Sam suspected that Asta had tried a few times with Paul but to no avail. "Someday, when you are ready, I would like to hear your side of things. I know she cared about your friendship a lot. Asta would not have cared about you if you weren't worth it." "But that's just the point," Paul exclaimed, "she did care about people that no one else would have bothered with." "You are right about that and what I meant was that she would have let you go without a fight if she didn't see value in the time you spent together. Although she never gave up on anybody, she did let people go. Let's remember that we will always have her in common so, if there is a time you want to talk about it, I am open to hearing. "Thank you," said Paul, "I really appreciate that. I learned a lot from her and I always wanted to make it right. I was just being a guy and being afraid that she would be disappointed in me. I don't think I ever came to grips with my real feelings for her. I was immature about the whole thing. I guess I just ran from it. I mean, she was so fiercely independent, I was afraid she wouldn't want me to have a bigger role in her life."

"Did you know about Aaron?" Paul replied, "I knew that she was in a relationship with someone who wrote a symphony for her. She used to talk about it in terms of cooking. She greatly respected his talent and felt that, for her, that energy was directed in the kitchen. She used to call our meals a symphony or work of art - many elements blended together to become a thing of beauty. We used to talk about the different ways to look at nutrition, art as a nutrient, music as a nutrient and it is from there that she drew the comparison." "Interesting", said Sam, "and so Asta." At that they both smiled.

When Jake walked into the funeral home and looked around, he was surprised to see Deb. What was she doing here, he wondered. She had accused Jake of having an affair with Asta, she thought of Asta as the other woman. She thought that Asta had broken up their marriage. He couldn't imagine why she would come to her funeral. How did she even know about Asta's passing? Jake wasn't sure that he wanted to approach

Deb. He was distraught over losing Asta and didn't want any more grief. He actually panicked thinking that Deb knew about Asta's passing. He was able to get away with Deb's displeasure as long as she kept thinking Asta was at fault. With no Asta to blame, would Deb expect more from him? He didn't want to find out so he did his best to avoid her. He realized that he could not avoid her, however, when he saw that the kids were with her. He was totally confused now and there was no avoiding them as his kids nodded when they saw him.

Jake ventured over to where they were sitting. "Hi everybody," he said. They looked at him questionably and he began to wonder how he looked. He hadn't been straight for long and he wondered if it showed. He wondered if they would figure out his secret. He began to sweat profusely and chatter, almost as if Bella had trained him. "I'm happy to see you. I'm surprised you're all here. How did you know her?" For a moment, he thought, maybe this is just a coincidence. Maybe they know her from the library. He decided this would be a good tack to take. "I'm sure you all know her from her great work at the library. Wasn't that a great feat she pulled off? She asked me several times to get involved, you know, help her sell the concept, raise funds from corporations, you know, that kind of stuff." His kids looked puzzled. "What do you mean, the library? She was Mom's friend." Jake needed to divert the conversation. He did not want to dredge up the past in the funeral home. "Sure, sure, I knew that," he said and started twitching. "Well, I guess I will get some coffee, anyone want coffee?" "Dad, we don't drink coffee!" "Sure, sure I knew that, do you want something else to drink - water, soda?" "No thanks," they offered. There was no avoiding it now, he had to look at Deb. Otherwise, his kids would think he was totally nuts. He looked sideways at Deb and said "Want anything?" "No thanks," she replied, "but thanks for asking." Deb had long since figured out Jake's racket and felt compassion for him. She had continued to go to her support meetings. She went because she enjoyed the people there and because, she realized she needed to stay engaged in the conversation so that she didn't repeat her behavior with Jake. She would have to deal with Jake for the rest of her life because of their children and she wanted to be sure she didn't get into a relationship with another Jake. He was a constant reminder that addicts are in relationships with themselves, and no one else. All in all, though, she did chuckle to see him squirm. You wouldn't have to squirm, she thought to herself, if you embraced sobriety. She wanted Jake to look like a hero in front of their children, so she always kept these thoughts to herself. Jake used the excuse of getting a cup of coffee to escape the conversation. He avoided them the rest of the evening.

Bella cornered Jake at the coffee urns. "Isn't this terrible? I don't know what I will do without her." Jake would do anything to avoid Deb and the kids so he murmured something in response and did his best to look interested and engaged in the conversation. "I mean, she was never the one to get sick, I thought she was taking better care of herself. It makes me wonder if there really is a benefit to all of her positive thinking. It didn't do much for her, did it?" Jake nodded. "I wonder what will happen to me if I think differently. I mean, I was serious about wanting to be in a long term committed relationship but I never felt that she really believed me. Of course, I still haven't found "the one" but not for lack of trying. I have been close a few times,

but never like she was with Aaron. I wonder why she never told me about him. Maybe there was more to it than I realized. I should have asked her. Did you ever ask her about Aaron?" "No," Jake replied. Asta never really spoke about herself, mainly we talked about me." "Oh, I always asked her about herself, how her life was going and all of that, you know?" "Well," Jake asked trying to prolong the conversation and avoid any others, "what did she tell you?" "She told me all sorts of things." "Like what?" "Well, she told me to think about the difference between acquaintances and friends. She told me it was okay to stay home by yourself. She loved to do that. She had loads of friends, just look at how many people are here, and she could be out every night of the week but she liked to spend some time by herself, probably reflecting on all of her friends." "She told me I should invite my family here to visit. I still haven't done that but I promise I will. It's too bad they didn't get to meet her. I think she might have liked them, well maybe not, it's hard to tell. I can't really describe them that well but I think she understood what I meant about them. She told me it was okay to break off a relationship. She told me it was okay to have quiet moments in conversation but I never really got what she meant by that, you know what I mean?"

"I sure do," replied Jake. He was beginning to wonder if conversation with his ex-wife would be as challenging as listening to this self absorbed beauty. How did Asta deal with her?, he thought. But, then again, how did Asta deal with me? What did she and Deb talk about? When did their friendship begin? How did Asta get Deb to believe that she was not "the other woman?" Gerry asked everyone to take their seats and opened up the podium for anyone to speak. Jake decided he would take advantage of this offer. On the one hand, it got him away from Bella. On the other hand, he could avoid Deb. He figured if he spoke his piece he would be free to leave at any time. He approached the podium and grabbed onto it for dear life. He could not figure out why, but he was terrified. It was like looking at the face of his own mortality. He started to sweat profusely. Again, he wasn't sure if he was perspiring from fear or from detoxing. He wanted to express his feelings for Asta. She was the truest, most compassionate person he had ever known. He described meeting her at the coffee shop in the airport. "Just like we just met over coffee," Bella interrupted. Jake looked at her a little quizzically. Gerry thanked Bella for her comment and assured her she would have plenty of time to speak. Bella smiled and thanked Gerry. Jake continued. "She was the person that gave me permission to look at my life from a myriad of different angles. I didn't have to look at it from any standpoint other than the one I was most comfortable with at that point in time. If I felt like thinking like a teenager for an afternoon, that was okay. It was so refreshing to have that freedom. She understood that I needed that. Yet she allowed me my privacy. I shared my family history with her and she was very helpful. She encouraged me to try to understand my children better. I love my children but I was not a good Dad in that I couldn't relate to what was important to them. To me, it seemed that, just when I understood what was going on with them, they outgrew that phase. I hate to admit this and I want to assure my children, who are in this room, that I do love them unconditionally. Asta encouraged me to never give up. She made me see that, as important it was for me to be able to see my life from different angles, my children could actually teach me that. As they grew and developed

their angles kept changing and I saw that they needed that as much as I did. It wasn't about understanding every phase in its entirety, it was about embracing each phase and learning from it. This is how we grow. This is how we care."

The room was silent, everyone intent on Jake. Jake had not meant to share this much. It seemed as if he had wanted to say this for a very long time. He had kept it bottled up like a magic potion. He hadn't wanted to share his experience with Asta with anyone. It wasn't until he had stepped in front of that room that he realized, this was not his choice. Asta had an open door policy and he did not "own" any piece of her. "I wanted to keep Asta for myself, I didn't want anyone else to take any of her time away from me. It wasn't until today that I realize I need to share Asta. I am so humbled and grateful that I will have all of you to share Asta with. I have no doubt that everyone in this room had their own version of Asta. I don't think I could have learned the true lesson of Asta until today when I see all of you. It's ironic that I didn't see it until now. It makes me wish I had one more meeting with her to express the absolute joy she was to be around. I don't think I could have ever understood her impact until I realized that she touched so many people in the same way that she touched me. Although I did everything in my power to keep her to myself, today I am glad that she reached so many people. I think I finally get what she was trying, in her kind manner, to get across to me. She made me want to be a better person even though she never judged me. She had no expectations yet somehow she made you want to set your own expectations very high. I couldn't always meet my own expectations but she never stopped encouraging me to set them anyway. Like most people, some days are better than others for me but days when I knew I could talk to Asta were always sunny and encouraging. I'm not really sure how she managed it all, but I am a better person for knowing her." Jake began to weep and sat down in the back of the room. Gerry again suggested taking a break. "One of the marvelous things about Asta," he said, "was that she knew when to be engaged and she knew when to listen. Let's take a break and reflect on Jake's comments."

Sam and Faith were still sitting arm in arm. "Wow," said Faith, "I never realized just how far Asta set her net." Sam agreed, "she had an never ending well of energy and never left anyone wanting. I do wonder what the deal is with him, though. He has something going on that he is not revealing." Well," said Faith, "I guess we all do and Asta will take that with her in her grave. She was always very respectful of people's privacy. I think that is why so many felt comfortable taking her into their confidence." "Agreed," said Sam. "Faith, I would like you to meet my husband Rick and our children. They are sitting over there. Are you up for it?" "I would be delighted," Faith replied. They made their way over to Rick and the kids. They had just completed all the introductions and gotten situated when Gerry asked for everyone's attention.

"We have some very special guests here today. They visited with Asta and asked her permission to participate in today's event. Asta was honored and thrilled. Our guests are the Young Reading Club from the library. They came up with what they thought would be a fitting tribute and Asta was amazed at their creativity. Each one will read a passage from a book that inspired them. Each one of these books was made available to them through Asta's library sharing program, a project many of them were

involved with years ago." A line of young adults filed into the room. Gerry set up chairs for them and they all sat down, looking a little nervous but yet excited. Gerry asked the first young woman to explain what they were about to do. "Asta was a great lady. She always helped us find books, even books that we didn't know existed. You could tell her what was going on in your life and she would know a book that told a story to help you through your challenges. Most of us met her when we were in grade school, and we are now in college but we never forgot which book it was that she helped us with. When we heard she was sick, we contacted each other to think about what we could do to thank her. We all came home from college for a weekend and went to visit her. She loved our idea. Although she seemed pretty sick, we thought that maybe, if we read a passage from our books to her, it would make her feel better. I was the last one to read to her, and I read to her last week. We are all so glad that she heard every one of our books since they all meant so much to us."

The first reading was from "The Man Who Was Magic" by Paul Gallico. It had been one of Asta's favorite books as a pre-teen and she had shared it with a young man who was grappling with what he wanted to study. It is the story of a strangely dressed man who travels to a town filled with magicians. He wants to study with these magicians but they soon learn that he has a very special form of magic. "Asta encouraged me to follow my own form of magic and it helped me a lot. I wanted to study painting but my family is all engineers. Asta and this book helped me to convince them that I was serious about painting. I am now studying painting in college and I am very happy. Asta and this book gave me the confidence to go after a lifetime of magic."

The second reader was a young woman whose family went through a challenging time. They had moved here and she didn't know anyone. She was extraordinarily shy and didn't know how to reach out to people to make friends. "Going to the library was my salvation, it was my safe cave. Asta noticed that I was there all by myself most afternoons. She asked me what I was reading. She was never pushy, she just made sure the door was open when I needed to talk. This was extremely important for a shy girl like I was. She suggested I read "The North Star" by Peter Reynolds. I had never heard of him or this book, but I was captivated by it and since have read every one of his books and I love his illustrations. I am now in college studying social work. I want to be able to help people the way Asta helped me."

The next young man came up rather sheepishly. "I was scared of everything. It was becoming a big problem for me socially. I couldn't play all of the games my friends played, games with dragons and monsters and it made me stand out. If I tried to play, I would go home and cry and not be able to sleep for days. I couldn't go to any scary movies. I was spending more and more time by myself. My friends were starting to make fun of me. I wasn't sure what to do, either I would have no friends or I would have to figure out why these things scared me so much. Asta convinced me to read the Harry Potter books. She encouraged me to let her know when I was scared and she or another one of the librarians would sit with me during those parts. After getting through the first book, I felt much better. My favorite character became Neville because he seemed so scared in the beginning. My friends had not read the books yet so it was a big win for me to recommend the books to them."

Another young man read from a book about boys in Sudan. "Asta explained to me that the money for the library came to us because of the civil war in the Sudan. She explained that, sometimes, good things can come out of bad. She wanted us to know that there were other young people who were making big sacrifices for their country and that we had benefited from that. I was doing a report for my social studies class. I wrote about the Sudan and got my first "A" on a paper ever. I also found an organization that was trying to help those in the Sudan and donated a portion of my allowance every month to them. I know it wasn't much but at least I felt I was doing something. She showed us the movie "Pay It Forward" on movie night and I never forgot it. I want to continue giving the rest of my life, no matter how much or how little. I feel better when I know that I am contributing to something greater than me (this was a phrase Asta used often). I don't feel as guilty about using the software that the boys in the Sudan will not get to use as long as I am contributing to them."

Each of the young adults read excerpts from their books. The group looked solemn at the end. They said they wanted to do something more long term for Asta but that, for now, this was what they knew would make her happy. The presentation was very touching but it also gave Sam an idea. She asked her youngest child, her daughter Ariel, what she had thought about the readings and the presentation in general. Ariel was very pleased to see other young people who had reaped the rewards of Asta's library. Although Asta would never have wanted anyone to think of it as her library, it was everyone's library in her mind, everyone did anyway. She was such an integral part of the modernization and renewed interest in the library that her name was synonymous with it. At the next break, Ariel approached the other young adults and introduced herself. She told them that her family was friends with Asta and that Asta had inspired her to study library science. "If you guys are interested, I'd like to get together to see if we can come up with a more long term tribute to Asta. It would be a shame if there was no one for young people going to the library now. We know we don't have Asta anymore, but maybe we can come up with something." They all agreed to meet over their next college break. Ariel told her parents of their plans and they were both pleased and proud. Sam was also secretly hopeful that they would come up with some sort of lasting program to continue the spirit of Asta. Sam would always have Asta in her heart but she knew it would be the next generation that could continue her spirit.

Deb also was inspired by the young adults. She was hoping that her children would want to be involved in their project. She wanted them to come to that decision on their own so she told them she was going to introduce herself to them. Her children stayed behind and broke into a private conversation. Deb was pleasantly surprised when her children came along later and introduced themselves. "We've been talking and we would like to be involved in your project. Asta was a good friend to our mother and our father and we would be happy to work with you on whatever it is you come up with." Everyone smiled and Ariel said, "I'm getting really excited now."

Bella had cornered Jake during the break. "I completely agree with you about Asta. I didn't realize she could have so many friends that meant as much to her as our friendship. She always said that she couldn't wait for our coffee date. I didn't realize

she was also having coffee with you." Jake explained that he had not physically seen Asta in years. They had only spoken on the phone. He was traveling all the time and it would have been hard to schedule something or someplace where they could meet. He didn't want to admit that, at times, he was in a state that he would not have wanted Asta to see him in. He thought he had been successful in hiding his dependencies from her. "Well, she always wanted me to meet "the one" so I am surprised that she didn't mention you. Do you think she would have thought we weren't right for each other in a relationship? I mean, I am always up for meeting someone new." Jake was not sure how to respond to this. Sure, she was beautiful, but he certainly was not thinking about a relationship while in this room, with his friend dead and his ex-wife and kids in attendance. "I'm sure she would have thought it was a mistake. She was very honest about things like that." Bella looked crushed. She wasn't used to be turned down. She stood there and batted her eyes. Jake wasn't sure if she was flirting or fighting back tears. He backtracked a little and said, "Look, I'm sure you are very nice but today I am only thinking of Asta. I should also tell you that I am not available." He thought this would cover him and send her off on another track. He was wrong but at least he had tried to make things clear. He excused himself saying he had to go to the men's room.

Deb saw Jake sneak out of the room and out the front door. She decided to introduce herself to Sam. She had loved Sam's story about Asta and wanted to hear more. Sam and Deb seemed to have an instant bond. They were both mature, bright women who had confided in Asta and Asta had confided in them. Deb explained her initial feelings about Asta, how she thought her husband was having an affair with her, and laughed. "I have never been more wrong and never been so happy to be wrong. I am still so impressed with the way that she reached out to me to discuss Jake. She became my port in a storm and gave me a clearer perspective on the issues I was really dealing with." Sam hugged Deb and encouraged her to tell her story to the group. "I know it is still sensitive with your children here." "I know," Deb replied, "they are still grappling with trying to understand his addictions but I owe it to Asta to let everyone know how brave and honorable she was to reach out at a time when I was very angry with her. I need to ask the kids first to see if they are okay with it." Deb and Jake's kids were not surprised their mother wanted to speak but they asked her not to speak about his addictions. They understood that their mom wanted to explain how Asta had helped during a crisis but they didn't want everyone knowing that their dad had an addiction problem. They still weren't sure they wanted to know that themselves. Deb agreed. "You know I must speak about some of it so they understand what a magnanimous gesture she made, but I will be gentle on the rougher parts." She also pointed out that Jake had left. The kids agreed.

Sam and Deb approached Gerry and said that Deb wanted to speak next. Deb smiled as she addressed the group. "Asta was one in a million and I want to tell you just how wonderful she was to me. We have been good friends for many, many years but it certainly didn't start out that way." Deb told everyone that Jake was her husband at the time he met Asta at the airport. "We were having some challenges in our marriage when he came home and told me that he had met a remarkable woman at the airport. He told me that he had started meeting her regularly. You can only imagine

what I thought he was trying to tell me. I was very upset by this. He swore that it was only a friendship and that I just couldn't understand. Nothing he told me prepared me for Asta," Deb said with a big smile. "Asta reached out to me at this time. Of course, I didn't want anything to do with her and what a big mistake I could have made had I not agreed to meet her. When we met, I started to understand what Jake was talking about. Over the course of time, Asta and I broke down what some of the issues were that Jake and I were dealing with. I think I wanted to remain in the dark but Asta took me gently along the path to realization. I had some serious thinking to do about the state of my marriage. I had two young children at the time, they are sitting right there, and I wanted them to have the best mother, father and family. It was only through my conversations with Asta that I was able to come to the decisions I did at the time. Ultimately, Jake and I divorced and I married a wonderful man. Jake continues to be a great father, he is always responsible when it comes to the children. No one wants to admit their marriage isn't working and no one wants a divorce, especially when they still love each other. In my case, it took the other woman to see the reality that, unfortunately, divorce was the best option. It gave Jake and I another chance at happiness in our relationships. I was so blessed to have Asta in my life at that time and we continued to have a warm and loving friendship from that time on. I am proud that my children got to know her. I am also very happy that Jake needed that cup of coffee in the airport that day. That cup of coffee brought Asta into all of our lives and we are all much better for it." Deb, still smiling, wiped away a tear and went to hug her children, who were crying and jumped into her arms.

Paul introduced himself to Gerry at the break and confided that he would like to address the room but was feeling awkward and hesitant about it. "Asta wanted everyone to participate that felt comfortable. If you are not comfortable, I am sure she would understand." Paul thought about this and changed his thinking. "I'm sorry, Gerry, I shouldn't be so thoughtless. I would like nothing more than to pay tribute to Asta. It's just that I missed my opportunity when she was living and I feel guilty about that." Gerry replied, "I am sure Asta was at peace with you. She never left unfinished business and I am sure she would be very pleased that you took the time to come. The fact that you are here means you have made some peace with your relationship with her. You wouldn't have come if there was still an outstanding misunderstanding." "You are right," said Paul, "Asta and I were a great team at one time and I should be willing to stand up for the team." "Well, if you are comfortable, I can introduce you next. If not, we have plenty of time for you to get comfortable." Paul started to relax a little bit more. "Asta always had a way of getting me to "man up", he said and laughed a bit. "If I think of her smile as she goaded me into doing things I didn't think I could do, I will be able to speak intelligently about her." Gerry smiled and led him to the podium.

Paul approached the podium with a smile that was a mixture of love, sheepishness and determination. Sam felt for him. She wondered what was going through his mind and what would come out of his mouth. He cleared his throat and began. "Please bear with me, this is very difficult. It's hard to describe the relationship Asta and I had except that it was always a strong partnership and was based in a bit of mystery. We were yin and yang in some ways, in other ways we were no more than

admiring acquaintances. When we worked together, we were like one person. When we were apart, we were just that, apart. We made efforts to find events that would allow us to work together. When there weren't any events, we would prepare Sunday dinner together. It was intimate in the way that preparing food can be intimate. We combined ingredients and coaxed flavors out of them. We mixed and matched and came up with some winning combinations. We considered our ingredients our palette and our meal our masterpiece. We challenged each other to stretch our creativity using only the most local and fresh ingredients. Some people may look at greens as food to meet your minimum daily nutritional requirement, we looked at them as fresh colors for our masterpiece. We used color in the same way a painter did. How I wish we had taken photos of some of those dishes. Neither one of us was great at plating, so we had to compensate by making the colors do the work. One year for a Christmas Eve party, we made an entire meal of red and green dishes. Most of the food was red and we plated it on green dishes. We had red pepper goulash over a bed of green spinach. We made sweet red chili with beef and red peppers served in green pepper bowls. Our red and green cole slaw rounded the meal out. Everything had red and green cabbage garnishes. For the desert, we made pistachio and cranberry biscotti and red velvet cupcake tops dusted with green sanding sugar in the shape of a candy cane."

Paul could see the looks of amazement on the faces in the room. Although most people knew that Asta enjoyed cooking, they hadn't realized just how creative an endeavor it was for her. "I think the time that most people remember and that was the most fun was the Fourth of July cookout for a camp for children with disabilities. Asta really wanted to go over the top for that one. I was able to restrain her a little, but mostly we achieved her vision. The kids wanted the usual hot dogs and hamburgers. Although Asta was not particularly in favor of that menu, she agreed to serve hot dogs and burgers as long as we could be more creative with the sides and the deserts. We created fireworks salads, with red peppers filled with sprays of greens. We put a dollop of ranch dressing in the bottom and then filled it with celery sticks, carrot sticks and green pepper and cucumber spears. It looked great but it was also fun and easy for the kids to eat. You should have seen those kids dive into their vegetables! The parents were happy but, understandably, a bit daunted by the idea of replicating the dish. Asta told them to use red plastic cups and it would be very easy to do. She loved the challenge that cooking for large groups and particularly special needs groups would provide. She got especially creative for the deserts for these kids. She knew that she needed to make it easy and fun and she was also determined to make them colorful. We made sheets of red and blue jello and then used cookie cutters to shape the jello like stars. We layered the stars around the edge of white plates and then filled the middle with blueberries and watermelon cut into bite sized pieces. Each plate then got a healthy dollop of whipped cream and red and blue sprinkles."

"Asta and I were great partners in the kitchen. We didn't view the kitchen like any other kitchen. Our kitchens were typical in that they had ingredients and appliances but it was much bigger than that for us. We viewed our kitchens as traveling laboratories where people could be expressive and learn to work together in circumstances that only appeared once we showed up. We really never knew what our

resources were going to be until we arrived. Many times we didn't even know our crew, sometimes we hadn't met in person and we had no idea what their skill set was. I was in favor of asking for people who at least enjoyed project management and cooking. Asta scoffed at this. She felt that if a person raised their hand, there had to be some way they could contribute. Sometimes we wouldn't find out what that was until the event was over, but we enjoyed the challenge of working around some things to achieve our desired results. Asta and I created many magical events together but make no mistake about it, I was always the sous chef. She respected my ideas and would carry them out but the real genius came from her. I was always willing to go the extra mile to achieve her vision. One of the reasons I was so happy to do so was that she was just a genius in this realm and it was an honor to work with her. It also made me happy to see the satisfaction and pure elation when we pulled something off that we really weren't sure that we could. We could challenge each other to stretch in ways we hadn't thought possible and this was the pure joy of our relationship. I needed Asta to remind me that I could achieve anything I wanted to as long as I was willing to be open to other people's suggestions and to accept some shortcomings in order to get to the main goal, which was to operate as a seamless, loving team that served others. It was my humble privilege to have stood next to her in our kitchens and help her make her magic happen. Thank you all and I look forward to hearing about your Asta experiences and getting to know some of you better. I believe we are all part of Asta's team and that is our extreme fortune."

When Paul sat down, Gerry noticed a number of damp eyes in the room. He suggested another break to reflect on "Asta's team." Bella made a beeline for Paul. "I'm so sorry. I thought you were the one that broke Asta's heart. I guess it was the other way around." Paul looked at her again, "Where do I know you from?" "The event at the barn that summer," she replied and smiled her sweetest, most flirtatious smile at him. "I am sure you remember now that I reminded you." "Uh, sure," Paul replied. Bella continued. "We should spend some time together. I've cooked before and I helped Asta that time. It might make you feel better if you had someone to cook with again." Paul wasn't exactly sure how to respond. Sure she was alluring and beautiful but something made him feel hesitant, even fearful around her. He wasn't sure if there would be any harm in getting to know her a little better but there was just something about her that seemed a bit off. She continued in her pursuit. "I think it's important for friends to stick together during hard times. I have been wondering just how I was going to manage without Asta. It sounds as if you feel the same way so maybe we don't have to, maybe we can go through this together. I know it would help me so it must be something that will help you as well." Paul noticed that she barely took a breath in between sentences. "It's just so hard, I can't figure out what I am going to do with the time I used to spend with her. We had coffee once a week most of the time. I think that it would be helpful if you and I had coffee, perhaps at the same time that Asta and I used to meet. Don't you think that's a great idea? Of course, we don't have to have coffee, since we both like cooking. We could cook. We could do anything we want to as long as we spend the time so we don't miss Asta too much. We would be able to be understanding since we are both going through the same thing. I think this will be great, don't you? Where do

you live? I hope you don't live too far away so it's not a hassle to get together. But then, you must live pretty close if you got together with Asta."

Paul wasn't sure which question to respond to or how to respond to any of it. Sam noticed the look on his face and came over and offered him a bottle of water. "Thanks a lot, Sam". Sam replied, "no problem, you look like you need it. You did a great job and I am sure Asta is smiling at you from heaven right now. You also managed to make everyone hungry, take a look at the line at the food table." Paul smiled and said, "I should have cooked for tonight and I will make it a point to do some from now on." Bella took advantage of his statement, jumping in with "Oh that will be wonderful! You and I could cook for Asta together." Paul mumbled something like, "Cooking was religion to Asta and me, I don't think I am ready for another partner yet." Bella replied, "Of course, but I am sure you will be over time." Sam kindly took Paul's hand and said "we all need to take our time to adjust to this." Paul smiled gratefully and squeezed her hand. At this point Rick came over as well. Bella quickly turned her gaze on Rick. He offered her his hand and said, "Hi, I'm Rick, Sam's husband." Bella gave a tiny, tight smile and a quick handshake. Paul reached out and gave him a hearty handshake and said, "Rick, good to see you again. It's been a long time." "Yeah, I certainly wish it was under better circumstances. Hey, I would like for you to meet our kids." "That would be great," Paul replied, remembering the covert mission he and Sam were on at the family event. He was genuinely happy that he had played a very small role in helping them to decide on parent hood. They took off in the direction of the kids.

Bella found Gerry. "I feel like I need to talk now," she explained. "Okay," said Gerry. "Do you think it would be okay if I asked people questions about Asta? I really want to know if all of these people really are her friends." "I can assure you that they are," Gerry replied, "and there are more that could not be here tonight." "Okay," said Bella, "I just am curious as to how she did it." "I think", Gerry replied, "that she did it by being a great listener and very compassionate and non-judgmental." "Sure," said Bella, "I mean she always listened to me."

Bella approached the podium and made a few noises to get everyone's attention. She didn't seem to want to wait for Gerry to quiet the crowd and introduce her. Gerry leapt up to help her but she just kept on going. "Hello, everyone, my name is Bella and I am a very close friend of Asta. I am sure she told most of you about me but, just in case, I wanted to introduce myself. Asta and I met for coffee every week. We talked about everything from getting into long term committed relationships to the difference between acquaintances and true friends. I am very happy to be in this room with all of you, who I am certain are true friends of hers. If she didn't tell you about me, I'm not sure why but probably because she ran out of time. We confided in each other about everything. The best thing about Asta, for me, is that she listened to me. She didn't ask too many questions and she always seemed to know what I meant about everything. I just don't know how she did it! It always amazed me. I mean, some of the things we talked about were very deep and meaningful yet she always understood me. She helped me understand that not everyone was a friend. I mean, no one was ever mean to me but they weren't always helpful. She got me to take chances. I used to do what everybody else wanted me to do. I moved away from my family so that I wouldn't have

to do what they wanted anymore. I didn't realize how ingrained that behavior was and she made me see that I was still doing it. I was doing it with everyone I met. I used to go bowling to please people but I don't even enjoy bowling. Bowling was our big joke. Whenever I started to get back into my old pleasing behavior, Asta would ask me if I wanted to go bowling. I would totally deny that I was doing it again, but she was always right. I mean, most of the time or at least some of the time. Did anyone else ever experience that? I mean, how did she do it? I will wonder about that forever." Some heads in the room nodded but Bella did not wait for an answer. "I wish I could have asked her what she wanted me to say today. I was so impressed by those young people. They actually planned it all ahead so that Asta would know what they were going to say. I am sure that made her very happy. I wish I could have made her as happy as you did." She looked for the young adults in the crowd and smiled at them. "You should be very proud and your parents should be very proud of you as well. Since we always went out for coffee I didn't get to experience her cooking all that much. We met at a community event and I saw it there but then not again. I guess she needed a day off and I was only one person so she didn't need to cook for me. We only went out for coffee anyway. I am so happy to meet all of you. I hope that we can stay in touch. I know some of you have already said you were interested in meeting at the time Asta and I met for coffee. It would be great if we could have an Asta coffee group so that we could all keep in touch. I certainly don't want to lose track of anyone and I think it's important that we continue to look at our lives through Asta's visions."

Bella continued on for the next ten minutes but most had started to drift off. Gerry gently asked if anyone needed a break. He told Bella that she could continue to speak but that it was time for a short break. She smiled wanly and looked almost relieved. It was as if she didn't know how to stop herself. "Thank you, Gerry, I have said all I need to for today. I would prefer to hear from other people anyway. I just want to say one more thing," and she teared up and choked out, "Asta was the only person in the world who was a true friend, she didn't fake it or make it up. I was always jealous of how easily she made true friends. Today I am grateful that I was blessed to be one of them."

Everyone got up from their seats and headed to the rest rooms or the food tables. Ariel and the young adults seemed anxious to talk about future plans. Although they had just met, they made a solemn commitment to the Asta project. Faith was beginning to show signs of tiring. Gerry took note and offered to get her a taxi. She said she was tired but that she wanted to stay to the end. When they all got settled down again, Gerry made a suggestion. "The terms of Asta's will allow for this meeting to last as long as necessary. I think most of you would agree that we still have plenty to talk about and learn. I am willing to keep the funeral home and this room open for as long as you want but I have another idea. I did mention this to Asta as a suggestion and she was not opposed to it so we are in no way in violation of her wishes. I suggest we plan on meeting again on this same day next year. I will reserve the room now. If you are interested, please leave your contact information so I can send a reminder. I will post the announcement in the usual papers and on the website. I have been inspired this evening by all of the tributes. In my book, Asta is not someone who can

be described in one meeting. I know we would all go home and then think of something else about her that we want to share. If we continue tonight, we might miss out on something because we got tired or forgot about it in the moment. I am especially interested to hear about the progress the young people make in their Asta project, and I want to know what that project will become. I was deeply involved in the library upgrade project so it is very satisfying to see first hand the fruits of our labors. The other reason I am suggesting postponing the rest of today's meeting to next year is that I know there are some people that could not be here. I read Asta's wishes for her service as a very generous way of sharing each of us with each other. Only Asta would think to bring us together like this and really give us a chance to know one another."

Bella was the first one to respond to Gerry's suggestion. "I think that would be great. I have enjoyed meeting everyone today and I still want to meet more people who can tell me more about Asta." Sam and Deb both nodded in agreement. "Our children are going to be involved in the Asta project so we will be in touch but we would want to see everyone again. If there are other children out there that were touched by Asta, we would welcome the opportunity to meet them." Faith also agreed and seemed a bit relieved as she had to admit she was tiring. Paul promised that he would get together a cooking crew for their next meeting and serve them food "Asta style." Gerry said, "Well, I can see we are all in agreement, I want to thank you all for coming tonight and I look forward to our future meetings. With that said, I bid you all a good evening."