

Good Neighbors

“Hi, I’m Caroline Kramer,” she said to the older woman in the elevator of their West Side apartment building.

“Sandra Siegel,” the woman replied, nodding, somewhat taken aback by the introduction. She held a little white-haired dog in her arms. Caroline petted it and exclaimed how beautiful it was.

“Her name is Betsy,” Sandra Siegel said.

“She’s absolutely gorgeous,” Caroline said, letting the dog lick her fingers.

As a general rule, few people in Manhattan introduced themselves in elevators. The lady with the dog was short-haired, graying, wearing slacks, sneakers, and a sweatshirt, the usual dress for a Central Park dog walk in early fall.

When the elevator reached the lobby floor, Sandra Siegel let Betsy down and snapped on its leash. Then she nodded an acknowledgement and hurried away with Betsy in tow through the lobby to the street.

Later when Jules came home from work and they were having a glass of white wine before dinner, Caroline told him what she had done.

“Brave girl,” Jules snickered, helping himself to a handful of nuts and washing it down with a deep sip of the wine.

“I felt good about it,” Caroline said. “I think it’s awful that people don’t communicate in New York apartments. Our elevator bank is a good place to display neighborliness. We lived too much in isolation in these apartment buildings

in New York. After all, we do live under one roof."

"I suppose you're right," Jules acknowledged. He was a dyed-in-the-wool New Yorker, having been brought up in Brooklyn, migrating to Manhattan in the early nineties. He was vice president of a media company, married to Caroline five years now, but still postponing having a family. Caroline was from Hempstead, Long Island, a freelance copywriter who worked at home. They had bought the one-bedroom co-op on the fifteenth floor of a twenty-floor pre-war building.

"Why not, Jules?" she said, as if convincing herself. "I go up and down the same elevator bank and often meet the same people. It doesn't hurt to be friendly, which is different than becoming fast friends. Why shouldn't we at the very least introduce ourselves? And she had a cute little pooch with her."

"And you fussed over her dog?"

"Her name was Betsy and she was beautiful."

"No dogs for us, baby. Ties you down and you have to worry about kennels when you go away."

"I'm not tempted, but it was a cute dog and the lady was very proud of her."

"Cheers," he said, lifting his glass. "May she and her canine have nothing but happiness."

They clicked glasses and drank.

Caroline acknowledged that she was one of those people who were naturally friendly. She liked to engage people in conversations, make eye contact, offer smiles. On buses she talked to people and knew she had the kind of face that in-

vited openness. She had the look of a compassionate person and with her open, white-teethed smile; round, cherubic, naturally rouged cheeks; and large, blue eyes, she made others feel comfortable.

"You're you," he said, reaching for her hand, caressing it and bringing it up to his lips. "I adore you."

"I know it's the right thing to do, to break this pattern of isolation. It startles people. They're not used to it."

"That's for sure," he said, agreeing. "I guess we New Yorkers are wary of intimacy in our apartment culture."

"I'm not talking about intimacy, just common friendliness."

"Maybe when you're surrounded by crowds everywhere you go, people welcome privacy. Like now. You and me. Cozy, intimate and, above all, private. Delicious, quiet time." He bent over and kissed her.

"That doesn't mean people can't be neighborly when they venture out. Say hello on the elevator."

"Also," he added. "They may be too self-absorbed in their daily business. Like me. Sometimes I start thinking about the office the minute I close the door."

"You can still offer a smile and a kind word. You don't have to be bosom buddies. Just a good neighbor."

"As long as they're not nosy neighbors."

"There is a big difference between nosy neighbors and good neighbors. They don't have to be intimate friends."

"We have plenty of those," he said. "And people who are important to us on the job. And relatives, and old school chums. What I'm saying is that we have enough people on

our 'known to' list."

"Still, it would be nice to know our neighbors."

"Our circle is wide enough as it is. We have barely enough time for further obligations."

"You have a point," Caroline acknowledged, wondering how the conversation had reached this strange territory. "But you never know when you need a neighbor. After all, we do live in the same house. We share services, utilities, and doormen."

"Who can forget doormen?"

"They deserve our acknowledgement. They're always ready with a smile and a few words of greeting."

"Especially around Christmastime, and remember, we only own shares in the building. This is a co-op in case you forgot. With a board that has to approve everyone and keep the riffraff out."

"Snob," she said playfully. "As for me, I am an egalitarian and from now on, I plan to introduce myself to the neighbors on our elevator bank as a start."

"I think you are undertaking a noble venture," he said. "And I'd be flattered if a beautiful, open-faced charmer like yourself said hello to me on the elevator."

She started to introduce herself to those who came up and down with her on the elevator. Not many remembered her name, and more than once someone asked her, "What was your name again?"

She was, however, determined to remember theirs so that she could greet them by their first names whenever she met them again. There was Bob Rainey, who got on at the tenth

floor, a thin-faced elderly man with a pencil thin moustache. Mary Schwartz lived on an upper floor, a youngish woman with flaming red hair. And Benjamin Agronsky, who got on at eight, a preppy-looking man in his thirties in pinstripes and button-down, white shirts and thick-soled brown shoes. Paisley McGuire, a young, Irish-looking girl with creamy skin and dark curly hair, got on at floor five. Caroline liked the idea of saying hello by name although the extent of the conversation was mostly about the weather. She did not encourage any further intimacy.

There were four apartments on each floor. One of the tenants of the four, she assumed, lived in another city and came to New York seldom. Another was a secretive bachelor named Sheldon whom she knew by sight, although he always turned away when they waited for an elevator and never even grunted an acknowledgement. The fourth apartment was occupied by a woman named Anne Myers who lived alone and apparently traveled a great deal. Anne was the only other tenant on the floor who received home delivery of the *New York Times*. Caroline had had only one brief conversation with her.

"I travel a great deal," the woman said. "It's a bother to cancel the *Times* every time I go away. Could you please not let them pile up? You know, just in case. We don't want people to know when I'm not home."

Caroline consented, since the trash bin was close to her own apartment. When two *Times* lay in front of her apartment, Caroline dutifully threw them away, always knowing when the Myers woman was home because the *Times*

was not on the floor in front of her apartment.

"Why doesn't she cancel them when she goes away?" Jules asked.

"I don't mind," she countered.

Because she worked at home, she spent more time coming up and down the elevator, at times to shop, at other times when the weather was good, to take a break by walking in Central Park, sometimes watching the dancing roller skaters or observing the rowboats glide through the water or sitting on a bench by the pond and watching the hobbyists sailing their power-operated little sailboats.

One day as she worked she got a call from the woman who introduced herself as Sandra Siegel.

"Remember me?" the woman asked pleasantly. "Sandra Siegel, the woman with the little white dog."

"Betsy," Caroline said. "How could I forget?"

"I took a chance, hoping you were home."

"I work at home, freelance," Caroline responded, thinking the woman might invite her to tea.

"I hate to bother you," Sandra Siegel said. "I have a favor. You see, I twisted my ankle and can't take Betsy for her walk. And Sam, our doorman, is off on vacation. He's the only one I can trust to walk her. So I'm in a bit of a jam. The dear little girl needs to go out. It's her regular routine. I hate to ask. It would be just this once. Could you take her? I'd be so grateful. I'm sure I'll be better by tomorrow."

"You mean now?" Caroline asked.

"Say in a half hour, if you could. I really hate to ask. But you see my dilemma."

Caroline contemplated the request. She was about ready for a break, and there was no pressing time factor.

"I really hate to ask," the woman said yet again.

In the brief interval before her consent, she thought of Jules and determined not to mention it, since it would provoke his "I told you so's." She snickered to herself, deciding that to accept was still in the realm of good neighboring.

The woman lived on the twelfth floor, and she opened the door leaning on a cane and handed Caroline Betsy and the leash after first planting a big kiss on the dog's snout.

"She likes the walk that goes to the baseball field. That gives her the greatest sniffing pleasure." She handed Caroline a plastic glove. "She makes such tiny little bitsty poopies."

It was a nice day and Caroline actually enjoyed watching the little dog sniff about, and disposing of her little bitsty poops was hardly a chore. In a half hour she was back to the grateful Sandra Siegel, who expressed her heartfelt thanks.

"You are a real princess," she said. "I'm eternally grateful."

She did not include this little episode in her and Jules's review of their day and she felt quite comfortable with her good deed, even when it repeated itself the next day, and the next.

"The doctor said I should be better in a week or so. I am so grateful."

After the first few times, it became a kind of routine, and she didn't mind it as long as the weather stayed good. Besides, it didn't take much more than a half hour out of her

day. Still, she didn't tell Jules.

As part of her regular regimen, she would often take a break in the afternoon and go down to the Starbucks a half a block away and get a Frappuccino, a sort of gift she gave herself before going back to work. Usually she sat alone, thought about the work she was doing, then after draining the concoction she went back up to her apartment.

One day, a voice intruded. She was sitting at a table by herself staring into space, tranced out on her work.

"You're Carol, am I right?"

"Caroline," she corrected.

She looked up and saw Bob Rainey, whom she recognized by his pencil-thin moustache.

"You're Bob Rainey," Caroline said.

"May I join you?" Rainey said.

"Of course."

They chatted amiably as she sipped her Frappuccino. Rainey was nursing a large-sized coffee.

"Not a very good day for me," he said suddenly. She studied his face, which seemed to mirror his announcement suggesting internal pain. "I never come here, but you see, Lila is moving out as we speak. I didn't want to be there." He swallowed hard and his face seemed to grow ashen. "Eighteen years together," he shook his head. "Not a very happy day."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Problem is my wife won't give me a divorce. That means I can't marry Lila." He shook his head. "Can I blame her? She wants stability. But, you see, my wife is determined to

extract her pound of flesh. No divorce, no Lila. Can you blame her?"

It seemed a question directed at Caroline.

"I suppose not," Caroline shrugged, sipping her frothy drink.

"Lila was a wonderful companion, but you see, there is no legal future for her. That's what she wants. A ring around the finger. Who can blame her?"

Inadvertently Caroline reached for her ring and traced its smooth surface.

"I understand. I'm very happily married."

"Lucky girl," he snickered. "Lucky guy. My wife was a monster. My life was a hell until I met Lila. She was a saint, that woman, but after all, you can't live on hope alone. She wants to be Mrs. Bob Rainey, not a mistress. She's a traditional girl. I can't blame her."

He looked at his watch.

"She should be out by three. Her sister is helping her pack. We agreed, no long goodbyes. Frankly it's a lot better not to be there, don't you think?"

"A lot better, I'm sure."

"I'm devastated," Bob Rainey said. She watched his eyes grow moist. He wiped away a tear that slid down the side of his cheek.

"Frankly, I don't know how I'm going to get through the day." He sighed. "And the night which will be worse. It will be a mighty cold bed."

Caroline wondered whether he was dishing out a seduction line, but then, seeing the man's pain, decided that it

wasn't. Besides, he was elderly and too broken up to pursue such a line. Poor guy, she thought. She looked at her watch.

"Gotta go, Bob. Keep your chin up. Life goes on."

"Wonderful talking with you, Carol," he said.

"Caroline," she corrected patiently.

"Oh yes. I'm so sorry."

She smiled and shook his proffered hand.

"Thanks. It's been very comforting talking to you."

She went back up to her apartment, dismissing Bob Rainey and his dilemma from her mind. But she remembered it later when she and Jules had their usual before-dinner aperitif and she told him about it. At times she either cooked simple meals or they ordered in or went to a neighborhood restaurant.

"Are we supposed to shed tears?" Jules said.

"I guess he needed to confide in someone," Caroline said.

"So you lent him your ears."

"Nothing wrong with giving comfort by listening."

"Save it all for me. I'm a glutton for comfort."

He smiled and patted her cheek.

"He's a real nice guy, Jules," Caroline said. "Maybe we can invite him in for dinner sometime?"

"We're not therapists. You have no obligation to comfort him."

"Just being neighborly," she sighed, on the verge of telling him about her daily walks with Betsy, but quickly re-treating.

She was into the second week of walking Sandra Siegal's

dog when she bumped into Mary Schwartz, who was sitting on a park bench behind which Betsy was sniffing. They had brief eye contact and it was unavoidable for either of them to deny recognition.

"I'm Caroline Kramer from the building."

"Oh yes, I remember. But I don't recall a dog."

"It's Sandra Siegel's."

"Who?"

"One of the other tenants. Hurt her ankle. I'm being a good neighbor."

"I see."

She had picked up some of Betsy's poop offerings and flung them into a trash basket.

"I've been laid off," Mary said. "They're dumping all the oldies. Anyone over fifty. They deny it, of course, but it's apparent as the nose on your face. I've been sitting here figuring out ways to really hurt them, the bastards."

"I can't imagine how devastating it would be," Caroline said.

"I worked for this advertising agency for nearly twenty years. I thought I was the resident expert on media, especially the new media, you know cable, the Internet, etcetera etcetera. Sons of bitches. I trained this little rat and now she's taken over."

"I'm sure something else will turn up," Caroline said.

"They want the sweet young things, I'm afraid. I'm neither sweet nor young."

"I wish you luck," Caroline said, starting to lead Betsy away. Then she thought of something and came back.

"My husband's a vice president of a company in the media business. I'll talk to him if that's okay?"

"Why not?" Mary muttered. "You never know."

She picked up the mail and brought the dog back to Sandra Siegel, who came to the door without a cane. She picked up Betsy, kissed her on the snout and talked baby talk to her as the dog licked her face.

"I think I can hack it now, Caroline. I can't begin to thank you. You've been great."

"That's what neighbors are for."

Caroline felt good about it. After all, it didn't take much time. Betsy was an obedient dog. It generated good feelings. She supposed she could tell Jules about it now. Jules came in at his usual hour carrying a bottle of champagne with a ribbon around it and a card.

"The doorman gave it to me. It says, 'Thanks a million from Sandra Siegel,'" Jules said. "Who the hell is Sandra Siegel and why is she thanking you?"

"For walking her dog," Caroline admitted. "She's a tenant and twisted her ankle."

"Part of your good neighbor campaign?"

She held up the champagne bottle he had given her.

"Good fellowship and good cheer," she said. "And this." She handed him an invitation to a dinner party from Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Agronsky. "The ninth floor Agronskys," Caroline said, winking. "You see what happens when you open up to them? People are hungry for companionship."

"Couple of days. Short notice," he commented, reading the invitation.

"It's the thought that counts," she said.

"I haven't really been against the idea," he said. "Only wary of involvement."

"I like the idea of involvement with people. After all, I work alone all day. It's nice to have friends to chat with."

"Like that guy with the girlfriend."

"Like him, and today I talked with another neighbor who just lost her job. I told him what you did and maybe you might see her." Caroline explained her credentials. "She says companies look askance when you're over fifty, no matter what your expertise."

In a comic mime, he looked around him as if he were checking for spies and he put a finger over his lips.

"Don't ask. Don't tell."

"It's not fair."

"Neither is life."

In the morning, when she went to get the *New York Times* outside her door, there was an envelope with Mary's resume. She gave it to Jules.

"I'll look it over," he promised. "Don't encourage her."

When she went for her afternoon Frappuccino, Bob Rainey was sitting alone at a table. He motioned her over after she got her order. It was impossible to avoid him without seeming rude and she sat down at the table.

"I was hoping you'd come."

"Were you?"

"You were so considerate the other day. You were great."

"So, how are you doing?"

"I'm lonely as hell," he said. "I miss her like crazy. I'm

barely able to function.”

“Maybe there are people you can talk with,” she said, hoping he might take her subtle suggestion to see a therapist.

“They can’t help. They can’t bring her back to me. She’s gone to Europe for a long tour.”

“Maybe she’ll return when she comes back,” she suggested. His downbeat talk was having a negative effect on her.

“No she won’t. I know her. She’s made up her mind.”

He then went into a long dissertation on their history together, how they had met, how they decided to live together and the things they did together, describing the most intimate details.

“I felt, don’t take this amiss, rejuvenated. Every time we made love, I felt twenty years younger. We slept together like spoons.”

“You’ll be fine, Bob,” she said, offering a big smile, suddenly wary at the reference. “You’ll see. Someone will come along to recharge your batteries.”

She was immediately sorry she had put it that way, not wanting to give him the wrong impression. “I’m very happily married,” she said, as if to draw the curtain on any errant ideas he might be entertaining.

“I’m so grateful to you for listening, Carol.”

“Caroline,” she corrected again, putting out her hand to say goodbye. He took it and squeezed it in obvious gratitude.

A couple of days later, they went to the Agronsky party. Caroline counted eight guests, none of whom she rec-

ognized as coming from the building. Mrs. Agronsky, her name was Sheila, was a tall blonde in a ponytail with high cheekbones and the stringy body of a model. She was dressed in tight, shiny silk slacks and a colorful, almost sheer blouse, greeting each guest with enthusiasm.

"So glad you could come," she said. Then bending over, she addressed Caroline and Jules in a whisper. "I know it was short notice, but one couple crapped out. You guys are life savers."

Caroline looked at the carefully laid table set for ten with an elaborate flowered centerpiece.

"So we're last minute fill-ins," Jules said.

"Be glad she thought of us."

"I'm overjoyed," he said with sarcasm surveying the group.

The guests were youngish, thirties and forties, some dressed preppy like their host and a number of the women of the type she designated to herself as "blonde goddesses." It soon became apparent that most of the male guests had known each other from college. Yalies, mostly. Not knowing anyone, she and Jules felt somewhat out of place. They had met at Queens College.

"Because you live under one roof," Jules whispered. "It doesn't mean you have things in common."

"Be a good guest," Caroline remonstrated, working the room, trying to engage people in conversation. She noted that the wine flowed copiously and dinner, which was catered, was timed so that the cocktail time would last longer.

"When are we going to eat?" Jules whispered at about

nine. The guests had been cocktailing for about two hours by then, with no sign of letup.

"Ben told me you were a very interesting person," Sheila said, finally getting around to a more in-depth conversation with Caroline. By then, Jules had recognized his irrelevancy to the group, most of whom were young Wall Street hotshots. He feigned looking over the books in the bookcases.

"We met on the elevator," Caroline said.

"Did you?"

They traded the usual pleasantries. Sheila was, as she suspected, a fashion model.

"We don't know many people in the building," Sheila said. Her words were slurred. "I guess it's time we got acquainted." She was interrupted by another of the guests and moved away.

"When are we going to eat?" Jules whispered again.

"That is total bullshit," Ben shouted suddenly, directing the remark to Sheila. It was quickly apparent to Caroline that a drunken argument was ensuing.

"Look who's talking about bullshit."

"Hey, cool it guys," one of the guests said.

"Mind your own fucking business, Charley," Ben said.

"Pardon me, Benny baby," Charley said, walking away.

The obvious conflagration between host and hostess silenced the group and Sheila finally called everyone to the dining room table. The conversation was quieter now. Caroline was seated next to a large, red-faced man who had beads of perspiration on his upper lip.

"So what do you do?" the red-faced man, whose name

was Tom something, asked. His question seemed obligatory, but she answered politely.

"Oh," he said, turning away to talk with the woman on the other side of him.

"You are a scumbag," Sheila shouted across the round table to Ben.

"Takes one to know one," Ben said.

"Are they always like this?" Caroline asked the red-faced man.

"Booze rage," he snickered, then turned back to the woman on the other side of him.

The conversation ebbed and flowed. Most of the subject matter of the conversation centered on stocks, deals, and money, sprinkled with the names of people unknown to neither she nor Jules. They used initials to describe things that she didn't understand. She exchanged glances with Jules, who was sitting between two women who were holding a conversation around him as if he didn't exist. He looked at her and shrugged.

As the evening wore on, she felt more and more irrelevant to the group and when they left, Ben, who slurred his words, walked them to the door.

"Thanks for helping us out," he said.

"Your pleasure," Jules mumbled. Ben, not getting it, smiled and closed the door.

Jules was livid when they got back to their apartment.

"Yes, we all live under the same roof, but that is not the way to pick and choose our friends and companions. We were props. They were preppy Wall Street shits. Admit it,

this was purgatory.”

“You can’t win them all,” she said, knowing he was right in this case.

“I don’t think we should just accept invitations willy-nilly because we live under the same roof.”

It was late and she could see an argument was coming and decided to ignore the subject and go to sleep. For the next few days she concentrated on pressing deadlines and did not go to Starbucks for Frappuccino. Then, one day, she got a call, from Sandra Siegel. By then, the weather had turned and it was raining.

“I did it again, Caroline. My ankle gave out. Could you please take Betsy out?”

“I’m in the middle of a deadline, Sandra,” she protested. She looked out the window at the rain coming down in long slanting sheets.

“Please, Caroline. Betsy needs this. I tried to do it but I could barely stand.”

She heard Betsy barking in the background. “Hear that? The little girl is in pain. Please, help me Caroline.”

“And the doorman? What about him?”

“She wants you,” Sandra replied.

“How do you know?”

“I can tell.”

Reluctantly, Caroline complied. She put on her rain gear, took an umbrella, and picked up Betsy. Coming back soaked, she handed Betsy back to Sandra.

“Oh my God, look at the poor baby; she’s soaked to the skin.”

She hobbled away with Betsy in her arms without saying thank you or goodbye. Caroline went back to work but her concentration was broken, and it was difficult to pick up where she left off. She did not tell Jules what had happened.

It was still raining the next morning and she had promised herself that she would refuse, absolutely refuse, to take Betsy for a walk. When the phone rang she picked it up, dreading that it would be Sandra and vowing that she would have to get a caller identification system for their home phone. She was relieved it wasn't Sandra, but the call offered yet another complication.

"This is Bob," the voice said, hoarse, barely audible.

"Bob?"

"Bob Rainey. I need to talk."

"Oh yes, Bob," she said cheerfully, suddenly apologetic. "I've been very busy, you see..."

Her explanation was interrupted abruptly.

"Please Carol. I need to talk. Now."

She wanted to correct her name, but held off. The voice seemed positively desperate.

"Now? I'm in the midst..."

"Please Carol, I beg you. I'm upstairs in my apartment. 10F. Now. I need you."

"Me?"

The phone clicked off and she debated for a few moments on what to do. She was pressed by her deadline and expected a call momentarily from a client. This was, indeed, an intrusion, but the man sounded desperate. Finally, after fifteen minutes had gone by, she went up to the man's apart-

ment and rang the buzzer. She took her cell phone with her in case her client called.

"It's open," a hoarse cracked voice said.

Bob Rainey was sitting in his pajamas and robe in a darkened living room. The blinds were drawn and the apartment looked in disarray.

"What is it, Bob?"

He didn't answer. He seemed disoriented and barely able to speak. She moved closer to him.

"What's wrong?"

He didn't answer, and his eyes were closing. Beside him on a table was an open pill container. She looked at the label. "Take one pill before retiring," she read. There was a warning pasted onto the container.

"Oh my God," she cried, shaking Bob, who was obviously falling into a deep sleep or coma. "What have you done?"

Having never confronted such a situation before, she was momentarily confused. Her first thought was to call Jules, but when she noticed that Bob Rainey's chin had fallen into his chest, she called 911. She had never in her life ever called 911 before, but she managed to answer the questions rationally.

"Wait there," the woman at the other end of the phone said, after taking her address and the number of her cell.

Left alone with the slumping Bob Rainey, she felt uncomfortable and irritated. The apartment was in chaos and smelled of rotting food. She shook the man again. When he didn't respond she tried to feel his pulse and couldn't, wondering if the man was dead. Clearly, he was still breath-

ing, his chest rising and falling. Suddenly, her cell phone screamed out a tune, startling her. It was her client.

"I can't talk now. I have a problem."

"What?" her client asked.

"I'll explain later."

"We have this deadline, Caroline. Today. I'm sorry. We have to get the copy in a couple of hours."

"I'll have it. I promise."

A half hour went by. She sat on the couch and watched Bob Rainey, concentrating on the rise and fall of his chest, wondering how long it would take the pills to do its damage. Would he die in front of her eyes? She felt suddenly panicked and called Jules, hanging up before he could answer. Why disrupt his day, she told herself, feeling increasingly panicked and upset. She wanted to cry.

Finally, she heard the doorman's buzzer ring and she answered it.

"Who is this?" the doorman asked.

"I'm Caroline Kramer from 15G. But I'm here in 10F. Is the ambulance here?"

In less than five minutes, medical people arrived with a rolling stretcher, along with two policemen. The medical people worked on Rainey and lifted him onto the stretcher while the policeman took her name and interviewed her. She explained that she knew the man casually from going up and down the elevator and had met him at Starbucks. Her explanation sounded confused and, she thought, suspicious, and she had the impression that the policeman didn't really believe her explanation although he wrote it

down in a little book.

"We might need to contact you," the policeman said as they wheeled the body of Bob Rainey out of the apartment.

"He'll be okay," one of the doctors said.

"He called me. I live in the building. Just a friend," she explained.

"Potential suicides like an audience," the doctor said. "If he was serious, he would just do it."

When they had gone, she went downstairs to her own apartment. She was very shaken and poured herself a glass of wine, which she gulped down. Her hands shook and she could not concentrate on her work. Finally, she called Jules.

"You sound harassed," he said.

She wanted to explain what had happened, but could not bring herself to do it. "Later," she told herself.

"Just wanted to hear your voice, darling," she said, meaning exactly that. Hearing his voice steadied her.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Fine, darling. I'm fine."

Again she tried to work, but finding her concentration again was making it difficult. Then, at last, she found the words and knew she would make the deadline. The phone rang again and, without thinking, she answered it.

"This is Sandra Siegel."

"Not again," she muttered.

"My little girl needs to go out."

"Does she?" Caroline said.

"I'm so sorry to ask, but I just can't make it. Betsy is dying. She needs to go out."

"Tell you what, Sandra," Caroline said, searching for words that would make the point, finding them, pausing for a moment.

"Why don't you take that fucking dog out yourself, I'm busy."

"That's awfully rude of you," Sandra Siegel said, hanging up abruptly.

The phone rang again.

"I said I'm busy," Caroline snapped, thinking it was the Siegel woman.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. It's Mary Schwartz, remember? Remember? I dropped off my resume."

"I don't think my husband can help you," Caroline said.

"Figures, nobody wants people over fifty."

Caroline hung up without saying goodbye.

When Jules got home, she embraced him before he could sit down.

"Why the affectionate greeting?" he asked.

"I am in dire need of intimacy," she said, then poured the wine and told him about her horrendous day.

"No good deed goes unpunished," he said. "You have to pick and choose wisely."

"I suppose," she replied.

"Unfortunately, people don't wear signs saying 'I'm needy.' I guess it's a matter of luck."

Instead of dinner, they made love.

"I was very needy," she said in the aftermath. "You must have seen my sign."

"I always see your sign," he said.

“And I always see yours.”

She grew cautious after her recent experiences, nodding to the various people who came up and down her elevator bank, avoiding eye contact. One morning Bob Rainey came down the elevator.

“Hello Carol,” he grunted.

She smiled, nodded and turned away.

Sometime later, she noted that Anne Myers’s newspapers were piling up. Instead of throwing them in the trash, Caroline ignored them. Then she noticed that they weren’t there anymore.

“You let me down,” Anne Myers said one day as they both waited for the elevator.

“Did I?” Caroline said, avoiding eye contact.

“You let them pile up,” she said.

Caroline shrugged. The elevator came and they both got on. She looked the other way all the way down. Pick and choose wisely, she told herself.

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