

## Cassandra

The steel towers of the four mile long suspension bridge loomed ahead as David approached Chesapeake Bay. The height of the twin spans still made him apprehensive even though he crossed the bay every day to teach at the Naval Academy. The evening sky glowed purple, casting its reflection on the dark water below and reminding him of Homer's description of the wine-dark sea that surrounded his tragic figures.

When traffic slowed at the top, he glanced quickly at the distant view of Annapolis. He had once hoped that his son would attend the Academy, but Aaron's grades weren't good enough to survive a long list of better applicants. David wasn't good at pulling strings or schmoozing and still felt that his son's decision to enlist in the Marines after high school was his fault. As he approached the western end both bridges curved in graceful parallel arcs toward the shore. Despite their shared symmetry the structures were not identical, having been built thirty years apart by two different companies and two different generations of steel workers.

Instead of taking the Annapolis exit he headed north toward Baltimore to meet his daughter at the airport. When he parked in the garage using his side view mirror as a guide, he noticed the familiar words he had often quoted to Casey when she was learning to drive. *Objects in mirror are closer than they appear.* He usually said it as a warning but had once raised his voice and spoken too harshly. She sulked about it for weeks afterwards. During the painful changes of adolescence Casey had gone from demanding child to rebellious teenager. Then she went off to college on the west coast and settled there after graduation. David was surprised

when she called last week to say she was flying to London on business and could arrange to see him during a stopover on the east coast.

Her real name was Cassandra and she had recently been promoted to assistant editor at a fashion magazine, a job for which she seemed well suited. A tall redhead with striking features like her mother, she moved with self-assured grace and poise. But her stunning beauty was easily overshadowed by a disapproving gaze or dismissive words. She and David had never been close, probably because he had paid more attention to her younger brother. She hadn't come home to spend vacations or Christmas holidays since Clara died. He sometimes wondered how she had coped with the loss of her mother. She lived by herself in San Francisco and never mentioned being close to anyone.

Several days after she called the oldest of their two dogs had to be put down. He knew Casey would be upset because she had named both of the red haired retrievers, but he hadn't told her yet, saving the bad news until he could tell her in person. David lived alone with the dogs in an the old Victorian house that Clara had helped to renovate. She had worked for years with carpenters, plumbers, and painters until she got everything right. But as the condition of the house improved, her cancer returned. She died at home in hospice care after planning her funeral as meticulously as she did the renovation. She had hoped a traditional church service might draw the family closer, but that hadn't happened. During the funeral Casey glared at David as if he had chosen the method of her mother's dying as well as the hymns.

In the airport he scanned the arrivals screen before going to the security gate. When he caught sight of her long red hair in the crowd, he waived. She smiled and gave him a quick hug. At the baggage claim she said, "How's Daphne?" Their eyes met briefly and he shook his head.

He hadn't planned to tell her about the dog right away, not until they were crossing the bridge to the Eastern Shore. "I knew it," she said and turned away. Then she grabbed her bag and stormed off toward the parking garage. David quickly caught up with her and led the way to the car.

They drove in silence until he said, "I'm sorry, but she went downhill so quickly that I had to put her down."

"Couldn't you at least have waited until I got here?"

"You wouldn't have wanted to see her like that," he said.

She glared at him with that disapproving look he remembered so well, as if he had no right to guess what she would or wouldn't want. "What about Barney?" she asked. He was Daphne's offspring, younger by several years.

"He's fine but he spends most of the time lying at my feet, wanting to be petted. We seem to comfort each other." He glanced at Casey, but she said nothing. As they approached the bay bridge David stared straight ahead, focusing his attention on the two lane roadway of the eastbound span. He had hoped that her visit might be a chance to make up for past misunderstandings, but that didn't seem likely now.

At the house Barney came bounding down the hallway to greet them. He wagged his tail and licked Casey's face when she knelt to pet him, but he reminded her so much of Daphne that her heart sank. "Good boy," she said with a catch in her throat and stood up to look around.

Little had changed since her last visit. While her father fed Barney she walked through the formal dining room, the heavily draped living room, and her parents' master suite on the first floor. She glanced inside her father's study at the dark walls lined with bookcases and his neatly

arranged desk. She looked for the small Buddha she had once given him but didn't see it. Then, telling him that she was jet-lagged, she headed upstairs to bed. She stopped at the door to her brother's room. Everything was exactly the same as the day Aaron left for boot camp: the photos on the wall, the trophies in the bookcase, the ship model on his desk. The same as the day two Marine officers arrived on their doorstep to announce his death in Iraq. He had always seen her through a crisis despite their differences and she still missed him desperately. She had often unburdened herself to him and wished she could again. After wiping away tears she went to her old room at the end of the hall and collapsed on the bed, wondering how her father could go on living here with everything the same. Her eyes soon grew heavy and she fell asleep without unpacking.

David was pleased the next morning when Casey asked how his classes were going. "Teaching ancient history to young naval officers is a real challenge," he said over coffee. "Especially when they'd rather be studying computer science. But the semester is going well. I've even had time to publish an article." After breakfast he suggested they take Barney for a walk along the beach.

As the dog raced ahead of them David wrestled with what he wanted to say. He took a deep breath and said, "There's a trunk in the guest room with your mother's things in it. I'd like you to take a look and see if there's anything you want."

Casey shook her head. "Where would I put it? I have a one bedroom apartment with hardly any closet space." They walked in silence for a while until she said, "Do you still have the Buddha I gave you when I was in college?" She had given him the miniature figure surrounded by golden flames after taking a class in comparative religions.

David still remembered what she had said at the time. *They represent enlightenment, a state of peace and clarity without emotional attachments.* “It’s on a shelf in the study,” he said. “Along with souvenirs of the trips your mother and I took.” He threw a small piece of driftwood into the water for the dog to chase. “Do you still practice yoga?”

She nodded as they watched Barney swimming after the stick. “Yes. It gives me peace of mind and helps keeps me in shape.”

He followed her gaze to the horizon where sky and water met. “My students tell me that computers will soon be able to predict the future with a 98% accuracy rating. They use terms like disambiguation and cloud infrastructure, but I have no idea what they mean.” Then he surprised himself by saying, “Are you happy?”

Casey was surprised. He rarely asked about her personal life. She had never told him about her affair with Justin or the abortion afterward. She took the stick that Barney brought back and said yes, even though it wasn’t true. Happiness had eluded her, despite her successful career and expensive sessions with a therapist.

That afternoon, while her father retreated to his study, Casey walked alone on the beach with Barney. She watched him chasing after sea gulls and smiled. Dogs were so simple. They accepted you for who you were and appreciated everything you did for them. Why was it so hard to talk to her father? They had often argued in the past. She still recalled the day he yelled at her because she failed to check the side view mirror of her car. Looking back now, it seemed that one small incident was the beginning of their growing apart. In college she learned to control her feelings so she wouldn’t be hurt so easily. Some of her friends said that she came across as

distant and unknowable, even though her emotions sometimes got the best of her. She couldn't help herself. That's just the way she was.

David suggested they go out for dinner that night to a new seafood place in Chestertown. He asked for a gin and tonic while she chose a glass of white wine. "I'd like to see Melissa while I'm here," she said after they ordered. "But I would have to borrow the car, if you don't mind."

He shrugged. "Of course not. How many children does she have now?"

"Two boys and a girl. She sends me their pictures every year at Christmas. I think she's expecting again."

Four children seemed excessive to David, but he said nothing. At a recent class reunion he met an old friend who had ten grandchildren and was shocked to think how easily two had multiplied into twelve. He had never wanted a large family but would not have predicted that he and Casey would be the last two survivors of their small clan. It seemed unlikely now with her ambitious career that she would have children. When he asked about her trip to London, she talked about fashion shoots and celebrity luncheons. "It'll be hectic," she said, "But I love my job." As he listened to her talk of a possible promotion, David decided not to mention his plans to sell the house and move closer to the Academy. Casey had never appreciated what he and Clara had shared there: planting a garden every spring, watching the sunset over the water each evening, listening for the cry of geese during their annual migration. But he was growing tired of the commute over the bridge and coming home to a large empty house. He intended to buy a condo closer to Annapolis.

Casey spent the second day visiting her friend Melissa and didn't return until after dinner. When they said goodbye at the airport the following morning she wanted to say *I love you* but

the words stuck in her throat. She hugged her father quickly and then turned away, striding purposefully toward the gate. David watched her go, thinking it was better they lived at a distance from one another with little to connect them except an occasional visit or the carefully measured words of a phone call.

As the plane climbed steeply in a cloudless sky Casey gazed down at the twin bridges that connected both sides of the bay. Tiny boats sailed out from both shores in random patterns. She wished she could have told her father that her greatest fear was spending the rest of her life alone, but it was too late now. He seemed happy with his predictable life of teaching and his scholarly interests. She would not come back again. There was no point, since they had so little to say or share. They lived in two different worlds with no way to bridge the gap. Later, when the plane reached its cruising altitude over the ocean, she peered down at a few wispy clouds moving slowly across the rippling surface. She had a sudden premonition that she would never see her father again, just as she had known her mother would die of cancer and her brother would be killed in Iraq. An unexpected wave of sorrow welled up inside her and she wiped away the salty tears from her cheek. She sensed, not for the first time, that she was alone in the world. There was no escaping the past or the future, no matter how hard she tried. Most days she could ignore the feeling or shake it off, but it was always there, something dark and painful, a note of sadness just beneath the rhythm of her daily life. She wished it wasn't so.

On the drive home David mentally reviewed his topic for tomorrow's class based on the article he had recently published. He would explain the ancient Greek concept of *agon* or conflict, how they embodied it not just in battle or warfare, but ritualized it in games and drama as well. Their goal was to achieve a life lived with a balance of conflicting urges, to avoid the excess of emotion that led to suffering and disaster. It was part of the age old struggle between

order and chaos, reason and emotion, detachment and sympathy. When he passed the exit sign for Annapolis, he thought again of Aaron. Casey had been close to her brother and was devastated by his death, but she hadn't mentioned it during her visit. He recalled her animated conversation about her job and the London trip. He hadn't expected her to be so successful and realized now that she was the smarter one and could have gone to the Naval Academy if she had wanted to. As the bay bridge loomed in the distance he wondered if he had misjudged her in other ways as well and she in turn had imitated his seeming indifference. He remembered the recurring phrase sung by the chorus in Greek tragedy. *The greatest evils are those we cause ourselves.* He wished it wasn't so.