

A DIFFICULT CHILD

The sky was still dark, just edging out of night. Few cars filled the Beltway, and it was even too early for the young professionals to begin their runs or the garbage trucks to arrive. Gary Braverman swung his car into the parking lot which reeked from an oversized bin piled high with garbage bags. The pavement was littered with cigarette butts and empty beer and cream soda bottles. Past the back door, the day had already begun. Fluorescent lights burned bright and there were sounds of chopping, refrigerators opening and shutting, Spanish patter. Gary slipped a chef's white apron over his head like a noose. He poured a cup of coffee from a percolator and took a few hurried sips to shake off fatigue. He'd been getting up early his entire life but had barely slept last night from worry about what would happen this evening when Julie came for dinner.

"You're on egg and white fish salads today," Manuel told Gary. "Okay?"

Manuel, the manager, languidly sipped a milky coffee as he handed out recipe cards. Gary nodded as he took his. Not that he needed them. He'd been making these deli salads longer than any of these workers had been alive. A few months ago, he suggested to Ilan, the deli's owner, how he could improve on them. But Ilan dismissively waved his hand as the gold chain around his thick neck rattled.

Like a lot of Israelis, Ilan thought he knew everything. But he didn't know his business. When Gary had run his own deli in Teaneck New Jersey, he had arrived early each morning and gone straight to the kitchen. He asked about a cook's sick child or kibbitzed about last night's baseball game, all the while tasting the white fish salad or blintz filling. *More salt here, he'd say. A touch of mustard in that.* Ilan, who had opened his own deli in Silver Spring less than two years ago, almost never came into the kitchen. The Israeli didn't even seem to eat the food, preferring to buy a Mexican burrito from a place down the block.

Gary lined up his onions on the chopping block and expertly raised his knife. His eyes stung, a familiar and not fatal pain. The harsher the sting the better the onion. Then he dropped three cartons of eggs one by one into an oversized vat of boiling water. So many bobbing eggs that would be wasted in a crappy salad that few customers liked. At Gary's deli, Julie's egg salad was one of the most popular items on the menu. The recipe had developed because of Julie's repulsion to eggs, although he had never succeeded in getting his picky daughter to eat it.

At 8 AM, the workers stopped to eat their own breakfast from the food they had just prepared. They were a nice group, all of them from countries where deli food didn't exist. Sometimes Gary joined them for a few bites of plain bagel. But today he didn't want to take the time. There was too much to prepare back home for the evening.

By 9:30 AM, he was hurrying to his car pretending to be engrossed in his phone. He drove to the gourmet food store where he dropped the equivalent of his weekly paycheck on dinner provisions, pulled into the Watergate's garage and arrived upstairs with enough time to take a long shower and make a fresh fruit salad and omelet just as Wendy returned from spinning class. Then they sat down to eat. She had learned not to ask him about his morning activities or to ever request whitefish, tuna and especially not egg salad.

**

She was only 15 minutes late. Seeing Julie walk into the apartment made Gary feel hopeful, a word he didn't associate with her. "You've chosen Wendy over me," she explained why she wouldn't come visit, even though she now lived close by. "You love her more. You never loved me." He told her she was wrong. Again, and again the dialogue played itself out. Now she was here, inspecting the apartment and looking for something to criticize because that was how Julie organized herself. She pronounced the dining room overhead fixture "tacky" and the baseboards "poorly painted." Her attention to those little things that passed by most people was impressive. Wendy had apparently mistakenly chosen "to display a Chinese etching and pastoral scenes invoking European tropes while her furniture was modern and sparse." That was thanks to Julie's art history major for which he'd paid.

She examined the place settings on the dining room table, picking up a tumbler and fingering the indentations which was supposed to depict the wild Irish sea.

"Waterford."

"That's right."

"There are only two settings. I thought I was invited for dinner."

"Don't be silly, they're for you and me. Wendy thought we would prefer eating alone, so she went to see her grandchildren."

Wendy could have insisted on staying in her own apartment or even meeting Julie. But she had understood that wouldn't be best for Julie.

"Hungry?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Good, I've cooked up a storm. You never answered my question about dietary issues."

Julie had variously flitted from vegan to low carb to gluten free to sugar free. Whatever he made that she couldn't eat would somehow be his fault.

Julie picked up the cloth napkin secured with a wooden ring and smirked.

"Really?"

"Maybe napkin rings are a little silly. But we use them on special occasions such as having my daughter come for dinner."

"That shouldn't be a special occasion."

"I just meant --"

"I'm eating everything these days, Daddy. And lots of it."

Yes, her face looked softer and fuller. She had pulled back her dirty blondish hair and he saw her mother tossing a frisbee high in the air in the Rutgers quad where it hit him squarely on his nose. Fran had run over, full of apologies, and he had managed despite the throbbing to say she could make it up by buying him a coffee. Her boyfriend wouldn't like that, she laughed. But he remained optimistic and by junior year they were a couple who couldn't stop having sex. They did it everywhere.

He snapped himself out of the reverie. When he was with Julie he didn't like to think about sex.

"I'll bring in the food," he turned toward the kitchen.

Pesto salmon, homemade Focaccia with rosemary and goat cheese, sauteed vegetables and heirloom tomato salad. Whatever else might happen with this meal, he wanted to have tried.

"Make sure to save room for dessert," he said.

He also brought out a chilled Rose which Wendy had tried to talk him out of serving. She had heard the stories of Julie drinking too much and if she was still taking antidepressants alcohol was a bad idea. But he wanted to show his daughter that he was treating her like a mature adult who could have a glass of wine and he wanted one himself. He uncorked the bottle as she covered her glass with one of her hands revealing ragged nails. She was still biting them.

"I'm not drinking," she said.

"Because of the anti-depressants?"

"Nope, I'm off all my meds."

That should have pleased him, but it made him nervous since often the meds seemed the only thing protecting everyone from Julie.

He put aside the unopened wine and poured them both homemade iced tea from a crystal pitcher that matched the tumblers. Suddenly it all seemed too much. The overpriced glasses and pitcher, silver bread knife and napkin rings. He should have kept it simple. But he had wanted to show off. So many times, she had called him a loser who had ruined her life with the bankruptcy.

"This bread is amazing," Julie spoke with her mouth full.

Many times, Fran had ejected her from the dinner table for eating with her mouth open. And the more Fran ejected her, the more she persisted in doing it.

"Good. There's plenty more. Enjoy."

She ravaged the food as if she hadn't eaten in a week. He'd never seen that before and liked it.

"How's the job going? Do you like working with Dr. Friend?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I quit because she was no friend, despite her ridiculous name."

"You quit or were fired?"

"Quit, Daddy. I quit because Dr. Melissa Friend is a terrible person."

"Terrible?"

"Do you want to hear the stories? How she refused to take care of a stray cat with a broken tail because she wouldn't be paid for it. She's a vet. They have the equivalent of a Hippocratic duty to take care of all animals. Look it up if you don't believe me. She should have her license stripped."

"And because of that you quit?"

"I have principles."

Dr. Friend no doubt had a different version: That Julie was late coming into work. That Julie had insulted clients. That Julie had slept with someone completely inappropriate like the cleaning man or even Dr. Friend's husband. It was all possible. And it was impossible to believe that when Julie became older, she would become more responsible. She was 38 years old.

"So now you're unemployed?"

"I have my private clients."

In Julie's website for the "Pet Whisperer," she dubbed herself the "premier animal trainer" in the Washington DC area. A photo showed her wearing teeny shorts and a tight white t-shirt standing alongside a sheepdog with a graduation cap on his head. Testimonials claimed that she had trained a German Shepherd to stop attacking smaller dogs and multiple cats from destroying furniture. He didn't believe any of it.

"You have enough clients to support yourself?"

She sloppily cut another jagged piece of bread and pushed it into her mouth.

"Business is a little slow, but it will pick up."

"I think you should get a job with another vet, at least you'll have a steady source of income."

"You don't believe me about Dr. Friend. Why don't you just say it?"

Easy. Relax. Don't react.

"I believe you, Julie. But it's not easy working with bosses."

"Oh, that's a hoot coming from a kept man," she laughed, showing stained teeth. When was the last time she'd been to a dentist? "I wish I could latch myself onto a desperate millionaire, that would solve all my problems."

"Don't talk about Wendy like that."

"But isn't it true that you're a kept man?"

He wouldn't give her the satisfaction of getting angry. True, Wendy paid for pretty much everything and they had a nice lifestyle. Those people who looked down on it, and there were some, were sexist. If he were a woman and Wendy was a man, her higher income wouldn't be an issue.

"We're talking about you Julie."

"Sure, you want to talk about me and ignore your own ridiculous life. Napkin rings? I mean, really."

Every time you lose your temper you play right into her hands, one of Julie's many therapists told him and Fran. He looked at all the food he'd spent hours cooking in the ridiculous hope that Julie could or had become someone different. But no one changed. Not Julie. Despite all the medications and therapists, she never changed.

"All I'm saying is that you need to earn money. Keep in mind that your mother and I are paying your rent."

That was why he had begged Ilan for a job and woke up three days a week at 3 AM to make crappy egg salad. Because while Wendy could pay for the ingredients for this lunch and all the rest of their living expenses, he would never ask Wendy to take care of his children.

"Don't pay my rent!" Julie shrieked. "I'll manage."

He and Fran, newly divorced, had done that once, on the advice of a therapist. They didn't hear from or contact Julie for a full month. It was hard on him. He worried that Julie was drinking too much or had been beaten up by some strange man she had brought home. Fran was no help. She was preoccupied carrying on an affair with a married man and selling homes. And then one morning Julie called him crying.

She'd been evicted from her apartment and ended up in a homeless shelter where they wouldn't let her keep her Husky. He immediately drove to the shelter. The women there were heartbreaking: young mothers with rings under their eyes surrounded by wide-eyed children desperate for attention or playing with bottle tops or plastic bags, and elderly women with unfocused eyes and sagging knee socks muttering to themselves. He thanked God that his mother of blessed memory hadn't been alive to see this. His parents had immigrated from Poland with nothing. But they had worked hard so he never wanted as a child and had sent him to university. Now his daughter had fallen to the bottom.

That day he took Julie to find a new apartment. Oh, that hadn't been easy either. She wanted a one bedroom, and she didn't like the kitchen in one of them. And they had to allow dogs. And when he exploded that she better pick something or he'd take her back to the shelter, she said "take me back there." And obviously he wouldn't do that.

And then someone, Fran's married boyfriend he found out later, had found her an oversized studio in Arlington whose owner demanded the first six months of rent upfront. Gary had to borrow from his cousin – thanks to his bankruptcy he could never get another bank or credit card loan -- which came with a patronizing lecture. But anything so his daughter wouldn't have to live in a homeless shelter.

She stood up, searching for her purse and jacket.

"Come on, sit down," he said. "We still have dessert. It's Crack pie with homemade chocolate ice cream."

"Eat it with your rich girlfriend."

"Julie, please. Sit down. We were just talking."

"No, you were just harping on me. Like you always do."

"I'm worried how you're going to support yourself."

"I told you, I'm a professional animal trainer."

"But that's not a secure job in which you'll receive benefits like health insurance."

She slumped back down in the chair.

"I would like health insurance."

"Who wouldn't? That's why you need to work for someone else."

She fiddled with the tumbler, running her hands up and down over the etching of waves

"Even if I wanted to get another job, there's a complication."

"What complication?"

She put her fingers through the napkin ring.

"Within eight months I won't be able to work."

It took him a few seconds because he had never thought or imagined *that*. He had assumed when Julie turned 38 that at least the possibility of *that* would disappear. He told her now that there was a solution to *that*, and Julie said, absolutely no way. She was determined to have this baby. There now existed an enormous problem that was not, as with many of Julie's other problems, just in her head.

**

Later, when he was cleaning up the kitchen and putting away what remained of the Crack pie that Julie had decimated it hit him that he hadn't asked her the most obvious question: Who is the father? He suspected that she didn't know.

His daughter was what they called, at least in his day, a slut. It had begun in elementary school when she showed her underwear to boys during recess and masturbated during classroom reading time. He and Fran had thought it was a childish phase and dismissed concerns from school authorities. They had been overwhelmed with their own lives. Fran was trying to get her real estate broker's license and he was trying to save his deli. And they were arguing. Fran thought he was a screw-up, and he was appalled by her materialism. So, yes, Julie hadn't gotten the attention she deserved. When he went bankrupt, it was especially hard for Julie. She was in high school and suddenly not being able to wear nice clothes or take horseback riding lessons was a big deal. She slept around -- with her best friend's boyfriend, the science teacher, and several members of the wrestling team. Even worse were those men who made the mistake of falling for her.

She brought Keith home with her Thanksgiving of freshman year in college. He was pre-Med and infatuated with her. He called her "My princess." Keith had even known Gary's deli and Julie's egg salad. They had all liked him.

"If it takes a man to calm her down, then I'm for it," Fran said privately. And they smiled when they heard loud moans coming from the room where Julie and Keith were staying. During the young couple's next visit over Christmas break, Keith had the look of a man driven to despair. In the middle of the night, they heard Julie screaming that he "didn't love her, was terrible in bed, and, yes, she had slept with her political science professor." They heard a car speed off and found Julie locked in the bedroom. They had to get a locksmith – on Christmas Day! -- to get the door down and found her huddled in a corner with a knife.

There were other men, many of them, but it always ended the same. The surest way to make Julie crazy was to fall in love with her.

**

On their third date, Gary told Wendy about Julie. They had been walking through the streets of Georgetown looking at storefront windows displaying high-end furniture and trendy clothes. They talked animatedly and frankly about their lives, a first for Gary since the divorce. In a rare confession, he even told her about the bankruptcy. Then Wendy paused in front of a storefront window and pointed at a black wool coat. It

reminded her of one she had bought once for Rebecca, her daughter. And Rebecca, then a teenager, had told her it was an old lady coat and refused to wear it. She was being unreasonable, Wendy said. Still Rebecca refused to wear it. A simple black coat that she could easily have worn but wouldn't because she wanted to annoy her mother.

And seeing a similar coat, after enduring Rebecca's endless nasty remarks about her attempts to find love as a widow made Wendy conclude that her daughter was stubborn and narcissistic.

"I have a difficult daughter," Wendy said.

And Gary shook his head. "No, no. You don't know difficult. "

Having once been an elementary school teacher she insisted she knew. She taught children who physically and verbally bullied other children. One fifth grader had taken home the classroom hamster and intentionally starved it.

Then he told her all about Julie. How she had been diagnosed variously as borderline, narcissistic, and bipolar. How Fran blamed the sushi and two Cosmopolitans she consumed during the third trimester of pregnancy but also her Aunt Millie who underwent shock therapy in an asylum. And she wanted Gary to do the same family reckoning. But he had two loving parents. Not content, Fran had blamed it on the bankruptcy, even though Julie's problems had preceded that. And they had shown Julie plenty of love. Of that he was confident.

"Julie is a difficult child," he said.

Wendy asked to see Julie's photograph. He showed her one in which Julie was seated by the waterfront at St. Michael's Island eating an ice cream cone. Julie's cheeks were red and wisps of hair falling over her eyes as she devoured the cone. She looked carefree and happy, as if finishing that cone was all that mattered. He didn't tell Wendy what happened after the photo was taken. He was driving them home when a squirrel darted in front of their car, and he failed to slam on the brakes quickly enough despite Julie's screams. Julie had insisted on picking up the squirrel's mangled body and taking it to a veterinary hospital. When the squirrel was pronounced dead, she told him he was a murderer and went into a depressed state that lasted several months.

"She's very, very beautiful," Wendy said. "That must make everything more difficult."

**

Julie sounded like a pro-life activist. "At six weeks, the embryo had a bump that will become the brain and head, and a bulge that will become the heart," she told him. "I am carrying something that's alive, that's my flesh and blood and yours also.

He was scared. It reminded him when he had seen *Rosemary's Baby* in high school with a friend who complained that they hadn't shown the demon baby's face in the end. But Gary had understood that was the ending's genius. In not showing the baby they were leaving it to the viewer's imagination which was so much scarier.

In Julie's pregnancy, she was, of course, the demon. He worried about her being left alone with an infant because he couldn't imagine her doing anything -- feeding, changing a diaper, giving the baby a bath. He and Fran were going to take over, maybe even urge Julie and the baby to move in with one of them. Fran wouldn't likely agree to that. The last time Julie had lived with her it was a nightmare. And if Julie and he lived together, that would mean moving out of Wendy's apartment. He hadn't told Wendy about the pregnancy for this very reason. He loved her. He wanted to be with her. This pregnancy was a big mess.

There was only one possible way out of all this: a miscarriage. There was no doubt it would be better for everyone involved, especially the embryo. Of course, he couldn't forget how devastated Fran had been by the miscarriage she suffered before giving birth to Julie. She said it was the worst feeling to have carried a child and then have it die within you.

Everything changed with the 14-week ultrasound. Julie had wanted him and Fran to accompany her there. At the last-minute Fran had to cancel because she had a house closing. Unbelievably, Julie had understood, and Gary drove her there alone as she chatted about some dog she wanted to adopt, because it was important to expose children early to pets. He let her go on and on about picking a breed known for being good with babies, not interrupting to say that as the single mother of an infant a dog was the last thing she could manage.

Julie winced as cold gel was put on her stomach and seized his hand. They heard the lub dub of the heartbeat -- strong and decisive. The technician waggled her electronic wand.

"Would you like to know the baby's sex?" The technician asked.

Julie nodded.

“A girl. You’re having a girl.”

Julie squeezed his hand so tight it hurt. It reminded him of the tire rafting trip in the Shenandoah River they had taken with some friends so many decades ago. Julie, only eight, and was supposed to be accompanied by an adult. But she kicked and screamed that she could handle her own tire. She splashed excitedly into the water. Once she was floating on her tire and the gap between her and the others widened, she screamed for help. He threaded his way back to her and reached for her hand. What a nightmare it had been riding those currents while holding her hand. You did this and more for your child. Your child gave you a reason to try to save your failing business, endure your wife’s insults and make crappy deli salads.

The technician pointed out the four chambers of the heart, the eyes, the spine, and the brain. His daughter’s daughter. His granddaughter.

“Everything looks good,” the technician said.

He was not the religious man his father had been. But you couldn’t help but think there was something preordained about all this. God was giving him another chance with this child. He was being called upon to make another sacrifice. Julie’s hand dug deeper into his.

**

He dumped the cooked eggs into cold water so the shells loosened and could be removed in one piece. He chopped the peeled eggs with the tine of his fork. Everything was going to have to change. This baby was 15 weeks invitro and he’d have to help support her. Working at Ilan’s wouldn’t be enough. He’d need a real job. Maybe he could start a new deli. It would be very difficult to get the financing but possibly he could swing it. He’d met a lot of wealthy people through his new life with Wendy and this was a good investment as Ilan’s crappy deli proved. He’d make sure not to make the same mistakes as last time – to pick the best location and suppliers. As he diced the eggs, he played out a pleasant fantasy of bringing his granddaughter to his new restaurant. He’d even name a salad after her. Of course, there were a lot of loose ends in that fantasy, especially Wendy’s role. Last night he finally told her about the pregnancy, Wendy said little, although she was clearly shocked and worried. They would have a lot to talk about and figure out. But Wendy was waiting. He admired her deeply for her restraint.

He missed the first phone call and then the second. Ilan had instructed that all workers were forbidden to be on their phones during their shift. It was only by chance, going to get some more eggs from the refrigerator, that he looked at his phone and saw that Julie had called six times. It was 4:45 AM. He stepped outside in the cold air, surprising a young homeless woman who was removing the empty bottles.

“Daddy! There’s blood, Daddy. A lot of blood. Come quickly!”

Julie’s crying from his phone filled the car as he drove. He felt deeply ashamed and responsible as if all his prayers for a miscarriage were responsible for this. Hadn’t God understood that he had changed his mind? The smell of stale bagels and cheap coffee in the hospital trailed him to Julie’s room. She was sleeping. Fran sat beside her, twisting a soiled tissue, no doubt reliving her own miscarriage. If she hadn’t lost that child, Julie likely would never have been born.

“I don’t get it,” Fran sniffed. “The pregnancy seemed fine. How does a miscarriage happen at this late stage?”

It could happen, he understood later after doing some research. But it could also be made to happen by someone very determined to end their pregnancy. None of the methods sounded nice and would not be deployed by any sensible person. But it couldn’t be dismissed because Julie was not sensible, never had been. And it couldn’t be dismissed because of the way she had gripped his hand during that ultrasound. So tight. As if he could save her.

