

The Good

It wasn't like...oh dear! It wasn't *as if* Elise had not been trying. But try she must and till the end of time, it would seem. After all, perseverance saved many a day and many an event from failure.

What was that saying again? Victory has a thousand fathers but defeat is an orphan. Just the same, why in Heaven's name was Erin behaving like, no as if, her family were all against her? Why was Erin who had been refused nothing, confiding in, of all people, Fran? The Fran that Elise had met when they were both at Hunter in the thirties, when Hunter College was the Ellis Island immigrants' daughters' finishing school and a ticket into a certain America. Hunter College in those days was nothing like Smith and Vassar, which responded to Jewish names with polite rejection slips from the board of trustees and admission committees. Well, at least they were polite, unlike the tzarist police who would have sent Elise's father to the front as a damned Jew if he had not emigrated in time. No, "their Hunter" was more like a waiting room for their daughters' generation, and already Elise noticed that friends with unapologetically Jewish names were sending their children to Smith, Vassar, Bryn Mawr, and what-have-you. This is what Elise wanted most of all for Erin with a musical education which was another road into the best schools and *salons*. Talent is a door opener and Erin had talent. Didn't everyone say so? Fran said so, and Fran was making quite a name for herself.

Fran lived on 112th Street and Broadway, just across the way from Columbia where she was giving courses in how to teach music to young children. Well, she was always giving courses on things related to music, not the creative, but the practical aspect of music centered on how to teach it to young children, to the handicapped and even to the elderly. The City University, Columbia, the New School, Teachers' College couldn't get enough of dear old Fran, and, one had

to hand it to dear old Fran, she was doing better financially post than pre divorce! Bernard described Fran as a “patchwork of professional angst,” but that was awfully unfair of Bernard when he tacked “angst” onto Fran. If the truth be told, he was mostly describing himself, and his not managing to get a toehold into any institution more glorious than that darn community college where Elise felt he was wasting his time and his talents as a professor of English. Teaching English to dopes! The best of Bernard's students transferred to Columbia, to City College and New York University where Elise taught Spanish. (Sometimes Bernard's students landed in her classes and found that being Puerto Rican was actually an advantage). The rest of the community college chow waded through American literature 101 which Bernard taught and taught and taught until the end of time, it seemed to Elise. Bernard was such a brave heart and a stoic. Despite bringing home the bacon, as a manner of speaking, he also found time to produce tons of articles and books on Edgar Allan Poe, and no one ever offered him anything better than the Manhattan Community College American Literature 101! Elise shied away from talking about NYU, and blessed her lucky stars that Bernard never spoke about wanting to join the faculty there. Fran, it turned out, was giving a course at NYU in the fall and would be just down the hall from Elise's classroom, which was really great for lunch dates. Ah! Reminiscences of Hunter when both girls giggled over strawberry malts at the drugstore fountain – Was it Walgreen's or Woolworth's? - and compared notes about teachers. Elise was also very sensitive to music, although, unlike Fran, cared beans about teaching it.

Bernard hated Fran, that was obvious, hated her for running about like “a money grubbing rabbit,” (Elise wasn't too sure about his metaphor) giving courses which paid the rent and then some, and – supreme insult – being interviewed on public television and authoring a book-workbook combo on the subject of musical education that was written up in the *Times*. Also, Fran, born in Atlanta, Georgia, spoke in a mingling of Yiddish and Southern accents, which had the effect of a nail

scraping against a blackboard to Bernard's sensitive ears, and it was only through a series of “please-let's-cool-it” looks coming from Elise that kept Bernard's very verbal hatred of Fran from spilling over into Erin's ear. Although Bernard was right about most things, and Elise shared some of his reticence about Fran, their friendship was grounded in memories that concerned only themselves and pre-dated Bernard. So, (nah!) Bernard would have to take Fran's uncouth accent and sloppy appearance and lump it! However, there were things that even Elise had trouble lumping, like this sudden and passionate friendship that their daughter Erin conceived for Fran. However, on the way to that cute little coffee shop where they were going to enjoy a sinful cheesecake and coffee (Elise made sure never to tip the scales over 120 pounds) Elise put aside Bernard's anguish, Fran's overly pragmatic attitude towards life and her dislike of Bernard, and even the family's difficulty with Erin to enjoy the blithe spring morning.

An angel's halo seemed to glow above and about the Columbia campus dotted with smiling young people, a picture that convinced Elise that there was, despite Bernard's invective and militant atheism, a sort of higher power promising that doing good and nourishing an undying sort of patience pays off in the end. Of course, bringing up a teenage girl is fraught with trials and tribulations. Fran understood that, although she had only produced sons who were both older than Erin and living Somewhere Out In California. However, other parents who produced only girls seemed to have lucked out more than Elise and Bernard Vogel. Elise held up Janie, or Carol or Ruth as models for Elise in full rebellion. Same age group, same lifestyle, even the same neighborhood and their parents did not seem to have any problems. Ruth, a junior in high school, like Erin, was an absolute whiz in math and science, besides being fluent in Russian, thanks to immigrant parents. Likewise Carol who had added on the luster of a becoming a future world class violinist. Admiration was Elise's middle name. Wasn't admiration a form of goodness, eschewing jealousy and bitterness? Wasn't Elise putting aside her own frustration, and

disappointments when she voiced it (her admiration) to her daughter as, “Why can't you be more like Carol?” Elise had read articles about the importance of the peer group. Every young person needs a role model and as Erin unhappily, even tragically, disregarded the excellence of her parents, she might pattern herself on her friends. Even that had backfired. Erin had crawled even further into her hole, and, in a way, it was lucky that Fran had taken Erin under her uncouthly Southern accented wing as a short term measure. Well, it was time Fran fessed up. What was bothering Erin? In school, and about the flute? Bernard and Elise had gone to such time and expense to buy a silver plated flute and to get the best teacher for Erin, following Fran's advice, and Erin was still... well, being so resistant and downright nasty about every aspect of flute playing, and also about school.

Whoosh! An unseen sprinkler turned its jet on Elise! Will Fran say anything about her wet skirt? It serves her right for being lost in thought. Well, Broadway and cheesecake Heaven are in sight. Hopefully, Fran has not forgotten their date.

No, Fran has not forgotten and is very much there, sitting at a table by the window. She waves to Elise like a passenger on an ocean liner moving seaward. That was Fran in a nutshell. What she did, she did all the way.

Fran was the opposite of Elise in looks – small and dumpy to Elise's graceful medium height figure and self-imposed dancer's gait. Fran had a face that seemed smudged into a thick fleece of graying hair pulled into a chignon. Her skin was spotty, her nose and chin ill-defined, and an air of pushy crassness permeated her physical appearance that said “Ok, I am far from perfect, so get over it, I got the goods and I deliver” while Elise had chiseled and slightly aquiline features illuminated by large blue eyes and the air of always auditioning for something. Elise had just

recently, with Bernard's permission, got her hair cut into a fashionable bob, and she dressed well-suits in winter, and now that the weather was warm, a springlike flowered shirtwaist with a dark pink cardigan. However different both women were, or because of it, there was that common and delectable ground of polite disagreement which nourished and blossomed with their friendship.

“I ordered the raspberry cheesecake for you,” Fran began smiling at her friend.

“Sinful as always. Won't eat for the rest of the day.” Elise replied, kissing Fran on both cheeks. Fran did not answer, it was the classical opening for Elise. Who declared what was or wasn't sinful in the Elise and Bernard household?

“Well, how are things?” Fran wanted to do away with the niceties, always a bad sign for Elise. Normally, Fran would go on at length about Stu and Gary, her sons Somewhere in California, who were doing wonderful things in the Whatever Profession (Elise listened distractedly). Fran had married earlier than Elise and had given birth to Stu and Gary right away. The family all got on fine even after the divorce and did not seem to encounter any of the problems Elise and Bernard were facing with Erin.

“Not going the way Bernard and I want them too, with Erin. Oh thank you!” A waiter brought the cheesecake and coffee. Would Fran think raspberry cheesecake was comfort food? God forbid!

“Alright, Elly,” (God! How Elise hated that nickname and Fran knew it. Another sign of difficulty ahead) let's get right down to it. You are here because you are upset. Right?”

Elise nodded tearfully and pricked the raspberry red wedge of deliciousness with her fork. How many calories per bite? “I feel we are losing Erin, something is bothering her, something she

cannot or will not tell us, me or Bernard. We have done so much and it has been awful. But no matter how we try, there is no positive reaction and as for the flute..."

"Erin's been sloughing off. I know. And in school too. God does that child hate herself! Has a guilt complex as big as King Kong, well many kids do."

"Fran, I tell you we are at our wit's end. We followed your advice about the teacher, and it's just been getting worse. I think..."

"Maybe you should leave off nagging the child, you know how stressful Bernie can get, a little sometimes goes a long way." Fran said, helping herself to an isosceles triangle of cheesecake. No shy eater Fran. Not really fat, not really thin, her body seemed a secondary factor in her existence, something that she had to clothe with the maximum amount of indifference in order to travel from point A to point B.

"I know that Bernard expects a lot from Erin, from all of us, but that is just the way he is. Criticism is his way of expressing love, I..."

"I doubt that," Fran remarked and took a sip of coffee. "Ok, why did you want to talk? Why did you call me, other than the pleasure of getting together? Erin has..."

Elise interrupted, "has been going to a psychologist to talk to ,well, someone about her complexes. This is a recent development. You can see how hard we are trying."

"It's hard to be only 14 and a junior in high school. She's two years ahead, thanks to your

husband's pretent..."

"I did not come here to discuss Bernard, really you people should kiss and make up." Elise said as if wishful thinking were another form of social politeness. "I came here to try to understand. To hear what Fran has been telling you. I know it is hard to be two years ahead of one's class, but Erin is an exceptional child, and her flute playing..."

"Did she ever ask you to buy her a flute, Elly? Or is that another one of Bernard's fantasies over having a musically gifted child even if she isn't." Fran took a long sip of coffee while Elise tried not to hate her through liquid blue eyes. Was Erin also responsible for this newfound animosity? Or, perhaps, Elise and Bernard Vogel had produced that rarity - an authentically bad child, but that seemed too outlandish. Normally when one is good to one's children, at least, one is repaid in kind, or there had to be something that Elise did not know and Fran knew, but could Fran be trusted to tell all the truth? "Last year, it was her freckles, this year, it is her height. I know, very few fourteen year olds reach five foot nine, but there again, it's not our fault. We hoped that the flute would give Erin that extra boost to overcome being as tall or taller than most of the boys in her class, but nothing has worked. At times, she refuses to grow up, her slouching, for example. There you have the perfect instance of a young woman (Well, I wouldn't call her that exactly, Fran thought) wanting to crawl into a hole and, be overlooked. Erin is so bright, has so much to give, and we are at our wit's end. If she feels confident in telling you what goes on in her little teenage brain, so be it. But, we her parents want to understand. What does she tell you? Is there anything particularly, well, awful that she could not tell her parents? Anything involving, hmm, boys?"

They were skirting the issue, and Fran knew it. Fran thought she knew more than Elise about her daughter and the real reason for Erin's bad behavior, general depression and sprouting complexes.

Take away the flute teacher, and one might take away most if not all of Erin's complexes. How to tell Elise that the teacher recommended by Fran, Zachary Plotnik was doing other things than teach her daughter flute? It was a delicate situation from all ends. Plotnik had made a favorable impression on Fran when they met at a concert two years before. He was also one of the most gifted and talked about teachers in the city and had a following at the Julliard, which would look wonderful on a college application. Sterling high school record, plus the Julliard! The Ivy gates would not fail to swing wide open. But lessons with Plotnik came with a price that was not only measured in money. Should Fran tell Elise? Or did she know some or all of what was going on?

Elise had always been a prude, it was not that sex did not interest her, it did in a medicinal sort of way, but it was always covered with shame and menace, just as Erin was finding out, the hard way. No, Elise had always read the fairy tale, never the manual for mating, and as for Bernard, he was the root of all Elise's evil in the category of lovemaking. Whenever the subject of sex came between the two friends, it was always giggled it off, in a "you know men" sort of way, as if Elise desperately and quickly wanted to change the subject. Fran believed that Bernard with all his airs of Mr. Prim and Proper, had a seamy and steamy side to him. Fran wouldn't put it past him to be a regular monster in bed, with a hefty soupcon of guilt, and he would make his wife pay for it in the most horrible ways. Was Elise faithful to Bernard? Yes, because the dictates of some steely moralistic God who undoubtedly ate the Wicked, but with Its little finger up, decreed that fidelity ran through good character. Was Bernard faithful to Elise? Hmm, more problematic. They, Elise and Fran, had one mutual girlfriend who like most people hated Bernard, but was physically attracted to him, and when Fran told Elise about it, Elise brushed it off as a gross impossibility. Love of the true kind, (whatever that was) dominated the bestial instincts, at least in the upper echelons of society and the intelligentsia. The rest was the nonsense, Elise did not want to know about and which, Fran saw immediately, gave this girly meeting over sinful cheesecake a sort of

unsolvable drama. Would she be able to tell Elise that Plotnik was taking liberties with Erin, or would she keep silent, for fear of destroying the rug under which a lot of dirt was hidden? Would Elise even ask, let alone, imagine the question that came more naturally into others' minds? The best tack would be to sound off Elise who had just, thankfully, brought up the question of boys. Perhaps, just perhaps, Elise knew more than she wanted to know and tell. It was after all Elise who had brought up the subject of boys, a code word, for Plotnik. Ridiculous! No one could call Plotnik, a fifty year old married man, a boy even if he could be called a lot of other things, and there Fran had to tread on thin ice. Erin had not been specific about his abuses, but there was such a thing as statutory rape. Let's hope it had not come to that.

“I don't think it is specifically *boys* that is upsetting Erin, Elly.” Fran emphasized, dabbing her lips with her napkin. “But, it has to do with, well, sex.”

“It's her age. All arms and legs. Can't deal with hormones. I'm sure she'll get over it, it's just that Erin is making life difficult for all of us.” Elise retreated. When in distress, the cliché is the most comforting security blanket. The cliché gives misery a time tested historical context.

Fran replied, casting a very broad hint, “There is that aspect of it, but, I think that a little less insistence on practicing the flute would do Erin a world of good, and channel a sex drive, mind you, I did not say *her* sex drive, but that of, well, someone else. You know, some people have a little less talent than others. Erin has enormous gifts in other realms. Languages, for example, you know...” Would Elise get the seemingly incoherent connection between a sex drive and flute playing without Fran sounding too absurd?

“All I know is that Erin is driving her poor father crazy.” Elise suddenly broke into tears

convincing Fran that the flute-dash-sex drive connection might have been understood, but the crying spell was a strange plea for mercy. Fran had to work with what she had in hand, and for the moment the surest approach to save Erin was through Bernard.

“That is because Bernard drives everyone crazy and there is no reason why a 14 year old girl should put up with his different obsessions. Like punishment as a form of love. Like just trying to be like the kids in her class which is hard to do when you are two years ahead, and trying to prove to one's father that one is a genius. Like not being as gifted as his wife!”

“You have always hated Bernard, Fran. But we are not talking about Bernard, we are talking about Erin and that something which she is confiding in you and you are loathe to speak about it. Now out with it. I can take it.”

“Are you sure, Elise? You've just burst into tears.”

“My outburst is because tension has been building and it has all come to a head. Erin has been talking about killing herself because, and I quote her, she is monstrously tall.”

“I thought we were concerned only about the flute. Erin is not my daughter, but ” Fran remarked trying to steer the conversation back to Erin in the hope that if Plotnik somehow disappeared from the scene, the world would settle peacefully back into Elise and Bernard Vogel's intense and gloomy mode of existence. But the Vogels, particularly Bernard, probably believed in Plotnik as much as they believed in FDR's brand of Social Democracy and a letter of recommendation by Plotnik was a boon on any college application. In fact, the odd thing about the Vogels, Elise and Bernard, was that they lunged towards doing good with all the rapacity of a wolf preying on

sheep.

“It's part of a whole,” Elise said. “But somehow it is all connected with you, since you have become the second mother, and the flute, since you found us Mr. Plotnik, and Lord knows how hard it is to get accepted as his pupil. Remember the audition we took Erin to? Hundreds of kids and their mothers were lining up and...”

“I know, Elise. Well, just think of it. Maybe Zachary Plotnik has something to do with Erin's depressed state. What has she told you?”

Another burst of hysteria from Elise. The merry raspberry of the cheesecake started to look like a puddle of blood. Fran blamed herself. It was obvious that Erin had indeed opened up to her mother, with nefarious results. It was also obvious that Elise did not and could not believe her daughter. So, why did she want Fran to be there? To confirm the worst?

“She has been making wild statements, awful things about Plotnik. I could hardly bel...She wants to give up the flute. Bernard will be furious. The flute and being Plotnik's pupil at the Julliard look great on college applications.”

“Why do you think Plotnik took Erin on in the first place?” Fran asked and took a sip of water. Plotnik had probably disregarded Erin's musical talents for other reasons. Fran was sure of that now.

“Because she has talent. Because ... well, how should I know? Erin is incapable of taking things *in a stride*. (‘Like being abused,’ Fran thought, ‘is that Elise's definition of in a stride? Well yes, it

is.”)We are thinking of sending Erin away next year before college. A good boarding school in Upper State New York. Life has become intolerable.” Elise cupped her hand over her eyes not to show her tears but to warn her friend that she was crying.

“More intolerable than it already has been?” Fran thought, but she put her hand on Elise's shoulder, grateful that Elise was not the blaming type who would, with some justification, accuse her of being partly responsible for the hell that reigned in their household.

Then it hit Fran...the purpose of Elise's coming. Delicate flowers cannot take suffering. That was a fact of life. Elise was not there to learn the truth, which she already knew, but to be a friend exercising friendship's most cherished right – the right to solace. Elise had come to this meeting on the pretense, certainly false, of discussing Erin, but really with the intention of begging for pity. Plotnik, Erin, and Bernard who did what he did best - throw a Doctor Mabuse shadow over everything provided the backdrop for an insane opera. Well, some people live, love and thrive in, the insane operas of their own creations. Bernard certainly did and Fran started wondering about her best friend Elise.

The truth about the truth is that it has no meaning for those who live in constant goodness. How could Fran explain to *her friend* Elise that the most wonderful people like Plotnik can do and do the most horrible things? One did not explain, justify or even warn, for all explanations are useless, laughed away or, in that manner of girls describing boys, tossed off in a “that's the way they are” manner. Grin and bear it, dear little Elise. *Your father had the right attitude when he fled the tzar's army.* Finally, flight, like sending Erin away to school, is the no solution solution, it is buying time, which is the only thing that The Good can hope for. Elise was totally right not to come up with a brutally honest description of what was happening between Erin and Plotnik. The

Lady of Shalott had lifted the veil she was weaving and she had choked with the dust. A little goodness, or at least its illusion, provides the grease on which the dirty world runs.

“Hey,” Fran said after Elise stopped crying and managed a ghost of a smile, “good idea that one about a boarding school. Would do Erin a world of good to get out of the house more, and as for the flute...She's got talent, I feel sure Erin will go back to it once she is in college. It's just a bad period, most teens go through it, believe me Stu and Gary had,well, their moments. Despite all my boasting and bragging, they were not easy and I know what you are dealing with. Look! Why don't we sin even a little more and ask the waiter for a ton of whipped cream on our cheesecake?”

The End