

## THE FALL

As Tom merges onto the entrance for the Tappan Zee Bridge, he firmly grips the steering wheel of his SUV that is being buffeted by wind gusts in advance of a cold front. It sends a shooting pain up his right arm, the result of unsuccessful shoulder surgery to repair years of overuse as a starting pitcher for the New York Mets. Since he was already well into his thirties when it happened, the team released him from his contract because everyone knew the rehab would take too long to get him back on the mound when he still had something to give. Luckily, Tom was realistic about the longevity of a sports career and had wisely invested his earnings, the benefit of having a business degree from Duke and the necessity of putting three kids to put through college.

His latest business venture was a barbecue restaurant in Nyack. With the lunch rush well in hand, he managed to slip out, hopeful that he could make it in time for his mother's ninety-third birthday luncheon in Connecticut. Vera, his widowed mother, lived with an aide/companion in a fifties-style ranch house where Tom and his sister grew up. She decided to remain there after her husband, Francis, died some ten years earlier, an event that exposed her mild,

though increasing dementia. Tom wondered how long his father had shielded him and his sister from her condition and how much strain it added to Francis' heart condition.

The O'Malley house is noticeably out of synch with the new custom-built homes that were slowly overtaking the neighborhood he once knew, creating the air of success rather than of modesty, which had become passé. Once Vera dies, he thought, the house will be torn down to make room for something grander, more evocative of the affluence that surrounded it.

When Tom reaches his mother's home, there are leaves covering the yard and driveway, a remnant from the storm the night before. He parks in front of the garage, takes his tweed sport coat from the hanger in the back seat, and puts it on as he walks toward the house, slipping on the wet leaves covering the slate pathway to the front door. He steadies himself with the branches of the overgrown holly tree to his right. His balance restored, he simultaneously knocks on the door, and turns the knob, but realizes Olga, the Brazilian companion, has locked it, which she does less out of the fear of intrusion than out of fear of Vera's escape into the neighborhood.

Six months ago, she wandered off down the street with an old book clutched in her arm. Recognizing that she was disoriented, a young woman approached Vera and asked her where she lived. Unable to understand her, the young woman asked to look at what she was holding, a nineteen-forty-two St. Catherine of Siena yearbook in which her name was written in cursive on the inside cover. With her smart phone, the woman searched for Vera and found

that she lived just a couple of blocks away from where they stood, so she escorted Vera home. When they appeared back at her home, Olga shrieked, not realizing that she had left the house.

On this day, Olga answers the door, dressed in a brightly colored smock that was better suited for a pediatric nurse.

“Come on in . . . We got a late start,” she offers

Tom steps inside and takes off his loafers, a concession to Olga’s OCD.

“Is she okay?”

“Had a restless night, so I let her sleep in.”

“Do you think she’s up to going out?”

Olga pauses while listening for ominous sounds from the bedroom. “Yeah,” I think she will be fine. . . We’re just doing her hair and make up.”

“Oh no . . . that could take all day.”

“What’s the hurry?”

Olga listens again and hears a thud. Tom looks concerned and follows her down the corridor into her bedroom. Vera is splayed out on the floor and bed, like a mermaid, her upper body face down on the bed and her lower with both legs bent to one side on the floor.

“Mom, you okay?” says Tom.

“I’m fine. I was trying to get my lipstick in the bathroom, but I slipped on the floor.”

“You sure? Do you hurt anywhere?”

“What?”

Olga and Tom lift her up under her arms and seat her on the bed. Looking to Olga, Tom says, "I'm not sure we should go out."

"I'm going out! I'm meeting Francis!" Vera slams her fist on the bed.

"Maybe I should go with you?" suggests Olga

"I don't need a chaperone." Vera protests. "I'm twenty-five years old!"

Tom sighed. . . Francis was his father. He and Vera met in the mid-nineteen fifties, when he was working at Chase Manhattan bank. He was visiting his best friend, the head of the creative department at a major ad agency during a photo shoot, and there met Vera who was hired as a model for a print campaign. In those days, she was trying to make it in the theatre---she was an excellent dancer and passable singer--- but found more work on the new medium of TV, where she had some non-speaking roles in commercials and an infrequently recurring part as a nurse on a daytime drama. Her aspirations ended when she married Francis a year later, and the children followed. Nevertheless, Vera liked to reminisce about her theatrical career and about what might have been, something that annoyed Tom as a teenager, but now he's grateful. She is unaware of the hopelessness of her current situation. He only wishes he could do the same; between his mother's declining mental state and his impending divorce, he'd welcome an escape from the present.

"It's okay. We'll keep it simple and go to the diner."

He leaves the bedroom, and lets Olga help her with her make-up and calls to cancel his reservation at a nice, country inn. He walks outside and instinctively reaches for a pack of cigarettes in his inside breast pocket, realizing that they are

no longer there, a habit he gave up a few years earlier when he became winded climbing up the steps from the downstairs platform at Grand Central. Maybe it was his wife's decision to separate that forced him to re-evaluate his life and take better care of himself. Either as an effort to resuscitate his marriage or move in a new direction---Tom couldn't tell you---he committed to getting healthy by giving up cigarettes, going to the gym and eating right. Thanks to winning the genetic lottery, Tom inherited his mother's good looks as well as her sense of movement, which made his pitches as graceful as they were deceptive.

Twenty minutes later, Vera, in a camel coat with a fur collar and holding Olga's elbow, walks out the front door. Tom is standing in the yard, looking up at the cedar tree where two squirrels are chasing each other, jumping from limb to limb.

"We're all set here," says Olga.

Tom turns around and sees his mother. He can't help but feel she is shorter than he remembers. He walks toward them, and then leads his mother into his car. Once she is settled, he reaches across her to buckle her seat belt.

"No funny business---Francis will knock your block off."

Tom chuckles. It is strange to see Vera as she was before she became "Mom"---like surreptitiously reading someone's diary. Nevertheless, he feels conflicted, hurt that she didn't remember who he is and angry that she is leaving him bit by bit. Her emotional connection to him wanes while his grows more intense in his need to maintain a link to the mother who loved him without expectation.

When they arrive at the Parkway Diner, Tom goes around to Vera's side of the car and helps her out. As she stands by the car, she asks, "How do I look?"

"Gorgeous."

She smiles, and Tom offers his arm, and she loops hers through his and together they climb the half dozen steps leading to the front door. When he swings it open, he spies a Mets banner above the cash register. The owner, a short, middle-aged man with tufts of gray hair coming out of his ears, comes from behind the register.

"Aren't you Tom O'Malley?"

"Yes, I am."

"Whoa! I heard you grew up around here. . ." And with that, he begins searching below the desk. Vera becomes restless.

"Can we just take that booth over there?" The restaurant is half-filled with young families and seniors,, but there is an open booth free near the window.

"Oh sure, help yourself. I'll bring you menus."

Tom ushers Vera to the booth, takes her coat and hangs it up on the hook beside it. The décor is as expected--- Formica tabletops and tape on the ripped red vinyl bench seats. The owner returns to the table with the menus, which are like oversized plastic books that are sticky and smell of maple syrup. As Tom begins to read through the choices, he catches a glimpse of his mother, who is playing with the jukebox on the wall of the booth.

"Who's Beyoncé?"

“No one you’d like.”

“Ah, here we go . . . Frank Sinatra.”

Tom puts some coins in the machine, and “Fly with Me” begins to play. Vera, in another world, sways back and forth softly singing along. Listening to her voice reminds Tom of why she never made it in musical theatre, but no matter, she is transfixed by the music.

“You know I saw him once, when he was just starting out. . . Skinny Dago with that silly, floppy, bow tie and greasy hair. Never thought he’d make it.”

“You can’t say stuff like that.”

“Okay, “wop”---that better?”

“Please!”

An older couple in the nearest table glares at them.

“Anyway, looks aren’t everything. . . though he did polish his act and became quite successful.”

“Became?”

“Died almost twenty years ago.”

“Must’nt have been long after I saw him. . . How did I miss that?”

“So, what are you thinking of having?”

“A Ruben---”

“What are you having?”

“A tossed green salad with grilled chicken.”

“And what else?”

“That’s it.”

"I don't mean to criticize, but men don't eat salad for lunch."

"Why not?"

"Well . . . they just don't."

"I love salad."

Vera leans in, whispering to him behind her menu. "You're not one of--- you know---those guys?"

"You mean "homosexual" --- no. I'm married with three kids."

"On a diet then?"

"I just want to be healthy."

"And you're sure you're not---."

"I'm sure."

The waiter, a skinny Latino kid with a *fauxhawk* comes to the table. "Do you know what you want?"

A slack-jawed Vera looks at him incredulously. "A Ruben and a martini."

"We don't serve alcohol."

"Then make that an orange juice."

"I'll have a tossed green salad with grilled chicken and an iced tea."

"Dressing?"

"Oil and vinegar."

Tom hands the menus to the waiter, and Vera begins looking for another song.

"I'll get some more change." When Tom gets up from the booth, Vera begins to rummage through her handbag.



“You need something?”

The waiter returns with an orange juice and iced tea.

“Aha!” She pulls out an airplane bottle of vodka just as Tom slides back into the booth. He watches in surprise as she unscrews the top and pours it into the orange juice. “Something my girlfriend taught me. You save a bundle on booze.”

“Uh-huh.” Tom looks through the songs. “So what do you want to hear?”

“Um . . . Tony Bennett!”

“Here we go---a classic.” He slips the coins in the slot and “I left my heart in San Francisco” plays.

“You know, I have an audition tomorrow.”

“Really? For what?”

“Guys and Dolls.”

“That’s a great show.”

“It hasn’t opened yet.”

“Oh, I heard about it from one of the producers.”

“Can you put a good word in for me.”

“Absolutely.”

“You’re swell. . . You know, we should go to a show.”

“I’d like that.”

“How about Damn Yankees?”

“Maybe something else.”

“Don’t like baseball?”

“I love it---just not the Yankees.”

“You sound like my son---doesn’t like them either. And my daughter, well, she isn’t interested in any kind of sport. Just reads, reads, reads . . .”

“She sounds smart.”

“You mean dull. My son’s the fun one.---was always getting into mischief in school.” She chuckles. “He and his friends were caught blowing up trash cans on Main Street.---total rascal.”

Tom lets out a hearty laugh and the waiter brings their lunches. Vera sinks into her sandwich and moans. “This is so good. Want a bite?”

“No thanks, I’m good.”

Vera rolls her eyes. They then eat their meals in silence, and Tom notices Vera’s demeanor subtly change, from contentment to a tinge of sadness. He gets the check, and pays the cashier, noticing the Yankees game on over the counter.

“They’re ahead by three,” says the owner.

“They always land on top.”

“Yeah, but they still suck.”

Tom returns to the table, leaves a tip and helps Vera with her coat. In the car, Tom turns on a Sirius station of show tunes, and Vera hums along. When they arrive back home, Tom walks her to the door, and before he knocks, Olga opens it. “So how was lunch?”

“Tom and I had a nice time.”

With that, Olga takes her arm and leads Vera into the house. Tom,

smiling, follows them inside.

“Well, thanks so much for lunch. . . It was awfully nice of you,” says Vera as Olga helps remove her coat.

“My pleasure.”

“You know, you should meet Francis---he’d really like you.”

“I’d like that.” And with that Tom, with tears in his eyes, bends forward and kisses Vera on the cheek. “Happy Birthday.”

“But it’s not my birthday.”

“It should be,” says Tom as he squeezes her hand. “See you soon.”

“Hope so,” says Vera.

As Tom walks back to his car, he notices the wet leaves have dried and blown off the walkway.