

## NOVEMBER

“Cheer up,” Miriam said to the other Life agents in the elevator. “It’s not like losing your best friend.”

“Easy for you to say. You don’t have to drive thirty miles in it,” Laura told her.

The rain had started about two o’clock after a morning of high wind and constantly changing skies. This was San Francisco, it was time for the rains to start, almost past time. Still, they had all become glum - rain signaled that the year was nearly over and from now on daylight would be gone when they left the office building.

“November has to come sometime!”

“Thank you for that!”

Miriam had brought in last year’s umbrella a week ago when rain had been promised. She had meant to go out and buy a new one on her lunch hour, but the sky had cleared, and she forgot about it. Now she had only an umbrella with two broken spokes, a short cloth coat and almost new tan pumps in which to face the night.

“Say hello to Dan for me!” Laura waved.

The others turned toward the garage while Miriam walked through the revolving door to the street. The rain was like a wall in front of her, so heavy the sidewalks could just be glimpsed under an inch or two of water. The sky was charcoal gray and the wet blacktop street was decorated with circles of iridescence where oil spilled months ago was being reconstituted by the downpour. Solid lines of honking cars and buses filled the street from curb to curb.

What was the good of buying beautiful shoes to cheer yourself up if you were going to ruin them? “Cattle get wet,” she said out loud at the corner.

A plump woman standing just ahead of her, waiting at the light, shrank from her words.

“Shoes should survive,” Miriam said by way of an explanation.

The light changed and the woman hurried away from her.

“You’re neurotic!” Miriam called after her.

As they both started across the street in the middle of a crowd, the woman seemed to be pressing forward to get away from Miriam. Mission Street was solid with cars because two electric buses which had disconnected from the overhead lines were stalled in the center. Pedestrians streamed forward unfazed by the wall of metal. Blocked by a bus, they took a jog in the middle of the street and threaded their way between the bus and a car only a few feet away. Miriam’s leg rubbed against the car fender, and she felt the vibration of its engine. Her eyes went up to the driver who was looking sullen. What if he let his brake foot relax?

Ahead of Miriam, the woman who had been beside her looked back to see if Miriam was about to catch up.

Miriam laughed in irritation. “Maybe counseling would help!” she called out.

Now another woman turned and walked back to her. “It’s me,” Jill said.

Miriam stopped. Probably the person she least wanted to run into. “Are you a ghost of Christmas Past?”

Jill waved a hand in a vague direction. “I work here now!”

They stopped. No wonder Miriam hadn't recognized her. Jill had gotten fat. Thirty pounds, maybe more. "What's there?"

"It's a small law firm. I'm a paralegal."

"Is that good? Five months ago, you were the respected editor of a newsletter for power companies."

The fat woman who looked like Jill laughed awkwardly. Under the new blonde hair, she still had a gentle prettiness, but the chin was fast disappearing into the neck. "It has its ups and downs. Mostly I write very careful letters to potential witnesses. You didn't mention my hair."

Miriam ignored the rain on her legs and picked among things she might say. Revenge might be sweet, but it didn't have to be crude. "Fabulous," she finally said.

"Sorry, you're over the limit. If you don't say it's terrific within the first three minutes, I know you don't mean it." The fat lady smiled to take away the sting. "You look good; you're as thin as ever. Why haven't I heard from you?"

"You haven't called me either." People were bumping into them, shaking umbrellas at them, muttering complaints because the two of them stood in the middle of the sidewalk.

"But I did. I left you a thank you message on your machine after I came to dinner in June, and then I left you two more at least."

"I didn't think they were for me," Miriam said gently.

"Who else would they be for? Dan? Oh, Mir, don't say that. Just because we flirted at dinner. You and I have been friends too long for that."

"Oh?"

Jill took her arm forcibly and turned both of them toward Market Street. “You’re going to BART, aren’t you? For once, I’m headed your way. I’m going out to Walnut Creek to have dinner with my mother.”

She tried to keep Miriam’s arm clutched against her side as she threaded their way up the long block, but Miriam pulled away. She was tired; she didn’t want this now. Some other time maybe, because they had been friends so long, but not now.

“I was really thinking about doing some shopping before I go home.”

“In this mess?” Jill turned and took her arm again. “Let’s just get on the train and we’ll get to talk a minute or two.”

Miriam tried to think of a response; it had been too hard a day, her sales were faltering. They went down the double flight of stairs to the underground station, shaking out their umbrellas as they came under the roof. Miriam’s toes were cold against the slickness of wet stockings.

“We can both take the Concord train.” Jill said.

“That means I have to transfer.”

But at the foot of the stairs there was something wrong. A great many people stood dazedly like cattle gathered at the pasture gate waiting to be let through to the milking barn.

“What happened?” Miriam asked the nearest man.

He made a face. “A train derailed in the tunnel. They’re going to run trains on the other track as soon as they get all the passengers out.... only now they are walking back through the tunnel on foot.”

“They have to walk out of there?” Jill asked. “In the dark? How many miles is it?”

“Five maybe, though they’d only have to walk halfway, whichever way is shorter. But alongside the hot rail,” the man said. He pursed his mouth as he calculated, picking among unfortunate thoughts. “A couple of hours at least. If no one has a heart attack.”

He shook his head and walked back toward the steps they had just come down.

“Nice looking man,” Jill said reflectively.

“Sounded like an accountant.”

“At least he’d always be solvent...”

Miriam started to speak but the next announcement came. People were still being evacuated. The estimate was that a train would be loaded on the inbound side of the station and make its way to the East Bay on that track at about seven o’clock.

“Seven o’clock,” Jill groaned. “What time is it now?”

“Five fifteen. And we won’t get on that train anyway. There must be at least one trainload of people already down on the platform.”

“Oh great,” Jill said.

Miriam was damned if she waited two hours for a train. She disengaged her arm again. “We can talk some other time. I’m going to catch a bus. See you.”

She had started back up the stairs when she heard Jill behind her. “Hey, can I get one to Walnut Creek?”

Miriam kept going and didn’t answer. She paused at the top, opening her umbrella though not in time to block the rain. Darkness had descended on the financial district and

moving lights flashed like prisms through the mist. Jill pulled up beside her, puffing slightly.

“You go ahead. I may stop and have some coffee and warm up,” Miriam said.

“I think we should both keep going. There’s probably going to be a crowd at the bus station.” Under the blonde curls, Jill smiled in a conciliatory way so Miriam bit her lip and they turned together, umbrellas up, toward the bus station.

That cavern of dirty concrete, with shoe prints worn into the steps, and railings smeared by too many hands, was three blocks away. More than a crowd, something like the population of a small city had converged on it, walking up the long shadowy ramps and spreading out beside the semi-protected walkways, or already lined up at each numbered sign which designated a different route in the East Bay.

“The Ashby BART station? The Ashby BART station?” Miriam kept asking. Some people shrugged but others waved her forward, till she reached a group who nodded agreement. Then she turned on Jill who was still behind her.

“You had better go call your mother.”

“You should have told me that when we passed the phone booths,” Jill said plaintively. “Do you have a cell phone?”

“No,” Miriam told her. “I’ll hold a place in line for you.” She joined the end of the queue.

The line was already longer than the roof, and the roof twelve feet overhead gave no sideways protection. The rain blew back and forth at will through the bus lanes and onto the rows of patient commuters. Miriam rested her umbrella on her shoulder, letting it surround her head and looked at the other people in line, wondering why she knew none

of them though she had been commuting from the East Bay for ten years. The bottom of her skirt, brushing against her legs, was heavy with moisture.

Two years ago, when the rains had gone on for weeks at a time, she and Dan had driven to work in the old Volvo station wagon. In the morning, they took their coffee along and listened to the news and debated the elections, sometimes hotly. He would drive her to her job out on Union Street and then to his downtown. In the evening, he would drive the extra distance out to get her though she could have taken a bus down to meet him. While the traffic crept slowly to the Bay Bridge, they had sat in a pool of calm, listening to classical music on KKHI.

Somehow, on the bridge itself, sudden sheets of water would come down through the expansion cracks in the roadway overhead and hit the windshield with a loud crack. It was alarming but without significance. They had continued on, warm and dry, in the trusty wagon with its ashtray stuffed with gum wrappers and their briefcases, one brown, one black, side by side on the seat behind them.

She tried to think of a way to lose Jill, but the leech came smiling through the rain. “My mother is the greatest. She just said – “Anytime you get here is fine.”

Marian’s anger surfaced. She leaned forward. “You tried to break up my marriage.”

Jill’s dismay changed her whole demeanor. “Mir! That’s not true. But I’m sorry. Whatever I did. I’m sorry.”

“What do you mean ‘whatever you did’? You came to my house for dinner and flirted all evening with my husband. Then you kept leaving him messages on my phone for the next month...”

“That’s not true.” The plump face looked ready to cry. “Those messages were for you.”

“Then he came to see you...” Miriam trailed off, watching her enemy’s face.

Bright lights shone from above so that, even under the umbrella, she could see the blotchy red as it began to show under the blond curls. “Please...” Jill begged.

Now that she knew for sure, Miriam turned her back on Jill and tried to curb her anger. Nothing more really needed to be said, did it? Her oldest friend and her husband!

When their bus finally arrived, it pulled up too fast, and sent a gush of dirty water three feet high toward the row of travelers who were already wet enough. They rushed backwards, tripping over each other. Miriam scurried back till her way was blocked by a short, stout man with a mulish look. She bumped against him, but he took the impact without moving and she was splashed from foot to knee. She could feel the drops running down her legs.

“He probably can’t drive a car either!” Jill said, looking at the dirty splashes on her light gray raincoat.

After all that, they didn’t even get on that bus. The driver cut off the line and closed the door two people in front of them. Those who didn’t make it sighed and shuffled into new positions; a few people left the line and went on toward another one as if there was something more hopeful about that one.

“Remember the first time we went to Tahoe?” Jill said suddenly from behind. “We were standing just like this in a line for the bus. And it was raining and all we could think about was that the rain might melt all the snow and spoil our week.”



There was a long silence. I'm not going to talk to her anymore, Miriam thought. But the memory worked its own magic. "We didn't know it would snow all night till it was six feet deep and more."

That had been their first year in California. They took their first ski lesson, and both ended up with sprained ankles. The cabin was not really warm, there was no shower, only a huge old tub that took forever to fill. In spite of all that, everything had seemed a marvel – the amazing blue of the lake, the frightening lifts, the child skiers like little birds on the snow, the noisy casino. On the bus back to San Francisco, they had talked seriously about moving to the mountains.

"Everything that happened then was wonderful and exciting," Jill said. "But it was us. Because we were young."

They stared into each other's eyes, their faces on a level, under the umbrellas. "How did we get so old so fast?" Jill asked.

Miriam turned away. What a question for an evening like this!

"So, how's your job going?" Jill asked a little later.

"Oh, same-old, same-old."

"But you're making lots of money!"

There was nothing to say to this. After a while, mostly to keep her mind off her wet ankles, Miriam asked, "What happened to your job?"

"New boss. He kept saying he wanted a whole new approach. I didn't pay any attention because we were doing what our readers wanted. So, he fired me. Next time I'll know."

Served her right. "You going to keep this job or look for something else?"

“When I think there is something else, I’ll look, but there isn’t anything right now.”

Was that true? Was the economy really that bad? Only the job-hunters would know for sure.

“The thing is you’re married; you own a house; your job’s not the only thing in your life.”

Miriam looked down the ramp for another bus and didn’t answer.

The second bus finally came, splashing its way to the curb, getting them again even though they fled to the far side of the walkway. At least they were able to get on this one and they were dry.

Being out of the rain made the crowd more cheerful. The air in the bus which had been warm and dry was soon warm and damp, filled with somewhat happier people in wet coats who folded up umbrellas, unbuttoned whatever was too warm. They found handkerchiefs and put briefcases and parcels at their feet or in the overhead rack. Water ran in little rivulets along the floor from the tips of fifty umbrellas. The windows grew layers of steam so that nothing could be seen, while in front the big wiper on the windshield went back and forth as regular as a metronome, taking away the rain though only for the moment.

The bus pulled out and small happy bits of conversation rose from the passengers. However, ten minutes later, Miriam said, “We’re not going anywhere.”

The bus had started from the station at a good speed till it joined the traffic. Now it had been some time since the wheels had turned at all, and then not by very much. Wiping the steam off her window, she saw that they were only halfway up a hill aimed at

an onramp to the Bay Bridge. Three long lines of headlights were pointed at the same narrow opening; windshield wipers were the only thing moving.

Jill sighed. “I was going to take my mother out to dinner for her birthday. At this rate, I’ll be lucky if I get there in time for bed.”

Miriam looked back at the city they were trying to leave – the steel towers that clustered near the bay and the bridge, most of them built in the eighteen years since she came to town. So many things had happened since then; so many people had entered and left her life.

“This is ridiculous,” she said. “I didn’t get my new shoes soaked just to sit here all night.”

“There’s probably an accident on the bridge.”

“It’s been nice seeing you.” Miriam buttoned her wet cloth coat again and picked up her umbrella and purse. “Take care of yourself.”

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

Jill, who was on the outside, stood up. “Honestly, Miriam, you are impossible. We could have stayed at BART and been on the train by now.”

“Not true. It’s only six o’clock.”

Jill moved aside so that Miriam could get out and Miriam moved to the front of the bus, walking uphill.

“I want to get off,” she told the bus driver.

“I can’t let you off here,” he answered without looking up. “It’s against the rules.”

“It’s also against the rules to pull up to a stop so that you splash water on everyone standing there,” Miriam said. “I’m going to complain.”

He sighed. “Be my guest, lady!” He pulled the lever and opened the door.

Miriam climbed down, pulling her coat closed, but not quite in time to keep the rain from hitting her chest with an unpleasant chill, and hurried across the street to the nearest sidewalk.

“Hey, not so fast!” Jill said behind her.

Miriam turned around. “Why did you come?”

Jill made a face. “Because I’m crazy. But where are you going?”

They were on a steep slope in what had been the warehouse district, now interspersed with new office towers. Everything was closed up; the only lights came from the lines of cars trying to leave the city.

“The ferry. I’m going to get the ferry.”

“To Marin?”

“No, Dummy! There’s one that goes to Alameda and Jack London Square.”

“And from there?”

“From there we take a taxi to the 12<sup>th</sup> Street BART station. Simple.”

Jill laughed again. “Okay. At least you have a plan. I wasn’t sure you did.”

“But you came anyway.”

“Well, I came to California with you. I can’t get out of the habit. I think you need me.”

The rain was invisible in the darkness, but they could feel the steady flicker of it on their faces and hands. They put up their umbrellas and started downhill facing the long line of cars.

“Poor things!” Miriam said. “Wanting their dinners.”

“At least they’re dry.”

Miriam turned at the first block and took them across the hill one block before heading down again, zigzagging toward the Ferry Building.

“You’re quite a walker,” she said to Jill who had a longer stride.

“I took it up while I was out of work. I’m good for about six miles, then I fade completely.”

“I don’t think I could make six miles.”

“Well, you’re married. You can have more fun at home.”

Miriam did not respond.

“What’s the matter?” Jill demanded. “You and Dan are having trouble, aren’t you? What’s the problem?”

“Oh...nothing,” Miriam said. “Marriage always has these ups and downs.”

“But you and Dan are so well suited.”

“You think so?” Miriam said in a way that closed off the conversation.

They were passing empty parking lots and small industrial buildings, a lonely world of concrete, bricks and For Rent signs. Jill took Miriam’s arm.

“Remember Ali? Remember when I was living with Ali and we were planning to go back to Baghdad and raise a whole lot of multi-lingual, world-citizen children?”

“Pure madness.”

“Yes. A three-day visit in Baghdad was enough to cure me. I would probably have cut my throat before the first one was born.”

“What made you think of that?”

“Oh, just that it was the only time I got close to getting married and it was such a crazy concept. Last year I had this dream job, and I let it go. I don’t have any talent for living.”

Miriam said nothing. They had come into a greater darkness under an overhead highway.

“FILLING FORES...” yelled a hoarse voice close to their feet.

Jill and Miriam collided in their confusion. They had thought they were totally alone. Miriam dropped the broken umbrella and when she reached down to snatch it up, was greeted with a strong stench and a stream of angry, incomprehensible words that came from a toothless mouth. Light glinted momentarily on two circles of glass side by side, but all the rest of the creature was in the dark.

“Some people are never satisfied,” Miriam said in a loud voice.

“Come on,” Jill whispered urgently and pulled at Miriam’s sleeve.

Miriam caught the umbrella by one tip and pulled it along with her. They half ran until they got to the corner under a streetlight, then Miriam looked back. Now she could see light glinting on a chain link fence but below that, only a dark pile of debris.

“What are we doing here?” Jill muttered.

“A troll under the bridge.” Miriam was trembling ever so slightly.

Jill picked up her pace and Miriam did all she could do to keep up with her.

“That was a woman you know!”

Jill hmphed. "You couldn't see that. It was too dark."

"That was a woman's voice."

There was a long line for the ferry. Miriam began to have regrets about the bus which might by now be close to the bridge. But when the ferryboat came, it absorbed the whole of the line. They went below to the coffee bar which at this hour was also serving liquor.

"I'd love to have some bourbon," Miriam said.

"It will just give you a headache."

They settled for hot chocolate and drank it standing up, because there was no place to sit; in the crowded lounge where most people had their damp coats off in spite of the chill, they settled in for the trip. All were talking and the much-breathed air smelled strongly of wet wool. After their cold walk, it was too much noise and not enough oxygen.

"Let's go out and look at the bridge," Jill said. "And laugh at all those poor souls in cars."

So, they went out on deck under the awning, where the hardy or desperate smokers puffed away, and stared up at the Bay Bridge which was rapidly receding into the mist. They could hear the waves in the Bay but not see them. The rain was also invisible, light but cold, and a sliver of a moon made the sky larger. The lower level of cars crept slowly east toward Oakland and the mainland.

"What do you think?" Miriam asked. "Twenty miles an hour, or less?"

"Ten. But their feet are dry."

“You are so ungrateful after all I’ve done for you. So, when did Dan come to see you?”

The rain seemed to pause, waiting on Jill.

“Sometime in September. I don’t remember the date.”

“Around the 8<sup>th</sup> or the 10<sup>th</sup>. I bet. Did he call first?”

Jill was looking straight ahead at the dark water. “No. He dropped by on a Sunday afternoon when I was in bed with a headache. He said you were at a modern dance thing.”

“And what did he have to say?”

Jill sighed. “He said he thought he and I had things to talk about. He said you weren’t getting along. He thought the marriage was over. But I didn’t believe that.”

“So, what did you say?”

Jill finally looked into Miriam’s eyes. “Don’t do this, Mir!”

“What did you say?”

“I said I wasn’t aware of anything we needed to talk over.”

“Did you make love?”

“MIR!”

“Did you?”

“Yes.”

Miriam grunted in pain.

“I was out of work, and I hurt,” Jill said, crying now. “I hadn’t had anybody comfort me in a long time. You didn’t return my phone calls. But it never happened again, I swear.”



“That’s not true.”

“It is true. I told him not to come again and he didn’t.”

“Well, he’s seeing someone.” Miriam put her face down on her arms on the railing and began to cry.

Jill found a tissue in her pocket and wiped her eyes and then she began to pat her friend gently on the back, alternating the pats with a circular rubbing motion as if polishing comfort into the wool.

When Miriam’s tears began to abate, and she could feel the rain seeping down her neck, they went inside without saying much.

“Another hot chocolate?” Jill asked, and Miriam nodded. Jill brought two and they sat squeezed together on a bench, legs against each other, without talking. Their pooled warmth was welcome. Instead of looking at each other, they looked outward with identical glances at the crowd which saw them without really looking at them. Just other souls with private sorrows.

Miriam had said there would be taxis at Jack London Square, but there were no taxis. And no welcoming shelter. They landed on a dock facing a row of dark office buildings with no lobbies or overhangs. They put up their umbrellas hastily.

Jill looked at her watch. “It’s only five after seven. I thought we were getting on toward nine or ten. Look, there’s a telephone over there. We can call a taxi.”

“When you have to call a taxi in the rain, you’re in for a long wait,” Miriam said grimly. But she opened her purse, feeling for change, letting drops fall on her billfold.

“Look,” Jill grabbed her arm. “There’s a bus. Let’s run.”

Yes, the bus was going down Broadway, right past the BART station. They dug for change, standing in the well of the steps, while the driver closed the door behind them but waited at the stop as if he planned to put them off if they didn't have the fare.

After they had found a seat near the back door, they looked silently out at unfamiliar scenery. They were under the freeway now as they had been under the bus overpass when the troll had sworn at them from the darkness.

"So, what happened with Dan?" Jill asked.

The bus driver called out: "Twelfth Street, BART!"

They got up hastily and went to the back door which was not open.

"Push on it!" the driver called out.

Miriam pushed and they were released.

At the entrance to BART, they were importuned by a gypsy-looking old man in a felt hat which had long ago lost its shape.

"Just trying to get up enough money to get home," he pleaded.

"Where's home?" Miriam asked.

"Baton Rouge."

Miriam laughed and shook her head, but Jill surrendered two quarters.

"That won't do shit!" they heard behind them as they fled down the steps to the station.

The train platform was crowded, of course, because so many trains had yet to come from San Francisco. The first train to come was a Concord.

Miriam had forgotten they would have to separate now. "I'll get on with you and ride to McArthur and change trains there."

“You don’t have to do that.”

They were lucky to get on at all. They were not far back in the line, but the line disintegrated into a shoving match when the train doors opened. At the back of the crowd, Miriam and Jill squeezed in together, and just managed to tuck themselves in far enough to let the doors close. Miriam’s arm was trapped against her breast, her face only inches from Jill’s.

She whispered: “I’ve never felt so close to you.”

“You’ve never been so close to me. What happened?”

“I don’t want anything to come between us.”

“Nothing can,” Jill answered softly.

“And we’ll keep in touch!”

“Every week. I just haven’t felt up to seeing anyone. But I’m coming out of it. It’s only a job, not my whole life.”

“Or who you are! To hell with them.”

Jill smiled, the best smile she had managed all night. “Right! And as for you, that used to be a good marriage. Maybe it will still work out.”

They were entering the station now. Miriam shook her head. “It was my fault. I stopped believing.”

Jill leaned forward and kissed her. “You wouldn’t do that. I know you.”

When the train came to a stop, Miriam squeezed her way out and watched the train pull away. She felt bereft.

McArthur was an outdoor, overhead station. The wind whipped rain across the platform, against the tiled elevator shaft where it sounded like dried beans pouring into a

pan. She had to go downstairs and then up again to the other platform to get the train to Berkeley. For the first time, she thought longingly of her house which would be warm and dry, of the canopied bed piled with flowered pillows.

The sight of the train barreling toward her broke into her iciness; the noise of its shrieking wheels as it stopped revived her. Her car was in the station parking lot. Only fifteen minutes later, she climbed tiredly out in front of her house. The rain had stopped. The street was quiet, with only the sound of water dripping from gutters and branches.

The pewter lamp was on in the living room; she had a quick start of hope. Then she thought that probably she had left it on in the morning. Just the same, she went slowly from room to room, turning on a light in each room to look in.

No, the house was empty as it had been for weeks now. He was gone for good. Was this what she had wanted when she had given up being hopeful and pulled away? Now Jill was coming over for dinner and their sky would be bright.

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