

“Birthday Bash”

Three weeks before turning 60, Molly Gerstler strode into Ace of Bass and came out an hour later with a sparkling new electric guitar. The Gibson Les Paul, in skyburst blue, was a gift to herself, something she’d wanted ever since her music teacher had introduced her to classic compositions for the electric. The arrangements for Bach and Paganini, with their clean plucked lines, sounded wonderfully modern. She fended off suggestions for a big party – now that she had her guitar, her only request was to spend her birthday weekend at home in the Berkshires. “Just quiet, intimate family time,” she explained to her husband Jeremiah and the kids, both of whom promised to come up from New York for the occasion. “No parties, no surprises, no fireworks.”

“Quiet she wants,” Jeremiah said, turning his face upward to converse with the ceiling as if she wasn’t right there in the same room. “Yet she brings home an electric guitar!” Though his tone was playful, Molly began – again – to remind him that her latest hobby was simply the natural step in her musical progression, following a lifetime of teaching piano and several years of playing classic guitar.

“I know, I know!” he said, cutting her off. “You don’t have to explain it to me.” He smiled at her. “I’m happy for you, sweetheart. Really. Use it in good health.”

“Thank you. I am.” She didn’t tell him that the first few times she’d taken the guitar out of its case, she felt giddy, like a child unwrapping a fancy present with bows and curlicue ribbons.

“Are you sure you don’t want to just go away somewhere to celebrate?” They didn’t have to do anything ambitious, he said, a weekend in NYC with a show or two, or quiet B&B in the Cape. Wouldn’t she prefer that to hosting and cooking for the whole family?

“It’s not hosting when it’s our own kids and grandchildren,” she insisted. The whole family was only five people: Hannah and her husband and their two small children, and Stuart, who, at 27, had yet to settle down. “I’ll have everything I want right here.” She was eager to show Stu the guitar. The only other musically-inclined person in the family, he’d sounded excited about the purchase. *Mom, you rock!* “Stu says he’s going to dust off his drum set and we’ll have a jam session.”

“Terrific. I can’t wait. Maybe he wants to dust off his resume.” Jeremiah took it as a personal affront that their college-educated son was working as a bartender in Greenwich Village and seemed devoid of any inner drive or ambition. They shared an unspoken hope that Stuart would find a wife or a girlfriend who would be a positive influence on him and help him grow up a bit.

“I said, ‘no fireworks,’ primarily between you and Stuart!” She frowned, worried that her husband and son would be incapable of refraining from arguing for an entire weekend. Every time, she ended up as the referee. Jeremiah couldn’t – or wouldn’t – stop himself from making remarks that oozed with disappointment, no matter how many times she told him not to. “I’m talking about doing something nice with him – making music – and you have to bring everything back to your frustration.”

“Alright, alright,” Jeremiah said, throwing up his hands in mock surrender. “Sorry. Go form a rock band for all I care. Go jam or jim to your heart’s content. Just remind me to get some earplugs.”

She sighed. Such a grouch, her husband could be, though even after four decades together there were still times when she wasn’t sure if he was kidding or just being grumpy. Now he came over from behind and drew her towards him, his arms resting lightly on her stomach. “I’m just teasing, you know that! I think it’s sexy that my wife is taking up the electric guitar.”

He tried to nuzzle her neck and make hubba-hubba noises, but she swatted him away and unclasped his hands.

“Just don’t take up with Luis!” he said.

“Here we go again.” He loved to rib her about her 30-something guitar teacher, who wore tight black jeans and resembled a young Desi Arnaz Jr. *Luis is just trying to get in your pants!* Somehow these comments were meant to be taken as a compliment. *Well, I want to sleep with you, so why wouldn’t he?*

“You’re exasperating, you know that?” she scolded him.

“But you love me anyway,” he said.

“Against my better judgment.” She pecked him on the lips and headed for her practice room. Long ago they’d converted the detached garage into her studio, where she’d taught local youngsters to play the piano for over a quarter of a century. And now she, too, was a student again, practicing power chords and experimenting with how tightly to hold the fret board on the Les Paul. She was having fun with it, delighted with how easy it was for her aging fingers to achieve the resonance and complex overtones she’d hoped for. Even her barre chords sounded punchy and alive. She was 16 again. A rock star every time she picked up the instrument.

--

The first twinges of regret came when Jeremiah unloaded the groceries, a few days before the birthday weekend. Molly had planned an elaborate menu that included veal in white wine, spinach risotto, braised artichokes, several salads, and a variety of mouth-watering desserts. Plus, of course, other child-friendly food at Hannah’s request, such as mashed potatoes and meatballs.

“I’m not complaining, of course,” said Jeremiah as he carried in more bags and caught her halfhearted expression surveying the bags of groceries. “I love your veal and meringues and the rest, but maybe it’s too much?”

“Nope, I’m fine.” Baking and cooking were Molly’s second and third loves. Twenty years ago, she’d have begun her preparations with enthusiasm, thinking of little touches to enhance each dish’s presentation and purchasing decorative napkins and accoutrements to prettify the table. But now the piles of raw ingredients stared up at her like a long, dreary to-do list. Why had she chosen dishes that required so much *potchkying*, as her mother and mother-in-law would have said? All the cooking, baking and getting the house ready for the family would not allow much time to practice her music.

She swallowed a sigh, unable to admit to Jeremiah that perhaps he was right – and started moving things around on the counter. She’d made the elaborate menu, so she had no one to blame but herself. She tied her apron around her, telling herself she’d feel better once her fingers began chopping and mixing and the aromas from her oven filled the kitchen. “I’ll get it all done.”

“Well, you’re predictable, that’s for sure,” Jeremiah said, with a faint grin. “Too stubborn to admit maybe I was right.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “We could just put all this stuff in the freezer and tell the kids not to come.”

She was tempted to say yes but instead said: “Don’t be silly.”

“Can I help with something? You know. Be your right-hand man, what’s the culinary term for that?”

“Sous chef,” she answered, smiling, her mood starting to lighten. She would just have to try to tamp down that frazzled feeling. “That’s sweet of you, thanks. But, no.” Her husband had

two left hands in the kitchen. He could make himself a scrambled egg and put up water to boil, but that was the extent of his cooking abilities. “You can be the taster, how about that?”

“Sounds good to me.”

“We’ll have a nice weekend, won’t we?” she asked. She shut her eyes and pictured the instruments: the Steinway Baby Grand, her Taylor acoustic guitar, and the Gibson Les Paul, with its gleaming finish, the shade of crystal blue water at a Bermuda beach. They weren’t going anywhere, she told herself.

“Of course,” he said. “I’ll be on my best behavior.”

If she couldn’t be practicing her music at least she could listen while cooking. She shoed Jeremiah away, put on her favorite recording of Yo-Yo Ma playing Tchaikovsky live at Lincoln Center, and set to work.

Molly was bushed by the time Hannah and Tom arrived on Friday afternoon – she hadn’t realized until she’d had to go without how much she relied on practicing her music to keep her sane and unflappable. But seeing her grandchildren tumble out of the car brought out in Molly a deep, innate joy. Two-year-old Ben was still sleepy but 5-year-old Pamela ran up and started chattering about the tea party she would like to have with her grandmother. Molly swept Pam into her arms and onto her lap, swaddling her with kisses. She told her granddaughter that she still had too much to do to get dinner ready, but that they could have the tea party tomorrow. And perhaps, she added, they could hold the tea party in the music studio and she would entertain them with songs on the piano and maybe even her new guitar.

Pam wrinkled her nose at this, not excited by the prospect, but then ran off to play. Ben was wailing – sometimes it took him awhile to settle down once he awoke from a nap, Hannah explained as she tried to calm him. Molly nodded, understanding, but after 35 minutes her grandson was still whining and kicking. And between Ben’s cries and Jeremiah starting in on Stuart being late, she felt ready to scream herself.

Molly chided herself for forgetting to keep her expectations in check – she should really try to remember how stretched she often felt by family gatherings. Of course she wanted everyone there, together but it didn’t mean that her nerves didn’t fray. She could never seem to relax; could anyone, with two little children running around? Though of course it wasn’t her grandchildren who were the main problem; it was the stress of dealing with everyone’s differing needs, her own included, and the anxiety over Stuart and Jeremiah’s exchanges.

When Stuart’s car pulled into the driveway, he was not alone. A heavily-made up girl emerged from the front seat, wearing a black t-shirt, black mini-skirt, and black boots.

“*Who*, in God’s name, is that?” she asked Hannah and Jeremiah. “Did you know he was bringing a friend?” They both shook their heads, no. This was so like Stu, she thought, not to mention he was bringing someone. She didn’t like to pry, never wanted to be one of those mothers who would say in a false voice, *anyone special in your life these days, dear*, but inside her, a small candle of resentment ignited. Was this Stuart’s idea of a surprise? Hadn’t she made it clear that she wanted this weekend to be just the family?

She marched outside, letting the screen door slam behind her.

“Hi!” Stuart pecked her on the cheek. “This is Tess.”

The girl looked to be no more than 20, and she extended her hand to shake Molly’s. Even her nail-polish was black. Good god.

“Hello,” Molly said, taking Tess’s hand and smiling wanly. She darted her eyes to her son. “Stuart’s told us all about you.” Tess seemed to catch the haughtiness in Molly’s voice, and she looked back and forth from mother to son.

“Yeah, sorry about that. I should have told you she was coming. But I wasn’t sure she could make it until yesterday.”

Irresponsible, immature, unreliable, maddening, going nowhere in life – all the words and phrases Jeremiah used to describe their son ran through her mind now, though she was careful not to let them escape her pursed lips.

“Hey, and it’s kind of like, ‘surprise!’” Stuart continued.

“That it is.” Molly agreed.

He shrugged, carefree, unaware of her attempt to ask him, telepathically, if Tess was a girlfriend, a friend, or just someone he was babysitting for the weekend.

“Well, come on inside.” She could hear the ice in her tone and wondered if Stuart noticed. Molly felt like throwing a temper tantrum right there on the driveway. *This is not what I wanted! Who is this trampy-looking girl and why did you bring her home, Stuart?* She turned back towards the house without offering to carry any of their bags. “I’ve got stuff on the stove. You’ll excuse me, Tess. Stuart will show you to the guest room. We’ll have to move the kids to be in the same room as Hannah and Tom.”

At dinner, Molly was irritable. Why Stuart hadn’t told her about Tess in advance? *Common courtesy!* she kept thinking, though she was having difficulty displaying some common courtesy of her own. It was as if the words coming out of her mouth were not hers but had been placed

there by a ventriloquist, someone else controlling her jaw. Trying to get her to relax, Jeremiah poured copious glasses of red wine for the adults. Molly drank hers as if she'd just emerged from a two-day hike in the desert. *So, how did you two meet? Oh, not at your bar, Stuart, at a club? Do you frequent clubs often, Tess? How old are you, dear? Oh, really. And, let me see, that makes you, what, a junior in college? Entering junior?* She expected Tess to say, no, I'm not in college, but instead the girl told her she was studying at Barnard.

A thin layer of mistrust fell away from Molly, and she said, "Isn't that funny, I also went to Barnard!" After a pause, she added, "Of course, in my day, they didn't let us girls dress like that."

"Women."

"Excuse me?"

"We're women, not girls," Tess said.

"Oh, right."

Tess gave tight, one word answers, as if she was afraid that any extra verbiage would become an arrow that would find its way to Molly's bow. *What a dull girl*, Molly thought. She was going to need some more wine to make it through the meal.

When Molly brought out the main course, both Tess and Stuart held up their hands to stop her from serving them. "I guess I should have told you," her son said. "I don't eat veal anymore. It's not humane, the way they treat the animals."

She frowned and rolled her eyes. "More for us, then," she said, letting the serving spoon make a loud scraping noise as she placed a helping on Jeremiah's plate.

Now Jeremiah piped in, asking Tess if she'd taken poli sci classes (no), if she knew his friends Professor Della-Caprisi and Professor Weinbrenner at Columbia (no), what was she majoring (chemistry), what was she planning to do after graduation, and so on.

“Med school, I hope,” she said simply, and went on chewing her food.

“Very nice!” cried Jeremiah. “Excellent!” He clapped his hands in that same son-of-a-gun style he'd become fond of. A quick glance at her husband and Molly could tell that he didn't seem bothered by this girl's appearance or age in the least. She could read his mind: he was hoping Tess would exert some positive influence on Stuart. She polished off her second glass of wine and poured herself a third, aware, but uncaring, of the alarmed looks being passed between her daughter and her husband.

Molly peppered Tess with more questions. *How did you get interested in medicine? Is one of your parents a doctor? Really, a beautician? Does she own her own salon? No? And your father? Oh dear, that's terrible. And you've got no contact with him whatsoever? That's quite an accomplishment for your mother, sending you to Barnard on a beautician's salary, and a single parent, no less.*

“Mom!” She felt someone kicking her under the table and looked up to see Hannah scowling at her. Hannah's tone was sharp, warning.

“I meant it as a compliment to Tess's mother!”

Tess's skin tone turned a dark shade of purple and she seemed to shrink a bit.

Stuart jumped in, eager to sway the subject. “Ma – here's the coolest thing: Tess is an awesome bass player.

“Is that right? So you thought...” she trailed off.

“So I was telling her about you, and she was telling me how much she wanted to get out of the City for the weekend, so I figured, hey, might as well bring her, right? She brought her guitar with her. And we can all jam together.”

Molly raised her eyebrows, her mouth twisting into a pucker as she considered this new piece of information. But just because the girl was a musician didn't mean Molly had to like her. “So – you're not... together?” Her confusion gave way to a slow relief, but then she saw her son exchange a look with Tess.

“You're right,” she said quickly. “It's none of my business.” Stuart inhaled and took hold of Tess's hand, glaring at his mother defiantly, and Molly knew that whatever their relationship might be, they were certainly sleeping together. She felt nauseous. “But wait, Tess, have you told your mother about Stuart? And she doesn't have a problem that he's 27?”

Stuart's fork fell to his plate with a clang. “Jesus Christ, Ma! Enough, already! We're adults! What's the matter with you?”

“I was very clear, Stuart.” Molly was unused to fighting with her son, and later she would blame what she said next on the wine, on the state of her emotional turmoil. “I really just wanted this to be an intimate weekend with the family. No offense, dear.”

Stuart was on his feet, fuming. “C'mon,” he said to Tess. “Let's go.” The girl was trying, Molly could see, to hold her head up high, to decide how to best react. Her jaw set, Tess followed Stuart without a word; Molly guessed she was about to cry.

Jeremiah tried to intervene. “Don't mind her,” he called to Tess. “She's just a little wound up...”

But the screen door slammed before Jeremiah could finish his sentence. “Happy fucking birthday, Ma!”

“Stuart!” Molly cried. “Wait!” But she couldn’t bring herself to get up from the table. Jeremiah went after them. For a few moments Molly sat transfixed, numb, as if someone was blowing up a balloon in her chest cavity. She didn’t know anything about medicine but she imagined a thousand little synapses going off in her brain. Pop, pop, pop, pop, the sound of irrevocable shattering.

A sinking, desperate feeling came over Molly, though she also felt strangely detached from the scene. She could hear Jeremiah speaking to Stuart on the driveway. Now here was a role reversal, she thought, almost amused. I’ve been the mean, bitchy one and Jeremiah has to apologize for *my* behavior. *What the fuck*, her son was yelling.

Hannah’s voice reconnected her to the present. “Mom! You can’t treat people like that! I don’t care how much she looks like a witch!”

“Vampire, I was thinking.” But she was in no mood to be reprimanded by her daughter. Molly got up, stacked a few plates and sulked into the kitchen. She was furious at herself for losing control. Furious at Stuart for bringing this girl home. Even furious at Jeremiah for taking the girl’s side. All of a sudden Molly felt a strong sense of déjà vu, and her hands flew to cover her face in a panic. The ventriloquist in her mouth was her mother! She saw it now with horrifying clarity. Sarah Kellman had never made Jeremiah feel welcome in the family. Growing up, Molly had never noticed anything unusual, but once she met Jeremiah, a new side of her mother had been revealed. The snobby side, the one that seemed to care only about social stature, expensive dinners and *appearances*. But even as the epiphany passed, Molly knew it was no excuse; she’d have to own up, sooner or later, to the fact that she’d been terribly rude to this girl.

Hannah came into the kitchen to check on her. “You can’t treat people like that, Ma!” she said again.

“I don’t know what came over me.”

“You were so passive-aggressive. No, actually just aggressive.”

“Thanks Han, you’re really making me feel better.”

“Is something bothering you? Is it too much for you to have all of us up here at the same time?”

“No! I mean, I don’t know. He just threw me for a loop when he brought her home, unannounced. Plus, she’s half his age!

“And how old were you when you met Dad? Hmm? 19, right? And he was 25?”

“That was different. We were both serious about our studies, our future, our careers. We were both more mature than Stuart is today.”

Hannah rolled her eyes. “Whatever, Ma. It’s not that different. You should really apologize. To her and to Stu.”

Molly’s sinking feeling deepened. *What had she been trying to prove?* Jeremiah had not come back inside yet, nor had she heard a car driving off. Perhaps Stuart and Tess were still outside. They were in the car, she saw, talking to Jeremiah through the window, though the ignition was turned off. Molly held her head high and headed out to the driveway. Stuart started the car when he saw her. Molly held up her hand for him to wait, and though her voice was stiff and the words bitter, she forced them to come out. “I want to apologize for my behavior. I’m sorry, Tess. If I’d known you were coming I would have been a bit more prepared. I guess I just... I hope we can start over.”

Stuart glared ahead, refusing to look at her.

“Will you come back inside? Please?”

“No. We’re leaving.” He shifted the car into reverse and started backing out of the driveway.

She nodded. Behind the angry look in Stuart's eyes she could still see his shock, the pain she'd caused. She wanted to crumple herself up into a little ball and stay that way. For as long as she could remember, *she* had been the one to protect her son from Jeremiah's disappointment and sarcastic vitriol. "He'll be back," Jeremiah said. "Not sure about Tess, though."

"Did they take their stuff?" she asked, surprised. She hadn't heard them bring down a suitcase, but perhaps she'd missed it.

"I think so. They didn't have much. Couple backpacks. A guitar."

"I don't know what came over me. Maybe I'm having a breakdown."

He chortled. "Not my Molly." He put his arm around her and started walking her back into the house. She marveled at the fact that Jeremiah had such a blind spot when it came to her faults. He was never as forgiving or patient with anyone else, except maybe Hannah. But faults she had. Starting with the way she'd just treated this girl. Now she started to fret. What if Stuart and this girl actually stayed together? Tess, her future daughter-in-law. It was unlikely – who in their right mind would stick around after such treatment? Molly had driven her away. If Stuart stayed away too, she'd only have herself to blame. She began babbling to Jeremiah, her worries spilling out.

"Mol. Mol! Stop it. They'll be fine. He's not going to disown you over this. Everyone snaps some times. Even you."

Tears sprung to her eyes. Molly Gerstler didn't snap. She was supposed to be the always-dependable, feet-on-the-ground wife/mother they'd known forever. Some stable domestic core, she was.

Against the darkening sky Jeremiah was smiling. He seemed to be finding the whole thing amusing.

"I see you're enjoying this," she accused.

“No, not enjoying. Well, maybe a little. Maybe now Stuart will see that I’m not always the bad guy. He called you ‘unhinged.’ Ha! Usually that’s what he calls me.” Jeremiah’s smile turned into a broad grin. “So, you’re in good company.”

“Great.” She did not feel like being in anyone’s company. “I think I need to be alone for a bit. I’m going to the music room, okay?”

“Okay, Bon Jovi.”

“He’ll be back, right?” She’d wiped the tears from her eyes but the knot in her stomach remained.

“Stop worrying. I’ve said much worse to him – and vice versa, I might add – and we haven’t turned our backs on each other yet. He’s a good kid at heart. I know that.”

She nodded and parted ways with her husband. Maybe that was their problem; that they both still looked at Stuart as a kid. Someone who had never grown up. Or maybe it was only in her mind that he hadn’t grown up, some part of her that needed his dependence on her.

Molly let herself into the music room and stood inside for a few seconds, trying to block out her troubled thoughts. Which instrument to play? She looked at her acoustic guitar, sitting lonely in the corner. She’d neglected it these last few weeks, in her attempt to become more proficient in the electric. What had she been trying to prove with this new hobby? That she was still young and carefree and cool? What a joke! Tomorrow she’d be 60. Back in the house she had two grandchildren. Stuart was no longer a baby or even a boy, but a young man who had to be left to make his own decisions, his own mistakes.

The piano beckoned. In Molly’s mind, there was nothing more soothing than Chopin, and she sat down to play Nocturne in C Sharp Minor. Her fingers flowed over the keyboard. Despite the wine, the complicated trills gave her no trouble at all. She finished the piece and turned to

Beethoven's Fur Elise. It was a piece she thought would translate well to the electric guitar, and she made a mental note to try to find a copy of the arrangement.

Molly played a few more pieces and tried not to think about her ruined weekend. She'd defied everyone's expectations, but not in the way she'd wanted. Tomorrow she'd do the tea party with her granddaughter. If Stu didn't return, she'd find out where he was and apologize for her adolescent behavior again. She didn't want to be 60 going on 16. The couch against the back wall of the music room had never looked as comfortable, and Molly lay down to rest, falling into a deep sleep.

Jeremiah came in just past midnight, nudging her awake. The kids were back, he said. Thought you'd want to know.

He squeezed her hand and led her back to the house. "Happy birthday," he whispered. "Welcome to the sixties."