

Misfortune at the Argyle Club

by IVY GOODMAN

Like casked wine or caved cheese, a certain percentage go off when they get old. I wondered if she was one of those. Earlier in the evening, I had noted her as someone's guest because I doubted she would have qualified for membership on her own. She was eighty or thereabouts, white haired and very pale. Her lips had almost vanished in the pallid softness of her face, and her voice, at first, was practically inaudible. "I have a problem," she said. I was close enough to hear, but before she was acknowledged by the room, she needed to make that statement twice.

Although she'd been seated at the periphery, her appeal was intended for the dozen or so at the large main table. The occasion was our monthly banquet, and we'd finished our coffee and slices of torte. Our wine goblets held nothing more than glimmers from the flame bulbs in the fixture overhead. Used napkins had been refolded inexactly or dropped in careless gathers on the cloth. A few of us had angled our chairs in order to rise, scraping the chair legs against the floor. That commotion might have initially obscured her voice.

"While you're all still here." She stepped forward. "With your collective expertise." Her cylindrical figure was wrapped in floral camouflage very like a bathrobe. "I'm sleeping upstairs tonight," she said, alluding to the club's emergency quarters, which I've never had occasion to reserve. "Well, it's better than the hospital, and believe me, I've been there." She crossed her hands at the wrist and quickly parted them as if to give a final ruling. "Just horrible."

"You've been ill?" someone asked.

Someone else said, "Would you look at the time!"

"If you can help me." Her freckled fingers reached out to us from wide, pendant sleeves. "I know it's late, but I was too ashamed to speak up sooner. The problem is, my daughter's robbed me."

I suspected she was confabulating, maybe we all did, but we let out a choral gasp. *Unbelievable. So sorry. Good lord.* Immediately, though, members began to back away. Even the most pitying, who murmured loudest and bent near to pat her arm, those few younger women with their shining hair, soon hurried toward the door.

"Our repentant mommies are racing home to kiss their little monsters goodnight. I think you've scared them," I said. By then, on our side of the room, the two of us were standing alone.

She turned. "You don't have children?"

"Zero. Bachelor."

She smiled as if to put me at my ease, as if our positions were reversed and I were beseeching her. At the archway leading out, the remaining members, men I knew well, glanced back, and I waved to signal I would handle things. Against the far wall, two of the kitchen staff looked on.

"Shall we let them clear the tables? We'll find somewhere quiet, and you can fill me in."

"Thank you."

"Think of me as the club's ambassador." I took her elbow but labored to match her determined, stoic stride. For her age, her posture was extraordinary.

"You're injured?" she asked.

"My right leg is spastic. Among other issues."

She looked down. "I see it now."

"Yes, there it is. People try to make believe I don't know and they mustn't tell me. As if I've never passed a mirror and seen the crooked man."



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Her sagging eyes again filled with empathy, unless the effect was just another accident of aging. I urged her on, and we continued, our path strewn with cabbage roses woven into the carpet runner. Adjacent to the dining room is the Argyle's lounge, where I found two cushioned chairs already in conversation near the cocktail cart. I have an angular way of collapsing, a bit like Jacob's ladder. She aimed roughly for the space between the armrests and let her body fall. Once she was down, she shifted sideways back and forth, in hopeless conflict with the juncture of her wrapper, where the parted halves bared one dimpled knee.

"I'm not looking, promise," I said. "Now tell me, have you worked in the helping professions?"

"No, I taught sociology. Emeritus. I had a good pension. Had." She frowned and tugged, as if her problems were now knotted in her sash.

"Me? I'm a dilettante. Ask anyone in town."

With this, she finally looked up and smiled again--at my pretensions and the town's. We are a small city, actually. We have our social strata. We have our polluted river, miraculously unspoiled to the eye. We have Elmerton, where I studied, one of those odd little colleges with its own companion law school. We have our clubs, the Argyle, of course, and then there's the Art Association and the Aeolian Society that brings in chamber groups to play at a venue called the Odeum, and I can't omit our Optimists, our Elks, our Moose, our Shriners.

She said, "You paint in oil?"

"I sketch and jot." I didn't divulge that I also practice law and the elderly are my bread and butter. I had no idea at the time that she knew this already. "I collect people, after a fashion."

"Using their real names?"

"You haven't told me yours."

"Call me something else."

"Don't you trust me?"

"Oh dear God." She brought her hands to her mouth. "That's exactly what my daughter asked."

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The middle-aged daughter had been exploitive, the elderly mother naive. It was a phenomenon I'd observed before. The mother's disillusionment had come the previous evening, in the company of the daughter and the son-in-law. She was still in shock, inside that momentous event. My task was to coax her out, back to the start. But when had deceit begun? When her daughter learned to lie as a tiny little girl?

I talked with Em that night for hours. We decided I would call her Em, in reference to her role as mother. Clearly, she needed to decompress, and I prefer any conviviality at the club to my empty childhood house. When Em was calmer, she answered a nagging quibble of mine. Why hadn't I seen her at the Argyle before? She explained she belonged on principle, as one of the first women invited, decades back, but seldom took advantage of the honor or "bothered with the place." Her dues were paid through December, "and it's a good thing now. I know I can't stay forever, even if I haven't got much time."

"My parents were the same way, threatening to die at any moment."

"And then?"

We both chuckled because I'd already told her they were dead. With the intimacy of strangers, we had sketched in our lives. Of her ex-husband's subsequent spouses, the last was now his widow, but Em had never remarried. Em's husband left when Dee, their daughter, was very young; the divorce ensued with little regret on either parent's side. If I may quote Em, "He was of less use

around the house than a can of tomato sauce.” Still, Dee blamed Em for his departure and his fatherly neglect.

The girl grew up, her emotions indulged and starved in those misproportions unique to every individual. She was bossy with friends, abusive to her mother and her dolls. “I spoiled her,” Em said. “I let her pretend to be in charge, and then she really was. Oh, but who knows why? I’m old enough to remember the nature-nurture split, and now, apparently, social environment alters DNA.”

“Did she mind your lovers?” I asked.

“Aren’t you brazen.” But Em was flattered, I could tell. I’d aroused her memory, and she stared at me as she might have stared at other men. “None I care to speak of. And you? Is there no one special in your life?”

In retrospect, I wonder if she’d heard the club gossip, including the bit I’d spread myself: There had been someone years and years ago, but when I asked my secretary to mail back a cardigan the young lady had forgotten at my house, that was the end of that. More commonly, people said I was fixated on my dead mother. That I was closeted, asexual, perverse. That I accrued almost a year of abstinence like vacation leave and lavished it on three weeks of sexual tourism every summer. I said, “I prefer to fan the mystery, like you.”

“Mystery. Good God, I was exhausted. I had no child support. But I loved my work.”

“We had household help, but my mother stayed at home.”

“And I’m sure you thanked her. Not all women can or want to. Ask those professionals who stampeded tonight. They’d give their lives for their children, but their children bore them to death.” She spoke with certainty, her head higher, her neck taut. She was old and bruised, but no, she wasn’t soft.

I began to see Dee’s motivation and even, briefly, to doubt her guilt.

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To my surprise, I found out that Dee and I are the same age, So many of our contemporaries went off as undergraduates and never returned to our hometown to live. But Dee had, and so had I. Well, I’d never left. In a small world, my family’s world for generations, bearers of locally famous names are nurtured, even cosseted, and so I’ve stayed on in my family’s historic stone Georgian with a river view that I could afford nowhere else. Class descends and density increases in the blocks behind, eastward from the river, and then the trend reverses in the approach to College Hill, the neighborhood where Dee grew up. Riverside and College Hill mingle at Green Ridge, our mediocre local private prep. But I didn’t remember Dee. Naturally, I assumed that Em had sent her off to boarding school as early as possible.

“My father would have sent me, too, but my mother took my side. He even threatened military academy, which was absurd.”

Em said, “We had no choice. No child support, remember?”

“You can’t mean public school?”

“It wasn’t bad. For college she could have gone to Elmerton at a discount, but she wanted State.”

“Is that where she met...” I took a moment to remember the alias we’d assigned the son-in-law. It wasn’t Es. “...Sil?”

“No, they met here in town, when they were children.”

I admit I was startled by what Em told me next. As a boy, I was slow to develop sexually, slow to understand. Boys and girls kissing looked to me like they were eating ice cream cones. I don’t know why I went to classmates’ parties, but for a time I did, while they still invited me, and then I’d escape their antics by wandering off to peek in unfamiliar rooms where doors were open or ajar. In the guise of that baffled prepubescent, I envisioned Dee and Sil as if they were my fellow

seventh graders, cavorting naked on Em's double bed. At that age, they might have looked almost the same from behind, but I would have retreated fast, before I saw their faces or they saw me. I think even my boyhood self would have had an adult foreboding about that precocious pair. I imagined them fully themselves by age twelve, fearless, lawless, forever immature, as the precocious often are, beyond civil discipline, far beyond the acumen of a lawyer with boilerplate skills. To be set upon by children? What could be more terrifying?

"In the evening, when I came home from work," Em said, "I would find their dirty plates and glasses everywhere. Eating was fine, but I wanted them to clean up. I was slower to smell them in my sheets."

"Call me prudish," I said, "but I think there's general distaste when a room smells of someone else's sex."

I could hear the fussiness in my voice when I pronounced that the ideal bed smells of laundry soap and sunshine. Em and I agreed that it's difficult to smell yourself, though people identify with the fragrances of the toiletries they use, soap, shampoo, lotions, the women's varieties sweeter than the men's. "My bed was often rumpled anyway," she said, "so it wasn't that. But I began to smell something wrong, the way dogs and cats smell the foreign and aversive, like a seasoning they know will make them sick. It was their smell, or mostly his. I can smell it on him to this day."

Em didn't shame her daughter. She offered birth control. Dee asserted her virginity and called her mother obscene. Nonetheless, every day after school, she and the rank boy persisted. Em began to change her sheets Friday evenings and guard her bed over the weekend. Week nights, she picked up the scattered condom wrappers and spread out a sleeping bag on the floor. "Recommended for my bad back, I claimed, but my daughter mocked me anyway."

"You said you'd spoiled the girl, but this? Incredible. And it went on from seventh grade through high school graduation?"

"No. For her sweet sixteen, we redecorated, and she and I switched rooms." Em closed her eyes, inhaling in a kind of transport, almost smiling. "I was innocent again. They left the narrow bed alone."

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Is self-deceit a conscious choice? Maybe it's the only way to live. Still, I was surprised to hear Em say that halcyon decades followed. Dee and Sil married the day after graduating college. They set up house. They found jobs and lost them, found and lost them. But when they appealed to Em, she was always happy to help "the kids" with their rent and dubious enterprises. "I loved my work," Em said. "I worked as long as I could. But I'd always worked for her, too. Was I disappointed in their choices? Sometimes. They run a medical accounting service now, and they've finally made a go of things. She likes doctors. I think she sees a plastic surgeon as often as the dentist. And just last year, without my help, they had the money to buy in at Fort Bough."

"Old Bow Wow? That travesty?"

Em shook her head. "You should see it now."

"I have. I think it still looks like prison." But the developers had won and planted grass and posted hazard signs over the controversial buried fuel drums. The old stockade was remodeled as a clubhouse. Rampant honeysuckle conceals the chain link, and as advertised, the perimeter is entirely secure. Closer to town, the other gated enclaves flaunt their decorative brickwork up front, but around back tempt trespass for the fun of leaping drainage ditches or slipping through a barrier of Leland cypress, maybe with your eyes closed. "Do Dee and Sil have children? Do they lock them in out there?"

"No children, but I think she wanted them. I wonder if that's why."

"Why?" I asked.

"She won't be thwarted. She absolutely won't."

"Wasn't she always..."

"She's so much worse now."

"Really?"

But Em had turned away, distracted by darkness at the far end of the lounge. Lamps on automatic timers had begun switching off in sequence, the mechanisms ticking in the old sockets. "Must we leave?" she asked.

"No, Peter, our custodian, our sexton, as I like to think of him, is helping the club conserve. But we're fine." I reached up to override the timer on the lamp between us and brushed the lampshade and a silky tatter of fringe. The Argyle's lounge is capacious, like its counterpart in a shabby, old resort hotel. Gloom covered the distance slowly, approaching us, and groups of bulky chairs retreated, many worn to hopsacking where generations of members had hit their marks, across the back and buttocks, at the elbow's point, at the dingy edges of armrests where the fingers curled. "The Argyle is economizing. Our wine is plonk, if you noticed. Our waiting list is zero. But I will always blackball Dee and Sil."

She jerked slightly, and I thought I'd affronted her. But apparently she hadn't heard. Her shoulders tensed, and she appeared keen on something invisible, some sensation or sound.

"Are you all right?"

She shook herself as if she'd dozed. "It was nothing. It's passed."

"Do you need another break? To revisit the ladies' room?"

"No, no, thank you..." Her voice again trailed off. She stared into the middle distance, her jaw tense, her shoulders rounded, as if memory loomed right there in the Argyle's lounge as an imminent physical threat.

"My dear? What happened?"

She turned to me with her haunted stare. "What always happens. I got sick."

*

It was just last May. She collapsed outside, fetching her mail, but had no memory of the fall or of the letter carrier who summoned help and saved her life. When she awoke in ICU, Dee was beside her bed. "I heard the automatic blood pressure cuff inflate, and I thought it was breathing for me. I was touched that my daughter hadn't pulled the plug, that she wanted me to live. I used to worry she would hold me down with a pillow over my face."

Delusion is not uncommon when the elderly are hospitalized, but I believed that Em's fears of Dee were altogether rational. "Thank goodness for that mailman." I raised my glass to Em's. She cupped hers with both freckled hands, the tendons in high relief. To re-energize us both, I'd poured two whiskeys from the cocktail cart, convenient to our chairs. Our stock is as rough as mouthwash, and Em needed a moment to swallow, drawing in her pale lips before she went on.

"I was in that hospital for weeks, and then in rehab," she said. "My daughter would sashay in every afternoon. I became her possession, *my mother*. She was difficult and demanding on my behalf. None of the nurses liked her, but she enjoyed the notoriety."

"And Sil?"

"She made him visit. I can remember looking over and seeing him propped in a chair, like a bag of grain in khakis and an oxford cloth shirt, with a belt around his middle. But he came."

"How respectful."

She laughed. "I was never fooled by him."

"You recovered, obviously. Because you look well."

"I'm still mortal." She paused. "There's something I should have told you earlier."

It was the sentence every lawyer dreads, but then again, I wasn't her lawyer yet. "Go on."

"I retired late, when I was seventy, and right away my daughter wanted me to transfer my assets, modest savings, my pension, to her. This was almost ten years ago."

"But wasn't she your only heir, with primogeniture, so to speak?"

"Yes, of course. But avoiding estate tax was not my worry. I'd be dead. What if I needed money in the meantime? She called me names, accused me, said I didn't trust her. I placated her with a nice check. My retirement gift, I called it. But she was still angry. I wrote bigger checks for all occasions from then on, birthdays, holidays. I don't know how to explain it. Anxiety would overtake me when I was shopping for those greeting cards."

"But you resisted her. That's good."

"But then I got sick, you see?"

"I think so."

"What if I'd remained in a coma? How would my bills be paid?" Em's voice rose with steady emphasis, not loud but louder for her, from the alcohol, perhaps. "My daughter described a costly mess. So I transferred everything, just the way she wanted. I recovered. I went abroad to see an old friend in Wales. Louise raises chickens and rabbits. Never again. Sleeping on a window seat. Cleaning hen splat off eggs, scattering straw beneath the rabbits' cages, where the droppings fell through the screened floor. I got home, what was it, yesterday or the day before? I'm still jet lagged."

"Very recently, let's say."

"Before I left, I'd sold my condo and my car, or my daughter had. She convinced me to give up my driver's license, for my own safety. We moved my belongings into storage. She helped me find an apartment in a complex for the old. Meals are provided and they have a shuttle bus. She said she'd turn in my deposit and my lease, but she must have torn it up. Last night she claimed I'd never signed. I know I did."

"She met your plane?"

"No, I took a cab. I came through customs and switched planes in New York. I was exhausted by the time I got back here. While I was waiting for my suitcase, I tried to buy a can of iced tea, but my credit card failed, every card I owned, and it wasn't just the one machine. I tried the news stand, too. I called my daughter. At least my cell phone worked. She asked if I had money for a cab. I thought I did. When I travel I routinely hide two fifty dollar bills in my shoe. So they expected me."

"At Bow Wow?"

"It's a dreadful place. You're right."

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The Bow Wow gate was down, and high beacons cast the yellow deterrent light that paradoxically creates the perfect mood for crime. Inside the sentry box, the silhouetted guard inclined his head toward the bluish glow of several electronic screens. Em offered her passport from the backseat window. The cabby's credentials were sealed on a sun visor that he swiveled into view, but when the guard demanded that he take off his knitted cap, the man cursed him and refused.

Em said, "Imagine sending someone to the dictionary to look up a word he has no idea how to spell." In that spirit, the guard seemed to check and cross-check every extant list, invited guests and scofflaws and who knew what: the Do Not Fly, the Do Not Call, organ and bone marrow donors and identity thieves.

"But weren't you invited?"

"I think my daughter never told the guard. So it wasn't his fault. He was only putting in his hours. But the cabby glared at me in the rearview mirror. Did I even have a daughter? I leaned out the window and pled my case for the umpteenth time. My daughter, her husband, their phone number, their address. The thing is, I recognized this guard. Crew cut, plaid sport shirt, missing molars upper left, halfway back. I said I knew him from before and was sorry not to know his name. He demanded quiet because I was distracting him."

"Couldn't he simply call your daughter on the phone?"

"He'd been calling, but they didn't pick up. I found out later they were having sex."

"That's outlandish."

"No, it makes sense."

As Em explained, Dee and Sil had managed her paper death, her social death, and for all intents and purposes, had wrapped up her estate. They were thieves, not murderers, but a form of murder was necessary to their plan. They didn't care that she was alive and walking around. Their sex, coordinated with her likely arrival by cab, was another ancillary "crime." Even if they didn't really want to, they felt they had to anyway, to distract themselves when the guard dialed up and the phone rang on and on.

Though I continued to question her hypothesis right then, I thought her solution at the gate was inspired. After half an hour sitting in that cab, she needed to urinate so badly that she gave the guard fifty dollars, and he let her in. Luckily the cabby was content with her remaining fifty dollar bill. He wound his way to Dee's address and dropped Em and her suitcase on the doorstep.

"Except how would you get in?" I asked. "What if they really weren't home?"

Em responded with a shudder of dismissal. "That's absurd. I'm telling you, they were."

"But at the time you didn't know. If you were stranded, then what?"

"I knew in my gut. I would have made a ruckus, embarrassed them before the neighbors. Or begged the neighbors' help."

In fact, she only needed to follow what she described as "our routine." She concentrated on the chime to reassure herself that she had rung the bell, at least twice. She waited several minutes until, from within, Dee shouted, "Door's open!" Em tried the handle and shouted back, "No, it's locked." Because it always was. She heard Dee and Sil exchange muffled, blunt words, something like, "No, *you*." This went on for a spell. She heard footsteps, Sil's footsteps. She heard the mechanism of the lock. She said, "My son-in-law's proprioception is extraordinary, unless he can see through steel doors. He must have guessed I'd be standing to his left, left of center, on the side where the doorbell is. But he also had to dodge my luggage, and he did. He opened the door as wide as it would go and stepped out, right past me, as if I weren't there at all."

I said, "You mean he didn't say hello?"

"He never says hello, goodbye, not even good riddance. While he pretended to be looking in the shrubs, I wheeled past him with my bag. I could smell him vaguely. You know, that fermented, cooked, bodily smell."

"I'm confused. What was he looking for? Didn't he get your bag?"

"Box? Delivery notice? Menu from a pizza parlor? You'll have to ask him, it's his charade. I think he pretends that a deliveryman or huckster has rung and disappeared. He would never, ever help me with my bag."

"You sound happy."

"Because antipathy is simple with him. Fine. I ran to the toilet, the downstairs powder room. I didn't succumb to urgency, thank God." She paused in wonderment at her near escape. "But I confess my underwear was a touch damp."

"My dear, happens to us all. After a certain age, the genito recedes and the urinary comes to the fore."

"You're too nice."

"And where was Dee?"

"Upstairs."

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Dee beckoned from the master bedroom and would not come down. In her weary state, Em clung to the railing and climbed to her. "In here, Mother," Dee called, and Em heard the name as an epithet, ironically assigned, "like a nickname for an outcast who was actually a man. Or maybe I'm just thinking that because of how she looked to me."

As Em described her, Dee might have been more appropriately garbed in a sleeveless undershirt and beltless trousers with the fly undone, a chewed cigar in her mouth and a beer can in her fist. Since her liposuction, she'd acquired the sprawling upper arms and cushioned shoulders of a middle-aged hardworking man. Em explained it's not a secret that the fat comes back and resettles up top, but apparently most patients still prefer the new upper body to the old belly fat. Dee stood just inside the bedroom, near the mussed bed, the dented pillows, and the swirl of sheets. Em could smell the scent of Sil coming off the bedding, but Dee, damp from a shower, smelled "like rubbing alcohol." She had no reason not to be comfortable in her own house at night, but Em wanted her to be abashed, even a little, and she wasn't. She wore a very short frilly white chiffon nightie, a "teddy" that ended at the top of her broad thighs. Its spaghetti straps were black. Her thin lips were a straight, forbidding line directed at her mother. She'd had the nose, the chin, the body work but surprisingly had left her lips alone. Her platinum hair was brushed back, flat, almost as if she had no hair. Was she a woman? A man? A crossdresser? A transvestite in the midst of dolling up?

"I was frightened," Em said. "But she intended that. She was using the power of the perceived grotesque. Her presentation was an act of dominance, intimidation, shamelessness, taboo. Think of the wielded penis and the threat of rape, the fact of rape, in prison cultures."

For a moment I had difficulty moistening my mouth. "Good God."

"Forgive me," Em said. "That was the old professor talking."

"I hope she didn't hurt you."

"Hadh't she already?"

"You didn't question her?"

"I did. I asked why no one had answered when the guard called. Her tone was snide. She said they hadn't heard the phone. They'd been busy. I asked her what had happened to my bank cards, and she said obviously I hadn't paid my bills and I was overdrawn. But everything was in her name! She pretended she had no idea what I meant. I felt so sick I asked to lie down. She said they'd just had company. The guest beds were stripped, and all the linens in a dirty heap. Damn it, I said, let me lie down. When she knows your vulnerabilities, she's sadistic. 'So you can wet the mattress?' she said."

"Oh my."

"I asked for cash. She said they had none in the house. I remembered the Argyle. Otherwise I had no idea where to go."

"How did you get here?"

"My son-in-law drove. When my daughter compels him, he performs in a silent fury. I sat in back. I cracked the window open. I didn't want to talk either. I didn't want to see his face. The custodian let me in."

"Peter."

"Yes, Peter. And here I am."

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We sat for a while, quietly. Em felt lighter, I imagine, and I, too, was relieved that she had brought us to that present moment. But catharsis is ephemeral. Because you can't give away your problems, even if there's money in it. Beyond our two chairs and single table lamp, the darkness of the lounge was diffuse, but light funneled in from the archway leading to the corridor, where the dim wall scones would be adequate to see me out.

I said, "What about your local friends?"

Em shook her head. "Demented. Deceased. Moved to warmer climes."

"So what do you think you'll do?"

Before she spoke, she paused, open mouthed, imploring, the creases on her forehead recopying the line of her brow, higher and higher up. "I thought...I thought you could help me."

"Me?"

"At dinner this evening, you were the lawyer pointed out. You distinctly. With your limp."

"Of all the nerve." My face went hot. "Who was it?"

"I'm so terrible with names."

I looked at her, held her out as if for reappraisal at a greater distance, though neither of us moved. "You should have told me earlier. At the outset."

She dropped her chin and exaggerated peering up. "I've been a bad girl."

"Oh, please." I heard the influence of our backwater hospital, where nurses on the geriatric floor comfort with baby talk, thickening their tongues like four year olds who can't pronounce the hard letters, lisping, "*let me see how sweet you are*," with every finger stick for the glucose monitor. "That's insulting to us both."

Now she was angry, shaking her cheeks, leaning forward, reassuming her rightful age. "You should have told *me*. You are a lawyer?"

I hesitated. "But am I the one to help you?"

She studied me, and I watched the thought forming. "So you're afraid."

"Realistic. What else did you omit? About you and Dee when she was growing up?"

"The endless mistreatment of the indestructible. Isn't that family life?" She shut her eyes. Both her knees were exposed. Her sash must have loosened and her robe opened wider in the course of the evening, but until then I hadn't noticed, and she didn't seem to care. We were friends, except we weren't. I'd wanted to be intrigued by her story, not tainted. I had hoped for an easy client.

"Should I represent you as incompetent?" I asked. "Would that offend you?"

She blinked. "But that's the truth, God help me."

"It's not considered a fleeting state of mind. The court will appoint a guardian. It's messy. You've heard that doctors stay out of hospitals if they can? Well, lawyers stay out of court. Your daughter can't be trusted, you know that. She'd swear to anything, with her hand still on the Bible. In the end the court could assign you damages in excess of what she stole."

"Damages?"

"For her childhood. If you're found to be at fault. Abuse. Neglect. Sexual permissiveness. Believe me, they'll dredge it up."

"I couldn't stop her."

"You still can't."

"But I'm poor. I can't afford senescence. Must the poor die faster?"

"I think they do, on average."

"Can't you help me?"

"I'll write your daughter on my letterhead. I'll send a copy to the office on aging. We'll try. Maybe we'll squeeze out a pitiful allowance, and she'll torment you over it every month." I scooted forward in my chair. "That's enough for now. I'm going home. Shall I see you upstairs?"

"No, I'll stay down a while longer."

I reached out and took her hand. She smiled plaintively. The average warm handclasp ends after several seconds, but when I cued release with a gentle backwards tug, her grip only tightened. Later I wondered if she'd squeezed in pain, the way she might have squeezed an armrest, or if cerebral sparklers were already going off, reversing the movements she intended.

"You'll be back?" she asked.

"Tomorrow."

"Please. Call my daughter now. Compel her. Make it right. Don't abandon me."

"I think it's better if I correspond." All this while we were maintaining the fraught tension, still holding hands. "But right now I need to go."

She held tight, though her mouth was slack. "Call her."

"Will you give me back my hand? I'm saying goodbye."

But she held on with the solid inert gravity of the old. She wasn't strong. My mother came to mind, though she wasn't like mother, not at all. They were as different as volume and mass, as a beaker filled with bone dust and a beaker filled with flesh and blood. But I could feel the same endless need within the finitude of remaining time. No one knew how long. I didn't want to hurt her, and yet I had to wrench away. It was my hand. Afterwards, I don't know who spoke first. Perhaps we both spoke at once.

I said, "You were a fool to trust her."

She twisted her mouth. "Don't you know how all the others laugh at you?"

"In fact, I do. Well, I do and I don't. I'm never sure how successful I am." I was boosting myself up, standing by increments as I spoke. "You see, my caricature is my own contrivance. It makes two of us on my side."

But she wasn't even looking at me. She was crying. Her cheeks were wet, and new tears gathered briefly in the circles under her eyes before they ran on down. I couldn't find my handkerchief, and so I reached for napkins from the cocktail cart instead, a measurable pile because the brand we use tends to disintegrate. When I placed them on her lap, they immediately went askew, fanning out against the floral cloth.

She raised her face. "But I'm her mother," she said.

CODA

An important message from Reid Bell to the Argyle membership:

We join her family and the entire community in mourning the passing of our esteemed member, Professor Emerita [], who died of a stroke alone in the Argyle's lounge in the predawn hours, Thursday morning. She led an astounding life, an account of which, on Wednesday evening, I am honored to say she shared with me.

Commendations to our custodial manager, Peter Carter, who was confronted with a dire situation when he arrived at work on Thursday morning. Peter, thank you for your efforts at CPR and your swift call for an ambulance.

Memo to the Facilities Committee, from Reid Bell:

As you know, we had a recent "accident" in the Argyle's lounge. The loss of bodily control pales beside the subsequent loss of life, but still, we have a problem. The affected chair is one of two in gold velveteen, near the north doorway and the cocktail cart. We've begun to address the chair in house. If results are unacceptable, we'll have the chair cleaned professionally, and if that fails, if odor has saturated the kiln-dried frame, then we'll be forced to throw it out. Reupholstery would be foolhardy. I also doubt we can match the fabric of the mate. Our budget constrains us to keep the mate. Perhaps, in memoriam, we can angle it to gaze out the window alone. In the interim, our resourceful Pete has moved the chair to basement, near the iron tub. I will keep you posted on his results. To neutralize the smell, he's sponging the cushions with water and vinegar, a trick his mother recommends.



IVY GOODMAN has published two collections of short stories, *Heart Failure* and *A Chapter from Her Upbringing*. Her fiction has appeared in *Epoch*, *Witness*, *Washington Square* and many other literary magazines. Recent work is out in *ARDOR*, *Hobart* and *A cappella Zoo*.