The Making of Miranda

by Millgirl

Summary

A new chapter in Miranda and Andrea's life begins. As they go forward, they also go back and re-examine the past.

Notes

As always, I do not own the original characters, nor do I make any money from them. This story forms part of a new series, Miranda's Sabbatical, and runs to several chapters. It follows immediately after "The Heatwave" series, and "Joy". The emphasis, as with most of my stories, is on light-hearted romance and love, but when more sadness creeps in, as it might in later chapters, I will put up a warning. Miranda, like many people carries emotional scars and I don't want to upset any readers too much by not warning of what's ahead. You might already have picked up a few clues.
“Miranda?”

“Yes my darling?”

“I’ve just looked at the balance on my checking account, and $100,000 has miraculously turned up there overnight. “

“Hmm?”

Miranda was brushing Andrea’s hair, an activity she always enjoyed, partly because it gave her extreme sensory pleasure to see the waves ripple down almost to Andrea’s waist, and partly because it then gave her a chance to braid, tie up and generally fiddle about with the long chestnut locks.

It fulfilled a childhood dream, of having a beautiful doll with long hair to play with. Miranda could only remember ever having one doll, a plastic baby which someone threw away before she was four, so she had a lot of catching up to do in the playing area. Her twin daughters also preferred their red curly hair cut quite short, and were anyway far too wriggly to endure much more than her periodic trims.

“Would that have anything to do with you by any chance?”

“What?”

“All that money in my bank! If it wasn’t you, then I’ve been the victim of a reverse banking scam. Someone is pouring money into my account!”

Miranda made a wry face and gave a little nod to confess her guilt.

“Well, I wanted to give you an engagement present, and it makes sense. You can pay off your student debts and the lease on your flat. You’ll need a bit of cash as well to live on, now you’ve left Runway.”

“But it’s so much . . . “

“Sshh, it’s nothing. It was just lying around in my account doing nothing. If I really wanted to spoil you I’d give you at least a million.”

“Still aiming on becoming a sugar mommy then?”

Miranda just gazed at her and said nothing. Andrea was sorry she might be making her uneasy.

“Then thank you, my love. It is a wonderful present, and I will be certainly able to pay off my student loans with it. But how did you know my account number?”

“Oh, I just wrote it down from your check book one evening. I’m not a complete idiot. It’s so hard to give you presents I had to do it quietly. Actually, you do know that everything I have is yours for the asking, don’t you?”

“I only want your heart.”

“Now you’re being ridiculous. That was already firmly in your possession the first week we met.”
Andrea looked up into the mirror at Miranda, who was standing behind her at the dressing table. She had put down the brush and now placed her hands over Andy’s shoulders, kissing her lightly on top of her head.

Andy smiled and said, “Ah, those heady days of being perpetually terrified of you.”

“You were never terrified. I am sure you just pretended.”

“You were never truly terrifying either. You just pretended too.”

“But if that was the case, we were both very good at it, weren’t we?”

“We were. I spent almost as much time in the staff bathroom almost wetting myself with anxiety, as Emily spent in there throwing up.”

Miranda decided quickly to change the subject from what she feared might soon become an analysis of her professional sadism.

“So, beautiful girl, how do you want your hair today?”

“It’s still so warm. Could you braid it for me, darling, and then swing it up round my head, like a little goose girl?”

“Yes, I enjoy it that way. It shows off your collar bones.”

Andy continued the conversation. The last two weeks had been so busy, they had hardly had time to chat. They did collide every night in Miranda’s bed, but there they usually had more urgent priorities than mulling over the day’s events.

“How has it been at Runway, after announcing your sabbatical? Have the Board been supportive?”

Miranda started to divide and braid Andrea’s hair.

“Generally, yes, they were fine with it, and I’ve got a water-tight agreement that I can return on the same terms. I have extended my absence to a full year though. It seemed foolish to return to work just when the girls’ summer vacation will begin. So it’s September this year to September next year.”

“Wow, all those lovely months when we’ll have you just to ourselves!”

“You don’t mind? You do think I’m doing the right thing? I know it’s a bit late to ask. I should have consulted you . . . “

“Absolutely the right thing. I couldn’t be happier, and the twins are ecstatic.”

“Irv huffed and puffed of course. He had the silly notion that I should have asked him first, before announcing it to the world, but he is so happy not to see me scowling at him for the next twelve months, he’s being quite co-operative. I think he imagines Nigel will be more amenable in the Editor’s chair.”

“And will he?”

“Let’s wait and see. Nigel had needed this for a long time. He has better manners than I do with regard to authority, but he is becoming more directive daily. I have been pleased to see it. He’s more than ready to take over.”
Her firm but gentle plaiting of hair continued until all the waves were subdued and a long Rapunzel like braid swung down Andy’s back. Then Miranda picked it up and wound it round her lover’s head, securing it with a few transparent clips and tucking the end in out of sight.

“There, you can now run off and look for your flock of geese. And I’m about all ready to pack up my office and finally arrange to leave Runway this afternoon. Frankly I’m nervous. I’ve worked full time since I was sixteen.

“That’s thirty three years, apart from two months after I had the twins, and I can scarcely remember those weeks, apart from being permanently sleepless and feeling like a milk cow. “

“You just need a project, and we have a great one, don’t we? We’re going to furnish the cottage in Provincetown and move in this next week. And before that, the girls’ summer school final recital is tomorrow evening, don’t forget. We can’t miss that.”

“I wouldn’t for the world. They’d never forgive me, not after Florida!“

“Thank you for reminding me! But, seriously, thank you for the hair, and the chance to be styled in the most exclusive salon in New York! Just don’t ask me to return the favor. You know my skills with a comb and brush. All I am good at is mussing up your hair!”

“Which you do far too often! Now, darling, I must leave for Runway. Oh, how horrible can I be today, I wonder? I wouldn’t want anyone to miss me too much. I just want to slip away without any fuss.”

Miranda packed up her brushes and put them away in the drawer. Then she hurried out of the bedroom and called to her daughters to give her a hug before she left the house. They were upstairs practising the piano duets they were scheduled to play in the recital the following evening, but came down as soon as they heard their mother’s voice.

Andrea knew they were very adroit and musical little pianists. They would not have made it to the Juilliard summer school if they hadn’t been, and she was pleased Caroline was now also taking up a second instrument, the cello.

Cassidy, having surveyed various options, had decided to stick with just the keyboard. It was the first time she had made a decision totally independent from her twin sister, and Andy encouraged her to follow her own course as she chose.

It also meant that she could spend time with each girl separately, as she could see different characteristics emerge, even though their brains often acted identically and they shared the same mischief gene, which she could see in Miranda. There was fun and mayhem lurking inside their mother, and a whole year free from Runway should let it flourish.

What Miranda didn’t know was that Andy, Serena and Nigel, with Emily as their main organiser, had arranged a little party to make the beginning of Miranda’s sabbatical that very afternoon. Crates of wine, pop and fizzy water had been ordered along with an extravagant buffet selection of pretty little canapes. A round robin invitation sent out to many of the New York based designers, photographers and models had resulted in a very high acceptance rate. Miranda was more popular than she imagined, and even several of her previous personal assistants had promised to attend.

Keeping the party a secret from Miranda had been a challenge because she had all the natural instincts of a forensic detective, but Andy and Emily had managed to give nothing away, and the correspondence with balloon providers, caterers and even a trad. jazz trio had been buried deep inside Emily’s private files. She had finally learned her lesson on confidentiality after the latest
debacle, when naked pictures of a sleeping Andy had turned up on CEO Irv’s desktop.

Andy had confided with Caroline and Cassidy as well, deciding to invite them up to the Runway offices to join the party. This was a very rare treat for them and they were very excited to be included in their Mom’s professional world.

Andy went over the arrangements with them again as she dropped them off at the Juilliard Music School for their last morning of summer school.

“Cara will pick you up and bring you home, so you can then change and get ready. I’ll be ready to collect you at 3pm, and we can go to the Runway office together. We’re holding the party in the largest conference room in the building. Your Mom mustn’t see you beforehand or know anything’s different, so if she calls or texts you, don’t say anything, will you?”

“We won’t Andy. We promise.”

“And kiddoes, this is really important. I want no tricks, no cheek to any of the Runway staff, no fun and games. I want you to be especially nice to Emily, who has put in a lot of work to make this afternoon a really happy party, so no teasing or provoking her. I’m trusting you. This is for your Mom. I don’t want you to give her a moment’s anxiety.”

It was a longer, more serious speech than they had ever heard Andy make to them before, and it sobered them up.

“We won’t. We’ll be as good as gold, angels. No really, angels. We love you Andy, and we love Mommy. We won’t let you down. Angels.”

The words had been divided between them, but the last word came from Cassidy, who was the lesser angelic of the pair. She looked sincere though.

Andy felt she could do no more, and she did want them to be present. A year was a long time in a ten year old’s life, and this would mark the end of a real era for them.

“Well good. Thank you. We’re here now. Hug?”

All three embraced in a group hug, and the girls went through the big doors of the academy. Cass turned and waved back at Andy with a grin. She just hoped the little imp wasn’t still plotting some dastardly practical joke for the party entertainment.

“Oh well, there’s only so much a girl can do”, she thought, as she made her way to her Brooklyn apartment, to complete the final clean up and clear out of her furniture and treasures. A van was due to meet her there at Noon, and then she would hand the keys over to the agent.

At four o’clock that afternoon, Nigel put his head round Miranda’s door and watched as she was looking through a pile of back issues of Runway stacked on her desk.

“Quite a portfolio, eh? You should be very proud.”

“They take me back. I remember all these covers, all the photo shoots. We had some fun, didn’t we, Nigel? It wasn’t all agony, even if it felt like giving birth every month.”

“It’s been a privilege. How will I manage without you? But I promise I won’t hassle you over anything while you’re off. As you know, half the upcoming issues are already planned and in the pipeline already.
“Now, Miranda, can I just borrow you for a little while? There some serious stuff come up in the advertising department which needs you to look at and give us your opinion.”

“I’m almost out of the door for the last time. You deal with it.”

“No it’s serious. We’ve got something laid out, and we need you there.”

He sounded sufficiently business like and a little brusque, so Miranda reluctantly stood up and followed him out of the door. Once they were moving, Nigel kept up the momentum by walking swiftly ahead of her, and called over his shoulder.

“Don’t take the elevator. It’s only one floor down. “

Miranda’s head was away in the clouds, remembering her early years as Editor. So she followed him along the corridors and down the stairs almost without thinking where they were going.

One floor below, he swung left instead of right as she expected, and held open the door to the big room they used for entertaining and showcasing new fashion. The lights were dim, so she could hardly see.

“What the?”

Then as she stepped in, all the lamps came on at once and a huge cheer went up from the eighty or more people in the room. She could hear a jazz trumpeter give a fanfare, and then she was swept forward in such an excess of applause and affection, she didn’t know where to look or what to say.

Many of her oldest friends and colleagues clustered round her, including some of the world class designers she had helped nurture and bring to the fore. Emily, Serena, Nigel and Andrea between them had done a fantastic job at bringing together the key people from the last decade, and as a glass of champagne was pressed into her hand, Miranda felt overwhelmed at just how warm and friendly everyone seemed to be. Maybe she wasn’t as hated as much as she supposed, after all.

It was a lovely party. Waiters and waitresses from one of New York’s best caterers quietly circled through the guests with refills for their glasses, as well as an endless supply of tiny snacks, including miniature steaks, in homage to Miranda, tiny fried cheese sandwiches, and a large assortment of other varied canapes. The jazz trio in the corner seemed to be playing Miles Davis type improvisations, and wherever she turned, people wanted to air kiss her, hold her hand and wish her a lovely sabbatical year.

Miranda though, was looking round the room for just one face, and when she found it, grinning at her like a Cheshire Cat, she homed in on it as if drawn by a string.

And then she saw her two other favorite human beings besides Andy, bouncing up and down excitedly in their new party dresses.

“Well! Obviously you’re behind all of this.”

“No, it was Emily’s idea actually. Nigel and Serena helped, and I’ve had to do very little. We couldn’t let you leave Runway, even for only a year, without a decent send off. And I thought Cass and Caro should be here too, to see how much we all care about you at Runway.”

“My darlings, how lovely to see you here.” Miranda hugged and kissed her daughters, and held them tightly for a moment. Andy had already given them soft drinks, so they felt like proper grown-ups at the party. She then kept them closely under control by asking them to stand by her as she supervised the presentation of a large cake. It was displayed on a central table in the shape of an open magazine with Runway’s front cover mocked up cleverly in edible ink.
“You should have told me. Then I could have changed into something more presentable than this old navy shirt-waister.”

“You always look fabulous, and if I’d told you, you might just have spoilt things by doing a runner. Now go and circulate, while the twins and I sort out the cake cutting. Caroline, you put napkins on the plates and Cass, will you please place a piece of cake on each napkin. Here, you should put on these little plastic gloves. “

Andy was organised, the girls were occupied, and Nigel swirled Miranda away round the room, for once simply enjoying the company of all the people she knew and loved.

The twins weren’t the only children present. Three mothers with toddlers and babies were there as well, bringing their children back to see Miranda, their dragon employer from hell, but now appreciated and forgiven with the hindsight of a few years’ grace. It was a very happy occasion.

At 5.30 Irv arrived, late, but he’d come, following his secretary and his wife, who’d been there from the beginning. They’d both been allies of Miranda since the early days.

He shook her hand and wished her a good sabbatical. She had responded equally cordially, and refrained from standing on his toes. They couldn’t ask more of each other than that.

By the end of the party, between seven and eight pm, Miranda at last sat down and ate some food, a plate of goodies which Andy had saved her from the buffet, now almost fully consumed. The many catwalk models present may not shown much appetite, but they’d been supplanted by hungry staff from the various other departments, and celebrities who had all eaten like horses.

“Eat, darling!” commanded Andy. “You know how you get when you don’t!” Miranda obediently did as ordered. She had made a short speech towards the end of the event, when the room was still full of people, thanking everyone for coming, saying what a surprise it had been, and then turning to Andrea, standing just behind her.

“Many of you know, but not everyone perhaps, that in the coming year I won’t be wandering lonely as a cloud, but enjoying the company of the person who has made my life immeasurably happier and more fulfilled by coming into it. I have asked Andrea Sachs here, to be my wife, and I’m delighted to say she’s accepted.”

A buzz immediately ran round all those present, because, no, many people still had no idea that Miranda now had a woman partner, and that it was in fact her most recent, most junior PA. But the buzz was entirely positive.

“I’m ashamed I still haven’t found time to buy a ring. But by the time I return next year, I am sure we will have married, although I hope the honeymoon will last forever.”

This was remarkably open and expressive, coming from Miranda, and the final hour of the party was taken up with people congratulating her. Many of them, though, looked sideways at Andrea with open mouths.

She guessed correctly their puzzled expressions meant one of two things. Even though her hair was still immaculate, (care of Miranda,) she showed not an ounce of natural fashion sense now that she had left Runway’s employment, and today had actually come to the party wearing trainers!

The other half of those present gazed in awe at her bravery and apparent willingness to share her life with Miranda Priestly, Ice Queen and fire-breathing dragon combined! It beggared belief, but the fashion world was liberal and very forgiving. It also loved a good love story, which Miranda
had provided it with in spades today.
But at the end of the party, neither Miranda nor Andy really cared what other people thought.
Miranda put her feet up, and slipped off her Jimmy Choo four inch heels. She ate all the snacks
Andy had set aside for her, and drank the champagne.

“These are delicious, Emily. Where did you go for the catering?”

“And thank you, Nigel, for setting this all up. I’ve had fun, and it was so much nicer than the sad
little exit I’d expected to make. “
The twins cuddled over their mother and kissed her.

“You behaved so well, darlings. So grown up. Several people commented.”

Caroline smiled. “Andy explained we should be good, so we were.”

“Why doesn’t it work then when I ask you to be good?”

Cass looked across at Andy. “We will in future. We’re so happy you two are getting married.”

“Can we be the bridesmaids?”

Andy laughed. “Of course, chief bridesmaids, but I also have some little nieces and nephews who
might want to be involved as well.”

Andy’s phone pinged.

“It’s Roy, asking us when we want to be picked up.”

“Bless him, I saw him sticking to soft drinks earlier. If he’s still in the building, ask him to take me
and the girls home. Are you in the Lexus?”

“Yes, but it’s full of gear from the apartment. I squeezed the twins in the back, but the front
passenger seat is full. I’ll meet you all at home.”

So Miranda was swept out of the building with her two little ten-year-olds, which gave her no time
for regrets or last minute panic, and Andrea later drove her own final journey out of Runway. A
new chapter in their lives was about to begin, and she couldn’t wait. It would be nothing if not
exciting, but best of all, it would be her and Miranda, together. That was the main thing, after all.

Later that night, in bed together, they had a little epilogue on the day. Miranda was unplaiting
Andrea’s hair, which had stayed round her head very well, despite such a busy day, the party, and
an evening shower to cool off, but now it needed her Beloved’s careful fingers to un-braid the plait
without pulling it out too painfully. As she worked Miranda whispered,

“You know, I’ve never been given a party before, not just for me.”

“Never? Not even when you were little?”

Miranda snorted. “Certainly not then.”

“Will you tell me about it, one day, about when you were little?”

Andrea knew this was a very big ask. She could just sense it. There was a silence of several
seconds, then,
“One day I will, my love. One day. But not tonight. Today was such a happy day. Thank you for helping it all happen. Thank you for everything.”

Andrea felt Miranda finish undoing her hair, and then kiss her shoulder. She turned, and they fell into each other’s arms.

“Andrea,” Miranda said back. “And about the 100K, it doesn’t make you a sugar mommy. It makes you a very generous lover in bed with someone who no longer has expensive rent to pay, or a pile of student debt, a very relieved, solvent person who adores you.”

“Sshh, just be quiet and put out the light please.”

“All right.”

The room fell into darkness.

“Now, kiss me?”

“Yes, Miranda.”

And she did.
Punch and Judy

Chapter Summary

A recital, a journey and a new beginning.

“I don’t normally dress them in identical outfits, but for tonight they said they wanted to match.”

“They look adorable, very French in those navy sailor suit dresses. Oh I do hope it will all go well and they don’t get nervous.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much. I know my children. Nerves of steel.”

It was the Saturday night recital at the end of the junior Juilliard music summer school. Andrea and Miranda had taken their seats three rows back from the front of the auditorium, and were passing surreptitious grins of encouragement to their little darlings, sitting with the other student performers at the back of the large stage, and waving enthusiastically down to them. The twins certainly didn’t look nervous.

“Where are they in the programme?”

Miranda pulled out her reading glasses and put them on her nose to read down the running order. “Hmm, last in the first half. That’s good, not on first, but not so late as to have everyone yawning before they even start.”

“And they’re playing the Faure Dolly Suite. Goodness knows they’ve been practising enough. I know every note of the whole set off by heart by now.”

“Yes, so do they, but they told me they’re only playing the last movement. All the parents naturally want to hear their babies perform, so the programme is very long already.”

“Well, let’s sit back and enjoy it. You never know, we might hear a future Ashkenazy tonight. As school concerts go, this is rather special.”

So they did. Miranda flexed her shoulder muscles to relieve the tension she could feel, and sat back in her chair. She was still mentally coiled up like a spring after embarking on her sabbatical year only the day before, but she could sense she was beginning slowly to calm down and turn into a human being again, rather than just a manic robot magazine editor.

Andrea, sitting beside her, appeared much more relaxed, but Miranda knew she was almost as wound up as she was, though mainly with purely positive excitement. Early the next morning, they would be hitting the road north east, just the four of them.

The cottage on the bay at Provincetown was now at their disposal, and they only had to pick up the keys from the realtor’s office to take possession. Miranda was running over in her mind once more all the things she would have to do in order to move in without hassle, when the lights flickered up and then dimmed, signalling the concert was about to begin. She turned to the stage, and gave the performers her full attention.

Each of the young musicians played or sang beautifully. Their hard work showed, and there wasn’t
a squeak or a whistle out of place. Andy knew she was biased, of course, but she did think the twins just gave that something special to their flamboyant performance of the merry finale to the Dolly Suite.

They played the piece from memory, and the Spanish themed tunes danced from one set of hands to the other on the large concert grand piano. It was over in minutes, but when they stood up to take a bow the audience clapped very enthusiastically. Miranda was secretly very proud of her daughters as well. She wouldn’t call herself a tiger mother, but she knew how often she’d sent them upstairs to practise, and how many hours they had put in. They deserved to do well.

The whole audience seemed to jump up and be on the move during the interval, and the girls ran down from the stage to join Andrea and their mother. Someone else approached them, Mrs Berkeley, their piano teacher, had come to listen, and while she was never one to be over generous with praise, she was smiling with professional pride.

“Well done, girls. Very nicely done. Miranda, so pleased to see you here. It was such a pity you couldn’t make the last concert in the early spring.” This was by no means the first time she had brought up that unfortunate event. It was like rubbing a blister on her heel for Miranda.

Andrea could feel her begin to bridle.

“Oh, that was entirely my fault,” she stepped in before Miranda could comment. “Miranda tried so hard to get home for the twins, but I couldn’t find her a flight due to the hurricane.”

Both Miranda and Mrs Berkeley shared the same silent thought that maybe the business trip hadn’t been necessary in the first place, but the two girls bouncing around them drew them back to the present.

“Mom, what did you think?”

“Did we do OK?”

“I thought you were wonderful. You played like professionals.”

“It was only in F. It wasn’t difficult, but we’ve been in a masterclass with the whole suite this week, and our tutor said that would be the best movement to choose.”

“It was lovely. It took me right back to Spain.”

“Oh, lovely, maybe we could all go there one day, Mom, all four of us?”

Andy, who had only ever travelled on the American continent, silently agreed. She longed to go to Europe. Obviously Miranda had travelled the world as Runway Editor and before, but really she knew no details of her life before she came to the US.

They were joined by a fourth adult, the young piano tutor who had been coaching the girls for the last two weeks. He was much more relaxed and enthusiastic than Mrs Berkeley, but shared her opinion and complimented the twins on their playing. Then he turned to Miranda.

“Your girls both have a very real gift for music, and a natural ear. They very nearly have perfect pitch. Does it come from you?”

Miranda shook her head.

“I don’t think so. I never learned as a child. There was never any money for that sort of thing, but
we did a lot of singing at school. I do love to sing.”

“Mommy’s very musical,” informed Caroline firmly. “She can harmonise anything we sing. She sang to us from when we were babies, and she speaks brilliant French.”

“Our father can’t sing a note, and anyway he’d never dream of coming to support us at a concert like this.”

“That’s not true, darling. Your Dad wanted to be here, but it’s a long way from Boston, and he’s been very busy.”

Why she was defending her ex-husband No. 1, Miranda wasn’t sure, but she knew her girls’ father was a thousand times better father than her own parent had ever been.

“When we’re up in Provincetown, he’s promised to drive over and visit.”

Dead silence was the response to this news. The girls said nothing, but the lack of expression on their faces spoke for itself.

The two music teachers continued to chat with the family until the end of the interview, when the twins re-joined their cohort up on the stage, and Miranda and Andrea resumed their seats.

“You definitely are musical,” whispered Andrea. “Caroline was right. Left to yourself you’d be singing all day.”

“I can scarcely read music.”

“Because you never had the chance to learn. While we’re off, the girls and I can bring you up to speed. I had seven years of piano lessons, and can play the ukulele as well!”

“I’d like that. My maternal grandfather apparently was an Irish Fiddle player before he took to drink, and I was told once somewhere back on my father’s side there was a Jewish Cantor.”

“Well, there you go! What a heritage.”

“No, not exactly one to be proud of. Don’t get your hopes up. My childhood was like something out a bad kitchen sink drama. They were all the rage in the fifties.” Miranda neatly deflected her personal revelation into a general joke.

Andrea was about to pursue this very interesting conversation though, which gave her more information about Miranda’s background than she’d been able to extract before, but the auditorium lights flicked off and on again, and the audience’s buzz quieted down.

Seven more little geniuses prepared to take to the stage, and show what they could do. In the darkened room Miranda felt for Andrea’s hand and gave it a squeeze, and instead of letting it go, stayed with her fingers wrapped round it until they were called on to give the next round of applause to the junior musicians.

The following morning, the whole family was up, if not with the lark at least with the pigeons who sat on the townhouse roof and cooed persistently from 5 am onwards. Cassidy and Caroline, tired already after their piano playing and subsequent late night, tumbled into their clothes, and walked like zombies into the back of the car. Their cases were already packed and stowed. Andy gathered up water bottles, snacks and everyone’s phone, and Miranda took the keys and started the vehicle.

It was very early Sunday morning, but New York traffic ran 24/7 and it needed her expertise to get them away on Route 96 and out of town before breakfast time. Andy rode shot-gun. She had made
a thermos of coffee, another of hot chocolate, and a bag of bagels, so she was prepared to feed the twins their breakfast as they went, but after ten minutes, when she turned round, they had already fallen straight back to sleep and stayed like that for two thirds of the way up to Cape Cod. Even when Miranda and Andrea refuelled and swapped over as drivers, neither stirred.

“Poor things, they must be exhausted,” whispered Andrea.

“Yes. Let them sleep. They’ll wake when they are ready.”

Miranda settled down into the front passenger seat and watched New England sail past them from the turnpike. The world and his wife, or in their case, she thought, her wife, were on the road in these last few days of August and the first few days of September running up to the Labor Day public holiday.

Seeing the twins were fast asleep, she said quietly to Andrea, “You know I do wish they weren’t so miserable about seeing their father. He is only supposed to have them one weekend in four, and half the school holidays, but neither he nor they have been keen to make it happen all this summer. That’s why I’ve invited him to the cottage next weekend, to try and improve their relationship, much as I won’t enjoy his company.”

“Will the latest girlfriend come?”

“No, I insisted he came alone, but he may have installed her in a hotel somewhere nearby. I also wanted him to meet you, and to tell him about our plans. I don’t want to put that responsibility onto my children.”

“You don’t think they might have talked to him already about us?”

“Maybe, but I would have expected him to make some comment to me if they had. No, after Stephen, they’ve become very protective of me. I think they would have told me if their father knew about us.”

The morning was beginning to brighten into yet another lovely summer Sunday. The unbearable heat of July and early August had lifted, and the day had all the weather needed for a perfect day at the seaside. As they neared their destination, both Miranda and Andrea could feel their spirits rise and begin to get excited.

“So, how are we doing on the furniture?”

“The table and chairs, and some crockery arrived yesterday. I checked with the agent. He was there to check the delivery as he promised. It’s completely basic, as I thought we’d like to choose how to furnish it together this week. He has also hidden the keys to the house under a stone pot in the yard, so we can drive straight there.”

“Beds?”

“Bunk beds for the girls, and a Futon for us. Don’t look at me like that! It’s a temporary measure while we get organised. You know what we said the other evening about getting a nice old fashioned iron bedstead . . . I thought that needed some further thought.”

Andrea gave Miranda a little sideways grin, keeping her eye on the road.

“Pas devant les enfants, ma Cherie,” she replied, under her breath.

Miranda smiled. “So your French isn’t completely forgotten then from school days?”
“Oui, mais je ne me souviens que d'un peu.”

There was a bump and a rustle behind them.

“Where are we, Mommy?”

“Why are you talking to Mommy in French, Andy?”

So much for hiding the subject of their conversation! Andy couldn’t see any possibility of adult bedroom games with these bright twins omnipresent at the cottage.

“Hi there, sleepy heads. Because I need to practise it. I’m so glad to see you’ve woken up because it’s not too far now to Provincetown. I know you’ll love it there. It’s such a pretty, funky place, and the beaches go on for miles.”

“Oh I do like to be beside the seaside,” Cassidy unwittingly quoted the old British music hall song, and Miranda immediately recognised it and put it to music. She burst into song.

“Oh I do like to be beside the seaside. I do like to be beside the sea! Oh I do like to walk along the prom, prom, prom where the brass band plays tiddly-om-pom-pom!”

She sang, so happily and with such carefree pleasure that Andy’s heart swelled with love at the sight of it

“What’s a prom-prom-prom?” asked Cassidy.

“Teach us the whole song,” demanded Caroline.

“A prom is slang for what they call a Promenade walk running along by the beach in England. People used to dress up and parade up and down in their best clothes. There were Punch and Judy shows and brass bands.”

“What’s a Punch and Judy show?”

“Well, it’s a traditional puppet show. There’s a little booth, like a small tent, with a counter up high . . . “

Miranda began the very complicated task of talking them through the Punch and Judy tradition. As a child, she had only once actually been taken to the seaside to enjoy such entertainment, but the basic violence of the drama, the thumps and whacks and visits from the policeman she knew only too well. She hadn’t found it funny at all.

Why were these unwelcome memories of her childhood coming back to her so vividly these days, after years of being firmly locked away? She knew Andy was wanting to know more about her mysterious past before she had emerged into the daylight of the fashion world as Miranda Priestly, and she understood it wasn’t just idle curiosity.

She owed it to their love to be honest, to let her see beyond the present glamour back to those terrible years which had actually made her who she was today, and she needed to clear it out before they were together for much longer. Something about the depth and reality of their relationship was physically drawing out the shards of painful memories still inside her.

Andy’s mother had witnessed those shards in the back of her eyes and had actually acknowledged it. And if she was totally honest, she knew that by suddenly claiming this sabbatical year, she was trying to give herself enough time and space to embark on digging up the past. Maybe then, with
Andy’s support, (and possibly she might need Jenny’s professional experienced help as well), she could lay it all finally to rest. What had happened to her, and the pain it had caused, had been a twitching corpse in her life for far too long.

She didn’t want it damaging how she mothered her own children. Nor, heaven forbid, did she want it to cause any damage to her wonderful love affair with Andrea. She knew it was the cause of her separation anxiety, why she demanded Andy keep restating her love, why she had immediately bought her the tethering IPhone, why she genuinely felt so frightened she could lose her love to a traffic accident.

No, this week In Provincetown, she would begin to unpack the past, and share it just as she and Andrea would unpack their new home.

“There was a man called Mr Punch, dressed in funny clothes, and he kept hitting his wife. Then there was a dog with some sausages . . .”

“Whaat!?”

“Yes, and a policeman . . . But you have to see it to understand why it was thought funny.”

“Did you think it was funny, Mom?”

“No, but some people did.”

Caroline repeated her earlier demand. “Teach us the sea-side song, Mom, so we can all sing it.”

“Bless her,” thought Andrea, “She is a good little psychologist and knows how to get her Mom back on the right track.”

Miranda began to sing again, and they all joined in. Then they began to improvise the harmonies to the tune as they drove round the peninsula to Provincetown. When they had almost turned it into a four part canon, they were all laughing.

“There’s no doubt about it, we are definitely a musical family!”

“But not like those children in the Sound of Music!” protested Caroline.

“No, darling, definitely not like the Sound of Music! But . . . here we are! So what do you think?”

The girls jumped out of their seatbelts and left the car as fast as they could run. Miranda and Andrea both stood up and stretched in the sunshine. They looked at the little white house they, (well, Miranda, to be fair) had bought after one short visit six weeks before, and realised once more what a lucky find it had been. The smell of the Atlantic Ocean, the sound of the sea, the sparkle of the water all called to them. The children were already down on the beach, turning cartwheels on the sands.

Andrea took Miranda’s arm and squeezed her round the waist. “Come on, my Queen, Let’s inspect our castle. It will be all right, you know. Everything will be all right.”

She was talking not about the lovely day and the thrill of the new property, but about the subject Miranda had so obliquely alluded to in the car, the Punch and Judy show of her childhood. They both knew it.

“Yes, I think it will. No, I know it will!”
And Miranda let herself be taken forward into their beach cottage, next to the lovely sea, in one of the most gay-friendly communities in America.

She was a happy woman.
A Swimming Lesson

“Where did he say the key was?”

“Under the middle pot of geraniums.”

Andy pushed the large stone pot aside and retrieved a package which revealed five keys and a piece of paper with helpful advice about water stop taps, meters and which day the trash removal truck would come. She and Miranda walked towards the main door, and sorted the keys out as they moved forward.

“Two front, two back and the garage.”

“Shall I?”

“Go on. No point hanging around all day!”

The key turned and they entered into the cottage lobby, all white and shiny and smelling of fresh paint.

“Look, they’ve painted the lobby. They didn’t need to.”

“I think the last people had a dog. When we looked round before I could see paw marks and scratches against the inner door. They maybe wanted to just smarten up the porch for us.”

“I didn’t notice, but it smells so clean and fresh now. Wow, just look at the views!”

The sea was surrounding them, and in front of it, golden sands stretched as far as they could see round the bay. The house faced south west, like the whole of Provincetown, sheltered from the Atlantic behind them, so the sun beamed in through the windows and patio doors.

They walked through into the centre of the main living room and Andrea almost danced round it. For her it truly was a dream come true.

Miranda suddenly had a moment of maternal panic.

She went to the window and called down to the twins on the beach below.

“Bobbsies! The mid-day sun! Come back inside and see the house, and I’ll put on your sunblock.”

The girls waved, and obeyed. They were being so co-operative these days she could hardly believe it. Since Andy had moved in, their almost daily fights seemed to have evaporated, both with her, and with each other. It delighted and intrigued her in equal measure, and she tried to analyse what had turned them from little terrors into such happy, agreeable children.

But when she thought about it, it didn’t take a genius to solve the puzzle. Her own happiness and lack of tension at home directly affected her daughters. They also had begun to mirror Andy’s basic demeanour, always positive, never sulky or self-centred. Andrea also never played manipulative games. There was no emotional blackmail in her DNA. It was like a good fairy had joined their little family and all three Priestlys were becoming better behaved, happier people as a result.

Andy was now unwrapping the chairs and table out of their packing, and already gathering up the cardboard and plastic wrap to dispose of it. Four chairs and a table were all Miranda had ordered,
as she really wanted the cottage to be Andrea’s home, her project to design and furnish as she chose. Tomorrow they could shop for what they decided they needed.

The girls hopped and wriggled, but she managed to smother them with sun cream against the bright light before they did anything else. Then she took them to unpack the car and move their suitcases into the second bedroom. A set of bunk beds were leaned against a wall, but they needed to be constructed. Miranda realised she’d foolishly forgotten even to bring a basic household tool kit.

As she pointed this out, she heard a voice. “Worry not, “smiled Andrea, coming into the room behind them. “I have the answer. My trusty Swiss penknife with ten different tools is in my purse. I thought we might need it I am sure us girls can get these bunks put together in no time.”

She was like a project manager, immediately organizing her work force, and Miranda realised this was another trick she had. Instead of telling the twins just to go off and play, she was involving them, making them realise how needed they were. Literally making their own beds would keep them busy for the next hour or so.

“It’s just like Camp!” exclaimed Cassidy.

“We love the bunk beds. Can we unwrap them and help put them together?” asked Caroline, as if it was a real treat.

“Sure, and see there are the pillows and quilts as well.” We can do it in no time.”

“I’ll unpack the rest of the house and then fix us something to eat,” Miranda said, and set about the task. She started by turning on the water, and running all the taps, not sure how long it had been since the house was occupied. Then she opened the garage and drew the Lexus inside, out of the sun.

Another nice surprise! The garage had been swept clean and tidy, but a set of patio furniture and a swing seat had been left for them, perfect for sitting outside in the evening. She also found beach buckets and spades, old-fashioned equipment for the children which she guessed they were still not too old to play with, and one or two basic gardening tools, including a watering can which would be useful to freshen up the pots in the front yard.

She wiped down the new wooden table and put their prepared picnic on it. It was by now 2pm and high time they all ate. In the bedroom which she thought she and Andrea could use, she unwrapped the futon sofa bed she’d ordered, and realised it would work equally well as a couch in the living room. She went through to the room next door and was surprised at the progress Andrea and the twins had already made putting up the bunk beds.

“I’m impressed!”

“Andy’s got this really cool knife, full of gadgets. There are two sorts of screw driver!” said Cassidy, who was already deep into the technical detail of the self-assembly instruction sheet.

“We found a key to tighten the bolts taped to the bunks as well.”

“It needs three of us, the twins have to hold the ends upright while I screw on the base. We don’t want it collapsing in the night.” Andy straightened up as she spoke. She knew putting bunks together would be tricky but it was hot work, and she could feel the sweat running down the inside of her tee shirt.

Miranda surveyed her team of workers with satisfaction at their happy faces. “Lunch is ready when you are. Also, when someone has a minute, I wondered if you could help me move the futon in the
main room. It will make a comfy couch.”

Andrea loved the way Miranda said “Comfy.” That’s just what she felt, comfy. Who could have imagined they’d use that word between them. Their early working relationship had been about as comfy as a bed of nails for Andrea.

“Can we all watch TV tonight together on it?” asked Caroline.

“We don’t have a TV yet, I’m afraid, and no Internet, either. Knowing how slow the installation can be, it might be Christmas before we’re hooked up.”

“Wow. What will we do then?”

“It will be like Camp,” said Cassidy to her sister. “We can talk, and make a fire, and cook S’mores.” Cassidy had obviously taken to the Camp experience in a big way.

“Let’s break for lunch, kids,” said Andrea. “Twenty minutes more, and we’ll have these beds fixed, but I’m hungry. Let’s move the sofa bed for your Mom, and eat some lunch together.”

Miranda had unwrapped a basic set of crockery, and washed the plates under the sink. One knife, fork and spoon each, and she had opened several boxes of supermarket salad. The refrigerator had been switched off and left ajar, so it was now humming as it cooled down. They all enjoyed the lunch, simple food, shared together in a virtually empty room.

Miranda still couldn’t believe the gods had given her this, this sense of balance, of peace, of sufficiency. Since she had started out on her own in her teens, she had been perpetually chasing something elusive, never still, driving herself beyond the point of exhaustion at times, and always looking for perfection.

Natural talent and a thirst for beauty had propelled her into the fashion industry almost like a comet. One day she had seen an old copy of English Vogue in a hairdressing salon where she worked on Saturdays, and the pages filled her with wonder. She had devoured the magazine, and knew that it showed her the world she wanted to inhabit. She wanted it so badly, she had done everything necessary to achieve it. But when she had that world at her feet, (for was she not indeed the Queen of New York fashion, with a global reputation for the most exquisite taste?) it still never quite satisfied her soul.

Here she was, eating store bought potato salad and frankfurters with her ten year old little girls, and her ridiculously young, and completely artless girlfriend, and she was happier than she had ever been in her life. Somehow the doors inside her heart, like the doors of this cottage, had been flung open. It was definitely weird, but Miranda realised what had happened. She had been allowed to stop running. She was in a state of grace, of peace. She could rest.

And the person who had made it all happen, the catalyst, the person she loved more than life itself, was this droll, bright and unfashionable girl who had waltzed into her life that chilly morning the previous winter. Andrea Sachs had actually challenged her, made fun of her world, played mental hopscotch with her assumptions, dared to show her how to love, and most importantly, be loved. It was almost too much to comprehend.

Andrea, while all this introspection was going on inside Miranda’s head, had remembered the still hot thermos flasks of coffee and hot chocolate, and was serving them up as after lunch drinks. Mugs, they were something else to go on tomorrow’s shopping list. She passed round the drinks using the little plastic cups which came with the flasks.
“Twenty more minutes on the bunk beds, girls and then let’s go for a swim. Will you come with us, my love?”

Miranda, who had never properly swum in the sea, not even at the Hamptons where she and the girls’ father still shared a house, looked across to the three merry and hopeful faces, and thought, “Oh, why not?” Why have a cottage on the shoreline and not go swimming? It was ridiculous.

“Yes, I will. But you must promise not to splash me. I’m not getting my hair wet.”

Andrea and the twins exchanged knowing looks.

“As if!”

It indeed made a lovely end to their day. The twins had pulled Miranda into the water in her very designer-led one piece bathing suit, and after the initial shock, (because it was the North Atlantic after all) she had actually frolicked with them in the waves like a porpoise.

Andrea knew she was nervous in water, and held her firmly by the hand until they were beyond the gentle breakers, and could float together in relatively smooth water only four feet deep. Miranda forgot all about keeping her hair dry, and had the same feeling of bliss she often had in bed with Andrea, pure contentment.

Her brain could switch off and she could live through her senses. She lay back in the water, with Andrea supporting her shoulders, and let herself float free, staring up at the blue sky with its wispy clouds, and circling gulls. She was finding herself again, finding the child she had left behind thirty five years before. She could hear her girls nearby, whooping and diving like young dolphins, and was so glad she had sent them to swimming lessons from an early age.

Andrea had released her shoulders very slowly and lightly, without her noticing, and Miranda caught on that she was now simply floating in this huge blue ocean by herself, and the water was supporting her.

She remembered a phrase from a feminist writer many years before. “Women should aim, not to be tidy, but tidal.” She closed her eyes and just felt the water lapping under her, the sound of the sea. She could float. She was not afraid. Miranda was becoming buoyant, physically, mentally and emotionally. It felt wonderful.

“Come on Mom!” Caro swam up beside her and gently tipped her up.

“Hey!”

“It’s great, isn’t it? You’ve never swum with us before!”

“Haven’t I? Well I carried you into the water when you were babies. You used to kick your little toes up and down and laugh.”

“But not since we can remember. Come and swim with us now. We can teach you the crawl.”

She found her feet and stood on the sandy bottom. She looked up at Andrea watching her and the twins put their arms round her.

“Go on”, urged Andy gently. “Let them teach you. They’ll be gentle and I’ll make sure you’re safe. “

So Miranda let her children show her how to put her head under the water, hold her breath and then
breath out, open her eyes and look at the submerged blue world, turn her head up and breathe in air. She spluttered to the surface, but wanted to try again.

Andy grinned at her.

“It’s all in the breathing. You can learn to crawl like you can learn to dance. By the end of the week we’ll have you doing it beautifully. We just need to get you some goggles.”

“By the end of the week, my hair will be like a dishmop!”

“Maybe, my own lovely dishmop. Don’t worry, tomorrow when we go into town and find all the things we need, a good hairdressing salon can be one of things we look for.”

They stayed in the water for another twenty minutes, and then all walked back up their house. All round the bay, other families were similarly ending the day, gathering up picnic rugs, and parasols. Between them they pulled the patio furniture out onto the large veranda which ran round the front of the beach cottage and dried off in the sun, each wearing a large towel. Miranda insisted everyone reapplied sunblock.

“You’re such a Mom!” said Cassidy, but she didn’t protest, and even fetched their sunhats and sun cream from inside the house without a murmur.

Later that evening, after the children had finally settled to sleep in their bunk beds, having deciding to take turns and swop over every other night (in a very mature and democratic agreement according to Andy), Miranda and Andy sat together on the veranda, swaying gently in the swing.

“It’s been a wonderful day,” sighed Andy. “Such a gentle Sunday. Everything has gone well.”

Miranda looked at her, her eyes like stars, and her hair, indeed like a dish-mop.

“I’m sure it’s down to you. You bring us all good fortune. You’re my fortune cookie.”

“Don’t be silly, darling. I’m the lucky one. Never in my wildest dreams, did I imagine I’d be marrying Miranda, that I’d be here with you now. Look, tonight let’s sleep in the main room. We can put the futon mattress on the floor, and we can then see the moon through the patio doors.”

“The girls are just through their bedroom door and the walls are thin. Supposing they wake in the night and come out.”

“We can wear pyjamas. There’s a sheet as well, and you didn’t forget to order pillows, so we have all we need. The girls know we sleep together. And I promise not to scream.”

“Not even if I tickle you?”

“Well if you do that, I can’t promise anything. So be reasonable and keep your hands to yourself, woman. If you tickle me. I shall definitely send you off to sleep on the beach by yourself.”

Andy’s actions contradicted her words, as she drew Miranda’s face towards her own for a long lingering kiss. Miranda tasted of the sea, and of the summer. It was a divine combination.

So they slept together on the floor of the living room in their new cottage, and the children never disturbed them, not even when Miranda had a sudden need to be made love to in the middle of the night, and her pyjamas somehow migrated several feet from the makeshift bed. In her life, she had slept on many a softer mattress, and many a harder one, but never one which gave her, or Andrea for that matter, sweeter dreams.
They had been in Provincetown for three days and the cottage by the beach was gradually being furnished and decorated, totally from the small local businesses in the seaside town at the end of Cape Cod.

“You take charge, please!” Miranda had told Andrea early on the Monday morning. “My decision making brain is on vacation, and I know I will love everything you choose. You have such exquisite taste.”

They both burst into laughter at this palpably false compliment, for Andy knew, whatever else she was good at, “exquisite taste” was not one of her gifts.

She raised her eyebrows up behind the chestnut bangs which swept down over her forehead and put a hand up to mockingly check the temperature on Miranda’s forehead, as they sat together in the rising sun on the swinging hammock.

“I hope you’re not running a fever, darling.”

“No, I’m not. In fact I am a little serious about this. I want you to be the one in charge of this property. Take the girls into town and buy what you think we need. I’ll be content with whatever you all choose. You can use one of my credit cards.”

“Oh no, with regard to funds, I still have thousands in my account which you gave me last week. I’ll use that. But what will you do, here on your own? Will you be OK?”

“Oh of course. Please don’t fret. I just need some solitude. I want to have a serious talk to myself for a while. I may take a walk.”

Andrea looked at her lover, already more relaxed and dressed down than she’d ever seen her in New York. Miranda wore light denim shorts and a red and white striped cotton top, with sandals on her feet. Her finger and toe nails were still painted a jaunty scarlet, but her ivory skin was already taking on a slight summer blush, and Andy couldn’t detect any make-up to speak of.

She drew Miranda’s face towards her for a kiss. “Well if you go down to the beach on your own, be sure to wear sun screen and a hat, won’t you?” She loved to pretend to mother Miranda, and Miranda enjoyed letting her.

So Andrea and the twins had taken the car down into the town centre, and had a great time. They took breakfast at a local cafe, and wrote a rough shopping list on one of the napkins while enjoying all the delights of New England cinnamon buns and milkshakes. Then they went from store to store, choosing towels and bedding, soft furnishings, a rug, cushions, and some more basic mugs, glasses and cooking equipment, including a little barbecue stove which would work perfectly down on the beach.

Andrea also picked up a water-jug to fit in the fridge, two fly-screens so they could leave both the front and back doors open, to let the air flow through, and a small CD player and some discs so they could have music even if they had no TV or internet. She was pleased to be able to liberate the twins from their tablets and phones, but wanted to keep them amused, so in a second hand shop she
also found a couple of classic board games, including Monopoly, and Cluedo, and a wooden box of chess and chequers pieces. Finally she scooped up a watercolour set of paints, brushes, and a large pad of watercolour paper. There would be plenty of time for them all to get creative!

She said the twins should each pick out one piece of artwork, poster or a wall-hanging. Cassidy came back with a poster of white horses galloping along the water’s edge, turning into the waves themselves as they galloped. It was perfect for any horse-mad ten year old’s bedroom. Caroline chose a rather more sophisticated picture in blues and greys of a series of shore birds perched on a fence. It was very calm and still, and would work well over the mantelpiece in the living room.

“Well done, Bobbsies! Now we need to just buy a hammer and some nails to hang them up “

They continued shopping, this time for food, and as they struggled out of the local supermarket, with a trolley load of provisions, Caroline wondered, “What do you suppose Mom has been up to this morning? Why did she want to be alone?”

“Grown-ups do need thinking time darling. She’s been so very busy all summer, she just needs some peace and quiet now to help her unwind. I’m sure she’ll come swimming with us again this afternoon. You’ll see.”

They packed all their purchases in the car, and Andrea took them home before the frozen foods began to melt. Large items still needed to be purchased, like a bed, like some wardrobes, like a bookcase and some lamps, but she could do that later. She did wonder herself what Miranda had been doing, and hoped she was all right.

Miranda had in fact combed some conditioning lotion through her dishmop like hair, put on sufficient sunblock and shades to deter the most persistent rays, and a straw hat, and taken herself out for a two hour walk all round the point and along the ocean side of the Cape.

She knew she needed to do some psychological preparation before she reached back into her own youth and confronted the memories of what had happened to her. Those events, and the subsequent emotions which had filled her with terror and heart wrenching sorrow at such an early age, had simply been too much to deal with. So she had buried them, and even half-forgotten the worst of it.

As she walked far along the beach, she realised she had buried her childhood trauma down as deep as these sands, but the tides of time now refused to leave them buried. The rippling waves were just kissing the shore. It was another lovely morning, and she had walked far enough to be quite alone on the golden sands.

She slipped her feet out of her sandals and went down to the water’s edge, paddling along and looking for pretty coloured pebbles just below the tideline. She bent down to pick one up, and held it in her hand to examine its colours.

Suddenly, completely out of the blue, Miranda felt tears running down her cheeks and she heard a heart-wrenching sob from somewhere. It was fully two seconds before she realised it came from her own chest, and worse, she was unable to stop it, or those which followed it. Within a few moments she was weeping so profoundly she could hardly see in front of her, so she retreated from the water’s edge, and went back up to where the sand was powdery dry. She sat down hard on the ground, and cried herself out, still holding the little blue pebble in the palm of her left hand.

If Andy had been with her, she knew she would have embraced and rocked her until the sobbing stopped. But Andy would surely have been so upset by the depth of her grieving, she was glad to have spared her that. She knew self-recrimination, or shame at her weeping was pointless. The weeping was a natural response. She had to let it just flow, and she sensed she’d feel much better.
by not fighting it.

No-one was within three hundred yards of her, no-one could hear her, so only the wheeling seabirds above were likely to catch the sound of her crying. Miranda sobbed, just some of the tears she’d never been allowed to cry before, and words came through from her brain, words she had not spoken in forty six years,

“Oh, oh, Mummy, my Mummy, my Mummy . . . . “, she cried it aloud, and the articulation of it both shocked her, and also somehow liberated the terrible tightness in her chest. Her sobs began to come under control, and her tears dried enough for her to feel in her pocket for a paper hankie and blow her nose. She simply sat where she was, alone on the beach, holding her pebble, and slowly but surely her spirit regained its poise, and her breathing steadied.

Her sensible, controlling self wanted to regain the upper hand, but her inner self, having escaped from its prison through her tears, refused to hand over the decision making entirely. The answer was to sit still for a little while longer, which she did, and then she went down to the seashore and washed her face with some scoops of cold water. Her eyes eventually stopped stinging.

She put her pebble in her shorts pocket, and rinsed her face again, until she was nearly back to normal. For one insane moment she was tempted to hurl herself about like the twins, and even turn a cartwheel. She remembered how good she’d been at handstands in the school playground when she was almost their age, and then another sharp shard of memory cut through the years. That was how a teacher had seen her bruises, the welts across her back. That was the beginning of how she’d finally been rescued.

Miranda decided not to turn a cartwheel, but to walk the mile or two back to the cottage, and ask Andy for her mother’s phone number. There was only one person in the world who she knew would be able to help her through this, and who wouldn’t be shocked by her secrets. Miranda wanted to talk to Jenny Sachs before she did anything else.

When she finally walked through the newly erected fly-screen curtain on the back door of the cottage, she could see the results of all the girls’ shopping expedition. The minimalist look had certainly gone, but the general effect was still uncluttered and Shaker simple. The rug and cushions were bright and homely.

“Mom!”

The twins bounced round her, and both talked at once. Her eyes were still red, she knew, but she’d hidden them behind her sunglasses, and she could give a very good impression of someone without a care in the world.

Andy was washing lettuce, and gave her a fond smile.

“We bought some ground beef at the local butcher’s, and I’m going to make my speciality burgers. Go and see what the girls have bought, while I finish up here.”

“Where did you go Mom? What did you do?”

“Oh, I had a lovely walk. I found this pebble.”

Miranda produced her little treasure. It looked like an ordinary pebble to Cassidy and Caroline, but they were very tactful.

“Cool, Mom.” “Let’s put it on the mantelpiece.”
“Come and see what we’ve bought. And can you play Chess? Andy found a set in an old junk shop and she says she’ll teach us.”

Miranda had let herself be swept up and taken to admire all the new treasures. Eventually she escaped to the bathroom and successfully repaired the damage to her eyes, complexion and hair after her morning’s beach walk, and she could sit and enjoy lunch with the rest of her family.

In the afternoon, Andy and the girls, after a sensible period of siesta, (for no-one should swim straight after a meal said Miranda,) took her off swimming again, and she actually managed a few strokes of a creditable front crawl before forgetting to breathe in the right place and swallowing a good amount of salt water. But she didn’t drown, and they all sat on the beach afterwards.

As if on cue, Cassidy asked, “When you were at school, Mom, why didn’t they teach you the crawl first? You can kind of do the breast stroke which is much harder, but you never learned the Crawl?”

Miranda was forced to go back to those days in the late Fifties and early 1960s yet again. She was determined not to burst into tears once more, especially in front of her children.

“You have to remember it was much colder in England where I was brought up, and the pools weren’t heated. We had swimming lessons only in 7th grade, and they taught you by tying a rope round your middle and pulling you along in an outdoor Lido. They taught the breast stroke to begin with, I’m not sure why. Some girls were good at swimming but that’s because their parents could pay for them to have private lessons. I wasn’t lucky like that. But heh, one thing I do remember was being able to do cartwheels. I bet I could do one of those again.”

The twins jumped to their feet.

“Bet you can’t!”

Miranda decided to show them, and still in her salty swimsuit, took a run and then did a series of quite beautiful cartwheels along the sands. She sat down firmly at the end though and shook her head.

“Oh that’s made me dizzy”.

Andy and the girls clapped in admiration, and the twins then tried to emulate their impressive mother.

Miranda turned to Andrea, who put out a hand to help her up.

“That surprised even me! But I’d forgotten one crucial alteration between me at ten years old and me at forty-nine!”

“What?”

“The existence of breasts!” I’m now size 36C, which kind of makes a difference to weight distribution and body mass!

“I adore your breasts.”

Andrea put her arms round Miranda and fondled said breasts. The girls were cavorting away down the beach. Miranda leaned back against Andrea’s chest.

“I adore yours too. I’m glad above all things that we’re two grown women, that we’re mature and
yet can still play.”

“Did you have a nice walk this morning? I was concerned.”

“I did have a nice walk. I also had a bit of a cry. No, don’t worry darling, it was all good. I do need you to give me your Mom’s cell phone number though, please. I’d like to talk to her, and it would be wonderful if we could get her over here for a few days. Do you think there’s any chance?”

“Well, let’s ask her. We will need to furnish the third bedroom anyway for the girls’ Dad when he comes next Sunday. I’m on the case. Oh, and by the way, my Goddess, I have found a lovely double bed with brass knobs on, down in the town. I want you to see it, but I think it has definite possibilities.”

“Possibilities?”

“Hmm, definite possibilities.”

“You are a wicked woman. Could you marry me, by any chance?”

“Possibly. If you ever get round to buying me a ring.”

“Let’s go to town now then, and get one, and the bed.”

“We can’t leave the girls unsupervised.”

“Then let’s take them with us. We’re all family.”

So they did.

Later that night, while Andrea sat admiring her diamond engagement ring in the moonlight, Miranda called Jenny for a long chat, and Andy’s mother seemed to understand just how urgently her soon-to-be-daughter-in-law needed her wisdom and experience of dealing with child abuse. She promised to look up flights from Cincinnati to Boston, and on to Providence or Provincetown.

“We’re off the internet,” explained Miranda, “So we can’t do it from this end. But I could drive to Boston to meet you if necessary.”

“I’ll get back to you first thing tomorrow,” Jenny reassured her. “Don’t worry. I’ll be there somehow, I promise. It will be lovely to see you all again anyway.”

Miranda handed the phone back to Andy to let her catch up with the news from her home, and spend time talking to her mother.

“I’ve got an engagement ring!” Miranda heard her say. “Yes, it’s perfect, not from Tiffany’s No. From Taggert’s jewellery store on Main Street, Provincetown. I wanted to get Miranda one as well, but she says it can wait. I’m buying her one as soon as I sell my next article. “What’s it going to be about?” How about, “Gay friendly things to do in Provincetown”? “Yes, Mom, I’m kidding. (Well sort of)”

All around them the sea murmured, in and out, louder with the incoming tide, softer as the tide receded. It fascinated the twins.

“Will you tell us more about how tides work, Andy?” they’d asked the following evening.
Andrea had racked her brains and wished she could look it up on Google. She remembered the mini-planetarium she had made them using a set of ping-pong balls, and went over to the fruit bowl.

“Look, your Mom is the Sun, naturally! Here Miranda darling, will you sit here in the middle of the room? Cass you’re the earth, holding this apple. Now circle your mother turning the apple. Each complete circuit takes a year and each turn of the apple takes a day.”

Cass started slowly walking round and turned the apple fast.

“So I have to turn it 365 times to make a complete year?”

“Yes, Now, for the moon. Caroline. You’re the Moon. This is the complicated bit. It takes you a month to go round the Earth completely. And you and the moon are going together round the Sun over the space of a year. “

“Does the moon swivel round as well?”

“No. That’s why we see the same picture on the moon all the time, like a face. That’s why people call it the man in the moon.”

So Caroline started to go round Cassidy, while Cassidy went round Miranda.

“It’s very complicated, but I can see that sometimes the moon is between the earth and the sun, and sometimes it’s the other side of the earth.”

“Who are you, Andy?”

“I’m God, of course.”

“Ha, ha, ha!” they all giggled.

Then Caroline stopped being the Moon, and asked firmly, “But what has this got to do with the tides coming in and out twice a day, and why is it different in different places?”

Andrea stopped being God, and looked very puzzled.

“You know? I’ve really no idea! But it definitely has something to do with the pull of the moon’s gravity. “

“If we had Mr Google, he’d tell us!”

“Yes, well, we don’t. But see if you can work it out for yourself. It’s a good puzzle.”

Andrea retrieved the fruit and put them back in the bowl. Cassidy went away with a pencil and a piece of paper to tackle the problem, (And it was the start of an interest in astronomy which was to lead her fifteen years later to a PhD in Astro-physics, and an internship in 2019 on the NASA Mars exploration project!)

“Do you know why the tides come in and out?” asked Andrea of Miranda, as they cuddled up in their new high bed that evening.

“Not really, but Cass will have worked out the answer by morning, don’t worry.”

“Are you OK, darling?”
“Not really, but I will be. I’ve been talking some more to your Mom and she understands. Do you genuinely like your new ring? It hardly cost anything, compared to what I wanted to spend on you.”

“Yes I do, but please don’t change the subject. When Mom gets here tomorrow evening, will you finally tell me what has been troubling you?”

“Yes, while she’s here, I’ll tell you everything, I promise. Do you like our new bedstead with those useful brass bars?”

“I give in, “sighed Andy. “Let’s talk about what you want to. I can then write an article called, “Gay friendly things to do with a brass bedstead.” Ow! Stop that! No tickling . . .

“I mean it, Miranda!”

“Sshh . . . Tais-toi, ma chérie. “

“. . .!“

And so ended another gay friendly day in Provincetown.
Kissing of Feet

Chapter Summary

Miranda remembers more and more.

“It’s so cool that your Mom can come up here. Has she ever seen the sea before? Where is Ohio? Is in on the west coast?” asked Caroline.

Andy realised then that the twins’ geographical awareness of their own country was more than a little patchy. They’d been off to Hawaii with their father before now, but the mid-western states remained something of a mystery. She would have to take them to her family home sooner rather than later.

“Heck no, darling. Ohio is in the middle of the Midwest, east of the Rockies. We used to take vacations in Colorado when I was your age. My parents liked to ski in the mountains there, but when I first went to the sea, it was down in Florida. I loved the sea from early on. When we go back to the townhouse, I’ll show you on the atlas and we can do a quiz about the Midwest states. We’ll all have to go to Cincinnati before too long”

“How about Thanksgiving?” asked Cassidy, and Andrea actually thought that might be a really viable plan. The Sachs family all gathered for Thanksgiving, some from far-flung places like Japan, so she could introduce her new family to everyone.

It was Wednesday evening, and Jenny Sachs had successfully booked flights from Cincinnati through to Providence via Boston. She’d been lucky because it was the busiest week for vacationers for the whole summer, so the small Provincetown airport had had no spaces on flights in or out.

Miranda had been prepared to drive all the way to Boston, she was so motivated to see her new friend, but then Providence airport provided a much nearer solution, so she’d driven off there to collect Andy’s Mom from the evening flight. They were due back by 8pm, in time for a late dinner, and Andy and the twins had finalised the decorating of all three bedrooms, leaving the futon sofa in the living area as an extra guest bed when needed.

The day had been spent in and out of the house, down on the beach, in the water. Miranda, tackling her swimming lessons with typical energy, could now do a decent front crawl for at least ten strokes without capsizing, and had abandoned any hope of keeping an immaculate coiffure for the rest of the week.

“You look very good in goggles,” laughed Andrea. “My hair is a real pain in the water. I definitely think I’ll go and get it all chopped off.”

She knew exactly what reaction that would create. Miranda actually growled.

“If you threaten that again, I will lock you in a tower like Rapunzel and send your food up in a basket.”

Andy was happy to see her Beloved back on track with a lighter heart. There had been no more
tears all day, and Miranda had dedicated herself to just having fun. They had played a fourhanded version of softball on the beach, with a tennis racket found in the garage. The Priestly females were genuinely in awe at the speed at which Andy could pitch the ball, even though it was only an old tennis ball.

“Wow, if we bought a proper ball and bat, you could coach us.”

“Eye on the ball, kids, eye on the ball. That’s rule number one.”

Andrea had encouraged them to move, to run and turn, catch and run. Then they’d had races. Miranda showed just how fast she could sprint, when challenged. The girls had never seen their mother so physical and were entranced. Andrea had seen her do the jive in a New York bar, so knew how frisky she could be, but she still loved to watch her move, free from those exasperating high heels she insisted on wearing most of the time.

As they sat on a rug on the sands after all this sporty activity, she reached down and picked up Miranda’s bare left foot, caressed it, gently removed the grains of sand, and kissed each of her toes.

“Hey! That tickles.”

“About time you had a taste of your own medicine, darling. You have such pretty feet. You should let them out to play more often.”

“You are silly, Andy,” giggled Caroline. “Kissing Mommy’s toes. It’s like ‘This little piggy goes to market.’”

“But I am silly, and your Mommy has the most beautiful feet in the world. She’s also delightfully ticklish, and I like to make her laugh.”

Miranda lay back and closed her eyes. She had a sudden stabbing flashback of her mother kissing her toes when she was hardly more than a baby. Out of the blue, she could see her mother’s face, and even hear her voice. It was weird, and definitely scary. “Don’t you cry!” she silently told herself. “Don’t you dare cry and spoil their afternoon.”

Andy had stopped kissing and tickling, but just held her foot fondly. Miranda settled, her eyes still shut against the sunshine, and the threat of tears faded. The twins ran back onto the sands to play with the tennis ball again, and the women were able to talk about more serious issues.

“Are you sure you’ll be all right driving down to Providence? I can go and get Mom, no bother.”

“Yes, I’m fine. I’d like to go and get her, if you don’t mind. I’d appreciate the chance to talk to her, without the girls being present. I need to get stuff off my chest and I’m not sure how to go about it, even to you my love. I have never, ever told anyone, not even my husbands, about my early childhood. I don’t honestly know how to do it, or even if I can. Do you understand?”

“Oh my God, darling. What have I done to deserve such a wonderful gift as you? It scares me sometimes to think how much I love you, and how I might so nearly not even have invited you back for that crazy job as my assistant. Emily might not have caught up with you, you could be now working across New York for another company! We might never have had the chance to be
together.”

“We would have, somehow. It is in our stars, not that I believe in astrology!”

“When is your birthday? What is your star sign?”

“The end of September. I’m a Libra.”

“There you see, everyone knows their star sign, funny isn’t it?”

“What’s yours then?”


“And the twins?”

“Gemini. Very appropriate. Gosh it was so hot when they were born in June. I thought I’d die in the heat.”

“Of course, I remember organising their birthday party!”

“You of course you did beautifully. Come here girl, and let me kiss you, before I go in for a shower. At least if I’m meeting your mother at Arrivals she won’t have to look for a grubby sand urchin.”

So Miranda had showered, washed and styled her hair, put on a pretty linen dress of the sort she liked for the summer and had slipped into not too ridiculously high heels. She looked beautiful and Andrea kissed her fondly. Jenny had called them from Boston and her flight was on time. Miranda drew the car out of the garage, and the twins and Andy waved her off.

“Come on, sweeties, let’s clean the house of all the sand we’ve tracked in, and then we’ll have time to do some painting. How does that sound?”

Two hours later, the twins had settled at the table to practise their art work with the paints and paper Andy had bought them. Cassidy was drawing and painting horses, trying to copy the ones on her print, while Caroline was doing a still life of a jug of geraniums from the front yard, and her mother’s little pebble.

“It looked ordinary when I first saw it. But see how it sparkles in the light.”

“That’s true about a lot of things, Caro. There are hidden treasures everywhere. Your picture is coming on fine. I like the shading down one side of the jug. Your Mom will love it.”

Andy went back to preparing supper, a mushroom risotto she knew her Mom would appreciate, when her phone went. It was just past eight and she saw her mother was making the call.

“Hi Mom, did Miranda find you OK? Is everything all right.”

“Everything’s fine, love. Don’t worry. Only we may be a bit later than Miranda told you, as I thought it would be a good idea if we stopped for a bite to eat en route. So that’s what we’re doing. I’m so sorry if you’ve already cooked supper. Miranda says would you mind apologising to the twins and persuading them to go onto bed. Tell them I look forward to seeing them in the morning.”

Andrea knew immediately that something wasn’t right.
“Can I have a word with Miranda?”

“Not right now. She’s just gone to the loo. But trust me, sweetheart. I’m here, and I’m looking after her. We’ll be home later. It’s just that she’d rather not let the girls see her upset.”

“Oh my God, are you sure she’s OK? I wish I was there!”

“The most important thing is that you’re home to look after the girls. Don’t worry! Miranda’s fine. She’s so strong and brave. She’s dealing with some really painful stuff right now. I’ll call you again when we’re thirty minutes from your place. I can’t wait to see it.”

Andrea could hear that her Mom was using similar deflection techniques as Miranda had the night before, but there was no point arguing. Her mother, Jenny, sounded very much in charge, and essentially was one of the kindest, most stable people in the world. Miranda would be OK in her care.

“It’s a bit ironic,” she thought, as she put down her phone. “There I was worrying about the two of them ending up in a cat fight, and they’re sharing stuff Miranda has been reluctant even to share with me.”

“Slight change of plan, kiddoes,” she said in her most positive voice, while not feeling that way at all.

“My Mom eats like a horse, though you wouldn’t think it, but she virtually lives on oats so has to keep topping up. She and Mommy are stopping off at a restaurant for supper on the way, so they’ve asked me to let you go on to bed, and they’ll see you first thing in the morning.”

Caroline and Cassidy looked as if they were going to argue and defend their right to stay up till 10pm at least, but their little faces were showing signs of real tiredness after a day mainly spent playing ball on the sands and swimming, and they reluctantly shrugged their shoulders and nodded.

“Can we finish the pictures first?”

“Of course! And how about I make you some hot chocolate with mini marshmallows as a bedtime treat, while you do that?”

In the event, she had the art session finished and paints put away within twenty minutes, and the girls went to shower and change into their pyjamas without any further worries. At least their antennae hadn’t picked up that anything untoward had happened with their Mom.

They sat on the outside veranda with her and drank their hot chocolates, then drifted off to bed via the bathroom to clean their teeth. Cassidy’s painting was still a work in progress, but Caroline’s was finished and propped up on the mantelpiece. Andrea hadn’t fibbed about how good it was. The girl could really draw and had a great sense of colour and tone.

By 9pm the house was silent, and Andy sat on the swing by herself, kicking it gently back and forth in the soft deepening shadows. Above her the first stars had emerged and the lights from the curve of the little town were reflected in the rippling seas beneath. The sound of the waves soothed her troubled heart.

She felt so worried about Miranda. She knew that her best efforts might not be enough to heal such a troubled, sensitive spirit, one that had been bridled so tightly for so long. All their earlier tussles, Miranda’s spikes of irrational fury and temper when she’d first started working for her, what one
might have called tantrums if she wasn’t the wonderful, perfectionist editor-in-chief, her deep silences, her need to be adored, these all made perfect sense.

But while she could give unlimited adoration and total security, Andrea knew she was relatively young, and inexperienced in the field of post-traumatic stress, which is what she guessed Miranda must be going through. Yes, her lover had been right to call in Jenny, an older woman, worldly wiser and professionally experienced in dealing with childhood trauma. And Miranda had promised to tell Andrea her whole story while Jenny was with them. She’d learn the worst of it soon.

Just before 10pm she heard the car pull up at the front, and noticed immediately that her Mom was driving. They hadn’t phoned ahead. Two bad signs. She ran to the passenger door and virtually pulled Miranda out.

“My love!”

Miranda stepped out of the car, and put her arms round Andy. She hugged her very, very tightly. Andy could feel her cheeks were wet. She’d obviously been crying for quite a while.

“What . . . ?” Andrea looked across to her mother, who was getting up from the driver’s seat on the other side.

“Sshh, she’s absolutely fine. Let’s go inside. I just thought it was better if I drove us the rest of the way home. “

Andrea led them both inside. In the lamplight she could see more of Miranda, to assess just how upset she was. She looked very tired, and almost emptied. Her eyes were red. She hadn’t spoken yet, but her face was somehow more peaceful than it had been before. Even when she had previously been laughing, loving, teasing, there had always been a slight hint of pain in her eyes, and that did not seem to be quite there as much anymore.

“We had a long talk on the way home. Miranda wants to tell you some of the story now, and then you’ll understand. What a beautiful little house this is. Why don’t you take her out onto your veranda, while I make us all a nice hot cup of tea? I could certainly do with one, after two flights, and getting through Boston airport.”

Miranda and Andrea did exactly as she suggested and went out onto the veranda. The twins’ room was at the other side of the house, so there was less chance of them being woken by the conversation.

“My darling, I’ve been worried about you.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I’ve been a coward before, not telling you. I just knew that if I started, then I might not be able to stop crying about it all. I knew I’d lose control, and you know what a control freak I am.”

“Bits have been seeping out though, haven’t they? I know you had a horrendous childhood. Can you tell me about it now?”

“I can make a start. There were so many things, so much I can hardly remember now. I started to tell your Mom and then I just fell to pieces. That’s why we stopped. She let me do it in my own way. I’d like her to hear the rest as well. Just give me some tea and I’ll be OK.”

At that point Jenny came out into the warm night, with three mugs of tea she’d brewed, and passed two of them over. She sat opposite them in one of the sea-grass patio chairs, and stretched her legs...
appreciatively.

“Isn’t this a special place? I totally understand why you bought it, Miri. It’s gorgeous!”

“Miri? What’s this Miri about?” demanded Andrea, smiling. “Even I haven’t ventured into the realms of pet names for my very own goddess.”

Jenny and Miranda exchanged a look.

“Miri was what I was called as a child,” explained Miranda. “I hadn’t been called it in so long, but then it came back suddenly into my head. I think your Mom knows me better as Miri, than she does as Miranda.”

“Well, can I join the Miri club? It is about time, don’t you think?”

“Of course, my darling girl.”

And Miranda began to tell the story of her childhood.
Miranda's childhood

Chapter Summary

Andy hears about what made Miranda the woman she is.

“The first part of what I can tell you comes from my grandmother, who I went to see just before she died in 1970.

“My mother’s name was Helen McCarthy, and was one of about eight children. Her father’s family had originally come from Cork, and had migrated slowly across England until just before the war, when they settled in East London. My mother was born in 1939, but hardly knew her father who had joined up, and was captured in the Dunkirk evacuation a year later.

“So my grandmother was left with eight kids, seven boys and my mother, the only girl, and no husband. Then in the Blitz they were bombed out and most of the children were evacuated over to somewhere in the East of England, far away from London, but to different families.

“My grandmother struggled to make a living in a munitions factory. When my mother Helen and her younger brothers re-joined her, they hardly recognised each other. When my grandfather was eventually released from a prison camp, he never worked again, but just sat and drank. So theirs was what we’d call today a pretty dysfunctional family.

“The older brothers, including a set of twins apparently, all immigrated to Australia in the early Fifties. In 1954, my mother, Helen, who was then fifteen, left school and managed to get a job as a maid in a private boarding school on the outskirts of London. She had long red curly hair apparently and was small for her age, partly due to the shortage of food in the war. “

Miranda paused, and sipped her tea. Her voice sounded calm, but Andy guessed the story would begin to get worse from now on.

“My mother was “persuaded”, well, maybe her head was turned, or maybe she was just forced up against a wall, to have sex with one of the teachers in the school. Inevitably she became pregnant. The father, my father it seems, was a Jewish music teacher, a Polish refugee, but of course he was married with children, and there was no way he would take on a young pregnant girlfriend. He denied it all, and my mother was sacked in disgrace.

“She had to go home to the East End of London terraced house where her mother, father and younger brothers lived, but they didn’t want the disgrace of an illegitimate child in the family, and there was no money to spare anyway.

“They married my mother off to an older man in another borough, a widower whose wife had died leaving three or four older children, so when I turned up, early in 1955, it was into that household. My mother was a virtual slave to this man, who was then in his fifties, and he expected her to cook and clean, care for the whole family. You’ve got to remember she was only sixteen.

“What she hadn’t known, and what my grandmother claimed she’d never known either, was that he was a notorious wife beater and child abuser. His first wife had actually died from a broken neck where he’d knocked her down and kicked her down the stairs. That was the story in the street
anyway, though the police hadn’t been able to prove anything. He could spin a good tale, that man.

“When I was very small, my mother was able to protect me, but I remember I was never supposed to cry, and I used to spend a lot of time hiding under the kitchen table. When he came home, he would shout and roar and thump anyone in sight. His eldest son was about fifteen, and took the brunt of it, but then he began to fight back, and became almost as violent as his father.

“Anyway, “here Miranda paused, and drank more of her tea. “Are you ready for this, my love, because it doesn’t get any better I’m afraid?”

“Of course, darling. You can’t stop now.”

“Your Mom’s heard some of it in the car coming home. I keep getting more and more vivid flashbacks.

“Anyway,” Miranda began again, “My poor little mother was beaten black and blue, and he just used her for sex whenever he wanted. I remember once she carried me back across London to try and move home with my grandmother, but they told her she’d made her bed and had to lie on it, so we left again and returned to this house of horrors.

“I was three. I could already dress and look after myself, and I tried just to keep out of his way as much as I could. I didn’t realise it at the time, but of course soon my mother was pregnant again, this time with twins. She must have been completely worn out. Twins obviously ran in her family, because she had those older twin brothers.

“So when I was three, nearly four, my mother gave birth to twins. I remember it was winter. The midwife came and there was even more screaming and noise which went on all night. By the end of the next day there were two tiny babies in a box next to my mother’s bed.

“Nobody noticed me so I was left on my own under the kitchen table. Nobody told me what had happened, and I was far too frightened to ask the older children, and certainly not the Man, where my mother was. Of course, I realised much later she’d lost so much blood, they took her into hospital, with the babies.

“Eventually I crept out from under the table, because I needed the toilet, which was down the end of the yard. I was also very hungry. My step brothers caught me taking a slice of bread off the table, and began to tease me and call me names. I started to cry.

“Then my stepfather came in and they fled.

“What you crying for? I’ll give you something to cry about,” he shouted, and he put his hand up and hit me so hard I was thrown from one end of the kitchen to the other. I think he must have actually knocked me out for a while. When I came round I had a huge bump on my forehead, and I remember the headache lasted for a whole week.

“I ran out of the house, and into next door, where the woman had been kind to me before. I don’t remember much after that, except being convinced that my mother and the babies were dead and I would never see them again. Someone must have fed me, and I must have managed somehow. Without my mother being there, no one cleaned the house or washed any clothes. It was a complete slum.

“But then, one wonderful day, my mother walked back in through the door. She was white as a sheet, and she’d been crying, but she was back. I remember thinking she was an angel come back from heaven. She gathered me up and kissed me, and put cream on my big bruise. She told me my
baby brothers had had to stay in hospital because they’d been born early and weren’t strong enough to leave hospital.

“What I didn’t realise was that the Man had actually kicked her so hard in the stomach when she was barely eight months pregnant, that she’d given birth too early, at 35 weeks. Again I only found this out, much later, that the hospital social worker had reported on all her bruises, and recommended that the infants be put up for adoption.

“That’s why my mother had been crying. They’d taken her babies away and she never saw them again. The authorities would have taken me into care as well if they’d known about me, but no-one had noticed me, or thought to mention me, hiding under the table."

“You poor darling, and your poor mother! So what happened next?” Despite herself, Andrea couldn’t help be drawn into the sheer dramatic misery of the story.

“We struggled on for a few more months. My mother kept being sick, and she was obviously very anaemic. I remember her skin being as white as snow, and she had great dark circles under her eyes. Then one day, my step father took his belt to her again and she fell against the table. I tried to protect her and rushed to put my arms round her, but his belt caught me and he whipped my arm open with his buckle. I do actually still have the scar if you look carefully, just above my elbow.

“Well, that did it finally for my Mum. She grabbed our coats, because it was the middle of winter, - I remember it was sleeting, - and she took me by the hand and we left.

“I’d no idea where we were going, maybe back to try my grandmother once again, but we caught a bus until we were in the middle of London in a really busy street. It might have been Oxford Street, thinking about it, because all the Christmas lights were up and twinkling. It was magical after the dreary street where we lived.

“We’re going somewhere really nice, Miri,” said my mother. “I know a lovely shop where they have toys and you can look at them.”

“But she was still in pain from her beating. I was hurting from the cut on my arm. I stood with her at the crossing, and then she said, “Come on quick, let’s get over the street,” and she pulled me forward, then, then, “ and here Miranda faltered in her long narrative.

Her eyes filled with tears and she seemed unable to continue. Jenny leaned forward and took her hand. Andrea held her by the shoulders and gently kissed her face.

“It’s all right. You don’t have to go on, if you don’t want to.”

Miranda took a deep breath and steadied herself. “No, I have to finish. It’s better out.

“My mum took me halfway across the street, in the middle of the traffic, then she suddenly collapsed, fainted, but she fell forward right in front of a taxi cab. There was a screech of tyres, but he obviously couldn’t stop in time. The cab ran over her, and she died. My poor little Mum, who had hardly known a day’s happiness in her life, died in front of me in that busy London Street. She was twenty -one years old, and I was four, nearly five.”

“Oh!” Andrea was so shocked. All she could do was hold on to Miranda even more tightly. “So what happened?”

“I remember clinging to her body, trying to make her wake up. They had to lift me away screaming in the end, and I was taken to hospital to be checked over. I think they saw my cut and bruises, but thought they were from the accident, though the taxi hadn’t harmed me. You know, for ages
afterwards I wished it had. I wished I’d died and gone to heaven with Mummy. She was the only person in the world who had ever loved me.”

“And then?”

“Well, they found our address from my mother’s family allowance book inside her purse, and they sent someone round to tell my stepfather what had happened. I don’t think he wanted me back. He had no wish to keep me, his dead wife’s little bastard, but he was my legal guardian, and he could at least claim 17/6 (don’t ask. It’s complicated.) cash support from the government for me.

“He turned up at the hospital the next day, and told me to follow him. After that he never spoke to me all the way back to the house. I suppose there was some sort of autopsy, and a funeral, but I never was told anything. I cried a lot, but no-one comforted me, and in the end I just stopped crying. I virtually stopped speaking at home at all.

“Christmas came and went, but there were no presents of course. In the January, when I turned five, I started school. School was wonderful. It was warm and you got a dinner. There were books and pictures and people were kind. I loved school, and stayed there as late as I could, but home was hell.”

Andrea let Miranda slump against her. It was a long, such a very sad story, and it didn’t seem to get any better. Never in her wildest imagination would she have thought her elegant, articulate, cultured lover had endured such a miserable start in life.

Jenny said quietly, still holding Miranda’s hand, “Yes, it must have been hell, but you survived.”

“Yes, I survived. Within two months my stepfather had a new woman. I can’t think why, but he must have had some appeal because he was never short of girl-friends. They were all much younger than him, like my mother, and he liked to shout and dominate them. There was a pattern. You could tell when he went courting, because he actually washed and put grease in his hair. Then they’d eventually move in and start to do a bit of housekeeping, if you can call it that. Then he’d come home from the pub one night and thump them, they’d cry and he’d thump them again.”

“And did he hit you?”

“Oh yes, all the time. I reminded him of my mother you see, the one who had escaped him by falling under a taxi. I just avoided him whenever possible. He worked on the docks, so he was out a lot of the time. I used to sneak home after school and grab food when I could.

“Do you know I don’t remember my bed sheets ever being changed, not in all my childhood? When they fell to pieces eventually, I just slept under a blanket. If I went round to friends’ houses to play I couldn’t get over how wonderfully comfortable they were, and how their parents talked nicely to each other.

“My step brothers left home, and there was just one elder step sister and me in the house. She wasn’t too bad. She tried to keep me clean, and she used to talk to me once in a while, but then her father beat her up so badly because he thought she’s been seeing a boy, so even she ran away from home too, and I never saw her again. To me, she disappeared without trace. Finally, when I was about ten, there was just me left, and the latest girlfriend. It all came to a head then.

“I lived for books. I’d borrow them from the school library, and I’d read so many classics by the time I was ten. I felt more alive inside a story than I did at home. I loved Dickens. I knew exactly how Oliver Twist felt, how Little Nell lived, caring for her father on the road. They were my friends.
“One day I’d brought a book home from school to read. The teacher had given it to me. It was all about a girl whose father had left her in a school, and then when it seemed all his money had gone and he’d died she was forced to live in the attic and do all the work. It felt just like the story of my life, because I dreamed of having a famous father who would one day sweep me up and take me to live in a palace.

“Well my step-father caught me with it, and flung it into the fire, just out of spite, and he was probably drunk. He was always drunk. Something in me snapped, and I started to hit out at him. It was my one nice thing, and he’d destroyed it. How would I explain to the teacher at school what had happened? I screamed at him.

“Of course, it did no good. His temper was up and he beat me so badly I could hardly walk. That’s when they finally noticed at school. I limped around all week, worrying about how I was going to explain the lost book, but some girls persuaded me to join them in doing handstands against the playground wall. I tucked my dress into my knickers, and the teacher on dinner duty noticed the red wheals all across the tops of my legs.

“The head teacher must have informed social services, because I was called into her office. I thought it was because of the book, and that something dreadful would happen to me. But a tall, very smart woman was sitting there, and she had such a kind face that I stopped feeling quite so scared.

“She asked me lots of questions, and then she and the head teacher talked together quietly. They took me into a room and asked the school nurse to examine me in my vest and knickers. Well my vest was a rag. I remember them all drawing in their breaths in shock when they looked at all the bruises.

The lady from social services said, “Why didn’t you contact us before? Some of these injuries obviously aren’t fresh. They must have been inflicted months ago. And how long has she been wearing this one dress? It’s far too small for her.”

Finally she said to me, “Miriam, don’t be frightened. I’m going to visit your home, but you don’t have to go back there anymore. Is your mother there?”

“No.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s in heaven. She died when I was four.”

“So who looks after you?”

I just remember staring at her.

“No-one looks after me. I live in my step-father’s house. Do I really not have to go back there? Can I live here at school?” I remember asking.

“No, but we are taking you to a nice place, where you’ll be taken care of.”

“Will I still be able to come to this school?”

“Perhaps, or perhaps not. It might be safer if we take you right away. You’ve been through enough. We’ll see.”

“My heart sank because I loved that primary school, and the teachers, but yes, they did move me,
into what they called Care in another borough right across London. I lived in a children’s home in a bed with clean sheets, and wore clean clothes, with enough food, and no beatings until I finished primary school, and then they put me in for the 11 plus exam, which was a grading selection process we had in England to determine what school you went to.

“Everyone seemed astonished when I passed for a girls’ grammar school, and so they found me a foster family near to the school. I stayed in three different foster families in the end, but that is another story, for another day. The social worker who came to the school stayed in touch with me until I was sixteen, when I had to leave Care. That’s who your Mom reminded me of when we first met.”

Miranda looked absolutely shattered, and Andrea fully understood why. She had had at least eleven years of pain and fear to express. It was now approaching midnight. She had just one more question.

“So what became of your stepfather? Did they prosecute him for child cruelty?”

“They might have done, I don’t know. Again, I only found out later, but he was finally caught after he killed his last girlfriend with a carving knife, and he was sent to prison for life. I think he died there, and he deserved to. He as good as killed my mother, and he probably did cause the death of his first wife. His children hated him. He was a truly horrible man.”

Jenny said, “Andy, what Miranda has told us is only part of the story, but it’s more than enough for tonight. I want you to take her to bed and just look after her. She may have bad dreams, but she’s done a very brave thing tonight. That childhood pain she could never express, which no-one helped her deal with at the time, it has come out in your loving company. I’m just so glad I could be here to help, if only a very small way.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you,” murmured Miranda, “Both of you. But I am tired now, very tired.”

“Let’s turn in,” said Andrea, rising, and pulling Miranda to her feet with her. “Mom, let’s first show you your room. I think you’ll love it.”

They installed Jenny in the third bedroom, and then retreated to their own. Andrea took the cleansing tissues and very gently wiped Miranda’s make-up away, as softly and lovingly as she could.

“I’m always going to be here, darling,” she murmured, “to love you, and look after you. It will be my greatest joy in the world.”

Miranda shivered, and drew Andrea close. “Please, Yes,” was all she said. Andrea tenderly undressed her and put her into her smart cotton pyjamas, then she helped her into bed and drew up the sheets and blankets round her. She undressed herself and similarly attired, climbed into the bed.

For some reason, it felt almost as if they had not gone to bed together before. She now knew Miranda, who had once been a little girl called Miriam, wasn’t created fully formed to be her goddess lover from the stars. She had a sad, complex and abused past, but it made her an even more multi-dimensional human being, and what she had achieved in her life even more outstanding.

Andrea wrapped her arms round Miranda and held her against her heart. As they had done so often, their heartbeats seemed to be in balance with each other. Miranda’s head fell onto her breast and she could sense her falling asleep. “Miranda, all alone in the world, how did you ever make it to
America?” she thought, and then another fact came unbidden into her mind.

In fact, Miranda had not been an only child. She had unknown siblings from her father’s side, and two younger twin brothers also somewhere in the world. Whatever had happened to them?

But Andrea decided that was a question for another day as she fell asleep herself, Miranda in her arms, and cherishing the huge amount of love between them. She just hoped it was enough to heal the past.
Andrea rolled over in bed to see two young faces so close to hers, she could feel them breathing. They were also grinning. Caroline spoke in a stage whisper, “Wake up Andy. Granny Jen is in the kitchen making tea, but she said we weren’t to disturb you.”

Andrea thought her mother had had exactly the right idea.

“So?” she replied, “Why are you doing just that?”

“We want to take her swimming, but she’s forgotten her swimsuit. Can she borrow one of yours?” whispered Cassidy.

Andy came awake properly and looked at them. They were already dressed for swimming. She looked at the time on her phone. 8 am. She relented. For any ten year old, that was virtually midday.

She responded quietly, “Yes, of course and I think she’ll get into it OK. I’m broader, but my Mom is taller. It’s there on the chair. But be super quiet, girls. I don’t want your Mom to wake until she’s ready. She was very tired last night.”

The twins captured Andrea’s swimsuit and tiptoed out as quietly as they could. Andy swung her legs cautiously out of bed, and stood up. She stretched and looked back at Miranda curled up in the bed they had shared together all night. Miranda had fallen asleep immediately at midnight and hadn’t stirred once. She still seemed dead to the world.

Andy was determined to allow her as much sleep as she needed after the previous night’s exhausting and distressing revelations, so she picked up her clothes and left the room, silently drawing the door shut behind her. She found her mother just as the twins had said, sitting at the kitchen table with a large mug of her favourite drink, black tea, although you wouldn’t call it black in the cup, more light tobacco coloured.

“Darling! I’m sorry the girls woke you.”

“No worries. It would be great if you can go and enjoy a swim with them, just to keep an eye on them. Miranda won’t let them swim without one of us acting as lifeguard.”

“Of course not. She’s very wise. How was the night?”

“She slept like a top. She still is fast asleep, and I don’t expect her to stir anytime soon.”

“That’s the best news. Let her sleep till noon if she needs to. It will be very healing.”

“It’s so good you could come and join us here, Mom. Thank you so much. What did Dad say about
“No. I have had several serious talks to your father over the last few weeks, and he understands your whole relationship much better. He can also see how much I like Miranda, and it’s rubbing off on him. He’s actually talking about inviting you all to come to Ohio for Thanksgiving.”

“That’s exactly what the twins suggested yesterday. Could you fit us in?”

“Of course. It will be fantastic. Let’s work on that idea. But for now, like you, I am in summer mode. I will take the twins into the sea, or let them take me. It looks so inviting, even this early in the day. I was a fool to forget to bring a swimsuit. I was just so concerned for Miranda, I wasn’t thinking about anything else.”

“How long can you stay?”

“Three more nights. I have booked a Sunday flight back home, but this time from Provincetown airport via Boston.”

“Well, that’s great, because Miranda’s ex-husband, the twins’ father, is flying over from Boston the same day. With luck we can combine the trips to and from the airport.”

“Come on Granny Jen. Please go and change! We want to take you swimming!”

Cassidy and Caroline, who had been very quiet in their bedroom had all but lost patience with adults, who seemed to have endless capacity for just sitting and wasting time talking to each other all the time. Andy was amused how they had come up with a name for her Mom which seemed to suit all parties.

Jenny jumped up, and picked up Andy’s one piece swimsuit.

“Yes, my dears, I’m coming. Give me five minutes, that’s all.”

Later on, Andy sat on the veranda with her laptop, writing a piece of very personal reflection about Miranda’s childhood, and how that story had seared into her own head. She realised just how much of Miranda’s love of order, beauty and fashion, even fine cotton sheets, had been born out of her early deprivations. Her intense love of reading and her collection of fine books had emerged after the cruelty of never being allowed to own any, and having the one story book she had, viciously thrown onto a fire.

Andrea guessed she knew the book to which Miranda had referred. It sounded like “The Little Princess”, written in the early 1900s, or even earlier, and a couple of films, including one with Shirley Temple back in the 1930s had been based on it. A little thought came into her mind, that if she could order a copy, perhaps a first edition with the original pictures, it would be a good Christmas present for darling Miranda.

She put the thought secretly at the back of her mind, but determined to act on the idea before too long. Presumably Miranda could have bought herself a copy as an adult, but her memories had been so blocked by post traumatic shock that she might not even have recalled the title.

She looked out towards the water, and watched from a distance her mother, who was an excellent swimmer, and the twins thoroughly enjoying themselves out in the sea. They’d be hungry when they’d finished. Andrea went to prepare breakfast, bananas, cereal and toast, and as well for her mother included some almond milk which she’d been pleased to find in a grocery store downtown the day before.
It was in fact very close to eleven o’clock when Miranda did finally wake up. She emerged sleepily from their bedroom in her white pyjamas, looking almost bewildered. Her hair stood up on end in a style which Caroline dubbed “Mommy-punk”. Everyone clapped, and laughed. “At last! I won,” said Cassidy. “I said you’d wake before eleven, but the others thought it would be mid-day.”

“Eleven?!” Miranda looked shocked. “It can’t be. I have never, ever in my whole life slept in so long. Oh I am so sorry.”

“No need to apologise,” smiled Jenny. “It was exactly what you needed. We’ve had a wonderful morning, swimming and playing cards, haven’t we girls?”

“Yes, Granny Jen has taught us to play Racing Demons, Mom. It’s great fun.”

Andrea went across and hugged Miranda fondly. She kissed her cheek, and tried to flatten her hair just a tad.

“I’m brewing you some coffee. When you get back from the bathroom, it will be quite ready, darling.”

Miranda kissed her back, and disappeared into the end bathroom. “Eleven!” Andy could hear her say to herself. “I slept until eleven. My goodness!”

When she emerged, damp from a shower, and still dressed in pyjamas, Andy thrust a mug of coffee in her hand.

There was quite a noisy game of cards going on behind them at the table.

“How are you, my love? Really?”

Miranda could see Andy wasn’t going to be fobbed off with any “Perfectly all right, darling”.

“Slightly fragile, but actually I feel like I’ve emerged from a long dark tunnel. I feel almost newborn. It’s hard to describe. I feel so much happier.”

“Good. But you’re going to have to put up with me looking after you like a piece of porcelain china from now on. You are my heart’s treasure. You know that, don’t you?”

Miranda smiled ruefully, and cupped Andy’s face.

“Yes, honey. Whatever else I don’t know. I do know that. As you are mine.”

“Let’s sit outside.”

“They took their coffees out to the veranda, a wonderful place to sit in the warm summer sun. Andy sat down on the swing and pulled Miranda over so she ended up sitting in her lap.

“Whoops. I’ll spill my coffee.”

“No you won’t. Just sit still and let me rock you. I love to love you.” They sat together very peacefully, and Miranda let Andy rock her like a baby. It was an instinctive role play and extremely nurturing.

“What would you like to do for the rest of the day?” asked Andy after a while.

“Let’s take Jenny and the twins downtown for lunch. I also want to see if I can book in somewhere reasonably decent for a cut and blow-dry before Geoff comes over from Boston. I don’t really mind how I look over here, but . . . ”
“You don’t want him to think I’ve turned you into an unfashionable blob with haystack hair! But he would never think that, darling. You could wear a plastic bag and always look gorgeous. I don’t want to be too nosy, but your marriage to him is something else you never talk about. “

“I know. It’s all part of another long story. Let’s say I was as much to blame for the marriage failing as he was. We were married for more than a decade, but we were never truly on the same page. I married him for the wrong reasons, I know that now. When I was first established in the fashion business, I vowed to myself, that I would be completely self-sufficient, that I would never again be poor, that I would never again be powerless. He was good looking, and clever, and came from a wealthy family.

“We met because he acted as a lawyer when I bought some shares in a small fashion house in New York, and he seemed to think I was exotic and rather glamorous. He took me around to all the New York receptions and places to be seen. He turned my head a little, I admit, but when we went to bed, I was completely underwhelmed. My body never responded much to his at all. You couldn’t call it love-making, it was always over too quickly!”

Miranda was talking very quietly, so no-one in the inner room could hear her, but Andy got the picture.

“You can fill me in later with the details, honey. Actually I’m more interested in the middle part of your story, from when you were eleven years old onwards. Will you be able to share that later?”

“I will. It’s not nearly as awful as the early years’ saga, but it will take quite a long time to get through, and also maybe need some serious drinking of scotch whiskey to help us along. Let’s buy a bottle when we go out. Now, are you going to let me up, my love? I can’t stay in pyjamas all day!”

Andy put her coffee cup down on the decking, and made as if she was going to simply let Miranda stand, but then sneakily put her hand inside the other woman’s pyjama jacket and cheekily cupped her naked breast. She could feel Miranda shiver with an instant arousal.

“If we were here alone, I wouldn’t even permit you to wear pyjamas,” she whispered. “It would be straight back to bed with you for the rest of the day. But it looks like we will have houseguests now until we have to go back to New York on Tuesday. We must come up here again very soon, just the two of us, and test out the new bed properly. Did you know you can buy pink furry handcuffs online?”

“Never mention that word to me again,” growled Miranda, still with her right breast firmly in the grasp of Andrea’s fingers.

“What have you got against ‘online’? “ Andy laughed.

“You know what I mean! And you were far too excited for your own good as I recall, because you thought we were going to engage in bondage sex then and there, after our first kiss.”

“Well, we did. We were at it all night, or have you forgotten?”

“No, I haven’t forgotten. I remember every second I’ve been in your arms, and also inside your body. No-one will ever be able to take that away from me.”

Miranda gently lifted Andrea’s wandering hand from inside her pyjamas and lightly kissed her knuckles.

“Come on, it must be almost Noon. Let me dress and then we’ll take everyone out for lunch.
She looked down at Andrea’s left hand with its diamond ring.

“Do you really like the ring? We chose it so quickly.”

“I adore it, and I adore what it means, that you and I will be married to each other very soon.”

“You don’t ever hanker after pretty young men, or butch soft-ball players then, not even a tiny bit?”

Andrea rolled her eyes. “As if. Any more talk like that, and my poor mother and your poor daughters will have to witness me ravishing you on the hearth rug right in front of them, just to prove a point.”

She let Miranda go though, and they went back inside, laughing together.

“Fifteen minutes, Bobbsies, then we’re all going off to lunch.”

“Mom, have you noticed my painting on the mantelpiece?” asked Caroline. “I did it last night while you were out. It’s got your magic pebble in it.”

“So it has. It’s lovely, darling. Let’s look for a frame for it in town.” Miranda looked at the picture, and at her pebble beside it. Such a little thing, to bring on such a cascade of tears, which had really been just what she’d needed. She was objectively fascinated by just how upset her childhood memories had made her, and how healed she felt having shared them. Not completely healed, of course, maybe she never would be, but she felt much more able to cope, now that her adult self and her little girl self were communicating with each other. Transactional analysis, she remembered it was called, or something like that. She put her arms round each of her girls and kissed them in turn.

“I love you both to pieces, you do know that, don’t you?”

“Oh course, Mom. We love you too,” said Caroline. Cassidy added, “But please go and get yourself dressed. We are hungry enough to eat ten burgers each.”

Very soon, they were all in the Lexus and driving the short distance to town. Andrea could have run it in less than fifteen minutes, and thought that if she saw a second hand bicycle advertised locally, she might buy it to keep in the garage, for short trips to the shops. She wondered if Miranda could ride a bike, or if it was yet another simple childhood pleasure she’d been denied. Something else for the bucket list!

They all ate well at an independent burger restaurant, and Cassidy was once more engaged by how scrumptious Jenny’s black bean burger looked, and how veganism might be an interesting way to go, food wise. Miranda made a conscious decision to stop being such a police officer over her own diet, and tucked into French fries with the rest of them, as well as sharing Andy’s subsequent chocolate ice-cream from the side, surreptitiously dipping her tea spoon in round the corners.

Andy caught her eye, and they instantly shared the same naughty thought. The last day Jenny had visited them in New York, after seeing her off at the airport, what a wild time they had had with chocolate ice-cream. In the evening, Miranda had used Andy’s body as a plate for a large helping of ice-cream, and had been determined not to let a drop go to waste, which had involved a good deal of licking in secret places.

“She’s so much fun!” they both thought simultaneously. “God, I’m lucky to have her as my lover.”

Miranda finally called a halt to their lunch party. “Let’s go my darlings. I need to find a hairdresser, who still might have a spare appointment before the end of this week if such a thing is possible,
and also somewhere I can buy a picture frame and some Scotch.”

“Ugh,” said Cassidy. “Why do you want to buy Scotch, Mommy? It tastes horrid!”

“How would you know?” asked Andrea rather alarmed.

“Oh, just we tested it out once,” replied Cassidy airily. “Daddy knocks it back all the time. Grown-ups have such weird tastes.”

“Are you buying it for Dad, Mommy?” asked Caroline, very wide eyed and innocently.

“Oh yes, of course,” replied her mother hastily. “But you know, I might have to test it out myself first. But don’t you two ever touch the stuff again, or anything alcoholic. It is pure poison for people under twenty five.”

“Andy isn’t twenty-five yet!”

“Oh dear, well under twenty-four then!”

And so they went off happily to the shops together, Miranda nearly fifty, but today feeling about fifteen, Andy not yet twenty-five, but increasingly feeling at least forty in terms of parental responsibility. Only Jen and the girls felt their actual ages, which were fifty-nine and ten respectively. But what they did all share however, was a mutual sense of just how good it was to be so alive, and in such a loving family together.
Chapter Summary

Just a happy evening at the beach cottage.

It was after 6pm later that same day. Miranda and the twins were down on the beach walking along
the water’s edge, skimming flat stones into the sea. Andy could see them through the open
windows, and smiled as she watched them together. They looked happy, and the girls were
obviously chatting away to their Mom.

Andy had retrieved her uneaten mushroom risotto from the previous evening from the fridge and
was reheating it for the evening’s dinner. She was also taking the opportunity to talk to her own
mother as they made a salad and laid the table together.

“Provincetown is surprisingly delightful,” said Jenny. “I love all the little shops and cafes, and it
does have such a cultured, inclusive atmosphere. I can see why you and Miranda like it so much.”

“Yes I do love it, though I knew nothing about it before Miranda introduced it to me. I wonder if
she’s been here before. You know there’s so much about her life which I don’t yet know. But I
don’t want to appear inquisitive just for the sake of it. The story of her childhood was so
completely gut-wrenching. I can see why she buried it for so many years.”

Now that she felt confident her mother totally accepted Miranda as the love of her life, Andy
ventured to seek her advice about how best to help un-pack the things which had gone to make her
lover into the woman she was, all the unknown years, all the relationships she’d undoubtedly had.

“Just take it gently,” advised Jenny. “Miranda wants to share. She’s actually very communicative.
But there is so much pain as well, so much scar tissue. Don’t rush her, and she’ll unwrap her heart
completely for you. I know she will. She’s talked to me quite a lot about it. She said she worries
about dumping too much misery onto your shoulders.”

“I know. But I wish she would. I’ve got broad shoulders.”

“Miranda said to me, ‘Andy has such a tender, loving heart, and such a merry spirit. I cherish that
in her so much. I don’t want to dampen it.’ “

“Oh Mom, I do love her so very much. I want to get it right. I want to be there for her, and let her
have fun. I want to release all the fun and mischief I know is in there.”

Jenny was counting out the cutlery. “We seem to be a fork short here, darling. Any idea where it
is?”

“I used it to stir the risotto. We only have a few pieces of cutlery here at the moment. I’ll buy
another set tomorrow.”

Andy retrieved the fork, while her mother continued, “Yesterday evening Miranda talked to us
about things she has not shared with anyone for more than forty years. It was a very profound
moment, and she will take some time to recover her sense of balance, but then she will undoubtedly
share some more with you. Just be your natural, wonderful, steady self, and she’ll realise that she
can depend on you not being too shocked or collapsing under the knowledge of what happened.”

“Do you think we’ve heard the worst of it?”

“In some ways, but I am sure there is more to come. As I said, be very gentle with her, and don’t be frightened if there are a lot more tears. She needs to cry it out, and grief can take us by surprise, often in the most inconvenient places.”

“Well, after you go home on Sunday, we have the big challenge of my meeting the girls’ father, Geoff. I am rather apprehensive about his reaction, although I wouldn’t let Miranda know I’m nervous. Will he think I’ve seduced Miranda and turned her gay? Supposing he doesn’t want me involved in raising his daughters?”

“Don’t be concerned about that. Of course I am completely biased, but I would simply say to know you is to love you, and the twins are obviously besotted with you. In their eyes, there is nothing you can’t do.”

Andy snorted. “Well, that’s certainly not the case. I couldn’t even remember what causes the tide to come in and out at different times round the coast the other evening, and I’m still tussling with that one!

“What I really want to happen is for the girls to feel closer to their Dad, not more estranged, and for him to understand how much they need him to want to spend time with them. I think he may have spoiled them with money and gifts, instead of giving them enough of his undivided attention to make them understand how much he loves them.”

“Didn’t Miranda fall into that trap as well, from what you used to tell me?”

Andy nodded, “Yes, that’s true to some extent. But look at her with the girls now. It’s been wonderful to see them interact together this week. They are all so happy together.”

She now stood with her Mother on the veranda and they waved down at the other three who were beginning to turn back towards home. All three waved back, and they came up the beach together, looking like a painting of a happy family by the sea.

Miranda blew her hair up away from her forehead as she ran up the veranda steps, and threw her sun hat down on the couch.

“It’s pretty warm down there on the sands. “ She looked towards the cooking stove. “That smells delicious. I’m strangely hungry all over again. It must be the sea air!”

“We’ve been skimming pebbles,” said Caroline. “I managed four hops, Cass did five but Mom had one which went for six. It was awesome!”

“The sea is like a mill-pond this evening. You can only do that when the water is calm.”

Jenny smiled, “But it takes natural talent also. Well done Miranda! Why don’t you all go and wash your hands, and then let’s eat. Andy’s made a big risotto, and I can tell you, it’s ready to be consumed.”

They all sat round the table and together enjoyed the evening meal, even if they had to share the cutlery between them. Caroline was very clever at balancing rice on her knife.

Miranda suddenly remembered a little nonsense rhyme she must have read in a poetry book at school.
I eat my peas with honey. 
I’ve done it all my life.
It makes the peas taste funny,
But it keeps them on the knife.”

For some reason the children thought this was hilarious and both girls got the giggles. Then the adults joined them.

“Do you remember when you were little and your sisters made you start to laugh until you couldn’t stop. I think Caro and Cass are about to enter the same age of reckless giggling, It’s contagious.”

Jenny was laughing herself as she spoke.

“I imagine you had a very happy childhood, darling,” commented Miranda. “You don’t have any sign of anything else.”

Andy tried to answer the question seriously. “Very happy, except that I suffer from youngest child syndrome. I was always trying to catch the others up, not be the baby. But we were all very close in age. They all loved me, and spoiled me I suppose. And Mom was only twenty-five when she had me. How she coped I can’t imagine.”

Miranda looked across to Jenny, who grinned in reply.

“I’m afraid I was very young and foolish. I fell for Andy’s father when I was still in high-school and married him at eighteen. I had five children by the age of twenty-five, and only then realised that I should have liked to have gone to college. I did all my degree and training from then on, and was thereafter always a working Mom. But I was lucky. My parents lived nearby, and were superb baby-sitters. Andy was practically raised by them.”

“And do you still have your parents?”

“My father has passed on, but Momma lives with us. We have quite a large spread just outside Cincinnati. You must all definitely come to visit soon.”

The girls responded very enthusiastically, and Cass started to ask all about the promised pony who still lived there, and who Jenny had said they could ride.

Miranda reflected on the differences in her and Andy’s childhoods. How wonderful it would have been to have had a supportive extended family, loving grandparents, and even brothers and sisters who cared for her and included her in their games. She had never been one to feel self-pity, but a small wave of sorrow passed through her, and she gave a mental nod back to little Miri, sitting alone on a back-door step trying to shelter from the rain after being literally kicked out of the house.

She shook herself out of it, “Anyone want seconds of the risotto? If not, then I’ll finish it. I seem to have developed the appetite of a bear.”

“Bears don’t eat rice, Mommy.”

“They might do, if they found some in a trash can. Luckily I don’t think there are any bears living round here.”

Andrea noticed that Miranda was perfectly happy drinking tap water chilled in the fridge and had quite forgotten to demand San Pellegrino fizzy water. She was loosening up so much, she’d be thoroughly laid back if they stayed in their cottage much longer. It was sad they had to return to the
city in a few days, but the girls must not miss the beginning of their school year.

Miranda seemed to be thinking along the same lines. She turned to both girls, who were dressed simply in Tee shirts and shorts.

“You know, I think you must have both grown at least three inches over this summer. You’ll soon be up to my shoulder. Will your shoes and clothes fit properly for school? I should have thought of that before, because there won’t be time to shop next week.”

“Maybe new shoes, mine do pinch a bit,” said Cassidy. “Mine too,” added Caroline.

“We can sort something out tomorrow”, said Andrea to Miranda. “I don’t mind shopping with the girls, while you are in the beauty salon having your hair cut.”

“Then let me take care of all the catering tomorrow,” said Jenny. “You have looked after me so well today. Let me return the favor.”

“Thank you, both of you. I don’t know why I am forgetting the most basic necessities of parenting these days. My head is turning to porridge.”

Her twins laughed out loud at Miranda’s turn of phrase, which they’d not heard before.

“We think you’re wonderful, Mommy. We’ll be sure and tell you in future what we need, and if our shoes hurt. Don’t worry.”

“We’ll all go into town tomorrow together then. I found a nice little beauty salon, with good ratings, who can fit me in at nine.”

They all sat out on the veranda to watch the sun go down behind the horizon, and then played Botticelli, a word game which was flexible enough for the twins to be included.

When it was time for bed, Caroline remarked. “You know, I haven’t missed not having the internet or TV at all. Isn’t it weird? I thought we’d be so bored.”

“Tomorrow night, can we make a fire on the beach and cook dampers, like we did at Camp?” asked Cassidy.

“Would you like to join the girl-scouts, Cass?” asked Andy. “You seem a natural.”

“Do they have scout troops in Manhattan?”

“No idea. But let’s find out when we go back.”

Later, in bed with Miranda, Andrea gently smoothed her hair away from her face, and whispered, “I know you like my hair, but I love yours as well, especially the way it falls over your face if you don’t spray it back. Don’t let them chop too much off will you?”

Miranda snuggled against Andrea, putting her arms round her and taking up one of her favorite positions, lying against her breast with her head just under Andy’s chin.

“No I won’t, and I’ll try my best not to come over all Diva with them. At least no-one recognises me up here, not like East Hampton.”

“Hmm, did you say you still share that house with Geoff? How does that work?”

“When we split up, we kept it as neutral ground where we could both take the girls, and I could
also visit with his parents, with whom I have always got on well. I’m so glad we did, because it’s one thing Stephen can’t get his hands on, but I am going to ask Geoff if he’d like to take it over completely. He can put my share into a trust for the girls if he likes. It’s an expensive property, and would provide them with a college fund if he sells it.”

“You must be so anxious about the divorce from Stephen. I’m sorry I haven’t been more supportive. I forget how much it must trouble you.”

“Oh pooh. I have excellent attorneys. I have so much evidence about that man’s infidelities, he doesn’t have a hope of getting all the ridiculous things he is claiming. Let’s not waste loving time on him.”

Andy started to draw pictures on Miranda’s back, under her pyjama jacket, something she knew was both arousing and relaxing.

“How are you feeling tonight my darling? You seemed to get happier as the day has gone on.”

“Hmm, yes, and I feel fine tonight. What are you drawing? Which way is up?”

“This way.” Andrea touched Miranda’s neck. “Now concentrate.”

She started again.

“It’s got four legs. Oh and is that a tail?”

Andrea’s finger nails was tickling her ribs.

“It’s a horse.”

“Nearly. Think about Cassidy.”

“Oh, it’s a pony, with her on its back.”

“Well done! And now it’s galloping away.” Andy’s fingers ran up and down Miranda’s spine. She was being dangerous now.

Miranda demanded, “Turn over, and let me have a go.”

She flipped Andrea onto her stomach and lifted up her top. She drew an imaginary picture frame and then started a very complicated design inside it.

“I haven’t a clue!” Andy admitted defeat, her head buried in the pillow.

“Are you sure? Give in?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a bear looking in a trash can for some of your left over risotto, but he’s not found any because we ate it all, so he’s looking sad.”

“Miranda, you are the worst! How would I ever have guessed that?”

Miranda chuckled.

“That’s the point. We’re into serious art work here. Want to try again? I’ll make it easy this time.”
She drew a large heart on Andy’s back, with an arrow running through it, and to press the point home, finished it off with a loving kiss. They tumbled together into one of their protracted love making sessions, and Andrea knew Miranda did indeed feel fine. She was also a talented artist in more ways than one. They went to sleep late, but slept soundly all night, lulled by the sound of the eternal, deep moving sea.
Telling Geoffrey

Chapter Summary

Miranda goes to the hairdressers, gets some feedback on Runway and decides to tell her ex about Andrea.

Miranda took off her shades, put them into her carefully chosen non-designer blue leather bag, tucked it under her chair like her fellow customers and leaned back against a basin. She had made it on time to the beauty salon to have her hair washed by a girl who looked scarcely older than she’d been when she’d started work doing the same job. The youngster was gentle though, and mercifully silent. She closed her eyes and consciously breathed out slowly to relax, enjoying the flow of warm water over her head.

It was a medium sized hairdressing business, with five female staff, and prices hovering around $40 for a cut and blow dry. She didn’t dwell on the exorbitant price she normally paid in Manhattan for the same care and attention, but there she was also fawned over and extravagantly complimented on her latest Runway edition, fussed over like the supreme Diva they assumed she was.

The gaggle of gay boys with slicked back hair and nifty scissor skills who normally styled her hair would never be seen dead working in a place like this cheerful little shop, and she could just visualise them flying into an imaginary fury when they looked at whatever cut she was going to receive here.

But here was OK. It was normal, with real people. The customers varied in age from twelve to eighty, and there were some sophisticated foil work going on in the corner across from her booth. She had asked for the most experienced cutter to tackle her hair, and when the wash was finished, the shy assistant beckoned her over to a different chair to have it styled and trimmed.

The manager, maybe the owner of the shop herself, an attractive woman of about her own age, approached her. They looked at each other in the mirror. Miranda knew exactly what she’d be asked. She could have scripted it.

“How would you like it? Much the same, or something different?”

“Much the same, please, just take an inch off the sides and back and tidy it up. It’s become rather shaggy, and the sea and sun have dried it out.”

“I’ll give you some mousse and conditioning cream before I dry it. Are you here on vacation? I don’t think I’ve cut your hair before, though your face is very familiar.”

Miranda tried not to give anything away about her identity, and said vaguely, “I’m just here on vacation, but I may come up again before too long.”

“Where are you from?”

“Oh, towards New York.” She didn’t want to say, “Right in the centre of it.”

The hairdresser continued to snip, and appeared thoughtful. Then Miranda’s eyes slid of their own accord across to a side table, where she could see a neat pile of Runway magazines stacked up. Oh
She could almost feel the telepathy of her identity run from her hair down into the haircutter’s fingers. The woman’s hands slowed down and she physically trembled.

Miranda decided to play it lightly. “Don’t stop,” she said. “You’re doing a good job.”

Her hairdresser’s face went a deep shade of pink. “Oh, oh, I know who you are . . . My God, it’s worse than discovering Glen Close or Meryl Streep is sitting in my shop. One word from you, for good or bad and . . .”

Miranda was only thankful they were a little way apart from the other customers. “Sshh, please. I am sure you’ll give me a fine haircut. Let’s just proceed, and if I’m happy, I’ll bring my daughters in for a trim later. I normally cut their hair myself, so a trip to the hair-salon will be a treat for them. “

The owner of the shop drew in her breath and steadied her nerve. Miranda decided to be a typical customer and keep her talking about her own circumstances, what children she had, how long she’d been in business, where she was planning to go on vacation when the season ended. She well remembered hairdressers’ patter from her teenage days, and just reversed the process.

After the next ten minutes or so, the cut was completed to her satisfaction, and her signature curly bangs had been saved as Andy had requested. The hairdresser then massaged some more styling mousse and a light conditioning cream through her still damp locks.

Miranda decided to be brave and reached over to the magazine pile. She opened the top copy of Runway, which was last month’s edition, the last one under her editorship for the next twelve months. She turned to the editor’s letter page, and she and her hairdresser both stared at her unforgettable and iconic photograph.

“Yes, dry it so it’s like that if you would. Only of course my parting is on the left, not the right. Now tell me, what do you think of Runway? How could it be improved?”

She guessed the hairdresser, who now timidly took up a drier in one hand and a styling brush in the other, was hardly likely to say, “Oh it’s terrible. We only buy it for the pictures”, but she thought she might get some useful insights into what the average woman reader liked about her precious baby.

After some initial hesitancy, she did learn some useful feedback as her hair was dried and styled. The manager said she and her staff at the salon, young and older, all enjoyed Runway and thought it beautifully produced. The high end fashion of course would be too expensive for them to consider, but they liked the beauty section very much, and the editorial articles. They always especially enjoyed Miranda’s opening letters, and the fashion shoots on locations were better than reading an exotic travel magazine.

“Do you remember any editorials in particular?” This was rather a sneaky question from Miranda, to see if any of her words had registered with readers, in any way.

“Oh yes, last month, you talked about being true to yourself, to your own style, not just going with the crowd because a look or a fashion happened to be in. And I also like the previous column you wrote on quality over quantity. I always read your letter first. The customers enjoy the magazine as well. It really is such an honor to have you here.”

Miranda smiled but cut off the compliments. She stood up, handed back the customer’s smock and reached for her purse. She paid up willingly with a generous tip, and said, “Give me your card. When can you fit my girls in? Are you open tomorrow morning?”
“For you, Miranda Priestly, I would willingly open up on Sunday. But shall we say 9.30 tomorrow. It will be a pleasure. “

Miranda wrote down the date and time, not that she was likely to forget it, and made her escape, as the manager opened the door for her. She could hear the general frisson of excitement start to rise all through the shop the moment her exit was made. “Miranda Priestly?! Was that really her? Wow!”

Hers was certainly only a partial celebrity status, mainly just through the fashion and beauty world, and the New York gossip columns. What must it be like to be a globally famous Hollywood actress who could never appear in public without a crowd of people clustering about you, and your picture pushed immediately right round the world?

She sincerely hoped no-one else in Provincetown would identify her, or if they did, wouldn’t think it even worth remarking on. But she was pleased to have such positive feedback. She must be sure and tell Serena how well her Beauty sections went down.

Then Miranda remembered. Oh, she wouldn't be in the Runway office on Tuesday! It was truly wonderful not to have to return to the office, back into all that hard work and feverish activity for another whole year. Her heart gave a little skip.

Andrea and the twins spotted her walking down the street and ran towards her. The girls carried boxes of similar but not identical new school shoes. “We’ve gone up a whole size, Mom”, said Cassidy. They were about to enter the Dalton Middle School, which in its progressive culture disdained school uniforms, but a range of respectable school clothes was still a priority.

“Let’s go clothes shopping,” suggested Miranda. “Then you can look decent for your father as well.” The four of them went into the small department store, and headed for the pre-teen section. “There won’t be much choice girls. So go for quality rather than quantity!”

“Your hair looks sweet,” murmured Andrea as she walked behind Miranda. “Very nice and tidy. Just seeing your freshly shorn neck makes me want to kiss it.”

“Watch it, girl! I was recognised unfortunately, which meant some of the cutting might have gone rather wobbly, but she was very pleasant. I’ve arranged to take the girls for a wash and cut tomorrow, so we will all be respectable for Geoff. “

“Is he likely to notice if you weren’t?”

“Oh yes, very image conscious is our Geoff.”

Andrea caught sight of herself in the store mirror, ragged cut-off shorts and a skimpy tee shirt, her hair bundled into a ribbon and cascading right down her back, a rather sun-burned nose, despite all Miranda’s nagging about sun-block, and her bare feet in flip-flops. She began to be seriously worried.

Over lunch Miranda decided to do what she had been putting off for weeks, bring her ex-husband up to date with the new developments in her life, before he saw them for himself. After the family had enjoyed a superb light meal of chilled lettuce soup, crunchy bread rolls, and fresh raspberry and almond cake, all courtesy of Jenny, she took her phone with her for a walk along the lane alone. “So I can get a better signal, darlings,” she said, and went briskly away by herself before she had company.

She pressed Geoffrey’s office number and negotiated her way past his secretary’s natural defences
to be put through to him.

“Hi Geoff,” she began. “The girls are so looking forward to seeing you on Sunday. I just wanted to check what time your flight gets in . . . “

The conversation began cordially enough, but then she waded out into deeper waters, starting with a progress report on her divorce proceedings against Stephen.

“Why the urgency?” he commented. “Are you dating anybody new?”

Miranda gave him a succinct summary of the last two months of her life.

“What, girl? You’re joking, surely!”

The conversation followed its not to be unexpected, slightly embarrassing, course, with questions barked down the phone like, “You’re dating a woman? You mean she’s a female? How old? . . . Well, I know my girl-friend is younger than that but still, what do you think you’re playing at? Did Stephen put you off men for good then? What do the twins think? How will they cope knowing their Mom’s suddenly decided to be gay? “

Miranda managed to keep the dialogue from descending into rhetorical insults, and finished by assuring him that when he met Andrea, he would see what a wonderful person she was, and how happy they all were.

He didn’t sound convinced, but gave her the benefit of the doubt. He was now very grateful he hadn’t insisted on bringing his latest girlfriend over to the Cape with him. God knows what Cindy would make of it all, and his mother, what would his mother think? She’d always been very fond of Miranda.

“Cindy! His latest is called Cindy,” laughed Miranda, as she later regaled the gist of the phone call to Andrea. “You couldn’t make it up. Anyway, he knows about you now, and heaven help him if he makes stupid jokes, or pretends to be affronted by us.”

“I don’t feel worthy of you, Miranda,” declared Andrea, completely sincerely. “Geoff will think I’m a gold digger, that I’m worse than the girls who flock round him. He’ll despise me, I’m sure he will.”

“No, he won’t my love. He’ll be rightly very jealous of my good fortune.” Miranda took Andrea’s left hand and lifted it to her moth. She kissed the ring finger tenderly and turned it so the diamond sparked in the setting sun. “There is no-one else in the world as happy as I am right now.”

“Yes, there is, me!” replied Andrea. This was about to turn into one of their silly romantic competitions. Miranda smiled sideways at her, “But you deserve to be happy, because you are as good as gold. I am happy despite having a very shady past, so my good fortune is the greater.”

“I don’t believe you yourself were ever involved in anything shady!”

“Well, after the girls go to bed, let me tell you how I ended up where I am now, and then you can judge. Just remember you are wearing my ring, so you can’t back out, however shocked you might be by what I tell you!”
Andy looked astonished. “I can’t wait to hear, darling, I really can’t wait to hear.”
Chapter Summary

Miranda tells more of her story growing up in London in the 1960s.

Later that evening, on the veranda which was rapidly becoming the place for confessions and revelations, Miranda gave Andy and Jenny the second part of her autobiography, assisted by some medicinal Scotch over a clink of ice-cubes. She picked up the narrative pretty much where she’d left it before.

“When I was rescued and taken in to the orphanage, I was very nervous and frightened that they’d send me back home after all, I hardly dared speak for more than a month. The children’s home was so well run, it seemed like another planet compared to what I’d been used to. Everything was timetabled, and organised. Clean clothes were provided every week, and meals were always served on time.

I began to get used to eating more than one decent meal a day. Previously I’d relied on school hot dinners at lunch time, and was always half starved in the holidays. Now there was a breakfast of hot porridge, sometimes with an egg, and as much toast as you wanted. For tea we usually had jam sandwiches and fruit cake. “

“How many children were there?”

“Oh, it was a big place. It was the end of the era of large orphanages, so there must have been about forty of us. I slept in a dormitory with eight other girls, but there were far more boys there than girls. I’d read so many story books about boarding schools and people having adventures, playing hockey, doing ballet, that I just acted as if I was a girl in one of those stories. I lived inside my imagination most of the time.

“No-one had suffered quite as much physical abuse as me, as far as I could judge, but I healed up quickly, and as the months went by I shot up in height. From the age of ten until I was twelve I think I grew five inches, and my hair grew with it. I’d read Anne of Green Gables, who I could totally relate to, and I ended up with long curly red hair which I wore plaited in a long braid down my back, like I do yours, sweetie, sometimes. They even gave me pretty tartan ribbons to tie it up with.

“Did you make many friends?”
“Slowly. We were divided up between several different local elementary schools, and I walked to my new school with a girl whose mother had died in childbirth, and whose father couldn’t cope. I related to her story, and we gradually learned to trust each other, but it was difficult. Most of the kids there had suffered trauma of one sort or another, so there were a lot of problems, fights among the boys, bed-wetting, that sort of thing. You could well understand it. The staff were all very kind though. They liked me, because I was no trouble as long as I had a book to read.

“Anyway, in the spring after I turned eleven, we were told at school that we’d be sitting the “Eleven Plus.” I had no idea what that was, but they started giving us little maths quizzes, and spelling bees, and we wrote longer and longer essays. My teacher said to me, ‘If you concentrate Miriam, instead of living in a dream world all the time, you could do well and get into the grammar school.’

“I looked puzzled and she explained it was the very large academic girls’ school, from where you could take the examinations to go to university, or at least get a good job. I’d never heard of university, but I liked the sound of a good job. So I studied hard, and yes, passed the eleven plus exam. The staff at the orphanage were astonished when they read the letter from the school.

“We’ve never had a child do that before!” they said. “What shall we do with her?” They were so used to having children who could barely read coming through their care, and they did have very low expectations.

“So after more conferences about me, they decided I should be found a foster family to live with if I was going to be a grammar school girl and wear the very fancy uniform. From then on, I felt very unsettled again. I liked the routine in the children’s home, and I wasn’t used to living in a proper family. I began to be very nervous again, but like anything in life you learn to adjust.

“I was sent off to be fostered by an older couple, who had previously looked after dozens of children and were old hands at the game. Their own children had all grown and left home, so I was alone in the house with them, and I suppose you could say they civilised me.

“For a start they had carpets on the floor, and a TV which they watched at night. There was a soap opera called Compact, which was all about a fashion magazine which I especially liked. They had a bathroom with constant hot water and soap, and they told me I could have a bath twice a week. This was heavenly!

“In my room I had my own little desk where I could do my homework. They also had a bookcase full of children’s encyclopaedias dating back to about 1900, but I started at A, and by the time I left them two years later, I had reached Z. I felt very educated!”

“So you were happy there?”

“I wouldn’t say happy. They were older people who fostered children for the money. They weren’t unkind, but I don’t think they understood me. I think I had never yet learned what happiness was. But I felt safe. I stopped being afraid, and I began to be interested in lots of things.

“When I first lived with them, I spoke such broad Cockney they could hardly understand me, so I learned the Queen’s English from them and from the television. I also realised no-one at the grammar-school spoke like I did, and if I didn’t want to be laughed at, I had to change all my vowels and sound my Ts and Gs, and stop saying things like ‘nuffink’.

Miranda slipped into her mother tongue of London East End Cockney dialect, more pronounced than Eliza Doolittle in My Fair Lady. Then she changed into a smooth and very refined Oxford accent, before reverting to her usual American East Coast accent. “You can see how differently
people react to you when you speak like this, or when you talk like that, or when you turn into an American, or a native New Yorker! Professor Higgins was quite right. It can define you or trap you for the rest of your life.”

“You’re really good at accents,” smiled Jenny. “You must have a good ear.”

“I was lucky. I didn’t find it hard, as soon as I picked up the idea. And that’s why I was good at modern languages. We started to learn French when I went to the grammar school, and after a year we could choose a second language, so I took Spanish. I was top in both. The words just stuck in my brain, and I could hear how the different languages varied, but were also similar. After English they were my favorite subjects.

“But then in the third year, what they’d call eighth grade in the States today, we could take sewing classes as well and I fell in love with the idea of making my own clothes. It was the era of the mini skirt, so with a square yard or two of fabric you could easily make a top or a skirt. I learned lots of different sewing techniques and how to use the electric machines at school. I would stay late and sew just for the fun of it, but I needed fabric, and I had no money of my own, well, pocket money of one shilling a week, about 20 cents, which didn’t go far even in those days.

“When I was thirteen, I had to move foster homes, because the couple wanted to retire down to the West of England near their daughter, so I was unsettled again, but the move was good for me. It was to a house with three different foster children, and a younger set of parents. It was a lot more fun.

“One of the older boys had a paper delivery round, and earned 10 shillings a week doing it. That seemed a fortune to me, so I went with him to the newsagent and asked for a similar job in the early morning before school. My round was shorter, so I only earned five shillings, and I had to do it on foot as I didn’t have a bicycle, but I soon saved up enough to buy material on the market, and I made myself some nicer clothes than I had ever had in my life. I also started to save a shilling a week. Life was finally looking up.

“Then 1969 came in, the year I turned fourteen. My periods had started, and I was developing breasts. I felt very restless. I grew another two inches until I was nearly the height I am now, and I got tired of my long hair and decided to get it cut.

“I talked to my foster mother, who suggested I went to a hairdresser to have the job done properly, and she gave me enough money to pay for it. I’d never entered a beauty salon before, so it was a big deal, but I went to one on the local high street and asked for a cut. They chopped off my braids, and gave them back to me in a paper bag, and then styled my hair with a pair of sharp scissors, into a sleek bob.

“Mary Quant the British designer was all the rage then with sharp cut bobs, either that or flowing locks like princesses, but I didn’t feel princessy enough for those. There was also a model called Twiggy whose look I admired . . . Anyway . . . Are you both sure I’m not boring you to death here? . . . Why don’t we have another drink?”

Andy refilled their glasses with whiskey and water, and pulled some more ice-cubes from the freezer.

“Keep going, love,” she said. “I’m really into this story.” “Me too,” added Jenny. “I expect the plot thickens soon, doesn’t it?”

“Well, it does get rather more eventful from now on! While I was in the salon I saw a poster up in their window advertising a job as a Saturday girl. You were supposed to be fifteen, but I was now
quite tall, and could pass for fifteen. I asked if I could apply and how much would they pay? I found they were offering a whole pound for eight hours on a Saturday, or half a crown an hour! That was a fortune to me.

“Anyway, I managed to persuade them to give me the job, went home and convinced the foster parents it would be all right and I wouldn’t neglect my school work, and started learning to be a hairdresser every Saturday. The duties were mainly sweeping the floor, laundering towels and making drinks for customers, but I gradually progressed to shampooing women before they had their hair cut. Customers usually wanted ‘shampoo and sets’, or perms, so I was remember always sorting and washing out plastic curlers as well.

“Anyway I worked there every Saturday for more than twelve months, and it was in that salon that I first really got into fashion, through reading the old magazines they were given to provide reading for the women who had to sit under the driers for an hour or more while their hair dried off.

“I’d take a bunch of magazines home and return them the following Saturday, and one day I found a copy of British Vogue. It was then in that moment I knew what I wanted to do in life! I wanted to go to Paris to work for one of the big fashion houses, and I wanted to write about their collections, like the articles in the magazine. “

“Wow. That was great. So how did you get your heart’s desire?”

“Ha, well, let’s not get ahead of ourselves here. Just when I thought things were great, the bottom fell out of my world. “

“Oh dear . . . why?”

“It happened really quickly. One of my foster brothers, if you want to call him that, was found with cannabis on him at his school, and also with a stash at home. He was accused of being a drug dealer and was sent to a young offender’s prison. The authorities came down really hard on him, and on our foster parents who were told they could no longer care for teenagers.

“The house was closed and we were all shipped off again to other foster families. Mine was a good four miles away, and while I managed to stay in the same school, by taking two buses and walking a mile each way, I couldn’t keep my job at the hairdressers, or the paper round.

“No one listened or seemed to think it was important that I needed to earn money by working. I had a post office account with more than £50 in it by then, as I saved all my tips and at least half my pay every week. Building up savings had become very important to me, as soon as I was taught about compound interest, and has been that way ever since. Probably because I’ve stayed terrified of the vicious poverty I knew as a child.

“I was then fifteen, nearly sixteen, about to take my O levels at school, and I had another nasty shock when my social worker told me, that unfortunately, after the age of sixteen, my life in council care would finish and I’d have to earn my own living completely. I really wanted to stay on in the school into the Sixth Form, up to the age of eighteen, to take English, French, Spanish and Sewing, (what they called Domestic Science in those days), at Advanced level. My dream was to then train as a fashion designer or become a fashion journalist. But without financial support how was this going to happen?”

“So, what did you do?”

Miranda laughed, quite merrily. “I finished my O levels, and then I ran away to join the circus!”
Andrea’s mouth fell open. “You’re kidding!”

“No, I’m serious. That’s exactly what I did! But to do it, I had to get a passport, and in order to do that I had to find my birth certificate. So that is what led me back to visit my mother’s mother, the grandmother who had abandoned us to the sadistic murderer all those years before.”

Miranda looked at her watch. It showed a time well after midnight. She put down her glass and stood up, stretching.

“I’ve talked myself hoarse,” she said ruefully. “Enough ramblings, don’t you think for tonight? Part three can be told tomorrow evening, if you still keen.”

“Of course!” Jenny and her daughter both exclaimed, and would have cheerfully continued, if Miranda hadn’t looked so exhausted. They all stood up, safely put away the half empty whiskey bottle out of sight of the twins, and washed up their glasses. As they walked towards the bedrooms behind Andrea, Jenny hugged Miranda to her side, and said quietly, “Well done. You did splendidly. Of course that was a slightly edited version, wasn’t it?”

Miranda nodded. “Yes, afraid so. Call it the Reader’s Digest sanitised account. But it gives Andy the gist of things. I’ll fill her in another time with more sordid details. Goodnight my friend, and thank you, for everything,” and they exchanged hugs.

When she rolled into bed a few moments later next to Andy, she could scarcely speak for tiredness.

Andy was ready with a gentle hug, a kiss and a squeeze.

“Joining a circus? Well, I’d never have expected that!”

“No, it surprised me as well, at the time.”

“Were there elephants?” asked Andy.

But there was silence in return. It told her Miranda had already fallen fast asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow. Hearing about the rest of her youthful adventures would obviously have to wait until the next time. Andy held her close and looked up at the dark ceiling. Then she smiled, and fell asleep just as soundly.
The World's fastest sequin sewer

Chapter Summary

Miranda joins a Circus, yes, really.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to all of you who have followed this story, which Miranda told to Andy. We are nearly at the end, as the next chapter will be the final one and should be written and posted by the end of this week. Feedback and kudoses are always warmly appreciated!

It was Saturday afternoon, the first weekend in September, and the last before everyone in New England returned to work or school mode. The roads out of Provincetown were already becoming blocked with well-nigh stationary traffic, as people started to exit the peninsula. Miranda, Andy, Jenny and the twins however were still firmly ensconced on the beach, complete with parasol, chairs and a little picnic table on which sat an icebox full of soft drinks.

While Miranda had been in the hair-salon with her daughters earlier in the day, having their haircuts, witnessed by an ever growing crowd of star-struck staff and customers, Andrea and her mother had gone bargain hunting in a general goods store down the street. They’d snapped up various end of season things to make life by the sea a little less basic. Jenny insisted on paying for the beach furniture.

“My small contribution, call it a house warming present.”

Miranda had talked seriously to the twins before they went in for their hair-dressing session. “It’s not like New York up here. It’s safer, and you don’t need to be frightened of people looking at you, or being interested in me. But I also don’t want you acting like little divas either. Be polite and don’t pull faces. Try to be good, please, for my sake. “

The twins both looked hard at her.

“Mommy, why are you different?” asked Cassidy.

“What on earth do you mean?”

Caroline said, “It’s true, you’re so different these days. You used to secretly like it when we played tricks on people, and acted up like we were Hollywood kids. You used do the same yourself, sweeping past people, being rude to waiters, throwing coats about.”

“Are you saying you learned your bad behaviour from me?”

“Too right!”

Miranda realised that out of the mouths of babes and sucklings, as the quote went, a really severe
judgement might be coming her way. She didn’t argue with them.

“Well, what do you think the reason might be for us all changing for the better?”

“Andy, of course!” The twins shouted in unison, and Miranda laughed with them.

“Yes, it’s all down to Andy. She’s our good fairy, isn’t she?”

“She will always be with us, won’t she?”

“God, I hope so,” replied Miranda, and almost to herself, added. “She is the light of my life. I don’t think I could live without her.”

The three of them had entered the salon, and the girls had behaved perfectly. Cassidy had her hair trimmed up short in a tousled bob, but Caroline had asked to keep the length at the back of hers.

“I’d like to grow it. How long will it take to grow as long as Andy’s?”

“Who’s Andy?” asked the hairdresser, smiling at Miranda.

“Oh she’s our other mother!” replied Caroline. “We all love Andy. She and Mommy are getting married, and we’re going to be bridesmaids.”

So that was how Miranda found herself cheerfully outed as a lesbian Mom to half the female population of Provincetown!

She was telling the little tale to Andy and her mother on the beach, as they watched the twins playing in the water, and they both laughed.

Andrea, though, wanted to get to the bottom of what Miranda had said the previous evening, just before they went to bed.

“You were kidding, weren’t you, when you said you joined a circus?”

“No, it’s true. Believe me! I’ve done some crazy things in my life.”

“So, go on, spill the beans. How did that happen?”

“Well, you know I said when I turned sixteen, I knew I would have to leave school and get a job to look after myself. I was so mad and frustrated, so restless, and all my dreams seemed to be crumbling.

“Then a large Circus came to put on shows in a park in South London, not far from where we lived, and the foster parents said we could all go. They were also the ones which had taken me to Margate, to the sea-side once on a day-trip. Apart from that, I’d never ever left London, not even seen the rest of South East England.

“The Circus was a big one, very well-known across the UK and Europe, and in those days it had lions, tigers and elephants, a large group of clowns, and an acrobatic troupe who performed on the trapeze swings. It also had a troupe of white horses with feathers on their heads, ridden by a girl who used to do gymnastics on their backs wearing a ballet outfit. Of course today, live shows with lions and tigers and elephants, are really discouraged, but they was normal in Circuses in the Seventies.

“I was completely entranced by the Circus acts, the ringmaster wore a top hat and had a whip which he cracked, and it all seemed magical. After the show I learned that the Circus would be on
site for another week, so I returned the following evening, and slid inside the compound with the crowd before the show started.

“Once I was inside the main gate, I wandered behind the scenes to see if I could catch sight of the white horses and the girl who rode them. I suddenly came across her holding her uniform which had split right down the back, and she was cursing and stamping about complaining how it couldn’t have happened at a worse time and what was she going to wear in the ring that evening?

“It was one of those moments, where the universe does something good for a change and you’re in the right place.

‘I can fix that for you, if you have a needle and thread,’ I heard myself say. “It won’t take me long to sew it up, and then you could get a permanent repair later.”

“I had no idea why I said it. I presumed they must have a costume department. But anyway she thrust the dress at me, and went up into her caravan, coming out with a very basic sewing kit.

“I sat on the steps of her van, and mended her costume, so no-one could see the tear.

“She looked very impressed with my mending ability. ‘You’re an angel from heaven, so you are. We could really do with someone like you to wash and mend all the costumes. I don’t suppose you need a job do you?’

“Well, that was it! I almost fell over with excitement. “Yes actually, I do need a job. I’d love to work here.”

“Wait then, I’ll get my Dad.” She went off to talk to the Circus manager, who was the guy in charge of the whole shoot. He asked me how old I was, and I panicked, then I lied and said I was seventeen. Seventeen sounded quite sophisticated.

“Well, if you’re serious, come back tomorrow, and we’ll see what we can do. We need someone to take care of costumes, and sew us up new ones as the acts change, especially the clowns. What experience do you have?”

“I told him I’d done lots of sewing, also that I’d made the outfit I was wearing, and I had an O level school certificate in tailoring. (The results weren’t out yet, but I already knew I’d passed that subject with flying colours.)

“Then he said, “Well, you’ll need a passport if you join the company. We have three weeks in Bournemouth and then we leave for the Continent for the rest of the year. Will your parents let you do that?”

“I just nodded. I never told anyone I was in Care.”

“Right, we’ll see you here tomorrow.”

“It was June 1971. I hadn’t officially yet left school, and I had no idea how you got a passport, but I could see my days in foster care were numbered, and here I could actually get the chance to travel, not just round Britain, but to France, and beyond. I returned and secured the job the next day and was told I had a week to sort my identity papers out.

“I went to see the social worker back in Lambeth who had originally rescued me from my stepfather, and gave her half a true story about being offered a job which involved travelling. I didn’t mention the circus! She told me we needed to find or apply for a copy of my original birth certificate, and did I have any idea where it might be?
“I’m so sorry we can’t keep you in Care until you are old enough for university,” I remember she said. “Your school reports are excellent.” I shrugged. The bitter disappointment had faded now that I had a chance to work for a circus, and I was eager to be on my way.

“Anyway, she found some records which helped her trace my mother’s mother’s address, and offered to come with me to the house to see her. I won’t call her my grandmother, because that would imply we had any sort of relationship.

“When we went to the house, I knew it was her immediately. She was old and sick, but had a look of my mother about the eyes, and had a shock of white hair. She stared at me and I glared at her. I was so angry at how she had treated my mother, I let the social worker do the talking. I didn’t trust myself.

She said very little in reply, but did go to an old tin box in a bureau and pulled out an envelope with my birth certificate inside.

“This is what you need, I presume.”

“There is a father named here,” said my social worker.” Has he ever shown any sign of wishing to support Miriam or her mother?”

The old lady sniffed. “Some-one did come, years ago. But they were Jewish. I didn’t care for them and I don’t remember what they said. I am a staunch Catholic, and I ‘d already told my daughter she’d go to hell, having a child out of marriage like that.”

“Did you not know about her tragic death twelve years ago? Did you never think your granddaughter might need you or it would help her to be in touch with her father? She suffered greatly at the hands of her very abusive step-father.”

“Well, I didn’t know. We thought it was for the best, getting her mother married one way or another. I suffered too. I lost all my children,” was all she replied. “I’ve had a very hard life. But if Miriam promises to be a good girl and look after me in my old age, I might consider having her back now. She could go to work. My pension doesn’t go very far.”

The social worker caught my look of absolute horror.

“I think the days of reconciliation have passed, I’m afraid. Thank you for your time. We’ll take the birth certificate.”

And we left.

In her car on the way back, she said little, except, “Sorry about that, but you have come through it all very well under your own steam, Miriam. You’ll go far, I’m sure.”

“I looked at my birth certificate with its name Miriam McCarthy. I suddenly hated it. I hated all connection with the terrible childhood I’d had. My father’s name was almost unspellable, a Polish Jewish mixture, but I could shorten it. We’d been reading “The Tempest” at school, and I had loved the name of Miranda, Prospero’s daughter. I decided, if I could I would change my name, change my life, and change my country. So when I went to get my passport, I set things in motion. So yes, I did join the Circus!”

Andrea’s eyes were as big as saucers. “You are astounding. I knew it the moment we met, but your life, what you’ve achieved. It’s like a novel!”

“More like one of those books they used to call “Penny Dreadfults”, snorted Miranda. She opened a
can of chilled pop from the cool box, and slurped it back in a most un-Miranda-like way.

“Can you stand anymore of this saga?”

“Yes, please. If it doesn’t upset you.”

“No, but it feels strange to tell a story no-one has ever heard from me before. I never even told the husbands the truth. It’s quite therapeutic to share it with you and your Mom. Well here goes . . .

“I worked for the Circus for two years, sharing a caravan with an assortment of girls. I learned to smoke, to drink, to try the odd marijuana joint. I slept with boys I hardly knew just to see what it was like, and found I didn’t like it very much! But after living in Care for six years and the horrors before, it was fantastic fun. We toured all along the south coast of England in the summers, but in the autumn and spring we went right down through Germany, France and Spain, and there I could be really useful, as I’d kept up my languages, and could now practise them properly, negotiating with the local owners of the sites where we camped, and buying in supplies from local shops.

“I worked really hard improving the clothes everyone wore in the shows, as well as designing new costumes, all on an old hand powered Singer sewing machine. I became the world’s fastest sequin sewer-on! Then in the second year, just as I was approaching the age of nineteen, we went into winter quarters on the outskirts of Paris. I was sharing a van with a Romanian girl who worked for the guy who threw knives at her for a living, and they had a volcanic love affair, which reminded me too much of my time hiding under the kitchen table for safety when I was little.

“I decide to move out and leave them to it, and so I gave in my notice and took the metro into Paris to look for the Fashion quarter. I’d somehow grown out of the Circus, particularly as there was one old clown who kept groping me whenever he got the chance, and I was very tired of sewing up his enormous trousers.

“I went into the Galeries Lafayette, a large department store, and asked if they would like to hire me as a shop assistant and fashion consultant. You can tell I was no longer the shy little kid from Brixton!”

“You were offered that job, naturally?”

“Naturally, darling. There is no woman in the world so superior or as glamorous as a Parisian shopgirl, and I outdid them all! That was when my nails grew into scarlet talons, my heels went up to the skies, and my head got too big for its very fashionable hats. After six months selling high-priced ready to wear clothes, I was ready for the real Fashion Houses. I started as a junior embellisher at Worth’s, buttons and bows, that sort of thing (sequins again!) then moved up into being trained as a cutter before I was twenty-one. A good cutter was considered la crème de la crème, then, as it still is today. “

“How did you move into journalism?”

“I was living with a boy who worked for Paris Vogue. We shared a bed and I thought we were a couple, as he adored to be seen out with me in public, but I don’t think he had long term plans for me as he never seemed interested in sex. I was cool with that, as I wasn’t too interested either!

“Looking back, we were both obviously gay, only I was too repressed and ignorant to even think about sex with a woman. This boyfriend, Jean-Louis, was a junior feature writer, and I would read his stuff, and think, “I can do much better than that.” I wrote a few articles and submitted them anonymously, under a pseudonym, and they were accepted.
“So I decided to be brave and confess who I was to one of the editorial staff. It was a fluke, and would never happen today, but they offered me a position straight off the street so to speak, so I resigned from Worth to shrieks of horror at the temerity of it. No-one left such an opportunity I was told, a million girls would kill for my job, but I was learning to be more headstrong with every year which passed, and decided I was tired of working just with fabrics. I wanted to go back to words, which had always been my first love.

My flat-mate, Jean-Louis, had finally come out as gay, and went off to New York with his boyfriend, and I had the apartment we shared all to myself. It was bliss, to live alone, and to sleep in a room on my own. Because I had kept saving all through the years with the circus, I had more than enough money to cover the rent.

“So that is how, my darlings, in 1975 I became a fashion writer, in French, for what was then the best fashion magazine in the world. I was twenty years old, but felt I’d already lived a hundred lifetimes. In a very few years, a new star was in the ascendency. Runway was launched and immediately began to rival Vogue, and I could see its potential. As soon as I could, I moved sideways into a writing position in Runway Paris, and eventually was sent to New York as deputy features editor. And the rest, as they say is history!”

“Wow,” sighed Andrea. “How exciting it all sounds, but I bet it was tough at the time, and you must have worked very hard,”

“I have always worked hard, harder than is reasonable or good for the health. I have always been in pursuit of something I scarcely understood, and it has turned me almost into a caricature of myself. I really don’t much care for the sarcastic bitch I have become lately. But since I’ve been with you, I feel completely set free from it all at last.

“You have done this, my dearest girl, my love, my friend. You have saved me from myself, and I shall spent the rest of my life trying to be worthy of you. You will still love me and marry me, won’t you, even after hearing all this saga of my mis-spent youth, and knowing what strange life I come from?”

“Oh Miranda, Miranda . . . “

Andrea really had no words to express how deeply she loved her goddess, her mistress, her fiancée, her lover. She simply reached or her hand and quietly caressed Miranda’s palm for several moments.

Then she said, very seriously and thoughtfully, “But do tell me more about the elephants. Did you have to sew costumes for them as well?”
The summer by the seaside draws to a close. Miranda feels doubly blessed, and the twins finally learn how the tides work, (well maybe).

Miranda, Andy Cass and Caroline sat together round a small table in the tiny café attached to Provincetown Airport. They had ordered drinks and a large bag of corn chips, but no-one seemed very hungry. If she was honest, thought Andrea, she and the other three all felt rather forlorn, having just seen her mother off at the departures gate, with a general exchange of multiple kisses and hugs.

Caroline gave a gusty sigh. “Why does America have to be so big? Why can’t we all live closer to each other?”

“She is the best new Granny anyone could ask for,” said Cassidy. “And she has a pony. I love Granny Meg of course, but she’s always complaining about her very close veins, and she doesn’t know any card games.”

Miranda sipped a diet coke through a straw and tried to look on the bright side.

“Well, we’ll be seeing Jenny again at Thanksgiving, and Andy’s Dad as well as her brothers and sisters. It’s not too long now, and you’ll be so busy in your new big school, you’ll hardly notice the weeks fly by.”

“But what will you and Andy do? You’ve both quit your jobs, so are you just going to sit around at home all day?” Caroline sounded quite stern about the thought of her Mom having too much time on her hands.

“Not at all. Don’t be cheeky, darling Caro. Andy is going to put in at least eight hours a day, proving to me she really does wants to be a writer, and I am going to start my year by re-decorating and re-organizing the whole town house so it works better as a family home.”

Miranda had already decided she didn’t like the rather pompous formality of her house, and was determined to extinguish all traces of Stephen ever having shared it with them.

“Can we help? Can we re-decorate our own bedrooms the way we want?”
Miranda hesitated, but they were too young surely for going Goth on her and painting their walls black. She said, “Of course you can choose any colours and wallpapers you like, but I think I’m going to hire professional interior decorators to do the actual painting.”

Andy looked up at the display board. “Drink up everyone. Granny Jen’s flight is just about to take off. Let’s go up to the viewing gallery and wave her off. Then we only have thirty minutes before your Dad’s plane is due in.”

They all stood up and walked or scampered off, depending on their age-group, and then climbed the few steps up to the viewing area.

Miranda squeezed Andy’s hand resting on the rail. “Thank you for giving me your Mom, as my friend,” she said. “Apart from all the other joys you have brought into my life, she is one of the most precious. I still don’t know how she did it, but she gave me the key to open up my lost childhood. I can’t express how different I feel about things now. It’s like a great knot of tension in my stomach has completely uncurled.”

“I’m so happy for that, of course. But don’t feel you can’t still let more things out if they continue to trouble you. I don’t mind if you lose the plot sometimes. You can also get ratty with me as well. I am sure I do lots of things to irritate and annoy you. I certainly always used to.”

“Oh, baby, half the time I snarled at you it was simply to see how sweetly you used to blush and look tearfully confused. I was just a sadist, there’s no way of pretending otherwise. And then I so wanted just to gather you up and kiss away the tears. I deserve a hundred years in purgatory to work off my appalling behaviour.”

“No, no guilt, no talk of purgatory. If there is a heaven, you are going straight there. For one thing, you have made me the happiest woman on the planet. I keep pinching myself to see if I’m dreaming or not. My whole existence has turned into a golden haze of happiness. And don’t you be so sceptical, by the way, about my determination to write. I already have a book in my mind which I am going to get started on immediately.”

“On what, pray.”

“You’ll see! How about, “Dragon taming for beginners” as a working title?”

Miranda rolled her eyes, and slapped Andy lightly on the behind. But then, almost as an apparent afterthought, kept her hand firmly curved round the young woman’s buttock and squeezed it gently. They looked each other in the eye, and saw their pupils dilate together. Andrea felt the danger of the moment.

“Tell me what Geoffrey looks like, please,” she said, to break the spell. “You told me you were way off beam with how you imagined my Mom to be before you met each other. I feel the same with your ex-husband, I am sure he’s rich, handsome, and urbane and will definitely despise me.”

“Nonsense. Geoff is what you might imagine any overweight guy in his mid-fifties looks like who drinks far too much, and doesn’t take enough exercise. He used to be very good looking, but his hair is receding and his private life has taken its toll. He does have a good sense of humor though, and is charm personified compared to how Stephen turned out. He and I have stayed friends, after a fashion, and I would trust him implicitly where the twins are concerned. He’s a good dad and he does love them, so I hope they get back on the same wavelength over this weekend visit.”

When the plane from Boston landed, they did not have long to wait before Geoff Priestly came striding out through the door into the Arrivals lobby, and Andrea hung back slightly shyly while
the twins rushed forward and pulled him towards her and Miranda.

“Daddy! This is Andy! You’ve got to meet her. She’s so cool.”

Andrea felt anything but cool. She had dressed up slightly into a red shift dress and low slung heeled sandals, and she had brushed and coiled her hair into a twisted bun at the nape of her neck, but she still felt like a school girl, or maybe even worse, a bimbo hanger-on within Miranda’s family.

“Oh, wonder woman!” smiled Geoff, not unfriendly. He put out his right hand and she shook it with the tips of her fingers. “I’m told you have miraculously transformed my daughters into well adjusted, happy young women, rather than a pair of hoydens. I can’t wait to see whether this is true, and how you have achieved such a thing.”

Miranda sensed that Andrea did not quite know how to respond to this, and stepped into the breach. “We’re all very happy to see you Geoff, aren’t we girls? It’s especially good for Cassidy and Caroline to spend time with you. Let’s get the car and we’ll show you our new place on the beach.”

Andy followed the Priestlys over the parking lot to where Miranda’s Lexus was parked under a shaded area. She had previously asked Miranda why she had never changed her name from her first marriage. When it came, the answer had made sense.

“Mainly because I wanted my children to have the same name as me, and they are Priestlys. It’s not an unpleasant or unusual name, and anyway over the ten years of our marriage it was the professional name I was known by across the fashion world. I always wished it had an E before the final Y though, like J.B. Priestley, but so many names were changed when people first arrived in America, it’s hardly surprising.”

When they reached the car, they put Geoff’s small piece of luggage in the trunk, Miranda drove, and Andrea sat in the back next to the twins, who could barely stop talking to their father about all the things they had done, and the fun they had had in Provincetown.

“Pleased to see you haven’t brought golf-clubs,” muttered Miranda as they passed the local Course.

“I did actually consider it,” admitted her Ex, “but then I thought it wouldn’t be right. I haven’t played much at all this summer anyway. Too much on.”

“How are your parents?”

“Fine, for their age. They send their love, wish they could see more of you and the girls.”

“Well, they might be able to in the coming months. I’m taking a sabbatical, Geoff, for the whole of this academic year. I’m not returning to Runway until September next year.”

Geoff looked shocked, and turned in his seat to look back at Andrea. “Is she having me on? The most workaholic woman in the USA?”

Andrea nodded, with a little smile. “Yes, she deserves it. She taken a by-pass on a whole year of possible grief and struggle. The Paris shows will have to manage themselves this year, as will New York fashion week.”

“I can’t believe it! And is this down to you, young woman? You’ve managed to do something I never could, in ten years of marriage. She would hardly come away on a honeymoon with me.”
“Don’t pick on Andy, Geoff, though she did have a little bit to do with it. I mainly just realised I needed a break. I think I was approaching burn-out.”

Geoff gave Miranda a considered stare. It amazed him that she was even admitting to any human frailty herself, she who had always claimed to despise people who showed their fallibilities. This might be a very interesting 24 hour visit. Miranda’s new young companion was certainly very pretty, and looked a sweet natured girl. Maybe she had softened up the old battle-axe at last!

They were soon at the cottage, and again Geoff was surprised, both by its simplicity, and also by its very homely and friendly atmosphere. The girls took him by the hand and gave him the grand tour, which took all of ten minutes, while Miranda brewed coffee, and Andy set out the chairs and swing on the veranda.

Miranda had been right. Geoff did look like any slightly battered lawyer in his mid-fifties who could do with getting back into shape. He had a pleasant accent however and a crinkly smile when he grinned, rather like the twins. Andy stopped being quite so nervous about him despising her. He didn’t look the sarcastic type.

“Where’s the TV room?” she heard him ask, as the girls walked him back from their small bunk-bedded room.

“Daddy! We don’t watch TV here. We haven’t got any WIFI either. No Google. And we don’t have to practise music either. There’s no piano!”

“Well, I’ll be damned. What is it, a Buddhist retreat? Are you telling me, Miranda that our children have survived seven days without being on a tablet, or their Iphones?”

“Yes. I haven’t been in any hurry to get us online. It’s actually been good for us all. We’ve done a lot of talking.”

“You don’t say, just the four of you?”

“No, Daddy, Andy’s Mom, Granny Jen came to stay, so there’s been five. Granny Jen is a vegan. She eats bean burgers. Have you ever tried a bean burger? They’re very good. “

“I said it’s like a Buddhist retreat. All you need is some wind chimes and prayer flags, and you’ll be away. So what else have you done? “

“We’ve painted pictures. Look that’s mine up on the wall. It’s of geraniums and Mommy’s magic pebble, the one which made her cry. She thought we didn’t know, but we always know.”

“Oh darlings, I didn’t . . . “

“Don’t worry, Mommy. It’s all right. Granny Jen explained to us that even grown-ups cry sometimes, and it’s fine if it’s for the right reasons and she said yours was exactly the right reason, and we were not to worry, that Andy would look after you, and of course she has”.

Then Cassidy chipped in with news she was eager to share, “Daddy, Mommy is going to marry Andy. Do you mind?”

“My wonderful children. It is impossible to keep anything quiet with you two!” Miranda lifted up her hands in mock despair, and nodded ruefully at Geoff, before changing the subject.

“Here, have a coffee. We’ll eat in an hour or two, so let’s sit outside and enjoy the rest of the afternoon sun. Or would you like a shower to help you unwind from the city?”
Geoff was so astonished by everything he had heard in the last hour that he could hardly take it all in. He sipped his coffee and agreed that to sit on the veranda and enjoy the view of the still blue sea would be a perfect way to unwind. The girls sat at his feet, and continued their praise for Andy.

“She’s very good at softball, and she knows all about everything. She showed us how the sun and moon and earth work together using apples, but we still can’t get our heads round why the tides are higher or lower at different times in different places. Do you know, Daddy?”

Geoff suddenly felt the dignity of fatherhood depended on him coming up with the answer. “I’ll think about it,” was the best he could come up with, but decided that as soon as he went in for a shower, he would look it up on his Iphone on the phone network, and produce a solution.

“What else have you been doing?”

“We’ve given Mom swimming lessons. She’s not frightened of putting her head under the water anymore, and she can crawl a bit.”

“I thought I was very good,” protested Miranda, pretending to pull a face.

Cassidy patted her hand. “You are coming along nicely, but you need to practise more.”

Geoff had never seen Miranda even get her hair wet. This was truly an afternoon of revelations.

“And we’ve played cards. We learned a new one called Racing Demons, but I think it’s a bit fast for you, Dad.”

“Hmmrh.” Geoff grunted. “Have you ever played Poker? Every American needs to play poker, to understand our political system if nothing else.”

“Poke her? Is it like Old Maid?”

The unintentional double-entendre caught the adults by surprise and they had to stifle a laugh.

“No, honey, but it’s fun.”

“I’m not having them turning into little gamblers.”

“Don’t be daft. We can play with cents, or matchsticks.”

“We do know how to play Gin-Rummy, and Whist.”

“When you’re a little older, I’ll teach you to play Bridge if you like card games. Remember when we used to play Bridge with my parents, Miranda?”

He looked across at her, remembering how she used to hate to lose any game, how impatient she’d become if he made a blunder as her Bridge partner. Miranda seemed so different now, so much softer. She was still spectacularly Ice-Queen beautiful, but she looked, how could he describe it? . . . And then he realised. . . .his former wife just looked very, very happy. She looked healed from her demons.

He wondered if she had been basically gay all through her life, whether that was why she had found it so hard to enjoy sex with him, and, he suspected, any other man, why she had rarely come to orgasm, try as he often had to get her sufficiently drunk to relax and just go with the flow?
He understood, in a way he never had before, why their marriage had failed, and he didn’t hold it against Miranda any more. He stopped blaming her, even a little, for the mess they had found themselves in, and was simply grateful that they could still be friends, and that they had two bright and beautiful daughters. The atmosphere of the beach cottage seeped into his mind and body and he lay back on the swing seat and enjoyed the whisper of the waters around him.

“Dad! Dad! Wake up! Supper’s on the table!” Caroline was pulling on his arm, and he jumped with a start.

“My God, how long have I been asleep? Sorry!”

“Don’t worry. This place does it for you. You’ve slept for nearly two hours, but you were obviously exhausted,” said Miranda. She was stirring a pot of pasta, and taking it to the table in the one main sitting room. “Spag. Bol. The girls made it with Andy supervising them, but I made the salad!”

“Do you remember that short story by O Henry we used to like, where the three people in an apartment made a stew between them, but it took the neighbour who provided an onion to bring out the flavor? It just came back to me. I don’t know why.”

“Yes, I remember. We used to enjoy reading together, didn’t we?”

“We enjoyed lots of things together. We just have to bring those things back to mind, and forget all the garbage we piled on each other. I’ll go and wash up. Wow, you have two bathrooms here! Which one shall I choose?”

“Don’t be a snot, Geoff. “Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit” and yes, I do know I can’t talk as I’m the world’s most sarcastic person.”

They all sat down to the spaghetti Bolognese together, followed by strawberry ice-cream and fresh peaches from a farm stall down the road. Andrea blended in with the conversational gambits between Miranda and Geoff, and both women were pleased to see just how well he was relaxing with his daughters, really listening to what they said and answering them seriously. He did not once use his phone to escape with a phone call to Cindy.

Miranda felt a little guilty how much this pleased her, so asked, “And how is Cindy? Is she OK with you coming to see us?”

“Fine, she’s fine. She’s taking a course in para-legal administration, so she’s studying this weekend. “

“Does she work for your firm?”

“That’s how we met, but she’s moved to another firm in Boston. Not appropriate, work based relationships, you know . . . “

Miranda and Andrea exchanged a grin.

“Absolutely. We know all about that.”

Miranda then threw another ball right into the field of play, one no-one was expecting.

“You know, I am thinking about taking a college course or two myself this year, while I’m fixing
the house up.”

“What?!”

“Well you know I never made it to College first time around and there’s so much I want to learn. I was thinking of Art History. Then I’d have an excuse to take Andrea and the girls to Italy next Easter. What do you think? Do you think I could cope?”

They all laughed and agreed she’d walk it.

Geoff said, “It’s a great idea, but take Andrea off to Italy on your own. It’s a great place for romance, and you deserve some of that. The girls and I will be fine by ourselves, won’t we? We might even come here to Provincetown, if you lend me the cottage. It is rather a special place isn’t it?”

They all nodded, and Miranda felt doubly blessed. Her children, Andy’s Mom, her ex-husband, her colleagues at Runway, they all seemed to be wanting this to work, to affirm her and Andrea as a permanent, loving couple. That was one blessing, and the second, of course was Andy herself, sitting across from her, chatting to her girls and showing them how to fold napkins into the shape of candles, beautiful, sexy, candid and infinitely kind.

There were no words to express her happiness. But phrases formed in her mind. “You’ve made it, Miranda. You’ve made it through. You’ve made it to Andy. You’ve made it home.”

“Come down onto the beach,” said Geoff. “I think I know how to explain the tides. It came to me in the bathroom just before supper, but we need a length of rope or string. Do you have a washing line about the place?”

And the whole family went down laughing onto the sands together.

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