

J. COURTNEY
SULLIVAN

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF MAINE

THE
Engagements

A NOVEL



The Engagements

A NOVEL

J. Courtney Sullivan



ALFRED A. KNOPF

NEW YORK

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For Kevin

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Epigraph

1947

Part One

1972

1987

2003

2012

1955

Part Two

1972

1987

2003

2012

1968

Part Three

1972

1987

2003

2012

1988

Part Four

1972

2012

2003

1987

1988

Part Five

1972

2003

1987

2012

Author's Note

Acknowledgments

A Note About the Author

Reading Group Guide

Other Books by This Author

And what gives diamonds their hard and remorseless beauty, really? Whether they ~~emerge from the death of a star or the life of plankton makes no difference~~, for these chips from the earth are nothing more than an empty cage for our dreams—blank surfaces upon which the shifting desires of the heart could be written.

—Tom Zoellner, *The Heartless Stone*

We spread the word of diamonds worn by stars of screen and stage, by wives and ~~daughters of political leaders, by any woman who can make the grocer's wife and~~ the mechanic's sweetheart say, "I wish I had what she has."

—1948 strategy paper, N. W. Ayer and Son

Frances poured the last bitter remains of the coffeepot into her cup. The small kitchen table was covered in paper: layouts, copies of confidential reports, lousy ideas she had scrapped hours ago, and good ones, already published in *Look*, *Vogue*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, and *Harper's Bazaar*, to remind her that she had done it before and could do it again.

For once, the apartment building was silent. Usually, from off in some distant corner she could hear a baby crying, a couple arguing, a toilet flushing. But it was past three a.m. The revelers had long been asleep, and the milkmen weren't yet awake.

Her roommate had gone to bed around ten—at the sight of her standing there in her nightgown and curlers, Frances was overcome with professional jealousy, even though Ann was only a secretary in a law office, who would spend tomorrow the same way she spent every day, fetching coffee and taking dictation.

Frances had just finished writing the newest De Beers copy, a honeymoon series with pictures of pretty places newlyweds might go—*the rocky coast of Maine! Arizona! Paris! Arizona!*—something generic for people without much money, which she labeled *By the river*.

In a way, that one was the most important of them all, since they were trying to appeal to the average Joe. A decade earlier, when De Beers first came on as a client, the agency had done a lot of surveying to find out the strength—or really the weakness—of the diamond engagement ring tradition. In those days, not many women had wanted one. It was considered just absolutely money down the drain. They'd take a washing machine or a new car, anything but an expensive diamond ring. She had helped to change all that.

The honeymoon ads read, *May your happiness last as long as your diamond*. A pretty good line, she thought.

"Time for bed, Frank," she whispered to herself, the same words her mother had whispered to her every night when she was a child.

She was just about to switch off the light when she saw the blank signature line that the art director had drawn on the layouts, which she was meant to fill in by morning.

"Rats."

Frances sat back down, lit a cigarette, and picked up a pencil.

A day earlier, Gerry Lauck, head of the New York office, had called her.

"I think we should have something that identifies this as diamond advertising," he said. "What do you think?"

When Gerry Lauck asked what you thought, it was wise to understand that he was not actually asking. In her opinion, the man was a genius. Unpredictable and a bit gloomy at times, but perhaps all geniuses were like that.

"Yes, perfect," she said.

Gerry looked like Winston Churchill, he acted like Winston Churchill, and sometimes Frances believed he thought he was Winston Churchill. He even had fits of depression. The first time she had to go to New York to show him her ideas, she was scared to death. Gerry looked them over, his face giving no indication of what he thought. After several torturous

minutes, he smiled and said, "Frances, you write beautifully. More important, you know how to sell."

They had liked each other ever since. Half the employees of N. W. Ayer were afraid of Gerry Lauck, or couldn't stand him. The other half thought he hung the moon, and Frances was one of them.

"The line shouldn't say anything about De Beers, of course," Gerry continued over the phone.

"Of course."

For nine years, De Beers had spent millions on ads that barely mentioned the company itself. To even name it as a distributor would be breaking the law. So the advertisements were simply for diamonds, and they were beautiful. Ayer pulled out all the stops. They couldn't show pictures of diamond jewelry in the ads, which left the art department in a pickle. In theory, Gerry had nothing to do with creative. He was a straight-up businessman and just handed out the assignments. But as an art lover, he thought to commission a series of original paintings from Lucioni, Berman, Lamotte, and Dame Laura Knight. He purchased preexisting works from some of the finest galleries in Europe for the De Beers collection, including Dalí, Picasso, and Edvard.

The resulting four-color ads showed gorgeous landscapes, cities, cathedrals. Printed on the page, just below the artist's creation, would be a box displaying illustrations of stones ranging from half a carat to three carats, along with approximate prices for each. Gerry was the first person to create an ad campaign featuring fine art. A year or two later, everyone in the business was doing it.

"I'll need the tagline by tomorrow," Gerry said. "I'll be in to Philadelphia in the morning and then on to South Africa by late afternoon."

"Sure thing," Frances said, and then promptly forgot all about it until now, the middle of the night.

She sighed. If she hadn't been bucking all her life for the title of World's Biggest Procrastinator, maybe she'd get some sleep one of these days. She knew she had to work tonight, but still she had stayed out with her pal Dorothy Dignam until Dorothy had to catch the nine o'clock train back to Penn Station.

Dorothy started as an Ayer copywriter in the Philadelphia office in 1930, but soon after Frances came to the agency four years back, Dorothy moved to the New York office at 30 Rockefeller Center to head up the public relations department. Like Frances, De Beers was her main priority. They had publicists in Miami, Hollywood, and Paris, too, just for this one client. Dorothy had even arranged for the creation of a short film with Columbia Pictures, *The Magic Stone: Diamonds Through the Centuries*. It started playing in theaters in September 1945 and by the time the run was over, it had been seen by more than fifteen million people.

Her friend would never tell her age, but Frances guessed that Dorothy was at least a decade and a half older than she was, probably about fifty. She had been in advertising in Chicago the last year of the First World War. She was the *Chicago Herald's* society reporter at seventeen years old and stayed until the day Mr. Hearst moved in and moved her out. She went from there to the offices of the Contented Cow milk company as a copywriter, and later to Ayer.

Dorothy was a real hot ticket. She was something of a model for Frances. She had traveled

the world for Ayer in the thirties, working in London, Paris, and Geneva for Ford, sailing Norway and Sweden to study household electrical progress. She even made frequent visits to Hollywood, where she went to the Trocadero for dinner and saw all the stars. She once ran into Joan Crawford in Bullocks Wilshire. Dorothy bought size 16 of the dress that Joan had purchased in size 14. *Just an inexpensive black daytime frock and very useful to both of us, I'm sure* was how she had described it in a postcard she sent.

Their dinner tonight had started off as a business meeting, but after two martinis each they were laughing uproariously at a table at Bookbinder's, eating oysters and telling jokes about the fellas at work. They were endlessly amused by the things they were expected to know about women in the office. A few years ago, Dorothy started keeping a sheet of paper in the vacuum drawer under her typewriter, and every question that was asked of her, she typed down.

Tonight, she had read Frances a few of the latest: "How should a woman look when her son is seventeen? Could a winter hat have a bird's nest on it? Is Macy's singular or plural? Do women ever warble in the bathtub? What's the difference between suede and buck? Do Queen Mary have a nice complexion? How many times a day do you feed a baby? Is this thing an inverted pleat?"

They had had a ball, but now Frances would have to pay the price.

She glanced at a sheet of paper, a recent strategy plan, and read, *We are dealing primarily with a problem in mass psychology. We seek to maintain and strengthen the tradition of the diamond engagement ring—to make it a psychological necessity. Target audience: some seven million people fifteen years and over whose opinion we hope to influence in support of our objectives.*

Well, that narrowed it down nicely.

In 1938, a representative of Sir Ernest Oppenheimer, president of De Beers Consolidated Mines, wrote to Ayer to inquire whether, as he put it, "the use of propaganda in various forms" might boost the sales of diamonds in America.

The Depression had caused diamond prices to plummet around the world. Consumer interest had all but vanished. There were only half as many diamonds sold in America as there had been before the war, and the few diamond engagement rings still being purchased were inexpensive and small. De Beers had reserve stocks they couldn't possibly sell. Oppenheimer was eager to bring the diamond engagement ring to prominence in the United States, and he had it on good authority that Ayer was the best in the business, the only agency for the job. He proposed a campaign at \$500,000 annually for the first three years.

What Ayer had done for De Beers was a true testament to the power of advertising. By 1941, diamond sales had increased by 55 percent. After the Second World War, the number of weddings in America soared, and diamonds went right along with them. The price of diamonds went up, too: Today, a two-carat diamond could range in price from \$1,500 to \$3,300. In 1939, it would have been \$900 to \$1,750.

They had created a whole new sort of advertising for this campaign, and other agencies had been copying it ever since. In the absence of a direct sale to be made, or a brand name to be introduced, there was only an idea: the emotional currency attached to a diamond.

De Beers produced less than they could, to keep supply low and price high. Not only did their advertising approach boost sales, it also ensured that, once sold, a diamond would never return to the marketplace. After Frances got finished pulling their heartstrings, widows could

even divorcées would not want to part with their rings.

On occasion over the years, she had imagined what the Oppenheims must look like. The peculiar particulars of their relationship stoked her imagination, making her wonder what their faces did when they saw her newest ideas. Were there raised eyebrows? Slight smiles? Exclamations?

It was unusual for her not to have met a client, but De Beers was prohibited from coming to the United States because of the cartel. The company controlled the world supply of rough diamonds, a monopoly so strong that the mere presence of its representatives in America violated the law. They operated out of Johannesburg and London. Once a year, Gerry Laufer took the ads she wrote to South Africa in a thick leather-bound book for their approval. He kept a set of golf clubs there, since it was easier than lugging them back and forth from New York.

The first time Gerry went to Johannesburg to present market research to the Oppenheims, the small seaplane he was traveling on made a crash landing off the Island of Mozambique. He used the large mounted maps and charts he had brought along as flotation devices to get to shore. Two others on board died, and *The New York Times* ran the headline AIRLINER IS WRECKED IN SOUTHEAST AFRICA: AMERICAN ESCAPES INJURY. Gerry felt that the presentation quite literally saved his life, and perhaps for that reason, he was willing to do whatever it took for De Beers.

Her roommate let out a great snore in the next room, interrupting Frances's thoughts.

Ann was waiting on a marriage proposal from a dull accountant she had been dating for a while now. After that, Frances would be back on the hunt for a new roommate, as had tended to happen every few months or so since the war ended. Rose, Myrtle, Hildy: one by one, she had lost them all to matrimony. But she was up for a promotion at the office, so perhaps when Ann left she could finally afford to live alone.

When Frances started working at Ayer four years ago, at the age of twenty-eight, she had convinced her parents that it was time for her to move away from home and into the city. But her paycheck demanded that she get a roommate to help with the rent. She wanted a house of her own on the Main Line. Then she'd never have to worry about getting enough hot water in the shower on winter mornings, or tolerating Ann's nasally soprano as she accompanied Dinah Shore on the radio at night. She relished and dreamed about the prospect of living alone, the same way most single girls probably dreamed about married life.

Frances ran a finger over one of her new honeymoon ads. Other women never seemed to think about what came next. They were so eager to be paired up, as if marriage was known to be full of splendor. Frances was the opposite: she could never stop thinking about it. She might go to dinner or out dancing with someone new, and have a fine time. But when she got home and climbed into bed afterward, her heart would race with fear. If she went out with him again, then they might go out again after that. Eventually, she would have to take him home to be evaluated by her parents, and vice versa. Then he would propose. And she, like all the other working girls who had married before her, would simply disappear into a life of motherhood and isolation.

Dorothy had once told her that her beau George came home from the First World War and married a butcher's daughter. She said something clever, which Frances assumed she had said before: "The blow—as keen as that from any meat ax—was considerably softened by the

thought that the Women's Advertising Club still loved me."

Frances couldn't picture Dorothy with a broken heart. She was too independent, too sharp for all that. Say this George had returned and asked for her hand and hidden her away in a nice house somewhere. Wouldn't she have been bored out of her skull in a matter of weeks?

Dorothy's father was J. B. Dignam, an advertising pioneer and newspaperman who died when she was twenty. Ever since, she had supported herself and her dear mother, too. They lived in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, for a time, and now resided at the Hotel Parkside, a rooming house in the Gramercy section of Manhattan. Frances wasn't sure how Dorothy managed.

After five years at Ayer, you got a medal bearing the company motto: *KEEPING EVERLASTINGLY AT THE FOREFRONT BRINGS SUCCESS*. Whenever Frances saw one of the medals on someone's desk, she thought of herself, *Lovely sentiment. That and some money would be nice.*

Ayer employees had a saying: *It's a great place to work if your family can afford to send you.*

Frances had grown up mostly in Philadelphia, comfortable enough but without much extravagance. The family had one servant, a girl named Alberta, who taught her how to bake pies and braid her hair. Frances's father, the son of Irish immigrants, worked as a coal yard superintendent. Her mother's people hailed from Ireland as well, but they had settled in Canada, where they did an impressive business in construction, putting up skyscrapers all over Ontario. The Pigotts were well known there, but in the States no one had heard of them. Frances's mother liked to say that to Americans, Canada may as well be Zanzibar for all they knew about what went on across the border.

Her father lost his job at the start of the Depression. They had to let Alberta go. Eventually, they moved up north to Hamilton, her mother's hometown. Frances was fifteen when they arrived. She would stay until she turned twenty, when better times brought them three of them home. Back in Pennsylvania, her parents bought Longview Farm, a sprawling place in Media, where they now raised goats and horses.

As a teenager, it had been difficult to leave her friends behind and to try to fit in with her Pigott cousins, who were accustomed to all manner of luxury. But over time, Frances came to enjoy life in Canada.

There, she and her father grew closer than ever, the two outsiders. Frances was an only child, and if her father, like most men, had wanted a boy, he never let on. He treated her like neither male nor female, just as his one and only, his darling. Anything Frances wanted to do, he thought was swell. And if she didn't like something and wanted to give it a skip, that was fine by him too. Her father had saved her from the cotillions and socials and dance lessons that were the fate of all her female cousins.

As a girl, Frances had liked to write short stories. He read every one of them, giving her his critiques.

"You're not an editor," her mother once scolded him. "You're her father. You should just say the stories are grand."

But Frances thrilled to his criticisms. They made his praise all the sweeter. And they made her feel like she was a real writer.

At sixteen, while still in high school, she got a job at a community paper in Ontario, writing a shopping column. She went out and sold the advertising and wrote the ads, too, and made forty-five dollars a week in the middle of the Depression. That had lit a fire in her—she loved

writing and selling. Most of all, she loved drawing her own paycheck. Her father was proud.

Frances thought that her time in Canada had prepared her well for working at Ayer. The company president, Harry Batten, was a self-made man who liked hiring wealthy Ivy League types, with a strong tendency toward Yale. They had plenty of clients like that, too. Men with names like du Pont and Rockefeller. Frances was the only person in the copy department without a college degree, but she carried herself with as much confidence as anyone else, and no one seemed to notice the difference.

Batten was fond of boasting that Ayer had an employee from every one of the forty-eight states.

A Nordic Protestant from every state! Frances thought. *Well done you!* The agency didn't look fondly on Catholics, and Jews were out of the question. But then, every agency was like that. She kept her Catholicism to herself. She only called in sick once a year, on Ash Wednesday.

Four years at the agency had gone by in a flash, her grandmother wondering each Christmas with greater urgency than the last when Frances planned to settle down and have a family of her own. Her parents had been older than usual when they married in 1911, after meeting by chance on holiday in the Thousand Islands. Her mother was twenty-eight, her father thirty. Another four years passed before Frances was born. Her mother could still remember all the questions and concerns her older relatives had thrown at her—she had married too late, they said. She was waiting too long for children. These complaints had hurt her deeply. So for a long time, she refused to bother Frances about such things. When the window for nudging opened, it was quite short, as Frances soon turned thirty-two, apparently the age at which everyone gave up hope. Just like that, she went from perhaps only a pitiable late bloomer to a full-blown maiden lady. It was a delight to have the pressure off, really.

She worked for the most powerful advertising agency in the world. She found her job far more exciting than any man she had met in the longest. Even this—staying up until all hours jittery with the fear of not getting it right—even this thrilled her.

The irony of her situation wasn't lost on her: she was a bachelor girl whose greatest talent so far was for convincing couples to get engaged.

When Frances joined Ayer in '43, 103 employees were at war—10 percent of the agency. The only clients they took on during that time were the Boeing Airplane Company and the U.S. Army. Advertisements for luxury goods were seen as vulgar. From June 1942 until September 1943, De Beers advertising was confined to spreading the word of the company's contribution of industrial diamonds to the war effort. After that, jewelry advertising resumed but they had to be sensitive about it. In 1945, Frances created a new campaign, unlike anything that had ever been seen in American magazines before. The ads celebrated the weddings of real American GIs who were returning home to civilian life, and the girls they had left behind. They featured illustrations of actual ceremonies and stories about the couples. At the same time, important information was given about diamonds.

During the war, Ayer made increasing use of women. Out of necessity, they were hiring girls on, and not just in clerical jobs and the steno pool, but in executive and semi-executive roles. There was Dolores in business production, and Sally in the media department. Two women in accounts, and Dorothy in public relations, of course.

In the copy department, there were now a total of thirteen men and three women. The women were meant to provide the feminine point of view when it came to creating

campaigns for products that females would buy, or at least influence the purchase of.

For De Beers, Frances's own desires were no help. Instead, she studied her coworkers and her friends and her roommates. What did they want most? Well, that was easy—they wanted marriage. What did they fear? They feared being alone. The war had only heightened both sensations. She played off of that. She tried to say that the diamond itself could prevent a tragic outcome: *The engagement diamond on her finger is bright as a tear—but not with sadness. Like her eyes it holds a promise—of cool dawns together, of life grown rich and full and tranquil. Its lovely assurance shines through all the hours of waiting, to kindle with joy and precious meaning the beginning of their new life to be.*

Much of the time, the ads appealed to men, since they would be the ones buying the ring. They did a lot of rather fancy advertising about gentlemen—about good taste and accomplishment, and how both ideas could be conveyed through the ring you gave your beloved, even if you didn't actually have either one.

A friend had recalled one night during the war that her beau wrote to say he was worried about what might happen to her if he didn't come home. Mortality was on his mind, and Frances reasoned, the minds of others like him. And so she wrote, *Few men can found a city, name a new star, shatter an atom. Few build for themselves a monument so tall that future generations may point to it from far off, saying, "Look, that was our father. There is his name. That was his lifework." Diamonds are the most imperishable record a man may leave of his personal life.*

It was all very dark and heavy-handed. Gerry Lauck thought it was brilliant.

Frances closed her eyes for a moment. She should sleep some, or else she'd look a fright at the morning meeting. But what to do about the signature line? She arranged a handful of magazines in the shape of a fan on the floor, all open to her ads.

In *Vogue*: *Your diamonds glow with loveliness at every wearing. Yours is a timeless charm transcending every change in fashion.*

In *Collier's*: *Wear your diamonds as the night wears its stars, ever and always ... for their beauty is as timeless.*

In *Life*: *In the engagement diamond on her finger, the memories will shine forever.*

She had clearly long been surfeited by this idea of permanence. She closed her eyes and said, "Dear God, send me a line."

Frances scribbled something on a scrap of paper, taking it to bed with her and placing it on the nightstand. She lay down fully dressed, without getting under the covers, and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Three hours later, she woke to the alarm and looked first thing at the words she had written: *A Diamond Is Forever.*

She thought it would do just fine.

As her feet hit the cold hardwood, she heard Ann in the hallway making for the bathroom. In her roommate's case, the engagement couldn't come soon enough.

Frances quickly ate her breakfast and showered. She put on a long-sleeved brown dress, not bothering to check her reflection in the mirror. It was usually something of a disappointment to her anyway: her flat, wide cheeks, her goofy grin. She had been out on dates with men who called her pretty, but she knew the facts. She towered over half the boys at the office. She was all wrong for a woman in this day and age, when the gentler sex was supposed to be

demure, quiet, and pocket-sized.

She rode the train downtown, clutching the slip of paper from the previous night. When she reached Washington Square, she hurried toward the Ayer building. She was dangerously close to being late.

In 1934, when the rest of the world was flat broke, N. W. Ayer and Son had enough cash to build their thirteen-story headquarters, directly across from the old statehouse. It was a magnificent structure, made of Indiana limestone, in the Art Moderne style.

She had been so proud the first time her father visited for lunch and whistled under his breath, “Wow, Mary Frances. That’s really something.” He only used her first name when he wanted to emphasize his point.

Now she opened the building’s big brass door, so heavy that in the slightest breeze you could barely get it to budge an inch. The lobby walls were lined with marble. Classic, yet not at all fussy or ostentatious. Much like Ayer itself.

The middle-aged greeter sat behind an oak desk just inside the doors.

“Good morning, ma’am,” she said.

“Good morning.”

Frances waited for the elevator, willing it to come.

Finally, the doors opened, and there stood the blond elevator operator in her crisp uniform and white gloves.

“Tenth floor?” she asked, as she did every morning.

Frances nodded.

There was a strange sense of pride that came from a small moment like this—someone you didn’t know anything at all about knew something particular about you. It still gave her a thrill that she could tell any taxi driver in Philadelphia to take her to the Ayer building and they would know exactly where to go.

She got off the elevator and stopped at the typing pool in the middle of the floor. The wooden box that the stenographer, Alice Fairweather, and her four underlings worked in gave her the impression that they were barnyard animals who needed to be penned. Frances always felt a bit silly talking to them over the low wall.

“Morning, Miss Gerety,” Alice said. “What have you got for us today?”

Frances handed over the honeymoon copy. “I’ll need it before the meeting.”

“Certainly.”

It would be returned to her in perfect shape before it moved along to the art department downstairs. The copy chief, Mr. George Cecil, was an absolute stickler for proper English. A ten-year veteran of the department had once let an ad go out with a typo. Cecil fired him the next day.

Frances was at her desk by 9:05.

The morning meeting would start at ten. Mr. Cecil would look at new lines and hand out more assignments. He was old-fashioned, buttoned up, but the execs loved him. He was considered the greatest copywriter alive, having created the lines *Down from Canada Came Tales of a Wonderful Beverage* for Canada Dry and *They Laughed When I Sat Down at the Piano but When I Started to Play!*—for Steinway, and about a hundred others.

Nora Allen two offices down was yapping into her phone at top volume. The cubicles had doors and high brown walls, but no ceilings. You couldn’t see anyone if you shut your door.

but you could certainly hear them.

Frances tried to read over a memo on her desk. She was tired. Someday she'd have to start keeping normal hours, but she had always come awake at bedtime. She should have worked the night shift of a newspaper.

Some coffee would have hit the spot, but Harry Batten had forbidden them from drinking in the building after an art director spilled a cup on an original finished photo that was ready to go to publication. The ban was particularly painful given that Hills Bros. was one of the biggest clients; there were cans and cans of coffee around, just waiting to be brewed. Mr. Cecil had even coined the term *coffee break* back in the twenties as part of the company's advertising. Ironic, as there would never be a coffee break in the Ayer building as long as Batten lived.

Frances heard two voices in the hall, one of them the undeniable sound of Mr. Cecil in a foul mood.

"Who is that?" he said, irritated.

"Nora Allen, I believe," his secretary replied.

"What in God's name is she doing?"

"I think she's talking to New York, sir."

He scoffed. "Why doesn't she use the telephone?"

Frances chuckled to herself. But in the meeting, she found that Mr. Cecil's grumpiness had now made its way to her. When she presented her line, he rose from his chair and began pacing the floor, a sure sign that he was about to rip her idea up and down.

"Why did we go to school to learn grammar if you people are going to just disregard it?" he said. "You need an adjective here. If you said *A diamond is expensive*, or *A diamond is hard*, or *A diamond can cut stone*, that might work. But this?"

Frances was about to reply when he continued, "What do you think, Chuck?"

Her eyes met Chuck McCoy's. He was a solid writer, good at his job, but certainly not the most forceful of men.

Chuck cleared his throat. "Every love affair begins with 'I'll love you forever.' That's the intention of a marriage, that it will last forever, right? I think I like it."

Frances gave him a grateful nod, just as he turned to Mr. Cecil and spat out the words, "But it isn't correct grammar, sir, you're right."

She shook her head. *Stupid sycophant.*

Frances spoke up in defense of herself. "As far as I'm concerned, the word 'is' means 'exists.' It's a synonym for 'exists.' But change it if you like. I'm certainly not wedded to the idea."

"No pun intended," Chuck said.

Frances rolled her eyes. "If we talk about it, I'm sure we can find something similar that will do the trick."

She considered adding, *I only gave it about three minutes' thought in the dead of night*, but stopped herself.

"Yes, let's talk about it," Mr. Cecil said.

They tossed ideas around for the next three hours. The ashtray in the center of the table was filled to the brim. Frances could feel her stomach rumbling. At this point, she'd accept anything Mr. Cecil wanted if it meant she could pop out to the Automat for a cheese

sandwich.

Finally, Gerry Lauck poked his head in and said, "I've got to get to the airport now George. What's the word on the De Beers line?"

Mr. Cecil said, "Frances has come up with *A Diamond Is Forever*," in a tone that almost made it sound like he was tattling on her.

Gerry looked up at the ceiling, thinking it over.

"Let's try it," he said. "We'll show it to the client and see what they think."

"But it's not proper English," Mr. Cecil said.

Gerry shrugged. "Don't worry, George. It's not that important. It's just a way to sign the advertising for now."

Part One

On the table in the front hall there rested a pile of fifty envelopes, stamped, sealed, and addressed to a P.O. box in New Jersey. Evelyn swept them up into her hand.

“Darling, I’m off!” she called to Gerald in his study at the back of the house.

“Safe travels!” her husband returned.

“Mailing your entry forms!”

“You’re a saint!”

As she pulled the door closed, he shouted something she couldn’t make out.

Evelyn sighed and went back in.

“What was that?” she said.

Nothing. She hadn’t yet grown accustomed to having him around at nine o’clock on Tuesday. She walked toward his study—past the parlor, and the living room, and the formal dining room, where she had already set the table for three with a linen tablecloth and her mother’s good china. There was a large crystal vase in the center, which she would fill with tall flowers later this morning. She couldn’t say why she was going to such lengths for her son. After what he had done, she ought to just feed him a tuna fish sandwich on a paper plate and make him eat it out on the driveway. She had always considered her inability to make a scene one of her worst qualities.

In the study, Gerald sat at the desk, his typewriter in front of him, a box of envelopes leaning against his coffee cup.

“More?” she asked with a frown.

“This is for a different contest. A weeklong bicycle tour in Tuscany sponsored by Prince Spaghetti!” His eyes lit up. He looked like a portrait of himself as a child that had once hung in his mother’s sitting room.

Her husband, at sixty-six, did not get a thrill from beautiful women or fast cars, but from sweepstakes and contests of all varieties. Evelyn had always felt sorry for the eager young secretaries assigned to him at the insurance company, who probably thought they would be helping with important deals but instead spent hours on end filling out self-addressed stamped envelopes.

Since his retirement, the hobby had turned into something of an obsession. He usually didn’t win, but on the rare occasion when he did, it made him go twice as hard the next time. Gerald argued that the odds were in his favor, since most people entered a contest only every now and then (or *never*, she thought), when something they really wanted was at stake. But Gerald entered them all. In the twenty-odd years he’d been doing it, he had won just a few things, none of them very exciting: a pair of Red Sox tickets, a kayak, a hideous brown icebox that now resided in the garage, motor oil, a painting of dogs riding on a sailboat, and a lifetime supply of Kaboom breakfast cereal, which neither of them ate.

“*You May Already Be a Winner ...*” How many times had she seen those words splashed across a page? Most sweepstakes dropped out of sight a few years back, when the Federal Trade Commission issued a report revealing what she had long suspected to be true: the

biggest prizes seldom got awarded. These days, the few games that remained were mostly run by grocery stores and service stations as a promotional device.

There was one called Let's Go to the Races in which you picked up a free preprinted betting slip at Stop & Shop and then watched a weekly horse race on TV. If the horse on your slip won, you got the grand prize. Her husband sat before the television each Friday, clutching his ticket, so hopeful. Evelyn couldn't bring herself to mention that the races had probably been filmed long ago, and whoever had created those tickets in the grocery store knew exactly how many winners there would be.

The whole situation embarrassed her. They didn't need anything, after all. But she had come to realize that needing and winning were two entirely different things.

"A bicycle tour?" she said now. "When was the last time you rode a bicycle?"

"I'm sure I was a tot in short pants, Evie, but that's exactly the point—I'm retired. Anything is possible."

"Yes. But on the other hand, now you have to fill out all your own entry forms."

"True enough," he said. "If only I could get my wife interested in the job."

She pointed a finger at him. "Not a chance. Anyway, what were you saying? I couldn't help you."

"I was just asking if you needed me to do anything while you're out."

Evelyn smiled. Retirement had made a new man of Gerald, though perhaps more in thought than in deed. He had never before offered to help around the house. But the few times she had taken him up on it in recent weeks, everything went pear-shaped: the dishes were washed and put away with scum all over them, the hedges were clipped to the nubs like a pack of sad poodles.

"I don't think so, but you're a dear to ask," she said.

"All the beds upstairs are made?" he asked. "Where should we put him tonight?"

Evelyn's body tensed up.

"He's not staying," she said.

"No?"

"No."

She had told her son that they would have lunch, not dinner, for this very reason.

"We have six empty bedrooms," Gerald said.

Evelyn stared at him. She had conceded many points in this battle already, but on this one she intended to remain firm. It was a good sign that Teddy was coming. She hoped it meant that he had come to his senses. But when Evelyn thought about his wife and children in the house across town, and the fact that he had abandoned them for the past five months, it felt as if someone were twisting her heart like a dishrag.

Teddy hadn't mentioned whether or not he planned to sleep at his own house tonight. No, not, let him stay in a hotel.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—" Gerald started.

"No, no. It's all right."

Over the phone last week, Teddy had said he wanted to see them.

"There are some things we need to discuss," he said. "And we never got a chance to celebrate Dad's retirement."

It made her sad to see how much this last part pleased Gerald. Never mind that the firm

had thrown a lavish retirement party for him two months earlier and Teddy didn't bother to come up from Florida for that. Her husband always thought the best of their son, despite all the evidence to the contrary.

Gerald believed that Teddy was coming home to make things right in his marriage. Evelyn hoped it was true, but she had her doubts. Why had Teddy said that he wanted to come along when she suggested inviting Julie and the girls to lunch? Gerald said he probably wanted to talk it all through with the two of them before he went to his wife.

"Maybe even apologize to us," Gerald remarked.

Evelyn just nodded when he said it. She cared a great deal about keeping the peace, especially at home. She and Gerald rarely argued, and when they did she quickly nipped it in the bud, silently reciting an Ogden Nash poem entitled "A Word to Husbands," though she thought it applied just as well to wives:

*To keep your marriage brimming,
With love in the loving cup,
Whenever you're wrong, admit it;
Whenever you're right, shut up.*

But these past few months with Teddy had strained things between them. Gerald made it clear that they must stand by him, no matter what, and that if they did, he would realize what he had done wrong. Evelyn had never interfered with her son's dating life when he was a young man. She had bitten her tongue on several occasions. His first girlfriend was a drinker, and together they were thrown out of nearly every barroom in Boston, usually after having screaming arguments with each other. The next one was arrested after getting into a physical fight with her own mother. Teddy had to ask Gerald for the money to bail her out of jail. But then he married Julie, a wonderful girl, and they had two beautiful daughters.

Up until then, Evelyn's biggest regret in life had been that she was only able to have one child. She would have adopted five more if Gerald had let her. But when Julie came along, she felt that she at last had a daughter. They laughed together so much, and traded books and magazines. Julie asked for her recipes, and Evelyn copied them down by hand, giving her the whole collection one Christmas. The ten years since her son's marriage had been some of the happiest of her life. For the first time, the house felt full. They ate meals together as a family once or twice a week. On Sundays after church, the children fed chunks of stale bread to the ducks that bobbed about at the shallow edges of the pond, as she and Julie sat on the patio drinking lemonade and chatting. Once a year, the four of them dressed up and went for tea at the Ritz. The girls brought their favorite baby dolls, and fed them sips of Earl Grey from delicate china cups.

Evelyn and Julie met as teachers at the same high school. In the beginning, she observed Julie from afar. Tall and slim, with pretty blond hair, she seemed so at ease with the students, so delighted by them. In the teachers' lounge, the male faculty members tripped all over themselves to sit next to her at lunch. Evelyn thought immediately of Teddy. This was the type of girl he should be with—someone who loved children, someone steady, with a good heart.

After a few weeks, Evelyn got up the courage to talk to her. Her stomach fluttered with

nerves, as if she herself were the one with the crush. She learned that Julie had moved east from Oregon three months earlier and knew few people in the area. She was the oldest of four siblings. Her parents were academics who had settled on a working cherry farm sometime in the fifties.

Evelyn told her best friend about her plan. Ruth Dykema taught freshman algebra and always spoke her mind.

“Careful there,” she said. “Matchmaking can sometimes backfire on a girl.”

Evelyn tried not to feel hurt, or to wonder whether her friend’s warning had to do with her son’s unsuitability. But Ruthie was so close with her own devoted son that it stung all the more.

Truly, Evelyn was thinking of Julie’s best interest too. In those days, if a woman wasn’t married by her mid-twenties, she would probably never get married. Julie was twenty-three.

“You must come to a little party I’m throwing next weekend,” Evelyn said to her at lunch the next day. She could introduce them there. She knew you couldn’t force these things, but surely you could help them along a bit.

Evelyn was up all night before that party, thinking of the best way to get them talking. Teddy could sense that the setup was premeditated, he wouldn’t want anything to do with it. To her surprise and delight, they found their way to one another on the front porch the moment they both arrived. When Evelyn opened the door, there they stood, Teddy beaming in a way she hadn’t seen in ages.

They began seeing each other, and six months later they got engaged. Sometimes she wondered if Teddy had told Julie about his past, or if she herself had some obligation to do so. But eventually she decided not to worry. Julie seemed to have rehabilitated him. Evelyn thought then that perhaps he was just slow to mature. She felt relief, imagining that Teddy would become the sort of man Gerald had with time. The girls were born, and she assumed that was the end of the story. No need to worry anymore. She should have been smart enough to remember that in life you could never predict what would come next.

Her older granddaughter, Melody, had first told Evelyn the news of his leaving them last spring.

“Daddy went to Naples on business and he fell in love,” she said plainly, when Evelyn stopped by with tulips from the garden and found her daughter-in-law in tears at the kitchen table.

Evelyn smoothed Julie’s hair, and fixed two glasses of brandy. She never drank during the day, but the situation seemed to demand it. She assured Julie that this was just a stupid mistake that Teddy would come to regret and for which he would inevitably repent.

“He called and said he’s staying down in Florida for a while,” Julie said, stunned. “He said no one’s ever made him feel the way this woman does. When I asked him what exactly that meant, he said she makes him feel like a man. She makes him feel free. He sounded so excited. Almost as if he thought I would be happy for him.”

“He’s lost his mind,” Evelyn said.

She made them dinner that night, and stayed until the girls were in bed. “He’ll call and apologize in the morning. I know it,” she said. She wondered if he was drinking too much again. She felt like apologizing on his behalf, getting down on her knees and begging Julie to forgive him, though she knew there was no point to that.

When Evelyn got home and told Gerald the story, he only said, "What a mess."

"How could he, Gerald? What should we do about it? Should you fly down to Florida and talk some sense into him?"

She had expected him to be on her side, but Gerald shook his head with a sorrowful look. "We need to stay out of it, Evie. It's not right to be plotting with Julie. He's our son."

For a time, she ignored her husband's advice. She talked to Julie every evening, and strategized ways that they could get Teddy to come home. But eventually, Julie seemed to view her as only an extension of Teddy anyway. Now she saw her grandchildren less and less. Julie didn't even want to speak to her.

Evelyn looked at the clock on Gerald's desk. Teddy would arrive at one. That gave her just under four hours to pick up the roast, and the flowers, and the cake, to get lunch into the oven, and to change her clothes.

"I've got to go, sweetheart," she said. "I'll see you in a bit."

Gerald walked over to where she stood.

He placed his hands on her shoulders. "Whatever the day brings, we'll get through it."

She gave him a warm smile. "I know."

A few minutes later, she started the car up, feeling hopeful. She would try to focus on the positive. It wasn't her way to go borrowing trouble. A week ago, before Teddy called, she had believed that he might just never return. But soon he would be here. One day they might look back on this as a dark chapter; that was all. Men made mistakes and when they asked for forgiveness, women forgave. It happened every day.

She took a moment to appreciate the crisp fall morning. The leaves were turning, and all over town the trees burst bright orange and red and gold. Evelyn had to be mindful not to stare too long when she was behind the wheel, lest she drive clear off the road.

They had been blessed with three wooded acres in Belmont Hill, a house set far back from the street, and a pond twinkling in the distance. Her entire property had welcomed autumn—the yellow leaves looked lovely set against the stately brick; the recent rainstorms had left the grass a robust shade of green, and the boys from O'Malley's Landscaping had been out to mow it two days earlier. The high lilac trees and rhododendron bushes were long past blossoming, but still green enough to show well. Years ago, she had planted perennials and a vegetable patch and her roses out back. She loved to garden. She volunteered at the Arnold Arboretum once a week, working as a school program guide and organizing an annual fund-raiser, for which she arranged tours of historic Massachusetts homes, including her own.

Evelyn placed Gerald's envelopes on the seat beside her, along with her to-do list and her purse, and then opened the windows to let in some air. A tune she recognized and quite liked played on the classical station—Dvorák's symphony *From the New World*. She turned the volume up as she drove down the long driveway and out into the street.

She stopped first at the post office, popping Gerald's envelopes into the box. These were going toward a record player. For what Gerald had spent on postage, he could practically have purchased his own, but never mind.

In the town center, she found a parking spot in front of the bookshop. She gathered up her belongings, crossed Leonard Street, and walked toward Sage's Market a few doors down. When she reached it, out stepped Bernadette Hopkins, holding the hand of a little girl with pigtailed. It had been ten years. Bernadette had gained a few pounds around the middle, and

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