

ONE

When I was a kid, our small-town paper published wedding announcements, with descriptions of the ceremonies and dresses and pictures of the brides. Two of the disc jockeys at one of the local radio stations would spend Monday morning picking through the photographs and nominating the Bow-Wow Bride, the woman they deemed the ugliest of all the ladies who'd taken their vows in the Philadelphia region over the weekend. The grand prize was a case of Alpo.

I heard the disc jockeys doing this on my way to school one morning—"Uh-oh, bottom of page J-6, and yes . . . *yes*, I think we have a contender!" Jockey One said, and his companion snickered and replied, "There's not a veil big enough to hide *that* mess." "Wide bride! Wide bride!" Jockey One chanted before my mother changed the station back to NPR with an angry flick of her wrist. After that, I became more than a little obsessed with the contest. I would pore over the black-and-white head shots each Sunday morning as if I'd be quizzed on them later. Was the one in the middle ugly? Worse than the one in the upper-right-hand corner? Were the blondes always prettier than the brunettes? Did being fat automatically mean you were ugly? I'd rate the pictures and fume about how unfair it was, how just being born with a certain face or body could turn you into a punch line. Then I'd worry for the winner. Was the dog food actually delivered to the couple's door? Would they return from the honey-

moon and find it there, or would a well-meaning parent or friend try to hide it? How would the bride feel when she saw that she'd won? How would her husband feel, knowing that he'd chosen the ugliest girl in Philadelphia on any given weekend, to love and to cherish, until death did them part?

I wasn't sure of much back then, but I knew that when—if—I got married, there was no way I'd put a picture in the paper. I was pretty certain, at thirteen, that I had more in common with the bow-wows than the beautiful brides, and I was positive that the worst thing that could happen to any woman would be winning that contest.

Now, of course, I know better. The worst thing would not be a couple of superannuated pranksters on a ratings-challenged radio station oinking at your picture and depositing dog food at your door. The worst thing would be if they did it to your daughter.

I'm exaggerating, of course. And I'm not really worried. I looked across the room at the dance floor, just beginning to get crowded as the b'nai mitzvah guests dropped off their coats, feeling my heart lift at the sight of my daughter, my beautiful girl, dancing the hora in a circle of her friends. Joy will turn thirteen in May and is, in my own modest and completely unbiased opinion, the loveliest girl ever born. She inherited the best things I had to offer—my olive skin, which stays tan from early spring straight through December, and my green eyes. Then she got my ex-boyfriend's good looks: his straight nose and full lips, his dirty-blond hair, which, on Joy, came out as ringlets the deep gold of clover honey. My chest plus Bruce's skinny hips and lean legs combined to create the kind of body I always figured was available only thanks to divine or surgical intervention.

I walked to one of the three bars set along the edges of the room and ordered a vodka and cranberry juice from the bartender, a handsome young man looking miserable in a ruffled pale blue polyester tuxedo shirt and bell-bottoms. At least he didn't look as tormented as the waitress beside him, in a mermaid costume, with seashells and fake kelp in her hair. Todd had wanted a retro seventies theme for the

party celebrating his entry into Jewish adulthood. His twin sister, Tamsin, an aspiring marine biologist, hadn't wanted a theme at all and had grudgingly muttered the word "ocean" the eleventh time her mother had asked her. In between pre-party visits to Dr. Hammermesh to have her breasts enlarged, her thighs reduced, and the millimeters of excess flesh beneath her eyes eliminated, Shari Marmer, the twins' mom, had come up with a compromise. On this icy night in January, Shari and her husband, Scott, were hosting three hundred of their nearest and dearest at the National Constitution Center to celebrate at Studio 54 Under the Sea.

I passed beneath a doorway draped with fake seaweed and strands of dark blue beads and wandered toward the table at the room's entrance. My place card had my name stenciled in elaborate script on the back of a scallop shell. Said shell contained a T&T medallion, for Tamsin and Todd. I squinted at the shell and learned that my husband, Peter, and I would be sitting at Donna Summer. Joy hadn't picked up her shell yet. I peered at the whirling mass of coltish girls until I saw Joy in her knee-length dark blue dress, performing some kind of complicated line dance, hands clapping, hips rocking. As I watched, a boy detached himself from a cluster of his friends, crossed the room with his hands shoved in his pockets, and said something to my daughter. Joy nodded and let him take her hand as he led her underneath the strobe that cast cool bubbles of bluish light.

My Joy, I thought as the boy shifted his weight from foot to foot, looking like he was in desperate need of the bathroom. It isn't politically correct to say so, but in the real world, good looks function as a get-out-of-everything-free card. Beauty clears your path, it smooths the way, it holds the doors open, it makes people forgive you when your homework's late or you bring the car home with the gas gauge on E. Joy's adolescence would be so much easier than mine. Except . . . except. On her last report card, she'd gotten one A, two B's, and two C's instead of her usual A's and B's (and worlds away from the straight A's I'd gotten when I was her age and had more brains than friends). "She just doesn't seem as engaged, as present," her

teacher had said when Peter and I had gone in for our parent-teacher conference. “Is there anything unusual going on at home?”

Peter and I had shaken our heads, unable to think of a thing—no divorce, certainly, no moves, no deaths, no disruptions. When the teacher had folded her eyeglasses on her desk and asked about boy-friends, I’d said, “She’s *twelve*.” The teacher’s smile had been more than a little pitying. “You’d be surprised,” she said.

Except I wouldn’t. Other mothers, maybe, but not me. I kept a close watch on my daughter (too close, she’d probably say). I knew her teachers, the names of her friends, the horrible, whiny boy singer she likes, the brand of twenty-bucks-a-bottle shampoo on which she blows the bulk of her allowance. I know the way she struggles with reading and is a whiz at math, and that her favorite thing in the world to do is swim in the ocean. I know that apricots are her favorite fruit, that Tamsin and Todd are her best friends, that she worships my little sister and is terrified of needles and bees. I’d know if anything had changed, and Joy’s life, I explained, was the same as it had ever been. Her teacher had smiled and patted my knee. “We see it a lot with girls her age,” she’d said, putting her glasses back on and glancing at the clock. “Their worlds just get bigger. I’m sure she’ll be fine. She’s got involved parents and a good head on her shoulders. We’ll just keep an eye on things.”

As if I don’t do that already, I’d thought. But I’d smiled and thanked Mrs. McMillan and promised to call with any concerns. Of course, thirty minutes later, when I’d gone straight to the source and asked Joy whether anything was wrong, my interrogation had been met with the shrug/eye-roll combination that is the hallmark of adolescent girls everywhere. When I’d said, “That’s not an answer,” she’d replied, “Seventh grade’s harder than sixth,” and opened her math book to let me know definitively that the conversation was over.

I’d wanted to call her pediatrician, a psychologist, her old speech therapist, at the very least the school’s principal and guidance counselor. I’d made a list of possibilities: tutoring centers and homework-help websites, support groups for parents of premature children or

kids with hearing loss. Peter had talked me out of it. “It’s one quarter of seventh grade,” he’d argued. “All she needs is time.”

Time, I thought now. I sipped my drink and shoved the worries away. I’ve gotten good at that. At the age of forty-two, I’ve decided, ruefully, that I’m slightly inclined toward melancholy. I don’t trust happiness. I turn it over as if it were a glass at a flea market or a rug at a souk, looking for chipped rims or loose threads.

But not Joy, I thought as I watched my daughter shuffle back and forth with the boy’s hands on her hips, laughing at something he’d said. Joy is fine. Joy is lovely and lucky. And in the manner of almost-thirteen-year-olds everywhere, my daughter has no idea how lovely, or how lucky, she is.

“Cannie!” Shari Marmer’s voice cut across the crowded atrium of the Constitution Center, where guests were clustered, waiting to take their seats for dinner. I clutched my shell and my drink and gave a halfhearted wave as she hustled over, all bright red lips and blepharoplasty, a new diamond solitaire trapped in the Grand Canyon of her cleavage. “Yoo-hoo! Can-nie!” Shari singsonged. I groaned inwardly as she grabbed my arm with her French manicure. When I tried to pull away, her hand came with me and ended up lodged beneath my right breast. My embarrassment was instant and excruciating. Shari didn’t appear to notice.

“You and Peter are sitting with us,” she said. She swept me into the dining room, where I saw thirty tables for ten draped in aquamarine tablecloths with seashell centerpieces, topped with glittering disco balls.

“Great!” I said. *Why?* I wondered. Shari and Scott had relatives, grandparents, actual friends who should have been sitting with them. And it wasn’t as if Shari and I needed to catch up. Our kids were best friends, and even though we’d never become friends ourselves, we had years of shared history and saw each other plenty. Just last month we’d spent an entire day together, rehashing our latest reality-TV fixation and grating thirty pounds of potatoes for our synagogue’s an-

nual preschool Latkefest. Peter and I could've been over at Gloria Gaynor with the Callahans, or at Barry Gibb with Marisol Chang, whom I'd loved since I'd met her ten years ago in Music Together class.

"What do you think?" Shari asked me, waving her toned, sculpted, and possibly lipo'd arm at the room as we made our way toward the head table.

"It's fantastic," I said loyally. "And Tamsin and Todd did a wonderful job."

She tightened her grip on my arm. "Do you really think so?"

"They were great. You look amazing." That, at least, was the undisputable truth. Eight years older than me, Shari had been in advertising in New York before marriage and motherhood. Her job now was self-maintenance, and she worked at it harder than I'd worked at any paid employment I'd ever had. Frying potato pancakes in the synagogue's kitchen, I'd listened, awestruck and exhausted, as Shari had described her rounds: the personal trainer, the yoga and pilates, the facials, the waxing, the laser treatments and the eyelash tinting, the low-cal, low-carb meals delivered each morning to her door. It was, perhaps, the one good thing about never having been beautiful—you didn't have to kill yourself trying to hold on to something you'd never had in the first place.

"And the party?" Shari fretted. "It's not too much?"

"Not at all!" I lied.

Shari sighed as a gold-medallioned, Jheri-curled DJ who was a dead ringer for a pre-incarceration Rick James led her parents to the front of the room for the blessing over the bread. "Tamsin's furious. She says that marine biology is a serious science, and that I'm . . ." Her bejeweled fingers hooked into air quotes. " 'Trivializing her ambitions' with seashell centerpieces and mermaid costumes." She blinked at me with her newly widened eyes. "I think the waitresses look cute!"

"Adorable," I said.

"They should," Shari muttered. "I had to pay them extra to wear

bikinis. Something about the health code.” She towed me through the crowd, past the tables draped in ocean-blue tablecloths, and over to Donna Summer. Of the ten people at the table, six were family, two were me and Peter, and numbers nine and ten were the programming director of the city’s public radio station and his wife. I waved at my husband, who was standing in the corner, deep in conversation with a gastroenterologist of our acquaintance. *Better Peter than me*, I thought, and sank into my seat.

The elderly woman to my left peered at my place card, then at my face. My heart sank. I knew what was coming. “Candace Shapiro? Not Candace Shapiro the writer?”

“Former,” I said, trying to smile as I spread my napkin over my lap. Suddenly the gastroenterologist wasn’t looking so bad. Ah well. I supposed I should be flattered that Shari still thought my name was worth dropping. I’d written one novel under my own name almost ten years ago and, since then, had produced a steady stream of science fiction under a pseudonym. The pay for sci fi was a lot worse, but anonymity turned out to suit me much better than my fifteen minutes of fame had.

My seatmate placed one spotted, shaking hand on my forearm. “You know, dear, I’ve had a book inside me for the longest time.”

“My husband’s a doctor,” I told her gravely. “I’m sure he could help you get it out.”

A puzzled look crossed the aged party’s face.

“Sorry,” I said. “What’s your idea?”

“Well, it’s about a woman who gets divorced after many years of marriage . . .”

I smiled, sipped my drink, and tried to turn her synopsis into a pleasant blur of sound. A minute later, Peter appeared at my side. I shot him a grateful smile as he took my hand.

“Excuse me,” he said to the woman. “They’re playing our song. *Cannie?*”

I got to my feet and followed him to the dance floor, where a few grown-up couples had worked their way in among the kids. I waved

at Joy, stretched up to plant a quick kiss on the dimple in Peter's chin, and leaned in to his tuxedoed chest. It took me a minute to recognize the music. " 'Do It Till You're Raw' is our song?"

"I had to get you out of there, so it is now," he said.

"And here I was, hoping for something romantic." I sighed. "You know. 'I Had His Baby, But You Have My Heart.'" I rested my cheek on his shoulder, then waved at Shari and Scott Marmer as they fox-trotted past us. Scott looked euphoric, puffed up and proud of his children. His round brown eyes and his bald spot gleamed under the disco lights, along with his cummerbund, made of the same red satin as Shari's gown. "Can you believe that's going to be us this fall? I looked at Shari more closely. "Except I probably won't be getting my implants refreshed beforehand."

"No need," Peter said, and dipped me. When the song was over, I raised my hands to my hair, which felt fine, then dropped them to my hips, encased in black velvet. I thought I looked all right. No less an authority than my daughter had signed off on my ensemble. True, she'd done so with a less than enthusiastic *I guess it's okay*, and told me on our way into the building that if I took my shoes off at any point in the evening and wandered around like a homeless person, she would legally emancipate herself, which children were allowed to do these days.

I wondered, the way I always did on occasions like this, what people thought when they saw me and Peter together, and whether it was some incredulous version of *He's married to her?* Unlike poor, paunchy, balding Scott, Peter was tall and lean, and had only gotten better-looking as the years had progressed. Sadly, unlike the surgically improved Shari Marmer, the same could not be said of me. *Ah, well*, I thought. *I should look on the bright side*. Maybe they all assumed that I had the flexibility of a nineteen-year-old Romanian gymnast and the imagination of a porn star and could do all manner of crazy stuff in bed.

I squared my shoulders and lifted my head as the DJ played "Lady in Red" and Peter took me in his arms again. I was determined to be

a good role model, to set a good example for my daughter, to be judged on the content of my character as opposed to the size of my thighs. And if I was going to be judged by the size of my thighs, let the word go out that I was actually an impressive seven pounds thinner than I was when I'd gotten married, thanks to an indescribably hellish six weeks on the Atkins Diet. Plus, except for a touch of arthritis and the occasional back spasm, I was disgustingly healthy, while Peter was the one who'd inherited a cholesterol problem that he had to treat with three separate medications.

I looked up to find him staring at me, his forehead slightly furrowed, eyes intent.

"What is it?" I asked hopefully. "Do you wanna go make out in a stairwell?"

"Let's take a walk." He snagged a few beef satay sticks and a plate from a passing waiter, added some raw vegetables and crackers, and led me up the staircase to the Signers' Hall, with life-size statues of the men who'd signed the Constitution.

I leaned against Ben Franklin and took a look around. "You know what? Our country was founded by a bunch of short, short men."

"Better nutrition these days," said Peter, setting his plate on a cocktail table by the railing and giving John Witherspoon a friendly slap on the back. "It's the secret to everything. And you're wearing heels."

I pointed at George Washington. "Well, so is he. Hey, did Ben Franklin have VD, or was that someone else?"

"Cannie," Peter said soberly. "We are in the presence of great men. Molded bronze replicas of great men. And you have to bring up venereal disease?"

I squinted at Ben's biography, on a small rectangular plaque on the back of his chair. It made no mention of any nasty souvenirs he might have picked up during his years in Paris. History was a white-wash, I thought, crossing the floor and leaning over the railing to look down at the hired dancers, gyrating wildly as a specially constructed Studio 54 emblem descended from the ceiling (instead of

sniffing cocaine, the man on the moon appeared to be reading from the Torah). “This party is insane,” I said.

“I’ve been thinking about something,” Peter said, looking at me steadily over George Washington’s wig.

I hoisted myself up onto the stool in front of our cocktail table. “Joy’s party?” Our daughter’s bat mitzvah, and the party that would follow, were many months away but had already emerged as a hot topic around our house.

“Not that.” He took the seat across from me and looked at me sweetly, almost shyly, from underneath his long eyelashes.

“Are you dying?” I inquired. Then I asked, “Can I have your beef stick?”

Peter exhaled. His brown eyes crinkled in the corners and his teeth flashed briefly as he struggled not to smile.

“Those weren’t related questions. I’m very sympathetic,” I assured him. “I’m just also very hungry. But don’t worry. I’ll do the whole devoted-wife-of-many-years thing. Hold your hand, sleep by your bedside, have your body stuffed and mounted, whatever you like.”

“Viking funeral,” Peter said. “You know I want a Viking funeral. With flaming arrows and Wyclef Jean singing ‘Many Rivers to Cross.’ ”

“Right right right,” I said. I had an entire file on my laptop labeled “Peter’s Demise.” “If Wyclef’s busy, should I try for Pras?”

Peter shrugged. “He could use the work, I guess.”

“Well, you think it over. I really don’t want you haunting me from beyond the grave because I hired the wrong Fugee. And do you want the music before or after they set your corpse on fire?”

“Before,” he said, reclaiming his plate. “Once you light a corpse on fire, it’s all downhill from there.” He munched ruminatively on a carrot stick. “Maybe I could lie in state at the Apollo. Like James Brown.”

“You might have to release an album first, but I’ll see what I can do. I know people. So what’s up?” I raised my eyebrow in a knowing manner. “Do you want a threesome?”

“No, I don’t want a threesome!” he boomed. Peter has a very deep voice. It tends to carry. The three women in strapless gowns who’d wandered into the hall, presumably for some fresh air, stared at us. I gave them a sympathetic shrug and mouthed, *Sorry*.

“I want . . .” He lowered his voice and stared at me, his dark brown eyes intent. Even with all the little businesses of ten years of marriage between us, the conversations about when to get the roof fixed and where to send Joy for summer camp, his gaze could still melt me and make me wish we were somewhere all alone . . . and that I really was as limber as a Romanian gymnast.

“I want to have a baby,” Peter said.

“You want . . .” I felt my heart start pounding, and my velvet dress suddenly felt too tight. “Huh. Didn’t see that coming. Really?”

He nodded. “I want us to have a baby together.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. This was not the first time the possibility of a baby had come up over the course of our marriage. There’d be a story about some talk-show host or country singer on the news, the proud mother of twins or triplets “born with the help of a surrogate,” an expression that always made me roll my eyes. It would be like me saying that the oil in my car had been “changed with the help of a mechanic,” as if I had something to do with it other than paying the bill. But if we were going to have a baby who was biologically our own, there’d need to be a third party involved. Joy had been born two months early, via emergency C-section, which had been followed by an emergency hysterectomy. There’d be no more babies for me. Peter knew this, of course, and even though he’d pointed out the pieces about surrogates, he’d never pushed it.

Now, though, it looked like he was ready to push. “I’m fifty-four,” he said.

I turned away and read out loud from James McHenry’s plaque: “‘Physician, military aide, and politician.’ And a very sharp dresser.”

Peter ignored me. “I’m getting older. Joy’s growing up. And there might be possibilities. You might have viable eggs.”

I batted my eyelashes. “That is, hands down, the most romantic thing you’ve ever said to me.”

Peter took my hand, and his face was so open, so hopeful, so familiar and dear that I was sick with regret that my one shot at natural motherhood had come via my stoned jerk of an ex-boyfriend instead of with my husband. “Don’t you ever think about it?” he asked.

My eyelids started to prickle. “Well . . .” I shook my head and swallowed hard. “You know. Sometimes.” Obviously I’d wondered. I’d daydreamed about a baby we’d make together, a sober little boy who’d look like Peter, with flashes of his dry humor, like heat lightning in the summer sky; one perfect little boy to go along with my perfect girl. But it was like dreaming about being in the Supremes, or winning a marathon, or, in my case, running a marathon: a fantasy for a lazy afternoon in the hammock, something to mull over while stuck on a runway or driving on the turnpike, nothing that would ever really happen.

“We’re so happy now,” I said. “We have each other. We have Joy. And Joy needs us.”

“She’s growing up,” he said gently. “Our job now is to let her go.”

I freed my hand and turned away. Technically, it was true. With any other going-on-thirteen-year-old, I’d agree unconditionally. But Joy was a different story. She needed special attention because of who she was, the things she struggled with—her hearing, her reading—and because of who I’d been.

“Our lives are wonderful, but everything’s the same,” he continued. “We live in the same house, we see the same people, we go to the Jersey shore every summer—”

“You like it there!”

“Things are good,” he said. “But maybe they could be even better. It wouldn’t kill us to try something new.”

“Back to threesomes,” I said, half to myself.

“I think we should at least take a look. See what’s what.” He pulled a business card out of his wallet and handed it to me. Dr. Stan-

ley Neville, reproductive endocrinologist, offices on Spruce Street—in the same building, I noted ruefully, as the doctor who treated my recently diagnosed arthritis. “He can do an ultrasound of your ovaries.”

“Good times,” I said, and gave him back the card. I thought of our lives, perfectly arranged, the three of us safe, cocooned from the world. My garden, after ten years of attention, was in full flower, with espaliered roses climbing the brick walls, hydrangeas with blue and violet blossoms as big as babies’ heads. My house was just the way I’d always wanted it. Last month, seven years of searching had finally yielded the perfect green-and-gold antique grandfather clock that sat on top of the staircase and melodically bing-bonged the hours. Everything except for the tiny and no doubt fixable matter of Joy’s grades was perfect.

Peter touched my shoulder. “Whatever happens, whether this works out or not, our life is good just the way it is. I’m happy. You know that, don’t you?”

Beneath us, a parade of waiters and waitresses, in their bodysuits and bikinis, exited the kitchen bearing salad plates. I nodded. My eyelids were still burning, and there was a lump in my throat, but I wasn’t about to start bawling in the middle of the Constitution Center. I could only imagine the gossip that would start if Shari got wind of it. “Okay,” I said.

“Candace,” he said fondly. “Please don’t look so worried.”

“I’m not worried,” I lied. He handed me his plate, but for one of the rare times in recent memory, I wasn’t hungry at all. So I set it back on the table and followed him down the stairs, past the windows and the moon hanging high in the sky, flooding the lawn with its silvery light.