

SYLVIE

Breakfast in five-star hotels was always the same. This was what Sylvie Serfer Woodruff thought as the elevator descended from the sixth floor and opened onto the gleaming expanse of the lobby of the Four Seasons in Philadelphia. After thirty-two years of marriage, fourteen of them as the wife of the senior senator from New York, after visits to six continents and some of the major cities of the world, perhaps she should have been able to come up with something more profound about human nature and common ground and the ties that bind us all, but there it was—her very own insight. Maybe it wasn't much, but it wasn't nothing. If pressed, Sylvie also had some very profound and trenchant observations to make about executive airport lounges.

She took a deep breath, uncomfortably aware of the way the waistband of her skirt dug into her midriff. Then she slipped her hand into her husband's and walked beside him, past the reception desk toward the restaurant, thinking that it was a good thing, a reassuring thing, that no matter where you were, London or Los Angeles or Dubai, if you were in a good hotel, a Four Seasons or a Ritz-Carlton—and, these days, when she and Richard traveled they were almost always in a Four Seasons or a Ritz-Carlton—your breakfast would never surprise you.

There would be menus, offered today by a girl in a trim black suit who stood behind a podium in the plushly carpeted entryway, beaming at the patrons as if their arrival represented the very pinnacle of her day and possibly of her lifetime. Richard would wave the menus away. “We’ll do the buffet,” he’d announce, without asking whether there was one. There always was. “Of course, sir,” their waiter or the maitre d’ or today’s black-suited girl would murmur in approval. They’d be led through a richly appointed room, past the heavy silk drapes, elaborately tassled and tied, past mahogany sideboards and expensively dressed diners murmuring over their coffee. Richard would deposit his briefcase and his newspapers at their table, and then they’d proceed to the buffet.

There’d be an assortment of fresh fruit, slices of melon, peeled segments of grapefruit and orange and sliced kiwis, arranged like jewels on white china platters. There were always croissants, chocolate and plain, always muffins, bran and blueberry and corn, always bagels (yes, even in Dubai), always shot glasses layered with yogurt and muesli, always slices of bread and English muffins, arrayed next to a toaster, and chafing dishes of scrambled eggs and bacon and sausage and breakfast potatoes, and there was always a chef in a toque and a white jacket, making omelets. Richard would ask for an omelet (spinach, as a nod to health, and mushrooms and Cheddar cheese—he liked onions, but couldn’t risk a day of bad breath). Once the order was placed, he’d hand off his plate to Sylvie and return to their table, to his *New York Times* and his *Wall Street Journal* and the eternal consolation of his BlackBerry, and Sylvie would wait for his food.

The first time her mother, the Honorable Selma Serfer, had seen Sylvie perform this maneuver, she’d stared at her daughter with her mouth open and a dot of Crimson Kiss lipstick staining her incisor. “Seriously?” she’d asked, in her grating Brooklyn accent. Sylvie had tried to shush her. Selma, as always, had refused

to be shushed. “Seriously, Sylvie? This is what you do? You fetch his eggs?”

“He’s busy,” Sylvie murmured, shifting the plate to her right hand and tucking a lock of hair behind her ear with her left. “I don’t mind.” She knew what her mother was thinking without the Honorable Selma, first in her class (and one of seven women) at Yale Law, former chief judge of the state of New York, having to say a word. Sylvie should mind, and Sylvie should be busy, too. Like her mother, Sylvie had gone to Barnard and Yale. Sylvie was meant to have followed in Selma’s footsteps straight up to the Supreme Court, or at the very least practiced law for more than two years. Selma and David Serfer’s only child had been intended for better things than marriage, motherhood, committee work for various charities, and collecting her husband’s breakfast.

Ah, well, she thought, as the chef swirled melted butter in a pan. She was happy with her life, even if it didn’t please her mother. She loved her husband, she respected what he’d accomplished, she felt good about the part that she’d played in his career. Besides, she knew it could be worse. In cities all over the world, women went hungry, were beaten or abused; women watched their children suffer. Sylvie had seen them, had touched their hands and bounced their babies on her lap. It seemed churlish to complain about the occasional small indignity, about the hours she’d spent campaigning, face smoothed into a pleasant expression, mouth set in a smile, hair straightened into an inoffensive shoulder-length bob, wearing hose that squeezed her middle and pumps that pinched her toes, standing behind her husband, saying nothing.

Normally, it didn’t bother her, but every so often, discontent rose up inside her, spurred by some unpleasant reminder of her unrealized potential. A few months ago, the forms for her thirty-fifth reunion at Barnard had arrived in her in-box. There’d been a survey, a series of questions about life after college. One

of them was *Tell us how you spend your time. If you're working, please describe your job.* Before she could stop herself, Sylvie had typed *My job is to stay on a diet so that I can fit into size-six St. John knit suits and none of the bloggers can say that my behind's getting big.* She'd erased the words immediately, replacing them with a paragraph about her volunteer work, the funds she raised for the homeless and the ballet, breast cancer research and the library and the Museum of Modern Art. She'd added a sentence about her daughters: Diana, who was an emergency-room doctor right here in Philadelphia, and Lizzie, vexing Lizzie who'd given them such heartache, now several months sober (she didn't mention that), with her hair restored to its original blond and all those horrible piercings practically closed. She'd added a final beat about how for the last fourteen years she had been lucky enough to travel the world in the company of her husband, Senator Richard Woodruff, D-NY. But sometimes, late at night, she thought that the truth was the first thing she'd written. Whatever ambition she'd possessed, whatever the dreams she'd once had, Sylvie Serfer Woodruff had grown up to be a fifty-seven-year-old professional dieter, a woman whose only real job now that her daughters were gone was staying twenty pounds thinner than she'd been in law school.

So she'd lost herself a little bit, she thought, as the chef sprinkled cheese into the pan. So life hadn't been perfect; bad things had happened, mistakes had been made. But hadn't they built something together, she and Richard, and Lizzie and Diana, and wasn't that more important, more meaningful, than anything Sylvie could have done on her own? What kind of career would she have had, anyhow? She wasn't as good a lawyer as her mother. She might have been quick, and smart and well-read, but her mind wasn't built to spring and snap shut like a trap the way her mother's was. She could admit, if only to herself, that she was bright but not terribly ambitious; that she lacked a

certain something, aggression or tenacity or even just desire, that magical quality that would have lifted her from good to great. But she'd found a place for herself in the world. She'd raised her girls and been a help to her husband, a sounding board and a concierge, a scheduler and a speechwriter, a traveling companion and a co-campaigner. So what if every once in a while late at night she felt like all she had to show for her years on the planet were miles logged on a treadmill that took her nowhere and a number on the scale that was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain? So what if . . .

"Ma'am?" The chef was staring at her, spatula raised. The omelet sat in a perfectly browned half-circle in the center of the pan.

"Sorry," she said, and held out the empty plate toward him like an orphan in a Dickens novel, an orphan asking for more.

He slid the omelet onto the plate. Sylvie collected the slices of whole-wheat bread she'd popped into the toaster. She added a pat of butter, a pot of marmalade, the wedges of cantaloupe that Richard would ignore, and a single slice of bacon, well-done, the way he preferred it (he'd want more than one slice, but there was his heart to consider). Richard was reading the Op-Ed page and talking on his phone, with a cup of coffee steaming at his elbow, so busy multitasking that he barely looked up. She set his food in front of him and tapped his shoulder. "Eat," she said, and Richard smiled, put his arm around her waist, and gave her a quick squeeze.

"Thank you, dear," he said, and she said, "You're welcome," then went back to gather her own joyless meal: fat-free yogurt, a single stewed prune, a mini-box of Special K, a glass of skim milk, and, as her reward, a scoop of the oatmeal she could never resist, deliciously creamy, the way it never got at home. She'd add a little butter, a swirl of brown sugar, a splash of cream, turning it into something that was more like pudding than breakfast.

She'd eaten only a few bites when Richard dropped his

crumpled napkin over the remains of his eggs. He'd ignored the fruit, as she predicted, and the bacon was gone, the way she knew it would be. "All set?" he asked. She wasn't. But she nodded, rising as he stood, gripping the starched elbows of his suit jacket as he kissed her, lightly, on the lips. Her schedule was in a manila folder, tucked into her purse, and had been beamed to her iPhone as a backup, along with her speech. Richard would be attending a fund-raising coffee for a state senator, a rising star in the party who was being groomed for bigger things. This would be followed by a lunch at the convention center with CEOs of some of the nation's largest hospitals, bigwigs looking for breaks on the import taxes they'd pay to have their MRI machines assembled in Japan. Meanwhile, Sylvie, who hated public speaking, would be locking her shaking knees, hiding her sweating palms, and delivering an address to the Colonial Dames, a Philadelphia variation of the Junior League, about how, if each of them gave just what she spent each month on highlights and lattes to the Free Library, they could buy hundreds of books and expose thousands of children to the joys of stories. It was a speech she'd given dozens of times and would doubtless give dozens of times more before her husband's third term ended in four years. And after that? "Sky's the limit," Richard used to say, when they were young and dreaming, lying on the flimsy mattress in their apartment on Court Street in Brooklyn, where the floors tilted so severely that if you put anything round down against one wall it would roll to the other side of the room.

They'd lived in Brooklyn back when telling people your address made them treat you with the solicitous courtesy they'd extend to pioneers who'd just set off west in a covered wagon. Back then, Richard owned two suits, one navy blue and one brown, both purchased at an end-of-season clearance sale at Bloomingdale's and paid for, in part, with a gift certificate that Sylvie's parents had given her for Chanukah to buy her

own working-girl wardrobe. He would rotate his suits Monday through Friday—blue, brown, blue, brown, blue—and on Saturdays, he'd drop them off at the cleaner's. Every morning they'd walk to the subway together, and Sylvie would follow him down the stairs, thinking how lucky she was to have found this man, her Richard—slim-hipped, broad-shouldered, his light-brown hair thick and unruly, no matter how carefully he combed it, the hair of a little boy who'd just rolled out of bed, with his briefcase swinging jauntily in one hand. *That's my husband*, she would think. She'd want to shout it to the sky, or at least to the other women she'd catch looking him over, their eyes making the drop from his face to his ring finger. *My husband. Mine.*

"Husband," she whispered, standing on her tiptoes (Richard was nine inches taller than she was, a solid six foot three, a presidential height, she sometimes thought) and letting her lips graze his ear. Almost imperceptibly, he shuddered. "Wife," he whispered back. Richard had always been ticklish. In bed, she'd drag the tip of her tongue along the edge of his ear, nipping at the lobe with her teeth, and he'd tremble, muttering her name. At least, he used to. Sylvie frowned, or attempted a frown—the Botox she'd gotten the week before was making it hard to furrow her brow—and tried to remember how long it had been. Over the past months—maybe even the past years—things had slowed down, not in an alarming fashion, but in a manner that Sylvie had come to believe was normal for long-married couples. They made love once or twice a week, sometimes with dry spells of a week or two (or three, or four) when Congress was in session and Richard spent the weeknights in the rented townhouse in Georgetown. She missed it sometimes, but she thought that the kind of sex they'd had at the beginning—every night, sometimes twice a night, once in the thankfully empty sauna at a resort where they'd gone for a law school classmate's wedding—that was the sex you had in the early days, and then things settled

down, they had to, or else how would anyone get any work done, or raise children?

Richard gave her a squeeze and planted another kiss in the center of her paralyzed, poisonous brow (perfectly safe, the dermatologist had assured her when he'd come to the apartment with his doctor's bag full of needles and his mouth full of reassurance). "I'll see you tonight," he said. Sylvie watched him walk out of the restaurant, BlackBerry in one hand, briefcase in the other, through the lobby and then out to the curb, where a car would be waiting, the way, these days, a car always was. *My husband*, she thought, and her heart swelled, the way it had when she was a young bride watching Richard descend into the depths of the subway station, ready to rule the world.

She was in the backseat of her own Town Car by four o'clock, an issue of *The Economist* open in her lap, reading the latest news from the Middle East as the car crawled through a five-mile backup on the New Jersey Turnpike. The region was clenched in a typical August heat wave, the air a humid steambath that left everyone sticky and ill-tempered after even the briefest venture outside. She was planning her movements, how she'd exit the car and enter her apartment building with the least time possible spent in the humidity—she had a cocktail party to attend, and she didn't want to have to redo her hair—when her cell phone rang. Or, rather, her cell phone belched. Lizzie, her youngest, had set it up so it would burp instead of ring, and Sylvie hadn't been able to figure out how to make it stop. The phone burped again, and her best friend Ceil's face flashed on the screen. In the picture, which Sylvie had taken outside the Buttercup Bakery, Ceil was devouring a red velvet cupcake, and had a dab of frosting on her nose. Sylvie had snapped it and had threatened to post it on Facebook. Not that she completely understood how Facebook worked, or had any idea of how to post things

there. The threat alone had been enough to make Ceil laugh. As she hit the button to answer the call, Sylvie noticed two missed calls, both from Richard. She'd call him back after she was through with Ceil, she decided, and lifted the phone to her ear. "Hi!"

"Oh my God," Ceil whispered. "Are you watching?"

"Watching what?" Sylvie felt the first genuine smile of the afternoon on her face. There was probably some gossip about a star whose sex tape had leaked to the Internet or who'd been photographed exiting a limo, sans panties, or maybe more news about the Academy Award-winning actress whose husband was fooling around with a tattooed white-supremacist stripper, and her best friend couldn't wait to discuss it.

When they'd met at Barnard all those years ago, Ceil Faraday had had a Mia Farrow pixie cut and a face as round and sweet as a bowl of rice pudding. She'd arrived at the dorm with a trunk full of Fair Isle sweaters and pleated plaid skirts that she'd taken to the nearest consignment shop as soon as her parents' station wagon had pulled onto the West Side Highway. She'd spent the hundred dollars she'd gotten to buy black leggings, black turtlenecks, a pair of fringed suede boots, a woven Mexican poncho, and an eighth of an ounce of excellent pot.

At Barnard, Ceil had been a drama major who'd spent large portions of her college career pretending to be a tree, or the wind, or the embodiment of feminine anima. ("Or maybe I'm supposed to be Eve," she'd told Sylvie, perched on the window seat, blowing Virginia Slims smoke out into the night. "The director says he'll let me know Monday.")

The two of them had bonded instantly. "You're so exotic," Ceil had said, taking in Sylvie's tousled dark curls, her olive-tinged-with-honey skin, her hazel eyes and prominent nose. "Does exotic mean Jewish?" Sylvie had asked, bemused, and Ceil had beamed, clapping her hands in delight. "Are you Jew-

ish? Well, that's excellent! Come on," she said, dragging Sylvie toward the bottom bunk, which her mother had made up with a flowered comforter and down pillows that smelled of sachet. "Sit down and tell me all about it!"

Sylvie had given her an abbreviated version of her life story, with Ceil's wide eyes getting wider with every revelation. "Your mom's a judge?" she said. "Wow. My mom ran for the PTA once, and she didn't even win." Sylvie told her roommate that her parents had both grown up working-class, in Brooklyn, both of them the children of immigrants—her father's family from Russia, her mother's from the Ukraine. They'd met at Bronx Science High School, two smart, fast-talking strivers who'd spent their childhoods translating for their Yiddish-speaking parents wherever English was needed—at the bank or the post office or the department store. Both Dave and Selma had been told, since they were old enough to hear and understand, that they were destined for great things in the New World—with the implication being, of course, that their children would do even better.

Selma had gone to Barnard, then Yale, and Dave had gone to Columbia on a full scholarship, then Wharton for business school. He'd made his first million in commercial real estate by the time he turned thirty, and he and Selma had made Sylvie the year after that. Sylvie was their only child, the repository of all their hopes and dreams, which were detailed and extensive. If Selma and Dave had been expected to succeed, to go to college and then graduate school, to become professionals, then Sylvie, her parents intimated, should at least be president by her forty-fifth birthday, if she hadn't already been named empress for life. In the apartment on West Eighty-second Street where she'd grown up, expectation was like oxygen. It filled every breath she took, every particle of the atmosphere. Sylvie could have no more announced that she didn't want to be a lawyer than

she could have told her parents that she planned on growing a second head.

“So you’re rich?” Ceil had asked, in her guileless way.

Sylvie winced. Ceil’s mother, elegant and blond in a Lilly Pulitzer shift and pearls, and her hearty blue-eyed dad, who’d worn a cotton sweater tied around his shoulders, had just left the dorm, looking as if they were on their way to lunch at the country club. The Farradays were probably still on the staircase, with Sylvie’s mother, dressed, as usual, in a black skirt, white blouse, and flats—her philosophy was that money spent on clothing was a waste, because her robes covered everything—and her father, who stood just a shade over five foot three and always had a cigar clamped between his stained teeth. Sylvie wondered what they were talking about. She suspected that Ceil’s parents didn’t socialize with many Jews, and as for Selma and Dave, Shaker Heights, Ohio, might as well have been on the moon, populated by a race of bizarre aliens who’d encourage their kids to go to football games and drive-ins instead of the library.

“We do okay,” Sylvie had said, turning toward the closet and starting to hang up her clothes.

Ceil had persisted. “Do you live in a mansion?”

“An apartment,” said Sylvie, feeling relieved, because “apartment” didn’t sound ostentatious and Ceil wouldn’t think to ask a New Yorker’s follow-up questions—what neighborhood and how many rooms and did they have views of the park?

Ceil and Sylvie roomed together for all four years of college, much to Sylvie’s parents’ unspoken but palpable dismay (they called Ceil the shiksa princess behind her back and, eventually, to her face). After graduation, Sylvie went to Yale. She found a sunny apartment on Edgewood Avenue—she and a medical student named Danielle each had a tiny bedroom, and they shared the living room with its working fireplace, the bare-bones

kitchen, and the seventy-five-dollar-a-month rent, but they never bonded the way Sylvie and Ceil had, probably because both of them spent so much time in the library (and maybe because her new roommate had no sense of humor at all). Sylvie ate Sunday brunch at the Elm Street diner and took yoga classes at the Y down the street. Ceil, meanwhile, realized her New York dreams. She moved to the Village and took classes in dance and movement and voice. She never landed more than bit parts off-Broadway and had a speaking part (in reality, it was more of a grunting part) in a single laxative commercial before making the transition to marriage, motherhood, wealth, and the complacent life of a lady who lunched, shopped, and wrote large checks to laudable organizations. Still, Ceil had never lost her ability to wrest drama from the most commonplace situations. Once, she'd sent Sylvie an urgent e-mail, the memo line—MUST SPEAK TO YOU NOW—written in all capital letters. It turned out that a married actor had left his movie-star wife for the nineteen-year-old nanny—had, in fact, announced his defection on that day's installment of *The Howard Stern Show*, to which Ceil was addicted—and Ceil felt the need to discuss this development immediately, if not sooner.

"Is it juicy?" Sylvie asked, and adjusted her phone against her cheek. She had one of those space-age headpieces that fit inside her ear, but she'd never been able to figure out how to make it work reliably, and was too embarrassed to ask her daughters or her assistant to explain it again.

There was a pause. "You don't know?" asked Ceil.

"I'm on the New Jersey Turnpike. What's going on?" Sylvie settled more comfortably into the seat, readying herself for the soliloquy Ceil would doubtlessly deliver about New Jersey. Ceil hated suburbs and conformity and any place where people lived that wasn't the right neighborhoods of Paris or Manhattan, even though she, herself, was leading as white-bread a life

as possible, with her ex-Cornhusker husband named Larry, her twins Dashiell and Clementine, and the granddaughter named Lincoln whom she carted to Little Mozart music class every Tuesday (the normalcy of that, she insisted, was leavened by the fact that her daughter was a lesbian, and that Suri Cruise had attended one of Lincoln's makeup classes).

"Oh, God," Ceil said, and from the urgency in her voice Sylvie could tell she hadn't called to gossip. "You need to find a television set right this minute. They're saying . . ."

"What?" Possibilities raced through Sylvie's mind—another terrorist attack? A bombing, a plane crash? An assassination? Something to do with her daughters? With Lizzie? (Even in her panic, she knew that Diana would never do anything that would end up on TV, unless she was being credited with some scientific discovery or medical advance that Sylvie would have to spend the rest of her life pretending to understand.) "You're scaring me."

"It's Richard," Ceil said, her voice shaking.

Icy bands tightened around Sylvie's heart. "Is he all right?" But even as she asked the question, she assured herself that Richard was fine. If he wasn't, she'd have been told. Her driver, Derek, or her assistant, Clarissa, sitting ramrod-straight, with her spine hovering inches from the seat, beside him—if something was wrong, really wrong, they would have been informed by now. There were procedures in place, calls she would have gotten. Ceil started talking again, speaking rapidly in her ear.

"You know what? Don't. Just never mind. Just come home. To my house, okay? Come straight here, and don't watch the TV, Syl, promise me you won't, just get here as fast as you can."

"Ceil. Tell me." Sylvie gulped, pushing the panic down. "You're scaring me to death. Tell me what's going on."

From a hundred miles away, she heard her friend sigh. "I'm watching CNN right now, and they're saying that Richard had

an affair with one of his legislative aides. They're saying that he went on vacation with her, to the Bahamas, and got her some cushy job in the D.C. branch of the law firm where he used to work."

Ceil paused. Sylvie pressed her lips together, clutching the telephone in her right hand, pressing her left hand flat against her thigh. She felt as if she was in a roller coaster that had crested the steepest hill, and all the track was gone. She was in free fall. Not Richard. Not her Richard.

"Sylvie? Are you still there?" Ceil, cheerful, straightforward Ceil, who could get a whole room laughing with her reenactment of her stint as Anonymous Constipation Sufferer #3, sounded like she might have been crying. "Listen, honey, it kills me that I'm the one who has to tell you this, and I . . ."

"Let me call you back." She punched the button that would end the call, and leaned forward, feeling her three waistbands—the skirt, the control-top pantyhose, and the girdle she wore beneath them—biting at her flesh vengefully, as if her outfit was trying to strangle her. "Can we find a rest stop?" she asked as the telephone burped and displayed her husband's face. She ignored the call. There was a quaver in her voice, but, she hoped, not one obvious enough for the pair in the front seat to notice. And she'd asked politely. Sylvie was always polite. It was a reaction, she thought, to her frequently profane mother, who'd once made the papers for telling a plaintiff's attorney that he needed to buy her dinner if he was going to treat her like he'd been doing, because she insisted on dinner before getting fucked. Sylvie had made a point of raising her own daughters, headstrong Diana and dreamy Lizzie, to be polite, to be considerate, to think of others, and to remember, always, that manners mattered. Even when Lizzie was in the throes of her drug use, Sylvie liked to think that her younger daughter had said please and thank you to her dealer.

In the front seat, a look passed between Derek and Clarissa, and in that look Sylvie saw that what her friend had told her was true . . . or was, at least, being reported as true. Sylvie felt a scream swelling in her throat, demanding release. Her husband. Another woman. And it was on TV. Her hands wanted to sweat, her knees demanded to quiver. She wanted to eat something: a warm chocolate-chip cookie, a strawberry malted, a square of baklava, dripping with honey, a bowl of oatmeal big enough to swim in, with melted butter pooling on top . . . *Calm down*, she told herself, and settled her purse in her lap. *You're being Syllie*. That's what Ceil said, during the rare instances when Sylvie gave in to emotion, and Ceil, drama queen Ceil, who would turn the opening of a can of soup into a ten-minute performance, complete with intermission, would tell her to calm down, to stop being Syllie.

She tapped at her assistant's shoulder. "I really need to stop."

Clarissa turned. Her eyes were so wide that there was white all the way around the blue-green irises. Her cheeks were flushed, and her honey-colored hair, normally smoothed into the sleekest chignon this side of the ballet barre, was sticking out in a tuft over her left ear.

"Please," she said, speaking to Derek, telling him, in a tone that brooked no discussion, what to do and where to go.