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CARLA MARIA VERDINO-SÜLLWOLD

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Thomas Hampson: I Hear America Singing
www.pbs.org
ROUND TRIP
Ten Stories

by

Carla Maria Verdino–Süllwold

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To new beginnings and all those special friends who have made them possible
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DANNY BOY

Out of the darkness the tenor’s voice rang sweet and clear, sad and exquisitely beautiful. A single spotlight ever so subtly illuminated the singer’s handsome features – just enough to see his intense emotion and concentration, but compelling as his stage presence was, Camilla did not need to watch. She closed her eyes and let the sound wash over her – a sound that not only filled the theatre, but also swelled her soul to overflowing.

_O Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling_
_From glen to glen and down the mountainside.
_The summer’s gone, and all the flowers are dyin’._
_‘Tis you, ‘tis you must go and I must bide._

Camilla Caruso Carlsen considered herself an expert on voices. She had spent years writing about them, working with singers – one very famous opera star at that! Nothing could captivate her more than a singular sound, and she knew what made a voice special. There had only been a very few in all her six decades that had taken hold of her imagination and her being in that undeniable way that could only be
called transformative. Like Orpheus’, these voices had led her to discoveries and adventures, and like Orpheus’, they had each cast a spell over her.

She opened her eyes and continued to listen – no, to ABSORB...

*But come ye back when summer’s in the meadow
Or when the valley’s hushed and white with snow.*

Why was she so moved? Ever the critical analyst, she told herself it was the technical grace of the performer – his purity of tone that somehow retained a vibrant resonance, creamy lushness, velvety legato, crisp, elegant phrasing and diction, perfect intonation, clean attacks – in short consummate musicianship.

But musicianship was not the whole reason. There were the unquantifiable qualities which filled the sound that held her most in thrall – the melancholy, an abiding goodness, a generosity, an openness that held out its arms to the listeners and called them into that world of love and loss, living and dead.

*‘Tis I’ll be there in sunshine or in shadow*

*Oh, Danny Boy, oh Danny Boy, I love you so.*
And then, the verse turned mournful as it shifted to a vision of the grave; the voice became that of the sleeper reaching out to the still vibrant loved one.

*And when ye come, and all the flowers are dyin’*
*If I am dead, as dead I well may be.*
*You’ll come and find the place where I am lyin’*
*And kneel and say an ‘Ave’ there for me.*

And from the grave came the heart-wrenching, gentle plea to hear the living pierce the veil and return the balm of those words...

*And I shall hear, ‘tho soft ye tread above me*
*And all my grave will richer, sweeter be,*
*If you bend and tell me that you love me*

Three little words... words which Camilla herself had spoken so many times – to Nils now gone, to her family, to her friends, - words which in the wake of so much personal loss seemed to wither on her lips – until, until....like the sleeper in the song she found the joy to say them again.

Her reverie was interrupted by the visceral feeling that washed over her. The tenor, descending gracefully from the climactic high A₅, tenderly delivered the last verse. His tone spun the phrase with liquid beauty, yet there was that tiny tremolo that signaled the flood and the fury beneath the surface calm.
Then I shall sleep in peace until you come to me.

It was the word “come” – that heart-catching syllable sung piano which betrayed the singer’s seeming stoicism, which bravely acknowledged his vulnerability in his own identification with the song. That single note that faded into a gossamer diminuendo seemed a fragile thread connecting two worlds – of the living and the dead - each existing on a separate plane of meaning and time. But somehow, in the hushed beauty of the singer’s voice, these realms seemed to coalesce and to offer an embrace of all that had been and all that might yet come to be.
“Little Italian girls do like to stick close to their mothers. I do understand, and we at Sarah Lawrence are happy to release you from your housing contract. We understand. It’s not what you are accustomed to” – and here her voice betrayed for a second with barely concealed distaste – “or your family wishes for you. I can only say I understand, and I am truly sorry.”

Dean Jaclyn Madison, Sarah Lawrence’s forty-ish spinsterish head of student life, sat with her back ramrod straight as she made this last pronouncement. Her words stung Camilla Caruso to the core, but the young woman pretended to remain unfazed. Dressed in a pale pink Chanel look-alike suit, Dean Madison was no Jacqueline Kennedy, though in 1966 she still aspired to be. The mousy blond, flat-chested, plain-featured woman now stood and drew herself up to her full 5 foot 6 inches in her prim low heels and tried her best to sound coolly reprimanding.
How many scholarship girls had rejected an offer of housing or a trip to Europe? What was wrong with Camilla Caruso? There were clearly problems at home, Dean Madison surmised, and clearly issues raised about Sarah Lawrence’s admissions decision in Camilla’s case, though she conceded young Miss Caruso did have a 4.0 average and an SAT score of 780 and was by all her teachers’ accounts a bright young woman. At this admission, Dean Madison swallowed the instinctive prejudice she felt sneaking to her lips and let her voice trail off. Camilla Caruso, though she outwardly braved the Dean’s harangue with stoic silence, inwardly cringed. She HAD screwed up, and she felt the shame of it ever more deeply!

Little Miss Italian Girl from an immigrant working class, West New York clan, it was probably true that she didn’t have much in common with any of the other girls at Sarah Lawrence, even though she had come to the college from an equally fancy prep school. But that said, she didn’t have all that much in common with her own family either. Here she was at one of the little Seven Sister schools, contemplating a career in the arts, which was, as her mother would constantly berate her, a “totally impractical and inconsiderate choice.” How could a girl like Camilla dare to imagine she could have a life in the theatre, or become an artist from a family of artisans, laborers, wine makers, sweater manufacturers, and the occasional priest or nun?
She had better focus on getting that Mrs. degree along with her A.B. her mother would taunt, because your poor father can’t slave his entire life to support you!

That ingrained litany troubled Camilla more than Dean Madison’s scolding. Here she was, a freshman adrift, blindly, instinctively trying to carve out a path for herself. And here she was, one semester into it all having made some kind of major mistake when she elected to move out of the dorm after her first semester and commute to college from home. But it was not, as Dean Madison believed, because Camilla was homesick. It was because she knew she would never belong to the well-heeled, well-connected social world of her classmates. She didn’t spend her weekends on the Connecticut or Long Island shore. She didn’t drive her own car or belong to a country club, and she surely had not made her debut at eighteen. All this had always been true.

Wearing a white linen A-line dress – one of forty-eight girls dressed exactly the same – she sat in the front pew of Englewood’s First Presbyterian Church. Her mother – not her father, who was too busy scraping out a living or too uninterested – sat with the other parents across the aisle. The strains of Jerusalem sounded on the ancient organ; Mr. Birtwhistle raised his hands to cue the choir who
began softly, *And did those feet in ancient times*... as the faculty slowly processed down the center aisle in colorful academic plumage. The headmistress, a redoubtable, gray-haired woman by the name of Miss Nickelby, who bore an uncanny resemblance to Miss Marple and who spoke in affected, sing-songy British cadences, climbed the pulpit.

Commencement at the Marblestone School had followed the same hallowed tradition for more than eighty years: the same hymn, the same bell choir, the time-honored tastefulness of white dresses, identical floral bouquets, and calling cards embossed with the girls’ full names. This last tradition seemed a curious anachronism to Camilla; in a tumultuous decade that had already assassinated a President and seen the nation split by sectarian violence and foreign war, what possible use could this antiquated social custom have? And yet, despite the seeming fairytale impracticality of it all, Camilla Caruso found herself enjoying the aesthetics of the unfolding pageant with its sense of tradition, history, and music. Oh, yes, such beautiful music!

The speeches droned on; awards were presented; honors announced. Camilla scored department honors in every subject over the four years including disciplines she considered inscrutable mysteries like biology, chemistry, and math. The recognition with the drama award and the arts department award did
leave her genuinely smiling, and French honors pleased her as well. But then came time for Miss Nickleby to call the roster of girls to receive their diplomas.

Dramatically, she intoned each name, well aware of the girl’s academic and social history and the family’s connection to the school. Camilla allowed herself to daydream as Miss Nickleby meandered through the alphabet until she heard the headmistress roll her ‘r’s” and elongate her vowels, sounding her most operatically Italian as she pronounced “Camilla Maria Caruso.” It was both comical and likely well-intentioned, and as Camilla rose from her seat to collect her diploma, she heard Miss Nickelby add “with highest honors.” “Highest honors” was the Marblestone School’s subtle designation for the class valedictorian, and while Camilla understood that her average had indeed been 4.0, only moments before Mary Baxter had also been recognized with “highest honors.”

So they were sharing the award – an extraordinary feat for the little Italian girl – sharing with the bright, connected, lovely heir-apparent, the board president’s daughter who had spent twelve years at Marblestone. And this did not surprise Camilla because in this WASP universe, unlike public school, numbers and quantifiable achievement were not all that counted. Family history, pedigree, legacy – none of which Camilla could ever produce
– weighed just as heavily. And so when Mary Baxter’s 3.6 g.p.a. was surpassed by Camilla’s for the last four years, the school mistresses must have had some interesting behind-the-scenes discussions about how to handle this “problem.” That Camilla could not claim her prize unilaterally may have seemed a defeat, a slight, but in reality in 1965 Englewood, New Jersey, it was a victory. And even the eighteen year-old graduate understood this. All that mattered to Camilla Caruso was that someone had paid tribute to her intellect, to her work, to her ambition.

School had always been a safe haven for Camilla. She lost herself in books; she lived in the myriad worlds they opened for her. She was so happy when she immersed in study that it seemed like play. And so single-mindedly driven, so focused was she on her world that she didn’t notice the behind-her-back gossip or giggles from the popular girls or the occasional disapproving attitudes of some of her teachers. There had been her P.S. Number 5 kindergarten teacher Mrs. Baird, who had seen fit to call Camilla’s mother in and suggest that Mrs. Caruso provide her daughter with a more “American lunch like peanut butter and jelly sandwiches instead of broccoli aglio oglio, which made the classroom excessively aromatic.” Or her second grade teacher Mrs. Saunders, who reported to Josephine Caruso that she had decided to give
Camilla a “D” in penmanship because not only was this the girl’s weak suit, but it would be a “good lesson for her to realize she cannot always get straight A’s.” Or in junior high school when her kindly English teacher Mrs. Roth pulled Camilla aside and suggested she might have more friends if she just let herself get a few “B’s” and “C’s.”

Josephine Caruso’s blood boiled at these comments, and instead of acquiescing, she pushed Camilla to succeed even harder. “School is your only job, and you have to give it your all. Nothing less than perfection is what you must strive for.” Camilla wasn’t really a perfectionist, but she didn’t have to be coaxed much about working hard at what she loved. It was only after an ugly incident in eighth grade when two girls wielding scissors ganged up on Camilla in the locker room that she and her parents began to realize how much a fish out of water she was in the Palisades Park public schools. Camilla began to beg her parents to send her to a different high school.

Josephine Caruso thought St. Cecilia would be just the answer. The tuition was moderate – “after all, your father and I can’t afford private school” – but Camilla, who was already having her doubts about the Church, rebelled at this idea. And then, by some chance, she saw an announcement in the local paper for the annual scholarship exam at the Marblestone School. She clipped it out and tucked it under her
father’s dinner napkin that evening. As he so often did, Gianni Caruso said nothing when he read it, though his hazel eyes twinkled a little and his thin lips twitched in a smile.

What he and Josephine discussed late that night Camilla would never know, but the next day her mother acerbically announced, “Your father will let you register for the exam, but if you don’t get the full scholarship, then you’re going to St. Cecilia’s.” Camilla said nothing and just set her sights on doing her very best.

She did not win the full scholarship; she came in second to qualify for a partial stipend, but by some miraculous turn of fate, Camilla Caruso did enter the freshman class at Marblestone all the same that fall. Years later she would attribute her good fortune to her father’s anti-clericism, but no matter the reason, she understood that the decision had changed her life.

The Marblestone School was a K-12 institution with a brother school, the Lincoln School adjacent to it on the hill in Englewood, New Jersey. Both academies had venerable histories, having produced some of the country’s most learned and successful men and women, and they set their academic standards very high indeed. Marblestone’s teachers were nurturing and inspiring, and Camilla, for the
first time in her school experience, felt respected by the other girls. She made friends, and she was welcomed into the homes of many of these old social register families, whose impeccable manners never let on that the Caruso social credentials left something lacking or that Camilla’s homemade dresses did not come from the Engle Shop. Her mother was never included in the round robin of afternoon teas, which was just as well because Josephine would have declined, offering the excuse of having nothing to wear.

Little by little, Camilla blossomed. She reveled in the academic challenges; she found inspiration in several caring mentors like her French teacher, Mme. Mélange who instilled in her a desire to see Europe, or John Robbins, her art teacher, on whom she had a fierce crush and with whom she loved to discuss the great philosophers or the counterculture of the Soho art scene. She joined the drama club and appeared in every show at both the girls’ and boys’ schools, where her talent on stage more than compensated for her lackluster athletic ability. Try though she may have, Camilla failed miserably at every one of the preppy sports like lacrosse, field hockey, or tennis, just as her preferences favored absurdist dramas and Shakespeare or Broadway musicals to the hymns and choral works which the Marblestone choir and bell choir performed. And so for four glorious years, Camilla learned and learned – not only valuable knowledge and skills, but she
also learned the value of ideas, of independent thinking, and she grew more and more confident and comfortable with who she was and who she could become.

She chose her friends carefully, treasuring the few childhood mates who had been like sisters and brothers to her as an only child. She made new ones as well, gravitating to Marblestone girls who were artistic, bright, freethinking, and adventurous and to boys who were similarly special and different. Her closest male friend, Frank Carrera, was what Josephine Caruso called a paesan’ - a brilliant, quirky scholarship student from her hometown – a talented actor and musician, handsome, witty, and openly gay. Together he and Camilla constituted the Marbelstone-Lincoln Schools’ token minorities. Camilla’s first serious romance was with a Jewish fellow, Philip Weinstein, who defied his fiercely protective mother to date Camilla. The delicious sense of their rebellious attraction no doubt sparked the fire of their relationship, though it ultimately waned when Phil graduated and went off to Cornell.

Camilla spent her senior year unattached, and she focused her thoughts on more weighty matters like college and a career, waging a complex and sometimes losing battle to assert her independence and find her own voice, especially within the overly protective family enclave. In this struggle she also found allies at the Marlestone School, especially in
the unlikely person of the Dean of Students, Margaret Hutchins, who confronted Josephine Caruso and shamed Camilla’s mother into allowing her daughter to apply to Sarah Lawrence.

Josephine had proposed three finishing schools for Camilla – Katherine Gibbs, Finch College, or a commercial art program at Pratt. She and her husband, Josephine maintained, “could not afford a little Seven Sister college with a tuition bill in excess of $8000 a year, and Camilla could not afford to dabble in the arts. She needed to acquire some practical skills with which she could support herself after graduation. This was something all girls of their backgrounds – Josephine carefully avoided saying “working class” – must do. Becoming a secretary, an elementary school teacher or a commercial artist were possibilities, but hardly an actress, set designer, or art historian. Such insubstantial careers were best left to girls with old family money or who married wealthy young men, but then if they did marry, eventually they would have to settle down and become good housewives and mothers. Josephine espoused this logic passionately, oddly unaware that these were the very arguments Josephine’s own immigrant parents had brought to bear on her life some thirty-five years ago, leaving her, who had yearned to go to college to become a teacher, to earn a living as an embittered secretary before marrying and accepting her role as stay-at-home housewife.
Miss Hutchins listened patiently, and when Mrs. Caruso had finished her breathless tirade, the dean softly and firmly stated her own case. “Camilla had one of the highest grade point averages; she was an A.P. student, a gifted creative person with an inquisitive mind, and the Marblestone School quite simply could not permit its top student to attend anything but a college worthy of her abilities and the school’s reputation. Radcliffe, Barnard, or Sarah Lawrence were the only options the Marblestone School would consider appropriate for Camilla, and given the girl's four-year scholarship, the Marblestone School believed the Carusos had an obligation to accede to this argument.”

Josephine Caruso, knowing herself defeated, managed to muster as much dignity as she could and coolly replied that she would discuss it with her husband. Once again Gianni Caruso somehow prevailed because Camilla applied for early decision to Sarah Lawrence, her first choice, and was accepted before Christmas. She sailed through the remainder of her senior year with delirious anticipation.

Now, almost a year later, Camilla stood in Dean Madison’s office nervously shifting her weight from one foot to the other. She silently questioned whether she had made the right choice in coming here. For all Sarah Lawrence’s avant garde reputation, for all its deliberate Bohemianism and
defiant diversity, there was an undercurrent of WASP preppiness, embodied in the passive-aggressive patronizing of Dean Madison. Camilla knew that some of what Dean Madison was saying was perhaps true – a summer study scholarship in Europe would be priceless gift and living away from home for the very first time would perhaps be just what Camilla needed to strike that first step toward real independence. But somehow Camilla also understood that she was not ready to take these steps just yet. And she had to listen to that little cautionary voice within her. As the first girl in her family to attend college, she suddenly felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of the adventure. And as in all her academic experience and all her growing up, Camilla Caruso also knew that she was a bit of an anomaly. Nothing reinforced that notion more than the taunting smugness of the Dean’s words calling her “a little Italian girl.”

Drawing herself up with as much unapologetic self-possession as she could, Camilla Caruso excused herself with a polite “Thank you for your advice and time, Dean Madison.” And as she turned and left the room, she acknowledged to herself what she knew to be the truth, however faulty or misguided: that she Camilla Caruso would never fit perfectly or completely in either world – immigrant or WASP, working class or privileged. Rather, it was in the spaces between that she felt most comfortable and complete.
“How can you do this to me?” Her voice pierced the night in a high-pitched wail that would surely wake the neighbors sleeping in their little houses not twenty-five feet away from the tiny Tudor. Camilla anxiously eyed the window for signs of lights flipping on as she unsuccessfully tried to quiet her hysterical mother.

“Mom, please. It’s after midnight. You’ll wake the whole neighborhood. Can’t we just talk quietly about it in the morning?”

“Talk! Talk!! What is there to talk about when my own daughter – my ungrateful only child- comes home and tells me she’s getting married. Doesn’t ask! Tells me! Tells me!!” Josephine Caruso’s voice started to mount the scale again, growing more and more shrill with each syllable. “After all your father and I have sacrificed for you – private school, an expensive college! You haven’t even graduated yet!”

“But I will, Mom. We’ll get married next month, and then I have only a semester left. I’ll finish.”
“And how are you going to live? Who’s going to pay for it?”

Camilla let that remark go. ‘You and Dad,” she thought. ‘How does this change anything?’ Instead, she raised her own voice a bit to be heard and insisted, “I’ll work part-time, and Nils will work too until we graduate and then -”

Josephine cut her off. “And then, what? What then? You’ll probably get pregnant. Then what? You probably are pregnant already.” And as she said the unspeakable, a look of terror crossed Josephine Caruso’s face. She gulped for air and then began to shriek again.

“Gianni, Gianni, wake up,” she wailed, tearing into the bedroom with Camilla desperately following. “Gianni, do you hear me?”

The irony of the situation momentarily struck Camilla. How could her father not already be awake with the commotion going on around him? And yet by some maddeningly defiant display of serenity, Gianni Caruso moaned softly, “Go away” and pulled the pillow over his head.

“Gianni, do something! Get up! DO something,” Josephine commanded. “Your ungrateful daughter is running off with Nils to get married.”
“Not running anywhere, Mom.”

“Running off. Running off without time for a proper church wedding, without finishing school, without – without – “ Josephine ended with a helpless sputter, began to sob, and crumbled into the armchair next to the bed. “Gianni, please talk to her. She’s pregnant. I know it.”

“Mom, Dad, I am not pregnant.”

“Why else would she want to get married next month without any preparation – no plans- and leave me all alone. What will I do?”

Her sobs grew louder, and finally with an icy disdain, Gianni Caruso roused himself, perched on his elbow, and eyed his wife and daughter with a frigid stare. “Go to bed, both of you. We’ll discuss this in the morning.” And without another word, he rolled over, turning his back to them and muttered, “And turn out the light. NOW!” With that he closed his eyes again.

Camilla tried once more. “Come on, Mom, let’s go,” as she helped the still blubbering Josephine to her feet. Camilla gave her mother a gentle push toward the kitchen, following behind. As she flipped off the light switch, she turned in the dark and said softly,
but firmly, “Good night, Dad. And Dad? There’s nothing to discuss. I’ve made up my mind.”

Her insistence triggered Josephine’s wailing again. This time she was hysterically incoherent. Camilla closed the door to her parents’ bedroom and with a sigh picked up the hall phone and dialed. It rang twice before a sleepy and anxious voice answered.

“Hello? Hello? Who is this?”

“Me, Aunt Anna. I know it’s late. Can you talk to Mom, please? She’s absolutely hysterical, and I can’t get her to stop screaming and crying.”

“What’s happened, honey?”

“Nothing yet. I told her Nils and I are going to get married next month, and she has been hysterical now for over an hour. Dad is pissed, and if she doesn’t calm down, the neighbors are sure to call the police.”

“Put her on,” Anna rasped in her smoke-scarred night voice.

Camilla silently handed Josephine the phone and walked into her own bedroom across the hall. She left the door slightly ajar and wearily began to undress. Slipping into her nightgown, she flung herself on the bed without even turning it down. As
she closed her eyes, pressing her fingers to her throbbing temples, she heard Josephine’s voice take a more moderate tone and repeat pathetically, “But, Anna, she’s too young. She’s my baby. She can’t leave me. Not yet. And what if she’s pregnant?”

Her mother’s voice subsided, and Camilla caught only muttered snatches of conversation. But then, either Josephine was holding the receiver away from her ear or Anna was speaking very loudly because Camilla, as she was drifting off to sleep, managed to catch her Aunt’s words: “She’s getting married, Josie. We should be happy for her!”

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Camilla slept fitfully, and when she woke a few hours later, the house was dark and still. She assumed the exhausted Josephine had finally gone to bed beside her unresponsive husband. Camilla’s thoughts wandered back to the earlier evening and the wrenching and beautiful conversation she and Nils had shared sitting in his red Triumph parked at the Palisades Overlook.

He had given her the shattering news that he’d received his 1-A draft status. He was to report for the physical next month. His ACLU lawyer was filing one more conscientious objector appeal, but they would probably turn that down as well. And then he would have to decide.
“I always thought I’d go to jail like Wayne,” he said of his roommate – “that I’d be OK with that. But now. . .” Nils’ voice faltered. Even in the dark Camilla could see the glint of a tear in his eye. “But now, I don’t know.”

“There’s always Canada,” she offered softly. Silence greeted her words. “I would go with you.”

In response, Nils turned and clasped her in his arms. Together they sobbed freely, this time in relief.

“Whatever happens, we will do it together,” Camilla whispered.

Nils took this declaration in for a minute and then said softly, “I have no money for a ring? Would you be all right with that? We could get married next month.”

Camilla kissed him gently. “Yes, let’s.” And she rested her head on his shoulder. Together they sat quietly taking in the city lights twinkling across the Hudson. They were engaged.

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When Nils brought Camilla home that night past her curfew, he offered to come in to explain to
Josephine, who would surely be waiting up in a frenzy.

“No, Nils. Let me handle it tonight, and you come by in the morning and we’ll talk to them then together.”

And so he had gone home to encounter the inverse scene of what had taken place in the Caruso household. There was no shouting, only a terse gruff Lars Carlsen, who met his son at the door and scolded him fiercely for worrying his mother, who had taken a sedative and gone to bed distraught. When Lars’ reprimand subsided, Nils looked his father evenly in the eye and said firmly, “I am sorry, but I had a good reason. Camilla and I became engaged tonight.” And turning on his heel, he started upstairs. “We can talk more in the morning.” Had Nils looked over his shoulder, he would have seen the look of cool anger blazing in his father’s blue eyes.

Punctually at eight o’clock in the morning Nils rang the Caruso doorbell, a bouquet of flowers in hand. In cheery spirits, Camilla greeted him with a kiss. Before he could hand her the flowers, Josephine materialized and whisked them unceremoniously from his hand with a tart “thank you.” She was dressed in her best funereal black, and she silently
ushered Nils into the breakfast room, where Gianni sat munching his dry toast. She indicated two chairs for Camilla and Nils. After an awkward period of fumbling to serve themselves, Nils cleared his throat and launched into his prepared speech.

“Mr. Carsuo, your daughter Camilla and I are in love, and I –“

Before he could finish, Gianni looked up from his coffee and said dryly, “My wife and I will give you a small reception here at the house, and I will give you the old Buick as a wedding present.” And with that he went back to chewing his toast while Josephine Caruso nervously kept her eyes lowered on her plate.

Camilla picked up the cue, jumped from her seat to hug first her father and then her mother, both of whom mustered pale smiles and continued their repast.

A short while later, Camilla and Nils pulled up in the driveway of the Carlsen home, and Nils used his key. Camilla followed meekly, not sure what to expect here. They were greeted by Lars, who motioned them into his study.

“Your mother is too devastated to get up. I had to have the doctor come this morning and give her
something. You should have thought of how this would affect her, Nils.”

Nils tried to interject, but Lars continued.

“But let’s not go through all that again. How a son of mine is letting our country down by refusing to do his duty, how you’ve rejected your religion, how – “

“Dad, please let’s stick to the topic.”

Lars checked himself. “Yes, I suppose you’re right. You aren’t a Carlsen for nothing. When you’ve made up your mind...” He trailed off. “Anyway, we won’t stop you, but we don’t condone this either. When exactly are you planning this wedding?”

Lars turned the page of his calendar to October. “Let’s see. The 4th, 11th, and 25th are all booked for us. I am playing golf on the 4th, and then we are going to Massachusetts to see your mother’s relatives, so I guess that leaves October 18th – that is if you want us to be there?”

Camilla and Nils shot each other a quick glance and answered almost in unison:

“October 18th it is!”
JOHNNY WE HARDLY KNEW YE

While goin’ the road to sweet Athy
Hurroo, Hurroo

Camilla leaned back in her seat in the darkened theatre and drank in the mournful tapestry of the quartet. The tenor’s voice carried the sweet sad refrain:

We had guns and drums and drums and guns
Hurroo, Hurroo

And on the upstage screen flashed vivid black and white images that drew a series of collective sighs from the audience: the horse-drawn caisson, the black veiled widow and her stoic brothers-in-law walking behind the cortege, the crowds lining the streets of the capital with heads bowed and tears streaming in uncomprehending numbness. And then there it was – that single photo which shattered Camilla’s composure so that she let escape a tiny audible gasp. Everything seemed as vivid to
her there in that theatre fifty years later as it had on
the 24\textsuperscript{th} of November 1963.

Like everyone else of her generation, Camilla Caruso
Carlsen could remember distinctly every second of
that national trauma. And all those memories came
flooding back with an intensity made deeper by the
brief duration of the song.

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A junior in high school, Camilla was a brilliant
student and a little bit of a rebel. On that
unseasonably warm November 22\textsuperscript{nd}, she had taken
advantage of her open afternoon schedule to bend
the rules a little and sneak off campus with her
steady beau, Philip Weinstein. Phil was a senior, so
he could merely sign out, but Camilla was taking a
chance. Still she was so recklessly in love with Phil
and so frustrated by the objections of her strict
Catholic parents and Phil’s equally disapproving
Jewish ones that when an appropriate opportunity
presented itself to slip away with Philip, she did.

They had taken the shortcut downtown to the local
ice cream parlor where they grabbed burgers and
shakes and then walked back up the hill to campus.
Looking at his watch, Phil observed that they still
had a half hour before the next class. Winking
suggestively, he took Camilla by the hand and
crossed the playing field, heading into the woods
behind. The spot they chose in a little clearing out of sight of the school buildings was a popular trysting place, so when Paul Templeton came hurrying into the woods calling his friends’ names in an exaggerated whisper, neither Philip nor Camilla was surprised to be discovered in each other’s arms – his shirt and her blouse on the leaves beside them.

“Phil, Camilla, are you there?” Paul commanded. And seeing them, he commanded, “Get up!” Camilla clutched her blouse to her, hastily drew it on, and stood up brushing the leaves from her hair and her skirt.

“What’s up, Paul?” Philip asked nonchalantly.

“Something terrible has happened. Dr. Cali just called a special assembly, and the teachers are taking attendance. We better hurry or we’ll all be in trouble.”

And with that Paul turned on his heel and headed back with Camilla and Phil following quickly.

They filed into their seats silently. Normally, Ms. Quentin would have reprimanded them for tardiness, but instead she looked pale and shaken. Camilla took her seat with the juniors, while Philip moved up front to sit with the seniors. The wait for
Dr. Cali seemed endless, and yet strangely no one spoke.

The large industrial clock on the wall read 2:40 p.m. as Dr. Cali made his entrance. He stood awkwardly for a moment trying to summon courage and composure. And then he spoke. “It is my sad duty to inform you that President John F. Kennedy has been shot in Dallas and has just died at Parkland Hospital at 1:30 p.m. He took off his horn-rimmed glasses and wiped them, as a ripple of shock swept the auditorium. Many audible sobs were heard, and many others clasped each other in tight hugs as silent tears streamed down their faces.

Gravely, the headmaster continued,” I want you all to go home now, immediately to your families. You are dismissed.” And then he added softly, “Pray for us all.”

When Camilla arrived home, she found her entire family - except for her father who was ALWAYS at work – gathered around the thirteen-inch black-and-white television. Her grandmother, who spoke negligible English, kept dabbing her eyes and murmuring, ‘Povero giovane, poveretta moglie.’ Her mother and her aunt sat fingering their rosaries. They did not acknowledge Camilla’s entrance, so she quietly joined them on the sofa.
The somber newsreel images that flashed across the screen were the very same ones that played now in the theatre as the song continued:

\[ We \text{ had guns and drums and drums and guns} \]
\[ Hurroo, Hurroo \]

There was the flag-draped casket being carried onto the DC tarmac –

Jacqueline Kennedy in her bloodspattered pink suit, her face a tragic mask as she descended the plane’s stairs –

\[ Hurroo, Hurroo \]

Bobby Kennedy, barely in control of his own anguish, steadying her by the arm ..... 

And so the parade of indelible pictures marching live across that screen for three more days – images screaming to be heard from the confines of the tiny black box.

Camilla had not been able to convince her mother to allow Phil to join them until the next night. Saturday was their usual date night, but Camilla’s parents forbade her to go out – an injunction that was effectively meaningless, since nothing was open as waves of mourning swept an inconsolable nation. “It would be disrespectful even for a walk in the
crisp November moonlight,” Josephine had insisted, “and it is disrespectful for you to display affection at a time like this!” Her reprimand came sharply as Philip tried to put his arm around Camilla’s shoulders.

Sheepishly, he withdrew it and slid a little farther apart on the sofa. Camilla’s eyes were imploring. She desperately needed the comfort of his love right now, and the couple snatched a few hurried kisses – more consoling than passionate – while the elders were in the kitchen.

And so Saturday blurred into Sunday and marched on into Monday.

_Guns and drums – drums and guns_

Violence and more violence. Lee Harvey Oswald shot before their very eyes; footage with horrifying images from the Dallas motorcade. A nation rocked by tragedy. The harbinger of the turmoil, upheaval, unrest to come – the tigers already at the gates....

And yet, through it all, through that seemingly endless weekend, another visual thread seared itself into Camilla’s consciousness: the widow with her two young children – beautiful, dignified, defiant, proud, making of her grief a gift to the public, making the pain seem as beautiful as it was
devastating, cathartic as it was bottomless.... Jacqueline Kennedy the icon of inspiration.

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All this pounded in Camilla’s head in the darkened theatre as the drums beat and the song finished. And then there it was on the stage screen – the image which had made her gasp. A riderless horse – Black Jack – a proud, sleek black stallion, that pranced majestically with dressage perfection behind the President’s bier – a symbol of a fatherless America, the emblem of the fallen leader, still stunning in spirit, noble and tragic.

To the accompaniment of audible sniffles, the tenor sang the last verse as the projections faded.

_The enemy nearly slew ye_
_O my darlin’ dear, you look so queer_
_Johnny I hardly knew ye._

“But they did slay you,” Camilla thought to herself as a lump gorged in her throat. “Johnny WE hardly knew ye.”

The play continued, moving into its rousing finale, but Camilla’s thoughts were still fixed on the previous lyrics and images. She found herself hearing another verse sometimes added to the song
– another rallying cry associated with her youth and early days of marriage.

_They’re rollin’ out the guns again_
_Hurroo, Hurroo_
*But never will they they take our sons again,*
*Johnny I’m swearing to you.*
Tiny votive lights flickered on the small makeshift altar in the sparsely furnished bedroom. In the darkened hush a wizened old woman lay still, eyes closed on a narrow twin bed. Dressed in black, her face a parchment of wrinkles, her grey hair wrapped round her head in tiny braids, Domenica Catania folded her hands carefully over her stomach and whispered faintly, “Mio Dio!”

As her two daughters leaned in to listen to what she was saying and her son approached the foot of the bed tentatively, Domenica shifted her position ever so slightly several times as if trying to compose her body on a bier. Indeed, in the chiarascuro of the scene, it seemed to Camilla Caruso that she was catching a preview of her grandmother’s funeral.

Ninety-four-year-old Domenica Catania, widowed mother of three and grandmother of three, had never seen Eleonora Duse, though the great actress had toured the Calabrian village where Domenica grew up. Yet somehow the instinct for high drama was ingrained in the old peasant woman by birthright. And all throughout the hardworking,
often mundane life that brought her from the hills of San Donato to West New York, New Jersey, saw her marry a fellow villager, raise three children in Depression America, keep her cultural traditions, and live without incident to a considerable old age, Domenica Catania never lost the inclination toward operatic melodrama. And never perhaps was that inclination called into play more vividly than one spring night a year after Camilla Caruso had married Nils Carlsen.

The call came at 9:00 p.m. Aunt Anna was on the phone, and she summoned Camilla and Nils to come at once to the Catania home. “Noni is very ill. This is serious. You have to come quickly. Your cousins are on their way.”

“From Pennsylvania?” Camilla asked in surprise.

“Yes, they left college this afternoon.”

Though Camilla was used to this kind of hyperbole, there was something unusually jarring in that piece of information. She roused Nils from the den, and they hastily set off on the fifteen-minute drive in their dilapidated Buick. Camilla briefed her quiet, reserved husband on what he might expect at this family gathering. What the couple actually encountered was far more surreal than anything Camilla could have imagined.
A devout Catholic who had paradoxically not attended Mass in decades, Domenica had created her own little nun’s cell in the small front bedroom of the brick house she had shared with Carlo for fifty years. Shortly after all three children had married and moved out of the house, Domenica had abandoned Carlo’s bed and appropriated her son’s old room. Furnished with a twin bed, two straight-backed wooden chairs, a small dresser, the room had only one other piece - a simple nightstand which she commandeered to hold the statues of her favorite saints – Mother Cabrini, St. Anthony, St. Francis, and the Blessed Mother. There every night Domenica said her rosary and talked to God in her own way through these intermediaries.

Domenica, who, despite lifelong hypochondria, had actually been blessed with sturdy good health for most of her nine decades, had always expressed a wish that God would let her die in her own bed. And so when six days earlier, she had been struck by the flu and when, despite her daughters Anna and Josephine’s protestations, she had waived away Dr. Lombardo’s ministrations, the Catania household began to have grave premonitions.

That Friday evening, completely lucid, Domenica confirmed everyone’s fears by announcing that she had had a dream in which Mother Cabrini had come to her and told her it was time. Domenica ordered Anna to summon the family to say their goodbyes.
Josephine and Gianni arrived first, and Anna knew she would have a hard time keeping her older sister calm. Hadn’t Josephine thrown herself into Carlo’s open grave at his funeral? She met them at the door and sternly ordered her sister not to get hysterical. Camilla and Nils came soon after, and then, in another half hour, Domenica’s son, Francesco, with his wife Louella with Camilla’s cousins, Mary and Margaret, made their entrance. The mild-mannered “Fra” was pale and nervous; he had a horror of these kinds of scenes, and he was intently focused on protecting his twin daughters from the hysteria he knew was mounting and insuring that his high-strung Cajun wife maintained her own emotional stability through the evening. The three siblings gathered closely around the bed while the in-laws and young folks hovered in the shadows.

“Mama, it’s Francesco. How are you, Mama?” he asked softly, lowering his head toward the pillow to catch her reply. “We’re all here now, Mama,” he said his voice betraying his emotion. “It’s going to be all right. Mary and Margaret are here, too. Look, Mama.” He motioned his daughters to approach and each bent and kissed Noni on the forehead.

The old woman remained silent. Josephine and Anna pulled out their rosaries and started the litany as Camilla led Nils by the hand to the bedside, kissed her grandmother and whispered, “Nils is here, too, Noni.”
“Signora...” her husband added awkwardly.

Louella, Gianni, and Joseph, Anna’s husband, hung back talking in low tones. “We’re just the *cafoons,*” Louella asserted. “Let’s not interfere.” Her malapropistic use of the slang term *cafone* would have been very funny in any other context, especially because the New Orleans-born Louella actually thought the word meant “in-law.” But today Gianni and Joseph let it slide.

The rosary droned on.

*Hail Mary, full of grace*  
*The Lord is with thee.*

Nils looked bewildered. The twins and Camilla seemed ill at ease, wondering what next.

*Blessed art thou amongst women*  
*And blessed –*

Just then Domenica interrupted. The dying woman began to issue orders like a field general.

“*Miei figlie, venite vicino. Io morrò....*” She paused for dramatic effect.

As Josephine started to sniffle and Anna pinched her elbow menacingly, Domenica continued her
long-rehearsed soliloquy in her rudimentary English. “Anna, bring me the chest,” she rasped pointing her bony finger at a latched wooden box on the dresser.

Anna complied. Domenica opened it to reveal three small rings and two pairs of diamond stud earrings. She pressed the small diamond engagement ring into Anna’s hand, closing her daughter’s fingers around it. Josephine, for all her real sorrow, could not stifle a pang of jealousy that her younger sister received this choice gift, though if she had been honest with herself, she would have credited Anna with being the prime caregiver these last years. Before she could ruminate more on this perceived injustice, Domenica wordlessly placed her plain gold wedding band in Josephine’s palm, and then, taking the third ruby ring from the box, motioned to Louella. It was a healing gesture that even the unhappy daughter-in-law, so long convinced her in-laws hated her, could not fail to find moving.

Next Domenica summoned the granddaughters and handed each a single diamond stud earring – useless without its mate – but presented with such gravity and flourish as to seem a jewel beyond compare. Domenica’s last gesture was to remove Carlo’s gold pocket watch from the box and call her son to her.
“Mio caro figlio. Questo è l’ultimo dono del tuo padre. Ti voglio bene, mio figlio…..Not long now,” she murmured hoarsely, returning to broken English. “Anna, the candles… luce, prego….”

“Light them,” Josephine almost snapped at her sister, who did as she was told. Then, wordlessly, Domenica motioned to her son to open the nightstand. There he found a bottle of Barolo, a corkscrew, and ten small cordial glasses.

“Benviamo,” Domenica insisted, forcing herself to smile faintly. “Drink. It is from your wedding Francesco and Lucia.” She had never once in forty years gotten Louella’s name right, or perhaps she simply willed the Southern belle to be an Italian contadina.

In any case, Louella, taken aback, whispered to her husband, “Open it, Fra. Look, it’s from 1945.”

Francesco struggled with the cork, which promptly disintegrated, sending slivers into the bottle from which emanated a pungent aroma more redolent of aged vinegar than vintage wine. Eyebrows raised quizzically, Francesco silently poured the ten gasses and handed one to his mother.

“Try it!” she commanded. Her son obediently took a small swig. The acidity puckered his lips, and he grimaced.
“Good?” Domenica inquired. His throat burning, Francesco merely nodded.

“Allora, beviamo. Salute tutti. Addio miei cari.” And with that the tea-totaling nonagenarian, who had not touched even a drop of sacramental wine in fifty years, swallowed the liquid in one gulp. She settled back against the propped up pillows and closed her eyes, shutting out the looks of amazed bewilderment on the faces of her family. Only Nils, for whom this was a bizarre initiation into a family he had not long ago joined, allowed a wry smile to curl on his lips.

“La commedia è finita,” he mouthed to Camilla.

The family stayed until Domenica’s breathing grew regular, and it was clear she was truly asleep. Anna and Josephine agreed to keep vigil throughout the night and sent the others home. At home Camilla slept fitfully, half expecting the phone to ring at any moment. But eventually she collapsed into a deep tension-releasing sleep.

When the morning alarm woke her and Nils, Camilla made her way to the telephone and called her aunt. When she returned to the bedroom, Nils asked tersely, “Well, how is she?”
“She’s sitting up, eating breakfast. The fever’s gone, and she looks better than she has in a week, Aunt Anna says.”

“Nothing like a little melodrama to bring about a cure,” Nils remarked. Camilla first bit her lip and then burst out laughing.

For Domenica Catania had indeed played her _gran scena_ with the conviction of a great thespian. All that she had lacked was the instinct for perfect timing. When two years later at the age of ninety-six, Signora Catania did pass away unceremoniously in her sleep, her quiet exit might have been seen as anticlimactic.

But perhaps it was exactly what Domenica would have wished – peaceful, dignified, and, above all, a delayed departure which had given her time to savor the performance of her lifetime.
Camilla came to just at the wrong moment. Disoriented, she raised her head from her prone position only to feel it crack hard against a window sash. Hands immediately pulled her back, and she realized she was lying on a stretcher that was being awkwardly maneuvered through an open window. The four paramedics struggled to negotiate the sharp angle of the dilapidated Victorian porch and to pass the stretcher and its occupant into a waiting room filled with expectant but unsurprised faces.

The door to the house had proved too narrow so the wide veranda window seemed the only option and even that was a tight fit. A few more lurches and thrusts and Camilla, now fully awake, felt herself lowered onto the ground, then gently lifted up onto the sofa which had quickly been vacated by the waiting-room patients.

Despite her swollen eyes, engorged tongue, and bloated face, she was able to see a grey-haired, bespectacled man standing above her, syringe in hand. She heard her husband Nils’s panicked voice
running through all the possible causes for Camilla’s fainting and going into what appeared to be anaphylactic shock. The doctor quickly administered the epinephrine injection and popped an adrenalin tablet into Camilla’s mouth, all the while listening intently to Nils.

“We ate at Ciro and Sal’s – no, no fish, nothing exotic, pasta and eggplant parmesan, some red wine…..”

“Not that,” the doctor snapped curtly. “Before that?”

“Before that? Earlier?” And then Nils remembered. “She was stung by a bumblebee this afternoon in the car. I put ice on it when we got back to our cabin, and she seemed fine”

“That’s it!” the doctor exclaimed. “Where?”

“On her left shoulder.”

The old man quickly loosened Camilla’s blouse, found the huge red welt, went back into his examining room, and re-emerged, armed with tweezers, alcohol, and gauze. Despite his advanced age and gnarled hands, his touch was precise and firm, and with one flick of the tweezers he removed the stinger and cleaned the wound. By the time he finished, Camilla was feeling revived by the
adrenalin, a lot less dizzy, and she realized she was beginning to be able to swallow once again.

“So, little lady,” the doctor said, “do you feel up to standing and coming into my office?”

Nils helped his wife up, and they made their way through the motley waiting room assemblage – fishermen with bleeding hands, young men high on marijuana or worse, crying babies. Settling Camilla, then himself in two leather chairs opposite the old man’s massive, battered mahogany desk, Nils read the brass nameplate: Daniel Hiebert, M.D. Without bothering to introduce himself or ask his patient’s name, Dr. Hiebert cut directly to the point.

“Do you feel better?  It looks as if the swelling is coming down.”

Camilla looked at her hands, which were returning to their normal size.

“Open your mouth,” Dr. Hiebert commanded as he reached across the desk with a tongue depressor. “Say ‘ah.’ Yes, much better. You were choking when you came in. Almost back to normal now – your tongue, that is.” Coming round the desk, he felt her pulse, listened to her heart and lungs, and then perching on the desk opposite her, said, “So, young lady, tell me exactly what happened.”
It had been a brilliant summer day on the Cape, and Camilla and Nils Carlsen were reveling in the few days of vacation their newlywed budget could afford. They had driven up to Truro from New Jersey in their decrepit Buick and settled into the tiniest of the Whitman House cabins for a four-day holiday. On Saturday afternoon they had rolled down the windows in their airconditionless automobile and headed down the back roads toward Corn Hill Beach.

Camilla was wearing a bright yellow floral set of shorts and blouse, which, to the hapless insect that lit on her back, must have resembled a huge sunflower. Camilla, who harbored a life-long fear of bees, never saw the bee or felt it crawl down under her blouse until all at once she felt a stabbing pain in her shoulder and screamed. Nils swerved to the shoulder with the car coming to an abrupt halt just short of the ditch at the side of the road. By now Camilla was hysterical, flailing her arms and continuing to shriek.

“Get out of the car!” Nils commanded, tugging her by the hand. He began to pull his wife’s blouse over her head. As he did, a half-dazed bumblebee the size of a cherry tomato fell to the ground. Nils promptly dispatched the dying insect by stepping on
it and then put his arms around his wife and hugged her tightly until her sobs ebbed.

“Come on, let’s go back to the cabin and put some ice on it,” he said, handing the still dazed Camilla her blouse.

By the time they reached their little room in the woods, the welt on Camilla’s shoulder was very swollen. Nils found some ice in the room fridge and applied a compress. He also poured Camilla a glass of chilled white wine. Half an hour later the redness seemed to disappear; the wine had settled Camilla’s nerves, and the shadows were lengthening through the woods.

“Do you feel like dinner at Ciro and Sal’s?” Nils asked. The legendary Provincetown eatery was always their first pick for dinner whenever they visited the Cape.

“Sure,” agreed Camilla. “I’ll change, and we’ll go early before it gets too crowded.”

They drove to P-town along 6-A past the tiny rows of beach cottages that lined the narrow strip of land between the ocean and the bay. Camilla could not help but note their colorful names – all flowers like Rosebud, Gardenia, Dahlia. She thought about the flowers on her outfit that afternoon and made a
mental note to wear less colorful clothing that would not act as an aphrodisiac for bees on future outings.

The dinner at Ciro and Sal’s was romantic and delicious as always. After sharing a half bottle of Chianti, Camilla and Nils were feeling mellow. So as they walked down Commercial Street hand in hand toward the pier, it did not immediately strike Camilla as odd that her hands were beginning to tingle – first the palms, then the fingertips and then her lips!

“I feel itchy, hon,” she noted softly.

“Maybe something you ate?”

“I just had my usual.” And then she stopped herself. “Oh, God, hope it’s not botulism from canned tomatoes,” she exclaimed, referring to the recent lethal outbreak which had been in the news of late.

But before Nils could reject that comment, Camilla looked down at her hands. In the time it had taken to walk a single block, they had swollen to four times their size. Her plain gold wedding band was sinking into the growing fleshiness, and in seconds her lips began to curl upward toward her nose and downward toward her chin.

“Nils,” she stammered. “I feel very dizzy. I can’t breathe well...”
Nils steered her toward the open door of an art gallery. “My wife needs to sit down for a minute,” he told the proprietor.

The man did not argue but began to proffer Camilla a chair, when she collapsed to the floor and lost consciousness. She woke a few minutes later as Nils was trying to open her mouth and holding down her tongue so that she could get air.

“Call an ambulance, please!” But the gallery owner had already dialed.

On Saturday evenings in summer Provincetown the narrow Commercial Street is in theory open to vehicular traffic, but it is really a massive pedestrian mall with crowds filling the roadway as they amble through town. Somehow miraculously, however, the ambulance arrived from Arch Street, and the paramedics quickly slapped an oxygen mask on Camilla and loaded her stretcher into the vehicle. Nils climbed in beside her, babbling on about how it might be food poisoning.

The paramedics were swift and silent. Turning on their siren and flashing top light, they managed to clear a path through the sea of humanity. “We’re going right down Commercial Street – fast – there’s a clinic there. Just breathe deep, miss.”
Camilla closed her eyes and tried to obey. Before she lost consciousness again, she had a fleeting ironic thought about the movie *Love Story*, which they had seen just the week before. Thinking this story might end the same way, she managed to form three words with her swollen lips, whispering to her husband, “I love you.”

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Dr. Hiebert had listened carefully to the narrative, and when he was convinced that the crisis had passed, he sent Camilla back to Truro with a supply of adrenalin tablets. He handed Nils his card and told him that if Camilla had any further reaction to call this home number at any hour of the day or night and “you will get me or Mrs. Hiebert.” As Nils pulled out his wallet, Hiebert said, “No, I want to see you back here tomorrow morning at 10:00 a.m. before you head back home, so we can settle up then. Off you go!”

And with that he ushered them back out through the still teeming waiting room and motioned silently for the next patient to come in.

Exhausted Camilla and Nils went to bed as soon as they got back to their cabin. But a few hours later Nils was awakened by his wife’s plaintive voice calling his name.
“Nils, my heart is beating so fast it feels as if it is going to explode.”

Nils sat up in bed, flipped on the light, and put his head to her chest to listen. Sure enough, her heartbeat was pounding. Trying to remain calm, he said, “I’m sure it’s just the adrenalin, but I am going to call the doctor. He said we could, no matter what time,” Nils added, noting that it was just past midnight.

Nils dialed, and despite the hour, a wide-awake woman answered. He explained the situation, apologizing for having disturbed the doctor.

“No disturbance,” Mrs. Hiebert replied. “Dan is not here right now. He’s out stitching up a fisherman, but he should be back soon, and he will call you. Give me your number and where you’re staying.”

Nils told her they were in the Whitman House cottages and gave her the direct room line. For the next forty-five minutes Camilla tried unsuccessfully to fall back to sleep while Nils pretended to read, waiting for the phone to ring. But instead, both were startled by a robust knock on the door.

“Who is it?” Nils asked, jumping up.

“Dr. Hiebert.”
And sure enough, as Nils threw open the door, there stood the doctor, black bag in hand, his driver in tow.

“Damn,” he muttered as he crossed the threshold. “I had a devil of a time finding this cottage. You didn’t tell my wife the number. I had to wake them up at the desk.”

Stunned by the 1:00 a.m. house call, Nils could only stammer, “I don’t know if it’s serious. I just thought you would call us….I....”

“No problem. I was out in Wellfleet stitching a finger tip back onto a fisherman He put it in his pocket and called me to come. It was just as easy to stop on my way home.”

All the while as he spoke in a soft voice he was checking Camilla’s pulse and listening to her heart rate. “Well, I’d stop the adrenalin tablets,” he concluded. “That’s what’s got her going, but otherwise she looks fine. Allergic reaction seems to be suppressed.” And with that he pulled out a syringe from the bag and gave Camilla a shot. “This should relax you. Try to get some sleep, and I’ll see you in the morning.”

“You, too, Doctor. Thank you.”
“Oh, I’ve got one more call to make before I go home.” He smiled and left as swiftly as he had come.

The next morning came rather quickly after only a few hours of sleep, but somehow Camilla awoke feeling refreshed and her old self again. She and Nils treated themselves to a huge breakfast of pancakes and eggs before packing the car and heading up to P-town.

This time they entered the clinic by the front door, finding the waiting room no less crowded than it had been the evening before. They waited about half an hour before Dr. Hiebert came out, and seeing them motioned them to follow him.

“So, how do you feel, miss?”

“So much better. I can’t thank you enough, Dr. Hiebert.”

The doctor scribbled a prescription on a pad. “Two doors down..take this to the pharmacy and fill it before you go.”

“What do we owe you, Doctor?” Nils asked.

“Uh, make it $25.”
Nils and Camilla could not have looked any more surprised, but they knew better than to protest. They paid in cash, shook hands, reiterated their thanks, and left.

A few months later, Camilla, who was working on her master’s degree in literature, was immersed in Eugene O’Neill’s biography when she exclaimed:

“Nils, come here, listen to this!”

She read her husband a passage which talked about Eugene and Agnes’ who were living in Provincetown in the early 1920s, bringing their cat, Anna Christie, to Dr. Hiebert for emergency surgery after the cat had been seriously injured by a dog attack. Hiebert had been O’Neill’s Harvard housemate for a time and had come to P-town in 1919 to set up his practice, enjoying a friendship with the playwright and his wife and delivering their son Shane.

“It’s got to be the same Dr. Hiebert,” Camilla said to Nils, “because the dates work out. He’s probably in his eighties now.”

“Must be,” Nils agreed, and together they read on in the biography: how Hiebert had been the very face of medicine in Provincetown for five decades, delivering babies, tending the dying, performing surgery in his humble clinic, creating the first rescue
squad using the hearse as an ambulance and enlarging the porch window on his clinic home to accommodate the stretchers, and treating emergencies day or night. Unique in every sense, he practiced medicine in a hands-on, old-fashioned, people-centric, sometimes eccentric way. He would treat a duck or a cat with as much care as his human patients; he would keep O’Neill “just sober enough to finish his play Anna Christie,” or dispense B-12 shots to anemic druggies without lecturing.

“Amazing,” Camilla remarked when they finished reading. “We should stop in and say hello when we go up this summer.”

However, intent on finishing their degrees, one summer hastened to another, and Camilla and Nils never returned to Provincetown until June 1973. It was a glorious sunny morning as they took a leisurely stroll to 466 Commercial Street. The old captain’s house looked the same as it had three years before, but the doctor’s shingle had disappeared. And though the oversized window dominated the porch, it was sealed shut and draped in lace and velvet curtains. Thinking that the 19th century edifice seemed more a rooming house than a clinic, Camilla was determined to discover what had happened. She strode down the short walkway and rang the bell. A bearded man with long, straggly hair, wearing overalls, answered the door.
“We’re looking for Dr. Hiebert,” Camilla announced.

“He died last year, miss. His wife has moved in with her daughter. We’re fixing it up as a B&B. Not open yet.”

He started to close the door, but Camilla cried, “Wait! I knew him. He saved my life!”

The man hesitated a moment and then said softly, “Come on in. I can show you the obituary.”

Camilla and Nils stepped over the tools and the pieces of cut molding into the large room that had been Hiebert’s waiting room. The man disappeared and came back with a small clipping from the Provincetown Advocate.

Camilla and Nils read silently. “Did you know him?” she asked the man when she had finished.

“Oh, yeah. Everyone did. He delivered me and my brother. He was the only doctor for fifty miles, and there wasn’t much he couldn’t or wouldn’t do. He had pills for everything, if you know what I mean? A regular Dr. Feelgood.”

The remark, jarring as it was, did not really surprise Camilla and Nils. What had Hiebert given her that night three years ago in the syringe that made her
sleep? And yet, what would have happened to her without his emergency care?

“They don’t make ‘em like ol’ Hiebert anymore,” the man continued. “He sure was an original!”

Silently, Camilla nodded. Original, unorthodox, uncannily effective, flawed and human – an old-fashioned medicine man who didn’t give a damn about insurance or malpractice liability or the rules of the game, but a man who did care about life and saving it in any way he could.

And as she framed those thoughts, another realization struck Camilla like a lightening bolt – a realization that for Dr. Hiebert must have been a daily thought: that existence was tenuous, life fragile and precious. Without Dr. Daniel Hiebert, she, Camilla Caruso Carlsen, would have been one of those casualties.
In puzzled silence, Camilla fingered the tiny slip of yellowed paper with its neatly penned words: “Acute colon with metastases.” She had found it tucked behind a bottle of prescription tablets, high on an upper shelf of her aunt’s kitchen cabinet. If these words seemed hieroglyphics, the pills themselves were even more mystifying. There was no patient listed on the label, no directions for dosage, and no date, and they were amphetamines! This was certainly an unexpected discovery! Were they Aunt Anna’s or Uncle Joe’s? Were they somehow connected to the dire news contained on the tiny note, and if so, whose cancer diagnosis was it? It couldn’t have been Uncle Joe’s because the writing was clearly Anna’s, and she had predeceased him by seven years. Was it a note to herself, then, a secret confession, hidden away from everyone she loved?

But when Anna had died unexpectedly at age seventy, she had never consulted a doctor – at least to anyone else’s knowledge. And the family assumed her lungs had been the cause since she had
chain-smoked for fifty years. To whom else could the note refer and why was it squirreled away with the drugs? Anna, who for most of her life never took even an aspirin without clocking the intervals between pills to the minute and writing down every tablet consumed, seemed an unlikely candidate for taking uppers. If they were hers, then she must have been desperate to hide her terminal diagnosis from her family, and she must have gotten support from the longtime family physician Dr. Ricci, who had been known to prescribe a lifetime of diet pills and anti-depressants for Joseph.

Camilla called to Nils, who was carting boxes up from the basement of her aunt and uncle’s house in preparation for the trash removal men to come. The little ranch house in River Edge had sold quickly after Uncle Joe’s recent death, and Camilla and Nils were pressed to dispose of all its clutter hastily in time for the closing. They had been rather ruthless in their task, hauling heaps of unwanted belongings to the dump, selling furniture, and combing drawers for the few items they might want to keep – the disintegrating photographs, several packets of love letters from World War II, a few small pieces of jewelry – a relatively small cache of treasure from over forty-five years of marriage.

And then there was the piano – the old upright that occupied pride of place in the simple living room, just as it had graced her aunt’s dining room in West
New York so many years ago. Camilla wished she could keep it, for it held so many childhood memories, but her and Nils’ West New York condo was too small to accommodate it. So she was donating it to a needy child who desperately wanted to take piano lessons but couldn’t otherwise afford the instrument. The movers would be coming for it in a little while. Still, it seemed hard to see it go, Camilla thought, as she ran her fingers over the yellowed keys. The ivory smelled faintly of Chesterfields. She tentatively plucked out a scale. The instrument was slightly out of tune. Camilla sat on the worn leather bench and absentmindedly began to play a right hand melody.

_Quando m’en vo_
_Quando m’en vo soletta per la via_

It was the beginning of _Musetta’s Waltz_, the only piece Camilla had ever really mastered in that year of taking lessons from Anna. She had been forty years old, between jobs, and on a whim she had asked her aunt to teach her. Every week she had taken the bus to Anna’s and spent the afternoon practicing. It was clear that Camilla didn’t have much native talent as a pianist, but she worked diligently, and the sessions swiftly became something else entirely. They were a chance for her and Anna, who seemed older and frailer than she should have been for a woman of sixty-nine, to spend time together – a chance for Camilla’s once
ebullient aunt to rekindle some of the joy her niece remembered. For when Anna sat at the piano to demonstrate, playing a show tune or an aria, she became the vibrant woman Camilla had loved from childhood.

Anna was the youngest of the three Catania children. She had somehow navigated the family’s grim Depression years with an easy-going insouciance. She was spirited, clever, determined to make her independent way in the world and be happy. She had the ability to laugh off the rough patches in her life. Mischievous and a little willful, Anna would have her fun and then face the consequences. When their mother Domenica took out a belt to chastise the girls, Josephine would cry and run away, while Anna presented her backside and “got it over with.” “It doesn’t hurt much,” she told her sister, and, besides what’s the difference? We had our fun anyway?”

Anna had married her high school sweetheart, Joseph Cardona, as soon as he returned from the Navy in 1946, and the couple had installed themselves on the second floor of the Catania home. Anna took a job as a bookkeeper at a New York City engineering firm and within a short time had advanced herself to office manager. She was methodical, industrious, and loyal, and she contributed an air of camaraderie and fun to the
office. She loved her job and the independence her excellent salary brought her. Anna dressed in the best of Lord and Taylor and Macy’s, painted her long nails bright red, wore dramatic makeup and coiffed her long, curly black hair in the latest style. She unabashedly smoked two packs a day and drank Manhattans. She loved eating in restaurants, going on ski vacations and beach getaways, bowling, and entertaining. She enjoyed the carefree lifestyle so much that she and Joseph deferred having children for so long that they eventually decided against parenthood altogether. It was a curious decision because both Anna and Joseph doted on young folks, and they showered their nieces and nephews with gifts and affection.

Camilla had always been Anna’s favorite, perhaps because she sensed that her sister Josephine’s only, overprotected daughter needed a little fun and adventure in her life. And Anna was determined to provide that, even when it meant overruling her sister’s nagging remonstrances.

When Camilla was five, she begged for a cowgirl outfit so that she could look like her idol, Dale Evans. Josephine sewed a brown-fringed cotton skirt and vest from a Simplicity pattern, so makeshift that even the child had difficulty concealing her disappointment. Anna, understanding her sister’s frugality, said not a word, but went out and bought a complete piebald suede
outfit – skirt, vest, wide-brimmed hat, and boots and presented them to Camilla for her birthday in several large, elaborately wrapped boxes. After the delighted child had opened all of them, Joseph brought in the final gift: a huge, stuffed toy rocking horse – black with a white mane and silver-studded bridle. Josephine was speechless, and Camilla was in cowgirl heaven!

But it wasn’t all about “spoiling” her niece, as Josephine called it. It was about sharing a sense of fun. Camilla remembered how every holiday dinner with the Catanzas, Anna would sit at the piano and play Gilbert and Sullivan, Irving Berlin, or Rodgers and Hammerstein songs and sing the lyrics in her attractive mezzo. Then she would teach Camilla and her cousins, Mary and Margaret, the lyrics and before long the usually staid Catania household was alive with the sound of music.

As Camilla grew older, there were the outings to Chan’s Dragon Inn every Friday – the heaping “poo poo” platters, egg rolls, won-ton soup, and fried rice that Uncle Joe always ordered. All these dishes seemed terribly exotic to a young girl who had never before eaten in a restaurant or tasted anything other than Italian food.

And when Camilla was nine, Josephine let her sheltered “baby girl” go on the first of many vacations to the Jersey shore with Anna and Joe. It
took a great deal of convincing on Anna’s part, but she did succeed in persuading her sister that Camilla was old enough to be away from home with relatives who were, after all, really second parents. These Wildwood Crest summers continued for almost ten years, and they were one of the highlights of Camilla’s year. She frolicked in the surf with Uncle Joe and played cards and table games with Aunt Anna; they rode bicycles and played miniature golf in the day and walked the Boardwalk each night, trying their luck at the wheels of fortune and riding the ferris wheel. And they ate every meal in restaurants, always capping the holiday with an elegant dinner at Dino’s, where she would wear her best party dress and drink a Shirley Temple cocktail and order whatever she liked. As Camilla grew older, their adventures changed. Anna and Joe took her to Monmouth Racetrack for the first time and placed her bets for her. She dragged her aunt and uncle to see her choice of movies, and they played chess and bridge.

The bonds forged on those vacations translated into closeness throughout the years. As Camilla became an increasingly serious and sophisticated young woman, she shared her intellectual and artistic discoveries with Anna. She brought her favorite opera recordings to her aunt’s house, and they would listen together. She took Anna and Joe with her to the old Met to hear Franco Corelli and Renata Tebaldi in *La Bohème*; she brought her college
reading assignments to her aunt’s and spent the afternoons in that quiet supportive space. It was Anna who listened to her tales of heartbreak when Camilla and her high school sweetheart broke up and again when Camilla and her college beau, whom everyone hoped she would marry, went their separate ways. And when Camilla finally chose to make her life together with Nils Carlsen, it was Anna who brokered a peace between mother and daughter.

Oh, to be sure, Anna did not approve of everything her often rebellious niece did, but she knew how to talk rationally to Camilla, to reprove or caution without hysteria, and to support her niece’s choices. In the entire Caruso and Carlsen households only Anna offered support to Camilla and Nils when they made the decision to go to Canada to avoid the draft for Nils, whose conscientious objector status had been denied. Anna made it clear she would have preferred they didn’t go, but if that was what they felt they should do, she would be there to help them always. And, so saying, she pressed $1000 into her niece’s hand and gave them her blessing.

When a year later Camilla and Nils returned from Toronto penniless after their emigration experiment failed to produce jobs and when Nils’ father refused to let the young couple stay at the Carlsen home even temporarily, just as Josephine made incoherent excuses that she no longer had a second
bedroom to offer, it was Anna who opened her home and let Nils and Camilla live with her and Joseph for several months while they looked for work.

By that time, Anna had quit her New York job to care for her own widowed mother. It seemed to Camilla that her aunt had lost some of her spirit and joie de vivre, though at the time, it never occurred to her that she and Nils might have been posing an added burden. As Camilla and her husband eventually got back on their feet, settled into careers, and assumed their adult routines, the friendship with her aunt and uncle morphed into a different sharing. After Domenica died, Anna and Joe sold up and bought a house in Bergen County, where for more than two decades, except for the brief time Camilla and Nils lived in Chicago, she visited her aunt every week.

Anna learned to drive at fifty, and while Camilla always found it nerve-wracking to ride with her aunt, she had to admire Anna’s pluck. She laughed to herself now, thinking of the trips they would take in Anna’s blue Maverick, which she never drove above twenty-five miles an hour and always tooted the horn at every intersection. “Little old lady at the wheel,” she would say with a wry smile.

Perhaps it was because Anna had always been a cautious individual, a closet worrier, or perhaps because Camilla saw so much of her aunt that she
didn’t notice the gradual changes. Little by little Anna was slowing down, withdrawing. She went out less and less, and finally not at all. She gave her failing eyesight as an excuse, but, as Camilla thought guiltily, “I should have known better.” She stopped painting her nails or styling her hair which she let go gray, and she paid little attention to her wardrobe.

In fact, very few things seemed to rekindle the old light in Anna’s eyes. They always sparkled for Joseph, and in hindsight, Camilla realized that her aunt had likely concealed whatever illness she might have had from an almost maternal protectiveness for her husband. And Camilla acknowledged, with another pang of guilt, that she had been the other tiny flame of hope for her aunt. And so when, in that last year, Camilla had come every Friday to play piano with Anna, this had been the bright spot in Anna’s week. They would laugh; Anna would sing, and they coaxed music from the old upright. Then when Joe would come home and Nils swing by to pick Camilla up, Camilla would treat everyone to a mini performance of what she had learned that afternoon. The men would tease her; Anna would proudly defend her niece, and all would end in merriment, feasting on pizza and Chianti.

Camilla was so glad she had had that year with Anna. It eased the pain of her not making it to Anna’s hospital bedside when her Aunt collapsed
only a few hours before her passing. Camilla had been in New York at Carnegie Hall, attending the first concert she had handled in her new position as assistant to baritone Derek Howe when she learned her aunt had taken ill and had been taken to the hospital. She told her father she would come to the hospital later that afternoon directly after the concert. When she called from a pay booth, she was stunned to hear a tearful Joseph tell her “Auntie Annie is gone.” Camilla could still vividly recall the waves of shock which assailed her and the numbness of the subsequent days of wake and funeral.

Fingering the pill bottle before washing the contents down the drain of the kitchen sink, Camilla pocketed the note as if somehow preserving it might eventually reveal its mystery.

“What time is it?” Nils called from the other room. “Shouldn’t those piano movers have come already?”

Without answering, Camilla walked to the piano. She lifted the lid and hesitantly felt her way along the keys.

_Elisa Ferraro_:

*Quando m’en vo*

_Quando m’en vo soletta pert la via_

_La gente sosta e mira_

_E la bellezza mia tutta ricerca in me…._
Slowly she found the tempo and built to the soaring crescendo:

...*felice mi fa, felice mi fa!* – *It makes me happy*...

It made Camilla happy to remember Aunt Anna with this waltz. Not the fragile, diminished Anna of later years but rather, the joyous, indomitable woman of long ago. In the music of Musetta’s passionate embrace of living, Camilla heard the echoes of her aunt’s legacy.
Camilla’s hands were shaking on the steering wheel as she pulled her car off onto the dirt shoulder of the country road, churning up a cloud of dust as she skidded to a stop and jammed the gear shaft into neutral. Nils, sitting in the passenger seat, looked searchingly at his wife.

“What is it?” he mouthed as she listened intently to the cell phone glued to her ear.

“I repeat, you will have to contact our lawyer. I have nothing to discuss with you now. I’m my mother’s legal guardian, and you can contact Marino and Marino to discuss this.”

Nils could hear a high-pitched, aggressive voice through the line, but he couldn’t make out the caller’s response.

“Ms. Tate,” Camilla continued, “you almost caused me to have an accident while driving. I am up in Vermont, pulled over on the side of a road, and I
cannot and will not discuss this with you now!” With that, Camilla clicked disconnect, threw her phone into the console, and slumped over the wheel.

“What is it, hon?” Niles asked, rubbing her back. “Who was that? Here, I’ll drive, and you tell me what’s going on.”

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Back at the Equinox bar over an aged single-malt Scotch which Nils had gotten his wife to settle her nerves, the couple talked in low voices about the caller from New Jersey Adult Protective Services, who had informed Camilla that her father had filed a formal complaint against her and her handling of Josephine Caruso’s care. Camilla kept shaking her head in disbelief.

“It has got to be Uncle Sal who put him up to it. I know it!”

“What does he want?”

“He claims that Mom needs to go into a nursing home right away and that I am preventing her. He says the home health aides we’ve hired are all useless...”

“Well, that’s because he has fired them one after the other.”
“He says I’ve tied up his money –“

“He doesn’t have any money!” Nils exploded. “Thank God, you’ve managed the little they did have to last this long. What the fuck does the stubborn old Sicilian want now?”

Camilla put her hand to Nils’ lips to silence the expletive.

“Sh-h-h, everyone can hear you. Let’s go upstairs and get ready for dinner and we can talk there.”

Before and after dinner and late into the night, Camilla and Nils relived all the details of her disastrously dysfunctional family relationships. It had all begun when her mother, who had been showing signs of age and forgetfulness, managed to muster the wherewithal to pick up the telephone to call her daughter in a panic.

“Something’s wrong with your father, Camilla. He just passed out, and now he’s not making any sense.”

“I’m on my way, Mom.”

Immediately, Camilla jumped into the car, called 911 to meet her at her parents’ house, and called Nils, who was making his way home from the
airport at that very moment. By the time she arrived at her parents’ home some ten minutes later, the paramedics were already there, and by some miracle, Josephine had opened the door for them – even though for several years now she had been refusing to answer either the phone or the doorbell.

“Is he always this disoriented?” an elderly responder asked, as he helped strap Gianni Caruso to a stretcher.

By the time Nils arrived to meet his wife at the hospital emergency room some forty-five minutes later, Gianni seemed stable. “You better go back and stay with Mom, Nils, if you don’t mind? She won’t know what to do alone. She’s so completely dependent on him. Pick up something to eat on the way back, and I’ll come as soon as he gets admitted. He’s going to have to stay, so we’ll take Mom home with us then.”

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It was almost midnight when Camilla pulled into the driveway of her parents’ tiny Tudor home, yet all the lights were on, and Nils was sitting up in the kitchen opposite a distracted Josephine, who kept repeating, “Where’s my Gianni? When’s he coming back?” When Nils tried to soothe her by saying, “Not tonight, but we’re here,” she would scream, “I want Gianni! Where did you take him?”
Nils looked exhausted and just lifted his eyebrows in dismay as Camilla walked in. “She says she doesn’t want to come with us. She wants to wait here for your father.”

“Well, you have to, Mom, because Nils and I need to go home and feed the cats, and Nils, at least, needs to go to work tomorrow. You can’t stay here alone. Daddy isn’t coming home tonight. He will probably be in the hospital a few days. He had a minor stroke, but he is going to be fine.” Camilla stopped because she could see in Josephine’s glassy eyes that her mother was not listening.

Somehow they did get her into the car and home to North Bergen and installed her in the guest bedroom. The rest of the week proved a nightmare of discovery. Josephine remained largely incoherent. She hallucinated about being held prisoner in a hospital and called for Gianni to come rescue her. She called Camilla by her dead sister Anna’s name, refused to eat, and launched into an hysterical series of tantrums. Camilla never did get to her teaching job, but she did move quickly to get a handle on the situation that had clearly been spiraling out of control for longer than she had realized. Her father had been in well-meaning denial when he would insist that his wife was “just a little forgetful – nothing unusual.”
Camilla and Nils hired round-the-clock aides for Josephine and Gianni, who came home from the hospital a few days later. When it was time to leave the Carlsen home, Josephine went into full resistance mode; she screamed at the top of her lungs out the open windows, she refused to walk, and she flailed around with the strength of the possessed. Ultimately, Camilla called the parish priest to calm Josephine, and Nils hurried off to rent a wheelchair.

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Once the Carusos began to settle into their new routine with home help and Gianni was recovering in physical therapy sessions, Camilla and Nils tried to get her father to understand the gravity of their situation.

At first Gianni was amenable to his daughter and son-in-law’s suggestions. They called in a doctor for Josephine, who had refused to see a physician for the past forty years. The diagnosis was Alzheimer’s. They brought Gianni to their lawyer to help unravel the tangle of her father’s catastrophic finances and help the old man remove the liens he had accumulated over the years on the family house so that he could use that equity to care for Josephine. And on Robert Marino’s advice, given Gianni’s age and health, Camilla’s father agreed to make his daughter his wife’s legal guardian.
But at the precise moment when all this fell into place after months of legal filings, painfully awkward scenes, and mountains of bills, Camilla and Nils stood poised to breathe a sigh of relief. And then everything went south.

Gianni Caruso, who had acquiesced to everything his daughter and her lawyers suggested, suddenly experienced a change of heart. He accused Camilla of stealing his savings—the tiny sum of $4,000 which he had tucked away in Josephine’s name to avoid his creditors. Camilla patiently explained that the guardianship required her to create new joint bank accounts into which she deposited this small sum plus her mother’s half of the reverse mortgage stipend, but if her father wanted the $4,000 in his account, she would write him a check. All this proved inscrutable to Gianni, who never grasped what had transpired or the full legal ramifications of the guardianship. He resented having Camilla sign off in his wife’s place, and he began to find fault with everything his daughter did.

He started by firing one home health aide after the other. He threw out the groceries Camilla brought; he ranted in secret to his brother Sal all the while he maintained a Cheshire Cat smile whenever Camilla and Nils visited. And after almost a year of this low-level friction, Gianni Caruso filed a series of injunctions against Camilla to reverse the guardianship. He lost every legal battle, running up
a mound of bills which he then refused to pay because “They didn’t do what I asked them.” It was in the midst of this warring phase that Camilla received the call from Adult Protective Services.

The meeting with Ms. Tate ensued in lawyer Marino’s presence. Gianni insisted he wanted to move immediately with his wife to a nursing facility. Gianni was advised that this was not the wisest financial choice because the current reverse mortgage, though modest, was a guaranteed-for-life income. If he sold the house now, he would take away so little that he and Josephine would be on Medicaid in a matter of months. But, more importantly, Camilla tried to convince her father that moving Josephine would only hasten her decline. Gianni could not be persuaded by any of this, and finally, Camilla, though guilt weighed on her heart, gave in to her father’s demands. Marino convinced her that this battle would only get messier and messier and be detrimental to whatever resources her parents had left.

“But I promised Mom,” Camilla sobbed. “I promised her I would never do this...”

“Times have changed,” Rob Marino rejoined flatly.

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Days after the wrenching move in which her mother needed sedation, four paramedics, and a police escort to get her into an ambulance, and her howls of “Where are you taking me?” alarmed the entire neighborhood, Camilla and Nils were back at the house left to sort out possessions before the final sale. They were going through the attic, collecting some belongings that Camilla had left stored there over the years. She found most of her paintings from her college years, but disappointingly there was only a small shelf of children’s books. Camilla searched through for sentimental favorites like *The Dragons of Blueland* and tucked it under her arm. “But where were all the others? Where were *The Adventures of Madeleine* or her first copy of *Le Petit Prince*? And where was the magical collection of Breyer horses. She could only find one ceramic – a chestnut thoroughbred with a broken leg. Where was her Arabian Balthasar or her Derby horses like Tim Tam and Alydar? What had her mother done with all those memories?” Camilla felt strangely violated. There was so little of her childhood left in this attic after all. She sadly gathered up what there was and gave it to Nils to take to the car.

The furniture, her father had said, was spoken for, though he had never asked her if she wanted anything, and the rubbish removal guys would get the rest. “We should check the file cabinet in Dad’s office before we go.”
Slowly Camilla opened the neatly labeled file drawers her father had so meticulously organized. Most everything was gone here, too. Had he had the presence of mind to take it with him or had he destroyed the records? The single file that he had left behind had Camilla’s name on it; it sat solitarily with a cruel, calculated invitation to “Open Me.” It said, the Last Will and Testament of Gianni Caruso. The date was a mere two months prior. With trembling hands Camilla opened the envelope. She read for a short two minutes before feeling a hand on her shoulder. Silently, she finished and passed the document to Nils before she sank down on the office bench.

“God damn! Fuck!” Nils exploded as he read.

“Nils, please, I get it. But please..”

Gianni Caruso had revised his will a short time before he and Josephine made the move to Happy Meadow Memory Care Facility in Pompton Plains. It contained the usual unremarkable legalese. There was only one line that commanded Camilla and Nils’ attention. It read, “I bequeath all my earthly possessions to my brother Salvatore and his issue, and I leave to my only daughter, Camilla Caruso Carlsen, the sum of $1 for reasons which she will fully understand.”
Camilla did NOT understand. She sat collapsed and weeping, while Nils read on and ranted, “Understand? Understand what? That he is a stupid Sicilian prick? His only daughter…”

“Nils, please… I can’t get a handle on this now. I know you mean well, but please. It hurts! It HURTS!”

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The discussions continued for days. Nils called his close friends to commiserate. He seethed with rage, with an uncontrollable sense of the unconscionable injustice inflicted on his wife, while Camilla could only keep pleading, “Let it go! If I don’t let it go, it will destroy me. It will consume me. We have to let it go. What else can I do?” she would say to herself over and over again. Because she knew she would never, ever understand.

Her dad had not always been this man. “This is not the Uncle Gianni we know, You have to forgive him. They do crazy things like that at their age. Look at our father,” her cousins Mary and Margaret counseled, suggesting some form of dementia. Or her therapist tried to explain the behavior as cognitive dysfunction.

And Camilla would nod and try to factor these concepts into the aching abyss of her heart. She
tried to replace the image of the spiteful old man with the father of her childhood – the hardworking, smiling, doting Daddy, who dressed her in pretty clothes he had sewed himself, who took endless pictures of her and arranged them lovingly in carefully annotated scrapbooks, who took her sleigh riding in Hudson County Park and ice skating at the West New York rink or bowling with her aunt and uncle and every once in a while, for a special treat to Palisades Amusement Park. True, by the time of Camilla’s adolescence, he had become more remote, preoccupied with continuous business difficulties, mostly absent from home and dismissive of Josephine’s growing hysteria or his daughter’s coming of age crises. “Perhaps,” Camilla mused, “he could relate to me when I was the little doll child, but then?”

Still, it had been Gianni who architected some of the most crucial positive decisions that shaped her adult life: her prep school and Little Ivy college education. And it was from Gianni – who yearned to be a fashion designer and ended manufacturing sweaters - that she inherited her artistic temperament and aesthetic sensibility. Somewhere in this silent, enigmatic, maddeningly inscrutable man flickered a tiny flame of beauty, and perhaps that’s why all this hurt so desperately.

In recent years, after Camilla and Nils had moved back to New Jersey from Chicago and bought a
house nearby her parents’ home, Gianni, newly retired, began to spend more time visiting his daughter. Maybe he was escaping the deteriorating situation at home with Josephine; perhaps he was bored without his usual work regimen; or perhaps Camilla and her father had simply settled into a mature appreciation and acceptance of each other. But all that had come to an abrupt halt as her mother’s disease sucked the entire family into its destructive vortex.

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The sale of her family’s house culminated Camilla’s sense of loss. The neighbor’s son had bought it “as is”; the furniture and most of the sentimental belongings were spirited away by Sal and his children the night before the closing; not a trace of her childhood seemed to remain.

Nils grudgingly made peace with the prospect of visiting his in-laws, and each week he and Camilla drove to Happy Meadows for a short stay. The conversations with her father seemed surreal – as if nothing at all had gone amiss between them – and with her mother there was only deafening silence. For from the very first day that Josephine Caruso set foot in Happy Meadows, she closed her eyes, took to her bed, and never spoke or walked again. The only exception Josephine made to this was to call her husband’s name in bursts of piteous
neediness. And when Gianni was gentle and responsive – “What, Jo?” What do you want?” she could never shape the thought into words. Within a few months she stopped eating and within a few weeks after that she relinquished her existence. A burden was lifted for all.

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And so it was that when the second phone call came at 7:00 a.m. that December morning three years later, Camilla knew exactly what it was about. She had learned in those roller-coaster years to recognize instinctively the imminence of bad news. First, it had been her two girlhood friends Cesca and Marissa losing their battles to cancer and then it had been the ultimate blow – Nils’s sudden fatal heart attack right after they had moved to Maine for their retirement.

Numbly, Camilla answered the call. “Mrs. Carlsen?” It was a crisp but not unkind voice. “This is Imelda at Happy Meadows. I am so sorry to tell you that your Dad passed away during the night. It was peaceful and he didn’t suffer. We followed his legal directive and called your Uncle Sal, who is making the arrangements at the Mantello Funeral Home. But we thought you’d like to know. You can call them.”
“Yes, thank you for calling. I'll get in touch with them,” Camilla replied.

Ironically, she was scheduled to go down to New Jersey two days later and she had arranged – despite her uncle’s prohibition on her visits – with the social worker to visit her father. Driven by an odd sense of urgency the day before, she had called the nursing home and bullied her way through the legal barriers Sal had put up, convincing one of the aides to put her Dad on the phone. He sounded weak, but he knew who she was. Camilla told him to hang on. “I will be there in two days, Daddy.”

“I’ll be OK,” he said softly. “Typical Gianni,” she thought “with his curious blend of passivity, denial, and unrealistic optimism.” Then she added words she had not said in six years, “I love you, Dad.”

There was a long silence at the other end, but just before she heard the click, Camilla caught three whispered syllables – halting, half questioning, but unmistakable nonetheless: “Daddy’s girl?”

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What followed that moment became a coda of absurd chaos. Mr. Mantello, who had handled her mother’s funeral arrangements and who was aware of the estrangements within the family, asked Camilla what would be most convenient for her and
promised to persuade her Uncle Sal to cooperate. Still vulnerable about traveling alone so soon after Nils ‘death and calculating the Maine arrangements she had to make, Camilla suggested two days later on Wednesday for the wake and Thursday for the burial.

“Not to worry. I’ll work it out, Camilla. My sympathies,” the funeral director told her.

Camilla spent the rest of the day on the phone making her travel plans. The friendly parish priest, Father Jim, called to confirm the Wednesday-Thursday services, and her best friend Olivia, who assisted actively in the parish, helped the priest select the music and readings.

Camilla had started to pack when, later that evening, the phone rang again. It was Father Jim apologetically informing her that her uncle had categorically refused the Wednesday-Thursday plan, saying it was inconvenient for him and his family. He had ordered the funeral home to hold the service on Monday and burial on Tuesday.

“What family is that?” Camilla asked bitterly. “Am I not the closest family? I could never get there in time...”

“To put it plainly, Camilla,” Father Jim continued, “your uncle doesn’t really want you there. Now in
my church you are welcome anytime if you want to or if you can somehow find a way to get here, but if you do not, do not beat yourself up about it. You can go to church in Brunswick, and you can send a written eulogy, and Olivia will read it.”

And so, almost threadbare with successive onslaughts of recent grief, Camilla heard in the priest’s sensible solution a much-needed respite and resolution.

On Tuesday morning at 8:00 a.m. Camilla slipped into a rear pew of St. John’s in Brunswick and sat quietly through the Mass – something she had not done for decades, after which she lit a candle and made a hasty exit.

Late that night Olivia called. “Your uncle and a couple cousins and a few of the neighbors were there on one side, and all of us Tesoris were here on the other – on your side....We were all there for you. You should have seen your Uncle Sal’s face when Father Jim told the congregation why you couldn’t be there but that you had spoken to your dad just the day before. He then said that you had written the eulogy and I would deliver it. It was so very beautiful, you know. I think even your uncle was moved....”
There was a pause, as if Olivia was summoning some courage before continuing. “And then....I hope you are not angry with me, Camilla, but I finished by telling them about your last conversation – that you had told your Dad you loved him and that he had said –“

“Daddy’s girl?” Camilla replied softly.

“Yes, but, sweetie, I changed one thing.

“What?”

“There was no question mark. He didn’t ask you, Camilla. I believe that, and you have to, too. He told you what was really in his heart.”
The beautiful white-haired, bird-like woman in a simple black winter coat stood at the head of the coffin and in a high-pitched, quavery voice began to sing. *God on high, hear my prayer...* *Bring him home, bring him home...* When she finished, she pressed her gnarled fingers to her lips and placed a kiss on the mahogany bier.

“Hughey,” she whispered. “God keep you, my brother.” She did not add “in-law.” And before seating herself in the front row of the small gathering in the rotunda of the suburban mausoleum, she hugged her sister.

Antonia, who was still clutching the crisply folded flag – a tribute to her husband’s World War II service – blurted out a little too loudly, “Oh, Olga, you always used to sing with him. How we used to laugh and sing!” At that, the organist struck up *Be Not Afraid*, and the service drew to a close.

Camilla Caruso Carlsen, who had been sitting with her father Gianni in the second row reserved for
quasi-family, wiped a tear from her eyes and noticed that Gianni, normally so stoic, was liquid-eyed as well. Her husband Nils was away on a business trip, and her mother Josephine did not leave the house these days, so it was just the two of them, and she felt the painful smallness of the assemblage. Though close-knit, the immediate Tesori family was not large, and it had already been raided by death. Hugo’s daughter, Francesca, Camilla’s closest lifelong friend, had died prematurely of lung cancer two years before, and Olga’s husband had passed away of Alzheimer’s only a short while before. Cousins and extended family were three thousand miles away, so this quiet little farewell was left to Hugo’s widow, his two surviving children, and a handful of friends and neighbors. Camilla and Gianni Caruso and Hugo’s boyhood friend Alex Bellini and his wife Tina rounded out the group.

Though, technically speaking, Camilla was the Tesoris’ adoptive daughter, that term never seemed to describe adequately her relationship to this family and especially to the man she had met forty-five years before – the endearing man she had affectionately called Uncle Huggo who had become so much more than a father to her.

The connection had been born serendipitously. In fact, it had occurred with a touch of Italianate
drama. The Carusos had been living in their new home in Palisades Park, NJ, for only a few weeks when Josephine, cooking her traditional five-course Sunday meal, set on fire the pot roast. Alarmed by the flaming fillet, but unwilling to call the fire department, who would trek mud through her house, she promptly opened her kitchen window and chucked the cast iron pot with the roast into the small garden. To her surprise, just beyond the hedge sat her elderly neighbor, Enrico Martello, engrossed in his Il Progresso. As the fiery missile came crashing to the ground not far from where he sat, he looked up calmly over his wire-rimmed glasses and in lightly accented English asked, “Mrs. Caruso, what is the matter?”

Mrs. Caruso did not reply because she had already hysterically slammed down the window and was hyperventilating at the kitchen table. Instead, eight-year-old Camilla rushed into the yard to see what had become of the charred supper. There she found Mr. and Mrs. Martello standing at the hedge looking up at the Carusos’ window. Mary Martello asked Camilla if everyone in the house was OK, and when Camilla, looking embarrassed, nodded, the kindly old woman invited the girl into their little home for cookies and milk. It was the beginning of a friendship that brought the two families together and lasted nearly fifty years.
Enrico and “Mary” – not her given name of Maria – were a delightful pair of septuagenarians who had bought the Tudor home just behind the Carusos’ the previous year when Enrico had retired from his work as a wine merchant in Manhattan. Within days of the unceremonious introduction via the flying pot roast, Enrico and Mary Martello rang the bell at Josephine and Gianni’s house and introduced themselves more formally. Politeness took over for the normally withdrawn Josephine, and she invited her neighbors in for some coffee and biscotti.

It was one of those inter-generational connections that clicked immediately. Mary Martello was a petite gray-haired lady with arresting blue eyes and a melodic voice. Pious, gentle, she clearly doted on her “Henry,” and her husband returned the affection in a courtly European way. The older couple explained that they had two daughters who were also in the process of moving from New York City with their families, and Mary thought that Camilla would enjoy meeting her granddaughter Francesca, who was the same age. She promised to arrange it the next time Cesca and her family visited.

Mary and Enrico kept their promise, and before long Cesca and Camilla met and began what would become a lifelong sisterhood. Coming as they did from similar Italian Catholic backgrounds, the two girls hit it off immediately. They played as children;
they shared the confidences of adolescence; they enjoyed their madcap high school and college adventures, and eventually, when each married, the two couples became a close foursome. Nils and Camilla, though they never had any children, became godparents for Cesca and Robert’s second son, and throughout the years the two families continued to intertwine. For Camilla, an only child who was often at odds with her own household, this was an incomparable blessing.

In the days after Hugo Tesori’s funeral service, Camilla’s thoughts were drenched in three generations of memories. The oldest ones harkened to her youth. Some -like the pot roast flambé – were bizarrely funny; others just conjured up warm, fuzzy feelings of happiness. She recalled how Mary and Enrico had materialized one day when she was nine in the Caruso driveway as Camilla was tearfully arguing with Josephine to remove the training wheels from her shiny new purple bicycle and to let her ride it as did all the other neighborhood kids.

“Mrs. Caruso,” Enrico remonstrated, “here, let me,” and he produced a wrench, and as Josephine protested, he removed the wheels. “I will teach her to balance herself. Do not worry, dear lady. We will make sure she doesn’t fall.” And with that he swung Camilla onto the seat, and with Mary and him on either side to steady the bike, guided the at-first frightened and then increasingly exhilarated girl up
and down the sidewalk until they finally let go, and Camilla sailed breathlessly down the street on her own. Without a trace of smugness, Enrico turned to Josephine, who had collapsed in frantic worry onto her front steps, and said gently, “See, there is nothing to it, Mrs. Caruso!”

Still other memories were mysterious and sent chills up and down Camilla’s spine. She remembered a time when she was ten when she learned from her mother that Enrico was dying of colon cancer. The girl had sensed something was amiss when she no longer spied the old gentleman in his garden each morning reading his paper. And she wondered about the fleeting, whispered conversations over the hedge between Josephine and Mary. She also thought it unusual for her reclusive mother to be toting pyrex dishes laden with warm Italian delicacies across the yard to the Martellos’ back door. Josephine cautioned Camilla not to discuss the situation with Cesca because the Tesori children had not yet been told how serious their grandfather’s illness was.

So when on Palm Sunday morning, as Josephine opened her kitchen window to let in a warm breeze, she gasped and drew back, Camilla hurried to the window to see what had shaken her mother.
“Look,” Josephine said softly. “It’s a dove.” And she pointed up to the roof of the Martello home. “It’s a sign.”

And, in truth, it was not a grey pigeon, but a gleaming white bird perched atop the Martello chimney. Though it was only nine in the morning on a holy Sunday, Josephine rushed to the phone and dialed her neighbor. Mary Martello answered, her voice muffled in quiet sobs. “He is gone, Mrs. Caruso. My Henry is gone…”

“When? What happened?”

“Just a few minutes ago. He was sleeping peacefully, and then he just gave a little start and stopped breathing.”

“I’ll call Hugo and Antonia,” Josephine offered.

Camilla’s thoughts turned to her friend Cesca and the Tesoris and how she had come to be an integral part of their world – first from the grandparents and then simply because. Cesca and the younger Livy and Michael were the siblings she never had. And as Josephine’s agoraphobia worsened and the turmoil among the threesome worsened, Camilla, at Cesca’s invitation, spent more and more time in the Tesori household.
Antonia Tesori was feisty, funny, sassy, and sparkling – the quintessential outspoken, warm-hearted, demonstrative and dramatic Italian mother, and while she could be stern and domineering, she could be equally warm and loving.

“She’s crazy sometimes,” Cesca confided.

“She’s just crazy enough – not over the top like my mother,” Camilla rejoined.

And if his wife was the bold, brassy dynamic presence in the Tesori household, Hugo was the quiet, rock-like soul of the family. In his youth a handsome man with curling chestnut hair and blue eyes, he was a skilled woodcarver who worked as the foreman at one of Manhattan’s premiere framing houses, turning out gilded wooden creations as rare as the paintings they adorned. It was a demanding, responsible, satisfying job, and Hugo Testori worked at it for more than forty years.

But unlike her own father’s volatile employment history, zany hours, and uncertain success, Hugo’s job was the sort the Great Generation cherished: respected, well-paying, steady, and not all-consuming. Every morning he left with his friend Alex at 7:00 a.m. and returned in time for dinner with his whole family at 6:00 p.m. Every evening he gathered his wife and children in the living room, where they sipped cordials and coffee, discussed
events and ideas, and watched the news or listened to classical music. Every Sunday he piled his brood into the commodious turquoise Chevrolet sedan and took a drive to the “country,” to the beach, or to Manhattan to visit a museum or a neighborhood street fair. Camilla didn’t remember how it had actually all come about, but she recalled that by the time she was in high school, she was included in every one of these outings and had become a de facto fixture every evening in the Tesori household.

As she looked back on those years, she realized the bonds had grown gradually and naturally and that as her own home became more troubled – the tension between her and her mother Josephine, who was growing increasingly bitter, withdrawn, and verbally abusive – and as her father Gianni rarely spent any time at home – “he was working, poor man” was always Josephine’s lament – Camilla let herself fall into the uncomplicated embrace of the Tesori family. At first she would eat dinner at home with Josephine. Well, that wasn’t really an accurate description; she ate while Josephine hovered, served, lectured, and nagged. Then as soon as the dishes were in the sink, Camilla made her excuses and hurried around the corner to the Tesoris, catching them just as they finished dinner but in time for the ritual coffee.

Before long Camilla was curtailing her own supper, skipping dessert, pretending not to be hungry and
heading over to her friends in time to join them for their dinner. The normally frugal Antonia never once commented on this development. She simply kept open a place for Camilla at the table and cooked a little bit more.

After dinner was Camilla’s favorite time. It was Hugo who introduced her and Cesca to their first cocktails long before they were eighteen. With the relaxed European philosophy that demystified drinking and kept it in moderation, he allowed the teens to drink table wine or mixed drinks like Americanos or Campari and soda, which was always followed by dark, robust espresso made to perfection and served in demi tasse cups with gold-plated spoons. Camilla learned to like hers bold and unsweetened — a taste that Hugo and Antonia always teased her about, just as they loved to joke about how well done she liked her hamburgers or how she was going to turn into a rabbit as she slowly transitioned to being a vegetarian. But tease as they would, Camilla never felt she was being criticized or ever judged, but rather that Hugo was simply challenging her to question her own beliefs, affirm them, and strengthen them if they continued to ring true.

Camilla remembered this “game” had started early in their friendship. Hugo, knowing Camilla’s love of animals and in particular of her Siamese cat Koko, would twit her, saying, “You better keep an eye on
that cat. Easter is coming, and we Piedmontese eat cats. I have just the perfect recipe...marinated...”

And Camilla, eyes blazing, would cut him off, passionate, horrified. And then Hugo would laugh and say, “Just wanted to see if you would defend him. Good for you! You fight for whomever and whatever you love!”

In a similar vein, Hugo would play devil’s advocate with Camilla and Cesca as they grew up. But whereas Cesca held her father in almost reverential awe and rarely argued with him or expressed a contrary opinion, Camilla reveled in the opportunity to spar with a man as intelligent and well informed as Hugo. And Hugo loved to see her engage. In the 60s they argued over John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy - the Tesoris were staunch moderate Republicans – or over the Vietnam War and the civil unrest rocking the nation. But even if the entire Tesori family went to the polls in 1968 and voted for Richard Nixon, they still listened patiently and open-mindedly to Camilla’s defending her vote for Hubert Humphrey.

When it came to Catholicism, the debate grew a little more muted because the Tesoris were a devout family, but unlike Josephine, their faith was not of the rote and superstitious variety. Hugo had been educated in Italy by Jesuits, but he had quietly come to affirm his own beliefs through a rigorous path of
reasoning which those priests had instilled. And his was a faith that was not blind. Perhaps it was because of his hardscrabble young manhood in Hell’s Kitchen or the rigors of World War II fighting in Italy for the American cause that changed him, but whatever his inner journey had been, Hugo Tesori’s God was the sort Camilla could respect — paternal, compassionate, representative of firmly held truths, but never judgmental. Instinctively, when Camilla discussed religion with Hugo, she did not put on her boxing gloves as she did with Josephine and Gianni. She listened; she considered, and she spoke moderately.

It was this atmosphere of open-mindedness combined with unconditional support and love that Camilla had never glimpsed in her own family, except with Aunt Anna. It was at the Tesoris when she was a young teen that Camilla met a gay couple for the first time. The men were Hugo’s co-workers, and as closeted and constrained as life could be for such a couple in the early 1960s, it was clear that when Boyce and Larry came to dinner at the Tesoris’, there was no awkwardness — only acceptance and friendship. To Camilla the openness was a lifesaving breath of fresh air.

And perhaps it was just this sense that she or anyone who crossed the Tesori threshold need only be himself that made her able to confide not only in Cesca throughout the years but also in her parents.
This was a trust that carried her through some of the crises of her young adulthood and even into the tumultuous first few years of her marriage to Nils.

Long after she and Cesca had gone on to forge their respective adult lives, Hugo and Antonia remained a constant for Camilla. There were weddings, baptisms, anniversaries, birthdays, graduations, festive New Year’s Eve celebrations, professional successes – and failures – all shared. The Tesoris were always there inhabiting that place in her heart where one holds the best things locked tightly. And so on the day when Cesca called her and relayed in a shaky voice the painful news that Hugo had died a few hours before at Holy Name Hospital, Camilla fully fathomed her friend’s loss, because it was hers as well.

In recent years Antonia and Hugo, then in their late eighties, were plagued with a variety of age-related ailments. Hugo’s heart was weak, and Antonia suffered from circulatory problems. For the past two weeks they had been hospitalized for what was supposed to be a short stay, and they were sharing a double room. Hugo had been napping and Antonia reading when abruptly he sat up in bed and said in a raspy voice, “Annie, I think I’m dying.”

Antonia responded in her characteristic no-nonsense manner, scolding, “Don’t be silly, Hughey, you’re not dying! The doctor was just in –”
But before she could finish, she saw that her husband had leaned back wanly on the pillows. She pushed the call button for the nurse, and despite her infected and bandaged foot, struggled out of her bed to take his hand. As she did, he closed his eyes and said softly, “I love you all,” and with that he was gone.

Years later this dignified, complete exit continued to console and to haunt Camilla – years after the messy, angry, guilt ridden passings of her own parents, after the traumatic blow of Nils’ sudden heart attack and Cesca’s untimely death, and after Antonia’s weary passing, she kept the scene tucked away in her heart.

There was a curious comfort in the goodness of it all. Hugo Tesori was a man who had lived an honest, fulfilled life, and he had no regrets for himself when it came his time. His only thoughts were to be sure those he cared for knew that his last thoughts – indeed, his lifelong thoughts – were for them.

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These were the thoughts that ran through Camilla Caruso’s mind on a cold winter night almost a decade later – a decade that had forever changed her life with its list of losses and now with its burgeoning rebirth. Sitting before her fireplace, she pulled a book off the shelf and flipped through the
pages desultorily. It was a beautiful coffee table edition of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling. The images moved her as they did when she had first discovered this renaissance titan. She fingered the frontispiece inscription: *To Camilla from Uncle Huggo, Follow your dreams and become the artist you hope to be.*

She smiled to herself. *Uncle Huggo* – she hadn’t thought of that nickname in a very long time. It had been bestowed on Hugo Tesori by one of his small nieces who couldn’t pronounce his name, and the entire family – Camilla included – loved to tease him about it subsequently.

Hugo Tesori had brought the gift back in 1968 from Italy where he had gone to visit his ailing parents. She remembered vividly the day she had joined the family – all thrilled to have Hugo back after a month’s absence. He made a big show of dispensing the presents he had brought – beautiful gold jewelry for his wife and daughters, a fine watch for his son, and then to her surprise, he produced the book for Camilla.

“I thought you’d like this,” he said simply.

And without a doubt, as an art history student, Camilla did. Michelangelo – titan, rebel, gay poet, creator of art that lived, breathed, unconventional and monumental - he was one of her heroes.
Camilla moved slowly through the pages, and her eyes inevitably came to rest on the iconic image of God the Father extending a hand to Adam. Camilla and Nils had seen the painting “in the flesh,” but even here on the page— or perhaps because of the close up photography and the memory attached—it seemed even more dynamic.

She put the book on the coffee table and stood back at a distance to take in the full effect. Volumes have been written about the significance of this image, but to Camilla at this moment its meaning seemed quite simple and clear. God the Father and Adam—father and son—father and daughter—but most of all a hymn to the intangible that sparks creation—the bond between beings. It was a bond so subtle, so seemingly immaterial, and yet so electric and indelible. The spark—not visible, simply felt—in Michelangelo’s painting was the same spark that bound Camilla to Hugo Tesori and his family. And in the years of her life when it really mattered, that bond had been her lifeline.
Camilla took several deep breaths as her car service neared the Portland Jetport. She was trying every technique she knew to keep herself focused on her goal and to stay present - in the moment – enough to avoid a meltdown. On the ride down she had chatted amiably with the driver, confiding to him that she had not flown for many years, but not admitting it had actually been fifteen! She had dressed trimly in her best, but comfortable jeans, a preppy wool blazer and scarf that had been a Christmas stocking present from the friends she was on the way to visit. She carried her laptop bag so that she could immerse herself in some work if she needed a distraction, and she had loaded her iPhone with her current music favorites. And, most of all, she had tried – God knows she had tried to relax!

Camilla had not been sleeping well since Nils had died seven years before, but she had learned Reiki and meditation exercises to guide her sleepless thoughts to productive places, and she often stayed
awake fielding creative ideas on the many exciting people and projects that had slowly come to fill her life.

So, the night before the flight – a short eighty-minute jaunt to Philadelphia to spend a weekend with her two dear friends and see a show – she willed herself to focus on everything else except the sheer terror of taking off and being an airborne captive. She had undergone several months of hypnosis, but those techniques seemed to work less well than simply to do the Reiki relaxation and put up mental roadblocks whenever the terror presented itself.

She was creating a new state of mind, she had told her one friend. He had been the impetus for her to seek a way back. He had not pushed her, merely encouraged, suggesting gently and repeatedly that she should try. And Camilla, knowing he was right, knowing the time had come, and touched by the caring, did promise to do just that. And so, there she was on that crisp, sunny January morning ready to undertake what had once been routine for her before it had become a self-destructive phobia. The skies were cloudless and brilliantly blue. Thank God, Camilla thought, before the memory of the same bright skies more than fifteen years ago came back to her.

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It was 8:48 a.m. and Camilla had left for work – a little temporary job in a vet’s office in Lyndhurst - and was driving down Route 3 away from Manhattan when Nils called her cell phone.

“Where are you? A plane has just hit the World Trade Center, and there’s a huge fire. Put on the radio,” he commanded with an air of ominous urgency.

Camilla did as she was told and said she’d call him back as soon as she got to work. Within minutes, Camilla heard a barrage of frantic initial reports: “A small plane – the top floors on fire – help on the way!” But then the already shakily informed NPR announcer suddenly shed all journalistic equipoise and blurted out, “Oh my God! Another plane has just flown into the South Tower! All we can see are huge balls of fire!”

Camilla gasped, but she could not alter her course as she had just merged onto the busy New Jersey highway. She clung to the right lane, frantically listening for details and trying to decide whether to pull off and turn around or continue to the office. As she approached the flat stretch of road that crosses the Meadowlands, she saw cars pulled up on the shoulder. One man was standing next to his vehicle snapping photographs. Camilla looked up into the rearview mirror and saw what had prompted this risky behavior.
Clear as the day was across the waving grasses the Twin Towers were visible against the azure sky, but instead of gleaming in the sunlight, they were engulfed in billowing clouds of gray smoke which poured like a dragon’s fierce blast from gaping holes in the sides of the steel and glass edifices. Trembling, Camilla decided instantly to pull off at the next exit and see if she could make it back home.

The remainder of the ride that would normally have been a five-minute run turned into an horrific nightmare. As she approached the Lincoln Tunnel, which she inevitably had to do to head home to North Bergen, Camilla realized that the traffic had suddenly bottled up. Had they closed the tunnel? Would she be trapped here, unable to move indefinitely? What in God’s name was going on? This last question was rhetorical because Camilla knew in her heart that whatever had happened was nothing short of a catastrophe.

Her flight instinct told her the first thing she had to do was find a way out of this maze, get home, make sure her pets were all right, make sure Nils got home, and then together.... She cranked up the radio as she inched her way onto the shoulder – she knew it was illegal but that seemed of little consequence at the moment - and wove between cars until she reached the Secaucus exit. It was a little out of the way, but she knew the back roads
through the Meadowlands which would take her to their North Bergen home on the Hudson.

The news snippets from cable - the only broadcast outlets not knocked out by the planes – were short and often conflicting. The planes were jets – not the small aircraft originally believed. Both towers were filling with smoke. The upper floors were already infernos. Rescue workers from the entire tri-state area were speeding to the scene. Workers in the towers were urged to wait for assistance.

Camilla, trained as a journalist herself, felt sorry for the reporters who were desperately trying to piece together a story in a swirling chaos. It seemed an interminable wait before Mayor Giuliani finally made it to a CNN microphone and spoke with an air of authority that brought a momentary sense of relief. For what seemed like an eternity, President Bush was silent, and when he did respond, he seemed befuddled and equivocal.

Camilla called Nils back, but all of the circuits were busy. She hoped he, too, had had the good sense to head back home. She kept punching automatic dial as she wove her way through the ghostly quiet industrial park and up the hill to her cliffside home. Finally he answered.
“Nils, I’m almost home. Come home right now before everything is locked down. We’ll decide what to do when you get here.”

Nils agreed. “I’m on my way. Did you hear? Another plane hit the Pentagon,” he asked with a ring of terror in his voice.”

Camilla had not heard, but before she could say anything, the line went dead. The radio also faltered for a few seconds before the announcer came back on and said, with as much composure as he could muster, “We are getting reports that a fourth plane has just crashed in a Pennsylvania field. At the towers fires are raging out of control. We have some eyewitness reports that individuals have been holding hands and leaping from the burning building into the Hudson.”

“Was the world coming to an end? What other horror would rain from the sky this day?” Camilla asked herself these questions as she pulled into her driveway. She left her car there and hastened up the front steps of their house where she had a full view across the river. Before she could put her key into the lock, she glanced across the Hudson to lower Manhattan. It was then that she received her answer.

She heard a voracious roar and felt a rumble across the mile-wide watery expanse. Standing rooted to
the spot in speechless shock, Camilla saw the second tower erupt in a cataclysmic explosion and slowly sink into the earth. A cloud of ash darkened the sky, and for a moment the world – Camilla’s world – stood entirely still.

The images of that day and the subsequent nightmarish ones that followed burned holes into Camilla’s and Nils’ psyches. For weeks they dealt with the immediate consequences of the tragedy. There was a strange solace in being so close to the epicenter of the terrible drama.

New York City remained inaccessible for almost three days. All the nation’s airports were closed. Only Air Force jets droned on patrol overhead. Traffic in the shadow of Manhattan moved at a crawl. Paranoia ran rampant. Camilla and Nils kept packed suitcases in their front foyer and lined up the cat carriers there as well. Then after the initial days of noisy confusion, things suddenly became eerily quiet, palpitating with an anxious tension, as if another shoe would surely drop any minute. Camilla remembered how on the fourth day, as she emerged from her house, she felt enveloped by a strange acrid smell. It hovered like a smothering blanket – an indefinable and yet horrifically recognizable odor rising from the still smoldering ruins. Though nothing in her own personal experience could tell her this, Camilla immediately recognized it as the unmistakable smell of a
crematorium, as the ashes of the thousands lost continued to drift across the Hudson and hover above the city in a melancholy refusal to depart.

The sound and the fury of the aftermath left no room for cogent thought, only blind action. Nils, who worked as a financial manager for the Salvation Army, found himself overwhelmed by the charitable giving, and he worked day and night helping to put the aid mechanisms in place. Camilla, having just a little while before experienced a meltdown of her own when her decade-long dream job working for baritone Derek Howe had gone up in its own kind of smoke, found herself a welcome diversion to this career collapse by volunteering alongside Nils. But when a few months later all things gradually settled back into routine – because adhering to routine was deemed the best antidote to terrorism – Camilla, if not Nils, found herself having trouble getting into step with that concept.

Perhaps it was because she had experienced the first of her own losses just before this tragedy. She and Derek had dissolved a creative partnership that had been her raison d’être for more than a decade, and she was, despite any rationalizations, feeling rejected and unvalued. The parting with the famous singer had been amicable. Derek had decided to divest himself of his American management, which included his longtime, devoted agent, and Camilla, as his personal assistant, became part and parcel of
that decision. But his explanation, however civil, did not really compensate for the years of collaborative devotion and her sharing (without much recompense) of her intellectual and journalistic gifts.

“Your own fault,” Nils had told her when the split occurred. “Let it go,” and however unsympathetic that sounded, Camilla knew there was truth in it. But because she no longer needed to be in Vienna on Tuesday or Kansas City on Wednesday and because the world seemed to her to be upside down, Camilla retreated to a place where she resolved to hide until reemergence seemed safe. This was, in hindsight, a poor decision. She could see that now fifteen years later as she steeled herself to fly again.

So much had happened in those fifteen years – so much more loss actually. Her best friend Francesca died of lung cancer far too early. Nils and she, in an effort to find new horizons and happiness, brokered a deal to move to Maine, where Nils would work from home and finish his career, and Camilla would “retire.” They had not occupied their lovely newly built home for more than a few months when Nils died of a sudden heart attack. Camilla’s game plan was once again in disarray.

Her spiral downward had perhaps been predictable, surely regrettable, and now strongly
incontrovertible. The round trip back was more circuitous, harder, and truly more astonishing.

She began with the help of old New Jersey friends with whom she spent hours on the phone pouring out her grief. She hunkered down in the safety and quiet of her Maine home and let herself feel the weight of it all. Little by little like tiny pinholes of light piercing a vast, dark curtain, purpose and happiness forced their way back into her life.

A year after Nils died, Ruffian came into her life. A big, goofy bear of a Newfoundland with a huge personality to match, Ruffian made Camilla begin to laugh and to go out and join new activities. When Camilla took to writing about her adventures with her canine friend, she suddenly found herself with an appreciative audience for her first book of fiction. As if she had been tossed a life preserver, she embraced this writing with a fierce passion she had not felt in many years. Slowly, she rebuilt her journalism contacts and reclaimed her press credentials. She gained recognition for her arts byline, and before long she had secured a place for her work in Maine’s arts community. And this gave her purpose and joy and a way to give back.

And it was in that community that she made precious new connections with artists she understood and appreciated and who appreciated
her. And as the years passed two of those ties deepened into special bonds of loving friendship. The couple became artistic inspirations and kind, supportive, caring friends. Working on theatre projects together, she rediscovered her sense of confidence, and she began to believe her work was far from done yet. Before long the trust grew, and Camilla was able to talk as openly as she had to anyone in a very long time – about the trauma of losing Nils, about her beliefs and dreams and goals. They made her laugh; they made her feel young and purposeful again. They were kind and generous and sensitive, and the friendship made her try to be a better person in everything she did. For the first time in ever so long, there was light and joy in her life.

After feeling derailed for so long, of being marooned in a limbo of stasis, Camilla felt herself moving forward. She believed she had come to a crossroads, and she knew it was time. She must choose the road that confronted her fear. Only then would she reclaim the life she had once loved, and there were strong motivations to act now.

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The words of her friend replayed themselves in her head as she stepped from the car at the airline departures entrance. When he had learned that she planned to fly to their visit, he had encouraged her
saying, “You will do it, Camilla, because there is so much more left for you.” And Camilla knew exactly what he meant. It was time to live again.

All the night before as she tossed and turned, she told herself that she was going to pretend she was on one of those countless business trips from a decade ago. She would will herself to be calm no matter the hassle – something she hadn’t always done so well in the Derek Howe days – and she would focus on the destination: a weekend she looked forward to with all her heart.

Happily, the airport was relatively deserted at 10:30 a.m., and she made her way to the American check-in counter. She paid the surcharge for the bag and mustered her best air of professional confidence as she headed to security. Again, the line was short, and the TSA agent was polite, but he orange-flagged her passport and waved her to the body scan line. The woman operating the machine said rather apologetically, “It’s random, Miss,” and Camilla summoned her best insouciant look. Clearing that hurdle, she reassembled her carry-on and computer, put her blazer back on, and headed to locate the gate. An hour and a half early, there was no one else there, so Camilla decided to get something to eat and, more importantly, something to drink. She had resolved not to take the valium the doctor had prescribed unless it was absolutely necessary.
because she knew a Bloody Mary would be gentler, more predictable, and probably just as effective.

So she settled herself at the bar of Linda Bean’s and ordered one together with a brunch burrito. Balanced by the hearty meal, the tall drink worked its magic. The waitress must have sensed Camilla’s nervousness because she asked if she wanted another drink, which Camilla sensibly declined. She paid the check and took a seat at the gate. Thankfully, the flight was on time because waiting would surely have thrown her into a panic. The skies were clear, and the ordeal would be underway – and over – soon.

While waiting to board, Camilla tuned into a live stream interview her friend was giving in Pennsylvania. It seemed a good omen and a reassurance that she would soon be there, talking in person. Ever a little superstitious – that was the Caruso in her – Camilla avoided doing the Facebook check-in until she actually boarded the plane. Having treated herself to priority boarding and seating, she found her place easily, stowed her bag and computer under the aisle seat and kept her phone with her for the comfort and companionship it would offer.

The plane filled quickly and taxied away from the gate a few minutes early. Camilla took the precaution of alerting the older gentleman sitting
next to her that she was a jittery flyer, but she managed to say that with as much nonchalance as she could. He remarked kindly that his wife was too and if she needed someone to take her hand, to feel free. Camilla smiled wanly and gratefully, resolving, of course, to do no such thing.

It was just a matter of minutes before the Embraer 175 reached its spot in the takeoff cue. The engines revved as the aircraft waited in anticipation. It could only have been a few seconds, but the moment felt like a few hours to Camilla. Poised on the brink of propulsion, time seemed oddly to stand still. Her thoughts swirled in her head. They danced in circles.

How many round trips had brought her here? Endings and beginnings, Nils, her Aunt Anna, her parents, and just this last winter her beloved Ruffian...losses and victories - forward, back, round – seemingly endless circles that were trips to nowhere. Yet strangely, in that suspended instant of anticipation and sheer terror, this round trip seemed to become a destination. There was joy to be had on arrival, happiness in friendship, discovery, and fun. Focused on the narrow pinpoint of the horizon where the runway disappeared into the sky, this takeoff was Camilla’s chance at a new freedom.

The aircraft gathered speed. The runway vanished behind them. Camilla felt herself become airborne.
The plane shook a little, and her heart fluttered. As the pilot steadied the aircraft, Camilla switched on her own steadying device – the music she had brought with her. Music had always been Camilla’s secret weapon, the inspiration and the balm, the catharsis of her soul.

As the pilot leveled the plane off at its cruising altitude, Camilla settled back in her seat and drank in the voice that filled her ears. It was that same tenor voice that had captivated her not so long ago. It rang out with purity and goodness, a sadness and euphoria, a feeling of love and light. She closed her eyes and listened with her whole being. She knew she was going to be fine. In the embrace of its beautiful sound, Camilla felt something deep within her stir – something that had long been dormant, but was just about to be reborn.

_Oh, Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling......._
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in the metropolitan New York area, Carla Maria Verdiño-Süllwold took her degrees at Sarah Lawrence College and Fairleigh Dickinson University. She began her career as a teacher and arts administrator before becoming a journalist, critic, and author. Her music and visual arts reviews and features appeared regularly in Opera News, Gramophone, Opéra International, Opera, Music Magazine, Beaux Arts, and The Crisis, and her byline headed numerous program essays and record liner notes. Among her scholarly works, the best known is We Need A Hero! Heldentenors from Wagner’s Time to the Present: A Critical History. She helped to create several television projects, serving as associate producer and content consultant/writer, among them I Hear America Singing for WNET/PBS and Voices of the Heart: Stephen Foster for German television. She is also the author of Top Cat Tails of Mannahatta, a fictional account of her and husband Gregory’s adventures in breeding Maine Coons.

In 2009 the Süllwolds realized a lifelong dream to move to coastal Maine. Raising Rufus A Maine Love Story is a fictionalized account of the couple’s last year together with their beloved Newfoundland, Rufus, before Gregory Süllwold’s fatal heart attack in February 2010. Ms. Verdiño-Süllwold’s screenplay version of the novel won the Grand Prize at the Rhode Island International Film Festival in 2011.

Now working as a freelance arts journalist, Ms. Verdiño-Süllwold has published four subsequent works of fiction: The Whaler’s Bride, Bookends, and Carousel. She shares her home in Brunswick, Maine, with her two cats and a new Newfoundland puppy, Mariah.