

Helen Bender, vulnerable after her sudden widowhood, becomes infatuated with Frederic Grenville and begins a dangerous romance. She eventually discovers his terrible secret and must decide whether to flee, or to fight the great evil threatening them if they remain together.

Souls Alive

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SOULS ALIVE

Judith Gelber

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Chapter 1

“Naughty, bawdy Will,” indeed, Helen thought. If the new professor weren’t such a pompous ass, she might think he actually had some wit.

Helen sat alone on the little burgundy-colored sofa and sipped her cold tea for want of something better to do with the cup and saucer that had been thrust upon her by Barbara Longman, wife of Frank Longman, president of Perkins College. Barbara had poured the tea herself and held tightly to Helen’s arm while walking her toward this sofa in an alcove located somewhat apart from the festivities in the center of the large room. Helen had shrugged after being solicitously seated by a solemn Barbara. It was a place to sit rather than stand and try to converse with the others. They would be friendly enough, but what was left to say after expressing regrets and condolences at Karl Bender’s untimely death to his widow?

She took a quick second glance at the tall, rather handsome man with the dark good looks now glowering into the fire and quickly lowered her eyes. “Pompous ass,” she whispered to herself, as if to reassure herself that her original assessment of him was correct.

He had been quoting Shakespeare to the cluster of faculty wives around him with the disdainful posture of a British gentleman displaying his wit to the colonials.

“‘Virginity breeds mites,’” he now proclaimed. “‘Besides, virginity is peevish, proud, idle, made of self-love.’” He held lightly to the delicate cream-colored teacup and saucer with the pink rosebuds and tiny green leaves. The tea service, Helen guessed, was probably an heirloom handed down from grandmothers to daughters and alone stood aloof from the relentless Christmas motif. Everything else, including the silver

JUDITH GELBER

flatware and punch bowls engraved with snowflakes, was resolutely in the holiday mode.

“ ‘Tis a commodity will lose the gloss with lying: the longer kept, the less worth. Off with’t while ’tis vendible.” The professor indicated he was finished by looking out over the heads of the other guests toward the front door. Helen couldn’t help smirking at the quotation.

“Oh, Professor Grenville,” one faculty wife hissed. She raised a hand as if to tug at his elbow but quickly pulled back when he turned to her with dark eyebrows pulled tightly together. “Surely, you don’t think that a woman’s prize...”

“Not I, madam, naughty, bawdy Will,” he repeated. The words seemed intended in light fun, but they and the professor appeared burdened with dyspepsia. Helen noted he took a sip of tea before angrily putting the cup back in the saucer, although not hard enough to do harm to the delicate china. “Will Shakespeare was ever the one to have his little jokes. “And your virginity,” he continued more loudly, although the other professors and their spouses already listened as his voice carried around the room, “your old virginity is like one of our French withered pears; it looks ill, it eats drily. Marry, ’tis a withered pear!”

“Oh! I don’t for a moment believe that William Shakespeare...”

“Believe it, madam,” Professor Grenville assured the faculty wife, looking wearily down on her trembling gray curls. “Believe it. Will had a certain robust taste for tipping the wenches.” He put the cup and saucer on the mantle behind him, jammed his hands into his jacket pockets, and turned his back to his little circle of admirers, apparently preferring the warm comfort of the fire to the women who now chattered excitedly among themselves, whispering and giggling while trying hard to look shocked.

Pompous ass or not, Helen momentarily felt a small degree of kinship with the now glowering man. Newcomer or old-timer, one didn’t lightly ignore Barbara Longman’s invitations. Karl had been annoyed by these seemingly innumerable “teas,” but he hadn’t missed one intended for both sexes, or let her stay away, even when she had that rotten cold before the “tea” for the latest meeting strictly for the “girls,” the faculty women’s book club. He was convinced Barbara had an attendance list and checked off the names to make certain everyone

SOULS ALIVE

was present. A bad cold was not, apparently, enough of an excuse for her to stay away.

Helen looked down and saw that the small sofa where she sat could easily have accommodated another guest. However, although she could see two or three men sitting on the floor in the solarium because of a lack of seating space, she sat on, alone. If Barbara hadn't deliberately led her here, Helen thought, she would have enjoyed sitting out there, surrounded by the carefully tended indoor greenery.

Helen sighed as she looked about at the green garlands and wreaths and red ribbons and berries ringing any surface that Barbara Longman deemed in need of some holiday cheer. The round tables covered with snowy floor-length tablecloths and decorated with looped green vines and strategically-placed red satin bows presented a lovely picture that could have come straight out of a Christmas catalog.

Additionally, there was the gently leaping fire under the impressively carved mantle, and the casually dressed crowd of well-behaved, genteel guests who stood about with elevated teacups and bright smiles. The discreet sound of the occasional tinkling laugh enhanced the conversational murmur that spread in delicate waves from room to room. Helen sighed again at the picture-perfect scene. Put the guests in 19th century costumes, and she could be watching something out of Masterpiece Theater on TV. She looked out the window at the men and women clustered on the ice-crusted lawn. It was difficult to distinguish between exhaled breath and cigarette smoke. Barbara allowed no smoking in this lovely old house.

Helen vaguely recalled Barbara's lecture about the house's history and furnishings as she led Helen and the other new faculty wives about during the opening tea just three months ago. Karl Bender had been very much alive then. Helen felt her eyes sting. Was it because Karl had so unexpectedly left her a widow, or was it because she was now alone and floundering in a world she knew only on a movie or television screen, or as a magazine illustration?

The new professor now allowed himself to speak graciously to an older woman in a gray flannel suit and tucked white shirt and ascot who had worked her way toward him. So the new professor wasn't all ego, anger, angst, and bombast. Helen guessed he was in his mid-to-late forties. It was true, she concluded. Men aged more gracefully than

JUDITH GELBER

women. Her own gray hairs might be less prominent, but his collection, mainly at the temples, only made him handsomer. Dark brown, almost black hair brushed back from a high brow. Eyes that appeared black from this distance. Healthy pink skin stretched over a strong, firm, masculine bone structure that went with the height. He had to be over six feet. And the well-tailored jacket, slacks, and thick knitted sweater obviously didn't come off the racks of some men's store in a mall. Helen also liked his full lips. No, the top lip was rather narrow, but the bottom one full.

"You miss Karl, don't you, dear?" Elizabeth Warden, tall, slender, and seeming to sway with every puff of air, sank to the edge of the sofa beside Helen.

"Yes," Helen answered quickly, wishing fervently it was the truth.

"You poor dear." Elizabeth closed a cool hand over Helen's hot free hand now crushing the last bit of strength from her handkerchief.

"Who is he?" Helen asked, jutting her chin toward the new professor. She didn't like to be patronized. Elizabeth's expression immediately turned calculating. A blush across her high thin cheekbones lit her pale blue eyes.

"How wonderful!" she exclaimed. "Widowed only three weeks and already interested in the opposite sex."

"Four weeks, but who's counting?" Helen immediately regretted her tart tone. Dr. Theodore Warden, Elizabeth's husband, was the chair of the Foreign Language Department and Karl's boss. But Karl wasn't there anymore. Helen bit back a wave of hysteria and concentrated on the moment. It was pointless to irritate Elizabeth, who didn't take kindly to pointed remarks. "I just wondered if he was Karl's replacement," Helen said, attempting a more casual approach.

"Don't I wish! He's English." Elizabeth tucked in a loose strand of the fine blond hair that framed her delicate features.

"English as in citizen of England, or as in the English Department?"

"Both." Elizabeth's lips trembled slightly. "He's Frederic Isham Grenville," she continued, caressing the name. "Don't you just love it?" Elizabeth stared at him, almost visibly yearning. "Visiting Professor of English from the U.K. Unmarried. And his accent is exquisite. It sends chills up my spine." She lowered her voice and spoke almost in Helen's ear. "Janet in administration said she can't understand why he'd come to

SOULS ALIVE

such a small school like Perkins with his incredibly impressive teaching credentials and background.” She turned back to look at the new professor and visibly shivered, then blinked. “When I look at him I see the English moors, dark clouds, craggy bluffs. Heathcliff.”

Helen stared. More interesting than the teaching credentials was Elizabeth’s serious response to the professor. This exquisitely refined, frosty Nordic woman could indulge in the same hot, messy thoughts as the more Mediterranean types after all. Helen felt less defensive about her full-bodied, often unruly dark brown hair and eyes, and the warm skin that turned swarthy under the summer sun.

“I’m reminded more of Jane Eyre’s Mr. Rochester,” Helen said. She intended no malice, but the pale goddess’s light dimmed.

“Each woman to her own fantasy,” Elizabeth snapped, and left.

Helen sat on, alone. The cup and saucer began to tremble slightly with the fatigue in her fingers. To put the china down, however, she would have to get up. Then where would she go?

The new professor now had a full name. She recalled his last quotation from Shakespeare. Professor Grenville hadn’t spoken of, to, or at Helen Bender. He didn’t even know she existed. But she had to acknowledge that if she had remained a virgin until now, at almost forty-three, her sexual equipment might have qualified as being withered.

“Helen, no wonder it’s so difficult to see you,” declared Barbara Longman, peering down. “I didn’t see it before. Your dress blends so well with the color of my sofa.”

Helen looked down at her burgundy-colored dress. It was the darkest dress she owned, and she assumed that dark clothes were expected of a grieving widow. But she finally had admitted to herself that she was more confused than grieving.

She had been introduced to Karl Bender in June, married him at the end of August, and come to live with him here in Medford in September. It was all over in November. She had tried to think of their whirlwind courtship as a romantic rush. But Karl was just a professor of German at this college in a rural corner of northeastern Pennsylvania. The only certainty now, to Helen, was that the contrast between this lovely, picture-perfect house and the Bronx apartment where she had lived when she met Karl, couldn’t have been more profound. They

JUDITH GELBER

existed in two different worlds, and she now had to decide which one would be her home.

“You’re right, Barbara.” Helen stood up. “I’ve been sitting here so long; I’ve left a dent in the cushion. I hope it isn’t permanent.”

“It will fluff back up,” Barbara said reassuringly. Helen blinked at being taken literally.

“Thanks for the invitation to this lovely tea, Barbara.” White and red candles flickered pleasantly inside clear hurricane lamps, their flames almost lost in the glare of the electric lights. However, the woodsy aura from all the evergreens being heated by the hissing radiators and well-stoked fire overwhelmed the senses. Helen wanted to get out into the fresh air, no matter how icy.

“I’m afraid,” she said, looking for a place to put down the damn teacup and saucer, “that like all good things, this afternoon must end for me.” But Elizabeth suddenly appeared.

“Come, Helen,” Elizabeth urged, taking the cup and saucer from Helen and putting them down on a nearby table. “You have to meet the newcomer.”

“Please, Elizabeth.” Helen found the last of her emotional reserves ebbing fast. “I’m very tired. I need to go home.”

“Not before you meet Professor Grenville,” Elizabeth insisted as she pulled Helen toward the fireplace, pushing her way through the grudgingly yielding women. Professor Grenville acknowledged the new presence with a quick glance toward the window, as if judging the distance to freedom. Helen barely had time to take in at close range the angry dark brown eyes before Elizabeth gushed her way into the conversation.

“Professor Grenville, how fortunate we are to have you among us in this little center of learning out here in the wilderness.” Elizabeth’s attempt at a sophisticated laugh sounded more like a cackle.

“The campus is small,” Grenville murmured, his eyes still searching for an exit. “But it’s charming nevertheless.” He shook his head at several offers to get him something fresh and hot to drink. “And it’s not so much a wilderness, as you put it, as a refuge from the distractions of the big city. It’s more conducive to the pursuit of academics.”

SOULS ALIVE

Helen was surprised at the moderating tone. Or was he just resigned to being verbally mauled by a bunch of intruding females? Furthermore, Elizabeth was right about the professor's extraordinary voice and accent.

"Oh, yes," Elizabeth agreed, "but you must admit..." Professor Grenville apparently would admit nothing. He took a half-step forward. But Elizabeth moved closer, touching his arm. Grenville stopped and stared at the offending hand until Elizabeth sheepishly pulled it back. Several women smirked into their teacups.

"Before you go, Professor," Elizabeth said, still game for the encounter, "may I introduce Helen Bender? Mrs. Karl Bender. A new widow," Elizabeth added in a hushed tone that assumed he wouldn't be cruel enough to ignore a recently bereaved woman. He was, after all, an English gentleman.

Grenville startled Helen with his sudden, intense stare. She tried to stare back, but his look was too strong. "Karl Bender?" questioned Grenville. "Would your late husband have had any relationship to the German scholar, Karl Bender?"

"I don't know." Helen was too startled and confused to answer with anything but the truth. Karl was known outside this campus? "He was a German professor here at Perkins," she finally said. "And he was born in Prague." She bit her lip. Was that all she knew of Karl's background? Surely, a wife—a widow—would know more.

"That's the man," the professor said, still fixing her with those dark eyes, as if seeking to look past her facade. The other women, including Elizabeth, darted questioning, almost hostile looks at the two. The whole thing didn't make sense, Helen thought. But nothing had, finally, since June.

"Karl and I," Grenville said, unsmiling, "occasionally traveled in the same academic circles on the Continent, particularly in England. He taught there, too, for a while...as you know."

"Of course," Helen said as casually as she could, as if she had really known. But her voice trembled. Elizabeth apparently thought she had been ignored long enough. She tugged at Grenville's sleeve. Once more Grenville skewered her with his eyes until she released him. However, Elizabeth refused to back down.

"My husband's the chair of the Foreign Language Department. Karl taught there, you know," she added, dropping her voice to a sorrowful

JUDITH GELBER

moan, then quickly rising to her toes and producing a bright smile. “We’re having some guests over for dinner Wednesday night and would be so happy if you would join us.” Her smile faded under Grenville’s look of disdain.

“I think not,” he said, adding as an afterthought, “but thank you,” and turned back to look at Helen. She tried to swallow the rising panic. Too much pressure, too many thoughts. In a moment she would be screaming, and that would be horribly embarrassing.

“If you’re leaving,” he said, as if hinting that was the thing to do, “I would appreciate a lift. I left my car at the house.”

“I didn’t bring my car, either.” Helen put a trembling hand to her forehead. “I walked.”

“Splendid! We’ll walk together.” And before Helen could offer any dispute, Grenville, without a further word, steered her to the coats, quickly helped her into hers, put on his own parka as she dazedly pulled on her boots and gloves, and then led them through their polite “Thank-you” and “goodbye” to the Longmans. Barbara glared her displeasure. Frank Longman simply looked bewildered by this hasty departure from an afternoon that supposedly had some distance to go.

Out on the walkway, the chill blast snapped Helen’s head back. Grenville waited. She took several deep drafts, grateful for the sting in her lungs that brought her back to the reality of her body. Her thoughts coherent again, she turned to Grenville. Seeing her collected, he walked toward the open gate in the fence that separated the grounds of the president’s house from the town of Medford’s snow-streaked sidewalks. The college walkways were completely clear, even of snow mounds along the sides. Where did they put the snow they shoveled from the sidewalks, Helen wondered vaguely?

Grenville showed no remorse at fleeing the Christmas tea and dragging Helen with him. In fact, he looked delighted to be free. She marveled at the sudden change in him—a boy suddenly told to forget the algebra and go play in the snow. Not that she had wanted to stay. Also, what about his having known Karl?

“Barbara will think me rude and gauche now,” Helen lamented over their sudden departure.

“She’ll get over it,” Grenville answered casually. Out on the sidewalk, he hesitated. “My house is left, but I’ll turn right if you...”

SOULS ALIVE

“I also live left,” Helen said. “Several blocks.” They turned and walked together without further conversation. Grenville leaned down and balled up a fistful of slush and ice in his bare hands and turned it into a lethal pellet he launched against a nearby tree. “Ah,” he said with satisfaction when the frozen glob disintegrated and slowly slid down the center of the trunk. He rubbed his hands together to get rid of the remaining ice and plunged them into the pockets of his open parka. Helen saw no hat, no scarf, no gloves, and no boots. Rugged, she thought, or carelessly daring the viruses and bacteria that lay waiting everywhere to attack.

She had walked to the campus in the gray cold to give herself time to layer her nerves against the inevitable condolences. They were well-meaning people and didn’t want to cause her unnecessary pain. A number had come to visit after she returned from Karl’s funeral in New York City. Elizabeth confessed that she hadn’t expected Helen to come back to the little town of Medford and Perkins College after being back in the big city.

“But the house is here,” Helen had answered, not sure why she had returned herself. It wasn’t to pack up and leave because everything remained the same after a month of trying to proceed as if she knew what she was doing and the future appeared secure. Then Barbara had called with the invitation to her Christmas tea and insisted she come.

“You really must get out among your friends, Helen. We are your friends, aren’t we? You can’t bury yourself in that little house. Karl wouldn’t have wanted it. Besides, it’s not like going to a party and having a gay old time. It’s only our annual Christmas tea. It’s a tradition when we break for the holidays.” Barbara paused. “You know, Helen, even though you’ve been here a short time, and Karl isn’t here anymore, we still feel that you can become-are-one of us. We hope you’ll stay and make your home here. So, do come to the tea.” And Helen had come because if she stayed in Medford instead of going back to New York, she would need the goodwill of Barbara and Elizabeth and the others.

“I wouldn’t give a penny for your thoughts,” Grenville declared. “With that face, I wouldn’t want to know them.”

“I’m sorry,” Helen said. She picked her way over ragged clumps of ice left on the sidewalk after the most recent snowfall had been shoveled to the curb. She looked at Grenville’s shoes gathering slush and grime.

JUDITH GELBER

English leather, no doubt. Was he so well off that he didn't have to take care of his possessions?

"How long has Karl been dead?" Grenville asked without preliminaries. It was as if he assumed that now they were alone, there was no need to pretend about relationships.

"Four weeks," Helen answered in a tremulous voice. Her mind wandered back to the Bronx and her apartment's meager contents where she had lived alone after her parents died. It was the only home she had known most of her life. Now her possessions were packed into a few boxes stored in the cold, dark shed attached to the back of Karl's house, her house now. Karl's clothes still hung next to hers in the upstairs bedroom with the twin beds.

She now felt as if she had shared a bedroom with a man she hardly knew. Had she ever really known him at all? Her jumbled thoughts had begun to press hard since Karl's death. She felt as if she were just awakening from a deep trance and now had to wrestle with the after-effects of a nightmare. The thought was horrifying in its suggestions. Had she been asleep when she met and married Karl?

"Helen," Grenville said, unexpectedly using her first name, "are you still with me?" She had been plodding along, oblivious to the pools of slush in their way. "I'm sorry," he said, "if I've been abrupt. I've been rather careless of people's feelings today." She shot him a look. Today? Grenville laughed. "You're right. I have a tendency to stay with my own black thoughts. I didn't mean to suggest..." He helped her across a pile of snow at the corner and held to her elbow as they tested the ice in the road. She didn't resist his firm grip.

"Was it an accident?" he asked more solicitously. "I'm assuming," he added quickly. "I saw Karl a few months ago, and he seemed in robust health."

"It happened in New York." Helen's voice suddenly sounded mechanical to her. "He was hit by a truck." She said it too casually. The terrible accident deserved a more tragic telling. "The police assured me he was...gone almost instantly, without suffering."

"Helen! Are you all right?" Grenville demanded, staring down at her. When, she wondered, had they stopped walking? If she became hysterical, he'd probably slap her. She shook her head to clear it.

SOULS ALIVE

"I'm all right," she said, finally, "really." She took several deep breaths and began walking again. Off in the west, there were still some streaks of light behind the gray clouds. The sun was out there somewhere and might show its face tomorrow. She wished the sun would shine today and lift some of the gloom. Local people said the area was beautiful even in winter, although these spells of snow, ice, deep cold, and gray skies could last long enough to be real downers.

"I'm taking you out of your way," Helen said.

"Not at all," Grenville said. "We're apparently heading in the same direction."

"Where do you live?" Helen asked.

"Crest View Drive."

"So do I!" she exclaimed. "326."

"What a coincidence." Did he sneer, she wondered? "I rented a house at 504."

Helen couldn't tell whether he mocked her but decided to give him the benefit of the doubt, although his face was a little too innocent. She let it go. He probably meant no harm. "Have you started teaching yet?" she asked.

"No. I don't begin until the latter part of January. I came early to settle in before all the confusion that comes with taking on a new post, a new teaching year, a new..." His voice trailed off as he focused on the distant hills.

"504," Helen said, not wanting to lose his attention now that he seemed more human. "Is that by any chance that beautiful stone house at the top of the hill?"

"Yes. I was fortunate to find it so quickly. The owner was suddenly called away; someplace south, I think, lucky fellow. At any rate, he had to rent in a hurry. You must come and see it," he added after a long pause.

Helen was irritated that he would think she took this little excursion together as the opening wedge in a relationship with him, which he, no doubt, would avoid like the plague in the future. "You quoted Shakespeare, about virginity," Helen said, to lift herself out of a sense of descending again into the increasingly deeper depression that was beginning to frighten her. "Where did it come from?"

JUDITH GELBER

“All’s Well That Ends Well. Parolles was just showing off to the virtuous Helena, one of Will’s more interesting heroines. Parolles is a braggart, a coward, a rascal, a rogue, a silly fop—altogether an unsavory character.”

“Then I take it you don’t agree with him,” Helen said, “about what he said.” She liked Grenville’s current relaxed playfulness. The change in him since they left the tea was charming.

“I’ll put it this way.” Grenville said, his face indicating a little mischief. “I don’t agree with the way he expressed himself.”

That sort of left things up in the air, Helen thought. “But you agree with the underlying...”

“I can only repeat what I said.” Grenville apparently wasn’t going to give an inch.

“Why did you pick that particular quote?”

He grinned. “I find that in such company these sexual references in Shakespeare tend to open up the space around me.”

“You call him ‘Will’,” Helen said, suspecting he had also just moved her back. “You must feel very much at home with Shakespeare. Isn’t there something in one of his plays about someone being widowed a short time and...?”

“You’re probably thinking of Hamlet’s lament about his mother Gertrude’s hasty marriage to his father’s brother.” He stopped abruptly. Helen thought he hesitated as if wondering whether she knew what he was referring to. Now she was angry. She hadn’t even wanted to leave with him. He had used her as an excuse to get away. Barbara would think her ungrateful, and the other women would also shy away because Barbara was their leader. He inclined his head, indicating that they had come to her house.

The small white clapboard house waited, dark windows giving the house a shuttered look. The shallow front lawn was divided by concrete stairs leading to a small covered porch. The tiny patches of brown grass on either side of the stairs were still covered with the last snowfall. No flowers had edged the stairs when she first came. No foundation shrubs to make the house more visually appealing.

Although the grass had been cut, it all had a temporary, neglected look. She told Karl she would like to put in some plants and evergreens, but he had made his first sarcastic remark to her when he asked whether

SOULS ALIVE

she had learned to garden in a Bronx apartment. He laughed sheepishly at her startled look and said he was only teasing. Of course, he added, she could do whatever she wanted with the house and grounds, now her house and grounds as well, such as they were.

“You really knew Karl?” Helen asked Grenville, trying to keep the now familiar tide of despair from dragging her down even further.

“Of course,” Grenville said, his sourness returning. “Not that we were bosom buddies, as you Americans like to say.”

“You didn’t like him?” Helen put her hand to her throat, sensing a sudden threat.

“I’m sorry,” Grenville said, contrite. “These things are personal. The man I knew obviously wasn’t the man you knew. I supposed you were recently married because I saw Karl in New York last spring, and he was definitely still unmarried at that time. He also didn’t mention any woman he intended to marry, as I’m sure he would have. From what I knew, Karl was a talented teacher who made a bit of a name for himself as a linguist.”

Helen thought Grenville’s attempt at reassurance was a little forced. But she had no choice. She would not interrogate him further. Her anxiety about Karl’s past and her future as his widow were sufficiently threatening without her seeking to add to her emotional load. Even this stranger appeared to know more about her husband than the woman who had married him. Grenville must think her an absolute fool.

“Helen, you’re so vulnerable,” Grenville said suddenly. His arrogance and petulance dropped away, revealing a concern she didn’t think existed. His unexpected kindness made her want to reach out to him, but she remembered his cold reaction to Elizabeth’s attempt at such a small intimacy, and she held her arms rigidly at her side.

Grenville started to walk away, and then changed his mind. He reached into an inside pocket of his parka and drew out—nothing. But he still held his hand out, fingers curled around his wide but still empty palm.

“What do you see?” he asked.

“Your palm.”

“Come, come, what’s in the palm,” Grenville asked impatiently. He rotated his hand, apparently not losing hold of—what? Something glinted, but the light was too gray to catch a reflection, and he wore no

JUDITH GELBER

rings. He suddenly whirled away from her, and then back, his left elbow now crooked just beneath his eyes. He held his right hand with the rounded palm close to his body. Helen could now easily imagine a great black cape hiding him, except for his huge dark eyes that bored into her, demanding that she see what was—wasn't—there.

"A crystal ball," Helen exclaimed, taking a wild guess, delighted now to be part of his lark. Grenville was obviously pleased at her breakthrough. He let the "cape" fall back and once more held out his palm, where she was now quite willing to imagine a crystal ball that wasn't actually there.

"What do you think it weighs?" Grenville asked, hefting the ball a few times and giving it a little toss.

"I have no idea," Helen said. The ball appeared too large to roll in his palm, judging from the spread of his fingers. He brought it to his mouth and breathed on it before polishing it with his left sleeve.

"Ah," he said, finally satisfied at the gloss. "It's much clearer now. If the thing clouds up, you might as well pack it in."

"What can you see in it?" Helen asked eagerly.

"Anything you wish," he replied. "You have only to command."

"The future?" Helen's heart raced. Did Grenville's lip curl, if ever so slightly? That would have spoiled everything. Now he made circular motions over the glass globe with his free hand and peered intently into its depths. A low hum escaped him. Then he stood silent.

"I see," he finally intoned in an echoing bass. "Wait," he whispered, drawing the ball close until his eyes crossed. Helen burst out laughing. Her scalp prickled. Grenville, however, remained tied to his crystal ball.

"I see," he said, now holding the ball at arm's length, "a tall, dark, and handsome stranger coming into your life. I stress handsome."

"Pooh," Helen said. "Any crystal ball could show that."

"What? You think this object false, shallow, unremarkable, a liar?" Grenville asked angrily.

"No, I just..."

"You are right. It is worthless." He started to let his arm drop.

"No, really, I..."

"If it does not please you, away with it!" He heaved the ball toward a far tree.

SOULS ALIVE

“Don’t,” Helen shrieked, certain she saw the glass ball arc in the air and fragment against the stone-hard bark. Glass shards should be everywhere but, of course, they weren’t.

“Why did you do that?” Helen demanded, even while feeling foolish at having been sucked in by his imaginative powers.

“There are many more where that one came from,” Grenville said, grinning. He gave her a quick salute and continued up the hill at a fast pace. Helen heard her telephone ringing inside the not-so-solid front door. She hurried up the steps, and as she searched for her keys, she took a quick glance at his rapidly disappearing back. He did not turn back to see if she watched him.

Chapter 2

“For God’s sake, Helen, where were you? I’ve been calling all afternoon. It’s already almost dark here in New York. You know how I worry about you. Where were you?”

“Oh, Esther,” Helen said to her sister, impatiently slipping off her coat while cradling the phone between shoulder and ear. She let the coat fall to the floor with her purse and keys. She had dashed into the house when she heard the phone ringing, thinking it might be Barbara giving her a chance to explain her abrupt exit with Grenville. “How was I supposed to know you’d call? And it’s almost dark here, too. In case you’ve forgotten,” Helen added, letting the sarcasm through, “New York and Pennsylvania are still in the same time zone.”

“You know I always call Sunday afternoon.”

“Sunday afternoon, evening, night. You call any time of the day, any day of the week.” Helen tried to control her irritation. The woman meant well. But the road to madness was paved with good intentions. “It’s all right,” she finished lamely. Who else was there for her but Esther?

“Don’t be such a smart-ass,” Esther said, not at all put off.

“Esther, what are we arguing about? I’m here. Wait. Let me hang up my coat. I just got in.” Helen didn’t wait for permission. She put the receiver down on the small telephone table with attached seat of imitation black leather located in the tiny alcove under the stairs. She bumped her head again backing out and went to the front closet, vowing once more to find a new place for the phone, or do a better job of crouching. Whoever located it there probably didn’t expect too many calls. Karl? She shook her head. She never asked him about it, like so much else in the house. Since his death, however, she felt an urgent need to pick up the phone as soon as it rang.

SOULS ALIVE

"I'm back. What's up?" Helen asked.

"Do I need an excuse to call my own sister?"

"Then what's new since we last traded momentous facts about the momentous happenings in our momentous lives? Was it Friday night? Saturday morning?" Helen settled onto the seat, her back against the wall. If Esther suspected that Helen wanted to cut the conversation short, she would find lots to talk about.

"If you want excitement, Helen, you'll never find it in that crummy little town you're in now. So where were you all day?"

Esther hadn't been the least impressed by the rural beauty of Medford and northeastern Pennsylvania. She and her husband Seymour had come one Sunday afternoon soon after the wedding when Karl was called away by a fellow faculty member to translate something written in German. "It's important," he had said as he pulled on a sweater. "Please give my apologies to your sister and her husband."

"It couldn't wait?" Helen asked, irritated.

"It's an e-mail from a publisher who wants a quick reply about something the fellow is writing. He wants to make sure he makes the right response." Karl seemed happy to leave.

Esther and Seymour said nothing about the house after a quick tour, praised Helen's lunch, and refused to go for "a drive in the country" to take in the sights. They made one more trip to Medford right after Karl's funeral and spent an acrimonious afternoon trying to convince Helen that her place was with them back in the city.

"I was invited to the college president's house for their annual Christmas tea," Helen said. Silence on the other end. "Anyway, it was very pleasant. I met some interesting people." The topic of Grenville she would reserve for herself.

"Helen, don't get involved again," Esther cautioned anxiously.

"Esther! What is it with you today? You're usually more intelligent than this."

"Don't talk about intelligent. You were intelligent when you married old whatsisname before anybody knew what you were doing?"

"Karl!" Helen said loudly. "His name was Karl. With a 'K,' and he wasn't that old." Karl had admitted to her shortly before the wedding that he was pushing 60, but Esther was convinced he was pushing 60 from the other side. Helen had thought Karl was actually ten years

JUDITH GELBER

younger when they first met, given his tall, straight, muscular frame, and nary a wrinkle on his handsome face. He also had a great smile. Helen felt his age was not an important issue in the relationship.

“Okay,” Esther conceded, “Karl. With a ‘K,’ but you’re only forty-two.”

“How’s Seymour?” Helen asked, looking for firmer ground.

“Why, you care?” Esther asked. Helen laughed. She disliked Esther’s husband, and Esther often seemed to share the sentiment as well.

“What now?” Helen asked.

Esther’s snort stopped somewhere between contempt and laughter. “He’s staying later at the office. Work, you know,” she said with open scorn. “He’s got a new secretary, a little blonde. I’ll bet she’s younger than Karen.” Karen was their daughter, with two little girls of her own, who had remained in California after her divorce.

“And you think...” Helen coached. Esther’s sigh was enough of an answer.

“She’s not the first, she’s not the last. In a few weeks she’ll have a piece of cheap jewelry, and I’ll have a real diamond pin for my new black dress. I’ve already picked it out.”

“Why have you put up with it all these years?”

“Tell me, Helen,” Esther asked in a tired voice, “where would I go? So the bastard has his little flings. But he always comes back. He’d die if I ever called it quits.” Helen suddenly thought, *So would you!* They were faithful to one another in their own peculiar ways, despite Seymour’s infidelities. Helen was convinced that, if separated, they would wither away. The sudden insight made her uncomfortable.

Would Karl have remained faithful to her? He respected her, of that she was certain. He treated her with an old-world courtesy she found charming. Sexually, though, despite his strongly masculine appearance, these attributes translated into a softness that was more and more unsatisfying. Grenville suddenly came to mind, and Helen felt hot and embarrassed at the sudden pain in her groin.

“Helen, are you listening? I asked, have you found a buyer for the house yet?”

“I haven’t looked.” Helen hated herself for slipping so easily into her role as petulant child waiting for the inevitable adult reprimand. Esther was eighteen years old when Helen, the “miracle from Heaven,”

SOULS ALIVE

was born after their mother suffered years of miscarriages. However, their mother was quite ill because of this late pregnancy, and Esther was assigned to care for baby Helen. For a long time Helen was convinced Esther was her real mother. Esther had never fully let go of that role regarding her baby sister.

“Helen, how do you expect to get out of there? You can’t just walk away from a house. A husband, yes, but a house? With all your smartness and book-learning, you still... Have you at least listed the house with an agent? I thought we agreed.”

“‘Agreed’ to what?”

“Helen, don’t aggravate me. I don’t need it. You’re coming home, and that’s that, to New York. Where else do you belong? Seymour says he can get you a nice little apartment not far from us with the money you get for the house, since you won’t take anything from us, Miss Independent. But he said you should hold on to Karl’s investments.” Seymour, despite Helen’s outspoken anger at his interference in her affairs, had made a complete inventory after the funeral of Karl’s finances.

“He thinks,” Esther continued, “what that guy left—I know, with a ‘K’—will bring in enough to help pay expenses, especially if you get a job. With your smarts and skills, New York bosses will be begging you to work for them.”

The very morning Karl had gone to his death in New York, he gave her a slip of paper with his lawyer’s name and telephone number typed on it. “If anything happens to me,” he’d said casually before kissing her goodbye, “get in touch with this man, at this number. He’ll take care of everything. He knows what to do.”

Had Karl had a premonition? Calvin Marks, the lawyer, told her everything had been arranged just after Karl married her. There were no other living relatives. Therefore, to her astonishment, the house and its contents, the three-year-old car in excellent condition, some shares of blue-chip stocks and utilities, and a joint bank account with a balance of nearly \$10,000—all in both their names—were entirely hers.

She remembered signing a number of papers and the bank signature cards at Karl’s gentle urging almost immediately after she came to Medford. But she had never seen the passbook until she had opened the large manila envelope the lawyer had given her with instructions to call

JUDITH GELBER

him with any questions. How do you ask a new husband whom you don't know too well what is his precise financial status before the wedding? She also felt guilty because she hadn't told Karl about her own financial situation, and he never inquired, probably assuming she had little to declare. However, she had a large amount of cash in her own savings, she realized, all still in her maiden name—and still in the New York bank.

“...for a little bit,” Esther was saying. “The apartment is so big. You can have Karen's room. She went with the children in California to visit their father, her ex-whatever. Anyway, she won't be dropping in, in case you're afraid she'll need the room for a visit. Really, Helen, you'll be doing me a big favor by coming for a nice long visit. Then we'll see. I miss you, darling girl. We'll go shopping. To the theater, the movies. It'll be like old times. What do you say?”

Helen knew Esther genuinely missed her. And it would be so comforting to return to the love she knew awaited her, despite its smothering aspects. But that was the point. Esther would be there to comfort and support her and make life easy once again. Helen's being the widow of a college professor and desiring to live on her own in a small town more than a hundred miles away would be overlooked as some temporary aberration. Again Helen thought of Grenville and shut her eyes. Who else except Esther was left to love her?

“Please, Esther, don't push me,” Helen said. Karl's financial largesse and her own untapped resources gave her the breathing room she needed to think about what she wanted to make of her future. And at forty-two going on forty-three, the future now seemed endless—and endlessly barren.

“Not now,” she said more quietly. “I have to think things out for myself. I'll talk to you later.” Helen hung up before Esther could say something more.

Helen left her purse on a straight-backed chair near the stairs and walked carefully through the gloom in the hallway into the living room, easing past the shapes barely visible in the fast-fading light from the front windows. She turned on the floor lamp that was part of a narrow wooden end table with a magazine rack at the bottom that stood next to a tall tan lounge chair.

SOULS ALIVE

Helen loved to sit within the friendly ring of light falling over the chair. The feeling of occupying a cozy island was enhanced by pulling up a small woolen blanket she left folded on the arm. Inevitably, her eyes would grow heavy. Then she would press the recliner's mechanism and stretch out. Almost immediately, especially if the nearby table radio played softly, she would fall asleep. She had discovered the pleasures of reading and sleeping in the chair even while Karl was alive. Now, she sought the comfort of sleep any time of day, even resorting to sleeping in the chair through the night rather than going up to the bedroom she had shared with Karl.

Helen sat down and turned on the radio. The sweet melodies of the sixties and seventies were a staple of the station to which it remained tuned. She felt the warmth creeping through her as her muscles relaxed in preparation for the sleep she knew would come soon. All she needed was to kick off her shoes and pull up the blanket. The temptation to close her eyes was overwhelming. She didn't want to go upstairs. One of the two bedrooms had a double bed. She and Karl occupied the other bedroom with the twin beds. Something about his poor sleeping habits, he said, necessitated separate beds. They used her bed for sex.

Karl said he bought the house with the nondescript furniture already in place rather than waste time trying to furnish it himself. It all reminded Helen of the 1950's and 1960's sitcoms she saw on television. She was free to redecorate and add her own touches, he told her. However, in the next breath he said he had no problem with the way things were. In fact, he was used to it. So how could she change things after that? And his study, located near the kitchen on the other side of the house, was apparently off limits as far as redecorating was concerned.

"Karl's room," as she referred to it, was filled with books, but they were mostly in German. The history of Germany predominated, particularly of the Nazi era, and World War II. There was also a well-used thick volume in English on tracing Nazi war criminals. This fit with what Helen knew of Karl's background, as he had related it.

His parents had met in a refugee camp in Italy after the war where both found a safe harbor after surviving the concentration camps. Both were of German descent, which accounted for Karl's still handsome,

JUDITH GELBER

blond, blue-eyed looks. Seymour had once said he looked like a typical Nazi. Both Esther and Helen had been outraged.

Karl said his father died of some concentration-camp induced illness soon after the marriage. His mother, now pregnant, managed to return to Prague where Karl was born. She then roamed Europe, hopelessly seeking any family that remained alive and settled in what was then West Berlin, under the control of the Allies, where Karl grew up and went to school.

After his mother's death, Karl also remained in Europe for awhile, he told her, where he taught science and mathematics as well as German at different schools. He said he came to the United States to accept the teaching post offered him at Perkins on some exchange program that allowed scholars to come to the United States and stay and teach. His English, like that of many Europeans, was excellent. Helen found his slight German accent and courtly manners exciting.

Helen stared, unseeing, at the far wall. How did what she knew about Karl's history fit with Grenville's description? And why did this new English professor appear to dislike Karl? She slipped off her shoes, pushed the chair into a half-reclining position, and pulled up the blanket. Neil Diamond sang of love on the radio, drums throbbing softly in the background. Sex and love, love and sex always go together. Helen resolutely closed her eyes, but her eyelids continued to tremble. Let go, she told herself, and opened her clenched jaw. But the tension in her body only grew worse at her determined effort to relax. Her contracting muscles finally drove her upright, eyes wide open.

What was it with her and Grenville? She had only just met him. They had walked home together; nothing more. She had to admit he was handsome, sexy—and single, according to Elizabeth. Helen wondered why his marital status should make any difference to her. She twisted her head to view another part of the room, hoping to break the momentum of her thoughts. The man came from another world. Besides, what would he see in her?

“Stop it,” she shouted aloud, and leaned back, trembling. Karl, her husband, she reminded herself, “my late husband,” she added aloud for emphasis, had shared her bed not that long ago. And being a widow for only a month didn't entitle her to think of other men—just yet. Helen pulled the blanket up to her chin. It was all so ordinary. Commonplace.

SOULS ALIVE

There were no deep, dark secrets to bring into the light of day to explain the whys and wherefores—the haste in marrying a man she had been casually introduced to at a dinner party arranged by Esther, of all people. There were no black rivers hissing, unseen, beneath her feet. She and Karl had recognized each other instantly: They were two lonely people reaching toward each other as they arrived at the abyss at the same moment: the abyss marked “Beware! Fill Up Now! Nothing Ahead!”

Commonplace, even banal. All that had happened was that she finally feared becoming like the thin-lipped, lonely, unmarried older women in the office where she had worked who fought retirement as if fighting death itself. So, when a charming, handsome, “exotic” man, as one colleague described Karl, came along and wooed her with his wonderful intellect and seemingly interesting life, she had jumped, like a forlorn teenager, at the opportunity to be a married woman—and crash-landed as a widow. She had spent the first weeks after Karl’s death in a daze. She woke, ate, dressed, and did whatever was required; alone. And, if she finally admitted it, even just to herself, spent her days pleasantly alone. No! How could she be so callous, so unfeeling! But that was the problem. Now, with so much pushing its way forward in her brain, she wished for that earlier numbness that had shut down all the contradictions, all the...

Let it be! Stop needlessly tormenting yourself, her mind pleaded. “What’s done is done,” she said aloud, but found no comfort. Was it a mistake? Fear of being alone? “Ha!” Her voice sounded hollow. And now there was another professor; Frederic Isham Grenville.

Chapter 3

She gave up her walks and her clandestine peeking at Grenville's house when the weather turned nasty. Dark, bitter cold poured down the hillsides and slithered into every vulnerable crack in her house. She refused to consider her utility bill and kept the house lighted and heated to the attic. She drove instead of walked and set about learning how to maneuver on ice and snow, just like the locals.

Elizabeth Warden's unexpected invitation soon after the Christmas tea to join "the girls" for lunch at the Candlestick Café quickly dispelled Helen's growing feeling of isolation. Perhaps she hadn't committed such a gaffe after all, running out like that with Grenville. Barbara, the unofficial hostess of these luncheons, was apparently willing to forgive and forget. And while Helen didn't want to seem slavishly seeking the group's approval, she didn't want to offend them, either.

"We're not going to let Christmas shopping get us down," Elizabeth said to Helen on the phone. "You're lucky you don't have to go through all this. But don't you have a similar holiday?"

"Hanukkah," Helen said, but felt the need to add something. "It's not a terribly major holiday, like Christmas," she continued. "It celebrates an ancient battle for freedom, but it does involve giving gifts to the children. It's also festive and fun."

Elizabeth remained silent for a few seconds. "Yes. Well, do join us for some celebration of the season—if it won't interfere with your religious beliefs."

"Elizabeth," Helen asked, "are you inviting me to have lunch—or attend church?" She hoped her laugh was light-hearted enough to indicate the question wasn't meant to be taken seriously.

"I'm sorry," Elizabeth said with evident embarrassment. "I'm not sure in these matters."

SOULS ALIVE

“No offense taken,” Helen said reassuringly. “What day and time? Lunch, that is.”

“Can you make it today? The reservation is for one o’clock.” Elizabeth’s voice had suddenly turned tentative, almost apologetic.

Helen’s little surge of pleasure fizzled. The Candlestick Café was so popular, particularly during the luncheon hours that even long-standing reservations had to be confirmed well in advance at this time of year. It was already 11:00 A.M. Someone must have dropped out at the last minute. Pride, however, would earn her nothing more than a tuna fish sandwich in her own kitchen, with the radio atop the refrigerator playing love songs from the sixties and seventies.

“Sure!” she said quickly. She thought she heard Elizabeth sigh, as if relieved.

The Candlestick Café stood at the center of Medford’s Main Street shopping hub. Traffic was most likely to snarl here during the summer tourist season and especially at holidays like Christmas. Distant relatives and college students returning for family reunions and festivities easily made up for the population drain when the students at Perkins went home for the winter break. Skiers from nearby metropolitan areas looking for snowy, small-town charm crowded into the brightly decorated shops seeking souvenirs and bargains. Local people, however, complained about prices being jacked up on many items without the remotest connection to Christmas.

Christmas carols sounded everywhere, along with the perennial wish for a white Christmas that was obviously granted this year. The pungent smell of pine from the clusters of Christmas trees on sale at numerous spots around town only added to the cheerful togetherness that enclosed family and stranger alike. Religious observance appeared only as a minor backdrop to this swell of secular fun. Helen enjoyed the shoulder to shoulder, elbow to elbow contact. And with no specific schedule to follow, she didn’t mind the long wait at most checkout counters. It was even fun beating out a young man for a newly available, much coveted space in the municipal parking lot. Both laughed as he drove on in his fruitless search for a resting place for his little car.

Barbara Longman and Melanie Prentice were already seated at the large round table on the side of the graciously proportioned dining room when Helen arrived. Barbara was always prompt and evidently brought

JUDITH GELBER

Melanie, who didn't drive. Helen met Melanie at Barbara's welcoming tea for new women faculty and faculty wives at the start of the fall semester and found the young woman altogether delightful. Melanie wasn't exactly sure of what her husband Martin did in the business office.

Helen felt, however, that twenty-four-year-old Melanie was much too young to be taken up by "the girls." But Barbara, whose only child, a daughter about Melanie's age, lived in Minnesota with her college professor husband, insisted that Melanie "mingle." To Helen's surprise, Melanie didn't mind. Perhaps the young woman recently married and away from her home in California for the first time, missed her mother.

Also at the table was Sarah Richards, whose husband was a trustee at Perkins College. Dull but kindly, she directed Helen to sit next to her. Elizabeth rushed in soon after, surprising and delighting Helen by leaning over and pecking at Helen's cheek with cold lips. They had already ordered drinks. All chose white wine to satisfy the waitress's need to keep the orders flowing and prevent any back-up in the kitchen and bar. Last was Ann Parker who sailed in wrapped in layers of brightly colored scarves and flowing cape. Stout, florid, and booming of voice, she was an artist of some local repute. She taught painting part-time at Perkins. Helen found her landscapes boring. Ann liked people to gush over her talent and celebrity and seemed to find Helen's reserve irritating.

Sarah's bony, wrinkled hand with its perfect manicure kept Helen's arm pinned to the table as she told tales of her granddaughter's holiday tour of Mexico. Ann drained her wine as if it were water and quickly ordered another. Helen had a sneaking suspicion that Ann secretly drank something much harder in the privacy of her own home.

Barbara ordered the restaurant's specialty—onion soup topped with melted cheese dripping down the sides of the small brown bowl—and the dieter's salad of fresh fruit and cottage cheese. Each of the women followed suit, including Helen, who was immediately annoyed with herself for playing follow the leader. The others appeared to have no such qualms. The basket of freshly baked rolls, thick slices of rough brown bread, and crisp bread sticks was already considerably depleted. Barbara's favorite waitress would know exactly when to replace it with a fresh supply.

SOULS ALIVE

There was a genuine camaraderie about the table as the women chatted of family and friends and preparations for the holidays. Helen enjoyed listening to the details of the others' lives and was not at all shy about relating her impressions of Medford. The women seemed pleased at her unfeigned pleasure at being in their midst. If Barbara still harbored any resentment over Helen's unceremonious departure from her Christmas tea, she showed no signs of it now.

"Oh, my God!" Elizabeth suddenly exclaimed. "Don't look! Don't look!" She pointed a finger toward the front of the room but hid it behind the raised palm of her other hand. All heads immediately turned in that direction. When Helen entered the restaurant, she had passed the choice tables surrounding the fireplace. Only one had been empty and contained a card marked "Reserved." The table was now occupied by one of the most beautiful women Helen had ever seen in the flesh—and Professor Grenville.

The woman was young, perhaps only a little older than Melanie, and a study in black and white. Her black hair was pulled back into a knot that rested on the nape of her long white neck, emphasizing the beautiful oval of head and face. The pure, alabaster sheen of her skin was remarkably italicized by great dark eyes outlined in black and tipped up at the ends like those of an Egyptian princess. The only color was the slash of violent red on her wide, full lips. As if to further underscore her potent womanliness, she wore a severely tailored white blouse and a tight, short black skirt that rode high above her crossed long legs encased in ultra-sheer black stockings. Extremely high-heeled black pumps suggested a swaying walk that would probably reveal and entice with buttocks round enough to make the back view almost as interesting as the front.

Helen felt like an ogler when she realized that the woman's blouse was sheer enough to show her nakedness underneath. Full round breasts circled in voluptuous slow motion with every movement. Hard nipples pressed against the thin fabric. The woman's mesmerizing effect on the other diners around her was matched by her own entranced stare at Grenville. He, however, cut steadily at the food on his plate in complete concentration, seemingly oblivious to the charms of his beautiful companion.

JUDITH GELBER

“I know her,” Melanie said. “Not personally,” she laughed as the others reluctantly turned back while continuing to sneak glimpses of the couple. “She’s a model. I read about her in one of the magazines. Her name’s Deirdre. If I remember correctly, her story is typical: An ugly duckling from the wrong side of the tracks that grows up into a great beauty and has the world at her feet. She says she’s still unsure about what she’ll do when her looks go. But you all probably saw her in that television commercial. You know, the one with the diet drink, where she sashays up the beach, practically naked, in front of all those guys.”

“Oh, yes!” Ann burst out. She turned in her chair for another, more detailed look. Did her lips almost smack with hidden pleasure? “Sensational body,” she whispered to herself.

Helen had also seen the commercial. She recalled the model’s glorious curves, covered only by what amounted to a g-string and two tiny hammocks for her breasts. The face hadn’t seemed to matter that much, which was no doubt what the sponsors wanted. The girl had carried the drink at arm’s length, riveting attention on the lower part of her body.

“Isn’t that Professor Grenville with her?” Melanie asked.

Helen looked again, this time only at Grenville. He wiped his lips and nodded to the waitress hovering nearby who quickly moved in to take his plate. Deirdre, the model, also sat back, the food on her plate even from this distance noticeably untouched, and never took her eyes from Grenville. But the professor completely ignored her and surveyed the room. When Helen thought she caught his eye, she smiled brilliantly and gave a cramped wave, not wanting to draw too much attention. But as at the Christmas tea at the Longmans, Grenville once more looked through and beyond her, as if she didn’t exist.

Helen remained frozen for a few seconds before turning back to attack the limp remnants of her salad under Elizabeth’s barely concealed gloating and Barbara’s obvious pleasure.

“You must be hot, Helen dear,” Sarah observed solicitously, unaware of any deeper currents at the table. “Your cheeks are so flushed. It’s probably your jacket. It’s a lovely suit, dear. Red becomes you. But it is hot in here.”

After the lunch, Helen drove without thinking of where she was going. It was enough to feel the cold air on her face through the open

SOULS ALIVE

window. Distracted by incoherent thoughts, she hit an ice patch and slid sideways, stopping only inches from the roadside ditch filled with dirty snow and ice piled up by passing snow plows. Fortunately, the two-lane road was empty of traffic.

“*Moron,*” she screamed at herself. “Asshole,” she said less vehemently, beginning to cry. At least she hadn’t landed the car on its roof. Trembling, she saw nothing but brittle, lifeless trees and stark, empty countryside. Not a familiar landmark anywhere.

“Idiot,” she added, more in fear now than anything else. “Do you see a house with a telephone, a passing car? Pay attention, dammit!” She moved the car closer to the center of the road and resisted the desire to pull the car over and have a real good cry. “Keep going,” she demanded of herself. “You need to find a freaking road out of here.”

Grenville had no right to ignore her like that in the restaurant. So they weren’t “bosom buddies.” And walking her home wasn’t an invitation to begin a friendship. But he called her Helen instead of Mrs. Bender and left the impression... “What impression?” she shouted out the window as she hunted for a familiar landmark. And that business with the imaginary crystal ball. “Shit!” she said through her tears. “When are you going to learn the difference between a casual hello and an invitation to dance?”

The next day she gritted her teeth and telephoned Elizabeth for directions to a large mall in nearby New Jersey. Elizabeth quickly obliged and surprised Helen by suggesting they browse together. She confided to Helen that she had spent many an afternoon just going from shop to shop in the huge place without necessarily buying anything. Suddenly, her voice turned uncertain.

“If you’d rather go by yourself, I can direct you,” Elizabeth said. Surprised at the offer to join her, Helen thought she heard a plaintive note, as if Elizabeth felt she had misunderstood Helen’s request and was now uncertain whether Helen wanted to be alone.

“Oh, please, Elizabeth,” Helen said quickly. She didn’t want to pass up an opportunity to connect with another person, particularly female. She had had very few women friends in her life, perhaps because she had never learned the secret language they all understood so well. “I’m sure I’d enjoy it much more if...you went with me.” Now it was Helen’s

JUDITH GELBER

turn to fear she had overstepped an invitation she thought she heard. But it was Elizabeth who took the matter in hand.

“I think it would do us both good to get out of Medford for a little while. And why take two cars? Please join me. The family sedan hasn’t had a good, long highway workout in a long time.”

“Great,” Helen said quickly. “I get nervous on a new highway and crawl along to watch the signs until everybody’s honking at me and trying to pass.”

They had lunch at an Italian restaurant and ignored the salads to concentrate on the pasta. Helen was relieved that Elizabeth didn’t even mention Grenville’s name, and was even more pleased to note that Elizabeth seemed just as eager as she was to begin a relationship that stressed friendship between equals rather than boss’s wife. Helen wondered what was she now. More surprising was Elizabeth’s shy smile when she said it was “nice” to be with someone her own age.

Helen thought about that remark at home while heating a dinner of asparagus soup and a tofu concoction she had picked up at a health food store on the way home that Elizabeth recommended. Helen hummed as she watched the soup bubble lightly, and decided this was far better than opening a couple of cans. In fact, she would set the kitchen table for herself. She might even make some of that gourmet coffee.

The warmth she felt was more than due to the soup. Elizabeth had shared some of her personal life. And the idea of having discovered a possible friend in cold Medford kept her humming until all the dishes were done and she turned on the TV.

The weekend proceeded dully. On Sunday she immersed herself in *The New York Times* and fell asleep in the recliner to the comforting sounds of Karl’s rather extensive collection of classical music. The door chime woke her. She opened the door, and there stood Frederic Isham Grenville.

Helen Bender, vulnerable after her sudden widowhood, becomes infatuated with Frederic Grenville and begins a dangerous romance. She eventually discovers his terrible secret and must decide whether to flee, or to fight the great evil threatening them if they remain together.

Souls Alive

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