

# 1

Frieda Berg tossed, turned, woke up, lit cigarettes, stabbed them into her brass man-in-the-moon ashtray, closed her eyes, and stayed half-awake all night.

Then there was the nightmare.

*Frenchie, her father, dead thirty years, watched her, mournfully. Then his wavering image was cut off by the unwavering image of Stella, her mother, and her mother's crazy sisters—the Korsokoff sisters, her aunts, Anna and Libby. She wanted her father, but the Sisters blocked him out, erased him, as they'd done in life. Stella said, "Look how you repaid us! Look!"*

*A crowd. Old lovers, Ron, her crazed ex-husband, Ron's sneering prune-faced mother. It was a flying wedge of accusers. Ron gesticulated, his face a ball of sweat.*

*Ron poked a trembling finger at her, as if he was the ghost of Christmas past. "I hate you," he screamed. "Die, DIE, DIE."*

Frieda groaned.

*"Bad Seed," intoned the chorus. "Bad daughter. Bad wife. Bad lover. Bad seed."*

Frieda whipped her head back and forth on her pillow. "Yes. Yes."

*"It's not enough," shouted Ron.*

*He beat her with Iron John.*

Thump, thump, thump.

*Bad seed. Bad seed.*

Thump, thump, thump.

Frieda's eyes snapped open.

Thump, thump, thump.

Her hand fumbled for the clock on the night stand. She picked over her glasses, the smooth Gallimard cover of the *La Peste*, the sharp edges of an ashtray, a handful of coins. Finally she picked up her metal gray Braun clock and focused. Eight-thirty. She frowned. "Wait a minute."

In the dim light, the edges of a thousand objects balanced on the rim of her sight. Beyond her round Art Deco table, her handbag of yesterday—purple, used, and needing an overhaul—sat in her stuffed chair like a bloated frog, spilling out its change purses, lighters, smokes, lip-

sticks and accessories, as if it had performed hara-kiri. The floor was a garage sale of purple shoes, black dresses, and naughty nighties. Scarves and clothes bulged out of the closet and books balanced precariously from every nook, cranny, and cubbyhole.

*Iron John* was about to fall from the bookcase. It must have come out when she took out *La Peste*. No wonder she had nightmares of Ron. He'd sent her the book two years ago in one of his crazed amphetamine phases. And he'd sent it because of what? To show how far he'd come? To show that despite Frieda ripping his psyche and slashing off his testicles he could still shout his frail Jewish manhood into the void? At least crank kept him thin.

And she'd kept it for...for what? A symbol of their wasted marriage? A testament to the greedy ego-centric eighties? A sign of the nineties? Homage to Gutenberg?

Thump, thump, thump.

"Quit pounding on that door."

"It's Rose Tutweiler."

"I don't care if it's God. Quit that goddamn pounding."

Frieda picked up her rose-tinted sunglasses, flicked out the frames, and put them on. The jumble turned sepia. She got up slowly and navigated bare-footed towards the light rimming the blind of her bedroom/living room. She paused briefly in her passage, pulled *Iron John* off the shelf, and dropped it in the wastebasket on the side of her stuffed chair.

*Andahone, andahtwo, andabhree.*

The blind snapped up. Light flooded her brain. She blinked once, twice, three times. Sepia Manhattan, East Side, Kip's Bay. Past vines and morning glories tangling off towards the roof from her planter, the sun limned the edges of the Olympia, the pretentious, modernist monstrosity across Lexington. She saw opaque reflections of Rex windows in its windows. What did the reflections hide? An early morning grope? Spilling coffee on the hotplate? The disasters of the Republic on NPR?

Frieda turned and picked her way through the tangle of garments to the door. She put on her robe and cinched it up. She paused before she opened that door. She didn't believe in ghosts, heavens, hells, or other worlds. And she didn't believe in presentiments or premonitions. But at that moment, she felt a premonition. The timing was wrong. She didn't know Rose well. She wasn't sure she liked her. And Rose was pound-

ing on her door at eight-thirty in the morning. Something was going to happen that morning that would change everything.

She didn't know *how* she knew, she just knew.

She cracked open the door and saw it *was* Rose Tutweiler, a sepia Rose Tutweiler. She opened the door wider.

"What's up, Rose."

Rose Tutweiler lived on the sixth floor. She was sharp-nosed, diminutive, and lean. She wore a simple shift and a black beret from which an errant gray curl invariably crawled down towards her right ear. When she wasn't writing dark, death-oriented poetry à la Sylvia Plath, she was writing fan letters to Dr. Kervorkian. She was a vocal member of New York City's Hemlock Society and once a week took the subway to Queens where she was an equally vocal member of the death group Concern for Dying. Rose had a plan for "leaving" which included a last supper at Plato's Diner of fresh spinach pie, apple pie à la mode, 40 Seconal and two, possibly three, glasses of Christian Brother's Tawny Port. Rose was also on SSI and welfare, in part because of her obsession.

"This is up." She thrust a paper in front of Frieda's eyes. The sepia paper was a form from Frieda's own department, Human Resources Administration, HRA, the city's labyrinthine welfare department.

"It's too early to focus," Frieda said. "You have a problem, go to your worker."

A door cracked open behind Rose. White hair, ice-blue eyes, and wrinkles appeared in the cracked door. Sven Bjorn was a painter and teacher of retirees at the First Presbyterian Church. Frieda gave him a quick I-don't-have-a-remote-idea shrug. Sven frowned and closed the door.

"It's an IMD 209. It says my welfare has stopped. Cut off. Zip. No reason."

"Hum." Frieda tried to focus on the paper and failed.

"I've never gotten one of these," said Rose, fuming. "It doesn't say why. It's blank!"

It *was* blank, which *was* odd. "Give it here. I'll see—if I have time."

Rose let her take the form. She scowled as she tried to tuck the curl back under her beret. "I wrote my worker's name up here." She pointed a rigid, thin finger at the top of the form. "I know *you* can help. The

others are morons.”

“I told you I’d see. Right now I’m in the middle of a bad dream.”

Rose turned and stormed—Rose stormed more than anyone Frieda knew—down the hallway past Sven’s tiny paintings, which he’d placed between and above the doors, around the fire extinguisher, and around the floor telephone making the eighth floor of the Rex more a gallery than a hallway.

Frieda shut the door, shook her head, and headed towards her bathroom in the other room. After using the bathroom and opening the blinds in that room, she dug in her small refrigerator for a carton of orange juice. She extracted a blue glass from a sink that was a disaster zone of knives, forks, plates, and glasses. She poured a glass of juice and a few seconds later picked up her bag from the stuffed chair and dropped it on the floor. She sat, sifted through her bag, and extracted a lighter and an Old Gold.

She lit the cigarette and watched the smoke drift away. She ran over the events of last night in her head. Nothing was interesting or remarkable. She’d listened to Meryl, a phone tree lady, and her litany of health problems; she’d thought of calling Harry, her occasional lover. They were on the outs, had been for a week. She didn’t call. Typical. Boring.

Frieda plucked her Art Nouveau mirror off the wall behind her and looked critically at her image. She expected a sepia Ava Gardner. The cheekbones were still high, the hair a tumble of raven curls, the eyes, partially hidden behind rose-colored reflections, sloed and mysterious. That morning her face seemed to sag, to droop like a melting hepatic ovoid.

Frieda stubbed out the cigarette and hauled herself out of her chair. Fifteen minutes later, showered and freshly scrubbed, she started comparing dresses and purses and shoes. She chose a flowing paisley in purple, a burgundy bag, and her red shoes with their fantasy touch of Arabic tracery. She donned her mother’s ring, the square obsidian one with the diamond in the middle, and her watch with its soft tiger’s eye face—wheeled from an ex-lover, a romance writer she met in the Cave two years ago. Hoop earrings. A dash of blush. The rose-colored glasses.

She bent over and scrutinized her image, again. That same mirror, where half an hour before she’d found a wasted, early-morning Frieda, now showed her at top form. She was over forty—sure there were a few lines; who didn’t have them—slightly overweight, but with a solid frame,

good legs, firm breasts, and—she had to say after all those years and some of them very bad years—stunning good looks. Her looks had gotten her in trouble, too. After the divorce, before actually, she was needy, too needy. It led to bars, men, searching and mostly not finding. She ended up in dicey spots with violent, usually drunken men. She was surprised she'd come out of those personal dark ages intact.

*Miss Movie Star. Our little Frieda.*

The movie star business started with her mother and aunts. But over the years she decided she didn't care how she looked. It was about what counted as an accessory. Looks were another accessory. Something to use. Something which, when pressed, never touched inside. Sometimes when she was really down, after a long day sorting out welfare screw-ups or worrying why the men passed through her life like phantoms, she doubted her queer stamina, the hard quasi-existential exterior, the random shot of cynicism. Inside, deep inside her spirit, was the hollow worm of insecurity; her secret life was about a long grope towards the unchangeable. Always was, always would be.

Frieda shrugged, opened, and locked her door. Sven's gallery. Since his stroke, his portraits had gotten tinier and tinier. That morning, his gallery, her morning chorus, felt like a jury. It was the wailing of the Sisters, the stabbing finger of her ex, an echo of her nightmare.

Frieda walked around the elevator housing, pushed open the fire doors, and stopped in front of the red elevator. She looked longingly at the stairs up to the roof. No, she'd play in her garden after work. She punched the button and waited. A few seconds later, the elevator rattled to a stop and she got in, closed the accordion door, and pushed one.

The elevator almost made it in one whirring fall, past all those floors of Rex residents peeing, showering, or firing up their hotplates. The express jerked to a stop on four. Frieda frowned. A pale face flashed in the elevator's window. The flash assembled itself as Carly Darling, singer and Crazy Eddie saleswoman. Carly opened the door, then the accordion gate, and edged her way into the elevator.

Carly was a Cybill Shepherd double with a full mouth, full body, knowing smile, and long, straight blond hair. Carly sang blues, was cynical about men, but pining, waiting for a rescuer. Carly had given her a Bleeding Heart for the garden.

"Think it will make it," said Carly, shaking her hair so it swirled

around her neck.

“If we wanted to make it, we’d walk.”

Carly punched one. “It was a three-in-the-morning night. Funny how we say morning night. A three-in-the-morning morning doesn’t sound right.”

“I dreamt my ex was right.”

“Yuck. That’s a night stallion.”

Frieda laughed. “Come up to roof, tonight. I’ll buy you a drink.”

“Date. I love it up there. Whoops, got to go.”

Carly opened the accordion gates, then the elevator door, and sped through the lobby. Frieda held the accordion gate, angled through the closing door, and walked into the lobby. The sun streamed in the open door of the Rex; Rudi, the Rex’s diminutive manager and part owner, hunched over his green much-used ledger.

Frieda walked to the half-oval and propped her bag on the ledge. “Rudi.”

Rudi shoved his coke bottle glasses in his salt-and-pepper hair and adopted an expression of intense suffering. “What?”

She dug into her purse and found a cigarette and her Art Nouveau lighter. She snatched the lighter, flicked it open, and lit her cigarette in one movement. She carefully blew a plume away from Rudi. Behind Rudi, letter boxes rose halfway to the ceiling. A small fan she couldn’t see fluttered the edges of the ledger. She wasn’t sure why she stopped. “Most things are more than the sum of parts. You know that, of course. Take the Rex. What is it? A random collection of individuals? No. It’s a spiritual ship of fools, a magic mountain, and Oran, the city of plague, all rolled into one.” Frieda frowned. “I guess that makes more than one sum.”

Rudi shook his head. “Always the romantic. It’s a hotel. People pay money. They have rooms. It’s not a secret. Aren’t you late?”

Frieda shook her head no. “I can get in when I please. Of course, if I looked at my watch, which I’m not going to do, I’d see the express will reach Thirty-fourth Street in ten minutes and I’ll start rushing to catch it. Odd how we’re built.” She plucked a tissue out of her bag, bent to the side, and dabbed a ragged line of sweat trailing out of her curls.

“I have so many worries,” Rudi said, despondently. “The list already runs from your sagging roof of illegal plants to the prehistoric boiler.

They have a saying: No good deed goes—”

“Please, no witticisms this morning. When’s Harry on?”

Rudi shrugged. “You know already.”

“I know. I know. I’m reinforcing my own craziness. Keep the ship afloat, captain.”

Frieda grabbed her bag, turned, and in a few seconds she was on a street alive with yuppies, tourists, and worker bees. Cars and cabs sped towards Lexington Avenue and runners jogged up Twenty-eighth Street the neon strips on their cross trainers flashing like police sirens.

She was halfway up the street when she thought about Ron and her nightmare. It brought up all the rest, the Bronx, the Korsokoff Sisters—truly Chekhov’s “Three Sisters” pining, always pining—tentative steps in the real world, marriage, the West Side apartment, and the looping trajectory that landed her in the Rex.

She turned and shaded her eyes against the piercing sun. The Rex—her ship of fools—was a holdout on the western border of Kip’s Bay. Except for The Moat, the basement bar in the rundown house flat up against the Rex on the west, they were surrounded. Remodeled townhouses. Tall buildings up-and-down the block, the Olympia across Lexington, the Giltmore, catty-corner. Every day when she came back and turned down Twenty-eighth, she was surprised the Rex was still piercing the East Side skyline. She almost thought that they, whoever *they* were, could raze the Rex and put up a high-rise while she was at work.

She hesitated as a black limousine stopped at the door of the Olympia. It was sleek, intimidating. The door cracked open. A hand grabbed the top of the door, then an oily head edged into the triangle between the car and the door. But the head dipped back in the car, as if the owner were angry. She would have waited to see who got out, but she didn’t have time.

Frieda turned and rushed towards Park Avenue.

If she hurried, she’d catch the express.