

## PREFACE

The city of North Hollywood known affectionately as "NoHo" is a potpourri of diverse cultures. This uniqueness is its best feature.

There's many markets and foods from different islands and countries. Exotic and unfamiliar tastes can be sampled in restaurants serving traditional and specialty dishes. The results can be varied and gratifying along with the ambiance and décor of a particular ethnic art.

The locality of North Hollywood screams convenient. Just over the hill from Hollywood and Los Angeles through the Cahuenga Pass. The zip codes never change but areas do. Some streets morph into "Valley Village" and "Valley Glen" increasing real estate values.

Travel times on the Hollywood Freeway and Ventura Freeway average twenty minutes to most places. That's if? The traffic moves at a jack rabbit clip. Hence, time spent in designer tennis shoes and short shorts, trumps living elsewhere. Safe, sunny and laid-back, rules.

Home owners and apartment dwellers bonded into extended families supporting the NoHo Theatre and Arts District. There's more live stage theatres and acting companies than most cities. And, the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, the El Portal Theatre and Cinemark, Regal and Laemmle Movies offer more entertainment.

Commuters take the Red Line Subway to Hollywood and downtown Los Angeles or, they transfer to Chinatown and Long Beach. Riders on the Orange Line Bus travel east to Warner Center and west to the entrance of the Red Line Subway.

Each Saturday, there's an outdoor farmer's market and daily, there's over a thousand mom and pop businesses going strong.

Import stores of Italian Marble, Travertine and Granite line Sherman Way. Customers travel to NoHo from all over Southern California, to make purchases.

Eclectic businesses similar to the year round Christmas

Store and Art Institute of California co-exist with Sound, Editing and Recording studios specializing in music videos and film post production. The Clairmont Camera on Lankershim Boulevard, won the 2011 Academy Award for the custom built, special effect's movie camera. Their camera's film trains, planes, fires and underwater in special sequences.

And, my family loves "Eddie Brandt's Saturday Matinee." They rent and sell old movies that no one else stocks.

And for twenty-five years, on every Christmas Eve, the "Christmas Caroling Truck" parades dozens of costumed singers including Santa Claus, in his train on wheels. Fifty merry-makers parade up and down neighboring streets delighting residents with sing-a-longs.

Next door to NoHo, is the Bob Hope/Burbank Airport granting access, to U.S. cities and connecting hubs, to the world.

I've flown many times, in and out of this neighboring airport. But, as always...

My house welcomes me to this city established in 1890 by Mr. Weddinton as "Lankershim." And, due to the increase in population and commerce demands, twenty-one years later in 1911, the famous "Red Car" made its first run, to transport people over the hill. Through the Cahuenga Pass and into a "booming" Los Angeles and the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Silent and talking cowboy pictures were filmed in the hills of this same Pass while Red Car passengers cheered and later freeway car riders gawked. Movie actors on horseback shot the bad guys for the rolling cameras. Universal International Pictures became today's Universal Studios and Tours replacing the cowboys.

In 1927, North Hollywood blossomed and thrived.

And, in 1947, Mr. Kaiser built affordable tract homes for the returning G.I.'s and their families. Victory Boulevard became part of that plan.

## CHAPTER 1

If you lived in the same city, on the same street, in a buttercup yellow house for thirty-eight years like I have, you'd know your neighborhood, right? Then without warning, as if planes collided, things changed.

"Maribelle? Why aren't you wearing your glasses?"

"I could wear both pairs. It wouldn't matter."

"No. It's not okay," said Kate. She halted her walking stride like a guard at the gate, stomping both feet.

"Oh my God, you're right!" screeched Annie, our mutual friend. "That car's speeding right at us."

"The headlights... I can't see in the fog."

"Get out of the street," yelled Kate. "He's gonna kill us."

"Where's the sidewalk?" asked Annie thrashing about.

"It's too damn dark. Ouch. Annie... you kicked me."

"The high beams blinded me. Soorry."

"ANNIE!" yelled Kate, "You stepped on me wee toes." With that, Annie's balance went haywire and she fell. And, as quick as a knee jerk reaction, Kate and I swooped her up.

Kate screamed, "RUN..."

We took a mad dash for the curb and jumped.

Just in time. Whoa! A black SUV roared past us at a tremendous speed. We three women were so startled, we plowed into one another trying to make the targeted sidewalk. Not an easy feat, circumventing trash cans, parked cars, a broken couch, trees and bushes. Only the Keystone Kops could appreciate.

Kate yelled at the driver, "slow down you idiot."

"Hey," said Annie. "He never stopped at the stop sign."

"Somebody's late for work," I said with a giggle.

"Oh, my god!" said Annie. "Is he circling back?"

"Jesus. He just turned around. RUN..."

"No shit!"

Kate and Annie ran for the hedges at the side of a house while I scrambled up a driveway, to crouch low behind a cloth covered limo.

The SUV raced in front of us, knocking down trash cans to jump the curb. The car drove the sidewalk, flying in the opposite direction and disappeared out of sight. Did the driver head for a freeway? Or, would the driver return?

"Bastard scared me."

"Scared us all."

That's how our morning began ten minutes ago.

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In North Hollywood, every Tuesday is garbage and trash pick-up day. Blue, black and green bins line curbs waiting for smelly, oversized sanitation trucks to roll along residential streets. Trucks that move like elephants; swinging mechanical arms, to lift and dump. They haul recyclables and crap causing home owners to cringe at noisy crunching, against metal and plastic.

On this pre-dawn Tuesday morning, in the dark and before any trucks arrived, I waited on my front porch. No need to switch on, overhead porch lights because my flashlight lit the way.

"Oh, shit."

Billows of mist wafted by.

"Not shit, Maribelle," said a faint voice.

"What?"

"It's fog," said my neighbor Kate Flannery suddenly silhouetted, at the curb between two parked cars. "But, let's walk to Sherman Way anyway. I told Annie we'd meet her at the corner."

Kate's voice sounded an Irish Donegal lilt that even in anger maintained a delightful sweetness and her skin? Texture and softness kissed by heaven matched a baby's bottom. There couldn't be a more thoughtful woman, steeped in common sense than Kate. I valued her friendship and advice.

So, Kate Flannery and I walked under the night sky, unsure of our footing but continued placing one foot in front of the other. We made it to the corner guided by the glow of traffic lights and headlights.

"It's awful," yelled Annie Clare Fitzsimmons, a fair-haired beauty from Cork, Ireland waiting on the far corner. "Can you friggin' believe this? Tis a pity."

Annie's Irish accent faded in and out as often as ocean tides. When still a teenager, she won the Miss Tipperary Beauty Pageant but forfeited her crown because of an impropriety. No one knew the real reason but gossipmongers said, "it involved her maiden Aunt Lily Rose of Kilarney and a merry, very married Municipal Court Judge Brendan McSorley on the beauty pageant committee." Later, the pair ran off to England, much to the chagrin of Annie, our defunct beauty queen and kind friend.

As the years passed, Annie denied being angry at her aunt but she never spoke to her either. She maintained, "I've moved on. I got over it." Annie uttered these words at her thirty-eighth birthday dinner. "Some people are slow to forgive," said her husband Aidan.

But two years later, Annie's spirits soared when she received a hefty inheritance from a British Law Firm. It seemed her widowed aunt expired during High Tea, at the Langley Hilton. A reporter for The London Times wrote, "Lady Lily Rose Peckham dropped dead. Face-first in strawberry preserves, crumpets, scones and clotted cream. The widow of the late Lord George Oliver Peckham, dressed in classic black and white Chanel, plopped into the clotted cream (smashing a tiny jewel of a hat) before tasting it first. Imagine the surprise to Pastry Chefs at Langley Hilton? A memorial concert honoring Lady Peckham, to be held at St. Martins-in-the-Fields on Saturday next. Invitation only. Burial in Kilarney, Ireland where her only daughter, Mrs. Catherine Peckham Neeley, resides."

Would we ever hear of Lady Lily Rose again? Hold that thought.

Getting back to Tuesday morning, Annie crossed at the

Sherman Way intersection to join Kate and me. I squinted, watching Annie walk towards us, taking geisha-like steps. Petite and doll-like, she reminded me of illustrations in books from long ago. Stories I read, conjuring up images of kimono gowns in satiny iris purples and silks of orange and red chrysanthemums.

Anyway, Annie called over to Kate and me, "What? No moon, no stars. I can't remember a foog this baaadd; everrrr in our fair NoHo." Annie's baby blues widened, punching up certain words a la Evangelical Christian.

Picture a southern preacher, only female and Catholic, at an inspirational, televised ministry and you nailed her. Why did Annie elongate vowels? Who knew? "Not me," said the baby bear in my head.

All I said was, "MUST WE WALK EVERY morning at 5:30am? Can't we start later?"

"What?" said Kate.

"You know, because it's dark and chilly."

"You are joking," said Kate raising an eyebrow.

I probably should have added that one or more of us had a social life. We enjoyed a drink or two, maybe three with friends. Hence, waking up with throbbing temples and sleep deprivation to walk, at that ungodly hour of the morning, felt like hell when the alarm clock rang.

Annie jumped to my defense. "I love my warm snuggly bed. It's okay by me to begin laaater."

"Ah, c'mon girls, we've been walking at 5:30 for years," said Kate referring to us "senior citizens" as girls. "Where's your sense of adventure? Your get up and go?"

"Mine got up and left," said Annie.

"I can't see in the fog," I said. "Blind as a bat."

"My sainted mother, next you'll be asking to sleep till a quarter past seven. What a spoiled lot, you are."

"The stink from the garbage trucks hauling rotten food is gross," whined Annie.

"You've smelled it before."

"Why?" I said. "Can't we wait a couple hours till the trucks finish and the odor is gone?"

Annie and I gave her a questioning look.

"Aye. Well, have it your way. We'll vote on it." Kate sounded displeased but resolved to keep an open mind. Fair is fair, I'll give her that.

Kate hesitated, then said in a strong narrative voice, "all those in favor of taking the morning walk at 5:30am, a decent hour if I say so me self, for hard working women. Us early risers, but far be it from me to say otherwise or point fingers..."

She aimed two bony index fingers in my direction.

"Whoa," I said surprised at her intolerance.

"Jeeeesus Kate, you bloody well can't be so pedaaanntic," declared Annie. "It's not a strike."

Kate shot back a silly grin, "Pedantic is it? I'll show you me horse's arse." Her feet flew high shuffling a lunatic Michael Flatly jig.

I laughed watching Kate bounce up and down like a horny toad during mating season, leaping from one imaginary lily pad to another. The madder she got, the wilder her dance became until she stumbled over the toe of her left shoe and fell.

Annie tried not to laugh but did anyway. She helped Kate to her feet then remembered why she was pissed. Annie sounded off, "Mrs. Flaaannery" and attempted to swat the back of Kate's head but had instant second thoughts. She blamed this behavior on flashbacks to a strict parochial education and even stricter Mother Superior.

Kate glared daggers at us both. "Right, you are. Well then, all those in favor of walking at 5:30am regardless of the fog or any other cockamamie excuse. Raise their hands NOW!"

## Chapter 2

"Kate, you cheated," declared Annie.

"Did not."

"Did to."

"Millicent couldn't vote," said Kate holding both hands high in the air. "So I voted her proxy. Robert's Rules of Order."

"You're full of it," said Annie laughing. "What rules? Who's Robert?"

"Dead people can't vote," I said. "Not without a Ouigi Board or a séance in Lilydale, New York."

Kate's grin resembled a cat swallowing gold fish. Her conjured proxy was our walking partner, Millicent Duncan, God rest her soul, now strolling arm and arm with Saint Peter.

I said, "Two against one. Go figure."

Kate stiffened all five foot one of herself looking righteous. "The vote was two to two. There it tis."

Annie rolled her eyes at me.

Kate sounded chagrined. "Girls, we're walking to maintain healthy hearts and trim the hips."

"If that's the case, Annie doesn't have to walk, she's skinny already," I said with a pout. "But I'll have to walk to Palm springs and back to lose two pounds."

"Maribelle, you're not fat," said Annie biting her lip. "Kate... tell Maribelle, she's not fat."

No response.

Annie looked at my legs and shook her head. "Maribelle," she said. "Those velveteen pants don't dooooo you justice. You'd never catch me saying this but your thiiiiighs? Resemble stuffed Angel Wings at Ruen Thai Restaurant."

"What?" I said in a startled voice. "Oh, no..."

"No tragedy. You're in luck, men love big asses. I read

that in Cosmopolitan years ago and my doctor says... 'it's better to carry the weight in the glutes than in the abdomen.'"

"I don't think so," I said with a furtive peek from her tush to mine.

Annie looked past me. "Where's Kate?"

I glanced over my shoulder and looked about.

Kate had taken "mother may I steps" down the middle of Bellaire Avenue resembling a mountain climber scaling Mount Whitney. Fog or no fog, Kate knew the course as well as any down-hill racer on a ski slope. And Kate didn't buy into biological age restrictions. She lived almost sixty-eight years on planet earth and "so what" was her favorite expression. Hell, most teenage girls couldn't compete with Kate's energy or athletic ability. Off the record. Between you and me? Those Cortisone Shots she took for bursitis? Were filled with steroids enhancing her athletic prowess. She pooh-poohed the idea but I'll bet dollars to donuts, her calf muscles swelled under those sweat pants after each visit to the doctor.

As we continued our walk, somewhere in the murky gray mist, we heard Kate yell, "If the fog gets too thick? We'll turn back at Hatteras."

"Hatteras? That's two friggin' miles away! That's Sherman Oaks," declared Annie chasing after Kate's voice. "What do you call this? Beef bouillon?"

Annie cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled even louder, "Kaaaate. It's split pea soup."

"Victory Boulevard is much closer," I said scrambling to catch up. "And so is Starbucks and lowfat Raspberry Sunshine Muffins and lovely warm Blueberry Scones."

I caught up to Kate and Annie and tried to negotiate even further. "The scones are freshest in the early mornings and, my eyelashes hurt and my knees are sore. How about it?"

"We all know you have arthritis," said Kate. "So, if your bones hurt Maribelle? Don't walk. Go home."

Ouch, that pronouncement sounded lethal because the gossip, the humor and the latest world news, I would miss. And, I wanted to know who got kicked off "Dancing with The Stars" and

"America's Got Talent." I ceased yapping because sometimes, I fell asleep, in front of the television before the shows ended.

Hence with Starbucks, now out of the question, we continued parading like circus horses, down the center of the street, three abreast on new asphalt, with Annie in her comfort zone at the far right.

Kate increased her walking speed and scoffed if one of us called her "madam mayor." She loved to give advice to folks, in trouble. And she liked to follow the real estate and property newspaper sales in the valley.

What thrilled her most? Was being called "her ladyship." A title she felt, suited her best. Kate could melt like Kerrygold Butter on a hot potato if she heard those words. But, it wouldn't work at this moment because Kate sounded in an irritable mood.

I said, "and they're off and running at Santa Anita. It's three blind mice at the rail. The one that sees no evil is in the lead." Only Annie and I laughed.

Instead, Kate stayed self-absorbed; focusing on length of stride, increased heart rate and monitoring her pace. She couldn't read the odometer attached to her belt because of the dampness. This led to outbursts of Gallic swearing. At the same time, her arms swung to such heights, she could circle Moscow's Kremlin, celebrating May Day and fit right at home with the troops.

Meanwhile, Annie and I ambled along like spring tourists on the beach at Santa Monica. We lagged behind, not to be mean, just contrary which annoyed Kate.

We giggled as we watched her reactions... which wasn't nice but we couldn't help ourselves... we had to do what we had to do.

"And why not?" said Annie. "That's what it is, a walk, not the L. A. Marathon."

Annie, at age sixty-six and me, at age sixty-two, both baby boomers knew we couldn't qualify for anybody's team. So, why bother?

"Besides, who owns a skin-tight red, white and blue leotard?"

"Not I," said the mama bear and you know what?"

"What?"

"I look like shiittt in a ponytail," said Annie. She stopped walking and pulled from her pocket, a tube of aloe lip balm.

I called Kate's name. No answer.

We looked at each other and started running in the fog.

"Kate? Kaaaaate?"

"Kaaaaatttte!"

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"Didn't you heear us calling you?" said Annie sounding irritated and out of breath.

"What?"

"Why did you do that?" I said to Kate feeling the blood rush to my face.

"I'll show you girls a lesson, I will. We are trying to exercise and you two... better step it up and move your arse!"

"Ass'ss," said Annie. "There's two of us. Technically it's four? I mean cheeks."

"Whatever and don't dawdle like silly hens or I'll hide."

Again, it took a couple minutes before Annie and I could catch up with Kate. By that time, Kate no longer walked. She sprinted and gunned her engines reminding me of a "cherry red" Lamborghini I'd seen last summer. A sports classic that raced a Maserati on the 101 heading south, out of Santa Barbara. The two cars sped the rim of the Pacific Ocean at sunset. When suddenly, the Lamborghini shifted gears and flew into hyper-space and disappeared. The Maserati left in the dust, pulled off the road and stopped.

"Kate?" said a panicked Annie who bumped into my ribs while straining to see up ahead. "Where is she?"

"Kate?" I called. No answer. "What the?"

"Kaaatttte? Jesuuussss," said Annie as she stopped to catch her breath and grab a hankie from her pocket. She dabbed at the perspiration across the top of her forehead.

"That girl is stubborn as a mule."

"An ox."

"Whatever."

## CHAPTER 3

To prepare for the morning walks, our leader Kate warmed up by stretching and completing fifty sit-ups or abdominal crunches before meeting "us girls." And mind you, those exercises began before 5am.

Annie warmed up with Botox shots every three months and had her hair colored and cut, at five week intervals by a gorgeous young man, prancing in satin ballet slippers and lavender hair.

Me? I preferred a once a week massage at a beauty spa in Studio City. And on Saturday nights? With my gentleman friend Mr. Gilder? A romp in his backyard Jacuzzi (enclosed in a Redwood Gazebo) drinking Pinot Grigio and eating barbeque. Those Saturday night exercises, I neglected to mention because I was the only widow among our friends.

Therefore, telling Kate and Annie needless details of how or what I did with Mr. Gilder could only conjure up, many questions. Besides, we never walked on Sundays and by Monday, there was always "new" news to discuss. Although, it might be less exciting than my escapades. However, I regret to report that last statement was an over-exaggeration.

## Chapter 4

What did we wear for exercising?

Feel free to skip this chapter if clothes don't float your boat. And, no texting photos to Joan Rivers on "Fashion Police."

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Kate approached our six-day-a-week walkathon wearing Nike running outfits purchased from the Sports Authority. She preferred the light-weight sweat suit, a properly-fitted sport's bra and colorful matching head bands to absorb perspiration. A fifteen dollar a pair running sock was another extravagance she required because of the built-in arch supports. And routinely, she'd drive out to Pasadena, to the New Balance (mother ship) Shoe Store that weighed and measured every customer, for a proper fit. Funny, but as I observed Kate pinch pennies on corned beef at the grocery store, it didn't add up. How could she spend a hundred and fifty dollars on a pair of sneakers, twice a year and keep the fat on beef?

Annie had her own opinion on this subject. She said, "Kate could be a poster girl for the Senior Olympics but not a mannequin for haute couture" as several of Annie's card-playing friends also noted. "Only the brand names in well-fitting sportswear need apply." Hence, Armani and Celine by Michael Kors needn't concern themselves. And don't refer to Givenchy or Yves Saint Laurent in her presence.

"Don't go there," said Annie.

Case in point, when I told "the girls" an anecdote about my friend Beverly Bass of Dallas, Texas wearing Jimmy Choo, Kate said, "God bless you." She considered that remark a superstition dating back to the Black Plague.

"Oh, no, I said. "I meant Choo Shoe not ha-chew."

A bemused Kate said, "Anybody knows that. God bless you again Maribelle."

I waved goodbye fast before blurting out something stupid that might offend. Who knew how Kate might interpret Manolo Blainik or "Christian Louboutin's 'Drapo Rosso' red satin sandals at Footcandy" in Los Angeles. Where a girl could nibble on chocolate-dipped strawberries, and sip champagne on Valentine's Day. A real threat to Carrie Bradshaw and some other women at my

Iris Society Meetings in Canoga Park. But getting back to Kate in her defense, she hated shopping and anything pertaining to fashion. Silly "red-soled Louboutin's bored her to death" but she did read a lot of books. Mainly, the newest paperback Nora Robert's romances and she attended lectures on "eco-friendly kitchens" and Cymbidium and heirloom tomato gardening.

Kate could grow the biggest and juiciest tomatoes in the San Fernando Valley. Her method? Bury the seedlings almost entirely in the ground. Then, cover with a mixture of dirt and a secret recipe of fertilizers and nutrients handed down from an ancestor. After a few inches of growth, she pinched off the lower shoots to make the plant stronger.

Most gardeners volunteer their gardening tips but not Kate. She didn't share. Any advice, we could get was after bribes and lunches to "squeeze the turnip." Anyway, each September, family and friends encouraged Kate to enter her orchids and tomatoes in the competition at the L.A. County Fair. She always declined.

Annie couldn't be bothered with getting her hands dirty in soil. "Why bother?" she said. "There's Gelson's and Whole Foods. That's why God made markets."

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Getting back to Kate's walking attire, on this Tuesday, she chose a nautical jacket borrowed from her husband's twenty-two foot fishing boat, *The Louisa Mary Mae*. And, she wore a blue headband and a pair of green and white vertically striped pants, worn in Boston's Saint Patrick's Day Parade (when visiting her sister) after drinking a bottle of Chablis. Halloween had come and gone. What was she thinking?

Walker number two, the chic Annie Fitzsimmons paraded about in a pale, cream-colored, two-piece silk ensemble designed by Yves Saint Laurent. Entwined gracefully around her neck, anchored a hand painted scarf from the Louvre gift shop in Paris. This silkscreen scarf bore the likeness of George Seurat's *Un Dimanche Apres-midi a Ille de La Grande Jatte*. Money was no object, Annie had plenty of it. Seurat took two years to paint the pointillist park scene while Annie took two minutes to whip out a credit card and pay for it.

And, regarding make-up in the early hours before daybreak? Annie could take it or leave it. Often times, she left it. Some mornings she arrived to the corner, hung over and only had time

for teeth brushing. But somehow, the diamonds appeared on her fingers, tardy or not. I secretly believed she slept and bathed in bling. Could be swell, oh well, my turn and not to be outdone.

I wore mauve velveteen pants and matching top, one size too small, giving the impression of being poured into the outfit by a cement mixer. Always expecting my thirty-five extra pounds might magically disappear and I'd actually fit into the clothes proper like. I also wore a deep purple faux jacket, pink scarf and pink sun visor that read "New York Princess" outlined in sequins.

My mantra, never leave home without make-up or jewelry which included a hint of beige eye shadow and opal and gold pierced earrings from my first, late husband, not the one that passed away two years ago which was husband number two; may they both rest in peace but apart, and quite comfortably I might add, in the wall and mausoleum at Hillside Memorial. For what their burials cost. I could own property in Lake Arrowhead.

So, there you have it. Three somewhat glamorous women to a fault, best friends forever, good-natured, stead-fast and loyal.

"And why not?" Annie always said.

"So what?" said Kate some of the time.

And I said, "'Get Over It' by the Eagles as my anthem." You remember the Eagles? Rock n' roll back in the day? The Eagles still rule in my humble opinion.

"You girls are not practical," said Kate scrutinizing our walking attire. "This is meaningful exercise, not a tea party at the Biltmore Hotel at Christmas time."

*You're not serious* I thought and mumbled, "green and white Saint Paddy's Day pants?"

"Kate?" Annie declared, "Are you referring to our downtown High Tea at Pershing Square?"

Kate's face blanched. "I meant wear common sense clothes. They don't have to match but exercise hard in them. Break into a sweat."

"How gauche," commented Annie under her breath. "Sweat? Really? Never mind, dear heart, I glisten with glitter."

I murmured "oy vey" and remembered my own mother's admonitions. God bless her soul because I did listen and took her advice.

Mother always said, "go dressed to the nines, like Mrs. Astor's pet horse. You never know if you'll be hit by a bus or worse yet, run into someone you know." How's that for 1950's thinking? Duh. No wonder the Feminist Movement embraced the 1960's like race cars hugging curves at the Indy 500.

## Chapter 5

Returning to foggy AM Tuesday, Kate said, "Annie? How do you know there's no moon or stars if you can't see the sky?"

"What kind of a question is that? It's freeeeakin' dark out," responded Annie.

"Well?" said Kate.

"I bloody well know," said Annie.

"You don't know anything. You talk."

"I like to talk. Aidan neeevver talks," said Annie.

"You mean himself never listens."

"None of your husband's listen," I said. "It's selective hearing and ladies? It's freezing. I can't see bupkes. There's no street lights."

"What are your thoughts, Kate?" said Annie.

"Simple. No street lights."

"Oh, not again," I said. "Up ahead. A CAR."

"Let's move to the sidewalk before the son-of-a-bitch tries to kill us.."

"RUN TO THE BUSHES..."

We cleared out of sight and stayed hidden as we watched a black SUV glide past us. The driver slithered along as if looking for a parking spot.

"That can't be the same car that tried to hit us?"

"Can't tell."

The vehicle moved slow and faded away.

"What did you maaaake of that?" said Annie. Her voice beginning to quiver.

"Your man is a cheeky sort if you ask me, that driver," said Kate as she emerged from behind a tree. She looked around trying to recognize familiar things in the fog.

"Keep vigilant," I said. "That's all we can do."

Another car passed us on our left. We cleared out of that driver's way. No need. The vehicle traveled at a reasonable speed and politely pulled over to avoid hitting us.

Hence, silence became golden as we walked the next long block in the murky mist.

Annie broke the quiet. "I should be home in bed with my Aidan." She sounded resolute.

"Aidan's in Ireland," said Kate leaning into Annie. "He flew Aer Lingus on Sunday, out of New York. Your son drove him to Burbank, to catch Jet Blue's connecting flight."

"Oh, right... Ireland," Annie sounded wistful. "Sometimes I forget where he is."

"Look around," said Kate. "Nobody has a porch light on. That's unusual."

Another car passed us from behind. We closed rank and moved closer to the curb. It disappeared.

Annie coughed and clasped her hands. "Nobody cares if we're dead or alive. We're getting to the end. Aidan says we're going together."

"Not me. I'm not going anywhere. You're the drama queen."

"No, I'm mixed up. I couldn't sleep last night," complained Annie. "Maybe, I drank too much. That's it, Maribelle. I meant to say it's Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> and ..."

"You silly goose," I said interrupting. "It's not Friday. But that reminds me, did you know Chaucer wrote stories about Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> being unlucky in the Canterbury Tales? Annie, you mentioned what Chaucer wrote about seven hundred years ago, how cool is that?"

"Maribelle," said Kate. "Stop lolly-gagging... AND YOU!" Kate pointed her finger at Annie.

"Huh?"

"What?" I pulled back as Kate's arm swung across my chest.

Kate stopped and turned around to face Annie. "Damn it.

It's not Friday, it's Tuesday." Kate grabbed Annie's shoulders. "Smell the garbage cans. And wake up!" Her body stiffened like a soldier and Kate's face turned beet red.

Annie eyes settled on me pleading for help.

I offered none, thinking Kate's anger would pass as fast as it erupted. Anyone born upside down with a fistful of red hair, could explain a short fuse. It also meant, she'd slink out of her anger with the grace of a swan and apologize in minutes.

"Sorry Annie." (See, I told you) "Didn't mean to scold you. Forgive the quick temper."

"Are you suuure Kate?" said Annie in a nasally twang still looking uneasy.

"Is the Pope Polish?" said Kate now smiling at Annie.

"No, he's not."

"Well, then, it's settled."

I said. "Why don't you ever ask about a Rabbi?"

"What kind of a joke is the Rabbi Polish?" said Kate looking surprised and subdued.

"Not funny at all," said an indignant Annie.

"Never mind."

"I read this morning's Daily News," said Kate. "Tuesday, February 14<sup>th</sup>, Valentine's Day. The front page showed a RED BOX OF CHOCOLATES and a married couple from Burbank. They celebrated their sixty-ninth wedding anniversary."

"What bliss," I said. "To be married that long."

"So, girls. Let's keep walking." Kate grinned like a big happy face. "Tis a grand day. Thank the good Lord."

"Chocolates truffles in a red box, hummm." Annie smacked her lips. "Luscious creeeaamy centers."

"That's right Annie, your favorite dinner but they forgot your libation."

