

## THE APARTMENT ON RIVERSIDE DRIVE

Penny's parents died quite efficiently in a bus accident in a foreign country, deaths so complete as to provide their own cremations and obituaries since *The Times* ran an article celebrating both her father's scholarship and her mother's career as a violinist.

Penny was shocked and cancelled her guests that night to sit home alone watching herself for signs of grief. Around midnight she called her only living relative, her father's older sister who lived in assisted living outside San Diego.

"What are the arrangements?" Aunt Evelyn called through the phone.

"No arrangements," Penny said. "There was a huge conflagration. As I said, there are no remains."

"But there has to be a service."

"There does?"

"This is just like you, Penny. You are the sole heir and must be almost 30 years old."

Closer to 40, but no use correcting an elderly woman.

"You must take hold," Aunt Evelyn scolded.

But with her parents gone, all the pressure to take hold, to shine, to have a serious career was finally off. She would let an auctioneer empty the huge, dreary apartment on Riverside Drive.

"You could start by putting all their very personal things in those big storage cupboards along the hall," Aunt Evelyn suggested. "That will leave plenty of room."

“I don’t live there anymore.”

A silence. Finally the old voice asked, “You *are* in New York?”

“Sure, but I moved out of their apartment, years ago.”

“Where?”

She gave the address and ended the conversation abruptly. Aunt Evelyn had always been bossy. Penny’s parents inherited the apartment from Penny’s grandmother, and with the apartment came Evelyn who lived with Penny’s parents until Penny was born. Ever after that the spinster aunt had hovered—working as a library assistant in the city. Five years ago while visiting a former classmate in California, she’d had a bad fall. Penny’s father had rushed out and moved her into Sunset Assisted Living near San Diego, not far from the classmate’s home.

Three weeks after being notified of the deaths of her parents Penny sat on a kitchen stool, knees spread on either side of the trash compactor. It had been a mistake to ask her favorite caterer, Mia, to design the kitchen. It had turned out to look like a stainless steel bowling alley—huge fridge, cavernous microwave and miles of granite counter space but no cozy corner for reading *The Times*. Weeks had passed after she moved in before she discovered that what she’d taken for a dishwasher was a warming oven. Paper plates and plastic cups were her style between parties.

She had just finished the Arts and Leisure Section when she heard a knock. None of her guests ever showed up before 8:00 in the evening, and it was only 3:00—too early even for the caterer. The knock came again. And then a weak voice called—not the

building manager. She tip-toed to the door to peek through the little spy glass. All she could make out was a large agitated hat which must have been on the head of a dwarf.

“Penny!” a near-hysterical voice called. The temptation to creep back to the kitchen was almost over-whelming. It was Aunt Evelyn. Penny opened the door. Dressed in vivid turquoise and a mint green scarf and felt hat, a gnome with jet black hair swung her walker forward over the threshold and with shallow, deliberate steps entered the apartment. “The luggage is in the cab,” she gasped. The July heat had turned her cheeks cherry red.

What are you doing here? When are you leaving? Nothing that came to mind could be uttered, so Penny helped Aunt Evelyn lower herself onto the white Isamu Noguchi bench in the foyer. They stared at each other.

“Water?” Penny finally asked.

“You are an orphan now,” Aunt Evelyn pronounced without sympathy.

This wasn't right. She'd always wished to be a real orphan, so she could be adopted by a more agreeable set of parents who would take more notice of her. But to be called an orphan now felt like an undeserved bit of romance. Surely now she was just an adult.

“I'll help you with everything,” Aunt Evelyn said. “Do you have a funeral home?”

“As I said on the phone the bus plunged over a precipice and burst into flames.”

Evelyn blinked a few times and looked toward the living room furnished in white and chrome. Her voice was thin, almost inaudible. “Nothing left?”

“Nothing.”

“Whose place is this?”

“Mine. I told you I moved. Would you like some water or juice. Maybe a glass of wine.”

“You *will* be moving back into the apartment on Riverside Drive.”

“I’m selling it.”

Aunt Evelyn grew paler under her face powder. “But I always thought we would keep it in the family. There’s plenty of room.”

Penny’s mouth went dry. Was it possible Aunt Evelyn was dreaming of living in New York? And with her? More time passed with neither of them saying anything. A knock at the door rescued them. It was the building manager with a great deal of luggage and an angry cab driver.

In the coming weeks Penny found it impossible to stow all her aunt’s luggage in such a way as to keep it from interrupting the clean lines of her decor. Just as soon as Penny would get the bags stacked in a closet, Evelyn would call for that “largest of the green Samsonite pieces” or one of the many old leather valises and out would come more outdated clothes and old lady paraphernalia—a heating pad, a hot water bottle. There were also three huge cardboard boxes out of which burst bags of colorful knitting and crochet which reappeared slithering out from around the chrome legs of Penny’s white sofas and chairs.

Every level surface in the guest bathroom was covered with prescriptions and wrinkled tubes of ointments, as well as economy-sized bottles of over-the-counter

remedies. Penny clicked on the group address labeled PARTIERS to cancel all entertaining for the time being.

Rick, a regular guest for about a year, called to ask if she was truly serious. “Why don’t you throw a big bash?” he asked. “We’ll all take off our clothes and she’ll beat it the next morning.”

“Right,” Penny answered without conviction.

As the days passed and a carton of vitamin drink as well as Evelyn’s humidifier and air filter appeared to be permanently stored in the foyer, Penny realized she had lost control of the situation. She wanted to ask her aunt about her plans, her finances, and her understanding with the place she’d left, but Penny was no more able to ask direct questions than she had been able to ask her own mother if she were beautiful. She had so deeply learned the *Don’t Ask Lesson* that she and Aunt Evelyn, who seemed to be governed by a *Don’t Show Your Cards Policy*, were locked into getting through the days with bare civilities.

Without her friends coming at least twice a week, Penny felt marooned, reduced to ordering in meals for two. The apartment had no conventional dining furniture, and Evelyn was too small and weak to climb onto a bar stool, so Penny asked Mia, the caterer, to deliver a little bistro table and two chairs of the sort she usually dotted along the terrace for Penny’s fancier parties. The little table and chairs spoiled the scheme of modern classics in the living room. This could not go on. Penny began ordering meals from one ethnic restaurant after another, each night spicier than the last—Ethiopian, Afghani, Indonesian. Evelyn lifted and eyed and sorted the food, but said nothing.

Finally Penny thought to call Sunset in San Diego to see if there was a chance Evelyn was still a permanent resident there. “You’re the niece? She’s with you?” a deep female African voice asked. “Do you have Power of Attorney?”

“I am her only living relative. Yes,” Penny fudged.

“Then I should tell you our residents can come and go as they please. We can’t hold them. But when someone like your aunt packs up everything and makes no more contact, we wait thirty days then we return their bond.”

“So she can come back?”

There was a pause from the other end. “You will have to talk to the director. I am just covering the desk tonight.”

“But if she gets back there before the thirty days are up—?”

“We have a long waiting list.”

“But she’s definitely coming back.”

“She took all her clothes—summer and winter.”

“But this was just a visit. Her brother was killed.”

“The world famous professor? We’ve heard all about him for years. She’ll have to call us herself if she intends to continue her Life Bond here. Otherwise we will mail it to her.”

Penny said goodbye and put down the phone. California didn’t want Aunt Evelyn back. What to do? None of her friends had ever had this kind of problem. Was there a web site? And what on earth did Life Bond mean? She turned down the air conditioning to 40 degrees.

That evening as she was emptying the cartons of Burmese Daggar onto plastic plates, she asked Aunt Evelyn, “What does Life Bond mean?”

“I suppose it’s a tie—like someone you’re close to all your life.” Aunt Evelyn pulled her purple coat closer at her throat.

“You mean a friend?” Penny asked.

“I guess.”

The Burmese Daggar had been new to Evelyn last week, but tonight she ate it without inspection, stopping only to sniff and blow her nose. Penny, whose winter clothes were in storage, wore her bathrobe over her jeans and T-shirt. Evelyn had not mentioned the cold. Penny gritted her teeth. This was a squatter situation.

Penny sat down opposite her aunt and took a deep breath. “I was wondering about the Life Bond you have at Sunset in San Diego.” Penny felt suddenly hot in the face.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Evelyn’s face hardened. She carefully set down her fork. “Sunset is none of your business.”

Habit told Penny to be nice, to drop it and smooth things over. But Fear said, Listen you sissy, you won’t be able to bring this up again tomorrow when one more day of the precious waiting period will be gone. “I talked to them last night.” She cleared her throat. She felt cruel.

“That is unacceptable.” Evelyn struck the table with her little fist and probably would have left the room, but Penny had folded up and parked the walker in the foyer.

“I talked with Seray Jallo,” Penny said.

“She’s nothing but an aide.”

“Seray said you’d packed everything.”

“It was the logical thing to do, to come when there was a death in the family.

“But Seray said you packed *everything*.”

“Your father and I had an agreement.”

“Oh?”

“When I could no longer stay in my apartment because of the stairs, he said I was welcome to make a home with him except his wife wouldn’t allow it. The plan was that I would join him when she died.” She eyed Penny then added, “We were always very close.”

Penny knew that the sister and much younger brother had never been close even as children. Her father had laughed when he reported spitting at Evelyn, already a teenager, as she had tried to retrieve the four-year-old from under the bed. Penny could just hear him. *Of course, Evelyn, you can come make a home with me upon the death of my healthy wife who is fifteen years younger than you.* Smiling and glib, the same way he was when deflecting Penny’s pleas to tour with her Mother or stroll along the river with him when her mother was away.

A week later nothing had changed. Evelyn had plugged her heating pad into an outlet in the living room. She was sitting on it, wearing her purple coat and raspberry shawl and knitting something large in peach and light blue yarns. “Was this apartment like this when you bought it?”

“What?”

“Everything so cold.”

“Oh no. Horst did this. He’s famous on the Westside, Featured in Architectural Digest.”

“Do you like it?” Evelyn asked.

“Oh, I don’t have much taste. I never know what goes where.”

“But there’s absolutely no color,” Evelyn wailed. “All the photographs black and white.”

“Yes. Horst likes a cool pallet.”

“And look at yourself, all dressed in white. You’re almost invisible in here, just a little head bobbing above all the blankness. Evelyn’s old eyes swam about the room, searching and dissolving into tears. “I can’t bear this,” she sobbed.

“You mean New York? It must feel very different from California.”

“This place!” Evelyn’s little voice squeaked. “This horrible apartment, just white and chrome. I think I’m going snow blind.”

“I’m sorry. I will help you pack if you’d like.”

“I can’t go back to Sunset. I will never go back there. Ever.”

“But you’ve still got five days left before your Life Bond expires.”

“You don’t understand,” Evelyn cried, “I told them all about the Riverside Drive apartment, about the spacious rooms, the views, the dining room that seats twelve.” Her little head shook as though with palsy. “I told them about my room, the only place in my whole life I really felt at home.” Tears flooded down all the rivulets of her cheeks. “The book cases, the walls I painted burnt orange, all the dark wood and the view—oo—oo.” Her words shook.

Penny knew that room—small and dark and rather lonely being at the far end of the apartment, a space intended for a maid. It had been Penny’s from the time she was born. Her parents used to laugh about how it had taken Evelyn the entire nine months of her sister-in-law’s pregnancy to pack up even though there was really nothing to keep her in New York.

“They’ll think I made it all up,” Evelyn sobbed.

“Who?”

“Everyone at Sunset. I can’t go back with my tail between my legs.”

“Oh, of course not,” Penny heard herself saying. She would feel the same way. “I have an idea. Why don’t we go over to the apartment and take pictures of you there lounging in Father’s big chair by the fireplace and looking out your bedroom window with the morning light from the water reflected on your face.”

“You sound like a real photographer. Are you a professional?”

“I sometimes have photographs in shows, but I don’t actually have a business.”

They left for the apartment early the next morning taking the digital camera and all of Evelyn’s prescriptions. When Penny first looked at Evelyn’s image on the camera’s little screen, she saw a softness that she hadn’t seen before. Penny relaxed. Even though they hadn’t spelled it out, she knew that her aunt would leave when the object of her years of bragging, the Riverside Drive Apartment, had been confirmed for the residents of Sunset.

“Can you email these?” Evelyn asked as Penny posed her on the terrace.

“Clarence Fisk gets photos emailed to his computer right there on my floor at Sunset. We can send them to him. We get so sick of baby pictures of his homely great

grandson.” Evelyn laughed and Penny caught it on camera. “Clarence loves making copies.”

By noon they were both starving, and Penny called for delivery. Chicken sandwiches for both. They gave the camera to the young Pakistani who delivered. He began snapping even before the two of them could get properly posed. After lunch they napped, Evelyn falling dead asleep in the master bedroom and Penny lying spread eagle in the guest room, a lovely space she had always envied because of its proximity to her parents’ bedroom. After they’d made coffee and washed the dishes, they got back in a cab for a return to what Evelyn had slyly called The Refrigerator.

When they walked in the phone was ringing. Penny ran into the kitchen. It was Rick. “I am the designated grumbler,” he said. “We’re having to party at Tina’s”

“That dump!” Penny felt very uneasy that her crowd had continued without her.

“So when is the old bat leaving?” Rick asked.

“I don’t know when the old bat is leaving.” Penny’s tone was harsh. Rick had some nerve talking about her only living relative that way. She hung up and turned to see her aunt standing in the kitchen door.

“I will start my packing this evening,” Evelyn announced and made a fierce right turn with her walker. “You will kindly never speak to me again.”

The next week passed very slowly. Evelyn refused any help and would neither let Penny apologize or explain. Penny wanted to feel relieved, but actually felt guilty and angry as she was forced to watch Evelyn hobble back and forth to her suitcases carrying

only what she could pinch between her thumb and forefinger as she grasped her walker with both hands. Each item had to be carefully refolded before it could be packed.

Finally Penny couldn't stand it. "You don't even know where you're going!"

"I will find something on the Internet," Evelyn said without looking Penny's way.

"You don't even know where the Internet is!"

"I will find it." Evelyn's tone was cool and confident.

Penny stormed into her study to search for assisted living. Beside the computer was the camera. Had they both forgotten about the pictures? Without culling the shots she set up a slide show on the laptop, carried it into the guest room and placed it on the low chest of drawers. She wrestled the walker away from Evelyn, pushed her into a chair, started the slide show, then sat down on the bed.

Slide shows, the best kind, in Penny's opinion, were silent. Only the visual sense was engaged. Everything hung on the images.

The first four or five shots were too dark. Evelyn's little face seemed to peer out of a forest, but as the pictures flipped past, the photography improved, and it became clear that Evelyn was in a luxurious apartment furnished by very cultured people. She stood, resting her hand on an ancient, walnut bookcase, the walker pulled out of sight. She sat at her brother's desk; she opened one of the books he had authored, put her feet up on his footstool, fondled his bust of Dante. Dozens of shots brought gasps and sighs from Evelyn. Penny had known what would be most satisfying, and her piece d' resistance was an elegant composition. She had placed a chair in the middle of the living room's Chinese carpet. With trembling fingers she'd opened her mother's violin case and took out the Guanari. She handed it to Evelyn who sat up straighter than Penny

thought she could. For the first time the old lady held her sister-in-law's violin, grasped by the neck, rested on her knee as though waiting for the conductor to raise his arms. Tears streamed down Evelyn's face as she gazed at her image flooded with the afternoon light from the terrace of the apartment on Riverside Drive.

That had been their last effort. Simultaneously they had said how hungry they were. But another image came on the screen: Penny's back, Evelyn represented only by a hand gripping Penny's shoulder. Then another of Penny holding up her palm to the cameraman, a gesture he obviously ignored. The next shot was Penny's back again, lowering Evelyn into her father's chair beside the fireplace. Then Evelyn's hand brushing the hair from Penny's eyes. And on and on, two women preparing to be photographed, but not yet settled. Finally, in the last shot, they were ready and smiling, Evelyn seated, Penny on the footstool beside her, fear gone from both faces.

"We look happy." Evelyn sniffed.

"We were happy." Penny swallowed. Evelyn passed her a box of tissues, and they occupied themselves with wiping their eyes and blowing their noses.

"You know, Penny, any hovel in New York is better than growing old in California. Can you find something on the Internet? You've always been so smart. You were their only child."

"A fact that did not impress them. I gave up on them back when I turned thirty."

Evelyn gasped. "You're over thirty?"

"Oh, Evelyn. I am over everything."

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