



Chapter 1 JAM AND JUSTICE

Sometimes, as she counted up her friends, massage clients and the members of the collective and all their current tribulations, Rosemary felt like a flustered shepherdess with a bad head for numbers. Someone was always wandering off bleating into the thickets, and Rosemary was always having to think who to send out to round them up again. Rosemary quite liked this image of herself—at least the staff, the sturdy shoes, the responsibility, the steep mountain slope, the view. At seventy-one, she thought happily, I may have at last found my true calling. One that was founded on humor and yearning and putting her autocratic nature to good use.

But sheep were such frightening creatures, really, with those strange eyes, so blank and quick simultaneously, and the way they seemed to become something more than themselves, less than themselves, whenever they started moving as one, like water. Why was it, she wondered, that we found it so difficult to believe, as Fra Lippo Lippi said in that poem by Robert Browning, that the world means, and it means intensely and it means good. Wasn't it that inability that drove us bleating, desperately singular, off into the thickets?

Actually, Rosemary thought, she was a herder of wild cats, who had a savage, unconscionable edge to their loneliness, a willingness to draw blood if their survival required it. It meant her strategies were different. One of them was just sipping coffee and appreciating their antics. The other was a little more cunning—scratching backs, but only when asked. Setting food out where it was readily visible. Looking the other way when necessary to lure

them closer.

Funny, all these metaphors—how they made her think a little differently about herself, and God. Of course, she'd die rather than say a word of this to Ginger—who would just use it as proof that all her years of proselytizing had finally born fruit. Maybe it had, but not in the way Ginger expected. Rosemary certainly wasn't going to deny that having found her calling made her feel like she had a special bond with God and could see more and more often through Her eyes. What she realized when this happened is what a keen sense of humor God had, and what a powerful yearning for love, closeness, loyalty—not to Her exactly but to that belief that we are put here on this earth to mean and mean intensely and mean good.

Rosemary looked happily around her bright, clean bedroom, savoring the new coat of yellow-gold paint and how it set off Walt's last two landscapes—not to mention the hot pink bougainvillea pouring off the patio roof and snaking around the pillars. She did wish he could be with her now, in this new placid but deeply interested place she had discovered or received. There was no one she knew who would have appreciated more what it meant to her after all those years of her forties and fifties when she was locked in such furious battle, wresting meaning from an indifferent universe, wresting it from that sea of despair that seemed her deepest and most abiding reality. When it wasn't her own life she was fighting for, she fought for the lives of the children they took in. Such struggles they had had just to reach the ages they were when they came to them: Alicia at eleven, Byron at fourteen, Nefertiti at sixteen with a baby on the way, Valerie at twelve, Will at seventeen, David at ten.

She only wanted adolescents, she told the incredulous case workers. Because then all the worst damage had been done, there was no point in grieving or feeling responsible for creating a new world for them. It was a question of damage control, playing as well as one could the hand fate had dealt you. She wasn't a game player herself, but it felt like a good image—that or looking at the sparse supplies in the pantry and figuring out how to make the most interesting dinner possible out of them. It wasn't like Walt looking at the colors on his piece of plexiglass, willfully restricting his choices. These restrictions were more arbitrary, but intractable—an addicted mother, a demented grandmother, a father who couldn't keep his hands to himself, an embittering poverty so rich in things that it would pass for wealth where she was living now. When she and Walt moved to Antigua, she'd asked them

all to come down and see her, but they were surprisingly small-minded, all her children, foster, step and whole. They didn't want to leave the certain perimeters of their own lives, however successful or unsuccessful. They didn't want to see her, or Walt for that matter, grow in ways they hadn't foretold.

Oh, she missed Walt so much, his natural broadmindedness, that dear little *oh* he breathed more and more lightly each time a new path opened up for them. She couldn't imagine what their lives would have been like if they had met each other any earlier. So much of their delight in each other came because of what they had known before—lousy spouses, years of solitude, meaningless riches or draining near poverty, alcoholism, cancer, the whole gamut. They didn't feel singled out by anything but their unexpected good fortune in finding each other when they did.

She was glad that they had had a full year in Antigua before Walt's stroke. They had spent a decade visiting in the summer, overseeing the building of the house. But only had four years together in it. Sometimes, in those last few months when he couldn't talk and he couldn't walk and only his eyes would follow her or Wilma around the house, she wasn't sure that he knew who she—or he—were anymore. But then she would come upon him and glimpse a look of such intelligence and acceptance that she began to weep for joy. It was then, at the age of sixty-six, that she found her solid ground—as if that sea of sorrow that had been the most pervasive reality of her life suddenly divided and an irresistible arc of sand beckoned. She still felt Walt was walking beside her there, enjoying the time it was taking them to reach the far shore, enjoying the miracle and quite at rest as well with what would come after.

The phone rang. She heard Wilma answer it and take a message. Rosemary never spoke to anyone until she had had her morning coffee and her meditation session in the garden. Smiling, already anticipant, Rosemary got out of bed and went to dress. Ginger, she wondered. Or Simon. One never knew who—or what. Who would have thought that as life simplified with age it became a pointillist painting, sharp points of appreciation. The smell of coffee coming from the kitchen, the sound of the fountain in the courtyard, the unexpected perspective she had on Walt's painting as she stood at her clothes rack meditating on what color spoke to her today, the promising buzzing of the bees in the trumpet flowers, Wilma's sweet murmur as she repeated whatever message she was given. Life, Rosemary thought, selecting a red dress and a mauve scarf, is waiting for me and finally, finally, I am ready

for it.

“Wilma,” she cried out, suddenly famished, “*Mi café por favor. Inmediatamente!*”

Rosemary's Spanish had, to put it kindly, lapses—but it was good enough for her to understand that Estella's husband had taken her jam money and used it for liquor, that Mariana's children, in their hunger, had eaten half of her portion of strawberry jam, that Soledad's one year old had worms and she had tried to use the jam as a medicine.

She led them all out onto the back patio behind the kitchen where four large baskets of mangoes sat ripening beside the sinks. The attitude she took was similar to the one she had with the foster children she and Walt had taken in over the years when they lived in the States. Every little bit helps—but only God knows how.

She called to Wilma, who came out of the kitchen reluctantly. She brought knives to peel and slice the mangoes and two buckets, one for the fruit and one for the peels. She thought Rosemary's project foolish and didn't waste a tittle of energy pretending otherwise.

“What do you expect me to do?” Rosemary had asked her once. “Just let people starve?”

“You're fattening them with false hopes,” Wilma had said. “It's like feeding a starving child sweets when what she needs are milk and meat.”

“Do you have any better suggestions?” Rosemary had asked her. “I'm open, but I have to do something.”

She didn't force the women to come, for goodness sake. All she wanted to do was give them some options. Each month she tried something new. There was the month she had, at Ginger's suggestion, paid a carpenter to make a hundred small wooden crosses for the women to paint. She had thought they would sell them to the endless stream of missionary aid workers that came through the town, although the evangelicals found them suspiciously papist and the Catholics preferred their own tacky plastic rosaries. Ginger, bless her, bought most of them and shipped them back to her high Episcopalian friends with liberal sympathies.

There was the month she brought Lila's visiting daughter, a dress designer, in to suggest different cuts the women could give the blouses and