

New Beginnings

ONE DAY, MARK SAID TO ME on the telephone, “Luke, do you know what the Hemlock Society is?”

“No, why?”

“Mom’s been talking to them a lot and sending for all sorts of literature. It’s making me nervous. I think it has to do with assisted suicide.”

After Daddy died, for a while Mama simply didn’t want to go on. Her wonderful agent at the time, David Kalodner, had become a good friend and he offered her roles in a number of good television scripts and even a play or two, but she turned them all down. She was so despondent, she had contacted the Hemlock Society, an organization for terminally ill people who wish to take their own lives. Named for Socrates’ method of suicide (he had poisoned himself by drinking hemlock), the organization provided people with information on how to end it all. They were, of course, not condoning such an act, but merely providing resource information. They sent her numerous books and pamphlets on how to take one’s own life. I didn’t waste any time confronting her about it.

“I’d been saving my leftover prescription drugs for quite some time,” she said. “And I’ve read all of the Hemlock Society pamphlets very carefully. Guns in the mouth are too messy. Besides, I don’t have a steady hand. My head in the gas oven was a thought, until I remembered I have an electric range. I seriously considered carbon-monoxide poisoning in the car. I was going to take a handful of Percodan and start up the Mercedes with the garage door closed, but I was afraid Mark would find me. I couldn’t dump that on him.”

As she was telling me this in a matter-of-fact way, her voice had a strange directness to it. I knew she was serious. My stomach started churning. I’d just lost one parent three months ago and I wasn’t ready to lose another. I had to act quickly.

I contacted a friend of a friend, Cheryl Fluehr, who was the entertainment director at Holland America Cruise Lines. I pitched the idea that I would interview Mama about her career and show video clips from her films and television shows, followed by a question-and-answer session with the audience. We, in turn, would get a nice stipend and a free cruise anywhere in the world. Cheryl loved the idea. Now I just had to convince Mama.

At first, she was unresponsive. The more I told her about these exotic itineraries and places she’d never seen, the more intrigued she became. I said what a great opportunity it would be for us to share. Still heartbroken over the loss of Daddy, she responded out of grief and anger.

“So, you need me to be your friggin’ meal ticket, is that it?” she asked.

“If you want to look at it that way,” I replied, “you go right ahead. But it would get you out of the house, back into the real world, and keep your mind off the goddamn Hemlock Society for a few days!”

We did three two-week trips over the next year and a half: Juneau to Tokyo, Sydney to Hong Kong, and Bombay to Athens. We had a marvelous time and had experiences we would never have shared otherwise. We did two lectures per cruise and the rest of the time we were free to do as we pleased as VIP passengers.

I'd always known that Mama didn't like interviews, but I'd never really experienced it first hand. As we waited backstage while the cruise director introduced us, she would shake, sweat, and chain-smoke.

"God, I hate this!" she said.

"What's the problem, Mama? You know exactly what I'm going to ask. You've told these stories a hundred times. After the film clips, first you'll talk about the Oscars, then Marilyn, then Dietrich . . ."

"I'd rather be dead!" she said.

"Just be yourself, Mama."

"That's what I'm afraid of!"