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# All Adults Here

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## I

## The Quick Death

Astrid Strick had never liked Barbara Baker, not for a single day of their forty-year acquaintance, but when Barbara was hit and killed by the empty, speeding school bus at the intersection of Main and Morrison streets on the eastern side of the town roundabout, Astrid knew that her life had changed, the shock of which was indistinguishable from relief. It was already a busy day – she'd spent the morning in the garden, she had a haircut appointment at 11:30, and then her granddaughter, Cecelia, was arriving by train with two suitcases and zero parents (no school bus accidents there – just a needed escape hatch), and Astrid was to meet her at the Clapham station to bring her back to the Big House.

The bus hit Barbara just after eleven. Astrid was sitting in her parked car on the inner lane of the roundabout, the verdant circle at the center of town, adjusting her hair in the mirror. It was always the way, wasn't it, that one's hair always looked best on the day of a scheduled trim. She didn't wash her hair at home unless they'd gone to the beach, or she had been swimming in chlorinated water, or some foreign substance (paint, glue) was accidentally lobbed in her direction. No, Birdie Gonzalez washed Astrid's hair every Monday and had done so for five years, before which it had been washed by Nancy, at the same salon, Shear Beauty, which was located on the southeastern side of the roundabout, in the quarter circle between the Clapham Credit Union and Susan's Bookshop, kitty-corner from Spiro's Pancake House, if you peered through the

open sides of the white wooden gazebo at the grassy island's center. The professional hair washing was a relic from her mother's generation, and an affectation that her own mother had not possessed, and yet, there it was. It was not a pricey indulgence, if weighed against the cost of proper conditioner. On every eighth Monday, Birdie also gave Astrid a trim. Nancy had given slightly better haircuts, but Birdie was better with the shampoo, and Astrid had never been vain, only practical. Anyway, Nancy had retired and Astrid hadn't missed her. Birdie was from Texas, and her parents were from Mexico, and Astrid thought of her as human sunshine: bright, warm, sometimes harsh, but always good for one's mood.

It was the end of the summer, which meant that soon, from Monday to Friday, Clapham would belong to the year-rounders again. Kids would go back to school, and the summer inhabitants would go back to being weekend inhabitants, and life would return to its quieter pace. Astrid inspected her skin for spots. Ticks and skin cancer were the twin fears of anyone who spent time outdoors in the Hudson Valley, certainly for those over the age of twenty-five. In the rearview mirror, Astrid watched Clapham go about its morning routines: Women with rolled-up yoga mats plodded slowly out of the municipal hall, well-off summer residents strolled the sidewalks, looking for something to buy that they had somehow missed during the last three months, locals sat drinking coffee at the counter at Spiro's and at Croissant City, where every sixty-five-year-old man in Clapham could be found with a newspaper at 7:30 A.M., seven days a week. Frank, who owned the hardware store, which sold everything from window fans and fresh eggs to batteries and a small collection of DVDs, was standing beneath his awning as his teenage son pulled up the iron gate. The small shops that sold T-shirts and sweatshirts that read CLAPHAM in large block letters didn't open until noon. The fanciest clothing store on Main Street, Boutique Etc?, whose name Astrid had always found both grammatically and philosophically irritating, opened at noon, too, which Astrid knew because she begrudgingly bought most of her clothing there.

Astrid let her eyes wander to the eyesore, the *bête noire* of every Clapham resident, both year-round and summer interloper – the unweildy, trapezoidal building that had been empty for a year, the large space inside totally bare except for things abandoned by the most recent tenant: a ladder, two cans of paint, and three overstuffed garbage bags. There was a Sold sign in the window, with a telephone number, but the telephone number had long since been disconnected. The county records, which were available to anyone who cared to look – and Astrid had – said that the building had indeed been sold a year ago, but no one knew to whom, and whoever it was, they'd done nothing but let the dust bunnies proliferate. What went in was important: If it was some big-box store, or a national chain, it would be war. A death knell for the town as the residents knew it. When Rite Aid came in, not even to Clapham proper but to the outskirts of town, which did need a pharmacy, people lost their minds. Astrid still had a KEEP LOCAL, SHOP SMALL sign in the dirt next to her mailbox. She'd spent her own money making the signs and distributing them. And if that had been in the village itself? Astrid couldn't imagine. If the person who bought the building didn't know or didn't care, there would be riots in the street, and Astrid would carry the biggest pitchfork.

Because the storefront was on the eastern tip of the roundabout, the direction from which most cars entered Clapham, the large empty windows were what welcomed people to town, a very sorry state of affairs. At least Sal's Pizzeria, directly next door, was charming, with its red-and-white-tiled walls and its boxes printed with a portrait of its mustachioed proprietor.

Barbara was standing on the sidewalk, just beside the mailbox in front of Shear Beauty. Her car, a green Subaru hatchback with a 'My Other Car Is a Cat' bumper sticker, was parked in front of the municipal building, which held the mayor's office, a co-op preschool, yoga classes, and the winter farmers' market, among other things. Was she getting back into her car after mailing a letter? Was she looking across the street, squinting at the Sold sign, as if it would offer any new information? Astrid would never know.

She watched as Barbara stepped around the front bumper of her car and into the street, and then Astrid continued to watch as the yellow sixty-four-seat Clapham Junior High School bus came barreling down the street, knocking Barbara down as neatly and quietly as her grandsons' toy soldiers. Astrid snapped the visor closed and leapt out of the car. By the time she'd crossed the street, half a dozen people had already gathered. There was blood, but nothing gorier than a twelve-year-old could see on network television. Astrid had seen death up close before, but not like this, not on the street like a raccoon.

'It was empty,' Randall said. He owned the gas station, which made him an easy authority on vehicles. 'Except for the driver. No kids.'

'Should I cover her up? I shouldn't cover her up, should I? Should I?' said Louise, who taught the yoga class, a rather dim, sweet girl who couldn't remember her lefts and rights.

'I've got the police,' said a nervous-looking man, which was, of course, the right thing to do, even though the police station was two blocks away, and clearly there was nothing for the police to do, at least not for Barbara. 'Hello,' he said, into the phone, turning away, as if to shield the other bystanders from what was still on the pavement. 'There's been an accident.'

'Oh, for Chrissakes,' Birdie said, coming out of her shop. She saw Astrid and pulled her aside. They clutched each other's elbows and stood there in silence until the police arrived, at which point Astrid offered Barbara's husband's phone number and address. She'd always kept an organized address book, and this was why, just in case. The EMTs scooped Barbara's body up and put her on the stretcher, an unflippable pancake. When the ambulance had gone, Birdie pushed Astrid gently toward the salon's door.

Shear Beauty had made some improvements over the years, some attempts at modernization. The mirrors were frameless, and the wallpaper was silver with a gray geometric pattern, all of it meant to make the place seem sophisticated, which it wasn't

particularly. Birdie never could let go of the bowls of dusty pot-pourri in the bathroom or the embroidered pillows on the bench at the entrance. If someone wanted a fancier place, they were welcome to find one.

'I can't believe it,' Astrid said. She set her purse down on the bench. The salon was empty, as it always was on Mondays, when Shear Beauty was closed to the public. 'I can't believe it. I'm in shock, I'm definitely in shock. Listen to me! My brain is nonfunctional.' She stopped. 'Am I having an aneurysm?'

'You're not having an aneurysm. Those people just drop dead.' Birdie gently guided Astrid by the elbow and sat her down at the sink. 'Just try to relax.' Birdie also cut hair at Heron Meadows, the assisted living facility on the edge of the Clapham border, and she had a certain sangfroid approach to the mortal coil. Everyone shuffled, in the end. Astrid sat and leaned back until her neck touched the cold porcelain of the sink. She closed her eyes and listened to Birdie turn on the warm water, testing its temperature against her hand.

If Randall was right and the bus had been empty – that was important. Astrid had three children and three grandchildren, and even if she hadn't, the loss of a child was the most acute tragedy, followed closely by a young parent, followed by cancer researchers, sitting presidents, movie stars, and everybody else. People their age – Astrid's and Barbara's – were too old for it to be outright tragedy, and seeing as Barbara had no children of her own, people were bound to call it a blessing, that is to say, a blessing that the school bus hadn't run down someone else. But that didn't seem fair to Barbara. She'd had a husband, and cats. She'd been a crossing guard at the elementary school decades earlier – oh, the irony! *At least it wasn't her corner*, Astrid thought, exhaling while Birdie scratched her scalp with her short nails.

What was Barbara thinking about, when the bus was careering toward her? Why had she parked there and not across the street? What was on her list to do that day? Astrid sat up, her hair dripping on her neck and her blouse.

'Are you all right?' Birdie asked, moving a towel onto Astrid's shoulders.

'No,' Astrid said, 'I don't think so. I didn't even – you know this – I didn't even like Barbara. I just feel a little, well, shaken.'

'Well, in that case,' Birdie said, walking around to the front of the chair, crouching down so that she and Astrid were at eye level, 'let's go into the back.' Birdie's mouth was a straight line, as steady as a Catholic schoolteacher. She always had a solution.

Astrid nodded slowly and offered Birdie her hand. They walked around the half wall behind the sink, into the room where an eyebrow-less young woman named Jessica waxed off other people's body hair three days a week, and lay down next to each other on the twin-size mattress, Astrid on her back and Birdie propped up on an elbow. Astrid closed her eyes, suddenly exhausted. As usual, because after so long, there was a certain rhythm and sequence to what would unfold, Birdie started softly kissing Astrid's cheeks and ears and neck, everything but her mouth, but today was different, and Astrid reached up and pulled Birdie's mouth straight to her own. There was no time to waste, not in this life. There were always more school buses – how many times did a person have to be reminded? This time, it was clear. She was a sixty-eight-year-old widow. Better late than never.

## 2

## Taxi TV

Cecelia sat between her parents in the back seat of a taxi that smelled like body odor soup. Amtrak required unaccompanied riders between the ages of thirteen and fifteen to jump through a series of hoops, one of which was being escorted onto the train by an adult. The arrangement was supposed to be fun, but Cecelia could call a spade a spade. She was thirteen and had access to the internet. It was witness protection, more or less. Her school hadn't expelled her, not officially. It was more an agreement to take a break, the way people's parents did on television, right before their inevitable divorce. It was something Cecelia had said almost in passing when she and her parents were talking about what to do, how to solve the problem with her school. It was a joke, really – *maybe I should just go move in with Gammy for the year*. But the next morning, her parents were sitting at the tiny kitchen table, eyes bloodshot, as if they hadn't moved since dinner the night before, and they said that they'd written to her school and spoken to Astrid and that, yes, that was the plan. Cecelia was hard-pressed to decide whom she was angriest at – her parents, for yanking her, or at her school, for letting her be yanked. It wasn't close to fair. In fact, it was the opposite of fair. It was a Sucky Situation, even if it meant moving from a small apartment to a huge house. Any perks were vastly outweighed by the crushing feeling of apocalyptic failure and profound injustice. But Cecelia had tried to explain everything already a thousand times, and this was still where she ended up, so the idea of justice didn't really matter anymore. It was done.

‘The Big House is really best in the late summer, the whole valley, really.’ Cecelia’s father, Nicholas Strick, Nicky Stricky, was the baby of his family, and had run away from his parents’ house before his eighteenth birthday and returned only for holidays and special occasions that had been guilt-tripped for months in advance. He was not a reliable source. The taxi turned onto Flatbush Avenue and headed toward the Manhattan Bridge. Cecelia thought her father could be the most handsome father in the world if he shaved his beard or cut the short, messy ponytail that he usually wore at the nape of his neck, or bought clothes that weren’t made for ranchers and cowboys. Instead her father always looked like someone who could be handsome if he wanted to be, but the beard and the clothes and the hair were effective deterrents.

‘She really does have great taste, and she knows everybody,’ Juliette said. Cecelia’s mom was French and knew about good taste, everyone said so. Juliette liked Astrid better than her husband did. She may have liked Astrid better than her husband, period. ‘There are big, clean public swimming pools, and you only ever have to wait because someone is slow, not because there are a hundred people ahead of you. Clapham is great, *chérie*, you know that. You always liked going there, even when that house was like a toddler disaster, and I was always afraid you were about to kill yourself on the edge of something. And anyway, it’s better to be in the countryside, it gives the blood more oxygen.’

That didn’t sound true, but Cecelia didn’t bother to argue. And if it was, what the hell had her parents been doing, depriving her blood of maximum oxygen for the past thirteen years? ‘I already agreed to this plan. It’s fine, really.’ Cecelia’s suitcases were in the trunk. Together, the three of them – Cecelia and her parents – took up every inch of space in the car, like commuters on a rush-hour F train.

‘*D’accord*,’ Juliette said, patting Cecelia’s thigh. Her chin wobbled, and she turned her face toward the window. ‘Okay.’

'Are you sure you want to go by yourself? We could take the train up with you, get you settled.' Nicky had never volunteered to go to Clapham before – maybe this was already progress. He rubbed his hands on his beard.

'Dad, it's fine. I'm just going to read the *Deathly Hallows* again. It's only two hours.'

'Can you manage the two bags, you think? There are escalators.' Juliette was a dancer, both strong and practical about bodies. It was a good quality in a mother. Whenever Cecelia had fallen down or injured herself as a child, Juliette would whip up a pant leg to show her daughter a scar. Cecelia was trying to remind herself of these things in order to decrease the life-size piñata of her parents that she was building in her mind at all times. It wasn't their fault, but it also wasn't *her* fault, and parents were supposed to be the ones who swooped in and fixed things. But her parents had never been the kind to make a fuss. Her mother was a dancer who pretended not to smoke cigarettes. Her father was a hippie who sold bundles of sticks and crystals to younger hippies on the internet. His claim to fame, outside of their family, where he was famous for his quinoa salads, trumpeting farts, and humorous, improvised songs, was playing a handsome high school student in one movie, *The Life and Times of Jake George*, filmed when he himself was a handsome high school senior. He'd found the experience of teenage girl fandom so appalling that he'd become a Buddhist and spent the next year in a monastery in Tibet. They weren't the types to yell and scream on anyone's behalf, even hers.

'It'll be fine, Mom.' There was a tree-shaped air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror, and Cecelia watched it swing back and forth as they drove over the bridge. Taxi TV blared, and Juliette silenced it with her thumb. It was a beautiful day – blue sky, no clouds, no traffic. It almost made Cecelia sad to leave the city, but then she thought about going back to school in September and having her best friend not speak to her and having everyone else assume, because she was leaving, that she was the guilty

party – shaming her! Cecelia Raskin-Strick, who had slept with her American Girl dolls until she was twelve, just last year! And they weren't even soft plastic! And then she wasn't sad, at least not about leaving. For the rest of the ride, her parents stared out their respective windows and Cecelia looked over the driver's shoulder, trusting that he was going the right way.