

MENTORING

SHE WAS TO BECOME THE FIRM'S JEWESS. She knew it when they hired her. The hiring committee had been so obsequious and deferential she knew they could hardly afford to let her get away. It was time for a woman and a Jew, and she fit both categories.

She was dressed like a woman who had stepped from the pages of *Vogue* into the sparsely furnished conference room of Whitney & Hume the day she appeared before the hiring committee. They were seated before a fireplace framed by natural wood paneling. The fireplace was, of course, artificial, but it was screened and fully ornamented with a brass colonial andiron set. The fireplace ledge held several bone china plates. She wore a black suit with tiny cloth-covered buttons up the sleeves and a brown silk blouse with a single gold chain around her neck. The committee had immediately offered her \$50,000 and she had shaken each of their hands and smiled her perfect smile as she measured each of them. Alright. She would be their first Jewess, if that's what they really needed.

Now, two years later, she, just this afternoon, had miscarried a child by John Watson, one of the members of the committee. He'd been seated to her left. She remembered that his hair kept falling over his eyes and he kept pushing it away with his glasses. She liked his face even then. He'd asked her only one question.

"Ms. Hirsch, I don't mean to embarrass you or any of the members of the committee, but this is a question we always ask each of our female applicants. You are not now pregnant, are you, Ms. Hirsch? We ask that because you understand we have work of a magnitude that requires an uninterrupted work span and preparation for trial. We couldn't have you leave after investing the time and money that would be required to prepare you."

She thought of asking him whether the question was also asked of male applicants, whether or not they were putative fathers. Instead, she answered, "I am not pregnant." She shook her hair back over her shoulders. "And if you think I resent the question, I don't."

So she had become the firm's first Jewish associate and second woman employee. Of course, there were no blacks or Latins or Orientals. There was a woman associate in the probate department, Annie Tyler Rodman, who was an old spinster. Whitney & Hume, in Chicago in the summer of 1982, was a rather small firm with only 65 lawyers. At first they treated her like an exotic hothouse orchid. They gave her a lovely office and access to an interior decorator. Alison and the decorator filled the office with Scandinavian furniture, a teak desk, rosewood coffee table, side chairs with leather cushions, vases of colored paper flowers,

Marimekko wall hangings and even a small copy of a Jean Arp sculpture. It was all charged to the firm. The men would pass and stare at the office and Alison over their glasses. Some of them would stop and shyly introduce themselves. At first they seemed to her almost cloned in their three-piece black and gray suits. She was their exotic Jewish bloom, this beautiful young woman whose office looked like a bright garden.

Her affair with John Watson began as a conscious intellectual choice. She knew the probabilities. He was married, he had a young family, he would never leave his marriage or his young family. He was emotionally connected only to his work. He really didn't need her either as a lover or as a friend. In the early fall they'd been sent to Washington together to conduct depositions. There was late night work, he in his shirtsleeves, she with her shoes off in one of the conference rooms of the firm's Washington office. When they finished, they went to the bar in the Hyatt Capitol Hill for a drink. They ordered champagne at a table, with the lighted white dome of the Capitol shining through the window. It was a beautiful, cool fall evening. There was a small dance floor and he shyly asked her to dance. She remembered the first touch of his face on her cheek. It had begun that simply.

Now, though, having just miscarried his child this afternoon in a game of racquetball, she would tell him at dinner at Akido's. He'd wanted her to have an abortion. He'd implored her to have the abortion. She wanted this child. She even had a name: David Hirsch Watson. But David Hirsch Watson had come sliding down her leg while she was taking a shower. She had just beaten Heather Jackman three games, slamming the ball against the walls like a wild woman. She felt really good. She knew she was pregnant, it was now almost four weeks since her last period. She'd bought a pregnancy kit and had mixed her urine in it. The ring had been red on the test tube. She'd even begun to wear a red enameled ring on her wedding finger. She stared at the blob on the floor of the shower and the blood glistening inside her leg. It looked like a tiny fetal eye. There was no shape to it, just a piece of slime. She picked it up and got a Ziploc bag from the sandwich counter and dropped the slime of her child in it and put it in the refrigerator behind the stack of rusty V-8 juice cans.

In the Japanese restaurant Alison waited for John Watson and ordered a glass of plum wine from the tiny, moon-faced waitress in the kimono. She had the Ziploc bag in her purse. She would have to arrange for its burial. She hadn't said anything to Heather about the miscarriage, only that she was very tired, when Heather asked why she looked so pale. She watched the waitress mincing her way through the tables. There was a group of Japanese men from a bank seated in the

back room. She heard their guttural commands as the waitress handed them hot towels and ceramic jars of sake.

John Watson came in and stamped the snow from his feet. Every time Alison met him, she knew that the affair had to end. It was always a 20-second decision when they met. He was wearing a silly light-weight canvas folding golfing hat and a Brooks gray tweed overcoat. He was tall and slim with clear blue eyes, blonde, with a lean face and delicate features. He looked like a banker or a corporate officer, dressed in a gray pinstriped suit and a thin red silk, French patterned tie.

"How do you like this funky old hat," he said as he leaned over and kissed her. He folded the hat and stuck it in his overcoat pocket.

Why did she abide this man, who ordered salad with no dressing, who asked for water instead of wine, who jogged in sub-zero weather and as he ran pretended to step on the faces of his adversaries in lawsuits. She didn't know. Why did she want his child? Why did she always let him hurt her? How many times had he stared at her with those pale blue eyes and told her that he couldn't be with her, he had to catch the 8:20. He broke their dates so diffidently. Each canceled meeting, instead of making her angrier, seemed to make him more desirable. The pain had become so familiar. It was the only distillate of their relationship, this fine powder of pain. She held to John Watson. She just wanted him available to her. She didn't care about their status. She had even unconsciously begun to dress like him, to buy tailored gray woolen suits and subdued patterned silk bow-ties. She'd found an Italian gray flannel pinstripe and a navy wool to match his navy wool. She started to order some of her blouses at Brooks Brothers and a few button-down oxford shirts with the initials "A.H." on the sleeve.

"You don't like the hat," he said again as he sat down.

"I don't like it."

"You're in a bitchy mood." He pulled his glasses out of their case and put them on and looked at her.

"I don't call this a bitchy mood."

He didn't say anything and calmly began to inspect the menu. "What are you drinking?"

"Plum wine."

"Maybe I'll have a glass of plum wine." He took his glasses off and snapped them back into the case. "And some sashimi-yellowtail."

She was waiting for him to ask her how she felt.

"How do you feel?"

"Fine."

"You look pale. Are you ill?"

"Am I?"

He rubbed his eyes, those cool, blue eyes.

"Okay, you're not ill. There's something I want to say. Are you in a mood to listen?"

"Go ahead." She knew he was going to ask her about the pregnancy.

"The complaint in the Hofstetter case. Alison, you left out five paragraphs in Count I. I had to do the whole goddamned thing over again. That's why I'm late." He glanced at his watch. "It's so damned dark in here I can't see."

"I thought you had one of those glow in the dark things. What happened to your luminous Rolex? I didn't leave anything out, John. The word processor person left it out."

"The word processor person doesn't leave things out. You left it out. You know this is real hardball we're playing. If that complaint went out that way, the judge would think we're fools."

"Are you calling me a fool?"

"I'm not calling you a fool. I'm just telling you, you do it right or you don't do it."

The waitress brought Watson his glass of plum wine and bowed and daintily served it. He tasted the wine and they ordered. Alison didn't answer him.

"All right, let's change the subject." His face was slightly flushed. He looked around the restaurant. He was annoyed to be seen upset in public. She put her purse up on the table and put her chin on it and stared at him.

"I don't want to talk about playing baseball any more, John. I hate those baseball analogies."

He looked down at his plate and then quickly at the couple sitting at the table beside them. He took a small sip of the wine. "Have you done anything about the pregnancy?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know anything about a pregnancy." She pushed her hair back. "Why do you always ask questions in the accusative tense?"

"You know what I'm talking about," he said, looking directly at her.

"I don't want to talk about abortion."

"The firm wants you to terminate this pregnancy, Alison."

"What are you talking about, the firm wants me to terminate this pregnancy?"

"The executive committee wants it done. They know all about it. If you have the abortion, nothing further will be said. Nothing will be done to affect your chance at a partnership. I've been authorized to tell you that."

She didn't answer him for a moment. Then she opened her purse. She held the plastic bag up to the candlelight and watched the liquid slowly flow.

"John, look at this." She tilted the package in the candlelight. The

liquid looked like a dull viscous pink jelly. "Do you know what this is? I had a miscarriage. This is it. I had a miscarriage in the shower after racquetball."

"What do you mean?"

"This junk is my miscarriage." She held it up to him again.

"You're carrying it around with you?"

"I wanted to show it to you, so you'd believe me." She dropped it back into her purse.

He stared at her. "Are you telling the truth?"

"Of course I'm telling you the truth."

He stood up. His hand was trembling. "I want to step outside for a moment." He was ashen. He walked quickly to the front door.

The waitress came with the intricately cut sashimi. Alison stared at the coiled piece of yellowtail in the bed of shredded seaweed that had been set at his place. The seaweed looked like a nest of white tendrils. His coil of sashimi reminded her of something. It was almost protoplasmic, like a cornea surrounded by gel. She stared at it. It looked like the glob in the bag in her purse. She removed the Ziploc bag and held it up to the candlelight. All she had to do was replace his coil of sashimi with the coiled glob of David Hirsch Watson and she'd make him eat his own kid. It would be a kind of perverse communion. He was a High Episcopalian and he believed in that kind of communion.

When Watson returned he sat down very straight with both hands on his face. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Are you all right, John?"

"Yes."

"Do you think I'm telling you the truth?"

"Yes."

She looked away for a long moment. "Try your sashimi, John."

He picked at the coiled eye of gel with his fork and held it up and then swallowed a piece of it.

"How is it?"

"It's okay."

"I'm glad you like it."

He took a second piece in his fork and finished it and drank some of the plum wine.

"You just ate your kid, John."

"Yes?" he said.

"Did you hear what I said?" She pointed her finger at the empty nest of shredded seaweed. "You just ate your kid!"

He touched the edges of his mouth with the stiff corner of the scalloped napkin.

"That wasn't sashimi."

"Oh."

"You want to play hardball, John? Like they do in the men's games?"
She stood up and began to walk away.

"Sit down, Allie."

She was standing over him, her purse held tightly under her arm. She was angry but not crying. She could cry later. She wasn't going to let herself cry here, in front of him. She carefully went for her coat. She didn't want to faint. It was a black coat, with a small mink collar. She shook out her hair and returned to him and slowly put it on.

"Sit down, Alison."

"No, I'm going. The sashimi. It wasn't sashimi. I replaced it with our fetus, our child."

"What are you talking about?"

"Okay, it wasn't our fetus. It wasn't a fetus. It was our glob. I put it on your plate and you ate it. You ate our kid."

Suddenly his eyes narrowed and he grabbed her wrist. The recognition of the horror of her act had come to him. She yanked her arm away and ran toward the door.

"You Jewish bitch!" was the last thing she heard him scream at her. Her wrist was bleeding where her bracelet had cut into her as she wrenched her hand free.

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Later in the park she dug a hole in the ground beside the Grant Park Pavilion opposite the Art Institute with a hand hoe she bought at a drugstore. She'd begun to cry now for the seed growing inside her with the feeling of a soft dark flower. On her knees she dug the hole deeper. Was it beginning to snow? The ground was so hard. She looked around. She didn't see anyone. She should stop crying so she could see someone. She could be raped or mugged out here alone in the park. She'd run her stockings and there was mud smeared over the panels of her coat. She had a deep cut where he'd grabbed her wrist. She removed the bag from her purse and opened it and poured the gel into her hand. It looked like a tiny eye, a tiny dull eye, the slime of their child. She dropped the slime into the hole she'd dug. Of course she hadn't fed him their child. Let him think she'd done it. She wasn't courageous enough to do something male and civilized like that. On her knees she patted the dirt with the hoe and then stood up and stepped on the earth, tamping it down gently.