

Chapter One

The Gentle Cycle

I don't usually like to start the day chasing my husband around the apartment, kitchen scissors in hand, but today it simply had to be done—Joseph had a long white thread hanging off the new olive green sports coat I'd just bought him at the Syms Labor Day Event, and I could not, in good conscience, let his sartorial magnificence be so commonly marred. Truth be told, I was full of self-admiration for selecting the jacket in the first place, as the color could not match his eyes more perfectly, and I had a coupon, *and* it was under \$110 so there was no sales tax. I rest my case.

He was scooting around at a sprightly pace, especially given the early hour, gathering miscellaneous papers—the *Daily Behavior Report*, his moment-to-moment teaching plans—gulping a freshly brewed cup of Colombian Supremo coffee, the beans ground in the store, because who needs the noise or mess?—which is my job to get up every dawn to perk, to give him a nice sendoff, and I don't mind one bit—and socks, he's always rushing to put on his socks, 100% cotton, because he's a man who's on his feet all day and, I'm not ashamed to say, he sweats.

He was hurrying to board the 6:30 city bus he rides the length of Grand Street to the Delancey/Essex stop of the J-M-Z subway line. From there he catches the M, then transfers to the L to his job in the heart of Bushwick, where he teaches 31 seven-year-old public-school kids to sight-read words from the Dolch list, which is a list of the 220 most common English words. I've gained this knowledge as I'm in the process of making eight sets of flashcards with the Dolch-list words. That's 1,760 flashcards I have to make, another task he's assigned me I don't

mind one bit, even though I went to a better undergraduate school and I also have a Master's degree. But he's the captain of our ship now, and when the captain gives an order, the sailor just says "aye-aye, captain," if she knows what's good for her. Even though he teaches second grade, he's strictly first class.

I thought he understood what I, in my own humble way, was trying to accomplish on his behalf, the extra effort I was making, and that he'd be sensible enough to cooperate and stand statue-still while I neatly cut the thread, but he remembered yet another form required by the Chancellor—the class rules sheet: e.g., "keep your hands *and feet* to yourself"—and jerked away from me just as the blades were making contact. I startled, losing my precarious angle and sliced into the waffle of the fabric, replacing the problem of a single stray thread—which I tragically realized I could have simply brushed away with my hand; it wasn't even *attached*—with a square-inch patch of newly, needlessly fraying corduroy. I could've wept, but since it was in the back and he'd never see it, I just said, "There you go," and sent him on his way, silently berating myself for demolishing his brand new sports coat, the VISA bill not even paid.

"It's only Hump Day," he said from the door, filling the frame. He's six feet even and, aside from carrying some extra poundage in the middle, is long, elegant, and mostly toned from a daily yoga practice he began a few years ago. His hair, which he keeps tidily trimmed, is turning ever more from its original dark brown to gray, and for that very reason he no longer sports the ticklish moustache he had when I met him. But his wrinkle-free face, shining round eyes and playful smile give him a lusty, youthful aura and by any standard, in anyone's book, he cuts a fine figure. And because it's true what they say about long-time spouses eventually looking similar to each other, you'd simply have to subtract a few years, inches, and pounds, substitute big brown eyes for green ones and swimming for yoga, then strap on some breasts, jangling silver bangle bracelets, metallic Armani bifocals, and voilà!—you'd have me.

"Well, have a good Hump Day, honey."

“Is there anything going on I can look forward to?” he asked while bending over to pick up the morning’s *New York Times* and tossing all but the A section, rubber band and all, back inside on the rug before I could get over to pick it up.

“We have opera tickets this weekend.”

“We do?” he asked, brightening. “The Met?”

“City Opera. Donizetti. The short one. We’re in the nose bleeds.”

“The sound’s better up there. Are we going with anyone?”

“Just the two of us.”

“Good. Kiss me quick, the bus is going to take off. There’s a new driver on the route. Transferred down from Hunts Point. She’s a demon—gets her kicks watching us all run for it.”

“I hear her revving the engine. You better shake a leg.” The kiss tasted of coffee—milky and sweet.

“Lock up,” he called back from halfway down the hall.

Sipping my own hot mug of absolutely delicious coffee, I watched him from the kitchen window as he made his way through the morning *minyan* of mothball-scented *alter kockers* already congregating at the bus stop, shaking their canes in each other’s faces to make an urgent point about something that happened at least thirty years ago. I smiled at how dutifully, if not quite eagerly, he was facing his responsibilities as chief breadwinner. Several months ago I flamed out in my previously lucrative career as a professional doormat in the executive offices of Nurses in Neighborhoods NY, the upstart home-nursing nonprofit that claims: “*We Take the Healing to Your House.*” Since then we rely exclusively on his paycheck.

You may more easily recognize my former place of employment by its nickname: NINNY. Inaugurated in 2000, it’s the ever-expanding home-care agency with offices in a famously refurbished slaughterhouse in the Meatpacking District. The spread in *The New York Times* featured photos of the giant steel hooks still suspended from the vaulted ceilings in the

staff lounge-nee-butcherer hall. Was the architect presciently implying that NINNY would likely treat its more talented employees like just so many slabs of dead beef and, short of impaling them, be unable to hold onto them? One wonders. I'd venture a guess, but I may or may not have a confidentiality agreement in place as part of my termination, and therefore, may or may not be allowed to do so.

And while I may be currently unemployed after 25 years of relentless employment, I do not agree with those people—like my older brother Sanford who lives in the Berkeley area and coined the term “flame-out” in an e-mail to me the likes of which I hope none of you ever receive from a family member—who say I am not only unemployed but unemployable. I'm determined to prove them wrong one day soon.

The hot pink disc of the sun was surging upward over the East River as Joseph, unsuspecting of the stubbly blemish on the back of his sports coat, got on the bus. From my window perch I blew him a kiss and thought I really must make amends.

So even though it wasn't my usual laundry day, I decided to deviate from what's become a fairly rigid routine, since everyone has told me how much I need structure now that I'm not working, and, to go the extra mile, to launder his whites so he'd have a nice surprise when he looked in his underwear drawer tomorrow. Besides, I reasoned, I myself could use the inherent lift of the whole laundry experience. Someone in the communal laundry room always compliments me on how white my whites are, giving me the opportunity to explain my system (actually developed by my husband) of washing the whites not once, but twice, the first time with too much soap and bleach, the second time with none at all, to rinse the bleach smell away.

I heaved the laundry cart out of our chaotically crowded hall storage closet and put the detergent and bleach bottles in the bottom before filling it with a canvas bag, itself washable, stuffed with his dirty underwear, proud of my ambition as well as my wifely devotion. Descending from the high floor we live on to the ground floor, where the vast laundry facility's

housed, I felt this would be a good step towards restoring my equilibrium, something practical and positive I could accomplish. After all, self-esteem comes from performing esteemable acts, and what could be more esteemable than washing my beloved husband's dirty jockeys?

But, when I reached the laundry room with its 18 washers and 12 dryers, I was unpleasantly surprised by a bad smell. It wasn't mildew or mold, it wasn't trash—though the compactor's not far away, nor is the recycling station, and you wouldn't believe if I told you, which I won't, the filthy refuse some sociopaths think it's acceptable to leave there—but an unfamiliar odor. It seemed to be coming from a corner of the laundry room where the three double-load machines stood, and since I had enough dirty clothes to justify using a double-load machine, I made my way over through a tangle of laundry carts on wheels, knocking them hither and yon with a satisfying crack, like breaking a set of billiard balls, sending them skittering and crashing into each other. I pushed my own upright cart past the folding table and the waiting area with the plastic bucket seats to sniff it out.

When I finally turned the corner, I saw a small, rounded heap on the floor that appeared to be a dead body someone had politely shrouded with an exquisitely stitched coverlet. Why did I assume the body was dead? Why not sleeping? I don't know. I can only say that death has a way of announcing itself and making itself known in any room it's ever in and, maybe because we're human beings and live with the knowledge that we are someday going to die ourselves, maybe because of this, we know it instantly when we see it. The coverlet's edge with the label was turned up, revealing *Neiman Marcus—100% Combed Egyptian Cotton*. I don't usually go in for finder's keepers, but the color was the palest of sky blues and I thought it would be really pretty casually folded on the foot of our bed, so I reached down and picked it up.

You could've knocked me over with a feather—because the dead person was Mrs. Plotsky, my very own elderly neighbor. There are over 300 apartments in our building, which is really three apartment towers in one, so what are the chances? Just last night I'd overheard her

and her son's usual evening ritual of family intimacy, him yelling curses at her, her so full of piss and vinegar as she screamed back, and now this.

I won't over-dramatize and say I was in shock to find death in the laundry room, even though it's a place I associate more with renewal than dissolution, but it *was* a little disturbing. Maybe that's why I went ahead and started doing the laundry, which is what I'd come for, knowing that if my hands were busy, my mind would soon follow and clarity would replace confusion. So often I find if you just put your shoulder to the wheel and start pushing, eventually it'll turn and you'll be on your way to wherever it is were going, and that's what I did now with Mrs. Plotsky dead on the laundry room floor.

As I was pouring the bleach into the slot at the top of the machine, I thought if it were me on the laundry room floor starting to stink up a common area, I'd be more than a little upset with myself. And since I had extra bleach that I didn't absolutely need for Joseph's underwear, and bleach is an excellent odor fighter, I splashed a little on Mrs. Plotsky, thinking it might help. And it did! So then I thought, if a little bleach helps, a lot would probably lick the whole problem altogether.

The machines are front loading, which I generally find very convenient, but now even more so because it would've been too difficult for me to pick the dead weight of Mrs. Plotsky up off the floor, the dead being as heavy as they are, and I very well might've broken my back trying to load her in the top. But with the ease of front loading, I could unfold her legs into the machine, kind of scoop her tiny little self up, and shove her in. I'm not claiming it was easy, but I pride myself on my physical strength, problem-solving abilities, and a certain can-do attitude that's served me well over the years—well, at least it used to before the, you know, flame-out.

Anyway, I wavered about whether to put the new coverlet in with her, and ultimately decided to spring for the additional \$1.25 for a separate load, no bleach at all, just to be on the safe side.