

She swiped her Metrocard in the turnstile and pressed cautiously against the restraining bar, half expecting it to jam (it had done so once, leaving a large bruise on her thigh). But the bar gave way and she quickly moved through, replacing the card in her purse without considering the balance. The signs on the walls told her she was near the end of the F line, at Parsons Boulevard, where she always was at this time each weekday morning. She didn't mind the long ride to midtown from central Queens; it gave her time to think, and it meant she usually got a seat.

Here was the train now. Ellen Calderon entered and sat down, scooting to the end of the contoured metal bench. The car was filling up fast. She looked around and smiled at the change from just a few years ago: then almost everyone would be reading a newspaper or magazine; now nearly everyone was playing with his or her cellphone. She had one too, of course, but it would stay in her purse for now.

The metallic voice warning riders to stand clear of the closing doors sounded, and the doors slid shut. How long had she been doing this, she asked herself, knowing the answer: nearly thirty years. Since she'd graduated from college, the only four years she'd lived away from home. She'd been ready to refuse what New York Life offered —a glorified secretarial position, and that wasn't why she'd gone to college --- but her parents had urged her to accept. "It's a great company, with real security," her father had said. "They'll recognize

**your talent; this job will lead to something better,” her mother told her. And she had, after a while, taken tiny steps up the corporate ladder; now she was a manager, with a manager’s headaches.**

**Briarwood Avenue. The train stopped, the doors opened, and more people got on. She sat back, her mind running along the same tracks as the train. She hadn’t expected to still be living at home, at 52, and really there was no reason to stay in the house on Hillside Avenue now that her parents were gone (her dad at 75, her mom three years later, at 76). That was all the family she had, except for two cousins in Connecticut; her older brother Richard had died soon after birth, and was buried next to their parents in Calvary Cemetery. “There’s a space for you when the time comes,” her mother had said. Small consolation.**

**Forest Hills. The voice, the bell, the closing doors. She felt a little squashed – why did that huge man have to push in next to her? She looked across the car and felt a sudden sympathy for the young woman – not much more than a girl – sitting across from her; it might have been herself three decades earlier: sharp nose, glasses, a mop of brown hair. The girl sat staring dully at the car floor, as if she could see the approaching years. She’s old enough to have been Looked Through, Ellen thought.**

**‘Looked through’ was her term for the humiliating experience of standing with other, more desirable, women at dances, and having men act like you didn’t exist. Oh, what she could have told them about some of her prettier classmates! Well, they’d just have to find that out for themselves. Still, being looked through was a hurt that never entirely went away, no**

matter how often it happened. Her friend Carol had been supportive. “You’ll meet someone someday,” Carol had said. Where was Carol now? Married and living in Larchmont.

“Maybe you’ll marry someone from work,” her mother had said, but her only real romantic relationship had been with a Greek man from Astoria, George Patinou, who worked as a mechanic for the MTA. She had felt her father’s chilly disapproval, her mother’s worry. Was it bigotry? Religious prejudice? There was something else, she admitted: a lack of class. George was certainly tone-deaf socially – she intentionally hadn’t introduced him to her friends – and he struggled to show any interest outside his narrow world. That world of course included his family.

She’d met the Patinouts just once, when they’d invited her for dinner. Sister Anna was a shy, awkward girl who was going to CUNY; the mother, Sofia, obviously hoped Ellen would marry her son (and seemed worried she wouldn’t). It was Ellen’s encounter with George’s father that had decided her. Socrates Patinou was a nice man, but quite heavy and completely bald (George already was losing his hair). It seemed hypocritical to complain about someone’s looks, being no beauty herself, but that flash of an ugly future settled things. Goodbye George, and goodbye love, as it turned out.

The Queensbridge station. They were nearing the East River now. The voice, the bell, the sliding doors. Her thoughts reverted to Hillside Avenue. She would have to do something eventually with the house; she wasn’t sure how much longer she’d be at New York Life –

there were rumbles of changes, and she was easily the senior member in her department. But, do what? Sell the house and go where? To an apartment not far away? There was nowhere else she especially wanted to live, and the prospect of Florida seemed depressing.

The train stopped again; the car was packed now. A woman about her own age stood with her back turned, and for a moment Ellen was afraid it was Pat Wisnewski, though there was no reason why Pat should be on the train. Then the woman turned around; a stranger. The incident reminded Ellen of the Sunday, three weeks ago, when she'd met Pat in Walgreens. Pat had said, after the usual effusive greetings, why don't you join Doris Cole and Linda Bonifaci and me for dinner Friday at Marcini's? We meet there every Friday at seven.

Ellen knew Marcini's and didn't think much of it, but she promised to be there. Pat and the other women had been waiting a little while when she arrived. Pat waved to her as she entered, and Ellen felt herself being appraised as she zigzagged between the tables all the way to the back, where the trio sat beneath a pastel print of Sorrento. She'd never met Doris or Linda, but soon she would know more about them than she wanted to know.

Doris' husband Stewart had died five years ago; they had one son who was going to college upstate, and flunking out. Linda had married a man who was "no good," in her words, and Pat and Doris were quick to agree, though they had never known him. After the divorce – it was "a blessing" they'd had no children – she had returned to live with her invalid father on 179<sup>th</sup> Street. It hadn't been all sacrifice, Linda conceded; years ago she'd had a "fabulous affair" with a married British army officer, and had visited Greece, Italy and

France. She promised to bring photos next time, and Ellen hoped they wouldn't include ones of the adulterous British officer.

Suddenly Pat turned to her and said, "Ellen, you're so quiet – tell us what you've been up to; give us some juice." She'd been expecting just such a request, and was ready with a few stories about the odd and occasionally amusing people she worked with. As she talked she observed the cynical and mildly disappointed looks on the faces of Doris and Linda. Ellen hadn't felt she'd failed, but was relieved when she was finished and the conversation turned to generalities.

Gradually she realized, as she ate her stuffed shells, that she'd been invited because the others saw her as they saw themselves: women who'd given up on the possibility of romance, of finding the deeper happiness that springs from enduring love. They were bound for an emotionless old age, and saw Helen as being a perfect companion for the journey. Well, they could just find someone else, that's all! She'd concocted an excuse the next time Pat had invited her, and hoped that would put an end to it.

Twenty-third Street. This was her stop; the New York Life building towered yards away. She rose and walked firmly up the stairs to the street. When she got to the street she opened her purse and took out her cellphone; she saw with despair that Pat had texted her an invitation for Friday night. She jammed the phone back in her purse and began walking. Well, she wouldn't respond, that's all. Anyway, not just yet.