



Relic

I once had a therapist who blamed my dislike of children on the Korean War. I was never entirely sure how she made that connection. Something to do with my father's inability to serve because of bunions. Or maybe it was my much-analyzed only-child complex. At any rate, she left private practice to become a consultant for *Montel*, and I was left with my visceral distaste for Baby Gap and Shirley Temple healthy and intact.

Children unnerved me. They moved like their internal remote was stuck on fast-forward. I never knew how to protect myself. That particular winter morning, for example, I was tempted to think the little girl with a velvet ribbon in her hair was benign, cherubic, even. And the next thing I knew, she reached over to wipe a cocoa-sopped little mitt on my new Burberry skirt.

"Not so fast, young lady," I said to the criminal as I put out my hand to stop hers. I took a step back and locked eyes with the girl. She looked to be about five. I cleared my throat and enunciated like I was in diction

class, working to be heard above the throng in Tasia's Coffee Shop. "Your mommy is nearly finished paying."

Mommy half turned, keeping her palm open above the counter to catch her change. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes flickered like those who have been subjected to endless hours of child-adult interaction. "Francesca," she said to the girl, who stared at me with doe eyes. Francesca was still holding her wet hand in front of her and letting cocoa drip onto Tasia's floor.

"Can I help you?" A teenager with a pierced lip slouched behind the register and looked at me.

"You may," I said and rattled off my usual. "Large decaf soy white chocolate mocha. Light on the chocolate with a sprinkle of nutmeg." I edged around Francesca in a careful arc and set my mahogany leather clutch on the countertop. "Extra hot." I watched the barista move rapid-fire to concoct my drink. My eyes stayed trained on my cup, as my request for nutmeg had been ignored in times past.

"Sorry to bother you." Mommy poked her head around and invaded my personal space. Must have been genetic.

"No harm done," I said without looking up from my purse. I handed the cashier a crisp ten. "There are extra napkins near the door."

She kept staring until I turned to face her. "It *is* you!" she exclaimed. Her voice was nasal and high. "I can't believe it. You're Sadie Maddox, right?"

I dropped the paltry change from my ten into my clutch. After a careful sip of my mocha, I moved to make room for the next customer. Mommy followed me with a bouncing Francesca close behind. "I am," I said with a slow nod. I smiled before taking another sip.

"My mother is not going to believe this," the woman said. "She used to play your records for me when I was in junior high. We'd try to sing

along with the Italian, which never went too well, but I really feel all that foreign language stuff gave me an appreciation for high culture, you know?” The woman wore a jaunty red beret, which did not quite contain a head of light blonde curls. The timbre of her voice could have caused epileptic seizures; I realized I was squinting in some kind of misguided self-defense. Nevertheless, she did appear to be earnest.

“I appreciate your kind words,” I said. “Give your mother my regards.” I meant this as a parting gesture but she stayed.

“There was this one song I just loved. I can’t remember the name but it went like this.” She started in with a hum that cut through the buzz of Tasia’s noon rush. This woman was nothing less than remarkable.

I remained silent, as I most certainly did not recognize the melody through that narrow nasal passage. I shot a glance around the room for Avi but saw no sign of him.

“Remember?” the woman asked. She was a tenacious, humming bulldog. “It always reminded me of the beginning of ‘Let’s Get Physical’ by Olivia Newton-John.”

All right. “Yes, well, it’s been a pleasure to meet you and best wishes for a happy holiday.” I tried moving to the side but was startled when little Francesca jumped out and roared.

“Sorry,” Mommy said with a little laugh.

I clutched my heart.

“She’s really into roaring. We saw *Lion King* on Broadway a few months ago. Franny loves music, don’t you, sweetie?”

Franny roared again, this time showing me her fangs.

“Is that right?” I said, waving to Avi, who had just entered. He was shaking the snow from his coat and didn’t see me. “Francesca, do you like Italian art song like the other women in your family?”

Mommy shook her curls. “Oh, no. We don’t even have a record

player any more. She's more into Disney." She stopped her yammering and cleared her throat. "But we really should buy more classical CDs. I've been meaning to get around to that." She looked embarrassed and busied herself combing her fingers through Francesca's mop of hair. The child stared at me and stuck out her tongue when Mommy wasn't looking.

"Yes, well. You'll excuse me," I said, nodding to the two of them and eking out a tight smile before escaping with my mocha to a table by the window.



So now you know. I'm famous. It seems indelicate to say it that way, but we might as well be out with it. I am an artist, a singer to be more precise. I trained at two of the most prestigious conservatories in this country, did a widely coveted apprenticeship with a European opera legend, and spent a decade being flown around the world to sing all the major roles for a mezzo-soprano. The incident with scary little Francesca and her mother still played out several times a month, though most times without the humming, for which we could all be grateful. To be recognized in a city like New York was a coup. I saw it as a barometer of sorts to gauge if I was still a presence in the fickle music world.

Visibility is everything, my agent always said, and would likely say again when he returned to our table with his cappuccino. I smirked into my steaming mug. Visibility offered only so many choices to a woman who'd just turned forty. Couldn't be flashing my groceries to the paparazzi, for example. Sordid love affairs weren't as titillating when the flesh factor

sagged more than it sweated. One had to be crafty at this age and combine class with sass.

I straightened in my chair, newly pleased that I'd called this meeting with Avi. If anyone was capable of helping me map out a plan, it had to be Avi Feldman, that shark of a New York agent who signed a new client only if six-figure fees were involved. I bit the inside of my cheek, freshly chagrined at the exorbitant percentage the man skimmed from each of my paychecks. The price would pay off, I assured myself, flashing my new veneers at him across the room. Didn't one have to spend money to make money? Avi would know how to engage the likes of fanged Franny and her beret-sporting mother.

Record player, indeed.



“Happy Hanukkah,” I said and leaned over to peck him on the cheek.

“Thanks,” Avi said around his return kiss. “And Merry Exploitation of Your Own Messiah.” He smirked while unwrapping himself from a charcoal leather coat and silk scarf. “You Christians do have a way with pagan holidays.”

“Watch it or we’ll get a hold of Yom Kippur and start selling Day of Atonement cell phone accessories.”

“Appalling,” he said and turned to face me. “You look fantastic,” he said by way of professional appraisal. “Did you get your eyes lifted?”

“Thank you, and no,” I said, pleased and huffy at the same time. “Not all women over forty resort to the scalpel.”

He snorted into his doll-sized cappuccino mug. “Since when are you so well-adjusted?”

I took a deep breath, exhaled slowly. “I’m embracing the fullness of age.”

Avi raised one eyebrow. I suspected he waxed. “Yes, about that.” He tipped back his cup to drain it. “How are you feeling about your audience turnout lately?”

I felt my eyes widening. “I feel fine. Positive, I should say. The recital at St. Mark’s—” The show hadn’t sold out, but then I’d agreed to do it as a favor to an old friend. “We were—what—three-quarters full?”

“Half.”

“Half. Well.” I smoothed my hair. “Respectable, anyway, particularly so close to the holidays.”

“Sadie, I think you should try something new. Think total departure, breathing new life into old ideas, well-worn songs, familiar repertoire.”

“Yes,” I said, nodding vigorously. I put one hand over his and couldn’t help but notice my manicure was stunning. “I’m *so* pleased you’re saying this, Avi, because I’ve been giving this issue a lot of thought. I think I need a late-career reinvention of sorts.”

“Exactly.”

“Because I’m not that Lindy Lohan girl.”

“Lindsay.”

“Yes, of course. I’m not twenty but I think I’m *better* than I was at twenty. I’m wiser, more comfortable in my own skin, better able to choose what suits my voice.” I paused, tilting my head in thought and breathing in Tasia’s intoxicating aroma of cinnamon, cloves and caffeine. After allowing a moment to bask in the magnitude of female maturity, I returned my gaze to his face. “I’m *more*, Avi.”

“Well,” he said, leaning back in his chair and opening his arms. “You’ll be pleased to know I have the perfect opportunity for you and your fuller, wiser, better self.”

I cupped both hands around the waning warmth in my mug. “I’m open to absolutely everything. What’s our next adventure?” I winked as I took a last sip of my mocha.

“Visiting professor of voice at a small liberal arts college.” Avi waited for my reaction.

My sip became a pull even though the last dregs of drink had gone cold. “Professor of voice. I see. I don’t have a PhD.”

“They couldn’t care less. You’re Sadie Maddox.”

True enough. “Would I have to teach classes or just have a studio of students?”

“Negotiable.”

I tapped one finger on the porcelain saucer and took a moment to think. My eyes drifted around the room. Tasia’s was decked out for everybody’s holiday. Lit wreaths hung in each of the five tall café windows in front, silver menorahs lined a glass shelf behind the counter, and Kwanzaa candles were for sale by the register. I loved New York.

Avi cleared his throat. “And the best part is that you’ll be able to escape the craziness of urban life.”

I snapped my eyes back to his. “Why on earth would I want to do that?”

“Because the college is in Iowa.”

I paused and then burst into schoolgirl laughter. “Avi, come on. Tell me where this school really is. Which borough? Brooklyn? Queens? I’ll even go to Long Island in a pinch.” My smile was conciliatory.

Avi took both of my hands in his, leaned forward, and kissed one cheek. “Sadie,” he whispered. He kissed the other cheek and whispered in my other ear. “Iowa.” He kept his cheek on mine, likely to discourage a dramatic response.

I pushed him away and shrieked, “Are you insane?” People turned in their seats but I ignored them. People staring at me was nothing new. “What, in the name of all that is good, is in Iowa? Corn? Cows? Wal-Mart?”

“Honey,” Avi said in the voice of a therapist. He made his living working with hysterical people. “I can understand your reluctance. I’ve seen *Music Man* and *Field of Dreams*. But you just told me you need a fresh direction, am I right?”

“Fresh does *not* mean mind-numbing, culture-barren, provincial—*need* I go on?”

Avi took a manila envelope out of his satchel. “Take a look at the particulars,” he said, handing it to me. “Even without subletting your apartment, this is a financial no-brainer. You’ll have a break from the recital circuit, you can cultivate fans in a different part of the country—”

“You mean all twenty-four of the people who live there.”

“—and you can try your hand at teaching. It might just be the perfect fit.”

I’d come to this meeting thinking a Gap ad, a spot on *Martha Stewart*, at the very least a cover story in *Good Housekeeping* or something equally maternal. And Avi was suggesting Iowa. Things must have been worse than I thought.

“How are CD sales?” I asked, shoulders slumped.

Avi cleared his throat. “Not very good. And your performance calendar is nearly empty for the spring.” He looked at his watch and stood. “Listen, love, just think about it. Look over the materials, consult with all the smart people you know, and you’ll end up admitting I’m right on this. One semester. That’s it. They’re in a time crunch, they’ll fork out the cash, and you could use it. It’s not Carnegie, but you said yourself that hall is overrated anyway.” He leaned down to kiss the top of my head. “Call me.”

He walked away, leaving me to wallow in a stack of glossy brochures with photographs of people with bad hair. So things *were* worse than I'd feared. Not only was I getting old, losing audiences, and selling fewer CDs, I was a prime candidate for midwest living.

Merry blasted Christmas.