

MANNA

Israel did this. They gathered it, some more, some less. When they measured in an omer what they had gathered, the man who had gathered more had not too much, the man who had gathered less had not too little. Each found he had gathered what he needed. Exodus 16:17-18.

The sons of the House of Israel named it 'manna.' It was like coriander seed; it was white and its taste was like that of wafers made with honey. Exodus 16:31

(The Jerusalem Bible, Doubleday, 1966)

Flora woke up certain she was dead. She coughed and gasped for air, and a large man swabbed her nose with a bit of gauze and then pushed a plastic mask over her mouth and instructed her to be OK. "You're gonna be OK," he said. "We've got you. You're gonna be OK. OK, take her."

She wanted to scream no, don't take me, but she had no voice. Only a hoarse whisper. She was strapped on a stretcher, there were firemen and policeman all around and all she could see were black rubber jackets with yellow stripes and the tops of buildings and the remnant clouds of black smoke.

She woke up later, on stiff sheets in a darkened room, a tube out her nose, the darkness punctuated by small backlit rectangles and a mechanical silence. She strained to hear human voices, but heard only beeps and bells and gurgles.

"Hello," she said out loud. If she could hear herself, she was alive, right? She sounded to herself as if she had a really bad cold and on the phone she sounded sexy, not sick. "Hello," she said again.

The door opened, the light from the hallway harsh. A nurse in a lavender top came over to the bed and turned on another light, softer, over her bed.

"Good color," she said, with the enthusiasm of a high school cheerleader. "And the swelling's gone down. How are you feeling?"

Flora didn't answer right away, uncertain. Had she been asleep for a few hours or a few days? How had she gotten out of the stairwell? Linnie, one of the secretaries, had kept screaming "we're gonna die, we're gonna die," and Flora had taken her by the hand and tried to drag her up the stairs with the others, but Linnie refused to budge, like an anchor caught under a rock, and the crowd pushed Flora on. In the billowing black smoke, she'd lost Linnie's grip. Then what? She herself must've stumbled. Linnie cried. Someone felt Flora's neck. Then silence.

Outside the building, she'd opened her eyes, saw the beautiful hazel eyes of a paramedic wiping her nose, heard the order for intubation. Sedation. She must have been sedated because she remembered nothing until now.

“You were very lucky,” the nurse said. “By the way, I’m Kate, your night nurse, and you’re at Illinois Masonic.”

“Is everybody OK?” Flora asked.

“We’re hoping so,” the nurse said. “There are quite a few in the hospital.”

“Linnie?” she asked. Her throat felt dry and scratchy, like a scouring pad.

“Linnie who, honey? I can try to find out for you.”

Flora didn’t know Linnie’s last name. “Linnie,” she repeated, and lifted her hand to itch her forehead, but her index finger was in a clip, like a metal hair clip a hairdresser might use to hold back a clump of hair while working on a small section, and there were wires from it to somewhere. Another tether. The image of a sailboat on a mooring came to her, the anchor line stretched taut against a stiff breeze that threatened to blow it away.

“That measures your blood oxygen,” the nurse said. “It doesn’t hurt.”

“Linnie,” Flora demanded. “One of the secretaries.”

“Of course, I’ll check,” the nurse said, her voice mellowed to the calm of a hypnotist. “Now, you need to rest. If you need anything, here’s the buzzer.” She put it in Flora’s free hand, and turned off the bed light.

She woke up again in light that filtered through the blinds, and she guessed that it was morning. Vaguely she saw the outline of another person in the room.

“Linnie?” she called.

“No, sis, me! Your brother!” He too, instructed her to be OK. “I was so worried,” he said. “Six people died, and I was so afraid you were going to be one of them.”

“The nurse said they were OK,” Flora said.

“Oh,” Matt said, his voice a few notes higher, as if caught in a lie. “Then I must be wrong. I know they were worried.... I’m glad everyone pulled through.”

“Linnie?” she asked.

“I think so,” he said, but since he didn’t know Linnie, Flora didn’t believe him.

“I don’t know....” she said.

“Hey, that’s a pretty sexy voice you’ve got there,” he said, imitating hers, excessively husky.

“Tell me,” she insisted.

He told her they'd just removed a big tube that had been down her throat, that part of one of her lungs had collapsed and they'd had to inflate it and suction out soot and stuff and that she was fine now. That they'd given her some really good drugs—he laughed as if this were an inside joke—and if she played her cards right, she could get more. He said, then, his face perfectly still, his hand holding her tethered hand, that he loved her and didn't know what he'd do without her and he'd been scared to death.

She sniffed back tears. “Dad?” she asked.

Matt looked sheepish. “I haven't told him, yet,” he said. “I didn't know....” From the sound of his voice, she knew he meant he'd thought he was going to have to tell their father that his daughter had died.

“Saved by the bell,” she said. Their father and Matt rarely spoke; it would've been an impossible conversation for Matt to have with him.

“Let's not worry him,” she agreed. “Do you know how long they're going to keep me?” she asked.

“A few days, I would think,” he answered.

“Does Barbara know?”

“I called her office, but she's in New York,” he said. “I looked her up on the Internet,” he said, as if that had taken a huge amount of resourcefulness. “I left a message. I'm sure she'll come as soon as she gets back.” Barbara was Flora's closest friend.

He went to the window and opened the blinds. The sun brightened the room and convinced her she was indeed alive. She took a deep breath, which triggered a coughing spell that rattled her body and caused her to sit up, gasping for air in long, grating breaths that felt like she was breathing through a collapsing straw and sounded like she was belching and dying at the same time.

Matt ran to the door and called “Nurse!” which brought the cheerleader-type walking determinedly, but not running, into the room. “Hurry!” Matt shouted. “Hurry!”

“She's fine,” the nurse said. “Breathe out,” she instructed, her hand rubbing Flora's back. “Good. Again. Slowly.” Flora's cough subsided, and with it, the panic. It had been like that right before she passed out on the stairs. There had been panic and then release.

“When that happens, you need to breathe out or talk. If you don't panic, it will regulate itself,” she said.

Flora cleared her throat. It didn't feel like it would cure itself. While it was happening, it didn't feel like it would ever cure itself -- it felt like the last struggles for a last breath. Like facing a firing squad and not knowing which bullet.

She slept on and off the rest of the day, eating some applesauce and ice cream for dinner, and gratefully swallowing the sleep medicines offered. At some point Matt went home.

The next day they let Flora stand up and then take a walk down the hall. In the visitor's atrium at the end of the hall there were a number of newspapers on a rack, and the two Chicago papers had front page stories about the downtown fire. "Death Count Now Stands at Seven," she read. She headed for the rack before the nurse could stop her.

"Not sure you want to read that right now," the nurse said, this one a motherly type in her early fifties. "There's plenty of time for that later."

"I want to know now," she said. "Those are my friends. Last night the nurse said they were all fine." Her breath short from the exertion of having walked the equivalent of half a city block, she leaned on the sturdy day nurse.

"As far as she knew, that was probably true," she said in weak defense of the overnight nurse. "Look it, if you insist on reading about the fire, I insist on calling the chaplain, OK?"

Flora tucked the paper under her arm and they walked back to her room. "I'd like to be alone now," she said. The nurse nodded.

The story gave the names and briefest biographies of the dead, but protected the privacy of those who'd survived. They described her Linnie, 24, from a small town in Western Illinois, who was going to school at night to get a teaching certificate and was an administrative assistant at the Legal Aid office because she always had great empathy for the poor. She'd been found passed out in the stairwell below where "others"—presumably including Flora, but she had no memory--had been found alive. She had six younger brothers and sisters, all of whom were devastated by her loss, and there was a memorial fund. She'd been sending money home to help her siblings go to community college and follow in her footsteps.

A short-haired woman in a navy suit and pink blouse appeared at the doorway. She wore a gold cross around her neck and held a small black book.

"I'm Chaplain Hunter. May I come in?"

Rage rose up in her and she turned away, towards the windows, where the sky was gray but light. Tears spilled from her eyes to the pillow. What could prim Chaplain Hunter, just a few years older than herself, possibly have to say that Flora would want to hear?

The Chaplain apparently took her silence for assent, because she entered slowly, and stood at the windows, looking out, her back to Flora. Unlike the nurses and doctors and medical students and Matt, the Chaplain did not spray her with questions or assurances. Like her mother, the Chaplain stood stone silent, scarcely breathing, her thoughts beyond reach. Flora was grateful for the woman's silence, but still was not encouraged to talk. She closed her eyes, feigning sleep. In a few minutes, she felt the soft warm touch of the woman's hand on hers, and imagined the Chaplain was praying for her. Flora realized, with a stab of pain, that she didn't feel capable of praying for herself.

When she was sure the chaplain was gone, Flora opened her eyes briefly, thinking to finish reading the paper. She picked it up, but her eyelids grew heavy and she was unable to focus. She fell then into a long and peaceful sleep.

The next day, and the day after that, the Chaplain performed the same ritual and Flora the same feint. On the fourth day, the Chaplain didn't come, and Flora felt a tinge of anger that the woman had given up on her.

"What happened to the Chaplain?" she asked the day nurse who came in to check her vitals late in the afternoon.

"I think she's making her rounds," the nurse said.

"She didn't stop here," Flora said.

"Did you want to see her?" the nurse asked.

"No, not particularly," Flora said.

A smile pulled at the nurse's lips, but she only said, "I can call her if you want her."

"No, that's OK," Flora said.

"She gives priority to those who want her," the nurse said, which Flora interpreted as the slightest slap on the wrist. Did she want the Chaplain or not? What she really wanted was a mother who could function as a mother should, who, in her hour of need, would be with her and take care of her and understand and forgive her for not saving Linnie. But her mother, who had died years ago, had never been such a person.

Flora didn't remember asking specifically for her, but Chaplain Hunter came by at the end of the afternoon, all smiles, assuming the permission to come in even as she entered.

"I suppose you've heard twenty times today that you have good color," Chaplain Hunter chuckled. Flora couldn't help herself from smiling back. She had heard about her color on a daily basis, as if she were a marshmallow roasting on a campfire.

"Don't I?"

"Pretty good, I guess," the Chaplain said, "That's not exactly my department."

There was a short silence. "I understand that you lost friends in the fire," Chaplain Hunter said in a matter-of-fact tone. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Why them? Why not me?" Flora tried to sniff back a sob, but it crashed like a wave, and her bed shook with the violence of her tears. Her lungs hurt, and she gasped for air, but rather than call for the nurse, Chaplain Hunter came to the bed and gently sat, her left hand on Flora's arm, her right hand on Flora's cheek. She didn't say a word. Unlike her mother, Chaplain Hunter knew things and could say things, but didn't have to. Something about her silence was calming, and Flora recovered her breath. It took a few minutes before she could meet the Chaplain's eyes.

"I was afraid," Flora said.

"Of course you were," the Chaplain answered.

Like manna from heaven.

The lawyer tried to hide his excitement as he handed her the check. The various insurance defendants had kicked in more than a hundred million dollars to satisfy the more than twenty lawsuits which had been filed on behalf of decedents, relatives and survivors of the fire. No wonder he could hardly contain himself. The lawyers had skimmed at least fifteen million off the top, and they wouldn't even have to go to trial. There'd been no question of whether the defendants would settle, it was only a matter of when, and while it had taken four and a half years, Flora was grateful not to have to relive the horror. Her share was well into seven figures, more money than she'd ever dreamed of making as a legal aid attorney.

The numbers blurred as she looked at the light blue check, her name, Flora Michaelina Bradley, typed in all caps after "Pay to the order of," and a rush of zeroes. The lawyer withdrew his smile, perhaps understanding that the check represented compensation for her horrific experience. She'd spent two weeks in the hospital and a year out of work.

"Do you have plans?"

She didn't. She'd purposely not thought about the money, about what would happen if she came into millions. To think about it seemed ungrateful. Five others in the stairwell with her had died in that vertical coffin. She had passed out while still on her cell phone to 911. She'd come to, miraculously, on a stretcher on the sidewalk, an oxygen mask smothering her. Even if she had plans for the money, it was none of his business.

"Not specifically," she said.

"I could give you the name of a financial advisor," he said, not waiting for her answer to hand her a card. She took it without looking at it. "You're probably aware of this, but once people hear you've got money, they think they're entitled to it. They come out of the woodwork."

"You might put some aside in a foundation to deal with all the requests," he said, his tone all business.

“Is that what you do?” she asked. She been on the staff committee organizing the last fundraiser for her legal aid organization and remembered that her lawyer’s firm had only bought a table, not a sponsorship.

“My partners and I contribute out of current funds,” he said. “Tax-wise, for us...” he trailed off.

“I contributed out of current funds to the various memorials,” she said. “You know, I’m single, and the doctors can’t tell me what long term effects I might have, so I’m rather inclined to just put it somewhere and use it when I need it.”

“Where to put it is the question, these days,” he said with the weary air of a millionaire.

She followed the markets only generally. At thirty-five, she wasn’t thinking of retiring, and the recent plummet in the Dow Jones that had panicked her friends in private practice had been of only passing concern to her. During the first year of her recovery, her office had paid her full salary through some complicated insurance arrangement, and then she’d gone back to work. She had no intention of becoming preoccupied with stock indexes, bond prices, derivatives, futures and international money swaps, and rather than get sucked into further discussion with her attorney—who wasn’t a bad guy, just of a different ilk—she got up to leave.

“Thank you,” she said, “for this.” She waved the check and slipped it into her purse. It would be customary, she supposed, to congratulate the man on his success, but she felt such a mix of emotions, she took the most neutral stance that came to her. “We all appreciated your professionalism,” she said. “I wish you well in your future endeavors.”

In the elevator, she regretted that last line. “I wish you well in your future endeavors” was how law firms and agencies closed their letters to rejected applicants for employment. Still, she felt queasy about the check in her purse. Because he was inextricably associated with it, she didn’t want to see him again, ever.

The check represented both physical and emotional pain and suffering. Her physical pain had been real enough, the time in the hospital, her lungs blackened by the smoke that had curled up the stairwell as if it were a chimney. There had been fear, of course, of dying, suffering, and slowly burning to a crisp like a witch tied to a stake, and there were recurring nightmares, even now, and guilt, survivor’s guilt her therapist said, and she understood that, but felt more than guilt, felt an obligation to do more, to earn her future breaths on the merit of doing something

important, something big and meaningful and as yet unknown. That dissatisfaction haunted her every day.

How do you measure such fear and guilt in dollars? Had she been overpaid or not paid enough? She remembered a law school professor who had suggested a market mechanism, using the example of a swimmer who'd been abandoned by a skin-diving company in shark-infested waters. Put an ad in the paper, he'd said, for someone willing to brave that situation for ten minutes (or however long the plaintiff had been abandoned). Keep placing the ad and raising the pay until someone says yes. That's what it's worth. In law school she'd thought the professor clever. Today, she thought him glib. Even heartless. Too many personal factors would influence a person's response to such an ad, depending on how they valued life, how close they otherwise were to their end, how desperate their financial straits, how certain they were of rescue.

At the bank she stood in line while the three customers in front of her deposited checks, loudly recounted a hundred and fifty dollars in fives and tens, and bought a hefty stack of traveler's checks. She approached the teller, who was dressed in a uniform light blue blouse, and put the check on the counter with her deposit slip and savings passbook. The woman studied the check, looked up at her, and smiled broadly and unprofessionally. She asked her to wait a minute, and took the check to another woman, apparently her supervisor, who wore a navy suit with the bank's emblem on the pocket. The supervisor came to the teller's window.

"Ms. Bradley, why don't you come with me?"

"I just need to deposit the check," she said, holding her ground.

"Of course, but perhaps you'd be more comfortable in my office?"

Flora didn't know why she should be uncomfortable at the window. No one could see her transaction, but she decided to take the supervisor's advice, just in case. The supervisor came out to her side of the counter and led her to a glass office facing the customer lobby.

"You might want to put this in CDs rather than passbook savings," the supervisor said. "Let me show you what's available right now."

Flora sighed. She'd promised herself she would not become obsessed with the money, but she also saw that she shouldn't be stupid about it. If she wasn't going to spend it all at once--and how could she?--then it ought to be "working" for her. She remembered something from the gospels about buried treasure and agreed to a spread of CDs recommended by the supervisor.

The woman busied herself with the paperwork, and Flora checked her Blackberry for email and phone messages. She was mildly grateful that the banker didn't inquire as to the source of her millions. Coming from the lawyer's trust account, it was probably fairly obvious that she'd received a windfall of some kind. Windfall? Flora caught herself. A windfall would be undeserved. Hadn't she suffered for this cash? More than suffered. She'd been terrified. She would not have answered any professor's ad, at any price. No matter how many zeroes on her check, she'd been underpaid. That thought felt materialistic and greedy, unlike her or the person she wanted to be. She dug her nails into the banker's desk, anchoring herself against the quicksand of wealth.

An hour later, she emerged into the noontime traffic on the sidewalk, and headed towards her office. A block from the twenty-five story building where she'd been trapped, she stopped. Her stomach growled with adrenaline and her palms sweat.

It had taken her a year to go back to full-time work in the office. After the first six months, her supervisor Christine Wall, a woman seven years Flora's senior, had found some things for her to work on from home, to help ease her back. Then, a year and a week after the fire, Christine picked her up at her apartment to accompany her on her return.

"Try not to think about it," Christine had said as they were stopped at a crosswalk across from the building.

"Actually, my therapist said that was impossible. That I should confront the memory head-on so that it wouldn't haunt me," Flora said.

"Now that sounds like Pollyanna to me," Christine said, with the same matter-of-fact tone she used to tell a Cook County judge that he was wrong. "That's got to be a lot harder than just forgetting it."

The light turned but Flora didn't move, unable to forget and not certain of her courage.

"Walk," Christine said, pointing to the light. Flora frowned.

"I'm just reading," Christine corrected her tone, and Flora laughed. Christine put her arm around her shoulder and they crossed, the light flashing the countdown of seconds until it would say, "Don't Walk."

It was just about nine, and there was a small line of people entering the revolving doors to the building. Flora felt her heart pounding against her chest but the line moved so quickly, she was pushed inside as if this were a regular day. In the lobby there was a marble bench to the

right of the doors, and she sat down, trying to catch her breath. She was afraid she would hyperventilate and pass out, like she had in the stairwell.

Christine rushed to sit beside her and rub her back. “Breathe out,” she commanded, and Flora blew. “Again, slowly. Breathe out. Out.”

They sat together in silence, Flora breathing, picking at a hangnail, pulling on one hand and then the other, trying to still her tremors. Finally she rummaged in her purse for a brown paper bag. She squeezed it almost shut at the top and blew into it, inflating it like a balloon. After about ten minutes, Flora put the bag down. She yawned, exhausted by the rush of adrenaline and everything it had taken for her to stay and fight rather than flee. She looked at Christine and nodded with the sad resolve of a widow closing her husband’s casket. She smoothed out the bag and put it back in her purse.

Christine put her arm under Flora’s elbow, and they walked slowly to the elevator. A number of people on the floors above hers had escaped the fire by ignoring the loudspeaker’s command to stay put. Instead, they’d gathered their things and rode down to safety. Her floor, and eventually others, had been told to evacuate by the stairs, but the doors on the supposedly safe floors had been locked.

An elevator car was waiting, and Christine took Flora’s hand. She pushed number fifteen for their floor, and then, unnecessarily, the “close door” button. The car waited and Christine pushed “close door” again. When it finally obeyed, the ride to the offices of the legal aid office was over in a matter of seconds, and Flora felt relief even before the doors opened and her co-workers were there, cheering. They’d decorated her cube with yellow smiley Mylar balloons and a bouquet of huge, speckled pink stargazer lilies. In the main conference room, they’d laid out a spread of coffee cakes, muffins and fruit, and a huge sheet cake with creamy white icing and the legend, “Welcome Back Flora!” Tears came then, and she wiped her eyes, her colleagues falling into an awkward silence. Christine told her later that there had been a debate about what to do. One person from their floor, a junior secretary named Linnie, had died. Four more from the floors below and above them. Flora was the only other one from her floor hospitalized. Some of Flora’s co-workers had thought they should forget the past and let her slip back. Some had been concerned that she might be embarrassed in some odd way not to have escaped, like some of the others, and that calling attention to her return, even in a positive way, would plunge her back

into her dark and horrifying memories. . Still others simply wanted to make her feel welcomed and remembered, Christine had said. She'd cast the final vote for a party.

"Don't mind me," Flora said to her colleagues, breaking their silence. "My eyes water at the drop of a hat. I'm really happy to be back with you guys. Especially if there's cake for breakfast!"

"Want me to cut it for you?" a paralegal asked, and she said yes. Within fifteen minutes, everyone had gathered their food and drifted back to their cubicles and their work, most wishing her well, patting her on the back or giving her a quick hug, but a few, those closest to the young woman who'd died, nodded with the tight smiles she'd seen at wakes. They avoided prolonged eye contact, and she felt a pang of guilt and then resentment. It wasn't her fault she'd lived, and shouldn't be made to feel guilty about that. She had her own unspoken guilt to content with. She had no good explanation either for why she'd lived or for why she hadn't escaped with the others.

Christine walked her to her cubicle. "I know it's hard," she said. "I hope everyday will get a little better. Your clients need you--they've been driving Clive crazy, so check in with him and we can begin to get you back up to speed." She bent down and smelled the lilies. In the center of Flora's desk was a stack of files, topped by a paperweight in the shape of a fat cross with four curved V's, giving it eight points.

"The Florian Cross is from me," Christine said. "Don't lecture me about the separation of church and state. It's decorative. And only incidentally representative of the patron saint of firemen."

"I thought Christopher and all those kinds of saints were thrown out."

"I don't know about that, but since Florian's also the patron saint of brewers, he was probably in a protected class."

Flora laughed. The cross would be recognized by most as only of the Roman Empire, not as a religious symbol, and she appreciated that its true meaning was a secret between them, a symbol of a professional relationship which had grown into a deep friendship.

Now, having unburdened herself of the check, Flora faced the office building and began to cough. The city had made substantial changes in its zoning codes, so it was unlikely that she would ever be trapped in a stairwell again, even in the unlikely event of another fire in her

building--lightning never strikes twice--but every so often she flashed back to that evening and would have to duck into a bus stop, sit on the bench, and breathe into the brown paper bag she kept handy. Usually someone waiting at the stop would ask if she was OK, if they should call the paramedics, and she would politely decline. Once the paramedics had saved her life, but now the very sight of a uniform, whether on a policeman, a fire captain, or a paramedic, only deepened her panic. Today she was determined not to let the spiral begin, and so she turned a hundred and eighty degrees and walked away from the building at full speed. She was wearing modest two-inch heels, but after a few blocks of hitting the concrete, her feet hurt and she slowed, crossed the street and began her way back. It had been more than four years. She'd survived. She'd been compensated. Now, the challenge was to go on.

She made her way up to her office and worked through lunch to make up for the time she'd been out at her lawyer's and at the bank. At the end of the day, she walked the twenty-five minutes north to her high rise apartment at a leisurely pace, but still kicked off her shoes as soon as she got inside. In the kitchen, the message light on her phone was blinking. Some of her friends had given up landlines altogether, but all too often she let her cell phone run dry and twice she'd had to get a new one because the previous one had drowned, once in a spilled diet cola and once in a freak accident while sailing with friends on Lake Michigan. She liked the security of a phone attached to a wire that was always on, although security against what was hard to say: her building employed a twenty-four hour doorman, and if she slipped in the shower, she'd be a long way from the phone in the kitchen.

She pushed the button, expecting to hear mostly sales calls and perhaps a check-in from her brother, and opened the refrigerator door. While she studied the contents, a voice she didn't recognize her addressed her, "Floral."

"I hope it's OK if I call you Floral," the voice continued. Absolutely no one who knew her well could have mistaken her name for Floral—was that even a name? Most didn't question that Flora was correct. She closed the refrigerator door with a carton of chocolate chip yogurt in hand, and sat at the little ice-cream parlor style table that sat in the nook of protruding windows at the opposite end of the kitchen. From there she could see just a slice of the lake near the Ohio Street beach. "First, let me say how blessed we are that you survived that terrible fire. And I'm thinking that you may be looking for ways to express your gratitude to the Almighty. As the Proverbs say, 'Honor the Lord from your wealth and from the first of all your produce...' I'm

with Evangelical World Redemption, and our mission is to spread the Good Word of Our Lord Jesus Christ throughout the world. We send missionaries primarily to Africa and Asia, and would like to build a school in Nigeria, and we think \$500,000 would do it. Since you have recently been blessed with that settlement from the County....” In a panic, she hit delete. How dare they? There had been stories in the paper that morning stating the gross amount of the settlement being made by the various defendants and their insurance companies (but not the individuals’ names), and she knew that, like a lottery winner, many of her friends would feel she could afford now to support their various causes, small theatre groups and school bands and homeless shelters, that sort of thing, and she would, of course, buy their raffle tickets and chocolate bars, but she had not expected unrelated and perhaps bogus requests, although she saw now that she should have. Was it bogus? Of course, she told herself. “We think \$500,000 would do it?” Who calls up someone they don’t know and asks for half a million dollars and says “do it”? Shouldn’t they take you to lunch first?

Another voice intruded on her thoughts. “Hello, Floraletta. My name is Henry Block and I’m a friend of your brother. He’s had a little trouble, a minor traffic accident here in Joliet, and he didn’t have his driver’s license with him. He’s in jail and needs to post bond. He asks if you could wire \$25,000 to me, so I can get him out. He asks if you could do it right away. You can send the wire to....” Scam! Her brother, a city boy, would never venture sixty miles outside of the city. He probably couldn’t even find it on a map. Even if he were in jail for not having his driver’s license with him, it wouldn’t take twenty-five thousand to bail him out. She sped through three other such calls, including a legitimate reminder that her \$200 pledge to the Greater Chicago Food Depository was due.

Her cell phone rang and it was her best friend Barbara. “Wanna take me to dinner?” she deadpanned.

“At Les Nomades?” Flora asked, naming one of the city’s most expensive restaurants.

“Gosh, I’m not dressed for that. How about the chef’s salad at Jake’s?” Barbara was constantly watching her weight, hovering always about fifteen pounds over what the women’s magazines tagged as her ideal. Flora could pretty much eat whatever she wanted without taking on extra pounds, but she appreciated Barbara’s encouragement to eat more vegetables.

They met at a casual restaurant half-way between them. As they opened their menus, which they both knew by heart, Barbara said, “Just to be clear. This is my treat. Next time, Les Nomades. On you.”

“No, I’m the one....”

Barbara held up her hand in a stop sign. “They are going to be coming at you, kiddo, and you’ve got to nip that generous do-gooder in you in the bud. Just because you got a little settlement, doesn’t mean you always have to pay. It’s yours, remember. No one else is entitled to it.”

“It wasn’t little.”

Barbara made a face. “But it wasn’t a hundred million either. All I’m saying is that you could piss it away or give it away in a year, easy.”

Flora told her about the calls and Barbara shook her head. “I think you ought to make a plan and stick to it. Everybody who calls is going to have a sob story, and you should decide right now, up front, who you want to give money to and who you don’t. You can’t give to everything. Plus, I think you ought to do something for yourself. Buy a condo, at least. And some new clothes.”

“What’s wrong with my clothes?” Flora asked.

“A little student-y.”

“I haven’t been a student in eight years,” Flora answered.

Barbara pushed her glasses down her nose. “I believe you’ve made my point.”

“Okay,” Flora conceded. “But unlike you, I don’t work for a fancy schmancy law firm,” Flora said.

“Neither do I,” Barbara said, raising her water glass in toast. “Today, I made partner!”

“Wow!” Flora cheered, clapping with genuine happiness for her friend, who’d worked incredibly hard, billing more than twenty-two hundred hours a year ever since they’d graduated from law school. Making partner was not only a prestigious professional accomplishment, but a lucrative one as well.

“So what are you going to do with *your* profits?” Flora asked and smiled.

“By the time I pay my capital buy-in and my quarterly withholding taxes and my own insurance, I hear the first year is a loss,” she said, repeating the complaint she’d heard from the junior partners before her. “But I might treat myself to a new killer outfit for the new partners’

party,” she added, “if you’d want to go shopping with me on Saturday.” They made a plan for the weekend, and Flora’s spirits were buoyed. Sometimes when they’d shopped for Barbara’s “big” professional occasions--her first closing, her first new client pitch, her first out-of-town continuing legal education--Flora had felt like a little sister watching her elder get dressed for a prom she would never be old enough to attend. Barbara’s office had gone casual at least five years ago, but Barbara insisted they meant “country club casual” and she did her best to be recognized as a member of the right club, and therefore older and more partner-like than her colleagues. “It’s a huge place,” Barbara said. “First impressions matter.”

Flora’s office was small in number, compared to Barbara’s, but still she thought that there was something to Barbara’s theory. If she went to court against a landlord’s counsel who was dressed like Barbara, the landlord had an advantage. It was not simply a matter of vanity that Flora didn’t want to look like her clients, but still she’d always shopped the sales, never bought designer, and pretty much stuck to the basics, navy, black and gray.

The week passed quickly for Flora under the crush of new files being placed on her desk. There was a minor panic on her floor on Thursday morning when two fire trucks, three ambulances and three squad cars roared to a stop in front of the building kiddy-corner from them. About ten o’clock, after the morning rush, an elderly person had driven up on the sidewalk and through the plate glass window of a fast food restaurant. Miraculously no one was killed, but for a few minutes, Flora was surrounded by her fellow workers, assuring her their building was not involved.

“Thank you,” she’d said repeatedly, but her hands shook and despite her best efforts, tears flooded her face. A couple of the more emotional women in the group started crying too, and when the elevator doors opened and a woman in an expensive purple knit suit and matching feathered hat stepped up to the receptionist’s desk, they all stopped abruptly, including Flora, who started laughing and said to her co-workers, “Welcome to Legal Aid, where your lawyers are as sad as you are.”

“But not as well dressed,” Christine said, tugging at the hem of the gray gabardine jacket she wore over black slacks.

About an hour later, Rachel, a paralegal who interviewed potential clients to determine the nature of their problems, came to Flora’s desk. “The lady in the hat could use your help,” she said.

Flora looked at her stack of files. In the normal course, Rachel would schedule an appointment for the woman which would show up automatically on her calendar.

“She’s really nice. I thought maybe you could squeeze her in right now?”

Rachel was their most experienced paralegal, and Flora was inclined to try to keep her happy. “For you?” she said. “Anything.”

In one of the client interview rooms, Rachel introduced the woman in purple to Flora, as *Mrs. Bernice Johnson*, although it would later come to light that Mr. Johnson had left her as soon as she’d gotten pregnant with her son Zeke, who suffered from mental illness and was, at least indirectly, the source of Mrs. Johnson’s problems. On closer inspection, Flora saw that the purple suit was by St. John, a designer way beyond her own means, at least until this week.

“I love your suit,” Flora said, offering the woman a seat. Rachel left, and it occurred to Flora that Mrs. Johnson was getting special treatment precisely because she was dressed the way she was. She might be poor enough to qualify for legal aid, but somehow she’d managed to clothe herself as if she were herself an attorney at Barbara’s firm.

“Worth an entire paycheck,” Mrs. Johnson said, and Flora nodded. “I’m a good shopper.”

Mrs. Johnson smoothed her collar, and Bernice noticed her manicured nails, not overly long, but pearly white, clearly fresh.

For some of Flora’s clients, “good shopper” meant “good shoplifter,” and, perhaps reading Flora’s face, Mrs. Johnson quickly added, “Resale shops. In nice neighborhoods like Lincoln Park. Especially if someone rich has died.”

“Well, you have a good eye, Mrs. Johnson,” Flora said, wondering what Barbara would think about their hitting a few of those before the Michigan Avenue department stores.

Bernice Johnson had a story typical of many of the cases in Flora’s office. She had a relatively low-paid job as a clerk for the county hospital, but it had good benefits, and over the past couple of years her son’s mental illness had taken a turn for the worse, so she’d taken all of the leave she was entitled to. Then, after her last leave, she was fired. For no good reason.

“I’m not asking for no windfall,” Mrs. Johnson said. “All I want is my job back. I’m a good worker and I like to work. My son is taken care of. I can work now, and I need to work cause we’ve got expenses coming up. Can you help me?”

“We can try, Mrs. Johnson,” Flora said. “You could be entitled to reinstatement and to lost wages, but the county can be a formidable opponent, and we’ll need to know everything about your work history as honestly as you can tell us. OK?”

Clients often lied. Once, one of Flora’s clients had lied about having a high school diploma, which was a requirement for the job he’d applied for. Or sometimes they left key facts out of their stories, facts like prior felony convictions that shot holes in their cases. “Bad facts” in lawyer-speak. Mrs. Johnson, dressed in St. John’s, was either a much better con than most clients she’d ever had, or the most credible. Flora tended to believe Mrs. Johnson, and Flora found herself looking forward to remaking herself on the weekend, the final step, she hoped, in her recovery.