

Bedtime Stories for Grown-Up Girls

A Novel by Ethel Gordon

Part One: Now and Then

Chapter 3: The Triangle

Now: November 2004, Lenox, Massachusetts

Lillian sat in the back of the Church of the Holy Cross and waited until the service began. The front pews were jammed with mourners standing in line to pass the casket (not open, she noticed) and offer their condolences to Senator Bretton. White lilies were piled on the coffin and banked in front of the altar that was ablaze with white and gold candles. *Looks like a wedding*, Lillian thought, yawning. *Very dramatic... totally Marjorie's style*. There was a steady murmur of hushed crowd voices and a shuffle of feet down the center aisle, but Lillian did not recognize anyone in the pews around her.

From a distance Bobbie Bretton was as handsome as ever, black hair almost silver, dark skin still tanned and tight, although dark glasses covered his heartthrob blue eyes. He looked slightly stooped and had put on some weight, but the trademark Italian silk suit still fit impeccably. He stood next to the coffin, accepting the condolences of perfect strangers with a disarming, slightly crooked smile, for over 20 minutes as Lillian watched, incognito, she hoped, from a distance of several rows. His quiet equanimity was infectious; Lillian found herself thinking that despite what must have been a marriage from hell, Marjorie was, after all, his partner. Maybe Cydney should have just bowed out of the picture long ago and left their marriage alone.

It was hard to imagine a more unlikely long-term affair than Robert and Cydney. Robert was the calmest man she had ever met and Cydney was a force of nature. 'Portrait of the Artist as a Gathering Tornado', as Lillian used to describe Cydney in the years when they had somehow managed to run a business together. Of course, Marjorie was no shy and retiring character herself. Maybe calm guys need hellions to keep their blood pressure up, who knows? Lillian scanned the crowd for the second time, looking for Cydney, and although she hadn't set eyes on her for years, how could she not recognize someone who -- for almost a decade -- had been closer to her than her husband?

The line at the front of the church was beginning to thin out, as people took their seats in the blonde wood pews. The priest and his altar boys dressed in white, tiptoed around the altar and the sacristy, preparing the accoutrements of High Mass. Purple light and haze streamed in from the stained glass windows arched around the alcove in back of the altar. Lillian settled down in the hard wood bench, wrapping the lining of her rain coat around her legs, and realized that she hadn't stepped foot in a church in years. Did she miss it? Strange question for someone who wasn't Catholic.

This was a hard one to explain: her Jewish friends could not understand her attraction to a faith best known for the Spanish Inquisition, and her Catholic friends thought she

was nuts to have attended Catholic schools as the lone Jew in the first place. The explanation was simple really; Lillian was raised, or – as she often said -- benignly neglected, by her eccentric grandparents and a houseful of devout servants in the very Catholic province of Quebec while her own parents married, divorced, remarried, and lived a large life elsewhere that mostly didn't include Lillian until someone noticed that she was awfully fond of her rosary -- and wasn't this peculiar for a nice Jewish girl. But by then the damage was done, and no amount of dedicated Bat Mitzvah preparation could get rid of it.

Her former business partner, the missing Cydney Mallone, lapsed French-Canadian and Irish Catholic to the bone, refused to allow the occasional hapless nun who wandered into their former East Cambridge factory to leave religious literature behind, should a misguided attempt at missionary zeal lead them to the run-down artists' complex in the first place. Lillian couldn't help it; her heart leapt at the sight of nuns in full habit, and she intervened to accept the offered literature with questions about the Holy Blood of Lost Lambs and the mysteries of Stigmata, while forgetting all about payroll and eighteen-wheelers rolling up to the loading dock.

But, Lillian reasoned, this was about the only time she slacked off, and how could you compare that with the chaos of Cydney who could go to an ATM machine on the way to an important business meeting, find herself in the middle of a bank robbery, chase down the culprit while wearing very high heels, deliver him to the police, and then show up at a Dunkin Donuts 10 minutes late for a meeting without a regular excuse, like... "Sorry, I forgot my wallet," or ... "the car wouldn't start." No, Cydney would just tell the truth – it wouldn't occur to her to do otherwise -- which usually involved either the cops, or a narrow brush with cheerful death, or a rare animal escaped from the zoo and now residing in her living room. It turned out to be a great way to charm men – which Lillian did not need -- but a non-starter if you wanted them to invest in your company, which she did.

Lillian's reverie was broken by Robert Bretton's standing down from the side of the coffin, and seating himself slowly in the front of the church. The priest put on his glasses, cleared his throat and began: "Dear friends. We have come on this sad day to commit to eternal rest our dear sister, Marjorie Miranda Taylord Wallace Bretton, whose life has been taken from us so tragically..."

"Miranda huh?" said a throaty voice just behind Lillian. "Sounds like a goddamn law firm if you ask me."

"Hey Cyd," said Lillian without looking around. "I knew you wouldn't miss this for the world."
