

Bedtime Stories for Grown-Up Girls

A Novel by Ethel Gordon

Part One: Now and Then

Chapter 4: Origins and...Then: April, 1982, Lawrell, MA

Cydney Mallone got a call from her mother, Bianca, to come home because something really peculiar had happened to her grandmother, Pauline.

"Call a doctor, Mom, don't call me. I'm forty miles away."

"She's not sick," said Bianca, "but something amazing has happened."

Cydney had enough problems without dropping everything in the middle of a workday in Cambridge and driving up to Lawrell to hold her mother's hand. "Just tell me what it is Mom, or I'm not going anywhere."

"It's a package from Pauline's sister, Isabelle, who's never sent her a thing in her life. It's full of expensive looking stuff. I'm sure it's fake, but what do I know? Come on up and tell us what you think."

Cydney rolled her eyes. "Fake what...fake fur? Fake flowers... fake what, Mom? Tell me or I'm not coming."

"Well, fake jewelry, it looks like. Big diamonds. Pearls."

Cydney perked up. "Is this the sister who lived with the rich old guy for years and then married him a few months ago?"

"Yup. This package is postmarked and insured from the Bahamas. What do you think?" Bianca sounded slightly out of breath.

"I think they're probably hot and you should bury them in the backyard before the FBI gets there, that's what I think." Cydney considered hanging up; her mother called her a dozen times a week to complain about everything from the price of oranges to the neighbor's dog.

But Bianca had a different edge to her voice. "Will you be serious and just drive up? Your grandmother is really in a tizzy. She keeps saying this is a bad omen. I think she's about to have an asthma attack."

"Alright, alright, I'll be there." Cydney reluctantly agreed.

She hung up and promptly forgot this conversation, because her long time lover, Robert Bretton, called five minutes later to cancel dinner for the third time that week. Cydney was furious.

"How long am I supposed to put up with this, Robert? Either you're getting divorced or you're not. According to what I've been reading in the papers lately, you are the ideal

family man who is obviously not about to get a divorce. I mean, what would your ideal wife do without you? Go back to sucking someone else's blood..."

Robert was evidently in a room full of innocent bystanders who were on the verge of becoming political supporters and couldn't say much in his own defense. Cydney took full advantage. "So, look...you have some big decisions to make, and it's beginning to sound like one decision hangs on the other. Can't be in the midst of a divorce and run for the Senate at the same time, right? Well, just don't expect me to be there when you stumble across the finish line."

Robert managed to whisper, cupped hands over the phone, "Oh come on, Cyd, I think you have a secret desire to live close to the corridors of power in Washington."

Cydney was not about to be sweet-talked. "The only corridors I'm familiar with are in an old brewery, as you know only too well since you bought this dump and made me the landlord, or should I say janitor."

"C'mon, you love that place!" Robert did his best to be charming. "Better than the Combat Zone. Or Lawrell. Remember how much you love Lawrell?"

At the mention of their mutual hometown, Cydney realized that she had promised her mother she'd be there an hour ago. "Oh shit, I gotta run. Something about Pauline and a box of pearls. I'm serious, Robert. We need to talk. Soon. Find a secure phone or I won't be here when you get back."

Cydney hung up and dashed around her loft grabbing her jacket and pocketbook from underneath the furry bellies of a litter of kittens, muttering to herself. After years of dangling this guy at the end of a chain, he finally agrees to divorce his wife and then BAM! He's being drafted for Senator -- not that he wants it, but he's such a fine, upstanding, clean-cut, successful, local boy-makes-good businessman, that he's a shoe-in as last minute compromise candidate for the Republican primary next month. But wait until they find out about Cydney -- who would not make anyone's list as woman of the year -- the press will have a field day.

Cydney's long time nemesis, Marjorie, Robert's very wealthy wife and owner of Taylord Mills, would never stand for it. She hadn't put up with years of Robert's screwing around so that she could be blown off now that he's got a shot at the big time. Nope. Cydney knew she would be hearing from Marjorie any day now. Maybe she should just pack her bags and leave town.

When Cydney arrived at her grandmother's house, high on a hill overlooking the Merrimack River in Lawrell, packed in tight next to similar three-deckers, she sat in her parked car and stared up at the front porch. It had been awhile since she'd come to Pauline's. The junk pile on the teetering front porch was even higher than she remembered -- layers of cardboard boxes filled with old newspapers, empty diaper boxes brimming with rags. It would not surprise her if the neighbors had called the Board of Health.

Cydney walked past the junk on the porch and rapped at the kitchen window.

"Hey", she yelled, cupping her hands to her mouth, "when are you going to get rid of this shit?" Pauline, she knew, had the screwy idea that the more stuff she piled up and the uglier her house, the less likely it was that the city would repossess it for non-payment of taxes. Cydney had pointed out to her repeatedly that the city doesn't care what it looks like; if they think they can squeeze money out of it, they'll take it. Especially now that half the town was Puerto Rican and the rest was Cambodian. Pauline, to her credit, was full of sympathy for any immigrant group no matter how much they were hated.

"Just you remember, young lady, that's what I am, an immigrant. And your grandfather too. All your grandparents."

"All except one, Gram. Don't forget that." Cydney had a grandmother somewhere in the South Seas (if she was still alive), a native Samoan who had given birth to Cydney's father after a torrid liaison with an Irish sea-faring sailor. Cydney considered this to be the missing link to her past and the key to her contrasting beauty – thick black hair, pale skin, green eyes in almond slits, wide lips, thin nose -- she looked like one of those cut-out-the-best-part-and-paste-it-all together creations.

"OK what's up?" she asked. "You guys dragged me away from a busy work day for a parcel from the Bahamas. What's in it? Shells, I bet. Coconuts. I couldn't trust the two of you to recognize a pearl if you bit into it."

Cydney's mother, Bianca, her short red hair rolled up in pink spongy curlers, had just given herself a manicure and was waving her fingers delicately in the air. She looked her youngest child square in the eye. "I don't know how I could have made it without you, raising four daughters all by myself, as though your father was ever around. You were a big help, you were. Hell on wheels. Can't trust me... who does she think she is?" Bianca said, appealing to Pauline.

Pauline adored Cydney and rarely sided with Bianca when the two of them started in on each other. "Not again, please. I need some help, not the two of you fighting all the time."

"Alright, alright," said Cydney, reaching into her grandmother's purse and pulling out a cigarette, "I was just checking to make sure you were both alive."

"Well..." Bianca waited, her hands now folded primly on the table.

"Well what?" Cydney rummaged further in the purse until Pauline yanked it away from her.

"Well, ARE we?" Bianca glared at her, arching her right eyebrow, which was painted on.

"Oh for chrissake will you just show me the box please," Cydney said, and without waiting for an answer wandered over to the stove with the cigarette dangling from her mouth and lit it from the gas-fired front burner.

"Will you stop doing that," Bianca demanded. "You're gonna burn down the house. I hope you never do it at your place."

"You're right, Mom," said Cydney, pulling up a stool and hooking her feet into the bottom rung, "I never do it at my place because the stove doesn't work. That's the trouble with places that sound exotic, like a loft in an old brewery. Sometimes I feel as though I

live on a stage set; it all looks real, but somehow, it just doesn't come to life. Know what I mean?"

Bianca shook her head. "No, I don't know what you mean. Now will you stop blowing that stuff in my face and sit down here where I can see you?"

The three women had their height in common; Cydney was the giant of the group at 5'3". Pauline shuffled out of the kitchen in her old pink slippers that had once been fluffy as foxtails, and padded back with a shoebox. It was covered in plain brown paper marked with black ink, green customs slips and several gaily-colored stamps. She set it on the table and squeezed herself back into an armchair. They all stared at it. Cydney pulled the package toward her and flipped open the lid. She tossed out a wad of tissue paper and an envelope, and then lifted out a red velvet box about the size of a paperback novel. She looked up. Pauline and Bianca leaned forward.

Cydney had never seen anything like it. For a full minute after she snapped the top back she stared. She wasn't sure but her jaw may have dropped to her chest. She lifted out the necklace and dangled it from both index fingers. Three gray baroque pearls with a luster like the sea at sunset and each the size of a thumbnail, formed the bodies of three hummingbirds sucking nectar from three flowers. The birds' feathers were crusted with seed pearls and emeralds, the crest of their heads fashioned from French enamel in blue and green. Their throats flamed crimson with tiny inlaid rubies, and their eyes glittered with diamond chips. Their gold beaks rested on delicate scarlet stamens set in gold filigree and porcelain, and, as Cydney held them up to the light, they swung gently from a diamond chain.

"Wow..." breathed Cydney, "will you look at this. This came in a shoebox? Your sister must have been out of her mind. I told you it was probably stolen."

"So, you think it's real?" asked Bianca.

"Look at the workmanship. It's gotta be made by hand." She looked at the inside. "There's a hallmark, looks like 750 -- that's 18K gold, and something else...Gram, get me a magnifying glass." Bianca and Pauline waited patiently while Cydney held the necklace upside down and stared at it through the glass.

"Looks like... *Atlier Tzig*...this is the wrong side...there... *Atelier Tzigane!* How's my French, Gram? Think I'll pass? *Atelier Tzigane*. Shouldn't be hard to look that up. Let's call Shreve, Crump and Lowe."

"Who are they? Lawyers?" Pauline wanted to know. "Because I don't want no lawyers here on this."

"Gram," Cydney put the glass down on the table, "Shreve's is the biggest jewelry store in Boston. Don't you read the papers?"

Cydney called Shreve's and spent 15 minutes on the phone with the appraisal department looking up the *Atelier*, the year, 1925, and the Winged Lion Hallmarks that followed. She made a series of noncommittal, 'uh huh's' and 'hmmmm's' over the phone that kept Bianca and Pauline completely in the dark. Then she described the necklace and the matching pieces, bracelet, ring, earrings, all of which she was by now wearing,

dragging the phone into the bathroom to stare at herself in the mirror like a child wearing her mother's best forbidden clothes.

"So what's it worth, do you think?" she said into the receiver at her collarbone while she preened. "Yeah, at auction, probably. That's more money than retail, right?" She nodded for a long time, said thank you, and hung up, nonplussed.

Bianca and Pauline looked crestfallen as Cydney returned to the kitchen. "Not that much, huh?" Pauline said.

"Nope gram, not that much. Just about...oh...depends on the market...it's a rare piece... collector's item ...of course it's worth more as a set. Could be at least eight or nine HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS!!!" Cydney stood there with her arms flung open, waiting for them to start screaming and jumping up and down like contestants at a game show. They didn't. They sat and stared.

Pauline sighed. "I knew it. They're fake. Ahhhh Isabelle," she said leaning her head in her hands, "but they sure are pretty. So what? I'll wear them for Christmas."

"GRAM! Did you hear me? They're worth a fortune!"

They didn't buy a word of it, until Cydney dove through the tissue paper and retrieved the envelope that was still sealed and addressed, simply, Pauline, L'ainee, or the oldest. Which she was, oldest of 10 siblings, while Isabelle was the youngest. Cydney thought it strange that Isabelle would send a letter to Pauline -- who was illiterate and had never learned to read in the frozen Quebec of her childhood. Pauline had been too necessary in a household where the mother kept popping babies every 15 months. As the eldest Pauline raised every one from the time she was four. Unthinkable that she should be ripped away and sent to study book learning. But Isabelle, evidently, did not know this about the big sister she had only seen from her blue baby eyes. By the time Isabelle was old enough to go to school, Pauline had married and moved down to the mill towns of New England.

Cydney picked up the letter. Pauline would not admit that she couldn't read. "I don't have my reading glasses, ma p'tite, you read it for me."

"Sure gram," Cydney played along, "whatever you say."

March 20, 1982

Eleuthera, The Bahamas

Ma chere soeur Pauline:

I am sending along two things: One is a set of jewelry that belonged to my husband's first wife, Lady Alice Kuper. She had no daughters and Sir Geoffrey gave them to me as a wedding present. Since we married and left for the Bahamas, he's been very unpredictable and I am sending them to you because I know they will be safe. In my heart I know they belong to his granddaughter, Lily, but this isn't the right time to contact her. Geoffrey is furious with me whenever I mention it. Also in this box is a sealed envelope with my Last Will and a copy of Sir Geoffrey's latest will, signed and dated as of last

week and witnessed by a lawyer in Nassau. Well, not to be morbid, but you never can tell... especially at his age.

Aren't the hummingbirds beautiful? They remind me of the birds in the morning glories climbing the trellis on the front porch at home. Do you remember? It's been so long since we were both there. And we've taken such different paths in life. Oh well... please hold these beautiful birds for me until I see you again.

*A bientot; adieu;
Ta petite Isabelle*

"Well," said Cydney, dropping the sheet of onion skin, and picking up the thick, sealed envelope, "I wasn't far wrong, was I? Stolen."

Pauline looked worried. "What should we do?"

"Well you can't send it back to a boat; it doesn't have an address. Just do like she said until she gets back in touch with you." Cydney said. "By the way, if the old geezer's changed his will to leave Isabelle all the money, the family will have it contested up the wazoo, so don't plan any retirement homes in Florida just yet. I say hang on to the jewels until you know Isabelle's back in Canada and then send them on to her."

Pauline shook her head. "There's something wrong here. That letter was too final. Isabelle knows there's something wrong too."

"Oh, come on, Gram. You said yourself you haven't seen her since she was a baby! The only thing wrong is that we're up here feeling sorry for her and she's down there having dinner served to her on a private yacht. Wrap these rocks back up and put them away someplace safe." Cydney stood up and got ready to leave.

Pauline looked panicked. "I don't have anyplace safe!"

"Well, no one in their right mind would try to rob this house. It looks like it's been condemned." But that would not calm Pauline down, and she insisted that Cydney take the shoebox home with her and put the contents in her safe deposit box.

Cydney looked at her watch. "It's almost 2:00. I'll never get to a safe deposit box before the bank closes. I don't want the responsibility of keeping this stuff."

Bianca intervened. "Your grandmother is very upset. Pretty soon she'll have an asthma attack. Will that make you happy? Just take the box and get to the bank when you can."

Cydney started to argue and gave up, realizing that neither of them had any idea of the kind of neighborhood she lived in, on the top floor of a converted brewery in East Cambridge. If she wanted to get out of there, she had better take the damn box and go. This made her very nervous.

What if she left it in her car and forgot to lock the door?

What if she hid it so well among the other boxes of old running shoes that she forgot where it was? A million things could go wrong, and this was the most potential money Cydney had ever seen in one place in her life. She had better write a large note to herself to get this to the bank tomorrow morning. But first she had to remember where she kept the key to the vault.

When Cydney returned to the third floor loft where she lived and worked as a set designer she found two messages on her answering machine. One was from Robert saying that he had been scheduled for out of town fund-raising trips for the next two weeks and felt as though his life was being taken over by his handlers. The other was from his wife, Marjorie, saying that Cydney should expect a visit from her accountant, and she had better pay attention because she had a few debts to settle. More than a few debts. More like close to a million bucks in loans that Robert had given Cydney over the years to start various businesses. Loans that needed to be repaid now that his Senate race made his finances an open book.

Cydney unplugged the answering machine and considered throwing it out the window. How could this happen to her NOW? Now that Robert was finally successful enough to leave Marjorie. Now that Cydney had finally found a promising business venture with an uptight but pretty sensible partner. And even though she hardly knew Lillian Kupersmith, Cydney wanted to keep her new partner in the dark about the whole Robert-Marjorie thing. Probably also best to keep Lillian in the dark about how broke Cydney was and how much more broke she would be if Marjorie tried to wring this money out of her. After all, Lillian had come up with the seed money to start the Baby Grand Company. All Cydney had to do was follow through with the design and implementation.

Cydney stood up in a daze and tried to remember what it was she had to take care of immediately. The shoebox fell out of her lap and the contents spilled out on the floor. Rubies and pearls. A rare Art Deco collection worth almost a million bucks. She stared at the necklace, transfixed, for several minutes.

She didn't like what she was thinking.
