

Last night I dreamt I went to Queens Boulevard again. With the stately steps of a bride, I crossed to my parents' apartment house in Forest Hills. Its ten stories of once-red brick had darkened from decades of traffic exhaust, but in the dream it gleamed mahogany. A few doors down from the building, the awning on Perlmutter's Comfort Footwear, bent out of shape in some long-ago hurricane, still groaned. But in my REM sleep, the grinding metal sounded rich and Bach-like, a phrase from a cello suite. Not only that: the orthopedic shoes in Perlmutter's window looked so exquisite to me I thought (or maybe said aloud), *They deserve an exhibit at the Met*. Right next door was Norman's Coffee Shop, where my mother warned me never to eat. But the aroma was irresistible and, as I stood on the median between east- and westbound traffic, I unzipped my backpack and discovered a perfect grilled cheese sandwich.

"I dreamed I was living in Queens again," I told Josh the next morning. We were in the bathroom, at our separate sinks on opposite walls. The countertops were pink-veined marble, as was the floor. Not really garish: his late wife Dawn's style had been safely upscale suburban, which meant excess that never shouted, *Hey look, great taste!* It only whispered it. (Poor Dawn. When she suddenly, shockingly died during

a Pilates session from what turned out to be a theretofore undetected congenital coronary artery abnormality, everyone was stunned. Their friends told Josh and each other: *She was the last person in the world you'd think would die young.* Eliza was five years old then.)

Still, a couple of times when I was alone, sitting on the toilet in its own vestibule, I peered out into the huge, polished marble box and saw less a master bath than a family mausoleum. (Dawn herself was in Mount Eden Cemetery in Westchester. She'd grown up in Scarsdale and had once joked she didn't want to be buried with Josh's Grampy Seymour et al. and spend eternity on Long Island.)

As usual, Josh was far ahead of me, already showered, a towel wrapped around about half of why I'd married him. He was shaking aftershave, limey and rummy, into his palm. That sounds like something you'd say meh to at a Virgin Islands happy hour, but this came in a stout English bottle and smelled expensive, which it undoubtedly was.

"What were you doing in Queens again?" he asked. "Was I there?"

I squeezed a squiggle of Crest 3D White onto my brush, which I held aloft like Lady Liberty's torch. "No, just me. I was crossing the boulevard and all of a sudden the world's best grilled cheese sandwich was in my hand."

Tweet-tweet. Outside the arched window over the Jacuzzi, there was a blue sky with cotton-ball clouds. It was a prime May morning. A choir of local birds was serenading us from the branches of a sycamore and a cup-and-saucer magnolia. Or something like that: after three years of marriage and suburban life, I was still working on tree and flower names.

"God," he said. "I don't think I've had a grilled cheese since... I was up at Cambridge." That meant Harvard. Simply by his not saying the name, it boomed and echoed off the walls. Not that Josh was consciously boasting. Four years in college there plus three years in law school had given his DNA a crimson tinge. Maybe that Cambridge moniker was an

act of charity, to save others the humiliation that they'd gone to some lesser institution. Like Stanford. I was always tempted to come back with: *When I was over in Flushing.*

Josh was no snob. The other half of the reason I married him (once I got over the shock and flattery of his wanting to marry me) was his character: Decency, like treating people up and down the social ladder with equal respect. He was sincere, responsible, and an equal opportunity listener to women and men. It was a given I wanted marriage, a normal life. There was nothing more I thought I wanted than what Josh offered.

When Dawn died suddenly, Josh traded in a partnership at a white-shoe Manhattan firm for a federal judgeship so he wouldn't have to travel and be away from his daughter. It meant a four-mil pay cut, but he was a genuinely good father. True, his lifestyle didn't have to change since both he and Dawn had been born into what I'd only heard about: family money. Not major wealth, like oil gushing from the ground for the Rockefellers, but Tiny Togs (his family) and Cap'n Jake's Cough Drops (hers) were still in business and replenishing third-generation trusts.

His colleagues from the law firm and on the bench routinely said he was brilliant. However, since his brilliance was in jurisprudence, what I saw outside the courtroom was your basic smart person. Josh could fit in with any group, could talk the talk on sports, politics, kids, cars. If an arcane subject arose—such as the time a neighbor explained that she was raising Sussex chickens—he'd ask questions, genuinely curious.

Josh was a touch over six feet, but too honest to call himself six foot one. His body was that male ideal, an inverted isosceles triangle. People constantly went on about his being handsome, as in: *Oh my gawd. your husband is stunning.* Jaws slackened because of Josh's green eyes; they were mesmerizing, like polished jade.

Truthfully? His pedigree, his looks, and his being such a clear winner in life's lottery were definitely alluring. But I also fell for Josh because I fell in love with Eliza. The horror-movie stepdaughter I dreaded—a

nine-year-old with a Colt semiauto carbine on her shoulder ready to go against any woman moving in on her father, or a bratty, entitled rich kid—never materialized. Blessedly, she was not a precocious child who could navigate a cocktail party. Eliza was just an ordinary brown-eyed, curly-haired girl with a genuine smile and nice enough manners. No star quality, not even best supporting.

Even the youngest child who loses a parent never gets over the loss. But as memories faded, Dawn became less of a real person. She was the sum of all the stories Eliza had been told about her: a distant, benevolent presence. To Eliza's mind, Dawn was more of a tennis-playing guardian angel than an idealized, perfect dead mother who could never be replaced.

Just a few hours after I met Eliza for the first time at the house on Long Island, she said, "My dad told me it was okay if I asked to see your badge." Sure: at that point, I was still with the bureau. My cover was outreach to Arabic-speaking communities: *As-salamu alaykum. I'm Corie, your friend from the FBI.* I taught her my flipping-it-open technique, and she kept practicing saying, "Eliza Geller, special agent." When I caught Josh's beaming smile, the glint of excitement in his eye, I figured he and I were a done deal.

And we were a done deal, though when his eyes caught mine that morning in the bathroom mirror, he wasn't so much beaming as affectionately crinkling up one corner of his mouth. I watched as he ended his daily bathroom routine—squeezing a teensy dab of gel into his left hand, rubbing his palms in circles to heat it, then cautiously running his fingers through his hair so as not to look like one of those mousse men. "What's on your calendar today?" he asked. Then answered: "Right, it's Wednesday. Your group." The suburban self-employed at their weekly lunch. As he walked out of the bathroom into the room behind it—one giant walk-in closet—he couldn't avoid my response, a

groan. So he said, “If you say it’s boring and you’re always dreading it, why don’t you quit?”

A judicious question.

Five hours later, I was on the road, early for lunch. Even if I dragged my feet, I’d be on time. True, I could stroll over to Manhasset Bay for a couple of minutes and watch sunbeams exploding on the caps of waves, inhale the aroma of washed-up mussel shells. I’d be a little late to lunch, but at least I’d feel alive. Because right then, I was already numb with pre-boredom, knowing too well what the next hour and a half would bring.

I heard my name shouted across the two lanes of Shorehaven’s Main Street: “Corie! Caaaw-reee! Over here.” A squawk, as if one of the more clever gulls had mastered English.

Even before I turned, I knew it was Phoebe Melowicz, eBay reseller with a 99.7 percent positive feedback. Ever on the lookout, her head swiveling right-left-right, she waited for a flatulent minivan, a rumbling fish-delivery truck, and then a top-down BMW convertible (its panache diminished by its driver, a guy older than Kaiser Wilhelm). It’s not that I couldn’t have escaped Phoebe. At my peak, twelve years earlier, when the bureau transferred me from DC to New York to be part of the Joint Terrorism Task Force, I finished the marathon in four hours and forty-two minutes. But she might take offense if I were to cut and run, particularly since we were both headed to the same restaurant—the same table, actually.

“How’s things in the pub biz?” she asked when she was beside me. Just as Josh had changed careers for his daughter, so had I. (He did say he didn’t see why I couldn’t stay with the bureau if that’s what I wanted. But sometimes the pressure there left me close to numb, and that hadn’t seemed the way to start out with Eliza.) “I read real books are making a comeback,” Phoebe screeched. Even up close, she always spoke too

loud, as if she suspected all humanity had suffered a hearing loss. At the beginning, I figured she might be somewhat deaf herself and therefore be unable to hear how EARSPLITTING her voice was. Then one Wednesday I discovered she could pick up a whispered, “*Wizard of Oz* collectible plates,” across a crowded room.

Phoebe clasped her raffia clutch bag to her narrow chest, apparently ready to be thrilled by whatever I said, and added: “Find any new best-sellers?” I freelanced for three large literary agencies—two in New York, one in London—scouting contemporary Arabic work, mostly fiction, that could succeed in the English-speaking market.

“Well, I’m still looking for the next Ahdaf Soueif,” I told her cheerfully, figuring that would buy me thirty seconds of silence during which Phoebe would work on some predictable follow-up question. *Who’s Ahdaf Whatsis?* or *What made someone Jewish—you’re Jewish, right?—learn Arabic?*

But her follow-up neurons weren’t firing. She immediately segued to: “You’ll never guess what the trendingest item is on eBay!” I glanced at her shapeless dress, an upmarket potato sack, probably from some season when designers decided to exalt Depression-era farm labor, nicely hemmed, sleeveless of course. We started toward the restaurant.

Phoebe was walking too close to me. I kept edging away, but about ten feet before we reached the front door, I saw I was about to veer from curb into gutter. So I sucked it up, even though I wasn’t good with over-closeness. Having to rub up against the chicken-skinned upper-arm flesh of someone who wasn’t family or an extremely close friend? Next to a nightmare.

“I give up.” I smiled, calling to mind that TED talk that explains even fake smiling will put you in a good mood. It almost always worked, but not this time. “What’s trending on eBay?” I asked.

“Girdles from the 1950s!” Of the whole group, I knew Phoebe Melowicz the least, because she dealt mostly in vintage clothes and shoes. Although her business interested me more than data mining or landscape drainage—occupations of two other members—“vintage” is

better viewed than inhaled. Phoebe exuded a vague aroma of dead people's closets. Each Wednesday I made a point of breathing in through my mouth while greeting her with an excessively hearty: "Hey, good to see you!"—then sitting anywhere but next to her.

"What makes girdles such a hot item?" I asked. "And doesn't the elastic or rubber or whatever was in them disintegrate after all those years?"

She might have answered, but we reached the restaurant. Just as I was about to haul open the wood door, Pete Delaney, packaging designer with a home office, came across Main Street from the parking lot. Pete's own packaging was unremarkable. Though he wore a nice enough long-sleeve blue shirt with a teeny orange polo pony, his pants were strictly old-guy—the baggy kind that makes men look as if penises hadn't yet been invented.

Another lunch person, Iris Kubel, who owned the Movable Garden, once told me she'd been on line for car wash day at the high school and caught sight of Pete, who was serving as one of the volunteer supervisors. "So he'd gotten wet and was wearing this Yankees T-shirt. It's a good thing my windows were up because I probably said, 'Oh my God!' Like his muscles had muscles! Can you believe that?" Actually, I couldn't believe that. Looking at Pete now, you would in no way think *muscles* any more than you would *art* or *design*. You'd think: *Hmm, deputy commissioner of roads in Utica, New York.*

"Afternoon," he greeted us. Pete's accent didn't say much about him, though no one would accuse him of coming from New York. He had those pleasant, middle-aged, out-of-town manners. As always, he pulled open the heavy door and held it for us. However, a nanosecond after we were in, he quickly zigzagged around the tables, ensuring neither of us could get to his favorite seat. Phoebe chose a chair on the opposite side of the round table, so I sat to the right of Pete.

Over the next fifteen minutes, the rest of the suburban seven drifted in: Marcalynn who had cornered the market in writing speeches for Long Island Republicans running for lesser offices; John the landscape

drainage guy; Darby the freelance retoucher who had once worked for *People*; Iris the flowerpot garden queen. All nice enough, all out on their own, working from home.

We had already told each other the stories of how we got to where we now were. A Republican congressman lost a primary. A local antique/junque-store owner retired to Delray Beach. Thus, Marcalynn and Phoebe no longer got a paycheck. They no longer had to set their alarms. When you're "let go," that's what happens: nothing.

But for most of the seven, working from home wasn't the result of the perennial vagaries of career wins and losses. They'd been caught up in a global trauma—the Great Recession. All over the world, dreams dropped dead. Careers disintegrated, companies imploded. True, times eventually got better, but some of the people who'd been cast out never found their way back into corporate America. Many in the group hadn't chosen to work from home. That was all they had.

I was probably the only member who'd opted for a downsized life. My job hadn't vanished. I definitely hadn't been fired. I had quit with no plans of getting back to where I'd been. So I really didn't fit in. Also, since I'd married Josh, money wasn't an issue. I'd known when I signed up that the FBI was not the road to gold, but I had never wanted gold. Okay, I had a lottery daydream or two, a wish to fly business class, to stay in hotels which squeals in the night came from venerable plumbing, not rodents. But since I moved to Long Island, it was as though I'd fulfilled some archaic adage: *Ne'er seek the pot o' gold and ye will find it.*

So in terms of the group, I didn't really belong. I should have realized that truth two years and seven months earlier, after I was spurred to action by a short piece in the *Shorehaven Sentinel* titled "Freelancers Unite over Lunch," about residents with home offices who got together once a week. Had I given it some thought, I should have known that the group might not be the path to friendship. But I was new to the suburbs and lonely. My congenital urban skepticism wasn't functioning at its peak when I read how the six local entrepreneurs who "linked up over salads and sandwiches" would welcome new members. Instead of



thinking it would be tedious, I thought: *Cool! Maybe I'll find a soul mate.* Or at least feel a sense of community.

Each Wednesday we followed the same format. Fifteen minutes of free-range chitchat. The ritual passing around of cell phone photos to certify a happy life: pics of the kids with some piece of sports equipment, the new outdoor pizza oven, Posey the kitten inside what I hoped was an empty Cheerios box. Even though I grew up just fifteen miles west of Shorehaven, in Queens, this gotta-be-happy mind-set was foreign to me.

Of course, we of the five boroughs did not pass around snapshots of Aunt Minnie in hospice care. We weren't so concerned about proving to our neighbors that all was well or at least quasi-well. Also, we kept more of a distance. That was probably because we already knew too much about their lives via thin walls and open windows: screaming, pot throwing, headboard humping, TV preferences, Chinese takeout for dinner. I grew up in apartment 5B in Forest Hills, then spent most of my early adult life in a walk-up in Adams Morgan in DC, followed by a studio apartment on a noncool block of Chelsea in Manhattan. In those places, neighborliness was a terse exchange about weather.

Anyway, after about fifteen minutes, the members of the Wednesday group would order. At La Cuisine Délicieuse, everything had a French accent, including the décor. Lots of wood paneling, like a Parisian brasserie. Sconces on the walls, as if to dispel the fog created by existentialists puffing Gauloises. Traditional French food posters, of course, such as *Beurre d'Isigny* featuring a kitchen maid with creamy boobs like humongous butter balls, holding a large box of the product.

Behind the receptionist's stand near the front door were framed, yellowing reviews from very local food critics—"What's new on Main Street in Shorehaven? *Incroyable* hamburgers and pomme frites at La Cuisine Délicieuse! ★★½"

We socialized and gave each other support. Like: *You're lucky he didn't sign up with you because he sounds like a total asshole. I know a great mommy marketing consultant.* After we ordered, one of us—we rotated

weekly—would speak about what was going on in his/her business life: we called this show-and-tell. That week, it was Lucy Winters's turn. She came prepared with bar graphs and pie charts to illustrate what was going down, data mining-wise. "So I found this amazing sequential pattern for one of my clients," she began. She held up one of her charts, but as her seat was on the other side of me, I would have had to risk leaning forward and dipping my left nipple into the soupe à l'oignon to observe the data. "Consumers who buy motorcycle goggles will buy another pair with polarized lenses within *a month*."

Unless I stuck my fingers into my ears, it was impossible to tune out Lucy completely. But, as in the last couple of weeks, I found myself diverted: I was checking out Pete Delaney, the guy sitting to my other side. Not for any sexual thrill, despite the report about his muscles. But still, a pretty thorough checkout; I had the ability to look at people without seeming to look. My dad had been a New York City cop, a detective, so either it was in my DNA or I picked it up from him as a kid. I put it to good use at the FBI, seeming unaware of or at most indifferent to a conversation while taking in every word.

But this was the first time I got within inches of Pete, seated beside him. There was no immediately riveting finding, unless you counted the liver spots on his right temple, though maybe they were three-dimensional freckles. Weird for a middle-aged guy. Dots and a longer thing. They were arranged like five stars and a crescent, kind of what you'd expect on the flag of some small country bordering on Russia.

"And wait'll you hear this!" Lucy Winters was saying. She tapped her chart with one of her long aqua-polished nails. Each had a different flower painted on it. Her right index finger sported a daisy. "If the consumer's gross income is over fifty thou, he'll buy *another* pair of goggles with interchangeable lenses, the kind for all weather conditions, and within six months!"

I barely heard the group's comments, like whether motorcycle goggles were retro cool or merely retro or whether such buying behavior was a symptom of the decline of Western civilization. To be honest, I

didn't want to hear them. Plus, I was wondering why Pete Delaney, packaging designer with brownish things on the side of his head, thinning hair, possibly A+ pecs, and good manners, seemed compelled always to arrive early and sit in that same seat. All right, Pete could be one of those people who believe it's always better to get someplace a little early, especially when he had a need to grab a certain seat at the restaurant's one large round table. I spoke back to that tiny speculating voice in my head: of course it wasn't a Tony Soprano maneuver, facing the door so he could be on the lookout for a goon from a rival family. He couldn't have chosen that place for the water view because there was only the thinnest strip of the bay visible. Nine-tenths of what you saw through the glass was the municipal parking lot diagonally across Main Street.

Pete seemed far more engaged than I in listening to tales of the self-employed, as well as sharing his own experiences. He acted like part of the group. Still, as I watched each week, his eyes always returned to one spot in the parking lot: wherever his car happened to be. Weird.

I then recalled that months earlier I'd walked back to the lot after a Wednesday lunch to discover that I had parked a couple of cars down from Pete's. He'd gotten there first—so quickly I hadn't even noticed him walking ahead of me—and was already inside his SUV. It was a Jeep, very high-end, the kind with a sunroof and fancy wheel covers. Not gaudy at all: a dark gray car so clean I noticed a cloud reflected in the paint of its front hood. Nice enough, definitely the kind of car a packaging designer could comfortably choose: classic styling and, in this parking lot on Long Island, unusual simply because it was American made. Probably top of the line, Jeepwise. I'd seen some of Pete's work when it was his turn for show-and-tell, and he was definitely talented. I remember thinking: *Good for him. Getting canned in 2008 by some big ad agency and now doing well on his own.*

So along with onion soup and a small salad, lunch became me watching Pete Delaney watching his car. I wondered again: *What's with him?* Was he so fearful of somebody backing into his rear bumper? Sure, it was a risk, but it was a risk everybody took. Plus it wasn't a Maserati.

Was it apprehension about midday car thievery? Please. Theft of a locked and alarmed SUV from a public parking lot observable from any spot on lower Main Street? Hardly.

Pete didn't seem the nervous type. Not that I knew him—or any of them for that matter—very well. I wouldn't have called him outgoing, though a couple of times I'd overheard him being friendly in that neighborly suburban way: *No problem at all to bring over my snowblower*, he'd once told Marcalynn.

What was he worried about? The thought of a dead body in the back of his Jeep amused me for a minute, but I had to admit it was unlikely there'd be a new body every Wednesday, and the same old corpse would naturally be putrid enough to attract attention. Diamonds? Drugs?

Drugs were conceivable, mainly because (now I was down to the sludge of barely remembered observations) Pete kept getting new cell phones. For a small, supposedly informal gathering, the lunch group had many rules, including one that required us to turn off our mobile phones and put them on the table during show-and-tell. A few years earlier, drug dealers were switching phones—using disposable phones called burners—a lot more often than Pete did. Now, a lot of them had upgraded to burner apps or encryption. Anyway, if Pete were trying to hide the fact that he got new phones, he'd simply bring the same old one to lunch every week.

Besides, anyone stashing drugs in a Jeep was irreparably dumb, something that Pete Delaney didn't seem to be. Would he hide valuables there, like top secret prototypes of a new line of plastic bags and take-out hot cups he'd designed for some client, like a chain of truck stops? Conceivably, but if that were the case, why would he hide important items in his car on a weekly basis when there were safes and rentable storage units?

Truly, the only intriguing aspect of Pete—a guy so careful, so predictable—was that he was so nothing. The rest of us in the group, me included, openly carried around sacks of our qualities—humor, brains, empathy, pettiness—all those normal human attributes. Big,

small, even micro sacks, depending on the individual. But Pete seemed either to have zero baggage or to have put his personality in storage. His friendly neighbor shtick felt like an add-on, as if he recognized that he, too, needed some gear to tote around.

Maybe I was spending too much time these days in make-believe worlds. I covered ten to fifteen novels a month and sent reports to the literary agencies I worked for. An excess of fiction could make reality seem supremely dull with its crappy dialogue and lack of coincidences. It could lead to an unfulfilled longing for scintillation. Compared with the six other suburbanites at the Wednesday table, I was perhaps the only one who was a bit unmoored. Maybe I was creating a story for Pete where none existed.

Unlike the others in the group, I hadn't chosen this turf or been born to it. My husband, though, was born to it. Well, the house we lived in was more his late wife's domain, as she'd fallen in love with it the instant the realtor pulled into the driveway. It was a solid red brick house on three acres. "Georgian revival," my best friend, Wynne, informed me. Wynne was the last word on style. I wouldn't have chosen the place any more than I'd have chosen a yurt in exurban Mongolia.

As I picked crusted cheese off the side of the onion soup crock, I decided my speculating about Pete Delaney's nondiscernible personality, or (on the other hand) his fixation on his Jeep, was not purely a result of Lucy's being tedious. Neither did it come from my reading four or five thousand pages per month. My qualms about him were partly that I indeed sensed something weird. While this *Something's not right* suspicion does occur regularly in crime fiction—and, true, the written-in-Arabic mystery had been enjoying a resurgence recently—I was not simply re-creating the plot of some whodunit set in Algiers that I'd read.

"When something strikes you as weird," one of the instructors at the academy in Quantico told us, "do you say, 'Now isn't that something?' No. Course not."

Before I earned my living on the outskirts of publishing, I used my Arabic (and good high school Spanish) for the FBI for over ten years.

That was why I had a sense of what a drug dealer should look like. I didn't qualify as a narco maven, but when I moved from DC to New York to work in the Joint Terrorism Task Force, some of what I did involved the Tri-Border Area in South America; that's where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay come together. Islamic terrorist groups use that territory for drug trafficking and money laundering, mostly to finance activities in the Americas. I got to know some of the DEA, NYPD, and ATF people and interviewed Arabic-speaking suspects or informants.

Pete didn't seem like those drug dealers at all. Unless they were benumbed by their own inventory, even the most seemingly laid-back dealers had a hyperawareness about them, as if they filed down their nerve endings to get a better feel of what was going on around them. Their creepy alertness made regular people uncomfortable. But Pete wasn't like this, even with the intensity of his Jeep focus. He didn't say much, but when he did say something it was guaranteed to be unexciting. I imagined nearly everyone who met him would place him somewhere between "relentlessly bland" and "nice" on the line of human behavior.

"You ask yourself," the instructor said with surprising patience, "*why* is that weird?"

Okay: what was wrong with ordinary? When I married Joshua Geller and adopted Eliza a year later, I had such a bubbly vision of suburban life. *Ah, normality!* I pictured a racially and ethnically diverse group of friends holding Starbucks cups, dressed like a Ralph Lauren ad, each demanding to know if I thought Naguib Mahfouz deserved to win the Nobel Prize.

It's not that I hadn't met perfectly pleasant people, but I hadn't bonded with anyone in Shorehaven except Josh and Eliza. My clique was still composed of my parents in Queens and my best friend since first grade, Wynne, who now lived in Tribeca. My other friends were a couple of classmates from Queens College, the agents and a cop I'd worked with, and a former assistant US attorney who was now in private practice, but they had become people in other universes with whom I occasionally played catch-up. They weren't familiars to

keep up last week's conversation on politics or sports or what are you streaming.

"Bread?" Pete asked me. Apparently he'd been holding a basket in front of me and I hadn't noticed.

I looked down, hoping for a *ficelle*, that skinny roll with the delectable outer hardness that puts up a spirited fight when you chew it. But there were only a few slices of blah baguette. "No thanks," I said and set the basket on top of Lucy's plate, as she was still presenting what I prayed was her final bar graph.

Everyone in the group, actually, assumed I'd been in publishing since graduating from college, a belief I never tried to correct. It's not that I was undercover or anything. It's just that when you're in the FBI doing counterterrorism or doing contract work in that field as I sometimes still did, the bureau wanted you under the radar. No questions, no awkward answers.

Since I'd retired from the bureau, it was just easier to tell people: "I freelance for three literary agencies. Publishers are finally starting to take an interest in modern Arabic fiction. No, no translating. I'm not subtle enough and my knowledge of the language isn't all that deep. This is just an excuse for getting paid to read." Around town, only Josh and Eliza knew the truth. (After I retired from the bureau, moved to Shorehaven, and took Josh's name, I was explaining to Eliza the need to keep my FBI connection secret—a big ask for a kid her age. I suppose I went on too long, trying not to scare her and not to sound worried that she'd blab. Once I finished, Josh was more direct: "It's the law, Eliza. Also"—as he paused for emphasis, his face more animated and dramatic than I'd ever seen it, she held her breath—"it's important for all of us that she can feel she fits in, that neighbors don't think she's something out of the ordinary." Her lips formed a circle and she exhaled slowly. I was expecting a weary *I get it*. Instead she said resolutely: "I understand.")

While I never said anything blatantly false about my having been a special agent for the FBI, I was quasi-covert. Like my dad had (too) often told me: "Where's it written that you got to tell all? What's with

women? They have this ‘be open’ thing. You think it does them any good?”

So, I had a bit of a secret life. I held back. Well, actually I held back from leaving that day. While Pete and the others ambled out the door, I spent a minute with the waiter, ostensibly looking for my car keys under the table. “I thought I heard a metallic sound,” I told him. While he and I crawled around, the keys were actually safe and silent in my cleavage. I kept protesting that he didn’t have to help me, but he was one of those thin, hyper guys who spend their lives searching for ways to keep moving. I angled away from him and set the keys on the floor. He found them an instant later. “Thank you!” I said. “That was above and beyond.” I opened my handbag, but before I could go for my wallet, he shook his head.

“No problem,” he said. “Anyway, you tip good.”

The act over my keys lasted just long enough for me to go outside and see Pete Delaney on the other side of Main walking to the parking lot. A couple of the others were behind him, chatting or just strolling. He was walking just fast enough not to gather attention. I parallel tailed him on the restaurant side of the street. Twice he turned, once to look in the hardware store window, the other to brush something off the shoulder seam of his shirt. Both standard techniques for checking if there was a tail. Admittedly also standard behavior for a guy not rushing to get anywhere. As he approached the corner, his eyes locked on a runner in a Shorehaven Vikings T-shirt who was holding on to a lamppost while stretching his Achilles tendon. True, the guy was old enough to have seen his last Viking year in the nineties, but did he appear suspicious? No. A Shorehaven High School alum. In tag-team tails there were often one or two joggers, but what could Pete possibly be doing in order to imagine he’d be subject to high-employment tracking?

He reached the corner and was making a right when he turned and looked back—not behind him, but across the street, all the way up to where I was standing. My stomach did its OMG clench for a second, but from training and experience I knew not to play dumb. He’d seen



me walking in his direction, way back and across the street. Faking a deep dive into my handbag would only arouse suspicion, if he had any. So I grinned and gave him a friendly wave, as if he hadn't spotted me in a parallel tail. His return wave, like his personality, was pretty bland, but consistent with—gosh darn—his being the ultimate ordinary guy. Something had made him glance across the street and behind him and there was what's-her-name from the group. Corie.

That's why I couldn't stop wondering about Pete Delaney. Why was he perpetually watchful? What was the weird business about him and his car? I was less concerned about the phones, but that was a little odd, too. And why had he put his personality in a storage unit? It could have been that I was creating a Wednesday work of fiction. Except maybe Pete also had a bit of a secret life.

Maybe it takes one to know one.