

The Girl in the Photo

1 /

Abbie had begun the introductory talk she gave to every group of former convicts entering the New Prospects program when Olive, her assistant, slipped into the back of the classroom.

As the program's director, Abbie believed it was important that these recently-released women see her and hear her. She wanted them to know she was available for them, that she wasn't a remote figurehead. She was their guide, leading them toward new lives. She wanted them to understand what the program expected from them from this first Monday morning. She cleared her throat and said loudly, "Let's start with the basics: Life ain't fair."

The dozen black and Hispanic faces regarded her impassively. The women sat like oversized and self-conscious school children in three rows of heavily-used, steel-and-plastic desks scrounged from the Chicago Board of Education.

"Some of you may think because life has treated you like dirt you're entitled to an easier time of it now. You may think you've paid your dues so you don't need to make a big effort—or any effort at all."

She paused to see if that provoked any reaction. Almost none. A couple faces grew even more stolid.

"Well, I have to tell you it doesn't work like that. The world doesn't work like that. *Society owes you nothing*. Get used to it."

That caused a stir, a little ripple of noise and movement, feet shuffling on the classroom's worn tile floor. At moments like these, Abbie wished there were some way to hear the

THE GIRL IN THE PHOTO

women's thoughts. To tap directly into their minds.

"You're all ex-offenders. Some of you have been victims of boyfriends, husbands, fathers. Some of you have made bad choices in the past. But whatever happened in the past is never going to change. You can't go back. All you can do is take responsibility for what you've done—or what you should have done but didn't do—and make better choices in the future." Tell them the bad news first, then offer hope that things can be better. "Refuse to be victims again."

One of the women in the back said softly, "Amen to that."

Sometimes, giving this speech, Abbie felt like a minister, sometimes like a social worker, sometimes like a probation officer, and sometimes—as she now felt, stuck inside this scruffy classroom on this dazzling October morning—like a fraud. Who was she to tell these women anything? Except that the New Prospects program *did* seem to be effective. An independent follow-up study they used in grant applications found more than sixty percent of the women who completed the course stayed out of prison for at least five years. If a woman made it five years, the odds were she'd make it permanently. A key message in Abbie's never-ending fund-raising efforts.

"Here at New Prospects, we *know* from past experience our program can help women like you have better, productive lives. But we can't make your choices for you. If you *choose* to work—and work hard with us—we'll work with you. But it's always your choice. To work or not to work. To learn or not to learn. To take responsibility or to avoid responsibility. To be a victim or to be a winner. It's your choice."

Abbie paused to look over the group. Three or four of the women seemed to be with her. Three or four seemed skeptical. The rest were unreadable. She read the name tag of a woman who'd pursed her lips in skepticism. "Bernice, does this make sense to you?"

Bernice would not hold her eye. She spoke to her desk top, "Guess so."

Abbie changed her tone from authoritative, from *I know what's best*, to confiding, *We're all in this together*. "Look, if I were sitting where you are, *I'd* be skeptical. How's this white

THE GIRL IN THE PHOTO

lady—” She gestured at herself. “—who’s never done drugs, never done time, never done wrong understand what I been through.”

She’d been through enough, but she knew it was a false equivalency. Her ex-husband Russell’s abuse could not compare—would not compare—to the horrors some of these women had experienced. Abbie’s chest ached at stories the women told her. *But you have to be strong no matter who you are*, she thought.

“What you’ve been through, some of you, has been absolute hell. I know that. But that was then. This is now. That doesn’t have to be your life. You can change. Life is change. Things happen and you have to change or—” She was about to say “die,” but that was much too strong. “—or fail. We’re going to provide the knowledge and techniques so you can change your life, make a different life, a *good* life.”

Looking around to see what effect that had, she noticed Olive in the back of the room silently signaling, making the thumb/little finger gesture to indicate a phone call. It had to be serious. Olive would never interrupt the director’s orientation talk for a routine crisis. Abbie cut herself off. “We’re glad you’re here at New Prospects. Lucia will describe our program and the weeks ahead in detail. If you have any questions, you can always ask me or any member of the staff. Good luck, ladies.”

Lucia, surprised to find herself speaking so soon, lumbered to her feet and picked up an erasable marker to make notes on the whiteboard. “All *right*,” she said. “Let’s get started. Please open your notebooks.”

As soon as the classroom door closed behind them, Abbie asked, “What is it?”

Olive, her best friend in Chicago, the woman Abbie would trust with her car, her house, and her cat, an ex-offender who’d done seventeen years for murder, said, “Mrs. Mikhail is on the phone. She says it’s urgent. She sounds frantic.”

Abbie stumbled and had to grab Olive’s arm. Sophia Mikhail was her father’s housekeeper. Abbie grabbed the receiver from the center of her desk, her thoughts tumbling: *Father! Something happened! Oh, dear God, let him be all right*. But she

THE GIRL IN THE PHOTO

knew Sophia would be calling for one reason only.

She controlled her voice enough to say, “Sophia? This is Abbie.”

Sophia gave out an anguished, “Ohhh . . .” of pain and fear. “It’s terrible! Terrible!”

Abbie’s heart throbbed and her throat was abruptly tight. Only one thing could have shaken Sophia Mikhail so. But she would not allow herself to form the thought. “What is it, Sophia? What happened?”

“I . . . I . . . he’s passed.” She had trouble forming the words. She paused.

There it was. The news Abbie had dreaded from the moment Olive told her Sophia was calling. On some level, the news she anticipated for years.

He was an old man. But he’d been fine when she’d seen him in August. He sounded as healthy as ever when they’d talked two mornings ago.

Abbie imagined Sophia wiping her eyes with the corner of the apron she wore around the house. “He’s in the bedroom. Like he was going to the bathroom and fell.”

There it was.

After all, her father had turned eighty-six in August. But she’d always expected the call would be a warning. Her father himself saying he’d been diagnosed with an inoperable cancer. Or a call from the hospital saying he was unconscious and not expected to survive more than a few days. Something that would give her a chance to rush to his bedside to say goodbye.

Her father was indomitable. She’d always assumed she’d have a chance for last words. Ten years earlier, when her mother died, she and David and her father had been able to spend time with her during her last hours, talking to her quietly, telling her they loved her. It helped ease the loss even if her mother could hardly respond with a blink.

But this, this was too abrupt. Abbie closed her eyes, but the room was rocking and she had to sit heavily at her desk. Tears began to well up and she struggled to open the drawer where she kept a box of tissues. She could visualize her parents’ bedroom, the thick burgundy carpet. She visualized her father sprawled

THE GIRL IN THE PHOTO

motionless, dressed in the striped pajamas she'd given him last Christmas. She knew exactly where he had to be, between his giant bed and the wingback chair. And she knew he was dead.

"Are you sure?" She didn't know what else to ask.

"Oh, yes." Sophia's voice almost broke. "He's cold."

He must have collapsed over the weekend. *But we talked Saturday morning and he sounded fine.*

Abbie controlled her voice. "You have to call the police. Call the police and tell them what you found. Tell them I'm on my way. I'll be there as soon as I can."

There was a pause. "The doctor was a good man."

Abbie dealt with crisis by giving orders. She knew people sometimes thought she was unfeeling, but she had to do something. "Don't touch anything. Just call the police. They'll take care of—" Her ability to speak was slipping; her throat closed and would not let her form words. "—of him. Tell them . . . I'll be there as soon as I can." She thought wildly of what she could say to the poor woman. "You did the right thing. I'm so sorry you had to find him. I'll see you as soon as I can. Call me on my cell if you need anything. Anything at all."

They spent another minute backing and forth, Sophia trying to console Abbie, Abbie trying to console Sophia. "He's in a better place," said Abbie. "He's with God." Even if the old atheist didn't believe, the thought comforted her. *I believe, and that's enough.*

Sophia began to mutter something in her native language—a prayer?—and for a moment Abbie thought she might have to call the Shaker Heights police herself. Then Sophia was off the line and Abbie was staring at the framed motivational poster over the file cabinet, crimson letters on a canary background: "Not to decide is to decide."

Olive, wearing a look of intense concern, watching from the other desk, stood up to come over to Abbie. "Your father?" She'd heard enough about Doctor Robert Emmerling to understand the situation.

Abbie, wiped her eyes, nodded, and had to swallow a couple times to be able to answer. "She just found him." She added unnecessarily, "I told her to call the police." She looked around

THE GIRL IN THE PHOTO

the cluttered office and tried to think what had to be done. Another poster's orange letters on lavender mocked her: "When the going gets tough, the tough get going."

She needed to make a list, write tasks down and decide what to do first. Her eyes continued to tear. She needed a good cry, but she didn't have time to break down. She suppressed the urge to put her head down on her desk and sob uncontrollably. She could weep later. She might appear unfeeling, but Olive would understand. "I need to catch a plane to Cleveland. And call my brother. And Lisa."

Olive rested a consoling hand on Abbie's shoulder—Abbie found the gesture unusually comforting—and told her, "You make your calls. I'll get you a plane reservation and a car service to O'Hare."

Abbie glanced at her overflowing in-box. "This couldn't come at a worse time. Just as we're starting a new group. And a board of directors meeting next week." *What's wrong with me? My father has just died and I'm thinking about work.*

Olive said, "There's no good time for something like this. You know what you tell the ladies." Olive looked at her to ensure she had Abbie's full attention. "Life is change. Life ain't fair."

Abbie tried to smile. "It sure ain't."

"Don't you worry about the new group. We'll keep them busy. The directors will wait." Back at her desk, Olive began to type on her computer.

Abbie had to look up David's office number. They seldom talked, and she never called him at his office. As she pushed the buttons, she thought she should have David's office number as well as his home number stored in her cell phone. When she reached the corporation's communications department in Hartford, the assistant was not sure when Mr. Emmerling would be available; could she take a message? Abbie could not keep the impatience from her voice, "I'm David's sister, Abigail Hocking. Tell him there's been a death in the family. Tell him to call me in Chicago."

The woman gave a little gasp and said she'd do what she could and hung up.

THE GIRL IN THE PHOTO

Abbie sat motionless for a minute, conscious of the sound of Olive's keyboard, the faint murmur of voices from the classroom next door, a sharp smell from her own body. She had to call her daughter Lisa, but their conversations were so tense. Lisa always sounded so angry with her—more deeply angry than when she'd stamp out of the house as a teenager, slamming the door behind her. This was a cold, adult anger. Abbie was always afraid she'd say the wrong thing, afraid she'd make things worse, provoke a final break.

But not to call Lisa immediately with this news would only make their relations worse. Lisa, after all, was probably the grandchild closest to the old man.

Abbie's cell phone contained both the Ann Arbor bakery and Lisa's apartment numbers. Lisa at the bakery answered on the second ring. Abbie tried to control her voice and talked too quickly. "Lisa, honey, it's mom. Listen honey, I wouldn't call you when I know you're busy, but I'm afraid I just got some very bad news."

"What is it?" Lisa's tone implied Abbie was using some flimsy excuse to interrupt her day.

Abbie imagined the morning rush as students and office workers picked up their morning calories. "I don't know how to make this easy, and I've got to make it quick, but I just talked to Sophia at Granddad's house. I'm so sorry. Granddad has passed away." Her father would have snorted at the "passed away" euphemism. "She found him when she came in this morning."

"Oh . . . Mom," Lisa wailed into the phone. Abbie could imagine her face scalded with grief. Lisa had always been close to her grandfather. Closer than Abbie. Abbie'd never lived up to her father's expectations (whatever they were) although she'd supported herself, raised her daughter as a single mother, and founded a non-profit for ex-offenders to help them find jobs. Lisa, in contrast, had dropped out of college and lived above a bakery with a baker almost twice her age, seemed to have no interest in getting married or having children, and was content to work in the bakery. But in her grandfather's eyes Lisa was a productive, exemplary, responsible adult.

Abbie listened helplessly as Lisa sobbed, aching to hold her

THE GIRL IN THE PHOTO

close and tell her she understood. “I know . . . I know . . . It’s awful. I’m sorry, honey. I just heard. I haven’t even reached Uncle David yet.”

Abbie could hear someone calling Lisa, probably Wendell, her partner. Lisa’s reply was muffled, then to Abbie, “Funeral? When’s the funeral?”

“I don’t know yet,” she said helplessly. “I just this minute heard from Sophia. I’ll call you when I know.” Olive was signaling a call on the other line. “Listen, honey, Uncle David’s calling back. I’ve got to go. I’ll call you when I know more. Call me on my cell. Or call me at Granddad’s house.” Did her tone make her sound hungry for a call? She was.

“Just tell me when there’s the funeral.” Lisa spoke as if Abbie might not tell her. “I want to be there.”

“Of course, honey. Of course. We want everybody there.”

As soon as Abbie pushed the button to connect with line two, David said, “Somebody died?” He sounded as rushed as Lisa.

“I just talked to Sophia,” said Abbie without preamble. “She found Dad on the floor of the bedroom when she came to work this morning.” Abbie felt as if balancing on a very thin edge. One misstep and she’d tumble into hysteria.

“This morning?”

“Yes. This morning. Just now.”

“Is she sure? It’s not a false alarm?”

“Oh, she’s sure all right. She says he’s cold. What more do you want?”

Abbie had to stop to blow her nose. Her father might have died any time during the weekend. They’d asked him to wear one of those emergency I’ve-fallen-and-I-can’t-get-up alarms, but he wouldn’t listen. He was fine. When had she talked last to him? Less than forty-eight hours ago. He was fine. Never better. He was looking forward to his Sunday afternoon book group. They were going to discuss David Mitchell’s novel about the Dutch trading post in Nagasaki. He liked the story and the writing although he thought Westerners writing about Japan usually got it wrong. Abbie said something about his having lived in Japan so he should know. He said that was entirely different and

THE GIRL IN THE PHOTO

changed the subject.

“I told her to call the police and we’d be there this afternoon.”

“We? What do you mean *we*? I can’t just drop everything.”

Yes, you can, you selfish, self-centered bastard. If I can drop everything to hop on a plane to Cleveland, so can you. She should have expected his reaction.

David had never been a spontaneous person. Even as a child, he had to be primed for an occasion that was not part of his regular routine. Even if the occasion were something he wanted—a trip to Euclid Beach amusement park, for instance. He needed time to think, to absorb, to adjust. No spur-of-the-moment decisions for David Emmerling. One more unattractive trait he’d absorbed from their father.

“Why not? I am.” She was certain her position as director of New Prospects was more demanding, more responsible than David’s as a cog in a corporate communications machine.

He didn’t answer immediately, trying, Abbie knew, to devise a reasonable-sounding excuse. She’d never visited his Hartford office in the corporate headquarters. She imagined it sterile and efficient, the only personal touch a color photo of Evelyn and the children, Kayla and Keith, in a silver frame on David’s credenza.

“I have to close the November newsletter today.” He announced this as if it were important, but she thought she could hear the beginnings of distress.

“It’s our father, David. He’s dead.” She wanted to slap him.

His voice was petulant. “I *know* it’s our father. But I can’t just walk away without closing the employee newsletter.”

“Why not?”

He thought for a few seconds, but could only come up with, “Just because I can’t.” Then he added, “The way things are going here.”

Abbie said nothing. Let her silence tell him what she thought of his stinking employee newsletter. Let him think about the situation for a minute. What employer wouldn’t let him go immediately to his dead father? If David wanted to stay in Hartford, that was his decision. But he couldn’t blame the heartless

THE GIRL IN THE PHOTO

corporation. *Just tell your boss you need the time off.* Abbie was prepared to wait silently for him to say something more until the car service appeared in front of the New Prospects office to take her to the airport.

David blinked first. “Okay, okay. You’re right. I’ll get a plane tonight. First thing tomorrow if I can’t.” She could hear him reluctantly shuffling his priorities. “But, I can’t just walk away right this second. I really can’t.”

Conscious of her resentment—*did she always have to take the responsibility? Was she the only adult here?*—she asked, “You mind if I start making arrangements with a funeral home?”

“No, no. You decide what’s best. I trust your judgment.” She could hear relief in his voice. A responsibility he wouldn’t have to assume. “I’ll call Kayla and e-mail Keith in Thailand.” Abbie’s niece worked in New York City; her nephew was a Peace Corps volunteer.

David assured her he had her cell number, but she gave it to him again. Olive set a printout of her itinerary in front of her. Abbie scanned it and told David she expected to be at the Shaker Heights house by five. Let her know when he was coming in. She paused to let him absorb everything.

“David . . .” Abbie was abruptly washed by a wave of grief and her voice broke. She had to swallow several times. “Aren’t you a *little* sad?”

He didn’t answer immediately. “Yes. Of *course* I am.” He didn’t sound sad. He sounded as if he couldn’t wait to hang up and to return to his newsletter. Then, typical David, he tried to explain the feeling away. “But, after all, Dad was, what? Eighty-five? Eight-six? It’s a surprise. It’s a terrible shock. You can’t say it’s unexpected.” The words sounded exactly like something Dad would have said.

“It was a full life,” said Abbie speaking to herself as much as to her little brother.

“It was a *very* full life,” he agreed. “Look, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“At the house.” As if they’d be meeting anywhere else.

He couldn’t let her have the last word. “At the house.” Then he was gone.