

CAN YOU SEE US NOW?

Cheryl Benton

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ISBN-13: 978-0692054048

ISBN-10: 0692054049

The Three Tomatoes Publishing

New York

www.thethreetomatoes.com

the three
tomatoes

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to every woman who has ever felt
invisible.

And to Fergus O'Daly, our dear friend and mentor,
who inspired us and made us laugh, and coined
the term The Three Tomatoes.

We miss you.

BECOMING INVISIBLE

It felt great being inside the air-conditioned bar at Balthazar. Suzy was glad she had arrived early and grabbed three stools at the end of the bar. She hated these damned hot and humid days. And throw in the hot flashes and it made a bad day worse. At least she could cool down a bit before Madge and Trish arrived. This was their usual martini meet up before their monthly dinner with a group of friends who laughingly call themselves the Ripe Tomatoes.

She ordered a dirty martini from the very cute bartender with a crooked smile, perfect teeth, and sandy hair with a little stray piece that almost touched his baby blues. Another aspiring actor. Damn, he looks so young. But then so do the cops and firefighters these days. Not to mention everyone in the ad agency she works for, Secret Agent. The name alone tells you it's another "trendy" agency where anyone over forty starts to feel like a dinosaur.

She was looking forward to shedding her bad day with her two best pals. They'd all been friends since their first jobs with a big New York City ad agency right out of college, and there wasn't much they didn't know about each other or hadn't shared about their lives. They still laugh about their first apartment, a one-bedroom with twin beds and a pullout couch. Whichever one arrived home the latest got the couch. They had started their martini meet up tradition back then because it seemed like such a "grownup" drink.

Suzy had stayed in the advertising business, although she was having regrets about that now. Madge had gone into TV journalism, another cutthroat industry, and Trish had married a wealthy hedge fund guy and had the luxury of owning an art gallery, mostly for the fun of it.

They had been bridesmaids at each other's weddings. Suzy was the first to get married, and was still with Ken, a corporate attorney. They had two children in quick succession, their daughter,

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Keri, and son, Ian. After he was born, they moved out of the city to Bronxville. They wanted the kids raised in the suburbs and Bronxville was an easy commute to the city since both she and Ken worked there.

Trish married Michael a couple of years later, and their marriage was still intact too. Trish would have loved to have children, but it wasn't in the cards.

Madge didn't get married until she was almost forty, and the marriage didn't last much longer than the wedding reception. Seems he cheated on their honeymoon!

Now here they were more than twenty-five years later. They still looked damned good — Suzy, with her blonde highlighted hair, was tall and still trim (although lately she felt her middle was expanding). Madge was a dramatic-looking brunette who worked out all the time and had the arms to prove it. Trish was a petite redhead, who was into organic food, and holistic and healthy anything and everything.

Ahh...Sandy Blue Eyes put the martini in front of her. She took the first sip and already felt better. On her second sip, two beautiful models floated in and took seats at the center of the bar. Sandy Blue Eyes made a mad dash to grant them their every wish with his most ingratiating crooked smile.

On her third sip, Madge and Trish saddled up to the bar.

“Hello, darling...it's so fucking hot my panties are melting,” Madge said as she air-kissed Suzy.

Trish, looking cool as a cucumber in a little white linen dress with spaghetti straps and four-inch wedge sandals (how did she always look so damn perfect?), sat in between them. “Martinis...just what we need.” She gave a little nod in the direction of Sandy Blue Eyes that went unnoticed because he was too busy impressing the models with his mint muddling skills for the mojitos they had ordered.

“Oh, bartender,” Madge shouted in her most sultry voice, which also went unnoticed, prompting Madge to get up and interrupt the mint muddling reverie to order the martinis.

“Fuck — we've just become invisible. And how was your day, darlings?” said Madge as the errant martinis made their way to their end of the bar.

Suzy raised her glass to cheer her friends. “Oh, I had another lovely day in ad agency paradise being the oldest person in the conference room, and if that isn't bad enough, I had a hot flash just as I was presenting to the client and then a brain freeze.”

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“Have you been taking your black cohosh and exercising more?”

“No, Trish, I’m happy I find time to brush my teeth in the morning.”

Trish rolled her eyes.

“My day was hell too,” said Madge. “The rumor is that the network is thinking of moving me from the morning show to the midday ‘entertainment’ spot. *Midday*, for Christ’s sake, who watches the midday news? I know they’ve got that thirtysomething former beauty queen with a law degree from Harvard already lined up. I think the handwriting is on the wall. You’re so lucky you own your own art gallery, Trish, and don’t have to worry about being usurped by an overachieving, corporate ladder-climbing charmer who has men drooling on themselves.”

“I’m sure it’s just this wretched heat getting both of you down,” said Trish always the optimist of the trio. “Let’s focus on something fun, like planning Suzy’s big 5-0 birthday.”

“Oh God, do not say that out loud. There is no way I am celebrating this birthday. I’ve already told Ken and the kids *not* to plan anything. And I swear I’ll kill anyone who tries to come up with a surprise party. I plan to take to my bed that day, eat bonbons, and watch old movies. And *do not* mention this to the Tomatoes tonight. I just can’t deal.”

“At least you have a husband and kids. Not that I miss that cheating ex-husband of mine, but dating is so exhausting. And I haven’t felt attracted to anyone in so long, my vagina will probably dry up like a prune.” And with that Madge downed the entire martini in one gulp.

“Yikes, what’s happened to us?” said Trish. “Our girls’ nights out used to be fun. We’d flirt with the bartender, drink those drinks like the models are having, and laugh...a lot.”

“Well that was before menopause, hot flashes, and unsolicited membership cards from AARP,” replied Suzy. “And where the hell is Sandy Blue Eyes with our check?”

DINNER AND THE BILLIONAIRE

Oh God, here we go again, thought Suzy. Ordering dinner for their monthly Ripe Tomatoes gathering would try the patience of Job, never mind a seasoned New York City waiter. “Is the salmon organic? What do you have that’s gluten free? I’m on a fat-free, low-carb diet. Is the chicken free-range? Can you do the French onion soup without the cheese? I’m lactose intolerant. And please bring my ice tea with an extra glass of ice and three lemon slices on the side cut in quarters.”

Finally, dinner was ordered, drinks arrived, and the group settled down to sharing what’s on their minds. The Ripe Tomatoes dinners were started three years earlier by their friend Hope, a bigger than life Broadway producer to bring together her “brilliant and fabulous” friends to talk about anything they wanted to with the promise that whatever happened at the table, stayed at the table.

She selected twelve very accomplished professional women with careers in media, advertising, arts, theater, and other fields that make New York City a magnet for the best and brightest. Hope was the only one who knew all of them, and had an uncanny ability to select just the right people. Well almost. A couple of the originals were never invited back because they couldn’t keep their lips zipped, and they ended up on Hope’s enemy list. Fortunately, there was no shortage of brilliant and fabulous ladies in New York City, and the two loose-lipped ones were soon replaced.

It was around their third dinner together when their usual waiter, who prided himself on having been at this iconic Broadway restaurant for over forty years, looked at them appreciatively and said, “This is a group of hot tomatoes.”

When he left the table, Trish was the first to ask, “What’s a tomato?”

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Celeste, a best-selling romance novelist, and still stunningly beautiful at seventy-four, laughed and said, “Well in my day, that’s what guys called a savvy, sexy woman of a ‘certain age’ who knows her way around a man and a martini too, so I’d say we should take that as a compliment.”

“Well this is certainly a group of ripe tomatoes,” chuckled Hope. And the name stuck. Over the past three years, the Ripe Tomatoes had bonded into a loyal and supportive group who truly had each other’s backs.

All twelve tomatoes happened to be at dinner tonight, a rarity since one or two usually had a conflict at the last minute.

“Thanks for getting us the alcove table, Hope — at least I can hear what everyone is saying. I find myself simply smiling at most group dinners these day.”

They all nodded in agreement at Arlene’s comment. As usual, Arlene, the editor of a well-known fashion magazine, looked elegant. “So how’s the new show going?” she asked Hope.

“Well we still need another five hundred thousand dollars before production starts. And it didn’t help that Catherine Dubois was a no-show at this week’s reading. I was counting on her for two hundred thousand dollars and I swear if I find Ellen Martin has sabotaged me again I’ll knock her off her stilettos faster than you can say Jimmy Choo.”

“You know Ellen will be at the library fund-raiser in the fall, so be prepared,” said Mimi, a Tony Award-winning actress. “Speaking of which, I had a thoroughly depressing afternoon at Saks previewing the fall cocktail dresses. I couldn’t find anything to wear that doesn’t end at my derriere, or plunge down to my navel. Does this town not realize we’re not all size zero twentysomethings? It’s all your fault, Arlene,” she said jokingly.

There were familiar nods of agreement around the table. And they were all glad that Mimi had diverted the conversation because they knew Hope was heading for a rant about Ellen, especially since some of them were friends with Ellen too, a fact that Hope considered almost treasonous.

The conversation, like always, eventually got around to men — finding them, leaving them, and sex or lack of sex. And when they get to this part of the evening, they always love when Celeste holds them in rapt attention with her latest dating adventures. While Madge and Hope had many online dating disasters, Celeste had somehow attracted a bevy of successful men who all fell in love with her. But things never quite work out — the retired judge drank too much, the wealthy retired fast-food franchise owner wanted her to retire and move to a golf community in Florida. But still, her announcement at dinner was a surprise.

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“Okay, Tomatoes, let me tell you something. I’m dating someone fabulous,” Celeste pronounced.

“And that’s news?” said Madge. “You’re always dating someone fabulous. Which dating site did you meet this guy on?”

“Actually, I’m giving up on online dating because I’m just not finding the right kind of men. A couple of weeks ago I chatted for a while with the adorable new young rabbi at my synagogue. I told him I’d really like to find love again, but haven’t had much success since my husband died. And to my utter surprise, he said one of his congregants is a wonderful ‘older’ gentleman who lost his wife a couple of years ago, and he would love to meet the right woman and even marry again. He asked if I’d like him to arrange an introduction.

“And you know, ladies,” Celeste continued, “I never say no. Mr. B picked me up for our first date in his limo, and yes, it’s his own private limo with a driver he’s had for years. I told him I’d come downstairs and when I walked out, there he was waiting for me in the lobby and his driver was holding the door open. And off we went to Le Cirque. It was an incredible evening. Sirio even stopped by our table for a chat. Well let me tell you — Mr. B is the most interesting man I have ever met, and one of the most attentive. We’ve had five dates in two weeks, including last weekend when we traveled in his private jet to his estate in Costa Rica — one of three homes he owns, including the most fabulous apartment overlooking Central Park. But I’m not sure if I should continue seeing him.”

“Why not?” they all screamed in unison.

“Well turns out when my rabbi said he was an ‘older’ man he meant really older. Mr. B is ninety-two years old, but he’s so vital you’d never know it. But still, do I want to get involved with someone who’s that old?”

What ensued was a wonderful and lively debate — yes of course you should continue dating him, maybe he’ll leave you his money (although Celeste doesn’t need his money). No, are you crazy? You could be dating guys twenty years younger than yourself the way you look.

The evening was the perfect anecdote to Suzy’s hellish day and by the time she got home, a little tipsy, she gently removed the remote control from Ken’s hand where he had fallen asleep while watching *Law & Order* in bed, kissed the top of his head, and climbed into bed grateful she wasn’t single, but with visions of billionaires, estates, and private jets whirling in her head.

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