

The background is a deep blue monochromatic illustration of a tropical night. A large, bright yellow full moon is positioned at the top center, partially framed by the dark silhouettes of palm trees. Below the moon, there are faint, layered silhouettes of palm trees and what appears to be a beach or dunes. At the bottom of the image, three human silhouettes stand side-by-side, looking towards the viewer. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

B O C C A

by

M O O N

A FUNERAL. THREE FRIENDS. STARTING OVER.

L I G H T

B R A D G R A B E R

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DEDICATION

To my dad, who taught me everything
I know about Boca Raton.

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PROLOGUE

December 2018

GEORGE'S EYES FOCUSED on the doctor's lips. The man was talking, but what was he saying? Something about end of life?

Three days had passed since Jeanette, George's wife, had been admitted to the intensive care unit at Boca Raton Regional Hospital. Three days that seemed an eternity as George struggled to come to grips with the reality of Jeanette's condition. She'd been diagnosed a year earlier with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. At the time, a course of chemotherapy and radiation had promised a remission. But George had learned cancer didn't play by the rules. It had metastasized.

"There are no good options," the doctor said, as if George was consulting on the case. "You should consider removing the ventilator and let nature take its course."

George struggled to remain calm. He was certain Jeanette would rebound. That she'd soon be sitting up, alert, and smiling. He searched the doctor's face for another answer. There had to be more that could be done.

The doctor placed a hand on George's arm. It was a kind gesture. "I'm sorry, Mr. Elden. I know it's a hard decision. But more time won't change the outcome or make it any easier."

George reluctantly agreed to remove the ventilator. But once the doctor stepped away, he had second thoughts. He tried to reassure himself. *This isn't what she'd want. Hooked up to monitors. Unable to breathe on her own.* He examined his wife's ashen face. Was Jeanette in pain? Was she even aware he was there? How had this progressed so quickly?

It'd been a difficult year. Their lives had been consumed by cancer. Between the doctor appointments and multiple hospitalizations, it had been a whirlwind. George was certain Jeanette would pull through. The survival rate was in her favor. He'd done his best to be strong. He'd become her fierce advocate. Her main emotional support. But now, at her bedside, exhaustion overwhelmed him. And still, despite the doctor's words, he wasn't prepared to give up.

George gripped Jeanette's bed rail as he steadied himself. Lately, he'd been suffering from an odd dizziness. Moments of lightheadedness followed by a terrible sense of claustrophobia. He assumed he was run down. Needed a good night's sleep. But after giving the doctor the go-ahead to remove the ventilator, the dizziness was returning with a vengeance. And now, there was a new symptom. A tingling running up and down his arms.

He prayed the moment would pass. *Get a hold of yourself. Take a breath. You'll be okay.*

But he wasn't okay.

A wave of adrenaline surged through George's body. From the top of his head to the bottoms of his feet, he felt suddenly amplified. He needed to move. Run. Jump. Anything to expel the energy.

His heart raced as he pressed a hand to his chest; the pounding was so intense George feared his heart might shatter into a million pieces.

He struggled to breathe as he rushed past the nurses' station. *I need air*, he thought as the panic heightened. Perspiration gathered on his brow and upper lip; his body was in full revolt.

He picked up his pace, footsteps echoing loudly.

A voice called out. "Mr. Elden, please wait. I need to talk to you."

George's stomach clenched as he burst through the doors of the intensive care unit and into the hallway. He spotted an exit sign.

I've got to get out of here.

He leaned forward, willing himself to defy gravity. *One foot in front of the other...*

And then a hard tug on his arm. "Mr. Elden, please don't make me chase after you."

He turned and made eye contact.

A mistake.

A stout woman, clipboard in hand, glared at him. She'd been a warm and engaging presence at the nurses' station. Answering his questions with a smile. George's head throbbed. He read the nurse's name tag. "Whatever you need, Ruby, I'll do it later."

Ruby held out the clipboard and pulled a pen from a coat pocket. Her tone was firm. "I've spoken with the doctor. I'm sorry. But we need your signature before shift change."

"No," George said emphatically, denial kicking in. "She can still..."

Ruby's eyes widened. "Has she squeezed your hand?"

There was a quiver in George's voice. "Not exactly."

Ruby cocked her head. "Mr. Elden, if you'd like, there's a private room where we can talk. I'd be glad to sit with you."

George forced a smile and lied. "Thank you. But, I'm managing."

"Well then, this will only take a moment. These are the consent forms the doctor discussed. We need a signature

here, here, and here,” she said officiously as she provided small crosses next to the spots where George should sign.

George could no longer contain the emotion. Nervous energy erupted like Mount Vesuvius, hot and destructive as he pushed the clipboard away. His voice was the pleading, angry wail of a wounded animal caught in a trap. “I can’t do this now. Don’t ask me. Can’t you see I need to be alone?”

A family huddled nearby turned and stared.

George caught the eye of the matriarch. “I’m sorry,” he mouthed, horrified by the woman’s shocked expression.

A few more steps and George’s hand connected with the red metal bar marked *Emergency Exit*. With a push, there was a shrill, high-pitched, deafening blare. George covered his ears, afraid his head might explode.

Outside, he took a deep breath. He leaned against the building and shivered in the chilly night air. He wiped away the moisture from his forehead with the back of a hand as the clouds shifted. A bright December moon lit up the Boca night.

Jeanette always loved a moonlit sky. *George, make a wish. It just might come true.*

He’d thought it so silly. “Oh, Jeanette...” he whispered as he finally succumbed. “I wish for one more year. One more month. One more week.”

But the moon held no mystical powers. Its presence only marked the end of another long day at the hospital; a foreshadowing of Jeanette’s death. She’d soon be gone and he’d be alone. What would come next? How could he move forward? The future—impossible to grasp.

He heard Jeanette’s voice. *Living is hard, George. Dying... that’s easy.*

Seven Months Later

THE SUNSHINE CHAPEL at The Golden Funeral Home was standing room only. The July crowd packed the pews. “Thanks for saving me a spot,” George said to his friend Herbie as he slipped into the aisle seat in the eighth row.

Dressed in a freshly pressed black suit, shoes polished to a high luster, George thought he looked the ideal mourner. The Cary Grant of the Sunshine Chapel, if Cary Grant had been born in New York City, the only child of a mixed marriage between a Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jew.

George stared at the pine box up front that held their friend Willy. “Only the good die young.”

“That’s why we’re still here,” Herbie meekly answered, sparse gray curls barely concealing his thinning crown. “God doesn’t want us.”

George forced a smile as he tugged on his belt. He'd become accustomed to the elastic waistbands of retirement, and the dress pants were uncomfortably tight. He imagined a cobra, struggling to swallow him whole. "God, I hate this place."

Herbie arched a brow. His cherubic face retained the glow of hours spent outdoors, mostly on the golf course. "Who doesn't? Did you see the welcoming committee?"

George shuddered. Two pasty-faced greeters sporting white carnations had stood at the front door directing mourners. "You couldn't miss them. They look like they died last month."

"And no one bothered to tell them," Herbie deadpanned. "If that's their idea of marketing, forget it. I'm never dying."

George understood Herbie. When anything got too emotional, he'd make a joke to cover the pain. And though George played along, he would've preferred to just stay home. Hide from reality. But some things couldn't be avoided. And being back at The Golden Funeral Home, this time for Willy, was one of them.

George glanced about the oak-paneled space with its high ceiling and row upon row of wooden pews, mostly filled by women, younger than George had expected. But then young was a relative term. There was so much plastic surgery in Boca Raton, it was impossible to guess anyone's age. *Let's just say I'm over fifty*, one Boca matron had offered when the topic of age came up. Amused, George had pondered whether seventy had become the new fifty.

George craned his neck. The front row reserved for the family was empty. Typically, family was sequestered with the rabbi for a private viewing. Once the casket was out front, the future was about memory: trying to recall a loved one's voice, the glint in their eye, the warmth of their touch.

George rubbed the soft silk of his black tie. He wished he'd thrown the tie away. Burnt the suit. Why hadn't he?

He remembered when Jeanette had first broached the topic of downsizing. He'd been in the master bath of their Long Island home, shaving, the water running, a towel wrapped around his waist. "Hold on. I can't hear you," he'd shouted, poking his head out the bathroom door with dabs of shaving cream clinging to his cheeks. She'd looked lovely, even with no makeup, her light brown hair in a short bob. She wore a blue robe he'd given her five birthdays earlier.

She was still his girl. The girl he'd met and married when he was twenty-two. The same petite frame. The same hauntingly lovely green eyes.

She stood in front of the open closet taking inventory. She held a notepad and pencil as she looked at him over the top of her reading glasses. She suggested he keep a few sport coats. Not the heavy ones, only the light-colored ones. And a dark suit. The very one he was wearing. The rest would have to go. There'd be limited closet space when George retired from his job as a healthcare administrator and they moved from the four-bedroom house in Garden City, New York, to a Florida condo. She caressed the sleeve of one of his white button-down dress shirts, talking about his clothes as if they were hers.

Herbie nudged George back to reality. "When do you think they'll get this show on the road? And where the hell is Benny?"

George had last seen Benny the day before at breakfast. "He must be in the back. You know he hates funerals."

Red velvet curtains framed Willy's casket, hiding the private reception area where Willy's family would be congregating. George knew it well. He spotted the podium off to the side of the casket where the rabbi would deliver the eulogy. Though it had been seven months, the timbre of the rabbi's high-pitched voice still haunted him.

Jeanette was a loving wife and mother. She adored her family. They were the center of her universe.

George closed his eyes. Time had not diminished the pain. How surprised he'd been by Jeanette's diagnosis. He took a fast breath. *Men always go first*, he thought as he looked about the chapel. *How could she leave me alone?*

Herbie checked his watch. "We're really running late."

George shrugged. "It's not like we're in any rush."

"The family should've been seated by now," Herbie said, rather indignantly. "It's not right to keep everyone waiting."

It was odd. In all that time together on the golf course, Willy must have talked about his family. But George couldn't recall the details.

Herbie's blue eyes sparkled. "Did I tell you about the Realtor I met last month at a Boca open house? She's sitting in the back. A tall redhead. A real knockout." Herbie crossed his legs wide, bumping George's knee. A yellow Nike bobbed on the end of Herbie's ankle.

George's eyes traveled from Herbie's foot to the green Izod collar sticking out of Herbie's blue sport coat. "What the hell are you wearing?"

"Clothes," Herbie snapped.

George raised an eyebrow. "Love the sneakers."

"I have bad feet. You've been on the golf course with me. You know that."

George nodded. Herbie had bad feet, a strained back, and aching knees. Earlier in the week, he'd added a sore shoulder to the lineup. Anything to excuse a poor golf score.

Herbie rubbed his left shoulder as if reading George's mind.

"Maybe you should see a doctor," George suggested.

"I don't need a doctor. Do you know what an orthopedic surgeon charges?"

George shook his head in disbelief. Herbie was a successful pediatrician with junior partners. He had plenty of money. "How about a chiropractor?"

“No thank you. The last time I went, the guy wrapped his arms around me. Then, he pulled me in for a hug.”

“That was to adjust your spine,” George said dismissively.

Herbie offered a sour expression. “It was like we were on a first date.”

George stifled a yawn. He’d heard it all before. Herbie’s discomfort at being touched by other men. He’d known Herbie for over forty years, and in all that time, Herbie had loved the ladies. George remembered the night Jeanette’s sister had brought Herbie over to introduce him to the family. Jeanette had been so excited. “Judy thinks he’s the one,” Jeanette enthused as she rushed about the living room of their small Queens apartment, straightening up. “You have to be on your best behavior, George,” she warned as she repositioned the sofa pillows. “No teasing Judy. Promise?”

George smiled at the memory.

It had been Jeanette’s idea to buy a condo on the grounds of the exclusive Boca Raton Resort & Club. George believed their money would go farther in Weston or Plantation, but Jeanette insisted on the setting. And so George had purchased a two-bedroom unit on the second floor of the first building, right off of the East Palmetto Park Road entrance. The Realtor had promised it was one of the best deals in south Florida. *It’ll go fast. You’d better grab it.* George succumbed to the pressure and bought the condo sight unseen. Unfortunately, the balcony overlooked the parking lot of an Intracoastal boat launch. “If you lean over the railing and twist your head to the right, you can see the Intracoastal,” George explained to Jeanette as they stood on the balcony the day they’d taken possession.

The disappointment on Jeanette’s face still haunted him.

Herbie bumped George’s elbow. “Willy would be so happy with the turnout. The place is packed.”

George doubted Willy would be happy to be dead.

“You’d think they were serving food or giving away money,” Herbie said sarcastically. “Where were all these people when Willy needed them?”

George blushed. He’d rarely visited Willy in the hospital. After Jeanette had died, he’d developed an aversion to hospitals. He nervously jerked a leg forward, kicking the seat in front. A blonde, hair teased to a full fluff, turned around.

“Excuse me,” George mumbled.

The blonde held his glance long enough for George to decipher the half-smile as flirting.

Herbie’s eyes popped as he caught the blonde’s intent. He offered George a toothy grin. “We may not have longevity. But we do have fun.”

George ignored Herbie as his eyes settled back on the casket. He tried to imagine Willy lying inside, but all he could see was Jeanette in her final repose. The frozen half-smile. The unnatural makeup with its heavy foundation. Her hair brushed up and away from her face, revealing a forehead she’d always covered with bangs.

“I can’t afford to lose another friend,” Herbie suddenly said. “We’ve been friends a long time, George. Promise me you’ll never die. You just might be my dearest friend.”

“Who are you kidding?” George answered without a moment’s thought. “Besides Benny, I’m your only friend.”



Sylvia Haddit, seated in the fifteenth row, gasped. Her stacked bracelets jingled as a hand covered her mouth. She’d spotted a familiar face. Well, not exactly a face. It was more the back of a head.

“Oh my God. There he is,” Sylvia said, pointing with her chin, feeling the skin under her neck pull taut from the lift she’d undergone the previous summer when the snowbirds

left town. Her bright red hair was swept up and off the face to emphasize her high cheekbones. "That's the guy I've been telling you about. Over there."

Eleanor Rifkin tucked a strand of silver-gray hair behind an ear. She stretched her neck. "Where, where? Who?"

Sylvia broke into a smile. "The guy with the curly hair."

"The one with the green collar sticking up?"

Sylvia nodded, blinking hard as a contact lens suctioned.

"Gosh, I hate that look," Eleanor said. "Whoever told men they could do that with a collar?"

"Right," Sylvia agreed as she waited for her tears to lubricate the dry eye. With the next blink, the contact lens shifted. "They might as well wear their underwear over their pants."

The two giggled.

Eleanor tilted her head. "So how do you know him?"

"I showed him a property. He pretended to be interested. Then he made a pass." Sylvia pulled down the hem of her skirt, which barely reached mid-thigh. "You'd think in this day and age of Me Too, he'd know better." She lifted her head as if posing for a photo.

Eleanor crinkled her nose as if catching a whiff of something awful. "Why are we always talking about men? There must be something else to discuss."

"Like the economy or global warming?"

Eleanor sighed. "So, is he cute?"

Sylvia considered. "He's a dust bunny with legs."

"Oh, he's turning around," Eleanor said as the gentleman in the eighth row scanned the room. "Who is he looking for?" she whispered.

The man's eyes flashed back and forth across the chapel and then zeroed in on Eleanor. At once, his baby blues lit up.

"He's bad news. Just bad news," Sylvia warned.

"I think he's adorable," Eleanor said in a soft voice. "He looks like Billy Crystal in *When Harry Met Sally*. But older."

“Much older.” Sylvia tugged on a stiff cuff. The dry cleaner had added too much starch.

“So you’re not interested in him?”

“I’d rather be drawn and quartered,” Sylvia flatly answered as she focused on the sparseness of the hair on the back of the man’s head. Why hadn’t Herbie acknowledged her? Wasn’t she far more attractive than Eleanor? “He’s all yours,” she said with a flutter of a hand, pretending disgust, yet determined to undermine any adventure Eleanor might have with the eligible suitor.



George winced. The hardness of the wooden bench was beginning to flare his sciatica.

Herbie pulled out a roll of peppermint Life Savers. “It’s just like Willy to run late for his own funeral.” He popped a mint in his mouth. “How many times have we waited around for that guy? Always late. And such a slow eater. It used to drive me crazy the way he picked at his food. A bite here. A bite there.”

After golf, they’d usually eat lunch together. Willy would be the last to order. The friends would exchange impatient glances as the waitress flicked her pen back and forth against the order pad. As soon as Willy opened his mouth, they’d all say in unison, “A tuna on rye, chips, and a sour pickle on the side.”

Willy always seemed surprised they knew his order.

There was a sudden rustling from behind the red velvet curtain. A search for an opening. The murmur in the chapel softened as others noticed the movement. Then, a loud thud sounded as the curtain bounced. Someone had fallen. A number of ladies raised their voices in concern.

“What the hell is going on back there?” Herbie asked. “A wrestling match?”

George offered a blank look.

The side door to the right of the velvet curtain flung open. A huge man with a gray beard and wire-rimmed glasses, face bright red, burst forth like a baby chick from its cracked shell. He looked about the chapel. His expression reminded George of his Uncle Morty the day the toilet had overflowed in their Queens apartment. "Morty!" Aunt Clara had yelled. "I told you not to use so much toilet paper."

"It's Benny," Herbie said with a chuckle. "What a dope. He must have come in through the back entrance."

Benny made a beeline to where they were sitting.

"There's no room here," George said as he strained to look up. "You'll have to go to the back."

Benny knelt on one knee in the aisle next to George. His size-thirteen shoes impinged on George's space. "I need to talk with you, George. You too, Herbie."

"What were you doing back there, you clumsy ox?" Herbie said with an impish grin.

"Talking to the rabbi," Benny answered, his tone serious. "He wants to speak to the three of us. Together. Now."

George squinted. "Us? About what?"

Benny placed a hand on George's knee. "I can't talk about it here."

"Are you kidding?" Herbie checked his watch. "He should be doing the service."

"Come on, guys." Benny stood to his full height, his huge mitt using George's knee for leverage.

"Benny!" George cried in pain as he furiously rubbed the joint. "What are you trying to do, kill me?"



The eyes of the chapel occupants followed the three friends as they passed by the casket and through the side door leading to the area behind the velvet curtains.

“What’s going on?” George asked as he spotted the rabbi waiting for them.

Rabbi Sherman had the kind of face that firmly held a frown. A gnome in an ill-fitted sport coat, his hair was a kinky gray mess. “So these are the friends,” he said, a hand extended in greeting to George and Herbie. “Now you, young man,” he addressed George, “look familiar. That’s a very handsome face. Like a Jewish movie star. We’ve met. Am I right?”

“Yes.” George nodded, hoping to skip any discussion about Jeanette.

“How do we know each other?” the rabbi asked.

“Jeanette. Jeanette Elden. My wife.”

“Oh!” The rabbi’s eyes lit up. “She runs the auxiliary at the temple.”

“No. You presided over her funeral.”

The rabbi scratched his head. “Elden?”

“Yes.”

The rabbi searched the floor before looking up with an expression of clarity. “Yes,” he said, this time with determination. “She passed of a heart attack.”

“No. Cancer.”

“Of course. A tragic case.”

George nodded, keenly aware that the rabbi had no clue who Jeanette was.

The rabbi rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Now to the sad business at hand.” He looked over at Benny. “Have you told them?”

“I didn’t think it was appropriate to discuss it in the chapel,” Benny confessed.

Rabbi Sherman clasped his hands together. “Well, gentlemen, we have a problem.”

George looked at Benny, who then looked at Herbie.

The rabbi cleared his throat. “I’ve been asked to speak to the family. You see, the check provided to the funeral home

has failed to clear. I've assured the Goldenblatts, who own the mortuary, this was just a mistake. I promised, once the family arrived today, we'd clear up this entire matter."

George shrugged. "And the problem is?"

The rabbi waved a hand at the empty reception room. "There's no family. No one showed."

Herbie looked at Benny. "Is this a joke?"

Benny's expression indicated it wasn't.

Herbie's Izod collar seemed to sag. "But you must have met the family. How else could you do the eulogy?"

Rabbi Sherman shook his head. "I'd hoped to meet them today." He pulled on an earlobe. "This is very unusual."

"Now wait," George said. "How can there be no family? Who claimed the body? How did Willy get here? Someone made the arrangements."

Rabbi Sherman knitted his brow. "They were at the hospital, but they seem to be gone now. For some unknown reason, they've skipped the funeral."

"So what does that have to do with us?" Herbie asked.

"We've spoken, your friend and I." The rabbi nodded at Benny. "Before the body will be released for burial, someone needs to pay the bill."

Benny stared at the floor.

"Oh no," Herbie burst forth. "I'm not paying to bury Willy. He's not my responsibility."

Benny put a hand on Herbie's shoulder. "Herbie, come on; there's no other choice. We were his buddies."

"Heck no. Tell them to put him on ice. I'm not doing it."

Benny turned to George. "What do you say?"

George couldn't believe it. How had it come to this? How could Willy's family abandon him? The whole thing seemed crazy. "I don't know what to say," he stammered as he thought about Jeanette's past-due medical bills stacked up on his desk. He'd known health insurance wouldn't cover it all, but he hadn't

anticipated the enormity of the out-of-pocket expenses when someone was dying. If only he hadn't taken early retirement. If only he hadn't purchased that cheap policy. If only Jeanette had been old enough for Medicare. He'd already passed many sleepless nights worrying about bill collectors. "I've never known this to happen," George said, blushing as if he'd just admitted he was seriously strapped for cash.

The rabbi agreed. "It's highly unusual. But something needs to be done."

"Okay," George relented, a sinking feeling in his gut. Had he reached his credit limit? Was he about to be publicly humiliated? "But only if we split the cost three ways." He pointed at Herbie.

Benny pulled Herbie in close. A huge hand tightly grasped Herbie's right shoulder.

Herbie squirmed. "Jesus, that's my bad shoulder. Take it easy."

George could have sworn the left shoulder was the problem.

"Are we all set?" the rabbi asked.

George nodded.

Herbie nodded.

Benny smiled.

"Good then," the rabbi said. "I'll be back in a moment. Get those credit cards ready, boys," he called out as he disappeared through a door leading to the funeral home's back hallway. "We have a funeral today!"