

Ilene Rubin—46
A Thousand Deaths

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Part 1

Chapter 1

December 22, 2003

“Gregory, dear, would you see that there’s enough for everyone to drink?” Ceilly asked as she carried a silver tray into the dining room past a dozen well wishers.

“Sure. There’s some people want to meet you, Ceilly.”

“In a while. I have to get the table ready.”

“No, no. Let someone else do it, Mom. Come on.”

She shushed him away. “No, please. I need to do this, Gregory. Let me. Please. I need to keep busy right now. I’ll socialize later. Now? Busy. Meet your friends? Later.”

She walked back to the kitchen and hurried to get another cake on a plate. A housekeeper washed dishes and stacked the dishwasher. April unwrapped pastries. Ceilly grabbed a cake tray and made her way to the dining room table again.

The house was filling up quickly as those at the cemetery followed to Samantha’s house. Cars lined both sides of the quiet tree lined street. It served no purpose to dictate where they should park, not under the circumstances; Samantha was known. Her successes and failures made the evening news. The neighbors were at the funeral anyway or stopped by the house on their own; no one would complain. They parked everywhere but on the lawn.

Ceilly didn’t know everyone but was glad to see them come and to have them, glad that Samantha meant so much to everyone. She suspected many were there because Samantha was the daughter of the great legend, yes that was it, too. She had to admit that it felt good having all the people, the food and drink flowing like it was a wedding. She

had to stop herself now and then to remind herself that Samantha's wedding wasn't even so grandiose. And this certainly couldn't be called grandiose, now would it?

There was no music, after all. All mirrors weren't covered like they used to do in Baltimore where Ceilly never admitted having any connection to. Baltimore seemed like an old movie reel, a life that was lived by someone else. She remembered her Aunt Gertrude, Trudie they called her. Her funeral was so solemn that it left a draining isolation among the crowd in her uncle's house.

Ceilly was a child then. She remembered it in yellowed shades of *past*. The world was much larger then. Her cousins ran around and played between the tall legs of their parents and the friends of their Aunt, Tante Trudie. Most of what was visible of the adult world was from the vantage point of shined wing tip shoes and pumps, always black and sometimes suede.

The adults at Tante Trudie's funeral whispered in the living room, cried in the dining room and arranged neat platters of cold cuts and bread, cakes and cheeses in the kitchen. There were black ribbons and armbands, sniffles and a few coughs. Lace curtains were taken down to reveal discolored blinds or shades. No lace, no radio, no loud noises or laughter. No music, too many pipes and cigarettes, a few glasses with liquid that tinkled on ice cubes. Ceilly still could hear the ice cubes clink in those glasses as she watched the hands that shook the glass, mixed the drink round and round. She heard it just as she could still hear the casket clunk in Samantha's grave. Sounds, smells, the years rolling back and forth, mixed up like the drinks in the glasses.

All voices were hushed at Tante Trudie's house. Trudie's sisters hugged and were teary eyed, red noses drippy and one hundred percent cotton lace handkerchiefs crinkled and wilted from too many tears.

Ceilly's mother was among them, distraught and heartbroken. Why wasn't April so? Shouldn't someone be on the living room sofa hugging and tearful, pained and grieving for Samantha? Why did they choose to set the food out and worry about others? Where were her own sisters, now that she needed someone to take her hand and pull her away from the mundane to wallow in the sacred task of grieving? The absence of real family was brittle on her heart, splintering on her soul. So she went back to the kitchen to refill the rye bread basket. What else could she do? Sit on the sofa alone and cry?

Tante Trudie's whole house was black, all black; the furniture covered, the dresses, the suits, the covered mirrors that looked when they were covered like gaping mouths, an expression of horror or at least of death come to roost. The Rabbi sat on the sofa next to Uncle Max, who slumped so that all Ceilly could see of him were his suspenders and his flaccid belly spreading all over his trousers. For all their fighting he was truly lost and seemed so much smaller to Ceilly, in fact shrunken, as though Tante Trudie's girth might have been his brace, his strength. What would he be without her?

Here in her own home, in California, the sun always shone and no one draped the sofas in black. It was glaringly contrasted at this moment when it seemed to Ceilly that the old ways were to be honored, paid homage to; people didn't seem so old, tall or morose. People wore all different colors here, whatever colors they woke to that morning. Only those whose sense of loss or chic got the better of them dressed to express their

hearts. Lyndsay; Samantha's best friend, looked lovely in a silk Chanel, her hair perfect, her makeup barely smudged from any gracious tears that may have slipped out. Shauna wore black but did on any given day; her vamp look that Samantha so hated but never restricted. To Ceilly she looked like a whore but never said so. It was just the fashion was all, no reflection on her true nature.

Ceilly didn't remember much about her Tante Trudie. Her smell, everything was about sound and smell to Ceilly. Tante's perfume was as soft and plush as she had been when she stuffed quarters into Ceilly's pockets with polished nails and pudgy fingers. The charms of her bracelet knocked together, chi-chinked, chattering like Ceilly's teeth on a bitter winter's night. Her perfume could almost be conjured just by thinking long enough about it but then it would vaporize and Ceilly would be left with only a sense of it. The memory of Tante Trudie who made the worst matzo ball soup; too salty, her matzo balls heavy and thick as she was, came back in waves of familiarity. Tante Trudie shoved quarters that she didn't couldn't afford to give away, or Goldenberg's Peanut Chews into Ceilly's pocket like it was always a struggle but wasn't at all. Then she'd always hugged Ceilly as softly as a pillow with her huge chest and sweet soft perfume. Maybe it was Tea Rose or White Shoulders?

No one laughed at a joke at Tante Trudie's funeral or Shiva. There were no amusing stories about her childhood in Europe, no tales of funny occurrences at the market downtown. Even the men were downcast for though Trudie's matzo ball soup was the God awful worst, her brisket was just that good, succulent and like butter. Everyone would miss Trudie, whose laughter was hearty and made her whole body shake, her

whole rotund body. She could have been a Missus Santa Clause for her build even though Ceilly heard stories of what a beauty she'd been when she was young. Men stood in line to dance with her until she met Uncle Max. Her laughter was somewhere between a twitter and a guffaw and was thick as runny maple syrup.

Tante's sons sat on the sofa and hung their chins on their chests, only lifted them when some relative pinched their cheeks and held on long enough to move the head left and right. The boys didn't even flinch, the pain no worse than what they felt inside. Normally they would have run for cover at the sight of approaching smiles and grasping fingers ready to strike and would only stay if the promise of a dollar bill or chocolate were hung within their sight or reach.

Here the conversations were animated and there were smiles amid the tragedy of Samantha's death. Ceilly's two sons preceded Samantha and even their funerals were smaller, quieter. This one was big; an honor to her that both surprised and somehow made Ceilly angry in that Samantha's reputation must have eluded her own mother. She didn't know Samantha was so well liked and respected, only thought of her as a sickly, mousy child that was too quiet, too full of daydreams and fantasies, a young girl whose age never registered as a sign that Ceilly wasn't needed any longer. Samantha, responsible? No, she needed guidance to stay on track she was so easily influenced and led astray. A serious and respected physician? A fluke. Surely she'd fail sooner or later, or give it up to stay home with her babies. Scientist? Really. Some stroke of chance.

Yet here Ceilly listened to how Samantha helped a child through a terrible ordeal at school because the teacher spoke too quickly for her to absorb the lessons. The mother told Gregory the child was about to flunk. Again.

“She called the teacher herself, set up a meeting to explain the condition to the teacher and the principal.”

Gregory nodded and thanked the woman.

“A loss to the medical world”

“Tragedy, so young, such a dedicated scientist.”

“So beautiful, a beautiful woman.”

Woman? Samantha? But . . . that made Ceilly . . . old! Why, she herself was hardly a matriarch herself, couldn't be. Could she? Ceilly did her math, which she'd been very good at. Yes, Ceilly supposed that she was considered old. She looked around. Was she the oldest woman there? Was Samantha really forty-six years old at her last birthday? *Last birthday?* How did that happen? How did so much time slip by her while Samantha grew up and had a life of her own that she didn't, obviously by all those present, wish to share with Ceilly?

And the children! Shauna and Jordan, helping and smiling. Getting their cheeks patted by Samantha's best friend Lyndsay, pinched by that idiot gossip columnist Sadelle Winthrop.

Ceilly caught Shauna and pulled her away from Sadelle.

“Oh Ceilly,” Sadelle said as she cornered Ceilly on her way back to the kitchen, “I just can’t tell you how sorry I am. We all had such high hopes. Say, I was wondering, did you have to send out notices for all this? Do you people *do* that?”

Ceilly stopped, looked at Sadelle. The entire room stopped, all conversation dropped dead on a tack. The thought of scooping Ceilly for a story at her own daughter’s funeral was beyond even Ceilly. Sadelle’s question shut the room down.

“Sadelle, there certainly won’t be any notices necessary for your funeral. Word will spread like butter, baby, melted butter,” Ceilly spat without skipping a beat.

Shauna put her arm around her. “Come on, Grammy, don’t listen to her. She’s ignorant.”

“What? What did I say? It was a fair question. You people *do* things so strangely, no flowers, and what’s with the bottle of water out on the step? Can’t anyone answer me? What the hell are you all *looking* at?”

Gregory came to Sadelle. “Drop it. Come on, I’ll answer your questions.” He led her away from Ceilly. Shauna rolled her eyes at him.”

In the kitchen, Ceilly slammed the empty tray onto the table. “That woman!”

“Ignore her, Grammy,” Shauna said.

April gave directions in Spanish to a harried but efficient server. “Y no se olvide de limpiar las manchas del agua de esos cristales. Mi hermana no era la mejor ama de casa, era ella? Oh, Mother, there you are. Here, Shauna, take these to the living room. Someone asked for Knishes earlier, Mother. Do you believe it? Said they’d never tasted them. You’d think these idiots never went into a deli before. Jeez, it’s not like we live in

some remote *shtetl*, for God's sakes. Mother you look terrible. Come on, let's fix your makeup. There are too many guests here to look like you're dead, too. Has anyone asked for your autograph yet, Mother?"

"Really, April," she said.

"They will, Mother, give them time."

Ceilily raised both hands, cradled April's ears and planted a kiss on her cheek.

"You're priceless, dear. You always were my favorite, you know."

April led Ceilily toward the back stairs of the house, through the kitchen that led to the maid's quarters.

"Come on Mom, let's get some concealer and lipstick on you. *Consuella*, don't *dejan cualquier persona saber donde estamos*," she commanded.

"April, what the hell did you just say to her? I hate when you do that!"

"Calm down, Ma, I told her not to tell anyone where we went, that's all. Before that I told her to wash the glasses. That's all."

Ceilily let herself be led around by April like a doll. Her only remaining child. She'd have to mind that, make sure that nothing happened to April. Goodness knows one never knew when tragedy would strike. First Michael in Vietnam and then Bradley from AIDS. Now this.

"April, dear, we'll have to come back here next week and help Gregory sort through Sam's belongings. I don't want him to have to do it all himself."

"You just want first crack at it all, Mother. Will he move back in here with the kids?"

“April! Don’t be so blunt. It’s not becoming. It makes you sound like a vulture. I think he already has although I haven’t seen the slut. Have you? Is she here?”

April laughed. “Don’t let him hear you say that. No, she’s not here.”

They were in the maid’s room, using the mirror. They primped, fluffed their hair, straightened their clothes and checked their mascara.

“I’ll give you pictures and we’ll have to go through her jewelry, too.”

“She had none,” April said. “That dinky ring he gave her would be an embarrassment at my club, Mother. I wouldn’t bother.”

“I’m sure there must be something of hers that you’d like to have? Isn’t there?”

“I have my divorce. That’s enough souvenirs of my sister and it’s no thanks to her.”

“Now, April, he admitted to the rape himself. And on your wedding day of all things, the animal. Isn’t it time you forgave Sam for his ignorance?”

“Humph. Gregory had a knife to his throat. Under those circumstances even I’d admit to oral sex with the President. Oops, guess it’s too late for that, huh?”

“Only if it wasn’t so. Now, let’s not beat--” Ceilly choked on her thought.

“Can’t say it, can you? Dead horses, Mother, dead horses.”

“Oh, April, she was my daughter, too. Don’t ask me to choose.”

“Too late for that, isn’t it Mother? I guess I win by default. Never an outright victory for me, no, just the last one left. Come on. Let’s get back down there. The media should be here by now. We’ll need a spokesperson to give a statement. Who do you want?”

“How about her friend Lyndsay?”

“No, no. She’s a twit. Drunk, no doubt. Or looking for her next husband,” April said, her voice worse than Ceilly had heard in a long time.

“You’re in a terrible mood today, sweetheart. You do it.”

“All right, I’ll do it. I’ll say that we appreciate the kind wishes of the community in our time of loss. Actually I feel better than I have in years. Must be all the stress.”

“Either that or you know my estate is all yours now. Try to say it like you mean it.”

“Mother!”

“Well guess what? I’m going to spend every dime of it, do you hear me?”

They laughed. “Oh, Mother, you are in a wicked mood, yourself.”

They walked back the way they came, through the kitchen. The level of conversation mounted as they descended. With each step, their expressions moved closer to the stricken and when they arrived in the kitchen, Gregory was munching on a carrot stick and looked concerned for their profound grief.

“Oh, there you are. Mom, I want you to meet some people. Are you up to it?”

“I’ll manage, dear” She used the counter and chair to hold herself up. She reached into the pocket of her jacquard silk suit and came out with a raw silk handkerchief. She dabbed her eyes, her nose.

Lyndsay pushed her way into the crowded kitchen and placed her arms around Ceilly.

“Oh, Ceilly, it’s terrible. I can’t stop thinking about her.” She cried and dabbed her eyes. “What an awful thing, I don’t know how any of us can stand it.”

“Eh, another country heard from. Lyndsay dear, walk me into the living room. We’ll sit on the sofa. We’ll soak our eyes together. Where’s Aaron, dear?” Ceilly suspected that Aaron was more than a good friend to both Samantha *and* Lyndsay.

“He wasn’t sure if he was welcome here, Ceilly. Can you imagine? At a time like this when I need him so much? All he could think of was that Sam wouldn’t want him to upset Gregory.”

She looked right at Gregory. “Like he has a say in it anymore.” Ceilly put her arm through Lyndsay’s and off they sauntered through the dining room.

“Thank you very much, Ceilly. Glad to know I maintain some level of respect in my own house.”

“Gregory, dear, you lost that right the day you unzipped your pants for someone else.”

“Ceilly, the expert in faithful matrimony,” was the reply, without a moment’s hesitation.

Ceilly let go of Lyndsay and turned to Gregory, was about to pounce.

“Mother, don’t,” April said. “Let’s not do this again. Sam isn’t here to keep the peace anymore.”

“No reason to, April,” Lyndsay said as she cried anew.

Consuella looked at them and shook her head, walked out of the room clucking her tongue. “Tch, tch, tch, esta gente loca. Éste duerme con los tramposos aquél y aquél en éste como pedazos de un rompecabezas. Gente loca, todas!”

April followed into the dining room, followed Consuella with a load of cups for the table. “Really, Consuella, who asked for your opinion anyway? Don’t forget who gives you the biggest Christmas bonus.”

Greg got between April and Ceilly. “Always the diplomat as usual, April. Ceilly, come on. Just say hello to them. You’ll like them. They’re all reporters for the Post.”

Ceilly considered and relented. “Fine, fine. Just a minute or two, Lyndsay. I’ll be right back.”

April smiled her on stage smile that was so common a signal in their house that Ceilly immediately put on her gracious face and posture.

Lyndsay was left by the fireplace to cry into her tissue. She looked at the dining room table, loaded with all manner of food and chose a cracker with lox. She ate and cried at the same time. Actually eating made her choke, however, and she tossed the other half into the trash can by the bay window. She looked around at the crowded house that Samantha so loved.

April watched her, Ceilly didn’t give her another moment’s thought and then she and Gregory left the room, Ceilly ready for her moment before the cameras and notepads.

Gregory pushed a path through the crowded room with Ceilly in tow, through the hall, living room and into the den where his co-workers mingled by the fireplace.

“Everyone this is Ceilly Mathiaas, Samantha’s mother. Ceilly, this is Collin Jurrsic, Thomas Romecka, Bastian Lefare, Margaret Shippens and Stan Weathers.”

They all shook hands and exchanged pleasantries, condolences.

“Collin asked for a moment of your time, Ceil.”

“Of course. Why don’t we walk out back?”

“Great,” Collin said.

They left the group. “How do you know Gregory, Mister--”

“Jurrsic. Gregory was actually my mentor when I was starting out. He taught me so well that he kids me all the time that he’ll either have to discredit me or start a new paper with me to keep me out of his way.”

“He’s a barrel of laughs isn’t he?”

“He’s okay.”

They opened the French doors and walked out onto a patio surrounded with potted red geraniums and fiery pink fuscia. She indicated two ornate wrought iron seats by a small round table. On the table were gardening gloves and a trowel.

“Samantha loved gardening. She loved making things grow. Always did. When she was little she used to plant watermelon seeds and green beans that she didn’t want to eat.” Ceilly fingered the gloves and picked them up, held them close then dropped them. They sat and looked around at the peaceful garden, so much a haven from the chaos inside.

Ceilly wondered what Tante Trudie would have thought of this patio and garden, a place they could have only dreamt of in Baltimore. The pool and spa, such a thing wasn’t

even hoped for! She hadn't thought of her family back there in so long it seemed like a novel from long ago, the memory of it distant and vague.

"Where's the other one? Couldn't show her face?" Ceilly asked.

"To whom do you refer?"

"Gregory's slut."

Collin didn't respond. He blinked and shrugged. "I didn't ask. Personally I think that was a huge mistake on Greg's part."

"Do you?" She looked at him. "Not trying to suck up to me are you?"

He laughed. "No Mam. No need. I was wondering if there might be a time soon when we could talk."

"We're talking now."

"Not now. Some time soon but not now. This isn't the right time for this."

"Ah. You want an appointment?"

"Exactly."

"And this would be for?"

"I have questions. Would you mind?"

"No. Not at all. How about Tuesday?"

"Thank you. I know this is a difficult time for you and I appreciate your time."

"Come at ten o'clock, to my house on Mullholland."

"Thank you." He stood and when she didn't move, he returned to the house.

Ceilly remained on the patio, in the wrought iron chair at the round table with the gardening gloves. She sat silent, looked out over the back yard at the blue sky and

thought about her dead children, wondered who else could there possibly be in the world that lost three children in such ways?