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“Your only hope is to tie it back,” Mom said. My hair was red and Celticly wild, just like hers. The frizz offended her sensibilities. Too working-class.

To this day, Mom went to a Madison-Avenue stylist at \$475 a visit to master her own tresses, now a regal, silvery white. It was hard to tell if Mom was delusional, determined to live as she once had despite financial realities. Or if she was simply too stubborn to change her ways. I suspected it was probably both and wondered what financial alchemy, including Bert and the furniture sales, paid for it all.

My wild curls were like catnip to men, so I kept them that way. Tomorrow, on the other hand, was a Wall Street interview. “I probably should do something about it,” I mused.

“You’ll notice the River Valley oil is gone,” Mom said on her way to her avocado-colored kitchen. Bit by bit Mom was selling my grandmother’s things to make ends meet.

“Did you get what you wanted for it?” I called into the kitchen, trying to sound nonchalant. Mom emerged carrying a Spode teapot surrounded by chip-less sixty-year-old cups. The china had tracery crackling on its surface and was covered with birds. Birds were my family’s coat of arms, as it were, and all our china had been made by Tiffany in a custom Audubon pattern.

“Mmmm,” she said. It was *déclassé* to talk about money. I wondered if Mom would outlast the art and furniture or if it would outlast Mom. I pictured her, in her nineties, confined to one small corner of her house, sitting in a final remaining chair, drinking from a penultimate teacup.

Aside from Bert and art sales, Mom had one other ace in the hole to rescue her from penury: if she could cash in on a lease she still held to a rent-controlled apartment. She took the apartment in 1969. Later, Aunt Kathleen moved into it and her name was added to the lease. When her sister died, Mom retained the lease, and kept it all these years.

Rent-controlled leases were worth their weight in gold because they gave the leaseholder a lifetime right to their apartment. Landlords, eager to redevelop their properties, paid huge sums, six figures or more, to get tenants like Mom out. They converted their buildings to luxury apartments or, even better, ripped them down and put up huge towers if zoning laws allowed. Mom bribed the super to say she spent the required 183 days there. Mom didn’t set foot in the place because Aunt Kathleen had jumped from the building’s roof.

“Is your art dealer that lady you used to know?”

“Judith. Yes, she’s still at the Grandhope.”

What an Old New York phenomenon the Grandhope was!

A hotel where people real-life lived. It conjured up Eloise at the Plaza, Elaine Stritch at the Carlyle, Sylvia Plath at the Barbizon. Nowadays, these old hotels were being turned into co-ops. "I don't know how long it'll last. Judith's nearly ninety and going blind you know."

"I didn't know."

"I hear Angela is in the neighborhood, too." Angela was my childhood "best friend" (quotes stet). "I *don't* say hello." Mom never really liked Angela, though Angela worshipped Mom. Mom called Angela *a climber*. Pot, meet kettle. Please discuss amongst yourselves. "Do you have any plans about where you'll live when you get this job?" Mom's *when* was subtle, but I heard it. No matter how estranged we became, Mom never doubted my capacity. She didn't offer me her rent-controlled apartment, nor did I ask about it. The rule with Mom was her stuff was *hers*. Given city housing laws, a daughter could claim the right to a rent-control lease if she lived there. Mom didn't have to worry, though. Years ago, when she retreated into her pain and left me to mine, I decided I didn't want anything from her. Not that she would have given me anything if I asked. Now, I would rather die than accept a single teacup.

"I was thinking I'd buy my own place." Just saying those words gave me a thrill, as if uttering some incantation with the power to restore a lost life.

"You might want to read this." Mom passed me several ink-jet pages. "It's from the *Vanity Fair*." Bert had set her up with the internet and email. She kept the computer, which she considered aesthetically objectionable, in the laundry room. Mom was surprisingly adept on the thing, using it to track the art market.

The title on the printout said "Hedge Fund Rivals." Underneath was a photo of two men back to back, both good-looking, fortyish, in the immaculate suit-jacket-no-tie-gold-cuff link uniform that screeched, "high finance." The caption read: "Arch competitors Peter Priest of Odyssey Capital and Robert Goodman of Hermes Fund." Mom pointed to the second man, the one called Goodman.

"You think it's the same guy?" I asked. "There could be a hundred Robert Goodmans."

"It's the same," Mom said.

"How can you be sure?"

"I read the internet, darling." She looked over her glasses at me.

"He's your landlord these days, right?" The Goodman family owned Mom's rent-controlled building. If it was the same Robert Goodman, he inherited the building from his father.

"Yes." Boy, New York was a small world, everyone cramming together with the density of iridium. "Good-looking fellow." Mom examined the two men on the printout. "The other one is kind of dark." Mom's taste for Mediterraneans soured after the incident with the Greek shipping baron. "Delia, if you should ever run into Robert Goodman, you won't mention your connection with me?"

There was a plaintive quality under the steeliness of Mom's tone. Perhaps a note only a daughter could pick up. It was Mom's paranoia about her lease—the possibility, however remote, I might try to claim to it, or spill the beans she didn't live there. Mom thought everyone, except Bert, was out to take what little she had left.

"My interview's not with that one. He's Hermes Fund. It's with the competitor, Peter Priest of Odyssey Capital. In any case, no. I wouldn't ever mention it."

"Good," she said. "I'm just another name on a lease to Robert Goodman. It still has my maiden name." She really *was* staying off the radar.

Mom was welcome to keep everything to herself. I didn't want any of it. Besides, I was about to make a fortune of my own.