

Twenty-two

My re-birthday was August 21, 1990.

Caroline's office was in an old renovated house, blocks from Portland's Providence Hospital, where my sister had been taken years ago. Walking up those steps that day was terrifying. Although I'd seen many counselors through the years, something about this put butterflies in my stomach. After passing through the rose garden out front, I opened the door. A bell tinkled, a small set of chimes at the top of the door alerting the house that I had arrived. To the right was a set of stairs. To the left was an archway leading to what was once a living room. It was now a waiting room. A small handwritten sign on the mantel told me to please wait, my therapist would be right with me. Taking a seat in an overstuffed armchair, I smelled pipe tobacco. Beyond the softly playing classical music I could hear the murmur of a man's voice coming from what I assumed was the kitchen. In a small frame on a side table were words crafted with calligraphy: *"Easy Does It,"* next to a vase of lovely, fresh roses from the small rose garden out front, I surmised. There were a few magazines, mostly about health and wellness, and a newspaper. What struck me about this moment was how un-cliniclike this waiting room felt. I took a deep breath and sat back, allowing myself to settle into the familiar classical piece now playing.

A few moments later my reverie was broken by a door opening and voices coming from upstairs, fol-

lowed by footsteps. A woman came down the stairs. My heart began to race. Our eyes met for a moment before she looked away. At the bottom of the stairs she moved hastily to the front door. The bell chimed her departure. I shrugged and leaned back once more. Within minutes footsteps, brisk and purposeful, descended the stairs, followed by a cheerful voice.

"Hello, Suzanne. I'm Caroline," she spoke as she crossed into the waiting room, hand extended. I stood up. She had a willowy, thin frame, auburn hair cut in an attractive chin-length style and a sincere smile. When her eyes met mine, it felt like I'd been run down by a bulldozer! My palms began to sweat. I could feel my feet becoming cement.

Turning, she said, "Let's go upstairs to my office." I glanced once more at the front door. I could still bolt, I thought. But just as quickly, I admonished myself to not be foolish. After all, I'd been with therapists before.

At the top of the stairs, she turned left and went into the only open door. Several other rooms lined the hall, all with closed doors. Caroline took a seat in an old silver-blue, wingback chair. There was another chair and a loveseat I could choose from. I sat on the loveseat and wondered if which seat I chose signified anything to Caroline. She smiled. I smiled.

"So, tell me about yourself," she said. "What brings you here today?" I told her I wasn't sure why I would need an addiction therapist but described T.J.'s drinking problem and how it was killing me and how I wished he would change. She asked if I'd been married before. I dropped my eyes and nodded, reporting this was my fifth marriage. She asked about my childhood, my siblings and

my education. She asked about my career. I told her I was a homemaker. I was not ready to tell her about being psychic.

The extraordinary part of this initial meeting was how Caroline named everything. Terms like “emotional incest,” “rageaholic,” “emotional abuse” and “narcissism” were used to define events and conditions I was describing. I was intrigued. “This stuff has a name?” She nodded. “But who or what gives you permission to name it all? None of my other counselors have ever done that.”

She shrugged. “It is what it is,” she said firmly.

“I’d like to come back next week,” I said, noticing as our time drew to a close that she had not reached for her appointment book. Her arms were folded across her chest. As I spoke she held up one hand.

Shaking her head she said, “Well, I don’t know if I want to work with you. You have a lot of problems.”

What kind of therapist was this, telling me I had a lot of problems!

“To begin with, you have a relationship addiction....”

“I have a what?!”

She looked at me, lifting one eyebrow. “Well, Suzy, nobody gets married five times,” she said with a note of incredulity in her voice.

“That’s an addiction?” I asked, truly astonished by this news. She nodded.

We sat quietly, my mind reeling. I knew that I needed what this woman had but I could feel the opportunity slipping away. I had come to her because of T.J.’s drinking and she had turned the tables on me. She was stating that I had an addiction. Why hadn’t anyone told me this before? Who was this audacious woman anyway and how

can relationships be an addiction? My eyes darted around the room looking for her license or diploma. Maybe she wasn't really qualified for this kind of work.

After several extremely uncomfortable moments, Caroline leaned forward and spoke again. "Here's the deal. If we are to work together, I need a few things from you. First off, are you willing to admit you are 50 percent of the problem in this marriage?"

Did she not hear anything I'd told her about T.J.? Did she not understand how much pain I was in because of his behavior? And now she wanted me to admit to something I absolutely did not believe was true! I could feel my face burning and tears emerging. Don't cry. Don't cry...I told myself. Intuitively I knew the correct answer at this moment was yes. Quietly I nodded.

"I'm sorry," she asserted. "I didn't hear you."

I forced my gaze to meet her eyes. "Yes," I said directly at her, forcing sweetness.

She smiled. She wasn't done yet. "Good. Now there are a few more things. For the next two years you won't drink, you won't date, and you will attend a weekly 12-step meeting."

"But I don't have a drinking problem," I protested.

"Good, then that won't be a problem for you. You need to be available for your feelings while we work together. Alcohol, even a glass of wine occasionally, will numb your feelings. So, no alcohol."

I agreed, grudgingly.

"But dating?" I asked, reminding her I was still married.

She shrugged. "You never know what the next two years might bring."