

MURIEL - New Amsterdam, New York, December 8, 2007, 5 p.m.

Good morning, sunshine. Oh, it's nighttime.

Sadie. You and me on the living room floor. You're my dog, I know, but you listen better than any person.

Again.

I had too much wine.

Again.

You smell good, even though you roll in disgusting shit. You even eat shit. I can't believe I kiss your nose. I can't help it. You love me – I see that in your brown doggie eyes. You listen.

You gotta pee? Time for the evening walk? Not yet? OK.

I never drank until college. I was in my freshman bunk, alone at 10 p.m. on my 18th birthday. A friend came in, pulled down the covers, handed me my jeans, and dragged me out to the bars for flaming jellybean shots. Rum, fruit brandy and licorice liqueur. Yuck. All cheap, cheap, cheap and set on fire. Oh my god. We skipped home arm in arm and sang "You say it's your birthday." The Beatles.

I never liked college. Not true. I sorta did. I liked learning, but I wasn't good enough. So much academia and art and complicated shit to take in. Not enough space in my brain. I felt like a small boat lost on a big sea. Even a 3.75 GPA didn't reassure me. I pushed through, pushed, pushed. PUSHED onto a master's degree. In Public Health Administration. God help the public while I was in charge. Got another Masters to be a therapist. I'm 49, Sadie. This has GOT to be the solution.

We all act out, have troubles in life, because of our childhoods. Even me, who seemed to have a nice growing up: colonial house, mom the clueless homemaker. Not that all homemakers were clueless, but my mom was. She had three kids in four years, never knew my sister was anorexic in high school. Or that my brother punched me once. I put on eye makeup to hide it because Mom didn't want to see. Dad never looked right or left. He worked, came home, ate dinner, sat in his chair with the newspaper and TV. On weekends, he cut wood, gardened, fixed things.

Constant motion to push problems out of view.

Mom drove through red lights – dumb! She said that Rhoda Morgenstern on the Mary Tyler Moore show was “actually quite pretty as Jewish women can be.” Prejudice.

I think the family system, par usu-AL needs to go away. Do you know anyone who grows up without issues? Test-tube babies, but not the solution. Kid clusters brought up by paid adults might work. Nah, too much like an orphanage. Or communal parenting? Like the 1960s and 70s. The same father, three kids, three different mothers. Free love. Hippies who home schooled. A Pied Piper parent marched kiddies through fields to pick dandelions. Jesus.

Marriage doesn't work either. It's misery or divorce. Is that true? Am I miserable? I don't know. Was Mom miserable? I don't want to think about it. Is Wanda miserable? Maybe some. She competes with Max, feels inferior to him. But she isn't. But she's not him. She's herself and tries to be him.

I am kinda afraid of Max. He's an intimidating, curt, directed guy. Into extreme sports, extreme work, extreme play. Started his own international shipping business. Wanda hasn't done too badly either as a marketing director. But he is dashing. Exciting. They never stop. Paris this. Cape Town that. She has run all her life. I wonder what she is running from? As a therapist, I should know.

Do I feel inferior to Wanda? Do I try to be Wanda? Oh dear. An endless loop. We're just not good enough, Sadie. No one is. I wish I were a dog.

She and I were college students, on a Eurail pass for a month. It was Strasbourg, I think. No. Someplace in Germany. We got off the train headed for the campingplatz. Big dark clouds rolled toward us.. I'm looking around, such a cute town. But she's bookin' fast with that heavy pack to set up the campsite before the rain. I was tired and hungry and sat down on an historic stone wall, to eat my banana. Everything is historic in Europe, Sadie.

Get moving, she yelled, we're gonna get wet.

I ignored her, stood my ground, took small bites. I had to do that with Wanda. Stand ground. She is pushy. Big rain plops hit us just as we got there, checking in at the Community Center. A nice, bright warm DRY place. I sat down, off loaded my pack, reached into the outside pocket for cheese and crackers. I had to sneak snacks. When Wanda met me at the airport to start our trip,

she was appalled that I had gained 20 pounds and I wasn't skinny to begin with. She skimped on food the whole trip.

Stop that. She was STILL in a hurry and still skimping.

We gotta set up the tent and get inside it to stay dry, she said.

YOU can do that, I said. I'm stayin' here where it IS dry.

By then, the glass windows were streaming, the wind blew rain sheets sideways, puddles filled in the camping field.

I'll never forget the look on her face, so surprised that she was wrong. I WAS RIGHT for once.

Maybe more than once, maybe often, Sadie. And I didn't know it.

She sat down next to me, asked for some cheese and crackers. Wanda was so smart, so fast to get everything done. The best in her class, the best at her jobs. I stumbled, never the best in class or jobs. I think that's because I just never have found the right situation, Sadie.

I'll have cheese and crackers for dinner.

Time to walk, Sadie?

So nice here on the floor. I feel your breath when your head is curled under my chin. I'll quit drinking next week.

Good idea.

I look over my shoulder. No one is there. I could a voice helping me. Sadie, can you talk now?

Boy, am I tipsy. Mom would say that – good idea. She hates my drinkin'.

I was big on being good, so I am here for Mom, at the end of her life, Sadie. I am the only one here for her. I am still far away as a daughter, reluctant to admit that despite her faults, Mom is a much better person than I can be.

We were at her doctor's office this morning, Sadie.

Mom's head lolled on her neck, her chin to her chest, her eyes closed. She sat with me in the gastroenterologist's waiting room. White chin hairs match her head; blue-veined, brown-spotted hands rest, interlaced, over her ascitic belly.

Mom, don't do that, I said. You look like an old person.

She snorted, lifted her head, and opened sleepy, filmy blue-grey eyes.

I am an old person, she said.

It was hard to think of her as old, at 78 years old. That made me near old. She had been the electrician's daughter, a simple happy person. But she had scars, which she hid, from when she had cast away her identity, to be my father's wife. She found herself again when he died.

With the friendly, happy personality from before her marriage, she took the last of her money and had a good time. She went on a tour of Europe. She brought me a sweet 3-inch-tall bedside clock from Switzerland. She made it to the Caribbean and Alaska, and finally to a mobile home in Florida. I'm glad she had fun.

Dad had learning disabilities growing up. Letters didn't make sense to him, and numbers didn't add up. He was a WWII army vet. He shipped out, the picture of an innocent 18-year-old- boy, and when he came back, his eyes stared into the camera like an eagle looking for its prey. I saw the photos. I recognize a picture of trauma when I see it.

Dad wanted a sophisticated woman worthy of his college degree, of the many educations and fortunes, going back hundreds of years in his family. He, the only unsuccessful one in his generation, a mere salesman among lawyers and company presidents. He hoped he could be great, but he never met his standards. If it hadn't been for her, for Mom, he told me, there would have been more success, more friends, more to his life instead of a pedestrian path with his golden highway in the distance.

A nurse called us into the examination room and Dr. Johnson came in soon after.

How are you feeling today, Mrs. Fuller? Asked the doctor.

Mom put on her best Jackie O cordial smile, which didn't make her look glamorous but shy and sweet.

Fine.

He extended his hand to me.

I'm the daughter, I said.

It's good you came, he acknowledged.

I must be here, I thought. No, you don't, I thought again. A lot of daughters don't show up, and the elderly are neglected. Oh, this back and forth in my head, Sadie. Good thing you are here so I'm not alone. I finally talked about the talking-inside thing in psychotherapy training. The instructor said it's common to have spirit guides in consciousness. It was a progressive

educational program. A bit woo-woo. That's not woof-woof, Sadie, but woo-woo: unconventional, not scientific, mystical.

We heard the results of mom's lab tests and scans. I drove her back to the assisted living, which was five-minutes-drive from my house and takes Medicaid, which is good because Mom's broke. Oh Sadie. At least Mom has her own room. The food is good, and the nurse's aides are kind. I can't believe I got Mom in there. I had to beg the administrator, who sat at a desk piled a foot high with applications. I promised to visit three times and take Mom to lunch – every week. Mom is sweet and very pleasant, I said. She won't have demands or make trouble.

The woman stared into my pleading eyes and unexpected tears poured out. Her hand put my application on top, then she called me the next day.

I'll get up, Sadie. I make his coffee, my hard-working husband.

My dining table is in this corner of our big kitchen, since we don't really have a dining room. On the table are 20 toilet paper sheets and same-sized thin cardboards cut from a box that held copy paper and scissors and a ball point pen to my right.

I pick up a pen. I chew my cheek. I take a sip from the soup bowl-sized wine glass near the toilet paper. I take another sip, a longer one. Waiting.

He comes in the door from work, his Vermont ecologist green wool pants and shirt under a parka covered with fresh snowflakes; work boots on his size 12 feet. In minutes, he's hung up the parka, poured himself the coffee, which he drinks at all hours.

Sadie, your head moves from side to side as your eyes follow first him, then me.

He passes the table on his way to his desk in the front room, glances at my hand that holds a sheet of toilet paper poised over a cardboard, moist with glue.

What are you doing? He asks.

Making Christmas cards.

With toilet paper?

Yeah, look. I hold up a finished one: addressed on the TP side with a stamp and a nice note written on the back side of the firm cardboard, expertly glued.

A festive presentation, I add.

That's not funny, honey. Who does that? He asks. He stops to pull on your ears, Sadie, as though he understands you better me, likes to touch you more than me.

ME. It's hilarious, I yell. I stand, my hands on my hips, wine bloviating, me whining. People need a good laugh this time of year. Stop criticizing me. You don't like my creativity or fun ideas, I say, launched.

He sighs, shakes his head, takes a step toward his desk in the other room.

Sit down, please. I need to talk, I say and I get up to fill the wine glass from a jug of Carlo Rossi Chablis, right next to the toilet paper sheets.

He drops your ear, Sadie, takes the seat opposite the table from me. He blows on the hot cup, black, no sugar; takes a sip, looks me straight in the eyes.

Mom has hepatitis C. I take a deep breath and start my explanation. Three years to live. Her liver is 80% compromised. She's had it for years, decades, probably since the blood transfusion when had in the 50s, before they screened donated blood for this stuff.

He takes another sip of coffee; I take another gulp of wine. I try to keep my voice modulated, not too dramatic, so as not to push him away.

Hep C can be dormant that long, in this case until a year or so ago, when she started complaining of tiredness, no energy, didn't do much, so we had to sell her place and move her up here to live near us, I over explain. Drunkenness creates distance, as if I'm telling my story to a stranger.

I know that part, Muriel. I've been here, he says.

I'm over communicating again. I pick up a sheet of TP, twist it in my hands. I feel the shreds that hold me together start to let go. My upper lip quivers. On tear slips out of each eye.

He's suddenly gentler. I'm sorry, honey. What can I do? He says.

I burst into sobs, the water from the right eye meets the stream from the left and forms tributaries on either side of my neck. He's used to this. He comes around to hug my shoulder, pats my head, leans against me, his lips to my hair. My volume goes down. The crying stops.

You can help with these Christmas cards.

Muriel, I have work to do.

I look at him darkly. I dream of a different reaction from him, that I might be more important than turtle breeding habits.

But I brought you a present. I left it in the car. Hold on, he says to rescue the situation.

In minutes he's back, covered in snow, his eyebrows too, which have gotten bushy enough to catch a lot of flakes. I clip them, along with the ear hairs which tuft out and even nose hairs. I don't want him looking like an old man.

What is it with 'old' today? I look at Sadie with the question in my mind.

He hands me a burlap sack.

I love surprises, I say which of course, he also knows.

I open it up, pull out various-sized sheets of birch bark.

Oh, honey!

We came across a birch stand up near Camel's hump today. These were flaking off. Why did you ask for them?

For Christmas cards.

Hands excited, I take a bark sheet and my scissors, cut a postcard-sized piece from the bark, pick up the pen, write on the smooth side.

Dear Aunt Gini, Just thought I'd drop you a piece of bark to say Merry Christmas!

Get it, I say brightly to him, not drop a note, but drop a PIECE OF BARK.

I start laughing so hard. At my own joke.

Honey, that's not funny, he says.

I stop laughing, give him the same dark look, dream the same dream of his different reaction.

But the bark card is nice. Much better than toilet paper, he says.

What I don't know yet is that Sadie, you will soon be gone, a terrible accident. I'll spend two weeks in a psych ward, will quit drinking. He and I will learn to talk with each other. We won't end up like my parents. But for now, things are the same.

Can I do my work now? he asks.

Yes, yes, of course, Go ahead. I'm fine.

When he's been gone a few minutes, I take a long pull on the wine, start laughing again.

This is the laugh that I didn't finish before. It covers the fact that my mom is dying. And no, she hasn't always been there for me, but mostly she was, and I know she loves me. And she is sweet. She used to be so tired from having three kids in four years that she would take a nap

every afternoon. When we got old enough to climb up that high, we three kids would go out an open window to play with our friends.

By the time we got back, it was 5 P.M. Mom was serving turkey on biscuits with gravy and homemade apple pie. She wouldn't recognize that she had put us down for a nap, only thought that we were out with friends in the neighborhood like every night. Dad was in the Laz-E-Boy with his newspaper in front of CBS News, Walter Cronkite.

I pick up a sheet of TP.

I speak aloud. "And that's the way it is, Friday, December..."

Sadie stares at me.

I pause to check the calendar on the refrigerator:8, 2006.