

Part I: The Good Life

Four be the things I'd been better without:

Love, curiosity, freckles, and doubt.

Three be the things I shall never attain:

Envy, content, and sufficient champagne.

Dorothy Parker (from *Enough Rope*)

Chapter I

“Solitude has its advantages,” Rose Parrish liked to say, with a studied tap of cigarette ash, when well-meaning friends suggested she hire live-in help after Nate died. She wasn’t inclined to forfeit the freedom of doing as she pleased. Rose especially relished the nights—reading without interruption, watching television at three A.M. if she took a mind to, smoking in bed. It had been more than ten years now and she had never regretted her decision. Until tonight.

For hours, strong winds off the gulf had pushed and howled outside her windows like something alive and malevolent. An old magnolia limb, grown too close to the house, kept scraping the eave, unpredictable and annoying. Windows rattled. Rain came, then receded. Sleep was impossible. Propped on three pillows, trying to distract herself with a mystery novel, Rose made a mental note to get someone out to trim the old tree. The cement block that seemed to be resting on her chest was a different problem. Her bedside table, crowded with containers of cough medicine, Mentholatum®, tissues, aspirin, water, and cigarettes, had proven an ineffective arsenal. At one A.M., bringing up phlegm disturbingly pink, she phoned the Galveston Yellow Cab Company to take her to John Sealy. It was a respectable hospital, only six blocks from her house. She could walk it, she thought, if it weren’t for the damn cough, and the wind, and the rain.

When the taxi rolled to a stop at the emergency entrance, Rose tightened the satin ties of her cashmere robe with shaky hands and leaned forward. An ambulance was unloading up ahead, its red lights dancing crazily off the wet pavement. The possibility of her arrival being delayed hadn’t crossed her mind, given the already sufficient difficulties of the evening.

“Sir,” she spoke to the driver. Her voice was weak and curdled, unpleasant to the ear, but she maintained. “Tell me how much I owe and then fetch an attendant. I’ll need professional help.”

The driver hurried off while Rose leaned back to try again for a decent breath. Her heart was working much too hard. She hoped they

wouldn't have to use one of those clapper things she'd seen on *E.R.* She wondered how many patients came in by cab. Not as much fanfare as an ambulance, but more tasteful if you could manage it. She had given him, the driver, a bit of a scare—dressed in night clothes and waving with a flashlight from up on her porch. She had sat in the green wicker rocker, her mouth and nose covered with a handkerchief against the wind, hoping he'd come quickly, though she knew that people who drove cabs couldn't always be counted on. Lucky he hadn't had to carry her. He deserved a tip. She moved her wallet over to catch the light and fumbled with the bills. Damn, no tens. A twenty then. And maybe I should get his card in case this comes up again, she thought. Through the front windshield she could see the driver and a couple of white coats approaching.



The next thing Rose knew she was lying flat, in a white cubicle, with two lovely young things working over her. The blond nurse adjusted a tube in her right arm and gave a dimpled smile. The boy, he couldn't have been more than twenty-five, held her left wrist and watched a monitor.

"My vitals?" she asked.

He grinned, eyes still on the monitor. "Some of them. How're you feeling?"

She hesitated to consider. Her breath was coming easier; the marathon her heart had been running was over. "Seems like I've settled down," she said, and after a pause, "I suppose you have papers for me to fill out."

"Someone will be along to help you."

"I'm perfectly capable."

"I'm sure you are, but it's my job to make things easier." His dark hair was cut short and arranged to stand in points. Spiked, she thought they called it. Now why should she remember a thing like that? He actually looked like one of the interns on *General Hospital*; couldn't recall his name at the moment. Not handsome, as she thought of handsome. An oval face, with a vandyke beard setting off his high cheekbones.

Interesting, she decided. And, thank goodness, he didn't fumble. He worked, actually, with a high level of certainty. Despite his youth, she decided he had good sense.

"You're a doctor?"

"I'm a third year student. They give me the difficult cases, though." He looked at her then and smiled.

Perfect teeth, she thought. "Your name?"

He hesitated, caught off guard, she supposed, by her forwardness. "Martini," he said.

"And, Mr. Martini, I presume I'm going to live."

"With a little help."

"And that would be?"

"Some medication, some lifestyle changes. You like to jog?"

She shifted her eyes toward an opening in the curtain. "I think I'll wait for the real doctor's advice," she said.

She thought she saw the beautiful nurse frown at the young man as she placed a pillow beneath Rose's head, slipped an oxygen tube around her neck, and adjusted it in her nose. "The doctor will be in soon," the girl whispered. Rose lay back and closed her eyes. She felt no discomfort now. Maybe she was dreaming, or maybe she was dead, which was fine with her, as long as it felt this pleasant.



"Ms. Parrish."

Someone was calling her name. She opened her eyes reluctantly, rising slowly to the surface as if from underwater, fuzzy and irritable. A large black nurse with a take-charge manner was trying to move her.

"Can you help us here, honey? We need to get you off this gurney and into the bed. One, two, three, scoot."

Rose lifted herself as best she could and was dumped into the hospital bed rather like a sack of feed. "Where are the other nurse and that young man?"

"I dunno. They probably worked 'mergency last night. The shifts just now changed, and since you're stabilized, you came to us." As she spoke, the woman moved around the bed, adjusting its position,

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attaching oxygen, straightening the intravenous tube.

“And the doctor? Did I see a doctor?”

“Did a doctor see you? I s’pose one did, or you wouldn’t be here.” The nurse poured some water into a plastic cup, inserted a flexible straw and thrust it at her. “You comf’table? I’ll be back with your meds.”

“What’s your name?”

The woman pointed to a rectangular white name tag pinned to her massive chest.

“Victorias?”

“That’s right.” She winked. “Like the secret. You call me if you need me.”

Rose closed her eyes and tried to slip back into the place from which she’d come.



“Ms. Parrish.”

It was that voice again, that Victorias person. She stood at the foot of the bed and, as she spoke, gestured back toward the door, which stood slightly ajar. “Someone out there wants to see you. Your house-keeper came earlier and I told her you were restin’ easy. She’s comin’ back. Now this fellow. Nice-looking man. Might be your son. I told him he’d have to wait ’til I see to your needs. I thought you might want to use the bathroom, freshen up.”

“That’s considerate of you,” Rose said, wondering if hospital protocol had changed since she had last visited one, or if this was simply the mark of a unique person. The nurse helped Rose out of bed and into the bathroom, where she took a look in the mirror and gasped.

“I can’t see anyone looking like this.”

“Now you sit down on the toilet there,” Victorias offered. “I’ll bring your purse so’s you can comb this hair,” she ran her hand across Rose’s head, “it’s mighty thick and nice, and put some color on those lips and cheeks. You’ll be freshened up in no time.”

Rose sank onto the toilet and waited like a sulking child.



Minutes later, Captain John “J.J.” Broussard was allowed to enter the hospital room. Dressed in crisp white slacks, wearing his signature sailor’s cap, and armed with a bouquet of fresh mums, he cut a striking figure. Rose, seventy-six, was well of an age to be his mother, but she had never responded to him as one would a son. A few minutes earlier she’d managed to pull her hair back with metal combs and put on the wine colored dressing gown she’d worn to the hospital. Now she extended a trembling hand and managed a smile.

“You disappeared on me,” Broussard said, with a look of honest concern. “When I couldn’t get anyone to answer the phone, I finally checked the house.”

“Just one of those hellish nights.” She waved her hand across her forehead as if to brush away the memory. “Tossed and turned, dozed off, couldn’t get my breath. How’d you know I was here?”

“I found your note to Pearl on the refrigerator. ‘Gone to John Sealy. Take the day off’,” he recounted sarcastically. “Really, Rose.” He was frowning now. “You’re too proud to call for help?”

“I chose to call a cab.”

He stood with arms folded and no hint of a smile.

“I’m going to sell the car,” she said, businesslike. “Cabs work just fine.” Then her voice, something between a whisper and a croak, betrayed her. It began to fall blank in spaces, like an engine misfiring. “Get rid of other. . .too. Maybe. . .have. . .garage sale. She broke off into a deep, rumbling cough. When the spasm subsided, she lay back, pulled up the oxygen tube, placed it in her nose, and closed her eyes.

Broussard approached the bed. “Call me when you feel better,” he said quietly.

She nodded, eyes still closed.



John Broussard, “The Captain,” as Rose liked to call him, lived on the far west end of the island, where the Gulf of México meets Galveston Bay. Rose wished he lived closer to town—wished he hadn’t chosen to isolate himself out there with those fishermen, most of whom

cared more about their boats than their houses. Those people had no sense of history. To them, Galveston was just a strip of sand. Some of them, she was told, were downright strange, not that the west end of the island had a monopoly on eccentricity.

But she couldn't think about that right now. In fact, she found it hard to think about anything, what with the activity that went on in her room. Various people appeared regularly to check on her, others came to check on supplies, to mop the floor, to deliver and pick up food trays, or to simply look in with no word of explanation or apparent need, as if she were a new arrival at the zoo and the keepers were acquainting themselves with her. And for all the faces she saw morning and night, the two young things who attended her arrival never reappeared.

"They were working 'mergency," Victorias told her for the third time, making no effort to mask her impatience.

"Well, surely you can locate them for me."

"Ms. Parrish, I have patients to look after."

Rose pretended to be insulted, but was impressed by the woman's refusal. Most people did her bidding. The next time the nurse appeared Rose asked about the spelling of her name.

"Named after the Queen of England, except my mother, who was a church woman, put an s at the end, as in 'We shall be victorious.' She'd be rollin' in her grave to see it connected with fancy undergarments, but that's the nature of things. Unpredictable. Like that weather out there," she motioned her head toward the curtained window as she put a thermometer in her patient's mouth.

"How long have you been in nursing?" Rose mumbled around the thermometer.

"Thirty-two years."

Rose raised her eyebrows. "Ummm."

"When I first started, people like yourself didn't like the idea of me telling them what to do. I could bathe them and such, but it took some time before they got used to the fact that next to the doctor, I was the boss."

Rose nodded, aware she was being put in her place.

"My momma wanted something better for her daughters than

domestic work, so we were told we would be nurses, like it or not.”

“And you like it?” Rose asked as the thermometer was removed.

The nurse smiled. “Apparently I do. My sisters, they’ve stayed with it, too, all but one. They took their business to Houston. More money there. More men to choose from. Me, I like the island. Can’t predict the weather here or the people—no more than one can cure the common cold.” She removed the blood pressure cuff.

“I’ve paid my dues. Thirty-two years of puttin’ in a good day’s work and I get to call the shots on my floor. Long as I do good nursing,” she added, almost as an afterthought. She was reading the chart. “Looks like you haven’t had a B.M. since you came in.”

Rose groaned with displeasure and adjusted her sheet.

“I’m sending you a laxative, and if you don’t perform by the morning, we’ll have an enema,” Victorias spoke over her shoulder as she left the room.



Pearl came to visit, bringing fresh underwear and the mail. Rose almost sent her to the bookstore in search of an Ed Baines mystery she’d been wanting, but then thought better of it. The author’s vulgarity would surely embarrass her maid, if she had any notion what she was asking for. But that wasn’t likely. Pearl only read the Bible. A simple woman, she had worked for Rose for years and never failed to do as she was asked, though there were times she had to be prodded like a dray horse. If only she had a sense of humor, or some imagination, Rose thought, she could appreciate the woman more. God knows, she was a good person in many ways. She had shown up at the hospital every day, in spite of the incessant rain. . .

Bored and frustrated from feeling bad and looking worse, Rose thought about calling the captain, but discarded the idea. Often she invited him to her house for a drink, or dinner. Regularly, she asked for business advice. Never did she just call to chat. Men hated that. She rang the buzzer instead, tapping her fingers on the bed until an attendant answered.

“Listen, dear,” she said, “I need you to get my beauty shop on

the phone. The Pink Camellia, on Avenue K.”

The young woman did as she was told and handed Rose the phone.

“Lisette? Rose Parrish, here. I’m stranded at John Sealy and need your help in the worst way. Could you come over this afternoon, to do my hair and nails? Fourth floor, nothing contagious.” She waved the attendant out of the room and lowered her voice. “And bring me some strong coffee. This decaf is messing up my system, if you know what I mean.”



The next morning, when Victorias looked in, Rose was dressed and sitting in the chair, working the newspaper crossword.

“Looks like you’re feeling stronger.”

“I’m ready to go home. I believe I’ve met all the requirements.”

“So you have. The front desk was abuzz about you all morning—how you called your personal beautician in, and how you got around the enema with caffeine and sugar.”

Rose, pleased to have injected a little style into a sterile environment, didn’t allow herself to smile. “That always gets me going. You shouldn’t deny people things they’re used to just because you have them at your mercy.”

“Caffeine isn’t *recommended* for heart patients.”

“I don’t *consider* myself a heart patient.”

“That’s what it says on the chart.”

“I read the chart, but I’m not in agreement with it.”

Victorias, hands on her hips, shook her head slowly. “You just trying to be difficult?”

“I’m sure I’m not the worst you ever had.” Rose went back to her crossword.

“That’s true. There was a woman, a long time back, who you bring to mind. Wouldn’t listen to anyone. Sharp-tongued. Impatient. Owned one of those fancy houses used to be on Post Office Street. Thought she owned the town.”

Rose’s head jerked to attention. “You wouldn’t be talking about

Big Marie?"

The nurse nodded. "Didn't know who she was 'til someone told me. An awful name, I thought to myself, but it's what they called her. Even called herself that. Told me how the town would turn out for her funeral. 'Ever'one wants to see Big Tit Marie on her back,' she told me."

Rose leaned forward. "Could she really balance a cup and saucer on her chest?"

"Never saw her do it, but she could've if she took a mind to."

"Well, Victorias, this certainly makes my day. I've heard stories about that woman all my life, but I never knew anyone who'd been in the same room with her—or would own up to it. The last of the old time madams. Did she wear fancy nightgowns? Did men come to visit?"

Victorias pulled the bed straight. "She was just another patient for me, one who was dying and not too happy about it."

"But did she manage to go out in style?" Rose persisted.

The nurse cocked her head, as if weighing the question. "I s'pose you could call it that. There were flowers. She put out the word—said she couldn't appreciate them later, so if anyone wanted to send some, do it now. And they came, like four and five deliveries at a time. Her girls came too and kept candles burnin' night and day toward the end and they put perfume on the lamp bulbs. I recall how the room smelled heavy, but not like death, and they kept the blinds closed and played dance music on the radio."



About eight that morning Rose had telephoned the captain and had been surprised when a woman's voice answered.

"Didn't disturb you, I hope," she said when he came on the line.

"Not at all, but I never expected to hear from you this time of day."

"This ungodly place won't let a body sleep. I've been up since six-thirty," she complained. "I've got to get out of here, get some quiet, and a scotch wouldn't hurt. Who answered the phone?"

"The woman who works for me. What's your diagnosis?"

"Severe bronchitis. She certainly comes early."

"She comes when I ask her to. Severe bronchitis. That's all?"

"All I wish to discuss."

"You sound much better."

"I no longer cough like one of those old men you find on city street curbs."

"That's encouraging."

"I'm pumped so full of antibiotics and steroids and vitamins I could run a foot race, but they're reluctant to release me on my own, something about the storm. Seem to have forgotten the fact that I managed to get here by myself. I've lost track of the real world in the past week, Captain, but they tell me this storm has a name now. Wasn't there a movie named *Glenda*? Or was that *Gilda*? Could I impose on you to come and negotiate my release? I'd ask Pearl, but we both know she couldn't talk her way out of a paper bag."



The process of getting Rose out of the hospital took more than two hours, during which time she became increasingly impatient, commenting loudly at one point that she'd passed through customs in Morocco with less difficulty. The doctor was delayed, and when he finally showed up, he insisted on speaking to Captain Broussard, and Rose insisted on sitting in.

"You her son?"

The captain shook his head. "A friend."

"Advisor," Rose said, almost simultaneously.

"Well, it's imperative that Mrs. Parrish quit smoking." The doctor ignored Rose's presence. He'd had this conversation earlier with her. "I hope you'll do what you can to convince her. In addition to the bronchitis, which we've just about taken care of, she has the beginnings of emphysema and congestive heart failure."

The captain nodded.

"She could also benefit from an exercise regimen."



"My God," Rose said that evening, sitting in her leather chair at

home, fitting a cigarette into her holder, “don’t they love to scare us! I grant you, I shall die of something or other, but not of boredom. Can you think of anything more tedious than one-two-squat-stretch-bend-pull?”

John Broussard knew better than to argue. “You look a lot better than you did a week ago,” he told her.

She smiled. “Thanks to my hairdresser, who was willing to make a hospital call,” she told him. “One of the volunteers offered to do me, but I’d probably have ended up with a purple rinse.”

“Why don’t you see if your doctor makes house calls?”

Rose offered a humpf of disbelief.

“You need regular exams.”

“I know.” She inspected her polished nails briefly and then rubbed at a discolored spot on her arm where the intravenous tube had been attached. “I don’t like to drive anymore,” she announced. She tried to sound matter-of-fact, but the truth was, it was maddening, all these little losses. She remembered when driving was one of her favorite things.

“Hire a driver. You can afford it.”

She smiled politely, as if she hadn’t considered that, then asked him to fix a second scotch, and while he was in the kitchen, she made a quick telephone call.

He brought in the drinks. “Come, sit,” she motioned to the wing chair that sat at a ninety degree angle to hers. “I’ve ordered dinner from Mario’s.”

“I should get back.”

“Pooh. Relax and eat with me. I have some things to discuss. We’ll watch the news at ten, and if the storm’s kicking up, I want you to stay over. You’ll be safer here than way out there, and I’ll rest more comfortably all around. These things spawn tornados, and I’m not up to dealing with that thought just now.” She said it all rather fast, hoping not to sound needy. The captain had never stayed over, never been invited.

“I’ve decided to rent the apartment to someone I can count on the next time something like this happens,” she rambled on. “And I’m

thinking of moving my bedroom downstairs. Pearl's made up the sofa-bed in the library for tonight. We could move out the chairs and the console table, bring in the television and a floor lamp. There are certainly enough book shelves, but I need a work table, maybe something that fits over my recliner, like those tables they roll across the bed at the hospital."

He smiled, as if she'd made a joke. "That won't do much for your decor."

"To hell with decor, Captain. I'm too old for such vanities." She waved her hand as if the comment didn't require a response. "I suppose that sounds funny, coming from someone who refuses to discuss age." She frowned and wrinkled her nose. "Truth is, I've seen the reaper coming, but I've never had to smell his lousy breath before. I'm thinking I can take better care of myself and maybe last five more years. But they don't give you promises on quality. And frankly, I never knew anyone past eighty who was worth a damn anyway." She fit a cigarette into her holder and put it in her mouth without lighting it. "Go up to my office, would you, Captain, and bring down that large, red expanding file that takes up most of the top filing cabinet."

He did as he was asked. When he returned, Rose was stretched back against the chair with her eyes closed. He sat, holding the folder, until she opened them.

"Do you want to do this later?"

"Absolutely not. Here, let me see." While she unwrapped the ties of the file, he sat back, as if it might contain lingerie. She appreciated his discretion, though they both knew what it held—current records of her financial holdings, along with her will, and the combination to her in-house safe. She had pointed out the location of this file two years earlier at the same time she'd given him a house key, saying she didn't like the thought of strangers ransacking her things.

"I've been thinking about this all week, so don't interrupt me, or give me problems. I've decided to leave you my home and all the furnishings, including the art collection you've so gallantly admired, though I suspect you don't give a damn for those impressionists. But I've seen you eyeing the Wyeths. They're more masculine. Those were

Nate's."

"That's. . .*too* generous," the captain groped for words. Rose had no heirs and had regularly talked about leaving everything in a charitable trust, adamant about not giving more to the government than was absolutely necessary.

"I know what it is you say," she went on, "that you've got plenty of money for your needs and a cabin—a place to live," she corrected herself, "that suits you." She leaned forward, "But, indulge me. I've seen you admire this house, and I want her in the hands of someone who cares."

The captain sat quietly as Rose shuffled through papers and handed him the most recent statement on her Merrill Lynch master account, dated August 30, 1999. "I'm ready to sell out," she told him. "Never intended to stay in so long, but," she looked up and smiled, "it's been quite a ride. Still, things run in cycles, and this should peter out before long. How much money does one person need, anyway? My God, listen to me—a girl who grew up in Amarillo, Texas, during the dust bowl. But the problem is, if I pull out of the market, what the hell do I do with all that cash? I need you to put your mind to that."

There was something else she wanted. "A nice young man was working in the emergency room the night I went in," she told him. "His name was Martini. See if you can find him for me, Captain."

As Rose spoke, the hall clock began to chime. It was eight o'clock. Michael, the delivery boy, would be at the door soon in his yellow slicker, sheltering two orders of eggplant parmesan and a side of angel hair pasta from the rain and wind. The island had been battened down for the entire week. Ships were secured in the harbor, but the natives were restless, drinking and eating to stave off boredom, anxious to get back to business. Bookies were taking bets on if and when Glenda would hit, while the fickle girl sat out in the gulf, holding a coastline hostage.

