

Walking with Elephants

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

—*William Shakespeare*

The life which men praise and regard successful is but one kind. Why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of the others?

—*Henry David Thoreau*

To all the mothers who reach for the nine to five brass ring while being the glue that holds their families together. I know women like that, they are my best friends. To my children, Jenafer and her husband Jeff, Ross, Drew and his wife Karen, and Julia who read earlier drafts of this novel and told me it was great and to keep pushing. To my own working mother, Irene Isaacs, who managed to make me feel safe and secure while working full time and told me that my book was a “page turner.” To my beloved granddaughter, Madeleine Rose, who one day will reap the benefits of all the strong women who pushed for women’s rights and those who are now changing the world. And to my husband, Tim, who showed me the world literally and figuratively and who is my rock.

Chapter One

I have always believed life is a mysterious journey through chaos. And so far, for me, chaos has brought forth nothing extraordinary. I haven't been thrust into fabulous wealth by marrying someone who became a serendipitous millionaire. I haven't blossomed into a beauty of the ages. No, I am just the result of nature's accidents and my own silly choices. Working together, these forces have brought me to dwell among the mundane, and I accept it ...for now. My unremarkable existence, however, is also noble. For I have come to understand that the big questions such as, *What is my purpose in life?* and *Why am I here?* converge with the little questions like, *Where is my other shoe?* and *When will pot roast go on sale?* Big questions, little questions, big thoughts, little thoughts, even famous people have them. So we're not so different.

Except for the limos.

Although I live an ordinary life, I've deluded myself into believing that I'm capable of greatness. But not right now. Right now, distractions, reactions, predilections, and trying to catch five more minutes of sleep rule my world. In fact, although cocooned in sleep, I can hear the alarm buzzer sounding and automatically, my trained finger hits "Snooze." Stealing those extra minutes to snuggle under the covers and pretend I really don't have to get up is nourishment for my soul. Today, however, it seems that before I get my spirit-lifting five, a sonic boom explodes in my ears.

"Sooooooz, oh, Suze, Saaaaooooz, time to get up, hon. Hey, sleepy head!"

It never fails, just when a titillating and erotic dream is about to take shape, just when I'm about to feel the beating of a taut chest pressing against mine—fantasy interruptus and I am yanked into consciousness. That intrusion on my *I Can't Believe it's Not Butter* fantasy and assault on my auditory nerves would be from my husband, Bob. Every day he jumps out of bed on some adrenaline rush, but I require a gentler, quieter approach that has escaped his observation, lo these many years. As if bellowing weren't

enough, now he's shaking my arm. Erotica quickly transforms into a ride down the rapids.

The sleep-drenched mind is a curious phenomenon. That's it. I'm done. Fini. I'm up. Who wants to ride the rapids at this hour? I open my eyes and...whoa! My startled, but still paralyzed, self sees Bob's face eyeball to eyeball with mine. When he's satisfied that I'm awake, he stands back up and I can see he's nearly dressed in one of his two dress-for-less suits. His professorial uniform of jeans and corduroy blazer with leather arm patches is de rigueur on campus. Something must be special about today, mmm...can't remember.

"I have a special meeting this morning with my book publisher, I told you, remember?" He says answering my unvoiced question.

My groggy, slow-witted brain tries to comprehend what he's saying. But numbed by his chatter, I stare at him empty-headed while he puts on his tie. It feels late. I look at the clock. Yup. I'm screwed.

"You really overslept today, Suze. I thought you'd have gotten up when I jumped in the shower. Hey...lazy, you're still not moving. Aren't you getting up? Look, hey, open... don't close your eyes again...is this tie alright?" I nod, yes. "And hon, would you mind taking my blue slacks to the cleaners? I'm kinda in a rush now." I nod, yes. "One more thing, can you make a haircut appointment for me? Make it with Donny...for tomorrow...and oh, we're out of Scotch. So, please don't forget to pick up a bottle on your way home. Okay?"

I keep nodding like I'm listening. He kisses the air and mumbles something like, "Love ya," but I know it's probably, "See ya," and he dashes out.

Lumbering out of bed, I make my way to the bathroom sink and look in the mirror. I've got to wake myself out of this groggy stupor, and looking in the mirror first thing out of bed usually shocks me wide-eyed.

It works.

I'm shocked.

And fully awake now.

It didn't always work. Why just a few, maybe a mere 20 years ago, my fresh from sleep sag-free face took on a pink glow, my used-to-be-thick hair stayed neat and silky, and my bifocal-free eyes sparkled. But now, well, the get-going-in-the-morning mirror trick works, as previously mentioned. As I keep blinking at the mirror to get my reflection into focus, four gray hairs pop into view. Those suckers are coming out right now.

Ouch!

That tactic for staving off gray, rather than using dye, is not so smart because in certain lighting, you can see right through to my scalp. I turn on the shower and continue my morning routine, trying to enjoy the moment and not think about dashing here and there, doing this and that, scheduling where and when.

My focus on the spray of water as it pounds my aching back and the tile walls of the shower stall can't fully block a muffled sound coming from the far reaches of the house.

"Mahhhm! Mahhhm!" Okay. Which kid is that? It's hard to distinguish whose voice it is above the rush of water. Think. Ilana is riding to the high school with her boyfriend... Skip goes to the university with Bob...so that leaves...David. David. Damn! He's missed the bus again!

"Mom," he yells louder, "I missed the bus!"

Great. Now I have to drive David to school and I barely have time myself. Slapping soap on the important spots, I hop out of the shower in no time flat. A blast of cold air greets me—how did I not know it was freezing? But hey, the house is always freezing. Dear Bob says, "Feels perfect to me." I look longingly at my feather blanket that I keep on the bed even in summer, but I have no time to jump under it to warm up. That kid, why can't he be on time? This is the third time he's missed the bus this week. Doing jumping jacks in my walk-in closet to get warm, I spy my purple Liz Claiborne with the elastic

waist and grab it. A spitefully devoured pint of Ben and Jerry's made its way into my mouth and hips last night after Bob said, "Getting a little broad in the butt aren't you, hon?"

"Mom! Why don't you answer me?"

"Because I can't stand screaming," I scream. David barges into my room without knocking as I hop around yanking up my pantyhose. "Geez, David, can't I have any privacy around here?"

"Sorry, mom," he says, backing out of the room embarrassed. Dad's right ya know," he laughs from the hall.

"What does that mean?" I yell.

"Ya know, your butt is pretty broad!"

I slam the door. Do I need this?

Rushing around like a crazy person, I pull on my dress, and take two seconds to blow-dry my hair. Makeup. Oh no. Now I'm perspiring. Or am I having a hot flash? My biological thermostat has a major bug. Either I'm freezing or I'm hot. But one thing's for sure, I can't put makeup on a damp face.

No makeup.

I'll face the world au natural, their problem not mine. After all, vanity is for wimps. A real woman is measured by her inner beauty. I run downstairs. As soon as I get to the bottom, I run back up and grab my makeup bag.

"I'll pick you up outside," I yell to David as I race down the stairs again. Screeching out of the garage, I hardly stop while he jumps in.

"Are you trying to kill me?" He asks while fastening his seat belt. With no cops in sight, we get to his middle school in record time. David jumps out of the car as it jolts to a stop. "Hey, ever thought of qualifying at Indy?" He asks pretending to fall on the ground.

I peel away, rear wheels spinning, and race down Central Ave only to catch the light. Time to take a breath. It's lucky I live so close to work. The

corporate park is just the next turn. It's 8:56, a cool four minutes to spare as my car, on automatic pilot, turns into the parking lot.

Nodding at the receptionist, I scoot right into the ladies room and slap on my makeup. As I pass the coffee station it emits the scent of a fresh brew and I pour a cup, hop into the elevator to my second floor office, kick the door shut, and sit down at my desk. A sip of the hot and bitter stimulant and I am transformed. Ah. No longer frazzled wife and super mom, but career woman, Suze Hall, associate editor for Marcus & Stern, publishers of business books, trade magazines, and some general-interest nonfiction. I'm in the book division, books on all the mind-numbing facets of business. Unfortunately for Bob, we don't publish textbooks, so he had to peddle his business management book elsewhere.

Lousy pay and office politics don't make this my dream job. With my previous brief youthful experience as an editor (the comma was invented but not desktop computers), I thought I could negotiate a better salary at my offer meeting with the human resources manager. But as soon as I laid eyes on her, my only thought was *don't you have to be human to be in human resources?* She was, needless to say, intimidating. As tall as a tree, she towered over me and instead of saying "hello" with a pleasant smile her mole-laden, greenish-toned death mask face said, "Have a seat."

Everything about her was scary. Her hair was the texture of a bird's nest and dyed the color of endless night, a color so black that light couldn't escape. I still get the willies when I think of her pale, unholy mouth saying, "You realize of course that editors don't make much money?" Nodding like a lunatic, I took the job, and got out of there fast as I could with a vision of her moving intently toward my neck flashing in my mind.

But given there is probably no dream job at least I have an office with a window. The office is unexceptional except for the view. My desk is adorned with a few family photos and some motel room/office art hangs on my walls. As in most corporate buildings, no one knows how these prints got there, how long they've been there, or why they're considered art. Most of the time, I try to keep my eyes diverted.

The window definitely helps.

Also on my desk are my computer, a continuously replenished stack of direct mail garbage, and my current project, *Finding Spiritual Enlightenment Through Wealth*, a disturbing but apparently marketable title that will know the wrath of my sharpened red pencil.

This manuscript came to me by default when one editor (female) quit in a flurry and another (female) got promoted out and up to small-business magazines. Working with women is a minefield of deception and intrigue. I never realized how the workplace turns women into competitive paranoid schizophrenics that hustle opportunities and manipulate the men in charge. Tell that to Gloria Steinem. I know that when there is a sale at the mall most women would trample their own mothers, but you expect that. At work, it's more subtle, unseen, like a virus. The virus usually breaks out when more than two women work on the same project. One day a coworker is fine and then wham, she gets the virus. This behavior continues until the project is finished and totally screwed up. And so, projects sometimes come to me by default.

I'm just about to pick up the manuscript when there's a soft knock on the door.

"Yes?"

The door is partially pushed open. It's Elliott. "Are you very busy?" he asks.

I shake my head "no" as I take another sip of coffee. Elliott is my best friend at work. Before I started this job my friend, Marcia, warned me that women can be downright evil, and as just recounted, she was dead on. She told me, "Beware of the women who don't befriend you, or talk to you, or smile—they're sizing you up for the kill. Also, be careful of the women who first befriend you—they're sizing you up for the kill." So I made friends with Elliott.

Thank God for Elliott!