

SKIPPING STONES

SHE HAD GROWN UP ON Chicago's North Shore and gone to Boston University and Columbia Law School, and had graduated with distinction. She clerked for a year with a U.S. District Judge in Manhattan and then dropped out of the law and took a Master's in Social Work at the New School in New York City and lived in the Village for five years and worked at a hospital in Harlem. She wasn't happy in New York and eventually felt burned out, and finally returned to Chicago and resumed her career as a lawyer. She found a job with a small LaSalle Street divorce firm and, after seven more years, became a partner specializing in divorce litigation.

It wasn't easy being a woman litigator in the male club of the divorce courts, but she was a fighter and good at her work, very tough, capable of slashing, bruising argument, even when she knew the cases were clouted against her, that the judge was a political crony of her male opponent and regarded her as an enemy or political opponent, or just a bitch.

When Martha Levine began her job in Chicago, she still had the desire to help people as a lawyer. As a marital relations lawyer, she thought she would be helping people get on with their lives. She'd never been married, and now she was thirty-eight, her long dark hair showing strands of gray and lines just beginning in her face. She often wore long silk gaily colored scarves to the office and loose tops, and now in late summer, full flowered skirts with jangling bracelets and strands of Indian or Oriental jewelry as necklaces. She didn't want to harden into a man; she wanted to keep herself feminine. She didn't want to ossify into the curtness and gruffness of a man. Even though she fought with them daily, she kept her distance from her male opponents. She was polite and cordial, but not inviting, and over the years she began to intensely dislike many of her male opponents.

She had mostly women friends, but there were still a few men friends, men who she would join for dinner or go with to the symphony or Lyric Opera. No one special, just a few friends and confidants. Occasionally there would be a perfunctory kiss good night in a cab or at her building in the driveway.

Recently the man most prominent in her life had been the senior partner of her firm, Julius Frankel, who was in his early seventies, a widower and a workaholic. He had no interest other than his work and the law firm. He was constantly after Martha with his car phone before he arrived at work and then from behind his huge mahogany desk where he would leave her urgent messages: "M.L., See me immediately. J." She was tired of the messages, so tired that she'd have loved to shove one of them down his throat. His latest edict was that all associates and

partners carry portable phones with them at all times—on their way to court, at lunch, wherever they were—so he or any of the other partners could contact them. Martha carried her phone, but usually shut it off, and when Frankel confronted her she told him that several judges had objected to the sound of the cellular phones going off during courtroom argument. He grumbled, but accepted her explanation. He was not only dictatorial, but in complete control of the firm, a 65 percent owner of its voting stock. Martha had a 2.5 percent interest as a partner, and she and the six other partners really had nothing to say when it came to confronting Julius Frankel. It just wasn't done, unless you expected to be shown the door.

He also craftily assigned the cases, keeping the big-money cases for himself and one or two men who were his favorites. The firm was built on Frankel's tough negotiating and trial ability. He could walk away from a divorce negotiation with a multimillion dollar settlement for his client and \$100,000 in attorney's fees just on the basis of his reputation as a fierce trial lawyer. She wasn't assigned these cases. Instead, she was given second-tier cases that Julius felt "were not in the numbers." Her clients were usually women, wives of corporate executives, and the cases involved at the most one or two million dollar property settlements and \$10,000 to \$25,000 in fees. They were usually contested in the early motion stage, particularly on temporary maintenance for the wife. But they seldom actually went to trial and if so, were usually settled.

She had come on a long, painful journey from her social worker days. She tried to keep involved in public service cases, taking *pro bono* cases from a woman's coalition, but she found that she had very little time for *pro bono* work. She had tied herself up financially. She had a beautiful condo overlooking Lincoln Park in a slim, glass-paned Mies van der Rohe building and a white BMW convertible, a closet full of designer suits and shoes, and monthly credit card payments that wiped out her salary. At the end of the year she fought Julius and confronted him with a printout of her billing and the fees she had produced, and she received a \$15,000 bonus. It was almost all gone except for \$2,500. So in late July she bought herself a ticket to London. She deserved a summer sabbatical.

Why not? Ruth Bader Ginsburg was teaching in Innsbruck in Austria this summer. She had seen a photograph of her, suntanned, fit, her hair tied back with a ribbon. She looked like a young woman. Sandra Day O'Connor, where was she teaching this summer? Did she have any plans? Salzburg? No, Anthony Kennedy was teaching in Salzburg and Chief Justice Rehnquist in England, at Cambridge. If they could travel to Europe, why couldn't she? She could take two weeks in London, or maybe a week in London and a week in Paris. Her lawyer friend Julia

had said to her when she told her about Justice Ginsburg's summer plans, and how young and relaxed she looked, "Martha, have you ever noticed how the facial expressions of judges change after they're appointed to the bench? Before their appointment they're just like the rest of us—harried, worried, frazzled looking, but then after they put on their robes they begin to look just like the *Mona Lisa*, with that phony beatific smile."

Of course she should take the trip. She could get away from Frankel, the firm, and the divorce courts. The stack of brown file jackets in her office were no longer people to her. They were just files, a stack of files, one after another, this one worth \$5,000 in fees that one worth \$10,000. They weren't people any more, and neither was she a person anymore. She had become a money machine. She needed something exotic in her life, some adventure. So in anticipation of the trip, she bought a finger ring for her thumb, Thumbelina in Europa. She knew she was losing her sympathy for her clients; she only talked to them about money. Never about their loneliness. Never asked them about their absence from sex and their loss of confidence. She just didn't do that anymore.

So two weeks later, at the end of August, she flew British Air to London for a week and then a week in Paris. She stayed in Lancaster Gate at a charming hotel that another lawyer friend, Marguerite, had recommended. She'd stayed there and raved about the service. It was a small hotel and very posh, with privacy, a quiet paneled bar, a doorman in a green swallow-tailed coat, and a lovely breakfast room. It was near Hyde Park and she would walk in the park and pretend she was Virginia Woolf or Katherine Mansfield sitting on a bench.

She even looked up an old boyfriend. She'd known Colin Rifkind when he was a pale, lonely graduate student in English literature at Boston University. He was from London and he'd been her first real college love, but he was so unsure of himself, shy and tentative, that their relationship had imploded, like one of those lovely iridescent children's soap bubbles. She knew he had gone to law school at Oxford, had married and divorced, and was now working at a London corporate firm. So she called him, and he responded warmly, and they met for a drink in a wine bar in Bloomsbury.

Instead of a tentative pale young man in love, Colin had grown into a heavy, balding, angry trial partner of a huge British firm. He'd been in Singapore for the last several years and now was involved in litigating that required constant air travel. She knew that she couldn't ever revive, or even find, the young man he'd once been, in the blowzy, mottled-faced man who roared with laughter as he told her about the managing partner in Singapore who'd been ordered back to London because "he'd been caught in bed 'rogering' the children's amah."

She was back at the hotel by midnight. So much for the revival of international love affairs. In the morning she sat with a cup of coffee at the base of the statue of Peter Pan in Hyde Park watching the children approach with squeals of delight. Had she really given Colin a chance? Why was she so closed off to men? The awful story about the amah. Perhaps James Barrie, who created Peter Pan, used to sit here. He lived in Lancaster Square. Children's laughter. It was a beautiful sound. She never listened anymore to the voices of children. There weren't any children in her life, not even nieces or nephews. Would she ever have a child? Never. She would never have a child. She sipped her coffee in the sunlight. What was the name of the little angel in Peter Pan, the angel with the wand and the fairy dust? Tinkerbell. And there she was, standing next to Peter Pan, a tiny sculpted angel with her wings folded, waiting for more children to arrive.

Two days later she was sitting in front of another statue, the statue of Alfred Dreyfus in Paris. After getting a fax from Julius Frankel with a suggested Paris itinerary, she found a book about Dreyfus with photographs of the man with dark, sad eyes, in his French officer's uniform. She'd read about the Dreyfus Affair—a Jewish officer in the French Army who in 1895 was falsely accused of being a spy. He'd been stripped of his insignia, here in the courtyard of the *École Militaire*, behind the Eiffel Tower. Zola had defended him in the newspapers. Eventually Dreyfus was found innocent, but only after being imprisoned on Devil's Island. Julius Frankel had sent her a fax asking her to find the statue of Alfred Dreyfus and to take a photo. It would be "a personal favor." After the photo of the statue of Dreyfus he then recommended that she go to the Holocaust Monument, the "Lawyer's Church," *Ste. Chappelle*, the Magistrate Courts, the old Opera House with the Chagall angels on the ceiling, "so close you can touch them," and then told her to have coffee at the *Café de la Paix*. Even here she was Frankel's messenger girl. She should buy herself a nose ring.

The Holocaust Monument was an underground chamber with a modern glass sculpted ceiling of daggers, a sea of glass daggers. It was in the garden immediately behind *Notre Dame*, and she took another photo, and then she decided to abandon Julius's itinerary and strike out on her own.

She walked to the Tuileries at dusk and rode the wheel, and looked out at the magic sea of lights that was Paris, and tried to shake all the glass daggers out of her head. She was staying at a small hotel on the Left Bank, and when she returned the clerk handed her another fax from Chicago. She handed it back to him and told him to answer, "*Mademoiselle est sortie.*"

That night she went to a boring rendition of Molière at the Comédie Française. She didn't know if it was a comedy; it was in ancient French and iambic verse. Most of the actors were men in pantaloons with spiked beards and plumed hats, all prancing and waving swords. She fell asleep, and after the theater walked to the bar of the Ritz. There at the bar she met a man named Jean Paul. After drinking two splits each of champagne they walked together back to the Tuileries.

She showed him the Ferris wheel and they rode up into the lights of Paris, and then at the carnival in the park below she shot clay pigeons, winning a green glass figurine of a young woman with long hair.

"I think it's Jeanne d'Arc just before she was set afire," she told Jean Paul, who was married and from Lyon. He was a lovely man, about forty-five, with graying temples and a smooth face that seemed to convey constant surprise as she told him about herself.

"Martha, she looks like you, not Jeanne d'Arc."

"But I am not a woman on fire."

"But you are a beautiful woman."

"Thank you for saying that . . . I am also made of glass. I shatter very easily. Most women do. Do you agree with that? I am a sculptor in glass. Did you know that just by looking at me? Of course not. I sculpt glass figures. My apartment in Chicago is full of them."

Just as she said that, he came to her under the street lamp and kissed her. His lips were sweet, this married corporate manager from Lyon, who had told her she was a beautiful woman. He was a beautiful man, and she told him that, and he walked her back to the hotel and gave her his card with his e-mail number, kissed her one more time, and told her he would contact her and turned and walked away into the Paris night.

She rode the elevator to her room on the fifth floor and went to her window, and walked out on her balcony to see if she could find him on the street. There was no one there. Why did he leave her so abruptly? He was staying at the Ritz. She should just telephone him and ask him to come back to her.

The red light was flashing on her phone. "Mademoiselle, you have another fax from Chicago."

"No," she said, "tell them I've left. Don't you understand?" She put down the phone. She was crying now and stepped back out on the balcony. She held the glass figure of the long-haired young woman in her hand and looked down to the street. She hadn't cried like this in a long time. She wasn't permitted to cry in America. She put her hand on the ornamental iron balcony railing, and then dropped the glass figurine over the edge and watched it fall to the street. She didn't hear the sound of it shattering. There was no sound.

TWO DAYS LATER she was back in her office, jet lagged, hollow eyed, ready for the morning court call. She could see the folded computer list of cases and room assignments waiting for her on her desk. Her eyes looked like they had been daubed with kohl. The trip had been like a dream, as if she had stepped out of her own life. But now she was back, and it was as if she had never left. The platoon of young men heading for the courts, sunglasses, hair gelled, all with briefcases, heels clicking, full of purpose and malevolence. She was full of malevolence and she lacked purpose.

One of the lawyers called out to her and stopped in her office. "Welcome home, Martha. Of course you've heard the news."

"No, what news?"

"Julius is dead. He died last week. We tried several times to fax you."

"Julius is dead?"

"Yes, D-E-A-D."

"Oh, my God!"

"He died of a massive heart attack last week in his apartment. The funeral was yesterday. There's a partners meeting tonight. I think you've got the job of probating his will."

She closed her door and sat at her desk. Julius was dead, the angry face, eyes blazing, white hair over his forehead, sitting at his desk in suspenders, shouting at clients, buzzing for secretaries, all that crazy misplaced energy and intelligence dead? Julius is dead? Gone forever? Vanished? And with it all his power over her and the lawyers in this firm, also gone, Julius is dead?

She sat at her desk and touched the list of the morning court call. If Julius was dead, she was free to leave. Why not? She could open her own office. She and her friend Marguerite. Martha Levine and Marguerite Corbett, Attorneys and Counselors. There would always be flowers in their reception room, and their offices would be done in soft pastels, her glass sculptures would be there, and Marguerite's hemp figures. Why not? Why should men be counselors to women in divorce at a woman's most vulnerable time? Why shouldn't they turn to another woman, a woman equally skilled, and tempered now by experience? It was just like the men in this office to give her Julius's will to probate. To them, probate was a woman's job. Death was a matter to be attended by women.

That night at home she read his will. After a few large bequests to nieces and nephews, he left everything to charity. Julius had no children. One of the male partners in the office was named executor. He had one strange request. He had been cremated and wanted his ashes scattered over Lake Michigan. She took care of that. She hired a pilot to

fly the urn out into the center of the lake and scatter the ashes. She saved a small remnant of the ash, though, for herself in a Limoges jar, and then she put it into some special glass stones she sculpted. She called them skipping stones, and she filled them with tiny seeds of his ash and flecks of gold and miniature leaves with tiny bubbles of glass and swirls of color, swirling reds and blues that would mix with the water in which he sought immersion.

When she finished she had a small raffia basket of her sculpted skipping stones, and she went down to the beach at Oak Street near Julius's apartment. One by one, she skipped all of her stones into the water. She was alone and no one was near as a witness. Death was a matter to be attended by women. Was she being ghoulish? No, she was following his wishes: earth to earth, dust to dust, water to fire, dust to water.

