

Speaking on Condition of Anonymity

Author(s): JEANNE SCHINTO

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 Speaking on Condition of Anonymity

"My daughter is a lovely girl," my aging mother told me, leaning forward in her chair as far as the restraining belts allowed. "She's no trouble at all. You'd like her."

"Mmm. What's her name?" I asked.

My mother's remarkably line-free face grew cloudy with the pain of remembering. She tried to leave the chair, then gave up. "It's a beautiful name," she stalled, putting one finger to each of her liver-spotted temples. "I gave it to her myself, though it slips my mind right now. My husband was a man of few words. He didn't have any idea what to name a baby girl. He'd named our son for himself, of course."

"So what did you name her?" I tried again calmly.

"Give me a minute. It'll come to me. Hold on." And with blue-gnarled hands she gripped the arms of the chair so tightly it was as if at any moment a live current might race through her.

That was in early December. She'd been by then at the home for four weeks. Some months prior, my brother and I had made the decision that a home was the place for her to be. In the meantime, she'd live with me. And during that period there was one more event, a time Mother and I had together, truly memorable, on one of her last nights of freedom.

Here was the situation. I was invited to a Halloween party, and if I was to go at all, I would need to bring her. So I did.

I helped her into the car. Not that she needed my hand on her small-boned elbow. Bodily she was in as great a shape as ever. From the back, if she had dyed her hair, she could have looked forty.

I'd dressed her up as a chef. So it wasn't even a costume, just somebody else's uniform: a tall stiff white paper hat that I'd made myself, white pants and short white coat of my dentist father's, which I'd salvaged after his death and, just that afternoon, hastily altered. I was a black cat. In a black leotard with a homemade tail. Nothing original there. You could go around being dressed up as a cat anytime, and people might not notice.

"Where are we going again?" my mother asked, embarrassed. "Pleeeeeease?"

"Mother, look what you're wearing," I said, giving her a clue. "Look at yourself. What's in your hand?" She held the chef's hat, because it was too tall to wear while in the car.

"A dunce cap?"

I burst out laughing.

"I've said something foolish again," she whined in her well-meaning way.

"Oh, just shutup, Mother," I said. "We're going trick-or-treating."

Yes, trick-or-treating, but only to one house. Rudy's. "Wouldn't you like to see Rudy again?" I asked her. We were headed for Rudy's neighborhood anyway—that's where the party was, not more than just a few blocks away from Rudy's very house; and Mother always did like Rudy, and still remembered things about him, and I suddenly thought it might be fun. Enough time had passed. "We'll go to Rudy's," I repeated. "Then after that we're going to Allen's costume party. Do you remember Allen?" She'd only met him thirty or forty times in these last few weeks.

Away we went. It was terrible, driving. The tail was the worst part—stiffened with a straightened-out coathanger, then bent into a question mark. Try sitting, much less driving, when you're wearing a thing like that.

Up we drove past the School of Optometry where Rudy and I had met. He was the doctor—a student, anyway; I was a patient at the clinic, looking to get a pair of personality glasses. I hadn't known until the exam that I actually needed them.

Rudy was married at the time, with a child; then he got a divorce. The wife moved with the girl to Minnesota. Or Missouri. Once, before the separation, I'd seen him with his wife and daughter at a Burger King. He'd seemed unrelated to, but concerned about, them, like the orderlies and aides at the home would seem to me later, particularly those who worked the eleven-to-seven shift, and stayed awake all night, sitting up in a bedside chair. Or it could have been that Rudy had seen me and was only *trying* to look unattached. Deception. But he always was poor at it.

Rudy's neighborhood was the kind where you would expect the chief of police to live—and he did. You'd also expect it to be teeming with trick-or-treaters—well, maybe twenty years ago. The streets

were empty this evening, though I saw lots of cars parked along the curbsides. Somebody else besides Allen was having a party. Then I realized they were mostly parked in front of Rudy's house. "Rudy's having a party?" I said. Great! Going to the party, just for a few minutes, would be better than trick-or-treating him. We could slide in and slide out without being recognized.

"Rudy's party? I thought you said his name was Allen," said my mother.

The fact of a party at Rudy's was all the more surprising because of what I had heard from Allen, who'd rented a weekend house at the beach with Rudy that past summer. "I can't believe you ever lived with him," said Allen. "It was only a year and eight months," I said flatly. According to Allen, all Rudy ever did was walk the beach. He didn't go out dancing or for lobsters or anything else with the rest of the group. He just walked the beach, up and down, up and down like a guard.

"That's the *old* Rudy," I'd told Allen. "All my work's been undone."

But maybe Allen was wrong about Rudy. Maybe Rudy just didn't like Allen and his summer house crowd, for here was this string of cars and a brightly lit house at the end of the path leading to Rudy's front door.

"Come on, Mom, come on," I said, helping her out of the car. She had yet to put on her mask. It was one of those full-face, expressionless ones, with the nursing-home pallor that her own skin had started to take on. Still, she was unrecognizable. Anyway, Rudy was so unobservant, the most obvious things passed him right by. Except maybe what had to do with eyes. He'd even seen the *insides* of my eyes with that little flashlight. Still, I thought I was safe. My eyes were barely visible anyway, now that I had the cat mask on. Just slits. And naturally I told my mother not to say a word. Literally I wanted her lips to be sealed. And she was good, she obeyed, I could trust her, and I took her by the hand and we went up the path.

When Rudy answered the bell, I wanted to sink into the sidewalk. Why oh why had I ever thought that to see Rudy this way would be fun? There was no party. Not one note of music rushed out at us. Those cars—I learned later—were lined up out there because of street work on the block parallel to his. Not only that, but there on the couch that I had picked out for Rudy sat a young woman—ob-

viously a new girlfriend—and all at once I felt the thinness of my disguise, the microscale of leotard material. As for being with my mother, that only made it worse. People you might not recognize as a single, you'll often spot in tandem, flanked by a customary companion. The double image helps you see the solitary truth. My mother and I had never needed a crowd around us more.

"What have we here?" Rudy said, in a whisper, almost to himself.

I lowered my eyes, focussed them on Rudy's knees, his feet bare and pink with black hairs. He was wearing jogging shorts. I focussed on one black strand of his toe hair. I held my breath. And I would have held my mother's, too, if there'd been a way.

"Evie," he called to the woman on the couch. "Look, trick-or-treaters," he said in the same barely audible voice, like somebody at a wake.

Evie looked over. She and Rudy had been playing cards. I saw the deck fanned out on the glass coffee table. Rudy and I had never played cards; we'd never sat still that long. I hadn't even known he *liked* cards. But here was the evidence. I had thought only children and old people played cards, unless it was for money.

"Oh," she said, her hair a black helmet. A pixie cut of old. Anorexic, surely. Too weak to move off that couch, maybe. She looked exactly like the next thing out of her mouth was going to be a complaint. Instead she made a pronouncement. "It must be Halloween," she said, delivering her line awkwardly. She was sitting there with a sweatshirt on inside out, and reached for the bowl of munchies and started eating with both bony white hands.

"But I don't think we're ready for trick-or-treaters," Rudy said, sighing, caving his chest in a little, looking forlorn.

And I was thinking, if you're not ready for trick-or-treaters on Halloween night, when will you be? For suddenly I felt bold. He didn't recognize us. And for that reason, I'd never seen him so disguiseless, so clear. I felt like I was looking at him through a pair of magnifying glasses. Pure Rudy. A face as long as your arm. Long face, small body, and protruding teeth wide apart, the better to floss. He looked like a thin, solemn rabbit; only slow. As in mentally.

Then Rudy said, "Wait a minute." And he went around the room divider into the kitchen, wearing the same look he'd worn when I framed my newly removed I.U.D. and wanted to hang it up. I heard him fumbling around in one of the cabinets, which I had painted red

and white, myself, without his help, to cover up that muddy brown he could see nothing wrong with. What was he doing? Should I have run? But I couldn't have, with my mother in tow. Her legs wouldn't have buckled or anything like that. The trouble was, there wasn't time to explain. A change of plan might throw her. She might cry out my name.

So we just stood there.

"Here you go," Rudy said, coming back with two little teeny tiny raisin boxes, the ones with about three raisins each in them. And he handed one to me and one to my mother. And I was just about to say something, I didn't know what. What could it have been? But anyway he was already closing the door in our masked faces.

Back in the car, Mom and I just sat there. I was sure it was going to dawn on Rudy who we were. Or at least I expected that he'd turn back the curtains to see where these two weird, over-age trick-or-treaters were going next. Surely he had noticed my mother's white hair? Who wouldn't be curious?

Not Rudy. And certainly not Evie.

Maybe it would have been better if I'd let him recognize us after all.

But my mother was so good, never said a word, until we were driving away, her voice muffled by the mask. "This is all we got?" she asked me, looking at the box of raisins in her hand.

I said, "Now you know why I don't live with Rudy anymore, Mother."

I was about to add, "Anyway, why are you surprised? Don't you remember the episode of the Cornish hen?" On one of my first dates with Rudy, he invited me over to his place and cooked me dinner. One Cornish hen was what we split. But I didn't bring it up. I was afraid she wouldn't remember. Something we had laughed so hard over, on the phone long-distance, because she was living at the time a full five hours away.

It was worse when a couple of days after Halloween my mother had totally forgotten the incident at Rudy's, and refused to believe it had occurred and that she had had a part in it even though I pressed. As I watched the tears well up and spill over—she'd forgotten to blink—I warbled, "Muh-therrrr!" over and over. But it didn't help.

The next day while I was at work she went out for a walk, and forgot where she lived. I picked her up at the police station. That eve-

ning I called my brother, who together with me would foot the bill, and I brought her to the home at the end of the week.

After that, I engaged in a frenzy of extra activities after work; at the health club, I rowed, I ran: a regular at last, getting my money's worth. Without her, the house was too quiet, so I left. How quickly I'd become used to her!

Then one Saturday morning I lost my contacts. (Two years ago I'd switched from glasses to lenses to change my eye color.) In advanced-intermediate aerobics, they just flowed out of my eyes and down my cheeks with the sweat from my forehead. I'd wanted to blink, but there'd been no time. So that Monday I went to Rudy for a new pair.

He was wearing his white coat—actually, a short jacket—and white chinos and white running shoes that he only wore in the office, so they would stay white. He didn't greet me by name, he didn't even greet me. He just waited to hear what I would tell him, as if speaking first would set the tone, and that, evidently, was what he was waiting for me to do.

So I did. First, I told him where my mother was now. He had always liked my mother all right—as well as he'd liked anybody. Actually, he hadn't seen her all that much. Just on her infrequent visits.

"I'm sorry," Rudy said, as if she'd already died. It wasn't inappropriate. I appreciated it, and told him, then climbed into the chair, so unnecessarily comfortable. And Rudy turned off the lights and started the exam.

In the darkness Rudy flipped lenses in front of my eyes. "Better or worse? Better or worse?" he kept asking me as he flipped. But I didn't reply. I said what I'd been wanting to say for weeks:

"Rudy, do you remember Halloween?"

"Yes," he said.

"And do you remember those two really strange trick-or-treaters who came to your house? One was a really old chef—"

"Yes," said Rudy, getting up real close to me in the dark, with that lens machine between us. "But how did you know about them? Have you talked to Evie?"

"No, I didn't have to do that, because those two people were me and my mother, Rude."

"They were?" He took a step backward in order to see me better. Then he laughed. Just a little, heh heh. "Yeah, that's pretty funny, all right." Heh heh. And then in silence he finished the exam. And told

me my eyes were the same. Unchanged. I didn't need a new prescription. Only new contacts.

He turned on the light, making everything too bright.

Then he said: "But you know?"

"What, Rudy?"

"If you ever do talk to Evie, you better not tell *her* it was you."

"Why not?"

"She wouldn't think it was so funny."

"Yes, Rudy," I said simply.

At the nursing home, Jesus balanced the tray deftly, looking as proud as if he'd been on roller skates. He wore a short white coat, like a doctor. He was an orderly, and I knew his name was Jesus, because that was what his nametag said.

Contrasted with the white of his coat, his black hair looked even blacker, looked mowed rather than cut. The shiny dark eyes gleamed like polished marbles. Or buffed bingo balls. He winked, then maneuvered around the Christmas tree and was gone.

Especially at this holiday time, the cheeriness of the staff made me feel all that much glummer. Their tone was so professional I could not detect the falseness. But surely it was there and it made me uncomfortable. I didn't like the feeling of being fooled.

At this particular nursing home, everybody wore each other's clothes. The patients did, that is. The garments came back from the laundry and got all mixed up. Some people complained—those (unlike my mother) who noticed, that is. Or else their relatives who visited them complained, seeing another patient walk down the hall in their loved one's all-too-familiar housedress or sweater. I didn't care, of course. It could be worse.

Then again it could have been better. Shortly after Mother got there, she'd suffered a mild stroke. Her mouth had sagged. Her skin shrank back from the bones. She got wrinkles overnight, pinched by the hand of some sadistic sculptor. Now her mouth was better, and the lines were gone. But so was the last of her recent memory.

On the phone my brother reprimanded me, because when I went to visit her, I sort of roamed around and talked to the people I met in the hallways or who summoned me into their rooms. But there wasn't any point in having a conversation with Mother, I told him. "If you were here you'd see how it is," I added, then I hung up.

The next day Mrs. Metz, going down the hall, chugging along in the chair to which she was tied, her red wig askew, asked me if this train stopped in Poughkeepsie. She thought I was the conductor.

"Can you spell Poughkeepsie?" I asked her back. "If you can, then I'll answer your question."

She smirked at me with her slipping dentures and from under her slipping-down wig. The smell of urine, always so strong, must have been eating through her raspberry wool skirt, through the seat of the vinyl upholstery, down through the soaked wooden legs of the chair into the linoleum.

Another resident, with her own long brown braids, thought she was in place outside Rutland, Vermont. Sitting in her bed, Mrs. Chapman insisted she was in a lakeside hotel there and wanted to know if her daughter-in-law had arrived yet.

I pointed to the family pictures on her room's walls. "Mrs. Chapman," I said, "if this were a hotel room, what would these things be doing hanging up here?"

She was momentarily miffed, angry at me, more than anything. I knew the expression well, I'd worn it myself, many times. That Halloween night, for example, when we'd gone to Allen's from Rudy's, I'd made the face at the people who'd shown up in civvies. It was a costume party, after all.

On the TV in my mother's room, drug dealers, informers in the shadows, spoke on condition of anonymity. My mother apparently was engrossed. When the program was over, I decided to tell her who I was.

"You're not my daughter! Are you joking? My daughter? You have gotten very confused. If you help me out of this, I'll prove it to you. We'll go find my daughter together. Who is eight years old. But I seem to be caught. This is peculiar. Something's caught me around the waist. Can you help me out of it?"

"Not until you say my name," I insisted.

"What *is* your name, dear?" asked my exasperated mother.

"It's the same name as your daughter's," I said.

"What a coincidence," said my mother drily, losing patience.

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" Half-believing it myself. "So say your daughter's name and you'll say mine."

She squirmed awhile longer, looked at the TV, looked out the win-

dow, at winter birds (maybe swallows?), flying low over the parking lot. Then it came to her. She remembered!

"Mother!" I said.

"Mother, nothing," she said. "Do what you promised."

Without another moment's hesitation, I reached for the knot to untie her.

DAVID BAKER



Stroke

In the lilac light, in the lengthening pulse of a sorrow
so profound it was nothing, a numbness, she settled
one foot for the last time in the brickway dusts.
This took no time at all. Shadow and substance
vanished in the lightening moment so near to evening.
There is a terror that starts low in the throat
and chokes out even itself. It is clear or conclusive—

the way her other foot followed as if to confirm,
like the heart's two beats complete and imprinted.
She will take this step every moment for the rest of my life.
She will not walk from the porchlight and the spring again.
There is a long calm that settles every crisis.
There is a bubble in the blood, tiny and clear,
singing through the stream on its way to the brain.