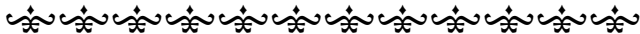
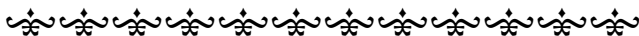


I
MURDERED
THE PTA



Wendy Dager



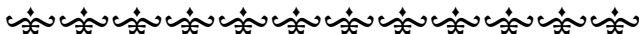


I MURDERED THE PTA

A Daphne Lee-Lee Misadventure

BY

WENDY DAGGER



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

I MURDERED THE PTA

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Dedication

*For Mike, who's waiting for
the movie*

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Author's Note

Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. No PTA members were harmed during the writing of this book, except in the author's head.

1

I COULDN'T FIGURE OUT WHETHER TO WEAR CLIFF OR Earl. When you have a vintage bowling shirt collection as extensive as mine, these are the tough decisions you face on a daily basis.

I decided against both Cliff and Earl and settled on Leo. Leo was white with a red collar. His name was embroidered in red over the front pocket and he had fancy purple lettering that said "Casbah Caterers" on the back.

Iris walked as I was slipping Leo over a pink satin water bra. I like water bras. They enhance what little I have up top, eliminating the need to seek the services of a plastic surgeon.

"Mommy," she said, "are you a transvestite?"

"Now, what kind of question is that for a seven-year-old to ask?" I said.

"Well, you're always wearing men's clothes," said Iris.

I tugged a pair of boot-cut jeans over my lavender thong underwear.

"Ridiculous," I answered. "I have plenty of bowling shirts with women's names."

Iris looked skeptical. The kid was spending way too much time with my mother, who liked to watch cable reruns of old television talk shows—shows with titles like "My Daughter Dresses Like a Man" and "My Husband Wears Women's Lingerie." Just because her mommy had a couple of guys' bowling shirts, my daughter was sure I was a cross-dresser.

"Then why can't you at least wear a bowling shirt with one of those names on it?" asked Iris. "A girl's one?"

"Charlotte and Edna are busy tonight," I said, rubbing some mousse into my strategically messy 'do. "Besides, I'm just going to band practice. And you know how the rest of 'em dress."

Iris made a face and shrugged. Sure she knew. Everybody else in Bob's Brain Freeze wore grunge-meets-punk-meets-something you'd find in a dark alley. Compared to the alternative lifestyles in Bob's Brain Freeze, I'm Gwyneth-freakin'-Paltrow.

If Gwyneth were Asian. And lived in a tract house. And had no money. Or husband.

"Gotta go," I said.

"Oh, Mommy," Iris sighed.

I held her close. I hadn't been to a rehearsal since Jack died. Eight months had passed, and even though I hadn't exactly stopped mourning, I knew it was time to get back to having something of a life. Besides, Bob's Brain Freeze might start looking for a replacement, and my fragile ego couldn't handle it.

I gave Iris a sloppy wet kiss on the forehead, which she wiped off with her fist and rubbed onto

the Winnie-the-Pooh applique on the front of her denim overalls. She wrinkled up her nose and frowned at me, her tiny hands clenched and her straight dark hair falling back from her face.

"I thought you were going to a PTA meeting," she said.

"Nah," I said. "I blew off the PTA meeting. The band's more important right now."

"And my future isn't important?"

I wondered where she got that. Probably from some poster-sized propaganda in the elementary school office: "Our children are our future!"

Or some crap like that.

"Of course your future is important," I said. "But PTA meetings don't pay the bills."

"And Bob's Brain Freeze does?"

She had a point. It's not like we had a record contract.

Yet.

"I'll go to next month's PTA meeting," I said. "I'll even chair something again, like I did with the Fine Arts for Kids program last year. Or how about if I head up the Fa..."

I almost said, "Father-Daughter Dinner Dance." It would've been Iris's first year going with her dad.

But her dad wouldn't be there. For a split second, I'd forgotten he was dead. I hugged her again.

Iris followed me into the kitchen, where Mari was studying fractions. My mother Ping—or "Penny," as she liked to be called—was helping her. Not that Ping was much better than I at seventh-grade math, but she was better at pretending she was better.

“Okay, Mari,” said Ping, with the faintest of accents. “When you take the lowest common denominator...”

She had no idea what a lowest common denominator was, proving that not all Asians were good at math. She just liked saying it.

Mari looked up at me. Her eyes begged me to stay. Or to send her grandmother somewhere. Back to China. Or another planet, maybe.

“Bye, swee’ pea,” I said. “Gotta run.”

“PTA meeting?” asked Mari.

I sighed. I felt guilty about not going to the PTA meeting, even though a lot of those PTA broads were about as unhip as the big plastic banana clips they liked to wear in their badly permed post-’80s hair. My friend Aldo called these women “Cupcakes”—because of the cupcakes they constantly made and decorated for classroom parties.

You are what you bake.

Still, I felt like being a part of the PTA was my way of helping out at Iris’s school.

The kids had been through enough, what with having a dead dad and a mom who wasn’t like other moms. I knew I should be giving them extra attention, but tonight I wanted to be part of a skanky, tattooed and pierced rock’n’ roll band. No Cupcakes there. More like candy apples—Halloween candy apples, the kind with razor blades.

I shook my head.

“No PTA tonight,” I said. “I’m going to Logan’s house to practice with Bob’s Brain Freeze.”

“Ewww, Mom,” said Mari. “Make sure you wash your hands after being with those...people.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I plan to disinfect my whole body. I’ll take a Lysol bubble bath when I get back.”

“And when will that be?” asked Ping.

My mother stood there with her eyebrows all scrunched up and her hands on her hips, once again ignoring the fact I was thirty-two years old.

She also forgets she is living in *my* house, at my invitation.

“I dunno, Ma,” I said. “Maybe by midnight.”

“Daphne, you don’t get enough sleep,” she scolded.

I couldn’t say anything. She was right, for once. I *don’t* get enough sleep. After Jack dropped dead so suddenly, it was hard getting used to sleeping by myself—I hadn’t slept alone in more than a decade. Plus, I kept thinking about money. How was I going to support the kids? The band didn’t make much scratch, and my pottery was barely selling at Aldo’s art gallery. Money suddenly became very important once the breadwinner wasn’t around to win the bread.

Every night I flopped around alone in my bed, thinking about what colleges the kids would attend. Or not attend.

The local JC, maybe, then the big university a few miles away—if they got scholarships. They were pretty smart kids. Gifted, according to their teachers. So, yeah, maybe scholarships...

And then after college, would I be able to afford two weddings? I could only hope at least one of them turned out to be a lesbian. Although, these days, they’d probably have a huge “commitment ceremony,” and I’d have to pay for a sit-down din-

ner, an ugly-ass mother-of-the-bride dress, and an Indigo Girls tribute band.

All those stupid worries nagging at me, keeping me from sleeping. Another woman—another widow—might have told herself “God will provide.” Or maybe she’d roll up her shirtsleeves like Rosie the Riveter, flex her bicep and command herself to “Look on the bright side” or “Have a nice day” or “Go girl.”

Blah blah blah.

Hell, I was a realist. I knew Jack’s life insurance money wasn’t going to last forever, and I refused to pretend to be cheery even though I tried to act like I was just fine about throwing myself back into performing with Bob’s Brain Freeze. My kids could see right through me. Good. At least I wasn’t raising dummies.

I put on Jack’s old black leather motorcycle jacket. Iris looked at me knowingly. Yeah, my mom’s totally a transvestite, she said with her eyes.

The jacket still had the vague scent of his cologne. I could picture us going out for dinner and a movie, him wearing the jacket and me saying, “Jack Lee, you smell soooo good.”

I choked back something. A sob? A hairball? The veggie burger I’d eaten for dinner?

My stomach did a little flip-flop. Stupid reflux. I’d always had a bad stomach, but it had gotten worse with age. My mother said it was from stress, but, as far as I was concerned, Mama Ping’s medical degree was straight out of Whatsamatta U.

“Bye, guys.”

I gave the girls each another squeeze and headed out the front door. It was the first time I’d been out at night in months. In fact, it was the first

time I'd been out at all, except for picking up the kids from school and going to the supermarket. And, yeah, the funeral. And, before that, the hospital.

I hate hospitals.

I thought about it as I hopped into my hot pink Volkswagen Bug, where I keep a bottle of Pepto in the cup holder. I took a swig.

My mind flashed back to the night Jack got sick. I'd taken him to the emergency room. He was so violently ill I figured it was food poisoning. The goddamn shellfish he loved so much. He joked that it was the only thing that kept him virile—being a diabetic, with all the related health problems, including the occasional inability to, well...do it. So, believer in karma that I am, I knew this sickness had to be *The Oysters' Revenge*.

We'll show you some grief for sacrificing our little fishy lives just so you can get your rocks off!

But when he went into cardiac arrest and died, I thought it must've been something else. He was only thirty-three, but people get clogged arteries at any age. His dad had died young. Not that young, but younger than the average dead guy. Maybe Jack had inherited his father's heart condition.

But it wasn't that. It *was* the freakin' oysters. I usually like being right about stuff—but this...this sucked, big time.

The doctor explained that Jack's diabetes made him susceptible to the harmful bacteria in shellfish. Where another person might get a little sick from it or not sick at all, my husband dropped dead.

Kaboom. The big sleep. The point of no return. Six feet under. See you never.

After he died, I kept hearing future conversations in my head, picturing myself at a schmancy party, somewhere no one knew about my past life—the mommy thing, the husband thing, the PTA thing. I could see it clearly. My pottery finally hits the big time, and it's being displayed at a famous New York gallery. I'm cornered by an Amazonian Eurotrash redhead with pushed-up, duct-taped boobs popping out of her black Vivienne Westwood gown.

"So, Daphne, are you married?" she says, teeth clenched around a vintage ivory cigarette holder.

"No, my husband died."

"Really? So sad. How did he die?"

"He ate bad fish."

As I maneuvered my Vee-Dub across Country Meadow Valley, with its identical houses and neat yards and shiny new RVs, I decided instead I would tell anyone who asked that Jack had died in "the war." Never mind that he'd been out of the army for years. It could be, like, our "War on Drugs"—an imaginary war, except instead it was "The War on Bad Fish."

I imagined children wearing "Just Say No" buttons with pictures of evil-faced maniacal mussels covered by red circles with a slash through them. Celebrities—maybe the cast of *Two and a Half Men*—could go on TV to warn against the dangers of seafood consumption.

"This is your brain," says dead-serious Charlie Sheen. "This is your brain on calamari."

By the time I made it to Logan's house, I had the giggles. I walked up the cement pathway and rang the bell.

Logan answered the door.

“Hey, man, what’s with you?” he asked.

“Oh, just some funny stuff on the car radio,” I said, trying to control myself. “Stern.”

Howard Stern was on in the morning, and it was now about six p.m., but I was very convincing. I swallowed another chuckle.

Sick, sick, sick.

Logan nodded, although I was pretty sure he never thought anything was funny. He has pitch-black dyed hair and a pasty white complexion studded with acne. He’s trying to grow a goatee, but it’s coming in blond—his natural hair color—so you can’t really see it. It just makes him look as if his chin is out of focus.

He wore a black floor-length cowboy-style duster, camouflage pants and a shirt with a marijuana leaf iron-on patch. He has a bad homemade tattoo of a skull on the back of his hand. If I didn’t already know what a pacifist-slash-vegetarian-slash-whiner he was, I’d say he looks just like one of those outcasts who had big plans to shoot up his high school.

I followed him to the basement, waved at Mr. and Mrs. Logan’s-Parents, who were sitting in front of the TV watching the news. They looked eerily Jabba the Hutt-like, which worried me, since they were probably only about ten years older than me.

My near future. I shuddered.

Mr. and Mrs. Logan’s-Parents waved back. I didn’t know Logan’s last name, so I didn’t know their last name. Although, it was possible they had a different last name than their son.

Jack and I had laughed about stuff like that. How smug we were about being a first marriage and parents of our own kids. Maybe that was part

of creating your own bad karma. Don't be smug about anything. You might die from eating rotten sushi.

Logan, who never ate sushi in his life, didn't look much like Mr. and Mrs. Logan's-Parents, so who knew if he was their biological kid or their adopted one or whatever. Still, if you asked him, he'd say there was no resemblance because they ate red meat. According to Logan, consuming animal flesh can do a lot of damage to your appearance.

I sometimes wonder what he thought about what happened to my husband. Maybe Logan felt that dropping dead was Jack's punishment for eating another living creature. He never said. And as much as I felt Bob's Brain Freeze was a bunch of weirdos, they did come to Jack's memorial service. Showed their respects. And their bad taste in clothes. I loved it. Especially after my mother saw them and just about freaked out. It was the one bright spot at the funeral.

Fuzzy-faced Logan and I walked into the basement, which was decorated like a '60s rumpus room. There aren't too many houses with basements in Southern California, and the people who did have them generally used them for storage. This one was a real time warp.

There was a bar covered in red vinyl tuck-and-roll, with matching barstools in perfect condition. Next to the bar was a parquet dance floor, and in one corner was a Z-Brick fireplace with a fake fire in it. The carpet was green shag, which Mrs. Logan's-Mom would occasionally come downstairs to fluff with a rake. As an added bonus, they had a watercolor portrait of JFK above the orange velour sofa. I was an avid thrift store shopper, but I never

could've found this much good crap even if I'd been looking for it for years. It was so geeky it was the epitome of retro, funky coolness. For Bob's Brain Freeze to practice there was a desecration, which is probably partly why we did it.

The Bobs greeted me with their customary grunts and half-nods. It's not that they don't like me; it's that they have to look as if they didn't give a rat's ass. At 32, I'm at least a decade older than any of them, so I let them have their little rebel-without-a-cause, don't-screw-with-me facade. I figure most of them still sleep with their blankies. The only part that matters is that they're pretty good musicians—and that they couldn't find a decent replacement for me while I was on dead husband sabbatical. They don't have to be my best buddies.

Annie, the drummer, has bleached-out-white hair and tongue, nose and nipple piercings—the latter she happily showed us the day after she got them done. For a skinny girl, she has the most developed arms I'd ever seen.

Keshawn, the bassist, is handsome enough to be a male model. He wears his dark-brown hair in dreadlocks and often dresses in a plaid skirt he stole from his fourteen-year-old ex-girlfriend, who attended a local Catholic high school. Tonight he wore a stylish black leather minidress, which probably also once belonged to the ex-girlfriend.

Meow is our guitarist. She has long, bright lipstick-red hair, and whenever we play a gig, she likes to swing her head and flick sweat on guys in the audience in some sort of bizarre mating ritual. I'm pretty sure Meow isn't her real name.

Logan is on keyboards. He's no Yanni, but he does okay.

I am the lead singer, much to the dismay of my mother, who long ago paid alcoholic has-been vocal coaches for years of singing lessons in hopes I would eventually morph into the Chinese-American Beverly Sills. But *Daughter of the Regiment* I wasn't. I was more *Anarchy in the UK*, which was pretty much why I left home at sixteen.

Bob's Brain Freeze are so bizarre as individuals and so unlikely as a group that we sure enough have to be different from the rest of the universe in our music, so we only play television show theme songs—a punk version of *The Jefferson's* "Movin' On Up," a reggae rendition of "Go, Speed Racer," a metal-tinged *Three's Company* theme where I'd scream, "Come and knock on my door!" Stuff like that. We were a big hit at a few small clubs in the San Fernando Valley, but hadn't performed since just before Jack died. It'd been a long time since we'd rehearsed together, so everybody was on edge.

"Goddammit, you're flaaaaat!" Meow shouted at me barely half an hour into the session.

I looked down at the water bra. It was my attempt at a joke, which Meow didn't find funny.

"Not there," she yelled. "Your goddamn voice. But, yeah, your boobs, too!"

I wasn't too hurt. I didn't say anything. I just let her rant. I have kids, and she was acting like one of them—worse, actually—so I stayed mellow. Pretty soon, though, Annie decided to jump in.

"You're off, too, you stupid bitch!" she screamed at Meow.

Naturally, it being Meow, a catfight ensued.

I left.

2

THE ONLY PLACE TO GO, BESIDES HOME—WHERE MY mother and mathematics were a scary combination—was to the PTA meeting.

I'd removed myself from the basement just as Meow was yanking Annie's nipple piercings while Logan and Keshawn stood there grinning as if this were the fantasy of a lifetime. Nothing like a good chick fight, except maybe a PTA meeting, where women do pretty much the same thing, only in a more civilized fashion, with barely raised voices.

And while I doubted there were any nipple rings in a room full of PTA moms, they figuratively did do some hair-pulling on occasion. Their choice of battles was different, though—not so much about being able to carry a tune in a rock'n' roll band but stuff like whether they should once again hold the Holiday Craft Workshop, and if PTA monies should be designated for special T-shirts for the Math/Science Olympiad. Important crap like that.

On my way out, I waved to Mr. and Mrs. Logan's-Parents, once again shuddering at the sight of their gelatinous bodies. I unlocked the Vee-Dub and gingerly slid myself in. My nipples ached a little—sympathy pain for Annie. And my head hurt.

I checked myself out in the Vee-Dub's rearview, figuring I would see the pulse of the vein at my temple as it pounded a beat in my head.

Throb, throb, throb.

Nope, just felt it. Couldn't see it at all.

I looked normal, pretty much, if this is what normal was. I had short Anne Hathaway-meets-lawnmower hair—blond with razored ends. I had brown eyeliner on my black eyes. Jack always said he loved my eyes. That it was the first thing that attracted him to me. At first, I'd thought this was your typical big-white-guy-seeking-forbidden-fruit stuff, but when I talked to him for a while, I was pretty sure he wasn't a player. And, obviously, we fell in love, got married, had kids, blah blah blah.

Being on the shorter side—five-foot-three-ish—and thin and, yeah, Asian—helped me look younger than thirty-two, but you could see the tiny wrinkles forming under my eyes—a definite sign of my true age. All my good times—marrying Jack, having the kids, working as an artist, singing rock 'n' roll—couldn't stop the hereditary facial imperfections.

Heredity. It was so easy to blame my parents for my flaws, emotional and physical. My dad was a heavy smoker and became a wrinkled mess by the time he died at sixty-seven. Still, I always figured my chances of getting his crosshatched mug were low, because I didn't smoke or go out in the sun.

Ping still looked pretty good at sixty-five, even though she was a pain in the ass with her negative attitude and—barf—Beanie Baby collection. Maybe I'd end up with her face instead of my dad's, but I hoped like hell I didn't get her personality. Even so, her voice would pop out of my mouth on occasion. I'd look around to see if she was there then be horrified to realize it was me sounding a lot like Mama Ping, Mother Superior of the Universe.

Mama Ping was the one who'd forced the Lee family move from Los Angeles proper to its outskirts—Country Meadow Valley, which sounded a lot like the name of an old folks' home. Or a cemetery. Or a feminine hygiene product.

I could still picture the young, trying hard-to-assimilate Penny/Ping with her black ponytail and Susie Homemaker apron—the one with the embroidered strawberries—standing in front of the stove, making grilled cheese sandwiches with Velveeta and Wonder Bread and real butter, telling my dad how she wanted us to get away from the traffic and congestion and evil influences of Los Angeles. She wanted to live in a small town where my brother Gary and I could play in orange groves and ride our bikes to the park.

And, yeah, Country Meadow Valley was pretty much like that when I was a kid. Ping's goal was that we'd have this normal, happy, idyllic—and white—childhood, and we'd grow up to be, as my friend Aldo says, "Gloriously numb in our Cupcakedom."

Cupcakey it was, but Country Meadow Valley didn't have too much small-town influence on my brother, who ended up moving to San Francisco to become a female impersonator. My parents

stopped talking to Gary, but I still hear from him periodically. Last e-mail I got from him was the joyous announcement that he and his life partner, Jason the Lawyer, were in the process of adopting a baby from China. When I tried to tell Mama Ping the good news, she put her hands over her ears and sang like Ethel Merman.

She was always so musical. I think that's where Gary got his talent. Even at five, he could belt out a mean "There's No Business Like Show Business." I sang pretty well, too, but Gary was always a lot better at Broadway tunes. Go figure.

When our nuclear Lee family—Mom, Dad, girl and boy-who-would-be-girl—first moved to Country Meadow Valley, my dad, Joe, was working in the San Fernando Valley, in that industry known once upon a time as "aerospace." I never had any idea what my dad did for a living, just that he was "in aerospace."

Eventually, the Cold War ended, and the aerospace industry had massive layoffs; and Joe took an early retirement and a subsequent second career as a Toyota salesman. It was right about then that Joe's face began to bend and fold and crumble into itself, like the weight of the world and the pressure of selling the Japanese cars he despised began crushing his eyes into his cheeks and his cheeks into his mouth. Joe hated being a car salesman, but he'd hated aerospace, too. Actually, there wasn't much Joe liked, so when he died, about a year before my husband ate the fatal fish, we were all relieved.

Including my mom, who found herself alone for the first time in forty years. She adapted to it a lot better than I have, but I had Jack for so much

less time than she had my dad. And, unlike her, I liked my husband. Loved him. How could I not love the man who made me go from Lee to Lee-Lee?

Daphne Lee-Lee. I didn't have to hyphenate, but I couldn't resist. Jack said I sounded like a freakin' panda.

I blinked back something—a tear? Some dust? An eyelash?—as my Vee-Dub transported me almost automatically to Greenapple School, where Iris attended second grade. Greenapple School is on Greenapple Drive. Nearby is Granny Smith Avenue and Pippin Lane and Golden Delicious Road. Which is all so very sweet and charming and nauseating in its appley delicious way, but that's Country Meadow Valley in a huge nutshell. In fact, we did have a nut tract—Cashew Court, etc.—and also a girl-name tract—Cynthia Circle, etc.—and even a newly built superhero tract—Spiderman Street, etc.

The superhero tract was Country Meadow Valley's developers' paean to the movie industry, which had slowly replaced the aerospace industry in terms of local residents who had jobs in it. You'd frequently hear Country Meadow Valley women cryptically say, "My husband works in the movie industry," which could indicate he was a propmaster or a lighting guy or, for all we knew, the unlucky bastard who got to carry the ashtray of a twenty-year-old asshole assistant director who only got the job because of nepotism. Or oral sex. Or both.

This was the sort of stuff that earned poisonous mockery from my bud Aldo—real name Aldonza, after that chick in *Don Quixote*—who went to school

with me at Greenapple Elementary twenty-five years ago. Even though she was way against local type—Hispanic, goth, scary, angry—she never moved away from the cultureless confines of Country Meadow Valley. This was likely done to spite all the people who didn't accept her kind. *Our* kind—eclectic, eccentric, ethnic artsy-fartsies better suited to New York or Los Angeles. Or San Francisco, where my brother Gary, his life partner Jason the Lawyer and their Chinese baby Mei-Ling Barbara Bette Lee-Shapiro currently resided.

I parked the Vee-Dub in the lot at Greenapple school. There were a surprising number of cars there. I counted a dozen or more, which was a big number of attendees for a busy weeknight, when most moms were schlepping kids home from Little League games or making dinner for their brood. Since it was early October, I guessed the motherly minions were preparing for the many upcoming PTA holiday events.

My Vee-Dub stood out among the minivans and SUVs. I'm the only mom who drives something compact and completely unreasonable for carting schoolchildren on field trips or taking entire soccer teams to practice. Which is okay, since I never do that. I shun most extracurriculars, since they mean socializing.

And, even though my kids inherited a killer pitching arm from my mom, who can throw shoes at us like nobody's business, they have no interest in team sports. Mari takes violin lessons, and Iris likes to accompany me to Aldo's studio, where she prefers sticking her hands in clay to the requisite jazz, ballet, and tap her friends seem to take year

after year, apparently so they can perform interminable recital after interminable recital.

I got out of the Vee-Dub, locked it and tentatively touched a black-booted foot onto the pavement. I always feel like the school is going to swallow me up—heathen that I am. I so don't fit the mommy mold. I don't go to church like most of the Cupcakes—I'm hopelessly agnostic. I don't get my hair done at one of the three beauty shops in town—I bleach and chop it myself in front of the bathroom mirror. And I don't have a real job—mom-slash-artist-slash-singer-in-a-rock-band does not appear on my tax returns. Straight-arrow Country Meadow Valley residents wouldn't count it as a job anyway, even if I did make money at it.

I also, at this point, no longer have a husband, but that was through no fault of my own, unless you consider that I didn't tell him not to eat the oysters, that he was plenty virile without them.

My bad.

I was late to the meeting, so I had to make an entrance. All PTA meetings take place in the school cafeteria, which doubles as an auditorium, and which isn't really a cafeteria or even much of an auditorium at all—just a large portable building the Greenapple staff had given the unfortunate name of “cafetorium,” which sounded all too much like “crematorium.”

Fascist states, PTA executive boards—there were a few similarities.

The PTA president, Crystal Chalice—whose name was better suited for either a religious icon or a porn star—was talking about how to allocate funds for assemblies for the rest of the school year. As she spoke, Crystal occasionally whacked her

gavel on the table. For some reason, I felt strangely emasculated, and I wasn't even a guy.

I slipped in as quietly as possible, making my way past the Cupcakes toward the rear of the cafeteria. Everyone turned and looked at me as my boot heels clacked against the cheapo linoleum. The Cupcakes all had that same mixed expression of pity: *Her husband died, you know.* And disgust: *What's with that hair?* And curiosity: *She's an artist?*

I kept walking, single-mindedly aiming at a chair in the back of the room.

"Oh, so nice of you to join us," said Crystal, who didn't sound as if it were nice at all.

I turned to face her, doing my Deniro impression in my head.

You talkin' ta me?

"Mrs. Lee-Lee." She smirked. "I said it's nice of you to join us."

Yep, she was talkin' ta me.

"Uh, thanks?" I said-slash-asked.

Crystal set down her gavel and riffled through some official-looking paperwork in a big red notebook in front of her.

"According to Robert's Rules of Order, a member of the board is going to have to make a motion to grant you a courtesy seat," she said, a little snottily.

I was a little snotty right back at her.

"What?"

"Robert's Rules of Order," she said, as if I knew what the hell she was talking about.

"Robert says I can't sit?"

Robert says. Simon says. Freakin' Cupcakes!

"No-ooo," huffed Crystal. "Since you are not on the PTA board, we must grant you a courtesy seat

in order for you to be officially allowed to attend the meeting.”

“Uh, all right,” I said, wondering if steam was exiting my ears.

This was stupid. And embarrassing. Courtesy seat? She didn’t sound very damn courteous to me. I tried to hide my indignation as the acid bubbled in my stomach. I desperately wanted them to tell me I couldn’t sit there with them. I needed for them to try to make me go away. Forget our children being our future. As much as I loved my kids, I so wanted to make a huge scene. I wanted to tell them off. I wanted to make fun of their silly clothes. I wanted to hurl frosted cupcakes at them, which I would have, had there been some at my disposal.

I was surprised there weren’t any on the refreshments table in the corner of the cafetorium. The hospitality chairperson must have forgotten to bring the plain yellow cupcakes with their predictably white icing—in case someone was allergic to chocolate—and sprinkled with those tiny, tasteless, indigestible pastel disks they called “jimmies,” which I’m pretty sure are made from recycled Barbie shoes.

So, there was nothing to hurl, except maybe my dinner. Instead, all I did was grin, somewhat hysterically.

The group stared at me as if I were from outer space. They seemed to be waiting for me to sprout antennae. I kept smiling like a total idiot, and they all looked away.

Okay, maybe one or two smiled back, but I refused to have eye-to-smile contact or, worse, eye-to-eye contact. In the past, whenever I saw them at school, I talked to them only if I had to, and the

ones who were overly friendly made me suspicious. I'd always thanked them when they'd give a backhanded compliment—"Your outfit is so interesting"—about my never-ending supply of vintage bowling shirts and other thrifted articles of clothing, but I declined any offers to go out for coffee or attend Pampered Chef parties. My friend card was full. I had Aldo, and I had my kids, even though a professional parent is not supposed to be friends with her kids.

And I had Bob's Brain Freeze, who weren't real friends but were at least real people—sort of—that I wanted to hang with. Sort of. Although, by now, I was sure the fighting I'd abandoned at rehearsal had dissolved into some kind of sore-nippled orgy. I thanked my lucky freakin' stars that I'd left.

Too icky to think about—all that young, dirty flesh rolling around on the basement's appropriately named shag carpet, while doughy Mr. and Mrs. Logan's-Parents slumped on the couch one flight above, half-listening to Katie Couric and her bad news.

Still, it might have been more fun for me to referee the naked young Bobs than to stand in the cafetorium like a Guantanamo Bay detainee, wondering if it was legal for an alien entity such as myself to be at a freakin' PTA meeting. I felt like a criminal or something.

The Dreaded PTA Bandit, stealing all the courtesy seats.

I noticed one of the Cupcakes smiling sweetly at me. She had long brown permed hair pulled tightly into a ponytail suspended midair via a purple Scrunchie. She wore a Greenapple School T-shirt tucked into impossibly high-waisted pleated

blue jeans. I wondered if her pants were cutting off her air supply.

"I'll make a motion to grant Debbie a courtesy seat," she said.

Who the hell is Debbie?

Oh, crap, she means me.

"Daphne," I said. "My name's Daphne."

"Oh, sorry," she giggled. "I move to grant Daphne a courtesy seat."

It looked as if Crystal glared at her, but I couldn't be sure. They were all sitting toward the front of the room, and I was standing at the back, still trying not to look directly at any of them and feeling like I was in some sort of high school nightmare, taking an exam I hadn't studied for. At least I wasn't nude. Or had forgotten my locker combination.

"Any ob-jec-tions?" asked Crystal, scarily pronouncing every syllable.

One of the other Cupcakes cleared her throat. She wore her blond ponytail in a green banana clip.

"Well, we're not going to be able to discuss our...special board functions...if there's a stranger here," she said.

Special board functions? What, were they all planning on hitting menopause simultaneously?

"If it's going to be a problem..." I started to say.

"I think it is going to be a problem," said yet another Cupcake, dirty-blond hair, pink banana clip *and* a Scrunchie. "We've already started the meeting and look how disruptive Debbie's presence is."

"Daphne," I said through my teeth.

I was definitely about to blow.

Brown ponytail piped up.

"I think it's just fine if she's here," she said, oozing Nutrasweet from her pores. "We can talk about the special functions at a later time, maybe when she's part of the board."

She looked at Crystal knowingly. Maybe a little too knowingly. Like I would ever commit to being on the stupid PTA board. I was only planning to help with a couple of events, like I used to, before Jack died. I just wanted to be a quasi-normal mom again. That was all. I wasn't going to start sporting a ponytail or pants that came up to my thorax.

"I mean, she just...lost...her...husband," she whispered.

I couldn't believe she'd actually whispered, as if I couldn't hear her. These women were total freaks. It would have been amusing had I not been standing there, trapped in 17th-century Salem. I wished Aldo were with me. She'd know what to do.

"Well, I second the motion," said another Cupcake, smiling warmly.

I felt all gooey inside, but it was mostly from nausea.

Crystal banged her gavel on the table, making everyone jump.

"All those in favor," she said through gritted teeth.

Most of the Cupcakes responded with an "aye."

"Those against," she said.

"Nay," said about three of them.

"Motion carried," she said.

She looked pissed off as she once again smacked her gavel, hard. I had no idea what she had against me. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe it was just that she had control over her little group,

and I gave the impression I wasn't ever going to be someone within her control. I've known a few people like that. In fact, I live with one. My mother.

"You can sit down," said Crystal.

I didn't say anything. I was too busy considering walking out of the room. But then I remembered my little Iris, and how important it was to her for me to be a part of her life, which currently consisted mainly of school activities. I couldn't let her down. There'd be time for that later, when I started doing heroin because of the stress of slowly turning into a Cupcake.

Nah. That'll never happen. I don't own any Scrunchies.

I found a chair in the back of the cafetorium, slightly removing myself from everyone else. They sat in a semicircle up close and tight with one another, raptly listening to Crystal as she talked endlessly in monotone and banged her gavel when the other Cupcakes got too rowdy.

They started talking about where to get money for a music assembly for students, but I simply could not tune into the conversation. My head hurt worse than it did before I got there, and it felt weird to be at a meeting when it had been so long since I'd left the house and been in close proximity to other people. I looked around, still avoiding eye contact with the Cupcakes. I stared instead at their barfy array of T-shirts, which advertised Greenapple School or the Country Meadow Valley Trinity Church Youth Club or I (heart) Kitty Cats. Then I worried they'd think I was staring at their boobs, so my eyes finally settled on the main table, where Crystal continued holding court.

On the tabletop in front of her were a number of gifts for the Sunshine Fund. Sunshine Fund is the money collected to pay for flowers that went to PTA members and their families when someone was sick—or died. The PTA had sent a huge bouquet to the funeral home where we'd held Jack's service, so my guess was they needed to build up the fund again. At the end of the meeting, everyone would pitch in a dollar each for a raffle ticket. The dollar went into the fund, and the winning raffle ticket holder got to collect the goodies, which were usually donated by PTA members. I could see there were two Sunshine Fund prizes on the table. One was wrapped, so it was hard to discern what it was—could've been a box of candy or fancy bath soap or maybe some candles—a favorite Sunshine Fund gift.

The other package made my carefully tweezed eyebrows shoot straight up. I didn't recognize it at first, because it was wrapped in clear cellophane and tied with a bow. I focused my eyes a little harder and saw that it was a ceramic vase—*my* ceramic vase—something I'd made at Aldo's studio.

Her place was a studio-slash-gallery, so I not only worked on my art there but I'd also put up some of my stuff for sale. She'd told me a few of my pieces had sold recently, but I was really surprised to see one of them at a PTA meeting. I was a little worried, because the vase was dangerously close to Crystal's gavel-wielding arm. I'd worked pretty hard on it, and I didn't want her to whack it to smithereens.

The piece was a large one I'd pressed lemon leaves into and glazed a sunny yellow—Iris had called it a "happy" vase. I guessed one of the Cup-

cakes thought it was happy, too—the price tag had been a not-so-cheap sixty-five bucks, fifty percent of which went to Aldo, who let me use her studio gratis. I told myself to forget the abuse I'd suffered when I came in the door, be polite and, at the end of the evening, ask who had bought it and donated it as a gift. Of course, I would thank them profusely.

But first, the bathroom. I had to pee.

I tried to keep my heels from clacking as I exited down the hallway just off the cafetorium. No one looked up. Or, if they did, I didn't see because my back was to the group.

The girls' room was way down at the end of the hall that connected the main office building to the cafetorium. I threw open the door, went inside and looked at myself in the mirror.

Not so bad. My hair still appeared nicely weed-whacked, even though the pain in my head hadn't diminished. I thought of the happy vase I'd lovingly crafted with my very own ten fingers. I began thinking maybe someone hadn't bought it but had gotten it as a gift and didn't like it, so she'd donated it to the Sunshine Fund.

Whatever.

Perhaps I wouldn't ask who'd brought it, which also meant I wouldn't have to give any insincere thanks. But I had all meeting to figure out what to do, so instead of worrying about it, I peed. Then I got up, yanked up my jeans, washed my hands and grabbed the door handle.

As soon as I clamped my hand around it, we had what I thought was an earthquake.

We live in California. We have them all the time. But this couldn't have been an earthquake.

The sound was too huge, like a bomb going off. I flew backwards and smacked the back of my head against the maxi-pad dispenser. I had the vague sensation of a soft avalanche of sanitary napkins hitting my shoulders.

And that was it.

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