

Chapter 1

Tuesday, June 12

Here's when I knew something about my life had to change.

I was sitting in the dentist's chair, waiting for the topical numbing goo to take effect on my gum so he could jab a needle in the same spot. My only choice for entertainment was to stare at the light blue wall, or flip through the channels available on the television suspended above me. That was when I stumbled upon an infomercial: Learn to preach in Spanish. The show had just started but promised to tell me how many souls needed saving, and what an impact I could have. Maybe this was the answer, my brain told me, I could become a successful Spanish missionary. I stared at the screen transfixed, until Dr. Banks appeared to administer the Novocain shot.

I couldn't see the rest of the show as my tooth's issues took center stage.

Why was I at the dentist? I'd actually surpassed all of the levels and stages of TMJ deterioration, reaching, finally – and yes, I'm an overachiever even when it comes to grinding my teeth – the stage where you grind through thick plastic mouth guards and crack a tooth. This I know was not healthy. It was simply a fact of my life. Or was, up until that moment when I knew something had to change. Which, as I said, was a moment ago. At 39, just, dreading 40, I had one gray eyebrow hair that angrily grew

back when tweezed, two adorable boys – a tween and a teen - and a husband named Dave.

I was in the middle of life. In a suburb in the middle of America. And I'd cracked a tooth because I was so busy being restless in my subconscious. And whatever that busy subconscious was doing at night, during the day it was drawn to infomercials about preaching in Spanish when I wasn't particularly religious and I didn't speak Spanish. I was a mess, although, when I looked at some of my neighbors, I had to admit, I was pretty lucky. My bouts of tooth-grinding were nothing compared to the truly miserable. Miserable described my neighbor, Heidi, who departed yesterday to I don't know where, following three moving vans that showed up as I was taking a shower and departed before I headed to yoga. Heidi's kids seem to have not made it on the van, or in her car, although it appears that the three large dogs did make the cut. And her husband, well, this afternoon when I left for the dentist, he was sitting alone on the lawn, in front of his furniture-less house. That was miserable.

So I wasn't miserable, at least, just in the middle. Middling. Muddling. I looked ahead and thought, wow, there were so many things I wanted to do. I looked behind and I was proud of what I'd done, and especially proud of my kids. After Dave and I married, and I got pregnant with baby boy number one, I gladly gave up my job as an account executive at the advertising agency. Sure, I loved my friends at work, and the creativity at the office - but I knew I wanted to stay home with my kids. And Dave's career path at the law firm was pretty much a given. And it worked out. He was a partner now. And it was great. At least for him, and it provided a great standard of living for our family. The

kids were pretty independent these days, and I felt, well, stuck. Between what I'd done, and what I wanted to do. That was the question. What was next?

I couldn't feel my chin. That was disturbing in and of itself, but what was most disturbing is the fact my two kids would arrive home from summer camp at the end of the summer and ask me what I'd been doing. They'd been sailing, shooting things, fishing, swimming, making camp fires and eating really unhealthy food. Me? Well, I'd been stewing, thinking, pondering, grinding my teeth and, well, eating really unhealthy food. Dave said I was using carbs to replace the comfort of kissing the boys good night, driving them to practice and basically just caring for them. After seventeen years of marriage, I wasn't going to admit he might be right. Each summer they were gone, I managed to pack on at least six pounds. And that's not insignificant on a 5'5" frame. This year I'd already gained two pounds and there was another six weeks to go before I got my babies back. They said that once you hit forty, you gained up to ten pounds a decade, just doing what you've always been doing. At that rate, plus the annual camp pounds, I was headed for obesity land, or maybe just the deep south. I just read today that Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana have the highest rates of obesity. Perhaps I'd find my future there?

It was Dave's idea to send the boys to summer camp, his camp alma mater to be exact, and even though this was their third year, the separation anxiety I felt during the weeks they were gone at camp was the same every year. I remembered the anguish I felt leaving the boys for the first time as we waved goodbye. We were headed to Dave's first partner's reward trip in Aruba. The boys were just one and three-years-old. While Dave celebrated his rainmaker status, I was convinced during the entire trip that I'd

never see my blonde-haired babies again. Scenarios danced in my head: My mom would decide to keep them and have me declared an unfit mother for abandoning them so young. Or, our plane would crash, on the way there or back. I told Dave we should fly separately, but he said that was ridiculous and handed me a peace token in the form of a Reese's two-pack to calm me down. That was sweet - but it didn't help - although perhaps planted the seed of food as comfort. I will need to bring this up during our next fight.

Even now, I never slept well during my boys' summer absence. Last night I had a horrible dream. Not only had my one gray eyebrow hair turned into two full gray bristly hedges above my eyes, but my face was covered in wrinkles. Not just crow's feet. Not just laugh lines, but full out, deeply creviced no-sunscreen wearing weathered lines. It was a sign.

"Ok, Debbie, that's all for today. We'll need a follow up in two weeks, and the bottom guard will be ready then, too," said the perky dental assistant. I'd had my eyes closed. Maybe she was talking so loudly to try to wake me up? I envisioned myself going to sleep every night. Top and bottom teeth covered in plastic and Dave giving up even trying to kiss me good night. I would just clack my guards together as a symbol of affection.

As she elevated me back to a sitting position, I tried to feel my lips. Nope. Chin? Nope. Could I learn to preach in Spanish? Nope. Heading out the front door, friendly helpful Susie of Dr. Bank's front desk asked when I would be free to come back.

"Really, I'm free anytime," I slurred.

"I'll call you when the appliance arrives," Susie chirped back happily.

You'd think I'd ordered a new refrigerator, that's how happy she was.

I crossed the parking lot and started to relax inside the safety of my SUV I'd named Doug, after his license plate DUG847. I knew it was an odd habit, but I didn't particularly like cars, just sort of knew they were a necessary suburban evil. With that in mind, personification helped me form a bond. Before Doug, I'd had Q. I still missed him a bit. With the air conditioning cranked, I took a moment and looked at my droopy mouth in the rear view mirror.

Suddenly someone tapped on my window. It was Rachel White. Rachel White. My nemesis. In terms of elementary school mom-to-mom combat, she was the general. No matter what task I volunteered for, me or anyone else for that matter, she would double check, re-do, or simply do it better herself. She'd been my youngest son Sean's room parent for so many years, the kids made fun of it. And if, by some stroke of luck she wasn't that year's room mom, she'd take over the parties anyway. Virtually every day, Rachel was at the school for some committee, or some volunteering activity or another. And she only had one child at the school. Of her omnipresence, Sean once remarked: "Mrs. White needs to get a life." Of course, I scolded him. But really, she was out of control. Hopefully, she'd be banned by the administration at the middle school where Sean and her child were headed in the fall.

"How are you?" Rachel asked, looking into my eyes. She wore wire frame glasses with thick lenses which made her appear to be able to see into your soul. She also resembled an owl, an odd, meddling owl. "Are the boys at camp already? How hard it

must be for you to be all alone all summer. I just love my little girl too much to send her away.”

“Yes, the boys are at camp. Great to see you, too, Rachel,” I slurred. “Gosh, look at the time. I have to run.” I reached down and popped Doug into reverse, but when I looked back up Rachel hadn’t moved.

“What are you up to this summer? We’re going to the beach, of course, and then well I’m just spending every second with Madeline. I just can’t believe we’ll be sending the kids to middle school, can you? No more elementary school” Rachel said.

She seemed genuinely hoping to engage me in a conversation. I realized, but she didn’t yet, that next year at the middle school, she wouldn’t be allowed to be around all the time. I willed myself to find an ounce of kindness, of sympathy. Nope. I couldn’t.

“I really do have to go,” I said, wiping the drool from my chin on the sleeve of my white blouse and backing out of the parking space with a wave. I looked in the rearview mirror and she had turned toward the door to Dr. Bank’s office. Tears had started to form at the corners of my eyes. Sure, I couldn’t feel most of my mouth and Dr. Banks was charging me an arm and a leg to fix a tooth. Yes, I missed the boys, and Rachel’s insensitive statements about camp stung. But why did I feel sorry for myself? I was blessed. Just, maybe, a bit bored, restless.

At the stop sign, I pulled off my latest pair of drug-store sunglasses and peered at myself in the rearview mirror. I was drooling, but my eyes weren’t even red from my

mini breakdown. Heck, not even a mascara smudge. I had stemmed the flow soon enough. My wavy blonde hair was comforting in its humidity filled predictability.

Sunglasses back on, I decided my best course of action was to focus on someone else's misery and so a little reconnaissance might be in order. If Heidi really had departed for good, what would her family do? A drive-by might provide answers, I reasoned. If nothing else, my new pursuit had me motivated. To appear as if driving by her house was on my way – which it wouldn't be had I simply headed home from the dentist – I had to circle back and approach my house from the opposite direction. Being directionally challenged, even after living in Granville my entire life, it took me five extra minutes to get to the bottom of the curved road leading up the hill first to Heidi's and then across the street, to mine.

My friend Cheryl was pushing a "For Sale" sign into the grass in the exact spot where I'd seen Heidi's husband sitting just a few hours earlier. I waved and tried to smile through numb lips at Cheryl, pulled into the beginning of my driveway, parked Doug haphazardly, and headed straight over for the scoop.

"You look awful!" Cheryl screeched as I crossed the street. For some reason she retained the high-pitched cheerleader voice of her youth. While her voice was endearing at normal octaves, it became nails on a chalkboard when thrown across the street at me.

"Thanks," I slurred, and then reluctantly acknowledged what everyone in our neighborhood, city or well, the state had already made formal: my friend Cheryl is a

beautiful woman. To be exact: Miss Granville, Miss Ohio and 4th runner up to Miss America. Kind of made you sick.

“I didn’t mean that how it sounded, honey,” she said giving me a quick hug before turning back to the yard sign she was shoving into the ground. “Gotta make sure I don’t hit the sprinkler system line. That’s always a bad omen. But really, what is wrong with your face?”

“Dentist. I hate dentists. All of them,” I said.

“Thank God, it sort of looks, just right now, like you could have had a stroke,” Cheryl said, handing me a hammer. “I’m sure you’ll be better in a few hours,” she added just in time for me not to hit her with the hammer. She’s only three years younger than me, but she looks fifteen years younger. Why did I befriend a perky brunette in the first place? Oh, right, she was my sister’s friend and I adopted her when my sister moved away. It was a moment of weakness that has turned into a friendship for life.

“There, it’s official,” Cheryl exclaimed while stepping back to admire her handiwork and the gleaming Coldwell Banker sign with her name rider slid in place below. “Hold on, I’ve got to get the rider for the top of the sign!” And so, I stood holding a hammer in front of a suddenly empty house as Cheryl’s twin daughters – Isabel and Alexandra – bounded around the corner of Heidi’s former home with their mom’s spunky attitude and good looks boiled down to third-grade size.

“Aunt Debbie!” they squealed simultaneously as I quickly dropped my weapon and bent down for the warm onslaught of the girls. They smelled like chlorine and sweet suburban grass, and their skin had the warm Mediterranean glow of their mother’s.

“We’ve been playing on the zip line in back! It’s sooo fun!” Alexandra informed me, before asking, “Are you ok? Your mouth looks funny!”

Cheryl arrived back with the rider reading “Make an Offer” and I just had to make an inquiry. “Ok, I’ve been patient, but you’ve got to give me the scoop,” I said, while keeping an eye on the twins who were showing off their latest gymnastics routine on the grass.

“Great!” I yelled to the girls through my numb cheeks.

“Well, as you probably saw, Heidi had one of her usual fits. She threatened for the 200th time to leave him, and Bob told her to go. So she did. Bob called me and said he feels better than he has in years and that he was ready to move on, and move. That’s it. I got the listing!”

“Wow!” I yelled to the twins, “What do you mean that’s it?” I said to Cheryl.

“Well, of course there is more to the story, but I am really not at liberty to discuss that Debbie,” she said, and smiled leaning closer. “Ok, well according to the gossip – and you should know all of this better than me since you live across the street – is that Bob was having an affair. But really, do you blame him? Heidi wasn’t really nice to anyone, even at the school. Her youngest is just a year older than the twins and she would never

even smile at me,” Cheryl said. Then we both turned and clapped for the twins’ synchronized cart wheels.

“I hardly think not smiling at someone she doesn’t know is a sign of meanness,” I slurred. I was hot and starting to get a headache. Cheryl hadn’t broken a sweat.

“Debbie, it’s against code. Everyone smiles and says *hi* to the other moms at school, that’s the way it’s done.”

“Whatever. Let’s go over to my house, the girls can play with the dog and we can cool off. Are you finished here?”

“Yep, this is all I need to do right now, except maybe bury a St. Joseph in the yard. It’s going to be tough to sell without furniture, but I’m going to try. It’s hard enough to sell perfectly beautiful homes in this market. Girls let’s go to Debbie’s!”

“You know, you really do have exquisite taste,” Cheryl remarked, as she walked through my kitchen door, acting as if she hadn’t been here a million times before this moment. Perhaps compared to the empty house for sale across the street where a family was just ripped apart, any house would look exquisite, as long as it was still a home.

A home in Granville to be exact - the community otherwise known satirically as Uppity Ville since most of the town sits up on a hill. We're all lucky here, in terms of lifestyle. The fortunate few. And holding onto that lifestyle, that luck, was what caused restless nights and many arguments behind closed doors. Others' misfortune makes our fortune feel more secure. That's why I was so interested in Bob and Heidi's implosion, I supposed.

"Maybe you should become an interior decorator?" Cheryl suggested as she walked around my kitchen and the adjoining great room. "You could do it, you know!"

Dave and I had lived in a series of houses since we married. I was in charge of the decorating and the life inside of it. Dave, as an attorney and business guy, was in charge of the finances, the mortgage and the like. Truly, we were a 1950s couple in that respect, although I sometimes worried about my lack of financial savvy.

"Thanks for the compliment. That still doesn't make up for the stroke comment," I said, pulling the cork out of a semi-classy bottle of chardonnay. "I have been thinking about going back to work, in some way. I know I couldn't break back into the advertising agency world after sitting out fifteen years, but something part-time could be just what I need.

"That's how I got into real estate," Cheryl said.

That was it! I started a mental things-to-change list. It would give me a start on the road to self fulfillment. First on the list: maximize decorating prowess. Number two: minimize dentist visits. Number three: buy a Suze Orman book to worry less and understand more about our finances.

We'd decided to celebrate Cheryl's new listing out on my outside porch. My favorite place in the house. As we headed through the living room and out to the porch, Cheryl yelled up to the twins that we were going outside. I was in charge of carrying the wine and the two glasses. I needed some pain relief. It was 5 p.m. somewhere as the saying went. The twins were playing upstairs, and with them was my beloved, unconditional-love filled mutt, Oreo, who I still called my puppy even though he was nine in February.

"Are you sure the girls are OK up there? They won't mess up any of the boys' game settings or anything will they?" Cheryl asked. It was a good point. The boys guarded their video games and the levels achieved like a buried treasure.

"Well, if anything happens, I'll play innocent and it will give them something to work on when they're home from camp and bored," I said leading Cheryl to my outdoor covered porch where we could sit and overlook my little slice of paradise. I was proud of my flower garden this year, especially my periwinkle hydrangeas in full bloom.

"So, how much are you working Cheryl? It seems like the real estate gig is more than just a part-time deal these days?"

"Well, this listing – Bob's house – was just lucky. He and I have known each other for awhile, and he plays tennis with Jim once a week. It's my highest priced listing. I have a couple others on the fruit streets," Cheryl said, referring to the traditional starter home streets in Granville that all had names like Peach, Pear and Cherry. "This is my first listing in the uppity, most wonderful side of town," she added, winking at me.

"Please. You're a block away," I said.

“Yes, I consider my house part of the uppity,” she laughed. “It keeps me calmer as I watch our house values plummet.”

“Is that why you have the sign, ‘Make an Offer’?” I asked.

“Yes, well, Bob needs money quick. He’s hoping to settle with Heidi and move on. He knows he’ll take a bath, but the way he’s looking at it, he can grab another house at a fraction of what it would’ve sold for a couple of years ago. It’s a wash, that way,” Cheryl added, and began filling up our wine glasses. The sun was dropping a little, and it had to be getting close to 5:30, or later. Summer days – even summer days when I’m missing my kids so much I could scream – are my favorite, followed closely by summer nights.

“What about the kids?” I asked.

“He’s keeping them, for now. Well, actually, they’re staying at Bob’s mom’s house.”

“Oh, my, that’s a handful,” I said, and we both knew what I meant. All three kids had what can only be described as a bad reputation and a suburban rap sheet for underage drinking, pranks and more.

“What’re ya gonna do?” Cheryl asked and I noticed she’d taken over the slurring duty, and I could actually feel my top lip as I took a sip.

“Let me go get us a snack, and some water,” I said. I guess when I thought about it, I hadn’t had much to eat either. Wine on an empty stomach was never a good idea. And given Cheryl’s bird-like frame, she could topple over if she drank much more. “When is the last time you ate? Last week? You are a toothpick, well comparatively speaking.”

“Food sounds great. Yeah, I don’t eat when I’m stressed. Always been that way,” Cheryl added. I remembered that, and wondered what was going on. I hoped she wasn’t on the path to her too-thin phase again. Before I got up to go inside, I thought I’d ask.

“What’s up? Do you need to talk?” I stood up and put my hand on her shoulder.

“No, I’m fine,” Cheryl answered, gazing out at my yard without making eye contact with me. Something was up. “How are the boys? Don’t you just miss them to death? I could never send my girls away. I’d miss them too much. You’re brave.”

I caught myself before launching into my canned speech, honed over the past four years of insensitive assaults from other moms. One actually said: “I just love my kids too much to send them to camp.” Another: “I just couldn’t be that selfish. I mean, really, you’re supposed to parent.” My answer, culled through the shock of the comments and the realization that camp is a great gift for my boys, today is: “It’s really not about me. It’s for them. And I love them enough to let them go.”

Instead of saying anything to Cheryl, I hurried inside just as the telephone rang. My home phone never rang unless it was someone selling something. I almost didn’t answer but recognized a few digits of the number. I used my gruff, sales-person-hating voice as a precaution.

“Debbie! Oh my gosh, so glad I got you,” a rushed, shaky voice said.

“Maureen, what’s up? Are you OK?” I asked. My friend Maureen, of course, recognized the fake gruff voice I put on for salespeople. No fooling her. We’d known

each other since college. Back then, she was a fun-loving, small town girl with dimples and long auburn hair. She'd grown into a stunningly glamorous high-powered business woman and the mother of a stunning daughter, wife of a stunning man. And usually, too busy to talk to me unless we planned a dinner weeks in advance

"Everything is fine, but well. . ."

"Maureen, talk to me," I said, knowing she was crying. I looked down at my cell phone and saw three missed calls. I checked. All Maureen. "Where are you?"

"In your driveway," she said, as I dropped the phone on the counter and rushed outside.

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