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# GOD'S BREAD (Baked Fresh Daily)

by

Carol Roper

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## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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[www.carolroper.net](http://www.carolroper.net)

## **God's Bread (Baked Fresh Daily)**

*This book is dedicated to the Reverend Christian Sorensen and Reverend Alice Bandy, who awakened my consciousness; to Karen Koblentz and Chriss Lemmon, who opened their hearts; and to my brother, Robert St. John Roper, an incorruptible lawyer, and good friend.*

## 1

**SHIFT HAPPENS**

At twenty-seven, Mira Tilbern had about her the wry resourcefulness of someone to whom life has delivered a devastating blow and who has chosen her own way to get over it. Although marrying a man she hardly knew had probably been a less than ideal choice. Still he had saved her from drowning, and she felt she owed him something for it. Mira thought of her lifeguard as she maneuvered their Ford Exposition into the parking garage of the ocean-front apartments on Pacific Coast Highway. His dental exams were coming up soon. She hoped he would be studying for them and not having a beer.

She had learned to drive to please him, who like many Californians, considered a car an extension of the body. Mira had grown up on the other Coast and didn't feel comfortable behind the wheel. She pressed her foot lightly on the accelerator and the vehicle plunged like a crazed buffalo into the parking space, halting just before hitting the cement wall. Mira's curly, auburn hair fell across her delicate face. She brushed it back and turned off the engine.

Stepping out of the car, humming the fragments of a song whose lyrics she had long forgotten, she rotated her shoulders, stretched her lean, swimmer's body and pushed aside doubt. She popped open the back of the Exposition and retrieved a melon and a bunch of lavender

gladiolas that had caught her eye at the Farmer's Market. Flowers gave her something pretty to look at in their hideous student's apartment. She wanted to move to a place where she could have a garden, but he had a year's lease and breaking it would be expensive. The truth was that he loved to surf and their apartment was right on the ocean.

The building lobby was the approximate temperature of a nuclear reactor core when Mira entered. She stopped at the mailbox to pull out the junk advertisements. Anything she wanted, it seemed, could be bought; though what she truly desired remained vague and undefinable. Someone had thoughtfully placed a recycling container at the end of the mailboxes. Mira expertly sorted through the papers looking for anything significant before tossing the junk. Occasionally, she would find a postcard from her grandfather who had taken to traveling the world. She came across a letter addressed to her husband from an attorney. A prickling sensation made her stop. Mira had interned at a law firm the summer her life started to unravel, and she had acquired a mental radar for bad news. Curiously, the reverse was not true. Good news always came as a thundering surprise to her, though that could be attributed to the fact that there had been so little of it in the past few years.

She got as far as the stair landing before ripping the letter open, squelching any qualms she had about opening someone else's mail, by reminding herself that her husband had often said they had no secrets from each other. Of course, he was drunk at the time he said it. Mira's heart thudded as she read the text. As she feared the news wasn't good. She remembered the day she had seen her mother enter the hospital. Here it comes again, she thought, sweet disaster. Although nothing was as bad as losing her mother had been. Mira folded the letter back into its envelope and walked toward the apartment. In her heart of hearts she knew the letter contained

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the truth. It seemed that the nice lifeguard who had breathed life back into Mira had forgotten to mention he had a wife and child. Just when her life was back on track, it was going off the rails. Mira felt resentment mixed with self-pity course through her veins. She didn't deserve this. She was a good person. Why was her life a series of crises, while other people lived peaceful and fulfilling lives? Why were Mira's best hopes unrealized, or quashed by circumstance? She didn't pray the letter was wrong. What was the point? In the history of the world, God didn't respond to her. In the history of the world God had been famously silent. She passed a neighbor's door. A lonely dog barked a greeting.

Unlocking the apartment, Mira stepped over the threshold. She angled her leg and kicked the door shut behind her. Open patio curtains, exposed the room's flaws in the unrelenting glare of the summer sun. The carpet was worn, the furnishings thrift shop. She careened into the studio kitchen tossing the melon on the counter and gladiolas in the sink. Her lifeguard's surfboard and mountain bike leaned against the Southwestern style couch she had planned to re-upholster, one of these days. Mira had met him at the bottom of the Y pool, where he worked as a lifeguard; she hadn't realized she was drowning at the time.

"Hi," Mira called out, her voice barely concealing her ire. How dare he? she thought. How dare he make a fool of her? She thought of her sister who had counseled her to wait til she knew him better, now Mira would have to admit Susan had been right, and she hated that. Her anger gave her a distinct advantage as she entered the bedroom.

Photos of the four stages of gum disease hung over their bed. Acrylic teeth rested on the dresser. These things had amused her just this morning, now she saw them as disgusting.

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Her lifeguard's perfect California-surfer profile was silhouetted against the window as he played a computer game. He was so beautiful Mira couldn't help but feel desire rise in her. Down girl, she admonished herself, not this time.

"Hey," she said.

"Christ!" he squawked. "Don't sneak up on me."

"I called when I came in."

"I didn't hear you."

"Because you're playing games, again."

"I'm taking a study break," he grinned reaching for her hand, the one without the letter.

"What's bothering you?" He asked.

"How do you know something's bothering me?" Mira looked into his fabulously, green eyes. It was easy to see how she had been duped. He was like Peng Di, her ex-boyfriend, a liar. When would she learn?

"You always show your emotions. I don't know how you'll be a lawyer. You need a poker face. What happened, Mrs. Steuben in a bad mood?"

Mrs. Steuben lived at the Shangri-la Terraces, an upscale retirement community where Mira worked as a lunch waitress, and at other times driving Mrs. Steuben places and running errands for her.

"She's fine. It's this." Mira's hand shook as she held out the accusing letter to him.

He gave her a look as if she were inconveniencing him, and didn't touch the letter. Instead, he leaned back in his chair and popped his jaw muscles. He put great emphasis on the

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mouth. "I've got a quick exam at five, but I thought it would be fun to catch a boat to Catalina.

Celebrate our third month anniversary."

This confrontation wasn't going as she expected. He was getting the upper-hand, and Mira was the one who was in the right.

"So, you've already read it. What's it say?"

"It says your wife's suing you for child support." Mira dropped the letter on the keyboard and watched him skim the page with his fingernail. Sweat ran down her neck. "I don't get it."

"It's a mistake," he said flatly.

For a moment, Mira wanted to believe the attorney had blundered. "How?"

"I told you about the marriage," he said. "The marriage was annulled years ago."

Her mind stopped, and flipped through the compartments of their courtship. He *had* mentioned a brief high school marriage. She remembered it, now. Mira had been so eager for their relationship to continue, so desirous of the marvel of love that she had discounted what he said and forgotten about it until this minute. "Yes, but you didn't say you had a child." Doubts crouched like dust bunnies in her brain.

"Prove it." He smirked, his beautiful face uncommunicative. So there it was, he had no conscience. She wondered if this could be a genetic defect, because he was perfect in every other way.

"You could take a DNA test."

"Are you saying you don't believe me?" His expression bordered on a snarl.

"No." Mira felt slightly queasy. "It's just that I studied family law, and there has to be

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some basis for the complaint. I mean, the lawyer had to see some evidence.”

“Women will say anything to get a man to pay for their mistakes.” He shrugged and turned to the monitor where a pixel figure was leaping on a tank. He blew the figure up.

“I’m a woman,” she said alarmed.

“You’re different.” He gazed at her, as she imagined he would one day look at his patients, with an expression of placid impiety. “You’re awesome.”

Ordinarily the compliment would have bathed Mira in warmth; today it whistled through her like a desert wind.

“It’s not for her, it’s for the child.” The would-be lawyer in Mira wanted him to do what fairness and the law demanded.

“What happened doesn’t concern you, Mira.” His diamond-white teeth glistened in a dismissive smile. “I have to study.” He reached out and reflexively squeezed her hip. “Could you bring me a beer?”

The subject slammed shut like a judge’s gavel. No more objections would be heard. She scooped up the letter, the evidence. “Sure,” she said, sure that she wouldn’t. The marriage that she had entered, thinking it would be a refuge from an unpredictable world, was a fraud.

Standing in the kitchen her arms wrapped around her body, humiliation enveloped Mira like an unpleasant vapor. She tried on various rationalizations that might allow her to stay with him, but none worked.. She grabbed the attorney’s letter from the counter and dialed his number. She had to be certain.

He answered his own phone.

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Mira, briefly, explained who she was and the reason for her call. He described, not unkindly, that annulment papers had been drawn up for the parties named, but there had never been an annulment, because his client had been pregnant at the time. DNA tests proved, conclusively, the lifeguard was the father. Mira thanked the attorney and replaced the receiver. Her ninety-day warranty on happiness had expired. She had married a bigamist.

She stared past the patio doors at the golden sun glistening on the Pacific Ocean and would have given anything for faith to see past the moment, to be able to pray and know her prayers were heard.

“What’s taking so long?” Her liar called from the bedroom.

Mira fought back annoying tears. There was one thing she knew for certain, there was nothing, no one, she could depend on but herself. She would not fall apart and cry as she had when her mother died. Mira could take anything life handed her and survive. She wouldn’t allow herself to be defeated by circumstance. She wouldn’t lay down and die as she’d seen her mother do.

She opened the fridge and took out a cold beer. Mira could be, when times demanded, a level-headed and objective young woman. She made her decision. There was only one choice, one correct thing to do, and Mira would do it.

Mira carried his beer to the bedroom and put it on his desk.

He didn’t look up from his game, but reached for the can. “Thanks,” he muttered.

Amazed by her outward calm, and how life could change direction on a moment’s notice, Mira grabbed a skirt and a few tops from the closet. She didn’t need much to start her new life. Just a few things until she found a place to rent.

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"I'm taking some stuff to the dry cleaners," she said.

"I need the car," he warned.

"I'll walk, it's not that far."

"It's a mile." He glanced up at her.

"I need the exercise." She averted her face. Her mother had always said, Mira couldn't tell a lie if her life depended on it.

"We can catch the last boat to Catalina," he said, returning to his game.

"Okay," she said, noncommittal.

In the kitchen, the honey scent of wilting gladiolas filled her nostrils. Mira tore a plastic bag from the recycling bin and crammed her clothes inside.

Her lifeguard appeared in the doorframe startling her.

"You're not still upset are you?"

"It's over," she said.

"I knew you'd understand," he replied.

Realizing he thought she meant her discontent, Mira squeezed her lips into a smile and didn't correct him.

His shirtless muscular back glistened as he sauntered to the bedroom.

She placed her wedding band on the attorney's letter, and moved quickly to the front door. Marriage was not the answer she had been looking for. She would have to find it elsewhere. The unknown future lured her.

**WHEREVER YOU GO THERE YOU ARE**

Mira stood out, conspicuous as the only white person among the waiting passengers at the bus stop on Pacific Coast Highway. Los Angeles public transportation compared favorably with any Third World country; the LA city fathers having bowed at mid-century to oil barons, who gutted the original trolley system and forced the entire population into cars. Several well-padded, assimilated Hispanic women, wearing cotton shorts and blouses and carrying cleaning tools, chatted amiably among themselves. A hungry-looking, Mexican family huddled inconspicuously with their three children on a bench at the rear.

The afternoon sun burned Mira's scalp probably hatching basal cell carcinomas, she thought. Her mind flashed on a picture of her mother covered with the scars that resembled cigarette burns, relics of the deadly war with the multiplying cells, which would eventually extinguish her life. She quickly foraged through her shoulder purse for a tube of Ultra 30 sunscreen, mentally prioritizing the rest of the day. She needed to buy a newspaper and check the rentals. A motel seemed best short-term, except that even the best motels reminded her of hospitals. Mira's other housing choices were staying with her sister, Susan, who had married an ex-airline pilot she met on a Club Med vacation, or with Mrs. Steuben. She had once mentioned to Mira the possibility of renting her guest room to a student, more for company than the money.

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Mira's fingers closed around the sunscreen. Retrieving the tube, she opened it and quickly smeared protective cream on her delicate face and slender arms and weighed her alternatives. Mrs. Steuben was rich and didn't need extra income. Susan lived in La Jolla, a posh enclave of San Diego, but she and Susan had a strained relationship to say, the least. Mrs. Steuben was conveniently located, but much as Mira enjoyed the old lady, living with her would become an unpaid, full-time job. Mira capped the sunscreen and dropped it into her purse. What she really wanted was to go home to Eighty-sixth Street and find her mother baking in the kitchen, her hands and face sprinkled with flour, happy for her daughter's safe return.

Mira gazed up the coastline, grateful for her small inheritance, placed in a mutual fund two years ago and which, through no effort on her part, had tripled in value. She glanced back at the Mexican family; the mother and teenage daughter in flimsy summer dresses, each with a baby in their arms. The husband in work clothes. Los Angeles had always seemed like a city of exiles to her, in all likelihood because that is how Mira viewed herself. An expatriate, a woman without a true home.

No buses approached. They had all been waiting at the bus stop for awhile, long enough, Mira now saw, to attract a black-and-white police car, which stopped a few feet from her. A stitch of fear tugged at her. Los Angeles police were famously irrational; they were not like New York cops, who loved the city and hated whomever was mayor. LA cops were mean as rabid dogs. They could club a black man into insensibility on video, or slap a celebrity in jail with impunity.

She pretended to stare in the opposite direction, willing a bus to appear; none did. She

heard the cruiser door open, turned and saw the cop coming straight toward her. He had wide, womanly hips and a humongous flashlight hung from his belt.

“You have any ID?” He asked, his raw face showing no emotion. She noted the flap on his holster exposed his gun grip.

Mira started to reply and realized with relief he was talking to the Mexican family. The other women waiting at the bus stop faded back a few steps as if they did not want any of the newcomer’s troubles to spill on them. She watched the terrified faces of the family as the cop questioned them. They did not speak English and the cop spoke no Spanish. It would’ve been comical if it wasn’t so sad. She wished she could help the peasant immigrants; if only she were a lawyer, but she wasn’t, not officially. She had graduated law school, but never taken the bar exam.

“Anyone speak Spanish?” the cop demanded, turning to the other minorities in the bus stop. No one answered.

The Mexican husband looked mortified. Mira debated with herself if she should get involved. The family was an easy target for harassment, too easy, she thought stepping forward.

“Is there a problem, Officer?” Mira heard herself ask. The first rule of law safety: Always be polite, even obsequious, to the police.

“That’s what I’m trying to find out,” he growled. She saw her image reflected in his mirrored aviator sunglasses.

“They’re just waiting for a bus.” Somewhere in LA real crimes were being committed: homes being broken into, people murdered, while he harassed Mexicans whose only crime was wanting a better life.

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“You speak Spanish?”

“No,” Mira smiled and concealed the bag of clothes she carried like a homeless waif.

“Then you’re no help.” He looked past Mira. “How about you?” He called to one of the women who shrugged.

“They’re not breaking any laws.” She flinched, seeing his flashlight crashing into her skull, but he just studied her for a moment.

“Who are you?” he asked. “Some kind of agitator?”

“I’m just waiting for a bus. We all are,” she indicated the others, who had shrunk further away from her.

“Well, here it is,” he said, as a bus arrived. The doors opened with a gasp and inhaled the Hispanic women who fled inside.

Mira stood between the cop and the family. The bus heaved and pulled into traffic.

“I’ll wait for the next one,” Mira said, more frightened than she showed. She would stay and make sure the family was safe. Someone had to be a witness, it was the least she could do.

“Let’s see your ID,” the cop demanded.

Mira pulled out her wallet and flashed her driver’s license.

“Remove it from your wallet, please.”

She did as she was asked aware of riders in passing cars looking at her with dispassionate curiosity.

“There are laws against loitering, you know.”

Mira gazed boldly at him. “I’m not loitering.”

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“You’re not waiting for a bus either.”

A green custom’s van screeched to a halt at the bus stop. The teenage Mexican girl, suddenly darted onto the Pacific Coast Highway with the baby in her arms.

Two customs officers leapt from the van and started chasing the girl through careening traffic.

“Oh, no,” Mira gasped. “Look what you’re doing!” she yelled at them.

The cop corralled the remainder of the family toward the van.

“You can go with them if you like,” he threatened.

“They don’t speak English, that’s all.”

“They’re illegals. They know the drill.”

She watched helplessly as the custom’s officer snared the teenager on the traffic island.

“Hi, sorry I’m late,” a friendly, but unfamiliar man’s voice said by her side.

Mira turned to see who it was. The sun behind the stranger’s head gave him an angelic halo. He moved closer. She saw a regular guy, a few years older than she, in jeans and a T-shirt, with a brass stud in his earlobe.

He put a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“There’s nothing we can do right now,” he said speaking quietly in her ear.

“Who are you?” She asked feeling as if she knew him from somewhere that she couldn’t quite place.

“A friend.” He watched with her as the custom’s officers rounded up the family and packed them into the custom’s vehicle. The whole drama took less than five minutes.

The van's door closed on the Mexican family's dream. The children screamed in dread as their parents tried to calm them. The father's face peered through the barred van windows, his eyes filled with shame.

"Don't forget to vote," the cop taunted as the van pulled away. He turned his attention to Mira. "It takes me twenty minutes to do my rounds," the cop said to her, "Don't be here when I return." He handed over her license.

She gave him a steely look. He smiled his bully's leer and turned. Mira watched him walk back to his black and white.

She turned to the man next to her. "Do I know you?" She asked.

"Not likely," he smiled.

"What did you mean there was nothing we could do?"

"A confrontation would've gotten you arrested, that's all."

"I was helping them," she replied.

"The only thing that's going to help is a shift in consciousness."

"A what?"

"Change the law." He turned and took a few steps away. He stopped next to a water truck parked on the shoulder. "Want a ride?" he smiled.

"No," she replied jabbing the traffic button a few times. There was a mini mart a few blocks east; she'd walk over there and get a newspaper.

"You don't recognize me do you?"

Apparently not. "Should I?"

He pointed to the truck. "I'm the water guy. The Shangri-la Terraces," he reminded. "I've

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seen you there. You're a waitress."

She vaguely realized she *had* seen him at the Shangri-la Terraces. "You look different."

"So do you," he said.

"You going that way? I mean, to Santa Monica?" Mira asked, seeing a shortcut.

"Close enough," he replied and opened the passenger door for her.

Mira scrambled aboard glad to be out of the day's heat.

He got into the driver's seat, started the truck and gave her a salutary nod.

"Do you think they'll be back?" Mira asked, her mind still caught by the drama of the Mexican family.

"Nothing can stop a dream. Next time they'll make an agreement not to get caught."

"An agreement? With who?" She asked, wondering why, the guy was clearly taling nonsense.

"Themselves."

"Ok-aay," Mira drew out the word to indicate her skepticism. The West Coast had an overpopulation of people whose philosophies would have gotten them a three-day competency examination anywhere else on earth. "Well, thanks for keeping me from getting arrested," she said, mentally dismissing him.

The truck stopped for a light.

"I'm not supposed to pick up hitchhikers." He had a genial manner about him. "It's Company policy, but it's my last week."

Mira made a low noise in her throat, meant to convey she wasn't interested in pursuing

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conversation.

The traffic light changed and he put the truck in motion. "You're from New York, right? I lived there for awhile."

"I don't feel like talking right now." She regarded him with a cool gaze.

"Whatever you want." He smiled and gave his attention to the road.

Mira looked out the window at the ocean and thought how her mother would have loved the natural splendor of California. Soon, though, she found herself sneaking a glance at the driver. He was the kind of man who became handsomer the longer you looked at him. She wondered if he was involved with anyone, had a girlfriend or a wife, and pushed the thoughts away. She didn't want to be enchanted right now. She needed a rest. In the three years since Peng Di had left her for his arranged marriage in Beijing, Mira had experienced a series of vertiginous relationships; all of which had begun promisingly enough, but soon revealed some alarming facet of the man's character, such as a cocaine addiction, or a wife. She was determined not to use another man to quell her feelings of emptiness. Men were an easy distraction for her. She had serious decisions to make, and no time for silly flirtations. And while she was setting her priorities, she needed to get an annulment. Then, finally, she would take the bar exam she had avoided for years. Mira eyed the driver. The water guy didn't deserve her being rude.

"Look, I'm having a really rotten day," Mira offered. "It's not personal."

"No problem," he said in an understanding voice.

"I'm Mira Tilbern." She offered her hand.

He glanced at her and took his right hand off the steering wheel.

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"I'm Riley Harris," he said.

Mira shook Riley's hand. His long slender fingers had calluses on their tips. A jolt of energy shot through her. She let go of him feeling as if some unnamed burden had been purged from her.

"What was that?"

"What?" He aimed the truck toward the Pico Boulevard off-ramp into Santa Monica. The engine ground with the effort of climbing a hill.

"Like, static electricity, or something," Mira said, slightly embarrassed

"Oh, yeah, it happens to me all the time. The Chinese call it Chi. In India it's called *Prana*. We just had a little energy exchange that's all."

"It doesn't happen to me all the time.

"Yeah, it does, you just don't realize it. You exchanged a little energy with the cop, the people in the bus stop, with me. A little energy here, a little energy there," he grinned. "Take a shower, have a night's rest. Start all over again."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"No problem." He maneuvered the truck along Pico Boulevard past a row of ugly motels that stretched along both sides of the street. "Where do you want me to drop you?"

"I don't know."

He laughed then stopped. "You know, every time you say that a decision gets made anyway. You just don't know it. You give up your power when you don't know."

"Yeah, well the force be with you," she said, and added, "I sort of just ended a

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relationship.”

“Should I offer condolences?”

“Not really.”

“A celebration then?”

“Somewhere in between.”

“It’s always exciting to get out of a situation that doesn’t work and start something new.”

“I just found out my husband is a bigamist.” Had she just told that to a total stranger?

She had.

“Bummer.”

“Yeah, kind of.”

“Did you love him?”

“That’s a tough question.”

“No, it’s not.” Riley parked the truck on Ocean Avenue. The load of plastic water bottles jostled.

“I kind of had a feeling that something wasn’t right when I first met him, but...,” her words drifted off.

“But you ignored it,” he finished her thought.

“Yeah.”

“How long were you married?”

“Three months.”

Riley choked on a laugh. “Three months?”

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“Look, I’m new here,” she said defensively. “Everyone’s a couple. In New York I could be single and not be an outsider, get invited places. I didn’t know anyone here.”

“So you married to fit in?”

“I hear how that sounds. Of course, I thought I loved him. He’s very handsome.”

“Well, there’s a reason to make a lifetime commitment.”

“Excuse me, I don’t have to excuse myself to you.”

“No, you don’t, but being straight with me would be a start.”

“I *am* being straight. Why do I feel I have to defend myself?”

“I don’t know, why do you?” he asked.

“I was lonely. Is that a crime?” She demanded.

“No, it’s a feeling.”

“And I believed in him.”

“Next time believe in yourself.”

“Easier said than done,” Mira fumed and looked out the window at the bleak motels. She turned to Riley. “Do you believe in God?”

“We’re taking a definite theological turn here,” he said with a kind smile. “Are you sure you want to go down that path with a stranger? I could be a nut, you know. The end of the world and all that stuff.”

“I know, but I don’t think you are. There’s just something different about you.”

“I’m just a guy,” he shrugged.

“I’m an atheist,” she said.

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He reached behind his seat for a clipboard. "Do you believe in Freud's theory of the unconscious mind?"

"Certainly."

"Then what's the difference between that and God, or love?" He faced her with an openness she found disconcerting.

"Freud isn't a religion, neither is love." Mira said.

"Religions change by country. We practically worship hamburgers in America; in India, the cow is sacred." Riley said, glancing at her with his crystal-blue eyes. "Science proves we're all energy and motion. Solidity exists only as a perception."

You didn't answer my question."

He smiled softly at her. "I believe in the truth that everything in the universe is connected, I believe it matters how we treat each other. I believe in grace and that life is a gift to be used well. Does that answer your question?"

"Your philosophy is interesting," she said, pursing her lips. "But naive."

"Believing too little can be a more of a hazard than believing too much," he said brusquely.

She was surprised by his dismissal, having expected a rousing defense of God. Mira reached half-heartedly for her clothing bag.

"Well, it's been nice talking to you. I guess I should look for a place to stay tonight." As soon as the words left her mouth, a creeping dread reached up and grabbed her heart. Without warning an instant panic shot through her body, permeating every pore. Sparks popped into her

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eyes. Mira's heart raced like a thoroughbred's.

"Is the door stuck?" Riley asked, his voice floating toward her like a cartoon character.

Mira's breath became short. On the surface, she knew she appeared normal, while inside her emotions roiled making it impossible for her to hold a thought for a splitsecond.

Riley turned to her. "Are you all right?" He sounded as if he were speaking from inside a wind tunnel.

"I just feel a little anxious," she said, or thought she said. Her first panic attack had come when her mother had moved to the hospital. After that, the life Mira had taken for granted went into free fall.

Her mother's voice echoed in Mira's head. "*Surrender is not what you think it is; it's not about loss.*"

"I'm sorry." Why had she said that? What did she have to be sorry for? Nothing. Everything. A wave of dizziness caught her and she felt her knees go wobbly. "No matter how hard I try, my worst fears keep coming true," she said.

"Wish for something else," Riley said, in a calm voice. "You have a choice."

"I said, fears, not wishes." Was she screaming?

"Same thing," Riley said. He had an imperturbable quality.

"You must be crazy."

He smiled like a saint. "Would you like a drink of water?" He asked, his voice filled with compassion. "I've got a truck full."

"Yes, please." She made no move. Her brain had crashed like a hard drive. If her heart

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would only slow down, her mind could hold a coherent thought. “Air. I can’t breathe.” She felt suffocated. Mira rolled down her window and gasped in the ocean air.

“Is there someone you’d like to call?” Riley asked, his rich voice next to her ear.

Mira thought of Susan.

*“You only know him a month. What’s the rush?” Susan had asked when told of Mira’s impending nuptials. “Are you pregnant?” Why did her sister always assume the worst?”*

*“I know what I’m doing,” Mira had replied, but she didn’t.*

“Can’t talk,” Mira managed to squeeze out.

“Understood,” Riley said.

Like a swimmer rising from the depths, Mira broke into a cold sweat.

“Don’t fight so hard,” Riley said. “They’re only your feelings. Relax. You’re safe. No one’s going to hurt you.”

His words soothed her. She yanked herself back from the chasm that had opened inside her where trust used to be.

“I’ll be okay.” She looked into Riley’s concerned face.

“You’re already okay,” he said. “Would you like to fix this so it doesn’t happen anymore?”

“I saw a shrink a few times.” Mira recalled the sour-faced psychologist, who never looked her in the eye.. “There’s nothing I can do about it,” she concluded.

“If that’s what you believe,” he said with a knowing smile.

She grimaced. “I know I can take antidepressants. My emotions may be messy but

## GOD'S BREAD (BAKED FRESH DAILY)

they're mine. I'd rather feel some thing than nothing at all.

"You don't need drugs," he said with confidence.

Mira's hopes bolted up.

"You're just a little out of your body. That happens when we gets scared," Riley said. A question formed in her mind, but slid away before she could grasp it. "Sit up straight and put your feet on the floor," he said calmly.

Mira uncrossed her legs and sat up straight.

"As we expand the spiritual truth of who we are to a conscious level, the structures of our lives change to mirror our new reality," Riley words sounded like an invocation. He moved his hand about ten inches over her body as if he were stroking the air around her.

"What are you doing?" It looked like he was grooming an invisible horse.

"We're all molecules and atoms. There's an energy field that surrounds our bodies," he replied. "I'm just moving some energy out of your space."

"It's a little spooky," Mira said, "Or possibly, psychotically delusional," she added.

Riley laughed, the sound filling the air around them. "You're better already." He sat back.

"Want to take a deep breath and let it out slowly?"

She did and in that moment a sense of peace and clarity returned to her. Mira looked at him in amazement. "What did you do?"

"Nothing." His expression became indecipherable. He handed her an open bottle of water. "Sometimes our minds get so busy it overwhelms our circuits. You just need to be grounded."

## GOD'S BREAD (BAKED FRESH DAILY)

Yeah, right, Mira thought, what planet did he live on?

“You ever see at cat or a dog, an animal stop and stare at something you can’t see?” He asked.

“I grew up in an apartment. I never had any pets.”

“It doesn’t really matter. You’ll be fine, now.” He leaned his slender body forward and rested on the steering wheel as if he were waiting for something.

Mira hesitated, “Thanks for whatever it is you did.” He may have been looney, but he was a nice looney.

“My pleasure,” Riley said.

She felt cocooned in the truck cab and had no desire to leave. “Where are you going next?” She asked.

“To return the truck.” He gave her a whimsical grin.

“I mean, you said, this was your last week, that’s why you gave me a ride.” She had no desire to leave him and look for a motel room.

“That’s not why I gave you a ride,” he corrected, “but it is my last day as a water guy. I’m moving to New Mexico at the end of the month.”

At the thought of his leaving, Mira felt an inexplicable loss “Why did you stop for me in the first place?”

“Because I could see you were about to get yourself arrested.” He grinned.

“You don’t know that for a fact,” her lawyer’s mind challenged.

He shrugged. “Intuition, I guess. Something just told me to stop.”

## GOD'S BREAD (BAKED FRESH DAILY)

“Put a piece of tinfoil across your forehead,” she joshed, “and you could get rid of that voice.”

He smiled and squinted his eyes as if he were assessing her. “You looked like you were in trouble and,” he paused. She regretted ridiculing him when he was so sincere her. “You’re a good-looking woman,” he finished his thought.

“Thank you,” she nodded at the compliment, knowing it was true. “You’re not exactly a typical truck driver, are you?”

He grinned. “Maybe I am. But, I do play in a band, among other things. So, what do you want to do?” Riley asked.

“I don’t know,” she said, feeling like a parasitic plant with its tendrils out.

“Could you be more specific?” He asked.

Mira gave him an appealing glance. “I kind of need a place to stay,” she said, unraveling a thread from her jeans’ pocket. “I don’t suppose you know anyone with a room for rent?”

Riley gave an impressive laugh.

**DEJA VU ALL OVER AGAIN**

Living, breathing plants lined the lobby of the Shangri-la Terraces. A skylight at the center of the roof brought in the evening sun.

Mrs. Steuben crossed the lobby. Though small and doll-like, she radiated a powerful presence. The air conditioning chilled her slightly. Fashionably dressed in a Chanel suit, Mrs. Steuben had raven-colored tresses, grey eyes, a Prince Valiant hairstyle, and appeared ten years younger than her sixty-six years. She stopped at the Service Desk to inquire about having the air turned down.

Martha, a sweet-tempered Guatemalan woman, who had risen from housekeeper to front desk, gave her a sympathetic smile. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Steuben, the temperature control is automatic. We have an engineer working on it, though." Martha had a white, crocheted sweater draped across her tan shoulders.

Mrs. Steuben almost asked if there were any messages for her, but stopped herself. Who would call? Her daughter? What an odd thought. Natalie had been out of touch for years

"Dinner is being served." Martha reminded, and Mrs. Steuben realized she had been standing there too long.

## GOD'S BREAD (BAKED FRESH DAILY)

"I thought my grandson might be joining me tonight," she offered, though she knew he had other plans.

"Sam. How is he?" Martha knew the families of all the residents, and seemed to have a genuine interest in their well-being.

"Very well, thank you."

"Is he still in film school?"

"He graduates this year."

"He's so creative," Martha said.

"Yes, thank, you." Although, not his official guardian, Sam was the other reason Mrs. Steuben lived in Los Angeles. She strolled across the luxurious lobby toward the dining room. The Shangri-la Terraces served dinner at five each evening on the theory, apparently, that people over sixty could not digest food after dark. Italian by birth, she was used to continental meal times and often had her dinner sent up to her apartment overlooking the ocean, where she would eat while watching a television magazine show. If it were not for her grandson and mother-in-law, Mrs. Steuben would return to her home town, Val di Cogne. Concessions for family took precedence over her own desires.

The impressive dining room divided at intervals by slim marble columns set in a polished wood floor, had been the setting for thousands of weddings over the years. Mrs. Steuben hoped this tradition was not coming to an end under the proposed new ownership. She stood in the doorway and saw that many of her neighbors had already been seated.

"Hi, there, Mrs. S.," Helen Crouch's Texas lilt came along side Mrs.

## GOD'S BREAD (BAKED FRESH DAILY)

Steuben.

“Look, I’m walking again. New hips.” Helen swivelled in place. She wore a floral print dress, belted at the waist and flat, leather shoes.

“Good evening, Helen.” She greeted her neighbor. Speech lessons had eradicated most of Mrs. Steuben’s Italian accent. She was glad to see Helen feisty again.

“One of these days, doctors will be able to replace everything. We’ll all be like the “Six Million Dollar Woman.” Too bad, Medicaid doesn’t cover it.” Helen smiled gaily. “They’re showing the new Bruce Willis movie in the theater tonight. I think he’s so sexy. Are you going?”

“Yes, I might.”

“It hasn’t even been released yet. Henry’s son is some kind of muck-a-muck over at the studio and got us a pre-release copy.” Helen grinned, showing twenty thousand dollars worth of dental work. She had once had a career as an actress and thought she had to look no more than fifty, just in case a part came along for her. “Let’s join Dick and Ruby. I hear he hasn’t been feeling too right and she’s lost without him, you know.” Helen smiled conspiratorially at Mrs. Steuben and linked arms with her.

“Yes, that’s a good idea.” She smiled at Helen, glad that her neighbor had recovered her spirits.

A waiter pulled out a chair for Mrs. Steuben at Dick and Ruby’s linen-covered table. Ruby had a cherub’s face, a ballerina’s ankles and a Sumo wrestler’s belly. She was a functional dipsomaniac. Dick, a retired Air Force pilot from the Midwest, was a once-handsome man with thinning hair. But that was the least of his afflictions. One of the things Mr. Steuben knew

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about life was there was no strict age defining when someone became old. No one knew when they were going to become old; what inner border was crossed that took a person from vigorous to helpless. She had seen men of twenty decline at the death of a war buddy. The loss of one of the five senses could open the door to eternity, or just a lethargy that might settle over a previously alert person. Mrs. Steuben would know she would not be seeing them much longer. Just as her husband, David, had gone from meals in the dining room to meals in the nursing facility. Those who stayed fit recovered faster from the invasions of age. In the few years she had known Dick and Ruby, he had survived an infarction and angioplasty, stomach cancer and arthritis. He rode a bicycle five miles a day and swam three. He looked well to Mrs. Steuben and she hoped Helen had been wrong about him.

“Are you going to the Getty Museum tomorrow?” Ruby asked.

“Is it tomorrow?” Mrs. Steuben thought a moment. “No, I go to Diamond Bar on Fridays.” Mira drove her to the weekly visits with Mrs. Steuben’s mother-in-law. She enjoyed the young woman’s company, though Mira’s driving abilities left something to be desired.

“Too bad. It’s going to be fun,” Ruby said.

“I’m sure it is.”

Helen chimed in between mouthfuls of salad. “Lois probably knows more about art than all of us put together. She was born in I-taly,” Helen pronounced it as two words.

“No, no,” Mrs. Steuben demurred, alert to America’s prejudices against the arts; she always denied any knowledge that might inadvertently offend someone by making her appear smarter than ordinary or, heaven forbid, intellectual.

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“Dick’s really feeling cheated. I traded him for the classic car show next week!” Ruby laughed victoriously. “He thinks I got the best of him.”

Mrs. Steuben placed the salad aside. In Italy salad was served after the entree not before. She took a dinner roll and carefully pulled it apart on her bread plate, buttering a small piece.

“Just don’t know why I have to look at some dead foreigner’s paintings,” Dick grouched. “We have perfectly good, living artists right here.”

“What do you hear about what’s going on with the Shangri-la?” Helen demanded.

“I don’t know anything more than you do, Helen.” Not yet, anyway. Mrs. Steuben didn’t like surprises. In the past, she had used a private detective, a woman confined to a wheelchair, who had helped her win battles others thought Mrs. Steuben would lose.

“Could we lose our homes?” Ruby looked worried. “I mean where would we go? Those retirees down in Baja, Mexico were evicted after twenty years and they spent all that money fixing up their properties. Those Mexicans just waited till the property was worth something and took it back. I’ll tell you, don’t get me feeling sorry for those illegals coming in every night over the border.”

“We’re a long way from losing our property,” Dick commented.

“But it’s a possibility,” Helen emphasized.

“Anything’s possible. We can’t worry about every little thing, or we’ll never have any peace.” Mrs. Steuben spoke with more conviction than she felt.

“No one plays by the old rules anymore,” Dick said. “There was a time a man gave his word and that was good enough.”

## GOD'S BREAD (BAKED FRESH DAILY)

"That must've been before my time, Dick." Mrs. Steuben's lips pursed in a rueful smile.

"Damn tax laws have us trapped." He reached for a bottle of Chardonnay. "Damn government's always changing things. If the Shangri-la's developers could've written off the losses, we wouldn't have a problem."

Mrs. Steuben wasn't listening, she had an overwhelming feeling of homesickness. She and David had bought the mayor's home in Val Di Cogne. Their original plan, before he became ill, had been to retire in Italy.

"Aren't you eating anything, Lois?" Ruby questioned, snapping Mrs. Steuben out of her reverie.

"I'm waiting for the salmon." The Shangri-la kept a gourmet chef employed full-time.

"My children have everything in the stock market," Helen said. "They didn't live through the Depression. They don't know what it's like to have nothing."

Ruby's expression changed. Apropos of nothing apparent, she asked. "Do you think the soul is separate from the body?"

"Now, Ruby." Dick looked up from his salad, embarrassed.

Ruby ignored her husband, "I know it's not polite to discuss spiritual matters, but we know each other well enough."

Mrs. Steuben wondered how much vodka Ruby had consumed before dinner.

"She's been on this all week," Dick said apologetically. "Our minister was talking about the eternal soul at Sunday service."

"I look in the mirror, I see a fat old woman, but I feel young."

## GOD'S BREAD (BAKED FRESH DAILY)

"I know a good surgeon can fix that for you, Ruby." Helen's laugh sounded like a ringing a bell.

"Maybe the body and soul are separate," Ruby said.

"They're one and the same thing. When the brain goes, the soul goes." Dick intervened.

Mrs. Steuben had, at one time, converted to Judaism, David's faith, but had drifted back to Christianity. Though she rarely attended church, because she disagreed with Vatican politics, she had an unshakable conviction in the Creator; it was people who had let her down.

"But what about deja vu?" Helen asked as the waiter placed a grilled salmon platter in front of each of them. "Some say the soul's a memory of other lives we've lived."

"Who says?" Asked Mrs. Steuben looking at the shimmering meal before her and having no desire to eat.

Helen's eyes seemed glued open in their sockets. "People who know about that sort of thing. Psychics. I had my horoscope done, and it all came true." She smiled. "Well, not completely," she laughed. "I never did star in a Broadway show, but I did marry a producer once."

"I think these things are so general, we can make anything we want of it." Mrs. Steuben said, poking at her salad. She would have the salmon packed for later in the evening.

"I have deja vu all the time," Ruby puzzled.

"I'm having it right now," Dick said slyly, lightening the seriousness that had descended on the group.

Ruby elbowed him and laughed. "You old dog."

## GOD'S BREAD (BAKED FRESH DAILY)

Dick barked lightly, then growled in her ear and grinned, playfully.

Mrs. Steuben envied their affection. She felt a twinge of longing for David.

Helen batted her eyelashes. "I know you know more than you're saying about the Shangri-la, Lois."

"I'm sure I don't know any more than you do," Mrs. Steuben said. She had served as the treasurer for the Homeowner's Association two years ago, but her neighbors treated her as if she had an inside track.

"Lois, you're so smart. I'm just helpless about these things."

Mrs. Steuben doubted Helen had ever been helpless, but held her tongue.

"We wouldn't have this problem," Helen went on, "If Ronald Reagan were still the President."

"I don't know that it would've made any difference in our situation." Reagan had been famously anti-government interference. Good for Mrs. Steuben's business, though. She had sold the company she had begun in her kitchen at three times its worth.

"Reagan would never have allowed a thing like this to happen," Dick agreed. "He knew how to protect the little people."

Not quite accurate, but Mrs. Steuben let it pass without comment. Politics and religion were subjects to be avoided in polite company.

"Did I ever tell you I made a movie with Reagan?" Helen asked.

"You may have mentioned it," Mrs. Steuben smiled tolerantly. Helen had once played a minor role in a Reagan potboiler and took every opportunity she could create to drop his name

## GOD'S BREAD (BAKED FRESH DAILY)

and remind listeners of her fleeting brush with history.

“Of course, I was just a girl. He was much older.”

Mrs. Steuben had no idea of Helen's age, her face had been lifted so many time it resembled fetal tissue. “I'm waiting to see what the board presents at next week's meeting,”

Mrs. Steuben said. “There's a Chinese company interested that has a good reputation.”

“There's a fine how-do-you-do, living in a community owned by the Chinese Army. Next thing you know they'll be sending the old generals to live here,” Dick said. “Someone's dropped the ball somewhere, I can tell you that.”

“I'm not worried,” Mrs. Steuben said, but she was. Her private detective had come up empty this time.

“Not everyone can afford a loss, Lois.” Helen spoke quietly.

“I bought my unit at the height of the real estate boom,” Mrs. Steuben replied defensively. She had known poverty, and was sensitive to investment fluctuations. “My property values have fallen just like yours.”

“We're all stuck,” Dick said. “Forty percent of the original units are still unsold. And we're supposed to be in a real estate boom!”

“I'm mad as hell.” Ruby poured the contents of a miniature vodka bottle she'd brought with her into her water glass. “We didn't put everything we had into the Shangri-la to wind up in a trailer park,” she added vehemently.

Helen fluffed her auburn bob with manicured nails. “I had a friend in Hawaii who was evicted.”

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“I don't know about your friend. Evictions are for people who rent. Same thing in Mexico. Those people didn't own their property. We are owners,” It was a distinction Mrs. Steuben valued. She had never forgotten the humiliation of living in her mother-in-law's house without the freedom to even hang a picture on a wall.

“Air. We own air. We have condominiums.” Helen sounded slightly hysterical. “We own the air space between the walls.”

“Helen, don't be ridiculous.” Mrs. Steuben realized from the shocked expression on Helen's face that she'd been too abrupt. “I'm sorry.” The last thing she needed was enemies.

“Forget it,” Helen said easily, she was not a person to hold grudges.

“Even if we could sell,” Ruby asked the others, “Where would you go?”

Mrs. Steuben knew the answer at once: Val di Cogne.

**EVERY DAY MAGIC**

Set between Santa Monica on the north, and Marina Del Rey on the south, Venice, California had a bipolar personality. The side most often portrayed in movies showed youthful, bosomy in-line skaters wearing thong bikinis and little else, weaving through colorful crowds on the ocean front walk. The less well-known version of Venice sat back from the beach, sheltered a diverse population, who dwelled in neatly restored houses, or newer town homes, didn't indulge in illicit drugs and held down regular jobs.

Riley's cottage stood hidden under a canopy of Sycamore trees along the canal. Stepping into his house Mira felt she had landed in a limelight world where time seemed to have slowed.

"This is nice," she said taking in the handmade rugs that covered hardwood floors.

"Thank you." Bookshelves lined two walls, indicating someone who read an impressive collection.

"Have you been here long?" She asked. A couple of rust-colored couches, covered with quilts, faced each other in front of a fireplace.

"A few years."

Riley showed her an enclosed porch that held a small end table and a futon with a few cushions.

## GOD'S BREAD (BAKED FRESH DAILY)

"This is the guest room," he said.

The room faced a peaceful garden.

"It looks comfortable." And well-used, she thought. He seemed the type who would have plenty of friends.

"The house isn't mine. I just take care of it for the owners. They live in Oregon."

Mira put her clothing bag down and inhaled the garden's sweetness.

"You have a private entrance," he said, opening the garden door.

Mira turned toward him like a satellite dish. Riley seemed to be one of those lucky people to whom good things just happened. She idly wondered if knowing him, she might experience better fortune.

He stepped down three stairs to the garden. "I'll show you where I keep the extra key."

She followed him across the garden. "It's so quiet. It's almost like being in the country."

He stopped before a rose-colored trellis. "Sometimes I sleep out here under the stars."

"Like camping out."

He grinned. "You obviously haven't camped much," he said good-naturedly.

"Not much," she said. Actually, never.

He stooped between two colorful Adirondack chairs surrounded by pots of pink and white geraniums and tipped a potted plant. "The house key's here. Just remember to put it back."

"Thank you."

Riley started for the house. "I've got to grab a shower and load my equipment. Gig tonight," he explained.

## GOD'S BREAD (BAKED FRESH DAILY)

“Sure.” Mira wondered if he would invite her to hear him play. “You won’t even know I’m here,” she promised.

“I doubt that,” he said, mock-skepticism etched on his fine features. “I’m moving at the end of the month, so you can have till then.”

“How much do you want for rent?” He’d probably want twice what it was worth, she thought, having had past experiences with rentals.

“I don’t pay any rent, so why should you?” He said, as if not exploiting her situation was the most natural thing in the world for him.

“Well, I’d want to contribute something,” she protested. “I could buy food.”

“Whatever you want is fine,” he said turning to face her. “House rules: No drugs, no booze. If you smoke, do it in the yard.”

“I don’t.”

“Good.”

“Riley!” A female voice shouted.

He whirled, tucked his head and hurried into the house.

Following him, Mira saw Riley embracing a tough-looking woman in a leather bustier, wearing tiny shorts and three inch platform shoes.

There followed a moment, during which Mira underwent a series of lightening-like emotional transformations: jealousy to disappointment to abandonment to cautious optimism.

“We’ve got a problem,” the intrusive woman said to Riley. “We need a drummer. Mike’s stuck at a studio gig.”

## GOD'S BREAD (BAKED FRESH DAILY)

“Okay, first we have a drummer, he’s just not here yet,” Riley answered with confidence.

Mira waited to be introduced, an expectant, half-smile on her face.

“He’s not going to make it and the record company suits are coming to see us tonight,” she whined.

“There’s more than one channel for success,” he said lightly. “So, let’s just let go of any negative expectations before they become self-fulfilling prophecies.”

“Riley, we have to *do* something,” the woman said exasperated.

“We’re doing it.”

“I want tonight to be perfect,” said the woman with a ring in her nose and sharp knees.

“It will be, it just may not be the way you imagined it.”

“You don’t understand,” the woman said.

“Yeah, I do,” he beamed. “You think the record company is God.” Riley said. “If I thought that, I’d be worried too.”

Mira thought she was hearing, possibly, the most inane exchange of her life. She grinned absurdly.

The annoying woman pointedly turned to Mira. “Who are you?” She demanded.

Riley made a welcoming gesture. “Mira this is Toy. She’s the band’s singer.”

“Toy, this is Mira,” Riley said, concluding the introductions.

Toy looked at her with hooded eyes. “Nice-to-meet-you,” she said, the words strung together as one.

Mira’s stomach made an embarrassing, gurgling noise. She winced. “I forgot to eat

GOD'S BREAD (BAKED FRESH DAILY)

today.”

“Help yourself to whatever you need. Look in the frig.”

His generosity had no apparent motive. This was a very interesting truck driver, one very intriguing man, Mira thought.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’ll just get a drink of water, if that’s all right?”

“Yeah, whatever,” Toy snapped at her. “We’re having a little catastrophe here, if you don’t mind.”

Mira narrowed her eyes at Toy.

“The kitchen’s down the hall,” Riley intervened, then turned to Toy “I have to grab a shower and get my equipment ready,” Riley reminded.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” Toy wailed.

“Try not to put energy into it,” he said, linking a brotherly arm around Toy’s shoulders. “The infinite knows what we need.” Riley took a few steps in the direction of the bathroom.

“It’s going to take more than grace,” Toy shouted after him. “We need a real, live drummer!”

“It’s a done deal,” he replied and disappeared into the bathroom.

Toy plucked a daily calendar and cell phone from her oversized purse. “I gotta make some calls,” she said.

Mira stood there grinning absurdly.

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