



Place Settings

By Susan Doherty

If pressed, Carly would say she didn't like Angela. She used the label "neighbor" rather than "friend." They exchanged Christmas cards, traded names of handymen and painters, bought stale candy from each other's kids for the band fundraiser at school. But Carly did not take Angela out to lunch on her birthday. She did not ring her doorbell when she went for a walk. She did not call Angela to catch a movie on a rainy Sunday afternoon. Besides, Carly assumed Angela hated the lighthearted comedies that she favored. Angela, after all, was the one who came to book group bearing discussion questions, while Carla showed up armed with wine.

Still, friendship was not a prerequisite for loyalty. So when the topic at the Wednesday afternoon coffee klatch turned to Angela and her son, Carly felt unsettled. She was grateful that the sound of hissing air, steam being forced into milk, sliced the conversation for a minute.

"The whole thing is just so sad," Laurie said as the squealing subsided.

"But really, is anyone surprised?" Barb asked while brushing crumbs from her scone onto the floor. "You have a kid who's over-indulged, a mother who lets him do anything, a dad who's not even around anymore. It was an accident waiting to happen. "

"Well, I don't know about that," Carly ventured.

"Oh, come on. That family has been a train wreck for years," Barb said, "and Angela's always so clueless. Whenever her son has problems, she blames the teachers, the coach, anyone but herself." Barb took another bite of her scone.

"You have to admit, Jeffrey has a lot of problems," said Laurie, always the peacemaker.

"Because his mother is totally in denial," Barb said. "Remember when Jeffrey broke the window at school and Angela tried to blame it on the other kids? And then he got caught with that knife in eighth grade but said it was someone else's and she believed him? Angela always thinks he's so innocent, but this was clearly his fault. Looks like Jeffrey finally got what was coming to him."

“That’s a bit harsh,” Carly said. True, Jeffrey had a history of getting in trouble and yes, it seemed like Angela always made excuses for her son. But he didn’t deserve to end up in the hospital. “Sometimes accidents just happen and no one is to blame,” Carly added.

“He’s totally to blame. He was drunk,” Barb said.

“Do we know that? I don’t think we know that.” Carly tried to keep the comment measured, but she held up a pointed finger, an accusing digit that said “Stop right there,” expressing the sentiment her mouth was too timid to handle. It was always Carly’s hands that betrayed her, like they had their own agenda and reported to a different department.

“Well, he did get busted trying to bring alcohol to the Homecoming dance,” Laurie said.

“But that doesn’t mean-” Carly started to say.

Barb interrupted with her usual air of authority. “Someone, I can’t say who, but someone told me he’s going to be charged as soon as he regains consciousness. Of course, that brings up the issue of where he got the alcohol.” Barb began to theorize on who, what, where, how.

As Barb launched into her analysis, Carly looked around at the clusters of women perched around tables. There were harried-looking moms in yoga pants, their chatter interrupted by preschoolers demanding juice, cookies, attention. A few tables were owned by women fueling up on caffeine for their equivalent of rush hour: after-school chauffeuring. Carly wondered if the accident was the topic of every conversation. It was a small town and tragedies like this were rare. News tended to travel quickly, especially when whisked with conjecture.

Jeffrey allegedly had run a stop sign, mashing his small Toyota into the side of an SUV. The driver of the other car was injured, but Jeffrey had borne the brunt of the impact. Supposedly his legs had been broken or crushed, depending on the source. Most people said he was in a coma, some reported he was brain-dead. Everyone seemed to have a different take on what happened, like analysts on a cable news show, dissecting the no-longer-personal tragedy. Carly hated how they focused on rumor, bonded over bad news, conducted social autopsies on the living. And yet, she came to Wednesday coffee each week.

She’d certainly participated in Angela-bashing in the past; it was so easy to do. Angela was a strange combination of uptight and permissive. She was adamant about keeping a chemical-free home. She bought only organic food, preferably locally sourced. At neighborhood playgroup when the kids were

young, she wouldn't let Jeffrey drink milk unless she was sure it came from cows that hadn't received growth hormones. She would, however, let Jeffrey take his organic grapes and throw them at people. She also let him snatch toys out of other kids' hands without a whiff of reprimand. 'I prefer not to use the word no with him,' Angela had once explained. The other moms thought perhaps she should give it a try.

Carly had dreaded neighborhood playgroup when it was Angela's turn to host. It was herbal tea and flax muffins, not coffee and doughnuts like everyone else served. Even the climate of Angela's house seemed off: chaotic with a vaguely sub-tropical feeling, as if it was an island in need of rebuilding after a storm. If Angela had been one of those "new earth mamas," the kind Carly encountered at yoga, she would have at least respected Angela for her quirkiness. But Angela didn't wear hemp skirts and batik shirts. She wore printed turtlenecks and pants with elastic waists. While everyone else sported the town uniform of skinny jeans and ballet flats, Angela looked like she was ready to don a Members-Only jacket and head back to 1988. Even her hair was out of style, a frizzy brown mop that rebelled against all authority, unlike Carly's blond razor-cut bob that rose or fell in length depending upon the latest celebrity trend.

But as odd as Angela was, Carly felt uncomfortable listening to her friends churning out the gossip. The sound of their words chopped at her ears. She felt the weight of the atmosphere pressing on her, humidity swirling with the scent of coffee. She made an excuse to go, pushing back from the table, leaving Barb mid-sentence, and escaped into the fresh air.

As she drove home, the tree-lined streets seemed uncertain, dangerous, as if peril lurked behind each stop sign. She felt a pit in her stomach, an awareness that something could go terribly wrong at any time. Carly slowed as she drove by Angela's house, noting that her car was gone. She'd be at the hospital, of course. Carly wondered if Bob, the husband who'd left Angela years ago, would come back. Or was Angela sitting a solo vigil at the bedside of her only child?

At home, Carly took note of the time and ran through the list of things she needed to do before school pickup. She assembled the ingredients for stew, trying to keep busy, distracted. She felt guilty for not defending Angela when Barb was vilifying her. Yes, Angela had let some things slide, but who hasn't?

“She’s a good person,” she heard herself say out loud as she chopped carrots. “She deserves better.” Carly put the vegetables and broth in the slow cooker, set the timer, and washed up. Absent-mindedly, she dried her hands on a dishtowel and walked into the living room. She looked at the green crushed velvet couch and remembered the day when Angela sat next to her.

A decade had passed, but the pain was still sharp. The endless possibilities of “what if” had never subsided. For ten years, Carly had carried an IV drip of guilt: steady, invasive, constant, necessary. What if she’d brought Lucy to the doctor sooner? What if she hadn’t been so distracted with the boys? What if she’d taken the fever more seriously, instead of just giving her medicine and loading her into the car? Lucy had dozed in her car seat while Carly drove all around town, running errands and doing carpool. At the time, Carly was happy the baby was quiet.

Lucy was her third child, so Carly had dealt with fevers before. The boys had suffered through them without problems. Carly had no reason to think Lucy would be different. It wasn’t until the seizures started that she realized how sick her little girl was, and by then it was too late.

Carly didn’t remember much about the funeral or the days that followed. She did, however, remember that afternoon several weeks later, lying on the couch, pinned by devastation. She heard the doorbell, but couldn’t move.

“Carly?” she heard a voice. “Carly? It’s me, Angela. I brought over a casserole.”

The words were a blur, the voice far away. It was as if her muscles had melted. Every inch of skin pressed onto the velvet fabric, crushing it even more.

“Carly, are you ok? Is Kevin going to be home soon? Do you want me to call him?”

The intoxication of grief filled Carly’s bloodstream, making it impossible for her to speak.

“You know what? This casserole is still warm. If it’s ok with you, I’m just going to go ahead and feed your boys. You stay here. I’ll make some tea.”

Tea? Why would she want tea? Her daughter was gone and her lack of attention, her distracted justification - “Oh, it’s just a little cold” - was to blame. She didn’t want tea. She wanted arsenic, gasoline, something toxic and bitter and final. She wanted to disappear, to sink into the couch and become absorbed by it. She was more crushed than any velvet could ever be.

She heard Angela in the kitchen, getting out cups. She heard the refrigerator being open and closed, milk being poured. She heard Angela on the phone. “Bob? Yes, sorry. I know, I thought it would only be a minute, but Carly’s in a bad way and I don’t want to leave her. Well, I don’t know, hopefully not long. I’m going to try to find Kevin. You and Jeffrey go ahead and have casserole for dinner. It’s still in the oven. Just take it out. No, you don’t have to do anything, just put it on a plate. I’m sorry. I’ll try to be home as soon as I can. Ok? Sorry. Sorry.”

What does she have to be sorry for? Her Jeffrey, same age as Carly’s boys, was alive and well. But not her Lucy-lu. Lucy-boo. Lulu. Boo-la-boo. The baby nicknames still lingered on Carly’s lips, pungent and raw.

Carly heard the sound of the kettle whistling, followed by Angela rifling through the cabinets. She heard Angela call the boys for dinner, the sound of elephants running up the basement stairs. Angela asked them about school, about hockey. One of them announced that he was going to try out for baseball.

Baseball was impossible. Baseball meant spring, and life starting over again, and time moving on. But that couldn’t happen. Time stopped when Lucy did. They needed to freeze, to stay still so that Lucy could catch up, so that she could come back without missing anything. Without Carly missing her.

Angela appeared at her side with one of the fine china teacups. “Here’s some tea,” she said, the cup rattling in the saucer as she placed it on the table. Carly was struck by the absurdity. Her baby was dead, but Angela thought it was a good time to get out the Wedgwood. She hadn’t used that china in years. Heck, she hadn’t drunk tea in years.

“I tried to find Chamomile, but I could only come up with Orange Spice,” she said.

Angela sat on the couch and put her hand on Carly’s shoulder, letting it rest there. Carly felt the weight pressing on her, an intrusion, but one she didn’t want to shrug off. At some point Kevin came home, went back out, and then came back again. Angela propped her up, made her swallow some pills. Carly drifted in and out, but every time she woke, there was Angela, sitting next to her, holding her hand or touching her shoulder, some kind of physical contact to keep her tethered to the world.

When morning arrived, Angela was gone. Kevin was asleep on the loveseat. Carly wondered if she dreamt the whole thing. But no, there was the teacup, the Wedgwood, on the table.

They never spoke about that day. Although she felt a debt, Carly couldn't bring herself to thank Angela. How do you acknowledge someone sitting next to you at the lowest point of your life? Send a note, some flowers, a fruit basket? She didn't know what to say, so she said nothing.

Everyone in town knew about Lucy's death, thanks to extensive news coverage. It was every parent's nightmare, a seemingly healthy infant killed by the flu. Carly became a tragedy celebrity, a fragilebrity. Wherever she went, she'd get the sympathetic head tilt usually reserved for widows and cancer patients. Complete strangers would look at her with soft eyes, offering sympathy or blessings.

But Carly resented the fact that her private devastation was so publicly exposed. It was her pain, her own personal earthquake, and it didn't belong to anyone else. She wanted to hoard her mourning, not share it with these people who'd barged into her life. She didn't like feeling exposed, vulnerable, weak, the way she had felt when Angela sat next to her on the couch, steam swirling from the teacup on the table. She wanted everyone to just leave her alone. So when Barb, the neighborhood queen bee, exerted her power as Carly's social gatekeeper, acting like a bouncer at the door of a nightclub, controlling her exposure, Carly offered no objection.

Barb stepped into the role of Carly's CTO: Chief Tragedy Officer. She organized the sign-ups for bringing meals. She coordinated car pool for the boys' sports. When Carly was ready to socialize, Barb hand-picked the right people for Girls' Night Out. Since Barb didn't like Angela, she never made the cut, and Carly was happy to follow Barb's lead. She stopped returning Angela's phone calls. She declined Angela's invitations to the Women's Caucus events at the library. She stopped letting her boys go over to Angela's house, ostensibly because Jeffrey was allowed to play violent video games. By the time Angela's husband left a few years later, it didn't occur to Carly that Angela could use some support. Instead, she told herself that Angela's marriage was her private concern, something she probably didn't want to talk about. After all, they weren't really friends.

As Carly stood in the living room, she pictured Angela at the hospital, alone. She imaged her sitting in a chair, the reality of the situation forcing all the air out of her lungs. She envisioned Angela gasping, flailing like a fish pulled from the water, unable to breathe, suddenly thrust into a different world.

Still, Carly wasn't sure if she was ready to step into the role she had long eschewed. She'd spent years avoiding it, turning down news interviews, rejecting bereavement groups, shrugging off the mantle of grief. But as much as she tried to disavow it, Carly knew what it meant to be the mother of tragedy. She didn't need to be friends with Angela to share that. And in the darkest, most hidden part of her heart, a small thought bloomed: perhaps Carly would no longer be quite so alone in her club of one.

After she dropped the boys at practice, Carly steered her car to the hospital. She looked into the room and saw Angela sitting on the side of the bed, her untamed brown hair glowing blue from the television mounted on the wall. Jeffrey was a mass of bandages, tubes, and wires. Carly pulled a chair over next to her.

"I brought you some tea," she said, placing the lidded cardboard cup on the side tray. "Chamomile."

Angela looked at her with eyes Carly recognized, brimming with a narrative of fear and despair. Angela's face softened for a moment, and then she turned her gaze back to Jeffrey. Carly sat down, ready to hold Angela in place.