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Where Are You Now?

Mary Higgins Clark

1

It is exactly midnight, which means Mother's Day has just begun. I stayed overnight with my mother in the apartment on Sutton Place where I grew up. She is down the hall in her room, and together we are keeping the vigil. The same vigil we've kept every year since my brother, Charles MacKenzie Jr., "Mack," walked out of the apartment he shared with two other Columbia University seniors ten years ago. He has never been seen since then. But every year at some point on Mother's Day, he calls to assure Mom he is fine. "Don't worry about me," he tells her. "One of these days I'll turn the key in the lock and be home." Then he hangs up.

We never know when in those twenty-four hours that call will come. Last year Mack called at a few minutes after midnight, and our vigil ended almost as soon as it began. Two years ago he waited until the very last second to phone, and Mom was frantic that this slim contact with him was over.

Mack has to have known that my father was killed in the Twin Towers tragedy. I was sure that no matter what he was doing, that terrible day would have compelled him to come home. But it did not. Then on the next Mother's Day, during his annual call, he started crying and gasped, "I'm sorry about Dad. I'm really sorry," and broke the connection.

I am Carolyn. I was sixteen when Mack disappeared. Following in his footsteps, I attended Columbia. Unlike him, I then went on to Duke Law School. Mack had been accepted there before he disappeared. After I passed the Bar last year, I clerked for a civil court judge in the courthouse on Centre Street in lower Manhattan. Judge Paul Huot has just retired, so at the moment I'm unemployed. I plan to apply for a job as an Assistant District Attorney in Manhattan, but not quite yet.

First, I must find a way to track my brother down. What happened to him? Why did he disappear? There was no sign of foul play. Mack's credit cards weren't used. His car was in the garage near his apartment. No one of his description ever ended up in the morgue, although in the beginning, my mother and father were sometimes asked to view the body of some unidentified young man who had been fished out of the river or killed in an accident.

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When we were growing up, Mack was my best friend, my confidant, my pal. Half my girlfriends had a crush on him. He was the perfect son, the perfect brother, handsome, kind, funny, an excellent student. How do I feel about him now? I don't know anymore. I remember how much I loved him, but that love has almost totally turned to anger and resentment. I wish I could even doubt that he's alive and that someone is playing a cruel trick, but there is no doubt in my mind about that. Years ago we recorded one of his phone calls and had the pattern of his voice compared to his voice from home movies. It was identical.

All of this means that Mom and I dangle slowly in the wind, and, before Dad died in that burning inferno, it was that way for him, too. In all these years, I have never gone into a restaurant or theatre without my eyes automatically scanning to see if just maybe, by chance, I will run into him. Someone with a similar profile and sandy brown hair will demand a second look and, sometimes, close scrutiny. I remember more than once almost knocking people over to get close to someone who turned out to be a perfect stranger.

All this was going through my mind as I set the volume of the phone on the loudest setting, got into bed, and tried to go to sleep. I guess I did fall into an uneasy doze because the jarring ring of the phone made me bolt up. I saw from the lighted dial on the clock that it was five minutes to three. With one hand I snapped on the bedside light and with the other grabbed the receiver. Mom had already picked up, and I heard her voice, breathless and nervous. "Hello, Mack."

"Hello, Mom. Happy Mother's Day. I love you."

His voice was resonant and confident. He sounds as though he doesn't have a care in the world, I thought bitterly.

As usual the sound of his voice shattered Mom. She began to cry. "Mack, I love you. I need to see you," she begged. "I don't care what trouble you may be in, what problems you have to solve, I'll help you. Mack, for God's sake, it's been ten years. Don't do this to me any longer. Please...please..."

He never stayed on the phone for as long as a minute. I'm sure he knew that we would try to trace the call, but now that that technology is available, he always calls from one of those cell phones with a prepaid time card.

I had been planning what I would say to him and rushed now to make him hear me out before he hung up. "Mack, I'm going to find you," I said. "The cops tried and failed. So did the private investigator. But I won't fail. I swear I won't." My voice had been quiet and firm, as I had planned, but then the sound of my mother crying sent me over the edge. "I'm going to track you down, you lowlife," I shrieked, "and you'd better have an awfully good reason for torturing us like this." I heard a click and knew that he had disconnected. I could have bitten my tongue off to take back the name I had called him, but, of course, it was too late.

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Knowing what I was facing, that Mom would be furious at me for the way I had screamed at Mack, I put on a robe and went down the hall to the suite that she and Dad had shared.

Sutton Place is an upscale Manhattan neighborhood of town houses and apartment buildings overlooking the East River. My father bought this place after putting himself through Fordham Law School at night and working his way up to partner in a corporate law firm. Our privileged childhood was the result of his brains and the hard work ethic that was instilled in him by his widowed Scotch-Irish mother. He never allowed a nickel of the money my mother inherited to affect our lives.

I tapped on the door and pushed it open. She was standing at the panoramic window that overlooked the East River. She did not turn, even though she knew I was there. It was a clear night, and to the left I could see the lights of the Queensboro Bridge. Even in this predawn hour, there was a steady stream of cars going back and forth across it. The fanciful thought crossed my mind that maybe Mack was in one of those cars and, having made his annual call, was now on his way to a distant destination.

Mack had always loved travel; it was in his veins. My mother's father, Liam O'Connell, was born in Dublin, educated at Trinity College, and came to the United States, smart, well-educated, and broke. Within five years he was buying potato fields in Long Island that eventually became the Hamptons, property in Palm Beach County, property on Third Avenue when it was still a dirty, dark street in the shadow of the elevated train track that hovered over it. That was when he sent for and married my grandmother, the English girl he had met at Trinity.

My mother, Olivia, is a genuine English beauty, tall, still slender as a reed at sixty-two, with silver hair, blue-gray eyes, and classic features. In appearance, Mack was practically her clone.

I inherited my father's reddish brown hair, hazel eyes, and stubborn jaw. When my mother wore heels, she was a shade taller than Dad, and, like him, I'm just average height. I found myself yearning for him as I walked across the room and put my arm around my mother.

She spun around, and I could feel the anger radiating from her. "Carolyn, how could you talk to Mack like that?" she snapped, her arms wrapped tightly across her chest. "Can't you understand that there must be some terrible problem that is keeping him from us? Can't you understand that he must be feeling frightened and helpless and that this call is a cry for understanding?"

Before my father died, they often used to have emotional conversations like this. Mom, always protective of Mack, my father getting to the point where he was ready to wash his hands of it all and stop worrying. "For the love of God, Liv," he would snap at Mom, "he sounds all right. Maybe he's involved with some woman and doesn't want to bring her around. Maybe he's trying to be an actor. He wanted to be one when he was a kid. Maybe I was too tough on him, making him have summer jobs. Who knows?"

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They would end up apologizing to each other, Mom crying, Dad anguished and angry at himself for upsetting her.

I wasn't going to make a second mistake by trying to justify myself. Instead I said, "Mom, listen to me. Since we haven't found Mack by now, he's not worrying about my threat. Look at it this way. You've heard from him. You know he's alive. He sounds downright upbeat. I know you hate sleeping pills, but I also know your doctor gave you a prescription. So take one now and get some rest."

I didn't wait for her to answer me. I knew I couldn't do any good by staying with her any longer because I was angry, too. Angry at her for railing at me, angry at Mack, angry at the fact that this ten-room duplex apartment was too big for Mom to live in alone, too filled with memories. She won't sell it because she doesn't trust that Mack's annual telephone call would be bounced to a new location, and of course she reminds me that he had said one day he would turn the key in the lock and be home...Home. Here.

I got back into bed, but sleep was a long way off. I started planning how I would begin to look for Mack. I thought about going to Lucas Reeves, the private investigator whom Dad hired, but then changed my mind. I was going to treat Mack's disappearance as if it had happened yesterday. The first thing Dad did when we became alarmed about Mack was call the police and report him missing. I'd begin at the beginning.

I knew people down at the courthouse, which also houses the District Attorney's office. I decided that my search would begin there. Finally I drifted off and began to dream of following a shadowy figure who was walking across a bridge. Try as I would to keep him in sight, he was too fast for me, and when we reached land, I didn't know which way to turn. But then I heard him calling me, his voice mournful and troubled. Carolyn, stay back, stay back.

"I can't, Mack," I said aloud as I awakened. "I can't."

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