

The Book Club Chronicles - Part 5, Hamlet

Chapter One

The Book Club Meets Again

"Annie, your new chairs! What happened?" Cindy inquired.

Annie, appreciating that at this stage in their lives change is looked at with great suspicion, declared, "Chairs do wear out you know, especially after decades of hard use."

She continued, "Just replacing the linen itself would have cost as much as a new chair. Then there is the problem of finding someone to reweave it. The last time, I sent them to Florida and it turned out to be expensive and cumbersome. This time I decided that it was way too expensive—not worth the effort and the expense. The wood was split in some of them, in others the joints were deteriorated. I checked into it and they would never be as sound as they were when new. I decided to replace them with new ones."

Cindy, eyes bright, absorbed the information. The other ladies nodded in commiseration. All of them had faced the same choice: refresh or replace?

Annie fondly patted the round table. "Solid oak is resistant to damage. The table is in good condition so I don't have to replace it. It is not the end of the world to get new chairs. Things do wear out."

Annie laughed, then put a hand to her forehead in mock dismay. "I'm a female brought up in the middle of the twentieth century. Old habits force me to apologize for chairs wearing out and then, in the next breath, I get furious and embarrassed that, after all the years of consciousness raising, I still feel compelled to apologize."

"Does it seem that things are crumbling around you?" asked Franny, sounding morose.

Katherine shook her improbably red curls. "Well, *some* things are crumbling, but not *everything*!"

Franny stared with resentment at Katherine, the jealousy over her youthful glow all too evident. Claire noted Katherine's sparkling brown eyes. *Franny's not getting laid, and she hates Katherine because it is obvious that she is.* Claire's eyes met Annie's for a nanosecond. Their thoughts were in alignment—not surprising after so many years of friendship. Annie's green eyes quickly looked away, so as to conceal their mutual amusement.

The ladies were ready to resume their studies. The doorman had welcomed the women to Annie's apartment building; all of them wore glowing, eager faces as if it were the first day of school. They were as joyful as playmates who had not seen their companions over the long summer. After all the years of being tested, after graduate school where they were competitive with themselves if not with everyone else, they had at last have returned to the pure joy of leaning.

All were neatly dressed, as in their professional lives, but a bit more relaxed than in the years where every day was a struggle to keep up appearances, to keep complicated lives running. Their children were grown and living adult lives—with intermittent crises with their own marriages and children. Problems at this stage of life were not the same. One set had been traded for a new set, and no one was exempt. Annie's apartment, which had been her mother's in retirement, was compact. The kitchen where the ladies met was an extension of the living room. It was still referred to as "the kitchen" just as the table was referred to as "the kitchen table," even though the days of a separate dining room and a separate kitchen were long gone, along with gardens, snow-shoveling, and multiple

bedrooms. The ladies had tried to rotate among their homes, but thankfully had returned to meeting at Annie's. It seemed right, somehow. Someone had said, "I hope you don't mind, Annie. It is much more comfortable being around the familiar table." Annie had acquiesced, secretly amused and charmed.

"It's time to pick what we are going to study next. Does anyone have a suggestion?" Since Richard was busy writing his thesis, Claire had picked up his mantle of leadership. She was at first uncomfortable with the position, but determined to keep the book club vital. She had discovered in herself, in turn, a surprising talent for leading the group.

"Shall we continue with our reading of Shakespeare?" Annie asked, looking around the table, "Or do you think we should try something else? We don't have to continue if we don't choose to. We could try another novel. We had such a good time with *The Tale of Genji*, so perhaps we could try something like *War and Peace* or whatever else might interest us."

"We got a lot out of Shakespeare with *Romeo and Juliet*," Katherine responded, her brown eyes gleaming. "Part of it was we had the ballet, West Side Story, the DVDs and the text. Although reading *Macbeth* in the dead of winter almost drove us crazy we still had the text and the performance, which worked really well. Now that we have discovered a method, why not exploit it by reading another play? How about *Hamlet*? Would that be a good play? Or *The Tempest*? I think it would be hard to do a comedy."

"Why would a comedy be hard?" Franny asked, the petulance mercifully gone from her face.

"I've talked to teachers of Shakespeare. They say that the comedies are hard to analyze or teach," Katherine replied. "In thinking it over, I could see that even analyzing the comedy in *The Sopranos* would be difficult. Then, with the comedy in Shakespeare we would have to contend with the puns, the ethnic stereotypes and perhaps the sense of humor so far removed from our own as to be hard to penetrate. For any comedy, so much depends upon the actor who speaks the lines." Katherine paused in full flight and then took wing again, her hands waving: "And then there is the theatrical cliché, 'tragedy is easy, comedy is hard'. Although to be fair, I looked it up and it was said by an actor, when he was dying, that '*dying* is easy, comedy is hard'. But I think it also applies to the analysis of a play."

There was a long pause before Franny said "Oh," I see. That makes sense." Other heads around the table bobbed with tenuous understanding. "I did a little research," Katherine announced with palpable false modesty, "on the resources available for studying *Hamlet*. There is a DVD of Sir Patrick Stewart playing Claudius. I forget who had the title role. Since we just studied his portrayal of Macbeth there would be continuity. We also know that he is articulate about his choices as an actor in a role. There is probably an interview with him somewhere, on *Hamlet*, just as there was for Macbeth. It's just a matter of digging on the internet. Kenneth Branagh has a DVD of his film *Hamlet*, if we wish to have more than one version to watch. Or maybe it is like Shakespeare Rep and sometimes one actor is perfection and the others aren't. John Updike did a short book, *Gertrude and Claudius*, which we could read. It is sort of a back story. Instead of studying young love as in *Romeo and Juliet*, we could concentrate on Gertrude and Claudius. What do you think, ladies?"

There was a sudden flash of pain on Franny's face. Katherine has been at crossed swords for many years with Franny, due to Franny's obsession with Mark. It had all happened just as Katherine was going through arduous months of deciding which, if any, treatments to accept for her breast cancer. Although to be fair, Franny never was one of Katherine's intimates and may have been unaware of her diagnosis. Katherine's resentment had softened just a bit. After all, she has known Franny for many years. She had even invited Franny's family to one of her parties, though she remained wary of showing Franny too much empathy.

Cindy, her ruffled curls now more ruffled than ever became excited. "What a good idea! How old do you think Gertrude and Claudius were or were thought to be?"

Mary, calm as always, spoke, "It depends upon how old Hamlet was, doesn't it? Do you think Hamlet is a teenager, like Romeo and Juliet? If he were a teenager, then Gertrude could be in her thirties, and perhaps Claudius in his forties."

Sally, the newest addition to the book club, remarked, "Their ages being younger puts a different perspective on their behavior than if all of them were a decade older—Hamlet being in his twenties and then Gertrude in her forties and Claudius in his fifties. Maybe we could spend some time thinking about how their ages change the way they are played? Of course, the actors' ages factor into it, too."

"So are we all agreed," Claire summarized, "that *Hamlet* will be our topic? The Folger edition? The Patrick Stewart DVD? Those two will be our start. Then, if we need it, the Updike book and the Branagh DVD."

Satisfied murmurs traveled around the round oak table.

"It's so good to be back together," Cindy asserted.

"I organize my whole week around our meeting," Mary quietly offered. "Annie, here is money for the parking. It is so convenient to just drive into the garage and be welcomed by one of the attendants. It's safer, too."

"You're welcome. As everyone who lives in a high rise knows, being in the good graces of the maintenance staff is obligatory for good living. It makes such a difference if you treat them as real human beings, instead of constantly criticizing and complaining. That's not me, not my style." Rising from her chair, Annie continued, "I'll get out the wine and we can celebrate our being back together."

Annie and Claire passed out the wine glasses, the napkins, and the bottles. The two friends and their consorts had migrated to the same high rise building after extracting themselves from houses that, after children had grown up and left, had outlived their usefulness. Katherine had lately joined them, recreating the old neighborhood from their busy years.

Sally sipped her wine, looked around and brought up a new topic. "I have a friend who would like to join the group. I let slip how much fun we had with *Macbeth*—well, perhaps fun is not the right word for *Macbeth*—but how vibrant the discussion was and she said she was interested in coming. I was very quiet because I didn't know how it would go over."

Brows wrinkled in an instant and eyes remained adamantly focused on books or the table. Embarrassment reigned.

Franny broke the uncomfortable silence. "We have had some troubles in the past," she said tentatively.

Katherine added, "Because of those troubles, we have become very careful."

Annie shuddered. "We had big troubles and it has made us wary."

"One of the problems," Claire interjected firmly, "is that it is very, very hard to disinvite someone once they come and want to stay. So we are very careful."

"Sally, it is only lately we have stopped putting the chain on the door when we are all gathered," Mary calmly added.

Sally's eyes widened with a mixture of confusion and curiosity.

"This was when we were still studying *The Tale of Genji*," Cindy related with a pained look on her face, "when our book club was new and we were all trying to be very careful with each other. From the beginning she was disruptive and nasty. This went on for months and we tried to think of ways to throw her out. We even thought of disbanding. Then, one night she appeared, apparently the worse for wear from substance abuse. Her husband came and got her. It was," Cindy took a deep breath and continued, "rather awful. We locked the door after that. We only stopped locking it recently."

Claire observed Sally's puzzled face and was blunt: "She arrived stinking drunk and was abusive to each and every one of us, and then, just as she was getting to the mawkish stage, had to be forcibly removed by her husband, who was, of course, mortified. It was ghastly. She disappeared into some sort of facility and we never saw her again."

Sally kept her thoughts to herself and her face carefully neutral. She looked around at her new friends, all at once understanding why they were hesitant to welcome a newcomer to their group. She was glad they welcomed her, but she now realized why she sensed tension when she first joined. To her relief, the tension had dissipated.

Annie offered a compromise. "Sally, a couple of us could have lunch with her—sort of an audition."

"Wait, wait," Katherine said impetuously. "I have an idea. I can throw a party to celebrate my moving into this building. You, Sally, can bring her along as a guest. Then it won't seem so much like an audition. And everyone can get a chance to talk to her and scope her out." Katherine looked delighted with her idea. Her hands settled demurely onto her lap, as the crows settle in the trees across the street each night. She usually looked delighted at her own ideas. Sometimes with good reason.

Sally gazed at Katherine. "What a grand idea! Sort of like a cup of coffee, first date thing. Each gets to see the other without a lot of stress."

Katherine, a smile lurking in the corner of her mouth, said, "I'll send out invitations by email. It will be the first party since Claire and Henry's wedding, so we can celebrate that as well. What fun!"

Cheered by this resolution, the ladies prepared to depart. They were dressed in clothes that befitted late summer or early fall: subdued pants, crisp shirts and sensible shoes—academic style. The sweet night carried a whiff of coming autumn as those who lived elsewhere in Hyde Park emerged from the building. Some of the leaves on the trees had faded from their plush green, prepared to turn color and then descend, in their yearly ceremony, to the welcoming ground. It was too soon for parkas, hats and gloves, but everyone carried an umbrella just in case. It was Chicago, after all, where the weather reports were as changeable as the weather—and just as unreliable.

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