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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Three Weissmanns of Westport**

Written by Cathleen Schine

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*The Three Weissmanns  
of Westport*

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*To the indelible memory of*

*Bertha Ehrenwerth*

*The fruit does not fall far from the tree*

# 1

When Joseph Weissmann divorced his wife, he was seventy-eight years old and she was seventy-five. He announced his decision in the kitchen of their apartment on the tenth floor of a large, graceful Central Park West building built at the turn of the last century, the original white tiles of the kitchen still gleaming on the walls around them. Joseph, known as Joe to his colleagues at work but always called Joseph by his wife, said the words ‘irreconcilable differences’, and saw real confusion in his wife’s eyes.

Irreconcilable differences? she said. Of course there are irreconcilable differences. What on earth does that have to do with divorce?

In Joe’s case it had very little to do with divorce. In Joe’s case, as is so often the case, the reason for the divorce was a woman. But a woman was not, unsurprisingly, the reason he gave his wife.

Irreconcilable differences?

Betty was surprised. They had been married for forty-eight years. She was used to Joseph, and she was sure Joseph was used to her. But he would not be dissuaded. Their history was history to him. Joseph had once been a handsome man. Even now, he was straight, unstooped; his bald head was somehow

distinguished rather than lacking, as if men, important men, aspired to a smooth shining pate. His nose was narrow and protruded importantly. His eyes were also narrow and, as he aged, increasingly protected by folds of skin, as if they were secrets. Women liked him. Betty had certainly liked him, once. He was quiet and unobtrusive, requiring only a large breakfast before he went to work, a large glass of Scotch when he arrived home, and a small, light dinner at 7.30 sharp.

Over the years, Betty began to forget that she liked Joseph. The large breakfast seemed grotesque, the drink obsessive, the light supper an affectation. This happened in their third decade together and lasted until their fourth. Then, Betty noticed, Joseph's routines somehow began to take on a comforting rhythm, like the heartbeat of a mother to a newborn baby. Betty was once again content, in love, even. They traveled to Tuscany and stood in the Chianti hills watching the swallows and the swift clouds of slate-grey rain approaching. They took a boat through the fjords of Norway and another through the Galápagos Islands. They took a train through India from one palace to the next, imagining the vanished Raj and eating fragrant delicate curries. They did all these things together. And then, all these things stopped.

'Irreconcilable differences,' Joe said.

'Oh, Joseph. What does that have to do with divorce?'

'I want to be generous,' Joe said.

Generous? she thought. It was as if she were the maid and she was being fired. Would he offer her two months' salary?

'You cannot be generous with what is mine,' she said.

And the divorce, like horses in a muddy race, their sides frothing, was off and running.

\* \* \*

The name of Joe's irreconcilable difference was Felicity, although Betty referred to her, pretending she could not remember the correct name, sometimes as Pleurisy, more often as Duplicity. But that was later, when Betty had surrendered the apartment on Central Park West. During the negotiations leading up to that move, Betty and her daughters were left to speculate, to surmise, and to suspect the existence of a Felicity to whom they had never been formally introduced.

'I will be generous to my wife,' Joe told Felicity. 'After all, I did spend almost fifty years of my life with the woman.' When he said the words 'my wife', it made Felicity glare at him. But he didn't notice, for when he said the word 'fifty' it made him sad and confused. That was more than half his life. What was he doing? He was too old to be starting out fresh. But when the word 'old' passed through his thoughts, that heavy, gloomy syllable, followed so closely by the word 'fresh', his doubt passed and he uttered the word 'woman' as if Betty were a rude ticket taker at a tollbooth, a stranger with her unmanicured hand out, and Felicity's glare softened.

'Of course you'll be generous,' Felicity said. 'You are a generous man. Anything you do will be generous, Joe.' She took his hand and kissed it. 'And I will help you, Joe,' she said. 'I'll help you be generous.'

'Naturally I'll give her the apartment,' Joe said. 'It seems only right. We've lived in it all our lives. She's put so much work into it. It's her baby.'

Felicity had seen the apartment. In a magazine. It sparkled and gleamed with a comforting Old World charm. Or so the magazine said. To Felicity, it just looked big and luscious, though the various shades of cream could do with a little splash of colour, and some of the furniture seemed a bit rickety, antique or no antique. She would like to live in such an apartment. But she said, 'Naturally.' Then she looked

thoughtfully at Joe, who sat on her own sofa in her own living room, a perfectly respectable place in Lincoln Towers that had once had a view of the Hudson River. She stood up and peered out the window at the Trump Towers that now blocked that view. ‘You bought that place for a song, didn’t you?’ she asked.

Joe smiled. ‘We did. We never missed a mortgage payment, either.’

‘*You* never missed a mortgage payment,’ Felicity corrected him.

‘Yes, of course. That’s true.’

‘Paid it from your salary?’

‘Well, who else’s salary would there be?’ he asked. ‘Betty never worked a day in her life. Never had to. You know that.’

Felicity did know that. She, on the other hand, had worked many days in her life.

‘But it was her money that made the down payment,’ Joe added. He thought of himself as a fair man.

‘A mere song,’ Felicity said. ‘You said so yourself.’

Joe considered this. ‘Yes. Five thousand dollars down. Can you imagine?’

‘And now the apartment is worth – what? Three million?’

‘Oh, at least.’

Felicity was silent, letting the implication sink in.

‘That’s quite a return on a five-thousand-dollar investment, isn’t it?’ he said.

‘I suppose the upkeep is very high these days.’

Joe nodded.

‘It’s really a burden, that big old place,’ Felicity said. ‘Poor Betty. I don’t envy her. At her age.’

‘She ought to downsize,’ Joe said. ‘We should sell the place, and she can take her share and buy something a little more realistic.’

‘Joe, you really are a generous man,’ Felicity said. ‘And self-sacrificing, too.’



He looked at her blankly. He knew he was generous and self-sacrificing, but just for a moment he could not quite make out how this act of taking half the proceeds, rather than none, fit that description. Then Felicity said, with some alarm, 'But what about the taxes? There will be hardly anything left from the sale after taxes. Poor Betty.' She saw it was six o'clock and made him his drink. 'It really will be a burden on her, much more than on you. You have so many deductions. She doesn't. Not having a business.'

Joe was not a stupid man, and he liked to think of himself as a generous man; but he loved the big, airy apartment Betty had made so comfortable for him, and he loved Felicity. Obviously the apartment would be too much for Betty to handle, he told himself. How could he have been so thoughtless, so insensitive?

'At her age,' Felicity murmured again, as if reading his thoughts.

The apartment was far more suitable for him and Felicity. She was young and energetic. He was neither, but he was so used to the place. Was it fair that he should be thrown out of his own home just to pay good money to the government? It would be very bad judgement. It would bankrupt Betty with taxes. It would be cruel.

And so it was decided. Joe would be generous and keep the apartment.

Betty had been married before she met Joseph Weissmann. Her first husband had died suddenly and young in an automobile accident, leaving her with two little girls, Annie, age three, and Miranda, two months. Joseph came into their lives not quite a year after the accident. He married Betty, and though they ate dinner in the kitchen before he came home from work and never saw him on the Saturdays when

he went to the office, the girls took his last name, called him Josie, considered him their father, and loved him as if he were.

When Annie got the phone call from her mother announcing Joseph's discovery of irreconcilable differences after almost fifty years, she immediately urged a visit to a neurologist. Had Josie been complaining of headaches? Erratic behaviour, headaches, dizziness: Of course it was a brain tumour. Did her mother remember her friend Oliver from graduate school? He died just like that. Betty had better get him to a doctor that day. Poor Josie.

'It's not a brain tumour,' her mother said. Joseph was feeling better than he had in years. 'And you know what that means.'

Annie grudgingly accepted what her sister, Miranda, understood immediately.

'He is in love,' Miranda said when Betty called her to tell her the news.

'I'm afraid he must be,' Betty said.

The two women were silent. They were both believers in love. This love was heresy.

'What does Annie say?'

'She's going to speak to him. And she suggested I get a lawyer.'

'A lawyer?' Miranda's voice was disapproving. 'What does Josie say about *that*?'

'He suggested we use a mediator.'

'This is not really happening,' Miranda said.

And she, too, decided to see Josie.

'I am entitled to live my life,' Joseph told them when they appeared together at his office. But there were tears in his eyes. 'I am entitled to my life.'

Both women were moved by the tears. And both agreed that he was entitled to his life, but with these provisos: Annie explained that the life Josie was entitled to was the life he had always lived, the one with their mother; Miranda, a more romantic soul, pointed out that while life must be lived to the fullest, Josie was no longer young, and his present life was surely full enough for someone his age.

‘This is difficult for me, too,’ Joseph said. He squeezed his fists into his eyes like a child. The two women put their arms around him.

‘Josie, Josie,’ they said softly, soothing the distinguished man in his pinstriped suit. They had never seen their stepfather cry.

He stood back and looked down at his two daughters, his ‘girls’, and he saw that his girls were no longer girls. Miranda was as lovely in her skittish, eye-flashing way as ever, her light brown hair shining, grazing her shoulders, the style not much different from what she wore as a teenager. But now in her still-youthful beauty there was something willed and hard. As for Annie, she had never looked youthful, always so serious, her dark eyes taking everything in and giving nothing back. He could see a faint line of grey where her hair parted. She watched him anxiously. What could he do for her, his sad little girl? Decades ago, in his youth, a man in his position might have handed her some bills and told her to buy herself a hat to cheer herself up. He imagined her in a little velvet cocktail hat, inclined rakishly to one side. The incongruity of it made him want to shake her.

‘I will be very generous to your mother,’ he said. ‘You can count on me for that.’

And the daughters left the office, angry, disappointed, but hopeful for their mother’s material comfort, at least.

‘Hi, Felicity,’ they said with forced cheerfulness to the pretty VP who had initiated the increasingly successful online

side of the business. There was no point in letting their misery show. Perhaps the whole thing could be patched up before Felicity and the others in the office knew anything about it.

‘Well, at least they’re not getting lawyers,’ Miranda said. ‘Lawyers are parasitic vultures.’

‘You’re mixing unpleasant species characteristics.’

‘Vermin,’ Miranda said defiantly. Miranda was a literary agent and resented the legal profession on principle for interfering in matters that ought not to concern them, like her clients’ contracts, but her experiences with lawyers had been particularly painful in the last six months. ‘They should mind their own business.’

‘Unfortunately, divorce sort of is their business. Some of them anyway.’

Miranda had never been divorced herself. This, she knew, was only because she had never been married. She fell in love too easily, too frequently, too hard, to get married. Miranda loved to be in love. It was a pleasure she was willing to suffer for, but not give up. Right now she was in love with a ne’er-do-well day trader. She thought of him and felt a flutter of giddy admiration: his bare back bent over her computer in her dark bedroom late at night, the pained expression on his face illuminated by the big, bright monitor.

Love was one of the reasons she gave for never getting married, the primary one. But there was another. She had always been too busy, constantly on the phone, barking out orders to her harassed assistant, flirting with a publisher on the hook, raising the spirits of a disappointed author. She specialized in the genre of what Annie dubbed the Lite Victory memoir. Her clients, the Awful Authors, as even Miranda called them, had always overcome something ghastly and lurid, something so ghastly and so lurid they had

to write a ghastly and lurid book recounting every detail of their mortification and misery. At the end of the book, there was a nice epiphany, and since no one could really object to an epiphany, not even Annie, the books were very popular and Miranda had built a thriving agency that required her constant attention.

Until the lawyers got to it, she thought. ‘Vermin,’ she said again. ‘Ha! No divorce lawyer will ever dine on my flesh.’

Annie said nothing. Miranda’s antipathy to marriage was a point of contention between them. Annie had always maintained that Miranda simply lacked the imagination to get married.

‘Marriage is too much like fiction for you,’ she once told Miranda. ‘Too unpredictable, too influenced by idiosyncratic characters.’

Miranda, who considered herself a hopeless romantic, had replied, ‘Fiction has a plot, the same old plot. In what way is that unpredictable?’

‘Because it all hangs on temperament, on personality, on serendipity and happenstance. On chance. Your books, and all your love affairs, are about control, losing it and then reasserting it.’

To which assessment of the genre of memoir and the miracles of the heart Miranda would shake her head, smile pityingly at her benighted older sister, contemplate her puzzling insistence on always wearing such drab colours, and say gently, ‘I want to be free, Annie. And I am.’

Then, invariably, the sisters would quote Louisa May Alcott at each other – ‘She is too fond of books, and it has turned her brain’ – and move on to other things.

Now, as Miranda walked beside her sister, she wondered if Josie wanted to be free, free of Annie and herself. As well as their mother, of course.

‘It’s so sad,’ she said. ‘Lawyers would make it ugly, too.’

She felt her phone vibrating. When she saw who it was, she didn't answer.

'Christ,' she muttered, but Annie didn't hear her.

'And expensive,' Annie was saying. 'They make it so expensive.' That had certainly been her experience. She had been married, many years ago. She had two grown children to prove it. But her husband, such an intense, driven young man, had turned out to be a gambler. Annie hadn't seen him after the divorce, eighteen years ago, nor had he kept in touch with his children. She had been informed of his death, of leukaemia, two years ago. 'Nothing lasts,' she said now, thinking of the waste that was love.

Miranda said, 'You're so literal minded.'

And the two sisters continued down the street, arm in arm, affectionate and indulgent, each smiling a small, comfortable smile at her superiority to the other.

On leaving her stepfather's office, Annie had given Felicity Barrow a brave, friendly hello, yet she had never liked Felicity. Felicity had round, oversized eyes, bright blue eyes, like a child actor who knows how to act like a child. Annie respected her stepfather's colleague. She knew how hard Felicity worked and how much she had contributed to the company, but she knew of Felicity's accomplishments by way of Felicity. It was not that the woman boasted. Quite the opposite. She was modest to a fault, the fault being that she insinuated her modesty, deftly, into almost any conversation, proclaiming her insignificance and ignorance, thereby assuring a correction.

Even so, under other circumstances, Annie would have stopped for a more extended greeting, for Felicity's older brother was the distinguished novelist Frederick Barrow, and through Felicity's generous intervention he had been induced

to speak at the library where Annie worked. It was a small, private, subscription library started in the nineteenth century by wealthy furriers hoping to help promote literacy and thus good citizenship among aspiring young men entering the trade. It was endowed with funds not quite sufficient to keep it going, and among her other duties as deputy director, Annie arranged readings there. They had become something of an event in the Upper West Side neighbourhood where the library was located. The tickets were sold for twenty-five dollars apiece, and after a rocky start, they had gotten audiences of over two hundred people for three years running.

One of Annie's talents was convincing writers to participate. At first she had simply kept abreast of who had a book coming out and might therefore be eager to promote it. But after a few years, she began giving the authors a percentage of the take, something she had observed at readings she'd attended in Germany. It seemed to excite the writers when she handed them a wad of smooth, worn bills, far more than an honorarium cheque would have done. They were like children receiving shiny coins. Annie had no illusions about authors. On the one hand, she admired them, for they created the books she admired. But, too, she felt most of them were rather sad, desperate people who couldn't hold down a job, and she counted out the money into their open palms with the same expression she wore when tipping the doorman.

But even with the inducement of a pile of twenty-dollar bills, it was unusual for her to get a writer like Frederick Barrow to read at her library. He was not only revered and rich, he was also reserved, and he rarely appeared in public. Felicity's offer had been a welcome one.

Annie had first met Felicity one evening a year ago when Annie went to the suite of offices to surprise her stepfather and join him on his walk home. Joseph walked home every day, rain or shine, and Annie liked to join him sometimes. It

was not far from his office to the apartment, eighteen blocks, it was on her way home, and that night had been a lovely, cool spring evening, the sunlight lingering and the finches warbling gloriously from the light poles.

The receptionist was not there when Annie stepped out of the elevator. Felicity, who was just leaving Joseph's office, appeared to be the only other person around, and Joseph introduced the two women. It was then that Felicity had offered up her brother. Annie, though excited at the prospect, did not take her seriously and forgot all about it. But a month later, an email appeared in her inbox from Felicity with Frederick Barrow's phone number, email address, and pledge that he would participate.

The reading promised to be a huge success. They had sent out the announcements, and one hundred tickets had been ordered already. Frederick Barrow himself, though he wrote turbulent, wrenching books, turned out to be as tranquil a man as Annie had ever met. They went for drinks to discuss the event, drinks somehow became dinner, and dinner led to after-dinner drinks at Bemelman's Bar. They walked together up Fifth Avenue past the closed museums and the dark forest of Central Park at night. They walked and walked in the windy night, quoting Shakespeare like undergraduates and holding hands.

Never, Annie thought, have I regretted an evening as a librarian less. This mood lasted for weeks. Then Frederick Barrow joined the library and began to use it for his research, which led to more lunches, more dinners, and considerably more quotation. Indeed, on the day that Annie and Miranda left their stepfather in tears and retreated to a café to drink tea, Annie was planning to have dinner with Frederick.

'He's so handsome in his author photos,' Miranda said.

'They're not terribly recent. His hair is almost white now. I think writers should keep their photos up-to-date. When he



does finally use a new one, it will be a terrible shock to his readers. They'll think he's been ill.'

'Good God, Annie.'

Miranda's cell phone gave a plaintive cry, and she checked a text message, frowned, and swore beneath her breath. 'Where does he live, anyway?' she said as she typed into the cell phone. 'These fuckers.' She put the phone away. 'So? Where?' It was important to Miranda that Frederick Barrow be a New Yorker. It would not do anyone any good if he lived in San Francisco or taught at the University of Iowa.

'He's been in Berlin for the past year – that's where I first got in touch with him.'

'Oh, Berlin!' Miranda, in her enthusiasm for a city she found endlessly fascinating, forgot for a moment that she wanted Frederick to live nearby. 'Wonderful.'

'But I think he actually lives in Massachusetts. Cape Cod? He's been staying with his kids in the city.'

Massachusetts was not bad. Miranda nodded in approval. She'd had a boyfriend in college who went to Harvard while she went to Barnard. There was a good train, and Miranda liked trains. A train felt fast, faster than a car, faster even than a plane, and the illusion of speed was almost as important to Miranda as was speed itself. She became bored and impatient easily, but had found that anything framed by a train window could hold her attention, as if the undersides and back ends and rusty corners of dying cities were episodes of a rough, rousing life flashing by. She had ended up detesting the Harvard boyfriend, Scarsdale Nick, as she used to call him, but the train had never disappointed her. No, Frederick Barrow in Massachusetts was not bad at all.

'He *is* still pretty good-looking,' Annie said. 'He wears nice old tweed jackets.'

Annie's tone was serious and full of warmth. Miranda gave a snort.

‘What?’ Annie said.

‘Ha!’

‘You’re crazy.’

‘I know what I know,’ Miranda said.

As the weeks wore on, the marriage mediation sessions began. Betty and Joseph went to an office oddly situated in Chelsea.

‘Where did you find out about this woman?’ Betty asked.

‘Referral.’

‘This is a very dumpy office,’ Betty whispered. They had walked down the narrow stairs of a decrepit brownstone to what was the basement level. ‘This was called the English basement when they first started doing them in New York. Nineteenth century. Very *Upstairs, Downstairs*, don’t you think? Do you remember when Annie hired a carpenter she found in the *Village Voice* classifieds? Did you find this woman in the *Village Voice* classifieds, honey? Those bookcases tilted terribly.’

A small dumpy woman appeared at the door to an inner dumpy office. She had full, poorly cut salt-and-pepper hair. She was, Betty noticed, wearing space shoes.

‘Are those back?’ she asked the woman. ‘They were very popular in the fifties. Our dentist wore them.’

The mediator did not smile. But she did hold out her hand and introduce herself. Her name was Nina Britsky. A *matzoh-punim*, Betty thought, feeling sad for her.

The office was small and crowded with piles of bulging folders. It resembled a closet, really – the bulging file closet. The mediator sat on a complicated ergonomic chair and placed her feet on a small stool that was on rockers. So much specialized equipment, Betty thought, just to listen to Joseph and me disagree.

Nina Britsky opened her laptop and began to type and speak.

Betty did not hear much of what she said. The initial barrage of New Age pop-psychological platitudes delivered in a hoarse Bronx accent immediately told Betty that daydreaming would be the most polite response. And Nina Britsky looked so much like a chimpanzee curled on her ergonomic chair: her coarse cap of hair; her lips pursed in contemplation, then opening wide to reveal large teeth. Betty imagined herself in a dark chimpanzee cave, though she did not believe, now that she thought of it, that chimpanzees slept in caves. Surely they slept in trees. But the room was almost as dark as a cave. Perhaps there was a divorce mediation lighting theory: if the two people could no longer see each other, they would leave each other more easily. The woman was probably just trying to keep her electricity bills down, and who could blame her? Betty had just begun changing over to the new energy-saving bulbs herself. They were so pretty, twisting and turning, like old-fashioned filaments . . .

‘It’s good there’s no child custody involved,’ the woman was saying. She typed importantly on her laptop. ‘In these cases, that can get pretty ugly.’

‘These cases?’ Betty said. ‘In all cases, I would think.’

‘Well, it can be much worse in same-sex cases.’

‘But Joseph and I are not the same sex,’ Betty explained gently.

Joseph was squirming a bit, she noticed.

‘Are we, Joseph?’

‘I was referring to the third party,’ Nina Britsky said.

‘There is no third party,’ Joseph said hurriedly.

‘And if there were, I don’t think it would be a man,’ Betty said.

‘Well, I assumed it was a woman,’ Nina Britsky said, throwing Betty a pointed look. ‘A same-sex woman,’ she

added, to Betty's further confusion. 'Why else would you come to me?'

It was only after they had been handed pamphlets inviting them to a support group – My Spouse's Closet Anonymous or MYSPCL, pronounced like bicycle – and left the office in a dull daze that Betty asked Joseph exactly who it was who had referred the ergonomic chimpanzee.

'Because, Joseph, she seems a rather specialized mediator.'

Joseph said, 'That was a disaster. Let's go get dinner.'

'Look at her card: *For couples seeking divorce when women seek women*. It could be a classified ad in *The Village Voice*, couldn't it? Maybe she'll build us a crooked bookcase.'

Joseph couldn't help laughing. Betty had always made him laugh.

'You're so funny,' he said.

Betty burst into tears.