

...AND THE TWO ROMEOS

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Excerpt from ...AND THE TWO ROMEOS by Jennifer Maisel

Ms. Hampton, the school guidance counselor, tries to welcome Stacy, the only survivor of a suicide pact, back to school.

MS. HAMPTON

Right on time - now that's an improvement. No...no...don't close the door. Come in. Leave it open, I said. Can't have an open door policy without an open door, now can I? I think it's very important that someone in my position be seen as one who keeps her word. Trust. I must engender trust, don't you think? Without trust in me not one person would come walking through that open door all day and then where would I be? I wouldn't be here very long, I tell you that. I want to commend you, Stacy, for promptness because that can engender trust too. So that's a good start, a good start - keep it up and it will be noticed that you are - reli - prompt. (smiles - waits)

So...

Don't - don't don't sit like that. Did your mother ever - oh well, it's not good manners to sit like that on other peoples' furniture Do me a favor, honey, and sit up straight - feet on the floor or close to it. I just see the sole of your shoe precariously close to the upholstery and I have to admit I can't think of much else until it's out of danger. Thank you. I do appreciate it. You see, with the way you listen so considerately we'll have you back in the swing in no time.

So... it is policy that after a...long absence we set up a little meeting to see how you're doing -

I have to say you're looking well. Those earrings are precious, though I would say not so heavy on the black eyeliner, it makes your eyes kind of ghoulish and what with everything that's...gone on... I think that your looking as presentable and sweet and friendly as possible is to your distinct advantage -

The shoes, darling, the shoes...try crossing your feet at the ankles and here, here, close your eyes.

There. There. Much better.

A mini-makeover always perks me up too. And you'll have beautiful skin in a few years - mark my words. I had skin exactly like yours - those pus-y little pimples at the hairline and on my chin that would just spring up during class so I always had to dart into the

bathroom between periods and force my way up to the mirror to pop them. I cried too - every morning I was in absolute despair after I'd wash away that smelly white stuff to find even more of them - I was so convinced that no boy would ever love me with these pustules - that's what my mama called them. Can you think of an uglier word in the human language than pustules?

Pustules. Pustules.

No wonder I was ready to end it right there and then - a face full pustules and no romantic prospects and hmmm, but then at nineteen I had the sweetest skin that the boys could not keep their hands off of, and I was well aware that if I had not waited I would have missed out on Mr. Hampton and Winona who as soon as she hits puberty is heading straight for the dermatologist since that is an advantage I can give her and will. My daughter won't be crying in front of mirrors every morning over boys not liking her if I can help it and I'd hate to think of you doing that either. Well, I guess you don't need me to tell you about boys - hmmm - no -

Such pretty hair too.

Don't you look all ready to make new friends - not dangerous at all. Now that the injunction has been dismissed I think things will calm down around here and I'll tell you that at the parent teacher meeting the air did not seem to be filled with such...such vehemence as the ones' prior and if nobody else manages to...damage themselves in the next few months this business might fade right out of peoples' minds.

Oh...there was a book I was reading last night in preparation for our little meeting - where is it - oh, stupid me, I left it right on the mail table in the foyer where I put it expressly so I would not forget to bring it to you today. Braindead. I will write the title down for you - it gives the most wonderful advice and while I was reading it I could not stop thinking about you so that usually means to me that it is the right advice for you. So clever when it comes to handling difficult situations - you take the actual events and then retell the situations around it to make the whole thing seem less...less like what it was. For example Mr. Hampton was very late for dinner the other night - so late I sent Winona off to bed and read her her story myself and I could have been mad or even thought up so many evil things he could possibly have been doing but instead I just created a new story, one that had to do with him still being so dreamily in love with me that he dreamed right past his stop on the train and by the time he realized...etc. So you could picture Richard and Carlton as two knights dueling to the death over their princess and then it doesn't seem quite the same thing. Or that when people are whispering in the halls, it is because you are such an interesting person and they'd like to get to know you better but are slightly in awe of you because they respect you so much...because...you're...a survivor. It's a matter of changing the perspective and I think that as we grow up we forget to do that.

It's good to have specific things to shake up your life because if you get into a routine there are things you'll never see. I mean I found the most soothing thing the other day... my...umm...back went out after I helped Ms. Magid move her things out of this

office and I moved my things in. I needed a flat hard surface and I thought this monstrosity - it takes up more floor space than the floor practically and suddenly it was a different way of seeing this ceiling that I'd complained to the school board should be fixed. Craters. And dust. And a kind of ever-changing landscape since the plaster isn't holding at all. And I thought, I'm floating above the moon. Zero gravity.

If you'd lie down next to me, you'd see it. And if it gives you the same kind of...solace that I feel you can come in any time and just float above the moon for a few moments. There's plenty of room on this desk - we could have three or four students on here, no problem.

Hmmm. It's all how you choose to see it.