



One

THERE'S A HILL covered with olive trees that nestles around our house like the strong, safe lap of an infinitely patient grandfather. We called it a mountain until we hiked up to the top one day and saw the snowcapped *Sibillini* stretching out across the horizon. No, it's a hill—one of many *colline* that climb to the east of us and roll out to the north and south of us, shimmering with silver-green olive leaves as far as you can see. The tiny stone house sits tucked into the side of the hill so that our bedroom window isn't exposed to the early rays of the sun, but that morning I was up with the first soft light in the sky. It's not often I'm alone when I wake up; Jill and I try not to spend nights apart these days. I ran my hand over the empty side of the bed and thought about our years in New York when any little job would take us away from each other for months at a time. We were two kids on the make in those days and our relationship was often relegated to the back burner.

The sky did a cross-fade from gray to light blue and one by one the birds started to sing. I had nowhere to go for a couple of hours; I just lay there and listened to them. I had





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flown over two days earlier to close the deal on this farmhouse in the hills of Umbria and I was heading back to California later that afternoon. My inner clock was totally confused at this point, but sleep wasn't really the issue; I could sleep some other time.

Rustico—that's its name—has been standing on this hill looking west out onto the vast and verdant Spoleto valley for over three hundred and fifty years. *Rustico* means a farm worker's cottage, a place where migrant workers slept when they came every year to harvest the olives. Now it was going to shelter two migrant actors.

I went down to the kitchen and made a pot of coffee. I sat at the table under the pergola just outside the kitchen door and watched a bird with black and white striped plumage and a smart-ass Woody Woodpecker look on his face squawk and swoop down from the trees, strafe the vegetable garden and then soar up for a couple of laps around the chimney. You could already tell it was going to be a hot day. But inside the *rustico* with its three-foot thick stone walls—which make it look considerably larger on the outside than it feels inside—it was as cool as a wine cellar.

I called Jill in California where it was nine o'clock the evening before. Totally confusing. I told her all about yesterday's meeting at the *notaio's* office where I signed the papers and passed over the certified checks—one above the table, one below. I told her how the *notaio* solemnly intoned the whole contract, pausing after every line for the English translation. It all felt quite official. I told her how Bruno and Mayes, who sold us the house, and JoJo, who brokered the deal, took me out to lunch afterwards



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at Fontanelle, a restaurant a few miles up the hill from our house. Bruno's mom, Silvana, was there, too—up from Rome for the week. We ate pasta with truffles and thin pork chops that had been grilled over wood and drank enough wine to remind me that I hadn't slept much in the last three days.

I told Jill how I was feeling at that moment, sitting next to the garden watching the birds; about the pull this place has for me, how the rhythm of the land dictates the pace for everything and everyone. I'm not a particularly patient person; I don't usually do the stillness thing well; but I thought that living in this house, in this valley, might change that some.

The year we met—1969 at the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C.—I was already married with a one-year-old little girl, and Jill was engaged to an actor who was working up in Montreal. We caught each other's eye in the read-through of the opening play and by the time we got to dress rehearsal, we were waist-deep in a love affair that's lasted for thirty-five years and counting. A few days after the closing play of the season, I left my marriage, and a month after that Jill and I took custody of Alison, my daughter. Then we left for New York to try our luck on Broadway, off-Broadway and—mostly—the unemployment office. That was the first time we stepped off the edge together and it's become a way of life with us.

We have nine-year cycles. At least, looking back, that seems to be the way it works out. New York, however, was a double-header—almost eighteen years in the traces, carving out our careers, learning to live with long periods of separation and falling prey to the pitfalls and tempta-



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tions of life on location. Alison grew up there. I took her to school—every day on the back of my bicycle, rain or shine—and when we left, she stayed on in the apartment and went to college there. Max, our son, was born in Lenox Hill Hospital and went—every day on the back of my bicycle—to the Montessori School on West 101st St. New York was our nest. We met our dearest friends there, the kind of friends that even if we don't see them for ten years, are still our dearest friends. Our personalities took shape there—individually, as a family and as a couple.

Then in 1986, we got a call from Steven Bochco, an old friend of mine from all the way back to college days, with an offer to do his new TV series. He had written the roles for us, he said. Jill got on the phone, thanked him graciously but told him that she was really a theater actress and didn't want to leave New York. Her kids were in good schools; she was a nester; she didn't want to be on TV. I was across the room screaming at her to sell out; sell out at any price!

But I needn't have worried. Bochco calmed her and said she didn't have to play the part, but was it okay with her if he kept her in mind—just to help him write it? She—again graciously—deigned to allow him to do this.

When the script showed up, Jill started to leaf through it and, after a few pages, started learning the lines. No way was she going to let anyone else play that part.

We flew out to LA for three weeks in May to shoot the pilot. It was a high time—first-class parts in a first-class pilot, custom-made clothes, studio flacks and agents hovering around us—it was like a scene in a movie. And we were doing it together. After years of one of us being up



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while the other was out of work, here we were taking our first stroll down the sidewalk of fame together, arm in arm, both winners, no loser.

We came back to New York after we shot the pilot to get our kids together, our things together, so that we could move out to LA in August to shoot the rest of the first season. We went to St. Martin in the Caribbean to celebrate and on the day we got back to New York, Jill reached up and felt a lump in her breast.

It was cancer. We laid down on our bed on West Eighty-Ninth Street, pulled the shades and held hands in the dark. Jill was looking at the end of her life. I was looking at life without her. Like a drowning man I watched all the scenes of our life together and realized how much of my identity had been tied up with having this exquisite woman in my life. Just standing next to her elevated what other people thought of me, what I thought of myself. I had cashed a lot of checks on that account. Not a pretty thought, but there it was.

Jill had her operation at Mt. Sinai in New York. Two weeks later she would have her first radiation appointment at UCLA—on the very same day *L.A. Law* went into production. We packed up, calmed our terrified children and got on the plane for LA. This time we weren't only changing coasts, jobs, schools, lifestyles and friends; we were also taking on a new life partner: cancer. This partner would radically change the way we looked at ourselves, our relationship, our future together—everything. Eventually—once we accepted it—cancer taught us how to live.

The sun appeared over the top of the mountain a little after eight and I got in the car and went down to our little





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village. I had an *espresso* at the bar; then I had another. I was too shy to start a conversation with the *barista*, so I pretended to read the local newspaper in which every fifth or sixth word made sense. After the morning crowd thinned out a bit I summoned up the courage to talk. I opened with my well-practiced phrase of self-abasement: “*I’m so sorry, I’m an American, I don’t speak very well in Italian . . .*” This always worked. The barman lit up and we had a third-grade level conversation in Italian in which I asked him if he could tell me where to buy the best local olive oil. He launched into a vivid description, with maps drawn on paper napkins, of where he thought I should go.

I wanted to take as much of Umbria back with me to California as I could fit into my suitcase. I found the olive oil outlet, where they also had some chestnut honey the region is known for and some cellophane bags of *strangozzi*, the local pasta. Then I stopped at a house—right on our road—that had a sign out front advertising fresh truffles. It turned out to be quite a serious operation—aluminum bins of truffles with the earth still clinging to them, scales to calculate their worth down to the smallest gram and a shrink-wrap machine so that people like me could travel without creating too much of a stink. I bought six beautiful specimens, each about the size of a billiard ball, to smuggle through customs. I went to the wine store to pick up six bottles of *Montefalco Rosso*. It’s a wonderful wine, which I hoped would taste as good when I got it back to California.

I went back to the house with my booty and stuffed it all into the suitcase among the few clothes I had with me. I locked up, closed the shutters and drove off to the air-



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port in Rome, bidding *arrivederci* to our little *rustico* until we'd be back in September.

