

SOFTLY FALL THE
SNOWBIRDS

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ULYSSES

Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved the earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

~ Alfred Lord Tennyson

CHAPTER 1

Jane Ramsey ran upstairs to the bathroom. Slammed the door and locked it. Quiet solitude at last. She had not enjoyed it for several weeks. She stood in front of the full-length mirror on the wall and slowly breathed in through her nose, out through her mouth. Did it again. She could feel herself calming down. Her breathing came easier and the tensions in her shoulders eased. She began to relax.

Their house had four bathrooms and each one has the toilet seat up. Jack, her newly retired husband, made the rounds of each toilet to ensure the seats were standing at attention. She was the one who had to pull them down and shut the lids. They constantly followed each other around the house. Seat up, seat down! One of these days she would superglue all the seats to the rims. Lost in her thoughts, she enjoyed the vision of him trying to pull up the glued toilet seat.

“Janie! Janie where are you?” Jack shouted.

Her reverie shattered like glass falling on ceramic tile.

“Janieeee! I need you! My e-mail doesn’t work. Will you help me? I need to get it out now!” He was banging on the bathroom door. She wasn’t going to open it.

“Why did you lock the door? I can’t send off an e-mail with a large attachment. This Mac works differently than my PC at the office. I need your help right away.”

“Just a moment Jack,” she said tersely.

She washed her hands, and combed her hair. Her shower would have to wait. She unlocked the door. Jack was leaning against the door jam, waiting. She could see the deep furrows in the frown on his forehead, right between his eyes like a target for a bullet. She imagined the target, raising her gun and firing at dead center.

“What took you so long? I have to get this letter out.” He rattled the paper in front of her as if that would emphasize its importance.

“I was contemplating my navel. Okay, Jack, let’s see what happened.”

She sat in front of his computer, a thirteen-inch-laptop that was sitting on the kitchen table. She was a MAC user and wasn’t used to a PC. “Why don’t you get a new Mac instead of that old PC? Or, better yet, the new iPad Air.”

“Well, I had this computer at the office and I’m familiar with it, I don’t want to change. Besides, you know how to use both computers.” He hovered over her as she fixed his problem with a click of the mouse and his e-mail disappeared.

“Thanks, Janie. You’re so good with computers.” He smiled and gave her a ‘good dog’ pat on her back. She should have barked and wagged her tail.

He sat down at the computer, staring at the screen, and suddenly she was wallpaper. It was a pain in the butt having him home. Jack took an early retirement from his very important job in the oil and gas industry. He had been CEO of a large company in New Jersey. He was top dog for twenty years,

flying in the company’s corporate jet, traveling around the world, waited on like a sultan, dined and pampered by his loyal single secretary of many years. No wonder he had become so useless now. She should’ve hired her to look after him, or maybe just turn him over to her. She can have him. She’d sign the papers giving her ownership immediately. Forget the ninety-day guarantee, it’s ‘as is’ only.

Damn! Her life changed four weeks ago when he walked in the front door and said in his boardroom manner, clearing his throat before he spoke:

“Janie. I took an early retirement with lots of benefits. Today was my last day with the company. So now I am fully retired and I am looking forward to the next stage in my life.”

He paused, expecting her to jump for joy! He was looking forward to the next stage in his life? What about hers? Did her life just keep going as it was or was she dependent on his life stage? Did she get to retire from housework and move on to the next stage in her life? So who would take care of them if they were both retired? Housewives never retire. They just keep on cooking and cleaning!

“Thanks for letting me know ahead of time that you were going to quit. I would have rearranged my busy schedule to celebrate.” She grumbled.

He ignored her and walked into the kitchen, sat down at the table, and tapped his fingers in a rhythmic drumbeat.

Apparently his secretary was not one of the perks, because she was still working at the company. The benefits are all in his favor. She didn’t see any benefit to his being home, disturbing her life. She simply smiled. There was nothing more to say.

She never thought of divorce. Murder? Maybe. No wonder so many retired people separated. She understood the changes that marriages went through. This was not one of her favorite changes, that’s for sure! Ha!

“I wanted to surprise you, honey! I thought you would be delighted that I finally left the company.”

“It might have been nice to discuss it with me first, Jack. After all, I have been your partner for eons.”

He squirmed in his chair. “I know that, Janie, but I just decided a week ago to leave. I thought it best not to discuss it. I made a quick decision, went through the paperwork and here I am, ready to begin a new adventure away from the office. Just the two of us being together.”

He smiled, apparently hoping she would be happy having him home. She thought he wanted a good dog pat on the back. She barked instead.

Unfortunately, she was not ready for this change. She was enjoying her life without having him home. Now, she had to adjust to her life with him home and underfoot. Nine-to-five was out the window. There went her afternoon bridge, her social teas and her desert parties. *Dr. Phil* and *Ellen*, goodbye! CNN became supreme ruler in the house. Piers Morgan should have the spare room.

She had her own life and her own business, painting and selling her art, selling on eBay, and visiting her friends for lunches and teas during the day. Now she had Jack. Every move she made was tracked.

“Jack, I am finally going to take a shower. I helped you out and now it’s my turn to clean up.” It’s almost ten and she was still in her nightgown.

She left him sitting at the kitchen table, concentrating on his e-mail and headed for the bedroom. The large window in the bedroom beckoned her to jump. She resisted the temptation and walked into the bathroom.

She undressed and looked at herself in the mirror. Her blond, short-styled hair had some dark roots; time to get to the beauty salon for a touch-up. She thought she looked pretty good. Her fair skin was smooth and fresh, not even any crow’s feet at the corners of her eyes. Her boobs hadn’t drooped

yet and her figure, well, it was still attractive, not bad for a woman her age. Her age, whom was she kidding? She was coming on sixty-one, four years younger than Jack. She turned on the hot water in the shower, adjusted the temperature and got in, closing the glass door. She let the water run over her body and thought about her life.

Jack was more refined and came from a British background, stiff upper lip and all that. He’s from upstate New York. His family dated back several generations. They must have come over on the *Mayflower* the way they acted. They stayed in the *New World* and probably fired the shot that killed the first turkey.

Her large family was Ukrainian and they loved big weddings, dancing, and enjoying good solid food that stayed in your stomach for several hours. Nothing was better than a dish full of cheese dumplings smothered in fried onions and butter with absolutely no calories attached to it. The only calories were in the tiny dollop of sour cream that crowned the top of the dumplings. Ha! Right!

She turned the water off, dried off and stepped out of the shower. She dressed in her usual outfit of black slacks with a red wool sweater, along with casual shoes. She refused to dress down around the house. ‘Always look your best,’ her mother had said when she was growing up. You never know who’ll be knocking at your door. She was right about that.

Jack came knocking on the door and her mother was disappointed that he wasn’t Ukrainian. Jack loved the Ukrainian food and her parents. They were down-to-earth people, no snobbery or class distinction there. They liked people for who they were, not what they owned. That was a long time ago.

Their three children were all married and living on the west coast. So what’s the point of staying in New Jersey? Who in their right mind lives in this climate?

The weather in New Jersey is bitterly cold and snowy in January. She can't take much more of this. We'll be housebound with the winter snowstorms. Not a pleasant thought.

Jack might have a heart attack shoveling snow in the winter. That often happens when we have heavy snowfalls and the men try to clean their driveways. Besides, Basking Ridge is an area where younger families had come to settle. All the retired people migrated to Florida to soak up the sun and enjoy their warm winters. They returned to New Jersey, but only when the temperature reached seventy degrees. Snowbirds, that's what they are called. She wasn't sure she wanted to be one of them.

After all, Florida had the highest death rate and it wasn't due to road accidents. Drug overdoses and old age were the main causes of death.

Janie's older sister Irene moved to Phoenix when her husband Larry Grady took an early retirement from 3M in Minnesota. Irene called yesterday and wants us to come to Phoenix for a visit. I liked the idea.

They now live in a large, retirement, gated community outside of Phoenix. She keeps in touch weekly and writes about her busy life there, so much to do and places to visit.

"Thanks, Irene. I will try and convince Jack to take the trip. Now that he is retired it should be easier to convince him to leave his company," she said.

"Well, get on it, girl! The weather is perfect, not too hot right now. November through April are the best months to be here."

"Okay, okay! I will do it today." Janie put the phone down and thought about her plan to convince Jack to fly to Phoenix for two weeks.

Most of those gated communities are full of retired people who only use their houses in the winter months. The snowbirds return to their homes in the northern states and Canada to avoid the sweltering summer heat in

Phoenix. They close up their homes or rent them out for a few months. Maybe that's what they should do, be with people their age and lifestyle.

But, she didn't know if she wanted to return to Jersey for the hot, humid summers. No! Arizona has more to offer, even though their summers are very hot, it's desert dry heat and that's better than the high humidity of Jersey. Besides Flagstaff is only two hours away and in the mountains where it is cooler. It's a great place to spend the summer. The Grand Canyon is near Flagstaff with a lot of trails to hike there. It makes for a great day trip.

Once we sell the house that would be it. Phoenix was the place to be. Now all she had to do was convince Jack. Besides, if he wanted to return for a meeting he could fly on the company's nickel. She was sure his secretary would happily arrange that for him. That's it! Enough! Time to put my plan into action.

Janie walked into the kitchen where Jack stood in front of a kitchen cupboard. He was staring at the canned food, holding onto the open door as if the hinges were loose.

"Janie, are we out of peanut butter? I can't find the jar in the fridge and where are my favorite crackers? My strawberry jam disappeared! They're not where I usually put them. Did you move them?"

Her eyes glazed over. Yes, she liked the idea of moving immediately. Now she had to label all the shelves in the fridge and the cupboards so he can find everything he wanted.

Funny, CEOs can write big reports and hold important board meetings but couldn't find a single jar of peanut butter in a cupboard or refrigerator.

Jack Ramsey was tall and slim, with a full head of dark brown hair salted with gray. A handsome man well-liked for his personality and kindness. He played a great game of tennis, loved squash, and enjoyed a Sunday golf game,

instead of spending it with Janie at church. He was a C-and-E Christian, along with baptisms and weddings.

Arizona would be a great place for him. Hiking the mountain trails and walking in the Sonoran desert would keep him busy. He's a bit of an amateur photo buff and would have plenty of opportunity for that. He could photograph all the Saguaro cacti and the birds. There are enough plants and animals in the desert to keep him occupied for months.

Yes, moving to Phoenix is in the cards. Now it's a matter of dealing the right card to him and it's not the joker.

She pulled the jam and the peanut butter out of the refrigerator and put crackers on his plate. He sat at the kitchen table reading his *Wall Street Journal*, deep into an article on economics while he enjoyed his snack. Maxine, their cairn terrier, sat beside him head on his right shoe, perfect bliss.

"Jack, I have a great idea! Why don't we sell the house and move to Phoenix? You can golf all year round and we'd be closer to the kids. Houses in Phoenix are inexpensive right now. If we sold our house here, we could make money and buy a house there with the money from the sale. Our house is over six thousand square feet, much too large for just the two of us. Think of the acre of lawn you would have to mow here if we have to let go of our gardener." She waited for his response but he was silent.

"Jack? Are you listening to me?" He shuffled his papers, folded the *Journal*, placed it in a separate pile of read newspapers, then picked up the *New York Times*. So organized! He lifted his head out of the *Times*, and looked at Janie as though she were a pesky mosquito spoiling his peace.

"I heard you, Janie. I don't want to mow our lawn or any lawn for that matter. I would be out there every weekend pushing a mower. I can get my exercise other ways."

He rattled his paper, scissors on the table in front of him, ready to clip an important article in the paper. He saved all those articles for future reference and had many boxes of articles that he has clipped over the years. His office was a real fire hazard of old newspaper clippings in boxes. The year, month and subject were labeled on each box, easy for him to identify.

When he's ready to give a talk he goes through the papers and pulls out what he needs to write his speech, and then files the papers back into the correct box. He got annoyed with their daughter who calls him Jack Scissorhands.

"Besides, its warm all year in Phoenix and you don't have to mow the grass, just plant a cactus and rocks and you're finished."

Jack hid behind his newspaper. "Phoenix? Why Phoenix? I like it here. I'm close to my company in case they need my advice or counsel on any matter. I still meet with the staff from the office once a week for dinner. I have my Rotary meetings and my Sunday golf games with the board members. What would I do there? It would mean starting over for me with people that I have no interest in meeting. My core group is here and I can talk to them in business language, not on the weather or other mundane items. I won't even consider it. Case closed!"

He shuffled his paper and continued reading, ignoring her. She rolled her eyes and gave him a sympathetic look.

"Jack ... its time to move on, change your life, get away from the company. They don't want you interfering with their work. You're retired. You have to let go sometime. Enjoy yourself. Let's start a new life. We'll become snowbirds and fly away to Phoenix! Look at it as a new adventure!"

"Snowbirds? You mean birds that fly south for the winter? Snowbirds come from the arctic and by the way, they are called snow geese not snowbirds."

That's all she needed, an encyclopedia description. Was he living in a cave?

“Oh, Jack. It’s just a term that describes people who leave their cold states to winter in Florida or Arizona where it’s warm, just like birds that migrate south for the winter. Even my relatives in Canada fly south for the winter. They return home at the first sign of spring. Yes, just like the snow geese.

“There’s a website called ‘Arizona Snowbirds’ that helps retired people get settled for their winter stay in mobile parks. They have a great time and return year after year meeting their friends at these mobile parks.”

He lowered his newspaper and gave her a look that would melt ice.

“I’m not living in a trailer park, Janie.” He raised his voice as if she didn’t hear him.

“Why would I want to leave the comfort of my home for a narrow aluminum box, sitting there day after day doing nothing? I definitely do not like that idea. It may be all right for you but not for me.”

“No one says you have to live in a trailer park, Jack. It’s just an example of what retirees do every year. It seems to me that it’s better than buying a home and finding out you don’t like it. We could try it out, don’t you think? Some of those trailer parks are very upscale and classy. You would be surprised at the people who do live in them. It’s not like the movies.”

She was slowly wearing him down. She had to keep her cool so he wouldn’t lose his. She needed to keep pushing and knew he would eventually agree.

“Hmmm, let me think about it. I don’t want to rush into anything just yet. What if we don’t like it there? What do we do then?”

She watched as he pushed his chair away from the table and folded the precious newspapers, neatly placing the stack on the small table beside the chair. Maxine stood beside him wagging her tail. He reached down and stroked her black head.

“I’ll take you out later, Maxine.” She pushed her ball toward him with her nose and he threw it down the long hallway letting her chase it. She brought it back dropping it at his feet waiting hopefully, but he ignored her.

Janie went to her office on the second floor, and gathered all the brochures and magazines on Arizona that she had collected from AAA and the local library over the past week. The web gave her information on the different communities in several areas surrounding Phoenix. She put them on the table in front of Jack. He was eating his breakfast of oatmeal and drinking black coffee, no cream with a just pinch of sugar. She hoped she made the coffee the way his secretary does. She didn’t want to be outdone.

“Go through these and see if you think you might like some area of Phoenix.”

She pretended to be busy at the sink sneaking a peek as he stared at the brochures for a moment, and then slowly pulled the top one toward his bowl of oatmeal with his index finger, almost afraid to touch it. He took a spoonful of oatmeal as he read the brochure, then tossed it aside without any caustic comments.

“I don’t want to live in a retirement center. I wouldn’t want to live in an entire community of retired people who have nothing to do. Definitely not my cup of tea.”

“Wait a minute, Jack. No one said you have to live in that type of community, either. There are lots of great areas surrounding the city. Take a look at Chandler or the area by South Mountain. Goodyear is another nice suburb. Scottsdale has some beautiful housing communities that are on the desert. Gilbert is another popular area for snowbirds. With your two degrees in geology and chemical engineering you might find something interesting to do in Phoenix. Perhaps start a company?”

“I’ll look at them later, ok?” He finished his breakfast, walked into his office and shut the door. Well, at least he looked at some of the brochures. At last, she had a few minutes to herself, alone. Pure heaven!

She pattered around the kitchen cleaning up the breakfast dishes before sitting down to read the *Times*. She heard his door open.

“Is it time for tea yet? Could I please have a cup and a cookie before I check my e-mail.”

“Yes, Jack. I’ll get it for you. Didn’t you just finish your breakfast?” She turned the electric teakettle on and waited for the water to boil. She pulled out the teabag and put it in the cup alongside a cookie on the saucer.

“Well, yes, but the tea would be nice right now.” He walked back to his beloved office and closed the door. It’s a small room off the den set up as his office — off limits to the house staff, also known as Janie. She never went there, not even to clean it. He does that. It’s his kingdom — crown, scepter and velvet robe included.

All she could do was plant the seed and wait until he absorbed the information that would take time to sink in. His brain was still in CEO mode and only registered business information, not ordinary, mundane trivia. She would talk to a real estate agent about selling the house after they returned from Phoenix.

CHAPTER 2

Janie rose early the next morning before Jack could give her his order for breakfast. She mused she should have worn a French maid’s outfit with a little white hat pinned to her hair, and a black revealing blouse or maybe just a see-through apron to get him started in the morning. What would the neighbors think?

The day before, she had talked to her good friend, Shirley Bitteworth, who gave her the name of the real estate company to call in Basking Ridge. Shirley said Mrs. Chomsky was easy to work with and honest.

She made Jack his oatmeal and pulled two eggs from the fridge ready for his order. She made a pot of coffee and enjoyed drinking it in silence, one of the pleasures of waking early.

Jack entered the kitchen, dressed in his office attire; dark blue dress pants, and a light blue, long-sleeve dress shirt, ready to go if someone from the office called him.

“Janie, where’s my juice? Did you make up the smoothie for me? Can you put it by my computer, please?”

“Can’t you get your own juice?”