

Adelaide Einstein

A Novel By
April L. Hamilton

This Excerpt Copyright April L. Hamilton © 2008
All Rights Reserved

One: Origins of the Universe

Today Adelaide looks back on that unhappy meeting with Ms. Warner as her point of departure, as the beginning of her real life and her new career. If she could've had just a glimpse into a crystal ball that day and seen just a fraction of all that was in store for her, she wouldn't have felt so worthless and stupid. But at the time, getting fired certainly didn't seem like a good thing.

As a volunteer nurses' aide, Addie's job description basically consisted of any and all non-medical tasks deemed too distasteful or boring to be performed by the nursing staff. It had been an especially difficult morning and by ten a.m. she could already feel a headache coming on.

Pushing her cart full of used bedpans toward the laboratory, she decided to take a detour to her locker at the nurses' station to grab a couple of aspirin. She made another quick stop at the drinking fountain in the regrettably small alcove just outside the lab. She bent over to add some water to the rapidly dissolving tablets in her mouth, reminding herself as she had so often reminded her children and husband that although they may not have that nice, easy-to-swallow coating, the generic aspirin tablets work just as well for half the price of the name brands.

As her mouth hit the stream of water her ample hind quarters hit the edge of the cart, sending it sailing down the hall at top speed on a collision course with Dr. Knowles, the Chief of Surgery. She immediately dashed after the cart in spite of the chalky, bitter remnants of undissolved aspirin still coating her tongue, wailing, "Gang way! Gang way!"

The ever-observant Dr. Knowles looked up just in time to drop his clipboard and carefully brake the oncoming cart with both hands, bringing it to a harmless stop just centimeters from his crisp, white coat and prompting sighs of relief from all onlookers. By then, Addie's forward momentum was beyond her control but the hallway was not quite wide enough for her to sidestep the cart and the now horrified, fully comprehending Dr. Knowles.

The noisy, messy pileup of herself, Dr. Knowles, the onlookers, and the cart with all its passengers was clearly inevitable and all she could think to do in that final moment was shrug and smile in what she hoped would come across as an expression of utmost regret and apology. Dr. Knowles was too busy scrambling backward and clawing for his clipboard-cum-shield to notice, but he ultimately failed in both endeavors anyway and fell. It came as no surprise when Addie was summoned to the Administrator's office.

"Adelaide," Ms. Warner began apologetically, "you already know what I'm going to say." She was using that slightly condescending tone so typical of younger people who occupy positions of authority over the middle-aged. The unspoken meaning of that tone is, "We both know you've outlived your usefulness ma'am, and I just hope you can appreciate all I've done to try and make the best possible use of you during these few remaining months of your shrinking lucidity."

Nervously twisting her hands around a pencil, Addie protested, "But it was an accident!"

Ms. Warner dropped Addie's personnel file on her desk from a height of about a foot for emphasis, allowing its weight to be heard. "You have way too many accidents." She began leafing through the stack of incident reports. "May 12: shredded an entire day's worth of lab results. May 20: misplaced the ER's crash cart. June 1: entered OR 5 during surgery without permission, or observance of sterilizing procedures. June 5: disposed of thirty-eight specimen vials before their contents were biopsied. June 18: set fire to the broom closet in Admitting..."

"Now wait a minute," Addie broke in, "I thought it was proven that some other employee had been smoking in there, against hospital policy too, and I just happened to knock the lit cigarette into the wastebasket. I wouldn't call that 'setting fire', exactly."

Exasperated, Ms. Warner sighed and picked up the open file. "I would call it five incident reports in two months: two in May, three in June. It is now July seventh. If this pattern continues I can expect a total of four incidents from you by August and upwards of thirty by Christmas. I'm afraid I can't have it. The hospital can't have it."

"I can work harder, I can be more attentive," Addie implored. "Just please, don't fire me!"

Ms. Warner shook her head. "I'm sorry Adelaide, but today was the last straw. At least no one was hurt in any of these other situations," she explained, motioning toward the incident reports, "but today's accident broke Dr. Knowles' tailbone, and it could have been much worse. It could have been a patient, and we could've been slapped with a lawsuit. I know your heart is in the right place and you're the hardest working volunteer I've ever met, but maybe you're just not cut out for this kind of job." She stood up to escort Addie to the door. "I really am sorry."

When Addie got home she didn't know what to do with herself. She didn't usually get home until two and according to the kitchen clock it was only twenty minutes to one. Her son was away at camp and her daughter had a summer job at the mall, and of course Bob, her husband, wouldn't be home from work until about six. She finally decided to crack open that shrink-wrapped basket of spa essentials she'd received from her mother a couple of birthdays back and take a nice, long bath.

It was all so lovely and she knew how expensive it must be since it came from Neiman Marcus, and she had intended to save it for one of those special, romantic weekend getaways with Bob. The only problem with that plan was that she and Bob had never been on a romantic weekend getaway, not in all their twenty six years together. Even their honeymoon didn't qualify since she spent it mostly alone in a Des Moines hotel room while Bob attended his first Structural Engineers and City Planners convention.

They were a young, struggling couple and Bob was just starting out in his career with the city, so Addie was willing to make the sacrifice. After all, she'd dropped out of college to get married and didn't have any skills to speak of. She decided early on that if she expected him to support a family she'd have to get used to the demands of his job. She figured that once he was well established they could take some nice vacations together, and probably enjoy the trips more since they would have plenty of time and money to spend. But then the children came along, and Bob got more and more responsibilities at work and somehow, two decades got away from her before she realized it.

Now she undressed and put on her robe, paused in front of the full-length mirror on her closet door to inspect her 5'5" frame. "Not a bad face for forty-six," she said aloud, and it was true. She'd always looked ten years younger than her age, and her

graying, ash-brown hair was easy enough to manage with home colorings. She leaned in closer to inspect her eyes: still a beautiful hazel, lids still firm and very few crows' feet around the corners; if she were a man, she reflected, they'd be called laugh lines.

Now she stepped back, took a deep breath, clamped her eyes shut and braced herself for the impact. She simultaneously dropped the robe and opened her eyes. Her body was average for a woman of her age and activity level, meaning about fifteen pounds overweight, all of it stowed below the waistline and above the knees, but she thought she looked like the Elephant Woman.

She imagined lumps, wrinkles, and excess pounds where there were none, and even though she kept mentally repeating, "I am healthy and vanity is the enemy of the soul," over and over to herself, she couldn't make herself believe it. Unable to stand the view for a moment longer she shut her eyes and groped the floor for her robe, to hurry down the hall toward the bathroom, carefully averting her gaze as she passed the large mirror.

She pulled the silver basket from its hiding place at the back of the linen closet and gently sliced through the wrap with her cuticle scissors. The aroma of gardenia escaped and for a few seconds she really felt like one of those women on the TV ads for bath salts: glamorous, extravagant, and with nothing better to do than luxuriate in a steamy, perfumed bath. She carefully removed the wrapping and moved all of the items from the basket to the vanity counter. Addie was in heaven just looking at all of it.

She drew the bath, carefully measuring the prescribed two capfuls of bath oil and adding them to the water. She inflated the pillow and spent several minutes adjusting its placement. She washed her face at the sink and applied the facial mask and the hair mask. She took out two of the eye compresses and the terry mitt, carefully packed everything else back into the basket and put it under the vanity sink for the time being. She was sure she wouldn't be able to relax completely if she knew the jars and bottles were strewn all over the vanity while she was lounging in the tub. Finally she removed her robe, lowered herself into the almost uncomfortably hot water, closed the curtain, put on the eye compresses, and laid her head back on the pillow.

Almost immediately she heard the front door swing open and the sound of her daughter's voice. Addie sat up, holding her eye compresses in place, and stifled her

immediate reflex to call out a greeting. Patty would want to know what she was doing home so early and Addie hadn't worked out a response yet.

"No," Patty said, "she won't be home for at least half an hour. That's plenty of time!" Addie wondered who Patty was talking to, until a muffled but distinctly male voice responded. Addie heard Patty's bedroom door open and slam shut, so she pressed her ear up against the wall between the tub and her daughter's room, making a mental note to scrub the mud facial off the tiles before she got out of the bath later. There was no denying what Patty and her male guest were up to.

Addie mentally debated what to do, painfully aware of the time constraints imposed by the likely age and libido of her daughter's guest. Should she make just enough noise for them to realize they're not alone so that they'll stop, and hope that maybe they'll learn from this close call and will decide never to have sex again until they're both bound by the holy covenant of marriage? Should she bang loudly on the wall and say something threatening to the boy so he'll leave, and look into parochial school matriculation for Patty? Should she throw open the door and swoop in on them, order the boy to put his pants back on and get out, and make some flavored coffee for her and Patty to share over a heart-to-heart in the kitchen? Should she be a modern, sensitive parent and wait until they're finished and invite them both into the kitchen for some flavored coffee and a heart-to-heart?

Of course, she knew all along that she'd just wimp out and cower in the tub, silent and blind behind her mud mask and eye compresses, praying for premature ejaculation, and that she'd never say a word about it to Patty.

She heard some more muffled giggles and tumbles on the floor, and Patty said something that sent an icy chill down her back: "I know, let's do it in the shower!" Addie yanked the compresses off her eyes just in time to catch sight of her topless daughter and a nude friend when Patty ripped the shower curtain open. All three screamed and threw up their arms in a hopeless attempt at modesty, which was all the more hopeless for the boy due to his excited state. There was no avoiding the confrontation now.

Addie pulled her knees up to cover herself a bit and, trying to sound authoritative in spite of her nudity and mud-covered head, asked, "Patricia, what is going on here?"

Patty quickly pulled a towel off the rack and wrapped it around her torso, casually saying, "Mom, I didn't know you were home. We'll just go back to my room."

"Wait!" Addie exclaimed. "I have a good idea what you plan to do in there, judging by this boy's....this boy's..." she trailed off, groping for a word she could feel comfortable saying aloud.

"Uh, it's gone now, Mrs. Binchley," the boy said from behind Patty's shoulder, apparently imagining he might somehow salvage this awful first impression. Not stepping out from behind Patty, he stretched out one hand to wave and added, "Oh, I'm Todd, by the way. It's nice to meet you."

Patty rolled her eyes and slapped back at him, saying, "Shut up, Todd." She turned to Addie and continued, "Mom, I don't think we need to have an embarrassing scene here..."

"Well I think we already have, Patty!" Addie shot back.

Todd broke in with, "But it's not what it looks like, Mrs. Binchley..."

Both Patty and Addie snapped together, "Shut up, Todd!" and he shrank back behind Patty.

Patty continued, "This is my private business and I think we should keep it that way."

Adelaide was beside herself with disbelief. "Patricia, you are too young to be having...private business, and I have no intention of allowing you to carry on with any...with any of this ...private business in our home!"

What had begun as embarrassment on Patty's part was now evolving into anger. "Look Mom, this is no big surprise so don't act all shocked and horrified. You know I'm not a virgin."

Addie didn't know what to say. As much as it shamed her to admit it, even to herself, Addie knew Patty was right. She'd been finding empty condom wrappers in Patty's clothes on laundry day ever since last summer and although she felt a deep sense of motherly failure and loss when she found the first one, she also knew that

forbidding something to Patty was tantamount to an engraved invitation from Patty's perspective.

After consulting with her best friend, Gwynnie Cox, Addie was convinced that there was nothing more to be done about it than to be grateful Patty at least had enough sense to try and protect herself from disease or pregnancy. Gwynnie explained that by leaving the empty wrappers for Addie to find, Patty was clearly sending a message; since Addie had no idea how to handle the situation she decided to play dumb until Patty brought the subject up in some other way—conversationally, for instance. But it never happened, and though Gwynnie urged Addie time and again to take this bull by the horns, Addie's fear of saying or doing the wrong thing held her back.

The uncomfortable silence was dragging on. When he was finally sure he wouldn't be interrupting, Todd leaned in and gingerly offered, "Just so you know, Mrs. Binchley, Patty and me take art class together at school and we were really just going to do some sketches of each other. 'Cause you know, that's okay, to draw naked pictures of people and stuff for art class. That's like, totally respectable." He dashed back into Patty's room and returned with a ballpoint pen and a lined pad of paper. "See, we were just so startled that we dropped our drawing stuff," he added, holding out the pad and pen for Addie to see.

Patty shook her drooping head and covered her face with one hand. When she looked up, she and Adelaide exchanged glances. Patty seemed to be wordlessly conceding that Todd truly was embarrassingly stupid and that she'd have to stop seeing him for fear of being labeled stupid by association.

Feeling somewhat vindicated by Todd's dunderhead tendencies, Adelaide sat up a bit straighter and said to Patty, "Please ask your friend to leave now, Patricia. We will continue our conversation shortly."

She pulled the curtain closed and quickly rinsed herself off, wrapped her hair in a towel and her body in her robe and marched into Patricia's room; it was empty. She called out and searched the rest of the house, but it was no use. Patty was gone. Glumly sinking back into her bath, Addie wondered what Gwynnie would say if she were here right now.

Gwynnie was nine years younger than Addie and a divorced mother of four boys, so she tended to have a much more pragmatic view of things. Gwynnie despaired of

ever finding a man willing to take on such a large ready-made family, but Addie thought that a woman as pretty and smart as Gwynnie was a good catch for any man. Gwynnie considered herself a bit overweight, but Adelaide thought she was wonderfully voluptuous and even envied her figure a little. Gwynnie's hair was a gorgeous, natural auburn and she had the green eyes to go with it: her maiden name was Sullivan. Besides her looks, Gwynnie had a Bachelor's Degree in Finance and a terrific career as Controller at a bank.

She could be pretty adventurous too; she'd had a tiny dragon tattooed on her left hip, just low enough that her bikini bottoms would cover it, on the day her divorce was declared final. That was just one more thing Addie envied about her not the tattoo itself, because for heavens' sake what would Bob say, and Good Lord it must've hurt but having the courage to go out and do something like that. Gwynnie was always trying out the latest hairstyle or even color, while Adelaide had to make several trial runs to the drugstore cosmetics counter and mentally debate herself for weeks before buying a new blusher compact or lipstick, and even then she only did it when the dwindling supply of her old favorite forced her hand. Still, she and Gwynnie complemented one another perfectly.

They first met when Addie was a competing senior in her highschool swim club; Addie gave swimming lessons to Gwynnie's class of "Guppies" eight to ten year olds over the summer, but they didn't become friends until they met again at a PTA meeting nearly twenty years later. Gwynnie was still married at that time and seemed to look up to Addie for guidance with her husband and boys. Gwynnie spent her twenties trying to be Supermom, Super Wife and Super Career Woman all at once, but Adelaide had dropped out of junior college as soon as Bob proposed and to Gwynnie she seemed very content to be a wife and stay-at-home mother. In reality, both women had an idealized view of the other's life and each daydreamed about what it must be like to be the other from time to time.

The one thing Addie had no illusions about was Gwynnie's marriage. Gwynnie's husband, Henry, obviously had a drinking problem and sometimes he seemed capable of physical violence too. Although she couldn't do much to help with the marriage, at least Addie had been Gwynnie's steadfast rock all through the ugly divorce and custody proceedings. Somehow their roles had reversed and it seemed like Addie was the one

forever turning to Gwynnie for support nowadays. Addie would rather talk to Gwynnie than soak in a hot bath after this awful morning and worse afternoon, but she knew Gwynnie wouldn't be home from work for hours.

The more she thought about the scene with Patty, the more certain Addie became that it was all her fault for not speaking up last summer, when she first had the chance. Maybe she'd wanted to hold on to Patty's youth and innocence, or at least the idea of it, a little bit longer. She closed her eyes and remembered Patty in all her childhood guises, from tiny, contented infant to beaming toddler; from Brownie to Girl Scout; from Britney worshipper to feminist folkie. Over those seventeen short years, Patty grew into an attractive, intelligent, and assertive young woman. True, like most teenaged girls, she tended to try and act more adult than was safe and Addie knew that sex probably wasn't the only thing hiding behind the curtain of Patty's 'private business'. Still, she never failed to make the Dean's list and Addie had yet to see her made a fool by some boy.

With her strength and sharp mind, Patty's opportunities seemed endless. She would be going into her senior year of high school at the end of summer and Addie didn't want to see her make the same mistakes no, Addie thought, strike that! How did that bogus thought creep into her mind, she wondered. Only the most ungrateful, grasping woman in the world could have this beautiful home and wonderful family and still feel it's not enough. College, a career, romantic getaways, and adventure are probably all overrated, she thought. But for some reason, she wanted Patty to have them all.

Addie wasn't sure how long she stayed in the tub but she got out as soon as the water became noticeably cool, and she remembered to scrub the remnants of mineral mud off of the tiles before leaving the bathroom. After that she dried off and used some of the scented body lotion, put it away in its silver basket and put the basket back in the linen closet.

By the time she'd put on her clothes and makeup and fixed her hair it was almost 4:30. She felt an instant surge of guilt slice through her she'd forgotten to start Bob's dinner! Today's menu specified pot roast and there simply wasn't enough time for it now. Worse yet, nothing else was defrosted. Her eyes were immediately, unwillingly drawn to the Domino's Pizza Delivery magnet on the refrigerator. It was only there for

Bob's use on those rare occasions when Addie was out of town visiting her sister; Addie prided herself on never serving takeout pizza to her family in lieu of a real dinner. Now she stared at the magnet with the same mixture of desire and contempt a junkie might feel while eyeing his next hit.

"Well," she rationalized to herself, "Bob really likes pizza. He won't mind having pizza for dinner at all. He might like a change of pace. Who knows when Patty will be back, and whether she'll even want anything to eat? And pizza really can be nutritious and healthy if you order a good variety of vegetable toppings along with the meat." She glanced around nervously before picking up the phone to dial Domino's, as if she were afraid that someone (specifically, her deceased mother's ghost) might see her perpetrating this heinous act of non-nurturing on her family.

The phone rang as soon as her hand touched it, which Adelaide took as an obvious sign that God disapproved of her brazen pizza strategy. She quickly pulled her hand back as if burned by a hot iron and waited to see if the phone would ring a second time. If no, she'd know it was definitely a sign from God. If yes, it was still probably a sign from God but maybe with slightly less wrath. The phone did ring, so she picked it up while silently reassuring God that although she was only human and probably would continue to slip up from time to time, she would never again be tempted by the seductive face Satan puts on Domino's Pizza.

"Hello?" she asked, tentatively.

"Hi, hon." It was Bob. "Have you started dinner yet?"

"Well actually, no." She was about to launch into a long and emotional justification, but he responded too quickly.

"Good. I'm going to have to spend a couple more hours here so I won't be home until eight or so." This news was disappointing. With the kids out of the house and Bob working late, it would be a very lonely night. After a day like today the last thing Adelaide wanted was a solitary evening at home. She needed someone or something to keep her mind off her troubles.

"Do you really have to work late again? It's the second time this week."

"Yeah, I know. But at least now I won't be in the way while you're setting up for your sewing group."

She'd completely forgotten tonight was the night for her embroidery circle; what a relief! "Oh! Thanks for reminding me. It's been such a day..."

"Look hon, we're gonna have to cut this short. Someone's waiting for me here. Can we talk about it later?" Before she could answer he said, "Okay then. I'll grab some fast food on the way home. See ya later," and the line went dead.

Adelaide stared blankly at the receiver in her hands for a few moments before hanging it up. A barely perceptible feeling of anxiety pricked at her, but she had no idea why. She finally decided it was just an irrational sensation, very reasonable considering the day's events, and that she should be glad it turned out that Bob had to work late on a day she forgot to start his dinner on time.

As if to punish herself for getting fired, failing to adequately parent her daughter, and neglecting Bob's pot roast, she had a spartan supper of canned split pea soup and saltine crackers. After washing her bowl and spoon and wiping up the crumbs she set to work getting ready for the ladies. At half past six, the phone rang again.

"Hi, sweetie!" It was Gwynnie.

Addie continued arranging cookies on a tray as she talked. "Oh, Gwynnie! Am I glad to hear from you."

"Well what is it, dear?"

"I was fired today."

"Oh, no! That's terrible! But why?"

"Another 'incident'," Addie groaned. "I crashed a cart full of bedpans into the Chief of Surgery and it made a big mess and a lot of noise, and the Chief fell and broke his tailbone. Ms. Warner said she had no choice but to let me go."

"I'm really sorry, sweetie. How're you holding up?"

"Okay, I guess. But I had a run-in with Patty today, too. Can you believe she had a boy over here? And I'm pretty sure they were going to have...relations...if I hadn't interrupted them."

"Nothing surprises me. And you already knew she was having sex."

"Yes; I guess I'd just put it out of my mind. Anyway, Patty turned it all around and acted as if I were the one embarrassing her."

"Typical teenager. Did you straighten her out?"

Addie sighed. "No, not really. I told her to send her friend home and by the time I came out to talk to her she was gone. She's still not back. And Bob's working late again, so I'm all alone here getting ready for embroidery circle."

"That's what I called about. I'm running a little behind and I still have some things to do before I head over there, so I'll be late."

"Don't worry about it. Take your time."

"Okay. I'll see you later."

"Bye."

Gwynnie turned to her boyfriend, who was lying on his stomach in bed next to her, and tapped his shoulder. "Bob," she asked Mr. Binchley, "why didn't you tell me Adelaide was fired today?"

Bob turned over and sat up. "I didn't know."

* * *

Celia usually arrived first for embroidery circle. She and Adelaide met at a local crafts fair several years back and quickly fell to discussing their shared love of needle arts. At about 5'1" and one-eighty, Celia made Adelaide feel positively svelte. Addie thought Celia's long, black curly hair and dark eyes were quite lovely, and at forty Celia was certainly still young enough to get herself into shape if she really wanted to. She'd always seemed much too busy with her crafts projects and her job at the yardage store to be too concerned about dating.

The embroidery circle was actually Celia's idea to begin with, but Adelaide was easily persuaded to serve as hostess when Celia explained how tiny her efficiency apartment was. After seeing it for herself Addie wondered how Celia managed to comfortably navigate the closet-sized bathroom and bathroom-sized kitchen. The claustrophobic sitting area in front of the kitchen had to serve as a living room, dining room and bedroom all in one so Celia kept a sleeper sofa and a collapsible table and chairs in it.

The one time she and Addie shared some coffee and brownies at that table was remembered by Addie as positively harrowing; Addie felt certain that Celia's put-upon chair would snap into toothpicks at any moment and couldn't restrain herself from continually reaching out a hand to steady the table each time Celia shifted and brushed against it. Aside from such practical concerns as broken furniture or spilled coffee, Addie really didn't have a problem with Celia's weight. Celia, however, was another matter.

She arrived on time, seven p.m. on the dot, and the evening began, as usual, with one of her God-I'm-So-Fat stories. "Oh my God, Adelaide. I'm so fat!" she announced with a look of wide-eyed surprise, as if it were something she'd just noticed while standing on Adelaide's porch. She settled herself in the corner of the sofa and started to get all of her supplies into position. Her current project was an embroidered reproduction of Monet's Waterlilies and it was coming along very nicely.

"Addie," she continued, "I had to run out to the market on my lunch hour today, just to get some knee highs because mine had a run." She was in the habit of justifying each trip to the supermarket. "So as I'm pushing my cart down the frozen food aisle," and why she needed a cart just to buy knee highs was a question Adelaide decided not to ask, "I catch sort of a reflection of something behind me in the glass door of the frozen food case, you know, just in my...what's that word? My...peripheral vision.

"So I'm thinking maybe it's a little kid who got lost or who knows what, and when I stop and look over my shoulder, oh my God Adelaide, when I look over my shoulder," and here she paused, shut her eyes, took a deep breath and put a hand to her chest for effect, "it was my ASS!"

Luckily, the doorbell rang before Adelaide could respond. It was Beth, one of Addie's now ex-coworkers from the hospital and a registered nurse. Beth's brow furrowed as she said, "Adelaide, I'm so sorry! I just heard the news, right before I left work, or I would've called!"

Beth was virtually the exact opposite of Celia in every way. Tall, thin, blonde, blue-eyed and twenty-two, she should've been roundly despised by Addie and her other friends, but Beth was just sweet and chaste and dense enough that she brought out the motherly side in them in spite of her beauty. She became the innocent daughter each woman never had, always adopting an attitude of awe and admiration around them. "I

feel just terrible about it, really," Beth continued as she took her place in the recliner next to Celia.

"Feel terrible about what?" Celia asked, already stitching.

Beth looked stricken. "Oh, you didn't want anyone to know," she half-whispered to Adelaide. Turning to Celia she blurted, "About my cat. My cat died today," and calmly removed her own project from its tote bag. Beth was working a design of two cartoonish puppies playing tug-of-war with a sock. It was a cross-stitch design, but not truly counted cross-stitch because the design was stamped on the linen. For counted cross-stitch, which Adelaide preferred, the stitches are made on blank linen according to a reference chart, making it necessary to count the number of stitches of each color in each row of the cloth.

"I didn't know you had a cat," Celia said.

"Well yes, I did," Beth responded, not looking up from her work. "Until today. Because now he's dead. Okay, next subject."

Celia snickered affectionately, "She is such a lousy liar, Addie. Come on, what's she talking about?"

"Nothing important. I got fired today, that's all," Adelaide said, trying to sound breezy as she took a seat next to Celia.

"Oh, honey," Celia said, dropping her design in her lap and putting a hand on Adelaide's shoulder. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," Adelaide said. "I mean, it's a huge let-down and I was pretty upset about it at first, but I'm just fine now. Really." But she began to sniffle and mist up.

Celia put an arm around Addie's shoulders and started murmuring things like, "It's okay," and "There, there," and "Go ahead, let it all out," as Adelaide began sobbing in earnest.

Beth also put her work aside and came over to kneel next to the sofa and pat Addie on the knee. She felt pretty ineffective, but she couldn't think of anything else to do. I know a lot of people at the hospital, she thought to herself; there must be someone looking for volunteers. She started mentally reviewing all of her contacts. Yes! The oncology hospice, of course! "Addie," she said excitedly, "you should apply for a position at the hospice. I know the Chief of Staff over there and she's always looking for help."

"Really?" Addie sniffled, looking up.

"Sure," Beth chirped brightly, "they have a lot of trouble getting any volunteers over there because all the patients are terminal, so it's just death, death, death all the time." She noticed that Celia looked a little nauseated and saw that Addie was also stunned into silence, so she elaborated. "I mean, not that's it's gross or anything. The patients usually go home in the end. To...pass, I mean. They just need people to visit with the patients who are lonely, like reading to them or playing board games or whatever. But it's still hard to get volunteers because either you don't like the patient you're assigned to, like he's just totally crabby and mean or something, or you do like the patient you get, but they go and die."

"Well I think it's the least any of us could do for someone who's dying, to spend a little time and kindness," Addie said, drying her face and cheering at the prospect of renewed usefulness. "But would the hospice want me, with my record? I do tend to have a lot of...accidents."

Beth made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "They'll take anybody." Celia glared at Beth from over Addie's shoulder. "Oh, sorry. That didn't come out right. I just mean that they really need all the help they can get. And they'd be lucky to get someone like you, Addie. You're so thoughtful and kind. I'm sure you could get a smile out of the absolute crabbiest patient."

"Well they have every reason to be crabby, Beth," Adelaide said, already feeling a sense of connection to these phantom charges. "They're sick with cancer and undergoing painful, humiliating treatments. I would be crabby too."

"I know," Beth said sheepishly, "I only mean that I don't think I could handle it, but I bet you'd be just great. I'll give you a number to call before I leave."

Gwynnie had just rung the Binchley's bell when Bob came up from behind and tapped her on the shoulder. "Hey!" she whispered harshly. "You said you were stopping for gas on the way over! We should never arrive at the same time!"

Adelaide opened the door before he could answer. "Ah! My two favorite people," she said as they all stepped into the foyer.

"Uh, look who I ran into on the porch," Bob said, trying to sound jokey. "Hey, what're the chances of that, huh?"

Adelaide caught his tone and decided to join in on the gag. "Oh, about one in a million I guess," she said, grinning wryly. "Is there something going on between you two?" she asked with mock jealousy.

Bob and Gwynnie looked at one another anxiously, not quite certain that Adelaide was joking, and asserted, "No!" in unison, quickly dissolving into nervous laughter.

Addie turned up the seriousness on her expression just to get a rise out of them. When Gwynnie was within a breath of spilling the truth Addie finally noticed that there was a palpable tension in the air, so she quickly cracked a smile and said, "Okay, bad joke. I guess we all know there's no love lost between you two. If I'd come to the door a moment later, I'm sure you'd have been at each other's throats!"

Bob and Gwynnie exchanged relieved glances and relaxed slightly. Bob tried to reinforce Addie's observation by saying, "Well hon, you know I don't try to interfere with your relationships, but you can't expect me to like all of your friends." This was very true; he'd only slept with two of them to date. The other was years ago, and she and Adelaide had long since fallen out of touch. Adelaide was never the wiser.

Gwynnie added, "And I can't spend five minutes talking to Bob before we find something to argue about." This was also very true. The sex was great, but there was no real relationship to speak of.

"Career women," Bob huffed, rolling his eyes for Addie's benefit.

"Misogynist pigs," Gwynnie snapped, irritated at Bob's lack of finesse and knowing that there was more than a grain of sincerity in his comment.

Now it was Bob's turn to be annoyed. Just because she had the cover of Adelaide's presence was no reason for Gwynnie to be so bitchy. "Overeducated, undersexed Feminazis," he countered accusingly, leaning in to face Gwynnie and squeezing Adelaide between them.

"Now just a minute," Adelaide protested, but Gwynnie was already leaning back and firing her next salvo.

"Brainless jerks who follow their dicks around like dogs on a leash!" she half-shouted.

Bob pushed Addie out of the way, forgetting the place and circumstances for a moment, and got nose to nose with Gwynnie. "You should be glad there are men who

only follow their dicks, because no man who was following his brain would ever end up on your doorstep!" he exclaimed.

"That is quite enough!" Addie yelled, getting between them and pushing them apart. She turned to Gwynnie. "Such language, in our home!" she said. She turned to Bob. "And speaking in that tone of voice to a woman, and my best friend besides!" Bob and Gwynnie seemed to deflate a bit, so she stepped back to address both of them. "I think you should be ashamed of yourselves. Would it kill you to try and get along together, just for my sake?" They both grudgingly shook their heads. Addie continued, "Now I want you to apologize to one another."

Bob sighed and offered his hand to Gwynnie. "I'm sorry, Gwynn."

Gwynnie took his hand and shook it. "Me too." She squeezed his hand harder and added, meaningfully, "We should both make more of an effort to control ourselves around Adelaide."

Addie smiled, very pleased with her little feat of diplomacy. "All right," she said as they started down the hallway together. Bob took a sharp left at the kitchen and the ladies continued on to join the others in the living room.

When they arrived, Celia looked up from her work and said, "Gwynnie, hi! What kept you?"

Two: Controlled Experiments

Embroidery circle ran late and by the time Addie headed off to bed Bob was already asleep. She decided not to tell him about getting fired right away; if she could get in as a hospice volunteer she'd never have to tell him at all. He never showed much interest in her volunteer work anyway, and she really couldn't blame him. She only started taking on these assignments a couple of years ago to bury some of the dead hours between taking the kids to school in the morning and picking them up again in the afternoon, and since she'd failed at every one so far it was a relief that none of them mattered to Bob.

He would always laugh off Addie's latest job failure as if he'd expected it to happen sooner or later, and although Addie was certain this was just his way of helping her not to take any of it too seriously, his cavalier approach could be hurtful. The jobs she took weren't very interesting, but she kept hoping that in her small way she could have a meaningful impact on the world in spite of her lack of education and skills. If she couldn't be a Gwynnie Cox, she'd at least try to be some tiny approximation.

The next morning Addie steeled herself and went to confront Patty, only to find Patty wasn't in her room. It looked like the bed had been slept in, but Addie knew that was easy enough to fake. She sat down on the rumpled bedclothes and thought back to her own years as a high school student. Had she been so headstrong and outspoken? No. But she could remember girls who were just like Patty, even in those days, even in her small hometown of Earle, Montana.

At the time she thought they were kind of ridiculous, with all their talk of equal rights and women in the military. After all, she'd thought, what woman in her right mind would want to slave away in the rat race or defend her life on a battlefield if men were already willing to do it? A lot of the feminist rhetoric still sounded absurd to her, but Addie was beginning to feel like a dusty relic now that her children were growing up. All she'd ever dreamed of, all she'd ever prepared for, was to be a Mommy. Now it seemed Patty needed something else, and all her boy Eric wanted was to be left alone.

She used to think being a supportive wife to Bob would be fulfilling enough once the children were grown, but now she wasn't so sure. Bob's career didn't seem to be leading him down the path of public service or even to the corner office, so all the entertaining Adelaide anticipated might never happen. And what if she couldn't find a volunteer job she could hold on to? What if the hospice took one look at her record from the hospital and laughed in her face? Oh well, she thought. Might as well get it over with.

Adelaide sighed, stood up and made the bed. She touched up her hair and makeup and went straight to the hospice. She thought of calling first, but finally decided that it might be a good idea to go check things out in person. What if it was a big, depressing death ward, with people just lying around marking time until the Grim Reaper came to call? Maybe she wouldn't even want to volunteer there. Much to her surprise, as soon as Adelaide stepped into the lobby all her fears were put to rest.

The lobby was really more like a large, airy atrium. Sunlight streamed in through skylights and a virtual jungle of plants splashed out from large, elevated planters which surrounded the semicircular front desk. Probably taking a tip from luxury hotels, the architect had integrated an immense saltwater aquarium into a freestanding wall behind the desk. It was full of colorful fish and other sea creatures, and Addie thought it was just breathtaking. She walked around to the back of the wall to take a closer look and found a pleasant sitting area with current magazines neatly stacked on the tables; she was surprised to see that some of them were children's magazines.

"Unfortunately, children get it too," a woman's voice whispered from behind her. Adelaide turned to face a tall, slender woman in peach-colored scrubs and a lab coat. The woman held out her hand and said, "Hi. I'm Dr. Mадiera. And you must be here to see Jakob." She began to lead Adelaide out of the lobby and down one of the hallways which radiated outward from the lobby in the design of a spoked wheel.

Adelaide was momentarily flustered and Dr. Mадiera was walking so quickly that she could hardly keep up, let alone clear up this matter of whom she had come to see. "Dr. Mадiera," she began, "my name is Adelaide Binchley and I used to volunteer across the way at the hospital—"

"Oh," Dr. Mадiera said, "I didn't know that Jakob had any acquaintances in The Big House."

Adelaide wanted to get a look at the place as they scurried down the hallway, but she knew that she was klutzy enough even with both eyes forward and at a regular walking pace, so she resigned herself to the task of merely getting wherever it was Dr. Madiera was going all in one piece and without knocking anything over. "Well, actually Dr. Madiera, he doesn't," she offered. "No, wait. That isn't what I meant. Maybe he does, I don't really know, but—"

"And here we are," the doctor interjected, ushering Addie into a semi-private room. It had two hospital beds in it, one of which was bare, but otherwise it didn't look much like a hospital room at all. "I've got rounds right now, but I'll come by later to check on Jakob." She smiled and patted Addie's shoulder. "It's so nice to see a visitor here for Jakob at last," she said, and vanished before Addie could even turn around or object, leaving her alone with this...Jakob.

"Ah, my catch of the day," he said, smiling. He looked thirtyish and bookish, with brown, curly hair and blue eyes behind wire-rimmed spectacles. He wore black jeans, a white t-shirt and sneakers, not a hospital gown. His illness, in whatever form it was, had clearly taken a toll on him but Addie could tell that at one time this thin, pale man had been quite handsome.

"Catch of the what?" asked Adelaide, wondering if the poor thing had begun to lose his mind to sickness as well.

"Catch of the day," he reiterated, coming over to lead Addie to a chair next to the one he'd been sitting in. "I'm Jakob, Jakob Pankowicz." After Addie was seated he asked, "Am I keeping you from an appointment, or can you stay for a few minutes?"

"Oh, no. You're not keeping me from anything." Addie couldn't get over how homey the room looked. There was a big picture window next to their chairs, which were comfy, overstuffed wingbacks upholstered in an old-fashioned ticking. She saw a bird feeder attached to the outside of the window by suction cups, and noticed that the small outdoor space between this "spoke" of the building and the next was landscaped with wildflowers and small trees. A television set and VCR resided in a knotty pine armoire and there was a matching desk and bookcase. The shelves overflowed with books, jigsaw puzzles and videotapes. Jakob's voice interrupted her reverie.

"Pretty nice, huh?"

“Oh yes, it’s just lovely here. Not at all like…” Addie paused, not sure what would be the most sensitive way to finish her sentence.

“Like a cancer ward? Well, there’s no reason besides money they can’t all look this way. Even Death takes a coffee break once in a while.”

“The design of this place is really amazing,” Addie went on, rising to her feet, turning slowly in a circle and taking it all in. “It’s a very unique sort of building. I like the way they put the lobby right in the middle and made all the hallways go outward from there in a circle.”

Jakob chuckled ruefully. “Yes, I noticed that myself on the first day. It occurred to me that if God is looking down on us, what He sees is a huge, white asterisk. Like cancer is some kind of footnote to humanity.” He turned away slightly and acted as if he were addressing God. ““Oh, by the way, here’s some people dying of a horrible disease; nothing you need to concern yourself with, this is just an FYI.””

He looked a little troubled, so Addie tried to redirect their discussion. “What did you mean by ‘catch of the day’?”

“Oh, that,” Jakob brightened and laughed. “I hope you don’t mind being involved in my little prank. Dr. Madiera nags me constantly about not having a support network—you know, friends and family to talk to and to help me out when I’m sick—so when she started in on me yesterday I decided to lie and tell her I’d have a visitor today just to get her off my back. I thought that would be the end of it, but of course she pressed me for details. I should have just confessed then and there, but for some reason I decided to dig myself in a little deeper and bluff big.

“I told her that a childhood friend of mine, an attractive woman in her thirties, would be coming to call today at ten. Naturally Dr. Madiera had to see for herself if this was true, so she took a break from her rounds just to go out to the lobby and see if this woman friend of mine really existed. I expected her to march back in here alone, smug and mad at me, but apparently she saw you standing out there and assumed you were my visitor.” He paused for a moment. “And you are ?” he finally asked.

Addie didn’t know quite what to say. She held out her hand to shake. “I’m Adelaide. It’s nice to meet you, Jakob.” Having dispensed with the formalities, she responded to his implied question. “Well, no. I don’t mind helping you out. Still, she’ll find out soon enough I’m not really your childhood friend. What will you do?”

He winked and grinned. "I won't tell if you won't."

Addie felt flattered to be trusted with this little intrigue, not to mention mistaken for an attractive woman in her thirties, but she also felt Dr. Madiera had good reason to be concerned about this man. "Okay, I won't tell. But...Jakob, I don't want to pry, so you don't have to answer, but why don't you have a support network? Where's your family?"

His smile faded a little. "Look, Adelaide "

"My friends call me Addie."

"Okay. Look, Addie. I'm terminal. I have an inoperable tumor in my head and it's growing. Lucky for me, it's growing slowly enough that it's not really making me sick yet. The only reason I found out about it is because I fell off a ladder when I was cleaning my storm drains and I cracked my head hard enough to need an x-ray. The news came as a total shock at first, but I've had a long time to get comfortable with it. I don't want my friends and my mother to think of me as a dying man; I don't want to look into their eyes and see that they're already mourning me. None of them know the whole truth about my illness, and I intend to keep it that way."

"How much do they know?"

"They know I have cancer, but they think the chemo treatments I come here for are keeping it in remission. The weight loss, the thinning hair, the pale skin; they think it's all from the chemo. They think I'll gain back the weight and get healthy again when I'm all done with chemo in a year or so."

"And the truth is...?"

"In a year or so I'll be dead."

The harshness of his assertion struck Addie as shocking, but Jakob simply stated it as a fact, and as if it were a fact no more pertinent to him than the current weather conditions. She protested, "But how do you know? How can you be sure? And how can you be so calm about it?"

"I've known about the tumor for over eight months now. The chemo treatments slow its growth a little, but it's gone from the size of a marble to the size of a golf ball during those eight months. It will kill me eventually; frankly, I'm more concerned about losing my mind in the meantime. So far I only get the occasional killer headache, but I

know that sometime soon it's going to start creeping into parts of my brain that I actually use and need."

"Why bother extending your life with chemotherapy if you're not going to spend that time close to the people who care about you?"

"I am close to them. They just don't happen to know that I'm dying."

"How close is that?" Addie persisted, feeling herself sinking into frustration borne of helplessness with a dash of maternal instinct thrown in. "Don't they deserve to know all of these things that you're willing to share with me, a complete stranger?"

Jakob remained perfectly calm, but he stopped smiling. "Addie, I'm sorry if this sounds a little harsh, but all that you know about cancer you probably learned from movies of the week. So you probably think that having cancer is some kind of transforming experience, that the patient goes from denial to anger and ultimately finds a way to cope and keep a gentle sense of humor about the whole thing, and in the end some kind of new, experimental treatment puts the cancer in permanent remission so it turns out there was really nothing to worry about in the first place. Everyone learns, everyone grows, everyone breathes a big sigh of relief and goes home to hug their kids.

"I can tell you, it's not like that at all. Not when you're terminal. It's ugly and scary, and the only thing it transforms you into is a corpse. I can't be that bighearted, wise and reflective cancer guy on the TV, sharing pithy insights with my co-workers and telling jokes about my biopsy around the dinner table, waiting for Act Four when Dr. Miracle comes in and saves me at the last minute. I know it's not going to happen that way. And it's good for me to keep a firm grip on reality because at least I can use my remaining time wisely."

Unexpectedly, Jakob sat up straighter and smiled warmly again, closed his eyes and shook his head as if trying to clear his mind. "Whoa!" he exclaimed when he finally opened his eyes again. "All this stuff is a little heavy for midmorning, isn't it? And you didn't plan on having it dumped on you when you got here, did you? I'm sorry, Addie. I really need to learn when to shut up."

"Well," Addie asked tentatively, "does it make you feel any better to talk to someone about it?"

Jakob tilted his head and considered. He nodded. "Yes. Yes, I think it does. Maybe a little."

Addie glanced around the room nervously, feeling very inappropriately bold, and asked, "How about if I keep coming to visit with you and talk, maybe two or three times a week? I only came here to offer my volunteer services to the Chief of Staff, and it seems like you would enjoy the company as much as anyone else."

Jakob narrowed his eyes and put his chin in his hand while he considered. "Do you play Spades?"

* * *

If you enjoyed this excerpt and would like to keep reading, you can purchase the book in trade paperback edition from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) or [Kindle edition from Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). You can also buy the [trade paperback edition direct from the publisher's site](https://www.aprillhamilton.com), which pays a 20% higher author royalty than other outlets.

Additional ebook formats are available for purchase from [April L. Hamilton's website](https://www.aprillhamilton.com) (<http://www.aprillhamilton.com/buybooks.html>). Thanks for reading!