

GUESTBOOK

by

Patti Veconi

Patti Veconi
284 Park Place
Brooklyn, NY 11238
patti@veconi.com
917.620.4586

CHARACTERS

JAN: 50s, middle class, capable wife, mother and daughter.

MARY: Jan's older sister. Insecure.

PLACE

Lobby of a funeral home.

TIME

The present.

SETTING: Funeral home lobby. At center is a door into the viewing room, on one side of the door is a stand holding a guest book. On the other side of the door is an easel holding a large print of a woman's portrait. A heading above the photo reads: Margaret Jane Swan 1937-2022.

AT RISE: JAN, dressed in appropriately somber clothing, stands reading the guestbook. She touches the book reverently, looking at the names on the pages, then closes it and puts it into her large bag. She surveys the room one last time, then checks her watch. After a moment, MARY enters.

JAN

Everything okay? Are you ready?

MARY

The powder room is just lovely. I'll give them that. They know how to keep the bereaved comfortable. Scented candle – or maybe it was one of those burning oil lamps, like a potpourri, you know the kind? It was oranges and spices...so nice...and soft towels – the single-use kind – really plushy hand towels that you use once and drop in this pretty basket next to the sink. They put out hand lotion too. And the stalls are like little phone booths with the kind of doors that go all the way to the floor so you don't have to see someone's feet while they do their business.

JAN

Sounds very nice.

MARY

Did you use the powder room? You really should before we go. There could be traffic getting to the cemetery and then back to the house.

JAN

Yes, I used it earlier. Are you ready?

MARY

(Looking around.)

Where?...Is everyone gone?

JAN

They're all in the parking lot – waiting for us.

MARY

(Still looking around.)

Mother would have hated those flowers. Did they have to take all the flowers? I hate when they just pile flowers on top of a grave.

JAN

The flowers went in Tom's van. I don't think they'll pile them onto the grave.

MARY

Well we don't want them back at the house.

JAN

I think having them there would be nice.

MARY

It's – well, but – they're all carnations and Mother hated carnations.

JAN

They're not all carnations.

MARY

And they last for weeks; they'll be there, in the house, as reminders for the longest time.

JAN

The whole house is a reminder, Mary. I promise you, when we go to the house, it won't be the flowers that remind us of Mom.

(Pause)

MARY

(Taking the portrait off of the easel.)

All right then.

JAN

You know that's just a print. You don't need to save it.

MARY

Well, but don't you think one of the kids might like it? Or you?

JAN

That pictures was taken at my wedding; I already have it – and so do you.

MARY

What about the kids?

JAN

Mary, it's an 11 by 17 poster. Really, you can leave it.

MARY

If we had printed out prayer cards with this picture, then everyone could have had one.

(JAN ignores this comment.)

MARY (cont.)

That's the kind of thing you get with a church funeral.

JAN

Right, well, this was Mom's decision.

MARY

I think if she had thought about how much comfort a church funeral could provide – if she had thought about what it would mean for us –

JAN

She did think about it, Mary.

MARY

Well it's too late now.

JAN

(Trying to placate MARY and move on.)

This was nice. The service was very nice and it was exactly what she wanted. We did the right thing.

MARY

(More to herself, than to JAN.)

I never did the right thing in her eyes.

(JAN ignores this. MARY scans the room again. JAN watches her, waiting. She knows her sister is in a mood and needs to be treated delicately, but she is also losing patience.)

JAN

This has been a lot and the day isn't over. We should –

MARY

(Suddenly registering the empty bookstand.)

Where's the guest book? Did you take the guest book?

JAN

Yes, don't worry; I have it.

MARY

(Looking somewhat suspiciously at JAN.)

Oh? Well thank you. That was – you think of everything.

JAN

Are you ready?

(Pause. They stand looking at each other in what suddenly feels like a friendly impasse.)

MARY

You know, Mother called me...last week.

JAN

Last week?

MARY

Right before she slipped under.

JAN

She went into a coma at 10:14 Friday morning – the week before last. She wasn't making any phone calls last week.

MARY

Maybe it was nine or ten days ago...the point is she wanted me to know she was fine – that she wasn't afraid. It was as if she just needed to talk to me and then she could feel safe enough to let go.

JAN

You made her feel safe enough to let go? That's what you're saying?

MARY

It felt like that. I mean the timing was undeniable, right?

(JAN doesn't respond to this. She takes a breath, looking at MARY.)

JAN

Didn't you have a scarf?

MARY

Oh, I must have left it in the powder room!

(MARY hurries out. JAN'S phone rings and she answers it.)

JAN

(Into phone.)

We're coming, yes. She's just – it's just hard, you know. Two minutes...yep.

(MARY returns and stops, standing very still and looking at JAN, who is putting her phone away. After a moment, JAN looks up and notices MARY staring at her. She shakes her head and raises her eyebrows as though to say, "What?" MARY purses her lips, shifts slightly and seems to take an almost audible breath in.)

JAN (cont.)

What is it?

MARY

The guestbook. I'd like to have the guestbook...please.

(Pause. JAN holds her gaze and slowly nods.)

JAN

I see. Let's talk about it later, okay? Tom just called – everyone is waiting.

MARY

I bought that guest book and I'd like to keep it.

(In a split second, JAN decides to dig in. Perhaps this demand is the last straw for her.)

JAN

The funeral home provides it – it was part of the package.

MARY

I picked it out.

JAN

It was the smaller of two sizes – really, you can't /be serious.

MARY

(Firmly.)

It's the one thing I want, Jan. The one thing I'm asking for.

(Pause. This is really too much for JAN to hear.)

JAN

The one thing you're asking for? That's rich because I thought the one thing you had asked for was that I take a leave of absence from work to care for Mom. That I be the one to do all the heavy lifting with doctors and visiting nurses and then hospice and all the arrangements that end of life requires. That was – that was the one thing I thought you had asked for.

MARY

(Equally incredulous.)

Well you live here and you have a husband to help you. That's just what made sense. I couldn't pick up and leave my job for an indefinite amount of time. I visited – you know I came as often as I could – but you – it was easy for you.

JAN

Easy? What would you even know? You made choices. I made choices. It isn't my fault that you moved away, or that you're alone – or that you don't have children – and I'll tell you what else, Mary; it certainly isn't my fault that you're not happy.

MARY

(Stung.)

I'm happy. *(Beat)* And I know it was hard, caring for Mother – I don't mean to – *(Beat)* But you're lucky. You do have someone. You have a job that will still be there for you. And you have all these memories of her that I didn't get. Can't you just be generous?

JAN

Can't you just...not be selfish?

(Pause)

MARY

It would mean a lot to me to have the guest book.

JAN

So, no then?

MARY

No?

JAN

That's right, no; you can't not be selfish.

MARY

Oh, I thought you meant no to the guest book. Double negatives are so grammatically inefficient and confusing, Jan.

JAN

Well yes, that too. I mean, yes you can't have the guest book, either. Not yes I give a shit about double negatives.

MARY

I don't understand. Why is fighting with me about this so important? Why do you care so much?

JAN

Because all you do is take, Mary. And I'm just – I'm gived out.

MARY

Gived out?

JAN

I'm done giving – for now. I'm just tired. I don't want to fight – I'm just...I'm tired.

MARY

I'm tired too! I spent hours traveling this week and all the arrangements that had to be made and sleeping in a strange bed and – well I'm at least as tired as you are but I'm not standing here trying to be difficult.

JAN

I don't mean that kind of tired.

(JAN'S phone buzzes. She looks at it.)

MARY

I don't know what more you want from me, Jan.

JAN

(Putting her phone down. She hasn't heard MARY.)

What?

MARY

What more do you want? I've told you that the book is important to me. What more do you want me to say? *(Beat)* Mother wanted me to have it.

JAN

She...? Did she say that? Did she say, Mary, when I die, I want you to keep the guestbook from my funeral?

MARY

She wanted me to know there were people who cared for her. She told me everything was going to be okay and that I was going to be okay and I need that book so I can know – so

I can know who all those people are. So I can reach out to them and know them and – it's what Mother would have wanted me to do – I need to know these people.

JAN

Reach out to them? You're going to – what – add them to your Christmas card list?
(Indicating the book.)

The names in here – these are my neighbors, my co-workers, my friends...people I've known my whole life. You want to reach out to them? They're all sitting outside in the parking lot – right now – waiting for us to go bury Mom. You want to thank them for taking care of her? *(Beat)* That was me, Mary. Me. *(Beat)* So, you can just thank me.

(Pause)

MARY

Mother would have wanted –

JAN

Stop it. You don't know what she wanted – it's just all in your head – it's what you...think – think you know. Want to know what I think? What I think she would have wanted? She would have wanted you there...wanted you to just show up – to just be there.

(Pause)

MARY

I couldn't.

(Pause)

JAN

Right, well maybe your phone conversation wasn't what made her feel safe enough to let go; maybe it was what made her feel like giving up.

(MARY gasps. They stare at each other. The silence is broken by JAN's phone ringing. She looks at it then answers.)

JAN

(Speaking into phone as she exits.)

We're walking out now.

(MARY watches JAN go, then looks down at the poster photograph she is still holding. She carefully sets it back on the easel, looks once more around the room, composes herself and exits.)

END OF PLAY