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How to Make a Life

by Florence Reiss Kraut

By a stroke of luck Elena Rodriguez' son Alex, standing on the porch of his mother's two family house in the Bronx and holding his baby daughter in his arms, turned his back just at the instant the car drove down the street. Who knows why. Maybe it wasn't luck. Maybe Alex saw the glint of steel, the gun-flash reflected in the window, just before he turned, taking the bullet below his left shoulder so that it pierced his heart and left his baby unharmed.

Elena watched from the window as he spiraled down on the porch, cradling his baby, Alicia, in his right arm, lying over her, his blood pooling under and around them. Before the scream was out of Elena's mouth and she opened the screen door, the car with the shooter had screeched down the street and her son was dead.

She picked up the squalling Alicia, so covered in blood Elena only knew she was alive because of her cries. When she bent to touch her son's face, pressed against the wooden slats of the porch, his unseeing eyes were wide open. His brown hair waved over his ears. Just that morning she told him he needed a haircut. She cannot get the image out of her head.

Sometimes it is mixed up with pictures of her brother, sprawled on the street in Columbia fifteen years before even though she hadn't seen him murdered. She and her mother were making dinner and watching five year old Alex play with a small plastic car on the floor, when the door burst open and Elena's Aunt Sophia stood etched against the purple evening light. All she said was "Hector" and they knew.

After her brother was killed her mother told her to get out of the country. They sat at the kitchen table, stony with grief, and her mother said, "Go. Go to America. Change your fate." Elena wondered why. Everything seemed destined. She hoped it would be different here, but no. Your fate pursues you.

Elena cleans houses for a living. She cleans Selma Jewett's apartment and Anita and Paul Mitchell's house, where the three children leave their dirty clothes all over the floors. She does Harry and Margaret Gruber's place, so immaculate she wonders why they bother having her come, but she doesn't ask. And on Tuesday and Saturday she cleans Miriam Goldstone's house.

One Tuesday, two months after Alex's death, Elena is going about her business. She drops the six month old Alicia off at Marcy's Home Day Care on Wood Avenue. Then she turns left, drives her battered Ford Escort down Montgomery Street, past CVS and Shoe Emporium noticing that there is a fifty percent off sale and thinking she needs boots for the winter.

On the next street she passes the red brick building of Montgomery Middle school. Her heart begins to race. She averts her eyes from the playground. Too late. The light at the corner turns red and she is

forced to stop, forced to see the boys dribbling a ball on the cement basketball court, playing before school starts. She swallows hard, shuts her eyes tight and when she opens them it is fourteen year old Alex she seems to see bouncing the ball and arcing three-pointers from the back court. She grits her teeth, but as she pulls through the now green light she is sobbing anyway, the street blurring before her. She cannot see clearly. She pulls to the curb beside a fire hydrant, puts her head on the steering wheel and waits for the waves of grief to subside. Then she drives the three miles to Miriam Goldstone's ranch house on Telly Avenue.

Elena parks her car in the driveway and takes two breaths, wiping her still wet cheeks with the arm of her sweater. Beside her on the seat the cell phone buzzes. Lilly. She calls almost every day at nine o'clock. She says: "I want to come to see the baby." Sometimes she cries. She begs. But she never comes, and Elena doesn't tell her to. She just listens to Lilly's sobs and then hangs up. Today she does not pick up the phone. She gets out of the car and lets herself into the house with the key Miriam gave her the day she hired her, saying "Call me Miriam. I don't like to be called Miss Goldstone. Reminds me of school."

When she first came to Miriam's house two years ago Elena thought it smelled old and musty; it seemed unchanged, as if it had been that way since Miriam was a child and lived there with her parents. Furniture in the living room and dining room was covered with photographs of relatives, which Elena dusted carefully, looking at the pictures of people in old fashioned clothing and wondering about them. She polished the furniture, washed the curtains and the windows, and now, when she walks into the house, is pleased with what she sees.

It is quiet except for the ticking of the big grandfather clock in the corner. "Miriam, Miriam," she calls in a loud voice, waiting to hear the response drift down the hall from the bedroom. She hears nothing. She calls again, walking down the hall. There is no answer. The bathroom door is ajar. She pushes it open and finds Miriam shivering in the tub, her pendulous breasts dipping below the cooling water.

"*Ah Dio*," Elena whispers.

Miriam looks at Elena, her mouth trembling, and whispers, "I couldn't get out."

Elena is frightened, wondering what happened; she gets a huge towel, pulls the plug from the tub so the water swirls down the drain, and tugs and lifts with all her strength on Miriam's slack spongy arms. She averts her eyes in respect, trying not to look at the colorless nipples on the swaying breasts, the folds of belly flesh, the sparse pubic hair.

"I'll call doctor," she says as she envelops Miriam in a towel and leads her to the bedroom.

"No. No doctor."

“We should call doctor,” Elena repeats.

“I’m all right,” Miriam insists. “I just felt a little weak.”

Elena nods her assent. Just for now she will agree. But later maybe she will convince her. Miriam sits on the side of the bed, her legs dangling, as Elena wipes her dry, dresses her in a flannel gown, a woolen bathrobe that she finds in the closet, and socks from the bureau drawer. She helps Miriam down the hall to the dining room. This time Elena is the one to make the chamomile tea, spooning three teaspoons of sugar into the cup and stirring it well.

On Elena’s first day back to work after Alex died she was unable to do anything but sit at the mahogany dining table drinking chamomile tea out of a dainty china cup. For two hours Elena wept for her lost boy while Miriam sat with her and patted her hands. She told Miriam the story of her mother and herself, of the poverty, the grief, the teenage births, the progression of men in and out of her life, the deaths of their sons. She whispered how she felt destined to repeat her mother’s life. Elena wondered how an old woman like Miriam could possibly know what it felt like to lose a child, but she told her anyway. And Miriam was kind, the only one of her clients who paid her wages for the two weeks she didn’t work.

Now she puts the cup to Miriam’s mouth, but Miriam insists on holding it herself.

The teacup clatters against the saucer. Miriam’s hands are unsteady. She sighs. “You do it.”

Elena feeds the chamomile tea to Miriam with a teaspoon and Miriam slurps the liquid again and again until the cup is empty. Then she closes her eyes.

“More?” Elena asks.

“No.” Miriam picks at the tablecloth with chipped fingernails.

“I can give you manicure,” Elena says. “It will look nice.”

Miriam shakes her head. Finally she says, “I don’t know what I should do.”

Elena doesn’t know what to say. She looks around the dining room at the photos, makes a sweeping gesture with her hands. “Your family. Call them.”

Miriam ignores this. “Could you come and live with me? I would pay you well.”

Elena pulls back. “No. No. I have the baby—Alicia--now. “

Miriam nods, is silent for a while and then says, “Where is her mother? Why doesn’t she take her back?”

“Lilly. She no good. She uses drugs.”

“A drug addict? Your son’s wife is an addict?”

“She not his wife!” Then her voice softened. “Maybe not an addict, but she uses drugs. Heroin, coke. I don’t know. She does not even come to his funeral...”

At first Elena was enraged at Lilly’s absence, her lack of respect for the father of her baby. Then the police told her they thought the shooters might have been drug dealers settling a score. She knew that Alex never used drugs. She was sure it was Lilly’s friends who were responsible for Alex’s death. She would never forgive her.

“You better call your family,” Elena says to Miriam.

There is a long silence. “They’re gone,” Miriam says finally.

The words hang in the air. It doesn’t seem possible to Elena that all these people, posing in twos, threes, fours, laughing into the camera, standing austere and straight, could possibly be gone. So many pictures. Elena herself only has one picture of her mother, brother and aunt. Of Alex she has many, but she cannot bear to look at them.

“Dead? All of them?”

“Poland...my mother’s family... Germany...my father’s family...all dead, some before, some in the Holocaust. Do you know what the Holocaust is?”

Elena nods. “*Claro.*”

Miriam points to a picture of a corseted young woman, standing behind a seated man holding a baby girl. “That’s my mother, Lena” she says, pointing to the woman.

Elena says, “Lena. Sometimes my mother calls me that.” Elena examines the picture. “You look like her,” she says to Miriam.

“I know.” Miriam nods. “Sometimes when I pass the mirror I think I am seeing my mother there.”

“Is that you?” Elena asks, pointing to the baby.

“No.”

“Your sister?”

“Half. Her name was Fanny. She died before I was born. I had a brother, but he’s gone now. His wife, too. Just his children and their families are left.”

“You should call them.”

“I don’t see them much.”

“Still, you should call them.” Elena is silent, stunned by Miriam’s world. To be so alone, like that. Even she was not so alone. Her mother and a married brother in Columbia. Her Aunt. Mostly she had Alicia.

Elena’s cell phone rings. She glances at it, sees the number. Lilly again. She ignores it.

“Why don’t you answer?” Miriam says.

“It’s Lilly. It’s the same thing every day. She says, “I want to come to see my daughter.”

“She has a right. It’s her daughter.”

“No.” Elena clenches her fists, hides them in her lap. After a moment of silence, Miriam says, “You should give her a chance.”

Elena is furious, wild. She wants to howl *que esta diciendo*. Instead she says “A chance? I give her a chance? So she can take baby? You don’t know anything,” she shouts. “It’s her fault. All her fault.”

“What is her fault?”

“Alex. Alex dying. She was taking care of the baby. He goes to visit and find her high. Lying on couch, drooling he said. Alicia crying in her crib. Soaking wet, dirty. Alex grabbed the baby. He’s screaming at Lilly. He saw on the table, packets. White stuff. Lilly is yelling at him, don’t touch them, but he throws them in the toilet, takes the baby and brings her home to me.” Elena is crying now, her shoulders shaking. She can barely get the words out. “He tells me later they... they come for money for the drugs and he... he didn’t have it... the police think that’s why they shoot him...why they come back.”

Miriam is murmuring, “Oh I’m sorry, sorry, I didn’t know. I’m so sorry.”

“So don’t say...she, she can come to me...she can’t, she says she’s straight, is in rehab...I don’t care...I don’t care...You don’t understand...she can’t.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

The house is still. Elena’s sobs subside. Miriam gets up. She walks to the kitchen and gets Social Tea Biscuits from the cupboard. They dip the biscuits in the tea and the cookies dissolve on their tongues.

“I do understand,” Miriam says. “My mother’s first husband caused the death of their baby,” Then she is talking, talking, Elena listening. She nods when Miriam tells her how alone she is. How her mother came to this country from Europe and lost her baby girl when a pot of scalding water fell on her. How it was the fault of the bum of a husband who was drunk when the baby pulled the pot down on

herself. "And she still had to get permission from the Rabbis for the divorce."

"Like the church."

Miriam nods. "The baby, Fanny, died. My mother divorced. She had no money. There were letters from Poland, begging for help, for her brother, Mendel, who was going to be conscripted into the army if he didn't get out of the country, but she couldn't help them. She had no money. It was fifteen years before she met my father and got married again." She tells Elena how her mother had mourned her baby, Fanny, all her life and had been bitter and angry when she married again. Miriam and her brother Michael were raised in a somber silent house.

Elena nods and listens as Miriam speaks of her own loneliness, her fear of marriage, what it was to teach school all those years and never have a child of her own. How, little by little, she shut herself off from Michael's family. It was too hard to watch them. They had such rich lives.

Miriam is silent for a moment. "My mother came here. Mendel didn't. A stroke of luck that I am here and they aren't," she says and points toward the pictures on the sideboard.

Elena nods. "Who knows why? *No es justo*. It is not their fate." She thinks of the boy Mendel who died in the army. Of her own brother dead. Alex dead. "They had hard lives." Elena says. "Tragico."

"They had a hard life? And it's so easy for you now?" Miriam shifts in her seat. "Everyone has a story. You, me. Different worlds, same story." It is quiet in the house. The big grandfather clock ticks.

Elena and Miriam are suddenly hungry. Elena looks in the refrigerator. There are six eggs, some milk, a loaf of bread, butter, strawberry jam, one lone orange. She scrambles eggs in the kitchen and brings them to the dining room with buttered toast and more tea. "Eat," she tells Miriam. Then, "Who does your shopping?"

"I do. Sometimes the grocery store delivers."

Elena knows she could shop for Miriam. She could shop, do some cooking, the laundry, drive Miriam places. Elena thinks about it all day as she cleans, about quitting her other jobs, just working for Miriam. It might be good. Easier. Miriam said she would pay her well. Elena thinks Miriam has money. She could do it.

At the end of the day Elena looks carefully at Miriam. She seems all right now. "Are you all right?" she asks. "Should you go to doctor now?"

Miriam shakes her head. "I'm okay. But I won't take a bath unless you are here." They smile at each other.

As she is about to leave, Miriam asks her, "Will you come here every

day? Give up your other jobs and work for me?"

"I'll see," she says, but she is nodding her head. It seems she is saying yes.

Just before Elena gets in her car, Miriam, standing at the doorway says, "Let her come. Don't turn out like me." Elena doesn't answer. She drives away, still thinking.

When she picks up Alicia at the day care the baby jumps into her arms with delight. Elena breathes. *At least I have day care.* She smells the baby powder on her granddaughter's neck. *At least I have Alicia.* She drives home carefully, parking her car on the street in front of her house. *I have a house. I can bring my mother here to help me.*

It is dusk and cool in the late September evening. She carries Alicia along the street, the diaper bag bumping her hip, and is just starting up the rickety stairs to the porch when she looks in the corner, imagining she sees a tall, slim girl, with lanky brown hair. The plastic white chair in the corner of the porch glows like a fluorescent light. There is no one on it.

But then a young woman emerges from the shadows. "Hello Mrs. Rodriguez," she says. Elena turns to look.

The girl holds her arms out. "Give her to me, please. Please. Let me hold her." Elena shivers. The evening feels chilly. She clasps Alicia close, sighs.

She has finally come. Alicia's mother, Lilly, stands before her, dressed in jeans and a sweat shirt. She has a bruise on her cheek. She looks frail and vulnerable, sad and wistful; Elena feels her anger begin to drain away. But she says, "No. Go away."

"Please. She's my baby."

The two women face each other, a stand-off, belligerence in their bodies; Elena's is fading quickly. "You still do drugs." She's not sure if it is a question or a statement.

"No, I'm done with that."

Elena is skeptical. She sees the bruise. She doesn't believe her. "*Cuidado*," she whispers to herself. "*Cuidado*."

In a rush Lilly says, "I'm in rehab now. I swear, I'm clean."

Elena shakes her head, thinks of Miriam, all alone. She opens the door to the little apartment and holds it. "Come in," she says finally. When she flicks on the light she looks around the small rooms, sees the second hand furniture, the colorful shawls she has placed on the sofa and chairs, the baby's crib in the corner. The house is neat. Home.

She turns and hands Alicia to Lilly, appraising her as she holds the baby, so awkward at first. But Lilly is smiling at her daughter, and her face is soft. Alicia is staring seriously at Lilly, her brown eyes wide. “She looks like me,” Lilly says, wonder in her voice.

Elena says nothing.

“Can I visit?” Lilly asks.

Elena wants to say no. There is a long silence. “Maybe,” she says at last.

“Please.” Lilly looks at Elena, her eyes wet. “I’m so sorry. So sorry. Please let me visit.”

“We’ll see.”

Lilly is weeping silently into the baby’s blanket. She nods. Outside Elena hears the neighbor’s car door slam. Everyone is coming home from work. The cool air of autumn is moving in, edging the thickness of summer out. She goes to the stove and puts the kettle on for tea.

Florence Reiss Kraut lives and works in Rye, New York. Her stories have recently appeared in *The Evening Street Review*, the *Westchester Review*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Peeks and Valleys*, and *The Write Room*. She has previously written widely for confession magazines and her op ed essays have appeared in the *Westchester* section of the *New York Times*. She is a social worker and therapist and travels widely.

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