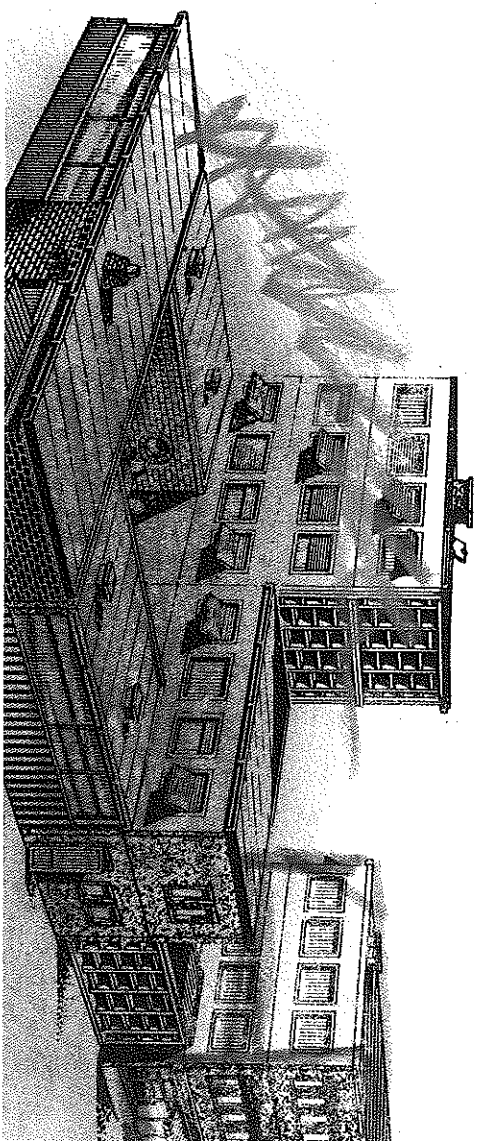


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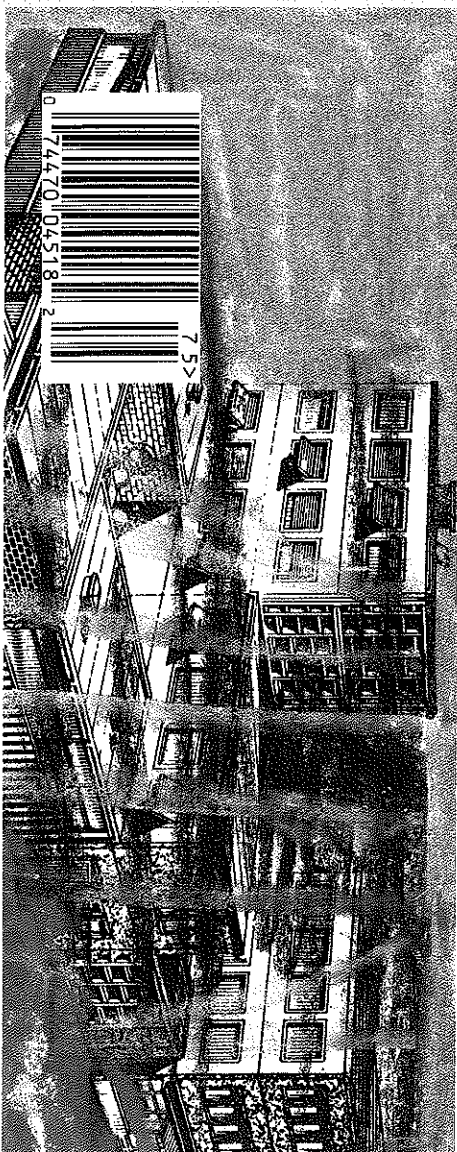
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2007



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Volume 43



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Weather

The first snowflakes brush the arm
of my coat, and I wipe my face
with a mittened hand. When I drive to work

I steer into—or is it away from?—
dangerous skids, veering away from love.
I pump the brakes or don't pump them,

slip through dark steam by the turkey plant.
My tires splash wings on the gleaming roads.
In spring I drive into light. At the end of the day,

workers remove their green plastic headgear
and crusted gloves and go home to scrub off
the smell of turkey. Coats fall to floors

in the backs of closets. Air sieves
through screens. Girls in tight jeans or dresses
that look like silk lean on warm brick walls.

I lie in bed by a window and hear the talk below,
the laughter and cursing, and then the murmurs
of one couple drawn into shadows. They can't
be lovers since this is a poem about weather—
hot night air from the ocean an hour away, violet
lightning, hushed sounds like the breath of waves.

Inventorying Phoebe

Even as she lay dying, Phoebe was a pain in the ass. Instead of dying in New York, where she lived, she'd flown to Los Angeles to visit some cousin — somebody named Harry on her father's side that none of us on her mother's side knew — and had a devastating heart attack. She lay in Intensive Care long enough for her niece Tina to prove herself more decent than any of us expected and fly out from Miami to be with her until she died four days later.

But that's how Phoebe was — demanding, requiring the people around her to prove their love in extravagant, highly specific, and generally ungratifying ways. You couldn't just invite Phoebe for a visit — you had to take her to a play you had no desire to see, to a shoe store that was supposed to have great deals on wide sizes. If you were traveling, you had to bring her back specific items even if you hated to shop, even if you weren't shopping for yourself — Aspirin with codeine from Montreal, some obscure cassis jam from Paris, a particular grade of maple syrup from New Hampshire.

She spoke in two tones — imperative and wheedling. "I'm just dying to go to this little Polish restaurant in Toronto that my friend told me about. You've gotta take me there," she'd command. Or, if it was a request that even she knew was outrageous, "Do you think you could do this one eentsy, teentsy thing? I hate to ask, but it would mean so much to me..." she'd trail off. Of course the eentsy, teentsy thing would be joining her on a three-day bus trip to all the outlet shopping malls in southeastern Maine, or painting her apartment.

I last saw Phoebe two weeks before she died, when I stopped overnight in New York on my way to New Jersey for a business trip. Her breathlessness had become so severe that she couldn't walk for more than about ten steps without needing to rest, and as we painfully made our way up 35th Street to Third Avenue, she'd stop and point mutely at the few flags and

decals that remained from the immediate post-9/11 flowering of patriotic symbols as if to say, "This is my city. See how we've suffered?" And more than that, "See how this city is my family?"

Over dinner I once again urged what my mother had been urging for the past three years, which was that she go for the cardiac catheterization that the doctor recommended.

"I don't know..." She sighed, paused, then abruptly demanded with her usual insistence, "So don't you just love my wall hanging?"

Answering "no" was not an option.

A week later she flew to Los Angeles, and three days later, at age 64, while Tina was catching up on sleep in a nearby hotel, she died.

Now, a week after her death, I've taken the train to New York for a day to empty out her safe deposit box, search her apartment for a will, and begin to pack it up. Phoebe's death and the detritus of her life now surrounding me is messy and anarchic and not easy — like Phoebe herself.

Phoebe and her sister Angela were my mother's first cousins. Gorgeous and extravagant, Angela had three kids, multiple husbands — each richer than the last — a jet-setting life of drama, and an early death in her mid-50s.

Unattractive, overbearing, and unaccomplished, Phoebe spent the first 15 years of her life in Montreal, then moved to Miami where she finished high school. She followed Angela to New York City, went to Manhattan Community College for an indifferent year or two, then at 20 took the first of many low- and mid-level retail jobs. Somewhere along the way, she got trained as a travel agent and spent many years as one. Those were the best years, when she traveled broadly, using her connections and street smarts (the only type she had) to go on junkets, serve as a courier, and see the world.

With the advent of the World Wide Web, there was no longer any room for someone in the travel business with her lack

of technical skill or curiosity. She moved on, becoming a recruiter for focus groups, living frugally but well. She seemed to have friends, though fewer and fewer in recent years as she burned her bridges, and her decreasing mobility confined her evermore to a life of round-the-clock CNN and phone calls. When her mother, Nel, died a few years ago, Phoebe came into a significant inheritance, but by then she was too infirm to take advantage of her father's legacy. Instead, she relied more than ever on the television and telephone to bring the world to her.

My phone would ring at ten p.m., just as I was finally settling down for an hour of relaxation before bed. "So what's this eBay?" she'd ask, with no preamble.

"Hi Phoebe," I'd answer. "It's an online auction, a sort of —"

"Because my friend swears that I can make a fortune selling off some of Mother's jewelry — not the good stuff, but the crap — on this eBay."

"Well, maybe..."

"So Jule, be a jewel — would you sell this big hideous garnet ring on eBay for me?"

Phoebe was the family obligation, the relative we visited and invited to visit primarily because we had to. But she took that role seriously. She routinely, doggedly checked in with every far-flung member of the extended family, updating my mother on the great aunts in Winnipeg. She carried around the baby pictures of the second cousin's third child and maintained close enough relationships with all of these disparate people to make snide comments about each to each.

With her niece Tina and my mother in Florida, one nephew in Arizona, and one in rehab nobody-knew-where, I was her geographically closest relative. That's how I landed this job — that, and the fact that a few years ago, I met her for lunch while on a brief visit, and she'd given me the key and cosigner access to her safe deposit box.

"Promise me you won't lose it," she'd said with her usual mixed tone of demand and entreaty as she handed me the safe

deposit box key over a streaming bowl of Shao Mai.

"Well, I promise that I'll try not to lose it," I'd answered with my usual mixed tone of amusement and annoyance whenever she spoke to me that way, which was usually.

"Jules, promise me," she'd repeated, clutching my key-grasping hand in both of hers.

"Let go of my hand so I can cross my heart," I'd answered. Then, with mock solemnity, I did.

So now I sit in this studio apartment at 222 East 35th Street where the artifacts of her entire life fill these 900 square rent-controlled feet that the neighbors are already coveting — that I'm already coveting — and think that when I finish this mission I haven't yet begun, all trace of her will be gone. And for that, I grieve. Nobody should be able to live for over 60 years and then disappear without something in someone's life changing as a consequence of her absence.

I start with her night table. I open the drawer to find recipes for weight loss and living with diabetes, discount coupons for restaurants and Kleenex and parking garages — so what if she had no car? A bargain's a bargain! Newspaper clippings — obituaries, travel articles that mentioned some place she'd been, reviews of plays featuring someone she'd maybe met or knew in high school, *USA Today* articles about possible investments, articles about skin care and hair care and weekend spa retreats. Below them, paperclipped together, are Playbills, ticket stubs, bills, letters, greeting cards, multiple copies of the same prayer book from the Eternal Life cemetery where her parents are buried.

On top of the night table are eyeglasses, a calendar, newspaper ads for the circus, "two-fers" coupons, bills, statements, a wallet of rarely used credit cards, and an empty plastic cup with traces of Coke? Iced coffee? Next to the bed, a pair of black, backless slippers and I flash back to two weeks ago, watching her laboriously walk to the bathroom, those slippers looking so ridiculously petite at the base of her skinny legs and bloated, mas-

sive torso. She had wide hips that were once sensual, thin blondish, gray hair, a piggy nose, wide eyes that were more thoughtful-looking than I think she was, and I realize that there's not a single picture of her amongst the many adorning every surface in this apartment.

At the foot of the bed are shoe boxes containing investment summaries. She has \$378,000 invested with Dean Witter! The paint is peeling from the walls in huge chunks, the sea foam green rug that hasn't changed in 35 years is crusty and dappled with flecks of paint that fall from the once peach, now brown walls that have rotted like the fruit — \$378,000, and she let me buy her dinner two weeks ago?

At one end of the couch, in her new, freshly antiqued wooden chest that she'd shown off to me with pride two weeks ago, I find Windex — can after can of concentrated, industrial-strength Windex, lovingly stored in tidy rows, hoarded like an alcoholic's secret stash of Jim Beam. When my brother Bobby and his wife had visited her a few years ago, she made them wash her windows.

I go back to the night table and remove the rubber band that holds together her rattled, bulging calendar, looking for names and phone numbers. Maybe she had a lawyer, an executor? I don't find one, but am drawn in by the dense and diverse contents:

- Pharmacy receipts for Avandia, Accupril, Glucotrol *
- Recipe for something involving butterscotch and semi-sweet chocolate chips, sweetened condensed milk, vanilla, and red and green cherries
- A card saying, "I have diabetes!" with emergency contact info on the back

That's so Phoebe — Diabetes meds and a recipe that's pure sugar. She loved collecting and trading recipes, and was always up on the food *du jour*.

"Have you tried this balsamic vinegar?" she asked in the middle of one Passover seder at my brother's — probably in the

middle of a Passover prayer. "I don't understand it, but they say it's to die for."

I can only remember one occasion when I ate food that Phoebe prepared (other than bagels she sliced). I was visiting over a Christmas holiday — it must have been my first solo visit, when I was 12 or 13 years old. She fed me leftover goose — a Christmas goose she'd proudly prepared. The skin was crispy and mortified with bits of apricot and herbs, the meat dark and gamey and rich. A Christmas goose — I didn't know what was more exotic — the Christmas or the goose. But I got a glimpse of a life as an independent grown-up, of a woman who celebrated holidays — Christian holidays! — and with friends, not parents. And the next day, she set me loose to wander around New York City all by myself. She gave me detailed instructions about how to get to Fifth Avenue, what bus to take to get to stores like Saks and Bloomingdales, what to look at in those stores. And I nodded, wanting to tell her that I hated to shop, but feeling too guilty to bite the hand that was opening the door to such exhilarating freedom.

• A clipped advertisement from *The New York Times* for Sotheby's Exhibition and Auction of "The Collection of The Duke and Duchess of Windsor," and most of an accompanying article about the Duke and Duchess titled "Fashion Plate with World as Audience"

Other than attending the occasional blockbuster exhibit that fashion dictated you just had to go to, Phoebe knew little about the "high culture" surrounding her and cared even less.

Only if Picasso had been on the cover of *People* magazine, would she have recognized that Cubism wasn't something invented by Rubik. But she had an encyclopedic knowledge of and fascination with celebrities. Jackie O, Heidi the Hollywood Madam, the knife-wielding Lorena Bobbitt and her temporarily de-dicked husband all held vaunted but temporary thrones in her consciousness. She forced herself to awaken early to watch the complete coverage of the wedding of Prince Charles and Diana. When Versace, the

fashion designer, was murdered by a jealous lover in an Italian hotel, Phoebe was stricken.

"It's just so senseless," she sighed. "And I was there a few years ago in that very same hotel," as if God could only top the cosmic cruelty of a minor celebrity murder by having it occur in a place whose air she'd breathed.

If she couldn't live large, she could at least be proximate to those who did. Her great glory was to have been on the same Los Angeles expressway at the same time as O.J. Simpson when he took off on his desperate but aimless drive in the white Ford Explorer. And if attending an auction of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor's possessions could vicariously cloak her in the pseudo-tragedy of the moronic prince and his bossy, acquisitive wife, then she'd be there.

• A Holiday Fair flyer from the Cuban Art Space, on the back of which are the names and numbers of gourmet grocery stores

• A Post-It with phone numbers for Anita Ruth Novell and the following: "Cassis Chambord 17.00-24.99 trenel tram-boise 22.99"

• A note to herself saying "Tell Linden about Brie at Dag's," and on the other side:

-Gift for Life — Basement Gift Bldg

-Betty Lee — 902 (Ronnie)

-Richard — Limoges Venetian Mask — 3rd Caspari — 637 (Sally)

I see names and lives I recognize. Ronnie was a friend whose name I'd occasionally hear her mention, as was Richard. Anita Ruth is a cousin in Winnipeg for whom she was probably buying liquor to bring as a gift on one of her periodic visits. Phoebe loved to research and shop for others, even though her offerings were generally wildly off the mark. My mother would periodically find envelopes from Phoebe in her mailbox, stuffed full of torn out catalogue pages featuring hideous caftans and

sequined dresses that she thought my mother should wear, clip-pings about the latest hot restaurant in a city at the other end of the state that my mother just had to sample, ads for sales at nationally franchised houseware and kitchen stores.

When visiting us, Phoebe would instruct me to go to her suitcase and “Get out the red shopping bag — but carefully, for God’s sake — and bring it to me. I have something in it for you.”

Equally docile at four and 45, I’d oblige.

With great care, Phoebe would pull out a tissue-paper wrapped package that she’d open herself, then hold up the unlikely bounty inside — a navy blue dickey, a gold charm bracelet for someone half my age and twice my size, an oversized dark leather bound folio with pockets for business cards, a wildly patterned scarf and accompanying giant brooch to hold it together. “Do you love it?” she’d demand.

I could never figure out if she’d bought these gifts with me in mind or acquired them for free or at great discount, then hoped that by imbuing them with enough emotional weight, they’d become “right” for me. They rarely were, but I knew, even from a very young age, that my thanks had to be prolific and my use of these items conspicuous, well beyond the requirements of standard courtesy. If I’d done otherwise, her hurt and bafflement would have been genuine and deep.

I hope that Richard cared about Venetian masks as much as Phoebe cared about him.

I take a break from her calendar. Next to the couch stands a portable shopping cart containing trade show giveaways, cloth gym bags, backpacks — some still pristine in their original plastic packaging — purses, canvas, grocery bags. And the bags — shiny gift bags, folded and stacked inside larger, more pedestrian shopping bags, old FedEx envelopes stuffed with bills and health insurance policies and medical records — her own, her dead mother Nel’s, her dead sister Angela’s, her niece Tina’s.

Bound together by a pristine purple ribbon is a stack of letters. The first, addressed to the proprietor of a cemetery in South Orange, New Jersey, is a letter from her father Charlie

(dead over 20 years now) inquiring about the condition of the plaque over the grave of Hadassah Tannen, born to her sister Angela, alive for only one day. Charlie’s letter surprises me. I remember him as a stocky, crude, cigar-chomping man with the face of a bulldog. I used to assume that he was an indifferent father, at best. But my mother, in a recent conversation with me about Phoebe’s family, suggested a very different scenario.

“Charlie had eyes only for Angela,” she told me, “and Nel was very jealous of her. I’m not sure if there was something incestuous going on, but there might have been.”

“Really?” I asked, aghast at the image as much as the idea. “Did Angela ever say anything about it?”

“No, nobody but my cousin Sam ever said anything bad about Charlie. But Nel and Phoebe were the outsiders in that family, and Nel was such a narcissist that poor Phoebe couldn’t even get her mother’s attention until Nel was too old to take care of herself.”

I find another letter from Charlie from 1979, this one accompanying a copy of Phoebe’s supplemental health insurance policy — coverage up to \$15,000 — enough in today’s world to cover what? Perhaps her last day of life? Charlie’s letter is heartbreaking, saying that Angela’s condition has gotten dramatically worse, and that he’s sorry they fought on their last phone call (Who fought? Phoebe and Angela? Charlie and Phoebe? Charlie and Angela?). *Angela’s had a hard life, he writes in surprisingly fine, elegant script, some of it her own making, but more of it mine. It isn’t fair that she’s the one dying — it should be me. Pray for God to take pity on her.*

Was this Charlie’s confession? And did Phoebe read it that way, or was this just the final flare from a dying solar system in which Angela was the sun, Charlie was the earth, and Phoebe was the small, cold moon orbiting them both?

After all, Angela eclipsed everyone around her. Her apartment — a duplex penthouse on Park Avenue — was as vast as Phoebe’s was cramped. Between marriages to millionaires, Angela radiated from the society pages of the New York papers on the

arms of rich and powerful men.

"Angela had no formal education beyond high school," my mother told me. "But she read voraciously and had this bright spark in her eye. She learned what she needed to know. When she got engaged to David, she taught herself about real estate and advised David on some of his biggest deals. When she married George, she immersed herself in modern art so that she could share his passion, entertain his friends, really do the job. That's how she looked at herself, I think — as a courtesan, as an expert companion to men."

Phoebe was no expert. For ten sad and fruitless years, she had an affair with a married man whom she left in her mid-30s, when she finally realized that he would never leave his wife. And by then, she bitterly complained to my mother, it was too late to have the husband and kids she always wanted.

She never expressed any of those regrets to me, though, even when I was old enough to receive her self-consciously swinging Sex and the Single Girl stories — probably right about the time that her affair ended.

"Have you ever done poppers?" she slyly asked me one evening in her apartment.

"Poppers?" I asked, stalling for time. I was probably about 17 but still young enough to be mortified by the prospect that my mother's middle-aged cousin could know more about drugs than I did.

"They're these capsules my gay friends told me about.

You snap one open under your nose when you're having sex, you know, right before you..." And here she stopped and rolled her eyes skyward, looking not so much insinuating as worried that the tenant in the apartment over hers had the room bugged.

"Right before you..."

"Oh for chrissake, you know!" she exploded at me. Then, after a pause while I gazed back with exaggerated innocence, "right before...you know." Again she cast a quick away-we-go glance upward. "Don't make me spell it out, Juliet."

And I hovered on the brink of making her, amazed and

emboldened at how easy it was to turn things around with Phoebe, to turn my discomfort into hers. She invited cruelty, I realized, even from people like me who weren't normally so inclined. She expected it.

Paper-clipped to the back cover of her calendar is a folded, typewritten letter.

Dear Phoebe,

Let me start by pointing out how typical it is that you choose to call me at exactly those times I have told you I do NOT want to be called. It seems to be a deliberate and attention-seeking act of perverseness and selfishness. When I ask that you wait until 11 o'clock to have a conversation with me and you refuse to honor that request, you become the loser, and I'll explain why. After I've gone through my full day of running all over town, shopping, cooking, cleaning, laundry, meetings, etc., all I want to do is sit back quietly and catch my breath. I don't have empathy for your whining histrionics. You have always tried to control me and make me dance to your tune — that is your way...

Everyone who cares about me honors my request about phoning — except you. And if they call when I'm in the middle of something and I ask to call back later, NOBODY has ever given me grief or gotten their ass in an uproar. For my undivided attention, honor my request.

I want to end by saying this: If you are in a GENUINE life crisis and need me, call me, tell me, and I'll understand and be there. But... if I haven't called in a week or two, I really don't need to hear your disappointed and disapproving voice trying to punish me for what you perceive as my ignoring you... If you want me in your life again — as I would like you in mine — you're going to have to back off.

Thelma

P.S. Get some nicer stationery.

The letter is dated December 22. Phoebe received it five days before she died. She saved this letter, which is breathtaking in its cruelty and accuracy.

I want to incinerate it. I want to know who Thelma is, to call her and say, *Do you know your last words to her were to get some nicer stationery?* It is the gratuitousness of that P.S. that has me so

shaken, because I'm sure Phoebe was proud of her stationery. She always had letterhead with her name on it and mailing labels for her envelopes. I look around this apartment crammed with articles bearing her name. "Phoebe" framed in a poster for a French opera, in a program for a "Dinner Saloon," in an ad for *something* mysterious and sensual — a perfume, perhaps? A line of lingerie? None of it the *real* Phoebe, but all of it demanding celebration. Perfume bottles, masks and prints, dozens of tiny framed family photos and obituaries — her father, her mother, her sister, her cousin. What does it all add up to? They are her souvenirs, her songs of herself. Someone who treasured a past, who doggedly stayed in touch with a vast network of relatives and made herself the unsolicited conduit between them, a woman who phoned and shopped for what she could not attain by other means to very literally and deliberately fashion a life.

Time is running out. I have to catch a train back to Boston, and it's clear that just as she refused to see a cardiologist, Phoebe refused to write a will. I pull a black leather overnight bag from the closet and pack it with the items that I want for myself or my mother — my grandmother's perfume tray and tiny glass atomizers, a soapstone sculpture that my mother had carved when I was a child. Then I take the contents of her safe deposit box — a jewelry box wrapped in instructions for how she wanted Tina to convert the enclosed brooch into a necklace for her daughter, her father's watch with a Post-It attached saying it was to be given to her nephew Michael who was not to sell it or pawn it under any circumstances, and roughly \$4,000 in ten- and twenty-dollar bills — and roll them into two sea foam green towels, which I stuff into the black bag.

I turn out the lights, then notice the flashing answering machine next to her bed. I press the playback button.

#1 Received Thursday, December 27. *This is Wendy Prul at the Laxe Hotel on Rodeo Drive. I'm hoping that a friend or relation of Phoebe Starr will pick this up. Phoebe is in the Intensive Care Unit of Cedars-Sinai Hospital. She's going to have bypass surgery this afternoon, but she may not survive... she probably won't survive. So I guess the only*

thing we can do is say a little prayer. We here at the Laxe Hotel don't know what else to do... Wendy Prul had persevered, finally finding my mother's phone number in Phoebe's address book two days later. Phoebe would have died alone had it not been for the kindness of strangers.

#2 Received Friday, December 28. *Hi, bon. It's me.*

Maybe you're already gone. Call me when you get back. I am shocked to hear my mother's voice, so unexpected in this empty, decaying apartment.

#3 Received Friday, December 28. *This is Maureen from the Spago Restaurant on Rodeo Drive calling to confirm reservations for two for Phoebe Starr tonight at seven p.m.* Robbed of her dream meal at a probably lousy, certainly overpriced, but absolutely famous restaurant. My heart breaks for Phoebe, making and missing her reservation.

#4 Received Sunday, December 31. *Hi Phoebe. Happy New Year. Love you. It's Caesar.* The cheery, accented voice of a friend I didn't know she had.

#5 Received Sunday, December 31. *Hi, it's me. I guess you're still gone? Well, listen sweetie, I hope you have a wonderful New Year's Eve. I hope I do, too. So let's be happy and healthy and think nothing but sweet thoughts.* This from someone — I can't tell if it's a man or a woman — who speaks in warm, Brooklyn tones.

#6 Received Monday, January 1. *It's Yvonne, calling to wish you a Happy New Year. Call me when you get back.* Yvonne, the younger second wife of a second cousin now deceased, a Toronto woman struck in Winnipeg and forgotten by all her late husband's family, who barely knew her — all except Phoebe, apparently.

Hearing these messages from friends and family who cared for her, from strangers who tried to do right by her, I realize that I've got her story wrong. The thumbnail sketch of Phoebe the Irritant, Phoebe the Obligation, just doesn't hold up in this complicated clutter of inventory. Our interconnected histories — Phoebe's, my mother's, mine, the friends whose stories faintly surface in memory like old magazine covers — are evidenced in the artifacts crammed into this black bag that I'm cradling as I

ride down to the lobby. I cannot write her off in death as I did in life.

The night air is bracing, and the streets around Madison Square Garden are packed with fans on their way to a Knicks game. I descend the escalator into Penn Station and sit, sipping coffee while waiting for the train. On the wall across from me is a poster promoting an exhibit of the "Missing" flyers and photos, the poems and pleas and tributes to those who died on September 11. There is Tina, a pudgy Jewish-looking New York girl like Phoebe in her youth, wearing a too-tight DKNY shirt and pointing to herself with a look of mock innocence, as if to say, "Who me?" Next to her is Sal, a fireman, the epitaph tells us, but in this picture just a balding guy scratching the hairless belly of the Weimaraner languorously stretched out on the floor in front of him. "Cookie" from Queens wears a sequined silver dress, big hair, and an even bigger smile as she proudly poses with an indecipherable trophy that she has clearly just won. Pete, in baggy shorts, gives the finger to the photographer and pries open a beer with the other hand. Daniel glares sideways from under the bill of a Yankees cap, his menacing look complemented by the "Go Ahead... Make my Day" T-shirt he's wearing. None of these people look like heroes, like martyrs. In these flyers, their families and friends have shown them unadorned, in unflattering clothes, wearing their ketchup stains and small triumphs and odors of old grudges. They cannot allow those wrenched from life to be flattened into symbols and robbed of dimension.

In front of this crammed montage, people pour in, filling the wide stairwell and passage with accents and cell phones and strollers and laughter. My train is called. I pick up the black leather bag and merge with the flood of people streaming toward Platform 12.