



## OPEN YOUR HEART, A MID-LIFE FABLE

### Chapter One: Hannah

It's Sunday night and I'm returning home, beat and starving. My keys slip into the two deadbolt locks as I balance a stack of books on my hip. My head pounds and I'm generally annoyed. It's been a frustrating day. The table by the door catches my keys and gloves and books. I glance in the mirror above it quickly and notice my nose and cheeks are chilled pink and my short brown hair is mussed. Some women do carefree well; I don't.

Out of habit I align the books I've just set down with the edge of the table. I notice some lint on the carpet and deposit it in my pocket. I walk into the kitchen to the left of the entry hall, glad that I did my whirlwind cleaning this morning.

Hoping to erase the winter chill which lingers in my bones, I turn the heat on High under the tea kettle. Then I race for the bathroom. Three minutes later with my pantyhose around one ankle I hobble back to the shrieking tea kettle which apparently was not as full as I had thought. Steam billows over the stove and my glasses fog. I pull them off, lay them on the table, and grab the tea kettle.

As I pour the hot water into my cup on the counter I freeze. Did I really see what I thought I saw? I look back at the table. An old woman sits there smoking! My first thought is that I don't own an ashtray and I don't allow anyone to smoke in my condo. What is she doing?!

And then I realize THERE IS AN INTRUDER IN MY HOME! WHO IS SHE AND HOW DID SHE GET IN HERE? She looks like a plump, frazzled homemaker. Apparently she's been cooking-- her apron is stained with tomato sauce and there are beads of perspiration at her hairline.

She's leaning over the kitchen table, elbows bent, the ash on her cigarette an inch long. Her frizzy brown hair is pinned up in back and she says, "Anne, you gotta minute? We need to talk." She's Jewish? Or Italian? She's some ethnicity that I am not. And I jerk back to attention. WHAT IS GOING ON? She continues, "I'm a surprise, huh? You expected maybe an angel and instead it's just me, Hannah, in the kitchen."

I don't know what she's talking about but before I can say that she interjects, "It's OK. I'm not made to order. I am definitely not your fantasy of a guide floating above it all."

She laughs and snorts a bit and then coughs. Her voice is coarse as it passes through a sandpaper throat. Her cough sounds like the sandpaper is being torn and rubbed against itself. With her coughs assaulting me I find myself leaning away from her.

She blows her nose into a rumpled handkerchief which she stuffs in a side pocket of her apron. Her yellow nicotine stained fingers backdrop her ragged nails, outlined by tomato sauce. I feel like a voyeur, watching another human go about the everyday private acts of being a person.

I'm over my initial consternation and now I'm curious. And embarrassed. Mostly for her. I have worked to develop a polished appearance and would never let myself be seen in this state. I want to protect her from my seeing but I remind myself that SHE'S IN MY KITCHEN! "Who are you and why are you sitting in my home?" Hannah has recovered from her coughing fit by drinking some water. A drop hangs at the corner of her mouth. "I've come because you called for me. I know I'm not what you were looking for. I'm not someone to show off. I won't help you impress anyone. But what I know is something you don't and you don't even know you're missing it."

I called for her? When? "What are you talking about?" And immediately I wonder why I'm talking to her at all. "Hannah, . . ." She interrupts me to answer my unspoken thought. "When you prayed. You called for me when you prayed." When I prayed? I don't pray. What IS she talking about? "You know, when you said, 'Good God, what am I doing wrong?' and 'Jesus Christ, why is life so hard?' You know, those prayers." She inhales deeply and blows her smoke toward the ceiling.

I had said those things. More than a few times lately. I've been very frustrated. "So that's why I'm here. Because of you." She rummages through her apron pocket and drops some change on the floor. All my life I've appreciated refinement, a tasteful low key subtlety. Hannah is not that. "Please tell me again what this is all about," I stammer, trying to make sense of this seemingly nonsensical situation. I'm willing to be reasonable. If she has come to me because of my "prayers", I'll listen. But that's all. I am definitely not impressed. She wants to talk? Let her talk.

"OK, I will." Again she answers my thought but her attention is only on her words and her cigarette. As she rolls her cigarette between her thumb and forefinger, she doesn't look at me. "You see, what you've done, well, I don't know that I would have done it that way, but OK, Anne, you have, so let's start from here. What you've done is to put your spirituality all in your head. You use it to get away from your life. A bit screwy to my way of thinking, but now you're here and we're talking and we'll just take it from this point." Articulate she's not.

Hannah acknowledges my unvoiced comment. "I told you I don't fit your image of what a teacher should be. Now I'm getting tired of your impertinence so you just listen to me and quit crowding my mind with your thoughts. OK, so here is where we are. You're 45, right? And your life is OK but you've completely lost me." I try not to laugh--does she think I've been looking for her? Oh no, she's already felt my disdain. While I don't respect her, I don't need to insult her, either. She's losing her sense of humor. "Will you listen?! I know it offends your dignity to realize that I'm your teacher but I'm the part of you that you have never developed and the part you don't know. I'm ordinary and everyday and I take care of little chores. I haven't accomplished anything big and I don't want to. I feel pretty good about being down here on the ground and taking care of my little bitty concerns."

She glances at me. I'm staring at my cuticles. Seeing hers reminds me to schedule a manicure. "Will you listen to me?!!" she demands more than asks. I find her annoying. I'm sure she is a fine person and all but, really, I'm not too keen about sitting here with her. And she knows that.

"Listen, sweetheart," she continues, "I didn't volunteer for this job. I don't want to be here. I have other things I could be doing." I laugh out loud now and say, "I'm sorry, I just don't understand who you are or why you're here or what you want me to know." "For being so

smart you're pretty dumb." And she fiddles with her cigarette. I hate smoking. I look down at my lap and I shiver. I tell myself this is not really happening. But when I look up she's still in front of me.

"Hannah, thanks for dropping by but . . ." "Not so fast. You're not the one in charge here. You've always thought you could be in control and you thought you could make your life look just the way you wanted it to, but. . ." and another coughing fit overtakes her. I offer her the glass of water with tomato finger prints on it. I wipe my hands after I pass it to her. "See? That is so much like you. You don't want to get your fingers dirty."

I protest, "I was just. . ." "Be quiet!" she booms and I'm taken aback by the violence of her response. "You are always trying to get away from what is real. You think too much." WHO IS THIS PERSON? "Are you real or are you part of my fantasy world that you're so critical of?" I ask. I hope she notices I ended that sentence with a preposition, not trying to be too perfect.

Hannah gets up from the table and walks to the sink and brushes something off her apron. "I'm not sure you're ready to hear me just yet. You still think you can do this life from your head. You still want to be in control. Well, I have nothing to say to you until you lose that piece of gibberish." And she turns her back to me and runs water in the sink.

I'm tempted to walk away. After all this is just a figment of my imagination. She's just in my head. But Hannah hears that thought, too. "No, dear, I am not just in your head. Not in the way your other mind creations are just in your head." And she mimics my judgement. She tilts her head back and lifts her nose in the air. She forces her words through her tight lips. I don't like being made fun of. "So what you don't like it," Hannah dares me to complain.

I am really annoyed with my lack of privacy. Since when are my thoughts not my own? "Since right now, dearie, and get used to it, 'cause you're never going back to being your little uptight super independent I-can-do-it-myself figurine of a human. Never. Get it? Times have changed. Wake up and smell the. . ." And her voice trails off. "Coffee," I offer derisively. "Or maybe roses." I find myself tidying up her conversation by finishing her sentence. I like things neat. "Hmm? Yeah, yeah, whatever. I'm here because you have been praying so hard and so loud. I swear sometimes your voice is deafening. It pounds in my head--baboom . . . baboom . . . bababoom . . . Good God, I wish this craziness would end . . . baboom . . . Jesus Christ, stop the world. . . baboom . . . God in heaven, help me . . . well, PLEASE GOD, I'm here now and you don't even want to listen to me. "You're a hypocrite, know that? That's what you are. A prissy little know it all hypocrite. So don't listen to me. I don't care. I'll go back where I was. I don't need you. You need me. But if you think you don't, well, OK. Keep doing your life your way. Just save yourself some time and stop with the babooms. They're giving me a headache."

Now Hannah had my attention. It's true. I had been complaining; I wouldn't call it praying. Life was not at all the way I thought it would be. By this time in my 40's I thought I would be settled and be normal and finally fit in.

I thought all those insecurities from my teen years and my 20's would have disappeared. Instead they simply evolved to a more complex life form. Now I don't worry about dates (or no dates), I worry that I'm not doing life right. I don't question if others think I'm OK, I'm more concerned that I don't really like myself. I'm not worried about establishing myself in my profession but I wonder if I'll ever truly be happy.

I've done everything right but still, just as Hannah said, there is something escaping me. There is something about being alive that I'm just not getting. That's what my questions and my frustration and my complaining (in her words "praying") has been about. And apparently Hannah is my answer. I can't very well turn away from her if she's come to me when I've asked for direction. So, immediately, and maybe a bit insincerely, I shift my tone to conciliatory. "Thank you very much for coming, Hannah. I appreciate your attention."

She looks at me sideways from her place at the sink. "Don't talk down to me. I don't care how your life goes. And if you don't, well, then there's no problem." She harrumphs. I've never known anyone with such a repertoire of expressive vocalizations.

I want to reassure her. "Oh, but I do care about my life. I truly want something more but I thought it would come in an insight when I meditate that would reveal the universe to me or a friendship with just the right person, someone who truly understands me and appreciates me or . . ." I could feel myself levitate.

Hannah barges into my reverie. "Forget it. You're on the wrong track. You're not even looking in the right direction so how can you hope to see what you're looking for? You still think that you know. But, toots, you know nothing. And when you're ready to accept that, we can talk. Until then you're just spinning your wheels and pretending that you're alive. But you're not. Being alive is such a gift and you're frittering your time away." She ends with a snort. She seems pretty self righteous if you ask me, which she didn't.

If I had read her words on paper I would have been magnetized. Seeing her in person I have trouble taking her seriously. The combination of her profound statements and her sloppy appearance pulls my mind in two different directions. I want her wisdom but I don't really like her.

So I respond equally self righteously. "What do you mean? I am responsible, I exercise every day or almost, I meditate and write in my journal. I'm not unkind to anyone. . . well, unless they really annoy me and then they deserve it. I recycle and I even do volunteer work. How can you tell me I'm not doing life right?" I am steamed. Gratuitous criticism from someone I'm pretty sure is a fantasy. And a messy fantasy at that. I don't have to be passive and take this.

"It wouldn't hurt you to be passive," Hannah replies, invading my thought-space even though I've attempted to establish my boundary around it. "No, it wouldn't hurt you one bit. You think you know so much but you are so lost." And she rolls her eyes.

Then Hannah dries her hands and sits back down at the table. In a quieter voice she continues as she looks into my eyes.

"Anne, you gotta stop. Stop trying so hard. Stop working so much. You work at everything. You even work at playing. Just stop it. Will you sit back and take it easy and trust? Trust that your life will be OK if you're not pushing your way through every little thing that comes up, using your mind as a steam roller? Trust that things will turn out just fine without trying to control every move?"

She is gentle now and I'm touched. Her words pierce the fear that has always lived inside me. The fear that's hiding behind my abundant anxiety. The fear that if I don't take care

of myself, no one else will. Hannah has entered my heart with her gentleness. I cry softly and that surprises me. Usually I don't like people to see my mushy side but Hannah isn't really a person. Not a separate person. "That's right, dear," Hannah whispers. "I already know you better than you know yourself. There isn't anything you could hide from me if you tried. Your fear is what's underneath all this rushing around. And beneath your seriousness. And behind your thinking."

Now I want to talk to her. I want to tell her about what I fear--the loneliness and the depressions--but she shushes me. "I already know. Life has been hard but it doesn't have to be hard any longer. Not if you make some different choices."

Immediately I perk up. Now she's speaking my language. There is something I can do. I always knew it. Now I can make things turn out right. Hannah is the informant with the magic message I've been waiting for. "I'll do it. Just tell me what it is," I gush in my eagerness to own the life fulfilling secret. "I won't hold back."

"That's wonderful, dear. What I want you to do is to open your heart and surrender to life. That's all. OK?" OK? OK to what? Open my heart? Surrender to life? These words sounded great but what did they mean? "Hannah, I thought we were getting somewhere but now I don't know. I'll do anything you tell me but what does 'surrender to life' mean? You want me to stay in bed all day? That's passive. You want me to forget my work? What?" My temporary hope for receiving specific life instructions was frustrated by her vagueness. Now I want her to be concrete.

She was silent a moment as she studied the table top. "I want you to forget everything you know. I want you to listen to me. I want you to take me with you everywhere you go. I am with you already--I just want you to realize that and to ask me when you need to make a decision. I want you to trust me."

Trust is not my long suit and I bet she knows that. I much prefer self reliance and independence. That's how I've always managed to get by. But for some incomprehensible reason, what has worked for me in the past is just not working anymore. No matter how hard I try I can't force my life to fit the form I've chosen. At this point I desperately need a change. The frustration grows daily and I'm more and more unhappy. I can't continue the way I've been going but I don't know what to do differently. I need something new but what?

So, if Hannah is the answer to some pretty powerful "praying" and if she has something to give me, I have an opening I haven't seen before. As yet I'm not certain what this "opportunity" is, but I have no alternatives. Out of desperation and no other apparent choices at this stage of my life, I commit to her.

"You got it, Hannah. I'm yours." I was pleased with my final decision to participate in this adventure with her, conveniently overlooking my intense resistance up to this point. "Yeah, we'll see."