

Chapter One

The Book Club Meets Again

“Henry said that if I want to understand men I should read *The Iliad*.”

Dead silence greets me. We have been tossing around what project to study next. Studying *Romeo and Juliet* was wonderful but we don’t want to repeat ourselves.

“Claire, what did Henry mean?” Annie inquires, looking baffled.

“Yes, Claire, I don’t get it,” Katherine chimes in.

“We were talking about something else, and it came up.” I don’t want to go into the details of that particular conversation.

We restarted our book club after the holidays, all of us eager to escape from the tyranny of the enforced good cheer and the lack of an orderly schedule. We are as ready as we ever will be for the deep winter months; January, where the snow falls and falls and falls and the temperature drops and drops and drops; February, which although the shortest month of the year, in Chicago seems the longest month, beginning and then continuing on implacably and is always, in our memories, grey. March, even though we have blizzards and plenty of cold weather seems close to spring, and we brush off the blizzards saying “It’s March. The snow won’t last long.” Perhaps it is the longer days that affect us, leading to optimism that the winter is almost over and we can look forward to warmer weather and safe sidewalks. The wimps leave us for the hard months, so those of us who stay think arrogant thoughts and stifle the impulses to flee with them to warmer climates. “Fair weather friends,” we sniff disdainfully.

Full of courage we venture out. Full of courage until the emails and the text messages drift in—“Broke my hip, surgery, pins, home but very tired”; “Vomited all night, now I have chills but no fever, feel awful”; “Horrible cold, sinus infections, trying to not go on antibiotics”; “Fell, broken wrist, won’t see you for a while”; “Stage 3 cancer, will have surgery and chemo, hope to see you in the spring.” And on it goes. Instead of news of marriages and new babies, and then the struggles to put the children through college, we have progressed to the new stage of hearing of fate, accidents. The litany of woes that escort us to the grave seem endless.

Cindy comes in the door with a rush of good will. The others follow her beaming with happiness at our convening again. The dance in the foyer proceeds as ladies struggle out of down coats and parkas, stuffing mittens, gloves and hats in capacious pockets. Boots are unzipped, wriggled off, then lined up neatly, or as neatly as possible, in small puddles of filthy water. Smiles appear beneath untamed hair.

Annie’s history and ours too resides in her round oak table. Toddlers pounded on it with metal toys, but could not make a dent. Spills could not mar its sturdy surface.

Books, whether from her children's homework or from all the book clubs that we have been part of were stacked in the middle. The history of her adult life is bound up in the table, and our history is entwined with it too. We first started meeting in the kitchen of her former house, back in the days of our young lives. The table has accompanied her everywhere. It moved with her through a painful divorce, a remarriage, the death of her second husband, the move to her mother's old apartment, and her remarriage to her first husband. Our lives have changed too—divorces, dread diseases, retirement, new beginnings, moving into apartments. The table is the emblem for many of us of the unchanging parts of our lives. It is built to last. Annie has never dared to suggest that she replace it with a newer table. A new table would disturb the karma and our book club would decompose, destroyed by the new.

"Annie, so good of you to host us again. Thanks so much. We had such a good time with *Romeo and Juliet*. How can we top that?"

I look around the table at the other ladies. We are all aging. Those who have lost weight appear ever more fragile—bony hands, bent backs which once were straight. The light has left some eyes; questions have to be repeated in a more insistent voice. For others the light still shines out of deteriorated bodies that are havens for intact intellects.

Katherine's red curls show no signs of dimming. I wonder who her hair person is? She looks calmer these days. With her decision to forgo any further treatment for her cancer, she plays the very good odds that the cancer will not kill her and also the low odds of a recurrence. She tells Annie and me that at her age it does not make sense to undergo a year or more of misery to postpone a recurrence, that she is unwilling to sacrifice her good years now, for a different outcome in her greater old age. But, and it is a big but, she is haunted by the certainty that her breast cancer will recur. She lives her life as if very little time remains. Most of us do the same, the certainty of what lies in the future, if not its exact shape, compels us to wring all the pleasures out of each day. Living in the moment has changed its meaning, as we have realized that moments are all that remain to us.

Franny is distinctly better since she had her parathyroid surgery. She no longer bursts into tears at our table, or takes umbrage at trivial remarks. Could it be that she is trying to get a grip on whatever it was that made her so negative? Long ago, she was more fun to have at the table. I hear that Sam has moved his office back into the spare bedroom in their house, out of the space above the garage. I hope that is a good sign, but long term marriages only make sense to those who are in them. Or the people in them have a narrative that makes sense to them.

We are all aging. Maybe I am the only one who gets out of the shower and expects to see my face circling the drain. This fantasy only lasts a moment, especially when Henry joins me in the shower. Then all such thoughts vanish.

Annie looks at me. I know that I am bright-eyed. Katherine sees me staring and stares back, mouthing “What?” I spread my hands, and give her a quick grin. She rolls her brown eyes, tosses her suspiciously red curls and gives me her mischief look.

Cindy, Mary and Sally are all their usual selves, happy to be back together with the rest of us around Annie’s magic table. Of course, it isn’t really a magic table but that is the way we think of it.

“Do we have an idea of what we want to study next? *Romeo and Juliet* set a really high bar didn’t it? Any suggestions?”

Sally, unsure as yet that she is a firm part of the group, quietly suggests: “*Macbeth*?”

Mary, with a far away look on her face, responds: “Well, the characters are certainly interesting. Isn’t there an opera by one of the Italians? Could we study it, too?”

“I think so. Or is it Othello? You know that opera is not my thing,” Cindy responds.

“Verdi,” says Sally.

An idea overtakes me. “Could we study something contemporary with it? How about the first episodes of *The Sopranos*? There is mayhem, a nuanced view of Tony, a nuanced view of his family life and great writing.”

Annie interjects, “That’s an interesting idea. How would we contrast them?”

“We could go where the text takes us, Annie, and see what we discover, which is what we did with *Romeo and Juliet*. You have taught me that there are writers who do not construct their plots before they start writing, but write from the characters and follow the characters as they act.”

Katherine quietly says: “Tony Soprano was a killer, but he had another side. Then there is the psychiatrist who we could contrast to the three witches. Macbeth started out a standard killer, a warrior. Then he became an out of control killer who violated all the norms of manhood of his time. We can get the first seasons on DVD.”

We are back to my original comment, which I repeat. “Henry says that if you want to understand men to read *The Iliad*.”

Everyone is looking at me. Wondering.

Henry and I had been in one of those conversations that try hard to bridge the gender gap. Me asking him for the male viewpoint, he looking at me knowing that I just didn’t get it. How important is a corner office? To Henry very important. How important

is it to him to continue working—to have billable hours? Very important to him. How important was it to Hector or Ulysses to act as a man should act? Very important. How important was it that Telemachas be as manly as his father? Very important. Every time I think I understand Henry, I find myself wrecked on the shoals of our gender differences. Trying not to sound exasperated I continue, “Could that be a framing device for the conversation. How Macbeth fits into that mold? And Tony Soprano. Can we really understand them, or any men, without understanding *The Iliad*?”

Katherine, her brown eyes gleaming, says “What an interesting way to look at them, I mean Macbeth and Tony Soprano. But are you suggesting that we also study *The Iliad*? ”

“I think that would be too much, but we have all read it, or studied it haven’t we?”

“When my son was activated after 9/11,” Mary adds, “he was so proud and excited. The women in the family were united in their horror. He was older, not the good age for combat, and he had a wife and child. We, the women, thought that he should be deferred.”

The murmuring and throat clearing around the table signal that the other women feel the same way.

Mary continues with a sad smile. “The men of the family were united in saying that it was his duty, of course he would go. They acted as if there was no question at all, they glanced at each other with those men looks. You all know them, like a secret brotherhood. Of course we women have glances that are of the sisterhood. Neither comprehends the other’s point of view, and after lots of discussion neither side changes their viewpoint at all. They simply agree to disagree. Or ignore the disagreement. Although that is not simple. I wore black for months before I got a grip on myself.”

Sally asks, prepared to be sympathetic and hoping that there wasn’t a bad ending to this story with visits to hospitals and PTSD, “Was he sent to Iraq or Afghanistan?”

“He was sent to Colorado,” Mary responds, a rueful smile tugging at her mouth.

Sally sighs in relief, then bestows a quizzical look on Mary, “So what was the big deal? Or is that like the question that the men of your family asked you?”

“I was scared to death he would volunteer for Iraq or Afghanistan and be sent there. I was terrified that in an excess of honor and doing his duty he would deliberately put himself in danger, which seemed to me to be insane. That was why my imagination, as well as his being excited and proud, led me to endure many bad days and worse nights. I could not understand why the men reacted the way they did. I thought he and all the men were nuts.”

Mary stops to drink water and, as we are well aware, cool down her emotions which are threatening to break out.

Mary continues after a pause to gather herself together. “I had read *The Iliad* before, of course, and like many women was utterly repelled by it. All that ridiculous fighting and dying over nonsensical issues. Hector was the only good man, the rest I thought were posturing idiots. But that sense of honor, that excluded women utterly, seemed to have passed with very little modification down to the present time. So, I reread *The Iliad*, or better said, read it for the first time. I still don’t get it about men and war but at least I recognize that what I am seeing is a real gender difference. For after all, the men of today read *The Iliad* and think the goings on are no big deal. It seems like real life to them and doesn’t arouse the same visceral sense of outrage that it does in women. The men I know lament the death of the honorable Hector and think Paris and Helen are simply assholes.” Mary finishes with a pained laugh.

Sally turns to me. “Mary, I get it. I think we all get it. Are you suggesting, Claire, not that we reread *The Iliad* but that we keep it in the back of our minds? Is that what you mean?”

Thus invited, I edge back into this conversation. “Yes, that is precisely what I meant. It is a framing device. Or to put it more bluntly, ‘What the hell is going on in men’s minds?’”

Quiet reigns around the table. I can almost hear the hum of memories, of conversations between my friends and their males which like the conversations in Chekhov do not connect. They look around the table at each other, comprehension writ large. Laughter and exasperation war on their faces. Not a word is said. Not a word has to be said.

I interrupt before we descend into a spirited discussion of the nature of men, which could go on for hours. “Perhaps it is time to find out if our study of *Macbeth* is even possible. Is there any movie version of *Macbeth* that is worth watching?”

Cindy, working her smart phone says: “Amazon has a Verdi streaming, but I will see if there is a DVD. There are numerous versions of *Macbeth*, the latest is Patrick Stewart as Macbeth. There is one with Judy Dench as Lady Macbeth which should be interesting. So we will have enough to work with. There is also a Japanese version called *Throne of Blood*, which might add to our discussion. That is especially so since we have read *The Tale of Genji*, which had malign spirits but no actual warfare. I will find out more when I am at my computer. Maybe the youngsters can see things on their smart phones but I like a larger computer screen where I don’t have to squint.”

“Why don’t we make searches before our next meeting and see what is available for us to study? Maybe pre-screen some of the DVDs, see which ones are worth studying. We could use the Folger version of *Macbeth*. It works well when we all have the same version.”

Sally puts her pen to paper, “Let’s divvy up the chores. I am making a list as we speak and will email to everyone.” She stops and permits herself a triumphant smile.

“We have a plan, ladies. Shall we start next time with the written text?” I expect a yes and I get it. Nobody objects. Everyone leaves, looking forward to receiving their assignments. All are happy to be back together again.

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