

# Hailey's Comets

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Just minutes before the new-faculty tea, Gloria asked Harold if he planned to make a speech and he glared at her with one of his "eat-dirt-you-inferior-moron" stares. Right there in their tidy dressing room, with the buttery aroma of baked brie in the air and the distant clattering of caterers in the kitchen, Gloria knew she had no choice but to kill him.

Back when Hailey was small, Harold's looks used to pierce Gloria's soul and leave her feeling wounded for days. But today, her punctured soul finally burst and Harold's stare switched on the full torrent of her hatred, which had been seeping out in a thin trickle since the day he moved wordlessly from their bedroom into his study twenty years ago.

Sometimes Gloria wondered whether they held the Guinness World Record for the longest time two married people lived in the same house without touching. If Harold wanted to give Gloria something, say a shirt that needed mending, he would set it on a table for her to pick up rather than risk letting his hand accidentally brush hers. At first she hadn't realized he was going to such extremes to avoid contact. But Harold had made his aversion clear by putting on surgical gloves

that night twenty years ago, when Hailey went into convulsions from a bad case of chickenpox and they brought her to the emergency room together. Harold told the resident that the gloves protected his wife and daughter from his poison ivy.

"You're full of it," Gloria had snapped with uncharacteristic boldness on the ride home, Hailey's head warm and heavy in her lap, her blond pigtailed damp with fever and smelling slightly of antiseptic. "If we don't get marriage counseling, Hailey's the one who'll suffer."

Harold flashed her a stare that wordlessly summed up his disdain for both marriage counselors and Gloria. "Hailey," he sniffed, "is perfect."

This was the one thing on which they both agreed. Their brilliant daughter — now twenty-two and studying to be a scientist like her father and grandfather — was the reason Gloria had stayed with the man who, it now seemed clear, had married her just for her genes. Gloria was twenty-four and Harold forty-four when they'd wed, and she'd been thrilled finally to do something that pleased her father, the Nobel Laureate Elliot Rotarian. But when her father died suddenly of a heart attack, shortly after Gloria became pregnant, Harold grew surly and withdrawn. Their spotty sex life ended, despite Gloria's shy attempt to take matters



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into her own hands. Gloria thought men were supposed to like that. But not Harold.

**The spicy scent** of after-shave filled their narrow, meticulously ordered dressing room as Harold slapped Paco Rabanne over his pale cheeks and neck with plump, soft hands. A dignified, fastidious man, with a thin mustache and halo of white hair, Harold eyed himself critically in the mirror, picked up a small pair of scissors, leaned forward, and began snipping wispy silver hairs from his nose. Had Gloria been in better humor, she might have laughed at the sight of this distinguished scientist stretching his face like Rubberman to gain access to his nostrils.

Instead, Gloria clipped on her good pearl earrings and glanced longingly toward her running shoes, tucked away in the closet. For one desperate moment she imagined herself kicking off her sensible pumps, lacing on the mud-splattered Comets, and racing down the street in her good silk dress, the wind freeing her hair from its matronly knot, her heart pounding with joy as she ran and ran until she couldn't run any farther.

But running away would not solve her problem, Gloria thought sadly, gazing at her own reflection, which was, as always, ordinary as white bread. No wonder the only hands to touch her in the darkness were her own. What a cruel joke it must have been for poor Harold to discover that the daughter of a genius could be so plain, so common, so uncompromisingly average.

Strands of gray salted Gloria's mouse-brown hair and she smoothed them back from her forehead with a quick, nervous gesture. Her simple navy dress hung loosely around her waist, she noted with surprise, and she reached down to tighten the belt. She'd lost some weight in the four months since she'd started running, and the muscles of her legs had taken on new definition. It still surprised her when men turned to watch her as she ran, and she felt hot and confused by their eyes. Harold would be shocked if he knew that men in trucks and sports cars honked appreciatively at his wife. But he would never, ever know.

Gloria's Comets, after all, really belonged to Hailey — an impulse purchase made last fall while shopping for school clothes. "Hey, Mom, if I bought those they'd be Hailey's Comets," her daughter had said, pointing to the electric-blue shoes adorned with gaudy yellow streaking comets. Then, thoughtfully, the girl volunteered, "You know, Mom, it'd be good for me to start jogging." Gloria had purchased the Comets on the spot, then watched with admiration as her daughter began running every morning, marveling at Hailey's ability

**A**lthough many of these same guests had been coming to her house for years, they still didn't recognize her.

to decide to do something, then follow through without fear or hesitation. When Hailey discarded the Comets in favor of lighter, faster shoes, Gloria felt an inexplicable sadness. She'd rescued the Comets from the trash, and hidden them until after Hailey left for California in May.

Then, to her surprise, Gloria had taken the Comets from their hiding place and laced them on. At first she'd felt ridiculous, a forty-six-year-old woman trotting down the street in shorts. But with Hailey's Comets on her feet, Gloria felt unusually confident. After a few weeks, her body remembered the long-forgotten wind-in-the-face thrill she'd experienced when running along the Pacific beaches of her childhood, light-years before Harold brought her to the harsh gray streets of New Haven. After four months, she could run sixty minutes without stopping, and set out every morning after Harold's car pulled out of the garage so he wouldn't see her and stare.

**Beside her, Harold** intently snipped nose hairs, and, for a fleeting moment, Gloria could see him yellow-skinned and lifeless in a satin-lined coffin. She

blinked quickly, her heart beginning to pound. Should she do it now, during the party, or after?

"Harold?" she ventured in a tentative voice, licking her suddenly dry lips.

"Uuugh," Harold replied, flaring a nostril to snip one last hair.

"Could I ask you a question?"

"Dammit, Gloria." Harold slammed down the scissors. "We've hosted these blasted teas forever, and I always give a speech. Haven't you assimilated that simple fact into your consciousness by now?"

Gloria's stomach did a little flip and she made her way to the window, pushed it open, and took a deep gulp of fresh, chilly air. The oaks were already starting to turn gold, and the air smelled of wood smoke and evergreen. She filled her lungs, then exhaled slowly. When it was over, she promised herself, she would go for a run. Gloria squared her shoulders and turned back toward her husband.

"Excuse me, Harold." Her voice was soft, deferential. "But you may recall that last year you decided to skip your speech in favor of letting each new faculty member briefly address the group."

Harold blinked hard. Gloria could almost see the wheels turning in his head. "Right," he said with a surprised expression that was as close to apology as Harold got. His face cracked into a tight smile, and he clapped his hands briskly.

"Touché," he said, nodding slightly in her direction. "Well done, Gloria. Let the new faculty speak, then." He turned on his heel and was gone.

In the distance, Gloria heard the *bing bong* of their door chime and, moments later, the muffled sounds of pleasantries. The party would be the same tedious two hours as last year and the years before that; filling glasses for people who never remembered her name. Sometimes she saw one of them in the Pantry Pride and smiled. But although many of these same guests had been coming to her house for ten years, since Harold had been named department chair, they still didn't recognize her without her husband. If Gloria was foolish enough to speak, they'd stare blankly, then stammer, Oh yes, Gloria. Isn't



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your husband Harold Bruckner? Wasn't your father that Nobel Prize winner? Aren't you nobody?

Gloria shut the window and, with a last, loving glance at her Comets, eased out of the dressing room, her heels clacking softly on the parquet floor. It was time.

She'd given a great deal of thought to the deed over the years, and kept a secret scrapbook of articles about family murders. Suffocation and strangulation were quite popular, but Gloria's favorite was the man who'd electrocuted his wife by short-circuiting her exercise bike. She'd flirted with the notion of hot-wiring Harold's electron microscope, but it really wasn't her style. Gloria's plan was infinitely more subtle, more feminine. Ancient, really. And a natural for someone as fond as she was of gardening.

A fragrant blast of hot pastry assailed her as she walked down the back stairs into the kitchen, where Sophia and her Moveable Feast crew were taking hors d'oeuvres off baking sheets and arranging them on silver platters. A steady drone filled Gloria's ears, and she couldn't tell if it was the crescendo of arriving guests in the next room or the adrenaline flooding her veins.

"I'll be out of your way in a minute," she apologized to Sophia, opening the freezer and reaching behind the ice trays for a small, zip-lock bag. Stuffing the bag into her pocket, Gloria grabbed a wedge of brie and a pastry, slipped quickly into the nearby bathroom, and locked the door.

With surprisingly steady hands, Gloria scooped the meat and cheese out of Sophia's signature pastry tart, dropped the filling into the toilet, and flushed. Then she removed the plastic bag from her pocket and eyed the grayish-white mass inside.

A chill raced over her body, causing the soft brown hairs on her arms to stand at attention. *Amanita bisporigera*. The Death Angel. Favored fungus of Roman emperors anxious to dispose of the bothersome. Easy to find in the Connecticut woods during the summer, if you do your homework. Gloria slid the contents of the plastic bag into the pastry, set the cheese on top, and smiled.

The buzzing in her ears grew louder as she stepped back into the busy kitchen and

tossed the empty bag into the trash compactor. She set the pastry on a small china plate, placed it in the microwave, and turned the digital counter, her heart hammering in time. Twenty, nineteen, eighteen ... . When she opened the door, Gloria gasped to see the tart look so perfect, so deliciously inviting.

"Here, Harold," she rehearsed mentally, grasping the warm plate and backing out the kitchen door toward the blur of guests in the living room. "Sophia made a special vegetarian tart for you."

Harold was standing by the fireplace, sipping port and pontificating to an adoring throng of tweed-jacketed men and dressed-for-success women. As she crossed the dark-red Persian rug, Gloria heard the pounding of wild surf in her ears and she struggled to breathe evenly, in and out. She was just inches away from Harold, the plate extended enticingly in her palm, when a hand reached out and grabbed her elbow. Gloria turned to face a stunning blonde.

"Don't you go running mornings down Camden Street?" The woman's smile was like sunshine, and Gloria felt something cold and hard inside her begin to melt.

"Yes," she stammered quietly, the plate suddenly heavy in her hand.

"I thought you looked familiar. I'm usually out there around 8:30, walking my dog, and I'm so impressed at how you go speeding by."

Gloria opened her mouth, then closed it again. She hadn't a clue what to say. How could this beautiful woman be impressed by someone so unfailingly mediocre?

The woman held out her hand. "I'm Stephanie Knowlands, a new transplant from Emory."

Gloria transferred the hot, fragrant plate to her left hand and grasped the young woman's palm with her right. Stephanie's hand felt cool and smooth in her own. She couldn't be older than thirty, still a child. Why, this might be Hailey in a few years.

"Welcome." Gloria forced the corners of

her mouth up. "I'm Gloria."

"Pleased to meet you, Gloria." There was an awkward pause as the weight of Gloria's unspoken last name and occupation hung heavily between them. But Stephanie's Southern manners kicked in. "How long have you been running?" she ventured.

Gloria smiled shyly. No one ever asked her about herself at one of these teas. "Just since May, when my daughter left for California," she said. "But what I do is more like plodding than running. I'm pretty slow."

"Well, it looks like running to me." Stephanie leaned forward and lowered her voice. "It's so nice to talk about something besides god-almighty Bruckner for a change. He's a bit of a pompous pig, isn't he?"

Gloria laughed, a freeing wave of mirth that rose up from her belly and massaged her soul. "Yes," she nodded. "He is a pompous pig."

Suddenly, Stephanie's eyes widened in alarm, and Gloria smelled the unmistakable spicy scent of her husband behind her.



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Harold cleared his throat imperiously, and Gloria stepped aside as he extended his hand to Stephanie. "Greetings, Dr. Knowlands. I see you've met my wife, Gloria Rotarian Bruckner. Her father is the late Elliot Rotarian."

Stephanie's pretty face flushed. "Oh, dear, Mrs. Bruckner. Why, I had no idea."

Gloria winked and grinned. "I've never had such fun at one of these things."

Harold looked around in annoyance. "Those blasted waiters never get to me," he said, reaching for the pastry on Gloria's plate. "May I?"

But just before his fingers grasped the tart, Gloria let it go, sending the plate crashing onto the floor. Everyone turned to stare as Harold's prized Angora cat stepped delicately over the broken china to gobble up the tart. Watching the cat lick its whiskers, Gloria felt a calmness descend over her. She'd always hated that cat. But as for Harold — well, he was just a pompous pig. And Hailey's father.

"Pardon me," Gloria said, smiling at Stephanie and walking gracefully out of the room and up the stairs to her dressing room. Humming happily, she kicked off her party dress and put on her running clothes. She felt light and airy as she strapped on her Walkman and slipped her credit cards into her pocket. How silly she'd been all these years not to realize that leaving wasn't running away, but running toward.

No one noticed Gloria as she slipped out the front door into the fading sunlight. They were all clustered around Harold's cat, as it jerked and writhed on the floor.

Gloria switched on her tape and began jogging lightly down the walk.

"California dreamin'," The Mamas and the Papas sang, and Gloria laughed out loud as Hailey's Comets flew over the pavement. The Pacific spray felt brisk and refreshing on her face, the sun warm and gentle in her hair. □

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