

## **ANOTHER FLIGHT OF STAIRS**

by

S. Frederic Liss

If Sabatino Nomano had one dollar for every flight of stairs he had walked up since inheriting his father's business thirty years ago, he would be a millionaire, retired in Florida or Arizona or, maybe, San Diego because he always wanted to live in a city with a world class zoo. Liberated from his split entry with its four living levels, long ago a symbol of sophistication and success, he would live instead in a ranch house, one floor, no attic, no basement, no stairs, not even a front stoop or a step down from the house to the garage or from the kitchen to the backyard patio, a house that would allow him to postpone, maybe forever, the knee replacement surgery his orthopedist had been nagging him about. Sabatino welcomed the attention, but he knew his doctor cared as little about him as Yumara, his wife; and, probably acting on the advice of legal counsel, peppered him with reminder letters to defend against a medical malpractice law suit when his knee gave out. Sabatino replied to every letter, reaffirming his intention to die with the knees he was born with.

On the day of his father's funeral, Sabatino's wife Yumara had said 'don't be stupid' when Sabatino told her he wanted to continue the business. They were in the limousine on the way from the church to the cemetery, the first car behind the hearse. The funeral director had neglected to draw the curtain across the back window of the hearse and Sabatino had stared at his father's coffin, pale white pine, on the long ride trying to imagine what it was like to be dead. Yumara had arranged a babysitter for their

son because she believed that young children who attended funerals died young. This superstition had been handed down from her grandmother to her mother to her because a four year old cousin who attended his grandfather's funeral died the week before her tenth birthday in the flu epidemic of the winter of 1921-1922. In Yumara's mind, this epidemic which killed thousands of people would not have happened if this cousin had not attended his grandfather's funeral. As the funeral procession – the hearse, one limousine, three private cars - passed through the cemetery gates, Sabatino debated with himself whether he dishonored his father by selecting such an inexpensive coffin. ("It's dumb to bury money," Yumara had said when he asked the price of a polished mahogany coffin with brass handles.) "So stupid," Yumara repeated as the limousine approached the grave site. "Wal-Mart and Costco will drive you into bankruptcy."

At the time, Sabatino had wanted to explain that continuing the business would keep his father alive for him, but he knew Yumara would laugh and say that only fools let the past dictate their future. Instead, he said, "I doubt Wal-Mart's customers sent Sam Walton's family condolence cards. Cheap prices mean nothing if you can't pay at the register. Wal-Mart demands cash or credit card. There aren't enough people in Ilion Heights who can do either to justify opening a store there and those who can wouldn't shop at Wal-Mart."

Since that day, Yumara treated him with the disrespect he felt he showed his father by burying him in a pine coffin, at the dinner table, in bed, at parties, whenever she had the opportunity. When he wanted to have another child, she refused to have sex with him. When he offered to have a vasectomy, she declared her celibacy. Shame of her husband bathed her like sweat from exercising on a hot July afternoon. She berated him

for preying on the poor of Ilion Heights as if she were a politician crusading against check cashing and money wiring stores. To her friends, she attributed the family wealth to an inheritance from an uncle rather than lie about Sabatino in a way that would be praiseful of him. When he needed another helper, she refused to allow their son to work with him. Still, her disgust did not extend to the money he made which she spent freely in upscale shopping malls or fancy stores, covering her shame in designer clothes, furs, and diamonds. She stalked luxury goods with as much guile and as little guilt as Blackie Hauser stalked his enemies.

Too embarrassed to make confession at the church in the suburb where they lived, Sabatino had confessed his desire to divorce Yumara to Father Dominic at The Church of the Holy Shepherd's Flock, the only Catholic church in Ilion Heights; but Father Dominic regurgitated church gospel, that marriage was a sacrament, divorce a sin, that his son deserved a father in the home, that he was obliged to treat his wife with kindness and charity. Nowadays, Sabatino had said to Father Dominic, it is common for Catholics to divorce. If you take the easy way in this life, Father Dominic had replied, God will condemn you to the hard way in the next. For years, Sabatino agonized first about the divorce, then whether to seek Blackie Hauser's help until, one day, he realized he had reached the age when neither divorce nor his wife's death mattered.

Now, standing on the sidewalk outside the sixth tenement he had visited that morning, Sabatino faced another long flight of stairs, thirty-three steps with eight inch risers rather than the usual six, fifteen to the landing, three to turn the corner, then fifteen more to the second floor. The tenements in Ilion Heights had the longest flights of stairs in the city; yet the flats had low ceilings as if the men who constructed the tenements in

the decades prior to the Civil War anticipated the descent of Ilion Heights from a neighborhood for the upper class to the middle class to a slum housing immigrants, legal and illegal, drug addicts, welfare addicts, and enough decent people like Simone Ng and her son Hoa who asked only for the opportunity to work hard and build a life in the United States for him to earn a living as a peddler who sold on credit.

Sabatino had been working Ilion Heights for almost thirty years, a peddler selling out of a catalogue he assembled himself, photocopies in a loose-leaf notebook rather than a push cart, clothing, household furnishings, furniture, appliances large or small, electronics, sporting goods, an occasional luxury item like a diamond pin or pinky ring, anything that could be purchased in a store other than groceries. Many of his customers traded with him because they did not like the way they were treated in stores or shopping malls, tailed by security because of their race or the way they dressed, talked down to by clerks who sneered rather than smiled, yelled at, sometimes cursed, by managers if they had the courage to complain; others because of Sabatino's personal touch, the way he made time to ask after their children, their spouses, their parents, to make small talk, to laugh at their jokes, to explain the wares in his catalogue, to take the time to understand what they wanted and why they wanted it, a two-slice or a four slice toaster, a six inch or an eight inch or a ten inch skillet; others because he extended credit to people who did not qualify for credit cards even when they were collateralized by bank deposits. Charm and credit, that's what Sabatino really peddled. His customers paid him \$1.00 to \$20.00 per week depending on the price of the item, the cash down, the rate of interest. Fifty-two weeks was the maximum term. Usury was a concept they neither understood nor cared about. What mattered to them was that Sabatino, as respectful to them as a young

child to a priest or teacher, could deliver a 19" color TV on terms they could afford and that he would replace it if it broke before they finished making their payments. What mattered to Sabatino was the double markup, one on the TV, the other on the credit. And, he pocketed the sales tax which itself was twice the margin conventional stores operated on. Outside Ilion Heights in the parts of the city where the apartment buildings had elevators, people did not need peddlers like Sabatino any more than they needed the ice man, the egg man, or the milk man; but as long as there were slums with strivers fighting there way out, and Sabatino knew there always would be, he would prosper.

One of Sabatino's warmest memories of his father was his father's speculation about the space between the tenement floors and the way it was used. One day it was storage space for drug dealers; another where the street gangs hid the property they stole while they arranged to fence it; or, his father's favorite, an ossuary for The Church of the Holy Shepherd's Flock because catacombs did not have to be underground; boxes of bones, easily accessible in the event Father Dominic suddenly had to replace a relic, perhaps organized by type, tibias with tibias, lower jaws with lower jaws; or, by individual, labeled in gothic script with the name of the deceased, dates of birth and death, position in the church; cardboard, wood, metal, marble, the quality of the box dependent upon the rank of the deceased in the church's hierarchy. Maybe if he joined Holy Shepherd's Flock, maybe if he contributed large sums of money faithfully, his bones, too, would be laid to rest in its ossuary and, someday, a fragment of his cheek bone, a piece of his skull, would be venerated as a holy relic of an ancient saint. Now, some thirty years after his father's death, Sabatino trudged up and down the stairs in the tenements of Ilion Heights tapping the walls with his knuckles, a eulogy to his father.

With each tap, he attempted to decipher the sound, hollow or solid, he was never sure. Whatever the use, Sabatino knew that urban real estate, even in a slum like Ilion Heights, was too precious to lay fallow.

Sabatino had two collections in this tenement, in its heyday known as the Excelsior according to the name carved into the marble lintel above the front door. On the second floor, he knew Simone Ng would make her forty-first of forty-eight weekly payments of \$14.00 toward her microwave. In the thirty or so years Sabatino had worked Ilion Heights, Simone had been his most reliable payer. On the sixth floor, he hoped to collect \$7.00 from Lia Mattawara who had made three of her twelve weekly payments on her toaster oven, but who had missed the last two, refusing to answer the door.

Sabatino knew she had been home. He had heard her children running from his knock, Lucia who was four and still wore diapers, Liliana who was two and refused to wear clothes, two little girls whose mother had already robbed them of any chance for a decent life. When he had sold Lia the toaster oven, he had said with a laugh that he would give it to her in trade for the two girls. And, he would have. Lia mumbled, ‘they be worth more when they growed.’ She wouldn’t be the first mother in Ilion Heights who pimped her children for dope. If she didn’t pay on time, Sabatino wrote on a note he slipped under her door, he would turn her account over to Blackie Hauser.

“You want I should handle this, boss?” Josie Obejas, Sabatino’s bodyguard, asked. Sabatino did not need a bodyguard. He was safe on the streets of Ilion Heights. He had served in Vietnam with Blackie Hauser, saved his life once or twice, and everyone knew he was under Blackie’s protection. Sabatino kept Josie on because he liked the company and the continuity. Eduardo, Josie’s father, had been his father’s

bodyguard and Josie had inherited the job about the same time Sabatino inherited the business. And Josie needed the money. He and his wife were raising an infant granddaughter because their daughter had died in a drive-by shooting and the baby's father had overdosed on dope.

Sabatino wished Josie had the money to buy the business so he could sell cars for a few years before retiring to a house with no steps, a job with regular hours, a weekly paycheck, benefits. He had always wanted to sell cars, luxury cars, German luxury cars, Porsche, Mercedes Benz, Audi; but he made too much money working Ilion Heights to give it up or to give it away. The cars attracted Sabatino, not the customers, because he despised the people who bought German luxury cars. At Yumara's insistence, he had joined a country club full of people who drove German luxury cars, but he doubted they would bring their trade to him when they shopped each year for a new car. They treated him as if he were one of the staff because both his first name and last name ended in a vowel, because his skin was a shade or two swarthier than theirs, because he preferred basketball to squash or tennis and greyhounds to thoroughbreds and refused to buy wine that cost more than \$10.00 per bottle, because he occasionally dropped a foreign word or phrase into his conversation when he could not remember the right English word, because he did not go to work every morning in suits and shirts and ties and shoes costing thousands of dollars nor sport a watch that cost as much as one of the German luxury cars he yearned to sell. And if they did, if they deigned to deal with someone who belonged to their country club but not their social class, he knew they would treat him with the same contempt that they treated the caddies or ball boys or locker room staff whom they would tip \$1.00 if they remembered to get change for the fifties or hundreds they carried.

Still, Sabatino had sent his son to the same summer camps as these people, to one of the elite boarding schools and private colleges, writing the same tuition checks out of an income that would have put him in the same tax bracket if he paid taxes.

“I’ll do Simone,” Sabatino said. Tell Lia it’s either you or Blackie Hauser.”

Josie grasped Sabatino by the elbow and assisted him up the stairs to the second floor. When Sabatino had inherited Ilion Heights from his father, he was able to scoot from the first floor to the sixth two steps at a time without stopping. Now, his knees ached as if they supported the bridges spanning the river, one that separated the city from its suburbs, another that separated Ilion Heights from the rest of the city, the bridges of sighs to the residents of Ilion Heights who looked at them and sighed. Crossing them in the morning, Sabatino felt he was in a prison van on his way to twenty to life; in the evening as if he were being transferred from one prison to another.

Usually as cheerful as a new grandmother, Simone greeted him with the face of a woman who had just returned from her child’s funeral. He bowed his head in the direction of the ancestral shrine that Simone had built along one wall, then sat on the couch, a two piece sectional, quality leather, that she had purchased from him the previous year, never missing a payment. He had tried to sell her a mahogany armoire that would fit nicely against the wall with the shrine, but she had refused to move it because the sun shined on it on the day of Thanh Minh, the day of visiting the tombs. Sun, Simone had said, make it holy.

“I visit the cemetery,” Sabatino had replied at the time, “on Memorial Day. I bring flowers, pull up the weeds, say a prayer.”

“In America,” Simone said, “no tomb for me visit.”

At first, Sabatino did not understand. His parents had died and he had grieved for them. Time had passed. Their memories lingered in the back of his mind like a tea stain on a white dress shirt, fading but never bleached out. He no longer mourned their loss. His memory of his grandparents was a photo of himself as an infant on their laps. Erecting a shrine to his parents and grandparents was as alien to him as Godzilla, Rodan, Mothra, and the other prehistoric creatures in the Japanese horror movies his son gorged himself on.

As the weeks passed, each payment for the couches was accompanied by a cup of green tea. Over tea, Simone explained to him the cult of the ancestors. “My people have a saying, ‘Birds have nests but people have ancestors.’ I hang funeral tablets of ancestors on shrine for five generations and one more for ancestors more old. I honor ancestors on . . . how you say . . . the day they die.”

“The anniversaries of their deaths,” Sabatino suggested

“I burn incense and offer food and flowers pretty like garden behind house where father grew up. I pray to them and put ashes of burned money on altar so they will prosper in next life. I ask them to watch me and show me way. On ritual days, I serve first meal to ancestors while we wait. If I do not worship them they suffer in afterlife. No peace.” On the day Simone made her final payment on the couches she confided to Sabatino, “I worry my son not honor me after I dead and I wander the earth forever with no peace.”

“I remember when I was a kid,” Sabatino told Simone, “how my father and uncles told stories about my grandparents and their grandparents. I didn’t realize how much I miss that.” That night, after entering Simone’s final payment for the couches in his

account book, Sabatino suggested to Yumara they erect a shrine in the living room to their ancestors.

“No voodoo in my house,” Yumara had said. “People will talk. They’ll say we stick pins in dolls or chop off the heads of chickens and drink their blood.”

Yumara had always been self-conscious about her parents because they dressed and talked as if they still lived in the old country. On their birthdays or anniversary she would go to their apartment and cook a meal rather than take them to a restaurant. When she graduated high school, then college, she persuaded them to stay home because the stress of the graduations might trigger heart problems. When her mother became too infirm to go to the doctor by herself, Yumara paid a neighbor to take her. At times Sabatino wondered if Yumara married him for love or to escape her parents. When he persisted about erecting a shrine, she said, “If you do, I’ll move your bed into the garage.”

“I’d rather share the garage with the spirits of my ancestors than my house with a wife who treats the dead as dead and the living as dead.”

“I’d rather live alone than live with a man who treats the dead as living.”

On Saturday it would be a year since he had moved into the garage. The first week, he built a shrine to his ancestors on his work bench along the back wall, a perfect replica of Simone’s with tablets and photographs. He typed up, as best as he could remember them, the stories his father and uncles had told, enclosing the pages in plastic sleeves and collecting them in a loose leaf notebook. He knew in his bones that on the day of his death his son would dismantle the shrine and discard the notebook, that within a year, his son would forget him. If he lived long enough to have adult grandchildren,

maybe they would honor him and their grandparents. This persistent feeling of emptiness made him regret Yumara's refusal to have another child, one he could teach to honor his or her ancestors, to respect rather than be ashamed of his or her father.

During his second week in the garage, he laid a wooden floor on top of the concrete to elevate himself above the dampness and purchased a dehumidifier for the summer and a space heater for the winter. With Josie's help, he installed a bathroom and wired the garage for cable. Each week he and Yumara negotiated the use of the kitchen, who would cook when. He ate at the end of his workbench. On warm evenings, he raised the garage doors so the neighbors could see in. He hoped this would embarrass Yumara more than rumors about voodoo, but she told people her husband was suffering from dementia and his psychiatrist and told her to humor him if he wanted to live in the garage. During the year he lived in the garage, she changed the color of her hair as many times as a woman tries on dresses while shopping. If he had photographs, he would circulate them, perhaps on the internet. Let her explain that to the world.

Now, Simone said, "I am so shamed, Mr. Sabatino. I no have your money. I give back microwave. My Hoa sick. Sick. He sees the spirits and knows they come for him."

"He should tell them to wait, that it's not his time for many years."

"The spirits know. They no come if it not his time."

"The microwave is yours, Simone. I will forgive the rest of the payments."

"Forgive?"

"I mark you paid in full."

"I pay, Mr. Sabatino."

"It is my offering to the spirits so they will wait."

“Confucius teach it forbidden to make offerings to ancestors not yours. It stealing someone else’s good fortune.”

“I want to help.”

“I pay. In week.”

“Two weeks. Three weeks. As much time as you need.” Sabatino accepted another cup of tea. “I had a son once. His mother turned him against me. He’s dead to me now. He hates me because he thinks I exploit people like you. He refuses to understand. He says I shame him. I wish I had never fathered him.” Sabatino finished his tea, declining an offer of a refill. “Do you know Lia Mattawara on the sixth floor?”

“She close her door to me. She close her door to everyone.”

Sabatino tried to visualize Lia's apartment. He had been in so many apartments in so many tenements over the years that he could not distinguish one from another. Some had been as clean as they were threadbare, others as homely as the cardboard boxes in the many alleys of Ilion Heights where the homeless squatted. He recalled freaky things, Simone's shrine, the way Lucia at four still wore diapers and Liliana at two refused to wear clothes, the apartment with the toilet in the kitchen, the apartment that had been subdivided into rooms by blankets draped over rope, another with an AIDS quilt hanging on a wall; but he remembered nothing about Lia's apartment other than her two daughters and his toaster oven. He could not even visualize where Lia had placed the toaster oven.

“What's the talk about her?” Sabatino asked.

“No listen. No listen.” Simone gripped her teacup Her knuckles whitened.

“Please, Mr. Sabatino.”

“What’s wrong?”

“She evil spirit who never had happy burial.”

Simone had explained the ritual of the happy burial to him. A second burial in the deceased’s home village, three years after death, when the bones were dug up while the family burned incense and chanted prayers at grave side, the bones then washed and arranged in a ceramic box so they resembled a skeleton. Sabatino had sensed the sadness in Simone’s voice because in her adopted country she would never have a happy burial. If the spirits took Hoa, neither would he. Sabatino imagined his own burial. On the day of his death, his son would dismantle his ancestral shrine, discard the photos and the tablets in the trash. Yumara would have him cremated rather than bury money in the ground. If he were lucky, she would pay Josie a few dollars to scatter his ashes in the alleys of Ilion Heights. Most likely she would abandon his ashes at the crematorium. No one would wash his bones. No one would bury him in his native village. No one would honor or remember him. Sabatino mumbled a good-bye and waited for Josie on the landing. Inside her apartment, Simone knelt before the shrine and prayed to the ancestors to watch over Hoa and Mr. Sabatino.

“I call Blackie Hauser,” Josie said as they paused for a soda and a slice at Slam’s, the last pizza joint in Ilion Heights. Lia had refused to answer the door even though Josie could hear the children running back and forth and a soap opera in Spanish on the television.

“I don’t know, Josie. It’s only a toaster oven.”

“Lia big mouth, boss. Tell people she no pay. They no pay. You need to show you boss or else you no business. Me no business.”

“For \$63.00? There must be a better way.”

“Your dad had rule: never let them welch.”

“I never have.” Sabatino took a bite out of his slice of pizza, then pushed it away.

“I’d rather repossess.”

“She make you fool, boss. You need to make big noise, not small noise.”

Blackie Hauser would make a loud noise, loud enough for everyone in Ilion Heights to hear. He admired Josie’s lack of guilt. In Josie’s view, Lia had brought it on herself by refusing to answer the door, refusing to answer the phone, refusing to make her payments. Whatever happened to her, she deserved it.

Sabatino tried to concentrate on the big picture. Where, he asked himself, would his customers, people like Simone, shop if he went out of business? What store would let them pay a few dollars a week? Not Wal-Mart, not Costco; only the stores that sold third rate merchandise at inflated prices on layaway. Buying on layaway, they would not get the goods until they made the payments. Miss a payment, they forfeited what they had paid. The store would repossess what it already possessed. If they made the payments, if they received the merchandise, the stores would refuse to stand behind it. Layaway stores lined the streets of Ilion Heights, Howard’s Fashion Passion, for one, a rummage sale disguised as a clothing store that screened its customers with surveillance cameras before buzzing them inside; or Jeffrey’s Appliance Haven which specialized in repossessed washers and driers, ovens and refrigerators, other appliances, delivery and installation extra, warranties with so many exclusions they did not warrant that the on/off switch would work; or Norris’s Palace of Furniture which worked the same scam with living room sets, bedrooms, or dining rooms, as Jeffrey’s did with appliances; or Dean’s

Family Jewels where gold plate sold for the price of 14 carat gold and cubic zirconium for the price of diamonds. If he did not call Blackie Hauser, women like Simone would be forced to shop in these stores. Did not Simone deserve his compassion more than Lia?

And Lia's children, Lucia and Liliana. He knew how better off they would be if Father Dominic engineered their adoption by an upper-class family who lived in a wealthy suburb. So what if Father Dominic divided the adoption fee, the adoption extortion in truth, between the Church and Blackie Hauser who would give him enough of a taste so he could share some with Josie. Contacting Blackie Hauser wasn't right, but it was right. And he would salvage the toaster oven. Clean it up. Donate it to a homeless shelter or a shelter for battered women where it would be appreciated. Sabatino thought about these things as he sipped his soda and tried to convince himself that a lot more was at stake than a \$63.00 debt and a toaster oven.

"You call Blackie Hauser," Josie said.

"You're a worse nag than my wife," Sabatino replied.

"No nag. No nag."

"Wait here, Josie. I want to take a walk. Clear my head."

At the Excelsior, Sabatino dragged himself across the lobby to the stairs. Raising his leg from one step to the next caused a searing pain behind his kneecap as if someone had cut an incision in the side of his knee and hammered a disk of red hot metal into his knee. When he shifted his weight forward to step up, pain flashed up and down his leg as if molten lava engulfed his nerves. Four or five steps short of the landing, he began to weep. His father would not approve. Men, his father had taught him, measure their manhood by the depth of their silence. His father had survived a North Korean prison

camp that way, his mind overwriting the memory of that experience until he visited the Korean War Memorial in Washington, D.C., by then confined to a wheelchair, when the memories flooded back and he refused to leave until a National Park Ranger gently explained that the memorial closed at sunset. Sabatino rubbed the tears from his cheeks, swallowed his pain, and dragged himself up the rest of the stairs to the second floor.

Three weeks later, Simone telephoned and insisted she would bring her account current. In her living room, Sabatino wiped away the sweat from his forehead and the back of his neck with a damp towel. Unable to bend his knees to sit, he leaned against the wall beside Simone's ancestral shrine. He declined a cup of green tea. "If a child is adopted, who would she honor, the parents who raised her or the parents who made her?"

"Parents who made baby."

"Suppose she doesn't know who they are?"

"Someone related," Simone tapped her chest over her heart with her palm, "by blood." She hugged herself. "Someone close. Grandfather. Father's brother."

"If she doesn't know who they are?"

"Ancestors wander. Never honored. Never at peace. Souls suffer in afterlife."

"Even if she honors the parents who raised her?"

"Not her blood."

"Suppose she has no memory of her real parents?"

Again, Simone tapped her chest over her heart with her palm and Sabatino now understood what he had to do. Adoption by strangers was alien to the cult of the ancestors. Blood raised blood and blood honored the blood that raised them. In this way, ancestors survived generation after generation. In this way, he and his parents and his

grandparents would survive generation after generation. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, oblivious to the pain.

Three days later, Sabatino succumbed to Josie's nagging and met Blackie Hauser at Slam's. Hauser wore a Teamster's jacket, a Manchester United baseball cap, and construction boots whose rawhide laces, stiff with newness, extended out like a motorcycle's handlebars.

"Lia Mattawara," Sabatino told him. "The Excelsior. Sixth floor. A toaster oven. A couple of young kids. Blindfold them so they won't see what you do to their mother. Search the place for photo albums, pictures, home videos. Anything like that I want."

"Souvenirs all of a sudden?" In Vietnam, Blackie Hauser had been notorious for his souvenirs. For him, a necklace of ears was too prosaic, a necklace of tongues too mundane, a backpack of bones too ordinary. He collected eyeballs the way young boys collected marbles, and penises which he used for playing practical jokes on grunts fresh from stateside. Dried out, they darkened and shriveled up like sticks of beef jerky. He would wait until the grunt had eaten most of it, then describe its origins in meticulous detail, careful to stand out of range of the vomit. Anywhere but Vietnam, he would have been considered a deranged sadist; but in Vietnam napalm had obliterated the boundary between normal and abnormal, the sane and the insane, and sadism had definitions that the fertile mind of Marquis de Sade never would have conjured up. Blackie Hauser's reputation in Ilion Heights was as notorious.

Sabatino smiled. "Yeah. All of a sudden."

When Sabatino returned home that night, he found Yumara's note in the middle of his shrine, propped against the photos of his paternal grandparents. 'I've gone to Alaska,' it read, 'with the bank accounts. Keep the house and furniture and call it even.' Calling the credit card companies to cancel the joint credit cards, Sabatino struggled to keep his voice somber and businesslike. In the yard, he dug away the dirt from the base of the chimney and shimmied out a loose brick, groping in the hollow behind the brick for the keys, five keys for five safe deposit boxes, each holding more than the combined bank accounts. If he could jump and click his heels, he would have.

The following week, with Josie's help, he moved his ancestral shrine into the living room. He stripped the Star Wars wallpaper from his son's bedroom and hung wallpaper of ballerinas. He bought twin beds to replace the bunk beds and comforters and curtains to match the wallpaper and enough toys for several Christmases. In the second bathroom, he discarded the Transformers shower curtain in favor of Winnie the Pooh, part of a decorating kit that included a rug, a tissue holder, and plastic drinking glasses. He blocked the electrical sockets with plastic plugs and installed locks on the cabinets where he stored cleansing products, medicines, and other dangerous items. He installed shelving in the garage seven feet above the floor to store his tools. He child-proofed the house with the obsession of a parent who had read too many how-to manuals.

The night before he brought Lucia and Liliana home from the orphanage operated by the nuns of The Church of the Holy Shepherd's Flock, he purchased a pair of kittens for them as housewarming gifts. By the end of the first month, the probate court had approved the adoption. By the end of the second month, Lucia was toilet trained and Liliana wore clothes. She especially favored dresses with ribbons and bows. By the end

of the third month, they called Sabatino ‘Papa’ and said their bedtime prayers at the shrine in the living room rather than kneeling beside their beds. During the fourth month, Sabatino stopped reading them bedtime stories and started telling them about the people whose pictures were on the shrine, identifying them as ‘your grandparents, your great grandparents’. By the end of the first year, Lucia’s occasional nightmares were the only remnants of their prior lives and Sabatino explained those to her as too much television. Within five years, they moved to San Diego, a one storey ranch house without stairs. Sabatino took out a family membership to the San Diego Zoo and each of the girls adopted an animal, Lucia a snow leopard and Liliana an ibex, which they loved as much as if the animals were their children. When the snow leopard died, Lucia pinned a photo of it to the wall above her desk and told Papa that now she, too, had a shrine.

The End

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