



Source: Steven R. Weisman, 'Iranian signals a bid to clear talks logjam', *New York Times in International Herald Tribune online*, 16/09/05.

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The cocktail party had been underway several hours. It was a Sunday afternoon in August. Guests moved between air-conditioned living room and heavy shade under maples on a terrace overlooking Ontario's Grand River. The sky appeared calm and clear, but horizons around Cambridge were smudged with haze. Thunder had held itself away all day, and no one could say when the wind might rise.

Penny Morgan's parties were famous among the city's young artists. She presided with detached grace, complemented by the more extravagant demeanour of her friends, director Jed Knight and sculptor Maddie Harrington. Penny took pride in inviting the most promising talents and seeing them prosper from connections made at her palatial home.

A theatre student of Jed's provided entertainment to the sedate crowd that humid day. A boy named Brock with elfish features and curly red fur on head and chest, took to the pool like a golden retriever to a pond. His vivacity attracted the attention of young men and women alike. Penny had made his acquaintance, but carefully showed preference to none of the new visitors.

Some familiar observers wondered at this, as they had before. With Callum Morgan absent, Penny might have flirted with anyone she chose. In such a crowd no one would have looked askance at a surreptitious romance. Her husband remained a mystery to practically all her friends. Some thought it sad, seeing little evidence of love around this intelligent and uncommonly beautiful woman. But privately, Penny had never conceived anything greater for herself than this: at the age of 34 to have so much comfort, and to be considered a benefactress.

Hardly anyone knew what she had been. Jed and Maddie had heard mention of the country childhood, but such references ended abruptly. Maddie, who taught Penny at university, remembered the demure young girl only for her stately beauty. Rather than lying about her past, Penny preferred to cultivate an aura of aloofness.

The only one who knew was Marcia Oliveira, a woman with strange, pale stigmata on the light brown skin of her neck, who kept herself silent and apart. Marcia was homely and irascible as Penny was lovely and sweet. She was the daughter of Ferdi Oliveira, foreman on Penny's father's farm. The two girls had grown up together and come to Cambridge after high school.

'Look at all the children you have,' Marcia said after her second martini, during a rare moment when she found herself alone beside Penny. 'Look what you've done with your life.'

Penny knew that tone of derision and self-pity too well to attempt a challenge. 'Why don't you have a child of your own?' she replied, concealing her own resentment.

'I could,' Marcia said. 'I have been considering it. A man would only make me feel unwanted, teach me to hang off him like a piece of laundry.'

They had exchanged these words before. They cut deeply. Penny had suffered from neglect during the early years of her experience as a trophy wife, until she learned to employ her husband's generosity for her own purposes. Marcia had taught that lesson, too.

'A child I could make my own. With no one to compete for attention I could raise it the way I wanted. I've made

enough money of my own. That's something you haven't got! Good benefits, too. I could afford to take the time off. This is what I've been working for.'

She didn't need to repeat how she had spent 15 years building her own security, while her friend lived a parasitic existence.

'Why don't you leave him?' Marcia had frequently demanded. 'You can have your share of everything that's his, and your independence.'

But Penny was too selfless. Another part of her life she kept secret was the pleasure she felt in Callum Morgan's company when they were alone together. It was enough for her.

This reticence frustrated Marcia, but on that August afternoon she was distracted and didn't push the argument. She had started a new strategy of her own, one that Penny could not share. Her brown eyes moved through the crowd of creative spirits. Normally the celebrants would have been more ebullient. But this dull, hot day was one designed for dalliances in curtained bedrooms.

Her sudden silence attracted a glance from Penny, who noticed the white scar on Marcia's neck. It bore witness to a similar day in August more than 20 years ago when two girls ran chasing through a field on their father's farm. They got into a quarrel and tangled with a barb wire fence. One received only a scratch; the other girl tore the skin on her neck and side. Penny still told herself it had been an accident.

'You have your choice of candidates for a sperm donor,' Penny remarked. 'Is this another one of your cynical jests, Marcia?'

Marcia's eyes rested on the red-headed Brock.

'Not him! You know, he's gay.'

'It doesn't matter,' said Marcia. 'He's young enough and drunk enough. I can't keep a straight man at home, but I know how to bed any man. He's beautiful, Penny. And beauty is the only thing I'll ever ask him to give my child.'

'You're serious, aren't you? Well you better think before you strike. He's only a theatre student. He's 19.'

'Intelligence is good! You never invite dopes or losers to these parties.'

'Marcia, he's deaf! Maybe it's congenital.'

But Marcia might as well have been deaf for all Penny's protests would do.

'No one would ever know it. Look how they're all attracted to him.'

An hour later the storm came up. And that was how Tana Oliveira was conceived, a flash of August lightning in her mother's eyes. Some would call her a work of art, the only graceful thing Marcia had ever made. But dark-haired and olive-skinned, she didn't take after her father, and from the age of five began to wonder who he was.

The only one who remembered for certain was Penny Morgan.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Van Waffle.*