

There Was an Old Woman

A Novel of Suspense

Author Hallie Ephron discusses the premise behind her new book

The germ of the idea for *There Was an Old Woman* came to me on a cold January morning a few years ago when my next-door neighbor was pulled out of her house. She'd fallen and had been lying on her kitchen floor, unable to call for help. Her minister alerted the police when she didn't show up for Sunday services. When firefighters broke down her door, they found a house full of cats and piles of garbage and debris so dense it was barely possible to get to the kitchen to rescue her. As they carried her to the ambulance, I could hear her giving perfectly lucid instructions to the ambulance driver about where she wanted to be taken.

My office window is barely ten feet from her living room window, and though her house needed paint, the outside gave no clue to the chaotic mess that was later discovered inside. A year or so before, I'd brought over some mail mis-delivered to us and the interior looked, well, normal.

And so, being a mystery writer, I began to *What if*. What if my neighbor didn't create that mess she was living in? How could her living conditions have deteriorated around her? Who might have orchestrated it? And the all-important: Why?

The idea percolated for more than a year. I began writing with a mental image of an old woman sitting on her back porch and gazing out across a salt marsh to the Manhattan skyline etched at the horizon. I knew her name (Mina Yetner), that as a little girl she had dreamed of living in the glittering tiara top of the Chrysler Building, and that her first real job was at the Empire State Building. I knew that she was one of the few remaining survivors of a fire there on a foggy morning in 1945 when a B-25 bomber ran into the 79th floor.

Mina is sharp and independent, but she worries every time she loses her balance or her memory. Her worst nightmare is that she'll become a burden to anyone but herself. (She's the person I'll become when I've outgrown the need to apologize for having so many opinions.)

The story begins with Mina watching her neighbor Sandra Ferrante being taken from her home -- just as I watched my neighbor being carried from hers. Sandra is an alcoholic, and it's not the first time an ambulance has shown up at the house. Sandra asks Mina to call her daughter and pass along the cryptic message, "Don't let him in until I'm gone."

Sandra's daughter Evie, a 30-year-old curator at a New York Historical Society, arrives the next day. She's overwhelmed by the state of house and shocked by the seriousness of her mother's illness. Evie is based loosely on me, too. My mother was an alcoholic who died much too young. Like me, Evie has a sister. Writing Evie gave me a chance to explore my conflicted feelings when my mother died. Guilt, anger, and relief get all mixed with love when your mother isn't very mothering, and sisters can grow apart or together as they deal with loss.

The story needed a residential neighborhood of small houses lined up along the edge of a natural salt marsh with a view of Empire State Building. Did a neighborhood like that exist? It seemed unlikely since Robert Moses long ago filled New York City's wetlands. But when I asked a friend who scouts

movie locations in the City, back came a Google Maps link and the message: "This point in the Bronx could work."

It could and it did. The more I learned about the neighborhood near Sound View Park at the southern tip of the Bronx and across the water from LaGuardia, the more excited I got. It had everything I'd imagined: a tidal marsh, lagoons, and even an anomalous collection of 1920's bungalows and summer houses lined up on narrow streets. A huge bonus was the neighborhood's history. The indigenous Siwanoy Indians, who were driven from the area in the 1700's, called it Snakapins, meaning "land between two waters." At the turn of the 20th century, ferries brought summer visitors there from Queens to swim and camp on its beaches, play at its amusement park, and gamble and carouse at its saloons and casino.

That neighborhood became the basis for the book's fictional Higgs Point. Anchored by that setting and two main characters, *There Was an Old Woman* grew into a story about trust and betrayal, about a young woman and a very old woman who connect across generations in spite of, or perhaps because of the fact they are not related.

There Was an Old Woman: A Novel of Suspense

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On Sale 4/2/13

William Morrow * Hardcover * ISBN

9780062117601

PRICE: \$25.99/\$33.99 Can.