

THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER SHOW
by Natalie Wexler

Subject: RE: BARTON 12TH GRADE MOTHER-DAUGHTER SHOW SAVE THE DATE!
From: barbatkins@aol.com
To: amarchetti, susan.logan, trishb, and 53 others
Date: January 20, 2009

Dear Mothers of Senior Girls,

*Please mark your calendars right now for the annual Mother-Daughter Show on **Saturday, May 30**. This show is a long-standing Barton tradition ... and a FUN and heart-warming event ... and it's also likely to be the most intense experience you've had as a mother at Barton Friends School!!! But don't worry, we'll all be in it together!*

*We'll have a planning meeting on February 10 at 7:30 in the Upper School cafeteria, where we'll begin to assign tasks—most importantly, writing the songs and skits. But remember, **ALL MOMS OF SENIOR GIRLS WILL BE UP ON STAGE FOR THE SHOW!***

The performance will be open to all members of the Barton community, and the goal is to have lots of FUN celebrating our girls!! Typically, mothers sing songs with funny lyrics they've written about the girls. As in past years, we'll have live musical accompaniment provided by Billy Spriggs—who some of you may remember from years ago as the Lower School music teacher who worked wonders with our kids!—and a professional choreographer will be helping us with our dance steps.

*Bearing in mind the Quaker values that Barton stands for, we are encouraged to keep things **SIMPLE** and **INCLUSIVE**. It won't be perfect, but it will be **FUN!!!** And environmentally friendly. Call or email me with any questions or concerns!*

*Thanks,
Barb Atkins (mother of Grace)*

CHAPTER ONE: AMANDA

“Ladies! If we could start with a moment of silence?”

The chatty hubbub among the mothers in the harshly lit Barton cafeteria began to die down. Then Barb Atkins, at the head of a roughly formed semicircle of lunch tables, bowed her head, propelling wisps of blonde hair gently forward towards her perky, upturned nose.

Amanda Marchetti stared down at her clasped hands, which she hoped signified the correct attitude: serious, but not quite prayerful. Even after fifteen years at Barton—her two boys now recent alumni, and her youngest, Kate, set to graduate in a few months—Amanda never knew what to do with herself during these seemingly interminable seconds of suspended animation, which, in a nod to Quaker tradition, opened every meeting or event at Barton Friends. She felt she should be examining her soul or contemplating the oneness of humanity, but somehow her subconscious always went careening in the opposite direction. Often she found herself consumed by the fear that someone would break the silence by emitting an embarrassing bodily noise (please, God, not her!). Right now, her eyes having strayed upwards, she was engaged in admiring Barb’s appearance. How did she get her hair to look both casually tousled and well coiffed at the same time? Where had she bought that gorgeous sweater? And why couldn’t Amanda herself look like that?

Years ago, when their daughters had been best friends in kindergarten and first grade, Barb and Amanda had had one of those functional stay-at-home-mom relationships: my-house-or-your-house, when’s-the-pick-up-time, would-you-mind-taking-her-today-I-have-an-

appointment. Maybe even, once in a while, at pick-up or drop-off, do-you-have-time-for-a-cup-of-coffee. But it hadn't been what Amanda would call a friendship—or even a balanced functional relationship, given that Barb had a full-time housekeeper and hadn't needed Amanda the way that Amanda needed her. Barb was one of those Barton moms who seemed to inhabit a different planet, with her perfect clothes and her perfect house and her presumably perfect husband—although of course Amanda had never gotten a glimpse of *him*.

How could two little girls from such different families cling to one another like the long-lost halves of a split soul, Amanda used to wonder? They would play intently for hours on end, their heads bowed together, Kate's mass of dark curls brushing up against Grace's straight white-blond locks. But then one of them—Grace or Kate, Amanda couldn't remember which—had suddenly lost interest in the tiny plastic animals they used to spend hours lining up in complex formations, and just like that, the intense connection between the two girls had evaporated. Amanda had been a little relieved, as though Kate had finally come to her senses and recognized that Grace, like Barb, was fundamentally an alien creature. After that the girls seemed to have gone their quite separate ways—which was a good thing, given the rumors about the antics Grace Atkins got up to.

So, although she'd known Barb for years, Amanda really didn't *know* Barb. But then again, everyone knew Barb. Barb was one of those mothers who—for reasons that Amanda could only guess at—had chosen to devote her life to the Barton Friends Parents Association. Sometimes it seemed like Amanda got an email a day from Barb, even though they hadn't spoken except to say hello in years. In fact, it was Barb's name that had appeared at the bottom of that email about this meeting, Amanda now realized. And she had probably carted in the

refreshments that covered one of the cafeteria tables: chocolate chip cookies, cheese and crackers, bottles of water. A number of women had helped themselves to water, but the food remained untouched. The protocol seemed to prohibit actual eating, Amanda noted with regret.

Amanda glanced surreptitiously at her friend Susan Logan, sitting next to her: her blue eyes were closed, her expansive brow furrowed in apparent concentration. Susan *looked* as though she were busy achieving inner peace, but knowing Susan, she was more likely obsessing over some report that was due at work, or outlining the itinerary for her next business trip. It had been Susan's idea to come tonight, and Amanda had reluctantly acceded to her request for companionship. The whole Parents Association scene wasn't Amanda's cup of tea. Besides, she'd heard that for some reason this Mother-Daughter Show tended to get pretty acrimonious—despite the references in Barb's email to how much “FUN” it was going to be. She'd even heard a rumor of a fistfight breaking out a few years ago. But Susan had been insistent—if we have to get up on stage and perform, she'd said, I'd like to know what the hell we're getting into—and Susan was a hard person to turn down. Not to mention that if Susan, who had a “real” job, could find the time to come to this meeting, could Amanda honestly plead that she was too busy?

Taking a quick survey of the still silent group of twenty-five women, Amanda guessed they were about equally divided between the stay-at-home moms like herself (some of them in jeans or sweat pants, others—like Barb—casually chic) and the real-job ones, like Susan, with their tailored suits and iPhones and Blackberrys discreetly at the ready. Not surprisingly, the D.C. Power Moms were absent: the CNN anchor, the ambassador's wife, the Democratic political consultant credited with masterminding the recent—and stunning—election of the country's first Asian-American President. Most Barton parents were just rich: law firm partners, doctors, the

occasional business mogul. But the school, one of the best in the city, also drew its share of celebrities, or what passed in Washington for celebrities. And, to great excitement, it had just hauled in the biggest fish in town: Marina Miyama, President Miyama's teenage daughter, had entered the eleventh grade a few weeks before, transferring in shortly before her father's Inauguration.

"Thank you ladies!" Barb said at last, lifting her head and smiling warmly. "I'm so glad to see you all here, and I just *know* we're going to have a great time putting this show together. You know, it's been going on for something like sixty years now, and it's just a really special way to honor our girls. And it's really all about our girls, of course. Because, you know, they've worked so hard—and we all know how hard they work here!—and this is just our way of celebrating them and doing something for them before they... you know ... go off to ... greater things!"

It looked like Barb was about to cry. Amanda held her breath and sensed that everyone else in the room was doing the same thing. She felt a stab of sympathy for Barb, followed by a twinge of self-pity: in a few short months *her* baby, her Kate, would be moving out of the house. My God, it hadn't really hit her before. Amanda felt her own eyes begin to well up. Jeez, she thought, how are we going to get through a whole show if we can't even make it through an organizational meeting without sobbing?

But Barb did a quick save, blinking and shaking her head and scrunching her face into something more or less resembling a smile, and everyone else smiled back, relieved. Under Barb's direction, they then engaged in the obligatory going-around-in-a-circle-introducing-themselves ritual: name, daughter's name, whether they had any other kids at Barton. Amanda

recognized a number of the women, but there were six or seven she'd somehow managed never to encounter before.

When they'd finished, Susan, ever eager to cut to the chase, raised her hand. "Um, could I ask a question? Is it possible to get some idea of what these shows are supposed to be like?"

"Absolutely!" said Barb. "I'm so glad you asked ... Susan? Sorry—is it Susan?"

Susan nodded.

"Basically it's just taking a bunch of songs—pre-existing songs, that is—and writing new lyrics for them. And they usually throw a few skits in there too. But you know, I brought along a DVD of last year's show. And I thought we could watch a little of it right now—not the whole thing of course, it's about an hour."

Barb picked up a remote control from the table in front of her and pointed it at a TV on a cart that had been wheeled in for the occasion. Soon female figures wearing black T-shirts and pants and banners with their daughters' names across their chests could be seen running onto the stage of the school auditorium, singing ... something. Amanda didn't recognize the tune, and the lyrics were inaudible, largely because the girls in the audience were screaming, apparently at the mere sight of their mothers running onto the stage and dancing. Then one of the mothers came to a podium and said a few words of welcome, after which some music came up and the women, now assembled on risers on the stage, started singing another song Amanda didn't know and couldn't really understand. But it sounded impressive—there was even some harmonizing going on—and down at the front of the stage a group of six or eight mothers were dancing, their moves smooth and synchronized. Once again, the girls went wild.

After that came a song that Amanda did recognize: "Officer Krupke," from *West Side*

Story. This time a few of the words came through: instead of pleading with Officer Krupke, a group of moms posing as “juvenile delinquents” were addressing the Upper School principal, Mr. Tucker: “Principal Tucker, we’re down on our knees ...” Next a screen came down and a video started rolling: various mothers from last year’s senior class were shown lip-synching a song about how much they were going to miss their daughters. It went by quickly, and there were several in-jokes Amanda didn’t get, but technically it was dazzling, full of quick-cuts and amusing juxtapositions.

Barb stopped the DVD and smiled at the group. “So ... any questions?”

No one said anything for a few seconds.

“We’re supposed to do *that*?” asked a woman to Amanda’s left.

“Oh, well...” Barb laughed. “Every year it’s different, of course. But don’t worry, we don’t have to do it all ourselves. We’ve got Billy Spriggs coming in to help us with the singing, and we’ll have a choreographer to help with the dancing.”

“But we have to *write* the whole thing?” said a voice from the back.

“I know it sounds daunting.” Barb’s manner was sympathetic but upbeat, admitting no doubts. “And *I*’m certainly not going to be doing any writing! But I’m sure we have some talented moms in this group who’ll be willing to take this on. We just need to identify them!”

Amanda felt a nudge. She turned and saw Susan raise her eyebrows inquiringly. NO, Amanda mouthed silently, widening her eyes. But Susan only made a dismissive face, then turned back to Barb.

“Well, if you need some songs written,” Susan called out, “Amanda here can help with that. She’s actually a songwriter!”

“Really!” Barb cried. “Well, that’s terrific. Amanda, you never told me!” A murmur of admiration spread through the crowd: little cries of “Wow” and “Gee.”

Amanda could feel her heart start pounding and her face grow warm. “Well, I’m not *really*”—

Susan interrupted with a wave of her hand. “Oh, she’s just being modest. She’s really good.”

“It’s just”— Amanda started. She shrugged helplessly. “I mean, it was a long time ago.”

Barb shook her head in a charming little scolding gesture. “Well, *that* doesn’t matter.” Her voice had a syrupy lilt. “Once you’ve got the talent, it’s just *there*, right?”

Susan spoke up again. “You know, one of Amanda’s songs was recorded by Bonnie Raitt.”

Another, stronger murmur arose from the group. Amanda winced: why couldn’t Susan just shut up? “Well, actually, it’s a little more complicated than that”— she began.

“Well, ladies, I think we’ve just found our writing chair!” Barb clearly wasn’t interested in any subtleties at this point. She looked around expectantly. People responded with nods and cries of “yeah” and “sure.” She turned back to Amanda. “Amanda, if you *would*? I mean, we’d be so grateful.”

“Well ...” Amanda looked at the sea of expectant, smiling faces trained on her. All she’d done, really, was to write a few songs back in her youth, which she’d performed at open mike nights and the occasional low-paying gig, accompanying herself on the guitar. And yes, Bonnie Raitt had once made some encouraging comments about a demo she’d sent off, but the singer had never recorded it. She knew she’d mentioned all this to Susan once or twice over the years,

probably sung her a song or two, and in Susan's mind the story must have taken on exaggerated proportions. Later, of course, she'd made a few bucks as a wedding singer to help pay her way through law school, and once in a while she'd thrown in a composition of her own—hoping someone would notice, although usually no one did. Still, when confronted with that dreaded question—“And what do *you* do?”—“songwriter” was never one of the answers she came up with.

On the other hand, Amanda clearly had more songwriting experience than anyone else in the room. The fact was, she'd probably do a better job than they could. And, ridiculous as the whole tradition sounded, she did want this show to be as good as it could be—or at least, not an embarrassing mess. For Kate's sake. Shouldn't she give it a whirl, for Kate?

“Well, I guess I could *try*,” Amanda heard herself saying.

“Oh, that's just wonderful!” Barb gushed, clearly relieved. “Okay, so now, I thought we'd do a little brainstorming. The first thing, I think, is to come up with a theme. Because you know, we'll need something to tie it all together?” She looked around. “Any ideas? Yes—Patty?”

“Well, I'm definitely *not* a creative type, so I don't know ...” Patty, one of the suit-wearing contingent, did a little hand-waving, eye-rolling gesture of humility. “But, I was thinking—what about *Mamma Mia*? You know, like the movie? And we could use the Abba songs? I mean, the girls all saw the movie.”

“Oh, that's a *great* idea!” said Barb, as others in the room nodded and voiced their approval. She clasped her hands under her chin and smiled broadly. “That's just perfect.”

Amanda looked around: was she the only one who thought this was actually a terrible idea? Even Susan looked like she was giving it serious consideration. Abba tunes were catchy,

but they were soulless and formulaic. And while Amanda hadn't seen the play or the movie, she'd read the reviews, and she didn't see that the story of *Mamma Mia*—about a young woman, the daughter of a former pop star, who doesn't know which of three men is her real father—had much relationship to the lives of their daughters.

“Um,” she said tentatively, as people continued to exclaim over what a stroke of inspiration this was. “I'm just not sure. Exactly *what* about *Mamma Mia* would we use? I mean, not the plot, right?”

Barb paused, her smile still fixed on her face. “Well, no, not the *plot* exactly. But, you know ... the *themes*.”

“Well, like ... *what* themes?” Aging rock stars? Uncertain paternity?

Barb shrugged a little helplessly.

“And actually,” Amanda continued, her resolve strengthened, “Nothing against Abba songs, but I don't really see the point of limiting ourselves to songs by any one group. I mean, I think we want more freedom than that, don't we?”

“Well, yeah, maybe you're right about that.” Barb's enthusiasm seemed to be melting rapidly, and taking the rest of the group's with it. God, Amanda thought, maybe they really *do* need me.

“So.” Barb brightened. “*You*'re the writing chair. Do you have any ideas?”

Uh oh. “Well, not right off the top of my head,” Amanda punted. “But I'll think about it.”

“Great!” Amanda could see Barb checking that task off her mental to-do list. “So we'll come back to that at the next meeting. But what we *can* do tonight is talk about the kinds of things we should have in the show—you know, things that are important to our girls, experiences

they've all shared. And I thought we'd do this in small groups? So if you could just get together with the people at your table, or nearby, we can just bat around some ideas for a few minutes. Okay?"

There was the grating sound of furniture scraping against linoleum as people moved tables and chairs apart and together to form their groups. Amanda and Susan had been at a table by themselves, but now they were joined by two others: Trish Baker, a thin woman with a long, pinched face who was the mother of one of Kate's friends—Amanda didn't know her well, but was aware that she'd written an advice book for parents; and Savi Prakash, an elegant woman whose daughter was on the lacrosse team with Susan's daughter Allie.

"Look, before we get started, do you want me to take notes?" said Susan, whipping out a pen and a pad of paper. "I'd be happy to do that, and I think it would be really useful."

They all looked at Amanda, their newly anointed leader. "Sure," she shrugged. It hadn't occurred to her to have anyone take notes. But that was the kind of thing Susan would think of. Susan had a passion for organization, and if there was one thing she apparently knew, it was how to run a meeting. Amanda didn't have a firm grasp on what it was Susan did, on a daily basis—every time Susan had tried to explain it, the details got lost in what sounded to Amanda like a welter of psychobabble—but it seemed to have something to do with helping people conduct meetings. Why these people couldn't figure out how to conduct meetings on their own, Amanda wasn't sure. But then, what did Amanda know about meetings? To her, they'd always seemed like a huge waste of time, people going around in circles and talking just to hear themselves talk. During her brief and painful career as a lawyer, she'd sometimes gotten so bored in meetings she found herself literally fighting back tears. But hey, she told herself, time to engage in a little

attitude adjustment: right now she needed a job, desperately, and most likely any job above sales clerk was going to involve meetings. Hell, probably even sales clerks had to attend meetings these days. Maybe she could actually learn something from Susan—like how to get through a meeting without crying, if not how to actually run one.

“So,” said Susan, her pen poised over the pad. “Any ideas?” Without pausing, Susan barreled ahead. “Actually, *my* daughter tells me, like, everything, so I’ve got tons of ideas. And we’ve absolutely *got* to do something about the bear.”

“Oh yes, the bear thing!” cried Trish, the parenting expert, playing with a strand of her frizzy auburn hair. “The bear has been *huge*.”

“Absolutely!” Savi chimed in, with her crisp British consonants. “We have to have something about that.”

Amanda alone seemed to have no idea what the “bear thing” was; asking would mark her as a mother who was hopelessly out of the loop, a mother whose daughter couldn’t be bothered to tell her about anything, even something “huge.” A mother whose daughter, when asked what had happened at school that day, consistently replied, “Nothing much”—an answer that, it was now clear, was not entirely accurate.

Susan, who knew something of Kate’s uncommunicativeness, picked up on Amanda’s confusion. “You know about the bear, right? This one kid—one of the senior boys—saw this huge stuffed bear in an alley or a dumpster or something. And I don’t mean just a stuffed animal, I mean a real bear that was like, stuffed by a taxidermist.”

The other mothers were nodding.

“Oh yeah,” Amanda lied, “I think I did hear something about that. So, the kid brought the

bear in to school?”

“Yeah, he brought it to the senior center—to be, you know, a decoration? But the school administration had a fit! They told the kids the bear had to go. I don’t remember why.”

“They said it was a fire hazard,” explained Savi. “It was blocking an exit. But it could have been moved to another spot—at least, that’s what the kids said.”

“So it just became this huge battle between the kids and the administration,” Trish put in. “And of course, the administration won.”

“Okay,” said Susan, “so I’m writing down ‘the bear.’”

Amanda felt the need to contribute something; Savi and Trish clearly suspected she’d never heard about the bear. Next they might start to ask how someone so clueless could possibly be in charge of writing the show.

“But *what* about the bear?” she asked.

“Oh, come on Amanda, I don’t think we need to decide that *now*,” Susan said, waving her pen. “We’re just brainstorming. But it could be a song—are there any songs about bears? Or wait, I know: we could just have the bear appear on stage at, you know, random places in the show!”

Trish and Savi let out delighted squeals. “Oh God,” said Trish, “they’d think that was hilarious!”

What was that about, Amanda thought, that brush-off? She loved Susan—their daughters had been best friends since fifth grade, they’d even taken family vacations together. Amanda would never forget the way Susan had come through shortly after the girls became friendly, during what Amanda remembered as the worst week of her life: Larry in the hospital with a

serious head injury after a bike accident at the same time that Jeremy, her middle child, was in the hospital with appendicitis. Susan had charged in, practically adopting Kate and her eldest brother Alex for the week, organizing food and activities, leaving Amanda free to shuttle back and forth between hospitals. Later, when it was all over and Larry was miraculously back to normal, Susan had announced, over Amanda's protests, that she was whisking Amanda off to a nearby spa for some R&R. It had turned out to be exactly what Amanda had needed: shortly after receiving the very first massage of her life, Amanda had dissolved into an uncontrollable laughing fit, tears streaming down her face. And Susan had joined in, even though whatever had triggered it was truly not that funny, understanding that some kind of dam had broken. Since then, the two of them had managed to get away for a spa weekend just about every year.

Yes, Susan was a kind, generous soul who, despite her manic schedule, was always willing to lend an ear when Amanda was going through some emotional upheaval—something that happened more often than Amanda wanted to admit. And sometimes she seemed to know what Amanda needed better than Amanda did herself. But there were times, like now, when Susan made her feel like she was about three inches tall. And it didn't help that when the two of them stood side by side, Susan in fact towered over her.

“Just a few more minutes, ladies!” Barb called out from the front of the room.

The four women hunched over the cafeteria table with renewed purpose. “Something about college, of course,” said Savi. “The college counselors? Taking the SATs? Writing the essays?”

“Oh, I don't know,” said Trish in a warning tone. “We might want to stay away from that. A little touchy for some people, you know?”

It was only February: most kids hadn't heard yet where they'd gotten in and were still in a state of high anxiety. Amanda knew she was lucky—Kate had gotten in early action to Yale and was so sure that was the place for her that she hadn't applied anywhere else—but still. Were the other kids such delicate flowers that they wouldn't be able to stand a few jokes about the college admissions process?

“Yeah,” said Susan, tapping her pen thoughtfully against her chin. “But maybe by the end of May ... Anyway, I'll write it down.”

“Oh, and we have to do something about clothes!” said Trish. “The way they dress? You know, with all the layers of tank tops? And the push-up bras?”

“Great,” Susan said, writing furiously. “And the flip-flops ...”

“And the thongs!” said Savi. “You know how they wear their jeans low, so that the top of the thong shows?”

Amanda was amazed: yes, Kate wore tank tops and flip flops. She might have one push-up bra. But Amanda was very familiar with Kate's dirty laundry, and she'd never seen a thong in it—let alone one peeking over the top of her jeans. Kate was the soul of modesty—Amanda hadn't seen her less than fully clothed in years. And anyway, how exactly was all this going to translate into a song or skit?

“We could have, like, a fashion show,” said Trish, as though reading Amanda's mind. “You know, with the moms dressed like their daughters?”

“Yes!” screeched Savi, suddenly losing her elegant cool. She raised her hand. “I'll wear a thong!”

Amanda's jaw dropped: was Savi serious? What was going on here? Some kind of

collective hysteria?

“All right!” Barb called out. “We really should wrap this up now.”

“Okay, well,” said Susan, putting her pen in her bag. “I know there’s a lot more to cover, but this is a *great* start, so ...”

“Oh, one more thing?” Amanda put in quickly. An idea had just come to her. “Shouldn’t we do something about the campaign, and the Miyama girl?”

“Oh yeah!” chorused the others in response to Amanda’s suggestion. “Absolutely!”

“Ooh,” said Susan, “maybe we could even get Christine Miyama to appear in the show!”

“My next-door neighbor’s cousin was pretty high up in the campaign and just got a job in the White House,” Savi offered. “So perhaps he could help us get to her.”

“That would be fantastic,” said Susan, whipping out her pen again. “Anyway, we definitely need something about the Miyama girl. Great idea, Amanda.”

Amanda smiled and ducked her head modestly, pleased that she had redeemed herself with the Miyama suggestion; she’d won back at least a few inches in stature. But frankly, she was surprised no one else had thought of the Miyama girl first. Their daughters must have been talking of little else lately. During the campaign Barton students, like kids across the country, had turned out in droves to work for Miyama, knocking on doors and registering voters. It wasn’t just that Franklin Miyama was young, intelligent, and charismatic. He was also—as Kate would say—unbelievably *cool*. And the fact that his wife was dazzlingly Caucasian, a Nordic blonde beauty, had led to much self-congratulatory commentary about the advent of a post-racial society.

When Miyama won, the joy around campus had been electric. And when he’d followed

that up by choosing Barton over the other elite private schools in D.C., the overwhelmingly liberal Barton community had been beside itself with pride—the parents in the usual understated Barton way, the kids more rambunctious. At a basketball game against another private school that had also been vying to enroll the First Daughter, Barton students had started using the name “Miyama” as a cheer, which had led to a reprimand from the principal—albeit a reprimand that, in the typical indirect Barton manner, had only warned against any further use of “family names” as cheers. As though the kids were going to yell “Marchetti” or “Logan” at the next game, Amanda had thought when Kate—breaking her usual vow of silence—had told her about the incident. And now that Marina Miyama had started school, Kate had been unable to restrain herself from offering updates on what the girl had been eating in the cafeteria, and how the burly Secret Service agents assigned to her were trying, with limited success, to blend in with the student population.

Still, even if the Miyama idea was obvious, it was gratifying to Amanda to have her contribution acknowledged. Most of the time what she did got taken for granted: nobody patted her on the back for going to the supermarket or doing the laundry. Generally, what Kate or Larry were likely to comment on were the things she *hadn't* done: Why hadn't she replenished the supply of Kashi cereal that Larry required every morning? Why were Kate's favorite jeans still in the hamper? Once in a while they told her they liked what she'd made for dinner, which was nice. But it wasn't the same as someone telling her she'd come up with a good idea.

“Okay, ladies,” Barb was saying as people started to gather their things. She held up a bright red folder with black lettering. “Don't forget to pick up one of these on your way out! Just find the one with your name on it. It's got the meeting and rehearsal schedule inside.”

Susan raised her hand. “Barb? I was just thinking—I took some notes from our brainstorming session over here? And I’d be happy to just go around to the other groups before everyone leaves and take notes on their ideas? And then I could write it all up and email it out, so we have a record of all the stuff we talked about.”

“Oh!” Barb clasped her hands in delight. “That’s a fantastic idea. You wouldn’t mind? That would be *so* helpful. So everybody, if you could just make sure someone from your group talks to Susan before they leave? Thanks! And hope to see you all at the next meeting.”

Amanda watched as Susan brandished her legal pad high above her head in a Statue of Liberty pose, beckoning the assembled masses to bring her their ideas—their tired, their poor ideas, yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of their teeming minds ...

Now, now, Amanda scolded herself, as women began to approach the legal pad and Susan started smiling, nodding, and scribbling; maybe there were some *good* ideas out there. It was just the thought of being presented with all those ideas, whatever they were, and having to somehow turn them into songs. That just wasn’t the way the creative process worked. The idea for a song had to come from within. Or at least, that’s the way she dimly remembered it. How long had it been since she’d had an idea for a song? Ten, fifteen years? More?

“Amanda? Here you go!” It was Barb, wearing her ever-present dazzling smile and extending a folder with Amanda’s name on it. “I’m just *thrilled* that you’re going to be spearheading the writing for us. You and Susan will make a great team.”

“Team?” said Amanda distractedly, glancing at the meeting schedule inside the folder: February 24th, March 12th, April 2nd, April 21st ... She groaned inwardly.

“Well, I know there’s nothing official,” Barb continued. “But you two are friends, right?”

And Susan”—she nodded across the room to Susan, only her head now visible above the bevy of women disgorging their ideas—“well, she seems to be on top of the organizational aspect of things. And that would free you up to focus on the, you know, *creative side*.”

“Well, yeah, I guess that could work.” It wasn’t as though Amanda had a burning desire to deal with the organizational side of things. It hadn’t even occurred to her there *would* be an organizational side. Maybe Barb was right: maybe Susan’s talents would complement her own. Assuming, of course, that she actually *had* any talents. Staying home for twenty years picking up after three kids, and then trying to get someone—anyone—to hire you during a recession weren’t exactly the kinds of activities likely to boost your self-esteem. What had she gotten herself into here? What if she reached down into the creative well and came up dry?

She and Barb exchanged some chit-chat about their daughters—with Amanda trying to avoid asking any direct questions, because you never knew what might be going on with Grace—until Susan joined them, having at last extricated herself from the eager crowd.

“Some great ideas here!” she announced, holding up the pad, her blue eyes shining and her smile broad. “I’ll just type ‘em up tonight.”

“Tonight?” Amanda asked incredulously. Susan’s energy level never ceased to amaze her; she was about ready for bed, herself.

Susan shrugged. “Shouldn’t take too long.” She turned to Barb. “So if I send these to you, can you forward them to everyone else?”

Barb said “Sure” at the same time that Amanda said, “What do you mean, ‘everyone else’? I thought *I* was the writing chair.”

“Of course you are,” Susan told her, “and you’re gonna do a great job! But right now

we're still at the brainstorming stage. We need to make sure we keep this process inclusive. You know, get everyone's input. Even people who couldn't make it to the meeting tonight. We need to get their ideas too."

"Absolutely!" Barb said enthusiastically, as she started to gather up the unclaimed red folders. "We need to be as inclusive as possible."

Amanda shrugged and turned to the task of moving tables and chairs back to their original locations. Inclusive? It sounded more like chaotic to her.

"Well, thanks a *lot*," Amanda growled to Susan after they'd helped Barb lug the platters of uneaten food past Barton's stately brick buildings and leafy courtyards and out to her car. It was a cool night, but with enough of a balmy undercurrent to inspire the hope—or maybe the fear, if you thought about how much needed to be done to put the show together—that spring wasn't far off.

"You're welcome," said Susan briskly, fishing for the keys to her black Volvo.

"I was *being* sarcastic." Amanda put her hand in her own enormous purse and started the lengthy process of key-diving; no matter how familiar she was with her bag, the keys always seemed to find some new hiding place. "Did you take a look at that schedule? All those meetings? And I have no *idea* if I can write these songs."

"I know you were being sarcastic, my dear, but the fact is, you *will* thank me for this, for real." Susan put her hands on her hips and let her car keys dangle. "Look, this is *perfect* for you. It plays to your talents, it'll give you something to do ..."

"Something to *do*? I'm supposed to be finding a job." Not that she was actually doing

much on that front, if truth be told. Amanda's hand at last located some key-shaped objects at the bottom of her bag and she began to haul them up to the surface.

"But it's not like you can spend all day doing *that*. This will be something fun to fool around with, you know, in between interviews." Susan narrowed her eyes and peered down at Amanda. "Hey, did you ever call that guy I told you about? The in-house counsel, the one Steve knows from college?"

Amanda sighed. "Oh, what's the point? It's not like he's going to just give me a job."

"He might. And anyway, *that's* not the point. The point is you have lunch, you show him what a great person you are, maybe he knows somebody else ... It's called *networking*."

"Yeah, but what if we have lunch and he thinks I'm *not* a great person? What if he thinks I'm just some ... *mom*, some relic whose legal skills date from the Dark Ages?" Amanda could feel the rising panic that assaulted her whenever she tried to focus on this topic. "Susan, the last time I worked in an office the Internet barely existed! My inbox was, you know, an actual *box*. And when you needed to look up a case you went to the library and looked in a *book*. Plus, I don't remember anything about the law! *Plus*, even if I did remember something, it would be way out of date."

Susan put her hands on Amanda's narrow shoulders. "Amanda, listen to me: that stuff's not important. So you'll take a week or two, a month, you'll learn the ropes. What's important is what's in here." She removed a hand from Amanda's shoulder and tapped the side of her own head. "And that stuff you've got in spades. You just need to recognize that! And that's where this show comes in."

"It does?"

Susan nodded authoritatively. “You’re going to get a sense of accomplishment, you’re going to see how much you’re capable of, people are going to be impressed ... And, trust me, that’s going to spill over into your job search. You’ll see—you’re going to start *oozing* self-confidence.”

“Sounds kind of unattractive, actually.” Amanda smiled up at her friend. “But thanks for the pep talk. And guess what? I actually made an appointment to see that career counselor tomorrow.”

“All right!” Susan raised her hand for a congratulatory high five. Amanda hesitated—she’d never really warmed to this whole high-five thing, and it wasn’t like there was anything to celebrate yet—but she couldn’t just leave Susan’s hand up there waiting. She reached up and gave it a gentle smack.

“And who knows,” Amanda said, “maybe you’re right about the show. Anyway, it certainly sounds more appealing than sending resumes out into the void.”

Susan unlocked her car door and eased herself into the driver’s seat. “Of course I’m right. I’m always right. I *know* you can do this.” She started the car and began to back out of the parking space, but then paused and rolled down the window. “And call that guy!” she yelled to Amanda before taking off.

Amanda made her way through the parking lot towards her ancient maroon minivan, veteran of many carpools past; they never used all seven seats any more, but they couldn’t afford to buy a replacement—not, at least, until Amanda got a job. Susan sure was ... forceful. And self-confident. *She* wouldn’t have any trouble networking, Amanda thought. And maybe Susan *was* right, maybe working on this show would somehow transform Amanda into the kind of

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person who could breeze into an interviewer's office and effortlessly sell herself. And just maybe, Amanda thought, the whole thing would even be—as Barb had promised in her email—
FUN.