

CODA

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CODA is set in LOTTE FELDMAN'S Upper East Side apartment in Manhattan. The first three scenes are in the present; the final scene takes place ten years later.

Awards of all kinds fill two floor-to-ceiling cabinets. Signed head shots and a few framed letters dress the walls. A desk suggests the room is a bedroom-office.

Lotte is a small, energetic and attractive woman in her nineties. She lies in her bed, against which a walker is parked. On her bedside tables are several prescription bottles and water.

Lotte is propped up on several unruly pillows, and her right foot, bound in a cast, rests precariously atop another stack of pillows. A laptop rests atop a large pillow in her lap. She attempts to write as she wrestles with pillows:

SCENE I. MONDAY

LOTTE

Hell and damnation.

Her cell phone, which lies beside her RINGS. She struggles to answer it. Angrily.

LOTTE (CONT'D)

What?! (She cries out in pain) No, I'm fine. I was just . . . killing a cockroach.

She adjusts herself and again cries out in pain.

LOTTE (CONT'D)

Shishe! No, no sweet boy, I have never been better. It was still alive. The damned roach. Yes, yes, I think he's quite dead now -- (condescending) Lonnie, darling, I am working on the tidbits as we speak. Yes, yes, I promise you'll have a *final* final draft by the end of the week.

As she disconnects, she hears her front door opening and closing. She fights sheets and a comforter to find a small handgun buried in the bed.

Her neighbor, SAANVI, a beautiful woman in her sixties, rushes into her bedroom to find a shaking gun aimed at her. Saanvi turns and rushes from the room.

LOTTE (CONT'D)
Saanvi, what the fuck?!

Saanvi returns cautiously, nervously clutching a stethoscope which hangs from her neck.

SAANVI
Lotte, darling, I heard you crying
out through the wall and --

LOTTE
-- I might have shot you.

SAANVI
I was worried.

LOTTE
I might have been using the toilet,
for chissake!

SAANVI
I would not mind that, darling.

LOTTE
I would.

SAANVI
You cry out when you use the
toilet?!

LOTTE
Saanvi! You must call, you must
always call before --

SAANVI
--I tried. I was worried your phone
was off the hook.

LOTTE
(holding the cell phone)
My phone has no hook! (As one
might threaten a child) Perhaps I
should take my spare key back?

SAANVI
No, not yet. Please. I will give
it back when you are well.

Both women gather themselves. Saanvi sits on Lotte's bed. Lotte puts the gun away under the sheet and takes Saanvi's hand.

LOTTE

Oh, sweetie, what on Earth would I do without you? You've been a life saver.

SAANVI

I know.

LOTTE

You called for help, got me to the hospital, brought me home, fetched my meds. . . uh, stocked my kitchen with food . . . What else? (Interjecting before Saanvi can speak) Everything else! You are a Saint. And I thank you. With all my heart, I thank you, BUT, I am fine on my own now. And, I must complete work on this damned book before --

SAANVI

-- do not speak of death--

LOTTE

-- before Friday at 2:00, I was about to say. Believe me, death would be easier --

SAANVI

-- do not speak of death, my darling!

Saanvi cries.

LOTTE

Save it for the wake! Look at me. I will phone you if I need help, so you can stop listening through the wall with that damned stethoscope.

SAANVI

You must be cared for, you are so --

LOTTE

-- Careful.

SAANVI

. . . advanced in years. Your ankle, it is broken, BROKEN and you are so bruised.

Saanvi cringes, feeling the pain herself.

(MORE)

SAANVI (CONT'D)

You fell down the stairs! You fell down the stairs!

LOTTE

Jesus, people fall down the stairs all the time! There are probably three million people falling down stairs as we speak! If the damned elevator were serviced regularly, I wouldn't fallen down the bloody goddamned stairs! Now, leave me alone, I have work to do. What is it, Monday?!

SAANVI

Yes, Monday.

LOTTE

Damn, I'm too . . . "advanced in years" to be under this pressure. Saanvi, get off my bed, please.

SAANVI

I go. I go.

Saanvi rises, walks away, stops, pauses, then:

SAANVI (CONT'D)

Have you heard from your handsome son?

LOTTE

No. Why?

SAANVI

I . . . called him.

Both women are silent and still for what seems an eternity. Saanvi slowly turns to face Lotte. Lotte, withdraws her handgun from beneath the bed covers:

LOTTE

Repeat.

SAANVI

(crying)
When he came for your birthday four years ago --

LOTTE

-- Six years ago --

SAANVI

-- whatever, he gave me his card
and insisted I call him if you
should need him.

LOTTE

I don't need him.

SAANVI

He is your only family! He should
know that you fell down the stairs!
You fell down the stairs!

There is another tense silence between the women.

SAANVI (CONT'D)

Are you going to shoot me?

LOTTE

Probably . . . not if you'll stop
shrieking "You fell down the
stairs!"

(putting the gun away)

Anyway, I am more likely to shoot
myself now.

A moment of silence. Saanvi turns to leave.

LOTTE (CONT'D)

When did you call Aaron?

SAANVI

When you were in emergency. He was
very concerned.

LOTTE

That was three days ago . . . It
would seem he was not very
concerned.

SAANVI

You haven't heard from him?

Lotte motions for Saanvi to go, and gets busy on her laptop.
Saanvi, watches her for a moment, and then slips out. We
hear the front door open and close. Lotte covers her face
with her hands.

SCENE II. TUESDAY

Lotte is hard at work. Pillows strewn about room suggest her
war with pillows has escalated. There's a knock at the door.

Lotte taking little notice, more to herself than to the knocker:

LOTTE

Go away. (Into her phone)
Flummoxed. (Straining to see) Ah,
an "O" not another "U."

Lotte removes her glasses with an angry jerk and cleans them vigorously.

LOTTE (CONT'D)

Why the hell must the vision go,
too!? (looking up) You are indeed
a vengeful God. (more knocking)
Who the hell could that be --
(more knocking) Shit. (She speed
dials) Saanvi, darling . . . Yes,
no. Saanvi, listen please. Would
you peek down the hall and see who
the fuck is banging on my door?
Yes, I'll hold. Thank you. Now,
where was I . . . ? (reading) " As
the young Mr. Preston nervously
approached with a flute of
champagne in each hand, I noticed
his fly was gaping open. As both
his hands were occupied, I zipped
him up. Slowly. Then I took a
flute and said 'Thank you, just the
Champagne will do for now.' He was
flummoxed every time I auditioned
him for the next ten years."

Lotte's enjoyment of that memory ends when she hears her front door.

SAANVI (O.S.)

She will be so delighted to see
you.

LOTTE

(To herself)

This does not bode well.

Saanvi sails into the bedroom.

LOTTE (CONT'D)

What?

SAANVI

Lotte, your son is here, Aaron is
here.

LOTTE

Why?!

As Lotte speaks, Aaron, a handsome well dressed man of sixty, pokes his head in.

AARON

Surprise!

He moves to Lotte offering a small bouquet of flowers. Lotte finally takes them.

LOTTE

You shouldn't have. But, thank you. I think that's how the script reads.

AARON

How are you Mother?

LOTTE

(gesturing with the flowers)

Yada, yada, yada . . . Saanvi, love, would you put these in water?

Saanvi takes the flowers, but continues to stare, smiling at the reunion.

LOTTE (CONT'D)

Please.

Saanvi starts out.

LOTTE (CONT'D)

And then you can go, darling. And Thank you.

Aaron and Lotte don't speak. They seem to anticipate the sound of Saanvi leaving the apartment. They hear her leave. They are alone. And now . . .

AARON

I . . . She's s good neighbor. Isn't she?

LOTTE

She tries to be.

AARON

She called me a couple of days ago.

LOTTE

Four. Days ago.

They let this go.

AARON
 (observing the laptop)
 Saanvi said you are working on a
 book?

LOTTE
 A Memoir.

AARON
 Memoir, huh? Should have some
 shaking in their boots.

LOTTE
 Shaking in their graves, you mean.

AARON
 Am I in it?

LOTTE
 What do you mean, "Am I in it? "
 You are my son -- of course you
 are in it.

AARON
 Should I be shaking in my boots?

A pause.

LOTTE
 Aaron, as you can see, I am still
 alive. You could have called to
 confirm that, so I have to assume
 you have other reasons for driving
 in from Boston.

AARON
 Flying in . . . Well, yes. I do
 have business here, but --

LOTTE
 -- Oh, then please go conduct it,
 your business. I have a deadline
 and I really don't have time for
 this.

AARON
 This?

(a silence in which much is felt, but nothing is said)

AARON (CONT'D)
 Deadline? You have a publisher?

LOTTE

Yes, I do. Actually. And this memoir will be out in less than a year, and everyone who reads it will know you wet the bed until you were ten. Now will you please let me get to work?

Long silence. Aaron struggles to remain composed.

AARON

I'll be back tomorrow. I'll call first. Some changes have to be made.

Aaron exits quickly.

LOTTE

What the hell . . . ?

SCENE III. WEDNESDAY

Lotte now sits at her desk with her broken foot propped up on a stack of pillows. Her laptop is open on the desk along with a glass and a bottle of wine. Lotte is working.

The front door opens. We hear Saanvi and Aaron:

SAANVI (O.S.)

You are right on time. I will let her know you are here.

AARON (O.S.)

Thank you, Saanvi, but I will see myself in, please.

The door is heard closing. Aaron walks into the doorway of the bedroom.

AARON (CONT'D)

Mother.

LOTTE

Son. (a brief silence) What changes?

AARON

Uh . . . I was going to say, "I hope you're feeling better today?" I see you're up, so you must be.

LOTTE

What changes? (Pause) When you stormed out yesterday after making your bold pronouncement --

AARON

I didn't storm out, Mother.

LOTTE

It was as close to storming as I have ever seen from you. And, the pronouncement was so promising. For a moment I imagined you'd finally grown a pair.

Aaron is angry, but he slumps and looks at the floor.

LOTTE (CONT'D)

Stop that.

AARON

Stop what?

LOTTE

Stop caving in! Your fifty something years old --

AARON

-- Sixty --

LOTTE

-- OK, sixty something years old --

AARON

-- no, Mother, just sixty.

LOTTE

OK, I got it, just sixty! And you still cower in my presence. Stand up straight and look me in the eye and tell me, what changes!?

AARON

Christine thinks --

LOTTE

--Do not tell me what your wife thinks! Tell me what you think.

AARON

OK. I think you are too old to live alone. We -- I want you to come to Boston where we can look after you.

Lotte laughs.

LOTTE

And, where would I live? Certainly not with you two -- I'd make you crazy. That's a promise! Or are you thinking of depositing me between clean white sheets in a nursing home?

AARON

Not at first, no. You'd live with us until this apartment sells, and a top tier assisted living . . . situation is affordable.

Long pause.

LOTTE

You don't want to care for me, you just feel responsible, you want to be a good son. Pathetically predictable. I own this apartment and it is not for sale and as long as I have my mental faculties, which I do, I will decide where and how I live! You said what you came to say. You may go now.

AARON

No, Mother. I'm not leaving until this is resolved.

LOTTE

Aaron, this is resolved. I am not budging from my apartment until I my death which will not inconvenience you, as I have seen to every detail. (She turns away to her laptop.) Now, where was I?

AARON

Mother.

LOTTE

(ignoring him)
Where the fuck was I?!

AARON

Mother!

LOTTE

Are you still here!?

AARON

I'll go, but first I have to know something.

LOTTE

Well, spit it out!

AARON

Why have you always hated me? Tell me why and I'll go and you'll never see me again. Just explain why even as a small boy I only remember disdain and criticism from you. I don't recall ever having been hugged or kissed by you or tucked into bed by you. I have no memory of ever being loved by you, my own mother.

LOTTE

Oh, Jesus! Your timing is lousy. I'm under the gun here!

AARON

Tell me, Mother, what did I do? What was so repugnant about me?!

LOTTE

Must we do this now?

AARON

If not now, when? How much longer will you be around? When your neighbor called to say you'd fallen and were in the hospital, I realized I can't wait forever to know why you hated me -- apparently still hate me.

LOTTE

I never hated you, I just didn't like you.

Aaron sits on her bed, head hanging.

AARON

What did I do to make you dislike me? What could a little boy do to become repellent to his own mother!?

LOTTE

Fuck. (She closes her laptop) Ok, boy, let's get all the shit on the table. (She pauses to focus) Almost from the day you were born you were compliant, nauseatingly compliant. Weak. Whatever I told you to do, you did it -- no argument, no questioning. You, just did it. Until now!

AARON

And that's bad?

LOTTE

Boring! Just like your father. Soft, polite, controllable, boring! Fucking boring!

AARON

If he was so fucking boring, why did you marry him?

LOTTE

Nobody else wanted me.

AARON

That doesn't surprise me.

Pause. His statement has landed.

LOTTE

I was a hard nosed casting director, and I met your daddy about the time I began producing. Most men don't like woman who are aggressive and ambitions, and worst of all, successful! No one, not even other women knew what to make of me. I was called a cunt, a dike, a bitch and various combinations of those names. I knew it. I heard it. I enjoyed that reputation. But, I was lonely, turning thirty-something, and your Father loved me. I didn't love him, but he was beautiful. And, I wanted a kid.

AARON

That does surprise me.

LOTTE

I'd made a big mistake marrying a man who'd come to bed and whisper in my ear "Permission to touch?" So, after he impregnated me, I asked him to leave and of course he did, politely, pathetically, no questions, no argument.

AARON

I always thought he left you.

LOTTE

That's funny. I was stronger than he was, and I thought my genes would be dominant, of course! HA! I expected to have a kid who was like me. Surprise! Aaron, I thought I wanted a kid, but, hell, I had no clue what that meant.

AARON

When you realized you didn't want me, why didn't you insist he take me?

LOTTE

When you were five or six --I don't know, it was before you started first grade, I was considering letting him have you, which would have put him over the moon, and probably would have been better for you. But, without warning, the asshole died. You were stuck with me.

AARON

He wanted me?

LOTTE

Of course! He just didn't have it in him to fight me for you.

AARON

You told me he didn't want me!

LOTTE

I lied.

After a moment:

AARON

Mother . . . I, ah, wish I had another name for you, because "mother" just . . . Doesn't fit you. You were never a mother. I don't know what you were, what you are. An unhappy, unloving, hateful . . . monster.

LOTTE

The hateful monster who paid for you to go to private schools and then to Harvard!

AARON

Yes! And as soon as I was out of the house, you sold it and moved to a small apartment-- this apartment with one bedroom! When I came home from school, I had to stay at the Y!

LOTTE

How the fuck do you think I paid for Harvard?! Now, get out! We are done!

Aaron moves to the door, stops and turns.

AARON

What happened to you? What the hell happened to you?

LOTTE

(Returning to her work)
You'll have to read my memoir.

Aaron stands in the doorway as though he will stay longer, then leaves.

Lotte hears the front door close. She looks toward the door for several beats, as lights fade.

SCENE IV. TEN YEARS LATER. EARLY MORNING.

Aaron enters the bedroom. He's wearing work clothes, and carries a large empty cardboard box. He stands looking about for a moment, then tosses the box on the bed, which is freshly made. He studies the memorabilia covering the walls and begins selecting a few items which he places in the box.

He reacts to hearing the door to the apartment.

AARON
Saanvi, I'm in here.

Saanvi steps into the doorway clutching a book.

SAANVI
Dear, dear Aaron, you have finally
come.

She places the book on the bed and embraces him.

AARON
The estate people will be here in
an hour. I, uh . . . I apologize
in advance for all the noise and
traffic.

SAANVI
No need to apologize --

AARON
--I want you to have anything you
want, so please look around and
help yourself. It's good to see
you again. You haven't aged at all
in ten years. Amazing. But, Like
I said, you can take whatever,
anything --

SAANVI
-- Thank you.

Saanvi reaches under a pillow on the bed and takes Lotte's
handgun. Smiling, she puts it in a pocket. Aaron doesn't
know what to make of this. Before he can speak:

SAANVI (CONT'D)
Will they sell everything?

AARON
Uh . . . Yes, well, they'll try to.
Anything left will go to the, will
be thrown out. By tonight, this
apartment will be scrubbed clean of
Lotte Feldman. It goes on the
market next week. I hope your new
neighbor will be a good person.

SAANVI
Your Mother was a good person.

AARON
Really? I didn't know that.

SAANVI

Oh, Aaron. You must not speak ill
of your own Mother.

Saanvi studies Aaron sympathetically as he considers a framed poster, takes it from the wall, then changes his mind, and places it on the floor against the wall.

Aaron takes the cardboard box from the bed, tosses it roughly to the floor and sits on the bed.

AARON

I really don't want any of this. I don't want reminders of what Lotte Feldman truly loved and what kept her from me. (He sighs) I don't know why I'm here.

Saanvi sits beside him. Then carefully:

SAANVI

We delayed her memorial service for an hour hoping you would come.

AARON

Did anyone show up?

SAANVI

Most of her friends had already passed.

AARON

Saanvi, I think you may have been her only friend. (He rises, looks about) I, I don't see anything that needs, that needs doing before the estate people arrive. I expected this place to be covered in dust. It's been a while since she died --

SAANVI

-- Two years. Two years, Aaron. I come twice a week to tidy, and I talk to her.

AARON

Talk to her?

SAANVI

Yes. I feel her here still. She is uneasy with regrets. As she lay dying, she waited for you.

(MORE)

SAANVI (CONT'D)

She called for you. At last you are here.

Saanvi places Lotte's memoir in Aaron's hands.

AARON

No, Saanvi, I --

SAANVI

-- you must read. At least the very end.

Saanvi exits. The door to the apartment is heard. Aaron opens the memoir to a page near the end marked with a ribbon. Aaron reads:

AARON

"Coda. A letter to my Son."

Aaron is shocked by this. He closes the book and puts it down, as though it might bite him. Hesitantly, he picks it up again and begins to read.

AARON (CONT'D)

"There are things you do not know, that you should know. I share my story with you, not to seek your sympathy, but to seek your understanding."

Aaron continues to read, silently, and we hear Lotte's voice.

LOTTE (V.O.)

I have only vague memories of leaving Berlin. My father, a doctor, was fired from his post at the Charite Hospital for the crime of being a Jew. I suppose he saw what was coming. It was 1936, I think. I was five and my older brother, Levi, whom I adored, was nine. On the train from Berlin to Hamburg, Levi went missing. My father saw my Mother and me to the ship that would take us to America, then he left us to look for Levi. I never saw my Father nor Levi again.

Aaron sits and continues to read. Lighting adjusts isolating Aaron in light. As we continue to hear Lotte's voice, she appears and speaks behind him.

LOTTE

My Mother was weak, physically and emotionally. She became very ill on the ship, and was diagnosed with Tuberculosis at Ellis Island. It was confusing time for a five year old. I never saw my Mother again. I was eventually placed in the Jewish Orphans Asylum, where I learned to read and write, the only education I would ever have. The asylum closed when I was about ten. Then, I was in a series of foster homes until I ran away at age fifteen, I think. I never knew my exact age nor my birthdate.

AARON

(looking up)

You told me you graduated from NYU.

LOTTE

I lied. I lied to you about so many things. I told you I never liked you. A lie. I told you I was too busy to attend your high school graduation. I lied. I stood in the back of the auditorium bursting with pride as you delivered your valedictory speech. I saw your baseball games, well, some of them. I loved that you tried so hard, even though you were not very good.

Aaron weeps.

Aaron, please try to understand that I lost everyone I ever loved except you. When I left an abusive foster home to fend for myself, I vowed never to be vulnerable, never to allow love of another person to hurt me. And I didn't. Until you, my beautiful, trusting boy. I was afraid to love you. Loving you terrified me. I was frightened that if I loved you, I would lose you, too. When you read this one day, and I hope you will, You will know that I loved you, and why I pushed you away. I beg you to forgive me, my son.

Lotte smooths Aaron's hair and kisses him on his head as lights fade.

END