Ambition by Carolyn Murdoch

**GINGER PIERCE** made it clear that if Deirdre were not attending college, which would be a grievous mistake, then she could not live in Ginger’s house rent-free.

So at age eighteen, Deirdre packed her bags and moved from Cincinnati to New York City. She left because she wanted to be there, where everything in the world was happening, and because she could.

She stayed at the YMCA. On the second day, she walked outside into the wide warm streets and believed she could do anything. It was July. Columbus Avenue was lined with cafés serving lunch to ladies in skirts and blouses, wearing sunglasses and lipstick, smoking cigarettes or eating salads and drinking wine from thin-stemmed glasses. Their painted fingernails fluttered like butterflies. She wanted badly to be one of them, and on that fine sunny day, it seemed possible.

There was a kiosk on the corner and she stopped and asked for a pack of Benson & Hedges. She had never smoked a cigarette. As she waited, she glanced at magazine covers. Someone picked up the *Village Voice* and laid down a dollar. “I’ll take this too,” she said, picking up the paper. She sat on a bench and stayed there a while, circling items of interest. She loved this city. She felt loved there. Wherever she went, doors opened. People let her in.

Two days later, Deirdre moved out of the Y and into a hotel on the Upper West Side that rented rooms by the week. In the 1930s, when it had become fashionable for well-to-do families to send their daughters off to finishing school in hopes they would find a suitable husband, the brownstone was converted to a boarding house. By the 1980s transient women stayed there for a week, or for months, however long it took for their lives to change course.

To enter the rooming house, Deirdre had to pass by a room that had a sliding-glass window, like a roadside motel, where a dark-haired man spent the livelong day watching the women come and go, and jotted down phone messages. A girl could receive a call, if someone had the hotel number, but room phones did not dial out, and all calls went through the man sitting in the room downstairs. He was the gatekeeper, and no one could go upstairs without his consent.

Upstairs were the bedrooms. None of them had locks on the door. That made Deirdre think it was a social place where friends would wander in and out to talk about their day. But the hotel was not at all like the dormitories Deirdre had imagined. None of the women seemed to know each other, and no one spoke in the hallway or anywhere else. There was a small kitchen for the residents and several bathrooms. No one ever left a toothbrush or a towel. There were no personal items anywhere.

Men were strictly not permitted upstairs, but some men came upstairs.

Deirdre was lucky. Her room faced the street. It wasn’t like the others that had an alley view, or no view at all. Her window looked out over trees and at brownstones, and above them she could see the sky. On the street below, there was a pleasant view of life, of people who knew people, people who talked and laughed and bought groceries in this city.

Her room was painted white and furnished with a dresser, a single chair, and a twin bed made up with white starched sheets, stamped in the corner *St. Joseph’s Hospital.* Long white curtains blew into the room in great snaps before the single long window. In time how she felt about the room would change considerably, but that was the way she saw it when she arrived, and it was fine.

In the second week, she signed with a talent agent. His name was John Knight. He wanted Deirdre to do commercials and print work. He sent her over to a recording studio behind Columbus Circle to appear in a short scene. She had only one line, but it was a good part. When she left his office, she wanted desperately to call her mother and say *haha,* but she did not. Her mother was a long way away, and for that day Deirdre wanted to hold on to what was hers.

She arrived on the set and gave her name to a woman blocking the entrance. The woman looked at her clipboard and opened the door. She pointed to where Deirdre should go. Filming was already going on, and Deirdre had to stand and wait in the dark behind the stage before she could go back to where she was expected. No one made a sound except the actor on stage. Finally, a man called out her name and she walked out into the lights and said three words.

*That’s a wrap,* he said.

The lights were so bright she had to look below them to see anything. All at once there were many, many people there, standing in the dark and deathly quiet. She packed her things. She’d change out of her high heels into sneakers later, on the sidewalk, before descending into the subway. She was the subway baby now, the girl on her own, the girl on the go. So she didn’t hesitate when a man came up from behind the set lights and said, “Do you have a résumé?”

That kind of thing happened here, in New York City. She listened. She whipped out a headshot/résumé from inside her bag and handed it over to him. She would regret that later, that she had given him her address and the hotel phone number.

He looked at the front and back and nodded. “I may have some work for you,” he said. He was older. Fifties. Maybe sixties. He spoke with an accent. She thought it was Russian but couldn’t be sure. He folded her résumé and tucked it under his arm, and then he took out his wallet and flipped through business cards. “Here,” he said. He sighed like an old smoker. “Come by my office tomorrow at 1:00.”

She put the card inside her pocket, slung her bag over her arm, and drifted out into the city. She needed to keep moving for a few blocks, then stopped to smoke a cigarette and think about the whirlwind her life was becoming. She was practically a regular smoker now. Even though the heat dragged her down, she was all electricity. She could go wherever she wanted to go. She loved this city.

**She was ready** by 11:00. She wore sandals and the sundress her mother had bought her before she left Cincinnati. The night before Deirdre left, her mother softened and took her shopping. “Whatever you like,” she said. Deirdre had never heard those words before.

But that was then. Now she had the focus of a hunter aimed at a rare prize. She would hunt with a bow and arrow. Like a forest girl, out to feed her family. Once you pull back on the bow, the arrow is set in motion. It will go where it goes without you.

The building was odd for an office. It wasn’t in Midtown like her agent’s office. It looked like apartments. She got into the elevator and a couple got in too, a man and woman wearing nice clothes. They chatted about plans for something later. Everyone and everything people did or said in New York City was of interest to Deirdre. The man pushed the number of his floor with an easy twist, like stabbing it, voilà. He looked at the woman. “You know where I have to go,” he said.

The sentence hung in the air as if there were some fated destination, some murderous plan to lead you to your destination. Some force that made days happen the way they always did.

The couple stepped out on the ninth floor and the doors closed after them. Deirdre stayed until it stopped at 11.

The hallway did not look like a hallway that had offices. It was narrow and plain and there were numbers on the doors, not names. There were no names anywhere. She found the number and stopped in front of it. It didn’t feel right.

She pressed the bell.

The man from yesterday opened the door. He was naked, with a white towel wrapped around his waist. The hair on his chest and arms was still wet. She would remember long spirals of black hair.

He stepped aside for her to enter.

This wasn’t right. It was wrong.

She went inside.

She went inside when she knew it wasn’t right. Later, she would blame herself for that.

The apartment was all one room. He offered her a chair at the table by the kitchen area. He went back to the sink, standing barefoot, eating something from a bowl with a spoon.

She sat down with her hands clasped together on top of the table. She didn’t know why she was there. They weren’t friends. This was supposed to be an office.

“Would you like a glass of orange juice?”

“Yes, please,” she said.

She studied the apartment, memorizing the shape and space of it, like someone who might try to escape or need a place to hide.

Over her shoulder, the back wall was windows. On the other side of the room was an unmade queen-size bed. It was a small place, really. In front of her was a small kitchen where the man was still naked, still wearing just a towel. There was the door. And over there was the bathroom, a closet.

“Come,” he said. He was suddenly standing in front of her. She froze. He took her hand. She didn’t know where they were going. She hadn’t had her orange juice yet. She stood up and walked with him to a black swivel chair that looked out over the Hudson River. A container barge was gliding downstream. She was looking at the colors. Orange. Blue.

*Pay attention, Deirdre.*

He was saying words about some work. He wanted her to look at his photographs. He pulled on her arm so she had to sit on his lap or fall over. His skin was damp. The towel was wet. She thought he could easily break her arm.

He had a photo album. It was the kind families keep of holidays and birthdays. These pictures were of topless women, showgirls, dancing in Atlantic City. Deirdre didn’t talk. It didn’t seem to matter if she spoke.

He picked her up and carried her to his bed.

Much, much later, when she could think about all this, she would realize each step was a test, a door for him to break through. Would she come inside his apartment? Would she accept the orange juice? Would she let him take her hand? And when she sat on his lap, the test was over. He had access to everything. She blamed herself for not seeing it then. If she had seen it then, nothing would have happened.

But there wasn’t time to think of what might happen. It was already happening. He’d dropped the towel and covered her body with his, so she couldn’t move. She couldn’t see very much. There was the ceiling there, and there was the corner and there was the top of the closet door.

Pain. Her eyes closed. Pain. Pain and nothing. Time was slow. Full seconds lasted days. It took a year. Deirdre died for a while. For a while she was utterly silent in a place where nothing moved or ever changed. Death in a mausoleum.

When she opened her eyes, some evil had entered her. It would live there, inside her. It was already alive inside her.

And then the unthinkable happened. He hopped off of her, naked. She was still wearing her sundress. He dragged her up and pulled the dress up over her head. He dragged her to the bathroom. She didn’t know why. There was a bright light, white tiles now, a white bathtub, more white towels. That was real. He was running the bathwater. She was there, in the room. He was in a hurry, she realized, to get her into his bathtub. He picked her up and set her down in the puddle of cold water. He got in with her. His stomach was a giant roll of snow-white skin covered with black hair. He kept her still with his knee on her chest. He spread her legs, her knees were bent. He washed her with a bar of yellow soap, as if she were a brick. He’d done this before. He grinned, holding the soap between her knees. “See,” he said. “All clean.”

His smile was weak, almost apologetic.

She wasn’t clean.

She had to leave. She got herself out of the bathtub. She had to get out now, she had to find a way, play along.

“I have to go now,” she said.

“Go on,” he said. He handed her her dress.

That was the end, but this was to be a never-ending story.

He had other purposes for this girl. She’d passed the test.

She dressed. She left.

**Everything died** in the city. Buildings were old and dark and the streets were dirty. Even the people were empty people. She couldn’t look up from the pavement. She got back to the hotel. She got her room key from the dark-haired man; she would never know his name but he would learn much about her. And then she was in her room where she had been on happier days, the room with the sheets from St. Joseph’s hospital, and the long white curtains that snapped in the wind, and the pack of Benson & Hedges cigarettes. She sat down and smoked a cigarette, looking out the window at nothing. The long ash dropped to the floor. Much later, she realized she was very hungry. The sky was growing dark and she was sitting in darkness. She couldn’t possibly move now, so she would eat tomorrow.

That was the beginning of the Dead Days. Things turned quickly after that, after the next day, when she decided To Do Something about the Rape.

**This was** the beginning of the new pattern: wake, smoke, rise like the smoke from your dead flesh.

It was the day after. She took the subway with all her might to see John Knight in his office. To Tell Him What That Man Did to Her.

“Hey kiddo,” he said, rising from his chair.

She could not sit down. She said the man’s name. “He raped me.”

John Knight went wild. He picked up his phone, then put it down. His chin dropped and quivered. “Go to the police,” he said. “Don’t go home. Go right now.”

“Okay,” she said.

She walked back out to the elevator. She remembered the elevator yesterday, how different everything had been. She got outside and then she was thinking about that bath and what the police might think about her. Her brain was dark-blue. Almost midnight.

She wasn’t going anywhere but back to her bed in the hotel room. She wanted to lie down until there was nothing left of yesterday and she could stand up again.

**It was** the same day, early in the afternoon. She was on her bed, still dressed, not quite asleep, just there, trying not to think. Someone opened her door. There was no knock. He just walked in. The man who had raped her yesterday was standing in her room. He was upset, but he was calm.

She stood up.

“You said I raped you,” he said.

She shook her head

*You did,* he said. *You’re making a lot of trouble for me.*

He wanted her to feel bad for him.

She shook her head again.

He took out his beeper and punched numbers into it. “You need to tell my friend I didn’t.”

They stood still, looking at each other while they waited.

Deirdre’s room phone rang.

“Pick it up,” he said.

“Is this Deirdre?”

“Yes.”

“This is Eddie Nelson,” he said. “Do you know who I am?”

She knew who he was. He was an actor her father used to watch on TV. “Yes,” she said.

“Joe is a good friend of mine. He didn’t rape you, did he?”

“No,” she said.

“Good girl,” he said. “Let me speak with him.”

She handed back her phone and they spoke for a few seconds in Russian, and then Joe hung up and looked at her.

She knew what was going to happen. He put his hand on her shoulder and pushed her down to her bed. And then he undressed and folded his clothes over her chair. And then he raped her on her own bed. He was very angry this time and everything hurt. She didn’t move at all. Moving would make it worse.

“We’re going out,” he said, standing up.

He kept a hand on her back as they walked into the street. A taxi was waiting for them. Her mind went brown. Burnt-brown. Some shade of nothing, like dead leaves fallen off a plant. They were in the back seat of the taxi going somewhere far and fast.

He kept an eye on her as they got out of the car, but she wasn’t going anywhere. She had nothing. In the Dead Days, fear was the overwhelming machine.

She did not know what was happening. They were at a restaurant in South Street Seaport. Another man was already sitting at an outside table, waiting for them. He was Russian also. He was taller and larger than the first man. The two men ordered food for themselves and food for her. They spoke only Russian. She wouldn’t remember anything about the food. She remembered looking at the ice cubes in her glass of water and occasionally leaning forward to stir the water with her straw. She never spoke.

Then, all at once, the men stood up and shook hands. Joe walked away into the city, and there was Deirdre, sitting next to a man who’s name she didn’t know, a man she’d only ever heard speak Russian.

It took weeks for her to piece together what had happened over lunch. The two men had reached an agreement. Money was exchanged, and she was owned. It would take nearly a year for her to get away.

**She did not** decide her days. Wake, smoke, rise like the smoke from your dead flesh. Weeks went by. In the place that wasn’t fear, that felt like death, she thought about her mother sometimes, and then she put that thought aside. Some days she broke down and would have to go into the shower and cry. Fear was better. It made things simple. As long as she was afraid, she knew what to do.

Why didn’t she run away? In a city like this, that was so large and so free, why didn’t she just leave? She could have left.

He promised he would always find her.

He would find her. Find her mother.

She dreamed of running, of hiding somewhere safe. In the dream she saw another girl like her, it but it was not her. The girl was burning, running from a fire, and when she looked in Deirdre’s eyes, they knew each other.