

HYSTERIA

Rich's wife and one of his two children were sent to a hospital last week when a subway car they were in was contaminated with Pyrexia, a man-made disease. Though it looks promising for both his wife, Sandy, and his youngest daughter, Christina, they have been quarantined. Due to his growing concern about their safety in their Manhattan high-rise, Rich, 40s, contacts his sister, Carla, 30s. She agrees to let him and his oldest daughter, Jill, stay with her in her Brooklyn flat until the hospital release date. The relationship between Carla and her brother is strained at best. Rich, a conservative, high-powered financial consultant is the complete opposite of Carla, a liberal social worker for the New York City Correctional Department. Both have good intentions and high ideals. In the last year, terrorist attacks have become far too common. The U.S. economy has been hit hard, but worse than the financial strain is the emotional strain. Carla enters with a load of groceries.

RICH: Jill was out with Ali again.

CARLA: *(Carrying in groceries.)* I got a great deal on pre-cooked lasagna noodles.

RICH: I just got off the phone with Sandy. I had to tell her about Jill.

CARLA: Did you know you could get them pre-cooked?

RICH: They were at the library—Jill and Ali.

CARLA: Your wife's got enough to worry about. How are they by the way?

RICH: Okay. Good—no signs of the disease yet. All negative. They'll be released from the hospital by next week if all keeps testing negative.

CARLA: Hey! That's great, Rich.

RICH: It is. This Pyrexia scare has been all over the media.

CARLA: What hasn't been? You know, I'd even prefer the usual celebrity garbage about so-and-so's affair over the constant panic spreading.

RICH: It's not just merely panic. It's the truth. It's just been pumped up a bit. Pyrexia's fatal.

CARLA: I know, and I'm not underestimating that. I'm just saying that they told us 30,000 or more were exposed and probably half that number would suffer the disease. Nobody we know has a full-blown case. And we know like . . . six people quarantined?

RICH: I guess.

CARLA: I'm thankful, believe me. I just think they scare us way too much.

RICH: Well, if they didn't scare us, we'd complain that it wasn't covered properly.

CARLA: I just think the panic spreading causes irrational behavior.

RICH: Now, I think *you're* blowing things out of proportion.

CARLA: Am I? I'm in the FBI holding cells every day. Half the people being held aren't even involved.

RICH: How do you know? Besides, if it were any other country, those folks would be thrown into prison and tortured for suspicious behavior. So civil liberties are screwed a bit?

CARLA: Yeah . . . anyway . . . I stopped at the Kosher Corner. I love that bread. What's that stuff called?

RICH: I would be careful over there, Carla.

CARLA: Yes, I may end up converting to Judiasm. That would piss Mom off, huh?

RICH: Yes it would. You were always the rebellious one. Are you sure Jill isn't your daughter? I told her a million times not to go to the library in the last few weeks.

CARLA: Used to be drugs. Now, it's checking out a book. Never know where diseases may lurk.

RICH: You think you're so funny, but it's dangerous. Any public place.

CARLA: Hum, well, that eliminates . . . ohhhh, all of New York. So . . . you and Jill feel like helping me make lasagna tonight?

RICH: Didn't you hear anything I just said about Jill and Ali?

CARLA: Yes. (*Beat.*) I'd like to be an Italian Jew. I think that would be an interesting combo.

RICH: Sandy said I should have sat down with her.

CARLA: What did you say to Jill exactly?

RICH: I told her she should never see him again.

CARLA: Well that was a dumb idea.

RICH: Thanks a lot.

CARLA: Well, she's *fourteen*, Rich. She's going to do the opposite of what you say.

RICH: She said they were just friends. So what's the big deal?

CARLA: Well exactly. They're friends, Rich. My niece, God forbid, has integrity.

RICH: Integrity? His family's supporting terrorists.

CARLA: No, he's not. His father happens to be a lawyer. He's defending people's constitutional right to have representation. You can see the difference.

RICH: Yes, but I don't want him to put her in danger. I've already had to deal with half of my family being hospitalized in the last week. I don't want to worry about her too.

CARLA: Then don't. Jill really likes this kid. He helps her in physics. They bonded while in a school play. I mean, what is more American than that? You met him. You said he was a great guy.

RICH: Yes. And he was a good kid but that was before things got out of hand with the attacks. That's before I understood who his father was associating with.

CARLA: He's not associating with them. He's defending them. As a lawyer. That's what he does. That's his job. And who's to say those men are guilty anyway?

RICH: Oh come on, Carla.

CARLA: Oh come on? My God, you of all people should

understand how easily people jump to conclusions when things seem suspicious. But often they can be explained.

RICH: Why me of all people?

CARLA: Oh come on, Rich.

RICH: Oh. That was different. I mean, it was totally different. We're talking misappropriating some funds, not murder. And Roger was the only one who went down for it.

CARLA: Yeah, and a lot of people suspected you.

RICH: Fine. I don't know if they are part of the terrorist network or not. And maybe Ali's father is incredible. A really good guy. And I'm unfairly judging his work.

CARLA: Now, you're talking.

RICH: But it doesn't matter. Jill told me there were rumors all over the school and that kids don't trust him.

CARLA: All the more reason he needs a friend.

RICH: It's not just Ali I'm worried about. It's all the people he associates with religiously. And it's the other kids at the school who might harm Jill because of her association.

CARLA: You say "association." We're talking about friendship . . . maybe even more than friendship.

RICH: Do you know something I don't?

CARLA: No.

RICH: What do you know? What did she tell you?

CARLA: Nothing.

RICH: I don't believe you.

CARLA: I'm just responding to the way she looks when he calls.

RICH: Do they talk often?

CARLA: I don't know. You lived with her for the last fourteen years.

RICH: I don't know. I guess I didn't pay much attention.

CARLA: Maybe you *should* pay attention. She's growing up fast. She'll be out of the house before you know it.

RICH: I don't need a lecture.

CARLA: Yeah, and you know what I don't need? I don't need my brother to suddenly thrust me in the middle of his family ordeal and then expect me to say nothing.

RICH: I didn't want you to say nothing, but I don't need a lecture.

CARLA: Well, I don't need to walk into my place after a long day and be confronted with conflict. This is my place. It isn't the high-rise on the Upper East Side with the doorman, but it's all mine. All day long I do conflict, Rich. Prisoners tend to be like that. Social workers catch hell. So when I come home, I veg. I joke. I like to eat. It would be nice if you'd greet me with a "Hey, how are ya, Sis?" or "We cooked you dinner!" I mean, it's not perfectly easy to share my place, ya know? Though I'm happy to do it.

RICH: *(Beat.)* We'll get a hotel tomorrow.

CARLA: Uhhhh! So now I get the guilt trip. You did not hear a single thing I just said. No wonder Jill doesn't talk to you.

(Beat.) Look, you are *not* staying at a hotel, okay? Not with Sandy and Christina in the hospital.

RICH: So you think I'm a bad father?

CARLA: No, I don't. I didn't say that!

RICH: Yeah, but you *think* it.

CARLA: No. I don't think you're a bad father. I think you genuinely love your kids, but I don't think you're very available. Hell, I don't think you've been available to me all these years either.

RICH: Like you'd care.

CARLA: Yeah, I do. I don't have any family of my own, Rich. I mean, I don't have a husband and kids. I have Mom, you and your family. That's it.

RICH: You could meet somebody.

CARLA: Yeah, I could, maybe, but I haven't.

RICH: That's cause you're too wrapped up in being a social worker. Working for the slime of the world.

CARLA: Okay, that pisses me off. I mean, that's what pisses me off about you. I can understand your passion for competition, for wheeling and dealing your days away, but you can't seem to get your arms around mine. You can't seem to accept the fact that I love what I do. Yes, I cater to the slime of the world sometimes, but criminals have families, and families have needs. *(Beat.)* You probably see that very clearly now, being apart from Sandy and Christina for this past week.

RICH: I miss her. I miss them both like nobody's business. The thing is . . . I feel like I can't protect them anymore. I've never felt so helpless.

CARLA: All of us are feeling vulnerable.

RICH: Yeah, but I don't like it. I'm thinking I should just shove aside this damn job, love it or not, and move out to a safer place.

CARLA: And live in some homogeneous suburb or take up the quiet life? It's not you. It's not either of us.

RICH: What would keep me here?

CARLA: Me, ya stupid idiot. I just confessed that I don't have anyone but you and Mom.

RICH: I'll take you both with me.

CARLA: You're not serious?

RICH: I don't know. It's . . . it's the lack of control that I can't stand. I'll spend more time with Jill. I will. Like you suggested. I know you're right . . . I'm unavailable . . . a little too much like Dad.

CARLA: I didn't say that.

RICH: No, no, but I am. I know Jill's growing fast and I know I've been out of the picture more than in . . . and I'm just coming down hard all of a sudden saying, "No, Arab kids . . . No, Arab kids like him."

CARLA: Wow, now you sound like Archie Bunker. Wanna move to Astoria and start calling blacks colored folk?

RICH: I just, I can't get it out of my head. I think Ali is dangerous to her. It's a premonition.

CARLA: So you told her not to see him, but you didn't happen to mention it's because you're scared for her life? Even if it's unreasonable, you should have told her why you're so set on this. That way, even if she were mad, she could understand it's because you care about her.

RICH: I feel I have to control things more now. I told her I'd pick her up from school from now on too. I'll drop her off too. She can go out on the weekends with a few friends that I know about. We can't be too careful. We should move out to some place safer, in the country. Some place where her associations or *friendships* won't put her in danger. Where we don't have to be worried about diseases being spread like crazy everywhere. Where we don't have to be afraid to ride the bus.

CARLA: Where is that place, Rich?

RICH: I won't force you to come. I won't force Mom either, but I do wish you would. I know you guys love Brooklyn, but I cannot do this anymore!

CARLA: You've got to. We all have to. Get up and do the routine. Make breakfast and go to work and laugh with friends. You can't run from shadows. We're all scared. Even us folks who like to act like we're tough guys are scared.

RICH: I can't do the routine! This is not routine! My wife and child in the hospital is not routine. I just want to protect us, Carla. I don't want any of us to die. *I don't want to die. Please. I don't want to die!*

CARLA: Okay, okay. *(Quietly, holding him.)* I know.

RICH: *(Pulls away a bit.)* I can't believe this has gotten to me so much. I haven't told this to anyone. Not even Sandy. I mean, about the dying part.

CARLA: Well, maybe you can say it to me. Maybe you don't feel like you have to protect me as much.

RICH: Maybe. That doesn't mean I don't, ya know, love you as much.

CARLA: I know.

RICH: The big financial consultant with the perfect life falls apart in his sister's flat.

CARLA: And then he goes on anti-anxiety medication or at least takes up yoga. Not so horrible. *(He smiles.)* So you'll think twice about moving out of here? You'd miss the Broadway openings and the beggars' patter.

RICH: I'll think about it. You think about moving too. *(Beat.)* So how do you tell your daughter that you're scared for her life without taking away every ounce of her security?

CARLA: *(Beat.)* I don't know, Rich. I don't know.