

FREEDOM

By

Jacqueline Gum

“In the matter of Wendall v Wendall, dissolution of marriage,” the clerk announced. My lawyer gave my a gentl shove from behind and and I moved forward towards the stand.

The dark and wood paneled courtroom was intimidating, especially with the judge seated so far above me. I was trembling as I took the oath.

“Mrs. Wendall,” the judge said. “Do you understand the agreement? Are these terms agreeable to you?”

“Well, I still don’t think it’s fair.” He looked so kind, I thought he really wanted to know. I finally had a chance to tell the real story.

“I mean I signed that prenuptial agreement years ago, before I gave up my career.” I pointed to the table where my husband sat. “The day he left me...it was a surprise, did you know that? He...he... promised that he’d make sure I never had to work again...not that I don't want to work, but there isn’t enough....I need more money to allow me more time to...I mean it’s been almost twenty years—”

“Objection your honor! Mrs. Wendall signed the papers yesterday. We’ve reached a final agreement here.” Confused, I looked to where my husband’s attorney stood.

“A moment with my client your honor?” my attorney walked towards me briskly, handsome in her black business suit.

“Make it brief counselor; I have a tight calendar today.”

The iciness in his voice made my heart stop. I guess he really didn’t want to know after all.

“Roberta, I thought I made it clear that this is just a formality. You signed the papers yesterday.” Her whisper was harsh and I could smell coffee on her breath.

“But he asked!” I whispered back loudly.

“Just say yes Roberta. That’s all you have to do, I told you that.”

I imagine I’d embarrassed her. Her client was college educated, world traveled, but couldn’t get a simple instruction straight. I’d forgotten it was about her.

“But—”

“It’s over Roberta. Just say yes, and you’ll be Roberta Gunn again.” She hissed and backed away.

I made a final attempt to meet my husband’s eyes, looking for something remotely close to the love I used to see there.

He stood up shouting, “I’m worth a hundred million dollars. Give her half – she’s worth it. She might not have been a perfect wife, but close enough.”

What really happened is... he shook his head and turned away, revolted by my outburst. But not before I saw the familiar glint of victory in his eye. Like the day he bought a competitive company for half its value.

In that moment, every good memory of my marriage disappeared; ripped asunder by the hard jagged edges of resentment and betrayal.

"Yes," I whispered. "I agree."

My now ex-husband was gone before I could inhale, the wide mahogany door closing behind him.

On the steps of the courthouse, on a blustery summer day, my attorney shook my hand. “You’re free Roberta.”

Until that moment, I never realized that emancipation can be terrifying. Particularly when you’ve been shoved through the freedom tunnel at warp speed.

I sat straight up in bed, the recurring nightmare drenching me in sweat.