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I stepped into the lobby of the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Manhattan to meet Mimi Silbert. Barely five feet tall, she stood quietly near a pillar, unnoticed, as travelers bustled past. I knew there had been scores of newspaper and magazine articles about her, dozens of radio and television interviews with her, and her career had been profiled on *This Is Your Life*. Yet who would suspect, I thought, that the slight, sandy-haired woman

in the white linen jacket and black skirt was in fact one of the most dynamic, successful, and sensitive crusaders in America?

For seventeen years, Mimi, who is forty-five, has been the leader of the renowned Delancey Street Foundation, a residential treatment center for former drug abusers, prostitutes, and convicts — transformed human beings who in one moment may be doing business with major corporations such as the Bank of America and in the next may be selling Christmas trees on vacant lots. The Delancey Street Foundation, which Mimi joined shortly after it was begun, runs without government aid; it is entirely self-supporting. The people who stay earn their way. Its eight hundred residents live in mansions in San Francisco and in some of the best neighborhoods in Los Angeles, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Brewster, New York. More than three thousand people have "graduated" from Delancey, which Dr. Karl Menninger described as "the best and most successful rehabilitation program I have studied in the world." Some of them are now attorneys and police officers, teachers and corporate executives.

The program is direct and strict. Most residents have been convicted of various crimes, many violent ones, and they arrive as functional illiterates. To graduate, each resident must earn a high school equivalency diploma and learn at least three marketable skills — a challenge that three out of four complete in an average of four years. More, they learn to talk, walk, and dress like sophisticated human beings.

This project is real — and at its center is Mimi, who earned a doctorate in criminology at the University of California at Berkeley. Her voice pops and splinters, its energy contagious, when she speaks.

"What are we going to talk about?" she asked me.

"You!" I said.

"That's boring," she replied — and I knew she'd be wrong.

In a few minutes we were sitting in Trumpets, a restaurant in the Hyatt, and I asked Mimi to describe the residents of Delancey Street.

"The people we take in," she said, "have hit bottom in their lives. Many have been drug addicts. Almost all have been poor, really poor, trapped outside what we normally consider the American system. They've ended up on the receiving end of life — receiving welfare, but not enough to live decently; receiving therapy, but not enough to help. The only thing they've received in large doses is punishment; they've served an average of four terms each in prison. Usually they've lived with great violence in their lives, and they're illiterate, with no discernible job skills. Six months is about as long as most of them have held any job. Work attitudes and work ethics thus are nonexistent among them. By the time they walk through our doors, they're bitter, angry, and cynical. They believe they are nobodies. Their frustration has showed itself in a vicious hatred of society, second only to the hatred they have for themselves. They have incredible energy — but it's directed negatively.

"Delancey Street is a boarding school, as I see it, like Andover or Exeter. The average stay is four years, just like at Harvard. The idea is to teach our residents all they need to know to live legitimately and successfully, to contribute and to participate in society. They're taught vocational skills, academic skills, art appreciation. They attend operas, learn to read fancy and complex restaurant menus, read great literature. We teach them how to set a table and how to choose and wear clothes properly. Now, not everyone will love the opera, but if someone is going to dislike it, he's going to dislike it because he has experienced it, not because it's something *other* people do. We teach money management and how to read contracts.

"Mainly, though —" Mimi's voice suddenly deepened, and she emphasized each word — "we teach how to believe and

how to love. This takes unbelievable courage on the part of our residents. They are desperately afraid. To believe in caring and closeness, to trust, is difficult for people who have hurt others and who have been burned all their lives. Finally — and it takes a long time — a leap of faith is required. It's believing a declaration: *I can be decent*. I can care and I can show it and I can get close to people and not hurt them, not destroy them or me. This integrity and sensitivity is so difficult to learn, and it's precisely what they want to learn, even when they most pretend that they do not care. When they shout loudest, it's to cover an almost childlike desire for people to be good to them and to be good themselves.

"This is what we spend a lot of time on — caring. The way the place is structured, they *have* to care, because there's no staff, only me. They have to care for each other, or they will die. The horror of Delancey Street is that when people split, leave early, don't make it for one reason or another, they're soon dead. Literally, we fight for lives. We have success because we believe in something larger than ourselves; we plan all the time, talk incessantly about how we need to prepare for the kids now standing on street corners, kids we don't know but who are going to need help. We build not for ourselves but for them, for the future."

"What was your vision seventeen years ago?"

"I could imagine a place where each person had dignity, where all lives mattered. I've focused my life on people who are really poor, those who don't believe they can make it, who have convinced themselves that they are either crazy or evil. They see themselves — usually accurately — as castoffs and castouts, at the bottom of the heap, society's garbage."

"Is your vision different today?"

"My vision today is bigger and more burning, because it has been fueled. I started out blindly idealistic and have come face

to face with the horrible realities of injustice and disappointment. When I began, I romanticized the poor; I suspected that the poor were somehow better, more real, than the rich, that they cared more about the things that really matter, that they were more loyal to each other. After seventeen years, I understand that the poor often have led terrible lives, that they can be nasty without discriminating about whom they're nasty to, including me. I did not anticipate how vicious human beings could be. Nor did I grasp that I might be the only person who believed in them. What happens, though, is that sometimes I can see a spark in their eyes, a tiny little light, barely visible. In that light, which ignites an inferno in me, I envision the future; I see these same people in a couple of years as decent, productive people."

"How were you treated at the start?"

"At night we'd have group sessions, and I'd be verbally assaulted by the participants on behalf of every professional that they had ever come in contact with. They'd shriek at me, 'What the hell do *you* know? You never shot dope. You've never been locked up. You damn pinko broad, who the hell are you to come here and tell us anything?' I took the abuse personally, and I was deeply hurt. I'd listen, then say softly, 'I can't believe you guys feel this way.' I'd desperately try not to cry. I'd hold it in, and at the end of every group session, I'd walk around the block with tears rolling from my eyes.

"Two guys were particularly mean, Abe and Nate. One was a huge Hispanic, the other a huge black. Both had false teeth. I remember this clearly because they'd yell at me with such intensity, such brutal rage, sometimes their teeth would come flying at me across the room, streaming spittle. I felt very small and very much alone. The poor, as I said, were not the romantic folk I'd imagined. Nevertheless, I would be conciliatory: 'I'm sorry,' I'd say, 'for making you this angry. I did not intend to

provoke you. I intended only to . . . ? No matter what I said, they'd ridicule me further. They'd shout, 'How dare you pretend to care! We're going through this bullshit with you for *nothing*. It's not going to work, anyway!'

"Until then, I had thought if I did good — this is not pleasant to recall, Walter — people would recognize how terrific I was and would respond: 'God, what a wonderful person Mimi is.' Instead I was vilified. It hurt terribly. I didn't understand. *Poor Mimi.*" She paused, laughing. "*No one* seemed to understand that I was wonderful. Then one day I snapped, and I told the truth."

"What exactly did you say?"

"*Exactly?*"

I nodded.

"I let loose. In utter fury, I screamed, 'Who the hell do you think you're talking to? You're damn right I haven't shot dope and I haven't served time in prison — and that's good. You already know how to do that. You're here to learn something else, how to make it in life. *That* I can teach you, because unlike you, I *have* made it. I *am* a success. If you stopped acting like such self-destructive jerks and listened to me instead, if you did what I suggested, maybe you'd end up being somebody. Now I'm sick of *your* bullshit!'"

"What happened?"

"Instant silence — and respect. I had been straight; I had stood up for myself. In time I grew very close to both men. I trained them, and I yelled at every mistake they made. I took them under my wing twenty-four hours a day. Today Abe is the vice president of Delancey Street."

"What is Abe like?"

"Back then he was slimy and violent, an angry man who had been locked up since childhood — who had, in fact, been an inmate of every prison in the state of California, including the youth facilities. He had been an addict since he was twelve,

and he was a member of a gang called the Mexican Mafia, a group sworn to kill. Simply, at the time, he was slick, mean, and incredibly violent. Today Abe is one of the most brilliant and sensitive counselors to be found anywhere.”

“When did it turn for Abe?”

“I can’t recall the day or moment, but I remember vividly when *he* recognized how different he’d become. He’d been with Delancey Street for five years, and I trusted him completely. Thus, when the California state legislature asked me to examine the prison system, I hired Abe as an assistant and had him accompany me to San Quentin, one of the prisons in which he had been incarcerated. I knew I’d be interviewing gang leaders in what’s called lock-down, an isolated section. Abe would be an asset, I thought, because I was sure that the gang leaders would see me initially as a little white social worker — you know the kind, precisely what I was when I started at Delancey Street. I could cut through that on my own, but having Abe with me, I felt, would speed the process. Midway through the interview with the head of the Mexican Mafia, though, Abe excused himself to go to the bathroom — and he didn’t return.”

“What happened to him?”

“After the interview I found him, and he was pale as a sheet. ‘What’s the matter?’ I asked him.

“‘My stomach,’ he said. ‘I’ve been vomiting in the bathroom.’

“We completed the rest of the interviews, though he looked terrible. Then, as we were leaving, with doors and gates clanking shut one by one behind us, a guard spotted Abe. ‘Hey,’ he said, ‘I recognize you. You were here!’

“‘That’s right,’ Abe told him, smiling, ‘and you’re *still* here.’

“When we got to the car, Abe broke into tears. He sobbed and sobbed.

“‘I am not *that* anymore,’ he said, ‘absolutely not that. I

looked at those guys. I know I would have given my life for them! Just to be accepted by them, I would have laid down my life. Don’t you see, Mimi? Those guys are everything I would have been if you hadn’t put up with my crap, if you hadn’t believed in me. You believed in me!’ He talked and talked, and we sat in that car parked on a dirt road near San Quentin for three hours. Abe cried the entire time. At first I wanted to say, ‘Of course you’re not that.’ But somehow, thank God, I realized that the understanding had to come from within him, not from me. Abe had to see the truth with his own eyes. And he did — and he made me see it, and more.”

“More?”

“More! He made me realize that the fight I had taken on was winnable, that the people I worked with, people who had given up on themselves as dead people, as the living dead, could change, could learn to believe in themselves. I was moved — and it was then that it all turned for me too. I could never go back. I knew I had to help. And then I cried too.”

Mimi stood, took a deep breath, and said, “I feel that moment even as I talk about it.”

When she sat down again, I asked: “There have been many more successes since that afternoon, haven’t there?”

“Yes,” she said.

“And more losses?”

“Yes, those too.”

“What happened to Nate?”

“After my explosion,” she began, “Nate too became sweeter. He was a very tough, very violent man who was illiterate, and consequently he was very sensitive about being thought of as stupid. He was well known among prison people, and he had a fearsome reputation. One day I asked him to break through for me, to go to school, to set an example for the others. Finally he agreed, and eventually he even called anyone who wouldn’t

attend a chicken. He started to make it, but then his relationship with a woman in San Francisco failed and he wrote himself off. 'I'm no good,' he told me. 'Don't believe in me. I'm no good and I'll never be any good.'

"That's a big problem we have with the people of Delancey Street. They don't believe that they can fix anything. When they make a mistake, they believe they've blown it all. That's it; they surrender; it's over. Nate quit —" she took another deep breath — and now he's back in prison.

"This is the reality we live with, how we define the world by our choices. I am continually telling people who walk through our doors that Delancey Street can't change the world; rather, *only you can change you*. Every day, I tell our people, you will have to make choices. Many will be right, and some will be wrong. We all make mistakes. Thus, the second choice you make is even more critical than the first: what you do when you mess up."

"Like Nate?"

"Yes," she said. "There's still hope. Maybe when he's released from prison —"

"When," I interrupted, "is it hopeless?"

She paused.

"Walter," she said, "the most horrible feeling is to love someone a lot, watch him become self-destructive, try to stop him or give him the tools to stop himself, yet somehow not matter enough. What I hate most is knowing there's nothing I can do, that loss or failure is complete. At Delancey Street we had a forty-seven-year-old man named Robert who had been the son of a police officer. For thirty years he was an addict — and twenty of those were spent in prison. He was torn between the new feelings of warmth, caring, and being vulnerable, for which he had a special gift, and a lifelong goal he had set in prison: 'having the feel of money in my pockets.'

"He was with us for two years. We became very close. I believed he had a true talent for giving, and I knew he could do a lot for kids. But he left Delancey Street early to chase after that money.

"'I'm using heroin again,' he told me over the telephone. 'I just needed a handle to grab onto. I know I've let you down.'

"He cried and asked if he could visit us, to regain his values and his strength — but twenty-four hours before he was to stop by, he overdosed on heroin. He was dead, and I felt like such a failure — so powerless, so hurt, so angry, so betrayed."

"When else do you doubt yourself?"

"Sometimes when I have to enforce the rules," she said. "We have three that are absolute: One, no drugs or alcohol. Two, no violence. Three, no threats of violence. In seventeen years no one has broken the violence rule, but fifteen people have broken the threat rule. I asked all of them to leave, with no exception. Some pleaded to stay. I remember one man in particular:

"'Please,' he begged me, 'give me another chance.'

"'No,' I told him.

"He dropped to the floor, grabbed my ankle, and he cried, 'Please, please, just one more chance.'

"'No,' I told him again.

"I always advise our people not to focus their energy on the person who quits but to give their feelings to those who are still here, still struggling, still needing help. But the truth is, when I have to ask someone to leave, I end up locking myself in the bathroom and crying my eyes out. I'm the only person who can throw a resident out of Delancey Street. It's a large, lonely responsibility —"

She paused.

"— so I become filled with self-doubt, questioning whether I should have made an exception, as in the situation I just

described. After all, I'll argue with myself, it's only a rule.

"I can't kid myself, though. We have gang members who have sworn to kill each other. Few people at Delancey Street have not experienced the most extreme forms of violence. I'm certainly not large enough physically to control our people. Also, it would be easy for those who've led hard lives to mistake niceness for weakness. I have to rely on my willingness to enforce the rules — on the strength of my personality. I know I can never allow a violent atmosphere to develop, and that begins with threats. I can't bend. That said, in my heart I'm still not sure whether my problem is that I should be tougher-gutted or that I have hardened too much."

"Mimi," I asked, "do the people of Delancey Street learn to take risks?"

"Absolutely," she said. "That's what Delancey Street is all about. Although some of their crimes may seem to involve great risk-taking or physical courage, that's a mirage. The facts are that these people, no matter how tough they may seem on the surface, are among the most frightened human beings on earth. It takes raw courage to survive Delancey Street, because they have to confront themselves. There's no running away. We teach them how to take risks, real risks, the largest of which are intimacy, trusting, sharing, and giving."

"What is it that you teach?"

"How to overcome the can'ts and the don'ts: I *can't* do this; I *don't* want that anyway. What we really mean when we say such things is that we have difficulty letting go of what's comfortable. How many human beings anywhere, not just at Delancey Street, hold onto a relationship merely because it exists? This fear of loneliness, abandonment, or failure can, if we let it, hold any of us back from doing exactly what each of us needs to do to feel fulfilled, which is to take a risk."

"How do you teach?"

"First, by role models. People who take risks are visible at Delancey Street. Others want to be like them. Second — well, I cheat. Because I know how hard it is to learn to take risks at first, I encourage the people here to help others take risks. Let me give you an example. One fellow who joined us after twenty years in prison could neither read nor write. After several months, he came to me.

"'Mimi,' he said, 'this is great, but it's not for me.'

"'I understand,' I told him. 'I can't beg you to change. Before you go, though, there's one thing you can do for me. A kid here, Tommy, worships you. He sees you as a hero, the best pickpocket in the world. He's only twenty years old. I don't want to see him spend a lot of time in the places you have, in prison. So before you go, help me with him.'

"'Why should I help him? Nobody ever helped me!'

"'We did! If you want to leave, *leave* — but first help someone, because we tried to help you.'

"He took Tommy under his wing, but to tutor him, he had to learn to read, which he did. Also, of course, he had to tell Tommy the truth about prison and his career. 'You ain't tough because you survive in prison,' he said. 'You're just dead. What you can't admit in the joint is that what you really want to do is wake up, look in the mirror, and see yourself as a man.'

"In time, both made it." Mimi paused again. "You know what the secret to Delancey Street is?"

"What is that?"

"These folks want what every human being desires: They want to be somebody. Simply to admit that takes guts. What's different about Delancey Street residents is that they've hit bottom. If they fail to take the risks the world presents, they die. Maybe they have an advantage in that they *know* what will happen if they don't take risks. It may be easier for the rest of us to fool ourselves."

"Mimi," I said, having saved for last the question I most wanted to ask, "why do you do this?"

"I touch someone. I see lives change. I live with great joy. How can I explain what it feels like to help a person, to look into that person's eyes and see what she or he can be? I feel love and triumph, and . . ."

"And?"

"I want to be somebody."

The key to successful risk-takers like Mimi is their solid core, the strength of their convictions. It's why the pilot of Delancey Street can survive, even though there are times when, as she says, "I end up locking myself in the bathroom and crying my eyes out. . . . I become filled with self-doubt."

Successful risk-takers wipe away the silver.

Liz Smith recalled, "I was extremely involved with love and romance when I was younger, and I rushed like a mad person trying to resolve my conflicts — but now I think the greatest thing that has happened to me is the wonderful friends I've made along the way. They are people I can really count on. This is the love that's really important. I had to be older, to have lived my life, to come to this truth."

Most of the great human beings I have known, who include Liz and Mimi, inwardly war with themselves. What distinguishes these leaders is not necessarily some inner peace, but rather how they've learned to organize their lives around a noble motive and to focus on it. *They see outside themselves* — an observation I was reminded of a few days after my dinner with Mimi, when I returned to the same hotel, this time to meet with another lively leader, one of the most respected managers in baseball.