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Well This Was Unexpected: Stories from My Life

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WELL THIS WAS UNEXPECTED:

STORIES FROM MY LIFE

by

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B.A. May 1993, Hunter College

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Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
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“But I cannot lay my finger upon the moment it ended, can never cut through the ambiguities and second starts and broken resolves to the exact place on the page where the heroine is no longer as optimistic as she once was.”

– Joan Didion, “Goodbye to All That”

“And no one can talk to a horse, of course.”

– “Mr. Ed”

PREFACE

There was one year when I was in elementary school during which reruns of the TV show “Mr. Ed” were broadcast between 8:30 and 9:00 every weekday morning. “Mr. Ed,” about a talking horse, was one of my favorite TV shows. My mother had already gone to work and I was alone in the rented house. I was a latchkey kid. The housekey literally hung on a knotted shoestring around my neck, tucked under my shirt. I was supposed to be at school, a ten-minute walk, at nine, meaning I would miss the ending. Daily I had to choose between getting to school on time and watching the end of “Mr. Ed.” I think you can imagine what an unsupervised ten-year-old girl chose most mornings.

That decision, alas, would foreshadow much.

Fast forward forty-something years. One afternoon in the MFA program, after reading too many annotated bibliographies and thesis essays about fantasy and speculative realism, I found myself singing the theme song to “Mr. Ed”:

*A horse is a horse, of course of course
And no one can talk to a horse, of course*

All right, so far so good.

*That is, of course, unless the horse
Is the famous Mr. Ed.*

But wait – so you *can* talk to a horse? But only if you’re Wilbur. Only if you’re someone who can hear a horse talking.

HOPE AND A TWENTY

On Memorial Day, 1970, summer reached in through the window screens and the sliding door, pulling us out with its heat. We wanted to do something. I don't remember exactly what – have a picnic at the beach, go to the carnival, cook a big barbecue on the grill. My mother had put aside twenty dollars for us to do something fun on the unofficial first day of summer.

But the money was lost. My mother sat, hunched and with her legs crossed, smoking a cigarette. She looked outside at the newly green trees shimmying in the breeze. My teenage sister muffled her feelings with industry. Spritzing blue-colored glass cleaner, she wiped sticky dirt from the glass doors. My sister and brother are really my half-siblings, the children of my mother's first marriage. They are about a decade older than me and at the time adolescence had honed their sense of potential disappointment.

Even as far back as 1970, when I was five years old, twenty bucks was not a lot of money. Yet our hopes were pinned to that Jackson note. It was all we needed. The five of us, including my mother's boyfriend, were convinced that a good time could be had if we could just produce those twenty smackers.

It was a big house in which to search for a small piece of greenish paper. The living room ceiling rose nearly two stories high. The wood-stained exterior blended with surrounding trees on a hillside. A slate entryway, running clear across the house from the front to back door, divided a double level of bedrooms from the airy living area, which pushed back into the forest. It was a grand, graceful house sheltering an awkward, stumbling family.

The house had been granted to my mother after she and my father divorced. Though we felt *we* did not belong, our home was a good fit in this tony, New York City bedroom community

in Connecticut. A striking, mid-century modern ranch on a lot behind ours sat empty, abandoned by its owners after their four-year-old daughter drowned in the swimming pool. A field separated us from the Bramletts, whose blue-blood wealth oozed from their large white colonial. Mrs. Bramlett was an eccentric, generous woman who got along well with my mother. I didn't like visiting the Bramletts, because their only child was a mentally handicapped boy who had a penchant for sexually molesting little neighborhood girls.

The All-American Greenlees lived in a more prosaic ranch house in the next nearest lot. They held a picnic every summer on their two acres of property. Their children, Bud and Nan, helped set up games, like bobbing for apples and dunking people by hitting a target with a softball. After a few failed attempts, Mrs. Greenlee finally succeeded in sneaking me away to her church one day. I sat on a wooden pew wondering what I was supposed to do, while Mrs. Greenlee she went to confession. In retrospect, I can't imagine what she had to confess.

My mother's boyfriend at the time was a tall, affable black man named Pete. My mother was a dramatic liberal, and it's hard to say which – her love for Pete or her desire to shock the neighbors – exerted the stronger emotional pull in her. Pete owned a closet of flamboyant, tight-fitting clothes. My memory of him is captured in a photograph taken in our living room. He is standing, wearing a white, synthetic three-piece suit. A violet polyester shirt, with long collar wings, splays above the vest. He is pulling my smiling mother close with one arm. She matches him, in a purple miniskirt and calf-covering, brown vinyl boots.

Pete was a singer. He sang in the house band at a nightclub on Route 7 called the Alibi. The Alibi burned down a few years later. Everybody said it was the Mafia and everybody was probably right. Pete's band used to practice at our house. I was supposed to be asleep, but who can sleep with a band rehearsing in your living room? I would peer out between the slats of the

second floor balcony railing and listen to the music. The highlight was when Pete sang their big slow number, a soul version of “Bridge Over Troubled Water.”

Two features dominated the living room: a stone fireplace climbing up twenty feet to the ceiling and a sliding glass door. The strange thing about the sliding door was that we had no deck. The ground just dropped away about a foot or so to a layer of dirt and weeds. In summer, it often seemed to us children that we couldn’t get through that door fast enough. It was a warm day, but the wind had picked up. My mother closed the freshly wiped door.

And then my brother appeared, hurtling down the stairs, waving a twenty-dollar bill. “I found it. I found it!” He jubilantly tossed the money aside and headed right for the sliding door. He ran into the glass. But he didn’t go all the way through. Like a videotape in reverse, he arched his body back inside. He must’ve done this instinctively to protect his head. I wonder if, years later, that sudden reversal made him laugh. Two things my brother was never known for, good luck and smart moves.

My mother called an ambulance and told my sister to go to the end of our long, dirt driveway to wait for it. My brother howled as red liquid began to spread across his clothing. Pete picked me up and held me in a basket made of his arms. I kept asking if Willie was going to die. “It’s okay, it’s okay,” Pete said. “It’s going to be alright.”

When paramedics started to cut off his jeans in the ambulance, my brother cried out, “No, no! You can’t cut those. They’re my sister’s, she’ll kill me!”

He was okay. He stayed in the hospital for a few days until he could move around stiffly. The scarring was below the neck. My brother was still a good-looking kid.

Within the year, we moved. The bank foreclosed on the house. It broke my mother’s

heart, she loved that house. We rented an ugly orange-painted house on the other side of town, near the railroad tracks. Until my senior year of high school, my mother and I were evicted from every place we lived. At seventeen, I executed a reverse eviction and left home.

About a year after the Memorial Day debacle, my Mom and Pete broke up. My mother was furious. She threw all of Pete's fine clothes in a hall closet and wouldn't let him have them. She particularly guarded a mohair vest trimmed with goat fur, which she had knitted as a birthday present. Things got ugly. My brother ran a quarter mile to the store at the corner and called the police. The police made my mother give Pete his clothes, even the mohair vest.

My sister fled to college, where she married young. She divorced in her twenties, got her MBA, and went into banking. In high school, she had won an art scholarship. After her divorce, she began to paint again and was awarded a full tuition scholarship at the Art Students League in New York City. She declined it and stopped taking classes. She made good progress – too good – in therapy, then quit, claiming that a record of psychological counseling would prevent her from getting jobs. She turned into something of a neurotic spinster. Whenever her talent appeared too obvious, or happiness too close, she ran away from it. She became an unhappy, frustrated vice president in a major bank. She thought that what she wanted above all was to be conventional.

My mother's health began to deteriorate in her mid-forties. For a decade she was periodically in and out of hospitals. After a long stretch of alarming symptoms, she finally went to see a doctor again. The doctor rushed her to a hospital, where they removed a bowl-like tumor from her abdomen and gave her an emergency colostomy. The three oncologists couldn't quite decide on what kind of cancer she had, though they knew it was advanced. Before cancer treatments began, the doctors performed double-bypass heart surgery and amputated her left leg

below the knee. She then underwent three agonizing rounds of aggressive chemotherapy. After five months in the hospital, she died at age fifty-eight.

My brother tried to enter the Air Force, but he didn't score high enough on the exam. He joined the drug-riddled U.S. Army of the nineteen-seventies. He served only nine months of a two-year term before he and the military agreed, semi-amicably, to part ways. For a time, he carried on a regular life with a steady girlfriend. He started his own house painting business. Eventually his rotten combination of nature and nurture caught up with him. He became hooked on a succession of drugs, ending up a homeless heroin addict, eating out of dumpsters.

I guess my brother running into a plate of glass and being transported to the emergency room is not a very cheerful story of a holiday weekend. But when he found the money, we still had a chance. We were looking forward to the barbecue or the carnival or whatever it was. We were anticipating a day together as a motley family.

My mother still believed there was a man, somewhere, who would stick around because she was worth the trouble. She thought she'd land a job that lasted. My sister envisioned sitting at an easel in the light-soaked studio of her country home. While her husband was at his high-paying position in the city, she would take one of their horses for a ride. Girls and parties were on my brother's mind. After that, I think he imagined the usual: a family, a house, definitely a dog.

We had hope, and eagerness for the future. That's what I remember now about that day.

BECAUSE I COULD

I'm not sorry I did it. I don't feel guilty or traumatized over it. I'd be lying if I said it was a hard decision to make. My feelings have changed little in the twenty-two years since I terminated a perfectly common pregnancy, unintentionally conceived with my unexceptional boyfriend. I find the event as unremarkable as the circumstances that precipitated it. The service was available and my boyfriend and I purchased it. I'm only remarking on it now out of frustration that my story, the common one, is uncommon in abortion narratives.

The pregnancy resulted from a concoction of recklessness, sloth, and a pinch of hedonism. My boyfriend had stopped using a condom months before. I was not on the pill and enjoyed those occasions when I could dispense with my diaphragm. *What occasions might those be?* I hear you asking. I took a chance at the beginning or end of my period, I don't remember which, and it turned out to be a foolish bet.

I became ill, green and nauseous all the time. I called in late to my secretarial job at a small college in Manhattan and found that, after I'd arrived at noon or one, it was pointless. I couldn't remain upright at my desk. I spent several afternoons in the sixth-floor ladies room, reclined on a green, vinyl couch, the kind the school nurse in fifth grade had when I didn't feel well. It was mid-May and classes had just ended. No one disturbed me or knew where I had gone. I clasped my hands on my chest, looked up at closed eyelids, and wondered what in hell was wrong with me and when would it get better?

I worked in the departments of chemistry and chemical engineering. In my faculty, there were two female professors. I explained my symptoms to one of them, told her how I couldn't eat or leave my bed, said it was like the flu, but without a cough or runny nose.

"It seems worse in the mornings," I said.

On the other side of my desk she stood, in her black pumps and khaki suit. Tall, Amazonian, capable. Mother of three daughters. She glanced around, then lowered her head. She spoke quietly and calmly.

“Are you sure you’re not pregnant?”

I took a break from work, went to the drugstore, bought an early pregnancy kit. I locked myself in a stall in the sixth-floor bathroom. My fingers fumbled with cardboard, wrappers, instructions.

Pink.

Mother-fuck me.

It never occurred to me that this would happen without my consent. I was a middle-class, educated woman. I had sat dutifully through all the sex ed talks and classes in school, analyzed diagrams of human reproductive anatomy, compared birth control options. I think all the education instilled in me a false sense of security. They arm you with information, reassure you with pamphlets. They make it all seem so doable. But what they don’t tell you is how strong biology can be. They neglect to convey how determined your body is to reproduce. What remains unsaid is that it’s going to take more than some progressive views to prevent pregnancy. It’s going to require the utmost vigilance and precision. Just congratulating yourself for being the modern woman will not be enough to thwart millennia of evolution. You need always be on your guard. They left that part out.

I was bewildered. Feeling in need of guidance, I sought the help of a professional. I called my ob-gyn. I told the receptionist I thought I was pregnant. She made an appointment for the day after next. I didn’t know what I expected from my visit to the gynecologist. She was the oracle and I hoped she would provide some wisdom on this sudden turn my life had taken into

swampy, uncharted territory. The standard protocol turned out to be a good deal less mystical than I had imagined. I was ushered into the examination room, where the doctor asked me some questions and administered a pregnancy test.

I sat back down in the waiting area, still thinking that this was the precursor to illumination, knowledge held on reserve. The nurse called my name. I rose and met the doctor in front of the reception desk. Behind me was a three-by-four-foot bulletin board plastered with photographs of beaming mothers cradling raisiny newborns who squinted into this bright, loud world into which my doctor had ejected them.

Her eyes lit up. “You’re pregnant!” she said, practically clapping her hands together.

The receptionist grinned. “Congratulations!”

My heart sank. So this was it, it was final. The only special knowledge they had for me was that I was screwed. Rather than elating in the good news, I think I must have looked as if I’d just been told I had only nine months to live. Which is kind of how I felt. My huge fear of this life-changing event was that it was, in fact, a life-exchanging event. You traded one life for another. What if you didn’t want to give up the current life? Suppose you were not yet ready to chuck your hard-won routine? Most alarming for me was this question: what if you had spent many strenuous years, painstakingly, and with recurrent reversals, constructing the flimsiest of foundations for your being, a fragile underpinning that could be sent sliding at the first hint of storm?

The two women watched my face hang. Their smiles and twinkling eyes faded. The receptionist reached across her desk and plucked a business card from a holder. She handed it to me. “Here’s a clinic on Park Avenue South. We recommend them.”

I went to work and called my boyfriend. I told him, with a flat voice, that we needed to

talk, soon. When he hung up, I dialed the abortion clinic. The appointment could always be cancelled, but I was pretty sure I knew what we were going to decide.

Marc was a skinny man, with blue bug eyes beneath his big, round, '80s-style wire-rim glasses. In his high school yearbook picture, his head resembled a large mushroom capped with a flaming red Jewish afro. More than two decades later, his hair had been trimmed into tight waves and modest sideburns. At the time I met him, he dressed only in black.

He had gone to Columbia University, intending to become a graphic artist, but he had suffered some kind of breakdown in his mid-twenties and moved back to his parents' home in Westchester to regroup. He devoted himself monastically to becoming a really good bass player, taking lessons and practicing hours daily. His salvation lay with the instrument and he would say later that music saved his life. He especially loved retro rock 'n' roll – surf, rockabilly, western swing, jump blues – hence his sideburns and little pouf in the front of his haircut.

He was thirty-nine when I met him, fourteen years older than me, though you couldn't tell, not by a mile. His desire to protect and insulate himself from the world lent a flat, unetched surface to his features. He rented a studio apartment in Astoria, Queens and worked as a file clerk for a law outfit in Manhattan. After he had been at the job many years, his boss took an extended vacation and he filled in during the absence. In recognition of his performance, the firm promoted him, which only made him feel pressured and miserable. He asked to be demoted and resumed his former, humble duties.

He'd had only one girlfriend before me, an older lawyer in the firm, who liked to invite him to her high-rise on the Palisades in Fort Lee, New Jersey and treat him as her sexual errand boy. I sometimes thought that he was unknowingly the only true cynic I'd ever met because, outside of music, he seemed to have no faith or interest whatsoever in human endeavor. He lived

in his own self-contained world, where he worked hard to maintain a viable ecosystem for one.

We were a secretary and a file clerk, each with an aversion to responsibility and a limited capacity for coping with the real world – hardly the stuff of parenthood.

I don't remember where I met him that day. A park, his apartment, a café? I only remember light, sunlight. It was spring, May in New York. The city seemed ready to burst with energy, its people buzzing like millions of honeybees intoxicated by warm air and long days. Wherever we were, I recall we sat side by side, facing out. He wanted to know the usual – how, when, how long? I tried to answer. It was mostly as I'd envisioned it. We were both respectful. There was no crying. He asked me what I wanted to do. I asked him how he felt.

“Well, I'm not ready to be a father!” he said, bending his narrow torso forward, as if physically straining away from the idea.

One thing I impressed upon him was how sick I was. I was so tired of feeling wretched, and of retching. I'd dropped a dress size and was on my way to losing another.

The cost was three-hundred and fifty dollars. We agreed to split it. I told him he did not need to accompany me and stay for the procedure, though he offered. We rode the subway together to the clinic, housed anonymously in a glass and steel office building. He waited until my name was called and then left for work. He insisted on giving me forty dollars to take car service back to Astoria, where I also lived. I shared a one-bedroom apartment with a plain photographer's stylist from Iowa. She slept in the living room.

The staff was pleasant and professional. The nurse gave me a cold gown to change into. She took my vital signs and talked about the weather, noting how spring had been so brief this year. It seemed shorter and shorter every year, she said, until we were almost going directly from

winter to summer, no pause in between. She ensconced me in the stirrup chair. The gently smiling doctor explained the procedure to me in tranquil tones. You'll be awake but sedated, he told me. You won't feel any pain.

Afterward, still groggy and unsteady, I was led to a sort of recuperation room, where there were cookies and juice. I had been looking so forward to eating something, keeping it down, and enjoying it. I munched a couple of cookies. It appeared my system was still not ready for them. My stomach lurched in rebellion. I did manage to drink a cup of apple juice. About an hour went by. I felt it was time to go home and rest. That morning, I'd entertained crazy thoughts about going into work. I had over-optimistically anticipated an immediate return to everything the way it had been, before this happened.

At the very least, I convinced myself that I didn't need car service. I planned to take the subway home and return the forty dollars. When I descended the stairs to the street at the Ditmars Boulevard station in Queens, the noise and light swam around in my head. I knew I'd never be able to walk ten blocks home. Luckily, there were cabs parked under the subway platform.

A few days later, I was at work when I got my daily check-in call, at four p.m., from Marc. A swift return to normalcy had been denied me. I felt bad, food remained repugnant, and if anything, I was bleeding a whole lot more. In noncommittal terms, I described my current condition to him. I could visualize his alarm rising like a dark swell on the ocean.

"You need to call the doctor," he said, in an even, forceful voice.

"Why don't I see how it is tomorrow –"

"Do you want me to call?"

I phoned the clinic just before closing. I told them of my lingering problems.

“You need to come back, immediately. I’ll schedule you for first thing tomorrow.”

I returned to the clinic the next morning. This time there was no sedation, no small talk or Oreos. They just reinserted the tubes and sucked out the red bits they’d somehow missed the first time around.

I got pregnant one more time, with a different boyfriend, though I didn’t know it until it was already over. Again I became sick and couldn’t eat. Yet the early pregnancy test came up negative. Also, there’d been no instance of having sex without my diaphragm. I’d learned that lesson. I spontaneously miscarried on a bloody bed sheet in the middle of the night. Still uncertain as to what had happened, I went to see the same ob-gyn, who gave me a more precise, after-the-fact test and confirmed that I’d been pregnant.

“Could it have been a weak pregnancy, low hormones?” I asked. “Because I was using a diaphragm and the home kit tested negative.”

I should’ve seen the answer coming. “There’s no such thing as a little bit pregnant,” she said.

I was in my late twenties by then. Through these accidents, I’d assumed I would eventually have children, just not now. Someday, when the time was right. When the man and conditions were a go. *When I was right*. The abortion was to buy me time, I thought. Which it did, though time brought an entirely different outcome and decision than I had foreseen. When I started dating that later boyfriend, the man who stormed the gates of my diaphragm, I had a sure sense that he was *it*. I was ready to meet someone I could conceive of as marriageable, as a dad. A man, unlike the bohemian oddballs I’d loved before, whom I could picture in a traditional role, a role in which I could finally see myself.

He proved, alas, more screwy and neurotic than I initially gave him credit for. Amid much agonizing, he broke it off after a year and a half. When that relationship ended, something else happened – the expectations of my youth died with it. I underwent a great upheaval and mourned conspicuously for them. I felt I'd lost my childhood in a way. When I regained some mental composure, a couple of years later, I felt lighter. As if I had discarded the weight of those received notions and desires. Preconceptions razed, I was free to figure out what I really wanted. Did I want to be married? If so, how, under what terms? And did I really want to start a family? I spent the next decade thinking about these questions and by the time I turned forty, I was reasonably sure of my answers. Marriage, I could take or leave. Children, I did not want.

COMING UP FOR AIR

On the day I turned thirty, in 1994, my mother called to wish me a happy birthday. It was a major bummer.

The call came just after I'd gotten in from a bike ride, my first in three weeks. I'd been riding my bike a lot that summer, laps in the Brooklyn's Prospect Park after work, long weekend rides. As the season wore on, though, this otherwise healthy activity turned into well-disguised procrastination. In May I'd agreed to type a book manuscript for a highly regarded art historian who was a professor in the Manhattan college where I worked as a secretary. Week after week, the cycling miles added up while that book draft sat untouched in its envelope on the corner of my desk. I took a last spin on Labor Day. It was a late summer beauty of a ride, an all-day jaunt past the marinas, farmers markets and multi-million dollar cottages of Long Island.

Then the drudgery began. For the next three weeks, I spent every weekend and two hours on weeknights hunched over my office PC, deciphering and transcribing the scribbled pages. I finished at two a.m. the night before my birthday. I took the next day off. I slept in, made a pot of coffee, and stood in line to buy a sort-of crappy muffin from the bakery next door. In the afternoon, I donned a t-shirt and my stretchy black shorts and rode eight laps in the park, a distance of about twenty-five miles.

The ride was like a snort of Prozac. A year earlier I'd fallen under a crushing depression. I was not hospitalized, and I didn't lose my job, by a slim margin each, even though I came into work some days at noon and some days not at all. One of the reasons I wanted to kill myself was that I could not bear the thought of ever having to live through this again. Over six months I saw four therapists who were of no help. Eventually I climbed out of the abyss, but not very far out of

it. The world still felt tenuous. Exercise was one of my lifelines, something that grounded me and, on better days, gave me hope.

When the phone rang, I had a sinking feeling I knew who it was. Since my own depression, calls from my mother brought me down, as if I had developed a sensitivity or intolerance to depression in others, as though I was now tuned unwillingly into a special frequency of their pain and despair. Actually, because of the baggage between us, it was only my mother who affected me this way.

My fifty-eight-year-old mother was a highly intelligent, very troubled person. She had been diagnosed as manic-depressive in the seventies, back when that term was still used and the diagnosis was rarer than today. When I was very young, four or five, she had once spent several weeks in bed, refusing to leave her room. My grandfather cared for us in her absence. It was spring and for some reason the only memory I have of this time is of seeing a vase of fresh flowers atop the empty dining room table. Also, my child memory recalls that she was in the hospital during that period, a misperception my older sister corrected years later. After my sister left for college when I was nine, it was just my mother and me, living in a squalid house overrun with trash and mold. I wasn't allowed to clean because it made my mom feel even guiltier as a parent (in later years this prohibition was lifted).

Though there were times, growing up, when I absolutely hated her, we were still very close. She was an intensely intelligent, passionate woman, magnetic in the way she attracted and repelled people with equal force. A former long-term boyfriend of hers, one-time fiancé, had become a kind of surrogate father to me. My relationship with my own father, following my parents' divorce when I was still too young for kindergarten, was a more distant one. In college, I

visited this alternate father one day and he asked about my mom. “She feels everything so *deeply*,” he said, in an ambiguous way that suggested this could be both a good and bad thing.

She worked in computers. A math major in college, with a skill for statistics, she had gotten into computing in the early days. She had done everything from programming to running whole departments. The older she got, the more of a gypsy she became, following jobs up and down the eastern seaboard. Less than a month earlier, she had taken a position with the R.J.R. Nabisco company – a particularly apt employer for her – and was living in a hotel room in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

She cared for herself as poorly as she looked after others. She would work seven days a week and on holidays, often into the night. She got no exercise and seemed to live on a diet of milkshakes and M&Ms. I am not exaggerating when I say she smoked close to four packs of cigarettes a day. She *always* had one lit, sometimes several simultaneously in different rooms of the house. And these weren’t just any cigarettes – they were Marlboro “Longhorn” 100s, extra strong fiends they don’t even make anymore. As I grew older, she was hospitalized several times. She was vague about disclosing the nature of her physical illnesses, not wanting to alarm me I think. Or not wanting to alarm herself. Lately though she’d made it clear something was wrong. Birthday wishes quickly gave way to a litany of symptoms delivered in an oddly conversational tone, the tone of denial.

“I really don’t feel well,” she said. “I’ve lost forty pounds – you won’t believe how skinny I am! – because I can’t eat anything. I’m having trouble sitting up too. Even Midas looks at me like something is wrong.” King Midas was her neglected, poignantly faithful golden retriever.

“Mom, you have to go see the doctor! Please, don’t keep telling me how sick you are. Just go!”

The call flattened my rising mood. Why couldn’t she have called to wish me a happy birthday on a day other than my birthday? I so desperately wanted my life to start getting better. After some despondent minutes, rallied. I showered, put on snug jeans and a soft sweater, and went to the bar around the corner to celebrate. The corner bar was actually the vestibule of a popular restaurant, with a couple of banquettes against the wall and a small U-shaped counter, seating eight people. I sat on the only empty stool. I didn’t mind being alone and I wasn’t trying to pick anyone up. I had a long-distance boyfriend at the time.

After two beers, the sharp edges of my life began to round. I listened to the chatter around me like I was turning the knob on an old radio. I spoke to the bartender about bringing in some of my CDs for him to play. He was an energetic man with rolling brown hair and the kind of easy good looks that ensured lots of tips. He was also, it appeared, a friend of the man sitting next to me. The man to my left seemed about the same age as the bartender, early thirties maybe, but he looked worse for the wear. His sandy hair was straighter and thinner and seemed to lie down flat almost through fatigue. He had a sketch of a mustache and mildly vacant brown eyes.

When I arrived, he had already been mated to his seat for some time. Up until now, he had kept to himself, sipping his beer and intently gnawing his way through a huge mound of chicken wings. He turned to me to be sociable, but then we both looked at the towering pile of masticated chicken bones, little bits of dead flesh hanging off them, the platter like something leftover from Caligula’s banquet table. We burst out laughing.

The laughs washed through us and when the waves turned to ripples, I could see that my new buddy was drunk. He was soused and he was in a spot. I couldn’t quite figure out the whole

story. His name was Andy and he was waiting in the bar at this restaurant until another friend of his got home. Andy had a car, but he couldn't get the car, so he couldn't drive home to Rhode Island where he lived with his wife.

"How long have you been married?" I asked.

"Not long, only five months. It's strange." He looked up at the backlit bottles in the liquor well, maybe considering the strangeness of marriage. "And good."

Andy got up, made some phone calls and sat back down with his lips pinned. It was getting late. The restaurant had already closed and the bartender was arranging the clean glassware for the next day. I neared the end of my fourth beer. "If you need to, you can stay at my place tonight," I found myself saying. "I live half a block away." This may not seem like the smartest offer of hospitality, in New York City, or in a bar anywhere. But the barman knew him and Andy seemed sweet and gentle, if a little down on his luck. Not only alcohol skewed my judgment. For the past year, I had been obsessively imagining and planning my great escape – a cross-country bicycle trip. I kept hearing stories of generous folks who opened their doors to touring cyclists. In my impaired state, I made some bizarre transference between a hale and wholesome bicycle tourist and an afflicted construction worker.

"I told your friend he could stay at my place," I said to the bartender.

"You know he's married?"

I found his response admirable, but unnecessary. "Yes, I know. I'm not trying to pick him up, I'm trying to help him out."

Andy and I walked the short distance to my apartment, which I shared at the time with a German woman. It was a floor-through, a long series of rooms connected like odd-size blocks on a string. My roommate's bedroom was at one end and mine on the other, an arrangement that

afforded maximum privacy. I'm still sort of astonished, though, when I look back at those young years and remember how careless and tolerant – and lucky – we were about random overnight visitors, mine and theirs.

The apartment was large enough that my roommate and I each had two rooms. In my second room I had a cheap little love seat that looked like it was made in arts and crafts class out of black felt, staples, and cardboard. It opened up into a predictably uncomfortable bed. I wrapped sheets around it, grabbed baggy bedclothes and went to brush my teeth. On the way back from the bathroom, I passed Andy, sitting on the edge of my floor-level futon. “Good night,” I said. “Shut off the light when you're ready.”

I was a few steps past him when he said, “You don't want to have sex?”

I paused, then turned and walked carefully back. I sat next to Andy on the futon. Really, this had not been my intent. Yet for some messed-up reason I found myself unable to say no. I was already headed off the wrong exit, yet I somehow thought one factor might deflect me from an act of utter, dangerous folly.

“Do you love your wife?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I felt, rather insanely, that this affirmation made him sincere, not an adulterous creep.

Andy stripped to his skinny flesh. I removed my boxer shorts and underwear. We didn't waste much time with introductions or niceties. Our gropings and muted kisses exuded a faint musk of spoil and regret. Which isn't to say that we weren't enjoying ourselves, but the pleasure burned like a swallow of cheap whiskey.

All the drinks he had consumed did not adversely affect Andy's sexual readiness. He kneeled behind me and gripped my hips. Then I felt the tip of his penis, sliding, circling,

searching for the wrong target. He found it and began little bobbing movements, wedging his way in.

“No,” I said very firmly. “No!” A casual encounter was *not* when I wanted to have anal sex. “I don’t want to do that.”

Instead of stopping, he pulled me to him and pushed in harder. His slack body belied his laborer’s strength. I tried again, “Stop that! No! I don’t want you to do that.” And then I gave up, and he got all the way where he was set on going and seemed quite satisfied by it. I felt very strange about this. Nevertheless, a craving for human warmth mashed me against him and we fell asleep nestled side by side.

The day after my thirtieth birthday I woke a little hungover and lightheaded from lack of sleep. I had the sense I was floating beside myself as I showered and dressed for work. When we got outside, in front of the outer security door, I kissed Andy and said goodbye. He went back to whatever fucked up life he could never seem to fully repair, to make sound.

I arrived at my job a little later than usual. I processed invoices, distributed mail, chatted with students, and the haze in my brain began to disperse. About three in the afternoon, I got a phone call from my mother. She sounded terrified, choking on her words. “I’m at the doctor’s office. We’re waiting for an ambulance. He found a tumor, a really big tumor, big as a grapefruit.” She inhaled a sob. “Barbara, I’m scared. What will I do about Midas?”

My mother went to the hospital and never came out. She died of cancer five months later. The ordeal was not so simple as those two sentences sound. The doctors had to contend first with the heart disease. They performed double-bypass heart surgery. Nonetheless, her left foot became gangrenous from lack of blood flow, so they amputated the leg below the knee. All this,

and more complications, occurred before chemotherapy could even be started, in January. I had to hassle with hospital administrators who wanted to put her out on the street because she initially lacked health insurance (COBRA kicked in after a couple months).

I asked the company organizing the cross-country bike tour to refund my deposit. The I.R.S. sent me a bill for taxes on unreported income. On New Year's Eve, my boyfriend dumped me.

My new day, my new year, reduced to yesterday's daydream. Efforts to get clear of the miasma that clung to me seemed pointless. I began to think of my life the way the Irish used to refer to the long conflict over Northern Ireland as "The Troubles," implying an interminable condition of unrightness to which they were resigned. My thirtieth birthday wasn't a fresh start, but a one-day respite. The miserableness that had preceded it seemed as if it would continue unabated. Amid this unrelenting anomie, that day's mundane and ambiguous activities transmogrified weirdly in my head. The shift recast my outwardly shabby birthday into a good day, a reminder that I could still enjoy things, even dumb things. Dumb things might be all there was to enjoy for a while.

WELCOME TO THE WEST

I was riding shotgun in a white Ford F-350 crew-cab on I-10 watching the desert hurtle past at seventy miles per hour. The terrain seemed alien and forbidding, and also a little thrilling. In the truck with me were three men I had never met before that day. We were driving from Arizona to California to do a seismic contracting job. I had very little idea what this was or what it entailed. I was a petite blond who had moved to Arizona from New York City only five months earlier. In New York I'd worked as an administrative assistant. I grew up in a Connecticut suburb and shipped off for the city as soon as I graduated high school. I was seventeen then, thirty-three now, almost twice as old and starting over again.

Just west of Blythe, the highway grazed a jutting spine of mountain, grey and fissured like bark. The road cut a remarkably straight course through the grey peaks on either side of it. Sandy washes, dotted with spindly shrubs and desiccated clumps of yellow grass, rolled onward lapping the toes of the mountains. The color, such as it was, of the landscape ranged from washed-out duns to scuffed gunmetal. It was as if someone had taken the lush green east-coast hills and valleys I was familiar with and desaturated them in Photoshop.

My boyfriend, Tom, referred to Blythe as Blight. I had met him on a vacation the year before. That was 1996 and he had just graduated from Arizona State University with a master's degree in geology. When I decided the time had finally come to leave New York, he was the only person I knew west of the Mississippi. He also called Needles – a stopping point on I-15 from Flagstaff – Needless. I relished these little inside jokes. They were part of how you claimed a new territory. In New York, many of these jokes revolved around the subways. When I lived in Astoria, Queens I learned why the N and the R lines are dubbed the Never and the Rarely. Back

then the G, which traveled exclusively between Queens and Brooklyn, bypassing Manhattan, was called the Ghost Train. One seldom glimpsed it, and when you did, it always seemed to be sailing by on the middle track without stopping, so that there was some mystery as to where its handful of spectral passengers had come from and where they were headed.

It seemed mystery had no place to hide out here in the land of Blight and Needless. Three-hundred and sixty degrees of open sky and hostile terrain, terrain indifferent to its cruelty, lying carelessly in wait for anyone with the balls to try and go out and do something in it. What could you even do in this scorched land, with everything stripped away but you?

I was jolted back to the conversation in the truck when Ken, the driver, said, “Good thing I packed those sledgehammers.”

“*Fucking* turtles!” Mitch barked from the backseat.

A ping of unease sounded internally. I was growing increasingly aware that I had no idea what I’d gotten myself into. “Tom said we be using the, uh, vibrator-thing, the vibe-buggy or whatever.” The thing I was trying to name is a Vibroseis, a large hydraulic device mounted on a vehicle. It essentially stamps a metal plate down on the earth, like you would stamp your foot. It artificially generates seismic waves, the same waves an earthquake causes naturally.

“We can’t,” said Ken, “it’s desert tortoise habitat.”

From behind me Mitch barked again, “*Fucking* turtles!”

We were cresting the top of a low pass. Gusting winds whipped up curtains of dirt and sand. They hit the truck in a cascade of grating little clicks. Ken eyed the rearview mirror to see how much our attached trailer was swaying. “I think we’ll be good with the 16-pound hammers,” he said.

This was supposed to be good news. Hopefully we wouldn’t have to break our backs (any

further) slinging monster 20-pound sledges. In a seismic survey, a device (such as the Vibroseis), an explosive, or in our case, a person generates an impulse that travels through the earth until it hits a geologic feature which reflects the signal back to a receiver (a geophone). By processing enough reflected signals, a rough picture can be obtained of what lies below the earth's surface. It is basically the same method that creates an ultrasound image. Though reflection seismology is primarily used in oil and gas exploration, we had been subcontracted to survey an environmental contamination site.

“This isn't what I signed up for,” I said, half-jokingly.

“No,” answered Ken, “it's what your boyfriend signed you up for.”

It was true, sort of.

Tom was a somewhat recent graduate. I had just relocated. Both of us needed jobs. While searching for permanent work, we were eager for any little bits of income we might be able to pull in. Tom had gotten hooked up with Ken's tiny company, Bird Seismic – Bird was his last name – through school connections. In retrospect, I cannot fathom how or why one would want to start a small business as a seismic contractor. It's rather like saying, I want to start a one-man company that builds highway bridges. Wouldn't simply owning a Carl's Jr. franchise be challenging enough?)

In late May, Tom had gone out on a two-week job, like mine. For the first week, he stood ankle-deep in polluted mud amid discarded car batteries and shopping carts on the banks of the Fox River in Aurora, Illinois, a run-down suburb of Chicago (fans of the writer Thom Jones may be familiar with this seedy locale). The crew then drove to Cape Canaveral where they used machetes to hack through jungle-like undergrowth while columns of fire ants marched up and down their bodies undeterred by coursing rivers of sweat. One guy bailed and was put on a

Greyhound bus back to Arizona. Every time Tom managed to call me late in the evening, he sounded more and more exhausted and miserable.

But seeing as he stuck it out, Ken asked if he would like to work on an upcoming job in the Mojave Desert; he politely declined. For reasons that should by now be obvious, Ken was chronically short of labor. When he tried to recruit at Home Depot, they practically laughed him out of the store. So he asked if Tom knew anyone else who might be interested.

Whereupon I got a call from Ken.

I should note that, despite my diminutive size (then), I was at this point in my life in pretty darn good shape. Also, I was no stranger to manual labor, having worked as a part-time theatre technician for many years. I was proud of my strength. I was the tiresome kind of woman who peevishly refused whenever a man offered to lift something for her. It's possible Tom was trying to challenge me when he recommended me for the job. Or shut me up.

Ken gave me some general information, then got to the important part: "The pay is \$7.25 an hour." It was, needless to say, a shockingly low amount.

"But Tom was making \$8.50 an hour." Eight-fifty was low enough. I hadn't considered the number could go even lower.

"Tom's got a master's degree," Ken said, as if that made any difference. "I tell you what, I'll bump you up another quarter because you've got a bachelor's degree."

The discussion of educational credentials was simply absurd. Working on a seismic crew requires zero education. In fact, zero education is generally preferred. I took the \$7.50 though. On the job I would have no expenses or anywhere to spend my money. I understood that we'd be working pretty much nonstop, with time-and-a-half over forty hours. The money would add up. Plus, my half of the rent for the small apartment I shared was only \$235 a month. Compared to

New York City, this represented a happy case of reverse sticker shock (though the landlord would raise the rent by almost forty percent in the next year and a half).

In the back seat of the crew cab sat our two other recruits: Mitch, a middle-aged man with thinning hair who was as desperate for cash as I was, and Bob, the son of Mitch's fiancée. Bob was still in high school and came along because he was too young and dumb to know better. They were friends of Ken's in Globe, where all three of them lived. About an hour east of Phoenix, Globe is a down-at-heel old mining town that's seen better days. As unlikely as it seemed, this was our crew: a bespectacled, college-educated secretary; a dopey, good-natured teenager; a man whose skin and expectations had been drooping for some time; and our chief, the hard-working entrepreneur who thought a one-man seismic company was the best opportunity going in Globe.

The lingering June sun was beginning to flag as we approached the juniper-studded flanks of the San Bernardino Mountains. We threaded a gap, then dropped down into a vast dusty, dreary valley, once again leached of color as if through exhaustion. Ken got us two rooms at a faded but functional motel in Palmdale. However, "faded" seemed something of a misnomer. I couldn't imagine there had ever been a time when anything was *unfaded*. In this place, faded was the original condition of things. I momentarily spread out on the queen bed in my room – too squishy. Though it was expected that I would work as hard as the men, Ken did make a couple of gentlemanly concessions due to my gender. Riding shotgun was one of them; getting my own motel room was the other. The three men crowded into one room with two double beds. We unhitched the trailer and unloaded the gear from the truck bed into our rooms. It was an area where anything left unguarded would be stolen, even if the thief didn't know exactly what it was he had stolen. We went out to dinner and I took a shower before going to bed because I knew I

wouldn't have time in the morning.

The wake-up call and the alarm went off simultaneously at six a.m. After grabbing some hasty grub at the free continental breakfast, loading the truck back up, and filling the 10-gallon orange cooler with water and motel ice, we were on the road by seven. The job site was Edwards Air Force Base, about forty-five minutes away. On arrival, a trim young man with wavy black hair greeted us. This was Seth, a geoscientist working for the environmental services company that had subcontracted us. He led us to a conference room where he delivered a brief orientation. He explained the nature of the problem. "They wash the missiles with trichloroethylene, or TCE, a highly toxic solvent that's been leaching into the ground for decades."

I immediately jumped at the chance to look naïve and out of my depth. "Oh, so if we can show where the solvent has collected, your company can come in and remediate it."

Seth looked at me, blinked slowly, then said, "We're not going to remediate it. We just want to know where it is."

Last thing before heading out in the field, we were shown a short movie about the desert tortoise, an unremarkable creature composed entirely in shades of mud.

"That?" said Ken. "That's what we're protecting? Why? That thing looks as interesting as a rock."

"And about as fast," added Mitch.

For the rest of the trip, they would only refer to the desert tortoise as the desert turtle. Turtles are water-loving. Turtles do not live in the desert. I knew they knew this. They were confounded by the inexplicable business with the desert turtle.

"The ground is full of toxic solvents. That's why we're here. The desert turtle habitat is already fucked."

Outside the sun was blazing robustly at nine a.m. A sandy arroyo stood between us and the work site. I watched as Ken eased his truck down into the deep sand, feeling sure he would get bogged down or spin out. But Ken knew how to handle the truck and was shortly crawling up the far bank. Unfortunately, crossing the wash was the only thing that went right for the rest of the day. Ken had trouble setting up the equipment, including the seismograph and laptop. Even though the locations for the geophones were marked with surveyor's tape, the crew – Mitch, Bob, and I – laid them out in the wrong places at the wrong intervals, despite the fact that Mitch and Bob had done this before. They had been out on the last two jobs. We didn't even get the first spread of geophones planted until after lunch. When we were finally ready to swing some sledgehammers, out of frustration as anything else, the impact sensor, or hammer switch, taped to the shaft wouldn't hold contact. Then the walkie-talkies stopped working.

Mitch was looking down at his walkie-talkie, jamming the buttons with his fingers like a pinball machine. He didn't notice Ken stalking up to him. Ken tore the walkie-talkie out of his hand and seemed about to throw it, then thought better of that idea. He stuffed it angrily in his back pocket. He reached for the sledgehammer. The loud *screech* of ripping duct tape rent the desert quiet as the hammer switch was sent flying. He would've done the same with the hammer, but even a grown man having a temper tantrum finds it hard to toss around a 16-pound sledgehammer with convincing authority. He got the walkie-talkies working then stomped back to his little command post inside the truck.

We were way behind by the time we shot the first spread. Of course we had to redo it because the results were garbage. Eventually we got things working and had to start making up lost time. A lingering orange glow was all that was left of the sun when we drove out the front gate at nine p.m. Dinner was a mostly sullen affair, no jokes about desert turtles or much else. I

fell into bed like a sack of lead sometime after midnight. I had no dreams.

The next day we began to settle into a routine, a brutal routine. We laid out twelve lines, of twenty-four geophones each, according to marked positions. The geophones were about six inches long, consisting of metal spikes with a square plastic head. The non-technical term for them was “jugs.” Hence people who worked on seismic crews were known as “juggies” (In their spare time, many of them earned another appellation that rhymes with *juggies*). We spaced the individual geophones about ten feet apart, twisting and pressing them fully into the ground. I’ve since seen videos where workers stomp on the jugs with their boot heels to plant them. We were told that could damage them. Descending on bended knee to bury each one by hand was certainly a more laborious, time-consuming method, though we tried to do it as rapidly as we could.

When the array of twelve lines was planted we began to shoot. The three of us swapped positions down the line. Bob swung the sledgehammer on the first eight. I carried an empty rack that looked like a giant safety pin for stringing up the geophones when we reached the end of the line. Mitch lugged a solid iron 16-inch-square strike plate from one shooting position to the next. When we got to geophone number nine, we rotated, and again at number seventeen. We kept the same order every day. I always swung the sledgehammer at the end of the line.

My first time with the hammer, I squared off and gripped the handle, face screwed in concentration like a batter at the mound. I tried to exude some confidence, but visions of Ken handing me a ticket for a Greyhound bus back to Arizona played in my head. Tips were given for how to swing a sledge: Left foot slightly forward. Spring from the feet through your whole body. Get the mallet as high as you can. I lifted off for my first strike. Whomp! We waited. In a few seconds the walkie-talkie crackled. “Okay. Give me four more.” Inside me there was cheering

and a marching band. Outside, Mitch, Bob, and I each cracked a thin smile. That was exactly the first and last time I would ever be excited about swinging a sledgehammer.

At each strike position, we were asked to provide as few as four and as many as ten or even twelve blows. We would bang out the first four or six and then a sort of sledgehammer bingo would commence, a game where lowest score was the winner. We waited while Ken looked at the results. If the striker was exceptionally fortunate, the next thing he or she would hear through the walkie-talkie was, "Move on." More often, though, additional hits were called for, usually in increments of two. Near the end of a 12-hour day in 100-plus-degree heat, it was with a special kind of dread and almost existential weariness that we waited and then heard, "Two more." And then, "Two more."

At night we returned to the motel to unload the truck. We hauled the seismograph, a car battery that powered it, rolls of orange cable, and the racks of geophones into our rooms. Then we went out for dinner at local strip malls, places like Applebee's and Outback. Ken encouraged us to eat as much food and drink as much beer as we wanted (except for Bob). We happily obliged. I guess the meals were write-offs for him, though that didn't explain why he was so stingy about the motel. I struggled every night to be in bed by 11:00 so I could get at least seven hours of sleep. I rarely made it. Ken would stay up at night still working.

Ken's set-jaw, all-business mien softened when he saw that we were getting the work done, minus any shitty attitude. Mitch and Bob had been out on the last couple of jobs and confirmed that those crews had devolved into festering hotbeds of hostility and resentment (though not Tom, who's a pretty stoical kind of guy). By contrast, we seemed positively peppy about the grinding work, the long hours, the extreme heat. Possibly the novelty of having a woman on the crew altered the dynamic. Though I found out that Bob's older sister had worked

on a previous job, knowledge which caused me to be consumed with a question too pathetic to ask: was she better than I was? I was tough enough that Seth playfully tried to nickname me “Barb-wire.” We tried it out for few hours but it didn’t stick: “Barb-wire, can you grab another cable roll?”

Every morning at about ten a.m., a brown pillow of smog would come wafting over the San Bernardino Mountains to our south. The day started clear and crystalline, as if the sky were a great glass disc for magnifying the sun’s rays. Then sure enough, mid-morning, the first sooty tendrils would come seeping around the gapped peaks.

“Here it comes,” I said.

Mitch looked briefly before he arched his back and whirled the hammer up over this head. *Claang* sang the strike plate. He let the hammer stand upright, his hand resting lightly on the shaft, while he waited for the count from Ken. With his other hand, he tugged his t-shirt back down over his beer belly, a little tic of his.

Mitch had to be in his mid-fifties. It seemed unfair that he should be doing work like this. At his age, shouldn’t he have a more secure position, like manager at a local Wal-Mart or something? He had been a supermarket butcher for many years, then held odd jobs. His quixotic dream was to open a butcher shop.

“I have a killer sausage recipe,” he said. “I’m going to make a bunch of different kinds, with different flavorings. Elk-garlic. Buffalo-jalapeno. People will come from miles just for that sausage.” Neither Ken nor I mentioned that people in Globe bought their meat on sale at King Soopers. “I can’t marry your mother until I open the butcher shop,” he said to Bob.

“It’s always some excuse,” Bob replied.

It was strange, too, to think of them as future father and stepson. I remembered one day

early on when we were taking a break around the water cooler strapped to the back of the truck. Bob liked to work shirtless and was careless with sunscreen. Ken grabbed a huge bottle of sunscreen and, in exaggerated fashion, plastered Bob's torso with gobs of it. "I told your mom I'd take care of you," he said.

Bob's immediate plans for the money he was earning was to turn his junky old Mazda hatchback into the biggest baddest rolling boombox ever. He was competing in a car stereo competition at the end of the summer. "I want it to be so loud it'll crack the glass."

"Your windshield's already cracked," said Mitch. "That'd be cheating."

An entrepreneur like Ken couldn't be expected to deal with the bullshit of running a seismic surveying company forever. At Olive Garden one night, over piles of soggy pasta and chewy, white-bellied breadsticks, he revealed his own plans. He plowed all his profits back into the business so it would grow in value. He hoped to sell it to a bigger geoservices company.

"I have a few ideas for new businesses," he said, "like a computer company, an internet services provider. Barbara, I could hire you as my manager."

"I'd have to move to Globe."

"It'd be a good opportunity. And you could buy sausage at Mitch's butcher shop."

Maybe it was strange, also, to think of myself – a middle-class woman in her thirties, a time when she should be solidifying a career – pounding a sledgehammer into the sun-blasted earth day after day. I felt like a Chinese coolie building a railroad; it could've been a century-and-a-half ago. Or was the experience like *Outward Bound* – except I got paid and was allowed to drink as much beer as I wanted? Or did I feel like I had some idea of what working on a chain gang was like? In my head I could hear Sam Cooke singing: *Unh-ah, unh-ah / That's the sound of the men working on the chain ga-a-ang.*

I had to modify the lyrics slightly. *I'm going home one of these days / I'm going home, see my man / Whom I love so dear*. Mitch asked me about Tom. I told him how Tom and I had gone to a beach-themed outdoor bar in Tempe one night. The ground was sand. It was an actual beach, without any water. Well, it stood beside the Salt River, but most of the time that was just a huge dry wash where people liked to practice driving their jeeps. Tom and I perhaps overindulged that night. We went back to my place afterward. I had just bought a shiny green hose so I could wash my bicycle. It was lying on the floor in my room. I went to the closet to hang up my sweater. When I turned back around, Tom had uncoiled the hose and was holding the end, pointed at me. "What are doing?" I asked. His eyes narrowed. "I'm going to hose you down," he said. Mitch convulsed in fits of laughter. He seemed to think this was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. Every once in a while he would fix me with a steady gaze and say, "I'm going to hose you down."

The desert is full of spiky things, designed to repel. The flora tries to protect its precious water reserves from thirsty fauna. When I needed to pee there was only one thing around big enough to even partially shield me: a lone Joshua tree. (The guys had it easy; they could just turn their backs to me.) Perhaps people think of the band U2 and botanical oddities when they think of Joshua trees. I don't know if they realize how hard and pointy the dagger-like leaves are. I would crouch down behind the trunk of the tree. My billed hat limited my peripheral vision, so that when I started to straighten up, I was frequently speared in the head right through the hat. This was one of the many and varied hazards of working on a seismic crew.

One day I kneeled to plant a geophone and leaped back up, crying in pain. I looked down to see a piece of cholla cactus affixed to my knee. When I had just moved to Arizona, one of the most startling sights I saw was a cholla ball stuck to a metal car bumper. They are that sticky,

with needle tips shaped like minute dual-barbed fishhooks. Ken grabbed some pliers from the truck. He yanked on the prickly clump, then plucked any straggler needles. I kneaded the flesh around the inflamed area for relief. We went back to planting geophones, which Ken was helping with. A moment later he kneeled down and cried out in falsetto, “Oh oh, there’s a cholla ball on my knee!” I didn’t mind. Mockery meant I belonged.

Normally we ate lunch at the base cafeteria. One day we piled into Seth’s SUV and drove to Boron, a field trip that seemed somehow emblematic of this whole backwards adventure. Boron, of Twenty-Mule Team fame, suggestively named for the chemical element, boasts several superlatives: world’s largest borax deposit; world’s largest borax mine; biggest open-pit mine in California; and, according to Wikipedia, supplier of “nearly half of the world's supply of refined borates” (think boric acid). To that list I might add yet another zenith: Boron was the most soul-crushing, ineffably desolate hamlet I have ever had the odd fortune to eat lunch in. Wikipedia’s general caption for the town is “a census-designated place,” which about sums it up. An aerial view shows California’s largest open-pit mine to be many, many times larger than the powdery white skid of earth that is Boron itself, home to two thousand people. We ate in a tiny shoebox of a café, quiet as a tomb, with washed-out photos of the Twenty-Mule Team tacked on the wall.

The heat began to be a real drag. One afternoon Seth, who spent most of his time inside working at a computer, came out and informed us that he’d just checked the weather: it was 110 in the shade. Ken had inquired if I’d be interested working a job in July in Safford, Arizona. In one of my more rose-tinted moments, I said something like, *sure*. But Safford, in the Sonoran Desert, was south of us. In July, it had to be even hotter than this. Frankly, I couldn’t even believe people did this kind of work in the Arizona desert in July.

It was Bob's turn with the sledge. When he brought it down, the strike plate broke in half. We didn't have an extra, so we kept using the broken halves. By the time we finished the job, it was in quarters. I had no idea how any useful data could come from banging on an eight-inch-square piece of iron. We got to the end of the line we were shooting, my turn. I waited with fatalistic resignation for Ken to keep adding on the extra hits it seemed I always had to do. Messing with me, Bob asked over the walkie-talkie, "Ken, who do you think is stronger: Barbara or my sister?"

He answered right away. "Your sister is stronger, but Barbara's got more endurance."

I later found out from Seth that the reason I had to pound the plate more times was because I always worked the end of the line. It had something to do with signal processing and attenuation, not so much the force of my hits. So I should've been glad to know that I measured up, but the truth was, I was getting weaker, not stronger. The heat, inadequate sleep, and extreme physical exertion had begun to push me past my limits.

The evening of our second-to-last day at the site we took a detour on our way back to the motel to search for the rumored wreck of a B-52 bomber in the desert. At the edge of Rogers Dry Lake (an oxymoron if there ever was) south of the base, we found it, or rather them. The rotting hulks of two B-52s and a slender B-58 with a long conical nose rested serenely amid a backdrop of endless sagebrush scrub and isolated Joshua trees. The aircraft had been deliberately left there, a mini-Air Force boneyard. They looked as if they had always been there, like Mayan ruins, monuments of some long-lost civilization. We stared silently at them, their battered fuselage glinting back at the stars popping into the sky.

Our last day on the job, we got out early. Mitch and I decided to go for a soak in the motel's dubious, lukewarm hot tub. First he went to the convenience store across the street and

returned with two six-packs and a fifth of Jack Daniels. While we pickled, he got pickled. After dinner I decided to do laundry and, in a major butter-up-the-boss move, I asked Ken if he had anything he wanted washed. I threw everything in one load, including a new, bright magenta t-shirt I'd bought before the trip. It turned Ken's underwear pink. He didn't even say anything.

We skipped the stale rolls and went to a diner for breakfast the next morning. Mitch looked grim as he ate his eggs. After loading up the truck one last time and hitching the trailer, we got on the road. Mitch was unusually subdued on the ride back. Mostly he just groaned and swayed a little. Every once in a while he would offer his retort to a famous LL Cool J song, moaning, "I ain't going back to Cali." Just past Coachella, where the towns end, he asked Ken to pull over to the shoulder. He barely waited for the truck to stop before he pushed the door open and threw up in the dirt. Bob looked both concerned and like he'd seen this before, which made me sad.

About a week after we got back, Ken called me. I'd been dreading this call. I knew he was going to officially ask me if I wanted to work on the upcoming job in Safford. I would have to say no. Maybe out there in the Mojave, in the flush of newness and exhilaration that I could handle such hard work, I had briefly thought that I might keep doing it. But now, back at home, I had to get real. I wasn't going to be a juggie. Ken sounded disappointed, but he knew. He knew that job was a one-shot deal, a singular time when the crew clicked, the work went off relatively without a hitch, and some rare alchemy transpired that turned something miserable into something almost fun. The experience would not be replicable. The punishing nature of the work would corrode the good will, that special synergy.

In July I got a job as an administrative assistant at ASU. Though Tom and I later broke

up, we remained good friends. Through his work at a geophysical services company, he occasionally crossed paths with Ken, who didn't sell his business or start his computer-slash-ISP company. I never found out if Mitch opened his butcher shop or married Bob's mother. I hoped Bob went to college and got a job a helluva lot better than being a juggie. But maybe he'd only gotten through high school and was working at the Home Depot in Globe.

If they remembered those two weeks in the California desert at all, it would be as a dim recollection of one seismic survey that went a little better than some of the others. But I remember it as something different, as a strange welcome. Everything was what it shouldn't be, inside out and upside down. It was unfamiliar and exciting. In retrospect that trip seemed an unlikely omen, a sign that the move West would be a grand adventure, almost as grand an adventure as my sixteen years in New York City had been.

And for a long time, it was.

SIMULACRUM

The plan was for me to come over at seven on Friday and he would cook me dinner. Glenn was a very good cook. But his house was an intolerable sty, a live-in landfill. I was surprised not to see a horde of seagulls cawing and flapping above it. Glenn was always promising to clean up, and he did, in futile patches here and there. When I eventually omitted? arrived at his house, close to nine, I could see that he'd done some cleaning and that it was more ineffectual than usual. He had wiped the round white table with a dirty sponge, leaving behind a scummy residue. Books, which had been on the table, now buried a mangled heap of broken CD cases and scratched discs on a chair. Crusted containers of cleanser and mildew remover strewed the floor of the mostly filthy bathroom. When I sat down to take a leak, Glenn pushed the door open a crack, saying "I just wanted to make sure I put toilet paper on the roll."

I had met Glenn a year and a half earlier at my job. I toiled listlessly as a college secretary while he did contract programming. My love for him bloomed like a towering thundercloud and came over me with similar speed and intensity. He was a bad boy through and through. Not the sort who affected an aura of rebelliousness, but one who walked on the edge because he didn't know how to stand on flat ground.

He lived truly in the moment, and when I was with him, I did too. For Glenn, there was no tomorrow. He owned a house, something he lamented bitterly, but he had no car, no credit cards or checkbook, and no plans. He didn't want to marry and have children, move to a better home, or climb all of Colorado's fourteeners. When things broke, he declined to fix or replace them. After his shower curtain rod snapped in two, he took baths. When first his watch died and then his cat, he replaced neither.

Though raised as a city boy, he took a postmodern pleasure in suburban culture. We often spent Saturdays or Sundays driving in my car from one nondescript Denver area strip mall to another. These shopping centers looked the same from the outside, but they contained specific gems – the Polish deli, the Indian market, the funky used record and bookstore. In a weird way, food and shopping turned Glenn on. We'd sit and talk dirty over Vietnamese pho soup and iced coffee. Bargains particularly aroused him. He got so excited upon finding marked-down tins of Italian Panettone pastry at the Big Lots on west Colfax that I had to give him a hand job as we drove out of the parking lot. Being with Glenn turned back time for me, like I was the young bohemian back in New York City years before.

The night before our dinner date, he called me uncharacteristically late. I had trouble understanding him, something about the time we should meet, was he talking about seven a.m. or p.m.? I agreed to lend him my car to buy groceries on the Asian strip on Federal Boulevard the next day. He had an extra car key. When I left for work the next morning, my car was already gone. Things grew more disorganized as evening approached. Just before seven, I called Glenn's house and no one answered. After forty-five minutes, I dialed his newly bought cell phone with similar results. I was tired and lay down. Immediately the phone rang. "Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Yes....," I answered. "You're still going to cook?"

"Yeah, I'm starving. I don't exactly know how this new phone works. I tried to pick up your call, but I couldn't."

"What time do you want me to come over?"

"I should be home by eight. Eight-fifteen? I'll call you when I get in."

At twenty minutes to nine, I tried him again. "I was just going to call you," he said. "Are

you hungry?”

Glenn lived nearby. I walked up the road to his house, a modest, whitewashed 1950s ranch with a cracked foundation, perched on a crumbling bluff. I could see my car parked crookedly against the curb, a hurried job. The front of the house was dark except for a glowing string of clear Christmas lights, which Glenn had inadvertently hung in the shape of a stretched-out heart in his living room window. I climbed the concrete steps past the terraced rows of weeds, old compound buckets, and delaminating shards of plywood. Peering through the front door, the middle of which was a large pane of glass, I could see Glenn, in his heavy old bomber jacket, lurching around the small kitchen. I rapped on the glass. Glenn opened the door and performed a clumsy sort of bow accompanied by a hand sweep. “*Chez Glenn... bonsoir,*” he said, or tried to say. It sounded like he was talking through a mouthful of painkillers.

I dropped my pack and stood in the kitchen entryway. Glenn chopped asparagus. He was a big man, standing six-foot-three volatile inches. He practically filled the whole kitchen and had to stoop to do anything in it. He lifted and rattled a cocktail glass. “Vodka and soda?” he offered.

“No thanks. I’ll just have a beer.”

His eyes popped a little. “Did you bring any?”

“Just one can of Keystone Light.”

On the cramped square of stained formica where Glenn was working, I could already see a two-liter plastic cola bottle and another of club soda. From behind these, he pulled a glass bottle filled with what looked to be neon pink antifreeze. “I bought **cosmopolitan** capitalize? mix, if you want any.” I declined.

“What are you doing with the asparagus?” I asked.

“I’m making soup. I want to see if there’s a difference between the tips and stalks. They

say the tips make a tastier soup, so you have something to do with the stalks.” Though his speech was slow and deliberate, it was hard to grasp. He talked and words sounded different, stretched or garbled. “Stalks” turned into “storks” and when he mentioned the meat he’d bought, I couldn’t tell if we were having lamb loin or lion chops. He moved carefully, like a weightless astronaut in a spacesuit trying to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Despite his obvious efforts to focus, he seemed oblivious. He fished around in the half-filled sink and removed the salt shaker from the tepid water. After that, he reached in for a coffee mug, dumped out the filmy dishwater and poured cola into it. Suddenly he yanked open the freezer door. “Jesus,” he said, “I left the twenty-dollar French chard in the freezer!”

He found a candle in one of the grocery bags on the floor, looked at it with consternation and handed it to me. Not wanting to ask him if he had a lighter, or several, I fumbled my words before saying, “Do you have something I can light this with?” He produced a lighter from a broken kitchen drawer on the floor. Putting flame to wick, I set the candle on the table. I could tell he was trying to make it a special night, like other special nights we’d had. But everything was off, like a fouled imitation or re-enactment of those other nights. It looked okay in soft focus, but when you twisted the lens you could see the details were wrong. The cooking, the cleaning, the halting conversation – it all seemed fake or corrupted, like a greasy reflection of itself in the dishwater.

Glenn laid bowls of pale green liquid on the table. He sat down and then jumped back up. “I guess we should have the chardonnay, huh? Do you want it?” A vigorous nod. We spooned our soup reticently, punctuating the silence with awkward burps of conversation. After finishing half his soup, Glenn shoved his bowl away and flopped back into his chair. He looked toward the kitchen.

“This soup is really rich,” I said. “I’m getting full.”

“Yeah, maybe I’ll hold off more cooking. Do you want some cheese and crackers?”

“Sure, that sounds good.”

He placed a roll of chevre and a box of crackers on the table and went inside the bathroom, about fifteen feet away. I listened intently. I heard him touching and moving things, but no sound of someone peeing. He opened the door and called out, “I was pissing like a racehorse earlier, but now, nothing.” He shut the door, turned on the fan, and finally flushed.

He sat back down across from me, still in his bulky leather jacket, one leg crossed and one hand resting on his crotch. I gulped my clean, non-oaky chardonnay. “Maybe you can’t pee, but I can,” I said, pushing my chair back. I really did have to go. I closed the door and sat on the toilet, issuing a light, warm stream. I didn’t have much time, so I made the most of it. I opened the cabinet under the sink. The personal hygiene and cleaning products had been cleared away to make space for a plate, instead of the usual mirror. Crumbly white lumps and mounds littered the plate, along with a cancelled credit card and an unfurling dollar bill. He must have run out of Bic pens to pull apart, or he was in a hurry, because he hated using rolled-up bills. Why didn’t he just stop at 7-Eleven and pick up some straws, I wondered.

I was expecting this. At some point during the day, I had added it up. He had wheels (mine), cash (his last payment of a six-month contract), and a cell phone. I put the odds at one in five of him coming home *without* drugs. He generally alternated between powder and rock, depending on what was available and what he was in the mood for. He’d gone down the rabbit hole, a big bender. He’d be under for two weeks or more, losing jobs and leads, not answering his phone or email. With luck, he’d re-emerge a few weeks later and try to pick up the pieces. Only each time, there were fewer pieces to pick up.

I returned to the table and took more swigs out of my glass. I had just enough time to detect hints of apple and grass as a river of wine sloshed down my throat. I pasted a cracker with goat cheese and popped it in my mouth. After draining my glass I said, “The soup was delicious. Thank you. But I’m exhausted.” Glenn looked tired, too, but in a different way. His forty-three-year-old face had puffed and drooped, obscuring the fine features and long, sweet eyelashes I had seen in a photo of him taken not a decade ago. “Glenn, I have to ask you something.” He tilted his head up. “Did you buy drugs?” He nodded.

I got up, put on my coat, and looked for my eyeglasses. When I was ready to leave, I stepped over to Glenn and gently pulled the lush, gray-streaked black hair away from his face. “I’m not going to do anything except sleep,” he insisted. “I’m exhausted, too.” It didn’t matter whether he slept or not, I had to get out. I turned to him before opening the door and he looked at me with unfocused eyes. “You don’t have to leave,” he said.

When I got home, I looked in my wallet. So far, he had been trustworthy – but that could change.

GET ME AWAY FROM HERE I'M DYING
(THANK YOU CARD)

A rapidly escalating case of anorexia had landed a close friend's daughter in the hospital. As we are wont to say, everything happened so fast, the days and weeks barreling by in a succession of unthinkables that was tragically familiar to my friend. (Her fiancé – not the girl's father – had become suddenly depressed and then hung himself three years earlier.) At the beginning of the year, people had begun to remark that her daughter looked awfully thin. The daughter was taken to a gynecologist to determine why, at sixteen, she had not yet started her period. By August, she was sleeping in the same bed as her mother. Afraid her heart would stop, the girl got up periodically during the night to nibble on something, a cracker maybe, a few raisins. When the next check-up recorded a pulse fluttering wanly under forty, the doctors stopped fooling around.

The daughter spent the first week in the intensive care unit, revivifying calories delivered by brute force through a tube. When her vital signs improved, they moved her to a different wing of the hospital, the wing of blessed wraiths. Here were found the girls covered in a thin layer of downy fur, called *lanugo*, their bodies' way of keeping warm in the absence of fat; boys whose teeth had rotted after years of daily vomiting; malnourished teens pushed about in wheelchairs, too weak to stand. Near ghosts whose former flesh had been replaced with recesses and cavities. They were literally turning to air. They were hard cases all, hard cases who resisted being cracked or giving in, resisted with a superhuman determination of which they were perversely proud.

Life presents us with too many situations in which we feel profoundly helpless, and they almost always involve someone else's distress.

Many gender-normative qualities elude or don't interest me. Commitment scares me. I never married. I've never even been in the bridal party of someone else who got married. I chose not to have children. I can't remember the last time I brought anything but beer to a potluck. Going out alone, whether to a movie, museum, or restaurant, feels perfectly comfortable and often delightful. My ways are lazy and selfish. With shame I admit that I worry about my friends falling into ill health or tragedy because I fear I won't be there for them. I won't appear at the front door with Chinese takeout. I won't keep vigil by their hospital beds.

For a long time, I thought my aversion to caregiving was a natural proclivity, or anti-clivity. Then in a moment of self-therapeutic insight, I realized my disinclination stemmed in part from the fact that I had already been a caretaker once in my life. My older sister left for college when I was nine. Through many of my ensuing childhood years, it was just my divorced mother and I, living together in semi-dysfunctional squalor. During the two least unstable of these years, from thirteen to fifteen, I did everything for my mother – when she was home. She was a computer programmer and IT manager who worked incessantly, during the day, at night, on weekends and holidays. Her brutal schedule soured me on a career in computers, one of my true regrets. I couldn't see at the time that this was not a condition of the job, but of my mother. It was the best way she knew to block out the world: to numb herself with work.

She used herself all up at work. At home, she was spent, useless, which I think is just how she wanted it. I shopped, cleaned (when she would let me), and prepared our meals, from a can or box or bag. I unloaded binders of reports and stacks of computer printouts from her car in the evening and reloaded them again in the morning. I fetched her cigarettes, pocketbook, the salt and pepper, a glass of milk, whatever she needed. I did it without thinking, wishing to please, the

way a child does. I learned to keep a spare pack of cigarettes hidden in my dresser so that I wouldn't be sent to the all-night truck stop at 4:00 a.m. to buy them.

In my early twenties when I was out of college, our screwy little family – my mother, (half-)sister, (half-)brother, and I – gathered at my sister's Staten Island apartment for Christmas dinner one year. My sister, who had cared for me when I was small, was well-acquainted with inversion of the parent-child relationship and had lost patience for it. After unloading mom's car, I went to the kitchen to pour her a glass of soda. My sister cornered me. "Why are you her maid?" she hissed. I had never asked myself that question.

So I don't know what my poor excuse was for failing to visit my friend's daughter in the hospital, a daughter whom I'd watched grow up since she was five. Was it because I was too much like my mother, in maternal ineptitude, or was I too determined to keep my distance from anyone who might be like my mother, troubled and troubling? Probably I was just lazy. I do know I felt guilty and ashamed about it; but not actually guilty and ashamed enough to get in my car and drive to the hospital once during the four weeks that she was in the eating disorders unit.

Instead, I availed myself of the time-honored tactic of people who don't show up. I tried to buy myself off.

I've always been lousy at codes, conventions, gestures, expectations.

Many years ago, I left my office job to be a ski bum for a couple of winters. I got a part-time job in the ski school of a major Colorado resort. I was to stand behind a customer service window selling lift tickets and ski school products. As someone with a reputation for being a grumpy solipsist, I was naturally somewhat trepidatious about this new job. I couldn't envision

myself perfecting a vacant smile and saying with complete insincerity, “So how’s your day going?” Improbably, I turned out to be fine at customer service. I was better than fine. I won awards for my customer service and was promoted to fulfillment lead my second season.

The thing was that the ticketing system at the school was very disorganized, resulting in a high number of orders that were lost or messed up. In addition, the potential product and pricing combinations were mind-numbing. I became the fixer, the ticket detective, the super-sleuth of botched ski school orders. I solved people’s problems. I parsed complicated orders for other staff members. I succeeded because what people wanted, after all, wasn’t fake smiles and fake “relationships” but... customer service. What I was good at was fixing things and then getting them right the first time.

I’ve never been good inside the roles: the good wife (or any wife), punctual employee, dutiful mother or friend. From outside the roles I cast about for something of value I can offer. I try, like the magi, like my mother did, to make amends with my own strange, unexpected gifts: *no, I won’t actually be by your side during this difficult time, but here... here is some frankincense*. It was the equivalent of frankincense that I mailed off to my friend’s daughter: a package containing a silk scarf, three CDs, and a card scribbled with a few carefully chosen words. Inadequate does not begin to describe it.

So imagine my dismay, a week later, when I received a very proper thank-you note in the mail. On nice stationery, in meticulous script, she wrote a paragraph of vapid comments about the presents. I found her punctiliousness bizarre and unsettling. It was just like a thank-you for a wedding gift, some baby shower booty. Everything seemed distorted and out of proportion, much like an anorexic’s perception of her body, I realized. I thought, *You’re on death’s door, with a*

life-threatening illness, and you think it's important to send me a thank you card?? Isn't this a symptom of the problem? Needless to say I was not expecting a thank-you note or any acknowledgement. In fact, the card seemed to mock me, to subtly hint at what a fraud I was, as if its sender was saying, *I'm on death's door with a life-threatening illness and you think it's important to send me a scarf and some CDs??* I don't know if I was more appalled by my response (a package in the mail) to her situation, or her response to my response.

In any case, I had an even dimmer view than before of what I considered petty formalities. Freakishly, the girl's mother brought up this very topic when we were at a restaurant with friends one night. In confidential tones, the mother averred that she was pissed off over not receiving a wedding gift thank-you card from the wife of someone else in the group. (The wedding had been a year earlier.)

"I made sure my daughter knows the importance of sending thank-you cards," the mother said.

I squirmed in my seat.

"I mean, *I* don't care that much," she continued, "but I think it's very poor manners for children not to learn to send thank you cards. My nephew in Texas never writes thank-yous for the presents I send him. How will I know if he received them?"

You talk to your sister every week on the phone, I thought. Why don't you just ask her?

That night, plagued by ever more frequent insomnia and erratic sleep, I stayed up late watching episode after episode of the A&E program, *Hoarders*. I'd never seen the show before. I was repulsed and riveted at the same time. And depressed. So few of the hoarder interventions were successful. Hoarding seemed as intractable a mental disorder as anorexia. The show also triggered an *Aha!* moment of recognition so obvious I have no explanation for why it didn't

occur to me earlier: my mother was a hoarder. I think I had recognized it, but just not named it, because naming something makes it real. If we don't name things, we don't have to think about them. I'm sure that's why AA meetings begin with the declaration: "Hello, I'm Suzy and I'm an alcoholic."

She had subscriptions to a bunch of magazines and daily newspapers, back in the pre-internet days when newspapers were still hefty bundles of dead trees. Of course she would get home exhausted every night and didn't have time to read them. But she couldn't bring herself to admit that she would never read them. She *intended* to read them, to catch up, and so she would never throw them away. Our television sat on a dresser placed diagonally against a corner of the living room wall, forming a triangular well behind it. At first I threw all the newspapers there, until they got high enough that they cascaded over the top of the TV. Then I started stacking them against the walls of the dining room. Eventually the dining table became inaccessible. She refused to let me throw the old ones away, though I tried to be sneaky and discard some from the middles of the piles, thinking she wouldn't notice. She always did (I never knew how) and a fuming argument would ensue.

She was terrified of giving up control long after she'd already lost control.

The show was creepy and enlightening, how little separates the slide into chaos. The hoarders frequently echoed some variant of, *I'm not sure how it got like this*. There is a link. I'm aware that one thank-you card stands between you and the void – an impassable hall, a bedroom two-feet-thick with discarded soda bottles. The hoarder's inability to limit represents the flipside of the anorexic's control. The stuff-monger has completely given up; the anorexic refuses to give up control of a single thing. I appreciate that one thank-you card holds back the abyss. Or seems to, in a practice of distorted thinking by which one entombs oneself, physically room by room,

mentally gesture by gesture, a series of misjudged weights.

About those presents: I bought the scarf on Etsy. It was one-of-a-kind, hand-screened by an Indian graphic designer who had been my Brooklyn roommate once. For some reason the daughter had a fascination with India. The scarf was mailed to me first. It unfurled from its envelope shimmery and light, like a butterfly that might take flight on iridescent green and white wings.

The CDs I chose with great deliberation. The first was *The Sunset Tree*, by a group called The Mountain Goats, who were really just one man, one man with a tough childhood. The CD is akin to a memoir of that childhood told in song. The music aches with the kind of beautifully articulated pain which paradoxically unburdens the listener's heart. I thought she might appreciate the sentiment in a song called "This Year": "I am gonna make it through this year if it kills me." The next album was *If You're Feeling Sinister*, by Belle and Sebastian, another group that's pretty much just one guy, from Scotland. Bookish and gay, he seems to consider his outsider status a diverting challenge: "Ooh! Get me away from here I'm dying / Play me a song to set me free / Nobody writes them like they used to / So it may as well be me." The last CD, *Kala*, showcased the multicultural hip-hop of M.I.A., a strong, complex Sri Lankan woman. Her father, a member of the rebel Tamil Tigers, was imprisoned when she was a child. Charged political undertones lurk beneath her music's infectious veneer of rhythm and sly lyrics.

Perhaps the best track on the CD, "Paper Planes," is set hauntingly to a sample from the Clash song, "Straight to Hell." The video shows M.I.A. cavorting in a number of New York City locales – a food truck, a bodega. She is attired in partyfied street clothes, her long tea-hued hair unrestrained. Her look is decidedly democratic. She has none of the processed, packaged, heavily

styled gloss of most female pop or hip-hop artists. She winkingly sings the song's refrain: "All I want to do is take your money." She claims she's "got more records than the K.G.B." Near the end comes an almost throwaway moment that's chilling. Her voice drops to a singing whisper. Sounding like a little girl cooing a lullaby, she flutters her hands on one side and then the other, softly intoning, "Some-uh, some I, some I murder... some-uh, some I let go."

In 2013, two people, who were significant in my life for very different reasons, died. If writers were coroners, I'd say they each died of a broken heart. One was like a step-brother to me, his father having been my mother's boyfriend for six years, longer than she had remained married to any of her three husbands. The faux-step-brother was only forty-eight, a year younger than me. He was a smart, skinny man who didn't smoke or drink. He was without vice; he should've been healthy. He was also shy and geeky, with Obama-ears, and an awkward, horizontal smile that made him look perpetually like a kid in braces even though his teeth were fine. He lived in New York City, as his father had long ago. He found a wife relatively late in life, when friends and family were quietly beginning to abandon hope.

The wife made him ecstatic, but she was ambitious. In order to please her, he quit his IT job with Deutsche Bank so that he could work on applications to top MBA programs. Though his wife's income was good, he secretly borrowed large sums of money to buy her clothing and jewelry and support their New York lifestyle. When he failed to get into grad school, his wife divorced him. Jobless and spouseless, **comma** he began to give up on himself, to forget who or why he was. He had no family left in New York to see what was happening. After six months of wasting away, he died of chronic, untreated pneumonia. It was shocking.

The family was not religious and held a memorial gathering in lieu of a funeral. My sister

arrived an hour and a half early to help set up. I arrived late and hungover. I was confident, however, about what I had prepared. I couldn't deliver it extemporaneously. I had to read my little speech because I had crafted it carefully. I chose specific events that no one would have remembered the way I did and wrought unexpected meaning out of them. The conclusion concerned an odd moment (the epiphany) from a camping trip that several people in the room had been on and forgotten about until now. My eulogy kicked some ass. Personal, authentic, that I could do.

The other death concerned a different situation. I hadn't even been in touch with the woman and heard about it via an email that had been forwarded and re-forwarded. She had been my boss when I worked as an administrative assistant at a national laboratory in Boulder, which is also where I met the anorexic's mother. The boss had been fragile, insecure, and manipulative at a time when I felt stupidly strong and sure of myself. She had a Marilyn Monroe complex and talked in a breathy little voice. Her young son had died in a rafting accident some years earlier. Since then she had retreated into an alcohol-fueled fantasy world, as the real world held nothing for her.

We did not get along. Eventually our toxic animosity was one of several problems that led me to quit that job and take a breather at the ski resort. Over the years I began to reassess our embattled relationship. I began to think that not only had I been too hard on her, but more surprisingly, saw that she and I were much more alike than I had ever supposed at the time. Another complicating factor in that imbroglio of a job was that my other boss, whom I liked very much, was plainly in love with the woman, though both were married to other people. My difficulties with her drove a wedge into my relationship with him.

Years later, long after I'd left the job, the two of them divorced their respective spouses,

retired (her health had become too poor for her to work), and were building their dream home together on a fragrant plot of east Texas land. It was sadly easy to predict, though, that her future would hold no happy ending. The two of them quarreled one night over her drinking and when she didn't show up the next morning, he finally found her at the new house site, slumped in the driver's seat of her car, which sat baking in the July sun with all the windows rolled up.

Though we had not parted on good terms, I felt we three were strangely intertwined in some way I couldn't quite get at. I had to reach out and say something. I sent him an email that began, *I'm probably the last person you want to hear from...* I tried to tell him how I had misjudged her and how sorry I was. I didn't expect to hear back, but when I did, I felt that his response was more natural than that thank-you card had been. He wrote: *Yes, you probably were the last person I expected to send a note. I was taken aback by your insight of Rose in your note; it was pretty much spot on. I very much appreciate you taking the time to send those words.*

Words, it seemed, were something I knew how to give, even – as with the CDs – when they weren't my own words. I couldn't buck up, get it together, do the right thing, or behave the way I should. I've never been good at roles and responsibilities. I've only been good at being me. Sad, whiney, asleep in the day, fucked-up me. What I have to give you is honesty and understanding. And maybe some myrrh.

ME AND MY DERMATOLOGIST:
A LOVE STORY

It's January and work is crazy. I work as an administrative assistant at a college. The start of the semester is always madness. It's so busy, I have to reschedule my dermatologist appointment, the one I've already delayed making for years. The next available opening is February 14 – Valentine's Day. The afternoon of the appointment, I leave work earlier than I need to. Nobody likes going to the doctor. I have a plan, however, for dealing with this plain fact. There is a bar, Dillinger's, conveniently located in the little strip mall next to the medical building. I order a cold pint of the Avery IPA. It is delicious. I am feeling quite blasé when I walk into the doctor's waiting room. A medical technician in scrubs comes out and calls my name. I follow her to the examination room where I am seated on a modern-y looking ash-veneer chair against the wall. She asks what brings me in.

“This thing on my head,” I answer with a gesture like pointing a gun at my head.

She leans forward and looks at my head. “How long have you had that?”

“For fifteen years.”

The look on her face tells me that my answer requires extenuation. “A physician's assistant looked at it once and she told me it was probably just a staph infection and I could leave it alone.” Only as I'm saying this do I fully realize how ludicrous it sounds. You don't leave a staph infection alone. You annihilate it with antibiotics, posthaste.

“When was that?”

“Fourteen years ago.” More extenuation seems called for. “I've wanted to get it looked at for the past few years, but I didn't have insurance for a while and then I was on a high deductible plan.”

She steps away, offering no sign of sympathy or understanding of my plight. “Dr. Gallagher will be here in a minute,” she says, exiting the room. The effects of the beer are ebbing away and I’m beginning to feel less sanguine about this whole encounter.

The tech returns several minutes later, followed by the doctor, a short, slim man with a shiny narrow head. He’s dressed in a vaguely metrosexual way, trousers, loafers, pastel purple dress shirt open at the neck revealing the collar of a white tee. I guess he’s late-forty-something, same as me. He shakes my hand. “I’m Casey Gallagher. How do you do?” I nod noncommittally. “And why are you here today?”

“This thing on my head.”

He leans in, parts my hair, and looks down. He steps back. “Oh yeah, that’s skin cancer. How long have you had that?”

The technician answers: “Fifteen years.”

I start to explain, “I didn’t have insurance for a while – ”

Dr. Gallagher looks startled. “You have insurance now though, right?”

“Yes, yes.”

Reassured, he confers briefly with the tech and is out the door again. She pats the padded examination chair, motioning for me to sit over there, which I do. She is messing about behind me at a counter where vials, implements, bandages, and such are arrayed. When she turns back around, she is holding a needle. I have the dreadful realization that the needle is going into my head. She reassures me that she is using an extra small needle, but in my eyes, it might as well be a railroad spike she’s driving into my skull – over and over, until fifteen years of tumorial growth are thoroughly zonked by a mixture of Lidocaine and epinephrine. She pokes several times to check for any remaining hot spots.

Dr. Gallagher walks briskly in and back to the counter behind me, a location that now makes me nervous. He turns, with something in his hand I don't see. The next thing I feel, or rather don't feel but *experience*, with cosmically disembodied consciousness, is an awareness that the doctor is sawing vigorously away at something on my head. His left arm pulls up as he slices free the last bit of tumor. He thrusts the other arm, holding the scalpel, out by my side.

“Here, you want to see it?”

I turn away, but not before I catch a glimpse of a bloody blob trailing strings of hair, the pulpy mass held to the scalpel blade by his thumb. The arm retreats as he turns back around to deposit *the thing* on the counter for biopsy prep. For some reason, I have a vision of him dropping the tumor in a sandwich baggie to be put with the outgoing mail. I can feel something trickling out of the numb zone. The doctor and the tech have begun mopping up the tumor site with gauze. And more gauze. A nurse enters the room. Now three people are crowded around me, engaged in a kind of firemen's drill, a bucket-to-bucket brigade of supplying fresh gauze, mopping, handing off used gauze for disposal. The tech asks if I've been taking ibuprofen. No, why? It's a blood thinner, she says, hurrying to sop up a fresh stream as it streaks down my forehead.

The doctor tries to seal the wound with a cauterizing tool. An acrid, mineral smell infuses the air. The cauterization helps; still the wound continues to expel blood. I feel as if my head has become the site of a stand-off between a stubborn doctor and a stubborn wound. The doctor is losing patience. “I'm going to move you to another room to wait for the bleeding to subside,” he says. “Marina here,” – he motions toward the nurse – “is an ace with bandaging. She'll wrap you up like a present under the Christmas tree.” He hands me a thick stack of three-inch square gauze pads. Guiding my hand to the top of my head, he presses down, demonstrating how much

pressure to apply to stanch the bleeding. “Like that. Now hold it there.” He removes his hand, tosses his disposable gloves in the bio-hazard bin, and heads toward the door. He’s halfway out the door when he looks back and says cheerily, “Happy Valentine’s Day!”

I stand and follow Marina into the hallway, which opens onto the front desk and reception area. I wonder how this looks. It can hardly present an encouraging sight in a dermatologist’s office – a patient with blood-stained hair, looking slightly dazed, wandering around holding a wad of gauze to the top of her head. Marina leads me to another examination room where I sit in the padded chair. “I’ll be back to check on you in a little while,” she says as she closes the door. I sit, press, and wait. The window blinds are drawn, though it’s getting dark anyway. Yeah, happy Valentine’s Day. Some date this turned out to be.

Growing quickly bored with the skin cancer pamphlets, I indulged in some rumination on the curious manner in which I was spending this already doubtful holiday. I was particularly concerned with one of the more bogus Valentine’s fantasies, the idea of The One. I imagined a woman alone on Valentine’s Day crying bitterly into the box of expensive salted caramels she’s bought herself and dreaming that she’ll spend next Valentine’s Day with The One, the perfect man, strong, sensitive, a protector and provider. Those who have someone on Valentine’s Day will imagine he is that man. I wanted to believe Dr. Gallagher was that man, an expertly skilled physician, who graduated near the top of his medical class, and had the bedside manner of the concierge at a four-star hotel. I was having my doubts, though. I suspected he might be like any other guy, fallible, mediocre, disappointing. The kind of guy who gets impatient waiting for me to stop bleeding.

Against all intent, maybe I’d somehow fallen prey to the myth of The One, or even

worse, a false duality of The One or No One. It wouldn't be surprising, given that my family was notably deficient in responsible, available, caregiving adults. My mother was cut out to be neither a wife nor parent. When I was young, my older sister cooked dinners and kept house. After she left for college those things, cooking dinner and cleaning house, stopped happening. My mother and I lived like two orphaned children. One especially cold winter, we slept in **the** same bed, staying up late playing crazy-eights. For a couple of years in high school, the situation improved, and I had the opportunity and wherewithal to assume my sister's former role. Yet even when I did make dinner every night, it was things like fish sticks and canned cream of mushroom soup.

My sister was nine years older than I was and my opposite. My brother was two years younger than her and opposite both of us. I was the bohemian screw-up, he was the working-class screw-up, and my sister over-compensated for everyone by being the miserable, rigidly controlling, over-competent over-achiever. My brother suffered terribly from the lack of a father figure in his life. You knew things were not going to go well for him when, as a young child, he set his bedroom on fire. My brother and sister are actually half-siblings, the children of my mother's first marriage, which ended badly, as did her two subsequent marriages. My mother told me once that when she met my father, a bustling man, full of ideas, thirteen years her senior, she thought she had finally found someone who would take of her. She realized she was wrong the night I was born. My father was not present at this 1964 event. He was four hours away, processing corporate data on the then-scarce mainframe computers at Cornell University.

The biopsy comes back basal cell carcinoma, the most common and treatable form of skin cancer. Treatment usually entails Mohs surgery, an outpatient procedure in which layers of

tissue are removed one by one and, rather than being sent away for biopsy, are microscopically examined onsite. When a layer is reached that is completely free of cancer cells, the surgery is stopped. This method maximizes preservation of healthy tissue. After the cancer is excised, the skin must be cosmetically reconstructed. The procedure takes the better part of a day. Once again, the dermatologist's office displays a twisted knack for scheduling. The appointment is set for March 11, a date that has poignant significance for me. It is my mother's birthday, though she died almost twenty years ago. She died of cancer so maybe it's fitting that I'll spend her birthday getting mine removed.

There was a story about my mother that on the day before her high school graduation, she purchased a cheap suitcase at Woolworth's. The day after graduation, she packed the suitcase and left home. I replicated this act, with slightly different details, twenty-eight years later. It's not quite right to say I left home, however, because at that point there was hardly a home to leave. After being evicted, this time with an actual sheriff and a flatbed truck, from the too-nice apartment we'd been renting, my mother and I were living in a run-down one-room studio provided by social services, who considered it an improvement over the motel room they'd had us in before. It was a week before my high school graduation (an outcome in question). While my mother was out one afternoon, I loaded some things into a friend's car and was gone. It hurt my mom horribly. I had essentially abandoned her.

The tech, whose name is Karen, greets me after I arrive. A wavy bob frames her smooth, open face, the kind indicative of untroubled capability. I meet another technician in the exam room. "This is Barbara," she tells him before pivoting firmly on the ball of her doctor's-office

sneaker and striding back out the door. This new tech, tall and a little doughy, reminds me of an oversized cherub. Like Karen, he has dark curly hair.

“Hi Barbara... hello. I’m Serge,” he says with adorable earnestness. “How are you today?” He removes my bandage and gently begins to clean and prep the wound site. The small movements of his large hands suggest a little boy trying nervously to care for a baby bird.

*There's a somebody I'm longin' to see
I hope that he, turns out to be
Someone who'll watch over me*

*I'm a little lamb who's lost in the wood
I know I could, always be good
To one who'll watch over me*

My mother loved music. When I was young, we had one of those fancy-wood hi-fi stereo credenzas that take up the better part of a wall and count as serious furniture. The elegant croon of old standards could often be heard oozing out of the built-in speakers. One of my favorites was “Someone to Watch Over Me,” both the Ella Fitzgerald and Rosemary Clooney versions.

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Karen and Dr. Gallagher reenter, chattering like two office hens. She says something nice about Serge after he leaves.

“Yes, he’s a keeper,” the doctor says.

The two of them examine my head. He dictates several notes and measurements to her, then dashes off to attend to something or someone else. I note that the doctor is dressed in scrubs this time. Karen once again numbs the spot on my head which, due to its size, takes quite a few injections. After I’m numbed, the whole gang crowds around. Dr. G. makes tiny cuts and calls out more measurements. The tissue slices must be carefully gridded and reassembled in the

proper order. Dr. Gallagher has an unnerving ability to perform professional duties in the most offhand manner possible. He acts as though he's at happy hour with friends and I'm something that's appearing on the bar TV.

He asks Karen, "So, have you and Mark decided where you're going to spend your honeymoon?"

"Well, we're thinking the Caribbean, St. Bart's or St. John's."

"Oh, definitely St. John's. How could you stand all those horrible posers who flock to St. Bart's?"

They continue to coffee-klatch over my head. I gather both the techs are pre-med. The doctor inquires if they know yet what they want to specialize in. It is clearly a leading question.

"Well..." says Karen coyly, "I was thinking about dermatology."

The doctor erupts effusively, "Oh you absolutely should! Dermatology is the best. The skin is such an amazing, fascinating organ."

I'd experienced my share of romance, but was never married. Neither was my brother. My sister married in college and was divorced by the time she turned thirty. She did not remarry or even date much. None of my mother's children had children of their own. I think we didn't trust ourselves. We were understandably suspicious of any arrangement requiring us to be dependent on someone else or to look after someone else.

Growing up, the three of us couldn't wait to take flight, the nest consisting as it did of a few desolate pointy twigs. Independent by nature and necessity, I initially thrived as an adult. Like many naïve and determined daughters of troubled mothers, before and after me, I was convinced that the key to success was just to do the opposite of everything my mother did. I kept

my finances ship-shape. I paid off my student loans early. I began to exercise regularly and lost weight. I engaged in drama-free relationships with men, wherein I refused to act clingy and needy. In fact, the frequent complaint was that I was too unavailable.

You know where this is going, though... a sad truism. No matter how fast you run from the past, it always catches up with you. Around the time I turned forty, my grip began to slip. Exercise became intermittent; I gained the weight back. With my great credit, I ran up dangerous debt. I became seemingly unable to achieve personal goals. My hard-earned confidence absconded with my sense of motivation; in their place was left a constant anxiety.

I listen absently to the chatter of the doctor and his assistants as they work on my head. It's rather like overhearing another table at a café. I'm relieved not to have to contribute. I detest small talk. I'm the kind of customer who frustrates the hair stylist by refusing to answer any of her chatty questions. Telling people where I'm from and what kind of job I have simply reinscribes the tedium.

Dr. G. switches fluidly between banal chit-chat and instructional commentary. "Okay, see that white part?" he says at one point. "That's the skull."

I wince involuntarily, though I can't feel anything.

"Oh I'm sorry," he says, "was that disturbing?"

The thing is that when I was exhausted and overwhelmed, when I most needed someone to look after me, someone who would make things right without judging or nagging, who would listen and tell me what to do to, I knew such a man. In fact I knew several: my dentist, my mechanic, my gastroenterologist, and two lawyers. They never let me down, no matter how I

provoked them. They always knew what to do and never botched it. They were the perfect men.

My dentist's fillings didn't fall out. His crowns didn't crack. He did the teeth cleaning himself. My gastroenterologist, after diagnosing severe acid reflux, didn't lecture me on diet or lifestyle. When I responded poorly to heavy sedation, he booked my next endoscopy at a hospital, with full anaesthesia. He did this without being asked and without charging extra.

The first part of the procedure is over. Now I hang fire a couple of hours while they examine the layers of tissue. I decide to head over to Dillinger's for a pint of the IPA and a lunch burrito. I try to cover up the oozing bandage on my head with a cheap, fake-straw fedora. The bandage is held in place by rolls of gauze wrapped vertically around my head. I thought only cartoon characters were bandaged this way. The dressing doesn't work, though. While I'm eating, the bandaging begins to slide off down my forehead. I keep trying to push it back up. The people seated around the bar try hard not to look at me.

My mechanic was legendary. He owned a shop called Charley's Garage that worked only on Toyotas. I owned a 1989 Corolla with 140,000 miles on it when I bought it. I'd owned it less than a year when the engine began to inexplicably cut out while driving, a dangerous and unnerving issue. And intermittent. I took it to a shop that gave it a tune-up and adjusted the timing. They charged me a couple hundred dollars. A few weeks later the engine cut out while going sixty on the highway. A second shop, recommended by a colleague, didn't know what the problem was either, but wanted \$600 for another tune-up and a bunch of unneeded work for a problem they couldn't even diagnose. I finally found Charley's. When I first took my car there, they drove it around for forty-five minutes and couldn't make it stall. They charged me nothing.

On a subsequent visit, they figured out I needed the carburetor overhauled, requiring a special kit. The cost of the repair was \$350.

Fortunately, they get all the cancer cells on the first pass. Now they need to reconstruct the skin. Because the area is so large, they can't simply sew it shut. Instead, the doctor will employ flap reconstruction, in which little flaps of adjoining skin are cut, slid over, stitched together like a quilt. Dr. Gallagher is alone in the examination room when I return. He removes the dressing and begins to examine the wound with his gloved fingers. I cry out in pain. Blood spills from my head onto my clothes. The anaesthesia has worn off.

The doctor yelps in alarm. "Oh! Oh!" He doesn't know what to do first. "Your jeans!" He grabs some gauze and tries to wipe up the blood on my jeans, spreading it into a splotch instead. I'm still moaning, so he rips open the nearest syringe of Lidocaine he can lay his hands on. It's not the small diameter syringe. He is priming the needle as he rushes to get to me, sending jets of Lidocaine squirting through the air. He injects several times, more than one syringe. At this point he begins to get anxious about how much of the injection he is giving me. Too much of the epinephrine in the mixture can basically produce the effects of a speed overdose – spiking blood pressure, heart beating out of the chest, acute anxiety.

Karen and Serge re-enter and cleaned up my face. All numb, a little agitated, I try to get comfortable in the chair. The tumor site is large enough that there is a risk the flap reconstruction will be inadequate for covering so much surface area. Toward the end, as they're stitching the pieces together, there is lots of pushing and tugging, as if they're trying to zip up an overstuffed suitcase. "Push, Serge. More." They're yanking so hard up there I can't believe the sutures will even hold. But they do. "I knew you were good for something besides just a pretty face," the

doctor says to Serge.

In my greatest hour of need, it was two attorneys who came to my rescue. After my boyfriend disappeared (and turned up five months later, married), I was seized with a desire to buy my own condo in downtown Denver. Nevermind that I was already heavily in debt. In the height of the housing boom, a mortgage could practically be obtained just by signing your name. I bought a beautiful condo in a 1904 building that had undergone gut renovation. Then, eleven months after moving in, I discovered I had bedbugs. The condo was smaller than my previous rental and I had accumulated way too much. The place was stuffed floor-to-ceiling with crap. When I called a pest control company, the receptionist told me that I had to put all of my belongings into plastic bags and move them out of the way. I looked at the towers of wire shelving, the lines of bookcases, the piles of boxes yet unpacked. “Where am I supposed to put my stuff?” I asked.

“We tell people they can put things in the bathtub,” was her answer.

I decided I could no longer sleep in my home. A colleague from work let me stay with her family temporarily. Despite taking precautions, I spread the bugs to her. Distraught, consumed with guilt, and also paranoid that I might have spread the bugs to work, I quit my job. I rented a room in a freezing-cold rooming house. I had no idea what to do about the condo. I didn't know what I *could* do about it. From a computer at the local Kinko's, I did a Google search that produced the names of several local lawyers specializing in real estate. I made an appointment with one for a free forty-five-minute consultation. For thirty of the minutes, I poured out my story of woe to him. He nodded impassively. When I was done, he said simply: “I recommend you let your condo foreclose and declare bankruptcy. The bankruptcy is necessary to

prevent the bank from suing you for the mortgage deficiency.”

This was not at all the counsel I had expected. I burst into tears. When I was done crying, I asked for the name of a good bankruptcy lawyer. Less than a year later, I sat in a bankruptcy court answering questions before a federal judge. My bankruptcy lawyer had guided me through the process without a hitch. For a flat fee of \$1400, over \$100,000 of debt, including mortgage, was erased.

I’ve been hours in this chair. Everyone is tired. “Remind me next time we have one this extensive to schedule it earlier.” Dr. G. shakes his head and looks at me. “Next time, don’t wait fifteen years, okay?”

Perhaps it was unrealistic, unfair even to expect Dr. Gallagher to meet the exceptionally high bar set by those who came before him. It was like a Daddy’s girl finding every boyfriend lacking compared to Daddy. Maybe Dr. G. wasn’t perfect like the others, but I wasn’t perfect either. And I had to take some responsibility in our relationship. I had to ask for the Vicodin; hold the gauze to my own head. Maybe it wasn’t so good that my gastroenterologist never lectured me about my diet or lifestyle. I should’ve been more proactive about getting that thing on my head looked at sooner.

I even began to grow fond of Dr. Gallagher’s quirks – his unfiltered transparency, his bumbling dandy-ishness. A visit with him was so much more unpredictable, in a kind of entertaining way, than seeing the other professionals. Maybe Dr. Gallagher was a good match after all. In a flight of fancy, I could even imagine Karen and Serge as somehow like our children: Karen, the bossy, know-it-all older sister; Serge, the sweet, gentle younger brother.

Their parents were less than perfect, but they'd turned out great anyway.

A week later I'm back to have the stitches removed. The door to the exam room is ajar. As I wait in the chair, I can hear Dr. Gallagher talking to Serge out in the hallway.

"What do you think, Serge? You want to try removing the sutures yourself?"

"I've never done it before."

"You'll be fine."

When the doctor walks in I ask, "Will there be somebody helping Serge?" What I really mean is, *supervising* him.

Dr. G. is briefly taken aback. He recovers. "Yes, of course. I'll send Karen in."

I am glad for Karen's presence. She prompts Serge with tips and techniques. "See, if you pull that one you'll get the whole row. There you go."

I wince a little.

"We're almost done," she says. I feel one last short tug.

Dr. Gallagher pops in to see how we're doing. It's like the whole family's here. "Serge did great," says Karen. I'm glad it's all over. She dresses my head with a bandage I know will fall off before I reach the car. I'm already thinking of heading over to Dillinger's for a last celebratory beer.

THE CHRISTMAS INSIDE

December 20, 2014. I'm at a nightclub called Dazzle, in Denver, to hear the superb Ron Miles play trumpet. To the right of me sits a man who was once my boss and best friend, and now boyfriend. Tonight is the thirteenth time he and I have been to Dazzle together, the sixth time we've heard Ron Miles play here. My boyfriend arrives early to make sure we always get the same seat, in the middle of the second row, at a little round table barely big enough to hold our food and drinks.

Though it sounds hokey, at Dazzle there really isn't a bad seat in the house. The intimate venue, seating maybe two hundred people, is the only real jazz club in Denver (not counting dive-y, free El Chapultepec). To the uninitiated, the phrase "the only real jazz club in Denver" may seem oxymoronic. One visit, however, will make you a believer. You will undergo a musical baptism and emerge spiritually reborn. If this does not happen, then you cannot be saved, at least not by music.

The performance room (as opposed to the separate bar area) is spare and unadorned, just black walls and an unassuming black platform at front for the musicians. The first time I came here, several years ago, the stage was draped with long scarves and tiny, twinkly Christmas lights. It looked like a cross between a gypsy cavern and someone's rec room. They have thankfully done away with the billowing, twinkling frippery. Speaking of twinkling, I always note sadly when I arrive that at least one, usually more, of the letters in the neon Dazzle sign outside is unlit. The closet-like women's room, inconveniently located beside the servers' station, fits two stalls and one sink into a space about half the size of a standard handicapped stall. When using it, a svelte figure will be handy and even then some complex maneuvering is

involved. It is painted completely red inside, which only heightens the claustrophobia. The paint job was probably the idea of the same person who thought of the scarves.

Yet none of these things matter. In fact, they only serve to highlight the one thing that does matter: the music. The sound in the room is gorgeous – clear, warm, rich. Listening to it, one feels as though enveloped in a luxurious and rare fabric, the kind of fabric with magical properties. The music provides all the adornment needed.

My boyfriend, David, and I scan the room, noting several familiar faces, strangers we know only in this context. In hushed tones, we crack silly jokes about them. There's the embarrassing woman in the front row who can't help acting out her admiration. She taps, sways, bobs her head, and sometimes erupts in little squeals and joyful claps. There is the big, bearded old hippie whom we used to see at every obscure movie screening in Denver and Boulder.

I say *used to* because I left Denver a year and a half ago to attend the MFA program in creative writing at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. This week, I've flown into town for a visit; I'll fly back before Christmas. I'm not exactly sure why I won't stay for Christmas. David is Jewish, so he can take it or leave it. I tell myself that airfares are cheaper the week before. Traveling during the holidays does not put me in a festive mood. Yet really, celebrating Christmas the way it's meant to be celebrated, with friends and loved ones, has come to seem an inexplicable burden. A great heaviness has been growing inside me, a heaviness visible on the outside if you pay attention to the clues.

The server delivers our drinks, straining the last drops of my cocktail into a martini glass. Ron Miles takes the stage (plywood platform), where he is joined by several other musicians: a drummer, upright bass player, someone on piano, an electric guitarist, and a special treat, a pedal steel guitar player. They open, in haunting, beautiful form, with "On Green Dolphin Street," a

tune most associated with a Miles Davis and John Coltrane recording.

Wistful, close-lipped smiles stretch across our two faces. David takes a sip of his beer, gripping the glass with a big-knuckled hand. He is a tall man with broad shoulders, skinny legs, and a large shaved head. He sits cross-legged, hunched a little in his chair as if he feels conspicuous beside the tiny table. A subtle goatee, auburn flecked with grey, accessorizes his face. He's not bad-looking; my girlfriends report that he's "cute." He is a professor of computer science at a local university. In fact, he is chair of his department. I love that he is a smartypants. Both in our fifties, we play at being middle-aged hipsters. We go to concerts and museums and new breweries. Wedged into the mustached crowd, we watch World Cup soccer games at a local bar.

I remember the first time we saw Ron Miles, the first time we went to Dazzle. Miles was playing with his knockout trio, including the virtuoso Bill Frisell on guitar and drummer Brian Blade. It was early April five years ago. I worked as the administrative assistant for the department my now-boyfriend chaired. When I took the job, David was married. On Christmas Day, his wife asked for a divorce. He and I began to do things outside of work. A jazz club was something new though, something different. The concert was at seven. On that Friday afternoon, I locked myself in the only individual bathroom in the building. I changed into a pretty, low-cut top, put in contact lenses, and carefully did my makeup. People banged on the door and I cursed them. David shut his office door while he changed. When he emerged he was wearing a crisp white dress shirt beneath a striking wool vest with a Native design on it.

Outside, under the Denver spring sun, I felt suddenly exposed and foolish. I was sure my facepaint looked garish and unnatural in the daylight. On the first week of Daylight Savings, the day seemed too early. It should be dark, I wanted cover. In the passenger seat, I turned my head

to the window. I wasn't sure what to expect from the performance. I listened to a little jazz, but not much. I was worried I might be bored. Instead I experienced a very different reaction. The music was amazing, so amazing that waves of emotion welled up inside me. I began to cry, turning my face away again. I thought of things, good and bad, that had happened in the past few years. I thought of people I loved. I recalled my childhood and thought of my dead mother.

She loved jazz and played the piano, two things she shared with my father, whom she divorced when I was small. She spent the '60s in a Mad Men kind of existence, putting her hair up in complicated hairdos and going to nightclubs, where she sat with a cigarette in one hand and a martini in the other, very dry, lots of olives.

I remembered one afternoon, though, when I was grown. My mother was renting a townhouse on the ocean in Atlantic City, where she had taken a job. She was lonely and tired, having cycled through too many jobs and places. Her physical and mental health had both declined. Yet she was momentarily excited to be living on the water. It had always been a dream of hers to live by the ocean, even if the beach in Atlantic City wasn't quite what she'd imagined, a little scuzzy and prosaically suburban.

In August, she invited her three adult children down for the weekend. Her mood crested and dropped like the waves. We lit the barbecue for dinner and were hanging out on the deck. My mother had put on a Charlie Parker LP and through the screen door came a swell of raucous, high-spirited skronks and squeals. I sipped my beer and listened, hearing something unexpected. I hadn't realized how much I could enjoy this kind of music.

Not everyone shared my opinion. "Can you please turn that off," my sister said. "It's giving me a headache."

On Sunday afternoon when it was time to leave, my mother broke down crying, huge

hulking sobs shaking her body, as my brother walked out to his truck. My brother stood, abashed, his hand on the door handle.

“Please, mom...” he pleaded.

Every New Year since that first time at Dazzle I vow I will listen to more jazz, and every year I never do. When I get back to Norfolk this year, I’m not up to my annual Christmas ritual, and it’s too far a drive anyway. The ritual I refer to is so pathetically mundane that this will seem strange, both that I enjoy it and that I can’t manage to pull it off this year: I go to Whole Foods.

I’ve spent many Christmases in my own company. I don’t really mind that, not in and of itself. I don’t have a problem being alone. I can enjoy myself alone. But *how much* I enjoy myself, whether alone or with others, depends on how I feel about myself. It’s one of those truisms so easy to forget.

Two years ago, 2012, was my last Christmas in Denver before going to grad school. On Christmas Eve I planned to go to the Whole Foods in Cherry Creek and then catch a showing of *Anna Karenina*, the new one with Kiera Knightley, at the Esquire Theatre. When I zipped down Lincoln to Speer Boulevard in late afternoon, grey clouds blanketed the sky. Snow was in the forecast.

The Whole Foods in affluent Cherry Creek is probably the nicest one in Colorado, except for maybe the big Boulder store. I jockeyed for position in the parking lot, trying not to let my little Corolla be bullied by Lexus SUVs. I eyed a spot and jumped for it. The scene inside was similar to one in the parking lot, with well-heeled Denverites in disorder, careening about madly to pick up last-minute free-range turkeys, organic produce, and most importantly, containers upon containers of fancy premade foods they wouldn’t have to cook themselves.

After buying some prepared foods for the next day (my Christmas dinner), I dodged other carts to make my way over to the large hot buffet. This was my favorite part, rows of chafing dishes containing everything from chilaquiles to moussaka to the makings of a complete turkey dinner. I had to use more than one carton to get everything I wanted. At the checkout area, lines of irritable, impatient customers snaked back toward the aisles. Impassive cashiers manned each register with mechanical efficiency. Overall, there wasn't much Christmas cheer on display. The reason this holiday pilgrimage was a special treat for me was that all that pre-prepared food was a huge splurge. My bill came out to almost forty dollars.

I took a seat at the counter by the window to eat my food. It'd gotten dark outside. Having adequately stuffed myself with processed carbs, I drove north up the slope that leads to Capitol Hill and parked next to the theater. Sparkles of white had begun to drift from the sky. I looked around for someplace to grab a drink before the movie. I had vaguely remembered a bar nearby, and sure enough, across the street a little ways down the block, I found a cozy neighborhood joint lit up inside with the requisite strings of Christmas lights. I sat at the bar and ordered a beer. The place was pretty empty. Three people to my right laughed and traded stories of annoying relatives, obviously getting into the holiday spirit.

The cook, who had nothing to do, talked to the bartender, who'd apparently just dashed out to 7-Eleven to buy Christmas presents for her daughter.

"Did you find anything good?" asked the cook.

"Yeah, I scored a stuffed owl that said 'BE ME' on the front, a rubber ducky keychain, and some stick-on tattoos.

"Nice."

The previews were just starting when I walked into the theater. Kiera Knightley made a

fetching Anna. There was lots of fur – fur hats, fur muffs, wool cloaks trimmed with fur. Upon leaving, I experienced the familiar disorientation that comes when you exit a movie theater, the eliding of two different worlds. Outside, with snow falling through the cones of orange light cast by sodium-vapor streetlamps, I could imagine reminders of czarist Russia half-hidden beneath the whitened cityscape. And my sleigh was covered with four inches of snow.

I brushed and scraped it all off, then headed north again toward home, about five miles away. After cresting the rise at Capitol Hill, the road began to dip. I knew this hill ended at busy Colfax Avenue, so I downshifted the stick shift to second, letting the transmission brake my speed. I ignored the frustrated closeness of an SUV behind me. I stopped for a red light at Park Avenue. When the light changed I tried to apply the gas gently, but the wheels spun anyway. Abruptly they convulsed with traction, sending me into a fishtail. I steadily turned my wheel in the direction the car had gone. I gave her the rein until I had calmed her enough to gently bring her back on course.

I hadn't counted on a confounding detour at the Coca-Cola bottling plant. The road ahead was closed for light rail construction, I guessed. I turned off to the left and tried to find my way out of a tangle of side streets. At last I teed into Blake Street. On my right a single wooden barrier saying ROAD CLOSED stood in front of a gaping pit, 30-feet across by 40-feet long. I shuddered a little next to the hole, turned left, and slowly drove the last mile over untracked snow, the night noiseless as the galaxy.

It was a little after midnight when I got home. The snow was still falling. I felt unaccountably giddy. I was happy...happy to have made it home, happy for the night, happy there, happy to be leaving, happy for change, something new, happy for what I was leaving behind. I was delirious with joy and snow and sledges and nostalgia.

Tonight at Dazzle I wear no makeup. I am not dressed in anything particularly fancy. But I do cry. I'm always taken by surprise at how emotional the music makes me, just as it did my mother. At the close of the year, it's natural I suppose to look back and feel some turbulence inside. It's been six months since I was last in Denver, a year and a half since I left.

I had moved to Denver from New York City (with a stop in Arizona in between). Denver sits on the edge of the prairie abutting the Rockies, historically positioned at a major cattle shipping point. There is a sense in which it's an uncomfortable meld of Midwestern and mountain. Which is to say, I never thought I'd warm up to Cowtown as much as I did. Indulged tonight by the music, I enter a kind of reverie. I think about the other times David and I have been to Dazzle. I think about the restaurants and coffee shops, distilleries and cider bars, reclaimed art co-ops, new music venues, the museums, the farmers market, the old warehouse and mercantile architecture. I think about always being able to see the mountains in the distance, and how much fun it is to stroll around downtown, how pleasant to walk the sunken Cherry Creek bike path through the center of the city, popping up at the REI in the old trolley power station, or at the Mayan Theatre on Broadway. I remember eating gourmet happy-hour fare at Deluxe before going to see the restored *Metropolis* at the Mayan one night. We stopped at Sweet Action for ice cream, and when I walked into the Mayan still eating my ice cream, I got nervous. "It's okay," said the ticket taker, "you can bring your sweet action in here."

I know I'll never warm up to Norfolk. Something in the close, brackish smell of the water in the estuary at low tide lets me know that this place is not for me. I feel dislocated not only physically. Mentally I'm getting further and further off course. Going to grad school was supposed to magically fix that, put me back on track. I'm not surprised though. Deep down I

knew that when you go someplace new, you can't hope to leave yourself behind. All my clichés have become mixed up. I can't find myself, I can't get away from myself.

I miss things. I miss the past. Most of the time, the present is consumed with trying to claw my way out of my increasing dysfunction. Looking forward, I miss things I haven't even lost. Yet.

On my first Christmas Eve in Norfolk, a year ago, I endeavored to take a drive out to Hilltop in Virginia Beach where the only Whole Foods in the area was located. I don't like driving and I try to stay off freeways, so I take surface roads a lot. I got on Virginia Beach Boulevard near downtown Norfolk and commenced driving east. And driving. Innumerable strip malls, car dealerships, and depressing little stores rattled past. I kept driving. I settled into a kind of torpor of strip-mall-induced malaise. I reached Town Center, where there was a tall hotel, a tall office building, and nicer stores. Swaths of towering pine trees began to appear. I drove and drove and drove until I was sure I was going to drive straight into the ocean and off the edge of the planet.

The Whole Foods finally popped up on my left in between the other stores. It looked like a Bed Bath and Beyond, so I almost drove past it. Whole Foods are nothing to boast of architecturally, but they seem to derive a certain aura from their context, their *ethos* if you will. Think Boulder, or Santa Fe, or Austin, pedestrian-friendly, hip places like that. The ethos of this sixteen-mile stretch from Norfolk through Virginia Beach was one of nothing but interminable strip mall, strip mall that ended only where there was no more land on which to erect a chain outlet. I have no doubt that plans are in the works for the city of Virginia Beach to construct a floating platform at sea on which they can build a mixed-use, retail/residential development.

The atmosphere inside this Whole Foods was different as well, mellower, not frenzied like Cherry Creek. I witnessed no shenanigans, such as people pushing other people's carts out of the way or skipping ahead in the checkout line. People rolled their carts in a leisurely daze, seemingly stupefied by the high-end grocery fare. They peered perplexed at indecipherable labels on what looked like normal food, as if the labels were written in a strange code sent back from the future, a future taking place now in another part of the country. There were no lines at the checkout counters. Enthusiastic cashiers stood at the ready, shouting "Hello, Merry Christmas" to everyone.

I proceeded straight to the hot buffet. In big cauldrons, three different kinds of seafood bisque curdled from the high heat. The buffet pans were not so numerous and contained bland, generic items: some soupy mashed potatoes, steamed broccoli, spaghetti and meatballs, and two different kinds of chicken in sauce. It was a little disappointing, but I had driven all this way, so I stocked up my wax carton anyway, and grabbed some wrapped foods for Christmas Day.

On my way out, though, I noticed the feature that compensated for the lackluster buffet: an attached cafe, called The Porch, offering wine and a large beer selection. Jackpot. None of the Whole Foods in Colorado serve alcohol. It was happy hour, making the already cheap beverages even cheaper. I ordered a pint of Arrogant Bastard ale, a fittingly malty brew for a winter night. It cost only three dollars, a jolly amount. I sat with my drink at a table to eat my food in civilized fashion.

A Chinese woman and her American husband were at the table next to me. They picked from a large platter of seafood. "Here, have some," the man offered. The woman said, "We buy at the fish counter and they cook it for us. So cheap!" People kept traipsing through the front door, calling out to friends who happened to be there. A large group of black women conversed

convivially around a long table, upon which were several opened bottles of wine and the strewn remnants of gift wrapping.

I finished my food and beer. It was six-thirty. The store was closing early, at seven. I figured I had time for one more. I got a tart, bubbly Duchesse de Bourgogne, a garnet-colored beer served in a tulip goblet. Again, three dollars. I had decamped to the bar to take up less room. A man beside me asked, “What are you drinking? Is that a dark beer?”

“No, it’s a sour.”

He asked the bartender for a taster. He took a sip, paused, then said, “That’s good. That tastes Christmas-y.”

Whole Foods was the party place in Virginia Beach on Christmas Eve. Who knew? I thought, *this is good. This is as much Christmas as I can handle.*

I cry tonight. I cry not just because the music is beautiful and I’m feeling sentimental and homesick. I cry because I know this will be the last time David and I, as a couple, hear Ron Miles play. It will be the last time, as a couple, we go to Dazzle and sit at that little table in the center of the second row. I know I am going to leave him. I don’t know it will take five months to happen, but I know it *will* happen. David is wonderful, but it’s become too exhausting to hate myself and love someone else.

The servers have placed a wallet containing a bill on each table. David gets out his credit card. Ron Miles and the band are playing their last number, an original called “Since Forever.” It alternates between loud and quiet, orchestral and intimate. It sweeps grandly, sounding like a movie soundtrack. They do an encore, then clear the stage. I pocket a tissue after furtively trying to dab my eyes. I tell David, the man I will leave, that I am going to buy a CD and have Ron

Miles sign it. He nods. "Okay," he says, "I'll meet you outside."

I know I will break up with him. I do not know it won't be until May, on the phone, when we are supposed to be making plans for a vacation in the Pacific Northwest, and that he will say, "This is not the conversation I thought we'd be having," and that my heart will drop so low, so hard the ground will shake for days.

The Christmas after my mom died, twenty years ago, I was living in Park Slope, Brooklyn. For dinner that night, I got cold sesame noodles (a New York City thing) from the Chinese take-out across the street. I steamed some broccoli and carrot slices and mixed them in with the noodles. I was health-conscious then and in good shape. I'll admit that was not a very good Christmas on my own. But I had the sense that it marked a day of mourning, of transition, a day of putting my troubles firmly in the past where they belonged. I wanted to get on with my life.

This year, at the end of 2014, there is no such getting on. I have been curdling inside for a long time now. My car stays parked on Christmas Eve. I do feel sad and lonely. It's not someone else's company I'm missing, though. It's *my* company, myself. I'm not here. I miss me, I miss the me that used to be.

A couple of days after Christmas, I walk down Colley Avenue in Norfolk and stop to look in the window of A. Dobson's, a gift shop. Displayed in the window are festive party settings, holiday decorations, a sparkly blouse on a hanger. *It's party season*, I think dully. It all looks very inviting, conjuring a modern-day version of one of the fancy balls in *Anna Karenina*. Yet these things arouse no spark, no interest in me. I don't buy myself gifts anymore or fun decorations or take people up on their invitations to come over for Christmas dinner. I could do

all of those things and it wouldn't be a good Christmas. Because there's no room inside of me for Christmas. I have no Christmas inside.

I buy a CD and spend at least a minute trying to get the impenetrable shrink wrap off. I wait my turn. Ron Miles may be the most humble person I have ever seen. Another audience member is bending his ear. He listens patiently, head bowed as if in prayer, his trumpet held close to his chest. He lays it down before I get to him. As he pulls out the CD cover to sign, I try to explain what the night has meant to me. I tell him I no longer live here and that I miss coming to Dazzle. "Yes," he says, "I recognize you and your friend. You always sit in the middle near the stage."

I tell him how much I enjoyed the performance, how emotionally resonant it was. "It was like listening to the ghosts of Christmas past, Christmas present, and Christmas future."

"That's a beautiful description," he says.