

## Carrying Sam

by Karen Foster

*I am walking a tightrope, carrying a black cat.*

*Below lies a sea of sorrow.*

*There are safety nets I can aim for when I lose my balance.*

*Being resilient is a harrowing experience.*

—Reflection

Class News, Harvard Radcliffe Class of 1974

Thirtieth Anniversary Report

My father and I have a schedule: I pour the cereal into each child's bowl, and he adds the strawberries, defrosted from the night before. I put clothes in the washer, and he moves them to the dryer, initiating a truce between us. If he bathes the kids, I dry them and put them in pajamas. He hands me the baton as he leaves for work, and I run my leg of the course until I go to school or work and then give it back to him.

Everyone in town knows the shocking story of how our mother abandoned us, her flight from our lives bringing an end to a kind of chaos she seemed to cherish and initiating the schedule by which my father and I managed our own negotiations. The day of her departure was the happiest of my life. I was sixteen and she had been keeping me home from school since I was six.

*"I just can't get her to go to school," Mummy tells my third-grade teacher. No one would believe me if I said she keeps me at home, that she gives me her pills, that she lies.*



Earning a scholarship to Harvard grants me a new life away from my responsibilities to my siblings. It allows access to the lush, textured learning into which I can burrow. It is *time*: to delve deeper, to challenge, to experiment. It offers *choices*: to stay up all night, to have a second helping, to take Introduction to Music or Beginner Urdu. It means being surrounded by museums, libraries, labs, and athletic fields. It is the Emerald City and the Land of Promise.

I climb the thirty steps to Widener Library's columned entrance. Inside the main reading room, grad students, researchers, professors, and scholars sit at long, oak tables with books fanned out around them in semi-circles or stacked in short towers. They are highlighting sentences, writing in margins, and making notes on 4x5 inch index cards. They are looking at pages of printed words, and I am looking at them—academics, who all know why they are here. Now I am one of them. Despite the work I put in to be among them, a part of me wonders if I belong. Is my presence here an illusion? Have I deceived myself?

Each day after classes, I pass through Harvard Square where orange-robed Hari Krishnas trance-chant to tinkling bells, street musicians play guitars, and peace activists hand out pamphlets. On some days, there are jugglers, puppeteers, and acrobats. Bookstore windows feature feminist authors: Germaine Greer, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan. "New Wave" films play at The Brattle Theater: "Belle du Jour" and "Breathless."

On my dorm floor, Emma Brody returns from classes carrying a guitar case and singing as she walks down our hallway. She is a Folklore and Mythology sophomore. Her long, red hair is topped with a beret. Paul is from working class Winthrop, not far from Boston. He and his roommate, Bill, play Neil Young songs on guitar. A pick-up soccer game begins in the hallway before dinner. Jung pokes his head out of his doorway and

asks, "What is going on?" in a mainland Chinese accent. He wears thick, dark rimmed glasses that look too big for his slight body. His hair makes him look like a newly hatched bird.

Everything around me vibrates; the newness, the now-ness of this spanking new life. I have a home and a family of peers who also salivate over course reading lists.

*Kept home, I sterilize bottles of formula for the new baby, change diapers, and cook Cream of Wheat for my mother to stop the sound of her retching from morning sickness. In between, I read anything that has words: detergent boxes, cans of hairspray, prescription bottles, and the encyclopedia my mother bought from the salesman who lingered in our doorway. If I get to school, the librarian has held books for me. I want to read about famous women, Mary Queen of Scots, Jane Adams, Sacajawea, and Joan of Arc.*

September 28, 1970

Dear Aunt Liv,

I still can't believe I'm at Harvard! There is so much to tell you! I love my courses! I'm taking Classical Greek (in case I major in Archaeology), a British and American theater course that meets in an actual theater, an introductory biology course with a Nobel prize winner, and "Group Dynamics" with Freed Bales, who studies non-directed group behavior. Jamie Bernstein (Leonard's daughter) is in my group!

My dorm, Holmes Hall, is in a group of residences called "North House," in "The Quad," about ten minutes' walk from Harvard Square. There are students from Beijing, Auckland, and Cape Town on our floor! My roommate, Marie Schultz, is from Sandusky, Ohio, and she seems really lovely. Our room is on the third floor and looks out onto the courtyard. We each have a desk, a dresser, and a

closet—spacious after sharing a room with three sisters! There are upperclassmen on our floor—women, and men —since this is the first year of co-residential living. When parents visit, they always ask us what it's like to share the bathrooms with men. It seems like a funny question to us because it's like family and no big deal.

The dining rooms here are beautiful!—lots of sun-filled windows and round tables, nothing like the rushed cafeterias I saw at other colleges I visited. At dinner, students talk with each other about their courses and the war in Vietnam.

Just wanted to let you know how much I love it here and to thank you for being such a great godmother and aunt. I could never have gotten here without you.

Much Love,

Kaz

PS I'll be home to see the kids at Thanksgiving.



"Has George Wald burned a dollar bill yet?" Michael, a Physics major, asks Colleen and me. As freshmen, we take "Nat Sci 5" with the Nobel Prize winner, who introduces us to the biology of the natural world and its destruction through corporate greed. David is taking a seminar with a young, controversial lecturer in evolutionary biology.

"Basically, Trivers' theory is that men can never be certain that the offspring carry their genes, while women always know."

"Lowell got a job at the new Computer Center," Leo tells us. "You must be the only undergrad they hired," Leo says, turning to Lowell.

"Uhm." Lowell is reading *The Washington Post*. "It turns out that there aren't enough grad students with experience."

"Wow! Where did you get the experience?" I ask, poking the newspaper playfully. I have spied Lowell rushing into the dining-room each evening just before dinner ends, and wondered why this handsome man usually sits alone.

"Oh!" he says, startled and then blush-smiling at me, "I sort of taught myself."

"That's impressive. I'm 'Kaz.'"

"I know."

"Oh," I say, pleased that he has noticed me. "Hey, is the black cat yours?"

"Oh, Sam? Yeah. He just appeared in my room. I don't know how he got in. I mean, the window was open, but it's the third floor."

"Wow! There's nothing but a fire escape ladder outside. Why did you name him 'Sam'?"

"Oh," Lowell chuckles. "Once when my guitar was lying on the floor he suddenly pounced on the strings. Leo and I were in the room and simultaneously called out 'Play it again, Sam.'"

"From *Casablanca*," I said.



The elevator opens, empty, but for a black cat who heads down our hallway and stops at Lowell's door. He gives a short meow, then sits, waiting for Lowell to answer.

“He’s at class, I think,” I say when Sam looks up at me.

Sam suddenly drops to the floor on one shoulder and stretches out on his side.

“You are very friendly!” I say, kneeling beside him and scratching his jowl lightly.

“Wanna wait over here?” I motion across the hall to the room I share with Marie. “It’s just me,” I say, standing. He remains sitting.

“Okay, I’ll just leave the door open in case you change your mind.”

A few minutes later, Sam appears in my doorway.

“Could you get me some water?” he asks

“Sure. There’s a bowl in the kitchen.”

I set the bowl down and watch him scoop up the water with his paw, licking the drops as they fall.

“We prefer water that moves,” he says, looking up at me. “Running water.”

“Good to know,” I say.



I have been re-reading the same Greek text over and over when I notice the falling snow in the glow of the streetlights.

"First Snowfall!!!!" I say to Marie. "Come On!" Pulling on my shoes, I run down the hallway of my floor, calling at the open doors, "First Snowfall!" as if it is a fire drill. Dormmates drop their highlighters and abandon their typewriters with welcomed urgency as they follow me into the chilly courtyard. Snow is sticking to our hair and eyelashes as we slide and fall, drunk with spontaneity. "Red Rover!" Someone yells, and we divide up into two teams.

"Red Rover, Red Rover! Send Kaz right over!" I recognize Lowell's voice. Hoots and cheers from my teammates, "Go, Kaz!" "Breakthrough, Kaz!" "Don't get caught!" Snow-slush-running toward the line of linked arms, Lowell wraps his long arms around me before we join hands for the next turn. Later, we chase each other down the halls and up the stairs of all three floors of the dorm, shooting one another with elastic bands and then landing in his bed. By November, I have moved into his room.



Since Lowell is flying to D.C. for Thanksgiving, I offer to take Sam home. Walking up the hill from the train station, I place Sam's carrier on the wrought iron bench overlooking the restaurant where I had worked during high school and sit down next to him.

"That's where I had sex for the first time," I tell Sam. "It was with my boss on the basement floor."

"Sounds romantic," Sam quips.

"I thought it meant he loved me, that I had some sort of control over him."

"Did you?" Sam asks.

“No,” I say, pulling Sam’s carrier closer to me. “He mocked me in front of the other guys who worked there. ‘*Hurry up, Kaz, or I’ll have to slip my dick through the keyhole,*’ He yelled outside the dressing room door when I was changing into my uniform.”

“That was cruel and ignorant.”

“It was. But you know what I told myself?”

“What?” Sam asks.

“*I am leaving, and he is stuck here.*”

“Maybe you had some power after all?” Sam offers.

“You know, this town, this *enlightened*, prep school town, hanged three women as witches,” I say, clenching my jaw.

“Were you treated like a witch?” he asks.

“In a way,” I say, “It was as if our mother’s leaving made us untouchables. Nobody offered help.” I shake my head, remembering. “Did you know that people believed witches could shapeshift into black cats?” I tease.

“Humans are still afraid of black cats,” he says, flattening his ears in angry memory.

“My sibs won’t be. They will love meeting you!”

“An offering?” he asks.

“What do you mean?”

“I can also be the reason you need to leave them, again.”

“But they know I’m at college now, Sam. They know I have to go back to Cambridge.”

“It’s not them I’m worried about.”

We reach the tiny apartment where my father and siblings live, despite the limitations on the number of tenants. Thick smells of garlic and chili peppers from the neighbors’ cooking permeate the thin walls, reminding me that I never want to live like this again, Thanksgiving barely begins when my father’s façade of caring falls away, and the dark, domineering man re-emerges.

“This isn’t a hotel, you know,” he says after I return from seeing a friend who is also home for the holiday. “You seem to think you can just come back here to sleep.”

“Come on, Dad, are you still going to pull this crap?” I say, remembering the times I slept in the park after he locked me out for being late.

“You may be running around in Cambridge, but the rules are different here. You are using my heat, my lights, my water,” he says, goading me.

“Fine!” I yell back. I grab Sam’s carrier and my coat.

I leave a roasted turkey on top of the stove to prove that he can no longer treat me this way. He no longer has power over me.

My grip is fused to the handle of Sam’s carrier as I walk across an empty, frozen campus. I am struggling to see past the memory of tears running down small faces, because I left them sooner than planned.

On my return, it is quiet in the dorm because no one else is back from their holiday.

“You were expecting him to be different?” Sam asks, rubbing against me.

“He was so happy when I got the acceptance letter.”

“Like when you were little? Like when you were the center of his world?” Sam asks.

“I was,” I say, remembering. “He would take me to work with him in Boston and detour through Cambridge to show me Harvard. ‘Someday you may go here,’ he would say. I was only four.”

“He changed,” Sam says.

“He did. After the accident he became paranoid and controlling.”

*Daddy leans on his crutches and looks at the kitchen like it is the first time he has seen it. He has a patch over one eye. "It's so good to be home," he says.*

*Mummy pulls out his chair at the head of the table and he sits down slowly like it hurts him. The crutches crash to the floor. Now I can see a big white bandage taped around his throat. I take my seat next to Daddy. Tiny, black threads go in and out of his forehead near his hair. The skin looks like raw meat.*

*“It’s just some bandages, Honey,” he says, except that when he talks, he can’t open his mouth. His tongue is trapped in a cage of teeth and silver wire.*

*I run from the table and lock myself in the bathroom, crying so hard I can hardly catch my breath. My handsome Daddy is broken and looks like a Frankenstein monster.*

“After the accident they fought like they hated each other. It was frightening.”

“You felt sorry for him,” Sam says.

“Yes.”

“Maybe you need to stop doing that,” Sam says.

I roll up my sadness and place it in the back of a drawer because mid-term exams lie ahead. Reading has always been my evergreen, my way of coping with conditions I have no power to change.



Lowell and I are driving to his family’s summer house near Cape Cod to pick up skis stored there. He is going to Gstaad with his family for Christmas Vacation. I have to look up “Gstaad” on a map.

“I thought Cape Cod was on the ocean,” I say, noting the towering trees along the road.

“You’ll see,” he teases, clearly enjoying the suspense.

“Not a cottage,” I say as he pulls into a circular driveway.

The driveway leads to a two-story, weather-shingled house whose splendor is not apparent until I walk through the front door into a vast foyer. Straight ahead and behind a wall of glass doors, there is an enclosed porch overlooking the bluest sea. The brilliance of the sun's reflection off the water is stunning, even blinding.

Lowell hugs me from behind, his beard nuzzling my neck and in seconds we are taking off each other's clothes.

"You're freezing," he says, as he scoops me up and carries me up the grand stair case, passing a mounted ship's figurehead of a mermaid. Lowell is still holding me as he turns down the puffy comforter on his parents' king size bed. Sun streams through a semi-circle of windows as we climb under the sheets.

"Electric blanket!" Lowell says, producing the corded control box like a rabbit out of a hat.

Sex with Lowell is playful and tender. Our bodies are agile as we try remembered illustrations from *The Joy of Sex*. I fit snugly inside the long, slim frame of his body curled around me. His skin is like the soft lining of a hummingbird nest built with cobwebs. Inside I am free of yearning.

The sun is lower in the sky when we wake up.

"Is it okay if I look around?" I ask afterward.

Room after room is wallpapered and curtained in complementing nautical themed patterns and colors, each with a bedspread to match. Closets are filled with summer clothes, rain gear, boots, and jackets. Everything thought of ahead of time. On the wallpaper, sailboats bob on gentle waves.

"My brother and I shared this room," Lowell says, catching up with me. "Andy is an excellent sailor."

"And you?"

“Hated it.”

“How come?”

“I didn’t fit in with the yacht club kids. Come on! I want to show you something!” He grabs my hand and pulls me down the stairs.

“Look,” he says, lifting the long cushion. Lowell is hovering over a bench to the side of a stone fireplace that is big enough to stand in.

“Is it a storage box?”

“Watch this.” As he pushes a button, and the box begins to descend.

“Come with me!” he says.

We run to the basement as the box arrives. Firewood is neatly stacked against one wall. Lowell tosses several logs into the box.

“Now watch this!” he says as the box chugs up the track to the living room above us.

“I built that!”

“How did you know how to do that?” I ask.

“I just figured it out,” he says, as if building a machine was a simple task.

I am thinking that my father couldn’t change a light bulb and my mother hid in closets during thunderstorms.

On the drive back to Cambridge, I ask Lowell if he was a loner.

“Since fifth grade. I asked the teacher for a ‘rubber’ instead of an ‘eraser.’”

“Oh, No! How come you called it that?”

“The Foreign Service posted my father in London, and I went to a British school. When we came back to the States on home leave, the American kids made fun of my accent and for using words that meant sexual things.”

“Did you tell your parents?”

“I think they wanted me to figure it out on my own.”

“And did you?”

“In a way. I acted like I was above them, like they were childish. I’ve always gotten along better with adults.”

“Sounds lonely,” I say.

“It was,” he says. “But I taught myself things, like how to get that firewood upstairs.”

“When the other kids were sailing,” I muse.



When we return to Cambridge, Lowell drops me and the skis off at the dorm to hunt for a parking space. I open the door and Sam hops down from the dresser. His tail is raised and curved in curiosity.

“I thought it was a summer cottage!” I tell Sam, “I had no idea ....”

“... that Lowell came from money?” Sam finishes the sentence. “Is that what you were going to say?”

“I knew Lowell wasn’t poor. But seeing the house, the care taken, each boy treated like an individual rather than a blur of babies. It made me uncomfortable.”

“Angry?” Sam asks.

“Maybe. My father would take groceries off the check-out belt at the supermarket when he realized he didn’t have enough money.”

“Embarrassing?” Sam asks.

“Mortifying. My father had no shame. He would drag out counting his money as people waited in line behind us.”

“For sympathy?”

“Oh, yes!”

“And yet you felt sorry for him?”

“Yes,” and somehow responsible. When my father looked at the mail, he would bark at us, ‘Bills, Bills, Bills!’ as if we had caused something bad. It was as if he didn’t make the connection between spending money and getting bills. He can be so fucking pathetic and helpless!”

“Unlike Lowell,” Sam notes.



It is Saturday morning at Hemenway Gym where Lowell and his opponent are whacking a small rubber ball off the pock-marked walls of a small court. Others in the gallery with me are watching intently but silently, making it harder for me to figure out who is winning. Suddenly Lowell slaps his hand at the wall angrily, sweat flying.

“Lowell!!!!” he yells loudly.

I am jolted by the self-directed harshness, but the match continues.

As we are leaving the gym, Lowell pauses at a row of framed team photos from years past.

“That’s my dad and uncle. My grandfather is probably here somewhere,” he says, scanning the row of photos. “Everyone in my family has played,” adding “in prep school, too.”

“Do you enjoy playing?” I ask.

“Not that much, really, but can’t break the family chain.”

“Why not?”

“Duty? Obligation? Legacy?”

“Playing squash?” I snort.

“You’re barking up the wrong tree, Kaz.”

I am puzzled by the severity of his tone.

“Why do you slap the wall?”

“Oh! I always do that when I lose a point.”

“It looks like you’re hurting yourself.”

We walk back to the dorm in silence.



After the botched Thanksgiving with my family, I am going home with Marie to spend a *normal* holiday with a *normal* family. We are sharing the cost of a ride with a stoic upperclassman who is driving to Pennsylvania. We stop at a phone booth outside of Youngstown so Marie can call home ahead of our arrival. Pushing my nose against the glass in goofy anticipation, I try to make her laugh while she is talking to her parents. But Marie is not talking. She is sinking to the ground, and the dropped receiver is dangling above her. She has learned that her mother died.

This isn’t supposed to happen. This is not the plan. And it is as if I am watching a movie of my past, watching myself dial my father’s number at work.

*“Dad, Mummy left.’ I tell him. “Aunt Linda, came to pick her up. Uncle Marvin was driving. It was all planned. The kids are scared and crying.”*

*“Can you take care of things until I get there?” he asked.*

*“Yes,” I said, feeling as if a great weight was lifting. Thinking, ‘Now things will be better. One parent is better than the two of them.’”*

Except this time, there are no kids, and I feel the floor dropping out from under me as I free-fall in darkness, further and further outside the earth’s gravitational pull. Cut loose. Weightless. Helpless. I have no one.

The upperclassman driver takes me to his home in a coal-mining town of shale piles to spend an awkward gray Christmas with strangers. Desperate to calm my terror, to anchor myself, I crawl into the driver’s bed while he is sleeping. Sex with near strangers has always been a reliable way to feel wanted.

“What are you doing?!” he gasps. “Get out of here!”

His reproof is unexpected, leaving me even more alone and humiliated.



Back in Cambridge, Sam pushes the door to our room open and sees me curled up on the bed, still wearing my coat.

“Pretty bad?” Sam asks, gently tapping me with his paw, urging me out of despair and back to the present.

“Yeah,” I whisper, stroking his forehead with my index finger. “Her mother wasn’t even sick.”

“Another mother who leaves without notice,” he says.

“But I was glad my mother left, Sam,” I say, sitting up.

“Still, her leaving took you by surprise,” he says. “You didn’t see it coming.”



It is Spring vacation.

“I don’t know whether I’m more afraid of flying or meeting Lowell’s parents,” I tell Sam as I throw a ball of yarn at him to get his attention. He catches the ball with his front paws and starts beating it with his hind legs.

“Do you know how silly you look, thumping that ball?” I say, laughing.

“Some things are hard-wired,” he says, settling down on the ball as if brooding an egg.

“Lowell told them about my family.”

“Your stigmata?” Sam asks.

“We want to be upfront with them, Sam. I am probably not the girlfriend they are hoping to see with their son.”

“You mean you are not wealthy?” Sam asks.

“Not just that. I want them to know that Lowell has chosen to be with someone who carries a lot of ‘baggage.’”

“So, how did the parents react?”

“Lowell said they thought I must be an incredible person to have done all that and get into Harvard.”

“Not what you expected.”

“I don’t know what I expected, maybe some concern for their son.”

“And now?”

“I guess I’m cautiously optimistic.”



A spiky green cactus sits alone in the center of the plate in front of me.

“Never had an artichoke?” Lowell’s dad suddenly asks. “Let me show you.” He plucks off an outer leaf. “You see this part at the top?” he asks, showing me the underside of the blade. “You scrape it with your bottom teeth like this.” He demonstrates and tosses it to the side of the plate.

“Thanks!” I say, in relief.

He tells me that I can call him ‘Adam’. “Isn’t Harvard an amazing place, Kaz?” he asks.

“I feel like I could spend a lifetime there and only experience a part of it.”

“Have you chosen a major yet?”

“Yes! Psychology.”

“Interesting ... and is there a particular area in psychology?”

“Child psychology! Lowell and I are taking a course on Erik Erikson.”

“I’m not familiar with him.”

“He’s a psychologist who describes social development as stages that parents and children negotiate,” Lowell says, joining in.

“‘Negotiate’?” Adam asks.

“According to Erikson, children play an active role in their development; they have intentions,” I say. “For example, a twelve-year-old is curious and tries drinking or smoking.”

“Right!” Lowell adds. “Parents can respond in different ways, like being overly-prescriptive.”

“Or, they can be the opposite, and the kid gets hurt!” I say.

“That’s why you send your children to boarding school!” Adam jokes. “No really, let the *experts* handle these things. Then you can enjoy skiing vacations with your parents!”

“But children need to separate from their parents,” I counter. “It’s part of normal development.”

“‘Separate?’ Adam repeats. “Hmm, I need to think about that one. Let’s talk about this again.”

He is a large man with ruddy cheeks and jet-black straight hair. Lowell has told me that he was the preferred parent at bath-time. "Mum was all business, four little boys to bathe, but his dad soaped up the washcloth and ran it softly down each shoulder and arm, lightly tickling as he washed between fingers and toes. He reminds me of the way my father used to be.

I like this kind of father; one who would catch you if you fell backwards. Not like the one who left me with her.

*Mummy walks through the front door carrying a black plastic garment bag with "The Yankee Lady," an expensive clothing store, printed across it in gold lettering.*

*"Where did you get the money to buy that?" he demands.*

*She smiles wistfully and says something she is saying more frequently these days:*

*"It wouldn't take much, just a blow to the head."*

*She talks nonchalantly about his injuries from the car accident six years ago. Is part of her serious? She could easily kill him. I wonder what will happen to us if she does.*

*"Dad, can I talk to you?"*

*"What is it? I can't talk to you now! What do you want?!" I am an annoying insect.*

*"I don't have a ride to school."*

*"What are you talking about! I didn't enroll you in that school, your mother did. **She** can find you a ride!" He leaves, taking with him my hope of rescue.*

Later, we watch home movies of little Lowell and his brother hunting for hidden Easter eggs in a small yard of green grass.

“This was when we lived in London, Kaz,” Adam says.

Each little boy’s face lights up as he discovers another colored egg to add to his basket.

While I am embracing my new life, there is an illusion that Where-I-Come-From is standing still. But it is not standing still; it is moving from “bad” to “worse.” When we return to Cambridge, I learn that my father has taken the three youngest children to an orphanage in upstate New York. They are ages five, eight, and ten. In two years, time, they have been left by our mother, by me, and now, by our father.

Guilt reaches into my chest, twisting and tightening its grip, matched only by the ruthless determination required of me to thrive here.

“They must have been so frightened,” I say to Lowell.

“It’s not your fault, Kaz,” Lowell says, pulling me toward him. “We’ll figure something out. We can visit them!”

And I believe him. I devour courses in family dynamics, attachment theory, early childhood, psychosocial development, and neuropsychology seeking answers that will help me understand what has happened to my family and me, a bargain of sorts, allowing me to stay.



“We got it!” Leo is banging on our door.

"It's open," Lowell yells back.

"We got the grant!!" Leo announces. "We're going to Saskatchewan!"

"Saskatchewan?" I ask.

"It was such a long shot, Kaz," Lowell says. "I forgot to tell you about it."

Studying Canada's socialized health care system is a strategy for bolstering their applications to medical school.

"It's just three months," Lowell says. "Then, you and Meg fly out and join us for a cross-country road trip." Meg is Leo's friend.

Spreading the atlas out on the bed, Leo says. "We *have* to go to Banff! Lake Louise!"

"Then down to Vancouver," Lowell says.

My mind is floating up to the ceiling and looking down at myself as if in a scene. I have been here before.

*A taut silence stretches thin inside our house except for the sound of shoes rat-a-tat-tatting across the wooden floor upstairs. Back and forth, back and forth. I climb the stairs slowly, listening hard for clues. Her bureau drawer is pulled open. Soft satin is folded neatly inside a suitcase on the floor. She looks out the window where below a car trunk is open, waiting. Her sister waits in the passenger seat, while my uncle paces on the sidewalk. No words needed. She is leaving.*

“Have you seen Sam?” I ask, looking for my backpack. But Lowell and Leo do not see me in battle with my past, fighting to stay on the ground. They do not hear my panic.



“How could he *forget* to tell me, Sam? For the past year, he’s been acting as if he cares about me.”

“I don’t think it’s an act,” Sam says, kneading my sweatered arm gently, rhythmically. “I think he cares deeply about you.”

“So, he avoided telling me.”

“Maybe. Admitting he cares leaves him open to getting hurt. He’s shut himself away from people since grade school when the kids made fun of him.”

“So, he is willing to risk losing me after a year of letting me in? Jesus, Sam! Why am I so easy to leave?”



A month later, we are driving Sam to the summer house, where he will stay while Lowell is in Canada.

“I’m glad that you’ll be with Liv this summer, Kaz,” Lowell says.

“I don’t like leaving him behind,” I say, turning to face Sam’s carrier in the backseat. I can’t take him with me because my aunt is allergic to cats.

“He’ll be fine,” Lowell says. “He’ll love being there! All that space!”

“With your mother’s cats? You don’t just toss a new cat into existing cat territory.”

“Sam’s tough. Remember, he was a stray before he found us. They’ll adapt to each other. They always do.” Lowell says. “It’s only for three months.”

I can’t say, “Now Sam is being taken away from me,” because it was my decision. Another rotten choice between Bad and Worse; living with my family and keeping Sam with me, or staying with Liv and leaving him. I can’t ask why I always have to choose between outcomes in which I lose.

Lowell’s departure date is like waiting for inevitable calamity, trembling, and continuously tamping down the panic inside when the instinct is to collapse to the ground and beg, “Please, please don’t do this to me. Please don’t send me back.”

*Mummy is lying on one of the twin beds in the room I share with my sisters. Naked underneath the nightgown she has gathered up around her waist. As she spreads her legs, I close my eyes and hold my breath, preparing to insert my middle finger inside her, searching for a thread that tells us that the intrauterine device has not escaped. The muscular walls grab my middle finger, closing around it tightly and I am afraid that they will not let go; that they will consume even more of me.*



Two weeks after Lowell has arrived in Saskatoon, I learn that my aunt has phoned him.

“I’m worried,” she says. “Kaz is severely depressed, in a sort of fugue state. You need to do something.”

I can't seem to get off the bed in the little guest room Aunt Liv has made up for me. It is as if I dreamed my freshman year and my life with Lowell. Or that I did live it, and it's been taken away as reprisal for thinking I could escape my past.



Lowell flies me to Saskatoon, where I join him in the room he is renting at a co-op house with twelve other residents.

"Whoa, I didn't even hear you get up," Lowell says. "How long have you been sitting there?"

"Are you angry at me being here?"

"No." He pulls on his jeans. "I flew you out here, didn't I?"

"Yes. But It's like you're going through the motions. Fulfilling some obligation. I know Leo doesn't want me here, that he thinks I'll be a distraction."

"Leo and I are fine."

"It's so frustrating, Lowell! You practically have steam coming out of your ears, but say you're not angry!!

While Lowell and Leo are at work or out of town, I begin an affair with a housemate.



Lowell is sitting in an armchair in the shared living-room and reading the local newspaper.

“Lowell, I need to talk to you; it’s important.”

“Okay.”

“Not here. It’s private.”

He folds the paper and follows me to our room, pulling the door shut behind him.

“Have a seat,” I tell him.

“Jesus! Kaz, what’s this about?”

“I slept with Dale when you and Leo went to Winnipeg. I’m so sorry, Lowell. I just felt so alone.”

“It happens,” he says and gets up to leave.

“Wait, there’s more. The infection I have? The doctor says it could be gonorrhoea.”

“Then, we’ll all just get a shot of penicillin!” he says.

“That’s it?”

“That’s what we have to do, right? Have you told Dale?”

“Yes. I didn’t mean to hurt you, Lowell.”

“Actually, I don’t feel anything,” he says, getting up to leave. “I don’t own you, Kaz. You know I don’t believe in jealousy,” he says as he closes the door behind him.

But despite his denial, I know that I have cut him.

In the remaining weeks of the summer, we continue as if the affair hasn't happened, as if Lowell has buried the hurt deeply enough that it cannot reach us at the surface.



The symptoms begin on the first night of the cross-country road trip; stomach cramps and diarrhea requiring frequent, flash-lit visits to campground outhouses. From midwestern Canada to the coast of British Columbia, across the border to Seattle, and south to the Northern California Redwoods, Berkeley, Las Vegas, Salt Lake City, Kansas City, and Columbus. Clinic stops become part of our itinerary, and I worry about ruining the trip for everyone. Lowell is supportive and often stays behind with me when I'm not feeling well, affording us some privacy and time to talk. While Leo and Meg explore the Pacific Northwest's majesty, Lowell and I begin a different exploration, one in which, despite my symptoms, I am the guide.

"Feelings aren't rational," Lowell insists. "You can't base decisions on feelings."

"Lowell, you don't act like other pre-meds. You never study. Your grades are terrible!"

"My grades were never good, but I test well. It's always been the plan. I'd go to Harvard, then to Med School and become a doctor. If I didn't, my mother would be so disappointed."

"*Whose* plan? Look, it's sad that your mother didn't go to med school, but that doesn't mean you want to go. *What do you want??*"

Lowell is quiet, and then says, as if surprised. "You know, I don't really know."

“Maybe you could talk to the Resident Tutor. Remember that guy we met at dinner, Jeff Blum? He’s the Pre-Med advisor.”

“That’s not a bad idea.”



We return to campus, expecting my symptoms to abate. Instead, they become worse. I sit on the aisles of lecture halls, monitoring every sensation in my gut. Lowell’s parents send us names of gut specialists at Mass General and Beth Israel Hospitals in Boston. But consultations and tests find no medical cause. My GP refers me to the Psychiatry department at the university health services.

Leaving the dorm is contingent on knowing the location of the exits in lecture halls and the store bathrooms that do not require keys. It means obsessively asking Lowell to assure me that we can leave if my gut acts up: at a movie, dinner at a friend’s house, a wedding reception, a Red Sox game

Me: “I’m not sure I can make it. What if it starts?”

Lowell: “I’ll take you home.”

Me: “But you really want to go.”

Lowell: “It’s okay. Don’t worry about that. We’ll just try. If we leave, we leave.”

Lowell never seems angry or disappointed. It is as if I am a small, wounded bird he is sheltering and mending.



Sam is sitting on the window sill watching two young squirrels chase each other around the trunk of a tree.

“You know what’s really lousy?” I say, looking over at him.

He jumps down from the bookshelf and joins me on the sofa.

“Calling it “psychosomatic” means it’s not real; it means that I’m making myself sick!”

“Like when your mother kept you home and you weren’t really sick?” Sam asks.

“Oh God, Sam! I never thought of that! What’s happening to me?”

“You are suffering,” he says, his large golden eyes slow-blinking affection. “But in spite of that, you are also doing well here.”

“Like getting the homework assignments when I missed school,” I respond bitterly.

“That got you here, Kaz.”

“My doc thinks I should see a shrink. Lowell does too. He offered to come with me.”

“What do *you* think?” Sam asks.

“I’m out of options, Sam. I’m so tired and angry at having to deal with this. It’s like I missed the ‘small print’ in the acceptance letter: ‘You can have this life, but you will be handicapped.’ I’ve tried so hard to leave the past behind, but it’s like running in place.”

“Maybe you need to stop running,” he says.



“Ms. Christie? Karen?” She calls out, scanning the faces in the waiting area of Psychiatric Services. She is an attractive, thirty-something woman with smiling eyes and wavy, shoulder-length hair that loosely frames her face.

“Yes, that’s me.” I gingerly raise my index finger in response and blink back a lifetime of tears that, once started, will never stop. Tears because I can’t rescue my sibs without hurting myself, tears for thinking that I could be like everyone else at Harvard, tears because I am losing this life with Lowell that I want so badly.

“I’m Barbara Frasier,” she says. Her grasp is warm and genuine.

“I’m called Kaz.”

“Whom have you brought with you, Kaz?” she asks, meaning the carrier on the seat next to me and its inhabitant, who will remain my companion.

“Oh, this is Sam.”



*I sometimes feel like an audience is watching my story, amazed at my strength.  
But they expect me to keep acting strong when that is what it often feels like—an  
act.*

*Being resilient exacts a fitness from you comparable to your peers.*

*You must be like them, but you can never be them.*

*Because you carry something that they do not.*

*Knowing the difference is essential because the work of maintaining that strength is life-long.*

—Reflection

Class News

Harvard Radcliff Class News

Forty-Fifth Anniversary Report



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