

bioStories

**Volume 11,
Issue 1**

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Cover Art: Mother and Child, Osama el-Laithy

bio**Stories**

sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

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Blues

by Sydney Lea

—May, 2020

Another unarmed black man has been gunned down by police. Great cities erupt, but the *thin blue line*—what else?—is established to contain that predictable response.

Meanwhile, as daylight dies here in Vermont, I catnap on my couch, remote from mayhem and fury, retired, well-heeled, ashamed of my own comfort.

Half-conscious, I watch my mind stray from metaphoric to identifiable blue, like the wetland iris I beheld on this morning's hike; like the blue sulfur butterflies, hovering close to ground, arrived again with spring; like the luminous indigo bunting last week at our feeder, a miracle.

"Blue Monday" was recorded long ago by the late Fats Domino. I loved that tune in his rendition, and to think of it now, prompted by a mere adjective, is to lament the thrust of time. Of course. Yet I've largely been spared more epical sorrows.

My bourgeois woes are as common and small as many of the things I notice. This May, for further instance, the wild violets are rampant. Little things like that. Soon, the darkness will shroud the landscape and some creatures will search for refuge, while others prepare to wreak their violence. No, that expression doesn't ring quite true. What they'll do is what predators must do in the natural world.

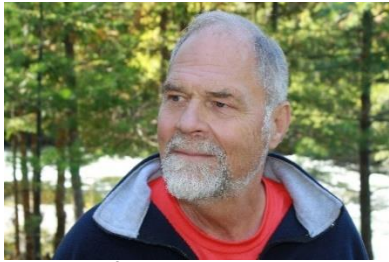
On the far side of the ridge, there's a wailing train, a sound that has prompted music of a kind I dearly love. You know what kind I mean, though it's not restricted to the ingenious likes of Hank Williams, white Alabaman, who by the way, received his first guitar lessons from black bluesman Rufus "Tee Tot" Payne. No, the blue in that sound is part of every stirring vernacular music America has ever engendered.

But of course there are larger blues. The sky, for the most obvious example. As its color recedes, I remember a grandchild clad entirely in blue last fall for Halloween. She wanted to *be* the sky. From her father she gets the African blood for which I pray to whatever God I can invoke that she and her brother and sister won't have to suffer. I shudder.

I try to will myself back into trance, but I can't. I want to dream up a blue that forever assuages, a blue in which I could paint the world.

Who in hell do I think I am? Whom do I help with my poetical fancies?

Through a screen, I hear night creatures begin to hoot and shriek. The dark is taking over.



Sydney Lea is 2021 recipient of his home state Vermont's most prestigious distinction for an artist: the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts. (Past winners include luminaries from Galway Kinnell to Bernard Malamud, Grace Paley, Rudolf Serkin, and many others.) A former Pulitzer finalist and winner of the Poets' Prize, he served as founding editor of *New England Review* and was Vermont's Poet Laureate from 2011 to 2015.

Our Second Outbreak

by Patti Niemi

Opera plots don't bother with reality. In Wagner's *The Ring*, a brother and sister make out and have a baby together. So it's a plot twist worthy of opera that Covid-19 is San Francisco Opera's *second* experience with contagion. Twenty-seven years earlier, we dealt with a different epidemic.

That one began with an itch.

It was November, the busiest part of our season. The orchestra was stuffed into the pit for rehearsals by day and performances at night. Sweat was destroying the armpits of tailcoats; spit was raining down from the singers above us. We were *asking* to spread germs.

At first, only one cellist was itching. It could've been dry skin; it could've been her body's reaction to her pregnancy.

Then her stand partner started scratching.

Reports began coming in from other corners of the opera house: two chorus members were itching. A wigmaster. A stagehand. During an intermission, the cellist took her itch to the company doctor. He told her it was stress.

You don't anger a pregnant lady. I pictured her listening to this doctor, her face darkening and morphing into the Queen of the Night from *Magic Flute*, who sings, "The vengeance of hell burns in my heart." She made an appointment with her own doctor. Two days later, during a performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, I put down the cymbals and started clawing at the back of my hands.

It was a disservice to call this an "itch." I dug at my shins like I was trying to hit bone. I clawed at an arm until it looked like a map of New York's Finger Lakes. I told a colleague I had fingertip-sized bruises on my thighs from scratching; she pulled up her skirt to show me hers. Nature, in her misguided wisdom, designed it to be worse at night. Conductors looked out over the orchestra and saw instruments at rest, their owners frantically raking their limbs before an entrance.

Soon there were ten scratchers in the pit. The chorus count was eight. Was this hysteria? There was nothing to see—our only evidence of disease was a symptom.

We weren't waiting for intervention. In the percussion room, we strapped on gloves and took matters into our own hands. The pile of clothes on our couch was the first thing to go, followed by the couch. We waited until after a performance, then pushed it down the hall and into the garbage room. The rest of the orchestra was unnerved enough by the outbreak to follow suit. The whole basement looked like the waiting room of a DMV: only hard plastic chairs allowed.

Our unofficial count crept close to fifty. Chorus members were changing in and out of hot and sweaty costumes all night long—what did that mean for the dressers? For the make-up artists? What about the stars of the opera, the singers?

The cellist finally had her appointment. Her doctor found pinprick red spots in her finger webbing and delivered his diagnosis.

Scabies was not what we wanted to share with our audience. It's highly contagious; we could spread it if we shook hands over the pit wall. The extreme itchiness is caused by the body's reaction to mites, their eggs, and their excreta.

Bugs were having sex, giving birth, and pooping under our skin.

The regular strain would have been bad enough. We had Norwegian scabies, also known by its more vivid name, Crusted Scabies. Instead of the five to ten mites seen in the classic variety, we had thousands. We were playing host to a colony so unique it made the Associated Press.

The company was forced to deal with the plague when it started creeping towards Famous Soprano. FS, starring in *Lucia*, was married to a baritone in the chorus. She would not have legions of scabies riding her coattails to the stage.

And if the itch hadn't started spreading to the audience, the rumor had. One night, a woman leaned down to me and stage-whispered: *Is it true that y'all are contagious?* The San Francisco Department of Health was called. A Pacific Heights dermatologist, taken from the world of teenage acne and giddy with his sudden significance, stood in front of the company. D-Day was scheduled for the following day's performance—time enough for Elimite prescriptions to be filled. Itching or not, everyone in the company had

to perform the ritual. Some carriers might be asymptomatic, just waiting for the bugs to finish procreating.

The doctor instructed us: Take off all your clothes. Start at the top of your head and massage the cream into your scalp. Work your way down: the folds of your ears, your armpits, under your nails, between every finger, your stomach—

A question, from our group: “Do you have to put it—everywhere?”

Scabies’ favorite home was in the folds of the skin. “*Epecially* everywhere,” was the answer.

We had to leave it on for eight miserable hours. The personnel managers of each union would be stationed at the door with a checklist. No one would be allowed to enter unless they’d greased themselves.

As the itching died down, we reimagined a new season. After our opening night performance of Pagli-itchy, we would have eight operas: The Merry Hives of Windsor, Billy Bug, The Girl of the Golden Pest, Cosi Fan Cootie, The Rash’s Progress, Scales of Hoffman, A Midsummer Mite’s Cream, and the rarely performed Beatrice and Benadryl.

That scourge was an easy fix. COVID-19 was not.

Live music is in the business of crowds. The relationship between performers and crowd has always consisted of one activity: spending hours together in the dark, listening to music. Covid-19 forced us to break up with our audiences.

We’ve all had unwanted breakups. Part of grieving is replaying happy memories. Like this one. One night, we were performing *Turandot*. It’s hard to imagine a more hair-raising opening to an opera. After the orchestra shrieks out the first chords, the curtain is supposed to rise on a stage full of choristers screaming about a beheading.

That night, the curtain didn’t rise. Instead of watching the executioner grind his ax, 3200 pairs of eyes were staring at a gold curtain. Our conductor cut us off, turned to the audience and said, “I think the curtain has to be up to play opera.”

He could have gone backstage and waited for stagehands to resolve the mechanical glitch. Instead, he opened the door separating orchestra pit and audience. He strolled up the aisle, introducing himself and shaking hands. The audience started clapping in rhythm. Maestro conducted them—softer and louder, slower and faster. Since

the opera was being simulcast to AT&T ballpark, we played “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.” The audience sang along. When the stage manager announced the malfunction had been fixed, we applauded together: the orchestra, 3200 audience members inside the opera house, and our 30,000 fans watching us on a screen at the ballpark.

That was the only time in my twenty-eight years of playing in the San Francisco Opera Orchestra that the fourth wall was breached. For most of our relationship with the audience, we communicated only through music.

In Wagner’s Ring Cycle, we spend fourteen hours together. For us, the physicality of playing this music is a rollercoaster ride. We climb to astonishing heights, take dizzying turns and make death-defying drops.

But it demands as much of the audience as of the musicians. Over four nights, our fans take in catastrophic violence and disorder and magic swords (along with that incest). At the end of *Gotterdammerung*, the conductor leaves his hands in the air an extra beat. That silence is sacred. It separates the world of giants and fire and gods and vengeance, from the world of jobs and bills and disappointments. It’s our final moment together in Valhalla.

After our March 2020 split, we longed for this nightly interaction. But to get back making music together, we had to guarantee the only thing we’d share with each other is opera. Unamplified music works best when you cram in close to the source. If a virus can be spread through talking, how much more is spread when singers fill up their considerable lungs and spray great sheets of spit?

Thousands of empty seats waited for our return. The ghost light took center stage. The music was silenced.

On August 21, 2021, we returned to the Opera House. We missed you, audience. In an art form filled with drama, it’s not overly dramatic to say: we were nothing without you.



Patti Niemi has been a member of the San Francisco Opera Orchestra since 1992. Prior to joining SFO, she played in the New World Symphony from 1988-1992, under Music Director Michael Tilson Thomas. In 2016, she published her first book entitled *Sticking It Out-From Juilliard to the Orchestra Pit*. Her book won the 2017 Independent Publisher Book Award's Silver Medal-Performing Arts Category and was named *Philadelphia Inquirer's* Best Classical Music Book of 2016.

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. Dorm-mates 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 gonorrhea.”

“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 lifelong.

—Reflection

Class News

Harvard Radcliff Class News

Forty-Fifth Anniversary Report



Karen Foster writes memoir and nonfiction. Her work has appeared in *Losslit*, *RedFez*, *Salt Hill*, *Streetlight Magazine*, *Soft Cartel*, and *Quail Bell*. She lives in Vermont with her husband John and two feline

Eventually Everything

by Gabriel Sage

From my back, lying on the only corner of the rug not pinned under the burden of furniture legs, I realize I have stopped writing in past tense. At first the idea seems weightless, an accidental thought hovering without meaning—the chance product of my afterhours-brain meandering promiscuously through late-night thoughts. But then it gains effect and gravity, sits full bore on the forefront of my mind, taps me enigmatically with a reflex hammer. I look up to try and bring the thought into focus, but there is only the dense stillness of the house and the thick inky darkness of unlit morning sticking to the outside of the window. I take a quick mental inventory of my recent writing to test the idea: I find no *was* or *were*, only *is* and *are*. Frowning, I wonder if there is undiscovered significance here and roll onto my stomach, pressing up onto my elbows. Below me, an indentation of matted fibers is recessed from where my body had just been.

To my right, a messy stack of records leans against a small metal rack that is home to a turntable. The record playing is *Either/Or* by Elliott Smith. A black spiraling chord reaches from behind the console and connects to bulky headphones pressed over my ears. I am enveloped in haunting vulnerability and whispering melodies that tear with candor from the stark but ethereal music. I listen carefully to the reverberating tones until the last chord of the song decays into a gentle hum. A soft looping click, not unlike the whirl of moving water, signals that it is time to flip the record. I obey, lift the opaque plastic cover, carefully handle the vinyl by its edges, and lower the crystal stylus softly back into the thin spiral of grooves.

Music resumes and as it does a memory flashes behind my eyes, a moment I haven't recalled in years. In it I was doing almost what I am doing now, only I was fifteen years old and in the middle of a rainy afternoon. It was my sophomore year of high school and I had cut class, as I often did, to buy records at a music store in Venice Beach. I spent my entire pocketed twelve dollars on one still-in-the-plastic-new copy of *Either/Or*. I shielded the recent vinyl purchase under my jacket (feeling a rebel as I became soaked in rain). After taking the bus back to a house empty of parents, I sat on the floor of my

room. A gray-veined sky dropped water in loud rhythmic heaps against the house, but it was easy to ignore as I squeezed myself into the songs. I closed my eyes and wanted nothing more from my future than to create something as chilling and perfect as what I was hearing slip from the stereo.

A decade and a half later, that enigmatic notion of future has materialized into now; and listening to *Either/Or* closes the temporal distance, inviting me to think about the past and all its grammatical forms. The first encounter I had with Elliott Smith was the summer after middle school. It was memorably hot and I spent most of the time learning to play guitar with my best friend in the sour and musty but cool air of his garage, full of juvenescent certainty. We had a vinyl-strung guitar that was slathered with a glazed orange lacquer and we would pass it back and forth as we awkwardly trained our unpracticed hands to shape chords. We listened to the same few CDs compulsively. I can't remember how Elliott Smith ended up in the heavy rotation, who showed him to us or where we got the hand-labeled home-made CD, but suddenly it was there, and we were mesmerized by the low-fi angelic grit belonging to every track; the piercing lyrics and quiet power that echoed at us like a cannon in a steel tank.

It was (at least symbolically) the inciting incident that opened my hormonal floodgates and portended adolescence. The induction of a sudden bodily awareness—emotional tiers rooted in desires far more carnal and complex than wanting to go run around somewhere or throw rocks at something. That summer I tried smoking pot, dyed my hair black, pierced my ears, and found myself naked in a walk-in closet with a girl. The experimental effects of a pubescent snowball. At the time, I wouldn't have identified it as that, but looking back it is blatantly obvious. It makes sense, you can't see yourself age in a mirror, but find an old photo and everything becomes apparent and unmistakable.

The experience isn't unique. Eventually everything becomes past tense and everyone has a similar story to some degree. That is what happens at that age; you're a kid until you're not. It's *we all live in a yellow submarine* until you hear Elliott Smith harmonize the word *fuck* in elegant melliflence and the clouds part for a javelin of light and a cosmic hand that reaches down from the sky and passes you a fistful of acne and a surreptitious cigarette.

For me, that also meant a clarity of vision: a post-punk mentality of raising middle-fingers at anything remotely redolent of mainstream and an indefatigable penchant for confronting angst with music. The chimerical reality of ‘making it’ professionally never at all factored in, and even if it had, I wouldn’t have known what to factor. I experienced only pure excitement. Pure possibility. I stayed up all night diagramming guitar chord schematics and spent the next day in school writing down ideas for band names in theatrical fonts. Putting the time in wasn’t part of some grand pragmatic plan rooted in axiomatic ideas about hard work paying off. It was unadulterated pleasure, emphasis on the *un-adult*. There was no back-up plan, no expectations yoked to realistic outcomes, no consideration of practicality or sensibility, no preoccupation, no tense of any kind. Just the fervent unconcern that accompanies full, obdurate commitment. I bought a Tascam four-track cassette recorder and set up a living-room recording studio between the couch and coffee table, sitting cross-legged with my guitar, plucking strings until I couldn’t feel my fingers. In my hand the little grey level knobs and input sliders on the four-track felt like they were adjusting fate more than volume.

It’s late. Late enough that I am purposefully avoiding checking the time, afraid of how late it really is, worried about having to get up early in the morning. I make a few tedious calculations for when to leave the house, factoring in all the possible variables: how much time I will need to make coffee, cut fruit for breakfast, the best route to avoid traffic. I catch myself anxiously remembering an article I recently read about the decline of quality sleep for people in their thirties. I make a few adjustments to the plan. The rug beneath me feels stiffer than it did when I first lay down and I notice a few aggregates of dust under my bookshelf. I wonder where I can find a deal on a felt rug-pad, make a mental note that I need to sweep. None of this is very punk, I think, and laugh quietly.

Another song plays and eventually everything becomes past tense. The low-numbered hours of morning stretch above me dreamlike into the irradiated starkness of tomorrow, and the music from the stereo pulls me backward. Waves of nostalgia crash silently with a pleasant longing and the good-hurt of getting tattooed. I picture myself a something-teen with a head full of potential band names on the way to a show. One of my first. A drummer from one of the local high-school bands was driving, and little slices of guilt pressed against my temples because I had told my mom someone’s parents were

taking us. He held the steering wheel in one hand and drum sticks in the other, tapping out paradiddles and flams on the dashboard at every red light. The windows were down and the Pixies were blasting and we stuck our heads into the moving night to loudly wonder where our minds were.

We parked somewhere off Main and walked to a roll-up door that opened to the entrance for The Smell, where the fee to get in is always five dollars. Some crust-punk-garage-noise-indie-experimental band was sending power chords and strange synth sounds through the venue's PA system to a crowd of people with hair of every color and fish-net ensembles moving in a rhythmic circle of fists and high-knees. It felt as if I was being inaugurated into a clandestine scene of sweat and sound and screams. Someone gave me a sip of clear alcohol they had masquerading as water in a plastic bottle. I closed my eyes, trying to arrest the feeling in my mind, knowing that in a few short hours, I would be back home sucking on the memory.

My jaw clenches against a sweet sting.

There was a subterranean creek that ran through my neighborhood, hidden from the street by long, sloping concrete embankments. The water was always thick with green knots of slow-moving sludge, the air heavy with an unidentifiable brine. I was walking there with a friend while stabbing through the core of an apple with a number two pencil. She told me Elliott Smith was playing at the Henry Fonda Theatre and asked me if I wanted to go. I was probably wearing a shirt with his face on it. I don't remember the conversation, and even if I did it wouldn't make any sense. Whatever the reasons were, we didn't go. Maybe someone had parents going out of town. Maybe the tickets were more than five dollars. Maybe we wanted to buy weed and lie somewhere spitting smoke at the sky. In the romantic realm of expectant enthusiasm, nothing is urgent, everything endless.

That conversation happened early in January. Seven months later, Elliott Smith died in his apartment with a kitchen knife in his chest. I never saw him play. When I heard what happened I was in my living room. The sun was hot edges of light falling around me through the window. I watched illuminated particles hover in the air, noticed a stale taste

in my throat, pictured sloping concrete. I was probably wearing a t-shirt with his face on it.

I sit up as the last song of the record plays. The bookshelf against the wall now in view is horizontally stacked with strips of colored book spines. Pressing the headphones into my ears I listen closely, paying attention for signs of life buried within the complicated chord changes—a quick inhale between lyrics, the muted squeak of fingers sliding across steel strings.

Eventually everything becomes past tense. Moments perpetually break off and fall away as quickly as they begin. Just look at a clock, the way the second-hand cuts with twitching consistency. Watching it disappear is easy. It usually happens in enormous slabs, leaving only small, reminiscent fragments behind. A guitar buried in a cluttered garage. A few recordings on an external hard drive. A bad habit of smoking. It's holding on that is challenging—working against the ebb, even as the ground slides away below your feet.

The past can be powerfully co-optive, a force syphoning the present and future with an *ed* that turns live into lived and hope into hoped. It sits behind a glass case so you can look but can't touch. A professor once told a writing class I was in always use the past tense, it's easier. The students all moved their pens to capture the wisdom. In capital letters I wrote: THE PAST IS EASY. Speaking syntactically, I suppose it is. Sentences are simpler to shape under the clarifying perspective of hindsight. The hermetic distance offers malleability and simultaneously concreteness; the awkward comfort and conspicuousness of finitude. The past has a flow to it that can be rethreaded and tied in strategic places. It's easy he told us, just think of something that happened and give it words.

I have been working on a story for a literary contest that is due tomorrow. It is almost done but there is something still missing. I know that if I want to get anywhere with words each submission needs to deliver the refined result of gratifying but laborious work. To be a writer who successfully publishes is to be consistent and prudent, doused in diligence. It's making time to be at the computer even if that means spending afternoons staring at

the wall and scratching my beard for a few hundred words. It's rewarding but it's also a nail-biting challenge of unlikely odds and unlikelier stability.

Earlier today, I walked with my dog down a fire trail that cuts between dense eucalyptus groves looking for final story ideas. It was a fog-filled late afternoon and I could smell the moisture moving between the trees, herby and sweet like steeping tea. I wasn't sure what I was hoping to find; I think I just needed something to do with my body while my mind played with plot possibilities. I had been sitting in my house at my desk most of the day watching the cursor in a word document blink. I made small and unsatisfying changes. My hands would often hover over the keyboard or unconsciously flick a pen in little circles while my eyes shot up to check if anything had manifested in the corners of my vision.

As I walked, the dirt trail hooked into vapory thickets of trees. The ground on either side was layered with a low, dense growth covered in a hoary coat of glinting water droplets. Even though I have submitted many stories before, the stakes always feel tangibly atmospheric. There is constantly a tide of anxiety being pulled by self-doubt and a concern for measurable accomplishment. Every sentence I have written has felt dire, like each one stretched into the future to dictate my life's potential outcome. The words on my page tend to have gravity and heft to them. Even in those rare and wonderful moments when they flow facilely from my fingers, I am desperately aware of their purpose and destination. Small animals in the trees above me scurried with what seemed to be childlike excitement, shaking the branches as they moved through the leafy canopy. My dog lifted her head hoping one would find its way to the ground and I had to tug the leash hard to break her concentration and head back home.

When I got to my house, the sun was just dropping behind a darkening horizon and the structured gray of evening was slowly spreading out. I took out a few records and climbed down onto the rug.

It's too late to look at the clock, my jaw is tight, the album is almost over, and I've been on the floor fidgeting half the night in flooding orange lamplight because I have a piece I need to finish and I'm ardently looking for any gradient of inspiration. But it isn't the purity of passion that keeps me up now. It's fear. Fear that one day all these sentences will end

up packed away collecting dust. Fear that placid comfort will win out over urgency, again. Fear that anything I don't say right now will get lost irreversibly to silence—every unfinished story not submitted a muted knock on the wall of a sepulcher that makes no sound. Fear that this too will become past tense.

Maybe that is why I have been writing in the present. Maybe I need the burning urgency that comes with it. The unruliness and volatility of it. Maybe I am trying to recapture an internal momentum I am not ready to let end with an *ed*; to feel an openness in which undiscovered things are still waiting to happen. Where the present perfect is continuous and the bow is not yet tied. Maybe the past is too convenient and I need the floor to be on fire in order to do my dance.

The record ends and I let it spin and click.

My brown-leather notebook is sitting on the edge of my bed and I pull it down onto the floor. A pen falls from the worn spine. I thumb through it and notice that the sound of the flipping paper is not unlike the whirl of moving water. Almost every blank space is full of concentrated notes. It falls open to a chaotic page covered in mad scribbling; re-worked plot arcs, edited character sketches, marginalia, sporadic ideas for later consideration. I think about how much time I spend placing words here, worrying over every syllable. The corners are furled up at the edges with use. The black ink is smudged from hurried and anxious palms into amorphous Rorschach blisters, and for a moment the blue lines underneath seem miles away.



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Holy Mother

by Patricia Feeney

I was seven when I learned I had an older sister, a girl who didn't belong to my mother.

The secret sister orbited on the margins of my 1950s world. She appeared at family gatherings, trailing behind my paternal grandparents. She hung quietly on the perimeter of our crowded family, her spectral presence enveloping my childhood. I didn't concern myself with who Karen was. I only took note of her interest in my grandmother, whose attention I hoarded.

"Ain't that something?" my grandmother would say with raised eyebrows if a neighbor complained the mail was late or the man down the street was caught picking through trash cans in the alley. She thought most people were petty, stupid, or both. I was delighted with her irreverent comments and always agreed with her.

When I visited her, we feasted on potato chips and daytime soap operas that played in black and white on her Motorola TV. I couldn't follow the plot lines of *Guiding Light* and *The Secret Storm*, but I snuggled against my grandmother, who extended an arm across my lap and let me flick its flabby triceps, the cool, white flesh slapping back and forth. I was mesmerized.

Karen was two years older than Billy, my oldest brother, four years older than Tommy, my second brother, and five years older than I. She was so much older than my other siblings, they have no memory of her visits. Occasionally, Karen's arrival to our home led to a sleepover; she slept with me in a narrow top bunk in the room I shared with my two older brothers. Our bungalow in Glasgow Village, MO, had not an inch to spare for Karen's comfort. The three tiny bedrooms brimmed with seven bodies, and we all competed to use the single bathroom.

One night when I was about five, Karen hopped down from the upper bunk and told me to do the same. She shook the blanket, then swung it to the top bunk like a lasso, slapping the sheet. Saltine cracker crumbs and bits of Halloween candy rained to the floor.

After we climbed back onto the bed, Karen smoothed the sheet with a flourish. I dragged my hand across the sheet half-heartedly.

“Feels good, huh?” Karen said.

It *did* feel better, but I was sure my mother wouldn’t want me to admit that to Karen.

“It’s okay,” I said with no conviction.

Karen spoke easily with me, as if she knew me. She nestled herself near me in a companionable way as we closed our eyes. In those moments, Karen’s vaporous presence became stark and solid: flesh and blood against mine.

At the time, I didn’t know we were related. I learned Karen was my half-sister on another sleepover two years later—at my grandparents. My father took just the two of us, leaving my brothers at home. Karen blew into the spare room we were to share and crammed the space with a suitcase, a portable record player, and several teen magazines featuring movie stars and fancy clothes. She flopped onto the bed in one motion, propped both pillows behind her back, and began to flip through one of her magazines. I stood in the hallway and watched.

Though Karen was thin, I was scrawny. I touched my white-blond hair, feeling its choppy shape; I located the spot where my mother had cut gum from a tangled mess. Karen’s hair was curled and held to one side with a pink ribbon. Her long legs extended from short-shorts like those on the cover of one of her magazines. I looked down at the legs of my shorts, which bagged together like a skirt. Karen—who was almost a teenager—was exotic and out of my reach.

“Patty, wanna look at my *Seventeen*?” she asked, extending a magazine to me.

“No thanks.” I wasn’t sure what a *Seventeen* was or if a seven-year-old should read it.

That evening I sat at the kitchen table coloring a connect-the-dots picture of Cinderella.

“Go outside and call your grandpa and your sister. Tell ‘em supper’s ready,” my grandmother said.

My legs stuck to the faux leather of the kitchen chair, the summer humidity mixing with the stove’s heat. I didn’t have a *sister*. I only had brothers.

My grandmother leaned over a steaming pot of stew, holding a spoon to her pursed lips. When she realized I hadn't moved, she turned to me. "I told you to get Grandpa and Karen," she said with an exasperated sigh.

I ran to the screen door of the kitchen and spotted Karen chasing our grandfather, squirting water at him from a hose. He howled with delight each time she hit him. Karen whooped in tandem with our grandfather, her joy a vivid contrast to my serious disposition.

Standing in my grandparents' kitchen, I felt a tingling along both sides of my nose, the signal I was about to cry. I couldn't move, but I knew my grandmother would be angry if I stood paralyzed. I didn't ask her what she meant about my *sister*.

I shut off the tingling sinuses, flung open the door, and gleefully called out words I'd heard my mother say: "Come and get it!"

There was no one I could ask about Karen. Though I suspected my father had the answer—after all, he delivered Karen to my grandparents—he rarely spoke to his children except to give orders that we disappear: *Beat it* or *Shove off*. He had no patience for family life, rarely having dinner with us, preferring to unwind at the Topper, the bar where he was well known, and where I later learned, he likely knew most of the women. He'd arrive home late, loaded, and famished. As the kids brushed their teeth for bed, my mother fried a T-bone steak for him, adding garnishes from the dinner we'd had.

I saw my father sober on occasional weekend days when he had little to do with his children but was decidedly more pleasant. He read Shakespeare and his favorite poet, William Blake, as he relaxed in the living room chair.

"Teeny, listen to this," he called to my mother, who came from the kitchen and stood in the doorway. He read Blake's "The Tyger" as if he were performing onstage, his deep voice flowing like warm water over the lines. He paused just before the last stanza, lingering over an image:

Did he smile his work to see?

Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

"Really something," he said, shaking his head in appreciation when he finished.

My mother nodded with a smile. "Sounds right. He made them both."

"And he made all of *us*—the fierce and the tame," he said.

Their humor, like their love of literature, sailed far above my head, but I realize now there was no doubt my mother grasped my father's dry wit, and my father was equally taken with my mother's less subtle style. In light moments, laughter laced their conversations in the living room. From a hidden corner in the dining room, I saw my father's half-smile as he eyed my mother when she wasn't looking.

Since my father didn't talk to his children, I blamed my mother for not telling me about Karen, but I was afraid to ask her, just as I was afraid to ask my grandmother. Unspoken questions lodged in my throat and gave me stomachaches.

Throughout my childhood, I affixed myself to my mother like a tick. As she shoveled through an avalanche of household chores, she related her history from childhood to motherhood. Her love story with my father was the anchor of her oral history. It surpassed even the fairytales of handsome princes and their princesses. I believed every word she told me. My mother was a hypnotist.

For all her stories, she failed to mention Karen, an inconsequential child who had no place in the life of a woman who excelled at having children.

I got answers to my questions by listening to my parents argue when they thought we were sleeping: my father had been married before he married my mother. Karen was his child from his first marriage.

"We have four going to camp this year," my father said one night. I was eight, ready for my second year of summer camp. "And Karen wants to go, too." My father dropped this last statement with a matter-of-fact tone.

"Are you kidding?" my mother hissed the words.

"Why shouldn't Karen go? The other kids go every year." My father's baritone voice amplified the words.

"The *other* kids? You mean *our* kids? *Our* kids already do without plenty so you can make *her* support payments."

I didn't know what support payments were, but it was clear Karen was taking something from us. My father said nothing.

“If this is so important, Tom, why doesn’t Lorraine pay for camp?” my mother said.

“Her mother doesn’t give a Goddamn about Karen. You know that.” The anger drained from my father’s voice.

I’d never heard the name *Lorraine*, Karen’s mother. It sounded like she didn’t care about her daughter any more than my mother did. And it sounded like my father didn’t know what to do about this.

“Tell your mother to pay for her camp,” my mother said. “She always has enough for her card games.” My grandmother’s card-sharking pursuits were the subject of much discussion between my parents. My grandmother played—and usually lost—high-stakes poker with a group of women she referred to as *lucky widows*. Within a few years, I learned my father long held the same penchant for gambling. My mother’s hard scabbled savings often enriched my father’s bookie at the Topper. I imagine my mother’s shot at my grandmother was as much about my father as it was about his mother.

“My mother can’t even pay their own bills,” my father said. “She asked to borrow money again today.” He sighed as he elaborated on how my grandmother hid her gambling from my grandfather, who apparently turned over his paycheck to her each Friday.

“So, this is where it’s all coming from,” my mother said. “Your mother.” I could sense a triumphant *Aha!* beneath the disgust in my mother’s voice. I was rooting for her. My parents took sides: my father for my grandmother and Karen, my mother against them. As much as I loved my grandmother, I loved my mother more.

“Forget the whole Goddamned thing,” my father said, his voice rising again. “Just remember the kids’ camp the next time you write a check to Holy-Mother-the-Church!” I heard my father’s heavy footsteps move from the living room to the kitchen. The door to the back yard slammed.

Much like Karen, Holy-Mother-the-Church exerted an invisible undertow on our family. My father blamed the Holy Mother for what he considered *unbelievable* rules about marriage and *beautiful* rules about kids. I understood none of this. But I knew my father used the words *unbelievable* and *beautiful* when he considered something wrong,

disgusting, or just plain stupid. When he railed against the Holy Mother, the mother I thought was perfect shot back her usual retort: *We're Catholic*.

I conflated my mother's declaration of their faith with every word spoken to me in Catholic school: *We're Catholic*. I clung to the rules of the Church, believing everything the nuns told us about burning in Hell. I monitored my thoughts, words, and deeds, always coming up short on the balance sheet: not enough good, too many sins.

By age ten I'd established the facts of my parents' spiritual dilemma. I correctly determined that Catholics could not remarry if they divorced. They were considered forever married to their first spouse despite a civil dissolution of the marriage. Since my father was considered still married to Lorraine, he couldn't marry my mother in the Church—or anywhere else and stay in the good graces of Catholicism. My parents' courthouse marriage resulted in excommunication from the Church and a ticket to Hell for them both. Because of this sentence, my parents were banned from receiving Communion. To do so would rain more retribution in the afterlife, though I'm not sure what was considered worse than Hell.

In any Catholic parish, the divorced were akin to second-class citizens; the divorced-and-remarried were akin to untouchables—but only if the parishioners knew. This was a secret I kept as closely as my parents did.

I grew obsessed with my parents' afterlife. I hoped my father would die, leaving my mother free to go to Heaven. Then, I shamed myself for this sinful thought and hoped my mother would divorce my father and disengage herself from the family blight. I didn't have much concern for my father's outcome. I saw him merely as the obstacle to my mother's salvation.

I began to worry every time my grandparents pulled up in the front of our house, fearing Karen—proof of my parents' sin—would hop from the back seat. I feared neighbor kids—other Catholics—would ask who she was.

While I wrestled with the demons Karen's identity unleashed in my life, she must have wrestled with her own. Seemingly no more popular with her mother than she was

with mine, Karen often spent months of her life with our grandmother while Lorraine began her second and third childless marriages.

When I was eleven, my father's success led to a contract on a home three times the size of our little bungalow. Located in Florissant, MO, the new house was twenty minutes from our parish, which seemed like a moon-shot from the secrets of my childhood. We had a chance to hide Karen for good. She was sixteen and had dispensed with regular visits.

While the house was under construction during the summer and fall of 1963, I finally had sisters I could acknowledge, the sixth and seventh children, and my mother was pregnant with her eighth child. Despite the numbers in our small home, it was quieter than I'd ever remembered it.

Looking back, my parents probably were financially stable for the first time in their marriage. This security and Karen's infrequent appearances likely lifted a dual burden from their lives. I suspect it's also when they decided to take Communion at their new parish. I can imagine them deciding they'd done their best—years earlier they'd tried for an annulment of my father's first marriage but didn't have the influence or the money to land that Catholic dispensation. I think they decided it was time to try for the marriage my mother always pictured, and a new parish gave them the shot they needed. My father stopped sniping about the Holy Mother and kept silent about his distant daughter.

On Sundays after Mass, our family jammed the Mercury station wagon and drove to the construction site. As the bricks rose to the second story, I day-dreamed about a life that matched the home and people in *Leave it to Beaver*.

The good times carried on as my mother's belly grew. She took us to the neighborhood pool, sang show tunes in our kitchen, and executed goofy dance moves down the hallway. The house took on an orderly appearance as my mother dispensed of old toys, clothing, and household items in preparation for the move.

My father came home for dinner almost every evening, often carrying a coffee cake for dessert. I was scared at first because he'd never wanted to be home when we were awake. But after a few weeks, I viewed my father's appearance as normal, Dad coming home after work like other fathers in the neighborhood. The family my mother imagined took shape before my eyes.

The respite ended at an uncle's home on Thanksgiving Day 1963. The holiday fell a mere six days after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The country—and even more so, the Catholic world—was in deep mourning. My parents were tearful in the week leading to Thanksgiving but must have decided to put the grief aside for the holiday. It was a festive event.

As most of the family finished dinner, my grandmother moved to a chair close to another elderly relative, Myrtle. The men and older boys had settled in the living room to watch a football game, and the younger children ran to the basement to play. As always, I stuck by my mother, who was radiantly pregnant and decidedly not moving from the table as she enjoyed a second helping of dressing and turkey. Amidst the aroma of sage, pumpkin pie, and freshly brewed coffee, my grandmother paid tribute to my father's success in business.

"He's doing great. I guess you heard about his new house?" she said, turning to Myrtle.

"Oh, yes. That's wonderful," the other woman answered.

"This'll work out good." My grandmother lowered her voice as she glanced to the far end of the table where Karen sat idly picking at her dinner. "Finally, Karen'll have a place to live," she continued. "You know she's been staying with me?"

"No, I didn't know that," Myrtle replied, concern creasing her forehead.

My mother stared at the two older women, her mouth slightly open, her faded lipstick the only color left in her face. She stood and walked from the dining room and returned a moment later, her arms loaded with her children's coats and snowsuits.

"Come on, kids. It's time to go," she said in a monotone.

I stared at her, unmoving.

For a beat, she stared back. "I said it's time to go, Patty. Get Mo and Kath ready." She dropped their snow suits on the floor. "Guys, take your coats and head to the car," she called to my brothers. We surged into action.

"Teeny, what are you doing?" my father called back from the living room.

"You should know," she answered, pulling on her coat.

"Teen, aren't you saying goodbye? What the hell is going on?" My father stood, his voice stuck between fear and anger.

My mother walked out to the wintry wind on the porch. I hurtled down the steps, pulling my little sisters to the sidewalk. My father followed my mother to the porch. He was in his shirtsleeves and wrapped his arms across his chest.

“Teeny, what’s the matter?” I listened carefully because I wanted to know what happened, too.

My mother turned to face him. “I just heard your *mother*”—she spat this word—“tell Myrtle your *daughter* is moving into our new house.”

My father’s mouth moved, but I couldn’t decipher the words. The wind picked up, blowing horizontal waves of leaves.

When I saw my mother start down the steps of the porch, I pushed my sisters into the car as my brothers jockeyed for the coveted rear-facing seats. She slid into the driver’s seat, started the engine, and pulled from the curb. My father stood on the porch, staring as we left.

Decades later I wondered if my father knew about my grandmother’s plans for Karen to live with us. He may not have known, or perhaps he knew her wishes but ignored her. Or maybe he thought he’d pitch the idea to my mother once they moved. I never learned the answer.

We made the drive home in silence. Even my brothers seemed to recognize something serious was afoot.

After my mother thought her children were asleep, she pulled my father’s clothes from his dresser and their shared closet and threw them onto the front lawn. Suits, shoes, ties, underwear, and a load of the white shirts she’d carefully starched and ironed scattered on the yard. It was dark, but the living room light dimly illuminated the scene I watched from my bedroom window.

The next morning, I looked out my window. Everything was gone. I heard my mother in the kitchen, so I crept into my parents’ bedroom. My father’s empty drawers echoed as I opened and closed them.

Later that day, my mother huddled in the basement, the phone cord marking her path from the wall to the space beneath the staircase. She spoke in hushed tones that even I couldn’t decipher.

By nightfall, I couldn't tolerate my mother's silence. I asked her where my father was.

"He's gone." My mother's voice was empty of emotion.

"Is he coming back?" I hoped she would say "no" but didn't want my mother to know this.

"I don't know."

"Mom, what's going to happen?"

She sat on her bed, her hair uncombed, her bulging belly pushing against the cotton of her nightgown.

"Oh, Patty, I just don't know. He was going to move Karen into our new house!" With that, she made a choking sound as if she were trying not to cry.

The name hung in the air. *Karen* signaled something was unraveling in our family. Never had my mother acknowledged this child, and now she referenced her as the triggering force behind last night's cataclysm.

"Are you getting a divorce?" I asked. Just as she'd never spoken *Karen*, I'd never said *divorce*. It was as if the word itself were dangerous.

My mother showed no surprise at my question. She looked at me steadily, one woman to another and said, "Patty, I might. I called a lawyer today. I just don't know."

That night, I listened to my mother cry as I lay in bed on the other side of the adjoining wall.

Over the next few days, my spirits lifted. I fantasized about the divorce. I cheered at the prospect of life without my parents' emotional battles and without fear of my father's unpredictable moods. I adored my mother and looked forward to living as the child of this single parent, who would be free of the threat of Hell. I could tell my mother was miserable, her eyes swollen, her usual good nature tamped down to dull smiles that felt automated. But I thought she'd be better once my father was gone. And a divorce meant no more Karen, no more shame, and no more fear of other kids finding out about her.

I entertained these fantasies for days as I watched my mother resume a modicum of normalcy: driving to the grocery store, washing mountains of laundry, and packing our lunches for school.

Each day that passed without my father strengthened my conviction we'd be delivered from our misery.

Then, a week after Thanksgiving, my father returned. He strolled through the back door, his heavy footsteps signaling his entry before I saw him. He turned the corner into the living room and surveyed the early-evening scene of kids in front of the television.

"Beat it," he said to me and my brothers. We crept away, careful not to make a sound.

My mother never explained the new family order, and I didn't ask.

Several weeks later, we moved to the new house without joy and without Karen. My mother arranged for my parents' new bedroom set to be delivered the day the moving van arrived. A set of twin beds, two nightstands, and a dresser and chest in dark walnut were placed in their bedroom. My parents never slept in twin beds. Though I had just turned twelve, I sensed the new furniture reflected my parents' chilly *détente*.

Over the next few months, my father arrived home drunk hours after we'd had dinner. My mother didn't fry a T-bone steak. They rarely argued, and my father seldom mustered the energy to tell his children to get out of his line of vision. I think he stopped seeing us.

In March 1964, the eighth child, the fifth son, Danny, was born into our lifeless family. He was an easy baby, the adored little brother, the singular object of my mother's affection. In the days after his arrival, I thought Danny could heal us, but I was merely a child imagining an infant could perform a miracle.

For the next few years, my family spun further out of control. The uproars Karen had ignited between my parents ended. But after Danny's birth, they resumed diatribes on other topics, my father drunkenly swaying and my mother screaming into his face. Some of these battles related to Billy and Tommy, fifteen and thirteen when we moved to the big house, where they started a new life as neighborhood vandals. They keyed and egged cars, spun deep tire tracks in freshly manicured yards, broke windows, and stayed out all night with teenaged girls drawn to bad boys. They drank and did drugs and dragged a younger brother into the addiction fold. Both Billy and Tommy were expelled from their respective high schools, Billy at sixteen for reasons I never learned, Tommy at fourteen

because he sold stolen watches from his locker—watches Billy claimed he won playing poker.

Billy began to creep into my room late at night; he fondled me in my sleep, pulling his hands from beneath my pajamas when I awoke startled and frightened. My mother refused to believe me and refused to tell my father, and I spent the next two years standing guard over my little sisters until Billy left to marry the first of his three wives. As soon as he was out of the picture, I dated any boy with a car who would drive me as far from my home as possible. No one in the family noted my comings and goings.

I don't know why my parents' showdowns stopped, but when I was fifteen, they did. The ceasefire seemed abrupt, but perhaps battle fatigue had set in over time.

They seemed to have given up on my brothers, one now married. While their children ran wild and unprotected, my parents established new rules of engagement. My father accelerated his corporate climb, and my mother assumed the role of the big-shot's wife. They partied and traveled to business conventions at ritzy resorts. I don't remember who cared for my younger siblings when they were gone. I wasn't mentally present for much of this period of my life.

When my parents were in town, they entertained at the country club and arrived home tipsy and laughing. They regularly attended Sunday Mass at our new parish and took Communion, often within hours of my delinquent brothers climbing into their bedroom window after a night out. When I was sixteen, I found birth control pills in my mother's drawer and realized the twin beds hadn't frozen their sex life. By then, I understood what my father meant by the *beautiful* rules about kids and realized my mother wasn't as Catholic as she'd claimed.

With money in their pocket and Karen out of mind, my parents were dating and falling in love again. We kids weren't sure if we were lucky or abandoned.

At a time when my parents seemed to make peace with the Holy Mother, I stopped attending Church.

By the time I started college, I rarely saw Karen. She wandered in and out of our lives, sometimes showing up for holidays with boyfriends who never made second appearances.

“He’ll never marry her,” I heard my father tell my mother after one of our holidays.

“Why not? He seems like good husband material,” my mother said. She seemed able to talk about Karen now that the child support payments and weekend visits were far in the past.

“He’ll be a great husband for somebody else. He only wants one thing from *her*,” my father said.

My father’s instincts were correct, as we later learned Karen’s great catch was engaged to another woman while he was seeing her.

Though my grandparents continued to visit us at holidays, I don’t recall seeing Karen after I finished college. I never asked about her and I never heard my parents discuss her again.

When I was twenty-five, I spotted Karen on a sidewalk in a St. Louis City neighborhood where I lived. She was strolling slowly, holding the hand of a young child who appeared to be about three years old. I crossed the street and walked toward her. She stopped, and in that split-second I could tell she didn’t recognize me. Though she was only five years older than I, she appeared drawn and exhausted. She was thinner than I remembered, and her hair hung in straight dull strands to her shoulders. Her face lacked emotion as she stared blankly at me.

“Karen, it’s me. Patty.”

The years seemed to drop as a broad smile covered her face. She greeted me generously as if we’d just seen each other at Christmas. She turned her eyes to the child and said to me, “This is my son, Sean.”

I could feel her pride pulsing in the air between us. Her son was beautiful, exuding a calm and sweetness I loved in small children. He reminded me of Danny at that age. Sean looked directly into my eyes and offered a shy *Hi* when Karen coaxed him to say hello.

I didn’t suggest we get together. We didn’t exchange phone numbers. I wasn’t sure how to interact with Karen. I was no longer a child, but I felt a child’s fear of my mother’s disapproval if I were to treat my sister as a sister. At twenty-five I had little maternal sense.

I didn't know that my mother's behavior toward Karen fell outside the norm of maternal instinct. I didn't know that her parenting of her own children also fell outside this norm.

"I never really liked kids," my mom told me when I was twelve.

At the end of this confession, my mother must have sensed the need to say more. "But I love *my* kids," she added with a wide smile.

My mother, whom I adored and whose love I'd craved as a child, was at heart a child herself.

I never saw Karen or Sean again. According to Tommy, who occasionally ran into her, Karen struggled with drugs and alcohol. She drifted from job to job, often landing her next gig through my father's connections.

"Karen, you have to show up to work. You can't be a no-show. You have to prove yourself." There was a long pause as my father listened to Karen at the other end of the phone. He leaned against the kitchen wall, the curling cord wrapped around his torso. His voice had a tinge of urgency and he spoke quietly, kindly. I was forty, stopping by my parents' home for a quick visit on my way back from work. I listened to my father through the screen door that separated the deck from the kitchen.

"This is a good job. You've got brains, kid. You can do this if you decide to."

I watched him hang up, disentangle himself from the phone cord, shake his head, and retrieve a Budweiser from the fridge. I didn't ask him about the call.

When Karen was in her late forties, she left behind a husband and her son when she died of an overdose of prescribed meds. No one seemed to know if she did this purposely or simply made a mistake. I learned of her death long after the fact when Tommy told me he and our father had traveled to the funeral. Much later, my father told me he'd met Sean at the wake, "a very nice young man" who lived "up north, maybe in Michigan."

Shortly after that conversation, I found Karen's birth certificate in a hodgepodge of family documents and discovered her middle name was Patricia, my first name. This clearly was my father's favorite name for a daughter.

The conversation with my father about Sean took place in my parents' retirement apartment when my mother was out of town. In the last fifteen years of his life, my father

and I aired secrets we couldn't discuss in front of my mother. This last chapter of our relationship bore no resemblance to my childhood experience. I cannot explain it.

Several years before he died, my father told me his ex-wife called him to ask how to get in touch with Sean. My father didn't know.

"Why do you think she's looking for him?" I asked.

"She's getting old. She doesn't have anybody. Even Lorraine can feel *that*."

When I returned to my office that day, I Googled Sean Feeney and Shawn Feeney, but none of the results matched Sean's approximate age. I joined Reunion.com and ran a search for my nephew. I wrote emails to the ten young men who fell into his age category. No one responded. I wasn't trying to help Lorraine. I wanted to do the one thing I thought would help Karen were she alive: recognize her son as part of the family. I never found him.

I had two young kids of my own and was awash in maternal instincts. With the birth of my first child, I fell in love with every child. I imagined the pain Karen must have felt growing up. Her mother was preoccupied with a series of marriages, her father held her at arm's length, and her stepmother treated her as though she were invisible, never addressing her by name. The fact Karen lived on and off with our grandmother led me to think her stepfathers treated her with the same disinterest or disdain of most of the adults in her life.

About a year later, during a visit with my father, we excavated another family secret.

"Listen, Hon, when I die, there's something I want you to do. I'll die first—I promised your mother I would." My father referred to a long-standing joke between my parents: a man's obituary always contained the line, *survived by his wife*.

"Charlie, who lived to be 119, is survived by his wife, Ethel," my father said, his blue eyes crinkling at the thought of the old joke. He cleared his throat and took on a serious, business-like demeanor as if he were about to give an assignment to a subordinate. He sat back in his lounge chair and his silver hair caught the sunlight that slanted through the blinds. "So, when I die, I want you to do something for Teen."

"What's that?" I thought he was setting me up for another laugh, his deadpanned humor a staple of our relationship.

“I want you to take her to a priest and get this stuff cleared up about my divorce. Since I’ll be gone.”

“Are you kidding me?” I was stunned, but not at the request. I was stunned at the shorthand, as if my father had been in my head all those years ago. For the first time, one of my parents spoke of my father’s divorce and their Catholic sin. I’d observed my parents take Communion for years and thought they’d left that part of their lives behind them. But my father, who was the stauncher Catholic, had either not made this peace or believed my mother had not.

“No, Pat, I’m not kidding. This has bothered your mother her whole life. I don’t want her thinking she can’t go to Heaven.”

“Ok, Dad. I’ll see she gets to a priest. But you’ve really got to hold up your end and die first, or this isn’t going to work.”

“Got it covered, Hon.” My father stared straight at me for a long moment, his lips closed but smiling. Then his eyes lit up and he smiled broadly, showing even, capped teeth. We collapsed into uncontrolled laughter, tears filling my father’s eyes as we slapped our knees and called out the phrase *survived by his wife*, neither of us able to get the four words out at once.

When our laughter subsided, we sat in the silent apartment, the only sound the kick of the air conditioner as I reflected on the family upheavals throughout my childhood.

“Dad, I think you and Mom would have had an easier life, maybe a happier life, if you hadn’t had kids,” I said. I often thought this, but never confided it to anyone. My father looked at the ceiling at a place above the door frame, his lips tight.

“Hmm. That’s what you think, huh?” He didn’t look at me.

“Yes. I think there were too many of us. Just too much for the two of you.”

“Hmm,” He repeated, his eyes fixed.

There was a silence I would not pierce, and the grief in the room was palpable.

“Of course, it would have been fine for you to have *some* of us. Maybe three,” I said, referring to my place in the list of their progeny.

At that, my father turned to me with a sympathetic smile. He knew I regretted my words, which must have sounded like an indictment of their many years of parenthood.

“Yeah. So that’s what you think, huh? Three?”

“Yeah. Stop at perfection.”

We looked at each other for a long moment and moved on.

My father kept his word and left my mother behind when he died in 2005 at age eighty-three. She protested when I wrote his obituary and included Karen in the list of children who preceded him in death. I decided our sister didn’t deserve another insult even though she’d been long gone.

Friends of my mother took me aside at the reception following the funeral.

“Who is Karen?” Jane, one of her oldest friends, asked me in a near whisper as she stood in my kitchen. She cast a look over her shoulder to be sure no one was listening.

“Did you know my dad was married before he married my mom?” I asked.

“Yeah, I knew about that. I just didn’t know he had a kid. And she died?”

“Yes. Karen died about ten years ago. I’m really surprised you never heard about her.” I refused to lower my voice.

“No, I never knew. Your mom never said anything.” With that, Jane took a sudden interest in the coffee pot.

I kept my promise to my father to establish my mother’s path to Heaven. Over a cup of coffee in my kitchen, I suggested a visit to the parish priest to discuss her standing in the Church.

“Why would I do that?” she asked.

“Dad asked me to talk to you about this. He was worried for you—about his divorce.”

“Oh, my God, Patty. I don’t care about that,” she said, leaning across the table. She spoke with a quiet concern.

“When did you stop caring about it?”

“Years ago. I can’t believe Dad thought I cared.” She was smiling, clearly amused.

“Mom, he was really concerned for you.”

“There was no reason to worry. All that stuff was crazy,” she said.

We never discussed this again.

Three years later, a diagnosis of terminal cancer signaled my mother's imminent end. Despite the cancer ravaging her body, she was active and brimmed with good humor.

One afternoon, I took my mother out for an afternoon snack. As we sat at the restaurant table, I risked distressing her by asking about Karen. I told myself her mild dementia would erase the conversation as soon as it ended.

"Mom, why did you react to Karen the way you did?"

Without a pause, she responded. "I don't know. I think she reminded me of her mother."

My mother sipped her lemonade and stared past me out the window. "But she wasn't anything like her." My mother seemed to be talking to herself, making no eye contact with me. "Lorraine was kind of trashy. Karen never was."

"Then, what was the problem?"

"I think I didn't want to be reminded Dad was married before me. Karen reminded me," my mother said with a simplicity that left me breathless.

We split a cheesecake cookie and nibbled on it as we sat in a brief silence.

"Mom, I feel sad about Karen. I can't imagine being that child. So little comfort from the adults in her world." I felt a familiar tingling in my sinuses.

"Yes. It had to be hard," my mother responded. "She was a sad kid." My mother's eyes narrowed as they did when she was alone with her thoughts. I believed she was contemplating how she'd magnified Karen's grief. I wanted her to acknowledge she was one of the adults who withheld affection. I waited to hear regret in her voice.

"Didn't she die?" she asked, her face regaining its composure as she asked the question.

This was the last time I spoke to my mother about Karen.

My parents both were laid to rest with a Catholic Mass and burial. In the last ten years of his life, my father attended daily Mass; by then, my mother thought little of the Holy Mother and hadn't made it to the pews in at least as long.

My father confessed to a priest when he was in hospice care. I assume he addressed the sin of his two marriages as well as the many sins with his too-many-to-count girlfriends, and everything else he carried in his guilty heart.

But I was left with the grief of *my* sin, my shunning of Karen. Though I couldn't be blamed for how I treated her when we were children, I regret that I never contacted Karen in our adult lives. It wouldn't have taken much to extend a kindness, to let her know I was her family, to acknowledge we shared the name "Patricia."

I missed this opportunity, but Karen taught me more than she could have known. She never seemed angry with us. She seemed to forgive us in advance for all we'd never be able to give her. She seemed to accept that my mother would not mother her and that her own mother would not mother her. I never heard an unkind word from Karen—not about her father, not about her mother, and not about *my* mother.

Karen miraculously exuded a sense of family acceptance that was absent from her childhood. How she did that, I will never understand.

Like me, Karen was a child adrift among the people charged with her care. We grabbed at whatever shred of companionship, escape, or shelter we could find. We were alone—Karen as an only child and I as one of eight. I regret that I missed my chance to share family stories with the adult Karen—how we viewed our father, our brothers, and our grandparents. I missed the chance to tell her I knew my mother was wrong.

Today I know Karen reached out to me for solace when we were children. Though I was unable to be a sister to Karen, she showed me the kindness of an older sister. She curled up beside me in my childhood bunk bed. She offered me her magazines. She never teased me or made fun of my awkward appearance. And she never made me question the fact that I felt nothing in return.

It was a year after my mother died when I found out about Lisa, the child my father had with a family friend in an extra-marital affair. Lisa used Facebook to reach my youngest sister, who notified the rest of us. Lisa, fifty, lived with her husband and two sons in San Francisco.

We planned to meet at a restaurant in San Francisco. I flew from the Midwest with the little I had to offer her: medical information about our father and his family. I stood on a heavily trafficked sidewalk downtown with no picture of Lisa, only her description: "average height, short brown hair." Then I spotted a woman exiting the throng of sidewalk traffic and entering the restaurant. It wasn't her height or her hair that gave Lisa away.

Rather, it was an eerie reminder of my father: she had his military posture, his commanding stride, his slim, muscular body.

By the end of the lunch, I felt connected to the sister I'd never met. She has my father's deadpanned wit and his sharp mind. She loves poetry. We worked for years in the same field. Indeed, Lisa is my sister and over the past decade, she and her family have merged with ours: holidays, sister trips, evening phone calls when we share our angst about our jobs, our health, and our adult kids. Never do we end the call without a good laugh no matter what we discuss.

With no shame, I explain how Lisa came to join our family: *my dad's daughter from an affair*. Occasionally, I sense judgment: *Isn't that weird?* The judgment doesn't seem aimed at my father, who arguably deserves it. Rather, it seems aimed at me—for accepting the situation.

"I don't care what my dad and Lisa's mom did fifty years ago," I've said repeatedly.

I was fifty-seven when I learned I had another sister, another girl who didn't belong to my mother.

This time, I opened my heart to her.

This time I got it right.



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Gracepoint

by Amy Suzanne Parker

The dense gusts outside of my apartment conjure black clouds that amass overhead. It's 3 a.m., August 28, 2015, and I can't help but ingest the blackness around me. Like drinking ink, venom. There is a tropical storm, Erika, in the Atlantic Ocean, gaining strength. Together, she and I whirl in the darkness.

I awake from a vivid nightmare of past sexual abuse. Flashes of my grandpa's hands on my seven-year-old body and a blue condom keep appearing in my mind, while the tropical storm surges in my head. Erika sweeps her skirt in a spiral in my skull. Soon I find myself in the bathroom, the cap of the Klonopin bottle off, the bottle tilted toward my open hand, a bottle of SmartWater to wash it all down. After the pills, the vodka in the pantry. I read somewhere that the combination of benzos and alcohol is fatal.

I put the cap back on the Klonopin bottle, dress as quietly as possible, grab my purse and keys so I don't wake my sleeping boyfriend who works two jobs, and plug "Tampa General Hospital" (TGH) into my phone for directions.

I figure they have a psych ward and a doctor who does electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), a treatment that has worked for me in the past.

I drop my car off with the ER valet. The automatic doors provide a welcome whoosh of air conditioning.

"I'm suicidal." My voice cracks as I tell the nurse.

The valet drives my car away. The security guard takes my belongings. I change into hospital gowns, one in front, one around back, and hand over my glasses to the guard.

It is around 6 a.m. The winds in my head are seventy mph, still only tropical storm strength. I wait. A nurse draws blood. The tests all come back normal.

Noon comes. The second shift nurse gives me a turkey sandwich, yogurt, and applesauce with orange juice to wash it down. I eat most of it.

I wait. A nurse explains that TGH is not a Baker-Act-determining/accepting facility, so they are sending me to one instead. In Florida, patients who are a threat to themselves or others can be involuntarily hospitalized for seventy-two hours under this law.

They do not perform ECT there, the nurse says. He says that a van will transport me to the facility.

Right before I head off to the van, a young woman comes into the room. She is a social worker, young and freckled. “With sexual abuse, it’s about forgiveness,” she says. But it’s not about the abuser, my grandpa. I don’t have to forgive him; I need to forgive myself. I can’t let the past define me. It wasn’t my fault. I am so much more than what happened.

I feel a little better already, like I have some kind of power. Like my hands were controlling the bottle of Klonopin after all.

The wind from Tropical Storm Erika sweeps up the two hospital gowns that cover me. I wear only a tank top and yoga pants underneath and hospital socks. No shoes. I could be wearing all the clothes in the world and still feel like I do now—naked. The van’s driver leads me inside.

Without my glasses, objects and people blur into one another. While I sit to be admitted, I twist the ends of my hospital gowns and jiggle my legs up and down. Maybe I look like a crazy person.

Men wheel in a stretcher. A pretty woman in glasses is yelling about Jehovah God and how she is the Queen of Sheba.

A nurse huffs, “Oh God. Not this again. She was just in here.”

The woman babbles until she goes into the waiting room where there is a TV. I come into the room later after my paperwork goes through to my insurance company. I have waited hours. I can’t see the clock, and everything’s melting, turning into a Dalí painting. The hospital did not administer my morning meds. By default, I retreat to my dissociative state, and once again, my body is a shell full of ricocheting incoherent thoughts, memories, and dreams. We’re in a room with white faux-leather chairs, beige walls, and an array of patients muttering, twitching, moaning, the only light coming from the TV. I wonder what Dalí would’ve made of this.

From 3 p.m. to 1 a.m., I sit with the other waiting patients in this room and watch TruTv, a marathon of the pet version of *America's Funniest Home Videos*. The chairs are all filled. One scruffy man paces, and some other patients lay down a mattress so he can sleep on the floor. He pees all over the bathroom, the staff complain. I haven't had anything to eat or drink since the hospital. My lips are chapped. Sometimes the Queen of Sheba laughs at the videos on TV, and I see a spark of joy, more than a crazed caricature, *a person*.

The staff cuts off the ties on my hospital gowns but leave me in a room with two young, skinny women. My thoughts dart to tying the sheets around my neck and hanging myself. *Maybe the bathroom door would work as an anchor*. I've never been good at figuring out how to hang myself. In the past with belts or purse straps, I've choked, given up, my limbs collapsed. I quit thinking, and my body begs for sleep.

I float yet remain tethered to my body. I have not taken any of my meds today, but some invisible umbilical cord keeps me from drifting away, anchoring me in this storm.

The summer before high school, in 2000, I read *Girl, Interrupted*. I identified the most with the character who set herself on fire. Singed flesh is a nice way of telling everyone you're damaged without saying a word.

I thought there was something wrong with me, so my mom took me to our primary care physician. I was diagnosed with dysthymia in that September. By October, I thought about going to sleep forever. The Celexa my primary care physician gave me wasn't working. So I popped eight 10 mg Amitriptyline tablets, when I was supposed to take one to treat a migraine. A trial run. People can take up to 300 mg a day of the drug for depression, so it wasn't serious. I thought that I'd go to sleep for a while, and when I woke up, everything would be fixed.

The next day, Monday, my mom called the guidance counselor who called the school psychologist, Dr. Mason.¹ "Were you trying to kill yourself?" she asked.

"I don't know." I was fourteen.

I followed Dr. Mason's advice and consented to be hospitalized at the psych ward at Morton Plant Hospital, where I was born. My mother ranted. "I know *exactly* how you

¹ Names have been changed.

feel,” she assured me, but according to her, thousands of dollars of hospital-staff surveillance and joke therapy wouldn’t do any good.

My mother, despite a lifetime of depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder, has never been hospitalized for psychiatric reasons. She’s never attempted suicide either.

My father was summoned to deal with the crisis at hand. He came straight from work, still in his dress shirt and Dockers. He fiddled with the ballpoint pens in his shirt pocket. His ruddy face was a map of capillaries and pores with a topography of stubble, his eyes caverns dark with worry. Minutes tick-tocked into hours of paperwork and questions. I’d left school at 1 p.m., packed, and went to the hospital. Around 7 p.m., the staff had taken every potentially harmful implement from me, even for methods I hadn’t even thought of yet—shoelaces, belts, drawstrings from sweatpants, and pens. Before my arrival, my assigned roommate held a pen to her carotid artery and threatened to stab herself. The nurses sent her to the Quiet Room.

During the night, my insomnia lured me into a daze where I emerged from my room to ask the nurses what time it was. “It’s 3:45. Go back to bed,” they barked. I was still wide awake at 7 a.m., when we had to get up. The doctor took a look at the nurses’ notes and added Trazodone to help me sleep at night.

After a stale breakfast encased in Styrofoam, we attended therapy, during which the counselor, Anthony, asked us the usual questions: “Why don’t you do well in school?” (I did.) “Do you have any friends or family members who serve as positive influences?” (Yes.) And without directly asking, what besides cutting, overdosing, planning to jump off the Sunshine Skyway Bridge, numbing yourselves with cocaine and pot (unspoken: the drugs the doctors prescribed us), bingeing, purging, pulling your pubic hair out, threatening to poison your stepmother, and writing Plath-inspired poetry could help you cope? (Silence.)

Everyone aired their laundry lists of abuse, except me. I’d buried the memories of my grandpa’s abuse so deeply that its only manifestation was the tide of nausea I felt whenever I was around him, the feeling of needing to vomit up my skeleton.

We teens had “free” time. A few of us sat in the TV room. The nurses’ selection both amused and slighted us: *Pee-wee’s Big Adventure*. Here is a character who obviously

suffers from some mental instability searching for his stolen bike. He befriends and converses with inanimate objects. “Man, I can’t believe we’re in here, and that guy’s out there. What the fuck is wrong with society?” Derek, the boy who looked like he belonged in some 90s grunge band, was disturbed by who was inside and outside of the pathological bubble. First, it was fiction, but I also noted to myself that the actor playing Pee-wee was arrested for masturbating in an adult movie theater in Sarasota, so he was not fully on the outside after all.

“The mind plays tricks on you,” Pee-wee explains on screen. “You play tricks back! It’s like you’re unraveling a big cable-knit sweater that someone keeps knitting and knitting....”²

We understood.

I wasn’t even required to stay the full seventy-two hours stipulated by the Baker Act because I had been hospitalized voluntarily. On the second day, I amped up the saccharine in my voice and flashed the nurses and therapist a dimpled smile, swearing I’d never take too many pills again.

After a suicide attempt, an overdose of Klonopin, in 2006, I had one major depressive episode every two years, like clockwork. For each episode, I had electroconvulsive therapy, and it resurrected me. However, for the first three episodes, I had ECT on an outpatient basis.

For my fourth major depressive episode in 2012, I had the procedure three times a week at Shands Hospital in Gainesville, over 100 miles away. The most reasonable solution was the inpatient route, so I stayed in the psych ward for two weeks. My parents had gone to UF and thought Shands was an excellent hospital, better than the ones in Tampa.

This time, the patients were all women. Jessica, the resident cutter, gave me a tour. Diane had a pink walker and babbled on down the hall to no one. Ellen, the mysterious one, was on bedrest the entire time and was fed by the nurses. Brittany, in her twenties, alternated between a Marilyn Monroe and an Audrey Hepburn t-shirt, but always paired it with the same Snoopy pajama pants. Nicole was in her fifties with a

² *Pee-wee’s Big Adventure*. Directed by Tim Burton, performance by Paul Reubens, Warner Brothers, 1985.

retired-cop husband (and therefore, knew a little more about the right ways to kill oneself). Tori was a fast friend, bipolar and around my age (twenty-six), who graduated from Smith, my dream school. She, Brittany, Jessica, and I fit that young White woman depressive suicidal stereotype. Plathian ennui:

*In a strange way were free. We'd reached the end of the line. We had nothing more to lose. Our privacy, our liberty, our dignity: All of this was gone and we were stripped down to the bare bones of our selves.*³

I had my own room at Shands, and as long as I was in the nurses' sights, I could have a pen and write. Electroconvulsive therapy, recovery time, meals, art therapy, group therapy, medication times—even with all of this, we had free time. I tried to read. My parents bought me Steve Martin's *An Object of Beauty* from the hospital gift shop, but Lou Reed's words on electroshock were never truer:

*But every time you tried to read a book
You couldn't get to page 17
'Cause you forgot, where you were
So you couldn't even read.
Don't you know, they're gonna kill your sons*⁴

But your daughters will do their best to kill themselves.

At Gracepoint, in 2015, I become Tammy. That's according to the "looniest" resident, a disheveled forty-something white man named Bill who's been wearing the same blue t-shirt and gray sweatpants this whole time. He has not showered since he's arrived, and from the staff's complaints, I gather he's been around for at least a week. He talks in a falsetto, except when he speaks to men and calls them "motherfuckers." Then his voice descends into a growl.

³ Susanna Kaysen. *Girl, Interrupted*. Kindle, Vintage Books, 1994, p. 94.

⁴ "Kill Your Sons." *Sally Can't Dance*, RCA, 1974.

Everyone is given a different name by Bill. Laura is Kelly. The nurses are Mariah, Mary, and a dozen other names. Sometimes a person has more than one name or identity to Bill, but he always refers to me as Tammy. My husband's name is Randy. Bill proposes to Kelly/Laura at lunch one day. She says she has a boyfriend. Then he asks us to have a threesome with us. We both say no politely.

Later, in the dining room, he spits out his piece of ham onto the floor. At the end of lunch, when we line up against the wall to go back to the main area, I throw up what little I have eaten and the medicine the nurse gave me for my migraine. My vomit is pink and has corn in it. The nurse gave me red Kool-Aid to take with the Motrin. I throw up all over myself and onto the floor in front of everyone. Most are silent and look away, my roommates call me a "disgusting bitch," and Laura and the other women comfort me. Before dinner, one of them, a woman with perfect bangs who carries a blue blanket as if it holds a baby, lets me hold it as we wait in line.

Out of all the things taken from us, Laura and I are the most upset about not having our phones. There are public phones for the patients and one at the front desk for long-distance calls.

That night, Bill gets fed up with the staff and the other patients' telling him to shut up and sit down. He slaps his legs and shouts, "I'm gonna call Obama." He doesn't know how to work the public phones, and the idea soon flies out of his spinning mind.

Laura tells me why she's here. She goes to USF and lives with two other girls in the dorms. They called the police saying that she was going to kill herself by slitting her wrists. She says they mistook her—she often scratches herself across her wrists with her fingernails. I glance in the direction of her wrists. There are no marks.

A young Black man sits in the corner and sings Cohen's "Hallelujah," his voice a booming bass. Some patients are here because they were arrested for drug use and quake with withdrawal, some for anger management whom the staff hold back from punching the walls and each other, some for being homeless and streaming sentences without syntax, some just for not obeying law enforcement and for not being White. One teenage Hispanic father begs to speak to his daughter on the phone, "I need to speak to my daughter. Let me speak to my daughter. You don't understand." Two staff members usher him away from the phones. "You've had your calls for the day," one says.



It's been two days since I woke up from the nightmare of my grandpa's hands in my apartment. My roommates, Stephanie and Tamara, have wiry bodies, and I have a hard time telling them apart without my glasses.

We're all in our own beds in the room we share. The rain outside plops into puddles, and either Stephanie or Tamara says:

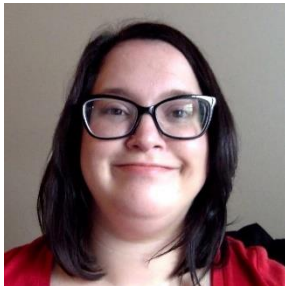
"Motherfucker skank ho. I'm gonna fuckin' kill you. You ugly. You mean looking."

All I can muster is "Well?" I lie back down.

That morning, Stephanie/Tamara has a screaming fit of psychosis (or is it a seizure? Both?) outside our room and the staff give her an injection to calm her down.

In the afternoon, the middle-aged women play cards with Laura, and the TV alternates between the Bucs' game and the local radar. The smoke break is cut short due to the rain and winds picking up. The patients complain of soggy cigarettes.

Tropical Storm Erika dissipates over the state. It pours and lightnings and thunders. By the time my boyfriend comes to pick me up, the bulk of the storm has swiveled elsewhere. I never have ECT again. Only thick gray clouds remain.



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Leaving Mum Behind ~ 1967- 68

by Deborah Burghardt

Dad, self-appointed ambulance driver, strangled the steering wheel with white-knuckled hands. His jaw clenched, he looked as frantic as I felt. Mum lay comatose on the pillow-laden back seat. My sister, Merri, and I squeezed in the front. We had rushed off from my paternal grandparents' home in Massachusetts to get to a hospital in Pennsylvania—our second twelve-hour road trip in a matter of days.

“Check on your mother,” Dad said in a voice, shaky, like her last steps.

My stomach twisted. Mum's face had paled to the white of crushed shells. I touched her still warm forehead. Her breathing labored with almost imperceptible inhales. Her exhales—specks of air released sporadically like in childhood Hold-Your-Breath contests.

“How's she doing?” Dad said, sweat trickling down his temples.

I pressed a cup to Mum's lips, only to watch the water dribble down her chin. “She swallowed a little.” I lied. “I'm taking care of her. Don't worry.” Why upset him with the truth? We had no choice but to keep driving and keep hoping—hoping Dr. McKelvey could undo what Dad had done.

Earlier that December, home for winter break, I noticed a change in Mum. Her body appeared slight, fragile, lucent in an unfamiliar way. Although she always rested her eyes, she rarely opened them. And when she did, she stared into space, sort of dazed, as if light years away from our living room. The sparkle I prided myself on setting aglow in her had dimmed. She barely acknowledged my college stories and her *My Fair Lady* soundtrack. I worried too because earlier that fall, Dr. McKelvey had hospitalized Mum for breathing difficulties due to weakened muscles in her chest and abdomen. The source of that weakening, a fear I intuited at five—*something is wrong with my mother*—Dad named multiple sclerosis (MS) when I turned nine. At eighteen, I was intuiting something far worse—*my mother is dying*.

Before I had a chance to talk to Dad, he announced we'd be traveling from Pennsylvania to my grandparents' home in Massachusetts. December 18, 1967, marked their 50th wedding anniversary.

Customarily, we visited Nana and Granddad during Dad's two-week vacation in July. His mood soared the closer we came to departure. Reunited with Granddad, the two talked work—stronger metals and smoother roads—in the vegetable garden. Nana toured Dad around her prized overgrown flower beds, threatening to chastise him should he dare to weed or trim. He'd try to talk her out of one of her paintings, but she refused even his offer to pay.

We dined on fresh clams, fish, lobster, and giant seedy squash—food that Dad adored. Food Mum, Merri, and I pushed around our plates suspiciously.

Every afternoon we sunbathed on Anthony's Beach, lunched on peanut butter and marshmallow fluff sandwiches. After a vigorous swim to the farthest buoys, Dad and Merri floated effortlessly on their backs, toes poking out of the waves. More of a wader myself, I settled for the closest raft. Once I met a French woman there, who taught me to twirl my ankles. "The secret to good legs," she said. Much more important to the teen me than those buoys.

Mum used to come to the beach with us, wearing a broad-brimmed hat with wide ribbon band and movie star sunglasses, but then MS sidelined her to the bathhouse porch. Eventually, her body couldn't endure the heat, and she stayed back at the house to nap. I'm sorry to say that it became routine—leaving Mum behind.

Perhaps my months away at college had enabled me to see more clearly than Dad the extent of Mum's decline. I tried again to express my doubts. "Hey, Dad. I'm not sure about this trip. What about Mum's health? What if the car breaks down or we drive into a nor'easter and get stranded? I think she's..."

"Avoiding danger," Dad interrupted, "is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.' Helen Keller." I'm sure Mum agreed with him on her healthy days. And in retrospect, I see how framing the trip as a "great

adventure” set us on an optimistic course, prepared us to face the unforeseen, to be as alive as we could muster.

And so, in the midst of much gone wrong and much more that might, Dad whistled while he tied Mum’s wheelchair to the roof of our Mercury Monterey. He said what he always said on our way out of town. “Ah, I smell the salt air already.”

A few hours into the drive, Mum started. “Oh boy.” Her hair needed a brush. Traces of lush red lipstick streaked her lips. “Oh boy,” she said, “Oh boy.”

I tried to distract myself by studying *Catcher in the Rye* for an upcoming English final. Merri counted out-of-state license plate states and stealthily stretched her long legs over the pillow blockade to my side.

“Oh boy.”

Trying to gain distance from Mum’s mournful sound, I pushed deep into my seat. Held my book in front of my face, simulating a soundproof barrier that blocked the view of her awkwardly angled body.

“Oh boy.”

Darkness cloaked the car as Dad drove through a tunnel, a welcome change from brown hillsides and the gray day that matched my mood. I closed the cover on Holden, pushed my sister’s long-legs back to her side.

“Oh boy.” Mum’s words echoed through the cavern. “Oh, boy.”

College gave me a two-hour escape from home where no one knew my secrets. Growing up, I hid out in my bedroom with my best girlfriend or in the cellar with my boyfriend. There was school and clerking at Troutman’s department store. But inside that damn car, I was trapped.

“Oh boy.”

“Daaaaad! Why does she keep saying that?” With hundreds of miles ahead of us, I figured the monotony of hearing those two words over and over would drive me crazy.

“Try changing her position.”

Reaching over the front seatback, I propped Mum against the locked door, rearranged the pillow beneath her freckled cheek with quick, squally movements. Her lashes fluttered.

Slumped back in my seat, I pressed my forehead against the cold side window. I bit my lip hard.

“Oh boy.”

“Daaaad. What is wrong with her? Is she dreaming?” His eyes darted between Mum and the mist rising from the wet road. He raised his knees high enough under the wheel to steer the car. His hands-free, he reached over and rubbed her hands between his.

“Take it easy, Barbara Boo-Boo. Almost to the George Washington Bridge. Back to New England, we go, ho, ho. Back to the land of our youth. In the meantime, you enjoy a little snooze.”

Dad’s gentle caresses and comforting words, generously given to a woman who couldn’t respond, mocked my outbursts and impatient treatment of my mother. I leaned up and kissed her cheek.

All these years later, I still see those knees steering that car, our peril never occurring to me: *adventure or nothing*. I’ve always been big on fixing, sometimes uninvited, sometimes too soon—ask my children. Maybe, I learned that from Dad—drive with your knees if that’s what it takes.

“Oh boy.”

I no longer remember the name of the restaurant where my grandparents held their anniversary dinner. In my memory, it exists as one with classic New England charm and nautical atmosphere. A place where the host spoke like my Bostonian parents and knew Granddad by name.

The eldest grandchild, I sat beside Granddad at the table and across from my parents. Dad wrapped his arm around Mum’s shoulders and placed his hand gently under her chin to support her head—neck muscles shot. Granddad wiped his mustache with a

linen napkin before speaking to Mum. His blue-gray eyes twinkled above prominent bags I hoped never to inherit. “How long have you been married, Barbie?” She gave him that faraway look.

Dad answered for her. “We’re coming up on twenty-three years.”

“Well, when you get to twenty-five, I’m coming to Pennsylvania to celebrate you. Would you like that?” Neither of them answered.

I suspected Granddad knew the day would never come. And even though he and Nana rarely traveled long distances, if, by some slim chance that day came, he’d be good to his word.

As I watched him watch Dad with Mum, I wondered if he was proud of his son for heeding his advice, another of Dad’s oft-quoted philosophies: “The best way to love your daughters is to love their mother.”

The morning after the party, Mum ran a high temperature and grew increasingly despondent, symptoms that baffled a local doctor, who kindly made a house call. Dad decided to take her home to Dr. McKelvey, who’d been handling the incurable case for the last decade. After her appointments, Dad said they always had a good laugh. That meant a lot to him. I don’t know if he tried to talk Dad into or out of the drive, only that he agreed to meet us at the hospital.

Dad drove, speedometer needle hovering past all limits, determined to get Mum to the man he trusted most to help her. I tucked a blanket around her and sopped up the water she couldn’t swallow. I whispered to her, “Come on, Mum. Please. Give us another, ‘Oh boy.’”

We raced in reverence, the Mercury Monterey, our church sanctuary. Merri, fourteen, didn’t say a word the entire trip. I’m not sure either Dad or I tried to reassure her. I can’t recall driving toward sunset or the phase of the moon.

Guilt had to have been pressing on Dad’s neck, abiding as the humming tires. He had to have been asking himself, “*What was I thinking? Did I push her too far?*” Unless.

Unless. Unless he too knew in that knowing place—Mum was fading. And so, he ferried her away on a “daring adventure” a return home one last time.

And perhaps, Mum, feeling herself shedding this life and believing in the promise that heaven awaited her, sang us her farewell. A hymn—composed from overflowing joy.

“Oh boy.”



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Try Harder

by Julie Wittes Schlack

“Which dish towel do you use for dishes?” my mother-in-law Roz asked while helping to clean up after dinner at our house one night. This was in the early days of my marriage, when her ways were still new to me.

In the span of a microsecond I wondered: How many dish towels do I have? How many dish towels should I have? What else would I use a dish towel for besides dishes?

“Oh, any one will do,” I answered genially, magnanimously, cluelessly.

“Really,” she said, almost trembling with the effort it took to contain her judgment. “I know I’m always grabbing a towel to clean up a spill on the counter—you know, if I overfill the coffee cup or I get a little dirty water run-off from the dish rack or ...” (chuckling) “... I remember one time I was spraying the cast iron skillet—this was before the days of Teflon—I was spraying the skillet—this was my mother’s old frying pan that she probably got from her mother, that’s how old it was—I was spraying the skillet with *Pam*—the butter-flavored *Pam*—I don’t like the olive oil flavor; I find it too heavy somehow ...”

Lost in *Pam*, I thought. I’m safe. She’ll never find her way back to my misuse of dish towels.

“... so I’m so absent minded that I ended up trying to dry a glass—one of my nice crystal glasses which don’t come cheap, you know—with the same towel I used to wipe the Pam from the counter! Which is why I have two sets of towels—the gingham for spills, and the blue terry for drying dishes.”

I tried to get by as the easy-going, devil-may-care house maiden in counterpoint to her relentless, methodical house frau. I hoped to charm her into submission, or to at least slow her down, by exposing my soft white underbelly and signaling that I was no challenge to her authority in these matters. But she was undeterred by my breezy refusal to engage.

“Do you put your eggs into the water before it’s boiled or after?” she asked as we were preparing to make egg salad for my kids one day.

Think, think I urged myself, but came up empty. “After,” I answered emphatically, knowing that this was a question on which I should have a definite and defensible position and adopting one, based on nothing but bravado.

“Oh really?” she answered. “That’s interesting ...”

Interesting, I silently wailed, as my internal buzzer screamed and giant lights flashed out *Error, Error!*

“... because I find that if I put them straight into boiling water, they crack.”

She stopped on that one, single and hard-syllabled word. Apparently eggs that crack was the catastrophe that could stop even the juggernaut of Roz’s monologue dead in its tracks.

“Unless, of course, I put vinegar in the water before hand, which I usually do,” she resumed, and I could breathe again.

“Oh, of course,” I hastily agreed. “Yeah, I always put vinegar in the water first.”

Saved.

I’m remembering these kitchen encounters as I pack up Roz’s pots and pans, dishes, aprons, and appliances. Most will go to an agency that helps poor people get settled in new homes. Her beloved toaster oven, her Melita coffee pot, and two mugs that she bought on a trip to Spain will go with her to her assisted living apartment.

She is uncharacteristically passive as I cull the contents of her kitchen. Occupying only a fraction of the chair, arms crossed—less in defiance than in an effort to keep her body warm on this December day—she is silent and small.

Looking over at her now and then, keeping up some mindless patter but no longer trying to engage her in decision-making, I realize that it wasn’t just my ineptness in domestic matters that made me so uncomfortable in the thirty years of our relationship, not even primarily that. It was my unstylish and large body next to her tiny, immaculate one. Of course, this self-consciousness wasn’t helped by the fact that Roz keenly observed every morsel of food that everyone in her immediate vicinity put into their mouths, and couldn’t help but comment on each. We’d sit down to breakfast when visiting her in Great Neck, to a table arrayed with bagels, eggs, orange juice, more bagels, two kinds of cream cheese, and a collection of natural fiber cereals more suitable for mulch

than for human nutrition. I'd spread a wafer-thin layer of cream cheese on my bagel, delicately slice it into quarters (something I never did at home), and just as I was about to take the first bite, Roz would note with surprise that felt an awful lot like judgment, "Oh, you put *cream cheese* on your bagel?"

I knew that the best defense was a good offense, but I couldn't muster the wherewithal to say "Oh, you *don't*?" No, instead, sounding like Gomer Pyle, through my clogged mouth I'd cheerily reply, "Yes. Yes, I do."

"I thought you didn't like cream cheese on your bagels," she'd reply, and this was a ritual that we repeated countless times over the years.

It wasn't that she consistently misremembered my taste in condiments that amazed me, but rather that she noted or tried to remember it at all. But once Roz formulated an impression about you—positive or negative—that was it. A legend was born. You became "the kind of person who...."

I took slim—well, modest—comfort from the fact that when watching a *National Geographic* special about the South Pacific, Roz felt obliged to comment on the imposing size of Samoan women. (I guess they ate too much cream cheese on their bagels....) But when I heard her fret about her daughter's eating habits, I relaxed still more. Ruthie was and is whippet thin—a personal trainer, for God's sake—and one of the most inoffensively health-conscious people I know.

No, it wasn't just that Roz was obsessed and judgmental about weight. She was obsessed about bodies and bodily functions in general, and convinced that there was a right way and a wrong way to do absolutely everything in life, from flossing to making love to completing a crossword puzzle. She wasn't sweeping in her judgments. You weren't a bad person if you were too fat or too thin, just a person who ate incorrectly.

But if you also cleaned your counter with an overly abrasive cleanser, styled your hair inappropriately for the shape of your face, voted for the more corrupt of two political candidates, spent your money profligately on movies when they were first released or failed to save your tin foil, paid too much attention to your children by giving them equal or even more time than the adults at the dinner table or too little attention to your children by not inspecting their homework every night, brushed your teeth in a circular motion instead of a unidirectional top-to-bottom motion, ate broccoli while you were breastfeeding

so of course your baby was gaseous, or parallel parked too far from the curb—well, you could be a good person who did a hell of a lot wrong.

But she was equally hard on herself. Her first pregnancy ended in a stillbirth; the baby was born with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck. Whenever Roz alluded to this heartbreaking event (which she did quite freely), she'd usually add "The doctor said this sometimes just happens, and in those days, they didn't have the ultrasound or any other of this fancy equipment to see what was going on." But the aversion of her gaze and flatness in her voice, the utter lack of conviction as she recited this palliative explanation, always left me feeling that she saw this loss not as fate, not even as the medical malpractice she was generally so swift to detect, but as her biggest failure.

She seems to feel the same way about aging. Misplacing her keys, forgetting where she parked her car, unable to sleep when the sun goes down, only when it rises—she thinks these are all signs of her own ineptitude. And it's clear from her shocking docility that moving to the Assisted Living facility four blocks away is her punishment.

When Roz got breast cancer at the age of sixty, she blamed it on having smoked in her thirties. Never mind that her section of Long Island is a notorious cancer cluster, or that her form of breast cancer is relatively common in post-menopausal women. And when she had a small melanoma on her arm seven years later despite wearing SPF 30+ sun block religiously, she was as hurt and angry as she was at sixteen upon getting a B in high school Biology despite having worked diligently, turning in all her assignments on time, and acing the final.

"It isn't fair," she protested fifty years later. "I couldn't draw well enough. That's why I got the B. My pictures of pistils and stamens were just not very well executed. I just don't have the fine motor coordination for it."

Roz had a hard time letting go.

Even at the age of eighty, she could sound remarkably adolescent, railing against her mother's over-protectiveness. Roz was an only child, born to Eddie and Heddy (whose rhyming names never amused her), a woman who lost her brother to WWI and her mother to a car accident on the North Fork of Long Island within three weeks of each other.

“I never learned to ride a bicycle. My mother was afraid that I’d hurt myself or get hit,” Roz complained bitterly. “And even after I was married,” she roared incredulously, “even after I was a mother myself, if I drove anywhere in the rain she’d insist, INSIST, that I call her when I got home so she’d know I was safe.”

The first time I heard this complaint I smiled sympathetically—*mothers!*—but in fact my sympathy was far greater for Heddy, so fearfully stranded on her island of loss, surrounded by danger from unsafe drivers, warring nations, influenza, bee strings, and spoiled mayonnaise. After the fifth or sixth time I heard this complaint, I said “So she’d calm down after you gave her a quick call, right?”

But the demands of her mother’s conventionality and her neediness were the hearty soil from which Roz’s energy and independence seemed to grow. “I wasn’t about to call her,” Roz snorted. “I refused to be tied down by her mishigas.”

And she meant it. Very bright (though very sure she wasn’t bright enough), she went to Queens College to study Spanish at sixteen, and at twenty-one, heady with the excitement and opportunity that World War II created for women, she made a mad dash for freedom.

“I went to Washington DC in August, for training as a translator at the State Department. And boy, in those days we didn’t have air conditioning,” she said, shaking her head, “so you can imagine! Between the BO and trying to clean the sweat stains off of the light cotton dresses and suits we wore all the time ... of course nobody could afford dry-cleaning ...”

“So Washington must have been quite a place during the war years,” I interrupted desperately. “All these young women in the workforce for the first time, all these guys in uniform eager for one last fling before being shipped out, all these spies and cryptographers ...”

“Oh, it was a beehive,” she said with gusto, laughing delightedly at the reminder of all those free and purposeful young people, exhilarated by the memory. “I lived with a group of girls from the State Department in a rooming house—that’s what we had in those days. Women would take in boarders and turn bedrooms into dormitory-style rooms with three or four beds and a bathtub ... well, the bathtub was just lined with our nylons that we’d carefully wash in the sink, because nylon was just so scarce in those days. They

used it for parachutes, of course, because this was really before synthetics—well, besides plastic, there really weren't any synthetics, none of your poly-cotton blends, just wool, which in that heat, well forget about it, and linen, which wrinkled terribly and of course we couldn't just hang it in the bathroom to get the wrinkles out while we were showering because we had no showers, only bathtubs—”

She'd done it again. Just when you thought she was on a tangent from which there was no return, defying all mortal expectations, she'd found her way back. “—and the bathtub rim was covered in individual nylons that we'd carefully lay there to dry after hand washing them in the sink with some very gentle soap, Ivory probably, though with rationing, even soap was hard to come by, and in that heat” And magically, we were back to BO.

Now and always, her body's betrayals ring out like tympanies and trombones in Roz's mental din. I heard about her rhinitis within five minutes of meeting her (and found out what it meant about twelve years later). Her deviated septum, her propensity not just to rhinitis but to sinusitis as well, her tendency towards chipped nails, gingivitis, mitral regurgitation, a tendency to break out with rosacea after eating nightshades (it took another decade for me to decipher that one), her difficulties getting a good haircut because she has “a big head and a double crown”—these are indignities that even as a young woman, when most of us assume we're immortal, she took as rebukes to her good behavior.

After that smelly summer in 1942, Roz had made her way by train, plane, and boat, to Costa Rica to work as a translator at the US Embassy in San Jose. I knew she'd gone, but never heard about this expedition. Aside from rare references to teas at the Ambassador's home, the one story I heard repeatedly over the years was about how difficult it was to pack a year's worth of possessions into a single trunk, how long it took that trunk to get to San Jose, and how guilty she felt about making a two-year commitment to the State Department when she knew all along that she intended to stay for only a year. (I was never clear as to whether that deception was driven by the fact that she couldn't possibly fit two years' worth of possessions into one trunk. All I know is that the trunk and the lie are closely bound in Roz's mind.)

As bright as she was, Roz seemed constitutionally incapable of separating the conversational wheat from the chaff. She could neither recognize what was generally interesting and admirable about her life *nor* what was so excruciatingly boring to anyone but herself that it could drive her poor listeners to pull out their hair, one strand at a time, just for a little distraction. (My husband Mark—a man not prone to hyperbole—swears that as a teen, he once left the house for a half-hour and when he returned, not only was Roz still talking but she hadn't even noticed he'd left. Theirs was a small apartment, so this was no mean feat.)

Still, she managed to sustain a marriage for twenty years before divorcing Jack. She may have been shrewder than she herself realized when at twenty-seven, hovering on the brink of being an old maid, she chose to marry a man who was narcissistic enough to tune out the words or needs of anyone who wasn't in the midst of paying him homage.

Friendships were tougher. She had a broad circle of women who she dined and went to theatre and traveled with—women she'd met at NOW or at the Domestic Violence Speakers' Bureau or as a volunteer at the Rape Crisis Center. But these relationships, while mutually useful, seemed lacking in depth or intimacy.

"I've never been very good at friendship," Roz once told me matter-of-factly. "I don't know if I just don't know how to read other people, or if there's something in me that turns them off, but I've never really had close, lifelong friends like some other women do."

Was her apparent calm at this gaping void something she'd had to practice, or had grown into with time and resignation? I could never tell. Her affect suggested that this deficit was just one in a litany of many that she'd learned to stoically accept since an early age. She wasn't much of an athlete, she told me, and suspected that she never enjoyed sex the way other women did. She wasn't creative—not like her son and me. She could cook adequately, she knew, but not with flair, could never remember the names of books she'd read, rarely sang to her children because she couldn't carry a tune, and her handwriting was hard to read. The junior high school kids she faced for fifteen years may have learned some Spanish from her, but she wasn't one of those popular teachers. She was tone deaf, she was only an adequate baker, and while she swam forty laps each day well into her seventies, she wasn't much of a swimmer ... not really, anyhow, not like some of the other women she saw at the Great Neck pool.

Never mind that she'd traveled the world when others of her age and class had stayed home doing their nails, supported two kids through college as a single mother, become a political activist at the age where complacency settles into the bones of most like chronic joint pain. Independence, lullabies, divorce, pot roast, opera, abortion, dish towels—these are all on a par in Roz's capacious but non-discriminating mind.

In recent years, gravity seems to have exerted an especially strong force on Roz. She started out short and has lost still more inches as she's aged. Her shoulders, always sloped, have taken on the shape of wet laundry hanging from a sagging clothesline. The wrinkles on either side of her mouth have grown deeper and rush downward, like valleys carved by ancient glaciers. But while becoming smaller and shorter, until the last six months or so, she'd also become more energetic—the clip of her walk even faster, the torrent of her words even more inexhaustible as she decried, with a startling new bitterness, the lack of causality between the care she'd taken and the fact that despite her best efforts, she was getting old and achy and forgetful.

A world that is arbitrary, a world that isn't uniformly governed by cause and effect, one where undesirable events are not always averted by talent or, failing that, by better informed, more conscientious behavior—this is a world that fundamentally terrifies and angers her. And so, like her mother, she is cataloguing—not external dangers—but her personal failures to triumph over the laws of nature.

And yet unlike her mother, she tried and so admirably succeeded in defying the social laws of her time—going to college, traveling, marrying late, working outside the home, divorcing before this was a mainstream activity.

Tonight, before packing up the photo albums she will take with her, we leaf through one of the earliest ones containing pictures from the 1940s. The adhesive plastic on each page is cloudy and too brittle to lift, so we have to peer intently to make out the images underneath.

“Look at you on that a horse!” Mark exclaims. “Ride ‘em, cowboy. Where was that taken?” He passes Roz the album and she rummages around the top of her head for the reading glasses hanging around her neck.

“Costa Rica,” she answers crisply as soon as she finds them and puts them on. “What a day that was! We rode all the way from the US Embassy to the beach. The pain in my gluteus maximus when I finally got home ...”

You’re back, I think, and am suddenly, surprisingly dewy-eyed with relief.

Slowly, she leafs through the pages. “If I’d grown up in the sixties, in the time that you kids grew up,” she says to Mark now in a moment of uncharacteristic and calm self-reflection, “I don’t know if I would have gotten married and had kids.”

I looked quickly over at Mark to see how he is coping with this classic Roz moment of unflinching honesty coupled with complete obliviousness. Even at his age, it could potentially be tough to hear your mother essentially say *If I was born in a different time, I wouldn’t have had you*.

“It sounds like you have some regrets,” I observe.

“Not really,” she answers, then after a pause, she fiercely declares, “I always swore that I wouldn’t sacrifice myself for anyone, and I’ve been true to that.”

What an odd principle to build your life on, I think, torn between respect and deep sadness, to fundamentally define yourself in opposition.

“I had to do that, to stand up to the suicide threat, if I was ever going to have my own life,” she continues.

“The suicide threat?” I ask. Roz is clearly picking up the thread of some internal narrative that was still hidden from Mark and me.

“Yeah,” she answered impatiently. “My mother threatened God knows how many times to kill herself if I went to Costa Rica. But I couldn’t give in to that. So I went. She didn’t attempt suicide, of course, but she made me pay for it the rest of my life.”

Did Heddy make her pay? I don’t know. But I do think she made it tough for Roz, the frightened, determined, joyless swimmer of laps, to comfortably navigate the eddy of needs that’s created by people trying to live together. And I suspect that Roz’s endless, undiscerning soliloquies were just the audible manifestation of her constant, internal dialogue between the only child who wanted to be good and the only child who wanted to be free.

She stirs her tea, the spoon clanging angrily against the cup. She has always equated a move to Assisted Living with the loss of independence and viewed a dependent life as one not worth living. Is this her slow suicide?

"I should have done crossword puzzles," Roz declares. "They're supposed to help prevent Alzheimer's."

"Well, it's not too late," Mark encourages her. "You can start doing them now."

"No, I can't," she answers irritably. "They have all these tricks in crossword puzzles, special words that they use over and over again. But you need to do puzzles for years to learn them. It's too late for me now."

"Well, you don't have to get all the answers right for it to be a worthwhile exercise," I argue. "If you get stuck, cheat. The point is just to engage in the mental exercise."

She looks at me blankly.

"You know," I try to explain. "Like figuring out even just one or two letters in the word, then asking yourself 'What's a five-letter word for *nice* that starts with a *B* and ...'"

But I can instantly see that the point is lost on her. No, eyes looking skyward, she is off and running, trying to think of a five-letter word for nice that starts with the letter B. "Roz, that was just an example."

"Oh," she answers, with annoyance, confusion, and contrition colliding in that one syllable. I've never, ever heard the latter two tones from her, and they are breaking my heart.

She stops speaking, and though silence is what I usually pray for when with her, on this night, in this tiny, exasperating woman, it sounds like surrender. *Try*, I silently urge her. *Try harder.*



Julie Wittes Schlack is the author of a memoir in essays, *This All-at-Onceness* (Pact Press), named one of *Kirkus Review's* 100 Best Indie Books of 2019, and of the forthcoming novel *Burning and Dodging* (Black Rose Writing, December, 2021). She writes and teaches both fiction and creative nonfiction, and has an MFA from Lesley University. Her essays and stories have appeared in numerous literary journals, including *Shenandoah*, *The Writer's Chronicle*, *Ninth Letter*, *Eleven Eleven*, and *The Tampa Review*. She reviews books for *The ARTery*, and is a regular contributor to

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Modesty and Other Provocations

by Amy Roost

Frustrated, yet disciplined, I throw back the covers and rise from the warmth of my bed. I make coffee, feed my confused cats their treats, open my laptop at the dining room table and begin taking dictation on the intrusive thoughts that have kept me tossing and turning all night. Although I'm a night owl by nature, early morning is my favorite time of day to write. The apartment is peaceful, interruptions are few, and there's the reward of the soft light at dawn that makes anything seem possible.

I chose writing as my second career because I wanted to 'be the change' by shining a light on social injustice. The hours are long and the pay sucks, but it feels like I'm finally making a difference in the world instead of merely collecting a paycheck.

I spend three hours getting good work done before reluctantly heeding the "time to stand" notification my iWatch keeps sending me. Thinking of Einstein's advice on the importance of doing nothing as a way to generate creative ideas, I go out for a walk. It's a crisp October day and I head toward the harbor. A gentle onshore breeze combs my skin and I feel the burden of multiple deadlines begin to lift. At the two-mile mark I stand before the rippling sails of The Star of India, an old clipper ship that graces San Diego's bayfront. I take in several deep breaths of briny air before turning around and heading for home, and more work.

To avoid the construction scaffolding on the west side of Columbia Street, I walk on the east side on this still-early Sunday morning. The only other pedestrians in sight are three young women, sisters, wearing black hijabs walking shoulder to shoulder beneath the scaffolding. Their conversation is animated. They are smiling.

Presently, a white middle-aged man enters my peripheral view. As he approaches the women, I notice the upturned collar of his white polo shirt, his leather flip flops, and his gait, which seems unsteady. One of the three women falls behind her two fellow travelers in order to make room for the man to pass. As she does, the man suddenly swings at the tallest of the women who is wearing chunky-framed glasses. He misses her but lands a glancing blow on the woman who had dropped behind. The taller woman

screams “What the fuck?!” at the man, and a cartoon-like scuffle ensues with eight arms and legs shoving, swinging and kicking. The man yanks the hijab off the head of the third woman, and begins hurling racist expletives. I cross the trafficless street yelling, “STOP! Or I’ll call the police.” Others appear, seemingly out of nowhere—a young couple runs to the scene as does a burly man, a woman walking her beagle, and a fireman who works at the station in the next block.

On November 8, 2016, a white man who brags about grabbing pussy is elected the 45th president of the United States. The next morning, my 24-year-old son, Stuart, texts me photos taken by a former classmate inside a Reed College library bathroom. Overnight, someone has spray-painted swastikas and the words “niggas gonna die” on the wall above the urinals.

In the ten days following Trump’s election, there are almost 900 reports of harassment and intimidation across the nation, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center. Targets include people at work, on the street, shopping in grocery stores, worshiping in temples, riding public transportation, and children harassed on the playground.

When I was seventeen, I ran everywhere. I ran laps around the track after school; I ran to the beach for sunset; and, one afternoon, I ran to a salon to get my hair cut. I apologized to the salon owner—a pock-faced white man in his mid-50s—for being a little sweaty, a condition society had taught me was only acceptable on men. “No problem,” he said. “It suits you.” The owner led me to the wash bowls in the back room of the otherwise empty salon. There he tucked a towel into the back of my tank top, letting his fingers linger on the nape of my neck just a milli-second too long—not worth mentioning even if I’d possessed the temerity to do so, which I didn’t.

I leaned back on the black pleather lounge to allow my long blonde curls to cascade into the basin. “Is the temperature okay?” the owner asked as he began to wet my hair. “Fine,” I said absent-mindedly, immersed as I was in thoughts of an older boy who had asked me to go with him to the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* Friday night.

“Ow!” I screamed. The owner had grabbed a fist full of my hair and was pulling my head down hard toward the base of the bowl. “Be still,” his changed voice whispered. While the owner clamped my hair with his right hand, he thrust his left hand down my shorts and grabbed my crotch. Reflexively, my knee shot up and landed a blow to his shoulder, solid enough to startle him backwards. I jumped up and windmilled my arms every which way to keep him at a distance then dashed out the door, hitting the sidewalk in a full sprint that didn’t let up until a mile later when I arrived home.

There was no keeping the incident from my mother, who was preparing dinner when I burst through the front door wet-headed and out of breath, the towel still barely hanging on to the back of my shirt, like some tattered cape of a defeated superhero. I spilled what happened to me in heaving sobs. Mom called the police.

“Can you tell me about your encounter with the man at the beauty salon?” asked the white male officer sitting across from me and mom in the living room. I told him every excruciating detail.

“What were you wearing?”

“Powder blue Dolphin jogging shorts, a pink Faded Glory tank top, white Nikes.” I paused. “Bra. My bra.”

“Were you wearing panties?” he inquired. I looked over at my mom, who gave me a “answer-the-question” nod. “No. My shorts have a built-in panty liner.”

I don’t remember if it was that night or later—after the white male judge gave the salon owner a slap on the wrist—that I learned he was a registered sex offender. What I do remember is what the police officer said to my mother as he was leaving. “Maybe have your daughter dress more modestly when she jogs.”

Stuart lost his innocence at the same age I did. His high school biology lab partner, Chelsea King, was brutally raped and murdered one afternoon when she went for a quick run around the lake near her house before heading to her violin lesson. She was wearing jogging shorts and a tank top. Entering her memorial service at the high school’s football stadium, every person in attendance was handed a sunflower, Chelsea’s favorite. The gathering of more than 2,000 mourners stood waving our sunflowers back and forth as the loudspeakers played Chelsea’s favorite song, “Owl City” by Vanilla Sky and white

doves were released from a box on stage. *This could have been me*, only with Dahlias and “Hey Jude.”

A few years later, the vampire of innocence called on Stuart, again.

When he phoned me from work, I knew something was wrong. “Remember my friend Taliesin, the one I worked with a couple of summers back?” he asked.

“Of course. Why?”

“He was stabbed and killed yesterday.”

I let Stuart talk. Mostly he recounted his fond memories of the summer he and Taliesin spent working side by side repainting dorm rooms. Then, he shared the gruesome details of Taliesin’s death—how he came to the defense of two women being harassed for wearing hijabs by a middle-aged white man on a Portland MAX train. When Taliesin intervened and told the man to stop, the man pulled a knife and stabbed him. Taliesin’s dying words were, “Tell everyone on this train I love them.”

Over the next few months, Stuart and I texted almost daily. We compared notes about work, discussed the news, and shared silly photos of our pets. Shortly after Heather Heyer was killed by a white supremacist in Charlottesville, and a day after a middle-aged white man in Las Vegas killed fifty-nine souls and injured 869, the comparatively insignificant news of Tom Petty’s death broke this camel’s back. I called rather than texted to check up on Stuart, and, truth be told, because I too needed some ballast.

“Howya doin’?” I asked. His one sentence reply imprinted me: “Nothing is sad anymore.”

A hijab is a veil or a headscarf worn by Muslim women in the presence of any male outside of their immediate family. It usually covers the head and chest. Traditionally, it is worn by women to conform to Islamic standards of modesty. A hijab also denotes a metaphysical dimension symbolizing our separation from God. The Qur’an instructs Muslim women to dress modestly, but scholars disagree about whether it actually mandates that women wear hijabs. Some contend that the mandate of the Qur’an to wear hijab applied only to the wives of Muhammad and not women generally. Nevertheless, most modern Muslim legal systems require women’s modesty, which is commonly thought to include covering everything except the face, hands and feet.

Even where it's not legally required—for instance, in the United States—a significant portion of Muslim women choose to wear headscarves. Ilhan Omar is one such woman. On January 3, 2019, after a rule change reversing a 181-year ban on headwear in the House of Representatives chamber, she wore a hijab when sworn in as a member of the 116th United States Congress.

Three months later, a middle-aged white man from South Florida was charged with threatening to kill Omar and another freshman Congresswoman, Rashida Tlaib, also Muslim. During his arraignment, he specifically cited his support for President Donald Trump.

Now less than ten feet away from the scuffle, I try dialing 911, but my hands are so shaky I have trouble unlocking my phone. Finally, I reach a dispatcher and begin talking a blue streak, describing the chaos: an enraged man taunting the three women yelling, 'Go back to where you came from;' another man trying to restrain him throwing a punch at the assailant and knocking him to the ground; the assailant collecting himself and his flip flops off the sidewalk and leaving the scene. Ignoring the dispatcher's advice to stay put, I inform the dispatcher that I and the woman out walking her beagle intend to pursue the assailant. We follow from a safe distance for several blocks all the while telling the dispatcher our route until, at an intersection.

I spot a police SUV katty corner from us. Dodging an oncoming car, I run toward the police motioning the officer on the passenger side to roll down his window. I point and breathlessly blurt, "See that man in the white shirt entering that apartment building up ahead? He just assaulted three women a few blocks from here. You need to catch him!"

Three months before the 2020 presidential election, heavily armed paramilitary forces operating without identification or badges, their faces camouflaged, begin snatching Americans off the streets of Portland, Oregon and stuffing them into unmarked vehicles.

A day later, an unidentified white-appearing woman wearing nothing but a beanie and face mask dares police to shoot her with tear gas during a stand-off in the same Portland neighborhood. She is dubbed the 'Naked Athena.' My white self thinks, *How great is that?!* That is until I read a Facebook post written by a Black friend who points out

that had the naked woman been Black in appearance, she likely would have been shot by police. I'm reminded of what I've known since I was sixteen: Immodesty has its limits.

The SUV parallel parks in front of the apartment building. The two male officers confer with one another before exiting their cruiser and sauntering into the lobby. The woman with her beagle follows them inside. By now, the White man in the white polo shirt and leather flip flops is nowhere to be seen. Fortunately, the woman with her dog has taken pictures at the scene and she shows them to the doorman. The doorman identifies the resident as Kyle Allen and provides police with his unit number.

Meanwhile, outside the building, I speak to another male officer from a second unit that has arrived on the scene. I tell him about the three women, several blocks away, who are presumably still waiting for police so they can report the crime that was perpetrated upon them. The officer says he'll walk to the scene. "They've been waiting a while. Maybe you oughta drive?" I suggest. He pays me no mind and sets out on foot. Sweat pouring down my back, I jog uphill, past the officer to where the women are thankfully still waiting. Several minutes later the officer I passed arrives on the scene and begins taking statements.

According to court testimony, Demetria Hester, a Black woman, was heading home from work on a commuter train on the night of May 25, 2017. As always, she sat directly behind the conductor, "for protection." A White man stepped into her car delivering a hate-filled rant against Blacks, Jews, Mexicans, and Japanese and telling Hester to "go back to your country ... you have no right to be here ... I will kill all of you!" Hester knocked on the conductor's door as was protocol when there was trouble on the train, but her knocks were unacknowledged. The man's ranting went on for three stops as did Hester's insistent knocking. Still no response from the conductor. Finally, Hester asked the man to lower his voice. She was met with another barrage of hate-filled epithets including, "Bitch, you're about to get it now!" At the next stop, as Hester stepped off the train, the angry man trailed her then lunged for her, hitting her in the eye with a bottle filled with fluid. Hester sprayed her assailant's face with the mace she was carrying for just such an occasion and he dropped to the ground. She then kicked him in the groin. Twenty-five bystanders and

transportation security officers passively watched on as the assailant washed his face in a drinking fountain.

Police arrived, and, with a cut above her eye still bleeding, Hester pointed at to the man from the train who was still washing his face at the drinking fountain. The white police officer responded, “No, I asked him. He said he had nothing to do with it.” Police then asked Hester for *her* I.D. She asked why they were asking for her ID and not apprehending her attacker who by now was departing the station. Finally, a White conductor confirmed Hester’s account to the officers, who then pursued the assailant. He managed to elude the police.

When the door to Kyle Allen’s apartment opens, police are greeted by Allen holding a gun with a silencer attached. It seems the man may have been expecting someone else—perhaps even the two women who followed him.

Meanwhile, the officer who is taking the statements of the three sisters pauses to answer his radio. He excuses himself saying he needs to answer an “all units” call. He turns and runs downhill to Mr. Allen’s apartment building where his brethren are staring down the barrel of a gun.

The woman with her beagle waits outside the apartment building hoping to learn the fate of the assailant she and I tracked down for the police. While loitering, she overhears an officer on the scene interviewing a middle-aged blonde white woman with a yoga mat under her arm. “It couldn’t have been my husband. He’s been with me all morning,” she lies to the officer.

In February 2020, a sweat-drenched young man holding a bike, and wearing a canvas messenger bag across his bare torso politely stops me outside my apartment building, asks if my name is Amy Roost, then presents me with a subpoena. I am to appear as a witness on “date TBD” in the case of *The People of the State of California vs. Kyle Allen*.

I hear nothing further for six months, so I finally call the office of the Deputy District Attorney prosecuting the case to ask about its status. “The Courts are closed until mid-August due to the coronavirus outbreak,” the DDA’s paralegal informs me.

Kyle Allen who pleaded ‘not guilty’ to charges of battery of the three Muslim women and has since been released on cash bail, awaits trial, comfortably ensconced in his high-rise apartment overlooking San Diego Bay, and the Star of India.

The treadmills at my gym face a bank of televisions. While running, I read the chyron beneath Anderson Cooper’s talking head. It reads, “Jury finds Jeremy Christian guilty of stabbing and killing Taliesin Namkai-Meche and Ricky Best and the attempted murder of Micah Fletcher on a MAX light rail train in Portland in 2017.”

At his sentencing hearing, Christian shouts, “I should’ve killed you, bitch,” at Demitria Hester, who he’d assaulted the night before the murders of Namkai-Meche and Best. Christian is subsequently sentenced to two life terms without the possibility of parole.

I am no longer a disciplined writer. I do not rise early to write down my thoughts or attempt to meet deadlines. Mostly I sit around the house reading quiet novels, practicing my ukulele, and drinking, not a lot, but most every night. It helps to quiet my fears and quell the grief. I still go for walks, no longer to generate creative ideas—those are dormant—but for the fresh air, which is all too scarce during a pandemic. I don’t know if this essay is me hitting my stride again, or just me with time on my hands. I do know that I once thought it was safe to run in jogging shorts, and that the three women I met on Columbia Street last fall thought it was safe to walk down a city sidewalk wearing hijabs. And I once thought my writing would change the world, only to have the world change me.



Amy Roost is co-editor of *Fury: Women’s Lived Experiences During the Trump Era* (Pact Press) and *(Her)oics: Women’s Lived Experiences During the Coronavirus Pandemic* (Pact Press, March 2021).

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