

DATING WHILE FAT: NOTES FROM A HARMED LIFE

A Project

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DEDICATION

To the most beautiful girls in the world,

Áine and Olivia

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so many people to thank as I did not get to this place alone. Although writing is a solitary sport, we need to occasionally poke our heads out of our holes and say, “Hey! Anyone want to read this thing?” And it’s good to have someone(s) who will answer, even when, perhaps especially when, we are broken and not ourselves. It took a team of people to keep the fragmented parts of me together, however loosely that is, and pointed in the same direction, so the list is long. It’s a miracle I got here. I’ve told many people, “Grad school is harder than any job I’ve ever had. It’s every night, every weekend, every holiday, seven days a week.” Here I have discovered what it means—how to be present for everything I have needed to accomplish on my journey towards a graduate level degree—to be a professional. I know now what it means to persevere through pain, sickness, depression, anxiety, and loss. That being a “professional” means showing up and doing it even if you don’t want to or think that you can’t. I can succeed in spite of my disabilities, both physical and mental. I can do hard things and be successful. That is the most important thing that I have learned, and everyone on this list has assisted me in discovering that.

First and foremost, I want to thank my committee chair, Professor Rob Davidson, for the generous sharing of his time along with his encyclopedic knowledge of both writing and the authors who live in his brain. Also for his encouragement, his honesty and compassion when telling me I could do better—he was right. For smiling and laughing along with his words to wholeheartedly underscore the truth of what he was telling me—that I would have something amazing if I kept it up. I believed because he did. To keep writing those difficult things not as a purgative exercise, but as art, truth, meaning and understanding . . . and when I was ready. You,

Professor, are a gift to writers and writing. You most certainly were a gift to me and my writing. Thank you.

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Dr. Rob Burton—for not thinking my ideas were wacky or outdated, but understanding where I was coming from because you came from there, too. For being supportive even if I didn't always hit the mark. For opening my eyes to the sub-altern all around the world, and giving me a new appreciation of difficult texts: I feel as if I might be able to read just about anything, now. I'm very grateful to have benefited from your knowledge and experience.

Sylvia Bowersox, dear one, Richard Bach explained it better than I could: "The bond that links your true family is not one of blood, but of respect and joy in each other's life. Rarely do members of one family grow up under the same roof." Yes, yes, yes. SII&g, always, even if the ink fades, dries, and blows away into ash.

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Dr. Lana McKnight, for years, literally, of welcoming arms, words, and wisdom. There were times when I held my breath until I could see you, to tell you the good news and the bad. You were genuinely happy for me of the former, and understanding and supportive of the latter, always with concrete solutions on how to remedy the bad. You are irreplaceable.

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I have so much gratitude for the off-campus writing group, Literary Charade, as it made me a better writer. Two of those fledgling pieces appear here.

David Puerner—I cannot thank you enough for your friendship. For showing up. For hugs. For your compassion and time as a writer, student, and fellow dumpee. For reminding me that humanity is not all ugly and darkness, and for showing me that love can come again even after the dirtiest heartbreak. (Congratulations!)

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Thank you ARC Services for providing my support people Erika and Morgan. They kept me scheduled and organized as a student, and supported as a human being. That extra assistance made all the difference in my ability to remain focused, on task, scheduled, and how to power through the bad times when I wanted to abandon ship. You were that extra something I needed to be successful as a graduate student. I felt empowered and capable with your compassionate guidance.

My Parents—it’s a complicated mess to love such two difficult people, but love you I do. I know you love me even if you don’t always get my weird wonderfulness.

Rex Ricks—for teaching me what unconditional love is really like. That was invaluable. I’ll love you forever, no matter what. My wish for you is what you most wish for yourself.

Robert Senger—without you, I might actually be dead. When I needed saving you were there. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, my oldest, dearest friend.

Susan Groeneweg, Sue-C., aunt, MFP, sister, mother, friend, I’ll never forgive you for moving back east although I see how happy you are. Fine. What. Ever. For never, ever, never judging me, no matter what stupid thing I’ve done. For all the wonderful surprises and pieces of

the world you've shared with me, and being a living example of what it means to be a good auntie. So, so, so much love for you. MORE.

Jill—I love you so much. Thank you for putting up with me. All of it. It's going to be okay, now.

For Ruby Alice McClintic, grandma, steel magnolia of the Great Depression, WWII, and onward. You are so very missed. I often wonder what you'd think of the 21st Century.

To my cohort for flattering me with your eagerness to read and workshop my pieces; you made me feel like a superstar, even if just for a moment. It was a good feeling to have. Thank you. I wish you all great success with your writing and careers.

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ABSTRACT

DATING WHILE FAT: NOTES FROM A HARMED LIFE

by

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Master of Arts in English

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Dating While Fat: Notes From a Harmed Life is a memoir, collected in four linked stories, exploring the intersection of absurdity and horror at various times throughout the author's life. "Dating While Fat" is a reflective look back at my life as a formerly obese woman, navigating the dangerous shores of dating, sex, and love and the ridiculous and appalling experiences that I both encouraged and enabled, and those that I did not. In "Mary" I revisit my childhood when I suffered a beating at the hands of an overworked, exhausted, and cruel babysitter, informing my relationships with adults throughout my childhood. In adulthood, I discovered just what having a mentally ill mother meant and working through our relationship and then her suicide attempt in "The Real, Genuine Kind"; and lastly, exploring just what it means to be a cancer patient, and the terrible things we sign up for and let the medical community do to us—that we'll fight for, please, do the unspeakable to me . . . in the hopes of a restoration to health in "A Bowl of Soup." All of the stories contribute to a narrative mélange for a revisitation, with fresh understanding through the backward lens of maturity, of a painful, confusing and strange life, experienced and navigated with humor, because at the end, everything is absurd.

CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Why

Live as if you were living a second time,
and as though you had acted wrongly the first time.

—Viktor E. Frankl

It has been my experience that, eventually, nearly everything will have a humorous side. Maybe not in the moment, although sometimes, but later, after whatever it was has passed. Then I will relate it as a story to others *making* it a funny story; there's always a funny bit, even to the sad stories. I come from a long line of Irish storytellers, and it used to be that all of my best stories were told verbally, to one person or a crowd. As an emerging writer, I am frequently intrigued by this intersection of absurdity and horror . . . ridiculousness in the face of adversity.

It was exciting for me to discover this juncture in literature because that was the construct I had cultivated for myself as a person to engage with the world—laughter can get you through it. I was so happy to discover that I was totally normal in this regard—it was both a relief and an engaging way to write my stories. And it came naturally to me. I'd been honing it for over fifty years. Humor enlivens the human experience, even, perhaps especially, the bad ones, and adds depth and flavor to stories. I have so many good stories to tell from my life, I may never be done, but what I have included here are some painful albeit humorous stories from my life. I appreciate that juxtaposition between the cruel and the comic, which, for some reason seems frequently to occur simultaneously, an intersection I like to exploit in my writing.

Years ago, before I finally realized that I was a memoirist/storyteller—say it, dammit—a writer, I saw a film called *Out of Africa* (Universal Pictures, 1985). The film opens with author Isak Dinesen’s now famous line, “I had a farm in Africa....” This line so intrigued me that I bought and read the book shortly thereafter (Dinesen 3). Those six words engage and invite—the past tense “had” tells us that the farm is no longer; that it takes place in Africa makes it exotic to those not living on the African continent; and what did she raise on her now lost farm? We are intrigued, there is tension, we have to know more, we must continue forward. With just six words. Those words have informed the opening lines of my stories ever since. Opening lines come to me all the time; the stories come after. Dinesen’s story moved me beyond just the beautiful crafting of the words; they were her story, her understanding, her interpretation of *her* life (even without abundant humor, humor is my milieu); her words have gripped my heart ever since.

This idea, however, that it was an autobiography, made it all the richer with emotional depth and veracity, for both me and certainly any reader’s understanding, and it was the first time that I truly understood what non-fiction could be about: using lyricism to craft a realistic, honest, vulnerable story with an engaging, evocative, and unforgettable voice. I understood that stories of our lives have a resonance of their own, different from fiction, that there is a space that we could have lived in, had things been just slightly different. I fought against this idea for years, thinking that only fiction was “real writing.” I have learned to let it go.

When I came to Chico State to undertake a graduate level degree, it was going to be as a fiction writer. There is a wonderful quote floating around that Internet that is wistfully, albeit unverifiably, attributed to William Faulkner that says, “I don’t know what I think about something until I read what I’ve written on it.” Wherever it came from, it’s applicable as this is how my brain works, precisely. I sat down to write fiction, and my brain and my hands colluded without me and

non-fiction, memoir specifically, is what came out. I was as surprised as anyone when I looked up to see what I had written.

In Joan Didion's essay "Why I Write," she makes as good an explanation of why we write as any I've read, and that sings true to my dark writer's lumpy heart:

I knew that I was no legitimate resident in any world of ideas. I knew I couldn't think. All I knew then was what I couldn't do. All I knew then was what I wasn't, and it took me some years to discover what I was.

I was a writer.

By which I mean not a "good" writer or a "bad" writer but simply a writer, a person whose most absorbed and passionate hours are spent arranging words on pieces of paper. . . . Had I been blessed with even limited access to my own mind there would have been no reason to write. I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear. (*New York Times* 1976)

Even author Kathryn Harrison said, "It wasn't a decision, it was a helpless act" (qtd. in Karr *The Art of Memoir* 167). It was then that I realized: I had stories, lots and lots of stories. Good, unusual, interesting stories. I could tell them and pass them off as fiction—but no, I realized I could not do that, either. I had to write it, I had to tell the truth, I had to learn how to write down to the bone, or as I once told Professor Eggers "...through the bone, down past the marrow, then out the other side, leaving my hand hanging only by a flap of skin" after writing the piece, "Mary." Then, he told me, that was probably good writing. He was right. And I had only just begun to write. In the first draft, questions were brought up that broke loose some memories that I thought "I had filed...away over and over again in that gray cardboard box in the back of my brain's attic" (Ricks McClintic 74). This was both good and bad. Good for my writing, bad for how I felt after remembering them.

Fortunately, Mary Karr helped me understand this process. She put it bluntly: “Those of you who felt a living emotional connection to the past that struck you as real, those who’ve been somewhere, who brim with feeling and may even be crying, but are not devastated—come on in” (Karr *The Art of Memoir* 33); I was ready to tell that painful story.

Writing “Mary” was an opportunity to purge some of the pain I’d been carrying around, and to kick it out of the attic completely, and put it down on the page instead. It was cathartic and writing it in that first draft exorcised it, so that now, during revision—although every bone in my writing body is now covered with scores, cut marks, ragged start and stop marks, breaks haphazardly healed, but healed just the same—I discovered not just the stories or memories, but in looking back on them through the lens of age and experience, of passed time that found me a different person than the person who existed before, a person who now framed those stories. Now I can dig deep for the elemental truth, at least my interpretation of it. Instead of being a pathetic and pathological pages-long whine, I write about understanding events and revelations that writing can produce. My stories don’t have concrete endings with glowing futures and moments of magical insight. My insights tend to the Charles Baxter Ideal: “sometimes the epiphanic insight is not so radiant. You discover that you are going to spend your life in laundromats, fighting other people to get access to the dryers” (62), and then I think, “Oh BS.” And then I laugh because of course it’s true. My stories seem to me to be more about the realm of understanding motivation, others’ as well as myself—why do we do the things we do? Sometimes there is no absolute answer. Sometimes it is about understanding why other people want to beat me to the dryers and why it’s okay to let them do it.

The view backwards for me was complex, two-fold, what Lopate calls the “double perspective” (*To Show and to Tell* 26): there was the memory of having the experience first; and second, I was now able to view my words objectively instead of emotionally, as an editor of my own

words. I found I could discover new meaning via excavation of past experiences that was not available, or at least not recognized, both at the time they occurred or in the first draft. It just wasn't that, either, though: I discovered that there was meaning for readers, too, in my workshop classes and presentations. I discovered that my stories were relatable to others because they told me. There is great significance for me that shifts and adjusts with every reading; I hope any meaning discovered there is also different for every reader of my work as well.

I have plenty of stories to tell or, as I like to laughingly tell people, "Bad childhoods make great stories." Not all my stories are about childhood, but it's a great throwaway line and then either people are intrigued about your stories or they don't want to hear anything more. Usually the first. After reading my stories, sometimes people ask me, "Have you ever read Mary Karr?" because my piece reminds them of her. We have a lot in common, Karr and I: our ages, the time in which we grew up; one crazy parent; one semi-absent parent, childhood abuse, undernourished intelligence, food insecurity, the wildness of being a child set free during daylight hours with no supervision, sexual abuse, addiction... yes, I have read Mary Karr, repeatedly, all of her books, yes. But my quest is to be inspired by her, not to mimic her. I wrote the way I write long before I read Mary Karr, but yes, she resonates, closely and tightly. What I take away from Mary Karr first and foremost is the ability to be absolutely honest and why.

My first semester at Chico State, I started by writing about something I did not like to share with people: I had had cancer, a strange and weird cancer, extremely rare, untreatable if it spreads, and the treatment of which left me blind in one eye. I wasn't ashamed of this, quite the opposite: I just didn't want anyone's pity. Something had happened to me, undeservedly, I had done nothing to provoke it, yet I had faced it head on, oftentimes intentionally ignorant. As I wrote in the scene where I first met Dr. Tsai, the doctor who was going to treat (i.e., kill) the tumor in my eye, I asked

him some broad questions about having a needle biopsy during surgery to extract material in order to test the tumor for genetic markers. I didn't want anything too specific, anything that might scare me away from showing up:

“Will it hurt?” I asked.

“No.”

“Will I be awake for it?”

“No.”

“Then let's do it.”

I should've asked how much it would cost. (Ricks McClintic 103).

Again, the doctor and I are discussing a medical procedure, and I end the flashback with black humor. This is how I coped. I preferred to remain ignorant of specifics for every medical procedure I have had done, and I did this with Dr. Tsai also.

I wrote about my unwillingness to know what would happen to me for some of the stranger, probably frightening, medical procedures, and which I willingly offered myself up for, because they had been necessary for survival, but now they were in the past and didn't define me. I was not, and did not wish to be, “the woman with cancer.” It hadn't changed me too much—I thought—and I did not want any pity. But I did write about it in “A Bowl of Soup,” anyway, detailing my diagnosis, crumbling marriage, treatment and recovery, both from cancer and the unhappy marriage. I related how I endured the horrible because I had humor:

All the invasive tests are routine now. You want to put something in my eye? Sure. Fine. IV for contrast in the back of the hand? Go ahead. What's one more. Ultrasound with gel on the eyeball? Burning eye drops? I eat those for lunch. (Ricks McClintic 118)

I laid it all out, warts and all as they say. In its first iteration it was a comedy—involving a comforting bowl of soup juxtaposed by a later, poisonous bowl that nearly interrupted my cancer treatment—but revised versions of it dug deep, then even deeper into the story underlying the story of the cancer, simmering just below, that of a relationship whose ending was only delayed by a fight with cancer. My goal was to layer it, the two journeys together, one nuanced, one in your face; one a quick roller coaster ride, the other a slow, gentle rise and fall. I intertwined the two like strands of DNA, chained together, until broken apart by radiation and resentment. I wrote about my difficult and often exhausting, autistic husband, Rex, unflinchingly. I dramatized some of his trying behaviors such as in a scene after my eye surgery:

I don't know how he managed it, but he lost almost everything that touched his hands. . . Keys, glasses, wallet, whatever, over and over. But not, oddly, after tantalum marker surgery. It was all in the bag. . . I was surprised, to say the least. I liked this new Rex. Years later I would realize that I had become his new hobby, his latest obsession. (Ricks McClintic 105)

The curling strands of story have moments of absurdity and horror in the final version that can make cancer relatable, even for people who've never had cancer, by interweaving it with the relationship story because everyone has a relationship story, and this relationship is still going badly, even after an (unnamed) cancer diagnosis as we left the doctor to go to a restaurant, SÜP:

So far today the only thing Rex had provided me was occasional concerned looks and driver service. . . “Well, *yeah*,” he said, like I was an idiot. Sarcasm and resentment had become our

fallback position over the last year or so. I think sometimes we genuinely hated one another.
(Ricks McClintic 99)

I also write about what it's like to be a single, severely overweight woman, making her way in the world of dating, using men and being used as "human sex toys" (Ricks McClintic 29), always searching for someone to complete me in "Dating While Fat." I wrote it without shame, even though some of what I experienced and wrote about might be considered shameful by some strained social mores; I didn't care about that, but I did write aggressively, and with regret and sadness. I wrote about a young woman who (thankfully) no longer exists for me, but exists still in a world that comes with judgments, shaming, and scorn. I illustrate this using an experience I had on a blind (Internet) date with an odd man that went awry from the first moment, becoming extremely evident to me as I contemplated a restaurant menu to order something that might make me appear as if I had a thyroid condition, not a food addiction:

He looked at the mound of strawberries, then up at me. Strawberries, me. Yep, disgusted. I was flawed, I was of poor moral character because I loved food too much and it showed. Worse... I was a food addict. I could feel him judging me across the table. I had failed the test. (Ricks McClintic 37)

Some of the dating situations that I found myself in, and wrote about, were both absurd and horrible, like the guy who wanted to "...spit in my open mouth while we were doing it at a by-the-hour hot tub motel in Hollywood" (Ricks McClintic 40-41). I wrote "Dating While Fat" first as a piece for a small, off-campus writing group I belonged to. The members of the group were classmates and friends I knew well, had writing I admired, and I trusted them. They loved "Dating While Fat" and encouraged me to go further, dig deeper. I did, and it became therapeutic, at first. But after the first few rough drafts, I decided to submit it for a workshop class, and I realized that what I needed to do

was become completely unfettered, to let it all out, to tell it all, and to create something to be examined and remembered. I wanted it to be an artful, alternate way of looking at something, like an exotic wild animal kept locked away in a too-small cage for too long: our view of it was never the viewpoint that it had of itself. That is what I hoped to write—something crafted to appear shameful on its face, but if looked at from a different perspective (mine), or reflected upon later, the reader might realize that beneath that ragged exterior was something that could touch one of the deep, sad places that exist in all of us; and that cages, like arrogant opinions, are wrong, and that beauty can come from sad places.

To fully illustrate this point, I had to be as honest as I could, I had to use embarrassing anatomical details to fully express that moment when I realized that I had been going about love completely wrong, that my expectations had been too low:

...because I was fat, no, not fat, obese, I was morbidly obese... I had to settle. So I had dates with strange, flawed men. I thought sex would entice a man into a long-term relationship. It somehow took me years to figure out that that did not work. At all. What I thought was bait—women parts, boobs and a vagina—for most men, wasn't bait, but the goal itself. I had misunderstood sexual dynamics completely. For years. I had given it all away. (Ricks McClintic 41)

This insight comes over five pages before the last scene. The opening line “I never trusted myself” is a hint of things to come, and since it is past tense, indicates that things have changed.

Revelations, understanding, and insights don't have to close out a piece—and they lived happily blahdy blah blah—they can come anywhere during the narrative. The reader won't lose interest of early disclosure because they will want to find out how you arrived at that point. Just like “I had a farm...” I open with “I never trusted...” past tense, not “I don't trust...” it keeps momentum

going: Why didn't she trust herself? Does she trust herself now? How? Tension. Its design is to be captivating, to pull the reader forward with interest like reaching for a falling object—they can't help it, their reaction is to reach out and catch it. They have to read all the way to the end to find out... "I trust myself more, now" (Ricks McClintic 120).

I also write about one instance of childhood abuse in "Mary," and my mentally ill mother in "The Real, Genuine Kind." As Mary Karr has said, ". . . when fortune hands you such characters, why bother to make stuff up?" (Karr, *The Liar's Club*, XI); I have to agree. I read Jeannette Walls amazing memoir *The Glass Castle* when it first came out. I was startled at her honesty regarding her parents, who had some kind of mental issue going on and were homeless. They made unusual choices, to say the least. When I write about my mother, I often think of Walls and her bravery at being so forthcoming. She had a lot more at stake—a career, credibility, a lifestyle—that I do not have. When I hesitate to write down some bizarre thing that happened in my life (or that I did), I am reminded of Walls and I can move forward again.

Sometimes, though, my stories have so much going on that I have to take some of it out, it seems too absurd, unbelievable really, and instead focus on just one or two incidents to highlight the memories of a time in my life. Bad babysitter stories have become almost a cliché, in my opinion, however, this babysitter story is mine, and I make it sensual; the absurdity is up close, visceral, muscular, and perhaps puts the reader in mind of their own childhood. Maybe my character helped them feel empowered by my writing about standing up to a bully, a much older bully who tried to make me eat something I didn't want to eat, and when I was only five-years-old:

If I could go back in time and take back the liver-soup-puking moment? I wouldn't, even after everything that came after. She had that coming. Maybe I was the only person in her life to ever stand up to her. (Ricks McClintic 57)

We were all children once, and sometimes our dealings with adults left us feeling powerless. Or if not, perhaps they are parents themselves, and the later moment of horror of a child being beaten will infuriate them. I'd like to think my defiant child is root-worthy, and maybe people took amusing satisfaction that I had managed to subvert Mary by using her own tools. Maybe.

Mentally ill mothers, on the other hand, to turn Tolstoy's famous phrase from *Anna Karenina*, are all ill in their own way. Mine is no exception. Her story, our story, in "The Real, Genuine Kind" may be a full-length book in the future—there are certainly plenty of stories. The story included here is just one partially reconstructed memory. As I've said before, "memory is specious" (Ricks McClintic 71), and as Mary Karr has expressed so well,

For veracity's sake, it doesn't cost a memoirist the reader's confidence either to skip over the half-remembered scene or to replicate her own psychic uncertainty—"This part is blurry." . . . The great memoirist enacts recall's fuzzy form. That's why we trust her. (Karr, *The Art of Memoir*, 15)

In writing memoir, one needs to be honest in order to remain authentic; however, not all memories are there or remembered correctly—blurry—therefore if a scene or dialogue needs to be reconstructed, then the author needs to admit that to the reader. I have done that using phrases such as "No, now that I think about it, I'm fairly certain that what he asked me was..." (Ricks McClintic 71), for example, to maintain that dialectic authenticity while retaining the narrative flow of an anecdote or incident. This will keep the reader engaged instead of put off by feelings of dishonesty. A lot of my memories of my mother from childhood are blurry—typical of trauma—but when writing about difficult or painful things, it is important, in my mind, to maintain the overall emotion and feel of the moment, even if it's not the actual dialogue, for example. Even if I remember more as

I'm writing, I still want to preface it with the fact that my memories may not be as accurate as I think they are. That gives me credibility. It's great advice and I use it when I need it.

How

I'm told my writing has a "conversational voice." It does, and although it came naturally at first, I have honed it as a creative writer these last few years. Mary Karr says that "Pretty much all the great memoirists I've met sound on the page like they do in person" (*The Art of Memoir* 36). When I write my stories, I am myself, idiosyncratic and informal. I imagine that I am sitting around a large campfire with a band of friends at day's end, telling stories to a relaxed but interested audience. My words wander over jagged spires of flame, our faces shadowed in darkness, giant tree limbs still warm from sunlight where we sit resting against them, tucked in closely next to dear ones. That is how I want my stories to feel: personal, immediate, funny yet comforting, and in the moment. I imagine my face coming in and out of shadow in flickering darkness, my "listeners" unable to look me fully in the face, but to catch glimpses, shadows, and piece them together into a whole that makes sense for them. I frequently break the fourth wall to engage the reader, bring them into my inner circle of confidence as if to say "I'm going to tell you this, but no one else." That is how I write: I can be incredibly, outrageously honest on white paper behind rows of black lines, but I owe that to my readers. At the 2016 Word Spring conference at Butte College, author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni said, to paraphrase, We've got to write honestly and with vulnerability, otherwise it's pretentious and dishonest and the reader will feel it too. That is my goal.

I write in the diction of first person, "this happened to me," not just as a warning or explanation, but to give immediacy, a sense of humanity, of space, to spend time, give perspective, and to create meaningful contemplation. I like my stories to have humor to both lessen and underscore any horrific incidents. In his 1998 essay, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I Will Never Do Again," David Foster Wallace writes in the first person about his experiences on a cruise ship. He shares with us his amused horror of being trapped on a floating city, everything you could possibly

want or need at your fingertips. At least, everything subtly but insidiously micro-managed so that you, a guest, do not need to think of anything, anything at all, and the thing you most want is the thing they've designed, and herded you toward, wanting. People will laugh in the moment while you tell the story, and I laughed long and loudly at Foster Wallace's excoriating tale of the cruise industry, but there is a burbling creek of horror wandering along under the glimmer of shiny:

[The Captain] refused to let me see the galley, Bridge, staff decks, *anything*, or interview any of the crew, or staff in an on-the-record way, and he wore sunglasses inside, and epaulets, and kept talking on the phone for long stretches of time in Greek when I was in his office after I'd skipped the karaoke semifinals in the Rendz-Vous Lounge to make a special appointment to see him; I wish him ill. (Wallace, location 5932)

We, the reader wonders: What didn't the Captain want him to see? What is going on with the staff? These questions will live on long after the last laugh dies, and the entire book is read, and Wallace crafts it to be that way. Any lessons that might be learned may come in minutes, hours, days or years, but that is up to the reader, not the teller. Once we set our words free, we can steer readers in a certain direction, but whether or not they get there is entirely up to them. Interpret my stories as you see fit, I imagine myself telling a reader. Like Wallace, I tell what happened, artfully, with thoughtfulness and understanding, and then leave it in the listener's able hands. The humor used lightens the horror *now*; it emphasizes the horror *later*.

My stories spring from first lines or titles—I am always imagining them, and I write them down and email to them to myself. Everything inspires me: nature, weather, buildings, people, animals, all of it, the unusual and the common. Usually more words follow after that; I don't outline. I just start writing, surprised as anyone at what appears on the page. Indeed. I read and I write. The former improves the latter. The more I read, the better I write; those are my top two skills. Donut

eating used to be my greatest skill, but after having most of my stomach removed, no longer (dark humor, see?). Now I write to organize whatever it is that goes on in my brain. When I sit down to write, I do what Mary Karr calls the “woo woo” (*Art of Memoir* 30) of meditation, in a sort. I sit calmly at my desk, my hands in my lap. I empty my mind of any thoughts. I think for a moment, *reach out, go into the empty*, and I let my subconscious wander for a bit into a gray blankness of nothing that looks similar to the “snow” of an analog TV screen. (Later, after I’ve written whatever, I imagine my brain cells sorting and filing, pulling up memories and piling them up in front of the memory door, making connections, and then putting them in order of importance or interest, like little Keebler brain elves. I’m not sure why they look like 1990s floppy disks, but they do.) And then, as I exist in a great gray nothingness, thoughts totally empty, abruptly it (my brain) comes back from the void with something interesting or amazing that I hadn’t thought of or remembered in a long time, or a different way to look at a familiar thing, and I start to write and then keep writing. This exercise has worked well for me even during in-class essays. It doesn’t take long. I do this every time I sit before a blank page. It is effective. In short, I have allowed the writer in me to be myself. That is what I am best at.

The revision process is where the real magic occurs, including use of the “woo woo”—the polishing, shaping, the fancy artful techniques I’ve learned such as Lopate’s list of characterizations, for example, of “(self-revelation, individual tastes and experiences, confidential manner), humor, graceful style, rambling structure, unconventionality or novelty of theme, freshness of form, freedom from stiffness and affectation, incomplete or tentative treatment of topic” (“Introduction” xxiv). While Lopate mentions these in terms of the informal personal essay, for my purposes, they have worked well in my ability to tell my story, my memories. I have reviewed some of my life’s experiences, many, especially in childhood that I had no control over at the time, but also the “self-

revelation” that comes with distance and time. I have attempted to put that reflective tone into each of the pieces included here in order to take the reader with me to “present the complex portrait of a human being” (Lopate, “Introduction,” xxviii). Or perhaps more aptly said, human beings, plural. I apply these tools and ideals that weren’t in the original piece, but only serve to make it better. From essayist John McPhee (“The Search for Marvin Gardens”) I discovered that I didn’t have to start a new paragraph just because I’d transitioned to a new topic. If the topic relates to the beginning of the paragraph, even loosely, I did not have to hit enter and indent. That gave me a sense of freedom in how I shaped my pieces—I could follow or flout convention as I deemed necessary for the expression of my work. These are things I have learned in graduate school. I worked very hard to learn how to let go, to be free.

Pattiann Rogers, in her book, *The Dream of the Marsh Wren*, wrote several things that echoed in a solipsistic way for me about the writing life and what it means to me to be a writer and to express myself in words to show to the world. In particular was a section on the act of writing:

I can take a sheet of blank paper or an empty computer screen and with a word or two open a door, a gate, into another realm, a world I can construct and simultaneously enter to explore as I wish, leading and being led by the music, pace, sound and form... I can create a new experience with language. So, purely on a selfish note, writing... is fun for me...I don’t mean it isn’t work. It is...But it’s the kind of work that totally engages me... (Rogers 11)

For eight years I made a moderately decent living as an editor and writer, thinking of myself first and foremost as an editor, sort of a clean-up writer. Until, that is, January 2016 when I started my graduate school career. But the writing and revision process—of my own writing—is such a joy to me. It is work, but it’s work that I love.

The stories included here, my memories (to the best of my ability), while all from my life, are not chronological. I was inspired by story cycles such as Christina Chiu's novel *Troublemaker and Other Saints* (Putnam 2001), and Don Lee's *Yellow*. I discovered that story collections had structure, a shape, almost like an earthquake graph or heart monitor. Chiu and Lee structured their books so that each individual story involves a character from a previous story as protagonist or narrator, thereby weaving something fuller and richer than telling the same stories from the point of view of just one character, chronologically. The action goes up, down, straight, sometimes has more than one line that also goes up, down or straight, interwoven with each other line. I wanted to model my project after them, to be a cycle, but it would've needed to be fiction to really be a cycle, with different characters existing and narrating in the same world with minor connections to one another in each "chapter." But memoir is the art of telling one's own story so there are no other character-narrators than the memoirist (in this case, me).

What I have done, and which is close to a cycle, is write linked essays. They are linked because I am the main narrator and the protagonist in each story, but they are not told in sequence here; there is not a smooth narrative from chapter to chapter. Each chapter covers a different stage of my life, a different occurrence of harm, whether involuntary or self-inflicted; however, by the end, there is a type of cohesive whole, a broad overview of the life of one Julie Ricks McClintic. Each chapter moves back and forth in time and involve some or all of the same characters from the other chapters. I also compile my chapter stories to exist independently in different time frames from their sibling stories. A childhood story in one chapter might only be one time of my life while another childhood story chapter is in a completely different time and location. I do this to create a jarring feeling, a little chaos, to help define what the narrator is also experiencing during her tumultuous childhood and growing-upness, and to illustrate how memories move back and forth in our

consciousness. My essays give a sense of who the woman is, and just the briefest idea of where she is now, not that I am necessarily that interesting, although certainly I've experienced some interesting things, but those experiences are part of the broader human experience. I believe that putting these slices of life together, without a consistent chronological timeline, gives them a more powerful authority and coherence than if I just droned on, reciting facts, people, and events, and would not be artistic or interesting.

Author Chris Offutt also inspired me with his ability to be completely honest with his reader about hard, even embarrassing things, in his Pushcart Prize winning essay, "Trash Food." That essay led me to his books, which excited and encouraged me. I was thrilled to see that I had unknowingly structured my work un-chronological as he had in *The Same River Twice*: each chapter alternates in time, between his leaving home at nineteen, to his present (at the time of writing), waiting for his first baby to be born, past, present, back, forth each chapter. It works well as we discover how the boy became a man, and how the man becomes a father and it is easier to contrast who those past and present selves are. Also unstinting with its honesty, I was encouraged by his reflective candor—"while the rest of my generation had been lodging themselves into careers, I'd pretty much run amok" (Offut 13)—to be even more honest in my work, not for praise, not to shock, but to tell the truth, to explore the past and how I understood it now. Although that understanding can change with each re-reading and/or revision, it is promising to know that a highly acclaimed, prize-winning author has done what I try to do.

When

As to the overarching question of why graduate school in my 50s? As I am entering middle age and beyond? I asked myself if I were even capable of learning new things, of rising to occasions, of pushing myself harder and better. Could I do it? Did I really want to do it? I had had cancer, I'd lived through unspeakable things, how could I not be changed by that? Of course I was changed. As I told a friend once, "...I've lived through cancer. Not much scares me anymore." Grad school did intimidate me, a little, but it couldn't be as bad as cancer. Nothing could.

A therapist, first my husband's and my marriage counselor, then just me by myself, talked me into graduate school. The therapist spent some months trying to convince me to enroll, actually. After the marriage ended, and I realized it really was over, and that of all the options in front of me, graduate school sounded like the most interesting path, I chose. I thought I could network and meet people. "I'll try it for a semester," I said. Oh the willfully ignorant: how we get things done.

Like refusing to know precisely what medical procedures were going to be done to my body, I did not want to know about all of the difficult, hard, challenging, and labyrinthine steps I would need to delicately stumble through toward a graduate level degree. I could only take it in small chunks, one bit at a time. As the survivor of a rare, "orphan" cancer, I belong to several private online communities of OM (ocular melanoma) patients. Nearly every week one of our members dies from metastatic OM. Noted neurologist and author Oliver Sacks passed away from this very disease two years ago. He penned a very moving article February 2015 in the *New York Times* shortly before passing away in August 2015, the month my marriage finally collapsed for good. For some reason, this death, of a man whom I did not know personally, affected me more severely than the deaths of people I knew only as names and posts on a message board. Perhaps the coincidental timing of my

marriage collapsing in the same few weeks was the motivation, but it hit me very hard that this life was no joke; *this was the real deal*. This was it. There are no do-overs. As Sacks wrote, "...I have been able to see my life as from a great altitude, as a sort of landscape, and with a deepening sense of the connection of all its parts" (*New York Times* 2015); that is it, just so.

Off I headed to grad school, a new city, a new life, determined to the best of my ability, to live life in full. Until I couldn't any more. I was inspired by Sacks and a woman whose blog I had found, *Love Times Infinity Squared*, by Sarah Elizabeth Dwyer. I had contacted her about turning her blog into a book (gratis), and we had spoken on the phone several times.¹ She had metastatic OM, yet it and the horrible medical procedures she underwent to stay alive, did not keep her from living life abundantly. She hit her bucket list hard, she even fell in love and got married. She lived three years and eight months longer than the four months doctors predicted she would live. She was an inspiration to me and to the entire OM community. She was inspiring even in death as this letter she composed to be delivered at her recent memorial service shows. She eloquently expressed what I have felt and how I have behaved in regard to having cancer and living life:

Dwyer, Sarah Elizabeth. "Farewell Letter," Celebration of Life Service, Staunton, VA, September 9, 2017. "People like to tell you that you are brave when you have cancer. I was not brave. I just didn't see the point in fear. What was there to fear? Pain, sorrow, injury, death? They come to all of us equally. And if you are full of fear, there can be no battle. You will run shaking from it before its [sic] even begun."

I will never forget it. In those moments when I think I cannot go on, I think of her. Although I do not have metastatic OM (I hope I never do), and although it's always a possibility, I don't waste any

¹ She was given four months to live just prior to our last phone call, and she decided to spend her time living instead of working on a book.

time thinking about it. I won't until I have to. But the reality that our lives are quick has been awakened in me. Anything could happen. I could be hit by a car, fall down the stairs, anything, it may not necessarily be cancer. In the meantime, I have to make meaning out of my life, and I do that through writing. This is my purpose, I know that now.

I showed up for grad school. But turns out? I was scared. A lot scared. It was not like cancer at all. Having my body turn on me was not my fault. Being unable to meet educational requirements, making choices, so many choices, screwing up... that could be my fault, and I could not bear to fail, especially with an audience. I had been given a second chance, to live my life differently, deliberately, and that meant doing the scary things. Peggy Shumaker wrote a book about life after a near-death experience in *Just Breathe Normally*. Like Peggy, I need to take advantage of this opportunity, "I always assumed I'd get old. And now I can't be sure. . . My gratitude has never had so much exercise" (264). I decided to keep trying scary things until they were no longer scary. Some days I gag as I make a list of things for which I am grateful. But at my university I signed up for everything that scared me. I did most of them. The ones I didn't do were simply because I was tired or didn't have the time. I shut down a house, put my belongings into storage, and moved me and four cats 500 miles away. I spent two long weeks in a crappy motel while I looked for an apartment. One of the things I wanted to do was walk my newly thin body to school. I rented an apartment about a mile from campus so I could do that—they also took pets, my biggest stumbling block. The first morning I was going to walk from my new apartment, I woke early, ate, dressed, picked up my backpack and headed out. As I got to the end of the driveway, I hesitated: I could just stop here and go back inside. No one would really care why I didn't show up to school. People would understand, "...after everything she's been through..." I could've gotten a pass, a nice, fresh cancer pass. Then I realized that this, walking to campus to go to classes, showing up to class, this was one of the scary

things. There were no consequences to what I decided, no life or death significance, but there was perseverance, resilience, and integrity, and I decided I wanted to live intentionally with all of those things, so I resumed walking. I continue to walk. As I discovered later, and which Lopate expresses well:

There is a melancholy tone . . . [which] might be called “the voice of middle age.” If the personal essay frequently presents a middle-aged point of view, it may be because it is the fruit of ripened experience, which naturally brings with it some worldly disenchantment, or at least realism. With middle age also comes a taste for equilibrium; hence, that stubborn, almost unnerving calm. . . (“Introduction,” xxxvi).

I could not have written these stories any sooner than when I did; I didn’t have the perspective that I have now, in my middle age having lived through a difficult marriage, a bad ankle break, cancer, and other health ridiculousness. I have regret, I have sadness, I have understanding, I have joy, I acknowledge how I sometimes got in my own way. This is when I should be (and will continue to be) writing my stories. Right now. Like a bad food metaphor, I am finally ripe.

Like other less technologically advanced epochs, my childhood is slipping away, unspooling behind me without ceasing, and those behind me will not understand it unless people like me, who lived it, tell it. I wouldn’t have wanted to live in another time. I had the best and worst of American society in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, pre-Internet, pre-cell phones. I know what it is like to live in both worlds. It continues to inform who I am, in person and on paper.

Cancer did not scare me. Divorce at fifty-three did not scare me. Grad school did not scare me (enough). What else will not scare me? I’m eager to know.

What

I am told by those who would know, other writers, professors, and the *New York Times* Bestseller list, that over the last ten years or so, memoir has seen a resurgence of popularity. I know this is also true of genre books with heavy supernatural components to them such as vampire, wizardry, and other types of books; both have become popular due to the 2008 Great Recession. During difficult economic times, people want escape and they want answers. Supernatural stories can provide the first, sometimes the second, but for real-life, hard won answers, people like to read memoir. I think they're looking for hints on how to pull themselves up out of the shit. They keep reading memoir now that they're used to it. I'd argue that people have found they like it. That's great for people like me who write memoir. Even Mary Karr, who is single-handedly credited for reviving the memoir form with her 1995 memoir, *The Liar's Club*, writes about the popularity of the memoir in her 2015 non-fiction book, *The Art of Memoir*, "Doubt and wonder come to stand as part of the story. . . . That's partly why memoir is in its ascendancy—not because it's not corrupt, but because the best ones openly confess the nature of their corruption" (47). Granted, here she is writing about being truthful or admitting in the text when you are not sure, but what she is absolutely correct about is that memoir is "in its ascendancy." I am delighted to hear that because that is what I write. I have hopes of being published someday. Maybe there is an editor, a house, an imprint, and readers who might find meaning, understanding, or just laughter if that's what they need, in the pages of whatever it is I end up producing, memoir, Julie-Ricks-McClintic style.

For the week ending November 5, 2017 on the NYT Bestseller list top 15 are two biographies, two autobiographies, and a memoir, so one third of the top selling books in the United States are personal stories. Clearly people are interested in reading about other people. If Dana Gioia is right, and the evidence is abundant, that if poetry can matter, then it's no small leap to say that

memoir can matter, too. I hope so. Regardless, published or not, I will continue to search for the meaning of life by writing about my search for meaning.

CHAPTER II

ESSAYS

Dating While Fat

I never trusted myself. I was always looking for validation from other people, people who could tell me who I was supposed to be, and directions for how to do that. After being handed around like a used Kleenex from family member to family member in my teens, it was clear to me that no one in my family truly loved me, at least not the way I understood love to be. My father loved me well, until he remarried. Then his attention turned to her. The food that I ate too much of to fill that empty hole didn't love me back. The cats I doted on loved me, in their quiet, cat-like way. But I needed a man who would love me for me. After high school, I began looking in earnest, for someone, anyone, a person who had no past with me, who would love me, not because we were related and they were "supposed" to love me, but because I was loveable. I needed that person, that someone, to tell me who I was supposed to be because I didn't know. So I started dating.

I was overweight when I got out of high school. Just enough to be called plump or curvy. The real obesity would come later. But when I started dating in the 80s, my weight was a handicap, like missing a leg, or having herpes, or baldness. Being fat was shameful, a moral failing, a character flaw, fat people couldn't control themselves, and making fun of fat people was an accepted form of entertainment. It still is, to a much smaller degree. But I sallied forth, into the void, looking for that person who would complete me. Dating is difficult under the best of circumstances, but while fat? That made it strange. The following stories are true; I've remembered them the best I can.

The first time a date ditched me was when I was twenty-two. I worked in retail, a big fancy department store at the mall, and my rotating days off generally fell during the week. Most of my friends worked in offices or went to school, so if I had a free afternoon, I would go to a matinee by myself. My favorite theater, and the one closest to my home, was in Tarzana, in *the Valley*, me and Frank Zappa's '80s-era Valley, right on Ventura Boulevard. I could walk there from my apartment had I the inclination. I didn't; my fat ass always drove, everywhere. And like most people who were underpaid or on a budget, I went to matinees because they were cheap.

There was a David Lean epic just out that demanded to be seen on the big screen—the cinematography was supposed to be amazing—and I was really early for the last matinee showing that Monday in 1984, a typically beautiful-and-balmy-in-January, Southern California Day—so I went down the block to a La Fiesta Mexican restaurant and cantina, settled into the bar and had a couple of Margaritas while I waited and read whatever paperback I was reading at the time; I always had one with me. It could've been Stephen King, but it was Probably Heinlein. Once I read him, I decided that the only important stories were science fiction. I eventually outgrew that.

So at the bar that day I ordered a Margarita and cracked my book. The bartender didn't bother to check my ID to see if I was twenty-one. It was a less regulated time, the '80s. I had started hanging out in bars and cantinas at nineteen, after I'd moved out on my own, and rarely ever had I been carded.

On that clear-skied, business humming along day, I enjoyed being off when everyone else was working; I felt like I had cheated the system somehow. As I read, I noticed that there was a man at the bar, good looking, wearing a suit, not too much older than myself, more than five but less than ten years I would guess, and he was looking at me. I seem to remember wearing a trendy '80s techno-pop white T-shirt with black Asian characters all over it. My skirt was black and above the

knees, way above the knees, and I had on black ballet flats. My hair was box-colored blonde (so orange), and I had a trendy shag haircut that was long on top, short on the sides, and hung down in the back a bit. It was David Bowie during his Diamond Dogs phase. It was a pre-mullet, mullet. I also had on my tortoise-shell schoolboy glasses as I was nearsighted and had been wearing glasses since junior high school. I was cute. Chubby, but cute. Curvy. Plump. The ohmygod fat would come later.

Anyway, he struck up a conversation with me. The talking turned into flirting. I was blushing on the inside, all the way through my skin, into my blood, pumping through my veins, making me a little bit thrilled. I remember him being handsome in a frat-boy, Ken-doll sort of way—perfect blondish hair, square jaw, sparkly blue eyes. By the time it came for the movie to start, he asked if he could accompany me. I said why not (that was the blush speaking), it was a public space and maybe after...? We got settled in, only two of the maybe five people in the whole theater, and started to watch. I was into it, staring mouth open at the gorgeous, early 20th century settings and costumes of colonial India rolling open before me in a color storm of images so exotic, so crisp, I could almost smell Mumbai itself. It never occurred to me to wonder what Mr. Ken Doll was doing in a bar at two o'clock on a weekday afternoon. Sometimes I still want to know. Smugly, I like to think that he'd just been fired from his job. His tie was loosened at the neck, he was drinking, heavily, he was available for a three o'clock movie on a Monday afternoon—and he'd been in the bar when I'd walked in ninety minutes earlier.

I remember the tie, but I don't remember his name. Light blue. His tie was light blue.

We sat there, quietly watching the film, and at about twenty minutes in, that's when he made his move. I knew it was coming. It's like when you know another driver is going to cut you off on the highway—they make hesitation moves toward you and then back. They're small, but if you're

aware, you'll notice them. He leaned in to kiss me while simultaneously grabbing my breast and squeezing, hard. It hurt. I pulled away and he stayed with me. Finally I said, "I really just want to watch the movie right now." He pulled back, removed his hand, and looked at me with flared nostrils. If he had been a cartoon character steam would have been coming out of those nostrils. He opened his mouth to speak but then quickly closed it. I could care less if he was upset; I was here to watch a movie. Whatever he wanted from me? And anything I might be interested in later? Came in second to this film.

In less than five minutes he leaned over and whispered in my ear, "I'm going to use the bathroom." I said okay, hoping he was just going to leave. He did. He never came back. I was relieved, but not embarrassed because it was dark in there and I don't think the other three people in the theater noticed or gave a crap, but later, much later, I was both embarrassed and pissed off.

As these types of experiences continued over the years, and I don't recall how many exactly, maybe nine or ten? A dozen? I don't know, they have all melded together into one moment full of fragments of images: chips and salsa; hairy knuckles; a BMW; a Jacuzzi; beer; a wooden cane; a beard; a goatee; a moustache; bad breath; dark rooms, always dark, those moments, they hurt more, not less. Part of me was pissed that rejection was so much a part of my life; another part was relieved because I had no boundaries, no tools to make the scary guys go away. I hoped one of the guys would turn out to be a regular guy, a regular long-term guy. A guy just for me. I had hope.

Eventually I came to discover that the men who hit on me did so for one of two reasons: They actually were attracted to me; or second, because fat girls were generally unwanted because fat was not socially acceptable. Fat was considered ugly and disgusting, like a really, really bad rash. Fat women were unwanted, so therefore fat women were perceived as an easy lay. It was an assumption that I would encounter and observe over and over again as I aged. Fat equaled desperate.

Fat girls would take anyone because no one ever wanted us. And for the most part, it was true, at least for me and other fat women friends of mine. I had lots of those moments of desperation, hours, days, months—just aching for someone to touch me, a hug, a hand, anything, just human touch. Some shrink might tell you I was longing for my daddy who had physically left when I was eleven, but had never come back emotionally, ever. Aw, hell, I probably would agree with them, too. But really it was more than that. A desire for a permanent relationship, human connection, and someone to take care of me mixed with a burning sexual urge, especially in my thirties and forties.

Regardless, as for me? What I got mostly was the second. I was fat so the assumption was I was an easy lay. And sometimes? Sometimes I was. But even the acknowledgement that this was just sex—basically we used each other as human sex toys—and that I'd never see the guy again and probably didn't want to, I still felt lonely the next morning. Although in the moment? It was sensual and exciting, otherworldly, and while engaged in that moment, I felt loved and valued. I wanted to crow with victory, clench my fist held high and announce to the world, "I got laid!" My belief that no one would want me had just been disproven. But those guys? They usually never stayed over, or I never stayed at their house, or the motel we rented, or a few times, in the car. Act done, thirty minutes or so of recovery and chatting, as if we were actual friends, and sometimes surprisingly confessional. But soon, soon if I didn't like them and they didn't make a move first? Then I was gone with some casual explanation like work or school starting early in the morning. But it didn't matter. They accepted whatever I said because it saved them from their own undies-thin, transparent lie. I stuck around for the guys I liked, but they often ditched me, too. Once or twice at a motel I got up to use the bathroom and came out to find the guy already gone. Ridiculous, right? How fast were they moving to dress and depart in the short amount of time it took me to pee? It was a schadenfreudish kind of relief mixed with stunned disbelief—we had just shared our bodies, but I

didn't even get a goodbye. But why would I? Why did I expect that? After all, I wasn't a real woman; I was a fat girl.

For me, many of these encounters were like eating a meal: I had been hungry, I had satisfied the craving, game over. No need to hang around. Even a restaurant would throw me out after ninety minutes or at least start giving those uncomfortable glares and repeated passes by the table. In sexual politics, quiet or TV watching or long visits to the bathroom were the uncomfortable glares for the "this is finished" of one night stands.

In 2000, the summer before I was set to start at USC, a guy I met online took a cab about twenty-five miles to my house—plodding LA miles even after 10 o'clock at night—and we had a really great evening. Laughing, joking, sharing, great sex, I mean GREAT, and after, he used my new cell phone to call a cab. I was startled. I offered to drive him home, but he declined, said it was no big deal. He asked me to walk him out to the curb, I lived in a back house in a backyard in Pasadena, CA, and so we walked down the long driveway. As we approached the street at around six a.m., the sun was barely up, the rays not yet reaching through the boughs of the leafy trees that lined my street, we were holding hands as we walked, and he asked me if I liked baseball. I said well enough. "Would you like to go to a Dodger game with me?" I was stunned. I never expected to see him again. Did he mean it? Did he really want an actual, real, go somewhere-with-me-in-public *date*? I said I would. He gave me a kiss, got in the cab, said he'd call or email me, and off he went.

I never heard from him again. Paul. His name was Paul. His online moniker was Gandalf. I remember now. I wonder how he is.

That was a painful lesson to learn. That one hurt. I'd had no expectations yet he'd offered up that something more that I always wanted and he gave me hope. I thought he had just given *us* a

chance. As time passed and I never heard from him, his profile even deleted from the dating site, it dawned on me that he really had liked me; he'd felt a connection, too. But he'd thought about it and couldn't handle the shame that came with having a fat girlfriend. At the abuse that he would receive from the hands of his friends, family, and even strangers in public. He had decided to leave the fat behind. I wasn't worth it.

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To be fat was to be invisible. I can't tell you how many doors I've had dropped on me because no one would hold it for me—bam! Right in the middle of my back. Because I was never seen, I must have had my fatoflauged gear on. Sometimes I felt like a street person being stepped over by a New Yorker: seen but only just. Not worthy of any full attention, just an obstacle to avoid.

There were the carts I'd been hit with in grocery stores, or the baby strollers that clipped my Achilles heel, or the cars that missed hitting me by *that* much while in the crosswalk. I had to remain hypervigilant in public to keep from getting hurt by others *while I was being invisible in my fat costume*. I once wondered if I needed a cape. I could be a fat super hero...FAT GIRL! Duh-DUH! With a neon yellow or wait, no, a pink cape. Would I be seen, then? Or maybe I could hide behind a Cal-Trans orange umbrella, the size of a patio umbrella, holding it in front of me as I walked. Maybe giant neon green wings like a giant parrot, I could flap them a little as I walked, "excuse me, excuse me" flap flap flap driving people ahead of me.

I'll never forget the homeless dude who I watched jaywalk across a busy boulevard as I stood waiting for my car at the car wash. As soon as I saw him, I knew he was going to make a beeline straight to me. He staggered, dodging cars like Pacman, over the curb, into the driveway, and always, always heading straight to me. It was a typical Saturday afternoon, normal Valley moderate

temperatures. I was wearing a T-shirt and some pull-on stretchy pants—I wasn't going anywhere fancy, just running errands. He walked right up to me. "What are you?" he asked, "Two-fifty, three hundred pounds?" He was way too close to my face, the stench of beer and cigarettes filling the space between us. It was as if I had put my head into a dumpster in an alley behind a bar. In a moment, I was going to wish I had. I reddened from the cement below my feet to the air that quivered above my head. I turned away from him unanswered. But he was right. I was about two-hundred-and-sixty pounds, which would not be my highest weight. How had he known? I glanced around to see if anyone had heard. I don't think anyone did. I remember that moment so clearly, the shame of it, the humiliation, the hurt, the accuracy.

But I was not just a target by minimized people, other "unseen" people like myself; no, normal-sized women despised me as if I were a threat, that if I got too close, the fat might rub off like a disease. Those women looked at me with snide glares of disdain, especially in "normal-sized" clothing shops and that I rarely went in. I usually went in with friends, or when shopping for my sister, a tall, lithe size six. I knew what those shop-girls were thinking: *There's nothing in here for you. Why don't you just go now and save us all the time and discomfort. Or maybe just get some earrings and then GO!* and they'd turn away and roll their eyes. I didn't need to see their eyes to know they were rolling. I had some nerve bringing my fat ass into their trendy, normal-sized store. *Don't touch the clothes and get your fat germs all over them!* I could hear them huff as I turned to leave, pretending to myself that I left because I needed a Diet Coke or a coffee immediately.

And lest we forget, there are also the so-called beer goggles; the last call at 2 a.m. eye sweeps of the bar or club, landing on me as the best of a pile of bad choices. I wasn't visible until I became useful. Hold the door for a woman with a baby—sure; getting into my car to pull out of a parking space ("Are you leaving!")—definitely; holding up a blouse the size of a canvas sail next to me and

asking, “My mom’s about *your size*, what size do you wear?”—groan. Make a mistake while driving? I was a “fat cow” or more commonly a “fat bitch.” I actually yelled back at a guy once, “Fat bitch? Is that the best you can do?” He looked startled and drove away. But at 2 a.m. in any bar or club? And I was suddenly not only visible, but desirable. I was any vagina-port in a storm and at least I wasn’t ugly, too.

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As the advent of the Internet and Internet dating began—when all the websites were free, *oh glory days*—the summer I was thirty-seven, newly single, waiting for the upcoming semester at USC, one of the two big universities in Los Angeles that I had transferred to after getting an AA at community college—and after breaking up with the latest in a string of idiot boyfriends and one leech of a husband, I put up ads on every major dating site. Dating.com. Match.com. LavaLife. You name it. Whatever. I wanted to *go out, have fun, meet people, have new experiences*. Well, that’s what I told myself anyway. What I really wanted was to get laid with the hopes of finding a long-term boyfriend. I was using my vagina as boyfriend bait. One who did not need me to support him financially on my \$11/hr internet service provider customer service rep income. And, as I told myself, once school started I was going to be hunkered down, my face in books and more books as I studied for that BA in English. It was going to be my very own Summer of Love.

I filled out profiles attempting to be witty, put up photos of me that always had my good side, and at least one of me, full length, head to toe to be honest. Being tall, 5’10”, my weight distribution was fairly proportionate, I basically just looked like a Russian nesting doll, one of those Matryoska dolls. If no one else was in the picture with me, there was no way to accurately determine my size. It was like seeing a professional basketball player in person. They don’t look that big because all the other players are about their size. But next to a normal-sized person? They look inhuman—like

giants from another planet, redwoods that walked and could throw a ball. And although in my case what looked tall and curvy in an online photo, unfortunately for them, turned into tall and huge in person. I startled plenty of internet dates.

I had an internet date over one night, Mike, I'll call him. We had talked every night for a week, he called me, so I felt comfortable having him to my tiny back house rental unit that I'd dubbed "the Box." He kept staring at me and chuckling while we chatted and drank our beers. "Why are you laughing?" I asked. I was horrified to hear the answer, but it had slipped out before I could help myself. "I didn't expect you to be so pretty," he said. I was stunned silent.

Even in our youth and beauty obsessed society, fat does not necessarily equal ugly. And I was attractive enough to garner moderate amounts of attention. More than my other fat friends, my eating and Lane Giant fat-clothes-store-shopping friends. Some of them were fat *and* ugly. And I knew it. I was a little arrogant and vain about that. I admit it. Embarrassed, but acknowledged, now.

Mike told me I was pretty. Sometimes I knew I was, mostly I thought I was just passing with makeup and a good haircut. We laughed a lot and eventually fell into my queen sized bed that took up most of the room in "the Box." He stayed the night. We cuddled. There was pillowtalk. I could fall for this guy, I knew it. He had a good job and a big truck. He made me laugh and feel good inside and out. When he left in the morning he hugged me and kissed me goodbye. That night after I got off work I called him. He was cold and distant; he acted as if I were bothering him. I wished him a good night and hung up. I had thought he might like to come over again, if not that night, then soon. I hadn't expected to be dismissed. His behavior hadn't indicated that. I never talked to him again. I was confused. I didn't know what to think. But I was hurt.

I kept dating.

I nearly always met my dates at public places, Starbucks or restaurants. I wanted to meet these men, but I also knew I needed to be as safe as possible. I had a routine by now: I'd arrive early, seated, facing the door, and watch for them to see what their face would betray when they spotted me. I called it "the look." I waited and watched their faces so I could steel myself, prepare my face to remain unchanged, hiding the knowledge that I had just been discarded, disposed of before we got to "hello." There was a second look that I called the yummy, "tits-on-a-Ritz" look that I would occasionally receive. I both liked and feared that look.

As I waited, I expected one of those two looks: The first one was presented as astonishment overriding disgust. Sort of a "Holy cow, she is *really* fat. Like...a whole lot fat! That is *way more* than the extra 25 pounds I thought she meant!"

I could see the hamster-on-the-wheel in their brain start spinning. "How do I get out of here, and soon?" I could see it in their face, a tightness to their jaw, a lack of sparkle in the eye, a wee crimping of an eyebrow. Yep. They would be a short date.

But the "tits on a Ritz" looks? Those were usually the guys with boob fetishes. At my weight, over 300 pounds, for a time over 350 pounds, I was a 44-46DDD, and generally their eyes did not go up to my face nor down to the rest of my body. They were just there for the titties. All I had to do was decide if I liked them well enough to let them touch me and when. One date? Two dates? Now? The guys with that look? I could call it any way I wanted. I had the boob bait and, like a giant fish, I could reel them in as far as I liked, or even bring them into the boat. These were few and far and between so I usually was all in. I thought once they got to know the rest of me attached to the boobs, they would like me and want to stick around. Boobs and smart and funny? That was a win, right? Right?

In general though, I usually got the first reaction, the *holy shit* reaction, rattled on by their involuntary reactions. Regardless, some of those guys would still try to hit it, too, out of desperation or whatever it was they needed. Most would sit down to talk with me as they came up with a game plan in their head. A few used the “I need to use the restroom” exit strategy; some drank more; and a few came right out and said I wasn’t what they were looking for and wished me luck. I could respect those guys for being honest. But some guys? Some even felt they needed to tell me the truth, usually in an email that I would get once I was home because they weren’t brave enough to say it to my face.

“Your picture doesn’t look like you at all!”

Really? I’m within five pounds of that picture, I said afterward to what might have been one of the worst dates, *Ever*. Why was it bad? Settle in, because you ain’t gonna believe this shit here.

It was in May 2002, about seven months after 9/11. After chatting online, we met in a public place in the late afternoon and then drove together to a restaurant in his giant, black SUV. He insisted on driving us, and I was overcome with interest by what I thought was a guy with a lot of money, unlike my last two boyfriends, so I got in. It looked like one of those vehicles a scary, no-name shadow-ish government agency would use with the blacked out windows, *X-Files* or *Alias*. I want to say it was a Suburban. Gianormous. We drove to a restaurant, Jerry’s Deli, well-known in Southern California for its massive, book-length menu.

I didn’t want to eat anything big or heavy, because I knew he would be watching to see what and how much I would eat. A fat-girl litmus test. I decided to go with something safe, small, and healthy-appearing, strawberry shortcake. The menu described it as fresh strawberries, a biscuit, all covered with whipped cream. Not too bad. I was thinking the size of a small sundae. I was just going to nibble at it regardless. Uh, no. Wrong! What the waitress set in front of me was a bastard dessert

the size of a baseball glove and about six inches high. Farrell's Old Time Ice Cream Parlor was put to shame. I was stunned silent and I felt my old friend, the Irish girls' blush, starting from the hairline down. He looked at the mountain of strawberry calories, too, as if he couldn't believe it either. In fact... he looked disgusted. He looked at the mound of strawberries, then up at me. Strawberries, me. Yep, disgusted. I was flawed, I was of poor moral character because I loved food too much and it showed. Worse... I was a food addict. I could feel him judging me across the table. I had failed the test.

But... I couldn't help but wonder where the judgmental attitude came from? He was overweight, too. Not as much as me, but he definitely didn't shop in the regular-sized clothes section at Nordstrom's.

He'd ordered a bowl of chicken soup. Dammit. Well played. I should have gotten that, too.

I picked at the strawberries and the whipped cream but left most of it. I was too embarrassed to eat much in front of all that shame echoing across the table at me.

He, however, had a cast on his left arm. A cast that he had neglected to mention in our online correspondence. I'm sure he told me how he broke it, but I don't remember the story. As we sat there, me with Mount Sugar, he with a modest bowl of soup, and it started bothering him: itching. He was getting agitated and scratchy. Finally we drove over to the local ER so he could get some relief. He drove to the very trendy upper-crusty Hoag Hospital in Newport Beach, within walking distance of the ocean. It had the best patients there, quality people. He parked in front of the entrance, jumped out and hollered at me to "park my car." The keys were still in the ignition and the engine was running. Did I mention that it was a giant SUV? It was a TANK on wheels. I had not driven anything that big in years. And the ER parking lot was tiny. So tiny. I circled and circled and

made eighty-seven point turns, and finally found a spot, wedging that fucker in between the lines without a scratch or a dent; not so much as condensation on the windows from the worried, exhaled breaths inside his shiny black urban assault vehicle. I jumped down from the vehicle expecting a shouting crowd clapping applause as I raised my fist in joy at winning the parking Olympics! *Thank you, thank you everyone!* As I took a bow and Bob Barker handed me a golden trophy. But there was no one.

I walked on shaky legs into the ER and waited. For one brief, crazy moment I thought of driving the tank to Vegas. But instead I waited. For hours. The sun went down. I had his keys, but I didn't even know his last name. The staff wouldn't let me in to see him or release any information to me because I was not a relative, so unless I wanted to be a complete asshole and take his keys, and then, in addition, pay for a cab twenty miles back to my car? I was trapped there. So I waited like a fool. A big fat fool.

After he was released—he got a brand new cast—I just wanted to go home, but like a persistent used car salesman, he wore me down until I was convinced the jalopy he was selling me was a Cadillac and I agreed to join him in his condo to watch a movie. The complex was large, well-manicured, lush with plants, water features, and that new-building smell in an expensive Orange County beach town, so naively I assumed that he would be fine. I somehow wanted it to work out the way it had worked out in my head and I kept forging forward, stupidly, waiting for something broken to mend itself. I went inside, and, well, he was decent in that he was neither a murderer nor a rapist, but he kept, strangely, offering me food. Ice cream. Soup. A sandwich. And I kept saying no. No, no, no, Jesus, no already.

He ate while I declined.

Anyway, after the third or fourth time he insisted that I eat, I accepted a meatball. I was expecting a normal, golf-ball sized meatball. No. Of course not. Not on this date. It was a huge, softball-sized meatball in a cereal bowl, covered with sauce and cheese. I nibbled at it while we watched Animal Planet. He offered sex, clinically, the way a male chimpanzee would hop on a female chimpanzee and just go for it. I declined and went home soon after, before he decided that there *would be sex*.

Because I hadn't slept with him, I got the nasty email via the dating site the next morning. Evidently he'd spent the night stewing about my (fat ass) rejection of him (and his fat ass). Not getting sex, and the realization that there was no chance of ever getting it, evidently left him feeling that he had the right to abuse and shame me outright—to burn that bridge. He had nothing to lose. He told me that I was way fatter than my picture, I clearly had eating issues as he mentioned both the shortcake and the meatball (that he'd practically forced on me), and that I should not lie to people and “take better care of myself.” This from a fat, ugly man who was about a five on the one to ten attractiveness scale. His personality made him even uglier.

I wrote back that “I love dates that involved hours at the ER! So fun!” And that he'd insisted on the meatball if he remembered, and that he had a “square-shaped ass.” Then I blocked him. Fortunately, he did not have my phone, last name, or personal email address. Evidently, I was good enough to take out, purchase food for, trust with his shiny new monster SUV, invite home and feed, but because I didn't give up the pussy he felt it gave him the right to denigrate me for rejecting him. If he had given me an opportunity to get to know him better, there could have been more dates and then maybe sex. Thinking back, though, with the truth that time passed can give you, he did let me “get to know him.” He showed his true, jerky colors. He was one of those men who had financial success that he equated with success in getting women to do whatever he wanted. I wasn't one of

those women so I moved on and he couldn't deal with it. He had been rejected by—say it with me now—a *fat girl*. Worst date ever, right? Well, it was up there for sure. Why did the successful guys always want to fuck me but not keep me? Women are ornaments, accoutrements to a man's success. I was not thin enough to qualify as an ornament. Pretty, sure. Interesting, yes. Funny, definitely. But as a prize? A thing to show off? I was not that thing. Think about it: The Oscar, the Emmy statues, not fat. I was golden but not thin—only good enough to look at and fondle in the dark, night lights flickering off my tarnished golden hue, audience of one.

But the loser guys? They were glad to have anyone, no matter how fat or ugly or handicapped. But I was tired of losers. Of crazy. Of lazy. Of brokeass fix-it-with-duct-tapers. Of course, those were the guys that were into me. They were strange. Usually they had something wrong with them like a bad leg, a wonky eye, a ridiculous comb over; guys who started fights at work, or only called me when they were upset, or lived in their mom's spare room and drove a car held together with coat hangers and electrical tape. Those were the guys who always wanted me. They were imperfect, so they wanted an imperfect woman who would not or could not point out their flaws because she had her own obvious issues. If we met and I rejected them, guess where they went? Yup. "You're too fat for me."

I longed for a normal guy who had a normal body, a normal place to live, normal relatives and exes, normal jobs that didn't involve making fries, cutting lawns, or telemarketing. Normal cars that could be entered and exited through the passenger door, didn't have to stop and have oil added every ten miles, and started, every time. Guys who hadn't just gotten out of prison or a mental hospital, or whose girlfriend hadn't just thrown them out a few weeks earlier—that bitch—or wanted to screw me on the hood of their car on the street in front of *my* house, or spit in my open mouth

while we were doing it at a by-the-hour hot tub motel in Hollywood. And no, thank you, I don't think so.

I wanted stability, normality, regularity. I wanted to get married. I wanted the ring, the white dress, the walk down the aisle, the big party, a honeymoon. I wanted to be Mrs. Someone. I wanted a house, a home, a yard, cats, a dog, backyard barbecues, a garden, a front porch, decent jobs that didn't involve saying "Welcome to ____!" at customers on their way in; friends, regular-dysfunction-type families, birthday celebrations and Christmas presents that weren't "that book I bought you at Borders last week was your gift" on Christmas morning.

But because I was fat, no, not fat, obese, I was morbidly obese... I had to settle. So I had dates with strange, flawed men. I thought sex would entice a man into a long-term relationship. It somehow took me years to figure out that that did not work. At all. What I thought was bait—women parts, boobs and a vagina—for most men, wasn't bait, but the goal itself. I had misunderstood sexual dynamics completely. For years. I had given it all away.

I quit dating.

People say the American Dream is a myth, something we were spoon-fed by TV with shows like *Leave it to Beaver*, *Ozzie and Harriett*, and *The Brady Bunch*. But that's not where I got my vision of the dream for my life. No, I lived it. My sister and I grew up poor, really poor, but we never really knew it until we'd grown up and gone out into the world ourselves. Our parents hid it from us. We lived in a sweet '50s era ranch style home, three bedrooms, one bath, a porch out front, a garage out back, and the biggest backyard this side of Beverly Hills. The house was pale green and situated on a corner lot on Greywood Avenue. My parents loved each other, my sister and I knew

that. Although our parents' marriage died in that house, for me, from age nine to eleven? It was golden. We had good food to eat, TV, the lights never got cut off, both my parents had cars (old, but we were kids and didn't notice), and there was a swing-set out back and the next door neighbor had a big above-ground pool and loved to have us kids over. We had our own rooms with real beds in them, not a piss and sweat-stained mattress thrown out in the garage with a dirty pillow and ragged blanket like one of my classmates had. My parents' friends visited and there was usually barbecuing, card games, daiquiris, giggly adults, and kids screaming with joy in the backyard. I wanted that for my adult life, the life I had as a kid. So far it had escaped me except for a few lovely years here and there.

But I kept trying. Eventually I returned to dating. But now I was selective. I tried to date up, I really did. I once met a guy for a date at a nice restaurant in the swanky part of Glendale who looked just like Gilligan from *Gilligan's Island*. I am not kidding. And he had the nerve to give me "the look" while I tried hard to hide my astonishment and suppress my laughter. All he needed was white bell bottoms, a red long-sleeved shirt, a sailor hat, and to run around frantically yelling "Cap'n!" to complete the image. I just couldn't get past the cartoonishness of that character to the real person that lived inside that body. I struggled to keep a straight face. I realized the depth of my shallowness, but Gilligan? Come on, he had to know.

As for him? He had the balls to leave me a voicemail that he "didn't think it would work." The 21st century habit of "ghosting" hadn't started yet in the early 2000s. But, oh my goodness. You didn't even need to write me, man. I already knew. That look said everything I needed to know. I didn't write or call him back. What would be the point. Rejected by Gilligan. That's so awesome.

I once dated an editor at the LA Times, the summer of 2000. He was short, fat, bald, funny, smart, interesting, and successful. I adored him. He seemed to like me, too. We saw each other for

months. We talked a lot about a variety of subjects. He even went places with me in public. He liked me to stay over and cuddle with his wiener dogs, Pancake and Penelope. I was falling. Then one day he told me if I was looking for a boyfriend, he wasn't it. I saw him a few more times, then the paper laid him off and he moved to another state. With the much younger woman he was seeing at the same time as me. And who he married.

So close.

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After the disastrous ER date, I started dating again. By then, there were websites for men who liked fat women. I thought my chances of meeting someone nice might actually be better. But it wasn't. I had my scariest date *Ever*. It was with a guy who said he was 5'9" and a professor of history at Cal State Fullerton. We emailed a few times and, even though he was short (5'9" to my 5'10"), I agreed to meet him at a restaurant.

I drove out from Claremont, where I was living at the time, showered, and perfumed and makeup'd, in a casual but nice summer outfit. He showed up to the restaurant parking lot in sweaty basketball clothes, straight from a pickup game, so clearly he valued my time—not. I was looking down on him so he might, I say might, have been 5'7", and he immediately asked for a hug while we stood in the parking lot of the restaurant. I said, sure, why not. It was a hot summer day so I'd worn a tank top and loose drawstring slacks. As we embraced, I felt him pulling my shirt up in the back; he was trying to get it over my arms. It was close. He was attempting to remove my shirt, in a restaurant parking lot, in front of a playground where children were playing. As I stepped back and struggled to pull it back down, he had unzipped his pants and was holding his penis. He grabbed my wrist, hard, and was pulling me forward as he asked me to come with him behind an apartment building just east

of the restaurant and give him head. In that instant, I had visions of him burying my body in a shallow grave somewhere desolate in the Mojave. My mother would never know what became of me. I balked.

I retreated from his grip, smoothed down my top, and told him I'd left something in the car; I'd be right back. I got in my car and peeled out of there and went home. Later that night I got an email saying, "What happened? Where did you go?" What in the name of all that's holy fuck? College professor? I doubt it. That date was when I decided to give up dating completely. If I kept it up, I was going to end up dead somewhere. I made a conscious choice—no more men. I was going to be the cliché: the crazy cat lady, surrounded by stacks of books that would, eventually, topple over in an earthquake, crush me, and my cats would eat me out of desperation. It sounded more appealing than humiliating myself time after time with strange guys who didn't give a damn about me whether I was monstrously huge and disgusting, or some kind of boob-fetisher's dream. I did not need the aggravation, the fear, or the heartbreak.

I took another year off dating. I'd started a new job doing data entry typing up advertising for a big online telecommunications company. It was a union gig, paid well, had good benefits, paid time off including a week off between Christmas and New Year, our slow season. It was boring as hell, but I didn't have to answer the phone or deal with any customers. I could wear headphones so I got a radio and listened to AM talk radio all night during my 4 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. shift, ending with George Noory's *Coast to Coast*. I plodded through. Re-learning what an office job meant again after being unemployed for nearly two years. It was the perfect job to do that. And I hated it.

By this time, I had gotten to know myself pretty well. I knew I went too fast with men wanting that instant intimacy. I would rush the sex hoping to hold onto them. I wanted someone to take care of me, but that was not going to happen. I needed to take care of myself. I was over forty,

and I knew that I equated sex with love. Some women do that. Sex causes a hormonal release than can cause an emotional attachment response in women. I read about it in a magazine. I've experienced that. As soon as I have the sex? I'm picturing that house with the backyard and the barbecue. Unfortunately, it's been my anecdotal field observation that it seems to create a "put on my clothes and get the hell out of here" response in men. Or maybe it was just me—I had a vagina, I was a sperm depository, but I was not relationship material. Who was I kidding? I was not fit to be seen in public with most of the guys I slept with—they made it very clear time and time again and I internalized it.

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Turns out, the love I was looking for? It was mine all along. My love. My love for myself. Years of rejection, shame, and humiliation are difficult to ignore; eventually you believe it. You're fat so you're ugly; you're fat so you're unlovable, you're fat so you should stay inside and never go out. No one wants to see you, no matter how much time you took on your makeup, hair, clothes, perfume, jewelry and accessories. You are fat and nothing you do can ameliorate that. You are not a person—you are a disgusting blob with no self-control. You have no value. It's sort of the reverse Justin Bieber syndrome: You start believing your own press—most everyone thought I was a waste of a human being, so I must be. Never mind that years of yo-yo dieting since the teen years had blown out my metabolism and no amount of dieting would ever get the weight off.

And then I met Rex. He loved me for all that I was. Fat. Tall. Funny. Bad at math. All of it. He adored me, and I him. And through him, I learned to value myself. If I gained nothing else from that marriage, I learned that I was fine just the way I was.

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I've spent years re-writing my own press. It's a process, not a destination. I went from experiencing love from men any way I could get it—sex if that's all that was offered—to a comfortable marriage to a handsome man with a thing for fat women, but who was broken inside; a marriage that deteriorated each year, slowly, inexorably until it died completely after I had weight loss surgery and lost enough weight to create a whole new person. Under all that weight was an attitude and an intolerance for his, or anyone else's, bullshit.

Mary

My childhood memories appear to me as dreams. I can see the events that happened in color; I can smell things, I can feel the wind on my skin, but there's no sound, just like my sleeping dreams. I imagine that I remember the words that were spoken, but I clearly remember the sirens that screamed, the honking of traffic, the water from a sprinkler hitting dry pavement, the songs of early-morning birds. How do I know these memories aren't dreams, too? Recreated by my brain trying to make sense of things that happened when I was a child? I don't. I have no way of knowing. The emotions these "memories" produce, however, are true—the hurt, the happy, the humiliating, the dangerous. Those things are real. I feel them even now. Maybe that's why I try so hard not to remember—the bad slips in unannounced along with the good, moving quietly down the tree-lined suburban neighborhoods of my childhood, pulling into my driveway unwelcome, unwanted, and in my spot.

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Mary. The name slips off the lips of faithful around the world, praying for intervention, mercy, comfort, or hope. Not for me. For me it rummages around in that dusty filing cabinet, back behind the other memories, brushes itself off, and brusquely shoves into my mind's eye uninvited and unwelcome: childish memories of fear, confusion, and terror. Of an exhausted, overworked, beyond middle-age housewife, whose job as wife, mother, cook, and housekeeper never ended. It was twenty-four hours a day, always on duty. In retrospect, through the optics of an adult, I can see the pressure she must have been feeling from all sides, without border, completion, or mercy. A group of small children, all under the age of six, I can only imagine the stress that would bring. I forgive you, Mary. I forgive you, but the memories.... I put my hands up but they won't go away.

When I was four, my mom worked. Back then, in the mid- to late '60s, that was a little unusual. Most women, especially after marriage and children, were what they called housewives, what we now call stay at home moms. Men were often shamed because they couldn't support their wives on what they earned alone, regardless of why the wife worked. I don't think I realized how remarkable this was until I was an adult. And it's only now, in the last four or five years, that I have heard some of the stories about when my mom worked for Allstate Insurance Company. I don't know precisely what she did there, but she told me that it was some kind of secretarial work. She regaled me with tales she remembered about the rude, misogynistic, men who would call—although misogyny at that time was a social norm—the men who always called her “honey” or “sweetie” even when she asked them not to, and that included her boss. At job interviews she was asked if “her husband minded if she worked?” or “What kind of birth control was she using?” And “What if you get pregnant?” Questions that are both illegal and irrelevant now.

Until recently, I never knew she had a college degree. I knew she had gone to nursing school but dropped out six months from graduation to marry my dad. At the time, you could not be married and attend nursing school. I asked her once why she had quit. “Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time,” she said, snorting a little as she flapped her hands in the air. She always regretted it. She bellyached about it constantly once she'd divorced my dad after twelve years of marriage. But a degree? She'd gotten an AA before transferring to nursing school? I'd had no idea. I thought I was the second in our family, after my sister, to finish college, and that was with my AA. My dad has an AA, also. And I never knew until a few years ago. So many secrets in our family, so many damn secrets or just plain lies by omission—I'm still parsing them out. Whether my mother intended it as a secret or not, I still didn't know about her degree for almost forty years.

But my mother is only tertiary in this story. My point is that she had to work which meant that at my age, I needed to be supervised at all times. So therefore Mary. My childhood was not perfect, there were some good times, some bad times and hard moments, a little suffering, I don't know if that makes it a normal American childhood or not, but in my mind it does. No, for actual terror there was really only one thing that became a permanent horror story stored in my mind. The memory that won't go away. It hides, sometimes for years, but it always resurfaces like a rotten apple floating to the top in a barrel: Mary, the babysitter.

Who clearly remembers being four? What I do remember is getting dropped off at Mary's. How she even came across our family's radar, until recently, I didn't know: there was no hireahag.com back then. If there were, their motto probably would have been something like "We'll bake your baby!" Or "No charge for nightmares!" Well, perhaps something like that. Damn close, anyway, in my mind.

That woman terrorized me, and all of the kids she babysat. The rules were firm and unwavering. We were to use the bathroom off the kitchen, only, and that was during the times we were allowed in the kitchen. That meant we often had to hold it for long periods of time. We were to keep off all of the furniture, dining room chairs, couch, side chairs, whatever, and we were to sit on the floor. There were more rules I don't remember. If we violated any of these rules, she would come at us—she moved pretty fast for a fat old lady—grab an arm and yank on it, hard, while yelling something like "I thought I told you to stay out of the kitchen!" More violence was always implied, and we were small children and confused and frightened by her.

I asked my mom recently how she'd found her. Evidently we lived in an apartment in Lynwood, CA on Las Flores Boulevard, just a few blocks from my grandparent's duplex on San Born Avenue, and where we would move later that year. A neighbor in the Las Flores apartment building recommended Mary. It was just that simple.

Mom drove us to the babysitter; I'm not sure how my dad got to work, we just had the one car then. Us being my sister and me. Mom would park the family car at the curb in front of the house and walk me up the long driveway to the front door, my hand in hers, my little sister on her hip. At one-year-old, she still didn't walk. I remember the gray-blue front door of Mary's house was some sort of '60s-style pre-western-feng-shui that faced the backyard, north, but parallel to the street, so you had to walk down the driveway and then make a 180 at the porch steps. The whole house was blue, West Point blue, inside and out. The concrete porch was small, narrow with no cracks, and then just the three steps, through the door and into the house. There was no room for porch furniture; nowhere to sit in the breeze and drink lemonade; nowhere to wave at neighbors. It was utilitarian in its smallness: Into the house, out of the house. That was it.

That mom walked me inside for safekeeping is so contradictory because I started walking to kindergarten alone that September, including crossing an eight-lane boulevard in the heart of Los Angeles County, the city of Lynwood, where we lived, Mary lived, and my school was located. Jill, my sister, stayed with Mary all day. She was too little to go to school yet.

The babysitter lived fairly close to us, sort of in a northerly direction. It feels like it was less than a mile. I have been back to the old neighborhood in Lynwood, CA several times, and I can never find Mary's. It's probably for the best; I don't want any more memories of that time of my life to resurface. I'm sure Mary has been gone for a very long time now, also. I hope bad memories

don't haunt houses the way it's said the dead can do. I'd rather leave my memories with the house anyway, if I could.

Next to her house was an empty lot, yellow with tall grasses and weeds that had died under the parch summer sun, and past that field was a line of small connected cottages, facing west toward Mary's house. That field caught fire that first summer. Mary put it out with her garden hose, while wearing a billowing dark blue housedress with light blue hibiscus flowers all over it, before the fire department arrived. They sprayed it down with their hose as if to say "Stand aside, we are professional grassfire water-sprayers!" looking at her like she was the problem. Childish me snickered at her, to the side and unobserved.

Across the field of weed-grass, in the cottages, lived a band of long-haired, guitar-playing, shoeless hippies, always enshrouded in a haze of pot smoke and incense wherever they walked, and to this day what I remember longing to be with them, to be one. At least the carefree image of what I thought a hippie was. Mary made me stay far away from them when playing outside. The field was forbidden ground and I never did play in it—it was too obvious: there I would be, chest-high in yellow grass, clear as day from the kitchen window over the sink. She could easily see me, surely doing something wrong while standing perfectly still. Punishment would follow, usually involving the yanking of an arm, maybe a slap to the face, then sitting on the cold linoleum in the kitchen for hours, doing nothing. Really bad kids also got a different lunch than the good kids. No dessert, or half a sandwich instead of a whole, no chips, no juice. And then she would goad you about what the good kids were eating and you weren't.

I stayed out of the field, but I stood on the sidewalk on its closer edge and stared at the hippies, hoping one would wave to me. When Mary caught me doing this, she came out, grabbed me by my arm and pulled me out of the field and back to the driveway on the other side of her house.

After that day, I was restricted to her backyard and the driveway of her house only. It was all cement, no grass in the back, and there was a garage where she had huge barrels of homemade sauerkraut fermenting. I didn't know what it was except it looked white, gooey, and disgusting. When the first *Alien* movie came out, I flashed back to those sauerkraut barrels as I sat in the quiet and dark of the theater. Forever now, whenever I think of those barrels or re-watch *Alien*, rare as it may be, I envision a giant alien hand popping out of a barrel-egg and locking onto my face.

It was not too long after this that I started stealing things from Mary's house: A pencil. A coloring book. A small figurine. Taking her things made me feel like I was stronger than her, braver; that I had the power, not her.

My little sister—and after she was born, she became *my* baby—I was her protector, and as a toddler still toilet training she once pooped her pants among those sauerkraut barrels. I tried to clean it up to save her from the wrath of Mary, but evidently I did a bad job of it and most of the poop missed the toilet and fell onto the garage floor. And we weren't even supposed to be using the garage bathroom. Fortunately it happened close to the time mom was coming to pick us up or retribution would have been much, much greater. For me, not my sister. My sister was very little, not really talking much, and me, well, Mary thought she had my number (she did).

Mary told Mom about it with this fake, shit-eating grin on her face, telling Mom that it was “All right, heh heh heh, it happens. Heh.” She was just biding her time. It was another tick mark in the “Bad” column for Julie.

Her seventeen-year-old son, a high school senior, lived in a small guesthouse that was attached to the garage. We were always in danger of being hit by one of his hormone-fueled, pedal-to-the-metal, Mary-induced rages as he tore in and out of the long driveway in his teal muscle car.

We weren't her only victims. I remember his car had pointy tail-fins, big doors, and it was fast. I wanted one just like it when I grew up. Hell, I wanted it then and I was not yet five. Fast. I always wanted to go fast and I definitely wanted out of Mary's yard. He and that car were almost the object of my, and the other children at Mary's, ugly death. When we heard that car coming, we knew to pin ourselves up against the fence on one side or dive into the bushes on the other. The boy was a menace. But he was Mary's kid, and he didn't know it yet, but he was just like her: Selfish and dangerous. I wanted to go with him, wherever he was going in that car, anyway. Just take me away from here.

I wanted to have that much authority someday. Even at four-years-old I knew I was at the mercy and whim of adults. I fought them every opportunity I had. Sometimes I fought them even when I didn't know I was provoking a fight where one didn't exist. I just knew that grownups constantly wanted me to go places, do things, wear things, eat things, not eat things, not go places, not do things, hold this, don't touch that, without question—it was hard to figure out exactly what I was supposed to be doing at any one time; so many contradictory rules. And now, this new woman, this Mary, I was supposed to listen to her, but I didn't even know her. She definitely wasn't my mother. My mom had red hair, stylish cat-eye glasses, and a slim silhouette. This lady had grey hair styled in a way that reminded me of George Washington from a dollar bill or even the Queen of England; she had a big floppy butt, and boobs that seemed held up by rolling them around a pencil, duct-taped, then shoved into her bra with hopes they'd remain there. And she had an evil smile she only showed to children; I was supposed to listen to her? Let her, this strange, scary, floppy grey woman, tell me what to do? I would soon learn that no matter what I did, she wasn't going to like it anyway. I nodded my head in acquiescence and then did what I wanted... provided she wasn't looking.

Something happened early on in our association that still makes me laugh, all these decades later, and that was on a soup-making day at Mary's. It must have been summer because I hadn't started kindergarten yet, so that would make me four. I would turn five after school started.

Mary was in her kitchen making this giant pot of soup out of something she called "liver." The pot was chrome-colored, and so big I probably could have gotten in it and put the lid on after me. I didn't like the sound of that word or the way she looked at me when she said it, sort of ghoulish and predatory while smirking, the way an evil witch might look at you, maybe the one from a Brothers Grimm fairy tale like the one my mother read to me sometimes, Hansel and Gretel that was the one. Whatever "liver" was? Unlike the witch in the fable, instead of wanting to eat me, she was looking forward to making me eat some nasty liver. She told me I *was* going to eat some. I told her I preferred not to do that. She insisted. I must have known the repercussions would be huge—I'm fairly sure that would've included yelling, arm pulling, frequently a slap to the face, and sitting on the floor instead of going outside—so I sat at the table, as ordered, and waited.

When I think of this day, I always picture Mary rubbing her long-fingered, pointed-nail hands together in glee. She didn't have long fingers or pointy nails, but that's what I think of when I think of her telling me I was going to eat some of that boiling shit.

Normally us kids weren't allowed to sit at the table. We had to line up on the floor in front of one wall of cabinets, opposite the sink and the stove, legs out in front of us. On that day I was sitting at the table, the only time I would sit at that massive pine table that seated eight, its giant chairs with thick turned legs and vinyl, turquoise-colored padded seats and seatbacks with a little matching vinyl ruffle around the bottom edge of the seats, like little mini-skirts. The chairs also had gold-colored studs that held the vinyl onto the chair. It was new, but not mid-century modern that is seeing a revival now. No, I think it was every-century ugly.

On that day, I thought for a moment that I might be special, but quickly realized that I somehow felt more like I was going to be the victim in whatever was taking place here. If you don't know what the merchandise is, it's probably you. Mary had me sitting on about three giant phone books so I could be at chest level to the table. Big phone books, not the wimpy skinny ones they have now. These were circus strong-man thick, six- to eight-inch-high books of white and yellow pages. Like a paper internet: if it wasn't in the phone book, it probably didn't exist.

I sat there and waited for her to serve me up some of that, well, it smelled like boiling garbage mixed with dirty laundry is what it smelled like. I realized that to have been invited to sit at the table meant the price was a bowl of that soup. She ladled some up and put it in a white Corelle bowl with a brown stripe (I have a bowl like that, now), giving me that same cruel grin as she did. "Oh, you're going to enjoy this," I'm sure she said. It was some kind of old country recipe her grandma made, most likely, now that I think of it, because they were too poor to eat anything else. I again insisted that I really would prefer to pass on the liver soup. She put the bowl in front of me and told me I would sit there until I ate some. I looked at it. Steam was coming off of something the color of leaf-filled gutter water after it rained—rusty but clear, with bubbles on top. The smell was even more foul close up. I debated on what to do. I looked out the window for a cop my mom always told me would help me if I needed help. Outside all there was was the postcard-fake blue of a Southern California summer sky, the Midwestern-winter-envy green of evergreen shrubs, the sidewalks white with the heat of the sun, and manicured lawns up and down the street bragging over the goodness of the weather...but not one cop.

I wasn't sure when my mom was coming—I didn't know how to tell time yet and digital clocks hadn't been invented—but I knew it was a long time, the sun would be going down. Could I make it until my mom showed up? I didn't have the option of thinking it over much longer: Mary

leaned over me, her left hand on the table, her right hand pointer finger inches from my face, her hulking grey-haired body like a flabby wall looming over my 30 pounds or so, as she told me absolutely, "You will eat that. Now."

I picked up my spoon, put it in the bowl, and she turned to walk away, her mission accomplished. Her back was to me when I put the vile shit in my mouth. I promptly gagged and puked up everything in my small stomach all over her dining room table. She turned around and looked at me, looked at the vomit all over her formerly clean linen placemat (from the Old Country, I'm sure), and considered me with this lopsided grin hovering over a look of resigned understanding, and told me, "You can go play. Go outside." She knew she'd been bested, but she accepted it. For now. I got the hell up out of there as fast as I could, you know it. I stayed out of her way all the rest of the day.

She took her failure to get me to eat the soup as a personal challenge, and me as a pet project that needed training; something to be brought to heel and other domineering platitudes. Although she acknowledged that she had lost this battle, I had just put myself at the top of her shit list, permanently.

I laughed. After I got outside. I laughed a lot. I'm still laughing. I hadn't planned on it, nor could I have vomited on command, but I was thrilled that I had and that she had looked defeated. I felt the thrill of victory. If I could go back in time and take back the liver-soup-puking moment? I wouldn't, even after everything that came after. She had that coming. Maybe I was the only person in her life to ever stand up to her.

Mary had a husband. We never saw him, he worked a lot. Us part-time motherless kids would whisper that there really wasn't a husband, that he had died, and we would offer up bizarre suggestions as to how he had met his demise. I suggested that "Maybe Mary ate him?" The truth was much simpler: when he came home from work, us, the babysat, about six of us, had already been picked up and carted home by our tired parents. That's all. There were strange murmurings about her husband by Mary's two kids, the boy, and an older daughter who was getting ready to get married that contributed to our bizarre speculations. I believe there was another, even older son who lived on his own who rarely came to the house. (I don't blame him.) When you spend a lot of time on the floor and adults talk over you? You hear stuff. And Mary's husband had some kind of weird thing going on with his body. Something about a war. The Vietnam War was in full swing at this time, so I kind of knew what war was. I saw it on our black and white TV at night with my parents. My uncle was "at war" too, and my mom used to get letters from him that made her cry. When I would ask, she would just tell me that there were "bad men who want to hurt your Uncle Jimmy, and it made her scared." That was enough of an answer for me at the time. I would find out later that he was a helicopter door-gunner. They had a life expectancy in Vietnam of thirty seconds. He made it back to us and was mostly fine, that we knew of, for a long time.

I knew that war was where other men tried to hurt other men, and I knew that was bad. I was at war with Mary. Mom had always told me never to hit anyone first. It was okay to hit back, but never hit first. I frequently wanted to punch Mary in her grinning face, but she was too big for me anyway. She excreted violence through her pores. I intuited that the only thing keeping her from hitting me or any of the other kids she watched was the loss of revenue from babysitting. Little kids bruise easily and talk frequently.

I came in from school one day, to Mary's, I was in first grade by this time, I think, and there was a strange, bald-headed, Ernest Borgnine-looking ugly man in the dining room and he had one leg in a pail of water. A big silver galvanized pail. And Mary was running to and fro at his beck and call adding more hot water and Epsom salts to the bucket, and when *All in the Family* would come on in a few more years, I recognized Mary in the actions of Edith Bunker, "Oh, Archie!" Flapping hands and ugly housedress included.

I stood there and stared. I'd never seen this man before but assumed that this was Mary's imaginary husband. Although he seemed very real now. She didn't see me otherwise I'm sure she would've shooed me away, but as I stood there, he pulled his leg out of the water and... I wasn't sure what I was seeing. It was a leg... except that instead of a foot, there was just this round... skin-covered ball above where a foot should be... and that leg was much shorter than the other leg. He held it aloft over the bucket as water dripped off of it and I stood, paralyzed, gaping at that thing that had come out of the bucket. He was yelling at Mary, issuing orders, and by the way he was grimacing, I could tell he was in pain. I got the heck out of there before Mary saw me. Somehow I knew I wasn't supposed to see that. I wasn't family, and only family got to see that. I threw down my plaid lunchbox, yelled hello I'm here, and ran out the front door. I never saw him again. When I think about the time frame now, his age and his wound, I figure that he was likely a Korea vet, and that he'd clearly been grievously injured. I'm sure whatever types of prostheses they had available at that time were uncomfortable and painful. There would be other horrific sights down the road in my life, but that was the first one I ever saw and at my age I didn't really understand what I was seeing. What I understood then, however, was that it was bad and it hurt. I know now, having observed the loving relationship between my own parents, that Mary loved the man, her husband. In those few

seconds, I had observed that through her stress and anxiety there was also worry and concern. He didn't have to yell at her; she would have done anything for him.

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The worst thing Mary ever did to me was buried so deeply that, until a writing exercise in a class broke it loose, it had ceased to exist in my daily consciousness. I hadn't thought of this memory in years. Maybe even a decade. I hope I can put it back in its box in my memory attic, cardboard sealed with rip-proof tape, nestled into a plastic tub with a snapping lid, tucked under a dark back eave in the back of my brain when I'm done here. There's a reason I didn't have children. I knew I would be a bad mom. Whether or not I was correct in this determination we'll never know, but the fact remains that I did not ever want to be a mother. Until my husband and I had been married a while, but by then it was too late for me.

That moment, that one moment has echoed throughout my life and informed my decision to not have children, the foundation that was followed by other reasons: I was afraid I might do the same to them, having experienced, internalized, and learned cruel behavior. I couldn't do it to another person. A child.

The summer before I would turn six in the fall, we were still being watched by Mary. My mother had discovered the porcelain figurine I'd stolen from Mary's living room and determined it was Mary's. She made me give it back and apologize. My mom had no idea what she was asking me to do. How could she? I hadn't told her of the terror we kids lived under. I had to do it, my mom watched as I did. I knew she wouldn't slap me while my mom was watching. She hadn't noticed that

the item was even missing, I could tell by the surprise on her face. I also thought I could see rage behind her grey eyes. I did.

Mary liked all the kids to take a nap in the afternoon, I'm guessing so that she could catch a break. I never took them, and tried to make myself scarce during naptime. I couldn't be forced to do something if I couldn't be found, right? Pretty smart for a kid. My mom liked to brag that I'd tested in the 99th percentile for intelligence. I don't know about that, but I definitely thought I was smarter than Mary, even at that age.

I was an ADHD child on Dexedrine, and my brain was constantly on. Even at my normal bedtime at night, I frequently couldn't get to sleep. The insomnia was always worse in the summer due to the heat. I used to get up at night and wander around the house, go through my mom's makeup pantry, the refrigerator, too afraid to turn on the TV for fear of being sent back to my hot bed. I remember going through my mom's over-the-counter medicines to see if I could find one that said "may cause drowsiness." A Sudafed said it would, but it didn't help. I admitted to my mom that I'd taken one after she asked me what I had been doing up that night. She understandably panicked and begged me to never do that again, but to come and wake her up instead. I said I would, but I never did. I didn't take any more drugs without asking, though. Even when it was cool, I'd go to bed at my regular bedtime, nine-thirty, and I'd still be awake until well after my parents went to bed at eleven. I would lie there and listen to them murmuring over the sounds burbling from the TV until they snapped it off.

Naps were not something I was capable of. But Mary caught me one day at naptime, literally. She grabbed my arm and pulled as she said, "You're taking a nap today." I protested, both verbally and with my feet. My five-year-old body couldn't compete with her over two-hundred-pound body and off to her bedroom I went, kicking, arching my back and arguing for sanctuary. She had a

painful grip on my arm as she dragged me through the living room, up the hall, and into her bedroom. I waited for a slap that never came. I'd never been up that hall let alone into a bedroom. Just as us kids had to use a half bath off the kitchen, the hallway and whatever was down there was verboten, off limits. I was alarmed. Frightened. I had been taken into the personal area of the home, maybe the most personal, and I was in prison in that room as surely as any holding cell in any jail. I was trapped.

She and her husband had twin beds in their room. Twin beds with dirt brown-colored bedspreads. I was startled even though I'd watched a lot of *I Love Lucy* reruns and Lucy and Ricky had twin beds, but I'd thought that was odd, too. My parents slept together in a big bed, and whenever I went in their room whether it was from a nightmare—if I had the courage to walk past that scary Curious George monkey who glared at me, blocking the path out of the bedroom, and bed, I shared with my sister—or to get mom up for breakfast, my dad was usually snuggled up next to my mom, one arm thrown over her as he snored. I knew he loved her and she him, but especially in those moments. Moms and dads slept in the same bed. That was the rule. Mary and her husband did not. That was weird. She was weird, he was strange, and now I was in their not-quite-right bedroom. Whatever was going to happen to me was not going to be right, either. I was on my guard. My five-fucking-year-old guard.

She dragged me by my arm up onto her husband's bed and told me to stay there. I was furious. I wanted to be outside, playing in the bright summer light coming through the vastness of the vacant sky—it wanted me to be out there, face and arms raised in the small breeze, I felt it. And here I was, stuck on a weird-ass twin bed on a scratchy blanket, being forced to do something that my body frequently did not want to do: sleep. I raged against the brightness of that well-missed light.

I refused to sleep. I absolutely would not even try to sleep. I would sit there, awake, for hours if necessary, bored. I didn't care; I would not give in to her demands.

But I did. Inexplicably, I fell asleep.

And wet the bed. Her husband's bed.

I was a bed wetter. Mostly because I was, and still, am a heavy sleeper. To this day I can sleep through most loud noises. I've slept through thunderstorms, fire engines, and train horns without so much as a whimper. A full bladder was not enough to wake me up. Over time, I learned how to hold it, but at five-and-three-quarters, I slept through it and wet the bed. And when I fell asleep on that endless hot summer day on Mary's angry, crippled husband's scratchy bed, I pissed all over it. I was still trying to figure out how to cover it up when she found me.

I remember her face, screwed up in a fugue of anger, screaming at me that I had done it on purpose. Again, she grabbed my arm and pulled at it against my socket, and dragged me off the bed, stumbling as I hit the wood floor, she dragged up the hallway and into the kitchen. She put me up against the cupboards where she made us all line up while we waited for lunch or our parents. She stripped me of my shorts and underwear, and as I squirmed and struggled, she tried to put a dishtowel on my butt like a diaper as she screamed invective at me while trying to pin it (there were no Pampers then). She started slapping my butt, hard, telling me to hold still. I put my hand down to cover it, so then she would slap my face. I put my hand to my face so she resumed hitting my butt, back and forth as I struggled to get away while she tried to safety pin the dishtowel to my lower torso. Face, slap; butt, slap. Face. Butt. Face. Butt. When I started screaming as loud as I could, she seemed to wake up, look down, and abruptly realize what she was doing because she got this weird look on her face, one of horror and shame. I know now that she realized, too late, that she had gone

too far. Whatever little war we were engaged in, I was a child. And I was someone else's child. At that time there was no CPS and the police didn't get called in to these kinds of matters, it was handled between the involved parties, so what I saw on her face was two-fold: Loss of revenue, especially if word got around to the other parents, they would probably pull their children out of her care, and what would her husband do if she lost the extra income she was bringing in; and that she had snapped. Could she trust herself again around children? Only she knew the answer to that. Mary may not have had an immaculate heart like her namesake, but down in there, somewhere, was a human heart.

She backed away from me on her knees on the linoleum, the dining room table at her back. She told me to pick out some clothes from the kid's pile by the washing machine on the other side of the kitchen, and sit back down with my back to the cabinets and not to move. I put them on, dirty, sticky with urine, but better than being naked. She would wash my urine-soaked clothes and return them to me the next day. I knew it was getting to be time for my mom to show up; the sun had moved and the shadows were darkening. It would only be a matter of minutes before Mom came and I would tell her everything and then Mary would be in trouble. I'd seen my mom freak out at my dad and it was not pretty.

When my mom came to get me, Mary would not let me be alone with her. "I need to talk to you," I whispered in my best conspiratorial five-year-old voice. "Go ahead, honey," she'd say. "No. Not here." I whispered so softly she couldn't hear me. "I can't understand you, honey. Speak up. It's okay. You can talk in front of Mary." NO! I wanted to scream, I can't talk in front of fucking Mary. Mary is the problem! Mary was moving in on us, closer. She preempted me by saying we'd had "an event" that afternoon, but that everything was okay now. I shut up. It was useless. No point in telling my mother, the grownups were in it together. Mary had already told my mom I'd had an "accident"

and that she'd gotten it cleaned up and that everything was "fine." By telling her story before mine, I would look like a liar, a little, thieving, child liar, and I knew it. And vocalizing the physical and emotional pain and shame in front of Mary was more than I could take. So I shut my mouth. Forever. I never told my mom, I never told anyone this story. I may not have imbued humanity with Grace, but I recognize that there is Grace, even in the worst or least of us. Do I forgive Mary, even though she never asked it of me? Of course I do. But forget? I cannot. Despite my best efforts, I cannot.

Eventually, it felt like not too long after the beating and humiliation, my mom quit her job to "stay home with you kids" and we quit going to Mary's. Years later when I asked her about it, and I told her that Mary had been a nightmare, she said they'd eventually figured it out. I asked her how she knew. She said that I would create such a scene, running away, crying, struggling, anything, not to go to Mary's, that they assumed there was a good reason for it, and they decided my mom would be a housewife and stay home with us.

And until my mom was forced by finances to go back to work five years later, she did. After moves from California to Illinois, then Illinois to Colorado, then Colorado back to California when I was nine, going on ten, mom told me we were invited to dinner at Mary's house. For a week I lived in fear of seeing that woman again. I couldn't bear it. I dreamed of running away. Finally, I told my mom that I didn't want to go to dinner at Mary's. She looked at my face. She must have seen the fear there because she said "Okay. We don't have to go. I'll tell her we can't come." She knew her child. At that moment, I don't think I loved my mother more. It's one of my best memories of her. Considering some of the things that came later, I would frequently return to this moment. That was a sparkling instant, a bright moment for my mom and me.

The Real, Genuine Kind

I don't like to talk about it.

Although I will, now.

I still don't like it.

I was well into my 30s before I could discuss the truth.

About her.

My mother, mom.

She's crazy. I don't mean in a quirky, hoards stolen Splenda packets, talks to her plants and strangers on the street kind of way, although those things are all true. No, I mean in the overdose on anxiety meds and slit your wrists with a modified pink Bic shaver then spend a couple weeks in a mental hospital after they pump your stomach and bandage up your arms kind of way.

That kind of crazy. The real, genuine kind.

I was afraid I was going to end up like her so I didn't want anyone to know. In case I got crazy, too. Bi-polar disease, high high's and low low's when moods could be better envisioned like the peaks and valleys of a heart monitor. It can manifest as late as your mid-40s. Once I passed that age, I decided that I probably wasn't going to end up like her and I started talking about it. Her. Not an it—a person, my mother. It has been freeing.

I didn't live with her after age thirteen. She sent me away. No... she gave me away. I was an ADHD child. I was wild, unruly, intelligent, and even dangerous. I lit things on fire. I stole. I lied. I had a bad temper. And I had no respect for her. I was defiant. I talked back to her, refused to follow

her often nonsensical orders. She was not a good mother. Well, she'd been a good mother to us as babies and small children, but pre-teens and teens? She floundered. She was too messed up to adequately look after us. I think she knew it. I knew it, and I was her child. I believed I knew better than her, and a lot of times, I did. She cried a lot. She smoked and drank wine and tuned out. She became hysterical over the smallest of things, like a stray hair in the bathroom sink, or a used Kleenex in the trashcan that *she had just emptied*. Rules that only made sense to her and that she couldn't communicate to us. We had to read the tea leaves to tiptoe around her mania. We had to make connections where there were none: If X was Y, then never Q. Unless it's hot, then sometimes it could be Q. But never ABC and then F. Ever. Best to just stay out of her way, avoid her, don't touch anything. Stay very, very still.

She once tried to put me in a foster home but changed her mind when the intake coordinator was an asshole to me. Somewhere in the back of her brain those mothering cells lit up and she came to my defense, lashing out at the intake counselor and quickly taking me out to the car and back home. Later, I'm not sure how long, but fast, and I'm not sure how it happened exactly, but I ended up living with my beloved uncle, my dad's brother, and his wife, who was also crazy only in a different, gas-lighting kind of way. If I had heard that she had been badly injured in an accident, I would have smiled. No longer. But this is not that story.

When I was twenty-six, I relocated from *the Valley*, a suburban sprawl of over two million people during the 80s—just north of the city of Los Angeles proper, although it was in the county of Los Angeles—to Orange County, where my mom and younger sister lived. She'd agreed to let me stay with her and my sister while I looked for a job and then my own place. I hadn't lived with her for over thirteen years. In the thirteen years since I had last lived with her, we had talked on the phone a lot, exchanged letters, and had short visits. The madness of my childhood and her weird

behavior was shelved. Our relationship healed. We were friends. I could tell her anything. Anything. And I had. Until I moved back in with her. And in that brief six months, I learned just how batshit nuts she really was.

When I got home from work, about 4:30 pm, she was already home as she worked an early shift. She would be in her chair in front of the TV, waiting. There was a ritual that had to be observed every time either my sister or I came home from anywhere. We had to hug her and kiss her on the face, then sit down and talk about our day at work or wherever we had been. My sister and I both hated it, but not making the motions meant that crazy Karen would be unleashed. We avoided that at all costs. But I didn't know that, yet. It had taken months of looking, scanning the newspaper, cutting out the ads I applied for and pasting them onto a sheet of paper that I hand dated and made notations. Getting my resume printed up on nice cream-colored paper with matching envelopes. Typing up the envelopes to mail out using an IBM Selectric typewriter as I sat at my mother's dining room table. Putting the stamps on the envelopes, taking them to the post office, and then waiting for a call. I'd finally gotten a job as a bookkeeper at the fancy corporate offices for Taco Bell in Irvine, right by John Wayne Airport. People frequently laughed when I told them I worked for Taco Bell, Corp., but I wasn't making food, I was doing the books at the corporate offices. It had a very elegant white-marble lobby in a ten-floor building. There was a health club, a store with snacks, cards, and small gifts like coffee mugs; a snazzy restaurant, a travel agency, and Cadillac-coverage health insurance on Day One. It was a very nice place to work. Fancy. I wore suits to work. (It was the '80s after all.) When I told my mom how nice it was, instead of being happy for me, she was angry, pissed. It was jealousy. She worked in a hospital. Typically, they're old, rundown, and the cafeteria has typical, bad hospital food. She'd been working for a new HMO in town, at their hospital, and it was pretty fancy, too. It had a limestone marble lobby and a great cafeteria with good food and patio

dining. I'd been, it was nice. Mine was fancier, and she didn't like being out-fancied. She could never be happy for anyone else. Somehow when someone got something nice, it was personal to her, almost as if they had taken the thing from her so they could have it. A friend got a new car? She was "that bitch. I've been driving the same car for twenty years," *blah, blah, blah*. Always the victim. She made good money, she could've afforded a new car if she'd really wanted one. But that meant accepting that she was self-centered and cruel. That she believed she had no power over her life to live the life that she wanted. I don't know if it was her illness that kept her from whatever it was that she thought she wanted, or some personality flaw, or her impoverished childhood, but she could never be happy for others, not in her heart.

My mom worked as a medical transcriber at a hospital about five miles from where she lived. At the time, it was a highly paid, technically skilled position. Doctors would dictate, on tape, history and physicals (H&Ps), or operation reports, things like that, and she would type them up from dictation on microcassettes. She was exceptionally good at strange, thick accents; a lot of doctors from other countries came to the US to study medicine and then stayed. She understood them all. I struggle with accents. She has a gift. Doctors requested her for her skill, quickness, and accuracy. She had all that nursing school training from before she got married, and she had a full medical dictionary of knowledge stored in her head. She was a very good transcriber.

Regardless, one night I came home from The Bell, tired and worn out, and she was bellyaching about someone at her work being "mean" to her. People were always being "mean" to her. Her idea of mean was not a normal person's idea of mean. It might be someone who was grumpy and having a bad day; it might be someone who gave her a special job to do that she didn't want to do (you know, how things go at *work*), or just failing to bid her a cheery "Good Morning" when they got in at six am. Or it could've been actual meanness. It's hard to really say for sure. The

lens through which she viewed life always put her at the center, and always the maligned injured party. She was the Queen on the Victim's Throne.

I remarked quickly and off the cuff, tired of hearing the same old whining from her again: "Well, if you act like a doormat, people are going to walk all over you."

She looked at me, crazy. I mean, if she'd been a cartoon, her eyes would've been spinning black spirals over a white background in place of her irises and pupils. It was the look a cat gives just before it starts running wild, bouncing off the furniture for no evident reason. Her tongue was loose, in the corner of her mouth where she bit down on it. In later years I would make my sister laugh by mimicking that tongue-in-corner-of-mouth tell that she would get just before she would take a swing at you. If you saw that, you needed to get out of arm's distance. She hadn't taken a swing at either one of us in years, not since we were teens, but we knew she wanted to. Now, she knew, there would be repercussions.

"FUCK YOU!" she screamed in my face and stormed loudly up the stairs of her townhouse apartment, banging each step as if a brick were strapped to either foot. She hadn't taken a swing at me, though, even though her tongue was showing. I was much bigger than her by then, and we had a history. She knew I would hit back. I had once during that bad time when I was eleven, at the Greywood house, just before she and dad decided to separate. But now, I just stood there for a moment, stunned, the way a bird caught by a cat, uninjured, will lie perfectly still, unsure if it is dead or alive before flying away...if they come to that realization before the cat pounces again.

I turned and looked at my younger sister, a questioning look on my face. She looked up at me from the couch and said sotto voce, "*You can't talk to her that way.*"

I was only just beginning to understand the depth of that statement.

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I remember once, when I was nine-years-old, so during the '70s, looking into the steely ocean blue eyes of my father. The eyes that were ringed with midnight blue along the edges of the irises, the same eyes that looked back at me in a mirror; the same eyes that looked out at me from my sister's face; and in thirty-one years, the same eyes that would look back at me innocently from the faces of my newborn nieces, twins.

My dad was squatted down on his heels, something I was never able to master, and now never would after breaking an ankle in 2012. He was looking up at me with those intense blue eyes, tears were welling up in them and I didn't understand why. He had just asked me the strangest question: "Do you want to continue to live here?"

I didn't understand. Were we moving *again*? We had already moved about six times in my short life; I'd already attended five different elementary schools in three states. Why was he asking me if I wanted to stay living here? Did I get to decide for the family? Is that what he was asking? Why me? I loved this cute house in southern California. It was located in a quiet suburban housing tract built in the 50s after the war for soldiers and their families; why would we leave? It was pale green with a big front porch that we never used. It was only about ten miles to the beach, the Pacific Ocean. Our favorite was Seal Beach.

The house had a huge backyard, lots of grass, a playhouse, a swing set, fruit trees, an enormous poinsettia plant outside one of my bedroom windows, a giant slide, ten feet high, not one of those cheapie ones that came with the swing set— no, someone had built this slide with steel pipe. It had welder's marks all over it. I had been at the top of it when my dad had come out of the back door, into the yard, and asked me to come down and talk to him. I had been wearing my favorite

outfit: a culottes jumpsuit in bright orange that had white outlines of sailing ships on it. It had no sleeves and buttoned down the front with big white plastic buttons. It was easy to put on—just one piece, it could be pulled, buttoned, up my legs, over my body, push my arms through the holes, and bam! done, ready to go outside and play in the vastness of no-school summer that lay ahead of all of us children from Betsy Ross Elementary. I would thrust myself into the costume and run outside, letting the screen door bang behind me as I went to inspect “my” yard.

I slid down, hit the grass running, and walked over to him.

I looked back down at my dad. He looked like he was going to cry. I didn’t know what the right answer was. What, particularly, was he asking me? I decided to guess. “Yes, daddy,” I said. He looked at me and blinked. The tears rolled back up into his eyes before spilling over the bottom lid. Apparently “yes” had been the right answer.

When I think back on this moment, I realize that memory is specious, and I’ve glossed over the horror of what he was really asking. Boxed it up, compartmentalized it and filed it away somewhere quiet in the back of my brain. No, now that I think about it, I’m fairly certain that what he asked me was “Do you want to continue to live here, *with us?*” The question was specific to me. They would stay, only I would be the one who was leaving. That’s what he had asked, and what I try, and try, to forget. But that memory keeps resurfacing like the creature at the bottom of the Black Lagoon.

I remember now looking over my father’s shoulder, toward the back door—not a sliding door, no, those weren’t en vogue when the house had been built in the 50s—just a regular door with a screen door over it. Through the screen I could see my mother just standing there. I could see the

whites of her eyes, one arm hugging her waist, her right hand over her mouth pinching her lips. It was as if she were willing him through her strength of thoughts to send me away. I could feel her eyes on my father, the look was intense. I abruptly knew he wasn't asking me this question for himself; no, he was asking for *her*.

Up to that moment, I'd disliked her. I'd fought against her power over me, adult versus child. I'd laughed at her behind her back. I'd resisted her authority at every possible opportunity, but until this moment... I had not hated her.

Not twenty minutes earlier, she had come out into the yard where I was playing with my friends. Two on the swing set, one in the playhouse, and me on the slide. My sister was in the house as she often was. My friends and I were jumping off of things, swinging high, running around, back and forth between the swings and the slide, in and out of the playhouse, laughing, and squealing the way kids will do at the height of summer, and she had come outside to tell us to "KEEP IT DOWN!" I was embarrassed that she'd done that in front of my friends. None of the other mothers had ever done that when I was at my friends' houses. I could hear kids screaming and laughing up and down our street. To save face, I rolled my eyes. I was a good fifty feet away from her, but she saw it. "Did you just roll your eyes at me? Did you? Get down young lady and come over here right now." My heart thumped hard in my chest. I knew two things at that moment: If I didn't go over there, my friends would be going home. If I did go over, there was a good chance I would be getting slapped... in the face.

I got down from the heights of the slide, sliding down, of course, and walked over to her. Her tongue was out. I stayed well out of arm's reach while she lectured me on respect for elders, the sanctity of quiet, and whatever the hell else was on her mind that day. I took it and looked appropriately shamed, nodded my head, said "Yes ma'am" and let her berate me, in front of

witnesses, like a champ. As soon as she was done, I turned around to go back to my friends, rolling my eyes and putting my tongue out in a crazy look, sort of like a popular “crazy face” emoji that exists now, and my friends knew it was going to be okay.

But then she’d sent in John Wayne to secure the perimeter, locked and loaded. I can almost hear her shrill voice telling my father as he came in from work that he “needed to do something with that child or she wouldn’t have her in her house.” I’d heard it before. This wasn’t the first time. But I was my father’s daughter, his first child, the son he would never have. He adored me. But he loved my mother more. Whatever she asked, no matter how bizarre or unreasonable, he would do it. Even now, some forty-three years after they separated, thirty-five years after he married his second wife (and who he is still married to), he asks me, “How’s your mom?”

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I liked to imagine myself as a child raised by wolves: wild, free, full of energy, creativity, and intelligence. I had no boundaries and I was fearless. And I had my territory. My yard, my street, my neighborhood. It was mine. My parents seemed almost accessories to my game board. I patrolled it. I knew its nuances and subtleties. I knew where everyone lived, who had the best trash, who mistreated their children, who fought with their wife. That I was a member of a human family and I had parents was irrelevant to me—I did what I wanted, especially in summer.

But what I did shouldn’t have mattered. I was their child, not a wolf, a pet, but a human child. My selfish distorted thinking was that of a child. A nine-year-old child, and one who should never have been given away, or worse, be asked if they wanted to be given away. Maybe in war time, or a disaster, or desperation “take my baby!”, but not because the kid stressed you out. No, it was wrong. It was wrong but she kept trying to get me gone, away from her. My life has pivoted

around those moments of unwantedness, rippling down through the decades affecting every aspect of my life. My parents didn't want me, so no one else ever would. Only the fractured, broken, imperfect people would ever want me. Perhaps I drew them to me. I tried to forget, to pretend I was a normal, wanted person. It was understandable why I had filed that memory with my dad away over and over again in that taped-up, gray cardboard box in the back of my brain's attic every time it popped up. But the bitch just won't stay filed.

Not too long ago I stood at the end of a bed where my mother lay in a nursing home, a "rehab facility," after breaking her second bone in three years. I was abashed at the feeble, wrinkled, almost toothless old lady who peered out at me from blue eyes that looked slightly afraid. I was the only member of her family to be there in her time of need; she had driven everyone else away. I couldn't abandon her, I wouldn't be able to live with myself. She had not been a perfect mother, far from it, but she was my mother, and she could not take care of herself, she had finally broken the hip that I somehow always knew that she would. But looking down at her, I knew I could not abrogate that responsibility. I didn't want to, believe me, but the frail gray thing that looked up at me was disintegrating before my eyes. I would do the same for an abandoned, mistreated animal, how could I not help her? I spent five days with her, 500 miles and a lifetime away from my current home, bringing her food, her mail, stories of her cat and my cats, the neighbors, and wheeling her around outside for air and to look at plants, flowers, and trees. I tried to help her pay her bills, I brought her checkbook, but she refused. I don't know why. On the last day, as we sat outside enjoying the abruptly cooler weather and shortly before I had to leave for the airport, she crapped herself in her diaper. "I have to go to the bathroom," she'd said. "Uh oh, too late," she quickly advised me. "I'm going to need to be cleaned up." This woman, this woman who had terrorized me in childhood,

loved me in early adulthood and treated me as a friend, then turned crazy and unrecognizably horrible again and then disappeared for eight years, living on the streets for three of them that I know of, this complicated woman had crapped herself just as I was making my exit. Fitting.

As an adult, in my 30s, I once asked my mom why she had given me away and she had said, "You were much smarter than me and always one step ahead. I couldn't keep up with you... I was afraid of you." I knew it was true then and I know it's still true to her now. At least, the person I was before, not the person I am now.

There was a day where me, my sister, and the babysitter had a water balloon fight in the house. It happened on a day when I decided I didn't want to take my ADD medicine. I wanted to find out what happened if I didn't take it. I'd been taking Dexedrine for about six years by that time, age nine. Without it, I felt kinetic. Expansive. I felt there was nothing I couldn't do. I jumped off the roof holding an umbrella once, in imitation of Mary Poppins. All right, I jumped four times before my mom caught me. It was exhilarating and I was unharmed.

I had talked the babysitter into the indoor water balloon fight. *When I was nine.*

I can remember the nervous look on my mom or dad's face, whoever was giving me breakfast that day and my pill, as they watched to make sure I took it. Whenever my behavior got out of control, the first thing they'd ask was "Did you take your pill today?" And 99% of the time I had. But sometimes I wanted to ask my mom if she'd taken hers. Even in the 5th grade I knew she wasn't right.

I have some sweet memories of the pale green house on Greywood Avenue. The smell of scrambled eggs or Swansons chicken pot pies can instantly return me to those days, but I do have

memories of my parents' marriage when it all fell apart. I didn't know that at the time, though. I just remember my dad getting fired from at least two jobs, my mom going back to work after having been, for years, what they still called "a housewife," and suddenly having to support us, and her burning inferno of resentment. She never let my dad forget that he wasn't capable of taking care of his family.

We were poor, brokeass poor that year, the year of the food stamps, although I didn't know it then. I do remember that there was just one present under the Christmas tree for my sister and me that year... not including what my grandparents put there. But I didn't let my parents know I knew.

Those years on Greywood Avenue were punctuated by a lot of crying on the part of my mother. Not the sweet, puppydog tears rolling quietly down her cheeks crying. No, I mean big, heaving, neighbor-waking sobs where she couldn't catch her breath. These "fits" usually occurred around three or four in the morning. We'd glimpse mom through the cracks of our bedroom doors near the hinges, her fists pounding on my father's chest as he stood there and took her abuse. "It's all your fault," she would scream, marching up and down the short hallway. My sister and I would look at each other across the hallway when she turned her back and roll our eyes. We didn't know what the fault was, but we figured it had something to do with my dad not having a job and mom being out of control. Our dad was so easygoing we couldn't imagine him doing anything to our mother that warranted her bizarre behavior toward him. Occasionally he caught us looking, and would hustle mom back into the bedroom and close the door, and then reassure us and put us back to bed. Mom was just sick, he would say. Everything was okay.

All our friends' dads did have jobs, though. Well, our friends who had dads. Every one of our school friend's parents were divorced and most of them never saw their dads. Thinking back, mine was the only intact family in the entire 5th and 6th grade the two years I was at Betsey Ross

Elementary. I'm not bragging, though. Having a mom and dad didn't mean everything was terrific, like *Leave it to Beaver* or *The Brady Bunch*. In our family, it was just one more person for her to yell at and blame.

I remember coming in from playing one stunning, crisp, blue early summer day to find my mother on the kitchen floor, knees to her face, hands fisted and pounding the floor, sobbing like, well, years later, I would see a movie called *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. And I would recognize my mother in some of the patient behaviors in that movie. Even then, although I had no context to relate what I was observing, I knew it was unusual. And I hated her for her weakness. I'm ashamed of that hate, now.

The wall phone, hanging by its cord, lay in her lap, shrieking loudly, meaning it had been off the hook for a while. I asked her, "Mommy, what's wrong?" And between sobs she told me to "Go--sob--gasp--back--gasp--sob--outside--sob--gasp--and--sob--gasp--play." As I stood there a few seconds and stared at her, I heard my grandma call out "Hello?" as she came in the front door and around into the kitchen. "Go outside, honey. Go play. I'll take care of your mama," she'd said.

I turned to go and, as I did, I heard my mother say, "I can't take much more." I know now what she meant.

We watched a lot of TV—that was our entertainment every night. We ate dinner, I don't remember what we talked about, mostly my parents talked to each other. If I had to guess, it was about work. Afterwards, Mom cleaned up by herself although I cleared the table, and then we all parked ourselves in front of the TV until my sister's and my bedtime at 9:30 pm. We all had our own spots—mom stretched out on the couch, dad in *his* Naugahyde recliner, my sister and I in our own

beanbag chairs right in front of the TV. Mine was orange, my sister's was yellow. My parents bought them so we wouldn't fight about who got to sit on the couch with mom. Not because we wanted to sit with mom, no; we wanted to stretch out on the couch.

Different nights of the week we watched the same shows, every week. There were only five channels, three network, two local, and then PBS, if you could get it to come in on VHF. We watched *Happy Days*; *M*A*S*H*, *MacMillan and Wife*; *McCloud*; *Monday Night Movie of the Week*; on Sunday's, *Disney*, preceded by the *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*. It was the family joke that I had once called it "Mutual of Oma-Hog." That's what it sounded like to my childish sensibilities. It was my favorite show, though. It usually involved this big burley guy named "Jim" who was usually doing something amazing like wrassling an alligator, or getting untangled from a python. I loved that show, man.

We'd all park ourselves around the TV in our respective spots, ready to be entertained like natives around a campfire, waiting to hear a ghost story, the TV flickering on our faces like any real fire might. This was our ritual, our "family togetherness nights." Hell, we were too broke to go anywhere.

We didn't talk to each other unless it was to ask for a snack or drink, or question our folks about something confusing we saw on one of the programs. We were quiet, all tuned in to the TV. There was no "rewind" or recording of TV: if you missed something, you might never find out what it was. Drinks or bathroom breaks were timed to be conducted during commercials as you came rushing back in gasping, "Did I miss anything?" Then one or both of my parents would shush-yell "Be quiet!" Special shows like *The Wizard of Oz* only came on once a year. That one usually was on around Easter. If you missed it, you were out of luck, so no talking. But honestly? We really had nothing to say to one another anyway.

My sister and I had our routines that revolved around the TV. In the morning, before school, we got dressed in front of the TV—the heater was right there—and watched cartoons. An hour of *Bugs Bunny* followed by half-an-hour of the *Flintstones*, then leave for school. Monday through Friday. On Saturday mornings, more cartoons like *Scooby Doo* and *Josie and the Pussycats*. As soon as our shows were over, we'd run outside and play before our parents got up and started yelling and issuing orders.

It was the Greywood house where I hit my mother. It was summer, and I remember it as being just past twilight, not fully dark, that in-between time when the sun was losing its grip on our neighborhood. My mother was in my face screaming at me full volume, inches away from my nose. I have no memory of why. If I had to guess, I'd say it was because I'd left my bike on the front lawn, unlocked, again. If it were stolen, there could be no replacement, but as a kid, I didn't really understand that.

I was tall, about 5'4" to her 5'8", and I was only eleven. I remember my father was behind me, to my left. He was just standing there. I said something to my mother, I don't recall what, and she responded with "FUCK YOU!" and she slapped me across the face as hard as she could. I felt the injustice of it even as her arm flickered through the air at my face. I was a child and I had not deserved either the fuck you or the slap. She hit me really hard. I tasted blood in my mouth. I was enraged. I could say I didn't know what I was doing, but I did. I wanted her to know just how wrong what she had just done was—I wanted her to feel it in her heart. I wanted her to experience the injustice, the wrongness of her actions. I wanted to hurt her as she'd hurt me. With angry intent, I swung my arm back far, like a spring, the palm of my hand tight, and I hit her, in the face, openhanded, with everything I had.

I remember the stunned look on her face. I also remember that I realized rather quickly that although my father understood what I had done, he also couldn't allow it, and once my mother composed herself, she would probably beat the shit out of me. I bolted. I was a few feet from the front door. I hit it, the screen door behind me not yet shut as I grabbed my bike off the lawn and sprinted onto it and into the street, gone, baby, gone. Later, my dad told me he'd looked for me for hours in the car, driving up and down our neighbors' streets. I rode around our tract just thinking about what I wanted to do. I wanted to run away, but as an eleven-year-old with nothing but a bike and the clothes on her back, I knew I had no choice but to go home. I stayed out as long as I could before I returned, hoping everyone would be asleep.

My leaving in that way and staying out so long tempered the situation; it took the heat out of it. My mother and sister were asleep when I got home, living room lights still on, front door open with just the screen door between the outside world and them. It was a warm summer night, and mosquitos and moths were circling the porchlight that had been left on for me. All I had on was a tank top and shorts. No shoes: I had run out of the house in my bare feet. My dad was sitting on the couch. It was after 11 o'clock; he should've been in bed. I tried to tip-toe past him and into my room. The look when he discovered that I was home remains with me. Relief, gratitude, happiness, and fear. He wasn't mad anymore. He got down on his knees and hugged me close to him and told me how worried he'd been; that he'd looked for me for hours, driving up and down in the car; was I okay? Where had I been? I didn't speak, I just cried, quietly. He put me to bed, tucked me in, and told me that what Mama had done was wrong, but what I had done was also wrong. He asked me if I understood. I nodded that I did. I slept, and in the morning nothing was said. Nothing was said ever again, but my father kept a closer eye on my mother.

For a while.

By the end of that summer my parents would separate. After school let out and the mutual face slapping, they sent me to Washington state to stay with my Dad's oldest friend and his wife while they hammered out what was left of their marriage: "Mommy and Daddy need some time to think." I couldn't figure out why they couldn't think with me there. They did agree, however, that my sister was too young at seven to be farmed out, so she stayed at home, and that I resented. When I came back in September, my dad was living with my maternal grandparents, his in-laws. My parents would never live together again. No explanation was ever given.

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In 1994 I quit my job and went back to school. Doctor's advice. School wouldn't start for two more months, so I had nothing but free time then. I had left Orange County some two years earlier after losing my job at The Bell and working a number of other clerical jobs. I hated Orange County and managed to get myself back up to LA County again. I had my own place, barely. My phone at home had gotten turned off and I couldn't afford the huge deposit, \$400, nearly a whole week's pay, to turn it back on, so I got a pager. A speech-to-text pager. It was cutting edge technology at the time. I was at a movie when the pager kept going off. I left it in my purse and ignored it wanting to wait until the movie was over, I was into it. I looked it up—it was *Wolf* with Jack Nicholson. It was actually decent now that I think about it. After, it was about thirty minutes or so since I started getting the pages, I went outside into the fading light and read the messages. "Call me, it's Jill, Mom's in the hospital." She'd called five times. I found a pay phone and called her collect. Our mother, that morning, had taken a handful of a powerful anti-anxiety medication called Klonopin, a schedule III drug, and also slashed her arms with a razor. She had trained as a nurse and worked as a medical transcriber, she knew that vertical was the way to go when cutting your arms,

not across. She was currently at the ER in the hospital where she worked. One of her co-workers would be typing up her history and physical in the morning. Soon, it would be all over the hospital.

My aunt, who was only five years older than me, my dad's half-sister actually, lived about a mile away from me. I drove over there to use her phone and to talk to her—we were like sisters at the time and very close. I called my therapist first. I was currently on disability after having a breakdown at work. I had been off about six weeks when this happened, I'd spent four of them at my mom's house in Huntington Beach. She still lived on Baron Circle.

I'd worked in accounting. I don't know how I got into accounting because not only did I hate it, I was really bad at it. I always got in trouble at work, and this last boss, for a plumbing manufacturer, had brought me into her office and told me, "You are the most unorganized person I've ever met." She was trying to help me, I was likable, everyone liked having me in the department, and she did give me some good advice about the position, but the job was clearly beyond my capacity. It wasn't too long after that I found myself in the ladies' room crying my eyes out. I called my therapist at lunchtime to ask him to put me on disability. I'd worked there for seven months. He said, "I was just waiting for you to ask." He'd been trying to get me to go out on disability—he knew how unhappy I was—for six months. I used to cry on the way to work. I was not well. Later, his partner, a psychiatrist and MD, would figure out a cocktail of anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medications that would allow me to function normally without wishing I were unconscious or dead. My job fired me while I was on disability. I danced a little jig over that one. After my doctor, the therapist, told me he'd put me on disability, I decided to finish out the day, and slowly, throughout the course of the workday, I gathered up my personal items and put them into the big gym bag that I brought with me every day to work—it held the *LA Times* I bought on my way in, usually outside a donut shop where I got coffee and donuts too many days of the week; my lunch, a

pair of sneakers, and anything else I thought I might need for the day. In went my family photos, the magnets I put on my overhead filing bin, my pens, some sticky notes, a few books I had stashed in a bottom drawer, my coffee mug, and last, just before leaving for the day, the jar of Jelly Belly jelly beans I always kept on my desk. Want to be popular in your office? Jelly Bellys are the way to go.

I don't think anyone noticed me "packing up"; I wanted my leaving to be a surprise. I planned on never coming back. And I didn't.

Over the phone, my Doctor asked me if I drank. I told him I did. He said for me to "have a shot of alcohol to calm down," and then call the hospital where my mother was. I asked my aunt if she had any booze. She did, of course. I was just realizing around that time that she was probably an alcoholic, she was and, in fact, still is. She gave me a shot of tequila that I quickly downed, the heat rapidly spreading, coating my throat, threading through my chest, veining out through my arms, and quieting my electric nerves, giving me a floaty feeling. I could do this.

The hospital confirmed that she was there, but nothing else. I told them to tell her I was on my way.

The weirdest part was, it was 6 o'clock in the evening. I had talked to her at 10:30 that morning, and she'd been fine. However, evidently I had spoken to her that morning *after* she took the pills but *before* she cut her arms, and before a friend showed up unexpectedly at her house around 1 o'clock. She'd been at the ER since about 2 o'clock that afternoon. She'd told me she was fine at 10:30 am. She'd even sounded fine when I'd talked to her from my aunt's apartment that morning. I went on about my day. The damn lying bitch had tried to kill herself already and then pretended everything was all right with me on the phone at 10:30 am. Here I was, having my own mental health issues, trying to take care of her, calling her every day from my aunt's house because I

didn't have a phone, and because I knew she was having a hard time at work with a new supervisor, but she was too far gone for me to help her. I found out just a few years ago that her younger sister used to call her every morning at work so she could get through the day. An army of people wouldn't have been enough for her. She could not, was incapable, could not, would not ever, be okay.

When I got to the hospital I told her if she tried it again I'd kill her myself. That made her laugh. She spent two weeks in a mental hospital in Mission Viejo. I visited her there. It wasn't like *Cuckoo's Nest*, but it was weird. There was a woman who walked around with her hand over her forehead to keep the government beams from reading her mind. No joke. There was a big dude who always wore shades and who never spoke, but once offered to put a chair through a window to get my mom an aspirin. She demurred. I brought all her prescription drugs to the hospital, a big bag full, but they didn't want them. I don't know why. I took them back to her house and where I stayed, cleaned up the blood, the vomit, the broken pink Bic shavers (it had taken several tries to get the plastic off just the razor itself), the 10-page suicide note where she excoriated everyone but me, crazy me, and took care of her cat until she came home.

She got better—well, that's a relative term—she got less crazy, got out of the hospital, went home, and retired from her job at the hospital, quickly getting approved for SSDI. She had been only hours away from being fired from her job at the hospital and what precipitated her suicide. It wasn't an attempt really; it was authentic, for keeps, for real. The doctors told me she should have died, they don't know why she didn't.

I used to call her from pay phones when things got especially bad for me, particularly with that final accounting job, and I'd call her, crying, upset, not sure what to do, and no matter what a mess she was, what shit she was dealing with, she would calm down and totally be there for me, cool

and composed, front and center, and I would feel better and have a plan after I talked to her. This went on for most of my late 20s, early 30s, now that I think of it.

In adulthood I came to understand her illness, and that it was neither her personality nor her fault. So I always came to her rescue, just as she had come to mine once I was no longer living under her roof. As adults, we always had one another's backs. We had forgiven and bonded as I grew up. When I went to live with my aunt and uncle at thirteen, she would come over once a week for dinner, and afterwards we would talk. And we remembered what it meant to have a regular mother/daughter relationship. And we discovered that not only did we love each other, we liked each other. And we both really despised that bitch, my uncle's wife. I think we bonded over our dislike of that woman most of all.

As the years went on, and I grew older and a little more like her every day, we stayed in daily contact by phone, and I would visit her over holidays and summers. We got along much better that way via brief spurts of in-person time. She would try hard not to be crazy, I would try hard to behave. She would take my side against my father—my uncle and his wife having given up on me after only eighteen months—when he would do something extraordinarily punitive in response to something I had done that he didn't like, probably in response to his new wife who I would never get along with.

I often feel like Faye Dunaway in *Chinatown*: I love her. I hate her. I love her. I hate her. I...

We love each other, mom and I. Even when we hate each other. Are hip to each others' bullshit. We deal with it, ignore it, walk away from it, call it out, move on. Always have, it was just hidden beneath crazy, pain, and anger. We are joined by history, crazy, and blood. We are family, even so. She did give me away, though, for reals. In hindsight, it really was the right thing to do,

wrong people, right thing. My sister stayed with her. She is almost four years younger than I am, and when I moved back home in my 20s, I discovered that my sister was the adult, my mother the child, and my sister had been taking care of Mom for years. She was twenty-two and exhausted. It could've been me instead, or both of us, enabling and fixing Mom.

My realization of my mother's illness, and the ways that she manipulated my sister and I were driven home clearly to me when she engaged in a whopping bit of manipulation.

The stunt she pulled was on my day off. I worked for Earthlink, an internet service provider in the early days of the Internet. I worked nights, and always had Sunday and Wednesday off. She knew this. She called me one Wednesday in the morning in hysterics, sobbing, begging me to drive the 60 miles down to her house because she couldn't make it a mile to the grocery store or pharmacy because she was "so sick she couldn't drive," and she'd been out of her medicine for days, and she was out of food, *blah blah blah*. She was sick, she had fibromyalgia and was bed-bound frequently. So I got dressed and drove down to Orange County. I was in Pasadena. Sixty miles one way. In LA traffic. When I got to her new apartment, instead of finding someone pale and wan, huddled under a blanket on the couch holding a cup of hot tea, what I got was an answered door from a woman in her best "going out" clothes, hair and makeup done, including mascara, and a cheery, "Hi honey! Come on in, I'll take you to lunch!" She was fine. Lonely maybe, but fine. That's when the light went on permanently and stayed on. I was a puppet in my mother's life. I swore it would be the last time. I set limits, boundaries with her, and up until today they've stayed in place. She can no longer fuck with my head. I learned how to tell her no.

My sister never learned how to set limits. She just cut mom off. That sort of explains why she hasn't spoken to our mom in over fifteen years, but she won't tell me the full reason. Our mother has never met her grandchildren, my nieces. My sister wants nothing to do with Mom and didn't want

her children exposed to crazy. Sometimes I envy her that. Sometimes. But even now, in her 70s, as Mom is declining and whirlpooling into dementia, my sister will not reach out. I told her if she wanted to repair that relationship, or if she had something to say, didn't want to have any regrets, that she better do it soon, otherwise Mom won't know who she is. So far she's done nothing.

My mom was homeless for a while, twice. I helped her get un-homeless the second time; I was in my 40s then. The first time we weren't speaking. That's a long story, trust me. The second one she walked out of the sober living home I helped her find. It was all she could afford, and she met the criteria as she'd been in AA for over thirty years by that time, but her deluded mind decided living in the bushes of a church was a better choice than staying in the sober living home. But I think the real reason was spite. She kept calling me, in hysterics because someone was "eating her mayonnaise" or other Titanic-sized emergencies, five minutes before I had to leave for work. I asked her to please not do that, she couldn't call me as I was leaving for work. It upset me for my entire shift and made it difficult for me to do my job. She needed to call earlier in the day. I left for work at 3 o'clock in the afternoon and she knew it. By that time, I'd had enough of her crazy. I got the obligatory "fuck you" and she hung up on me. After that, I did not talk to her nor know where she was for over eight years.

When I was diagnosed with cancer in 2012, I asked one of my aunts, her sister, who knew where she was but was sworn to secrecy by mom, to at least let her know that I was sick, very sick, and my aunt said she would, but then paused a moment and said, "Fuck it. You tell her yourself." And gave me all of her contact info. I sent Mom a card with a short note in it and my phone number. She called, we talked for four hours. It was as if those eight years were not between us. When I finally went to see her—I lived in Reno with my husband—a year later, it was uncomfortable only at first, then we fell back into our same roles, me as comedian, she as my best audience member. When

I realized that the crazy her was still there, just buried under a veneer of gratitude, love, and a little intended manipulation, I backed away a little. I'm older now and more experienced. I can see her bullshit coming a mile away. I could see it then, that first meeting after eight years apart, and I swore I wouldn't let her do to me as an adult what she'd done to me as a child. So far she hasn't. I won't allow it. I can't.

Now, Mom and I have the same conversations over and over again. It's horrible. We had finally come together, talked, healed, connected, and now her own brain is stealing her away from me again, only permanently this time.

There is no end to this story, not as long as my mother is alive, not as long as I'm alive. The damage that we do to each other in this existence is unimaginable. Intentional or not, it's there, we do it. We hurt each other. We forgive. We let it go—we think. We try to forget, but it's always there, waiting for an inopportune moment to pop into the forefront of consciousness, ruining a perfectly good day. We never get over each other. Never.

I have never not felt unwanted.

But sometimes, sometimes there is love. The real, genuine kind.

A Bowl of Soup

We were going to SÜP after my doctor appointment for, well, soup. It was my favorite lunch restaurant in Reno, where my husband, Rex, and I lived. I always got the tomato bisque. It was orgasmic. Rex always got tomato bisque, too, and some kind of a chicken sandwich. It was always a chicken fucking something with him no matter where we went. Not with me. I liked to mix it up, keep it fresh, different. Life was too short to eat the same thing over and over again. I had more than five dishes in *my* food repertoire. And today I was going to find out I had cancer. I was going to need that soup to hold me up.

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When I was growing up, a tail-end baby boomer, it was understood that us “young ladies,” as my mother described us, would eventually find husbands, settle down, become housewives, and have babies. The 70s and my parents’ divorce blew that idea up. I couldn’t believe that my parents, who so clearly loved each other very much, could end their marriage. Wasn’t love the only thing that mattered?

My mother struggled with her new role as a single mom, and I often wondered what my future was going to be like since, evidently, marriages could just go up in a puff of smoke. But I still wanted to get married when I grew up. I always wanted to be married, to be half of a whole, a partnership. I wanted the wedding, a husband, a home, and pets. As for children, I fluctuated on that depending on my age and hormones, but mostly I was a no. But as I got older and fatter, no one wanted to marry me. There was someone, before I got fat (again), the one I had put all my money on—my high school boyfriend, my first love, and first lover—backed out on me when I was

counting on him to take me away from my father's house after he was done with his Air Force training. I waited five long months for him. No wedding.

But Rex... We were comfortable together from the first moment we met. I was forty-one, he was thirty-seven. Not only was it an instant physical attraction, he was a handsome man, but we had a mental connection as well. I confessed my ADD, he confessed his autism. I started falling in love with him on that first date. I was cautious, but by two months, we knew. When he said the "L-word" first, I broke into tears. We spent every spare moment together. We didn't just love each other, we adored each other. Over time, marriage became the next logical step. It was not a matter of "will you" but "when." He never got down on one knee and proposed—he didn't have to, it was just assumed. We married in 2006, and we were happy...for the first year or so. Or, at least, I had convinced myself I was. I had averted any objections of his weird behaviors through a cloudy wedding veil of hazy misremembering. By the time we moved to Reno in 2010, however, in my mind, the marriage was a failure, and I wanted out. I just couldn't figure out how. My dreams of happy-ever-after were a lie, too. I had convinced myself that I could fix him. All he needed was the steady hand of guidance from a good woman who loved him unconditionally, and eventually he would get on the right path; he was smart enough to be anything he imagined himself to be. But marriages don't work when only one of the partners participates.

As I was formulating an exit strategy, I broke my ankle and then, before I was literally back on my feet, cancer.

Jesus. I wanted people to pay attention to me, but there had to be a better way than this.

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I should have eaten before we left the house. I was hungry and hoping that the doctor appointment was shorter than expected because I was really looking forward to the soup. The bread at SÜP was also excellent; it was locally sourced and baked and especially delicious dipped in the soup, blood and body, the Eucharist for \$4.95, drinks not included.

Rex did not dip. No food touching other food. No green food. No strangely textured food. No beef, pork, or turkey. No onions. No gravy. No... fuck.

I was a less picky eater. On that day, I weighed about 320 pounds. Tomato soup might be the healthiest thing I'd eat all week. Maybe all month.

The doctor visit was with a retinologist. I'd never seen a retinologist before, although this was my second time at his office. The first time I had gone to see this particular doctor I had limped in using a walker. The waiting room had been full of grey hairs, half blind, their glasses thicker than Coke bottles, their eyes huge and scared behind the lenses. They looked at me, in the walker, in my forties, young, compared to them, as they tried to figure out why I was in that walker. If they had looked at my right ankle, they would've seen the scars, still shiny and red, one interior, one exterior, where just eight weeks earlier the ankle I'd shattered had been put back together with ten screws and two plates. I got a big thrill showing people my X-ray and listening to them exclaim, "Oh my god!" Hell, I could hardly believe it myself. I mean, all that pain and suffering had a manifest value for entertainment and storytelling, so I was happy to re-tell it to anyone who wanted to hear, sometimes even if they didn't. But no one in that lobby did; they had their own stories.

As I stood swaying at the counter, holding onto the walker for dear life, only recently out of a wheelchair, I was told I needed to be there a minimum of four hours for testing. I had not budgeted for that much time at the eye specialist—why hadn't they told me this on the phone when I called for

the appointment? So I rescheduled it for two weeks down the road. I felt no sense of urgency. Why would I?

Just a few weeks earlier, I had scheduled Rex and I for a flurry of doctor and dental appointments the second week in April during his high school's spring break—he taught science. It was at an exam for glasses that the doctor had told me “there is something in the back of your eye,” and that “if it were me, I'd have it checked.” My first inclination had been to blurt out, “Did you find Jimmy Hoffa”? Ha ha. Ha. But I had the presence of mind, for once, to keep that to myself. My ADD frequently left my filter-door open for inappropriate comments. I had learned over the years that I could only deal with it effectively by silence. On or off, that's all I had. Anyway, I figured “it” was related to my type II diabetes, anyway, probably some kind of micro-aneurysm common with diabetics, but I was not up for a lecture about my weight today, so I didn't ask any questions and wheeled myself out of there as quickly as I could.

The doctor wrote me a referral for the retinologist across the parking lot, and that was where I was headed today, for the second time this month, although I had transitioned from a wheelchair, then walker, to a cane over the interim. I had set aside most of the day for the appointment, as advised, but was really hoping that the “four hours” was an exaggerated estimate because I really wanted that goddamned soup. What the hell could take four hours? It was just an eye.

After checking in, I limped over to the waiting area and was surprised to see, not two feet away from the window that ran the length of the room, a big brown dairy cow, chewing some grass, and staring Zen-like back at me through the glass. If I stretched out my arm, I could've patted her head. Behind her on the other side of the pasture were a few more cows of her coloring, grazing. She was the only one over here, by the office building; the outlier. She was probably just looking at her own reflection, oblivious to us humans, but I couldn't quite help but think that if she'd known that I

was standing there, would she have rushed me? I'd lived in the country as a kid, just outside of Denver, and my experience with cows told me that they were pretty easygoing and peaceful, despite their size. No, she probably wouldn't have given two cents even if she had known I was there. But I had been frightened for a moment.

The view was bucolic. I yearned to stand in the fresh green spring grass, the white split-rail fence that ran for yards and yards around the cow pen; the Sierra Nevadas rising grandly in the background, reminding me, as they always did, of the beloved Rockies of my childhood. Behind me, the smell of disinfectant and alcohol and the sound of computer keys being clicked. Abruptly I wished I were that cow. I flicked my eyes over at her. I wanted to stand in that field with her, smelling the grass, taking in the warmth of the sun, absorbing all that blue over us.

The nurse called my name. I'd have to wish myself into the body of a cow another time.

I was there four hours, maybe longer. It felt like longer. My husband had driven me over; we'd argued the whole way. I don't remember what we argued about, but it was usually the same things: He was late—waiting until five minutes before we had to leave to wake and dress. Or he drove badly, or he took strange, labyrinthine pathways to go anywhere instead of a straight, quick path, or any combination of those. He needed to eat, too, and hadn't eaten at home (he never would eat at home), planning to drive through Del Taco on the way over. I nixed it and he whined like a little boy. I insisted we go straight to the doctor. I hate being late. He could drop me, go get food, then come back. He stuttered protestations, I interrupted him with a quick "Stop. Just take me over." I had quit wanting to parent him a long time since and I wasn't going to start again today. Surprisingly, he waited in the lobby. I was lucky he'd done that. Normally it felt as if he'd slow

down to twenty, I'd open the door, tuck and roll and hurl myself onto the pavement toward the entrance of wherever. Target. The doctor. Home. He'd floor it and drive off, heading for a "snack," usually a full meal, a pre-lunch, lunch, and then I'd text to be picked up later whenever he got around to it, and I'd wait. Off he would go to his buckets of fast food. Oddly, not today.

The physician's assistant who first saw me seemed to be humming with an excited nervous energy as we had gone from room to room, performing a rash of invasive and uncomfortable tests on my left eye. Tests where they'd put things both on and in my eye, some requiring gel, all preceded by dilation drops and then excruciating, burning, unfortunately named "numbing drops," followed by explosions of bright camera flashes an inch from my fully dilated eye to get photos of the interior, burning it in the process and flaming out the cones and rods so I would see the whole world tinted in fuchsia for twenty minutes or so. That was pretty cool, but Oh My God. Then a second set of flash-photos *with IV contrast*. The tech couldn't find a vein in my hand, and, after five tries, called in the PA. He had trouble too. By this time I felt like my hand might be made of concrete. I wanted to bolt out of there, but still needing a cane I wouldn't get far. Then the doctor himself came in. Finally, he was able to pierce the elusive vein. It felt like a lava-encrusted screwdriver was being shoved through the back of my hand. I cursed loudly in agony. By this time a crowd had gathered and they all looked at me in alarm. Evidently "motherfucker" had just made its first appearance in the retinology offices.

I started praying to a god I wasn't sure I believed in because this right here? This was scary. The doctor and his PA's behavior didn't help.

The retinologist himself also seemed to buzz with an excited anticipation. They looked at the pictures on a lighted board the way X-rays are looked at. Their heads were together, backs to me in complicit concealment; they looked at the ultrasound and other tests. They nodded, scratched their

chins, tapped their expensive Italian shoes on the floor. I'd never have fancy shoes like that. (Why did they get the fancy shoes and I got the cancer? I call bullshit.) And they were definitely not thinking about tomato soup. They looked everywhere but at me. I *was* thinking about tomato soup. And I knew instinctively, whatever they were talking about, it involved me and it was definitely not good. You never want to be interesting to a doctor. I could see in the doctor's eyes that I had just become a conference paper, a publication, a presentation, I was no longer a living thing.

My husband had been called back in with us; he was staring at his phone. Outstanding.

The more nervous I got, the more I thought about escaping right into a giant pail of that soup. I wanted to cannonball into it and do the backstroke across its bowly pond. It wasn't just hunger; I held the image of that soup in my mind, a fixed point in the distance, a safe and red shore, if only I could get through this bullshit right here. Like any other addict, my "real" life would begin as soon as I had the food, no different than a snort of heroin or a bottle of Bourbon. One sip and all better. I would feel floaty and a little high from the Bourbon...I mean the soup. Even just imagining it could make my ocean of anxiety recede a little...the bright redness of the soup, like an IV infusion, blood-type T. The smell of it, conjuring up Mom's can of Campbell's made with milk and a side of grilled cheese; times I'd been too broke for anything soothing to eat but a can of soup; the culinary peak of tomato soup excellence at SÜP. If only I could have some *right now*. I looked at the two men in white cotton lab coats: they were as detached and sterile as soup was welcoming and comforting. I needed some soup and I needed some RIGHT DAMN NOW.

The two colleagues, the doctor and the PA, wouldn't look me in the eye. When they spoke to me, they looked somewhere over my head as if they were looking out over the cow pasture and the mountains, except that the room we were in had no windows. Why wouldn't they look at me?

I'd never even tried contact lenses because I didn't like things in my eyes, and they had done things to me here I normally would have undergone only if I were a prisoner in a Soviet gulag or third world country, and even then only against my will. I wouldn't have done some of them for money or love. An ultrasound of the eyeball? Camera flashes? Who even knew there was such a thing? But I took it, like a punch to the face. I took it and I let them do it. All of it.

Nevus—a freckle—they called it. In my eye. I knew what a nevus was. It was a mole about to be diagnosed as cancer is what it was, but they weren't using the C-word. They didn't have the courage to say it, it seemed to me. And they were talking about my eye. Inside my eye, in the lining, the choroid, in the back. How did a freckle get *in* my eye? I had seen the ultrasound; there was clearly a bump of some kind in there, in the back. But right now, what I did know for sure was that they were between me and some soup. I'd been there well over four hours. It was getting near closing time for the office. Dammit, just spit it out, already! I looked at Rex. He looked up at me with an "I dunno" look on his face and went back to his phone. I looked at the two men. Just tell me what's going on, already, quit dancing around it. "Who," said the doctor, "do we normally refer for this?" to the nurse.

"...in Sacramento," she said. We lived in Reno. That was a couple hundred miles away. Before I knew what was happening, I was at the front desk where they had the eye specialist's scheduler on the phone from Sacramento and I was to schedule an appointment *for the next available, immediately*. Now I knew I was really in trouble. I made the appointment with the military-crisp scheduler at the new doctor's office, but the first available was in a month's time.

I was confused: was this urgent or not?

I was discharged and limped out to the small sub-waiting area by the nurse's station where my husband had sat down. I told him I had an appointment in Sacramento in a month. He got angry and tried to make a scene in the current doctor's office, but I hustled him outside. He was a big man, and when he got agitated and started acting out, raising his voice, pacing and waving his arms, it was often scary for other people. In all the years I'd known him, I'd never witnessed him engage in a violent act—it was all sound and fury—but others didn't know that. Wait, there was that one time. He'd broken into my email and discovered me and a girlfriend talking about a handsome man in one of our classes. We were in the car when I confronted him with breaking into my email. He responded with anger that I was admiring another man. It escalated and he'd punched the windshield of the car. It cracked. I was afraid. I didn't want to be in a relationship with someone who resorted to violence. I thought of leaving him, his mother talked me out of it, but truthfully I didn't want to go. I loved him and I was all alone in the world; without him I would have nothing.

In the parking lot of the retinology office, as we sat in the car, we were both silent. We looked at one another but didn't speak. I had briefly, for one miniscule moment hoped that he would speak first. I remember how I felt at that juncture: If we spoke of it that would make it come to life and, holy mother of god, we might have to *share our feelings*. But I felt it briefly—the fear—but then I suppressed it, afraid if I started crying that I would never stop. I didn't want Rex to see me cry. The balance of power would tip in his favor, and I wasn't ready to surrender the throne just yet. No, we did not discuss it then, instead, I reverted to my usual state during stress: Detached. I was a character observing myself from outside my body. This is how children who grow up unsafe learn to survive: compartmentalize the fear and other emotions for later, right now you need to get through *this* intact. Cry later, alone, when no one who can exploit your emotions is watching. I was observing and objectively thinking how I *should* feel if I were her (me) so I could construct a

persona, a front, a character-suit so I would appear normal to everyone else. To help construct this I mentally turned to what I knew best: characters from books. What would Kay Scarpetta or Elvis Cole do right now? Harry Potter or Hermione Granger would have a spell they could wave a magic wand at and it would be gone, *tumorcendious!* I had no magic wand. No medical training. No gun, no Joe Pike to come in and save the day. But in the five-minute drive to SÜP I wondered: Was I supposed to cry? Be scared? Fall apart? I didn't know what the appropriate behavior was, exactly. I wanted to get it right, like a normal person in a normal relationship, but I didn't know what that was like. I felt pressure building in my lungs and moving up through my body to my neck and face. My nose, eyes, and lungs wanted to explode in a fury of wet, snot, and gasping. I forced it back down. I did not want to let my emotions overwhelm me. Not then. Not in public.

Between Rex and I only silence. A weighty sandbag full of soggy silence.

I wanted to smack him.

There was not a high incidence of cancer in my family. Mostly we had high blood pressure and heart problems. I'd always assumed that I'd die young of a heart attack or stroke like so many of my relatives. I was fat enough, sick with diabetes and high blood pressure. But cancer had never been on my radar. As we drove down Virginia Avenue toward the restaurant, I realized what I really felt was anger and betrayal. I was angry at my own body. I was angry at Rex. I wanted to blame him for this, too, as he was usually responsible for the disasters that occurred in our lives. I was also angry that he was not being comforting or compassionate, even though I knew not to expect it by now.

I looked at my husband as he pulled our car into the parking lot behind SÜP. When we'd driven out of the medical office driveway, I'd asked, "Are we still going to SÜP"? So far today the only thing Rex had provided me was occasional concerned looks and driver service.

"Well, *yeah*," he said, like I was an idiot. Sarcasm and resentment had become our fallback position over the last year or so. I think sometimes we genuinely hated one another. All right, I thought, he wanted to act like that just as I exited perhaps the worst doctor's appointment I'd ever had? Fine. Good. But I didn't feel like playing the "I resent you more" dance just now: I needed soup. We both remained silent across the table and over our food except for a few cursory snippets. "Pass the salt." Usually he hated it when I was quiet, I did it to piss him off, but he didn't take the bait today. We ate our food while looking at our cellphones respectively. I had something else with the soup, but I couldn't tell you what it was now. Steak salad, I think. The soup—its thick redness mimicking the blood I unknowingly would shed in the coming months—for now, was drug-like, calming, consoling. Food was always there for me when people weren't. I already knew that by June Rex would be out of work. Seven months into his new teaching job, and they already wanted him out. I was not surprised. This would be the third time he'd lost a job in less than three years. Diagnosed with autism, and advised by a professional that he had all the symptoms of being on the spectrum for Asperger's, his biggest issue was that he could not follow directions. He was functionally incapable of following directions. Bosses? They like it when you follow directions. He pissed off a lot of bosses over the years. But he refused to get help for the depression and anxiety that haunted him—he was frequently suicidal—in addition to Asperger's. It's hard to provide support to someone who won't help themselves. It gets heavy and exhausting.

I kept my eyes on the soup as I savored every bite of it and ignored Rex. This was not about him and he was, evidently, choosing not to involve himself. Fine. I ate the soup. Simultaneously it

diminished my hunger and my fear and was a balm to the white hot spot of anger that had burst into my chest just under my sternum. I mentally inventoried someone or something to blame but there was no one, nothing. No one but the body, my body, my brain transportation system: it had betrayed me.

The next few weeks were a blur of work, daily activities, and chores. I was angry that I had cancer and still had to do the laundry, still had to cook dinner and load the dishwasher. Didn't I get a special dispensation, no chores while experiencing cancer? I could get a note from my doctor. Where were magical cleaning fairies when I needed them? Rex wasn't going to help, that was for sure. He never did any work around the house. Well, that's not true, he did take out the trash without being asked.

I had no pain, no symptoms, you'd never know to look at me that there was a bomb in my eye, just waiting to go off. I wasn't lying in a sickbed hooked up to machines, beeping and ticking, nurses coming in and out to check on me, no. No, I felt fine. I looked fine. But I wanted to be Colette and drop onto my feinting couch, my husband and servants attending my every need, chocolates on a pillow, grapes peeled.

A week after the discovery of the "nevus," I had the first of many CT's of the abdomen to check for metastatic disease (although they hadn't explicitly said that at the time, I knew, me and Dr. Google), and I was just ticking off days to the appointment with the Sacramento guy. A friend had asked me what I thought about the tumor: Malignant or Benign? I said malignant. She said benign. "I have a feeling about these things and I'm always right." What the--? You know...there are right and wrong things to say to someone about a serious illness, but saying your telepathic powers know

the answer is just a bad idea. False hope, even when sincerely given, is still a lie. I wouldn't lie to myself about this, and I didn't want my friends and family to prop me up with false hope and deception either. That I didn't need. I needed to be ready, ready to face, no, to fight, whatever was coming, and to do that, I needed the truth. I had already lied to myself about marrying Rex, I recognized the million little things I had dismissed to be in the relationship, things that could no longer be ignored. But with a serious illness, there could be no lies, no half-truths, no "oh, it'll work itself out." No. Now was not the time for sideways understanding—it needed to be faced head on. And what I needed from family and friends was something more concrete: less sympathy, more honesty, compassion, and offers of tangible help like meeting me for coffee and listening to me talk, or an offer to go with me to an appointment—I knew Rex wouldn't. I needed the reliability of my thoughts and words to build the foundation for my recovery, because of *that* I had no doubt.

Other people I told of my diagnosis tried to be supportive and helpful with bizarre comments like "I had a friend with cancer do something with water, baking soda, and a lemon, and was cured. She saw it on YouTube. You should check it out." Others would tell me of people they'd known who had died. Can you imagine? And I can't think of anything less helpful than hearing, "Five of my friends have died in the last year of cancer. I get it. I hate cancer." You hate cancer? Try having it, my god. How does telling me about people who've died seem supportive in any way? What were you thinking? Get the fuck away from me.

But my least favorite platitude was "You are not alone." This is a secret code that cancer patients and survivors say to other cancer patients. It just pissed me off. *Oh yeah? I am not alone?* Well screw you, I *am* alone. I'm alone in the operating theater, I'm alone in the treatment room, I'm alone in the MRI machine, so snug my eyelashes brush the interior of the machine; I'm alone with my thoughts at night, I'm alone with my traitorous body quite frequently, and I'm alone even in a

waiting room full of cancer patients. I had to walk away from people who said that to me. I didn't even care if I appeared rude.

This same friend did find me some support groups on Facebook and a few blogs from writers who were also dealing with cancer of the eye, or as it was known more officially, Ocular Melanoma (OM for short). I saw that one of the bloggers had metastatic OM to the liver and reported she had only four months to live. Very uplifting, thanks for sending me that. *Not.*

(Sarah Elizabeth Dwyer, she lived five more years...passing away in August 2017, having hit her bucket list, hard.)

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I was very lucky with the Sacramento retinologist and tumor specialist I had been sent to. I didn't know it yet, I was just stumbling forward, sightlessly, doing what I was told, but he had been Summa Cum Laude at Harvard for his undergraduate degree in biology, and had gotten a full ride at Washington University in St. Louis for medical school. He was also a surgeon, geneticist, oncologist, and retinologist. On top of all that? He was very kind and extremely compassionate. On the West Coast, he's just about as good as it gets. People come from around the world to see him. I had only come 200 miles. I had won the doctor lottery and didn't know it.

This appointment was also long, but more professionally conducted. Rex had even come in with me and, incredibly, gone room to room alongside me and paid attention. I wasn't sure why, what had changed, but I didn't question it until later. I'd undergone a round of tests similar to those I had experienced in Reno and which required my eyes to be dilated and, my old friend, the fireworks numbing drops, were administered. I felt like my eyes were dilated past my ears the pupils were so

large, the light so bright. I went from test to test, each room involving various kinds of large medical equipment. I went into each room willingly and submitted to the weird tests.

I was still using the cane. I continued to have difficulty walking six weeks after the cast had been removed from my ankle and couldn't drive, either. Dr. Tony Tsai² came in holding my chart, introducing himself. I introduced him to my husband, Rex. The doctor looked at my chart, made a quizzical face and said, "Rex Ricks?" We nodded, yes, we know. His parents had really done that. And he laughed and said, "Well, my Chinese name means Golden Tiger, so I'm Tony the Tiger." And we laughed and I immediately loved him. Then he mentioned my doctor in Reno and—I'll never forget this—said: "So...they told you that it was c-c-c-cancer?" He didn't want to tell me. I could tell it was hard for him to tell his patients the bad news. He cared too much to have to tell us. But he *did* tell us. "No," I said, "but I surmised as much." He nodded his head.

Next he started throwing paperwork, dates, hospitals, brochures, and other info at me—surgery for non-metallic tantalum tumor markers to be sewn onto the back of my infiltrated left eye; meet with the oncology team at UCSF to prep for proton beam radiotherapy; an MRI of the head; did I want to have my genetic marker tested or not?—full disclosure, I thought I was participating in a study. I wasn't—"Will it hurt?" I asked.

"No."

"Will I be awake for it?"

"No."

"Then let's do it."

² Pronounced "Sigh."

I should've asked how much it would cost.

A needle biopsy would be done while I was in surgery for the marker placement. He nodded his head and turned back to the computer. He could type faster than anyone I'd ever seen, and I had at one point been able to type 100 wpm, when there was a value for such a thing. *He was good at everything, I thought.* Relief washed over me: I was in capable hands.

There are only 2,000 reported cases of OM in the US annually, it's very rare. Eye tumor specialists are uncommon. I floated out of his office feeling a little numb but also excited: I was finally taking action; I was going to kill this fucker. And then I went from numb to angry. Wherever this thing had come from? It was going back there...in a coffin.

Rex had asked questions and paid attention to all the tests and what Dr. Tsai had to say. I was startled albeit warily grateful. He looked at me and smiled as he held my hand all the way out to the van.

It took two months to get everything arranged and completed. Incredibly, Rex went with me to every appointment. He took time off from his teaching position, using vacation days and sick days, to go with me to every single appointment I had, big or small. I had an abdominal MRIs, a head/brain MRI, blood draws, x-rays, and then the tantalum marker placement surgery at Mercy Hospital in Sacramento, which was done by Dr. Tsai. I trusted him.

My husband waited with my bag of belongings in the lobby to take me home after surgery; it was outpatient. When I'd broken my ankle, he'd lost my bag of clothing that the ER had given him, and my favorite shirt had disappeared forever. My yoga pants ended up in a trash bag full of empty Coke Zero cans in the back of our van waiting to be recycled, and my glasses had gone missing for a few hours but had turned up somewhere, he wouldn't say where. I don't know how he managed it,

but he lost almost everything that touched his hands. Didn't matter what admonishments I gave, what systems I set in place, he couldn't or wouldn't follow them, and shit got lost. Keys, glasses, wallet, whatever, over and over. But not, oddly, after tantalum marker surgery. It was all in the bag including my note that said "If you lose this, I will cut your balls off." He didn't see it, fortunately. Later I felt bad about the note.

But, he'd made all the calls to friends and family to tell them I'd come out of surgery safely. I was surprised, to say the least. I liked this new Rex. Years later I would realize that I had become his new hobby, his latest obsession. He was perseverating on the cancer, now. "My wife has eye cancer," he would go around telling people, which is not only syntactically and medically incorrect, but it seemed as if the cancer were happening to him, he wanted to be comforted and praised for handling both me and *his* suffering so well.

On the way back to our hotel after surgery, he'd picked up the prescription antibiotic cream and steroid cream that would need to go into my eye every four hours for four days. He kept track of the time. He put it in my eye. He never missed. The man who could not keep track of his own wallet was like an alarm clock after the eye surgery. He was hyper-vigilant. I was startled but grateful. Putting cream from a tube into your own eye is difficult. With him handling it, I didn't have to worry about it. I decided to trust him on this. I was very grateful to have him. I turned to him that night, silently, in the massive king-sized bed at our Sacramento hotel when I got scared and he held me, my face in his shoulder as I exhaled, mentally and physically. We didn't speak. I stayed in his arms until I fell asleep.

~ ~ ~

Prior to the diagnosis, the more we drifted apart, the more he wanted to snuggle me when we fell asleep at night. I began to resent it. He would lean into me the way a big dog will lean against your legs when they're happy, even if meant knocking you down. Rex would lean into me so hard that it would hurt my back, and no matter how many nights I made him move it, he would drape his big arm just over and under my rib cage, pressing on the organs there, and it was very uncomfortable. Yet the more I complained, the more he leaned in and pulled me close. Every damn night.

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Unfortunately, after the surgery my treatment date was six weeks away. I spent most of that time angry and scared, impatient, eager to kill that thing, hoping it wasn't spreading while I waited. All it took was one cancer cell to break free from the tumor, enter my bloodstream, find a new organ to invade, typically the liver, and a bad diagnosis would become a death sentence. Metastatic OM has no cure. No radiation, no chemotherapy, no drugs at that time, anyway, that could stem the sludgy tide of death emanating from six centimeters of tumor.

OM survivors cannot donate blood for that same reason.

I waited.

I tried to cry, I tried to force myself to cry, but I couldn't.

I worked a lot over that time in my position as a freelance editor; staying busy helped. My husband went back to work, 100 miles away, at the school district in the mountains where he worked and lived, Monday through Friday, coming back to Reno for weekends. Normally I was glad to see him go, to give me space, my tranquility, peace during his absence, resting up from the times he was home and normally needed near-constant supervision, but he had turned into the husband I'd always

hoped for: attentive, concerned, compassionate, communicative, engaged, responsible. I missed *that* guy. We talked every night after dinner but before bed. Pre-cancer diagnosis, we had only talked to discuss housekeeping or budgetary issues as they came up during the week. Now we talked every night about our days, what we thought about, sex, politics, and regular married-people stuff. I liked this guy. This was the guy I thought had married.

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One day, during that long six weeks between surgery and treatment, I sat at my desk, arranged in front of our living room window where I worked from home, and looked up. My eyes were tired and needed to gaze at something far away. I had intentionally put the desk there in order to take advantage of sky, tree, and mountain both as a restorative and to give my eyes a rest. Looking at the natural beauty, I wondered: Why hadn't I cried? I tried to cry, to force it. I thought perhaps it might be cathartic, but nothing came. Was I trying to cry because that's what other people did? Was I like other people? Or was I not a unique and special snowflake, just like everyone else? Perhaps, because, instead of fear, I had visions of myself as Godzilla, raging and roaring as I stomped through the downtown Tokyo of my eye cancer, stomping it into pieces, leaning my head back and roaring.

Looking outside was also therapeutic. Nature fed my resolve. It was the middle of July and the foliage and fauna were in their prime bloom. The greens were bright and varied from dusty green-gray to a brilliant Kelly green of the grass. A light breeze moved the pine needles in the tree next to the window in a way that appeared as if I were on an old sailing ship, skimming across unknown waters on a quiet ocean, being gently rocked by a mother I no longer had.

Abruptly, the bird feeder, which I had put in the pine tree, was swinging hard and fast, stuttered by the hard landing of a Stellar's blue jay, as big as a pigeon. They are fierce little bastards,

fighters, and he cawed his defiant ownership of the bird feeder to all who could hear. He looked fierce, but also a little silly to me, the way he cocked his head in order to see better like he had just the one eye. I felt like he was looking at me, waiting. I'd seen jays attack my cat, leaving a scab on the top of his head, just because. I admired those jays.

I looked back at the screen of my computer. Somehow a manuscript on latex allergies had no relevancy to me whatsoever just now. My job was to tidy it up, rewrite sections, compress and add photos, design the layout, and deal with the very cranky author, but it seemed so unimportant in the face of that villainous bastard, cancer. My duty, however, was to honor my commitment to the author who had trusted me with their book.

Forcing myself to look back at the screen, instead my thoughts drifted back to the cow at the doctor's office. She had seemed so peaceful, standing in the warm, knee-high grass, sun shining, not too hot, the whitest puffy clouds hanging in an almost artificially blue sky. She had stood there, probably oblivious to me on the other side of the reflecting glass, chewing her cud, calmly, at harmony with the world. I wondered if that cow been a sign? The dichotomy that my life was about to become? I didn't look sick, but inside me was a deadly bomb, just waiting to make things worse. I wished sometimes I could trade places with the cow, but would I, if I could? Would I trade a shorter, stupider life for some ignorance and quiet? Of events unchanging, of routines unvarying, no knowledge or awareness of my own self or the world around me? Eat the grass. Drink the water. Go to the barn. Sometimes the answer was yes.

It occurred to me abruptly and unbidden that my daily life was similar to the cow's: the days unchanging, monotone, a single day could be any of a multitude of days. In an effort to reduce my overwhelming anxiety, I had isolated myself in our two bedroom, two story, rented condo. I stayed up late; I slept late; I worked late. I didn't go out or interact with other people. I ate whatever I

wanted, usually something to soothe my nerves, processed carbs mostly. I ate almost constantly throughout the day, always chewing, just like a cow. I had been on my way downstairs to get food when I'd fallen and broken my ankle. I never left the house to go anywhere unless it was to get food or go somewhere with my husband. I wore the same clothes every day: yoga pants and a T-shirt. I surfed the web. I did some work. I ate. Every day the same thing.

My god...I was the cow.

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I needed to go to Davis for treatment. It was on the campus of UC, Davis and their well-regarded medical school. The proton beam radiotherapy that was going to kill the tumor would occur over subsequent days, Monday through Thursday. I'd booked Rex and me a room in a nice hotel in a small town outside of Davis. It had a pool and a Jacuzzi and was close to the University and downtown Davis with its college-town charm, shops and restaurants. It would almost be like a vacation. Rex had come to every medical appointment, and there had been many, with me. He hovered over me as if his protection alone could keep me safe. When I turned to him, he was there, mind and body. He was present. We argued less, the sarcasm vanished, we closed ranks, our backs together, to fight, whatever that entailed. I didn't expect that from him. I was glad to be wrong.

We left Reno the Monday morning, July 23, 2012, and arrived in Davis for my first proton beam treatment with two hours to spare. Rex had been laid off in June, which meant not only that he had free time to accompany me to doctor visits, but also that on July 1, 2012 we had lost our top-tier PPO health insurance. In addition to dealing with a cancer diagnosis, fighting for my life even though I looked and felt fine, we'd had to figure out how to get on COBRA as quickly as possible. The insurance company had deliberately interfered with our ability to do this. They couldn't even

tell us how much it was per month until they received the cancellation notice from the school district. It was just SNAFUs and red tape for weeks. It was almost as if they wanted me to give up and lose the insurance. But that would be immoral, wouldn't it? I was determined to beat them at this game they played.

I was freaking out, but as usual, from the outside it was invisible. I had bottled it up, compartmentalized it, but it manifested as anger. Sometimes rage would erupt, but I channeled it into my work, making sure the insurance company did what they were supposed to do, and cleaning out my closets.

Rex had worked irregularly since we'd married, so this was just more of the same for me. As a fat girl, I'd known when I married him that he was imperfect; at the time I had just been grateful that someone loved me enough to marry me. But now? Now I was sick, and losing his job could actually kill me.

His peculiarities and struggles with anxiety and depression over the years, however, had increased instead of abating, and six years into the marriage, and up until the cancer diagnosis, I'd had enough. I was working my ass off at a call center taking abuse from elderly clients of the AARP during the daytime, and nights and weekends processing snail mail, getting paid overtime just so we could survive. I brought home \$1300/month. Our rent was \$775/month. I would come home after a long day at work and find him in bed, asleep, having slept all day.

The previous year I had asked him to move out after he'd forgotten to pick up my insulin before the pharmacy closed—again. He refused to leave. I didn't have the resources to force him out. I was going to leave, instead, I just couldn't find a way out that didn't involve me living in a car. In

our six years of marriage at that point, we'd only twice celebrated our anniversary: the first year and the year he'd received his teaching credential, our third year. I was usually too pissed off or hurt by him to want to celebrate. But now...as we fought cancer, *together*, now I had hope for our marriage.

In Davis, we decided to eat lunch first. We chose a chain restaurant that we enjoyed. We always got the same thing when we went together, the only things we could agree on: chicken wings and a big salad, which we shared. When I saw that they also had fresh tomato soup, well, it seemed a fortuitous omen: I had to have some.

After lunch, we still had an hour to kill but thought it best to head over to campus to find the right building—the map I'd been given by the oncologist seemed a little confusing. It was just a short hop down the 80 freeway. About halfway there, my stomach started gurgling. Then it started to hurt, a lot. Then I realized I needed a bathroom right away. I told Rex. By this time we were on the outskirts of the campus. “Why didn't you go at the restaurant?” his voice rising.

“I didn't have to go then! I think I have food poisoning!” My stomach was cramping up and I was holding it in agonizing pain. “Just find a bathroom!”

He got off the freeway and roared onto campus, pulling over in front of a large building full of classrooms and labs at a red, no parking curb. We started to fight about parking there but he told me to get out and go. I jumped out and ran inside. I quickly poked my head into an office and asked for help. Way at the end of the hallway was a bathroom. I took the largest stall, handicapped, and plopped myself down waiting for the worst to be over.

And... nothing.

I sat there for about twenty minutes, doing nothing. Finally, giving up, I pulled up my skirt and walked over to the sink to wash my hands. As I did, that feeling return. Urgently. I ran into the stall with wet hands, slammed the door, struggled with my clothes, flung myself onto the toilet and...nothing. Abruptly I felt as if I were going to vomit. There was a teeny little metal trashcan off to one side. I hooked it with my leg, not wanting to risk getting off the toilet but wanting something to vomit in, just in case. As if it were on wheels, the trashcan zipped away across the smooth tile of the large handicapped stall, bounced off the wall, and skittered out of my reach. Unbelievable.

Before I could make another move or even think another thought, bright red tomato soup spewed from my mouth and onto the tile, splashing into a dead-body shape not unlike a CSI episode. All it needed was a chalk outline. I felt better. Then horror set in: I had to clean this up. I stepped back out into the larger bathroom. No paper towels, just an air dryer. No janitors' closet, no mop and bucket, nothing. My appointment was in fifteen minutes. *My appointment to kill cancer, in my eye!* They had emphasized that if you were late *Your appointment may be canceled.* I didn't want to wait another six weeks. I couldn't afford to wait another six weeks both emotionally and financially, let alone whatever was going on with my body. We'd fought an insurance company, had fundraisers to pay for it and all the hotels and travel for assorted medical visits we'd had to do to get to this day, to kill the tumor, and now, here I was, finally, arriving for treatment, and now I had fucking food poisoning? Perfect.

I walked back into the stall I had just hurled in. Was it really that bad? My god, it was. Hastily, I covered it with some toilet seat covers and ran out into the hall. I was not missing this treatment. I would get there if I had to vomit my way over to the building.

Abruptly I was very dizzy. I leaned against the hall wall before I passed out. I heard my name. I looked to my right, and there was my husband, all 250 pounds of him, marching up the

hallway, angry, yelling, “Where have you been? I’ve been looking all over for you!” I was in the hall he’d dropped me at, and I had asked directions. I told him to just get me over to the appointment. He held my elbow as I staggered to the car where he’d stayed parked illegally at the red curb, barking at me about what a horrible time he’d had looking for me the whole way over.

As I got back into our minivan and buckled myself in it was then that I noticed the sign: I had been in the Robert Mondavi Hall of Food and Wine. I laughed hysterically as we drove across campus. Rex didn’t get it.

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I made it to the appointment. They were running an hour late, actually; they probably would have seen me. I was sick for two days. That night, back at the hotel, I asked Rex to get me some liquid Imodium from the drugstore. I was now sick upper and lower GI. I had to ask him three times to go to the drugstore as he was playing on the Internet. He finally left but didn’t return for over two hours. By this time I had been up and down to the bathroom multiple times, nearly shitting the bed on the high-end Egyptian cotton hotel sheets at least once. Yep, jackass-husband Rex was definitely back. And now my beloved tomato soup would not comfort me; it had turned on me just as my body had.

The radiotherapy itself was a breeze. Painless. Except for the explosive, numbing eye drops, a whole bottle just for the one eye. Clips placed onto my upper and lower lid and which were then taped to my face. I had worried about them, but I couldn’t feel anything. I was so excited to be getting the treatment I felt almost drunk; dizzy and high, laughing easily and joking with the team of doctors and nurses. They put on the mask and bit. I waited as they adjusted the machine, twenty or thirty minutes, to get the right angle to kill the tumor without taking out my face or brain. “Left,

point two five; up, right, three point one seven; up, point four.” The machine whirred and moved as they adjusted it remotely from another room where they could view me on a black and white TV screen. Rex took pictures of the screen. He talked science with the doctors while they fucked with my eye, waiting to dose it. Then: look at a blue light, don’t move your eye, the eyelids clipped open, for 90 seconds, done. Four days in a row of this. That was it. Straight back to the hotel the first two nights, no food for me; then the subsequent two nights into town for dinner and in my case, a pedicure. The first night I felt well enough to go to downtown Davis, I had Rex drop me in front of a Tibetan store that had lots of silver jewelry. I wanted something to commemorate my treating the cancer. I bought an Irish Claddagh ring. I asked Rex to pick me up in an hour. He didn’t show. He didn’t answer his cell phone. I walked over to a Jack-in-the-Box and bought a Diet Coke. I left another message stating where I was and to pick me up for dinner. No answer. I walked back to the Tibetan store which had closed. I saw a nail salon that took walk-ins so I got a pedicure. When the woman asked me why I was in town, I told her, and she gave me a free hot stone massage with the spa chair leaned way back. I fell asleep.

Still no Rex.

Now, with freshly painted toes, I found a Thai restaurant, got a table, ordered food, and was halfway through my meal when Rex showed up. “How did you find me?” I had stopped calling, planning on taking a cab back to the hotel. “It’s near the Tibet store and I know you like Thai food.” (And which he won’t eat, ever.) I just nodded my head. “Can you take me back to the hotel after this?” He knew I was mad because I didn’t ask where he’d been. He volunteered it like the guilty husband he was, even though I did not care. He’d been at a military museum looking up information and maps about former WWI and II bases that is a hobby of his. He hadn’t bothered telling me he

would be doing this, or that he'd planned on doing that, for weeks, while we were in Davis. I just nodded my head. I should've known. His gaze was already moving away from me.

Once, a few years earlier on a long road trip, he'd dropped me at a Walmart in Omaha where I was just going to run in and get soap and a new toothbrush— he disappeared for a several hours. I was left sitting on a bench inside Walmart, in the middle of a field, outside of Omaha. I didn't even really know where I was for sure. He had no clue how horrible, callous, and frightening this behavior was, and I could never make him understand. Ever.

We killed the tumor, the doctors and me; it's still in there, dead, in the choroid lining in the back of my eye. That's where all the little blood vessels are that provide oxygen to the eye. I'm blind in that eye, now. About nine months after the radiotherapy, as the tumor died, it leaked fluid all over my macula, part of the optic nerve, during the course of that month, and by the end of April 2013, the vision in that eye blurred for good. I didn't care; I thought it had been a good trade, an eye for a life. There is a treatment for what I now have, macular edema, that involves a colon cancer drug and a needle to the eye. Eyeballs are hollow, like a boiled egg without the yolk. I hadn't know that before my diagnosis. My doctor wanted to try it, "It's painless," he said. "The eye has no nerve endings." I somehow knew that for me it would not be painless. It wasn't. While we waited for insurance approval, I got an Ativan prescription for anxiety from my primary care doctor, and brought some leftover Percocet from my ankle surgery the year before, and took one of each while I waited for my shot in Dr. Tsai's waiting room. You know the drill by now, dilating drops, flaming eye drops, wait. A new wrinkle this time: The nurse squirted my eye with betadine, the soap hospitals use to clean patients before surgery. That was fun. They also did a test to see how large the puddle of fluid the

leaking dying/dead tumor had bled all over my macula as a baseline before the shot. It involved looking into a machine, sort of like the eye test at the DMV, holding your gaze, and done.

The doctor came in, leaned back my chair, prepped the syringe, told me to turn my head to the right and look right with my eye. The children's nursery rhyme chimed in my head, "Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye..." Oh my God...he was going to...I gripped the hand rests of the exam chair. He held my lids open with his fingers and jammed the needle into my eye and pressed the plunger. It hurt. I screamed. He wasn't prepared for that. It's an indescribable pain. It was as if a small explosion had gone off in my eye, like a percussion grenade, pressure, lots and lots of very sharp pressure. The doctor told me to take ibuprofen and lie down for a while, and he was gone. I sat there stunned, traumatized, alone, and now high as both the Ativan and Percocet had kicked in. I made Rex wait in the lobby at my appointments now. He didn't pay attention to the doctor when he did go with me anymore, and it had gotten embarrassing as after he would ask medical professionals to repeat everything they had just said. He was usually reading a magazine or on his phone during these visits.

I walked out into the lobby and told him to take me home. It was a nightmare ride back to Reno from Sacramento. Every bump and lurch of the van hurt my head. I held my hand over my eye and moaned. I finally got him to stop and buy me a bag of frozen peas and I put it over my eye. I did that all the rest of the way home and that night. I woke up in the morning feeling better, but I felt like I'd been punched in the face. I wished I had been in a bar fight; at least that might have been fun. Rex didn't ask how I was. It didn't occur to him. Fortunately, these shots were administered only once a month. As I waited for the next appointment, my vision didn't improve.

The next month I went on my own. Rex stayed home. I reserved a room about a mile away from Dr. Tsai. If I was going to have a needle stuck in my eye, I was going to stay somewhere nice. I

planned on taking the drugs while in Dr. Tsai's lobby. I figured if it was a quick procedure, the drugs wouldn't kick in before I got to the hotel, a Hilton this time. I talked to the doctor about the unexpected pain from the first time. "By any chance are you a redhead," he asked.

"Yes, I am," I replied. "This is not my natural color, but I had reddish-brown hair all my life."

"Interesting. There's a new study out," he said, "and it shows that genetically, redheads have a low tolerance for pain, and a high tolerance for anesthesia."

That was me. I'd always had a low tolerance for pain, and the recent surgeries I'd had had required extra anesthesia leaving me knocked out far longer than the average patient. At the dentist, I'd always needed numerous, once eight, shots of Novocain and I'd still had pain.

I told him this. "You should not have had any pain," he said. "None of my other patients I've given this treatment to have had any." He was very apologetic. I was grateful for it.

I told him to go ahead with the shot. I'd taken the Ativan and Percocet just a few minutes before, I had frozen peas in an ice chest in my car in the parking lot, and my plan was to stay lying down in front of the TV at my hotel, and which was about a mile away, until checkout the next day. He gave me the shot. It was bad. Just as bad as the first one. I yelled a bit. "OW!"

I spent the night in my room, resting, frozen peas over my eye. I put the TV on for sound, watching was hard as both eyes track simultaneously and it hurt. The next day I drove home. As the days passed, I decided I would never do that again; it wasn't worth it. At my next appointment, I told the doctor I didn't want to do it anymore. He checked the size of the edema puddle again. "Well, it's not helping. In fact, the size of the leak is actually larger now, so I'm totally on board with you not continuing."

“Great,” I said. “Because I don’t want to.” So no more Avastin shots. So I cannot see out of that eye, well, just shapes and colors. My remaining, right eye, did not “pick up the slack” as I was advised. I do not see in 3D anymore, only 2D. I spend a lot of time trying not to fall off curbs or cracks that look like curbs, or curbs that look like cracks, or carpets that look like stairs, or stairs that look flat. I take a lot of elevators even though I have no issues with stairs after losing the weight. It’s more about not falling than being in shape. Texts are difficult and I have to make it very large on a computer screen or reading tablet like my Kindle. There’s no rhyme or reason, it just doesn’t work right by itself.

My genetic marker, however, turned out to be *good* from the choices of *Excellent*, *Good*, and *Bad*, so I still get checked and scanned twice a year for metastatic OM with an MRI or CT scan of the chest, abdomen, and pelvis, plus the regular tests at the retinologist. All the invasive tests are routine now. You want to put something in my eye? Sure. Fine. IV for contrast in the back of the hand? Go ahead. What’s one more. Ultrasound with gel on the eyeball? Burning eye drops? I eat those for lunch.

So far, everything has been good. I just passed the five year mark. Dr. Tsai said “Congratulations, you beat the odds.” That was like a punch to the solar plexus. I don’t think I realized just how bad the odds were. He also thought we could go to nine-month screenings for now, and do an ultrasound of the liver and x-ray of the lungs. No more CT scans. “You’ve had enough radiation for a while.” Yes, I had.

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As the months and then years passed and I did not get sick, Rex’ involvement in my care tapered off and then we segued back into our old routines. He was back to his regular habit of

dropping me at the door and then going to get something to eat while I saw the doctor. I would text him when I was done. He would pick me up when he got around to it. I got tired of that, and told him I would just drive myself, he didn't need to be there for any reason.

Eventually, because I wasn't dying, my illness became part of the past and we reverted to sarcasm, yelling, and resentment. We fought loudly over mundane shit like "Where is a hammer?"

On New Year's Eve 2014-15, at 10 o'clock, he decided he wanted to go out. He had no plan. He bullied and guilted me until I dressed. We found a restaurant getting ready to close, and he convinced them to serve us dinner. Everyone from the waiter to the Maître d was giving us dirty looks. This upset me. I got nasty, then angry, and we fought at the table. I said "Fuck this. Take me home." He did. We drove through snow-covered mountains back to our high desert home. He told our therapist later that he'd gone to lie down on the railroad tracks that night, to kill himself, but a train never came. A bark of Schadenfreude-filled laughter nearly made it out of my mouth; I caught it by its tail at the last second. I suddenly realized I had been married to a fool. A little boy trapped in a man's body. This was the source of my anger. I blamed myself and not Rex. He couldn't help it; I should've known better.

Three years after my cancer treatment, after unsuccessful marital counseling—the therapist actually fired Rex for failing to follow directions—Surprise! Not surprised!—it ended in a screaming match in the kitchen, both of us yelling "I can't do this anymore!" He took a job that August in Northern California, I stayed on in Southern California as I waited for the lease on our rented house to expire, and tried to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. Over a year after weight loss surgery, I no longer looked like a cow. I didn't want to behave as a cow anymore, either. The therapist I continued to see told me I should go to grad school. It would be good for me he said. So I did. He was right.

The divorce was finalized the beginning of my second year of school.

I plan to embrace more of the hard, scary things for however long this life gives to me.

I trust myself more, now.

Epilogue

I did cry once, briefly. It didn't help. Cancer is viciously pitiless and crying garnered neither its sympathy nor bolstered my resolve. It would be more than two years, however, before I could eat tomato soup.

And every time I drive by a field of cows, I just laugh. Moo, you motherfuckers.

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