

HOME, AGAIN

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Home, Again is a collection of linked essays that is part memoir and part exploration of the idea of what “home” is and what it becomes over the course of one’s life. The first essay, “I’m a Dracutier,” introduces the reader to a particular time and place, Dracut, Massachusetts, in the 1950s and 1960s. This is the small, parochial town with a surprisingly vivid history where the narrator grew up and lived until she left for college. This essay sets the stage for the rest of the book, providing a geography to the narrator’s upbringing and early home, while also establishing a link among the essays that follow.

Other essays in the collection deal with critical events and people in the narrator’s life: deaths and burials; mother, father, brothers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, husbands, friends and coworkers; travels, jobs and moves. All of these things have caused the narrator to continually create new home throughout her life. In the final essay, “Home, Again,” the narrator comes to realize that, although she has physically and mentally left her Dracut home many years ago, some profound sense of home will always remain in that place and linger in her heart.

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DEDICATION

For Jim

My mother, father, husband, and best friend

EPIGRAPH

You can close your eyes to the things you do
not want to see, but you cannot close your
heart to the things you do not want to feel.

Anonymous

FOREWARD

The essayist transects the past, slicing through it first from one angle, then from another, until—though it can never be captured—some fugitive truth has been definitely cornered.

Emily Fox Gordon, “Book of Days”

Recently I returned from the longest vacation I have ever taken with my husband—seventeen days in Europe. We explored the castles, museums, mosaic sidewalks and Fado supper clubs of Lisbon, enjoyed wine visits at chateaux in Bordeaux and Pauillac, explored Bilbao’s Guggenheim Museum, the wild coast of Normandy and, finally, the lesser-known neighborhoods of London, a highlight of which was the Dickens House Museum. We spent ten of those seventeen days on a small, luxury ship, the Silver Cloud, cruising blindly at night and waking up every day to a new venue. Paradise, right? As usual, I was gung ho about the trip for months, spending days preparing, itchy to get aboard the plane. But almost as soon as we arrived at our hotel in Lisbon, I was counting the days until we headed for the airport again. I eyeballed the level of vitamins in the clear plastic container every day to see if the volume was low enough to start a countdown. Once I’m in the midst of discovering the new people and sights in foreign places, I’m thrilled and can’t get enough. But for the first few hours every morning, while it’s still dark in the strange room and I can’t see what’s outside, I ache to be back home.

It was only when I first started writing essays about my original home, Dracut, Mass., that I began to explore why I have such conflicting ideas about home—I want to leave it, but then want to go back; I’m afraid to leave, but can’t *not* leave. I wrote about sporadic memories from my childhood, interweaving research about specific historical

incidents and the geography related to the town. All this coalesced into a larger story focused on ideas about the geography of home, its peculiar stamp on me, and my inability to either allow it to wick into my being or to scratch it from my memory. I think I've become reconciled to the notion that I will never be completely at home again, since my original Dracut nest was blasted apart when I was only eighteen with the unexpected death of my mother. The enormous impact of that vacancy has only become apparent as I've aged and felt its accretive presence, like a hidden atoll rising slowly as waters recede around it. The sudden death of my father when I was thirty-two only added to a lingering malaise in my life.

At a cocktail reception for first time cruisers on the Silver Cloud, the ship's cruise consultant, a middle-aged bachelor from Amsterdam who hadn't been home in eight months, expressed great pride in the fact that certain cruise repeaters (members of the romantic-sounding "Venetian Society") have spent more than 1000 days on the ship, sometimes in the same suite. "When these guests go home, they say that's when they're on vacation," he said with a mysterious smile. Home turned upside down, I thought to myself.

But his story intrigued me and raised questions about how you define home and what draws you to and away from it. My favorite spot on the ship was the Panorama Lounge at the ship's tail, with its floor-to-ceiling windows and sliding doors out to a wraparound deck. There, after a day of touring, I could sit uninterrupted on a curved banquette with a glass of champagne and watch the continuous wake the ship leaves as it pushes forward. It looked like a great watery carpet doing a slow hula. Its edges were swishing blurs that rippled and swayed before disappearing into the horizon. Maybe

that's the fascination with living on a "ship-house" without definitive borders—you feel free of the rest of the land-world and can fashion a whole new view of the world and of your place in it at any time.

What is it about home that makes me want to constantly leave it, but then yearn to return? This collection explores that question and answers it, to some degree. Travel to me will always be enticing and harrowing at the same time, like the sirens in Capri were to Ulysses during his ten-year journey home to Ithaca. He wanted to hear the song of the sirens that was so beautiful it made men mad, but he didn't want to come within its power. So he stopped his men's ears with wax and ordered them to bind him to the mast and keep the ship going forward no matter what he implored them to do. Dracut has a siren-like hold on me—because I sometimes crave the sweet part of growing up in a stable home in a picturesque place with parents and siblings who loved me gratuitously. But I don't want to remember the abrupt disappearance of that home---my parents to early graves and the house my father built for us to other young families.

I have only visited Dracut a handful of times since my father's death thirty-one years ago. One visit was for the 100th anniversary of the Methodist Church in nearby Lowell, where my mother took my brothers and me every Sunday. I blinked hard when old Mrs. Mills, with papery skin, watery eyes and a feathered hat, clasped my hands and leaned into me to tell me how lovely and full of life my mother was, and how much I look like her. Another time was for Thanksgiving at my brother's house, the brother who never left town. It was the last time I saw my uncle Tony, who was in his late eighties and happily played the patriarch all weekend—ironic, considering how ungracious and self-centered he was when I was growing up. Each visit, whatever the impetus to return,

has left me feeling disjointed and deflated, the happy memories able to surface only once I'd left and come back to my current home. I always miss it so much until I return.

I find the idea of home changes as your life rolls along. You move, you travel, and you accumulate homes in different life-stages— as a youth, as a worker, as a spouse, as a middle-aged person and beyond. Home becomes a mosaic, a Picasso, a kaleidoscope of wildly different times, places and states of mind that intermingle in a separate plane of reality. You think you've left a place, but it doesn't leave you. It settles in your bloodstream, coursing along, affecting the spring in your step, the way you see the horizon, the way you react to people and places around you. The many homes I've fashioned as an adult are important, but simply cannot ease the ever-present longing I will probably always feel for the home of my childhood.

I'm A Dracuteer

Where you are born—what you are born into, the place, the history of the place, how that history mates with your own—stamps who you are, whatever the pundits of globalization have to say.

Jeanette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal*

I.

Elizabeth, “Betty,” Edgerly disappeared December 27, 1959, after a night of eating and heavy drinking at a local restaurant with her husband, George, and her brother, Francis. When the snow melted in late April, two young boys found her torso floating in the swampy waters of Beaver Brook in Dracut, Mass., a cow town about four miles northeast of Lowell and twenty-five miles north of Boston. At trial Francis testified that Betty was so drunk by the end of the night she had to be helped to the car. That Thanksgiving, several witnesses said one of the last things George told Betty before he stormed out of the house when asked to go buy a loaf of bread was, “I’ll kill you yet.” The Edgerlys lived on a nondescript road in Dracut, and were notorious for their frequent brawls. Betty often appeared in public with bruises and cuts on her face and body.

Police speculated that Betty’s killer used a hacksaw and a knife to chop her up. According to her mother, Betty’s face, arms and legs had marks that could have identified her easily. Ironically, a mark on her torso led to the tentative identification.

She was twenty-five and a mother of two.

I was eleven and living in Dracut with my parents and two older brothers when they found Betty’s body. At school, the murder was a topic at recess for months, until the trial was over. My brothers said her head was rolling in the woods somewhere, singing,

“I ain’t got no body.” They thought it was a riot. It gave me the heebie-jeebies, but it didn’t scare me. I felt safe at home.

Within weeks of the body’s discovery George, thirty-one and unemployed, was arrested and charged with Betty’s murder, in what became known in Greater Lowell as the “Torso Killing,” like something on Perry Mason. We kids thought it was wicked cool to hear our town’s name in the TV news and see it in the Lowell newspapers for days on end. We were famous before fame was everywhere, though it didn’t seem to affect us one way or another, any more than we could actually picture at that age what it meant to have a loved one murdered in cold blood and cut up like that.

The story gets better. George claimed that the night Betty disappeared they were driving through Lowell in the middle of a snow storm. “I stopped to help someone stuck ahead of me, and when I went back to the car she was gone. It was like her to do that. Be gone for days. Ask anyone.” It was her mother who reported her missing the next day.

Edgerly’s lawyer was a brash, up-and-coming young lawyer named F. Lee Bailey, who took over the defense when George’s first attorney had a heart attack halfway through the seventeen-day trial. (There’s no evidence George had anything to do with that.) George had alternately passed and flunked over fifty lie detector tests in the months before trial, which turned out to be the prosecution’s Achilles’ heel, thanks to Bailey. He had become an expert in lie detector technology after attending Keeler Polygraph Institute in Chicago and was especially good at debunking their reliability. Also in George’s favor was the fact that most of the evidence was circumstantial—they never did find Betty’s head and DNA testing was years away. Many people in town

claimed that George was one lucky S.O.B. My mother was also convinced Edgerly did it, but then one of her best friends was occasionally beaten by her regularly drunk husband. If my father had an opinion about it, I never knew what it was.

George's luck turned out to be only Dracut luck—that is, imaginary and fleeting. After his acquittal for Betty's murder, he went to work as a mechanic at Butler Chevrolet, a major dealership in Lowell, where he eventually became General Manager. In the 1970s his greed prompted him and some coworkers to cook up a scheme to submit false and padded bills for warranty work to General Motors. A dealer the size of Butler was expected to submit about \$30,000 per month for such repairs, but they were doing twice that—and pocketing the difference. Edgerly was convicted in what became known as “Motorgate,”—and while serving three-to-five years for that crime was charged with raping a local prostitute in 1975. George was touched again by fame as the prosecutor in the case was John Kerry, future lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, Senator, presidential candidate and Secretary of State. Fame didn't help George this time though; his rape conviction added eighteen years to his prison term.

But George wasn't finished yet. In 1978 he was convicted of the bullet-in-the-back-of-the-head murder of the General Motors insurance investigator who'd been sent to Lowell four years earlier to check out the excessive repair bills at Butler Chevy. His body was found bobbing in the Danvers River. The story was there was an eyewitness to the killing (this was before George went to prison) and that George had kidnapped him so he couldn't testify. But the witness managed to escape and showed up in the courthouse in time to help put George away. It had become a movie-of-the-week. At that trial, George acted as his own lawyer and was sentenced to more than thirty years. He died in

prison in 2007 after being hospitalized for pneumonia and contracting a staph infection, the most ordinary nosocomial occurrence in a hospital. He was seventy-nine.

Edward Edgerly, George's son from his second marriage, was interviewed after his father's death. "We waited for him to come home for years, but he was denied parole each time because he denied he murdered anyone to the end." While he admitted that George had "run afoul" of the law, he insisted that he "wasn't a monster" and, in fact, "was a wonderful father." Having been a war hero in the Army during World War II, earning three Bronze Stars while fighting in Korea, George was given an honor guard at his funeral by the VA.

George had a daughter, Elizabeth, named after her mother, who echoed her mother's life when she was murdered at age twenty-five by a jealous ex-boyfriend who couldn't stand the thought of her being with someone else. Her body had been sexually mutilated—yet another Dracut drama. My brother Jeff told me a few years ago that he and my sister-in-law used to be in a bowling league with another of George's daughters, by his second wife. I asked him if he ever talked to her about her father and was disappointed when he told me he hadn't—he was incredulous that I would even suggest it; he has lived in Dracut his whole life. Today, you can read crime blogs about the Lowell area, where there are fervent proclamations from George's children and grandchildren (he had seven children with his second wife) swearing that their father/grandfather never killed anyone and was a "good man."

Having spent my entire childhood in Dracut, I'm never surprised by surprises or by luck—good or bad—or by the contradictory nature of the world and the people in it. I

also never take people at face value and am shocked only at people's easy acceptance of everybody's stories.

II.

When I was growing up, Lowell was the big city. My brothers and I could take a bus there from Dracut for ten cents, about a thirty-minute ride. The first thing you'd see before crossing over the Bridge Street bridge into downtown was what was called the "mile of mills," more than forty multi-storied, red-brick buildings circling the banks of the Merrimack River like the outside wall of a medieval city, separating Lowell from the wilds beyond. The Merrimack created a unique geographical identity for Lowell and the surrounding valley. Rising in Franklin, New Hampshire, where the Pemigewasset and Winnepesaukee rivers converge, it's a 117 mile-long ribbon of water that seeps life into the land it covers as it meanders into the Atlantic at the river's mouth in Newburyport, Mass. Looked at on an aerial map, the river outlines an Indian head profile, with a hooked nose bulging around Lowell before curving up to the northeast—an appropriate symbol, since Lowell, Dracut and the entire Massachusetts-Southern New Hampshire region was originally settled by the Pennacooks, Pawtuckets and Wamesits, Native American tribes from French Canada, an influence also reflected in the abundance of Indian names for the streets, dams, parks and bodies of water in those towns.

My ancestors were touched by the Indian influence—we're part Iroquois on my grandmother's side. She and my great grandparents were part of Lowell's gush of immigrants that powered the mills. My grandmother, Blanche Côté, and her family left the depleted farms of Trois Rivières in Quebec, home of Algonquian, Sioux and Iroquois tribes, for a new life in industrial Lowell. My grandfather, Janos Economakos (later

shortened to Makos), stepped off the boat at Ellis Island from Laconia, a small town near Sparta, Greece. I'm sure both families were drawn to the city as much by the abundant mill jobs as by the ability to find old-world familiarity in the varied ethnic groups that converged there. Sectioned into distinct neighborhoods, like Little Canada, New Dublin and the (Greek) Acre, Lowell was a multicultural jigsaw puzzle, each piece having its own native-language newspapers, social clubs, food and collective memories of home. People came from a desire to escape something and then stayed for a lifetime, lulled partly by the re-creation of what they left. It's no mystery why people stayed there a lifetime, once installed.

Lowell was a big deal in its heyday, the first large-scale factory town in America. Historians called it the "Cradle of the American Industrial Revolution and Thoreau memorialized it in an essay, *A week on the Concord and Merrimack River*. The Lowell mills spun out 50,000 miles of fabric each year for places as far away as Europe, South America, even China. I often remind my older brother, Johnny, of his summer between high school and college, when he worked for Symphonic Industries, assembling pieces of phonographs with finger-numbing repetition during muggy, ninety-degree days that heated the red brick buildings practically to kiln temperatures. The mills helped him decide to go to college after all—the first in the family to do so—where he ended up staying for years, leaving just a dissertation short of a PhD in genetics.

I was around eleven when I started going to Lowell on the bus—my brothers were even younger. My mother gave us a lot of freedom in that more innocent time; she just assumed we'd be okay because we'd been brought up right—we had good manners, abundant common sense and a conscience. There were two main reasons I liked to go

there. First, it had three movie theaters: the Keith, the Strand and the Rialto. For a quarter I could sit in a cushy red velvet seat and see a double-feature, eat my way through a box of Good & Plenty and still have enough money to buy a scallop-frosted cupcake at the Nazareth Bakery for the bus ride home. It offered a view of life that was bigger than Dracut, where the world of entertainment wasn't relegated to visiting the bars, playing cards, betting on horses and maybe bowling once a week.

The second reason was to walk the grid of streets filled with all kinds of shops. There were three five-and-dime stores, a Woolworth's on Merrimack Street, the main artery in town, a Kresge's on Central and JJ Newbury's 5-10-25 Cent Store on Market. There was also Record Lane, Scott Jewelers, Lull and Hartford Sporting Goods, Cunningham's Variety Store, Fanny Farmer candy, Chop Suey, G.C. Prince, a book store where they sold things like thesauruses and Shakespeare's plays, a stationery store, gift shops, a Bon Marche, an A.G. Pollard department store, and my favorite, Cherry & Webb, an upscale women's clothing store where my mother opened a charge account for me and where I could buy things on layaway. She also helped me open up my own checking account at the American Mercantile Bank, so I could make payments on my Cherry & Webb account. After a full day of movies and shopping fun, I would end up at the Epicure, a luncheonette where my mother once worked as a waitress. I would sit at the counter and order a toasted tuna fish sandwich with chips and a lime Rickey, a heavenly concoction of club soda with lime juice, simple syrup and Angostura bitters—still the best drink to quaff your thirst in the summer, if you can find one.

Although I had several good friends as a kid and lots of cousins in the neighborhood for playing sports and bike riding, I took these Lowell trips by myself. My

mother helped me put together an outfit, which made me feel sophisticated. I liked it when other people on the bus looked askance at me, like I was an oddity, wondering where I was going all by myself. At that age I was one of the tallest and shapeliest girls in my class so I could carry off a confident air. Piano, ballet and tap recitals helped as well—I could act a part when necessary. I didn't feel the need to always have someone at my elbow, and I was happy my mother encouraged me to be independent and have outings that didn't follow an exact agenda. I did a lot of things by myself, without thinking about why.

Looking back I realize it must have had something to do with my mother's own fling with being independent and morphing into an iconoclast. She was born and raised in Magee, Mississippi, the youngest of six children, all of whom remained in the Deep South except her. In January of 1943, at nineteen, she met my father at a USO social in Jackson, and married him a month later. She became pregnant with my oldest brother Johnny three months later and returned to Magee to stay with my grandparents. My father rejoined his air force division, which was stationed in the Philippines, for the remainder of the war. After the war, he immediately whisked her to Lowell by train with my two-year-old brother in tow. My father's French Canadian, Catholic family wasn't particularly welcoming to her, except for my Aunt Cecile, my father's sister. One of the favorite things my grandmother and her sisters liked to do was speak French in front of my mother, who didn't understand a word of it. She not only learned how to endure the family's congenital brusqueness with quiet nods, but flourished in being able to create her own home-world without interference from them, using Southern food and hospitality as her best weapon, befuddling them to no end.

Most important, my outings in Lowell made me feel like an adult, an adult with possibilities. From those early days in Dracut, I knew I would never follow a traditional path of marrying young and being a stay-at-home mother. I knew I would never stay in Dracut, as almost everyone from there did, but would venture out into cities where I could be whoever I wanted to be and could sculpt my own history. I also knew early on that I would understand small-town life, but would not want to be confined by it. Like my immigrant ancestors who followed the river, I wanted life to be fluid and a little bit foreign.

III.

When I was young I had no clue how much the history and geography of Dracut and Lowell imprinted themselves on me, like black-inked tattoos that couldn't be diluted from a thousand washings. To this day they influence how I handle the world. Riding home in the back seat of our station wagon in the summer, I always knew, even with my eyes closed, that we had made the final right-hand turn towards our house on Tyngsboro Road when I got the first whiffs of popcorn and cotton candy drifting towards us from my Uncle Tony's food stand. I could also hear the clacking riff of the rides at Lakeview Park and the collective kid-squeals, though I learned to tune that out, the way your brain can ignore the background hubbub while watching a ball game. On the straightaway from that right hand turn to our house, we rode through Lakeview's main artery, which had amusements and rides on either side and, on the left, the vista from the lake. I could identify every detail of the landscape without looking up.

Lakeview's centerpiece, Lake Mascuppic, is a 200-plus acre, spring-fed lake that was the original draw for the Indians who settled Dracut—the town was deeded to

Passaconoway, the great Chief of the Pawtuckets, Penacooks, Wamesits, Nashuas and Souhegans; I still love just saying those names. Dracut was surrounded by offshoots of the Merrimack River—within a couple of miles of our house were Willowdale Lake, Beaver Brook Falls and Long Pond. Although the lake provided us with year-round entertainment, swimming, boating, ice skating and ice fishing, my grandmother told me when the park was first built, in 1908, the big draw was a stadium-sized ballroom on the lake-shore side of the road, where famous bands played well into the night—big band sounds like Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller. It was “a nickel a dance,” my grandmother said; the guys would buy the tickets, then go through a turnstile to get on the dance floor. She also told me there was a glittery ball suspended from a high ceiling, flinging shards of light through the dim air, as it spun with the dancers—a precursor to Studio 54 and the disco rage in New York in the late ‘70s. The last dance of the night at Lakeview was always, “Put Your Head On My Shoulder,” by the Lettermen.

I still have a postcard, “*Lakeview Ballroom on Lake Mascuppic, Dracut, Mass.*,” photographed from the water, where the ballroom looks as big as the Goodyear blimp, balanced on sea pilings dug into the lake’s shallows. The park was financed by a savvy industrialist named Harry Kittredge, who built it at the end of the trolley line to lure factory workers from Lowell and surrounding towns out to the park on weekends, for thirty-five cents each way. People from as far away as Boston poured into Lakeview from early spring to late fall. Listening to her, I wished I had been alive when that ball spun its magic.

Across the street from the ballroom was the other big draw, a silver-toned roller coaster, the top rails of which provided a clear view across the lake to Hudson County in

Southern New Hampshire. Both the ballroom and roller coaster burned to the ground in the early 1950s, shortly after I was born. The ballroom was replaced with the penny arcade, where I spent most of my allowance as a kid. For those pennies, I could make a machine spit out picture cards of famous starlets like Linda Darnell, or play baseball pinball and Skee-Ball, and collect coupons for high scores, which I traded in for whistles, water guns and pink and yellow plastic leis I would layer around my neck, like a kewpie doll. Next to the arcade was a big fenced-in area of kiddie rides, including the whip, the Scrambler, the whirling teacups, a small train that coasted along the high contours of the lake, and a lineup of counter games of chance, like ring tosses and ballooned dart boards. Beyond the train, just across from my Uncle's stand, was a maze of angular go-cart tracks that at one point made you feel like you would drive right off the edge of the track into the lake.

The roller coaster was replaced with the red paint and chrome-trimmed rink for Dodgem bumper cars, a mini-roller coaster, go-carts, a Ferris wheel and a merry-go-round. We called the merry-go-round "bobby horses," never realizing then that they were hand-carved and painted by Daniel Muller, generally recognized as the greatest carver of carousel animals, who used real horsehair tails and manes, and crafted the big-wheeled coaches with black leather seats. The horses are now part of the D.C. Muller carousel in Forest Park, Queens, New York, one of less than 200 remaining historic carousels in the world. I remember sitting on my favorite white horse with a green saddle, reaching for the golden ring that stuck out from the central pole. If you could grab the ring as you glided by, you'd get a free ride. My brothers would laugh at me for reaching for the ring on every revolution, almost slipping off the saddle, as it always

seemed to be just out of reach for my small arms. I was sure I'd catch the ring at some point, no matter how many times it brushed by my fingers. But we got plenty of free rides anyway because old Mr. Barris, the operator, didn't (or maybe couldn't be bothered to) notice when we hopped on the platform during the first few slow rounds of the ride. The bobby horses played music continually, pulsing with the rise and fall of the horses—great songs like Bobby Vinton's "Blue Velvet" and Dion's "The Wanderer." Roaming through the park on a weekend was a way to completely forget your everyday life and get wrapped up in a bubble of music, laughter, pleasure screams and sugar highs. The park was a kid's dream world and we lived spitting distance from it.

The rides on this side of Tyngsboro Road backed up to a row of sandy hills, beyond which was the area we called "the woods." The woods had various trails we used as a shortcut to reach the main streets of our neighborhood. In minutes, we could escape the cacophony of the park for the stillness of tall pine and maple trees. I loved that shift—it made things seem perfect, like everything was available to us. The trails were surrounded by swampy areas where we picked ladies' slipper orchids and ferns and teased garter snakes and frogs with sticks we collected along the way. The disparity of life at the park and life in our houses didn't strike us as strange or unusual. It was all we knew or, for the most part, cared to know.

My uncle's stand was at the end of Lakeview, a stone's throw from the bobby horses. Because it was the only place nearby to get sandwiches, fries, frappes, ice cream, candy apples, drinks and other fast food, the place was well known in the area. (I googled "Tony's by the lake in Dracut" recently and my uncle's stand appeared, facing the lake, with the tag "Next to the carousel was a small restaurant called Tony's. The

restaurant building still exists today and is presently called Sonia's Place.") It helped that my grandmother ran a barroom next door, called "the Paradise," a place where patrons could sit all afternoon, nursing a highball and catching up on the latest gossip from my grandmother, or playing cut-throat poker in the back room at night. Behind the bar was an expanse of pink cemented concrete that we called the Dance Hall, because there once was outdoor dancing there in the summers.

Our house sat across a small side street from the Paradise, full-facing the lake. Tyngsboro Road curled around the lakefront like a tarred ribbon, turning north into Hudson, New Hampshire. My father, who owned a small construction company, built the house on land my grandmother gave him. It sat high up from the road, and old man Salem, a master mason, spent one entire summer building the five-foot grey stone wall all around it, giving the house, a two-story white colonial, a castle-like air. You could reach the house only by walking up various sets of stone stairs starting at street level. We had a little beach area just across the road from the house, which we raked out at the start of every summer, leaving smooth sand that the waves rippled like an underwater dune. Our kitchen, dining and living room windows all looked out onto the lake. When my brothers and I took turns drying the dishes, we could scout out what was going on there. We took the lake views for granted, thinking everyone's house looked out onto watery vistas and a crimson horizon.

Our neighborhood fanned out behind us, in a small tangle of streets where most of my father's brothers and sisters and their kids lived in modest houses. Beyond the streets were pockets of woods and an extensive tawny-colored field, where Farmer Stone raised cows and tended an apple orchard. The neighbors changed only when someone died;

everyone knew everyone else, so we kids had the run of it. No one worried about getting molested or kidnapped; we had neighborhood-wide hide-and-seek games on summer evenings, pick-up baseball games in the field behind the Dodgems, picnics in the cow field and plenty of lazy days sitting on a tree-bench by the lake, staring out at the horizon, eating a box of Uncle Tony's popcorn. Only the seven o'clock whistle, a daily occurrence from the Tyngsboro firehouse, could call us home from our ramblings—it established a neighborhood rhythm. We all knew we'd better be home within ten minutes of that piercing wail. Only my father's blow-a-hole-in-your-eardrum two-fingered whistle could get us home sooner.

The neighborhood was populated with blue-collar workers: carpenters, electricians, plumbers, quarry workers, waitresses, store clerks and janitors. My father and uncle were among a rarified bunch who owned their own business. We got along with most of the neighborhood kids, barring the occasional fistfight over alleged cheating at games or the territories where we played them. There was a variety of neighbors. The Jacques family, who were French, had Leo, who walked funny and sometimes talked nonsense, but was basically a good kid. Doris Pintal, whose family lived directly above us, got polio in the late 1950s. She wasn't sick enough to have to live in an iron lung, but after coming back from a long hospital stay she always walked with a limp. Bobby Boissoneault, who today would be diagnosed with ADHD and doped on Ritalin, was just thought of as a jitterbug, with an attendant motor-mouth. And Stevie Kongioka, who was Polish, had memory and focus problems. The amazing thing was no one thought much about these quirks—I actually never knew what ailments Leo or Stevie may have had. We made adjustments for people, like we did for the meanderings of the lake and its

spreading ponds and falls. So when it was discovered that Uncle Tony was gay (and later Tony's son and my brother Johnny), people just accepted it. If the adults talked about it in private, I wasn't aware of it.

Dracut was tolerant in many ways, but narrow and circumscribed in others. Within a five mile radius of our house, there were nine barrooms (besides the Paradise): Leo's by the Lake, Willowdale Bar, Nick's Happy Hour, Blue Moon, which was also a strip club, the Collingswood Social Club, the Snow Shoe Club, Bergeron's, the Pompeii, and Roxie's. My brother Jeff, a life-long Dracuteer who knows everything about its people and history, said the guy who owned Roxie's was murdered by the Boston mafia, which they knew when they found his body—there were pennies in his eyes. He told me this with a completely straight face.

My parents were smart but uneducated; neither even thought about college, as there was neither precedent nor money for it. Because she was denied such luxuries, my mother made sure I had every lesson available to a young girl: ballet, tap and piano, with attendant Princess-like costumes and recitals, and "drawing by mail" with John Nagy. I sang in the church choir and the chorus at school and became the school piano accompanist in my senior year. When I ended up doing well in school and loving it, my parents sang my praises but never encouraged me to pursue a career; becoming a secretary was considered a choice of high ambition. They always told me they only wanted me to be happy, a cliché that has taken on different meanings for me throughout my life. My brother John and I are the only two people from our extended family who left town to go college; probably less than half of both our high school classes did. For the most part, people from Dracut stayed there and didn't seriously consider living

elsewhere. It never occurred to me not to go away to school, nor did I dream doing so would so dramatically change my idea of happiness. It was at the end of my first year at Boston University when I lost my mother, unexpectedly and violently, when I was eighteen and she was forty-three. I wouldn't come to realize the impact of this loss until much, much later, after I had lived several different lives in several different states and could then connect my repeated reinventions to the influence of my long-gone mother.

We moved into the house on Tyngsboro Road when I was two and I lived there until I left Dracut for Boston—a place I'd been to only once before, to visit the Museum of Science on a class trip. Being surrounded in Dracut by water and woods, amusement rides, sudden bursts of visitors, occasional newsworthy dramas and tragedies, and neighboring, sophisticated Lowell, Dracut was more than dichotomous: it was a unique stew that redefined the melting pot. As a kid, I felt it was my own special playground that had an endearing rootedness and familiarity; as a teen, I thought it was a dull backwater I had to escape from as soon as possible; as an adult, I realize it was unique in its ability to be both familiar and strange, nurturing and stifling. It could be weirder than an episode of *The Twilight Zone* and as ordinary as a blob of tadpoles sitting on the bottom of a pond.

Whatever its quirks, Dracut prepared me for a life of nontraditional and unexpected reinventions. I would become a gal Friday, an IRS functionary, a human resources administrator, a business equipment salesman and marketer, co-owner of a consulting firm, a healthcare attorney, and, finally, a writer. I would marry and divorce and marry again. I would lose my mother at eighteen, become an orphan at thirty-two, never have children myself. I would lose myself often, but, after a struggle, somehow

find another way to go. I would always feel protected, even when I was lost; I would learn not to fashion a box around the things I could or should do. I would be happy, but would always carry around the losses of my youth, like a weight in my hem.

Looking back, Dracut provided the gift of multiplicity. It would become, above all, a place I would always, unwittingly, think of as home and ache for—but, unlike the travelers of old, would never want to return to.

Rosemary's Adventure

In the beginning the love you get is the love that sets.
 Jeanette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Could
 Be Normal?*

I was probably too close to my mother as a child, which made it doubly hard to lose her as early as I did—at eighteen.

She: standing on tiptoe at the crescent cut-out windows in the kitchen door, watching for my father to come home from work.

She: working jigsaw puzzles with my brothers and me on the card table set up in the dining room on snowy evenings.

She: holding hands with my father, surveying the rose garden.

She: gossiping on the phone all afternoon with Mrs. Cabana.

She: pulling a pillow over her head while lying face down on her bed the day the vet came to put our 14-year old dog, Prince, to sleep.

She: sorting through her boxes of veiled hats on Sunday mornings to find the right one.

She: playing the net like a lioness the day we won the women's doubles tennis trophy in Lowell.

She: cocooned in my father's arms in the middle of the kitchen the day her mother died in Mississippi.

She: taking pecan pie and cornbread dressing out of the oven on Thanksgiving.

She: twirling around in her white, rose-bordered square-dancing dress.

She: putting a row of bird seeds between her lips so our parakeet, Blue Boy, could balance on her shoulder and peck them out.

She: retiring to her bedroom with *Gone With the Wind* on certain days, with instructions not to disturb her.

She: Ironing my father's underwear while we watched *As the World Turns*.

She: looking pensive sitting in front of the picture window in my grandmother's living room, a highball glass with ice resting in her palm.

She: smiling, full of life.

~

In the 1950s in Dracut, Mass., there was no kindergarten, no day care center, no scheduled play groups, no Montessori, no Gymboree. I was almost six-and-a-half when I started first grade, my first real break from my mother-centered life. After my two older brothers went off to school and my dad climbed into his truck to go to the house he was building that day, my mother and I spent practically every minute shadowing each other, with me orbiting around her like a minor planet to the sun. We baked snicker doodles, planted hydrangea bushes (she had a passion for flowers), embroidered pillowcases, read *Nancy Drew* mysteries and took walks in the nearby woods. She spent a lot of time on the phone, while I cut out paper dolls, practiced ballet or played with my stuffed animals. We spent every afternoon watching *The Guiding Light* and other soap operas, which she so believed in she would cry when a character died or was sick in the hospital. We'd munch on tuna fish sandwiches and bread-and-butter pickles while visiting these ersatz families. Sometimes we would go visit my Aunt Cecile, my father's sister, who helped run the family barroom after opening up my Uncle Tony's food stand next door.

My mother and I marked time on weekdays until 10:00, when Miss Frances and the Ding Dong School came on. It's hard to imagine such a show now, which began with a close-up of a pudgy female hand ringing an old-fashioned school bell. It was the Mr. Rogers of its day, geared toward toddlers. "Go and get your Mother, I want to talk to her," Miss Francis would cajole, in a low-key, soothing voice, and my mother and I would sit on the hooked rug in our living room (which my mother painstakingly made with wool scraps from outgrown clothes) after we gathered any supplies Miss Frances told us we would need for that day's project.

Miss Frances would look directly into the camera, at close range—a novelty then—talking to us as if she were right there in our living room, the up-close shot of her silvery hair and full cheeks giving her a warmth she may not have had naturally. Although my mother and I were oblivious to it then, I later learned that Frances Rappaport Horwich had a PhD in education from Northwestern and was head of educational programming for NBC, a big job for a woman back in the early '50s. The next thirty minutes were filled with her singing or reading poems, teaching us how to finger paint or blow bubbles through a pipe or how to make peanut butter, banana and lettuce sandwiches. Simple tasks, taught at a slow pace, encouraging us kids to stay quiet and listen, a method that undoubtedly instilled in me a patience I might not otherwise have had.

The format was as varied as Miss Frances' dress: sometimes she wore a plain, checked housedress with a big apron; other times she wore a shiny party dress with a scooped neckline, outlined with a long strand of pearls. In spite of her attire, her chunky figure and elderly hairdo and manner made me think of someone's grandmother. Since my father's mother spent her time tending the barroom or supervising the food at the stand, and my mother's mother still lived in Mississippi, where my mother was raised, Miss Frances was my surrogate grandmother and I idolized her show and the practical things I learned there.

When I finally started school, which lasted all day, coupled with a twenty-minute ride each way on the bus, I revolted at the maternal void. Every morning after breakfast, I would make myself sick—literally, crying and carrying on, and throwing up breakfast, so I could stay home with her. My mother caught on to this immediately and would

simply wipe my mouth with a damp dishrag and nudge me out the door. What I didn't know at the time was that once I turned the corner from my grandmother's barroom towards the bus stop, she would collapse into tears herself. Once I got to school, I was fine; in fact, I loved everything about it: Miss Whooley, my teacher, all the books and crayons, recess and the once-a-week visits from the art and music teachers. That year, I distinctly remember making a huge, people-sized Papier-Mâché chicken in the middle of the classroom, something I realized I couldn't have managed on the hooked rug in the living room, even with Miss Frances' televised help.

Regardless, even though I knew the bus would take me home later that afternoon, I couldn't rationalize the pain of being away from my mother for even part of a day. Nothing helped, not threats of weekends in my room, not spankings, not the lure of special suppers or a new Ginny doll. Once, I remember my parents drove by the Franco-American orphanage in nearby Lowell, and talked in a loud voice about whether the nuns might have some ideas about my morning routine. I crouched down on the floor in the back seat, pretending to be invisible; convinced this would keep me safe. Today I undoubtedly would have been sent for counseling.

This went on until halfway through second grade, when, inexplicably, I stopped the going-away ritual. School became a pleasure, a place where I learned new things every day. I always had enough school friends, but throughout those years, I never got much involved in things that would entail my spending extra time away from home. I didn't go to camp, I had very few overnights, and vacations were always spent with the immediate family.

Although it's been more than fifty years since the days I made my poor mother and myself sick over parting, I still harbor those feelings of unease and vague longing. They pop up unexpectedly, like age spots on my hands, seemingly harmless reminders of the effects of earlier times.

~

Rosemary Makos (née McKee) was a smart, pretty Southerner with great legs and hazel eyes that changed color from green to blue to aqua to grey, according to what she was wearing. Although she was a natural chestnut brunette, she formed a partnership with Miss Clairol in the 1960s and became an almost-platinum blonde, which seemed her natural color, given her fair complexion and light eyebrows from her Scotch, Irish and German heritage. She fell in love with my dark-eyed, curly-dark-haired Massachusetts-bred father over a Ping Pong table at the USO in Jackson, Mississippi during WW II—the stripes on his Air Force uniform promised intelligence and ambition, and his twinkly eyes promised a big heart. She won the game, having quick wrists and whip-like reflexes from years on the girls' basketball team at Magee high school.

“Was Dad annoyed you beat him”? I asked her once in the dressing room, when we were shopping for school clothes, a favorite ritual.

“Oh no, your father never held a grudge if he lost to somebody better. What got under his skin were lucky people, especially if they were lazy, too.”

Their wedding was in the chapel at the Air Base in Jackson. A yellowed newspaper clipping I have says the altar of the Chapel was banked with baskets of gladiolas. Although it probably was no different from thousands of other war-time weddings in 1942, the black-and-white picture of my father carrying her across the chapel

threshold into the sunlight shows two people glowing with life. Her clingy, jersey dress was blue, she told me, the color of forget-me-nots, and she wore a white orchid corsage surrounded by pink rose buds. Their honeymoon was a train trip to Dracut, so my father could show off his bride to his family—something akin to Bambi meeting the bears in the woods. Looking at that faded picture now I search for hints about what would become their history; I see only happiness.

They married on February 1, 1943 and my brother Johnny was born January 15 the following year. Jeff was born in November, two and a half years later, and I arrived on May 28, three years later and one day after my mother's birthday on May 27. Two Geminis with twin personalities. She said I always had to have things my own way—even traveling down the birth canal. But once I arrived, she forgave me most of my flaws (my secretiveness and more than occasional self-centeredness), as I was the natural receptacle for all her unfulfilled girlhood desires. Growing up poor as everyone else in Magee (4.9 square miles located between Jackson and Hattiesburg with fewer than 700 people at the time), there wasn't money for piano or ballet lessons or extra time to allow for singing in the choir. There were daily chores for her and her five siblings, all strictly directed by her mother, Mae Ola Hayes, known to us as Mammy. She wasn't one for life's niceties; she honed in on having good, fresh food in the dining room and clean featherbeds in the bedrooms, the kind you sank down into like a hot dog in a bun. The McKee homestead was on a small plot of land, big enough to grow corn, beans and tomatoes and to raise chickens for weekly protein. The pace didn't change much in Magee. When we visited there in the summers, we repeated my mother's girlhood routine of wheeling a big watermelon in a red wagon up to the ice house, where they'd

throw in big chunks to chill it on the walk home. On Sundays we had to do the scripture readings at Sunday School, because everyone loved to hear our Yankee accents.

My father loved to tell my brothers and me that “Rosie”—a nickname she wouldn’t tolerate from anyone except him—never had a real pair of shoes until she met him. This may have been true, because when I was growing up my mother always made a point to dress beautifully, wearing silk blouses, cashmere sweaters, shantung pants, and veiled hats and white gloves to church. I learned from her to savor the feel of luxurious fabric on skin and to appreciate the way dressing up could make you feel like “a rose in an onion patch”—Southerners are full of such sayings.

It wasn’t until I became an adult that I realized how bold my mother’s decision was, to marry my father only months after their meeting, a Yankee *and* a Catholic who lived over 1500 miles from Magee, more than a day’s drive from the Mason-Dixon Line. She was the baby of her family of three boys and three girls. My Aunt Ruby, the eldest, pretty much raised her, being thirteen years old when my mother was born. Ruby had been married for a few years to my Uncle Snooks (né Lee Alden Holland) and was living in Alexandria, Louisiana. As kids, my brothers and I heard over and over the story of my mother’s wild escapades with “Red,” the motorcycle riding rebel she sneaked out on dates with—before my father. Although she loved my father blindly, I’m sure some part of marrying him was to escape my grandmother’s clutching ways and the smother of small-town Southern life.

I try to imagine what the culture shock must have been when my mother arrived in Dracut for good. Our neighborhood was filled with relatives—my father’s, that is—his mother Blanche Côté, who was French Canadian and tough as Maplewood, her two

sisters, my great-aunts Eva and Alice, and my father's three sisters and two brothers, and a passel of cousins. The Makos clan constituted its own melting pot, as my grandfather, Janos Ekonomakos (later changed to John Makos) was Greek, from a tiny village near Sparta. Mixed with the Cotés, they constituted more of a stew, being, with a few notable exceptions, blunt, unoriginal and unrefined.

Along with being pretty, my mother had a natural grace and a colorful accent that I'm sure mystified and galled the Makoses at the same time. Sometimes when my mother and I visited my grandmother and great aunts, the three of them, smoking Lucky Strikes and drinking high-balls like the patrons in the bar, would dot the conversation with rapid passages of fluent French, which neither my mother nor I could follow a bit. These conversations inevitably were followed with raspy laughter. Consequently, for her first three or four years in Dracut, my mother assuaged the longing she must have felt for her own Mama and Papa and slow-spoken siblings in the South, by focusing rather intensely on her marriage-family, especially my brothers and me. Being the baby of the family, like her, and the only girl, I probably got more than my share of her attention.

My aunt Cecile, my father's closest-in-age-and-spirit sister, was the exception who adored my mother. Aunt Cecile treated us like we were her own kids, spoiling us to the limits my mother would allow while at the same time creating an unshakeable bond of closeness with my mother. Although most of the immediate family would always come to our house for Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter dinners (she was a good cook and they all loved her Southern food), my mother kept a smiling distance from all of them, creating an invisible oasis for us that we could retreat to when the Makoses crowded around us too much. My mother and brothers and I always watched for the

moment when my two great-aunts would retreat to our pink-tiled bathroom for their Bromo-Seltzer purge before sitting back down to vanilla wafer cake and ice cream. As my mother found her own like-minded friends and outside interests over time, I think she came to relish being outside their parochial world, something that wicked into me like a strip of hemp laying in the bottom of a kerosene lamp.

For the first couple of years after they married, my father was in the Air Force, stationed in the Philippines, and my mother stayed in Jackson with my brother—spending a fair amount of time visiting Ruby in Alexandria. She helped Ruby with household chores and they all spoiled Johnny, who was cute and smart, leading to a classic first-born obsession with himself his whole life. My favorite picture from this time is of Johnny in a wastepaper basket on the front stoop, his bald head just making it over the brim. I know there was some jealousy on my father's end for the besotted baby who kidnapped everyone's attention. This is probably why my brother never quite grasped the notion of how fickle the world's attention is.

~

Mostly, my mother taught us how to amuse and take care of ourselves, physically, financially and emotionally and not to feel we had to conform to anyone else's idea of who we should be—just as she learned to do in her new environment. I'm sure she didn't read Emerson, the champion of individualism, but she instinctively lived his philosophy while showering it over us, making sure we understood, in Emerson's words, that the best human relationships require the confident and independent nature of the self-reliant. She made us live it.

We learned discipline the way my mother had from Mammy and Poppy in Magee. When we were five or six and did something wrong, she would make us fetch switches from the apple trees in our yard, which she would then slap against the backs of our legs. If the switches were too small to accomplish the right amount of sting, she'd send us back for thicker ones. When we were older, she and my father would challenge us to decide the appropriate punishment for our misdeeds—like talking-back and lying. My brothers would come up with innocuous things, like no seconds on dessert, while I, always inclined towards the dramatic, proposed being locked in my room for two days with only crackers and water. Whatever our punishments were, they paled next to the unreserved love we felt for her, which provided the real incentive to keep out of trouble the next time.

~

She was killed on a Monday when she was forty-three in a freak accident at home. It was April 15, the day after Easter, when the whole family had come home for the usual holiday feast. I usually say she was killed, as if she were the victim of some horrendous crime. That's the way I think of it. We'll never know exactly what happened. It appears my mother got into her car that morning to go to work at the bank where she was a teller. (She went back to work when my brother Johnny started college, proudly advancing from dishing food in the high school cafeteria to handling a national bank's money.) My father later said she was teasing him that morning at breakfast about what she was going to do to him on the tennis court that evening. Her car, a 1966 white, four-door Mercury, was parked in the one-car garage underneath our house.

A full set of steps led from the back kitchen door down to the basement area that housed a pool table, the washer/dryer and my father's workbench and table-sized saws. A wall separated the basement from the garage, and you turned right at the bottom of the stairs to enter it through a narrow doorway. Dead center in front of the car, set back against the foundation wall sat a big, old-fashioned floor-to-ceiling oil heater, something of an iron tank in those days. Two sets of two-by-four wooden planks were set in front of the boiler, as a barrier between it and the car. To the right of the boiler, lining the wall at a 90 degree angle was a huge, 250-gallon oil tank. On the wall directly across from the boiler stood a double-width cedar closet that my father had, six months before the accident, built for my mother to store our off-season clothes—after years of her pleading for it.

This is what appears to have happened. She dressed for work, pinning on her Easter corsage from the day before. She started the car and realized she forgot something (she often did this). Thinking this would only take a minute, she left the car running, opened the driver's door and leaned left to get out of the front seat, maybe about to put the car in neutral, on the way to park. Somehow in the final push to get out of the car, her right foot missed the brake pedal, landed on the accelerator, and the car shot forward like an arrow from a cross-bow, leaping over the two-by-fours smack into the boiler, thrusting her half-out-of-the-car body against the cedar closet door.

~

I was sleeping in my dorm room at Boston University in the middle of the afternoon that day, taking a nap after studying all morning for my final exams. Suddenly

my father appeared, leaning over me as he sat on the bed. Half asleep, confused, disturbed by the look on his face, I sat up.

“Mommy’s been in an accident.”

“Is she okay?”

“No. She’s dead, baby, she’s dead.”

When I glanced around the room, it looked normal—rumped bed, door to the bathroom wide open in front of me, Lydia and Valerie, my roommates, parked on their beds to my left, open books on their laps. The lights were all on. It may have been raining outside. A blue-uniformed officer stood just outside the doorway, his hands deep in his pockets. He was sandy-haired and young, not much older than me. He was rocking on his heels.

I was very shy then, so it amazed me when I heard the outburst of sobs heaving from my own mouth. My father cocooned me in his arms.

My roommates told me later they’d never heard howls like that before. The rest is a daze of circling my room, tossing clothes and toiletries into a suitcase. I don’t remember saying goodbye to anyone. It was a long ride home in the backseat of a Dracut police car with my father, who was too jangled to drive so the policeman had offered to take him. I remember the back seat seemed extra-wide, like a city cab, and I keened from one side to the other, crossing over my father’s statue-still form, still crying, “What’ll we do, Dad, what’ll we do?”

The picture I can’t erase from my mind is when the police car pulled up into our back yard, my father dropped to his knees, bent over and covered his face in his two hands like he was counting in hide-and-seek, and moaned, “Oh, never again, never

again.” The sky was incredibly blue at home, azure, punctured by white clouds that looked like throngs of sheep. It scared me to see him in such desperate shape, but it shook me out of my own misery and made me think what this could possibly mean to him.

~

My father and brother Jeff (who worked with my dad in his construction company right after high school) were framing a house that morning in nearby Nashua, New Hampshire. Jeff distinctly remembers it was raining hard, because they had only outside work and had to call it quits early, around 10:00. My father said he had some errands to do in town, so Jeff went home before him. He drove right by our house, up the hill to his own place, even though he noticed that the garage door was open, and thought it strange, because my mother would have been at work by then.

“I was haunted for years that I didn’t stop to see what was going on with the door. Maybe I could have saved her.” He told me this only a few years ago and I was stunned that he had held onto this guilt so long. He said my father came home around noon and found her there, pinned in the car. The first thing he saw was the exhaust rolling out the garage door. The car’s nose was leaning up against the boiler, and was wedged so tightly against the cedar closet on one side and the oil tank on the other that he couldn’t get to my mother to pull her out. He ran over to my uncle’s stand and collected half a dozen men to come back with him to lift the car out of the narrow pocket it was jammed into.

The death certificate states the cause of death as “asphyxiation by carbon monoxide/ accident.” In other words, it claims she died of asphyxiation—that she was strangled by her own car. But my brother Jeff is adamant—and says everyone in the

family was—that she couldn’t have died from the car exhaust because the garage door was wide open and she was lying there for three, maybe four hours before my father found her. He says her body was so tightly wedged against the cedar closet that she had to have died upon impact. Whether her bloodstream filled up with carbon monoxide first is anyone’s guess at this point. It’s also curious that the death certificate states the date of death as May 15, 1968, when the actual date was April 15. And the obituary from the Lowell Sun relates how the bank where my mother worked called my father to notify him that she didn’t show up for work that morning. This was a time way before cell phones and there’s no way anyone could have reached him by phone at the job site where he was working.

Later that night, two Dracut policemen came to the house to ask my father questions, making him relive the horrifying day. I sat with them at the Formica table in the kitchen, holding my hand over my father’s. They repeated the same questions, over and over, grilling him as if waiting for him to slip up on the details. It didn’t register with me then that this was routine procedure when a man finds his wife dead at home. I clearly remember finally standing up and telling them to stop, and to leave. I was stunned that the same police force that had been so kind as to drive two hours to Boston and back to collect me from school was now interrogating my broken father as if he were a secret murderer.

For years I always believed in the carbon monoxide theory of death. It was only recently that Jeff told me that that wasn’t possible. Even though the police and autopsy records have most likely been destroyed by now, I have these vague ideas about tracking down the police report, to see what they concluded, and to see if there are pictures—other

than the ones in my mind. Maybe it would help me know what happened. At this point I think I'd rather choose to believe my brother's version of that scene, where she was knocked unconscious at first contact with the closet and never felt or thought a thing. But I'm still haunted by the idea of her being helpless and alone in such a predicament.

~

My mother's two-day wake, lying on satin in an open casket in her Easter finery, marked the end of my childhood and the end of my father's happiness, though I didn't admit to any of it until much later. When I first stood over the casket, I couldn't believe it was her. I touched the marble face and stiff hair and said "it doesn't even look like her." There was a nauseating smell of carnations. My southern aunts and uncles sobbed in the background. The funeral director, kindly, fussed over the hair with his fingers and asked me how it should look, but I knew it really didn't matter.

Jeff tells me our mother's funeral was the second biggest one in Lowell that year (the biggest being for the Malliaros patriarch, the wealthy owner of a well-known men's clothing store). The funeral home director said he had never seen so many flowers—that it took several cars to carry them all to the gravesite. What I remember most about the funeral was the way my father leaned on me in every way and crumpled in sobbing pain when he heard the minister remember her for being a wonderful wife and mother. Two days after the funeral, my father and I put my Aunt Ruby on a plane back to Louisiana and I went back to school, where I took my final exams, accepted my roommates' condolences and began life anew as a motherless daughter. Subconsciously, I think I also decided then not to have children—in spite of haphazard attempts during my fertile

years—as I knew I wouldn’t be able to stand the pain of having something bad happen to them, too. I’m always prepared to accept that something bad can happen at any time.

For years after her death, I had visitations from my mother in the middle of the night; Freud would call it wish fulfillment, but I saw it as something more. I would be awakened in the dark and sense a shadowy presence, sometimes at the foot of the bed and sometimes at the bedside, close to me but not touching. My heart would thump loud enough to wake the dead and I’d sit up, wildly waving my hand in circles in front of me, calling out, “who’s there?” The face was indistinct, but definitely womanly, though she never spoke and disappeared within minutes. Left with a still-pounding heart, I can’t say it was a comforting experience, but I knew it was her and that she was somehow trying to connect with me, but couldn’t figure out how. I do still communicate with her, occasionally, in a wordless, amorphous thought-exchange, like sending smoke signals across a prairie. I believe she recognizes these signals and responds in kind, which comforts me.

~

My brother Johnny keeps this on his foyer table to this day. It’s a photo of my mother, taken by my father in our backyard the day before it happened. She’s wearing her new Easter suit; we were headed for church. It’s sapphire blue, with a white silk blouse underneath and a chiffon scarf tied loosely at the neck. The scarf has zigzags of yellow and blue lines, arranged in an arty pattern. She’s holding a pair of short, white cotton gloves at breast level, like a fingered bouquet. Her white, brimmed hat has a fringe of cob-webby veil pulled down to the tip of her blond bangs, making her look far

more formal than her bright smile suggests. There's a white-with-purple-dots Cattleya orchid pinned to her lapel—my father always bought her and me a corsage at Easter. It was the last day we ever spent with her.

~

Although I feel lucky to have had my mother for as long as I did, and to always think of her as being young and vibrant, dressed in her holiday best, loving me unconditionally, I'm also angry at her abrupt disappearance from my life. In the span of twenty-four hours, I went from being soaked with love to being dried to fine powder.

We almost lost my mother earlier, when I was about twelve. I went on a weekend trip to Washington D.C. with my Girl Scout troop. I didn't want to go, as my mother had just come home from the hospital after having a hysterectomy. Old Dr. Greenstein, our family doctor from Lowell General had told her there was a shadow on an x-ray that looked like a tumor. (The post-op biopsy determined there was no cancer; my guess is her symptoms resulted from early menopause.) I survived being away from home, finding myself agog at the Lincoln Memorial, Smithsonian and the long climb up the inside of the Washington Monument. I stayed with two other girls in a (to me) fancy hotel room, feeling like a real traveler.

My father was to pick me up the day of our return in the parking lot of Sintros' food market, about a ten minute ride from home. The bus arrived about eight, just as the sun was beginning to set. I didn't see my father right off, which was a surprise as he was genetically incapable of ever being late. After fifteen minutes, I walked across the street to a payphone and called home. I left a message on the answering machine in an undoubtedly panicky voice. About forty minutes later as the last of my dinner was

making its way up into my throat, I spotted my father's truck at the traffic light just ahead of the parking lot where I was standing. When he stopped in the lot and jumped down from the driver's seat, I ran to him. He hugged me, saying "I'm sorry, baby," I'm sorry," but he was tense and distracted. My mother had been rushed back to the hospital by ambulance earlier that evening in exquisite pain. She had picked up a staph infection in the hospital, which was racing through her entire system, making her delirious. Seeing her in such dizzying pain the next day on a visit to the hospital, I was not only scared and concerned about her, but acutely aware of how central she was to our lives—our very being. It made me never want to leave home again.

My mother's legacy to me was the gift of knowing that I have been truly loved from the womb—that I am indeed lovable—which has given me an unbreechable self-confidence that has served as a bulwark against the pseudo-loves and selfish flatteries some people have offered me throughout my life. And for that I am grateful, though my heart is permanently altered, as if someone stuck a burr into an artery that used to flow freely.

Blanche's Wake

Old photos are more than mementoes. Lying quietly behind those yellowed facades are years of history that thrust themselves up into your consciousness without warning, like arrow-shaped perennials poking through the garden soil in early spring. Sometimes you don't realize the impact someone has on your life until well after she's nothing more than a fossilized image in a photo or in your mind.

In a photo of my grandmother, one of the monkeys, Bucko, is sitting on her left shoulder, her face closer to his than I ever remember it being to mine. She's standing on the sidewalk in front of Uncle Tony's food stand, clasping the monkey's chain-link leash with both hands, just over her heart. Behind her is the full-length popcorn machine, which I remember loading up with butter on Saturdays in the summer, and to her right is the long Formica counter, where packages of hot dog buns are stacked five-high against the glass guard of the steel grill. The sun is shining and she's got a canoe smile on her face. She's wearing a short-sleeved, cotton print dress that stops halfway down her short, stubby legs. The dress has rickrack edging along the tops of the baggy pockets and is belted by an apron, her usual accessory. Her feet are tucked into ugly, open-toed old-lady shoes, and her brown, slightly wavy hair hangs just below her ears, pushed back from her high forehead and square jaw. Standing in three-quarter profile, you can see her beautiful straight, French nose, which later started to sag and point down at the end.

Uncle Tony, the traveler in the family, brought back two monkeys from Puerto Rico after one of his winter trips there in the 1950s, instead of the usual maracas and broad-brimmed straw hats. They were moustache monkeys, small and brown with extra-long tails, oval faces with dark, close-together eyes and fat triangles of white whiskers

that drooped down the sides of their noses and circled their chins, making them look like wizened old men. When you petted their heads or stroked their tails, they allowed it, but would blast a trio of jungle shrieks if you lingered too long. We named them Bucko and Queenie, and they lived in a big dog house in the shed behind my grandmother's house for a year and a half, until their nose-wrinkling smell and the cost of fresh fruit and vet visits persuaded my uncle to sell them to Benson's Wild Animal Farm in Hudson, New Hampshire. On our many trips to Benson's as kids, my brothers and I loved it when the monkeys would leap at us against the chain link fence when we yelled their names.

My grandmother was French, though to my childhood eyes she had neither *savoir faire* nor *joie de vivre*. Her family immigrated to Lowell, Mass., in the late 1800s, where Blanche was born in 1896. They left a languishing farm in Trois Rivières in Québec to work in the flourishing Boott cotton mills, where all you needed to get a job were two hands and good eyesight.

Her name was Blanche Côté, which is lovely to the ear, but literally means "white side." My two older brothers and I never called her that, of course—we called her Ma Mère (pronounced "Mah Mair," French for "grandmother")—although white side would have been apt, because she was mostly a blank page to us. The family never spoke of their lives in Canada, as it was something of a blunder to talk about the old country and acknowledge its backward ways. Our family lawyer, Charlie Zaroulas, told me once that hard times on the Canadian farm caused forced adoptions and child-giveaways that were not to be spoken of and contributed to pained reticence about family histories.

Ma Mère was an enigma to me growing up, but now I feel perversely close to her, now that she is barely visible in sepia-toned photos. I do know that as a child I did not

want to be like my grandmother, as I saw only the hardness in her—no Proustian madeleines or crocheted afghan throws remind me of her. I wasn't afraid of her, but I didn't particularly like her either. Looking back, though, I have parsed out an undisclosed side to her that completely contradicts my early impressions.

At sixteen Ma Mère married my grandfather, Janos Ekonomakos, freshly arrived from Laconia, Greece—part of Sparta. Janos didn't speak a word of French, she didn't speak a word of Greek, and neither could speak English in complete sentences. Yet in spite of their language handicap, they communicated at some other level, had six children in seven years and stayed together until my grandfather died, at fifty-six, from a burst appendix.

Sometime in the late 1930s Ma Mère and Janos had saved enough money to buy the old Lakeview Inn, which they quickly renamed "Paradise," with no touch of irony. They put up a long wooden sign on a pole outside, which jutted out at a forty-five degree angle to the road, so passing cars couldn't miss it. It was painted sky blue, with a brown and yellow palm tree swaying in a carefree breeze.

Ma Mère ran the barroom while Janos acted out his Greek heritage, sitting all day with a pack of cigarettes at one of the round, wooden bar tables and gossiping with the mostly male patrons in a cloud of congenial smoke. They lived behind the bar in a two-story structure that looked out back onto a pink concrete expanse that in earlier times had been the Dance Hall to couples who waltzed and Charlestoned in the open air to a live local band. Rumor was that the two-room wooden structure at the far end of the Dance Hall was really a flop house, where close dancing and drink could lead people astray. As with many elements of life in Dracut, good was often closely aligned with bad. When I

was growing up, that old shed served many purposes—as a parking spot for my older brother Johnny’s mélange of caged guinea pigs, rabbits and birds, and as a chicken coop for my grandmother’s bantam hens, where we collected fresh eggs for her every day, as well as the temporary home of Bucko and Queenie and assorted stray dogs and cats. One of my favorite oases in the Dance Hall was a small corner up against the back wall of the bar where the tawny grass got very high in the summer. My cousin Gina and I would stand there and bend our ears low to listen for the grasshoppers, cupping them in our hands just before they jumped, so we could feel them scuttle around our palms.

Since my grandfather died before I was born, and I don’t even have a picture of him, I know him only from the oral history that survived him. Everyone agreed that dark-eyed, dark-haired Janos looked like a figure from Greek mythology and carried all the joy of living within him, like Dionysus personified. Meanwhile Ma Mère kept her eye on the cash register and the amount of ice in the whisky.

Although my father built our house across the side street from the barroom and I lived there until I went to college in Boston, I didn’t feel like I ever really knew Ma Mère. She favored my older brother Johnny, who went over her house to watch Robin Hood on TV every Wednesday night. She’d even go to the stand and scoop an ice cream cone for him to bring home. I had no special rituals just with Ma Mère, but I saw her for some period of time every week and she spent most Thanksgivings and Easters eating at our table. Since she acted as a true matriarch for my father’s family, directing her children’s lives, I think it was impossible not to be influenced by her, just breathing in the same air.

Because my grandmother was always a presence in my life, if not a talk-to-every-day character, my memories of her are global. I recall her in scenes rather than in the flesh, as if she's in a continually gliding video in my memory archives. Some of the pictures are vivid and I can zoom in up close, but they're constantly moving, are high up on the screen, and the speakers are turned off. So I have to fill in a lot on my own, which doesn't blunt her impact. She's the overarching link to a time that's been lost to me for decades, and which I'd like to know more about.

She had two sisters, my Aunt Alice and Aunt Eva. All three of them were about five-feet-two with thick middles and chatty personalities, especially when they had had a few drinks. When they dressed up for a rare outing to Lowell, they would carefully apply thick pancake makeup and heavy rouge, even though they all had skin as smooth as ironed sheets. I was told they sang together beautifully, but I saw them more standing in the back chorus of a Gilbert and Sullivan production—the *Mikado*, complete with powdered cheeks, fluttering fans and mysterious miens. The aunts dated Father Morrisette, the Parish priest, whom everyone called “Spike” and who thoroughly enjoyed his whisky, too. I thought nothing of this indiscretion at the time and it seems quaint in light of the recent scandals of the Catholic Church. My impression of the Makos clan in Dracut in the 1950s and 60s was that they lived their lives as they saw fit, not as was expected of them. We kids were taught to respect and not judge the activities of grownups, so we didn't think it strange that Father Spike was close to our aunts and that he occasionally haunted the barroom, like everyone else.

The tactile memories I have of Ma Mère during that time usually don't focus on her, but on the things around her, particularly at the bar, where we all spent a lot of time.

As soon as you walked in, there was a long pin-ball type machine where you slid a hockey-puck disc down a long alley into electronic bowling pins. I loved the za-zing sound it made when you threw a strike. There was a continuous buzz of high-pitched chatter spilling out the door—a legacy from Janos, perhaps. And there was always a haze of lighted Pall Malls or Lucky Strikes and the tinkling of ice cubes in palmed glasses—though during the day Ma Mère usually drank only tonic water. She organized nightly card games in a back room of the bar, where locals played serious poker and canasta. According to my brother Jeff, who played there as a teen and became as addicted to cards as Ma Mère, she would stand at the head of the room before play began and remind everyone: “no spitting, no cheating and no fighting at the table—play nice.” Violators would have to “take it out to the Dance Hall.” Not many people questioned her when she arched her eyebrows; she was nothing if not imperious, whether from being the keeper of the till or the guardian of everyone’s liquor-soaked secrets. Sometimes she would join in a game—she was a champion card-counter—but she hated to lose and would walk around the rest of the night with a “sour puss” if she did—not good for business. She was a typical French matriarch, in control of everything, and I distinctly remember one of her favorite sayings that she saved for the end of arguments: “Oh, for Chripe’s sake, it’s not the same thing at all.”

We kids were always welcome at the bar, where my Aunt Cecile made drinks and cleaned up. She was the oldest of the Makos siblings, and my father and I were her favorites. I didn’t think of her as unhappy at the time, but when she was a young girl she was sent by my grandmother to a nearby French convent for over a year, a common rite for Catholic girls back then. When she came home after refusing to take vows, she lived

alone, in a small house behind the stand, until she met her “chum” Mary, with whom she spent the rest of her life. They escaped Dracut to a house she and Mary bought in Pelham, New Hampshire, where they lived with their pet sheep, Mark.

Ma Mère and Tony ran the family businesses, so Cecile had to take orders from them, which probably rubbed against her independent spirit. Whenever any of my family ate at the stand, she wouldn’t take money from us, unless Tony was on site. At the bar she would let me keep the tips when I helped clear the tables and encouraged me afterwards to practice my tap routines on the tabletops, because I loved the thunking sound of the metal on thick wood. Then I would sit at the curved polished bar, like the grownups, and drink Shirley Temples she made me, with extra cherries, a secret we kept from Ma Mère. If I ever longed for a particular game or doll, I only had to mention it to Aunt Cecile and it would appear at the next birthday or gift-holiday.

One of my more close-up mind-videos of Ma Mère was making taffy apples, which my uncle’s stand was noted for. She commissioned my brothers and me to help. There was a long corridor that ran from the back of the stand into my grandmother’s kitchen. A big gas stove sat in a nook about halfway between the two areas. On those days, she would plant herself on a tall backless stool where the corridor began at the stand, silent as a Buddha, pretending to read the paper, but keeping her darting brown eyes on operations. I could never forget the dented cooper pot, bigger than my outstretched arms, where the red-dyed sugar and corn syrup were boiled. We had to take turns stirring constantly with a wooden spoon, so the sugar wouldn’t crystalize. Every fifteen minutes she would holler down the corridor, “ça va”—okay there?” To which we would answer, together, “Oui, ça va, Ma Mère.” When we thought the mixture was cool

enough, one of us would dash to her chair and ask her to test the bubbling red mass. She would stir the syrup several times and then lift the coated spoon and scrutinize it, maybe touch it with her little finger—she didn't use a thermometer—sometimes stirring again, increasing the heat. Once she nodded, we went to work. Having already stuck the Popsicle sticks into the bottoms of the Macintoshes, we plunged and twirled the apples into the taffy—one, two to three seconds each—and finally laid them, gleaming like patent leather, on plates of shredded coconut, coating the tops and sides. We felt important and grown-up to be part of this operation. If we did a good job, Ma Mère would let us drip the dregs of taffy onto waxed paper, making a sugar-daddy blob to suck on the rest of the day.

Probably from her farm background, Ma Mère always liked animals, but she doted on her dog, Beauty, a sweet-mannered bulldog that lived to be twelve or thirteen, which was ancient back then. I remember she always spoke softly to the dog in French: “Viens ‘ci, ‘lors,” a bastardization of “so come here,” and “Que c’est ci veux, ma choux” meaning “What do you want, Sweetie?” Beauty was more like a human friend to her, sharing a spot on her old beige coach.

One day I was hunting grasshoppers in the Dance Hall grass while my brothers were chalking pictures on the concrete. Beauty was bouncing around beside me. Ma Mère came out of the back of the house, walked over to the shed and scooped up a bantam from its nest. She carried it over to a stump near my spot, carefully stretched its neck across the wood and chopped its head off in one clean whack with her hatchet. Then she smoothed her hands on her apron while the chicken hopped around spurting blood from its leveled neck like an upside down faucet. Beauty yelped at the sight and

ran back to the shed while I simply stared at the chicken, too stunned to speak. We had never hurt an animal; we had solemn funerals for our countless dogs and cats when they died. Looking back, caring for an animal one minute and lopping off its head for food the next was part of the same cycle for a farm family. But at the time I couldn't reconcile the two.

This past summer, while sorting through boxes of old photos with my husband, I found three of Ma Mère. The first is the one with Bucko and Queenie by the stand. The next one is a picture of her and my father in front of what looks like a train station. He's in his Air Force uniform, carrying a small leather satchel in his right hand. She is decked out in a stylish, form-fitting wool coat with a large fur collar. She's wearing a hat that looks like a giant clam shell that forms a kind of halo over her head. There's a stiff bow on top, probably leather, with long ties and a fluff of netting hanging down from the bow. She's wearing a double strand of pearls and big pearl earrings (my eyes widen seeing these—not part of her barroom uniform). My father has his left arm around her back, but she's holding a purse in front of her with both hands, like the Queen of England. Although she's turned slightly towards my father, she's looking past him, and grinning like she's enjoying a joke someone just told her. It's impossible to tell if she's happy because he's coming or going.

The last picture is of her and Tony—always her favorite child—and the only one who inherited anything from her substantial estate. They're sitting in what looks like an upscale public bar with wood paneling and framed photos lining the walls behind them. The liquor bottles are encased in glass-fronted cabinets. I can see a piano off to the side that has potted areca palms around it. Tony wears a suit and tie. She has on a short

sleeved flowered dress, but she's wearing a heart-shaped pendant on a heavy chain and big sparkly earrings (I never saw those!). Her hair is swept back in curvy waves, showing off the broad high forehead, high cheekbones and square jaw, which I see are very like my own. They're each holding a glass of clear liquid—no ice—and she has a lit cigarette poised between her index and middle fingers. I notice how long and graceful her fingers are. A fringed shawl is casually draped across her lap, along with a small evening bag. Here again, she's smiling. When I think of Ma Mère, I don't see smiles; I see no-nonsense activity. It makes me wonder how much of Ma Mère's secret life was happy. Maybe on her wedding day to Janos, as a child in the bustling city of Lowell, tending to her beloved pets, winning at cards, singing with Alice and Eva.

If she had happy moments, she also had many disappointments. Uncle Tony married Aunt Diane in Italy, during the war, but divorced her after realizing he preferred men and went on to have a succession of hunky young men working for him at the stand. He helped raise the two daughters of his favorite paramour, a man who openly rejected his wife for a life with Tony. Tony's own son, cousin Chris, is gay. He became a semi-famous photographer for Andy Warhol in the '70s, but also became enamored of drugs. For years, Tony also ran a side business as a bookie, allegedly palling around with low level mobsters from Boston. Aunt Cecile never took final vows in the convent, then dedicated herself to her friend Mary. Homosexuality obviously was in our genetic makeup, and although the family didn't openly criticize it, they didn't celebrate it either.

My Aunt Rose was pretty, but had epilepsy and was slow; she also had boyfriends after she married my Uncle Ray. My uncle George, who was so like Janos—charmingly lazy and gossipy—worked as a janitor at my elementary school and divorced his first

wife after only two years of marriage. My aunt Alice married a drunk who treated her badly. Then there was my father, the baby of the family, whom Ma Mère told she had tried to abort with a coat hanger because they couldn't afford any more mouths to feed. Although he was a successful builder and a devoted family man, he never felt he lived up to her expectations, if he even knew what they were. Whatever Ma Mère thought of how her children turned out, I never had any sense that she did anything but accept them as they were. No matter the scandal, she was always there, an anchor as rooted to her family as the lakes and woods were to the place her immigrant parents landed.

She spent her life focused on making money. My father said she always kept a lot of cash in a black safety deposit box and wouldn't hesitate to dip into it for a loan for his business—with interest, of course. Yet she let my Uncle Tony influence her every move, especially as she got older.

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Ma Mère died in 1970, at seventy-two, from pancreatic cancer, possibly a result of worry over business matters or other unspoken maladies, or maybe too many years of smoking unfiltered cigarettes and eating greasy food from the stand. Her head for figures led to her amassing an impressive portfolio of blue chip stocks worth millions—all of which went to Tony. My father never got over the fact that she didn't even mention him in her will, yet he was named executor and had to referee petty squabbles among my aunts over her jewelry and fur coat.

When she died, I was twenty-one, a junior in college in Boston. To this day I am perplexed that I have no memory at all of her funeral—even whether I went to it. My brother Johnny can't remember either (he was living in Western Mass at the time), and

my brother Jeff (the only one who stayed in Dracut) says he was a pall bearer, but that's the extent of his memory of it. My father told me at the time that the end was dramatic, with an ambulance racing at full siren from the bar to Lowell General Hospital, although there was nothing to be done at that late stage. I imagine the wake was after the custom then (and still is today): two days of open white-satin-lined casket viewing, nauseating sprays of carnations and lilies, and rosary beads tucked into her folded, arthritic hands.

I would give a lot to be able to take Ma Mère to dinner next week, someplace fancy, in Boston, so we could wear out best jewelry and jazzy hats. And she could tell me her story, which has to have some elements of Greek Tragedy—and maybe French farce, too. Did she work as a mill girl in Lowell? Did she love Janos? Was meeting him a “coup de foudre,” a thunderclap of love at first sight—or was it merely an escape from her immigrant parents? What were her parents like—I only know that their names were Oliva Levèsque and Frank Coté. And what was she doing in that nightclub with Tony?

What I think would be confirmed to me is the number of things I inherited from Ma Mère: my wavy brown hair, good skin and high forehead; my love of animals; my work ethic and dislike of sentimentality; my ear for language; my insistence on making my own money and not depending on a man; my practical, clear-eyed French matriarchal view of the world. I might even tell her I've picked up her sour disposition when I lose at competitive games, my tendency to watch pennies too closely sometimes, and my often abrupt, no-nonsense way of dealing with people, even those I love.

There's a French word, *sillage*, which is pronounced “sea-ahhge” and literally means “wake,” like the track of waves left by a ship moving through the water. The French use it to refer to the scent of a woman's perfume after she's left a room. The

older I get, the more I feel that Ma Mère's *sillage*, unseen and unfelt while she plowed through my life, still ripples in my veins, informing my choices and helping me know who I am.

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The last photo is a crinkle-edged Polaroid of me with Bucko, taken in front of the barroom on the same day my grandmother posed with him in front of the stand. I look about six and am squatting on the sidewalk. The monkey is on the ground facing me, his leash curled in a heap at my side. He's standing on his hind legs, his long tail drooping behind him. The sun is shining and I'm laughing so hard my eyes are slits, as if he's tickling me with his paws. Just at the top right edge of the picture I can see Ma Mère's ankles and ugly shoes. I like to think she's the one making me laugh, telling me from a distance to be a good girl and smile pretty for the camera.

Connoisseurs of Loss

I tell you this
 To break your heart,
 By which I mean only
 That it break open and never close again
 To the rest of the world.
 Mary Oliver, "Lead"

One thing I loved about summer growing up was going to St. Mary's by the Lake Church on Sunday with my dad. He was a cradle Catholic, who went to confession and Mass every week, always made us say grace before a meal, never touched meat on Fridays, and kept a string of black rosary beads on a silver chain in the top drawer of his night stand. He never swore in front of us kids; my two brothers told me he could let loose with a "Goddamn" when something got under his skin, but I never heard it. He even knelt down every night on the beige shag rug by his bed to say his prayers while he fingered the rosary, until the arthritis in his knees forced him to stop. For as long as I remember him doing this, he said the Lord's Prayer in French. I could say it, too, by heart:

Notre père, qui est aux cieux,
 Que votre nom sois sanctifié

My father said I had a good ear; I know I loved the sound and rhythm of the French words, all words, really. When I recited the Notre Père, though, I had to leave off the ending we said at my church, "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever." My mother was a Protestant from Mississippi and her family thought it was bad enough she was marrying "that damn Yankee" she met in Jackson during the war—so my mother tried to smooth things out by getting my dad to agree, dragging his boots, that we kids would be brought up Methodist. The fact that he allowed that was proof of how

much he loved her. She did allow the occasional visit to St. Mary's, but only in the summer when there wasn't Sunday School at our church. She always told me she and my father had a partnership as well as a marriage, which meant that "we always give each other a hundred percent." This giving-in sometimes was probably helped along by the fact that all of my father's five brothers and sisters, as well as his parents, of course, were all Catholics and they lived within a couple of miles of us, and three of them lived just up the hill from our house. It was like growing up in a coven of Catholics. Maybe that's why only one of us kids could go on any Sunday, to make sure there weren't any group conversions.

The church had a wide front, with two peaks, a smaller one over the doors and another one very high up, above the first one. My builder-dad told me it was an A-frame design. It looked like a Swiss chalet I had seen in one of my geography books, but without the snow and the balcony. It was made of pink cement with white trim and was walking distance from our house, across from the circular spot where Mr. Levesque, our bus driver—who was a dead ringer for Jackie Gleason—picked us up for school. The double doors weren't red, like most other churches, but were left their natural wood color—maybe because we lived right on Lake Mascuppic and were surrounded by woods and fields, or maybe because the pink and red would really clash. We could get there in about three minutes in the car, but mostly we walked.

The minute we entered St. Mary's vestibule, all the smells would hit me: burnt wax, old pine, faded lilies—usually mixed with old lady perfume—and the best smell of all, the incense. The drama began when my dad put his left hand on the end of a pew, did a half-bow, and made the sign of the cross with his right hand before moving in and

patting the spot where I was supposed to sit. My favorite part of the whole service was when Father Morrisette (known as “Spike” to my family) swished down the aisle swinging a beautiful gold censer that puffed out clouds of grey smoke like a dragon, which smelled both smoky and sweet, like barbecue.

He himself looked like a giant bell, the way the stiff satin chasuble, or maybe the surplice, that he wore (I loved the names of things there) fanned out from under his arms. And the tall hat he wore (my brothers called it the “Mighty Mitre,” though not in front of my dad) made a nice line to the full bottom of the robe. All the while, he’d be mumbling *pater noster, in spiritu sancto* and other Latin phrases, which just added to the wonderful mysterious drama. The congregation was very active, standing, sitting, kneeling, making the sign of the cross as they entered and left the pews and dangling their rosaries in front of them as they knelt, their beads clicking as they touched the wooden backs.

I loved to watch all this, but I never mimicked any of the activities, as I would have felt I was betraying my own religion, not to mention my mother, whom I would never do anything to hurt in even a small way. Plus, it made me feel kind of special that I could just sit in my pew the whole time, taking everything in, but not being a part of the whole business, like watching my parents’ parties from the upstairs landing.

The church was small inside, although the aisle going up to the pulpit seemed to go on for miles. When communion started and people had to walk up to the railing in front to get their slivery wafers, it took forever. I knew when the procession was going to start by the bell-ringing that started right before. First, the altar boys brought the priest the gold containers that held the wine and the wafers. Then the priest turned his back on

us and took communion first. I always wondered why so much ritual happened out of the congregation's eyesight, like a miracle, or a satiny shield against criticism.

As soon as the bells started, I knew people would get up from the pews and make their slow way to Father Spike. Sometimes the bells rang only once, other times more than once, in a timed series. Somehow people knew what the different sequences meant, so that they would stand at certain rings, kneel at others and sit at still others. I thought it must be like a kind of Catholic dog whistle, where only they could hear the right ring. Someone would sing a solo from the balcony and it would take a lot of will power for me, a soloist in my church's choir, not to swivel my head around to watch. I was usually preoccupied with looking at the stained glass windows with the Stations of the Cross on them. It amazed me how the artists could get such detail in the faces and animals with cut pieces of glass. The colors were so vivid, the color of sky and sun and blood—nothing wimpy, which I liked. I was usually the only one who didn't go up to take communion and walk back with my hands in an upside-down vee.

Everything at the Mass except the Notre Pere was said in Latin, which I found had a nice, soft rhythm and made me calm. The priest never hurried the syllables, but accented each one, drawing the words out, like when you're speaking to someone who's hard of hearing. When I first started going, I asked my father what the Latin meant, especially when the congregation responded to something the priest said. "I don't know, sweetie," he would say, smiling, "that's just what we say at that point." Whether he actually knew and didn't want to bother explaining it, I don't know. Being the youngest of three and the only girl, I was happy just to be there alone with him, letting the garble of words float around me.

We'd usually go to the 7:00 a.m. Mass—everyone in my family was an early riser. And the service was done at 7:30, before it got anywhere near the heat of the day. The Sunday schedule at the Centralville Methodist Church, where I usually went, would start at 9:30 with Sunday school and end at 12:00, after the regular service. Then my mother would have to stand out in the church yard in her flowered hat and white gloves and yak with big-boned Mrs. Knudson, about the upcoming church supper, grey-haired Mrs. Ingalls about our choir practice for the following week, and with chatty Mrs. Thulia, who had eight kids in various grades, about the latest gossip. We wouldn't even start for home until 12:30, and as soon as we got there I had to start peeling potatoes and carrots for the eye-of-the-round roast that we always had on Sundays. The entire day was pretty much shot before it started.

Our own church, Centralville Methodist, was plain red brick and homey, the most colorful thing being the altar cloths—which could be deep purple, green, yellow or white, depending on the religious season—and the altarpiece flowers of mums, carnations and lilies, often donated in honor or in memory of someone. We had stained glass windows, but they seemed powder-puff in comparison to the fiery glass of St. Mary's. The best part of our service was the singing—those hymns are imprinted on my brain like sheet music, and my brothers and I sang in the choir from the time we were five or six, my mother nodding her head tensely in time with each note until we finished our solos. The worst part was enduring the sermons, which unfortunately weren't in Latin, and went on for at least half an hour. And since our minister knew every parishioner and had visited you at your house even, you had to at least pretend to be interested when his gaze paused at your face.

Our church, with its heavy schedule of monthly suppers, children's plays, weekly choir rehearsals and Sunday school, gave my mother and us kids a ready-made community and a sense of meaning beyond ourselves, in a way my father's family couldn't even approach.

After Mass at St. Mary's, my dad and I would go to the Eat-a-Donut shop in Lowell, where we'd buy cinnamon-sugar donuts and jelly-filled crullers that were still warm from the oven. The marshmallow crèmes weren't bad, either. When we got home, I'd sit on the hooked rug in the living room, froggy style, with the Sunday funnies spread out in front of me. My dad would sprawl on the couch to read the sports section and local news while I'd eat one donut—my allotment—as the whole family would have a real breakfast later, with eggs and grits and home-made buttermilk biscuits.

~

The phone wakes me up on a Friday morning in April, 1982, the end of my first year in law school.

"Where the hell have you been? We've been trying to reach you since 6:00 last night." It's my brother Johnny, calling from Ft. Lauderdale.

I'd been at my estranged husband's house in Princeton until around 1:30 in the morning, working out the details of our property settlement.

"Look, I don't want to worry you, but Dad's having quadruple bypass surgery this morning at eight."

I'm fully awake in a flash, the way you are when a crack of thunder rips through the house on a hot July night. He sounds calm, but this is the first I've heard about heart problems, never mind major surgery.

"Dad didn't want to even tell you until it was all over, because he knew you'd want to come down here and you're in the middle of studying for your finals and all." A small pause. "I was with him last night. He's okay, really. They do bypass surgery so often now, it's practically routine." My father had moved to Florida, near my brother in Ft. Lauderdale, when he retired several years before.

I look around the room. My clothes are in a heap from hastily undressing after the emotional session with my almost ex-husband, Jerry. Although we'd been separated for almost a year, we still cared about each other and had continued to see each other sporadically. I wore my wedding ring at school, not wanting anyone to think I was available. Only recently, we had decided to make a clean break, and I started divorce proceedings. Law books are lying everywhere, half-open. Before I can begin to sort my feelings, my brother goes on.

"Dad wants you to call him at 8:00. He wants to talk to you before they take him to surgery. They'll be doing pre-op tests before that, but he'll be back in the room by then. He's expecting your call."

He fills me in on the details. The decision to operate was made quickly. For the past few weeks, my father, who had always been a very active sixty-two—twice weekly tennis, daily bike riding and walks along the beach—suddenly found himself short of breath after even mild exercise. After a particularly bad episode, he called Johnny, who insisted on taking him to the hospital. They slapped him in a bed and scheduled the

surgery for the next day—today. The cardiologist couldn't believe he was still alive, his arteries were so clogged.

I listen, angry I didn't know about this sooner, angry at Jerry for wanting to get together last night when they were trying to reach me, angry at my father for living thousands of miles away.

I end with what seems an inadequate sign-off. "Okay, I'll call you later."

At 8:00 I dial the hospital's number and ask for room 432. An unfamiliar voice answers.

"Is this the daughter?"

"Yes. Who's this?"

"This is Dr. Epstein. Your father just had a heart attack. We're trying to revive him now—we're doing everything we can."

I hear the wheezing of machinery in the background, clusters of voices, low and methodical, and things being wheeled around at a quick pace on hard tile. My mind sticks on pause. Then I hear myself saying, "Does this mean he won't be having the surgery today?"

Even more incredible, the doctor responds evenly, "No, I don't think he will."

Suddenly, I think of Johnny, who doesn't know what's going on.

More inanities, all that I'm capable of. "I'm sorry, doctor, but I have to go so I can call my brother. He'll want to come right down to see my father."

Without waiting for a response, I hang up and dial Johnny's number. Tom, his long-time lover and business partner, answers. I tell him what's happened, and we snap into a plan. He and John will go to the hospital, while I drive to the airport to catch the

first plane out of Philly to Ft. Lauderdale. I agree to call their office as soon as I get to the airport, to let them know when and where to pick me up.

We say goodbye and I try to organize myself. I'm still in that state of semi-shock where my mind is leap-frogging ahead of my emotions because arrangements have to be made, and I'm the only one who can do them. I call one of my classmates, asking her to tell Professor Stein I won't be doing my moot court argument scheduled for later in the day. I call Jerry, who'd always liked my father and is upset by the news. He volunteers to do whatever I need him to do. I ask a neighbor to take care of my cat for a few days. I call my best friend, Joan, in Rhode Island, for moral support. The busywork done, I start downstairs to the bathroom, stumbling and falling down a couple of steps. In the shower, I keep dropping the soap. All the while, I'm telling myself, "I'm in control."

A strange thing happens as I'm driving down 295 on my way to the airport. I'm feeling okay, listening to the radio, concentrating on the traffic, when seemingly out of nowhere I feel a hot prick of emotion, like someone stubbed a cigarette out on my left temple. Then I start crying, hard, wiping my eyes and nose with my sleeve, embarrassed to be seen like this by strangers driving next to me.

Later I found out that that was just about the moment when my brother, sitting outside Room 432, told the doctors to stop all artificial support, as my father's brain waves on the EEG were completely flat.

I get to the airport, rush to the head of the line and get a seat on the next Delta flight out. It leaves in half an hour. I leave the ticket area and go to a pay phone to call my brother's office. His secretary, who is Tom's sister, relays a message—*don't get on the plane, but wait for John to call back*—she knows nothing else about what's

happening. It's funny how you can deceive yourself when needed. I know the message doesn't sound promising, but I'm not ready to believe I won't see my father again. I go the Ladies Room, head into a stall, shut the door, and cry, noiselessly, until I hear myself being paged on the overhead speaker.

I pull myself together and speed-walk across the grey carpeting to Delta's service counter, where there's a white courtesy phone. It's Jerry. He says, simply, "Oh Babe, he's dead."

Then he's saying something else, but I can't focus on it. Standing there in the middle of the airport terminal, listening to my soon-to-be ex-husband tell me my father's dead, I feel diminished, like a free-floating mote, drifting upward. I stare straight ahead, seeing nothing. Curiously, though, I'm acutely aware of the tremendous hubbub around me, the noise of passengers scurrying to their planes, suitcases scuffling behind them, babies crying, voices jangling, other pages blaring overhead. But I'm outside it, as if wrapped in invisible paper, as I stand there, tearless, the phone poised on my right ear, the voice on the other end so very far away.

Jerry picked me up at the airport and later accompanied me on the long drive back to Dracut for the funeral. Everyone but my brothers thought we were still a couple. When we pulled into the parking lot of Ouellette's Funeral Home in Lowell, where my mother's wake had been, I refused to get out of the car.

"I'm not going in there." I told Jerry when he came around to open my door.

"Of course you are. Your father's waiting for you."

“No, and you can’t make me.” Ten minutes or so passed. Silently. It was overcast, chilly and threatening rain, typical April weather in New England. I realized I was being a jerk, but I couldn’t help myself.

After much wrangling, my brother Johnny and I had convinced Jeff not to have an open casket—damn that tradition—as we had with our mother. But I insisted I had to see my father before the casket was closed. I don’t think I would have believed he actually was dead unless I saw for myself. My good friend, Joan, and her husband, Rich, pulled up next to us. When I saw her, I got out of the car, but kept repeating to all of them that I couldn’t go in there. She just nodded, rubbed my arm for a while, then she and Rich said they would see me inside, and walked in the back entrance, leaving me and Jerry alone. After about twenty more minutes, I followed. When I saw my father, lying in that shiny box in an unc customary white shirt and tie, the floodgate burst as I kneeled beside him. I touched the bruise on the right side of his forehead. The hospital staff told Johnny that my father had sat on the edge of his bed that morning, after his shower, to put his socks on, and just suddenly keeled over, making a bee line for the tile floor, smacking his head on landing. During the wake, we placed an 8 x 10 photo of our smiling dad on top of the casket, which made the whole affair bearable. So natural, in fact, thinking of him as he was in that photo, when we all gathered to head out for supper before the seven-to-nine p.m. viewing hours, I looked around and said, “Hey, wait, where’s Dad?”

After burying him beside my mother, I came back to New Jersey, got my divorce from Jerry, and finished law school. Life stumbled on. Sometime later, I fell in love again and remarried. And life perked up.

My father always thought he was ugly, in spite of his twinkly brown eyes, soft smile and thick head of wavy black hair. He was a semi-professional boxer in his early twenties and worked at keeping his body toned and strong. I remember him exercising at least every other day on the hooked rug in the living room, wearing his white BVDs and undershirt, clowning around afterwards by letting us take Polaroids of him in exaggerated body builder poses. I'm sure he abandoned that effort because he didn't have even a hint of the required kill instinct. He was generous to everyone, the first to volunteer to pick up a package at the post office, help someone move furniture, drive someone to an appointment, or spring for the bill at a restaurant. I think this was his way of dealing with his feelings of physical inadequacy.

Once he got his driver's license, my father acted as my grandfather's chauffeur, taking him to the Greek social clubs and coffee houses in Lowell, where my grandfather was a fixture until the Paradise, the family barroom, opened. One time when we were kids, my father told us that my grandfather, in a spirit of matrimonial generosity, had asked Ma Mère to go with him, which she happily did, putting on a party dress and carrying a purse. But he spent all his time there gossiping with his cronies, as usual; my father said she never went again—he winked at us as he said this.

Although he was always industrious, I don't think my father's ambition was really stirred until he met my mother. He was still an apprentice carpenter when they were newlyweds in Dracut. But within a year, with a loan from my grandmother, he started Makos and Dixon Construction with a co-worker and by the mid '50s, he had split with Dixon and managed up to three crews himself, going back and forth among jobs, supervising the work. The baby boom had exploded the need for new housing and my

father prospered in the cash-driven business. There always seemed to be money for nice clothes, new cars and summer vacations in New Hampshire and Vermont. The best thing about being self-employed, though, was that in the summer my father often came home in the middle of the afternoon, unexpectedly, announcing we were all going to the zoo.

When I think of my father, I think with my body, as he was very physically demonstrative. He and my mother weren't shy about hugging and kissing each other in front of us kids and he reacted to any kid-drama with a wrap of his muscled arms and big, soft hands. My mother gave him a manicure each week, with clear polish, and at night he always used hand cream, as he didn't want his work to let him lapse into having "crud hands." When I was little and we watched TV together in the living room, I would lie on the couch with my feet in his lap and he would massage them for hours.

His other passions, besides his family, were music and comedy. He was always whistling, especially while working on a project. And I think he may have invented singing in the shower, which he did often and with abandon. Since he never closed the bathroom door—something my brothers and I thought was normal—no one could escape his hearty baritone. One of his favorite singing acts was to put on Al Jolson records and sing along on his knees to "Mammy," his open palms entreating the sky to listen. He also loved puns and word-plays. I can't count how many times he said we were having fish for dinner on Friday, "just for the Halibut." He would look at my sideways when he said this, to make sure I got it.

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After he retired and relocated to Florida (leaving his business to my brother Jeff), my father used to call me every Saturday morning after I started law school in 1981.

“Just calling to shoot the breeze,” he’d start the conversation.

“How’re things in sunny Florida, Dad?”

“Loving the sunshine, but missing you.”

Indians, who by custom weren’t inclined to overexplain things, thought talking on the telephone was a function of “whispering spirits.” I have a recurring dream now about my father where I’m trying to reach him on the phone. I’m holding my iPhone in my hand, but I can’t remember his number and it’s not listed in my contacts. And I’m distraught, so frustrated and angry with myself for losing track of it. Befuddled, I run around the yard in our Dracut house, yelling that I can’t find him. “Where is he? Where’s my father?” Usually it’s my husband I’m addressing, but sometimes my brother Johnny. Unlike my mother, my father has never visited me at the bedside. Maybe he was waiting for me to call *him* for a change.

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The first year after my mother’s death, I closed my father out of my internal life. I still went home from school every weekend and cooked and cleaned house for him, but on the ride back to Boston, I would be silent pretty much the whole way. For years afterward, he would tease me about my “silent Buddha days,” asking me to explain what that was about. I can’t explain it even now, other than to say we each grieve in our own way and grief is almost always mixed with anger.

I clearly remember riding in the car a few days after the funeral. My father was driving the station wagon, with me sitting in the middle and my Aunt Ruby (my mother’s

sister) in the passenger seat. He was talking about taking her to the airport in two days and dropping me off at school on the way back.

“Oh, Dad, I can’t go back there,” I sniffled, trying not to make a scene with my aunt in the car. “I want to stay home with you.”

My aunt turned to the window; I could see her biting her lip in the window’s reflection.

“Don’t be silly, of course you’ll go back to school,” my father said, putting his hand on my knee. “Your mother was so proud of you. You’d be letting her down.”

I remember thinking I couldn’t fight them both, although the thought of returning to my dorm room was devastating. At the same time, though, I was worried, selfishly, about being sucked back to Dracut to take care of my father forever. I think I was angry that I felt I had to consider that choice, although he never even hinted at it—in fact, he never would have, even if his life depended on it. Only now do I realize how brave he was, how much he must have missed me—me being the closest thing he had to my mother from that moment on—and how hard he worked to be independent and not make me feel I had to sacrifice my life for him. The next year he went on a group trip to Europe (a first, for him) bringing me back a lovely set of cameo bracelet, ring and earrings from Rome. The next year he bought a small camper and drove to Florida for the winter.

Soon after, he spent the entire winter in Mexico—Puerto Vallarta—driving the camper all the way, which I found so admirable. I visited him for a week there, taking time off from my job. One night we both ate a roasted chicken in the camper, bought from a roadside stand my father had been to before. Two days later I was so sick I was

hospitalized, needing a full day and a half of intravenous feeding from the dire dehydration the “chicken bug” caused. My father was unaffected, as his “cast iron stomach” was inured to the local cuisine after having spent two months there. Puerto Vallarta was still rather backward at that time and I was admitted to a maternity hospital—the closest one to where my hotel was—that was largely open-aired, and full of flies that liked to scud along my tubing. My dad would want to stay by my bedside all day, but I insisted he go play tennis or ride his bike, as I was fine and would sleep most of the time anyway. Actually I was petrified, because no one spoke English, and I didn’t dare fall asleep, as I was afraid if I did, the nurses would forget to check my fluid bag and I’d get an air embolus in the fluid line. Once I was discharged, we played tennis every day and walked about the town square at night listening to the Mariachi bands. I missed him terribly when I went back to work.

So often now, when I think about the years he lived without my mother, having only the most superficial relationships with women (occasional sex, mainly), with me far away in New York and New Jersey, I cry for him, for his absolute, undeserved, unrelenting heart break, and for myself, for not being a more thoughtful daughter when he needed me the most. He knew I loved him, but I think I always kept a little of that Buddha reserve, because I could never replace her.

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I’m not positive when my father stopped going to St. Mary’s by the Lake. I stopped going to the Centralville Methodist church the same year we buried my mother under a rose-colored headstone in a Lowell cemetery. One Sunday that summer, after services at my old church, the new pastor asked me what my annual pledge was going to

be. When I declined to commit to anything—being a student and not having much money—he reminded me that my mother, whom people had told him all about, would be disappointed in my backing away from my church. Standing there on the familiar church steps, my lips puffed open and hands shaking, I must have looked like a wild woman, while my teen-aged self was inwardly screaming at him not to speak about a woman he never even knew, not to make assumptions about my financial resources, not to dare to challenge me about anything, and my dutiful daughter self was pulling on my impulse reins, as my mother would have been mortified at such a public display of ugly behavior. Instead of imploding, I simply walked away and never went back.

When I did choose to go to church, which wasn't often, I went to the Catholic services at St. Mary's in Lowell, where my father sometimes went in his later years. No one knew me, or my mother, and I could just sink into the warmth of the colors, smells and mindless litany of the short service and let whatever would sink in do so. My religion became as pictorial, olfactory and romantic as those Sunday masses in the summer when my family was intact. Having the early experience of routine attendance at church, with its colorful rituals and human communion, has imprinted me with a sense of spiritual otherness, something I don't believe I would have without that early church exposure. And that otherness is now wrapped up with each parent and his and her private religion of family and loving compromise. I wear that spirituality close to me but invisible to the world, like a second skin.

My father always said that he never had a bit of doubt that he would make it home from the war. Nothing would keep him from coming back to my mother. My brother Jeff told me that my father had visited the Lahey Clinic in Boston five years before he

died, where they advised him he urgently needed heart bypass surgery if he expected to live a long life—advice he studiously ignored.

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Nowadays I never tire of visiting churches and cathedrals when my husband and I are on vacation, especially in those Catholic jewels in Europe. It's partly Pavlovian, but as soon as I smell the wood and the wax and the faded incense, I feel inexplicably calmed and safe, as if surrounded by my parents' nimbus. St. Anthony's Basilica in Padua, Italy, stands out among those we've been to. During his lifetime in the 13th century, Anthony was acknowledged to be an eloquent speaker who could convert the unfaithful back to the righteous path. He's known as the Patron Saint of Lost Things, and is petitioned for help in finding everything that is lost, from car keys and misplaced papers to a lost job, lost child, straying partner, or a lost soul.

The architecture inside the Basilica is soaring Gothic, with a long nave marked by two hyper-extended arches on both sides and ornate chapels everywhere you turn. It is the result of three different reconstructions, which took place from 1238 to 1310. One chapel about mid-way down the aisle pulled us in the way an unexpected road accident does. There, amid the gilt and the tall-as-people candle holders and stunning paintings and stained glass, were, literally, hill-sized messy heaps of flowers, letters, trinkets and notes pinned or taped to the walls. They were from people all around the world who made the pilgrimage to pray to St. Anthony for help in recovering something they lost. In the short time we were there, I counted a dozen different languages as I browsed through the written entreaties and snapshots of vintage cars, boats, darling babies, dogs and mothers, sometimes having to step over people who lay on the floor, clasping something

in their hands and weeping. All of this went on in real time, while the priest was saying Mass.

Making a circuit around the nave, we came to one of the highlights of the church, the shrine of St. Anthony, where his “certified authentic” relic rests: a piece of his tongue encased in a ruby-studded globe reliquary, held in the left hand of a life-sized golden statute of the humble saint himself. The story is that when Anthony’s coffin was opened many years after his death, to re-inter him in a newly built part of the Basilica, there were only ashes and bones inside, with one exception. His vocal chords were intact and his tongue still red and soft. The miracle was said to be because Anthony was constantly praising God with his tongue and converting people to the faith. Every year since, on the days leading up to February 15, the day of the disinterment, the Basilica buzzes with joy for The Feast of St. Anthony’s Tongue, when a miracle happened. Hearing and seeing all of this amidst the ritual of the priest saying Mass in Italian, was at once both grotesque and incredibly impressive.

I suppose it’s no different from the secular relics we all carry around from our own lives. Religious relics, like Anthony’s tongue, are supposed to remind you of a saint’s life and help you focus on your devotion to that person. On my writing desk I keep a dark leather riding crop my father brought back from the Philippines. It’s about sixteen inches long, with a basket-weave knot at the handle end, a motif that’s repeated with another knot higher up the handle, at the base of the folded-over strap at the other end. The strap is imprinted on one side with the date “1945” and the word “Philippines” on the other—a tchotchke at the time. The imprints are encircled by decorative filigree. Sometimes I slide my finger up and down the numbers, like I’m reliving the carver’s

strokes. I haven't ridden a horse since I was a little girl, and my father never rode, but that leather crop is a piece of his history that reminds me of his stories about surviving the war and how he was never hungry because his Air Force squadron's mission was to bring provisions to all the troops on the ground. My father loved to say "an army travels on its stomach, you know," like he had invented the phrase.

I still use my mother's domed, stainless-steel roaster, the one she cooked thousands of Sunday eye-of-the-round dinners in—as well as her Sunbeam Mixmaster and gravy boat. Not only do they work better than the ones you can buy today, they invariably lead my mind to a picture of her working over the kitchen sink in a flowered apron, peeling vegetables, while enjoying the view out to the lake.

Before we left St. Anthony's, I lit a votive, my own ritual when visiting such churches, though like in the days of St. Mary's by the Lake, I still didn't know the words I was supposed to say.

Everything, and Nothing

I believe I will never quite know,
 Though I play at the edges of knowing,
 Truly I know
 Our part is not knowing,
 But looking, and touching, and loving,
 Mary Olive, “Bone”

We’re all the living dead, pieces of what came before.
 Taryn Smith, *A Living Man Declared Dead*

This is what it comes to: roughly five pounds of sand-like ash poured into a plastic bag wrapped with a yellow twisty tie and laid in a narrow cardboard box—like a delivery of gray cornmeal from the grocery. Cremains.

This particular five pounds once made up Tommy, my brother John’s lover of twenty-seven years. When John sifted the ashes with his fingers, he could see chunks of silver fillings from molars and dull shards of breast and thigh bone. He even found the metal pins from Tommy’s reconstructed wrist broken years before in a motorcycle accident, during his life before John when Tommy—beautiful, blond, six-foot tall Tommy—was one of Rock Hudson’s boys in California. The ashes were inexplicably warm, as if still faintly alive, and touching them shot small licks of heat through John’s hands, like from a Fourth of July sparkler.

“Is that him? Is that all that’s left?” Their good friend Bud saw the funeral container on the kitchen counter and picked it up, seesawing the ashes from side to side.

“Yes,” John nodded, unconvinced. It was, and, of course, it wasn’t.

Like that of many AIDS victims in the late eighties and early nineties, Tommy’s death was neither quick nor peaceful. His body was slowly ravaged for eight years from the day, one cruel April morning, when he spotted the first Kaposi’s sarcoma tattooing

his neck red—a death sentence back then. Lying in a hospital bed at the end, his body skeletonized, his Popsicle-blue eyes glazed and staring, he was no more Tommy than a skillfully painted mannequin.

Neither Tommy nor John was religious, which simplified the funeral arrangements, agreed upon months in advance: a speedy cremation, followed by a non-scripted remembrance at home with close friends and family. My husband and I flew down to Florida from New Jersey. At my brother's stylish yellow bungalow in Las Olas, the oldest section of Ft. Lauderdale, we ate cilantro-laced chili that he made from Tommy's recipe and we all told stories about him. The margaritas and red wine flowed, the glasses glinting in the candlelight.

"Remember the time we went to Istanbul and Customs ransacked every piece of his luggage, because of all the bottle of meds rattling around?" Claire, their oldest and best friend, began. She had helped manage their real estate business for years, and she loved Tommy as much as John did, maybe more, because it could only go so far.

"Yeah, him of all people," John chimed in, getting animated. "He hated to make a scene. He couldn't believe it, was so indignant he practically bore a hole in the inspector's chin when the guy pawed through his underwear. You know that icy star of his."

"Those eyes could cut through timber." Bud said. "Steel," someone else countered. "No, bank vaults." Several people rolled their eyes in confirmation, their forks clinking on china bowls.

"The way he craved travel the past year and a half, I thought he was going to kill *me* before he died." John leaned back in the club chair by the fireplace, his fawn-colored

eyes bloodshot. “I think it helped him cope. No one knowing us. No expectations. No explanations. We just kept going and going and going.”

“Just a couple of Energizer bunnies,” Claire smirked, hopping around in a circle.

More stories followed. People remembered him as “such a smooth talker,” “a true gentleman, but relentless if he wanted something,” and “a love magnet, with that body.” My brother said that of everyone he knew, he learned the most in life from Tommy, about people and how to “live for the moment”—before that became a popular mantra. I sat and watched the somber mood lift, as it does with good food and alcohol, and wondered who would remember what was said a year from that moment—how it would matter. Tommy would always be the love of John’s life, though none of us there that day had any idea how much of him would continue to inhabit John after Tommy was gone.

Around seven o’clock I went into the kitchen to work on dessert. A friend had arranged a photo gallery on the table in the eat-in area. I paused to scan them, stopping at one of my favorites: John and Tommy squatting side by side in a straw-colored field in front of a distant mountain in Cashier’s, South Carolina, a popular destination for gay men. Both of them wore white, short-sleeved shirts, khaki pants and healthy grins, surrounded by tall evergreens, looking like they were going to spring up and run like antelopes once the shutter clicked, leaving behind the shadows of their crouched torsos on the grass.

I smiled as I heard the opening bars of Moonlight Sonata coming from the piano in the living room. John had played a little in high school and this was the only piece he could get through by heart. Tommy had a tin ear, but always loved to hear John play.

Towards the end of the evening, after vanilla wafer cake and coffee, we ambled into the garden, redolent of rose-pink frangipani, where I read W.H. Auden's poem, "A Walk After Dark." It begins,

A cloudless night like this
Can set the spirit soaring.

~

Although Tommy died decades ago, I'm still affected by my brother's description of his ashes. So much of how you remember people who have died is tangled up with the way their bodies are disposed of. Earth burial weights memory to the coffin, the way tie-downs ground a hot-air balloon. With proper embalming and burial, the body can last for years, even decades, in its final state. Abraham Lincoln's body was preserved with a patented embalming technique after his assassination in 1865 and buried in the Lincoln Tomb in Springfield, Illinois. After the body was moved seventeen times, for various reasons (including a foiled kidnapping and multiple repairs to the tomb) his son, Robert, pledged to never disturb the body again. The tomb was reconstructed so that the coffin would be lowered into a cage, which would then be covered by two tons of cement. And so, thirty-six years after Lincoln's initial burial, his body was exhumed again and placed in a temporary grave. Before the final entombment, however, the coffin lid was raised in front of twenty-three witnesses, to ensure that it was indeed the peripatetic President Lincoln inside. All the witnesses agreed his features were totally recognizable—the thick, coarse, stand-up-straight hair, the whiskers on his chin and the mole on his cheek—along with the black suit he had been buried in, covered with a yellow mold. One witness proclaimed, "He looked just like a statue of himself lying there." Whatever "himself" was at that point.

It was traumatic enough for me to sit with my mother's open casket during her two-day wake. She died at age forty-three of carbon monoxide poisoning—a freak accident at home, while I was away at college—something involving her still-running car and our under-the-house garage. We'll never know exactly what happened; my father found her body half-in, half-out of the car, the slightly open driver's door crushed against the cedar closet he had built for her six months before. It feels barbaric, to me, even to consider gazing on her marbleized face and stiff hairdo now, decades later. Although the Lincolns found comfort in knowing that their father's body could be unearthed and permanently resettled, with certainty, into a solid block of rock, I would rather think of my mother solely as a spiritual presence. The certainty I would like to know is whether she was conscious upon the car's impact, whether she felt her blood pressure rise and her thoughts scatter from the odorless gas filling her nostrils, or whether she had time to contemplate her predicament, and to think about us.

She lies, still, in a Massachusetts cemetery, alongside my father. He died in Florida at sixty-two, while I was in New Jersey, on the phone with Broward General, trying to reach him before his emergency open-heart surgery scheduled that morning. I was studying for first-year law exams and wasn't told until the last minute. Instead of connecting with him that day, I heard a man's voice tell me my father had just had a heart attack, while clinicians worked the crash cart in the background, trying to revive him.

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Cremation seems kinder to me, as the aftermath of its fiery swiftness allows memories to drift and reformulate, like smoky tendrils from burning leaves. Not having a chance to say goodbye to either parent, I could speak to them more easily now if I didn't

think of them lying, mute and statue-like, beneath the rose-colored stone marker with their names and life-dates chiseled into it. As it is, I feel I have to translate—from earth to spirit mode—in order to reach them, which is like speaking a foreign language only moderately well.

In cases like Tommy's, where the body suffered through a lengthy deterioration before death, cremation is like a balm. During cremation, with temperatures between 1400 and 1600 degrees Fahrenheit, the body is reduced to chemical compounds in the form of gases, which then vaporize into the air. The chamber where the body is placed is called a retort—not a macabre form of repartee, but a term from ancient alchemy, where heated vessels were used to transmute lead and other base metals into gold, the perfection of matter. The time it takes to turn flesh to vapor varies according to height, weight and sex, but ranges from ninety minutes to two hours, leaving approximately three-and-a-half percent of the body's original weight. It sounds like the fire and brimstone of Hell, but to me it promises a purging of earthly scars and blemishes, allowing the survivors to remember an idealized face and body. Alchemist's gold.

Without a corporeal image to drag my thoughts down, I can create my own mythology of those who are gone. I imagine Tommy in his Rock Hudson days, when rumor was he was beyond beautiful. Think Troy Donahue, Tab Hunter and other movie idols of the '50s. I imagine my parents in their marital glow, still vibrant and undiminished. Hallmark-movie perfect.

~

Even a cremated body resists leaving the earth, though. After incineration, large bone fragments remain (the organs and tissue are what vaporize into gas), which are

swept out of the retort and processed by a machine—the cremulator—into ashes, or cremains, if you prefer. A cremation furnace isn’t designed to cremate more than one body at a time—in fact, it’s illegal. However, an unavoidable consequence of cremation is that a small residue of ash is left in the chamber, which mixes with the remains of the next body. Some may think of this as an eternal defilement—commingling at its basest level—but I find it existential, a mystical blending of the transcendental with the physical. At the moment the spirit is released, the body’s dust drops back to mingle with the earth left behind, like the particles of exhaust from a rocket zooming into space. This departure seems to me to echo the words of Walt Whitman, the poet of Body and Soul, who said, “as to you Life I reckon you are the leavings of many deaths.”

Hindu philosophy preaches that the body is merely an instrument to carry the soul, so it favors cremation because it induces a feeling of detachment into the freshly disembodied spirit—to encourage its quick separation from this earthly sphere to another, via billowing smoke instead of my Whitmanesque rocket.

Cremation is forbidden under Orthodox Jewish law—not because of the association of ashen mounds with the Holocaust, but because it dictates that the soul of a recently dead person isn’t fully aware that he died and so would experience pain watching his own body burn in that fiery halo. In a burial, then, where the body decays slowly in the coffin, the soul is allowed to move further away from the body over a span of time, like coral breaking away from a reef.

~

Ninety-nine percent of people in Japan are cremated. They don’t use a cremulator there to crumble the bones to ash after incineration, but engage in a bone-picking

ceremony. The bone relics are laid out at the funeral home and each family member uses chopsticks to select certain bones to keep. The bones are passed from one family member to another, down the line like a human conveyor belt, until they reach the urn at the end. Often, two family members hold on to the same piece of bone, in a kind of communion with the deceased. (Because of this, it's a major faux pas in Japan for two people to hold the same piece of food with chopsticks.) In these ceremonies, the bones of the feet are picked up first and those of the head last, so that the deceased isn't upside down in the urn. The horseshoe-shaped hyoid bone (the larynx) located at the root of the tongue, is the last bone put in the urn, because it physically resembles Buddha in prayer. It's as if the family is ensuring that the deceased will have a form of physical presence, along with a disembodied voice, on the journey to reincarnation.

In the aftermath of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011, with its masses of dead bodies to attend to, an avant-garde ad agency was asked by a funeral home client to create an ad for its services that would counter the typical muted, black-and-white dreariness of funerals “to express the memoir of the beauty of life.” The result is a life-size skeleton laid out in the usual bone-picking, feet- to-head configuration, but made entirely of delicately pressed, brilliantly colored flora: a fern ribcage, oval-leaf spinal column, sunflower hip bones, carnation-and-poppy shoulder and knee joints, bleeding heart metatarsals, beaming jasmine teeth. The predominant colors are yellow, green and blue—colors of the sun, trees, sky and water, the essential elements of life. These flower-bones, brilliant but already fading, are a gentler reminder of the relentless cycle of life.

The formality and symbolism of a ceremony can give the lifeless body's disposition an intimacy and dignity, the way a high mass does in the Catholic Church, with its smoky swinging censer perfuming the body, its communion rite mimicking the body's resurrection, and its plaintive Ave Marias mourning and celebrating the body's literal passing. In each case, the body-that-was is enveloped by the family and friends through whose thoughts the deceased now lives on—whether or not you believe in the religious aspect.

Even animals instinctively ritualize a fallen friend. When elephants come across a collection of bones in their migrations, even unrelated ones, the entire herd will stop and investigate them with their trunks and feet, turning them over and over, nuzzling them, remaining quiet for hours, sometimes days, as if holding a belated wake. And if a matriarch dies en route, the young calves continue to gently touch her body with their trunks, trying to “life her,” while the rest of the family rumbles loudly behind, in a kind of Greek chorus. Then they toss leaves and dirt over the body and break free branches to cover her, as a final remembrance, the way humans leave handfuls of dirt or roses on the casket as they leave the gravesite.

Whatever essence of life is left behind in human or animal remains, they are, as they were for my brother as he kneaded through Tommy's ashes, more than a symbol—they are, in fact, tangible, dusty evidence of the continuation of *something* after the flesh is gone. It's easier to imagine this *something* when it's released from the image of a decaying corpse.

John doesn't remember at this point whose idea it was initially, but he and Tommy agreed that parts of Tommy's ashes would be deposited at all of the houses he

lived in that were important to him, which included twenty-nine homes located in California, Louisiana, Missouri and Massachusetts. It took John nearly two years to do this, a kind of reverse bone-picking ritual where every bit of cremains from the funeral box was mixed back into the earth. At the time, I thought it was an extreme form of devotion and was annoyed that Tommy asked him to do this. But now, I think hanging on to the ashes for so long helped John transition from living with to living without Tommy.

New England was John's first stop. In the early sixties they had lived in Amherst, Belchertown and several other places surrounding the U. Mass campus, while John worked on his PhD in genetics and Tommy managed a foreign auto repair shop. They lived in at least 15 different houses there, satisfying some gypsy gene that was undoubtedly fostered by that less tolerant era for men who were couples.

John found himself sneaking into old leafy neighborhoods at four or five in the morning to spread Tommy among the azaleas and rhododendrons at several locations along the Mohawk Trail in New England. If the yards were overgrown or scraggly, he would scratch the ashes into the dirt, like fertilizer. It made him feel good when the lawns were manicured—here he would simply sprinkle them like lime. In New Orleans, where Tommy was stationed in the Coast Guard, John merely dusted the black, wrought iron fence surrounding the house; it was too close to the street to risk trespassing. He felt like a thief, stealing back time and memory from familiar space for Tommy's benefit, and his own.

I remember John telling me, over the phone, about his near-trip to their bungalow in Santee, California, outside of San Diego, where John did research at the Salk Institute

for a year, while Tommy started selling real estate. He had flown into L.A. with a small leather satchel half-filled with a meted-out portion of the ashes (he was afraid at one point he would run out) and was parked in traffic on the freeway for over an hour—always rush hour there. Sitting in the smoggy air, the sun beating down on the top of a rented red convertible, he was getting hotter and hotter.

He railed about the lineup of cars behind and ahead of him, the inching forward and stopping dead until, finally, he said he got a little crazy, reached over and scooped a big handful of ashes from the bag and tossed them out the window. He gave a half-laugh before describing how he then held the bag outside the window and shook it until it was empty, watching the ashes scatter on the windshields and hoods behind him.

John made the final ash deposit under a huge oak tree draped with Spanish moss in their front yard, behind the curving stucco wall that fronts the house. There were cremains around the base of the tree already from two of their dogs, Bear, a rescue from a vet's office, and Anuba, a thoroughbred miniature pincher. While alive, Anuba bore a tan and white female, Ena, who was a comfort to John for many years after Anuba died. Wild orchids sat demurely in crotches of the tree; it was April again. John mixed the ashes into the dirt with a garden trowel, then sat cross-legged on the ground for a while, relieved and bereft at the finality of it all.

Several months ago, John sent me an email. "Just buried Ena under the oak, where we'll all be eventually. It was time. I'll miss her. BRO."

I asked him if he thought of Tommy being there, under the tree, and he said no, that Tommy wasn't in any one place. He referred to Tommy's scattering as a "Tommy Trail, a grown-up's version of Hansel and Gretel." We laughed and I added that at least

he had a lot of great memories of life with Tommy. He paused, as if contemplating the vacancy of his life and heart now.

I thought about the enormity of Tom's influence on John's life. Before he met Tom he had been engaged for about a year to Carol, a pretty woman he met during his senior year at UMass. He broke up with her three weeks before the wedding. He told me years later that after the breakup he began to try out dating men, knowing something had always been missing in his female relationships. Almost immediately he started a tentative relationship with Scott, who took him to a party at a Manhattan apartment one weekend (the only place then where gay men could dance with each other). He spotted golden-haired Tom swaying inside a ring of men. With barely a glance back at the traditional life he had been herded towards, he leaped into that circle, knowing instantly that he and Tom were going to be together. And they were, from that moment until Tom's body morphed into fertilizer for the moss-draped oak.

After a long pause, he sighed.

"I don't know about memories. All I know is I miss him."

"Me too."

~

My husband and I both plan on being cremated. No surprise there; we've been together for thirty years and think alike on almost every important issue. Neither of us wants a wake—or any kind of traditional ritual; mainly, we don't want to be a bother to the other person at such a time. If one wants to, there's no end to the creativity that can go into disposing of the ashes. Besides the common urn or decorative box, the methods for remembrance vary wildly. Some people mix the ashes into concrete and pave

pathways with them. There's a company that packages part of the ashes into a lipstick-sized cartridge that they shoot into space. It orbits for a while, eventually coming back down to earth. Or you can fashion them into pieces of jewelry—a locket of ash, to remind you of when he was alive. All of these memorial machinations serve as a reminder that once a person dies no amount of mementos, photos, videos or thoughts can ever replace his actual touch, taste, smell, sound, smile, gestures and kindnesses.

My husband is a self-acknowledged wine geek, a serious student and collector of fine wine (there are over 3,000 bottles in our wine cellar). He has told me to cremate him, privately, and then schedule a wine dinner with our closest friends. Then I'm to buy the biggest bottle of Bordeaux produced, which is a Melchizedek (about five and a half gallons) and have everyone at the dinner drink it while we talk about him. I'll pile his plate with all the foods he always said he would die before he ate: fried eggs, escargots, canned tuna, and medium-rare salmon. At the end of the dinner, I'm to pour his ashes into the bottle.

"What do I do with the bottle?" I ask. This is a man who has a twenty-gallon glass bottle of pennies in our garage, which stays there only because it's too heavy for me to cart outside.

He smiles and shrugs. I've learned after all these years when not to press him.

I'd like nothing more than a brief and somewhat irreverent obituary notice in the paper, telling people there will be no funeral, and that they are to remember me as I was the last time they saw me. On the day they get the news they are to wear something colorful—even gaudy—and to save the black clothes for an evening out. In lieu of flowers they should treat a friend to lunch. Then, my husband can phone the news to my

two brothers and a handful of good friends, and send a blast email to others he thinks would care. After a bare-bones cremation, he can fling my ashes into a stiff wind in whatever yard we have at that time. Those closest to me would understand, and I don't care about those who couldn't.

The older I get, the more I think it futile to impose a legacy on anyone. One minute you're here; then you're gone.

~

If it's true that a person's entire life passes in front of him at the moment of death, I think it's so he can say goodbye to everyone, so he can feel resolved about how the survivors will live without him. Tommy, near the end, was in that hazy state between consciousness and nothingness. My brother had stopped the feeding and only glucose and morphine tubed down to his arm through the I-Med pump. His breathing sounded like rocks sliding down a washboard—the pneumocystis chipping away at his lungs. Yet, until the last bolus of morphine was pushed, his eyes remained open and staring, his skin was flushed and the blips on the heart monitor glided across the screen like skaters on a pond.

When I think of Tommy's last moments, I imagine that he, in his wide-eyed state, knew it was the day and he was overcome by sadness and regret at leaving everyone behind, especially my brother. I picture him hovering above his withered body, looking down at those at the bedside. Although he had always envied John's book smarts and raw intelligence, Tommy worried about his naiveté in relationships, his tendency to act without thinking, and his big, beating heart that was susceptible to the sob story of any ne'er-do-well who targeted him. He would never see John again, and couldn't help but

foresee vague sorrows for him, left behind in the indifferent world. If he could have seen the upcoming financial earthquake in John's real estate holdings, the troubled and unsatisfying parade of lovers—especially the younger cocaine-addicted Tommy clone who looked and sounded so much like him it caused sharp intakes of breath on first sight—and the stroke in John's mid-sixties that would push him to flirt with suicide during his dishearteningly slow recovery, maybe Tommy would have fought harder to find the tunnel of white light that some people on the brink say illuminates them, and allows them to choose to return to life.

Finally, whatever his spirit intended, I think Tommy, who lived through his emotions, felt only emptiness and knew his body was beyond hope. If he could have suddenly sat up in bed that day and said one last thing, it would not have been about regret for the casual liaison with the handsome drifter who infected him with HIV, or shame or praise for any other behavior during his relatively short life. It would simply have been, "I miss you so much already."

Auden's poem ends like this:

But the stars burn on overhead
 Unconscious of final ends,
 As I walk home to bed,
 Asking what judgment waits
 My person, all my friends,
 And these United States.

After Tommy died, his flesh disintegrated, his spirit dispersed, and my brother was left alone, underneath the blinking Floridian stars. Like the ashy bits left in the chamber after each cremation, a little of Tommy remained; for those left behind, it was everything, and nothing.

United Skirts of America

In Shakespears's use of the magic potion, it is not that the object of desire itself is altered—the women are who they are—rather that the man is forced to see them

Jeannette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal*

After having two boys, my parents decided to try one more time for a girl—and there I was, the pink-skinned, green-eyed embodiment of a delayed source of devotion for my father. My brother Johnny, the oldest, was my mother's favorite and, looking back with adult eyes, a source of nagging jealousy for my father, who was busy flying missions in the Philippines during World War II, while my precocious brother (he talked in complete sentences at ten months) enjoyed my mother's undivided and indivisible love for the first year and a half of his life.

As a girl, I had more than my share of Indian sunburns, noogies and tickle tortures, where one brother would hold me down while the other would “play the piano” on my ribs until I cried (which I resisted mightily until the very moment I heard my father's footsteps on the porch). These things were mere hors d'oeuvres, however, for Johnny, who thought he was a real brain because he skipped two grades in elementary school. He felt it his sacred duty to occasionally spearhead more intricate schemes for getting back at the precious baby for her tattling to Daddy every chance she got. My brother Jeff, the middle child, would always go along with Johnny's plans, the way an earthworm blindly follows the contours of your sneaker when you block its path.

One memorable week in October stands out in my mind, when I was six and Johnny was eleven, as the epitome of both the glory and the despair of life as a girl among men. Every Saturday, after my brothers had finished sweeping the driveway, emptying the wastebaskets, and doing their other chores, they were allowed the treat of taking the bus into the city of Lowell, the big city to us, living in Dracut, Mass. Once there, they'd spend the afternoon sunk down in the plushy red velvet chairs of the Keith Theater on Market Street, a giant bucket of buttery popcorn and *O'Henry* candy bars on the seat between them. *Saint Joan* was playing that Saturday and Johnny decided he just had to see it, as he'd read about France's national heroine in history class that week. This was a few years before I was allowed to take the bus by myself, so I cajoled my father into letting me go, too, as it was a girl's story and she was a real heroine.

The thing I remember most about that movie was the death scene. This was in the days of truly wide-screen cinema—big as the side of a barn. I couldn't believe the way Joan's fortunes had gone down in flames in such a short period of time. At the beginning of the picture she was the leonine savior of the city of Orleans, strutting with her hair streaming down glittering silver armor, with a pretty white underskirt peeping out from it with rows of purplish fleurs-de-lis as the French soldiers followed her through the city, like a female Pied Piper. The townspeople threw rose petals at her in Reims as she glided by on her prancing horse. By the end, though, she'd become a thin figure with a plain white muslin dress, strapped with thick braided rope to an enormous wooden stake in the center of the town square.

I particularly remember the rope, which circled her small waist and ankles and then crisscrossed in front of her body, making two big Xs, one at her neck and the other

just below her stomach, like she was there for target practice. Her hair, which was worn like mine, was held back into a loose ponytail. The wooden stake was surrounded by piles and piles of thick sticks scattered all around. The bottom of her dress flowed out from under the rope and just covered her bare feet. The worst part was that there were thousands of townspeople who stood around her and watched—some even threw more sticks on the piles—while the first torch was lit. She held a large wooden cross, the kind you see in old churches that has rounded ends, and was looking up at the sky as the flames began to scorch the hem of her dress. She looked beautiful, even though she knew she was in for a painful death, and I cried for her, and, without knowing it then, for the future Joans of the world.

My brothers and I went on about the details of the movie at supper for weeks. “We’ve *heard* all of that, at least ten times,” Johnny would sneer, his mouth full of peas, when I would start a fresh account of Joan receiving the sword and banner from the Charles VII. “You’re the only one in the world who could make that movie boring.” He clanked his fork down on his plate, for emphasis. I looked over to my father with pleading eyes.

“If I were you, I’d be glad I had a sister who’s interested in history,” he said, patting my hand (he sat at the head of the table; I sat to his immediate left). Feeling the glow of my father’s protection, I took this opportunity to look across the table at Johnny and give him a loud, nose-wrinkling snort.

“Ya, sure, it’s all stupid act. All she really cares about are those dippy dolls she has—big baby that she is.”

My dolls were important to me. I had over a hundred (I had christened each one and never forgot a name or age), and my father had built shelves along one entire wall of my room to house them all. This area was like a shrine, and my brothers knew it was off limits. My very favorite doll was Lisa, from my fifteen-deep bride collection. Since we weren't Catholic, like our paternal cousins, I didn't get to have a lacy white First Communion dress with the ultimate of little girl desires: a net tulle fingertip veil falling from a rhinestone tiara, just like a *real* bride's. Having these dolls provided the next best thing to sate my desire for ceremonial importance and feminine elegance.

I remember everything about Lisa, who was tall for a bride doll, with big blue eyes and lightly rouged cheeks and clouds of curly brown hair that hung down to the middle of her back. Her dress was long, of course, and creamy white, scalloped at the bottom edges. She carried a bouquet of pink and white flowers in a cone-shaped paper doily. She was a doll from heaven.

When I came home one afternoon the following week and smelled what I thought to be autumn leaves burning in the backyard, I was horrified to discover all that was left of Lisa was a delicate plume of black smoke and fluttering crisps of charcoaled fabric. When confronted that night by my father about "the meaning of this, young man," Johnny tried to slough it off as an educational reenactment of a significant historical event (seventh grade had really improved his vocabulary).

He took twenty minutes to explain how he and Jeff had been inspired by the movie (and my constant reminders at the supper table) to really *feel* the spirit of history by making an exact replica of Joan at the stake. The cement pad in the backyard, where my father had planted long metal poles to string a clothesline for the laundry, provided

the ideal site for “Joan’s” impending sainthood. He even described the exact placement of the rope, the two Xs, the bare feet hanging out from under the hem (they’d had to relieve Lisa of her satin slippers and stockings), the bundles of twigs, even the cross, which they had made with Popsicle sticks, gluing on 3-leafed clovers for the rounded ends. At first, Johnny continued, they’d only meant to set the stage, not to actually light it. But, when Jeff added his own (for him, ingenious) touch of bringing out all his men from his frontier fort set to act as the thronging masses, the thing had taken on a life of its own. “Just like in the movie, Dad, you shoulda seen those soldiers.”

I guess my father was impressed with Johnny’s ability to concoct such a plan, because the boys’ punishment, which didn’t seem nearly strong enough to me, was to have to bring me along on the movie outing each Saturday for the next month. How could he go so easy on them, when they knew how much Lisa meant to me, and they had no business going to my room, anyway? And, when my father pronounced the so-called punishment, Johnny snuck me a look that said, “Hey, the baby’s not gonna win *this* one.”

I could only believe that this male sticking together at my expense was meant to show me something about the vicissitudes of favor, even within one’s sacred space. Even though I felt like punching all three of them, I decided that, like Saint Joan before me, I would rise above this injustice in my own time and in my own way. Meanwhile, I would be wary of taking favor for granted and would try not to underestimate the power of the Y chromosome or overestimate my ability to influence it.

When I graduated from Boston University in the early 1970s, with high honors in English, the first question I invariably heard on job interviews was, “Can you type?” So, I went to night school and learned how to type. This did eventually help me get one or two short-lived “Gal Friday” jobs, but serves me best now, typing 65 words per minute on my Asus tablet. I had graduated early, in January, as I was antsy to get out into the world and start earning a living. My first job was at the regional center for the IRS in Andover, Mass, where they hire scads of temporary workers every year to handle the annual vomit of April returns. I don’t remember the title, but the job was as interesting as sorting pebbles in a fish tank. The pay was the equivalent of just under \$6500 per year—plus benefits I didn’t care about.

Another recent college grad, Lisa, started at the same time I did, and, luckily, we were teamed up. Every morning two or three multi-tiered carts of stacked returns were wheeled to our long metal table, located in the back of a large room filled with cubicles where the regular employees worked. Our job was to match the stacks on the left side of the cart with the stacks on the right side, using a computer-generated number on the top page of each return—something that might be challenging for a second grader. But every non-manager job there involved a discrete task that had to be done in paralyzing repetition: stamping the fronts of thousands of returns with the date, using one of those eight-inch steel stampers that plunged down and clanked when it hit the veneered desk; making sure the returns were signed; stapling the post-marked envelopes to the returns in case someone challenged a filing date. The whole scene was like something out of the movie *Metropolis*.

Most days Lisa and I finished our work by noon, and when we asked for something else to do, we were told to work more slowly, as there wouldn't be more stacks until the carts the next morning. So, we brought in *Gourmet* magazines and scouted out recipes and food destinations all afternoon.

We tried to get other women to join our magazine clique (there was an inordinate number of women there), but we might as well have asked them to strip and pirouette on top of a cart. It was Cedrick Snoonian—really, that was his name—who clued us in. Cedrick, who called us “the chicks,” was in his 40s, short, dark and stout and an IRS lifer.

“Most of these women are like me—they got at least fifteen years in to their twenty-year pensions and they ain't going to risk that. Much as *I* like having you gals around,” he said, winking, “most of these women would just as soon trip you in the aisle than act like you're one of them.”

Both Lisa and I were offered permanent jobs at the end of our tour of duty; we both politely declined.

2.

October 15, 1973, is one of those dates I always remember—like the dates of the Civil War, the two World Wars, and the year *The Origin of Species* was published. On that day in October I met my friend Joan, when we both became Xeroids—insiders' talk for Xerox salesmen. She was going to work in the Providence office; I was joining the Lexington, Mass. branch.

I'll never forget the first time I met her. I walked into the room where the new hires were assembled for orientation. There was Joan, a slender but curvy five-foot-ten,

with Crayola-yellow hair, worn long and hot-roller curled and Delft-blue eyes, standing at the head of a mahogany conference table. She was wearing a tailored, grey flannel jumper with a white, long-sleeved turtleneck underneath and a look that was feminine, but at the same time, imperial. Having recently read John Molloy's blockbuster best-seller, *Dress for Success*, I was wearing a black gabardine suit with a red and white polka dot hanky bubbling out of the jacket pocket.

She scrutinized the rest of us—Bucky (the rugged-faced blond sales manager in glen plaid, who hired us); a skinny jokester named Nick, who had an unlit cigar in his mouth; and three other unmemorable guys in blue suits, and then said, perfectly poker-faced, "I don't know who's in charge here, but he has exactly thirty-five seconds to get this meeting in gear, or this room is *mine*." The sound of her voice, soft and airy as wind chimes on a screened porch, was such a contrast with her looks and manner that we all burst out laughing. Pleased, she plopped into the head chair, eyes crinkling and cheekbones emerging. I liked her right away.

Equal Employment Opportunity was just making its debut, and women were just being allowed to do things like sell office equipment to Fortune 500 companies. Happily oblivious to political correctness back then, Joan and I reveled in our title, "salesman," since we were among only a fistful of females selling in the whole Northeast. We felt we were on a mission to show the world, but especially the men in the office, that women were more than just "skirts," as they called us, grinning with one side of their mouths.

Joan and I really bonded during "Basic," six weeks of sales training in Xerox's boot camp in Reston, Virginia. During the day, we doodled in class while hyperkinetic Xeroid trainers (all men) drilled us on the history of xerography, the proper use of toner

and the importance of paper fanning. At night, we fended off the men who thought being away from the wife and kids for a few days meant living in Happyland with Goofy-young female trainees, and indulged our shared passion for foreign films and rich food in nearby D.C.

The highlight of Basic was the 660 demo, twenty “why-did-I-wear-silk-today” minutes of orating a canned script into the glassy eye of a video camera. The point was to convince a businessman who didn’t know a plain-paper copier from an oversized paperweight that he was behind the times if he didn’t have a 660, Xerox’s bottom-of-the-line model, at \$37.50 per month.

Joan and I taped our demos with Nick (who was funny enough to do stand-up if this didn’t work out), in a cramped, bland-white room. At first, not knowing each other and being a competitive lot, we all diligently performed. I mean, you weren’t supposed to change one word, one comma of this spiel that would have made even Willy Loman gag. After an hour, though, Nick regaled us by inflecting the script with French, Russian and Ingmar Bergman Swedish accents. We had cramps from hooting all day. By the end of the session, I was pantomiming the routine, balancing the removable paper tray on my head while I sashayed around the room, with Joan and Nick singing that song from *Damn Yankees*,

“Whatever Lola wants, Lola gets,
And little man, little Lola wants you.”

I'd been selling for Telecom, the U.S. subsidiary of a Swedish telecommunications giant, about a year and a half, when I set up a meeting with the president, Joel Berman, to propose a new marketing effort for me to spearhead.

I was sitting across from him, in his corner office at the far end of the building, scanning my notes for a proposal I was pitching to him. He was sunk down in his faux leather swivel chair, staring at me with his heavy-lidded, dark brown eyes. He could be moody, so I wasn't alarmed by his dour expression. It was early spring, the sap was flowing, and I was in a particularly good mood.

"I think I'd be perfect for this new position, helping customers evaluate and update their phone systems, as new equipment and features come down the pike," I said, uncrossing my legs and leaning forward. "The updates alone could bring in a steady cash flow, while we're scouting new prospects." I took a sip of coffee from my mug.

Joel chewed on a toothpick—his thinking posture. "You know what I think?"

"No, what?" I looked down to scan my notes for the results I was projecting.

"I think you should just pack it in."

"What do you mean?" I looked up, sat back and pushed my hair back from my face.

"I mean, it's time to call it quits."

With that, he got up from his leather throne and preceded me down the hallway to my cubicled desk, where he asked me to clean out my drawers and leave. I would get two weeks' severance in the mail.

It was a Monday morning, so almost all of the other salesmen were at their cubicles, which were separated by padded, cloth-covered panels on three sides, extending

up about five feet from the floor. Since Joel had a booming voice, and I undoubtedly had a flushed face, the salesy chatter stopped immediately and everyone's mouth froze open, as if a streaker had just whizzed by.

Joel had hired me away from Xerox, where I had been over 100% of my goals for the two years I worked there. Being in sales, where I tripled my salary from my previous office job, I loved the fact that it was difficult to discriminate against women monetarily; if you made your quota, you got paid accordingly. As an extra bonus, during months where you were on target, nobody cared where you were on Friday afternoons—or any other time. The draw to Telecom for me was even bigger money and a much wider territory. I was the only female of the eight-member sales team, and they all firmly believed that although “dames” could sell Xerox machines, because they were on a month-to-month rental, they couldn't sell phone equipment, because it involved an outright sale that could easily reach six figures.

From the beginning Joel had treated me like a prized pet; he let me drive his maroon Jaguar XKE convertible to sales calls, and bragged like the father he could have been when I bagged a \$150,000 sale in my first two months there. Because I was in my twenties and attractive—and females with briefcases in the waiting room were a novelty—I could always get in to talk with prospects about saving money on their telephones. When a deal needed to be closed, I had no problem for the final presentation bringing Joel with me, whose graying sideburns, expensive Italian suits and glib patter allayed any lingering fears the company's management had about the deal. At that time I was ambitious and practical, and not about to second-guess a signed order in my bag.

So how did Golden Girl become Sacrificial Lamb? The problem was that the weekend before I was fired, Joel had suggested I come with him on a short trip to upstate New York, where he was attending a conference on communications technology. I was recently separated from my then-husband, whom Joel knew casually. My pheromone-antenna picked up that Joel was expecting this to be more than a business trip, so I pretended to be clueless about any sub-rosa context to the invitation and told him I was so sorry but I had plans I couldn't change. On that following Monday morning, I might have thought the weekend rebuke and my being canned was just a coincidence and that I probably deserved to be fired—a typical female reaction, I realize now. Within a month of my firing, though, he hired a very attractive woman to do public relations for the company (coincidentally, my good friend Joan's roommate from college) and, within weeks, they had embarked on a six-year affair.

The first call I made when I got home that day was to Joan. I was living in the condominium my husband and I had shared, with a \$1500 a month mortgage and \$1000 in the bank. Joan and I formulated a strategic plan to get me a job by the end of my two-week severance. We worked it like seasoned execs, using all the contacts we both had from our sales days—Joan was still at Xerox at the time. At the end of the two weeks, I had two job offers, and ended up starting that third week with a better position, selling word processing software for Bowne Time Sharing in Boston, and making more money than I had at Telecom. The good-ol'-girl-network was starting to weave a pattern, a pattern that would be strengthened and embellished over the many years I would work.

The Joel incident affected me more than I imagined at the time—shock can do that. Plus, economics squelched the luxury of ruminating. But ever since then, I have

rarely stayed in one job for more than two or three years, always moving to something better, but feeling that I should leave while people still wanted me. I don't think about it consciously, but I carry a little piece of his brutish humiliation around with me all the time, like an uncontrolled cowlick.

3.

In 1981, Joan and I were sitting in a white banquette at Cinelli's, a now-defunct destination saloon-turned-restaurant in southern New Jersey, where I was treating her to dinner. She had flown in from Rhode Island to help me move into my apartment in Haddonfield, where I had signed a three-year lease, to stay put while I got my law degree at Rutgers in Camden, New Jersey.

I had left my estranged husband, Jerry, our thriving executive search business and all our mutual friends in Princeton. It wasn't the first time I'd left him. I moved from Boston to New York for a marketing job, a promotion from selling word processing systems at Bowne Time Sharing.

~

"You have no idea how much it means to me that you came to help me with this move."

"Well, I remember you helping me move into that apartment in East Providence when Bill and I broke up. Besides," she continued, "I'm so happy you're going to *be* a professional, instead of *marrying* one."

We clinked our flutes, draining the Perrier Jouet.

Joan had landed a sales job at Honeywell, after getting fired from Xerox—for irritating her manager for being late. Now she had worked her way to Director of

Marketing—Computer Division (she had started her career in public relations), with over a hundred people reporting to her.

“This looks like the kind of place where mobsters bring their mistresses,” she said, swiveling her head around. There were an unusually large number of couples with big-haired, seriously made-up women sitting in darkened corners, further shielded from view by the booths’ high cornices.

“Oh?” I said, looking up from my menu. I love that old Xerox sales technique—the disingenuous “oh?”—followed by silence—that coaxes a waffling prospect to spill his guts about the real reason he won’t commit to that laser duplicator—the one that’ll make your quota for the month. It works every time.

Joan stopped scanning the glitzy room and turned to me. “Sometimes I think it would be easier to be like them—well, really, to be like the wives at home, looking the other way, not having the constant pressure of monthly numbers and ego-bloated salesmen—and I do mean the men—to deal with. “Only sometimes, though,” she laughed, pouring herself more champagne.

“Yeah,” I snorted, “somehow I don’t see you Ozzie and Harriet-ing, cleaning and shopping all day, then dressing up when the little man comes home for his from-scratch-cooked dinner. I thought about Jerry, whom I continued to see now and then back in Princeton. I missed him and my old, comfortable life and didn’t look forward to being a first year law student with classmates ten years my junior. I wondered if I would ever find a true partner.

“What really pisses me off is there’re so many guys I’m managing who still say women don’t belong in sales—not in front of me, of course. That it’s a man’s world, don’t you know, and women just aren’t tough enough.”

I laughed, thinking about how much effort and strategy Joan had to mount to get to her current position. Her golden looks helped—good looks always help—but it all boiled down to being twice as good as the men once she got her stiletto in the door.

“Men,” I said, shaking my head, “put them in a situation where their egos are front and center, like working for a woman, and it’s back to the cave man.”

I poured myself more champagne. “You can’t modify that Y chromosome. Ego will always trump and they’ll try to undercut you. But you can take it; you’ve got the job, not them. Besides, you so like the sound of ‘trailblazer,’” I said, adjusting the scarf around my neck.

She grinned. “Remember how the secretaries at Xerox used to gripe about all the freedom we had in our schedules, and about how much more money we made than them?”

“Yeah, especially the ones who wouldn’t answer the phone while on their break, or stay a minute past 5:00. What a joke. If you don’t want the constant pressure to produce and the gut-wrenching persistence to find, follow and close the sale, then don’t cry about not making the money or being treated equally.”

“I did feel sorry for them, though,” I said, because they’ll probably have to settle at some point, either for a job, or a man.”

“Oh, I do, too,” Joan chimed in. “And I totally respect that they’re the ones who can get you the appointment to see Mr. Big.” We nodded, together. “So, always respect the femme.”

“You know, we should write a book about women in sales,” I said, closing my menu and signaling the waitress.

“Yeah, we could start with the top rules.” She ticked these off on her fingers.

One, keep ‘em smiling.

Two, be smart, but not a smart-ass.”

“Feminine but not sexy,” I jumped in, tapping the tabletop. “Funny but not crass. Poised not angry.”

“One of the guys, but never one of the boys,” Joan injected, before taking a big breath for her finale.

“And never, no matter what, never cry in front of them, even if they steal your prospect or criticize your looks behind your back.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “The biggest mistake a woman can make is to think she has to act like a man to get somewhere in business.”

Joan provided the corollary. “And, the second biggest mistake is to act like a woman in the wrong situation.”

We clinked our flutes again.

Joan and I love and respect each other, but we’re both competitive, and I think our individual career successes over the years have helped egg each other on to bigger achievements. It may have helped that we have always lived in different cities and

circles of friends and accomplices. I do wonder if our close friendship, approaching forty years now, would have withstood having two big fishes in little ponds.

4.

While working as an associate at one of Philadelphia's top law firms, I often went AWOL. AWOL was an acronym for Always Women, Often Ladies. Once a quarter, the female lawyers would circle the wagons at a partner's house for food, stress relief and war stories—often involving the men who ran the firm and ways to avoid conflict with them. Carol, one of the first female partners, started there out of law school and billed more hours than almost everyone. Having two kids didn't stop her; she was back in the office, preparing for depositions within two weeks after the birth of each of her two children.

The best part of the AWOL parties was the reactions from the male lawyers the next day.

"So, did you gals settle the big questions last night—Tampax, hairdos and purses?" This was Steve, the head of litigation, smirking as I passed him in the hallway the day after one of our soirees.

"Why, Steve," I big-smiled, "you know all we talk about is you men. What else could occupy us for an entire evening? I mean, besides the human sacrifices on the kitchen counter and the pin-sticking in those dolls with the pants."

He beamed, as I thought back to the story from Beth that night about how every conversation between male colleagues always degenerated into a boast about who had the biggest dick.

I thought working for a white-shoe law firm, I could flip the I-was-fired cowlick, especially being fired for the wrong reason. Within the first six months of being there, though, I and half of the corporate department witnessed a brutal firing, where the young male associate was ousted in an instant and had to clear out his desk and exit the building, escorted by security. I don't remember the reason given for his departure, but I know that he was gay and the partner was a florid-cheeked, back-slapping, golf-playing corporate guy, who was having an affair with a young associate in the department.

Having AWOL made the difference here. Carol and a woman named Katie, the partner in charge of new associates (who has become a life-long friend), to talk to and get counsel from. A chorus of women at my back, who weren't afraid to demand accountability from the men at the head of the firm (they were all men at the time).

I saw how this worked when, during my first year when I practiced corporate law, I had to tell the chairman of the firm that one of his clients was a crook.

"Katie, I have to tell John that we can't go through with the "Smith" deal. When I did the due diligence for the public offering he wants us to do, I found the business is a sham and he's really selling little black boxes. And, we've already racked up six figures of time researching and doing drafts of the offering"

Katie is one of the smartest people I've ever met, as well as one of the nicest, so her opinion carried a lot of weight at the firm—she later became a part of the management group. She didn't wrinkle her brow or fret, but methodically led me through a step-by-step analysis of my research, to make sure I'd covered all the bases. Then, she

told me to set up a meeting with John, present the facts in a dispassionate, methodical way, and assured me all would be well. And it was.

7.

Having left business and law behind to pursue a writing career, I recently sifted through drawers of stories, essays and other pieces I'd clipped over the years. I re-read a terrific article about oxen from *Smithsonian* magazine years ago. There was a pair of Durham Reds on the cover, blazing in chestnut-red and white. They were yoked together with polished slabs of birch, their black eyes focused on the horizon. According to the writer—who didn't seem prone to exaggeration—without them clearing the forests, building stone walls and carting settlers westward, we wouldn't be where we are today.

It wasn't this pioneer stuff that impressed me, though. No, what really stuck in my head was the fact that oxen, once trained to be the left-hand or the right-hand ox, don't shift positions during their entire working lives. Nothing genetic, like being born right or left-handed; they simply can't or won't change once they're molded one way or the other.

Trained as draft animals, oxen are commonly castrated adult male cattle, although adult females and intact males are also used. The teamster (ox-driver) teaches the oxen to respond to his signals, which are given verbally and by body language: Get up (go); whoa (stop); Back (back up); Gee (turn to the right); and Haw (turn to the left). It's no surprise that teamsters were known for their loud voices and brash manners. After reading that article, I understood the old saw, "strong as an ox, and twice as smart."

Women, of course, have a history of flip-flopping between the visions of a life lived in a hypnotic protective cloud of wife and motherhood, doing what we have been programmed to do, as opposed to one lived in the freewheeling, bruising boulevard of work and career. In order to be successful, women have to step out of the pretty yoke, uncomfortable as that may be, and move around until it starts to feel normal. And not be afraid of how men are going to view you. It's like the feeling you have when you first land in a foreign country. Everything instills a little fear—of getting lost, of looking too American, of not knowing the language fluently. But within just a few days, if you work at it, it starts to feel like home, even though a temporary one, with familiar rhythms and neighborhoods. Your walk acquires a little swing to it, as you maneuver now-more-familiar territory. It's okay to remain an ox in some ways—say, to pose prettily for a photo op in the company brochure. But when real life resumes, the pose can make you boring after a while and, ultimately, make you look more dead than alive.

8.

On the wall above the built-in desk in my kitchen, I have a metal sculpture of the backs of six women, linked arm to arm, some in dresses, others in pants. The backs have color etched into them: green, lilac, rose and gold. They're pretty, but could probably hold up to being run over by a car. I look up at it when I'm paying bills and sorting through the mail. It reminds me of my deep connection with my female friends, most of whom work in either business or law. What we all share is a desire to have someone at our backs, encouraging us, mentoring us, respecting us—things I got from my mother, my aunts and, in a perverse way, my grandmother. We need to find a way to expand the

chain of experience we all have, to help us be true to our female psyches while living, still, in a man's world.

Home, Again

Every voyage brought [the Greeks and Jews] home, even if
the home to which they returned was not the one they left.

Roger Rosenblatt, *Kayak Morning*

The journey is about coming home. . . There is always the
return. And the wound will take you there. It is a blood
trail.

Jeanette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You
Can Be Normal?*

The last time I went home to visit Dracut, I walked into my brother Jeff's room at the rehab hospital. He was sitting in a wheelchair, his back to me. A nurse was hovering over him, giving him the last pill from a pleated white paper cup of medications. His hair was in a crew cut, the soft brown fuzz with temples-gray making him look as vulnerable as a newborn duckling. He was wearing white gym shorts and a tee-shirt. My eyes went to the floor, where I focused on the airspace where his left leg should have been—his foot on the other leg was sneakered. When we hugged I noticed how smooth his almost-lineless skin was; he always had the nicest skin of us kids.

The first I heard of it was when my sister-in-law called, three days before Christmas. My brother had had a third of his leg amputated the day before, from the midpoint of his left shin. I was in the kitchen with my husband, who saw my face and stopped cleaning the marble countertop, mid-swipe. Atherosclerosis, complicated by years of Type 2 diabetes, Parkinson's and a lifetime sweets addiction. The day after New Year's I took the train from Philadelphia to Providence and then drove to the rehab hospital in Salem, New Hampshire to visit him. He had an appointment the next day with his surgeon, whom I wanted to meet and quiz.

It wasn't unusual for Jeff and me not to see each other or even talk on the phone for four, eight, even twelve months at a time. We've never been estranged or angry; we simply have had a long-distance, minimal-contact relationship for the past forty years, ever since I left Dracut. Jeff is the middle child of our family (my brother John, who lives in Florida, is the oldest)—the one who graduated high school at sixteen—the one whom teachers called “brilliant but living in outer space”—the one who never left Dracut—the one who avoided college to take over my father's small construction company—the one whom I have seen cry only twice before, at the funerals of our mother and our father, who have been gone so long I forget the sound of their voices.

~

The next few hours were filled with my learning the “what happened?” and “why didn't you tell me sooner?” and “will you be able to walk with a prosthesis”? He seemed like himself, mostly, matter-of-fact, pessimistically stoic (we're New Englanders) and heartbreakingly diminished. I was surprised he wasn't angry, railing at the doctors, the hospital, the world . . . something. He occasionally moved from the wheelchair to the bed and back to the wheelchair, making us laugh, because whenever he got up from the wheelchair it set off an alarm. The first night he was there, he woke up in the middle of the night, on his knees, on the floor. Dreaming he had two legs, he didn't remember getting out of bed and dropping down hard onto the cold linoleum. So, he wasn't allowed to get up by himself—or go to the toilet or the bed or anywhere else unaccompanied. We did an end-run around the alarm, putting my travel-heavy purse on the seat before he lifted up from the chair.

After talking for a while he would get tired and go lie down on the bed, sitting his backside down first and then hoisting his bandaged stump up with both hands before swinging his good leg alongside it. I tried to be nonchalant as I watched him struggle with the awkward weight. I had the ridiculous urge to touch the stump, to pat around it to make sure the leg was gone. He said he could still feel his MIA toes—tingling and ice cold, like when we dipped them in the frigid waves at Salisbury Beach when we were kids. Phantom leg syndrome. His body was broken, irretrievably, though his brain hadn't taken it all in yet.

His bed ran alongside a large picture window, looking out onto a single tree, bare but golden from the bright sun. It was mild for January, a fluke, like losing part of your leg after forty-eight years of working it to build Cape Cods and wide-planked decks and family room additions. He would doze for short periods. I watched him sleep, chin up and mouth open, but quiet, like my mother and grandfather used to do.

In spite of our years of not being in close contact, there was no distance between us. The geography folded up instantly, like a paper fan. He was still the boy I played games with—baseball, hockey, tiddlywinks and marbles (he would scoop out the bunny holes with his heel on our dad's sweated-over lawn). He was the one who taught me the behind-the-left-hip softball pitch that faked all the batters out, and how to outlast the neighbors at our marathon Monopoly games in the basement on rainy days.

When a nurse came to bring him to the therapy room, my sister-in-law and I decided to leave, planning to come back after dinner. As soon as we were out of sight of his room I started to cry, giant, rolling tears—completely uncontrolled, and completely out of character for me.

“I feel so bad leaving him there, without all of his body intact. It’s so permanent, and there’s nothing we can do.”

She touches my shoulder. I don’t dare try to say anything else. I’m embarrassed to cry in public, a leftover from the days when my brothers mercilessly teased our soft-hearted Southern mother, who cried lavishly at the funerals of her soap opera favorites. I’m half resenting that I wasn’t even told until it was too late; I’m a healthcare lawyer and have so many connections in the field. And there was the continuing threat of the sugar still burbling in his bloodstream, padding the walls of his veins, inflaming them to induce more blockages, which could lead to more cutting, and more diminishment.

~

Whenever I talk to Jeff, I’m reminded of my childhood by his Boston-broad “A”s and fast-clipped cadence. On the occasions when we’ve connected over the years, we usually talk about him—his business before he retired and then his retirement, now his health and the state of his children’s lives. I realize how connected we are and how separate. When I left Dracut, to go to college in Boston, I was eager to leave and determined never to return. Our brother John left at age 16 to go to U. Mass in Amherst, also never to return.

~

This unplanned visit stirred partially buried notions of family. What is it about family love that lingers and settles? When parents are gone early, we tend to seek out our siblings, even if intermittently, the way tree roots do surface water in a prolonged drought. The urge is deep, natural, subconscious and almost imperceptible. Since I was eighteen when my mother died and thirty-two when my father did, neither my (current)

husband nor most of my close friends knew either parent, whom I miss beyond articulation. At this point all of my parents' siblings are dead, too, so my brothers are the only people whom I can talk to about our early family life. At one point during my visit, Jeff was remembering how on winter nights my mother and we kids squatted on the living room floor and played Parcheesi on a big "board" our mother had Crayolaed onto the polyurethane back of a square tablecloth. Looking at him, gesticulating and smiling, moving his imaginary Parcheesi piece in the air, I see that all of the Makos (my maiden name) facial quirks have settled among the creases and folds of his face and in the darting movements of his eyes. When he looks sideways, I also see the profile of my brother John, who so resembles our father.

~

Jeff cried twice while I was visiting. The first time was in the surgeon's office. A nurse had unwrapped the stump, revealing a reddened, slightly splotchy thigh, sewn up at the end in what my sister-in-law called a smiley face.

"I think it looks like a whale's mouth," I said in my jokey voice. We were crowded around the examination table, waiting for the surgeon. Jeff barked his laugh—he wasn't fazed by this—his blue, blue eyes danced. The surgeon came in and began poking and pulling the bruised, still-stapled edges, saying he would have liked to see better healing around certain spots. I worried about infection as the leg was red, but the surgeon said the flesh was soft, a good sign. I patted it all around and felt it hotter than normal; I peppered him with questions about the leg from the thigh up, about the other leg, about the test results leading to the surgery. He talked about my brother's coping with the loss, equating losing the leg to losing part of the family. I'm sure this was a rote

analogy for him, and that he had no idea how many parts we'd already lost. My brother sat quietly through all this, in helpless obedience.

What made him cry was the surgeon's pronouncement that my brother not go on his annual eight-week trip to Aruba—scheduled in three weeks. He didn't cry for himself, but for my sister-in-law, who looked forward all year to the mindless, beachy days at their timeshare. She sat behind him, hands massaging his shoulders, forehead on the back of his head.

The second time he welled up was the last afternoon I was there at the hospital. Jeff was in his wheelchair, waiting to be taken to his physical therapy session. He was hoping to be discharged home in a few days.

"I miss Ma and Dad so much," he said, turning to me, eyes full. "I think about them every day. I can't believe how most people still have at least one parent left." He lowered his head to one side.

"Jeff," I said, making him look up at me. "You forget, I'm three years younger than you."

In the statistically likely event that I survive both brothers, I wonder if I will feel totally unmoored. It's not just the idea of losing Jeff or John. It's the larger system of connected genes that fostered me seemingly eons ago. I wonder if the vague outline of my original family will fade to disappearance, like those paling Polaroids in the bottom desk drawer, or rush back to life like an undertow, coming on strong at different times, but then naturally succumbing to gravity in the end.

My husband and I married on February 1, the same day my parents wed. I had tried to find a blue jersey dress like my mother had worn at the altar, but I couldn't find

the right one. So I wore instead a navy blue silk dress with gold imprinted flower-clusters, which my husband had bought me the Christmas before. We were married for seven years before I changed my name to his. I had intended to always keep my maiden name, as a permanent link to my parents. But after twelve years together I felt my attachment to him was as strong as the one to my physically-faded parents. And so I became Hamilton, and in a way, he became my surrogate mother and father.

~

That last day in Jeff's rehab room, I hugged him goodbye, bending over his wheelchair to buss the smooth-shaven cheek. I told him, "You know I'm not a kissy-face, huggy kind of sister—never have been. But it doesn't mean I don't love you, because I do and I always will." I stopped because I was choking up. I realized that I think of him as my mother and father's son, more than as my brother. That's the bond we share, the root of our connection, our deep, amorphous, un-showy love. And the more time goes by, the stronger that bond becomes because of the increased time we've been without them. It's unclear to me whether it comes from my brain or my heart, but it's a bond that will lie within me, Jeff and John until the last of us dies.

~

Valdimir Horowitz, the great Russian pianist, got a six month visa to visit the United States in 1928; he ended up staying sixty years. He never saw his family again and often said he didn't miss Russia at all and had no desire to go back. His life in Kiev, where he was born and raised, was uneventful. His mother, herself a pianist, gave him piano lessons from an early age and he began performing in his teens. At nine, he

entered the Kiev conservatory, where he was taught by renowned pianists of the time. After touring Russia, where he received great acclaim, but payment in bread, butter and chocolate because of the country's poor economy, he branched out in 1925 into Germany and other European countries. He told an interviewer later in life that when he first left Russia he stuffed American dollars and British pounds into his shoes to finance his early concerts, because he privately intended never to return. In 1928, he was enticed to come to the United States to play a concert at Carnegie Hall, where he was hailed as a "tornado unleashed from the steppes." New York became home and he later married the daughter of famed conductor Arturo Toscanini, who came to the U.S. after World War II, and eventually became an American citizen.

But in 1986, at the age of eighty-three, Horowitz decided to return to the Soviet Union one last time. He gave recitals to much acclaim in Moscow and Leningrad. At a press conference in Moscow, before the recital, he was asked why he returned to Russia, since a short time before he was still telling everyone he would never go back while it was under Soviet rule. According to an eyewitness, the room went silent and "you could see perestroika was still in its fetal stage." Horowitz had a blank look on his face, not saying anything. Then his wife, Wanda, gently put her arm across her husband and announced in her Italian-accented English (reportedly without batting an eye) that "Mr. Horowitz has achangéd his amind!" We probably will never know the reason, but I think the maestro felt a natural, perhaps subconscious, urge to return to that place he was from, like swallows, Monarch butterflies, Canadian geese, penguins, sea turtles and so many other species all do. He didn't remain in Russia and died three years later in his home in

New York City from a massive heart attack. He was buried in the Toscanini tomb in Milan.

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When I was a kid, I loved going on day trips and vacations. I didn't think twice about leaving home, as I was certain it would be the same when I returned. But after my mother died the day after I left for school that year, home became a place where horrible things happened, things that you couldn't change. So leaving home became a scary thing.

Even now, it starts about a week before my husband and I are scheduled to go someplace—a little tugging, like driving with the emergency brake not fully released. It's not that I don't like to travel; I sometimes think I live for the next trip. And it's not that I don't like change; my biography is dotted with new plans, new jobs, new towns, new houses. But every time I'm in the final stages of packing for a trip, even just a weekend in hour-and-a-half-away New York, I start to feel those pulls in my gut, wishing I'd never agreed to go anywhere.

Although it's been fifty-plus years since the days in first grade when I made my mother and myself homesick over parting, I can't eradicate those long-ago feelings of unease and vague longing for her. So, whenever departure day arrives for a trip, I linger in the house, checking and re-checking doors and locks, windows, lights, cat litter, and shades, waiting until the very last moment to pull the door shut and join my husband in the warmed-up car.

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When I was married to my first husband, Jerry, we lived like gypsies. For five or six years we changed jobs and locales as easily as other people change wardrobes. At least once a year, I'd find myself packing up our belongings, a ritual that made me an expert at organizing our entire household by room-labeled boxes—purging accumulated deadwood each time. I pared things down to the essentials and could unpack a house in a day and a half, flat. And I would start unpacking the minute the boxes arrived at the new doorstep, and would insist on even hanging pictures and stacking all the dishes that day. I looked forward to new streets, neighborhoods, and restaurants to explore, and, often, the adventure of a new job.

While we were in the Boston area, Jerry convinced our joint employer, Inforex, to institute a four-day, thirty-eight hour work week, a novelty back then, spurred partly by the first oil crisis in October of 1973. That was the year OPEC members decided to proclaim an oil embargo to punish the U.S. for resupplying Israel with arms after a surprise attack on it by Egypt and Syria on Yom Kippur. That was also the year Jerry talked me into buying a twenty-four foot, luxury Chieftain Winnebago to live in all the time, so we could drive off every Thursday night and have four-day weekends all the time. During the day we parked in Inforex's employee lot and walked to work, making us the target of ubiquitous gossip, as he was my boss's boss, in the process of divorcing his first wife. At night we drove our house to the parking lot at the Burlington Mall, at signpost S-22, to be exact. We parked our blue Toyota just behind the Chieftain, like a calf behind its mother. Jerry was friendly with the township police, who would silently pass by our rig on their nightly rounds. Tired of the Inforex gossip, I started selling for Xerox during our S-22 days and I can't even imagine now how we managed to maintain

our dress-for-success suits and other clothes with the single closet and chest of drawers in the Chieftain. We felt we were living an adventure, were in fact pioneers of a sort. I remember feeling like a renegade when Jerry would swing our rig into Dunkin' Donuts parking lot on Friday mornings where he would dash out to buy jelly crullers and marshmallow doughnuts while I lolled in our double-bed in the back, still in my nightgown. More than one weekend we'd head for a beach and point the Chieftain nose towards the waves, drinking wine and taking in the view.

In the Spring of 1974, about the height of the oil embargo, we (amazingly) sold the Winnebago and rented an apartment in Burlington, Mass. In our nine years together we probably lived in more than a dozen places, including a tiny three-room house in Bedford, a historic house in Arlington, a bucolic spacious house in Carlyle (near Walden Pond), a brand-new split level in a town whose name I've forgotten and a four-bedroom two-and-a-half bath colonial on a wooded cul-de-sac in Princeton. In between those places, there was a three-year stint in several New York City apartments, where I moved in the late '70s during one of our many separations—for a marketing job on Water Street—with Jerry following six months later. Philadelphia was also home for six months at one point.

When Jerry left his first wife, Ingrid, he left part of his soul with her, in the form of his three children, who were six, four and fourteen months. They were beautiful: tow-haired, blue-eyed, smart, cute and devoted to their dad, as kids should be. If Brian, the oldest, was a bit wired and uncontrollable, that was offset by the sweetness of Heather, the middle child. Jason, the toddler, was too young to know anything except that he missed his father and didn't like to see his mother in tears. When we lived in Carlyle, the

kids came to live with us for a year, along with an eighteen-year old Swedish au pair, as I was still selling business equipment in a high-stress environment. That was also the year Jerry came home one afternoon and sprung on me the fact that he'd had a vasectomy that morning. He explained, matter-of-factly, that he didn't want any more children, and, more to the point, we couldn't afford any more. I couldn't argue with that point.

During the nine years that Jerry and I were together, Brian, Heather and Jason would Ping-Pong between their mother's house in Media, Pennsylvania and our various houses in the Boston area. Every other week he would make the six-and-a-half hour trek to visit them, staying with his father and sister who lived near Ingrid. Our reunions were full of heat and guilt, in equal parts. When we married, I was twenty-four and he was thirty. We were besotted with each other and I was too selfish to think about the consequences for his first family, whose home was blasted apart in a different way from my own. On our honeymoon night in a swank hotel in Barbados, Jerry got drunk, the first and only time in our relationship he did that. I see that night now and our whirlwind affair with so much empathy for him. We seemed so right for each other in some ways, but were so wrong in most every other way. If my mother had been alive when I met him, I don't think we would ever have married him.

Now that we've been divorced for over thirty years and Jerry and his kids have disappeared from my life, I try to picture his kids as adults, hopefully happy with spouses and kids of their own. They would probably not remember much of our time together, when I was so focused on myself. Today, I feel such regret for not having been more generous with them in every way.

“Home again, home again, jiggity jig.”

My mother used to say this whenever we pulled into our driveway after a long trip. A few years ago I found myself saying it when my husband, Jim, and I, coming home from a wine dinner or play in Philadelphia, steered our Jeep into the far right bay of our garage. I always smile while I repeat the mindless mantra. As a kid I thought my mother had made this saying up, and it was years before I learned it was from Mother Goose.

To market, to market, to buy a fat pig,
Home again, home again, jiggity-jig.
To market, to market, to buy a fat hog.
Home again, home again, jiggity-jog.
To market, to market, to buy a plum bun,
Home again, home again, market is done.

I always thought of the jingle as a happy thing, a celebration of coming back home. The truth of the matter, though, was that the little piggy bought at the market wasn't ever going home again. He wasn't aware of that and often times we aren't either.

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It wasn't until I met my current husband, Jim, that I started staying in one place for years at a time. We've been together for thirty-one years and live in a small Quaker-founded town in New Jersey, population 22,000, about the size of Dracut. We built the house twenty-five years ago. There's a freight train that crosses town on an infrequent schedule. Our house is far enough away from the tracks that we can hear the whistle, but only faintly, like a trumpet cupped by a mute. It's a sound I love to hear, as it makes me feel nostalgic, reminding me of the seven o'clock whistle in Dracut, that signaled it was time to go home. Hearing it makes me feel like I'm coming and going, like the linked cars themselves.

After a day of house hunting (we've been looking to downsize for about three years), I was talking with Jim about the pros and cons of the latest batch of possibilities. He was unusually quite as I droned on. When I finally looked over at him across the room, he looked at me and said, in an ordinary tone, "I don't really care; home to me is where you are." I stopped mid-sentence, telling him that was the nicest thing he'd ever said to me. It still is.

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About six or seven years ago, I arranged for Johnny and me to go to Dracut to visit Jeff on Thanksgiving. To get to Jeff's house, you have to drive by our old house, at the corner of Tyngsboro Road and Locust Street. One afternoon I walked down Locust Street and stood across the street from the house, on the old dance hall side. I paced back and forth, just staring. The new owner had made a few changes to the outside—different color paint, the old rose garden and perennials had been ripped up and Salem's wall was crumbling in a few places.

I saw a woman's face in the kitchen door windows. In a moment, the woman came out onto the side porch and asked me if I was looking for something. I walked over to the steps leading up to the main walkway.

"I grew up here. My dad built this house. My bedroom was there." I pointed to the terrace off the second story room above the screened-in porch.

"Oh, that's a nice room. My daughter's room now."

I nod.

"Would you like to come in and have a look around?"

I ended up spending about half an hour touring the house. Surprisingly, it didn't make me feel nostalgic or much of anything, possibly because I was doing it with a stranger. Much of the detail of the rooms was unchanged: my father had left the specially-made narrow dining room table with two wide side leaves on each side that swung up from below to seat eight people comfortably; the telephone table, where my mother spent hours talking with her friends, was intact, along with the black wall phone next to it; the knotty pine paneling was still in my father's den, along with the three-foot safe he kept in the closet there.

When we went up to my old bedroom, I laughed when I walked out onto the balcony that sat above the screened porch, overlooking the lake.

"What's so funny?" she asked, coming up behind me.

"I almost gave my parents heart attacks one summer when they found my boyfriend here in my room one night, when I was about 16."

"Oh?"

I don't why, but I told her about the time my boyfriend, Sonny, and I played out *Romeo and Juliet*, which I was reading in school, for a couple of weeks. He would walk three miles from his house to mine at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, then get the ladder from my father's truck and haul it over to the balcony. I would leave my door unlocked and he would climb the ladder and come to my room for an hour or so. We'd eat cake or other snacks I had brought up to bed and we'd kiss and talk and snuggle—we were years away from having sex. Then he'd walk back home.

"So what happened the night they discovered the plan?"

"It was one of those really humid nights in July—we didn't have air conditioning

then—and my mother had decided to sleep on the couch on the screened porch to escape the heat. She didn't waken until he was on his way down the ladder, so after he left I suddenly heard noises and yelling and the next thing I knew two sets of feet were pounding the stairs leading up to my room."

"Well, there's bad luck. What happened then?"

"Oh, I got a lecture and wasn't allowed to see him for a month, but then they realized it would just throw us together more if they tried to separate us. So, eventually they got over it, trusting that it was an innocent as I told them it was."

What I didn't tell her was how I could still visualize my mother kneeling at the foot of the bed, asking—no pleading—that I hadn't done anything to make myself pregnant, had I?

I made a hasty retreat and thanked her for her gracious tour of the house.

~

I'm still trying to figure out what home is and why Dracut has the hold on me that it does. After I visited the old house again, I realized it didn't belong to me anymore; it would always be someone else's home now. I miss it, the times and people it housed and the love it blew all around me. I feel like Gulliver, having returned home with a leg wound that never heals—a constant reminder of another life—and a living ache that never goes away.