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The Healing Power of Horses: On Riding, Writing & Grieving

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THE HEALING POWER OF HORSES: ON RIDING, WRITING & GRIEVING

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

Cathy La Forge

2015

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

December 1, 2015

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Cathy La Forge entitled *The Healing Power of Horses: On Riding, Writing & Grieving* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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Accepted

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Abstract

This thesis, *The Healing Power of Horses: On Riding, Writing & Grieving*, is a collection of essays that bring together the three stated themes—grieving, writing and horseback riding— as a means of healing that I discovered following the death of my husband. Each essay centers on one of these themes contributing to the telling of an entire story. Through scenes containing dialogue and description, I have tried to depict a universal world that many have experienced, but without living it no one can understand.

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Preface: The Annoying Parts of Process

Three themes that have resonated throughout my experience of earning an MFA from Stonecoast all revolve around one concept—process. Normally, I find process boring and difficult, but over the last six years the challenge in my life has been accepting and, yes, even embracing process. One of those challenges came to me through tragedy and two came by choice. First, the death of my husband catapulted me into the process of grieving; second, I began to take horseback riding lessons two months after his death; and third, I enrolled in Stonecoast and began to write again after a long hiatus. All these challenges came together, in enhanced and intensified form, during my time at Stonecoast.

November 4, 2009 was the day when my life changed forever. It was the day my husband died. I had been married for twelve years and in a relationship with a smart, hilarious, and artistic man for fourteen years. I won't say that our relationship ended on that day because it endures in my memories and in the changes he wrought in me while he was alive. An alcoholic in recovery for twenty-three years, he taught me to take life as it came, to stop incessantly worrying and planning. A minute at a time, a moment at a time is the skill that I've had to embrace in the years since his death.

Why am I here? Why did Jon die so young, at the age of fifty-one? I've had to explore these questions, acutely prompted by the loss of Jon. I've questioned my place in the universe and the other pressing question—What am I going to do? I asked it seconds after the doctor told me Jon had died, and I have never stopped. Then I cried it out in despair, now, six years later, I say it—what am I doing to do?—with some wonder and anticipation about what good things life can bring.

Grieving. Above all, I knew that I needed to allow myself to move on. Even at the bottom of the well, feeling isolated and weak, I was determined not to get stuck and not be bitter. In the days after Jon's death, I said those exact words to my therapist. I knew it was a possibility for me and I would need all my strength to resist the temptation to retreat from life into a fantasy in which I pretended that Jon was still with me, where I could never love again, where no one would ever live up to his memory, where I became a dusty shell of myself.

Writing. When I was nineteen years old I moved to New York City. A friend had a rent-controlled apartment and when she asked if I wanted to be her roommate I accepted. I always felt a bond with the City and was unhappy after my freshman year at the University of Vermont. I deferred my sophomore year at UVM and took a job as an escrow clerk at the Manhattan Savings Bank in mid-town New York. After working there for nine months handwriting escrow tax payment and deadlines in huge ledgers every day (I felt like Bartleby the Scrivener) I realized I needed to be back in college. I was accepted at Columbia University and began working on my degree in English/Creative Writing.

Like many writers, I began writing as a child, small poems and even a twelve-page short story/fairy tale in fourth grade. Throughout high school, writing was the place where I felt safe. I could choose whom I wanted to read my work or if I wanted anyone to read it at all. I told the story of my difficult childhood to the pages of my notebooks, and I didn't even know that is what I was doing. Everything I held inside of me came out in short stories and poetry. The topics went beyond typical teenage angst to the root causes of my shyness and anxiety.

I grew up in a small Vermont town with frequent visits to my paternal grandmother's home in one of the wealthiest areas of Connecticut and the country. My mother, brothers and I lived in a mobile home for a time, but my grandmother's solid stone house was where I felt most loved and safe. Even though my father had abandoned the family when I was barely out of toddlerhood, his mother made it her mission to welcome us into her home and bestow us with unconditional love. All of this contributed to an extremely uneven childhood and writing quickly became my escape.

In my early thirties, escaping a dead-end ten-year relationship, I picked a place on the map that wasn't New York and moved to New Hampshire where I eventually met my husband and soul mate. By that time, writing had gone by the wayside. I loved my life but maybe I just needed to live more in order to have something to write about? Aside from professional writing, I didn't write creatively for over a decade.

Riding. By the time Jon died we had lived for six years in a small New Hampshire town full of horse barns and boarding facilities so it wasn't hard to find a place to take lessons. I had wanted to learn to ride since I was a small child, but was never given the opportunity. It was something I'd joked about as an adult, how I never got to have a pony, but now I wonder how my life would have gone if I'd actually learned to ride as a child. I probably wouldn't have spent twelve years living in New York City which means I wouldn't have moved to New Hampshire when I was thirty-two, and wouldn't have met Jon when I was thirty-four.

Horseback riding immediately became my refuge from grief—the barn, the place where I felt most at peace. Being around horses got me through the most difficult time in my life, and it led me to owning my own horse and to a complete change of lifestyle. I

remember standing out in the field on a blustery February night helping the barn owner to mend a fence and saying out loud, “How did I get here from the Upper West Side of Manhattan?” But I wouldn’t have it any other way. Horses have brought so much joy into my life.

My first day at Stonecoast was terrifying. It was my first time in school since I earned my undergraduate degree in 1985. I had written on and off over the years but let work and relationships get in the way. I was stepping way outside my comfort zone. In my grief I wanted to hide from the world. I felt like an imposter among all the students busily chatting with each other, and with faculty about their own work and writing as a craft. My writing seemed woefully inadequate, sophomoric and incomplete. That, coupled with my grief and the fact that I was writing about that very grief left me in a whirlwind of super sensitivity and insecurity. I wondered why I was admitted to the program. Was it a huge oversight? I had a feeling the admittance wasn’t unanimous by my reviewers. Or was it just my own paranoia? I didn’t want any of these questions answered but these were moments and ways that I tortured myself.

My first workshop didn’t do much to alleviate my insecurity. The instructor was hard on my work. Looking back, I realize she was completely right and I knew it then too. Yet, as a creative non-fiction writer I bared myself to the group and it was painful. She compared the death of my husband to getting a divorce and I was floored. She wasn’t kind or gentle in her critique and although I had experienced tough critique and more before when I was at Columbia, my heightened fear and sadness, as well as the newness of the environment, magnified the experience. I understand where she was

going with her critique. What, indeed, was unique about the hospital scene when my husband died? It was unique to me, but if I wanted to be a good writer, a writer that other people would want to read, I needed to go beyond a dispassionate description of a hospital scene. Lesson number one.

What I did get from that workshop were friends. Friends who were also writers. Friends who would comfort me after a tough workshop. Friends who would tell me the truth about my writing. Friends who would look for me to see if I was okay. Friends to go to dinner with, to talk about writing ad nauseam, who were never boring and always supportive. What a gift. A whole new community that transcended place. We were scattered around the country and the world.

Lesson number two. There was no handholding from any of my mentors. I learned if I wanted to be a good writer, I had to do the work. No one was forcing me to do this program. How did this affect my writing? It made me take responsibility for my work, my schedules, my own and my mentor's deadlines. I learned that I am that person that waits until the last minute to get work done, but that deadlines are not variable. They are set. So, if I procrastinate, that is on me, and I still have to get the work done. But, my work doesn't start to come alive until a deadline is bearing down on me. It is stressful and painful at times but unless I can figure out a way to change this characteristic I have to accept that it's the way I write. That is actually a big relief for me. Rather than beating myself up, I can accept myself the way I am. Whoever said writing was easy?

Lesson number three. We come to the piece I wrote entitled, "Thailand," which is included in this thesis. I submitted this piece to be critiqued in the first workshop of my second residency and it created a storm. Naively, I had written a piece about being in

Thailand during the 2014 tsunami. I thought I'd written a memoir story about my own experience of going to Thailand to claim my father's estate almost exactly one year before. He had spent the last part of his life in southern Thailand, had brought property, and was building a house when he died there. The long-planned trip to claim his estate coincided with the tsunami, and the essay was about navigating through the chaos of the aftermath of the tsunami. When I submitted the piece to be workshopped I didn't know that the instructor would be a writer who appeared to be conflicted about being born to a Thai mother and an American father. I also didn't know that some of what I wrote appeared insensitive. Concentrating on my father's death in the essay, and coming across as not empathetic enough about the death and destruction wrought in the local population from the Tsunami set the scene for a tempestuous workshop.

I was genuinely shocked at being accused of racism. Unbeknownst to me, one of the students was very disturbed by my piece and spoke to the instructor before the workshop. I was completely blindsided, the workshop went into a tailspin and was completely out of control. Rather than critiquing my work, one or two people railed against my piece and made semi-personal attacks. We did not use the term "narrator," in the discussion—it was "you." I was silent throughout. A couple of students tried to get the class back on track but it was no use. Instead of having a professionally led critique of my work, with discussion of specific places where I went wrong, it turned into a free fall with one or two people hurling accusations at me. Of course I cried. Crying comes easily to me since the death of my husband and I've ceased being ashamed of it.

It took some time, but what I did get from the workshop was the awareness that there were subtle ways in which the telling of my story was insensitive. The fact that the

work elicited such strong emotions, albeit negative emotions, illustrated to me that if I could tell the story well, people would respond to it. I've since worked on the story with two mentors. The first mentor thought that the story sounded like I didn't care about the deaths of thousands. The second has helped me to find ways to tighten up the narrative, resulting in, hopefully, a more well-rounded telling of my experience with this natural disaster.

I have learned to be more careful with the words I use, especially as an American writing about another country. My writing spirit was crushed for a while but I bounced back, put the piece away for eight months and then pulled it out again to work on it. That was a good lesson. Sometimes one has to step back and allow some distance before even trying to continue. It is so hard for me to do that. A perfectionist, I want it fixed now. Which goes back to the annoying part of process. So much of process is just time. I want to be an excellent writer, now. I want to be an advanced rider, now. I wanted to be past the grief, immediately. Nothing done well is immediate.

That painful workshop brought home the strength of community at Stonecoast. A friend from the workshop who knew that I was upset tried to find me at the end of the day. She knew that I was staying at a guesthouse in Freeport but didn't know where. Since her phone had died, she drove from one guesthouse to another looking for me. Other students from the workshop came up to me later to talk. They did not all tell me what a jerk the instructor was, or say that my work was great the way it was. They did empathize with the pain of the writer's process. That sense of community made me want to continue writing.

A gift of this MFA is that I've learned to take the good and the bad from people who critique my work, and to appreciate any comments. Maybe even more importantly, I've learned to go with my gut. After all, I don't have to make every single change suggested. It's good to know what to accept and what to reject. Usually, a negative comment means the reader doesn't understand what I'm trying to convey. That is the time to step back and figure out what it was I meant. Is the idea fully fleshed out? Not usually.

Of course, sometimes I will make a change suggested in workshop only to realize that it doesn't belong in the piece. All of my mentors helped immensely by showing me where I needed to cut. Often later, I would end up cutting a section that I'd added based on workshop discussions. For me, doubt is part of the writing process, but learning to see the difference between doubt and fruitful revision is entirely necessary for a good end product.

For example, in the piece in this collection entitled "Lord Fauntleroy," a story about the death of a beautiful, white horse that I leased, some people in the workshop suggested that I add much more description about the human characters in the story. I did so, but in the end one of my later mentors immediately suggested that section distracted the reader from the real story about the relationship between the narrator and the horse and the fragility of life. I cut the added sections and the story still seemed complete, but the flow now was uninterrupted and the focus was on the beauty of this horse and the relationship between the narrator and the horse and the pain of loss. Sometimes less is more.

Probably the most sublime and magical experience in my Stonecoast time has been participating in the Ireland residency in Dingle. That residency helped me to build

my confidence as a writer and to find my place in the writing community. Because the group is small in Ireland there is much more time to focus on each individual's work. Each workshop never has more than two pieces being critiqued at a time. This allows for much more in depth discussion about the particular piece, about the writing process, and craft techniques to improve the story. For example, rather than going around the room and having each participant say what they liked and didn't like about the piece, there is time to do that and then have an in depth discussion, to drill down to particular paragraphs, sentences and words. I found myself learning how to do a close reading of my own work, which resulted in slowing down the process of revision and making that part of the process more productive.

Although I was a bit nervous about the addition of poetry to the workshops in Ireland, it was an incredibly useful experience to read and write poetry. The inclusion of poetry taught me to read each sentence of my prose carefully and I think this came at the exact right time in my Stonecoast degree, my fourth residency. While I did miss being in Maine—the wide range of lectures and seminars, and the larger group to interact with—getting to know the small group in Ireland was a good trade off.

Because the workshops were small, we had time for lots of writing exercises. I wrote, prose and poetry. I hadn't written any poetry since my poetry class with David Ignatow at Columbia in 1983. The poetry brought a new dimension and order to my thinking about prose. I love the rhythm and succinctness of poetry. I found that I like poetry that tells a story or paints a picture, but I get annoyed when it is too abstract or obtuse. This was another good lesson for my writing. Be clear and don't make too many assumptions about what the reader feels or understands.

The lectures by the faculty in Ireland and the visiting writers presented in such an intimate gathering were a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Learning about the writing processes of these lecturers was encouraging and daunting at the same time. All of the writers who presented had made sacrifices in order to have a writing life. But none of them seemed to regret it. The life/writing balance is indeed a delicate creature.

Irish writer Kevin Barry sat in the living room with the group and very generously talked about the writing life. Techniques that work for him include writing the minute he wakes up. He likes to use that dream state to write purely, before the events of the day begin to distract him. He allows no electronics in the bedroom so that there are no outside influences as he begins to write. Once he gets the initial ideas on paper, he can begin to allow the day to interrupt his process. His advice was to find the cheapest place to live (he lives in a converted police barracks) so that finances don't have to be a hindrance to the creative process. Kevin is a focused writer who is wholly devoted to his craft. He's an inspiration, and showed us that certain decisions have to be made in order to live the kind of writing life we decide is important. His lecture helped me to create my own routine when I returned home in which I set aside a part of each day to write, and found the space where I was most creative (on the porch in the summer, and in my husband's old art studio over the garage in bad weather). I hope these lessons continue to impact my writing for the rest of my life. We all found inspiration in the generous spirit that all of the instructors and guest writers shared.

Not enough can be said about the sense of writing community at Stonecoast both in the States and in Ireland. In Ireland, community was built around the lectures and workshops but also having lunch and dinner at the pubs with this wonderful group of

people who wanted to talk about writing and literature, and listening to the music in the evenings drinking Guinness or the Irish whisky, Writer's Tears. So cliché but such a romantic thing to do, to be a tortured artist drinking whiskey in an Irish pub. All of this built to the last night and our readings in the local bookstore.

I had read my work out loud on a couple of open mike nights in Maine, but I had never read in a public place. The bookstore is small but most nights' was quite full with chairs set up facing a small raised platform. Hearing Ted Deppe, Jean Marie Beaumont and the visiting writers, Kevin Barry, Angela Patton and Harry Clifton read out loud was inspiring and a good lesson in how to read. They read slowly, the poets rhythmically, looked up and into the audience often, and it drew us into the works.

On the last night of our residency we did eight-minute readings from our work. It was the last night and I was last to read. I tried not to be nervous but the place was packed and I was reading the essay "Redford," a piece about the death of my husband and finding riding a horse as some solace. I was truly exposing myself to strangers. But when I started to read, the nerves fled, and I was able to read slowly and with the proper inflections in my voice. I did have a hard time looking at the audience. I have to practice that more, but I was so afraid of losing my place. As I read the last sentence of my story, I heard a sympathetic murmur from the audience just where it should be. Relief that I'd made it through made me buoyant. As people milled about after the readings were over, a woman came to me and put her hand on my arm. She thanked me for the reading, told me that she was going through the same thing as she'd just lost her husband, and cited some passages that particularly touched her. That was the best moment of my entire MFA program. It was also the saddest because I'd connected with another person in so

much pain. But I'd connected. I told Ted and Annie Deppe what had happened and they smiled. "That is what we are looking for, isn't it." Ted said. "And you've done your first international reading."

I have found that the actions that go into process can be very fragile and this fragility is echoed in the themes of my life over the last several years. The only way to survive is to live in the moment. The act of grieving is very fluid and changes from second to second. The psyche is so tender and brittle during this process that the slightest variance can send one into the depths picking up broken and sharp shards of pain. Slowly, over time, the spirit becomes stronger and the depths become shallower. But the process is time-consuming and raw.

Learning to ride a horse has required patience, a willingness to go from one seemingly simple step to another. First, learn how to mount the horse, second, get off the horse. As a first time adult rider, each step seemed to take so long. Again, I learned how fragile a horse is and how fleeting is life. It can all be swept away quickly.

And, learning to write while balancing my emotions and my intellect has been a process of staying in the present. Before Stonecoast my emotions led my writing, which resulted in work that was not fully fleshed out. Now, as I'm writing a scene or piece of dialogue and I find myself wandering in my mind or squirming away from the computer, I remind myself to picture the exact moment in that scene to calm myself and capture it on the page. I've tried to take my easily bruised ego out of the equation.

Perhaps the most important gift from the Stonecoast MFA degree program is that over the last two years as I worked on my own writing, connected with mentors and

peers, and attended a residency in Ireland, I realized that I am a writer and it's actually okay to say that out loud.

Redford

I first entered the barn one cold Saturday in January and blinked to adjust to its dim light, a sharp contrast to bright sun on white snow. A white painted sign just below the hayloft said *Fairytales Do Come True*. I peered down the long aisle past the twenty-one stalls and saw Kim's silhouette against the open barn doors at the other end. I stood there listening to the sounds of the barn—the horses quietly munching on hay in their stalls, a nicker or full throated neigh, and the occasional stream of urine sounding like a fire hose. Who knew I would find those sounds so comforting, so soothing? Certainly not the city girl I had been.

Kim strode down the aisle to greet me. Tall and blond, she looked like the quintessential rider with her long, slightly bowed legs. Fine wrinkles around her blue eyes were telltale signs of her years on horseback, but her arms were toned and muscled from tossing hay bales, hoisting sixty pound bags of grain, and training high-strung show horses.

As she introduced me to the horse I was to ride, Kim gently stroked his nose and scratched the perfect spot on his neck making his lips quiver. Watching her with the chestnut horse, somehow I knew she would empathize with my strange, new place in the world. And so I looked into the deep brown eyes of Redford, a 16 hand, 21-year-old quarter horse. I watched from outside the stall door as Kim showed me how to saddle and bridle the horse, but I was too afraid to go in the stall. The bridle, with its many straps and buckles, and the metal bit to go between his teeth, was particularly daunting. Kim led Redford out of the stall and I stood back warily. Despite his calm manner,

everything about Redford seemed big and powerful, and he seemed too unpredictable to me. Would he kick out if I got too close, or step on me?

In the arena, I climbed the four step wooden platform that beginners used as a mounting block. Later, when I learned how to mount from a much narrower and shorter plastic block, I dubbed the platform the Taj Mahal for its size and impressiveness. But, that first day, I looked down at Redford's broad back from the Taj Mahal, put my foot in the stirrup, took a deep breath, and swung my leg over the saddle. Sitting on a horse for the first time in my life I felt exhilarated and terrified. I straightened my back and electricity surged through my body from head to toe as I looked down through Redford's ears. If he felt the energy I was emitting, he didn't show it, just flicked an ear in Kim's direction waiting for a command as she held onto his bridle. The nerves in the pit of my stomach reminded me of the first time going to kindergarten. I wanted to stay and I wanted to leave all at the same time. But even in that very first moment with Redford, I knew I would never leave.

Kim led me forward just a few steps away from the Taj Mahal, then instructed me on how to get off: lean forward, swing your leg over the saddle again, and slide to the ground. Looking down, I might as well have been at the top of the Empire State Building — although I was just five feet from the ground. But I slid off the horse and was in love. For those wonderful thirty minutes of groundwork, and only five minutes on the horse, my grief receded, as if a continuous stream of boiling water had suddenly stopped scalding my body, and a soothing salve was now being applied.

The first time I spoke to Kim was one week after my husband died and I was curled in one corner of the couch while people milled about talking and eating. Within days of Jon's death, a childhood dream of learning to ride a horse had sprung up unbidden in my mind. Was it Jon sending me a message from the "other side", a way to process my grief? I felt detached from my body, and my hand and arm looked like a strangers' as I dialed the phone. It seemed as if despite the grief that sliced me with surgical precision away from my former life, my arm, as it dialed that phone, was trying to save my life.

Kim answered the phone with a cheery "Hello?"

Do you offer lessons to middle aged, out of shape women?"

Her answer was affirmative. "We won't break the horse?" She laughed, but I was serious. A few minutes later I called her back.

"Full disclosure—I want to tell you that my husband just died." I have no recollection of that conversation, but Kim tells me it happened and that she hung up the phone and thought to herself, "So that's what's wrong with her." She had heard the pain in my voice.

My world began to change just a few months earlier when my husband, Jon, was scheduled for heart surgery for atrial fibrillation, a misfiring of some of his valves. It was fairly minor surgery, no cracking open of the chest, but going in through an artery to cauterize the areas that were misfiring — with just an overnight stay. Yet, those late summer months were filled with a strange light and tenderness. Jon was unable to work so he stayed home and feverishly painted and sculpted, sitting in the studio over the garage from morning until dusk.

Occasionally I would open the door and yell up the stairs, "Jon?"

“Whaddya need?” he’d sometimes bark back, his concentration breaking.

“I love you.”

His voice immediately softening, “I love you too sweetie. I’ll be down in a bit.”

When Jon checked into the hospital congested from a cold, I asked the doctors and nurses several times if it was okay for him to have the surgery. Yes, yes, they assured me. No problem. I kissed Jon and told him I loved him as he was wheeled off to surgery. I settled down to wait out the five-hour operation. I waited, tried to read, waited, drank a soda, waited, paced the halls, and waited some more. I didn’t pray or try to bargain with the universe yet. I didn’t think I needed to. It didn’t seriously occur to me that I might never see him again, that I might become a widow. I was living in the fantasy world of someone who’d never been touched by untimely death.

No one came to talk to me. Every couple of hours I asked the receptionist how the surgery was going. “The doctor will come and talk to you when it’s over,” was her rote response.

After six hours I started to get angry. Why was no one talking to me? If he wasn’t out of surgery by now then something was wrong. My husband was lying in a bed somewhere in the vast hospital and I needed to see him immediately. It would take me days to search the hospital. If I couldn’t find him, I couldn’t protect him.

I am a person who takes charge—doesn’t take no for an answer. Once, about a year after we were married, an airline overbooked our flight and tried to seat Jon and me apart. After some bargaining and a little fibbing (weren’t we technically still newlyweds?) we were seated together and served a complimentary bottle of champagne. My assertiveness sometimes embarrassed Jon, but he also marveled at the results. Yet in

this hospital I could do nothing but wait. The receptionist finally made a call and said someone would be out to see me. Fifteen minutes went by. I asked again. Another fifteen minutes. I asked again. The doctor never came, but, finally, after seven hours they took me to the recovery room. Jon was still groggy and waking up from the anesthesia. The sight of his bearded face was like a panacea, the sound of his dear, tenor voice a tonic. He smiled when he saw me, tried to move and then grimaced.

“Hi love. How do you feel?” I asked as I leaned over to kiss him.

“Groggy, but happy to see you.”

I held his hand and sat with him. But I still took his life, our life, for granted.

Six months later, Redford’s warmth seeped through the saddle and helped to keep the chilly spring day at bay. I walked him in a circle yet again.

“Try to do a figure eight, not just the circle.” Kim remained as patient as ever. She’d stay with me even if I just walked in damn circles around the arena for the next twenty years.

I was still walking Redford around the arena trying to learn how to guide him without pulling on the reins, and using all the aides that Kim had so patiently taught me. Just that simple figure eight to be completed, but that required a slight squeeze from one calf at just the right time, and then pressure from the other leg, and a little squeeze on the reins without pulling—keep the heels down, legs underneath you, head up, sit up straight and balanced, look where you want to go but don’t twist, hands together, hands down but not too far down, stay relaxed—and I have a really hard time patting my head and rubbing my stomach.

I circled around one more time, coming close to the wall and biting my lip with concentration. The Olympic-size indoor arena stretched out vast before me. After six months of riding lessons, the tall peaked ceiling with crisscrossing wooden beams, the horizontal, shiplap pine walls, and high windows were familiar to me. Just a little figure eight in one half of the arena was all we needed.

As I rounded the corner in the arena I let Redford get too close to the wall and, *wham*, I whacked my knee against the metal light switch box protruding four inches from the wall. The noise made everyone look up in alarm. Redford startled a bit but I stayed in the saddle. Pain seared through my knee and I rode a few more feet before I started crying. Mortified, I tried to keep it quiet at first; maybe I could get away with just a snuffle. But then it really came on and I was weeping on top of patient Redford who ambled to a stop.

Kim came running over, anxiously calling, “Is it your knee? Is it your knee? Are you okay?” Her worried face looked up at me.

Sobbing, “No, it’s not my knee.” Shoulders heaving. “Should I keep going?” I said, sniffing.

“I don’t know,” Kim said, the first time I’d heard uncertainty in her voice.

I hesitated, then, “I’m doing it.” I straightened my back and my resolve and clucked to Redford.

And then we completed a perfect figure eight.

Gone

Five weeks after checking into the hospital for an overnight stay, Jon was dead. Dead from complications from the anesthesia, dead from having surgery while congested, dead from medical incompetence, and from being in three different hospitals with varying levels of care. Because he had the surgery while he was sick, he had complications from the way and length of time he was positioned on the table. He had to go to the ICU for a week and then the recovery floor for a week, where he developed pneumonia. He came home, then back to another ICU where he was sedated right through our twelfth anniversary.

During this time, I had filled my head with the details of Jon's hospitalization. Every small change, good or bad, loomed large in my mind. I remembered the names of every medication he was on, how it was delivered—intravenous or feeding tube, calculated how long it might take to recover from new ailments. Every day I would talk to the doctors if available, or the nurses, always asking questions about his condition, never blindly taking a simple answer. What was Lasik for? How long could he, should he be on it? It was for flushing out the toxins that the complication from anesthesia had caused. I tried to be upbeat for him.

One day the curtains were closed around his bed in the ICU and I called out cheerfully as I swung them aside.

“Cathy!” he looked embarrassed.

“What? What's the matter?” Was something wrong?

“I'm on the bed pan.”

“Oh.” I retreated and closed the curtains. He couldn’t get up to use the bathroom. Another calculation in my head, a setback in the time it would take for him to be all right again. Back to normal. It didn’t occur to me that he wouldn’t get better, or that if he did come home that he wouldn’t be whole and healthy again.

On our anniversary we were two weeks into his illness and he’d already been sedated for three days. I sat by his bedside, held his hand and looked at his face. His lashes lay against his cheeks as the machine helped him breathe with a steady whoosh, whoosh and a rhythmic muffled click. I was already tired to the bone with lack of sleep and worry. The hospital was a half hour drive from our house. When I was at the hospital I wanted desperately to go home and lie on our bed to fall sleep, but when I lay down all I wanted to do was go back to the hospital and be with Jon.

The house we’d bought in the woods was serene, with just the sound of the birds twittering outside during the day and the hoot of the owls at night. Our first night in the house we heard the owls calling. Entranced, we stood on the front porch to listen. It was a cold, clear January night and we looked up at the stars and then smiled broadly at each other. We were happy. It’s good we couldn’t see into the future.

My mother came to stay and try to help but I still felt completely alone because no one could help with what I needed most—getting Jon healthy and home. Sometimes I would go home for the dinner she cooked for me, eat a few bites and head back to the hospital. I thought if I went to our home everything would be back to normal, except when I got home nothing was normal. Jon wasn’t there.

On the day of our anniversary, I wished I could take him to our favorite Italian restaurant for dinner—the restaurant where Jon practiced his Italian with the owner

before our tenth anniversary trip to Italy. Whenever we walked into the restaurant Pasquale immediately came out from the kitchen to see us. He always wore a red chef's toque and his round face lit up as Jon spoke to him in rudimentary Italian while they pumped hands energetically and patted each other on the shoulder. Pasquale sometimes sent out special dishes for him to try—squash blossoms filled with ricotta cheese and anchovies or Steak Pizzaiola simmered in tomato sauce and covered in mozzarella. I never could go to the restaurant again afterwards. When I saw some of the waitresses at the grocery store or another restaurant, they would hug me and tell me how sorry they were, and that Jon was such a funny, vibrant man, and how they missed his teasing and laughter. Jon made friends wherever he went and it seemed odd to me that the doctors and nurses only knew him as a sick body hooked up to several tubes to help him breathe, get nourishment and fight his illness.

The day of our anniversary was the second time the hospital chaplain came to see me. I was highly suspicious of religion at the time. I didn't consider myself spiritual and stayed as far away as I could from organized religion. The first time the chaplain came by and introduced herself, I told her Jon wouldn't appreciate her being there if she was pushing religion. She didn't look surprised, nodded in agreement, and said, "But if you don't mind, I'd like to check in on you once in a while." Looking back, I realize she was there to comfort *me*, not the man lying unconscious in the hospital bed. I'm sure when Jon woke up she would have offered him comfort, but he had me to watch out for him. I didn't have *him* to watch out for *me*. I put myself far in the background as I fought for Jon's life, and didn't realize others might be concerned for me.

So this second visit, on our anniversary, she walked into the room and simply asked me how I was doing. “Today is our anniversary.” I had been successful at keeping my composure throughout the day, telling myself that this was just one anniversary, next year would be different and we would celebrate. But the kindness in her voice and her gaze was almost too much to bear.

The doctors and nurses were nice to me, but we talked about the science of the body and illness. They allowed me to ask as many questions as I wanted and answered them patiently. I knew the medications he was on and what they were for. I knew why he was intubated, and asked daily when would he breathe on his own, when they would perform the next cat scan on his lungs, why his blood thinners were administered through his feeding tube and not the IV drip, when would he eat solid food again, when would they start to taper him off the sedation.

I watched the monitors for his heart rate, his blood pressure readings and his respiration levels. Ninety-nine was good for respiration, seventy was bad. I watched the levels go up and down, elation and terror superseding each other based on the reading. His heart rate remained steady for a while, then wildly high, and then steady again. His heart surgeon said the original procedure worked, they had his atrial fibrillation under control. As soon as he was out of the hospital for the pneumonia they would shock his heart and his rate would remain steady with medication. It was the illness causing the inconsistency.

All of those conversations and observations were accomplished dry-eyed and intellectually. But when the chaplain asked how I was, my lips began to tremble and my

eyes filled with tears. I willed the tears not to spill over onto my cheeks. I turned to her and said, “Today is our anniversary. What am I going to do?”

“I’m so sorry.” She put her arm around my shoulders and sat with me a while before moving on to the next room. I realized that not all people who believe in God are right-wing nut-jobs pushing their own agendas. Some of them just want to comfort those of us who are suffering.

I was at the hospital all the time. I put his iPod earphones in his ears, selected his favorite band, and sat by his bed with a book for hours—somehow I was able to escape by reading. One of the nurses noticed the uncomfortable chair I was sitting in and brought in a soft, padded teal blue armchair. It didn’t occur to me to be more comfortable; I paid no attention to my comfort, focusing only on Jon. The iPod was something I could do for him in this setting where I had no control, where the nurses bustled in and out of the room checking his IV, giving him meds, straightening his pillow. Sometimes I reached out to hold his big, strong hand, the hand that couldn’t squeeze back. But it was okay. I was there. Nothing could happen if I was just there.

Normally, Jon sang in the shower every day. Mornings, I lay in bed, waited for my turn in the bathroom, and listened as he sang with abandon. Depending on his mood he’d sing show tunes, sea shanties, rock—most often he sang songs by his favorite Canadian band, the Tragically Hip. He worked for a while at a local theatre in an old music hall. When the Tragically Hip came to play the house he worked hard all day helping to set up and fill the requirements of the band’s contract. During rehearsal Jon was taking a shower backstage to ready himself for the evening’s performance. He sang

along at the top of his lungs with the band much to their amusement and admiration. It was a dream come true.

We often sat in the living room and read together. Such a companionable quiet, such a gift to be able to sit together quietly, occasionally breaking the other's absorption by reading a passage out loud or exclaiming at a particularly tense or poignant chapter. He liked Stephen King and I liked Theodore Dreiser, an indication of how different we were but how alike as well. Even when Jon was in the studio painting or sculpting I felt his presence in the house—knew that any moment he might come barreling down the stairs calling out “Caterina,” needing to connect with me immediately after hours in his own head.

But reading a book by his hospital bed was different. I could trick myself into feeling the companionship of quietly reading together but did he know I was there? His hand didn't squeeze mine back. Over the weeks his strong hands began to atrophy, the fingers became thin as the muscles slackened. I'd never seen his hands like that and I wondered how long it would take to build those muscles back up. It couldn't take too long; it had been a rapid descent. The nurses said it was a long haul once the body began to lose its muscle tone. I didn't believe them. I knew once he was out of the hospital and had a little rehab he'd be back to normal. Everything would be back to normal.

One nurse told me to talk to Jon while he was sedated but I couldn't do it much and I felt like a failure. Maybe if I talked to him he'd have healed faster, the sound of my voice lasering to his clogged lungs and clearing them. But I couldn't talk to him without a response. He was such an intelligent, witty man. His brain was like quicksilver and it was hard to keep up with. Now, when I talked to him he just lay there with his eyes

closed. I wanted him to make me laugh with one of his puns, or aggravate me with one of his innumerable facts—he usually won any debate we had, and oh, how it made me mad. “Why do you have to be such a know-it-all?” He seemed so smug when he was right. If only I’d known he’d be lying in this hospital bed, would it have changed my reaction? Probably not much. I loved all of him, the good and the bad, and he did the same, for me. But I wish he could have written down everything he knew so I could dole it out over the remaining years of my life. There is never enough time to say everything.

I needed some help to talk to Jon so I called my brother and sister-in-law and they came with my two teenage nieces. Jon had a unique relationship with the two girls. When they came to spend the weekend with us the four of us would sing “Yellow Submarine” together at the top of our lungs, eat cake for breakfast, spend hours telling Uranus jokes, and stay up late playing monopoly or scrabble. When they came to the hospital they sang every verse of the “Shaving Cream” song to him as he lay in the bed with his eyes closed. The song always made them giggle when they were little, and I wonder if his subconscious heard it when he lay in the bed sedated.

When I asked him about it after he woke up, he didn’t remember. Later, I would have it played at his memorial service, and there was a stirring among his four brothers and his mother as it played.

Shaving Cream

I have a sad story to tell you
It may hurt your feelings a bit
Last night as I walked into my bathroom
I stepped in a big pile of sh
Shaving cream, be nice and clean
Shave every day and you'll always look keen

I think I'll break off with my girlfriend
Her antics are queer, I'll admit
Each time I say, "Darling, I love you"
She tells me that I'm full of sh
Shaving cream, be nice and clean
Shave every day and you'll always look keen

Our baby fell out of the window
You'd think that her head would be split
But good luck was with her that morning
She fell in a barrel of sh
Shaving cream, be nice and clean
Shave every day and you'll always look keen

Aside from the girls, he didn't have many visitors during the five weeks. When he was sedated there was no point, and after he was awake and could talk through his tracheotomy, I assumed that his friends would come to see him at home when he was discharged. Except for our friend Corey, a chef, who came to the ICU, rang the bell and asked to see Jon.

"Are you family?" a nurse asked.

"No." he answered. "But I really want to see him. He's my friend."

"I'm sorry. Only family is allowed."

I was touched when I heard this story. He was the only friend who tried to see him, hoping to sneak past the guardians of the ICU to Jon's bedside. He was very much like Jon. His wife and I used to listen to them talking and goofing around, acting ridiculous and laughing at each other when no one else would, and we would say to each other, "They must share a brain." They had spent a lot of time together in the weeks leading up to Jon's surgery. Twelve years older, Jon said that Corey reminded him of

himself when he was younger. It was after he died that Corey told me Jon had asked him to watch out for me if he didn't make it. Did he know he was going to die?

Corey might know what to do, what Jon might need, what would be good and helpful for him. There was a chance that Jon might hear his voice through the propofol, that it might somehow help him to heal. After Jon woke up and could talk I got the nurses to let Corey in. Jon was still groggy and woozy. The effects of the sedation took a couple of days to wear off.

“Hi Jon.” At six-foot-two, Corey towered over Jon's bed.

Jon smiled, delighted to have a visitor, “Hi buddy.” His words were slightly slurred and his speech slower than usual. “You know what I would like when I get out of here?”

Corey smiled, “What's that?”

“A nice mango smoothie.” Another smile played across his face. “Could you do that for me? A cold, mango smoothie?”

“Sure, we can do that.” There was uncertainty now on Corey's face. He was confused. I could see he was wondering what happened to the sharp wit, the intellect, the quick back and forth they always had as they talked about music, art and food. I knew that it was all still in there. I knew it was the drugs. I knew it would all come back but the words wouldn't come for me to reassure Corey. I was the one that needed reassuring, and it took all the strength I had to convince myself that everything would be all right.

It didn't bother me that Jon seemed a bit disoriented. The nurses thought he was worse off than he was. I knew his brain well, and all its crazy nooks and crannies. I knew that when he woke up he sat up suddenly and opened his eyes very, very wide with a

startled look on his face. As he first started to come out of the anesthesia he had that look often, and it worried the doctors until I assured them it wasn't out of the ordinary. This was a man who could make a puppet out of a bed pillow to make me laugh at night before we slept. As the effects of the propofol began to wear off, he started to interact with the people around him in his usual way. One night, a man came to visit his daughter in the next room. Every time he walked by Jon would yell out, "Hi buddy," and wave cheerily.

That behavior reminded me of the time he'd broken his toe when moving our woodstove. The side he was holding slipped out of his hand and before I knew what happened he was writhing on the floor while I yelled out, "Don't bleed on the Persian rug." At the packed emergency waiting room, the only available seats were in the bank of wheelchairs by the entrance. We sat in the wheelchairs waiting for Jon's name to be called as the busy doctors and nurses came in and out of the locked double doors leading to the emergency care. Every time someone in hospital scrubs walked by, Jon loudly said, "Ow." It sent me into paroxysms of giggles as they looked at us oddly. When we finally got in we overheard two nurses talking.

"Did you hear the guy out there who kept saying 'Ow'?"

"Yeah, that was so strange. He's in one of my beds now."

See, most people would have thought he was delusional with illness. But I knew it was just the way his brain worked.

With Corey, I looked out the window at the orange, yellow and red foliage blazing in the sunny autumn afternoon. Jon's back was to the window. "I wish he could

see out the window.” I said half to myself. Corey left the room and a few minutes later came back with a nurse who turned Jon’s bed around.

As he gazed out the window he murmured, “It’s like a Van Gogh painting.” Van Gogh was one of his favorite artists, he related to his torment in life. We left him engulfed in light and vibrant color. When I came back it was dusk and Jon’s bed was still turned to the window. But now, the colors were muted and dull. The room was dark and I watched him for a moment, lying alone, looking out the window to the bleak autumn evening.

“Hi honey,” I stepped brightly to his bedside. “How are you feeling?”

“A little lonely,” he answered wistfully.

My heart broke. I sat in the chair and lay my head on the side of the bed as Jon stroked my hair. The feel of his touch calmed me—we were in this together, a private team of two. I thought there was nothing we couldn’t conquer, but I didn’t know it would be the last time he ever caressed me.

It turned out all of his friends did come to the house, but he was gone by then.

A week after Corey’s visit Jon was transferred to a pseudo ICU at a pulmonary rehab facility an hour and a half from our home. When Jon arrived in the ambulance from the hospital he was talking and breathing on his own after two and a half weeks sedated on a ventilator. Within fifteen minutes at the rehab he had coughed his trach out along with the largest clump of blood I’d ever seen. It cleared the foot of the bed and landed on the floor. Within a half hour of arriving at this place, he was back on the

ventilator, back on a feeding tube, back on the IV drip for the propofol and his medications.

One night after taking a break for a dinner I couldn't eat (later I realized I'd lost twenty pounds in six weeks), I walked into the ICU to say goodnight to Jon. His room blazed with white light, the hospital bed raised to waist height and laid flat. The doctor, a pulmonary specialist, and nurse were hovering over him in the bed centered in the room. The curtains were pulled back exposing the entire room, the ventilator machine on rolling wheels pulled next to the head with the cords trailing behind it like tentacles. The cranberry colored guest chair with the wooden arms, where I spent so many hours, was pushed haphazardly back in the corner and sideways to the room as if it was too hard to look upon the scene.

The doctor stood with his back to the center desk. The white lab coat added to the bright white of the room. His long, dark, curly hair stood out wildly from his head reminding me of Cellini's statue of Perseus holding Medusa's severed head up high. Jon and I had seen it two years earlier on our tenth anniversary in Florence. He leaned over Jon.

I asked, "Is he okay?" No answer. "Is he okay?" louder.

I looked at the nurses. They were all standing around the center desk looking at Jon's room and carefully avoiding eye contact with me. It seemed unreal, as if they were watching a play with the hospital room the stage and the rest of the ICU darkened for an audience.

"What is going on? What happened? Is he okay?"

Tearing her gaze from the scene, one of the nurses said, “I was supposed to stop you from coming in. I’ll come find you in a minute.” She turned back to the scene.

I sat on the waiting room couch, which had cocooned me over the last few days, while my mother went into the hall to pray. I hated this rehab center with its poor attempt at an ICU and a doctor who was seldom available. It felt like the ICU patients were all in stasis, tended by only two nurses. Jon had been talking, laughing and making funny noises with his trach when he’d arrived and after fifteen minutes here, he was sedated with a machine helping him breathe again. The doctor only came to see Jon when threatened with ultimatums. “Tell the doctor if he’s not down here in five minutes I’m calling an ambulance,” I said to the nurse more than once. I constantly asked to see the doctor, looking for explanations, reasons, help and reassurance.

I had been an insistent advocate for Jon’s care before. At the rehab I was a barracuda. If human will, perseverance, and in-your-face determination would make him well, then I had it covered. I wanted to move him back to a real hospital with caring doctors. I had already begun to hate this doctor with his South American accent, blasé attitude, and Ferrari parked in front of the building. There was one nurse I trusted who told me in one breath that she wouldn’t want a loved one there—I could try to move him to a hospital—she wasn’t sure he’d make it—and I’d never forgive myself if he died in the ambulance. I felt trapped, terrified, and completely out-of-control.

In the waiting room, I stared at the wall until the nurse came in and said, “They took the trach tube out and put a breathing tube down his throat. His oxygen levels went back up to 99 from 79, but he started bleeding from the trach hole. They are still working

on him,” she paused, looked around and whispered, “They didn’t take him off the blood thinners.” Without looking up she hurried away.

She left and I sat with my head in my hands. A moment later, the doctor stood half in and half out of the doorway and said, “I don’t think he’s going to make it.”

“What?” disbelief in my voice. I stared with my mouth open unable to comprehend. “Can I see him?” Maybe I could make him hold on, stay with me. If not, I wanted to hold his hand while he died.

“Just a minute, we’re still working.”

I went into the small bathroom. White sink, white toilet, white tiled walls. I got down on my knees and prayed to God, Buddha, whoever. Please let him live. I’ll do anything. I pictured Jon from before the surgery, alive, sarcastic, and laughing. Please, please, please. I’d never been on my knees before talking to any kind of “higher power.” But Jon believed in a higher power. Maybe that would be enough.

The doctor came out of the ICU as I emerged from the white bathroom transformed into a chapel. We walked down the long hall towards each other. He shook his head with it slightly lowered, not meeting my eyes. I hated that doctor. I wished that I was Cellini’s Perseus holding the *doctor’s* severed head by his curling snaky hair with the blood gushing from *his* neck.

“He’s gone.” The doctor stood uncertainly before me.

I sat down on a nearby couch and stared at my hands. If I didn’t react, maybe it wouldn’t be true. The doctor sat next to me looking for my reaction. I didn’t move, I didn’t blink, my lips parted and my mouth hung slack. My body was still and numb. It was like I had a force field protecting my body, my psyche.

I thought, “I need to talk to Jon about this.” And then my body slumped as if I’d been hit in a boxing match. As I started to weep and shudder, the doctor stood up and left the room.

My mother moved to my side and rubbed my shoulder. I alternated between crying and staring into space with a strange stillness. “What am I going to do? What am I going to do without him?”

I did not walk down that long hallway, to see Jon lying on the white bed soiled with red blood and the white light shining so brightly. Instead I pictured him laughing and holding my hand, the way I want to remember him.

Leaving the rehab I had a vague feeling I’d forgotten something, like I was leaving on a trip and going over and over in my mind what I might have forgotten—a toothbrush, contact solution. Did I remember my comb and conditioner? What about my medications? In this case I was leaving behind a piece of myself but it was too much to understand. I thought I should be bringing Jon with me, or maybe just his body. But I knew that wasn’t Jon anymore. And I didn’t know where he was or how to find him. He was missing and I was leaving him behind but I forgot from second to second that he was gone. I still thought he’d be coming with me.

Even as I walked out the door, the receptionist called to me. I remember she had long nails painted deep red, blood red lipstick, leopard pants, and highly teased dyed black hair. When I checked Jon in she tried to get me to sign paperwork saying I wouldn’t sue. I did not sign. Did she want to apologize? To say she was sorry? I

hesitated, automatically responding to the sound of my name. And then, alone, I walked out the door into the blackness.

Daddy

The moving boxes towered over me like skyscrapers. At four years old, I craned my head upwards to read my parents' faces. They were closed to each other. It was 1964 and we were supposed to be moving together from Vermont to California. My father was going cross-country ahead of us. "When is Daddy coming back?" I asked over and over, but neither face looked down at me to answer. When he reached the west coast, my father called my mother and asked for a divorce. He came back for his things, and then I didn't see or talk to him again until I was fourteen.

Sometimes I thought about him and wondered what it would be like to have a father. Later when I was in third grade, when my mother, brothers and I moved from our 1960's ranch house, I felt torn in half. It was where we had all lived together in the same place, the last place where I had seen him.

The bedroom was the place where my mother tucked me in every night, said prayers with me, and sang me hymns. From that bed, tucked in one night, I asked my mother a question. I don't remember what the question was but I remember the answer.

"I don't know."

I was puzzled. "Yes, you know everything."

"No I don't." Amusement in her voice.

"Yes, you do." I was stricken. Didn't she have the answers for everything? It couldn't be true. Another blow. Her omnipotence had become important to me after he'd left. Now, my father could leave and my mother didn't know everything.

My mother decided to purge old memories by selling the house and auctioning off most of the furniture, books and toys. At the auction, our belongings were carried down

the driveway to waiting station wagons and trucks. The antique spinning wheel my grandmother had given us looked at me sadly over the shoulder of the tall man as it disappeared down the street. The solid maple hutch swayed precariously as two men lifted it into a truck, and I could see it for a long time, almost as tall as a giraffe, as they drove away and faded into the distance. The Danish modern Heathkit hi fi system my father had built sold quickly. As big as a buffet it had sat in our living room. I remember huddling against one of the cabinet speakers after my father left, listening to Puff the Magic Dragon and crying at the utterly sad thought of growing up and leaving magic behind.

A divorcee with only two years of college, my mother enrolled in school again, moved us closer to the University, and to save money, into a trailer park on a dirt road in a small rural Vermont village. I hated the cold metal box before I even saw it. Was it because I didn't want to leave the house where I'd last seen my father? Or maybe because I had to give up all my toys, including my beloved dollhouse, to move into a tiny room with a small built in closet and four drawers. I had watched my best friend's mother carrying it out to the station wagon with the fake wood sides.

My mother said, "Oh, isn't it nice that Janie got the dollhouse?"

I was quiet but knew that it wasn't nice, not nice at all. I didn't have the opportunity to grow out of my dolls and books. Maybe that's why I slept with every single one of my stuffed animals, the ones I'd been able to keep, until I was in high school. Barely room for me on the bed, I imbued them with human feelings and I couldn't hurt them.

The only benefit to my new room was the trailer bunk beds. The top bunk came up just underneath the only window in my room and I could lie in bed in the summer with the soft air cooling me and listen to the crickets. Sometimes I would make pretend that I was Heidi sleeping on straw and looking out over the mountainside. She was an orphan, and I was a half orphan. As time passed, my father became a distant memory. I would wonder what it would be like to have a father. Once in a great while I would cry without really knowing why.

I saw Dad again in 1974, the fall that I was fourteen and a freshman at a Connecticut boarding school twenty minutes from my grandmother's house and a forty-minute train ride from New York City. My brother was a senior at the same school. I sat in the library during a free period that afternoon idly whispering and giggling with a classmate while he threw sharpened pencils straight up into the dropped ceiling where they would lodge and remain hanging like a thin yellow stalactites.

The headmaster, a portly, balding, short man entered the room and headed straight for my table. I sat up and delved into my book as he approached. He handed me a note, smiled genially and rushed off. "You and your brother are to have dinner tonight with your father at your grandmother's house. You will be picked up at 5:30 outside the girls' dorm." My head began to spin and it seemed like the tables, chairs and windows were rushing away from me until I was floating and looking down at myself from a corner of the library ceiling. My father? Who was he? What did he look like? What would we talk about? Did I want to see this stranger who felt more like a figment of my imagination than a real person? And I was angry at the seeming callousness of the

headmaster who thought he was giving a student a very normal request to be ready to go to dinner with her father.

Later, as my older brother, Steve, and I waited for the car and driver to pick up us up, I asked, “Are you nervous?”

“No, why would I be?” Steve was not helping.

“I haven’t seen him in so long. I don’t remember him.”

“I have. It’s no big deal.”

I was shocked. Steve had seen Dad in the last few years? Why didn’t I know? As the youngest, I was left out again. It occurred to me that my oldest brother, Larry, had probably seen him too when he was at school. Yet, no one thought it might be appropriate to share that information with me, to prepare me. As a toddler, I’d chased after my brothers all the time. They raced off on their bikes as I desperately tried to keep up on my red tricycle. I pedaled as hard as my chubby legs could go and watched them fade into the distance down the road before mournfully turning for home on my own. I followed them to their “fort” in the backyard shed but only got in once and very briefly. But it was enough to be thrilled by the maps tacked on the walls, and the crates they used for seating. I wanted nothing more than to be included. But, why would they want me? I preferred dresses over pants, I needed taking care of, and if either of them did anything I didn’t like such as taking a toy or trying to keep me in line, I screamed at the top of my lungs for my mother. Once, I trundled after them as they ran off to the house of two friends who had built a treehouse in the woods with their father. When I arrived I could hear them talking.

“Wow. You guys have carpet up here.”

“Our dad gave us the scraps from the house.”

“Is that a chipmunk tail hanging on the wall?”

“Yeah, I found it dead in the back yard and cut the tail off.”

“Cool.”

I stood at the foot of the tree looking up. “I want to come up.” I yelled.

Four heads with 1960’s crew cuts peered down at me from the opening to the treehouse. “No girls allowed.”

I cried all the way home. My sobs got weaker and weaker as I walked on, but I was determined to keep the tears coming so my mother could see how mistreated I had been. A car pulled over and a woman leaned over to roll down the passenger side window.

“Do you need a ride? Are you okay?” Her concerned face peered out at me.

“No. I’m fine.” I said brightly with a big smile. As she drove off I attempted to get back to the crying, to embrace the hurt, but it was gone. By the time I got home and told my mother the sad story, she listened, unimpressed.

Now, I stood in the large living room of my grandmother’s house with my brother and my tall, handsome father with long sideburns and hair below his collar. Dad stood behind one of the large, antique chairs set in an arrangement next to the TV, his nervous hands clutching the chair’s tall back.

“You must have all the boys chasing you around,” he said. These were the first words he spoke to me in ten years. I was mostly surprised by how far away they were from the truth. I was afraid of boys and either kept them at arm’s length or treated them

like one of my brothers, teasing and emotionally rough. I had no idea how a couple acted nor had I seen romantic love growing up.

Later I would understand this was the typical way that my father judged life—by physical beauty and sex. Super thin model Twiggy was all the rage, and my sturdy build and curves would never be good enough in Dad’s eyes. I had always felt comfortable in my own body, enjoyed sports, and reveled in my strength and energy but that changed when I began to build a relationship with my father. He would make comments about my weight. For the rest of his life, he tried to get me to diet. He reinforced the messages that the fashion industry put out and I soon began to focus on my flaws—hips that were too big, breasts that were too small, too tall—instead of seeing my youthful creamy complexion, soft skin, the green eyes I’d inherited from Dad, and waist length honey colored hair.

I don’t remember dinner that night. I only remember the introduction. But back in my dorm room later that evening, I began to cry and didn’t stop for three days. I called my mother from the small phone booth in the dorm. She tried to comfort me but could only think to say, “It’s not your fault.” It never occurred to me that my parents’ splitting up was my fault and even then I thought, “Of course it’s not my fault.” Somehow I knew that none of this was what I deserved and that while my parents’ flawed lives hurt me, I didn’t create them. After the initial phone call to my mother I never talked about it to anyone. I just sniffled in bed in the room I shared with an older schoolmate and when she asked if I was all right, I said yes. No one else asked and eventually my tears dried.

In some ways I’m sure it would have been easier for Dad to just let the relationship drop right there but he did keep trying. Over my years at boarding school he

would visit his mother and see me. My sophomore year he took me out to dinner. It was the first time we'd been alone together. My brother had graduated and I think my grandmother insisted that we go out to dinner alone. We sat at a small table for two in a dimly lit steak restaurant. We ordered our food and proceeded to eat the entire meal without saying one word to each other. The table was too small to even have to ask for the salt to be passed. When I look back now, I think how excruciating that must have been for him as well. I felt awkward and shy and didn't have much to say, an angsty teenager. I can imagine that my father's awkwardness was the result of guilt, fear, and maybe even a bit of resentment. But he didn't give up and over the years we came to an understanding that while we would not have a "normal" father/daughter bond, we would have a bond nonetheless.

My father's relationship with his own mother was tense. He was adopted in 1936 at two years old and brought from a Canadian orphanage to live in a two-story penthouse Park Avenue apartment in New York City, and soon after moved to the Spanish villa my grandmother built in Connecticut. My grandparents had gone to Canada to adopt a baby, an infant girl, but when my grandmother saw my father, a boy cherub with curly blond hair, crying in the corner, she decided to take both children home. The baby girl died within the first few months after adoption and I'm sure my WASP family did its best to avoid explanations.

Dad was raised by a governess and saw my grandmother at meals and for an hour in the morning as she breakfasted in bed. Once, after the governess brought my father to his mother's room for his morning visit, my grandmother fell back asleep. Dad took that

time to dismantle a clock and the door handle to the bedroom. He told me, “They shouldn’t have left me alone.” I could feel the resentment in his voice even in his forties as if the scolding had happened recently. He was a curious boy who needed watching at such a young age.

As I got to know my father, I became aware of his limitations. For whatever reason, the time he was born into, the way he was raised, or the fact that he had severe dyslexia before anyone knew what that was, had made my father cynical, distrusting, and increasingly, a misogynist. And the older I got, the more I called him out on it. He began to spend time in Thailand after my grandmother died and on one visit home before he moved there permanently we talked on the phone. For some reason American women became the topic of our conversation.

“American women are too pushy, too aggressive,” he explained.

“No they aren’t. They are just smart and know what they want.” I bristled.

“They are all just too demanding.”

“All American women are like that?”

“Yes.”

“Dad, you know I’m an American woman.”

“You’re different.”

“I’m the only American woman that is okay?”

“Yes.”

“That is totally ridiculous.” I laughed and it made him laugh too.

In 1976, when I was sixteen, Dad moved to the French Riviera to live on his boat and he invited me and my best friend, Kristin, to come visit for the summer. He and his twenty-five year old wife, Cheryl, gathered Kristin and me at the Montpellier airport in a small Citroen and drove us to the beach resort town of La Grande Motte.

Those sun filled days on the French Riviera were idyllic. We watched fireworks from the boat in the middle of the harbor on Bastille Day, and later there was dancing in the square. My father stood with us for a few minutes before returning to the boat. The minute he left we were asked to dance. Later, he said he'd done it on purpose so that everyone knew we were with someone who would watch out for us. I remember that warm night, the softly lit square, the women wearing short skirts and sundresses, the French man who held me close and danced wildly to the faster music. There was just the music, the dancing and the tender evening air tinged with salt from the ocean. And I felt safe with my father in the marina just on the other side of the square.

A few days later the four of us headed up a canal towards Avignon on the boat. We stopped to explore small villages along the way and in between wild horses ran alongside the boat as we trolled along, their manes flowing and tails streaming out behind them. More often, though, we'd pass miles of rolling green hills with a few houses scattered on the bank. As the boat passed through locks I'd wrap the thick, supple lines around the oversized cleats to keep the boat in place as the lock emptied or filled. Occasionally, pushing the boat off the lock wall, my hands would come away black with oozing slime. On very hot days as we motored along, we'd attach a rope to a bucket and throw it over the side to fill with water, and pour it over our heads to cool off.

One day we came to a small town called Aigue-Mortes, tied the boat up to a large barge and clambered over it onto shore and into a small, ancient walled city. Kristin and I climbed the narrow, winding stone staircase to the top of the wall. We felt young and invincible in the sun as we gazed up and down the canal and over the town with its sea of red tiled roofs. That is, until a French seagull flew overhead and dropped his load on my bare arm. Disgusted, I scraped it off and glanced at Kristin. She was trying not to laugh which made me giggle and once again we felt invincible.

That night the four of us went to dinner at a small restaurant and were seated at the inner courtyard. Course after course arrived at our table, squid in an exquisite cream sauce, delicately roasted lamb, bright fresh greens, and cheese and fruit. At one point the waiter brought us a bowl of what looked like ashes. Puzzled, Cheryl poked at the ashes and discovered potatoes baked in the coals. And the wine, it flowed throughout the meal. Pitcher after pitcher of red wine came to the table. At sixteen, the extent of my alcohol intake was when I tried a beer in the hayloft of Kristin's barn in Vermont. That night, after all the wine, I was shocked when I stood up and realized I was wobbly and woozy. While my mother would have been shocked to know that I got drunk for the first time in France with my father, in his viewpoint he was letting me experience it in safe way, with him to watch out for me. When I look back I realize that I never had a father, he acted more like the cool uncle or family friend.

That night, as we walked back to the boat in the dark, the soft, warm night breeze wafting through some trees, Kristin stopped suddenly.

"I left Cheryl's jean jacket at the restaurant." She looked stricken. Cheryl looked annoyed, she'd admonished her not to lose the jacket when she lent it to Kristin.

“Let’s go back and get it,” I said to the whole group.

“No,” my father said. “Those guys in the bar know I have a fancy guitar on the boat. I don’t want them to break in.” He instructed us, “Cheryl, you and Cathy go back to the boat, I’ll go back to the restaurant with Kris to get the jacket.” Then they turned around and walked off into the trees.

I don’t really know what happened but when they came back Kristin went right to our cabin to go to bed. When I went down she was crying. I asked her why but she wouldn’t tell me. I don’t think I really wanted to know why.

Later, I read a passage in her diary when I was looking for a piece of paper. It said, “Mr. La Forge keeps looking at me and talking to me, but I can’t look at him.” I put the diary down, not wanting to read more, not wanting to know more. And, I blamed her. I blamed her for the hurt I felt about my father. I blamed her for the betrayal.

Why didn’t I ask her about what had happened and comfort her? A pretty, tall, slender and naïve 16 year old girl with sparkling blue eyes. If I could go back in time and be the adult me in 1976 in a Paris hotel room I would have gathered her in my arms to comfort her. And I would have flown back to the Riviera and punched my father in the face.

But it took years of therapy to figure out that I was also a naïve 16 year old who wanted nothing more than to have a relationship with my father, who only wanted my father to be a real father who cared about me and would never hurt me or my best friend. I had to cling to that father although he never existed. It was 1976, women still weren’t supposed to speak up. So I didn’t.

Thailand

Early on the morning of December 26, 2004 I was about to step in the shower of my Bangkok hotel room when I felt a vibration in the building. Maybe I was still jetlagged. We'd arrived the morning before on Christmas Day. The room, with its double paned windows and soft, thick carpeting, had felt well-built— usually quiet and comforting. Now, I looked up at the pendant lights; they were all swinging slightly.

“It must be the kind of building that’s designed to sway with strong winds,” I thought. I looked outside and some of the trees were slightly ruffled with the breeze but showed no evidence of big gusts of wind. Jon had gone down to the lobby to drink coffee, draw, write, and people watch, so I couldn’t ask him. I called the front desk.

“My room is moving. Is that normal?”

“What is wrong with your movie?” she answered in broken English. I was grateful for the attempt. As far as foreign languages go I have only a smattering of French and am not facile at learning new ones. I’m envious of those who can. All the Thai I knew was *hello*, *goodbye* and *thank you*.

“No, my *room* is moving,” I clarified. “The lights moved.” In reply, I heard rapid fire sentences in Thai.

A few minutes later as I was contemplating going to look for Jon there was a knock on my door. I opened it to a hotel staff member. He pointed to his head and said, “Are you sick?” Translation, are you crazy? Or was he just asking if I was dizzy.

In a few minutes Jon came back to the room, and I excitedly explained the moving lights, the floor butler, and the possibility that I might be hallucinating. He listened to me with his mouth half open and his eyes wide. He had felt nothing down in

the bustling lobby where he was distracted with people watching. Later, he joked that it was probably the ghosts of Joseph Conrad or Somerset Maugham, both of whom had stayed at the hotel.

We'd arrived Christmas morning in Bangkok, exactly a year and two days after my father had suffered a massive heart attack and died in the south of the country, near Phuket, where he had owned a small piece of land during the last part of his life. It was Jon's first time in a foreign country, and in two days' time we planned to travel with my brother, Steve, and his wife, Jeannie, to Phuket to formally claim Dad's land.

We had all the documentation to prove to the court that we were the heirs to my father's estate, then we would take possession of a piece of land on a long white beach an hour and a half north of Phuket, with a house foundation in place. His death had halted the building of his Thai villa. The word "villa" is used loosely here, but it was the term employed by the Thai legal documents. In reality, it was a nice three-bedroom.

A close friend back in the States, a Thai expat named Mawn, had helped us plan our trip. She arranged for one of her former university students to take us around Bangkok. Mawn mothered the Thai students who came to study in New Hampshire and they had great respect for her. She watched over them, cooked for them, ensured they were studying, and sometimes scolded them. Their parents were all grateful to her as she gave them regular updates on their child's progress and entertained them when they arrived at the University for visits and graduations. A kind and generous person, Mawn would come to my house and cook sumptuous Thai meals for parties of our mutual friends. She would take over the kitchen and we all watched while she made spring rolls, cashew chicken with Thai basil, pad thai, beef with hot chilis, and aromatic chicken and

coconut milk soup with lemongrass. We never ate food as good as Mawn's in any Thai restaurant in the U.S.

Before we left for Thailand she taught me some basic Thai words (the previously mentioned "hello," "goodbye," and "thank you"), and she explained waiing to me. In a most basic description, the wai is the gesture of pressing both hands together in a prayerful fashion, fingertips up, and bowing slightly. The higher the hands are held in front of the face and the depth of the bow, from a tilting of the head to a deep bending from the waist, depends on the respect one wishes to show. As I tried to emulate her, I asked Mawn how I would know how reverently to wai to the various people I would meet, especially as I would be seeing lawyers and judges. She smiled inscrutably and said, "Don't wai to anyone." Although she was being kind I felt a little confused and inadequate before I even left US soil.

One day at lunch in the hotel a bellboy, actually dressed in pantaloons, walked around the outdoor restaurant on the river holding up a sign edged in small bells with the name of a guest who was wanted on the phone. I felt embarrassed to be staying at The Oriental at that moment. It had been a whim to stay at the exclusive hotel for two nights, a deal found on the internet combined with the currency exchange rate made it affordable enough for a splurge. And I loved the jasmine posies placed on our pillows every night, quotes from famous authors who stayed at the hotel over the last one hundred years, the slippers beside the bed, and the masses of orchids inside and out.

But the contrast between the teeming streets of Bangkok and the cool interior of the hotel was almost too much. Our room was spacious with deep pink, silk covered furnishings, fine linens, and feather pillows. Each morning I padded around the room,

my bare feet luxuriating in the soft, thick carpet, and soaked in the large bath infused with lavender or jasmine aromatic bath salts and surrounded by fresh flowers. The dichotomies were not lost on me as I stood before the large window and observed the magnificent view of the city and the Chao Phraya River. At night the lights from the city twinkled and brightly lit boats moved up and down the river. But isolated as we were in our fine cocoon, I knew that the city, like any city, was a contradictory mix of poverty and wealth and that if I zoomed down to a micro level I would find prostitution, young girls sold for sex, opulent restaurants, shiny shopping malls, monks in their saffron robes, fancy apartment buildings and shanties along the river.

I also knew that our destination, Phuket, was a hotbed of exploitation in the country. According to a 2009 article by the Pulitzer Center of Crisis Reporting, “Thailand's sex tourism industry is primarily driven by acute poverty... In Thailand, a tourist with money is tourist with unchecked power. Women and girls from poor rural families make up the majority of sex workers in Thailand.”

While I loved my father as something between an uncle, a father, and a friend, I never knew him until I was an adult. I didn't understand his attitude and treatment of the opposite sex. I keenly felt the gap he'd left in my life, leaving me to grow up fatherless. The very reason he first went to Thailand, he had told Jon, was for a “sex tour.” He went with a group of middle aged, American white men escaping overseas to take in the sights— no doubt, the “sights” included strippers and prostitutes. I think a lot of the men he went with on that first trip were also looking for pretty young wives— pretty young Asian women they imagined would be compliant, childlike.

My father did, in fact, bring a young wife home to the United States, forty years

his junior. Together they chose her American name, Shirlee. And her father was able to retire with Dad's wedding gift to the family. That marriage didn't last, just as his previous five marriages had failed. There was something wrong with him—maybe it was all about power and the powerlessness that he began his life with as a small child in an orphanage. But, whatever the reasons, this was something about my father that I had a hard time reconciling and kept me from ever really becoming close to him. After a couple of years, he divorced his Thai wife. I know that she stayed in the U.S. and went on to work as a stripper. She had tried to tough it out living in Florida with a man forty years her senior but she was bored and people stared at them wherever they went.

Jon and I met her a few times when we went to visit Dad in Florida. She had taken up the hobby of making doll clothes to pass the time. The dolls were plastic and the outfits she made for them were extremely ruffled and frilly. They had luxurious hair, blond, black and brown, and they wore big hats with the same frills. They were hideous in my eyes but the work that she put into them was exquisite. As she showed us the dolls, I realized how creepy the situation was—a wife that looked like a twelve year old, playing with dolls.

On one visit, the four of us went to a restaurant in Coconut Grove for lunch. Jon and Dad went to the bathroom and Shirlee and I were left alone at the table.

“Do you want to have a baby?” she asked quite shyly.

“No, I don't plan on it. Jon and I don't want children.” I answered frankly.

“David said that if it happens, it happens. I really want a baby,” She said.

I was silent for a moment. My heart went out to her. She wanted all the things that any young girl would want in a marriage. She wanted the American dream, albeit an

old-fashioned one, a handsome husband, a nice house and a baby to love. But I was sure that my father had had a vasectomy many, many years before. It was cruel of him not to tell her.

“I really hope it happens for you.” I couldn’t tell her. I didn’t want to be the one to break her heart.

But nothing with my father was ever that clear cut. It would be easier to say that he was a bad man who exploited women, especially Shirlee. But he was a damaged man, not a bad person. Once I got to know him, as a young adult, he helped me when he could and tried to teach me some lessons about life—walking me through getting my first car loan, teaching me how to save money, instilling a love of travel. He moved back to Thailand a few years after his divorce from Shirlee and began plans to build his house on the remote beach on the Andaman Sea. He devoted some of his time to helping a Thai orphanage. He bought and installed air conditioners, purchased new beds, and did repairs on the buildings but he told me very little about the orphanage or the work he was doing with it.

We had one full day to see Bangkok. I forgot about our haunted room back at The Oriental when Mawn’s Thai friend, Ken (American name), and his girlfriend, arrived to take us on a tour. At the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, we entered through the Farang (foreigner) entrance and quickly picked out the other American tourists by their pasty white skin, khaki shorts, sneakers with white socks, t-shirts and baseball caps. My brother, his Taiwanese wife, and I were all well travelled, but my height and pale, New England winter complexion made me self-conscious. We were obviously American and I

often felt embarrassed by the arrogance and materialism of my country, especially during the Bush era. But my stiffness lessened as we began asking Ken questions about the temple. He admitted he didn't know much, but just a few minutes later, he began regaling us with facts as we listened in amazement.

I laughed, "Ken, you do know about the temple."

"No," he sheepishly answered. "I'm translating from the guide in the group right over there."

The temple's ornate, brightly painted carvings of flowers and designs in deep blue, gold, and red, and its gold leafed dome shining in the hot sun was a fitting place for rituals. I took a lotus flower out of the pool and splashed myself on the head for good luck before leaving my shoes outside with dozens of others and entering the temple. As farang we stood in the back of the temple.

The emerald Buddha with its golden clothes seemed diminutive in the large room; yet, all the energy in the room focused on the glowing green deity. It was cool and dim inside the temple, people were gently praying and waiing to the Buddha. Mostly silence, except for the occasional muted whisper. Standing there, it felt as if nothing existed outside of the temple—no time, no heat, no unrest, no planes, no cell phones, no United States, no home, no crazy hotel room. At that moment, the entire world was encompassed in that room with its vaulted ceiling, murmured prayers, and the Buddha watching over us all. I closed my eyes for a moment and prayed that my father was finally happy, no longer restless and searching for peace.

Reluctantly, we moved out of the temple into the blinding, hot sunshine. Then I remembered Mawn telling me that Thailand has two seasons—hot and hotter.

Walking to a restaurant for lunch we passed vendors sitting cross legged on the sidewalk with sixteen by sixteen inch white cloths spread out before them laden with amulets, trinkets, small, carved wooden boxes and several sets of false teeth for sale. A litter of Siamese kittens milled around the sellers' wares until the mother cat emerged from her shady resting place beneath a bush to call them back to her side. We moved down the street with Ken, our sweaty bodies joining the hundreds of sweaty people moving shoulder to shoulder on the sidewalks. The choking exhaust fumes combined with the din of car horns, the revving of engines, the screeching of brakes. The heat exacerbated the rising smell of garbage and discarded food, the decomposing vegetables and meats laced with sweet and pungent spices. Every sense was heightened. If I closed my eyes, I was back in New York City on the hottest day of summer, the street sweepers' disinfectant baking with the garbage in the gutters. And still the serenity of the temple stayed with me.

A few minutes later, we were sitting in an air conditioned restaurant ladling aromatic soup from a tureen containing an entire fish with head, and eating Thai noodles and chicken with cashews, lemongrass and spicy peppers. Purple, cream and pale pink orchid arrangements graced the spacious, dim, and cool interior.

We talked throughout the meal, Ken and his girlfriend offering small tidbits about Bangkok. (It wasn't until later that I discovered that Ken was calling Mawn almost every hour to make sure he was taking us where she wanted us to go.)

I told them about the incident in the hotel that morning, and we laughed at the hotel staff thinking I was a crazy farang. Only later, back in the hotel room that evening, did we turn on the television and hear the news that a tsunami had hit southern Thailand.

In the eight hours we'd been out enjoying Bangkok, news of the destruction had made its way to the north. An employee of the hotel, when he brought my brother a phone charger, turned on the television to the news station.

The reports described the watery deaths of people—the death toll estimates uncertain and rising. Animals, homes, communities, entire resorts, all washed away. The epicenter was the very place we were supposed to fly to the next morning.

The hotel porter stayed with us for a minute and we all stood in stunned silence staring at the television. At that point we were all one, transcending the language barrier, united in the utter horror of what had happened. Reports were coming in fast and furious but it wasn't obvious right away that the destruction was catastrophic. Then, suddenly the hotel employee shook himself and the trance was broken. Steve put his hand on the man's shoulder and walked to the door with him. He looked back at us as he rushed out the door, his face sagging. We were left to try and process the information.

It was hard to know what to do next. Our purpose in coming to Thailand was to mourn my father's death and settle his estate, and now an entire country was mourning so many of its dead from a catastrophe, the extent of which, no one yet understood. I called my brother and sister-in-law in New Hampshire. My sister-in-law answered with a sleepy hello, it was 6:00 am.

"There's been a Tsunami in Thailand." I blurted out. "When you turn on the TV it will look really bad, but we don't know how bad it is yet."

"Okay." She was completely alert now and I could hear my brother in the background.

“We are fine. We are still in Bangkok and don’t know if we will be able to go to Phuket or not.”

She exhaled, “Thank God.”

“Can you call Mom and let her know we are okay?”

“Yes of course, and give me a list of others you need us to call. Is there anything else I can do?”

My voice quavered, “No, I don’t think so. I don’t even know what I can do.”

I stayed up late with the others and watched the coverage. CNN was reporting on the destruction but no one knew the extent of the number of dead. The number rose every hour but the video and pictures showed a beautiful, sunny day with turquoise waters. Photos of the destruction came later, when reporters could actually get to the south.

The airport was closed. Later that night, we reached the Phuket hotel by phone and were told they were still open. The Phuket airport was closed, but the airline arranged a later flight for us, with the hope the airport would re-open later the next day. We were able to confirm that our court date was still on. It was impossible to understand the impact of the tsunami until we made the decision to travel south and saw the damage firsthand, and even then, people were still going about their business, opening restaurants and shops, and going to work. I often wonder, if we had known what we found out weeks later about the extent of the damage would we have gone straight home? Yes, I think so.

The airplane to Phuket was half empty the next day. Aside from a few Thai people who sat quietly in their seats, probably going to look for loved ones, the majority of the passengers were journalists from around the world. A French film crew stood in the aisle behind us laughing and gossiping, even as we landed, ignoring the seatbelt signs and the other people around them.

Their behavior was unseemly, I thought, not only because of airplane regulations, but especially in light of the circumstances. I turned and glared at a petite woman journalist with dark hair standing behind my seat talking non-stop to her colleagues. “Sit down!”

She glanced at me and looked away, still talking in French.

I scowled, “Sit down.”

She never did sit and just as we landed, she started to ask me questions, “Why are you going to Phuket? Do you have family there? A business?”

I waved her away as we disembarked. It had seemed clear to us in Bangkok that we should go on with our plans, but in the airport as we disembarked, and I saw the lines of people who waited to get out of Phuket as we entered, I wondered what we were doing there. People, mostly tourists, sat on the floor and leaned against walls. What struck me most was the eerie quiet and subdued atmosphere. Already, pictures of the missing were posted everywhere—a small blond toddler, a family of three smiling on a bright sunlit day with white sands in the background, a woman in a red dress with long black hair, a tall man in shorts and no shirt sitting at a bar on the beach. I thought of New York City after 9/11.

In the airport was the press corps, taking pictures, speaking into cell phones, talking with each other, looking, looking, looking for a story, the best story, any story. As we landed I looked out the window and saw azure water. From that distance there was no sign of the tsunami ravaged land and by the time we boarded the van to the hotel it was dark. It took weeks for the final count of the dead to be tallied. In the meantime, very little information was available. Phone lines were jammed, both cell and landline. We relied on spotty TV reception for our news. Nobody really knew what was happening.

We arrived at the hotel and in the lobby were first aid stations set up with bandages, antiseptics, ibuprofen and aspirin set up on the side tables. It seemed like a pitiful attempt to help but what else could anyone do? A Danish family of eleven was checking in ahead of us with no suitcases. They had been in a hotel on the beach that was demolished. They had climbed to the top floor and survived, but they'd become separated. For a time, they thought the little sister had perished, but were all reunited at last.

A beautiful family of blond, blue-eyed Danes, they were grateful to be alive. They stayed together in a large group everywhere they went, afraid to be separated again. I thought about life's fragility. Why had they survived and so many other's had not? Jon talked to them for a while and he told me they were determined to finish their vacation. They decided to seize life after coming so close to losing it. Oddly, there was no discussion of the people who lived in small houses on the coast, overtaken by the waves, no discussion of the people who were playing and walking on the beach when the waves came in. It was too hard to talk about. The experience was brutal enough. Neither the

guests nor the Thai people *wanted* to re-live it, and the extent of the tragedy wouldn't be known until weeks later.

Later, they comprised over half of the guests at the hotel's subdued New Year's Eve party. The hotel continued with the planned festivities, and we felt compelled to attend. It amazed me that in the middle of a disaster, life went on. I think the only thing to cling to in such a circumstance is some kind of normalcy. I suspect the hotel staff might have found some solace in continuing with the planned schedule, and I know I did. Any kind of distraction was valued, and actually the more mundane the better. So the celebration was muted but continued nonetheless. The tables were set up by the pool and lanterns floated gently in the water. The four of us dressed up a bit for the dinner but each table of people was subdued. We felt like automatons. Grateful to be alive, but certainly not feeling festive, we went through the motions for the staff who worked so hard, and because it felt better to be in a large group than alone in our hotel rooms.

We all won prizes. The youngest of the group of Danes, a girl of about seven, won a bottle of wine in the raffle and Jon traded with her for the umbrella he'd won. Her parents mouthed, "Thank you," to Jon, not realizing that twenty years into drug and alcohol recovery, he had no use for the wine.

The New Year celebrations ended at nine o'clock at the request of the King, who had lost a grandson in the tsunami. We went back to our rooms and an early bedtime, although none of us were sleeping well, laden as we were with grief for the country. I doubt anyone was sleeping in our hotel, or in the entire area. You could almost feel the collective aura of grief in the air. No one, we were beginning to understand, was immune to sadness.

Soon, countries with citizens on vacation and stranded in the region began calling them home. The airport was open, planes were flying out and just as they had arrived, the Danes left en masse with a flurry of shopping bags, calling out to each other over and over to ensure no one was left behind as they piled into the white hotel van. Another separation was unimaginable.

We watched all of this from the restaurant, the lobby and by the pool that dominated the hotel. All this while, in the coastal areas, unbeknown to us, bodies were being recovered, counted, identified, if possible. The lists of those lost and unrecovered grew longer and longer. There was no relief for the people of the region, or for the families who would go home broken apart, missing husbands, wives, children, grandparents. My family, unlike the others, would go home to intact houses with all of our belongings, family mementos and photographs, to our friends, cars and pets, parents and brothers and sisters. But it wouldn't be until we were home that we knew this was the largest natural disaster and loss of human life in modern record.

And in the midst of all this sadness, such natural beauty. Our individual bungalows bordered a turquoise pool. Pathways wound around the thatched bungalows with lush green vegetation and orchids—pink, yellow, white, and red, in all shapes and sizes. Bright birds twittered and called among the gardens, sometimes drowned out by the black hawk helicopters overhead. We spent our days, floating in the serene pool, eating lunch on the terrace, or walking among the gardens, as, above, ominous helicopters flew back and forth, a reminder that bodies and debris were floating in the water and washing up on shore just a few miles away.

The resort continued to function with meals served in the restaurant, the pool still turquoise and clear, and people chatting, but the atmosphere was subdued and there was very little laughter. We all understood the soberness of the situation. Outside the privileged walls of our small resort, along the water, was a very different experience. Lurking underwater, not far from here, suitcases, chairs, mattresses on the reef floor. I had daytime nightmares of lifeless bodies floating before me with long hair swaying in the current, eyes wide open, arms and legs useless to swim.

And through all of this I thought of my own father's death in this very spot, just one year earlier. Strangely, I caught myself thinking, "Thank god Dad didn't live, he would have been killed in the tsunami."

The day after we arrived in Phuket, the four of us met with the translator, a man who made a business of helping foreigners buy land in Thailand. Eric was an American who spoke fluent Thai, looked a lot like Peter O'Toole, and was often elusive, but understood the Thai legal system. He explained that foreigners can only buy land in Thailand by forming a corporation with a board that includes an equal number of Thai and foreign directors. This is what our father had done to secure his small stretch of white beach. Sitting in Eric's office, we listened to him explain what would happen in court that day. Suddenly, we heard the voice of a man shouting in English outside the closed door.

"Let me see him. Coward. I don't fucking care what he's doing. He doesn't return my calls. I need to talk to him now."

The five of us froze mid-conversation. The anguish in the man's voice sent a flush of fear and empathy through my body. We couldn't look at each other. It was too raw. We heard the voice fade away as Eric's secretary soothed the man.

Eric spoke into the stricken silence in the room. "He lost his wife in the tsunami and lost his house. He has nothing left anymore," he paused. "What he doesn't know is that I've been trying to call him back but all the cell phone circuits are jammed. And I can't help him. There is nothing to do. He didn't have insurance and I can't bring his wife back." He looked down at his desk with a faint, inscrutable frown on his face. "There's nothing I can do for him."

We sat silent, taking in this information. It's the first time I really took in the enormity of the tragedy around us. I wished we had made the decision to return home, and that we were not sitting in this office talking about business. But, we were here and we needed to continue.

"You won't be able to visit your father's land." Eric continued. "The only road leading up there is lined with bodies needing to be identified. I can't get ahold of anyone up in Khao Lak. The destruction there is the worst in the country."

We drove to the courthouse in silence and entered the courtroom with Eric and our Thai lawyer. The room was forbidding and large with tall ceilings and paneled with rich, dark wood. A small wooden box with three steps leading to a chair placed inside sat in the middle of the room surrounded by gleaming, deep wood floors. The judges' bench towered above. Nervous at having to navigate the legal system in a foreign country, we sat on a bench at the back of the room and waited for the judge to enter. Jon must have

been having some of the same realizations, because he looked as if he wished he could fold himself up in a ball and poof—disappear.

As executor, I was called forward to enter the wooden box, which put me at a level above our translator but still well below the judge. I felt conspicuously American with my pale skin, height and curvy figure. As the judge asked me questions to ascertain that I really was heir to my father's land, I noticed the long, black robes on the attorneys. The European formality of the courtroom seemed to belie the fact that Thailand had never been colonized—so many seeming contradictions. When the French and English were colonizing the countries surrounding Thailand—Burma, Laos, Malaysia, Vietnam and Cambodia — they wanted to divvy up Thailand. But in the end Thailand convinced Britain to use them as a buffer zone. So Britain didn't sign the agreement with France and Thailand stayed free. I sensed so much national pride while I was there.

In the courtroom, after the formal questions were over, the judge asked me if I was scared being in Phuket after the Tsunami.

“Not scared, just sad.”

He nodded, spoke in Thai and our translator told us he was sorry we had come at such a terrible time of national tragedy.

As we drove back to our hotel we detoured to the beach and saw the aftermath of the tsunami. It seemed so surreal that just a mile away life was continuing as normal. Restaurants, shops and businesses were open. Yet, many of the hotel resorts on the beach were either shells or completely missing, the only traces left were signs saying, Blue Orchid Resort and Spa or Phuket Inn. There were entryways leading to nothing, not even a piece of wood, a suitcase, or a chair left behind. On the other side of the road, in the

old abandoned tin mines, cars and other debris were submerged. Certainly, bodies lay there, too. We were all silent in the car and I thought about how we could easily have arrived in Thailand three days earlier and could have been staying in one of those resorts. Would we have been some of the lucky ones who reached the higher floors of luxury hotels? My father's death, in that moment, merged with the thousands of deaths around us. Death was no longer ours personally.

After a few minutes I said, "I'm not sure we should go to the show tonight." We had tickets to Simon Cabaret, the local drag show billed as the *Prettiest Lady Boys in the World*. My brother Steve nodded his head.

"It feels sort of disrespectful," Jon agreed from the back seat.

There was silence in the car again. The cabaret show, like the floating in aquamarine pools, and the little drinks with umbrellas in them, would have to go on, because this was part of the touristic appeal of the place, and because life has to go on.

"I think we should go," Jeannie said. "They are performing because they need the money." She paused, "Besides, I want to see the show."

The tension in the car released. My shoulders relaxed, Steve exhaled, and Jon sighed. Jeannie's practical words, as well as the frank statement of her wishes, brought us back to the world of the living. We were in a beautiful tropical location. My father was gone, thousands of people had died in the last few days, but we were still alive. The best way to honor the dead is to live.

Before the show we ate dinner in an open-air restaurant. It wasn't fancy, with an open storefront and two sides made of cinder block. The tables were covered with green plastic tablecloths and the kitchen was open so the diners could see the tiny middle-aged

woman cooking up a storm, moving quickly despite the high temperature. The sizzling sounds of meat hitting oil in the pan, and the aromatic smells of coconut and spices filled the air. It was still hot and humid, around 87 degrees. We were all sticky and sweaty too.

Our waitress was a young, deaf woman. She signaled that she would take our order reading lips. We also pointed to the menu items. She got everything right. Within moments, the platters began arriving—spicy chicken in green curry, an entire flaky white fish with papaya salad, all served with aromatic jasmine rice. She moved gracefully, with what appeared to be a kind of inner peace. Before we left she offered to take pictures of the four of us at the table, and then we asked her to join us in a photo. In that photo she is leaning over our table laughing and smiling, her long black hair slung over one shoulder. Looking back, I can see how important this small respite was, but there was never any escape from the grief we felt for the people we met, and for the nation.

At the show the drag queens were beautiful, graceful and talented, and the dance and music revues were colorful and entertaining. But the theater was only half full and an indescribable sadness emanated from the stage. Of course members of the troupe had probably all lost friends and loved ones in the tsunami. Many of the performers gathered outside on the sidewalk afterwards so that the patrons could pay to have pictures taken with them. Outside in the light, I could see the heavy makeup caked on their faces, the drooping feathers in their headdresses, and missing sequins from their gowns. The smiles seemed made of glass, and they could shatter at any second.

Two nights after the tsunami, Jon and I were sitting by the pool at the Phuket resort with Steve and his wife. Our court date was over, our flight home not scheduled for several

more days and there was no possibility of an earlier flight. We mostly stayed at the untouched, small resort as a respite from the grief outside. To some extent we felt protected within those walls. Our plan was to come to Thailand to reclaim our father, to grieve him, and to experience this country that he'd fallen so in love with that he wanted to spend his final days here.

We had originally planned to visit the land we now owned and to meet Dad's friend, Dave, who had been building his own house next door to our father's planned house. But we soon found out that Khao Lak was the worst hit area of the tsunami in Thailand. The wave had rushed three kilometers inland and taken every thing in its wake, including Dave. We learned that Dave had been found dead in Dad's truck. Dad's twisted motorcycle was later found in a pile of rubble. As this news sunk in, Steve put his head in his hands and said, "I feel like my father is being erased."

We learned these things sitting around the sparkling resort pool and a water sculpture of four elephants with intersecting fountains flowing in arches from each raised trunk. A few days earlier, Jeannie had posed for pictures under the fountain in her bathing suit. Petite, with short, dark hair, she posed for pictures often. She loved having her picture taken as much as I hated being in them. She had pictures of herself from all over the world—a smiling, middle aged, Taiwanese woman in front of the Great Wall, on the Riviera, at the Acropolis. Her posing for pictures wasn't about showing off her beauty or her worldly travels. It seemed, rather, to be about making a record, proof that she had been to these places, had existed in the world—a history of Jeannie, an intelligent, curious and resilient woman.

The photographic history of me is very sparse. My father was the photographer and he left home when I was so young. After that I mostly felt too unattractive to be preserved. Now, when I look back at my younger self, peering out of the photos that do exist, I see a pretty, green eyed, young woman who spent too much time doubting herself.

Before my grandmother died, I had her carefully label the backs of every photo in the house, relatives being captured in time from the beginning of photography. She told me that no one would care about the pictures when she was gone. I didn't believe her. I knew I would care.

When my grandmother died my father threw all the old, labeled pictures away as he cleaned out the house. He wanted to throw away his past, and I was angry with him because I wanted to save my heritage. I did manage to salvage a few photos from the garbage. But my grandmother was right. No one cared—except me.

All these years later, looking at the photos, so many things have happened. My husband Jon is no longer alive. And now, I look at the photos of Jon because I want to feel close to him. The photos remind me that he was alive, made of flesh and blood.

I have a picture from that trip of my brother and his wife in the pool in Thailand. Jon took that picture. My brother's beard was just beginning to grey at that point, and his glasses glinted a bit in the sunlight. They are returning from the swim up bar holding drinks with umbrellas in them. Because Jeannie couldn't swim, they walked across the shallow end holding their drinks up high, and holding hands at the same height as the drinks. It looked like they were dancing a quadrille in slow motion. They are smiling, secure in their private world.

I know what it is like to live in that intimate world of love and trust, that world of knowing your partner so completely, pleasing each other, making each other laugh, singing with abandon, holding hands in the car, fighting fiercely and—it's utter contentment. I can still remember it. There were the days when I looked at Jon and thought, "This man is the smartest, funniest, cutest man I have ever seen." And then there were days when I just wanted him to leave me the hell alone. All of those days were good days. I knew it was safe to be annoyed or angry with him, because I knew that he never would leave me alone.

Except that he did.

But that day, by the pool, he was still with me. Thousands of others had been washed away from their loved ones, or perished with them. My father was dead. But Jon was close to me in spirit and body. And I felt the grief and fragility all around us, especially outside the walls of our resort.

So I wasn't completely surprised at Jon's response one of our last nights in Thailand when I stepped into our bungalow to tell him that the rest of us had decided to venture outside the resort's one restaurant for dinner.

"I'm not leaving this resort. It's irresponsible to drive around in the DARK on the wrong side of the road." He had a hunted look on his face.

"We're tired of the resort restaurant!"

"Why would you want to leave a relatively safe place and go out there?"

Our voices began to escalate.

"What are you so afraid of?" I was angry now. I didn't understand how this adventurous, intelligent man could be afraid. I didn't take into account that he'd only

traveled outside the US to Canada. He'd never been overseas and here we were plopped in the middle of international devastation on the other side of the world.

"I'm not leaving." He crossed his arms against his chest and sat down hard, his face completely closed off, eyes squinting, mouth a hard white line, and his brow furrowed in self-protection.

"Well, we are going. You can just stay here." I stomped out of the bungalow and joined Steve and Jeannie in the lobby.

"Jon doesn't want to go. You guys can take the keys and find a restaurant on your own."

Steve looked doubtful. He hadn't driven the rental car yet. "I don't think I want to drive for the first time in the dark. On the other side of the road."

I walked back to the bungalow, but this time I entered calmly. I softly asked Jon why he didn't want to go out. It was then that he told me he was scared, and that his therapist had told him that even under the best travel conditions, he might very well have a meltdown on this trip. This trip was a huge deal to him. He'd never traveled like this. I went over and held him in my arms. This wonderful, big, burly guy who was man enough to admit he was scared. We stood hugging for a minute or two.

"So let's go to dinner," he said as we ended our embrace.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. C'mon Cat," he smiled at me.

As we joined the others, Jeannie took me aside. "How did you get him to come?"

"I just listened to him."

On the way to dinner we passed a family of three on a scooter, the woman holding a tiny baby in her arms as the man drove.

The restaurant, part of another, much more expensive resort on a hill, had a large, glowing pool in front and looked out over the ocean. The entire resort sparkled with lights and the colors were shades of sea glass, muted and serene. The tables had white tablecloths and cloth napkins. The maître d' seated us at a table next to the window. We were the only patrons which added to the surreal quality of the contrast with the debris strewn roads and beaches, and buildings torn in half. This resort catered to wealthy foreigners.

Over coconut milk, lemon grass soup, and Massaman curried chicken with rice, Jon told us that he saw that family and thought, "If they can be out in this world so unprotected, yet calm and happy, then who am I to fight it?" He paused. "Besides, I decided if you all go out and die, I'd rather die with you. Otherwise, I'm stuck trying to get three bodies home."

Granny

I have a faded photograph portrait of my great-grandmother from about 1890 when she was sixteen years old, taken at F. Sperber Photographic Studio, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I was just four years old when Granny died but I have a sense of her extraordinariness and strength from the stories others have told.

I look at that sepia photo and think how her whole life was ahead of her. In the picture she has a hairstyle of the time: a fringe of curly bangs and hair smoothed back tight into an intricate braid arranged close on the back of her head. Her head is turned slightly to the side, skin clear and cheeks plump with youth. She has a dreamy look, maybe imagining a romantic future? She didn't know then that she would have four children, two of whom would die before her, or that her husband would leave her for a younger woman. In my mind I can see her hair out of the braid, hanging in long waves to her waist in the shine and magnificence of youth.

Granny had a way with children. I remember her delight in us, and that she wanted us to be seen and heard. When you have several generations staying under one roof there are varying degrees of children. To Granny, we were all children—her daughter, her grandson and her great grandchildren. Although to me they were my grandmother, my father and my brothers.

We all abided by Granny's rules, strove to make her proud, and vied to make her comfortable and happy. If she was chilly, several of us would jump up to get her a throw. If she wanted to go for a walk, a gaggle of us would trail behind. If she was thirsty, even the littlest of us, me, would carefully get her a cool drink of water. And yet, she was the strength behind us all. I sensed it even as a small child. She always had a sympathetic

ear, and we felt we could tell her anything. She never judged and she allowed her family to make their own mistakes.

Every summer Granny traveled from Ohio, and later Connecticut, to “Camp” in New Brunswick, Canada where she would reside from July through the end of September. She and her husband built it in 1910 as a hunting lodge and it remains in the family today. The log cabin structure was expanded over and over again for many years. Rustic, in a wealthy, Standard Oil tycoon kind of way, it had many bedrooms and bathrooms, roomy enough for family to come and go all summer. A long sweeping expanse of green grass sloped down to the river. Wooden, green painted, flat-back canoes with motors were tied to the dock waiting for fishing and camping trips downriver. Those same canoes had taken family up and down the river for generations.

Every August, our family would arrive late in a summer evening for a week-long stay. The sound of the tires hitting gravel always woke us dozing children. It signaled the end of the long, hot car ride as we entered the driveway—a cool tunnel of immense pine trees that arched over the road. We rolled down our windows to inhale the sweet, pungent smell of pine knowing that in just a few minutes we’d be tumbling out of the car and welcomed at the door.

There were thousands of acres of pristine wilderness adjacent to Camp. On the other side of the river was a Maine nature preserve. When we canoed and camped downriver it was as if we were the only people in the world, the only other occupants were moose, deer, beavers, osprey and bald eagles. The osprey would circle high over us as we separated the inedible chub from the bass we’d caught and throw them into the air.

The osprey would swoop down and sometimes pluck the chub out of the air, an easy meal.

Granny ran Camp with precision. The button on the floor under her foot at the dining table called the maids from the kitchen during mealtimes to serve or clear. Lunch was at one o'clock and dinner at seven. We had to be seated at the table at the correct time, no variations. It wasn't so much that Granny was autocratic, but she felt that the staff had gone to the work of cooking and serving dinner, and we'd better be there with appreciation. Granny's job was to run the household; she took it seriously and had done it on her own for many years. We were taught to respect the cook, maids, and the caretaker who filled the canoe engine tanks with gas, helped us get our fishing gear together, and pick out the right size paddles.

A large, taxidermied bald eagle with full spread wings was mounted in the corner over the dining table. It never occurred to me to think that was odd. I'd grown up with it. But the snarling bobcat by the front door scared me every time I walked by. Even as an adult when I went back to visit it gave me a start. When Jon visited he commented that the collection was so full of endangered species they could keep the government of New Brunswick going for quite a while with the fines. A moose head hung over the big stone fireplace and there were comfortable brown leather couches and chairs nearby. Granny would sit in the chair closest to the fire and knit beautiful sweaters.

But probably the best feature of Camp was the long, deep swing on the screened-in porch overlooking the river. The swing, made of small, hand hewn logs, had thick, soft cushions good for snuggling with a favorite stuffed animal, or reading a book. We gathered before dinner for drinks on that porch, the adults with gin and tonics and the

children with ice cold Cokes in glass bottles. We children always fought to sit in the swing while we waited hungrily for dinner. The reality was that four children could easily fit, but we still scrambled for first dibs.

One of the most vivid memories I have of Granny is the gumdrop jar and the gumdrops coveted by all the grandchildren and great grandchildren. Granny must have brought it back and forth between Connecticut and Canada because I remember it in both places. I can see the jar as she held it out to me, and her elderly, soft arms and body. I can't see her face but I can feel her smile. The jar is shaped like an old coach lantern and is made of glass surrounded by a brass frame. The sweet smell coming from the jar as the lid was removed was irresistible. The bright green, red, and yellow gumdrops loomed closer as she held the open jar for me to reach inside. I see a honey haired, green eyed, solemn little girl soaking in the warmth and gentleness of my great-grandmother in the wake of my father leaving the family behind. My dimpled baby hand reached into the jar, grasped a gumdrop and the roughness of the sugar coated fruity gelatin hit my tongue as I looked up at Granny with a smile and a shy thank you.

When Granny died, my grandmother inherited the gumdrop jar but the magic had gone out of it; my grandmother never managed to imbue it with the same delight and warmth. Maybe partly because it wasn't possible to fill it with the same soft, fresh gumdrops anymore—they just didn't seem to exist. Everybody in the extended family had an attachment to the jar. When my grandmother died, I saved it from the estate sale and it now sits in my living room. But I don't fill it with gumdrops. It just wouldn't seem right.

My father told me that Granny was the one he went to with problems. I learned this decades after she died. Before he married my mother, they thought she was pregnant. In 1953 this was a big deal. My father went to Granny, confessed, and asked for help. Granny lovingly told him that he needed to marry my mother and supplied him with a diamond engagement ring to give to her. Of course, my father telling me this story when I was in my twenties crept me out—no one wants to know about their parents' sex life. It turned out my mother wasn't pregnant but they got married anyway.

One of Granny's most inventive games was played with everyone sitting in a large circle. Granny would spread a large, blue velvet blanket over the circle of laps, dim the lights and take her place at the head of the group. With the fire crackling in the background, she would tell harrowing stories as she passed around "artifacts" from the stories. Each person, with hands kept under the blanket, would take the object, feel it, and pass it on as she explained the item. Peeled grapes were eyeballs, spaghetti was worms, a large peeled tomato was a heart, a boiled cabbage head was a brain, and dried apple slices were ears. Granny would slowly pass these items around while explaining in detail where they came from. Everyone was spellbound and my brother would often squeal and run to his room, only to return a few minutes later, peeping around the door into the living room. I don't know what happened to the velvet blanket, but I wish I had it.

When I look back now, I marvel at what Granny lived through. She grew up in a wealthy, stiff, Victorian family where appearances were everything and women were expected to be pretty, charming, able to hold an intelligent conversation, but always know that their place was to make men feel superior. I have the letter my great grandfather

wrote to Granny's father asking for her hand in marriage. He was a doctor from Maine and she was just seventeen years old. He wrote, "I know that Laura is young but I will strive to be the best possible husband if you will just give your consent for our marriage. I cherish her and love her with all my heart." After they were married, the doctor was forced to give up his practice, move to Ohio to be close to Granny's mother and father, and work in her family's plate glass business that afforded several generations with a privileged lifestyle. Being a doctor at that time wasn't prestigious enough. The reality was that with his wife's wealth, he didn't need to work. But, it was considered a badge of honor to go to the office of the family business every day.

How my great-grandfather went from the devotion expressed in the letter to eventually running away with one of their daughter's schoolmates, I will never know. Perhaps he was jealous of all the love Granny gave to everyone, and all the love she received. Perhaps he didn't want to share her. Whatever the reason, Granny supported him and his mistress for the rest of his life. My grandmother told me that Granny went to him in New York City when he was dying. She said to me, "I could never understand how she could be so forgiving. But I went with her because I didn't want her to go alone."

In the four short years that I actually knew her, and in the years after her death as I heard stories of her, I learned that she was one of the kindest people around, with an open and forgiving heart. She treated everyone fairly, thought the best of people, and her generosity was legendary. One story goes that during the depression she hired a man down on his luck for a few days' worth of work. Twenty years later, she received a

check in the mail for ten dollars from that man and a note. In the note he apologized for stealing a chicken and a pot from her so that he could feed his family.

Granny would have given him that chicken if she'd known.

Lord Fauntleroy

On a frigidly cold and black February night in New Hampshire, four months after I started riding and leasing a beautiful horse named Lord, I received a call from the barn.

“Lord is still in the field. He’s lame and we can’t get him to come in.”

My stomach churned as I bundled up in warmly lined knee high boots, a sweater, parka, hat, scarf and warm gloves. The Subaru sluggishly ground to life, the seats, shift, brakes and gas pedal all stiff with cold. With only four miles to go, it would barely warm up before I got to the barn.

I saw Lord’s white coat glowing through the dark night. Overhead, the stars were shining brightly with a hard, blue light. I walked into the field where Lord stood quietly and patiently, and looked into his deep brown eyes. He didn’t seem alarmed or in pain but he couldn’t put any weight on his front left leg, which meant all his weight was on three legs and he couldn’t walk. He jerked his head back towards his side repeatedly, as if trying to see why he couldn’t move.

Judy, the barn owner and my riding instructor, fed him hay by hand to keep him occupied. He’d already been standing in the cold for a half hour and the hay would help to keep him warm. She went into the barn to get more hay and I stood alone in the freezing, empty field with Lord, murmuring into his ear, “You are a good boy, a handsome boy, a sweet boy, a loved boy.” I said it over and over.

That winter had been bitterly cold with very little snow. The ground, hard as a rock and rough with frozen ruts made on warmer days by the horses’ hooves, had no snow cover. The warm, golden lights from the barn spilled out through the windows. I

heard the faint rustling of the horses as they shifted in their stalls and chewed on hay. Lord, separated from his herd, lifted his head and gave a soulful call to the barn. He called again and some of the horses answered.

As I waited for the vet, I could feel the cold seeping through my layers. Donna, Lord's owner, arrived and whispered to him. She knelt down and looked at his leg, moving it back and forth. She held a flake of hay for him to eat. Her connection to this beautiful, white horse was palpable and strong. Having owned horses all her life, this was her horse of a lifetime. She developed a relationship with him at another barn long before she actually owned him. His beauty and sweet but mischievous personality caught her eye. The previous owner's impatience made her a bad match for Lord. He needed patience, consistency and love to be his best. Finally, Donna struck a deal with the owner and paid monthly for the privilege of owning him until the debt was paid. Lord's gratitude and devotion to Donna expressed itself when he nickered as she entered the barn, or stood for moments at a time with his soft nose resting on the back of her neck, blowing warm air across her shoulder.

The vet arrived and Judy, Donna and I surrounded Lord as he was examined. The vet moved his left, front leg back and forth. Even I could tell it was too loose. He stood up.

"It's broken," he said bluntly. This vet didn't go for small talk or soft words. "Now, in the old days that meant the only thing to do was put him down. Today, there are things that can be done. We can sedate him and bring him to the equine clinic. He can be suspended so his leg can heal. But it's a long process and there are no guarantees. And it's expensive. Thousands of dollars."

Donna nodded, her head in her hands as she knelt in the cold and dark.

“I don’t want him to suffer.”

He nodded, “I’ll go get my bag.”

Lord started to get more agitated, neighing to the barn, looking around and anxious that he couldn’t put weight on his leg, that the other horses were being fed without him, and that he was alone.

I had just started to ride this beautiful white horse who had taught me so much already, and now it was too late. I’d already become attached. Fool that I was to tempt the pain of death yet again. I didn’t have to stand in the freezing cold and dark field waiting for this majestic creature to die, but I needed to honor his life and the brief part he’d played in mine.

The first time I rode Lord I couldn’t believe my luck, even though it was predicated on Donna’s heartbreak. On that day, months earlier, the barn was busy with horses tied in the aisles and proud owners brushing long blond or black or chestnut tails with long sweeping motions until the horses gleamed. In the arena, horses trotted or cantered with those tails shimmering as they bounced with the motion or flicked at the rider’s command to trot left or right, in a circle, diagonal, or serpentine pattern.

Donna was quietly crying outside the tack room as she talked to Judy. I was un-tacking the horse I rode once a week and looked away to avoid intruding on an emotional moment. As I heaved the leather saddle off the back of the horse, Judy gave Donna a hug and walked quickly over to me.

“Do you want to lease Lord?”

“What? Why?” I stammered. Lord, the big white Hanoverian, was the darling of the barn. Everyone wanted to have a horse like him. Big, talented, athletic, quiet and patient, he was in charge of the herd in the field, but took care of his rider.

“She either has to sell him, or lease him. This way he can stay at this barn and she could still ride him occasionally.”

“Can I ride him? Am I good enough?”

“Absolutely. I’ll be here to help you in lessons.”

“Yes, I want to lease him.”

It was that simple. Scared and excited, I signed on for a new adventure.

With Lord, I learned about the bond between horse and person. From Donna, I learned how heartbreaking that bond can be when life and circumstances intercede. Donna is tall and leggy with short brown hair, and an open smile. Horses respond to her, even the difficult ones often become calm in her presence. Once I stood with Donna next to a horse as he pawed the concrete ground of the barn aisle until he created sparks. His head tossing, and his body restless, twitching and moving, every sound caused his head to come up fast, alert, his primal instincts surfacing as a prey animal looking for danger, poised to flee. I stepped back at the force of that energy, the nervousness transferring to me. In contrast, Donna stood close to the gelding whispering to him and laying her quiet hands on his neck and withers as he visibly relaxed. At that moment, I realized how much I could learn about horses from her.

As my lessons on Lord continued, I stepped up the game. One night a couple of months after taking on his lease, I was trying to learn to canter in a lesson but fear was overcoming my resolve. Trotting and walking are a slower gait, cantering is faster. As I

sat on Lord, I tried to use the commands to canter. Leg pressure on one side while giving a small kick with the other resulted in—nothing—Lord continued to trot and just looked a little confused. Do it again—nothing. Again—nothing. Again—nothing.

Riding is a process of trying over and over again, as is working through grief. Finally, Judy gave Lord a nudge from the ground with a whip. Lord gave what felt like a great leap forward and started cantering. Success. But fear clutched at me as I sped past familiar landmarks, the green three step mounting block, viewers chairs, the rack filled with whips, the wooden walls, the jump apparatus stored neatly in the corner. Panic quickly set in and I leaned forward to reach for Lord's neck, letting the reins go. It felt like slow motion and I knew it was wrong, but the comfort of holding onto that neck and mane as opposed to sitting up straight and balanced was overwhelming. But to Lord, my hold on his neck felt like a mountain lion clinging to his back. He raced around faster. I almost came off but clung tighter.

“Sit up! Sit up!” Judy yelled to me.

Sit up and leave the relative comfort and stability of clinging to this now frightened horse? Somehow, I began to comprehend that my options were to sit up and try to stop him, careen around for the next hour, or much more likely, fall off. Allowing logic to overcome terror, I unwound my arms from his neck and scrabbled for the reins among his mane. Slowly I forced my body to a semi-upright position, Lord slowed a bit and headed for Donna. When he came to a halt I saw concern, love, and a little horror on her face as she looked into his eyes.

“Is he scared?” I asked.

“Yes,” she nodded without looking at me. My heart dropped even as it beat hard.

“I’m so sorry.”

“I thought you were going to come off around that last corner!” Judy came running over. “Are you ok?”

Tears were running down my face. Of course, they’d never let me ride Lord again after this.

“I thought so too,” Donna answered.

“Were you trying to grab the reins?” Judy asked me. “I just wanted you to sit up. That’s the only way to get control back and make him stop. Next time we’ll work more on your balance.”

Next time? There would be a next time? Apparently so, as Judy and Donna analyzed my ride and tried to make me understand what had happened. My tears dried as they congratulated me for staying on and assured me that it would be better next time.

And it was better the next time, and many times after, until tonight. The vet came back into the field with his bag.

“You all know the routine, right?”

“No, I’ve never experienced this before.” My voice wavered.

“Ah. OK. Let me explain. I’ll give him an injection in his neck and he’ll start to get wobbly. He’s a big horse so when he falls it will be dramatic. Since we can’t move him, he may hit this fence when he falls. But by the time he starts to fall it will already be over. You all need to stay back until I tell you. Sometimes they can have a final reflex and kick even though they are already gone.”

Judy and I stood back to give Donna a moment with Lord. She thanked him over and over and then stepped away. As I watched Lord fall to the ground, I thanked him

too, for his kindness, beauty, and gentleness. I thanked him for nuzzling my neck, loving his carrots, and treating me like his partner.

Donna knelt next to Lord and tried to put her arms around his big body. He hadn't hit the fence, so he was lying on his side with his head and tail stretched out as he looked when he ran in the field with the wind in his mane. I put one hand on Donna's shoulder as she wept, and one hand on Lord's still warm body.

I sat in the heated tack room with Donna and Judy passing around the tissues, one or the other of us breaking the stunned silence with small comments.

"I can't figure out how he broke it. I just rode him and he seemed fine."

"The vet said it was probably the hard, rutted ground."

"He must have been running to come in and twisted it just right."

"Or just wrong."

I passed the tissues to Donna.

"I'm not going to ride anymore." I stated. Judy looked up but no one said anything. As I stepped out of the barn to head home I could see Lord's white body quietly lying in the field and thought about the humaneness of his death, and that he was surrounded by women who loved him in his final moments. It was what I would have wanted for Jon, and I realized how powerless I had been to help him have a good death.

The next morning I called Judy and said, "I need your help. I want to buy a horse."

Finn

Two months after Lord's tragic death, Judy and I drove a rental car from the Raleigh airport to a small, red horse barn in North Carolina. As we pulled into the driveway and looked out over a front paddock to the barn we noticed a tall, chestnut horse watching us, his head hung over his stall door. The large white blaze on his face had three random, small chestnut spots and his head was tilted slightly with curiosity. This was Fahrenheit, misspelled name and all.

"I think that's him," I said to Judy. I felt like a child on Christmas morning. After just two years of riding, beginning at age fifty, I was fulfilling a childhood dream of owning a horse. Somehow, even after just seeing him from afar, I knew this might be the one.

The night that Lord died I thought I would never ride again, never risk becoming attached to another living being. When I left the barn after Lord was put down, I had that familiar feeling of leaving someone behind. I couldn't quite comprehend that I would never hear that majestic creature's nicker again or feel him nuzzle the back of my neck. I had started riding to put aside that feeling of loss, but in riding I made a pact with myself to continue living and not bury myself in grief. So once again, when Lord died, I spent a night in anguish, assaulted by loss.

But the next morning I wearily called Judy to tell her I wanted to buy my first horse. I was scared and exhausted, but I couldn't throw away all the work I had done with Lord and Redford, any more than I could throw away the solace they had given me. I wanted to honor Lord's life and death, and I wanted to continue my journey. I wanted to live.

I spent several weeks looking online at horses for sale, asking for videos, talking to the owners, and talking to my fellow horse owners and Judy about the pros and cons of each horse until I narrowed the list down to two horses. Criteria included the following: age in the range of nine to thirteen years old—not too young, not too old; size—larger was better; no mares—too flighty and moody; training—as a beginner I wanted a sage horse partner; and of course, price—which could negate all of the other criteria.

We first flew to Virginia to look at another horse named Finer. As we drove through lush, green, horse country, we passed large, fancy looking stables but saw no horses outside. The pasture around the farms was a deep green and the paddocks fences were pristine white and glowing in the sun. I pictured the inside of those stables with clean, brick or stone floors, an oriental rug or two in the tack room, expensive black and brown leather bridles and saddles hanging on the walls, and deep wooden tack trunks with brass nameplates. For all the beauty of these stables, though, the horses were trapped in their stalls, too expensive at fifty thousand dollars and up, to be turned out and risk injuries.

Finer was stabled in a more utilitarian barn with row after row of stalls in a long, low building which could board up to fifty horses. Finer was a beautiful bay horse—chocolate brown with a black mane, tail and legs. His eyes revealed an old soul and a bit of sadness. I watched Judy ride him in an outdoor arena. March in Virginia was a welcome change from New Hampshire. I reveled in the warm sun on my face and the emerald pastures stretching into the distance. Finer's seller made comments as Judy rode.

“He’s not used to being ridden like that. If he won’t stop all she has to do is pull on the reins and lean back,” she murmured.

Still a beginning rider I had a hard time identifying the difficulties in a ride, and I wasn’t sure if Judy was trying to get Finer to stop or was still putting him through his paces. I did know that she was sitting up straight, tall and balanced and that she would never inflict pain on a horse by pulling back hard on the reins for a halt. Instead, by circling in smaller and smaller patterns and using gentle pressure on the reins, Judy could get the horse to come to a stop gradually but painlessly. It required patience with any horse, and nerves of steel with an unknown horse.

Next, we watched the seller, Sally, ride Finer. She trotted him around the arena a few times and we observed his lovely, smooth trot and canter. As she came to a halt, she leaned back with all her weight and pulled hard on the reins. I jumped and Judy winced. I could almost feel the hard metal bit cutting into the corners of Finer’s mouth as Sally tensed her muscles and pulled back.

As Sally, a slim woman with a thick brown braid down to her waist, dismounted she turned to us and said, “Sometimes he’s hard to stop but I’m really strong, so it’s no problem. Just takes a little practice.” She turned to me and said, “Do you want to ride him in the indoor arena?”

I hesitated and turned to Judy, “What do you think?” Finer seemed to be a challenging horse to ride.

“It’s up to you. You could always just walk him around. I don’t think he’s the horse for you, but it could be fun to try him.” There was uncertainty in her voice.

The dim, windowless indoor arena seemed grim, quiet, and lonely. I swung myself into the saddle and immediately felt the nervous energy in this horse.

“Just walk him around and only trot if you feel comfortable.” Judy started to video as I guided Finer around the arena.

Despite my nerves, I loosened up a bit and decided to trot. The small arena had several jumps set up in the center. I carefully avoided them. I didn’t want to jump for the first time on a strange horse, with no previous instruction. I asked for the trot by squeezing my legs quickly three times. Finer responded immediately, and I began to post up and down with the rhythm of his body. So far, so good. I started to enjoy the ride. Finer sped up.

“Just relax and go in small circles,” Judy instructed from behind the camera. “If it feels too fast, do small circles. And sit up!” The tendency is for a rider to lean forward when she’s nervous but that makes the horse go faster.

Finer picked up on my nervousness and sped up more. I tried to guide him into a small circle but with all the jumps in the middle I pictured myself flying over one of them. Nevertheless, I asked him to turn and guided him in between two jumps. I sat down, asking him to walk but he took it as a command to canter. At first, I sat up and felt the rhythm of the canter, rocking gently in the saddle. I decided to bring him to a halt remembering all the instruction I’d received. I tried to post to get him to come down to a trot but he kept cantering.

My body became tense, stiff and unbalanced in the saddle. I felt myself sliding to the right as the horse cantered around a corner. He slowed down briefly as I righted myself and then took off again. I lost my balance and slid completely off, swearing as I

hit the ground. Although it took mere seconds before I was lying on the arena floor staring up at the ceiling, the fall felt like it had happened in slow motion, as if I'd been floating in midair and could remain that way, cushioned and soft. The shock was all that much greater when my body and the ground connected. The video revealed Judy saying, "She's coming off!" as the camera swung to the ground.

By the time they got to me I was on my feet and brushing the dust and arena footing off my black riding breeches and tee shirt. "Well, that was my first fall from a horse." I tried to sound cheerful though my hands were shaking, "Not as bad as I thought it would be. But he's not the horse for me."

"No, he's not," Judy agreed. "But good for you for trying."

A few minutes later as the Sally untacked Finer, she tried to convince Judy that he was the right horse for me. I heard them talking softly to each other.

"He can be trained. He really just has a problem with stopping."

Judy shook her head, "He's a beautiful horse with good gaits, but not a horse for a beginner. If I had the money, I'd buy him and train him."

Sally wanted a good home for Finer and I could tell he had a sweet disposition. I shook my head even as Finer took a stepped forward on the crossties, looking at me with limpid brown eyes. This horse's issues revolved around bad training, not being a bad horse, but as a fifty-two-year-old beginning rider, I couldn't take the chance.

"I'm so sorry, buddy. I wish I could take you home." My heart broke for him as I went to sit in the car to collect my shattered nerves.

One day and a short flight later, in North Carolina, Diana, the seller's agent, brought Fahrenheit out of the stall. Judy gave him one look, turned around so Diana

couldn't see her face, and gave me a big thumbs up with a huge smile on her face. Fahrenheit was a lovely deep red chestnut color. Tall and large, he had strong shapely, well-muscled legs and good feet—all wonderful traits in a horse (or even in a man). He had good conformation with his shoulder, back and flank all proportional to each other. We walked all the way around him running hands over his back, belly and legs, looking for problems or imperfections. I asked him to pick up his front foot by leaning against his shoulder and reaching for his hoof. His large feet looked clean and well-shaped. He looked at me out of the corner of his brown eye with curiosity and a little mischievousness, an expression I would learn to know well.

“He has great feet. No problems,” Diana commented. She led him into the wash stall and sprayed him down with the hose to show his willingness to obey. A mare in the paddock behind the wash stall paced back and forth in front of the stall door nosily peering in at Fahrenheit. His ears pricked up and he stood tall and alert looking around to see the mare.

“Don't pay any attention to her. She's no good for you! No good at all!” Diana sang out. “That mare is a handful,” she said peering around Fahrenheit at us. Diana, tall and rather horsey looking with a tawny ponytail and a long face, has a comfort level around horses that makes her seem part of the herd. As she talked to him softly, Fahrenheit relaxed into his bath and stood with his eyes half closed. Diana squeegeed the water off his body, making sure to get under his belly.

My nerves were taut as I watched Judy ride him in the outdoor arena. At five-foot-three she looked small on top of such a large horse, but totally in control. The pit of my stomach felt leaden and I worked to stay in the minute, not thinking about the fall off

Finer. This horse was even bigger than Finer with a long stride. I'm five foot seven, and when I stood next to him, his back was level with the top of my forehead.

When it was my turn to ride, a large part of me did not want to get on this horse, but I climbed the mounting block, swung my leg over and settled into the saddle. Part of grieving is acting outside of your comfort zone in order to move forward. In the year-and-a-half since Jon died, I had trained myself to stay in the minute, not project into the future, and just do it. I felt the comforting warmth of Farenheit's body seeping through the saddle, my legs conformed to his rounded sides and I looked ahead between his pricked-up brownish red ears. Judy stood in the middle of the arena and began to instruct me.

"Keep your outside hand down. You aren't driving a car. Don't twist. Stay centered." Stiff and tense, I leaned forward slightly. "Sit up!" My body reacted to flashbacks of the fall by wanting to curl into the fetal position, but I sat up and gently squeezed my legs asking him to walk on.

Diana called to me, "Do you want me to run along beside his head while you trot?" I nodded. Judy looked slightly disapproving. She knew I could do it on my own. I asked for the trot with my legs and body energy and Farenheit picked it up as Diana jogged along beside us for a few feet.

"I'm OK. I can do it on my own now." I glanced down at Diana.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." I looked ahead to where I wanted to go.

"Thank God!" she said as she stopped and tried to catch her breath.

I trotted Farenheit around the ring, still nervous but building my confidence. And then for one glorious turn around the arena, everything fell into place. He put his head down and his back up in the rounded position sought after by dressage riders. Farenheit and I were one with each other. I felt like I was effortlessly flying and the slightest nudge with my leg or squeeze of the rein sent him where I wanted. All I did was think where I wanted to go and he was there. Then, just as quickly, it fell apart. His head came up high, his attention wandered from my commands and it all seemed slightly disjointed. But, as I came to a halt, I realized I was hooked. This horse and I were meant to be together.

Six weeks later Farenheit arrived at the barn in New Hampshire. When the transporters opened the door to the large horse trailer, there he was—easily recognizable with his white blaze and brown spots. He paused eating hay out of the feeder, looked up and our eyes met. We were both home. It took just one week to nickname him Finn, after Huck Finn, for his mischievous personality, boyish enthusiasm, and ability to get into trouble.

Caw Caw

One day several years into our marriage, Jon and I were travelling along a country road when a crow rose from a snow bank. Its beak holding a McDonald's bag with the top neatly folded over, the crow looked like it had just left the drive-through. We laughed and watched in amazement as it flew up to a large pine tree, where it was hidden from sight. That day we talked about crows. I told him I'd always had an affinity for them and admired their glossy black feathers, sleek heads, and long beaks. I find them beautiful but not pretty. Crows are intelligent, strong survivors.

The caw of a crow takes me back to my grandmother. In the mornings when I stayed at her house I would quietly lie in bed waiting for the sounds of the household stirring and hear the crows outside. I'd hear the "Caw, caw," and then the twittering of songbirds. Then I'd get up and the routine of the day would begin. My grandmother had a Sanka, half a grapefruit, and an English muffin every morning for breakfast. We would chat in the kitchen booth with its gaily-colored linen tablecloth and red leather benches. Then she would sit by the fireplace in the living room and read her mail or a romance novel, or entertain visitors. One day she was reading a novel and exclaiming in shock every few pages. She read a particularly racy section with rapt attention and said "Oh my," every few paragraphs. When done with the section, she ripped those pages out and threw them in the fire. "Cathy, you really should read this book," she said as she read the last page and closed the novel.

"Nonnie, you just burned the best parts," I laughed.

She smiled in return but declined to discuss her censorship.

When she died, she'd been ill for a few months and had a nurse in the house full-time. I visited every four to six weeks despite her initial protests. Ever the trained hostess, she tried to discourage me when I told her I wanted to visit.

"I can't entertain you," she said in a weakened voice.

"I don't care," I insisted. "I'll read to you and keep you company. You don't have to entertain me."

I'm not sure why I was so adamant about seeing her. I loved her dearly, but as a young woman, I didn't understand death and hadn't experienced it in any real way yet. But no one else in the family was able to get past her barriers to visit, and I knew I didn't want her to die alone. I didn't want the last months of her life spent with only a nurse for company in the big empty house. It was the house she built and my father grew up in, a house that echoed with voices from the past – laughter and kisses, family disagreements, childish quarrels and crying, weddings and tenderness, and ached with loss and heartbreak. It was the house with the closet my father picked the lock on and found his adoption papers. Adoption was a secret to be held back then.

It was a romantic country house, built in the late twenties and early thirties, and it was symbolic of the hopes and dreams of my grandmother as a young woman and new wife. My grandfather had been a pianist, voice coach and accompanist. They had traveled to Europe on tour where she fell in love with the architecture of Spain. So she decided to build a Spanish villa in Connecticut.

Featured in a five-page spread in *Architecture* magazine just after the house was finished in 1932, it was built around an open-air atrium complete with fountains and gardens. The big stone house was impractical for New England winters, and was always

cold despite its eight fireplaces. “The architect has used a local stone secured in part from old fences in the vicinity. Limestone is used for the trim, and there is a tile roof of reds and browns.” A glass loggia overlooked the pond, and a forty-five foot long cathedral-ceilinged living room could be transformed into concert space. “The owner, who is a composer and musician, allowed the architect unusual liberties in the latter’s quest of the picturesque, as will be seen first of all from the plan, in which hardly any two lines are at right angles.” My grandmother always took the back seat to her famous husband, and although she helped to design the house, he received the credit. I wonder about the toll that took on her, on all woman of that era. At one end of the living room stood a Steinway concert grand piano on a two step dais. Behind the piano was a full wall of windowed doors, each pane frosted in different muted hues of green, blue and white. “What is called the open-air temple is a broad terrace opening from the studio or music room, on which it is customary to assemble guests for organ, voice and piano recitals.”

In her European travels, and in the fad of the nineteen twenties, my grandmother had brought back mediaeval German stained glass windows for the entrance hall, an ornately carved door for the dining room, and colorful antique Italian tiles for one of the fireplace mantels. She told the story of purchasing the heavily carved, seven-foot cabinet for the living room. A family was selling the cabinet in a village in France, and it dominated their tiny living room. The piece was probably absconded with long ago during the French revolution and was passed down from generation to generation. Now the family was forced to sell, just as many others across Europe were selling whatever they could in an attempt to stave off the Depression.

When I was a child, the beautiful house was just Nonnie's house with the dollhouse in the loggia, the badminton birdy stuck high up in the organ pipes, the swimming pool my great-grandmother dubbed the Mae West pool for its curves, and the tall Christmas tree with presents piled underneath. The large boxwoods flanking the front entrance gave off a familiar, pungent odor and to this day I'm delighted when I smell boxwood and I'm transported back to those front steps. In the house wafted a combination of scents including Nonnie's Lily of the Valley perfume, the musty, rich odor of antique tapestries and furniture, and a slight whiff of mothballs. I have an old trunk from her house filled with letters, scrapbooks and photographs, and if I close my eyes when I open it, I get a whiff of her house and can imagine myself there.

That house represented solidity and consistency. I lived in a world of divorced parents, a father who disappeared for fourteen years and a single mother who moved us into a trailer so she could afford to go back to college and earn her degree, and later relocated us to a small house—what we could afford on her teacher's salary. Hand-me-down clothes, inexpensive furniture that didn't hold up to three children, and an old station wagon were the reality in the small Vermont town where we lived. Nonnie would give us whatever we wanted if we asked, but my mother didn't ask for much. She was making her own way in the world and my father sent child support. None of that bothered me because the house in Connecticut and my grandmother were a constant. When I entered the front hall, felt the cool flagstone floor underneath, and the large, arched, wooden door gave a satisfying thump as it closed, I felt secure. It was the one place that never changed.

My grandfather was long dead by the time I was born. I was the only granddaughter and the youngest grandchild, and my grandmother and I bonded when I was very young. She watched out for me. In many ways my mother was a better father than a mother, and she wasn't comfortable with teaching me about girl things.

Once, when I was in about fourth grade, Nonnie noticed that my toenails were caked with dirt. "Go up to my bathroom and get my nail clippers and file," she instructed in a no-nonsense voice. She proceeded to sit at my feet on a small stool and clean, clip and file my nails until they were pink and neat. My mother was incapable of teaching me how to do this for myself. "There," Nonnie said as she stood. "Don't ever let them get like that again." I never did. She knew that I wouldn't. I just needed to be taught.

When I was nineteen, I moved to New York City. The house was just a forty-five minute train ride from the City, and I often went to visit on the weekends. Two women, she in her eighties and me in my twenties took drives in the "country" and ate lunch at bucolic inns with views of rolling fields or swans in a pond.

Every year I took the train out to help Nonnie do her Christmas shopping. Everyone in town knew her and greeted her by name. Once, when she needed a new coffee percolator, I drove her to the local appliance store, went inside, chose a coffee pot and asked the owner if I could bring it out to the car to see if it met her approval before purchasing. He peered out the window, saw her sitting in the passenger seat and said, "Mrs. Webb? Oh certainly." By that time she'd lived in town for over fifty years and had seen it grow from a weekend, country retreat to a bedroom community full of housewives cheating on their husbands while the children played tennis, rode horses and attended private schools.

Both of us liked to stay up late and sleep late. We liked to read Dickens (aside from her romance novels). She took me to my first opera (*Madame Butterfly* at the Metropolitan Opera), which she chose carefully hoping that I would love it. I did. We talked about art and literature, religion, travel, and, vaguely, even abortion rights. She intimated that she was pro-choice, but I was too afraid to ask her outright. She was a life-long Republican and I was a Democrat so we avoided politics. When I took a year off from college she told me with an inscrutable small smile, “I don’t think it’s important for girls to go to college as long as they can type.” I went back to college the next semester. Most importantly, she told me she loved me and was proud of me and kissed me goodnight and hello and goodbye. She gave me the female nurturing that my mother wasn’t good at. And I needed that badly when I was young.

Nonnie told me stories of her youth, how she competed in her first horse show and won first place but then overheard a fellow competitor say to a friend, “She only won because her brother is one of the judges.” Pride hurt, she never competed again. She told me how my grandfather died performing at the piano on stage at the Musicians Club in New York. He had a massive heart attack. “I don’t know how I made it up on stage in my evening gown, but I vaulted onto the stage from my seat in the first row.” She told me how her second husband, the one I really considered my grandfather, was the love of her life. She even told me that sleeping with him was “just right” and that he was the only one allowed to call her Laurie instead of Laura. She told me how wonderful her mother was, how she adored her three older brothers. We had that in common, too—I with two older brothers. We both understood that older brothers are a blessing and a curse.

In 1919, at the age of seventeen, Nonnie was sent from Ohio to Miss Spence's finishing school in New York City where she studied French, drawing, singing, elocution, penmanship, arithmetic, geology and Latin. Her schoolmates were the young daughters of old American money—two Vanderbilts were included in her class of 1922. Nonnie's family came from old money too, but not as wealthy as the Vanderbilts. The girls were all trained to become good wives, good hostesses, to shine and sparkle enough to make their husbands look good, but not to take center stage. No wonder so many of her classmates would marry several times. They were living in a dramatically changing world where women were getting the vote, hems kept rising, men had just returned from war and would soon enough go off again, and the old order would never be the same.

Reading the letter sent to my great-grandmother explaining the rules and regulations at Miss Spence's School, the distinct impression is that the "girls" were very strictly supervised. "May we ask that no dresses be lower in the neck than three inches from the throat. . . . Our resident pupils never spend a night away from the school and they rarely go to the theatre. You probably understand that they do not receive calls from young men, and that, while they lead a happy school-girl life, our school is a strict one."

However, I remember Nonnie telling me stories about her older brothers and their friends picking her up for nights on the town. As the car pulled up in front of the school at Fifth Avenue and 55th Street, the friends ducked down as my grandmother ran out the door. It wouldn't do for Miss Spence to see her out in the company of young men who were not relations.

She delighted in flouting the rules and I loved hearing the stories. "I went to a speakeasy, just once," she said on one of my visits after I'd moved to New York, "and I

told my brothers I'd never been. But when they came to town they took me to the same one. We knocked on the door and the proprietor opened the little window and said, 'Oh, how nice to see you again Miss MacNichol. Please come in.'" She paused and almost giggled, "Oh, I took so much teasing that night."

And there were parties and weekends away despite Miss Spence's strict rules. An October 15, 1921 telegram invites my then young grandmother to Princeton. "CAN YOU COME TO PRINCETON NEXT WEEKEND FOR HOUSE PARTY AT TOWER CLUB AND CHICAGO FOOTBALL GAME JIM VERMILLION WILL ARRANGE TO HAVE CHAPERONE HERE RIGHT TO SCHOOL. – LOUIS A TURNER". Was this message from a potential beau, a friend of one of her brothers?

In 1922 during her senior year Nonnie was elected class president and she received many congratulatory letters and telegrams. "WE ARE MOST PROUD TO SEND OUR CONGRATULATIONS UPON YOUR BEING CHOSEN TO FILL SUCH A RESPONSIBLE POSITION. EVERYONE IN THE FAMILY SENDS DEAREST LOVE – MOTHER."

And one report addressed to Nonnie's mother, my great-grandmother, gave her excellent marks in dancing, sewing, neatness and account-book, with an addendum stating, "Laura might receive better marks except that she does not always conform to the regulations in regard to the arrangement of her hair. – Clara Spence." I'm sure she felt this as an injustice, as her hair was unruly, curly and hard to tame.

She married my grandfather in 1928 when she was twenty-five and he was fifty. I remember, in my early twenties, sitting in her living room with love letters from Frank La Forge scattered around the floor. We'd been cleaning out a closet when we came across the letters. Nonnie was in a tall wingback chair while I sat at her feet and handed them to

her as she read them aloud. They all began with “My dearest girl,” or “My darling girl” and went on to express how he missed seeing her and couldn’t wait until she returned from whatever trip she was taking. They met when she began to take voice lessons in his studio on West 63rd street. I wonder what their flirtation was like. I know that she was innocent in many ways and remained a romantic all her life, despite the usual disappointments of life. After she died I found a diary written just after her marriage. She describes her wedding night onboard the Queen Mary sailing from New York to Europe. “Well, it is done. I only wish that I could have had more time in his arms before he returned to his own bed.”

I like to think that he married her for love rather than her money, but I think fairly early on she started to sense the unhappiness in their future. She was constantly in the background, arranging parties and dinners and accompanying her husband to the opera several times a week. But the beautiful prima donnas for whom he played, and who flirted with and adored him, eclipsed her—Lily Pons, Marian Anderson, Frances Alda. I know from my father that later in life there was a lot of fighting and they did not share a bedroom.

By the time he died, my grandmother was desperately unhappy and had been thinking of divorce. When I was a teenager I heard a recording of my grandfather’s voice and was surprised at his precise diction and how high and effeminate his voice was. He didn’t participate in physical activity and Nonnie was raised with three older brothers who loved to hunt, ride, and play sports, although they did once take her to hear Caruso sing at the opera. I imagine that the contrast between her husband and the three brothers was stark. I never met my grandfather but Nonnie once told a close friend that her

husband was bi-sexual and that, combined with her adoration of her strapping brothers must have made their lives miserable. Being gay at that time in history wasn't something that my grandfather would have been able to admit openly, especially with his celebrity. So he settled on marrying my grandmother, twenty-five years his junior, a socialite, a young woman he could mold and perhaps wouldn't expect too much of him. I know that he wooed her and I think there was some love there.

My grandmother had always attempted to keep up with her brothers. At their summer camp in Canada every summer she rode, hunted, swam, canoed, fished, camped and hiked. She prided herself on being a "good sport," and tough. But she told me when she shot her first and only deer, she watched the life drain out of its deep brown eyes and knew she could never hunt again.

By contrast, my grandfather had been a child prodigy, studied music in Vienna in the late 1800s and traveled Europe extensively on tour with many famous opera singers. He never learned to drive, relying on a chauffeur, and was uncomfortable on horseback. I have a picture of him, probably around 1925, in a suit and hat, sitting on top of a horse looking more like he was ready for a stroll down Fifth Avenue. His passion was his music and had been for his entire life.

But Nonnie did live a glamorous life with my grandfather and I think that sustained her for years. In the beginning they had fun. They went to the opera several nights a week, dressed in evening clothes. The 1920s were a heady time to be in New York City. Once a rather somber and proper couple came to dinner at my grandparents' Park Avenue apartment after which they all went to a Broadway show. My grandparents were on their best behavior, but on the way down in the elevator my grandmother looked

at my grandfather and exclaimed, “Frank, what are you wearing around your neck?” The maid had laid out their clothes for the evening and Frank had absentmindedly draped his wife’s silk bloomers around his neck rather than the white silk opera scarf. The two of them burst into fits of giggles while the straight-laced couple looked on disapprovingly.

Before World War II, dinners in the house were formal affairs with staff cooking and serving and a butler standing behind my grandmother’s chair at every meal. Lunch was at one and dinner at seven, and it remained so for the rest of her life. Woe betide the family member who was late. Everyone dressed for dinner, the men in suits and the women in dresses. Tiffany silver, Spode china and fingerbowls graced the table at every meal. As hostess, my grandmother perfected the art of eating her meal at the pace of her guests. She was the first to start, signaling that everyone else could begin, and she timed her food so that the slowest eater would never be the last one to finish.

Things began to change during and after the war. The formality relaxed, although I think she had a hard time letting go. It wasn’t until her second marriage that she truly began to live a simpler life. Her second husband, Ted, helped her shift to a scaled-down lifestyle, eventually dismissing the butler and live-in maids and opting for one maid from outside to clean the house daily. He taught her to cook and, together, they even shopped for food. I’m sure she’d never been in a grocery store before.

She was truly happy with Ted. He was a retired opera singer with a booming voice and a tremendous bear hug. As a little girl I remember him sweeping me off the floor into his arms and I never felt so loved and safe. Their bedroom was far from the vast master bedroom and was located in the turret of the house. The room was small with six sides and overlooked a pond. The bed they slept in was full sized, rather than the two

twin beds in the master bedroom. They wanted to lie close to each other at night. After Ted died, that bed must have seemed large and empty. I can imagine because I have experienced the same feeling. Ted died when I was seventeen and they had been married for eighteen years. She spent the last sixteen years of her life without him and she moved on, taking comfort in family and friends. But she missed him every day.

They were the only example of a loving couple in my young life. My extended family was rife with divorce—everyone in my parents’ generation had been divorced at least twice. One evening a few months before Ted died, they were sitting in the living room watching TV in two chairs set side-by-side. My grandfather had a tremor in his hand and it was shaking so my grandmother took his hand in hers and held it for a long time absorbing the tremor. Sixteen years old, I watched them from another part of the living room as they sat next to each other holding hands. I thought to myself, “That’s what I want when I grow old. I want to sit and hold hands with the love of my life, absorbing each other’s aches and pains and tremors and forgetfulness until between the two of us we make one whole.”

I was visiting my grandmother the night she died. She’d been ill for several months. I was thirty-two years old, had just had a bad break-up and had moved from New York City to northern New England. I combined some business with my trip to see her and had spent the day in Manhattan. I was having drinks with a friend at the Waldorf Astoria before I took the train back to Connecticut. My friend and I hadn’t seen each other in a while and I planned to take a late train back, but after just an hour I suddenly looked at my watch and said, “I have to catch the 8 o’clock train.” My friend looked a bit surprised but we said goodbye quickly and I just made the train.

Back at the house I stood at the bottom of the gleaming mahogany stairs, looking up to see if my grandmother's light was still on. It was, so I went to her door and called her name. The nurse came out and said, "Go on in. She's awake." I hesitated, afraid of death, afraid of its finality and knowing what was coming was bad, but not understanding how much things would change. Even at thirty-two I didn't feel ready to be a grown up. I didn't want to give up my rock.

I stood next to her bedside and told her I'd taken an early train to come and say goodnight. I told her I loved her. It was hard for her to talk so I held her hand for a long time. When it was time to say goodbye, our hands stayed connected for as long as possible as I slowly moved away. Our arms stretched out and reached for each other until just the tips of our fingers were touching, and then the connection was broken. I told her I loved her again and she said it back. I was in the hallway when she called out to me. Her last words to me were, "Help yourself to anything in the kitchen." She was the ultimate hostess, grandmother and friend to the end.

The nurse woke me at five a.m. "Cathy, Cathy." She was gently shaking my shoulder. "Your grandmother died in the night."

"Oh," I sat up groggily and slowly took in the information. "Oh, I'm going to miss her." It hit me and the tears came as the woman hugged me.

"I know you will. I didn't know her long but she was an amazing lady."

Later that afternoon, after the coroner had come and they took her body away zipped in a body bag, after I called my father and he was on his way from Florida and my brother was heading down from Vermont, I lay on my bed to rest. I thought about how my grandmother would have hated leaving her home for the last time in such an

undignified way. I never saw her unkempt or uncoiffed. Even when she was ill, she came downstairs everyday fully dressed in a suit with her pearl necklace, clip-on pearl earrings and the pear-shaped diamond engagement ring. As long as I'd known her, she was always losing and finding her jewelry. The earrings pinched so she would take them off and put them in her lap when she dozed in her chair in the afternoon. Then she would stand, forgetting they were there. Later she'd notice they were missing and all of us, my brothers, my father, and whoever else was visiting, would be on our hands and knees looking under tables, chairs and radiator covers until we found them. Just two days before she died, her diamond engagement ring slipped off her finger as she lay on the couch. She'd lost so much weight it had become too large. As usual I crawled around until I found it. And now she'd left the house without her lavender wool suit or her earrings. It didn't seem right.

The house was empty and quiet. The maid had finished her work, and the neighbors who were close family friends had gone home. I was alone. I closed my eyes as I lay on the bed and began to sob. The thought of never seeing her again made me feel lonesome and abandoned. After a few minutes my body began to calm and I lay quietly in the room I'd stayed in so many times throughout my life. It was then I heard her voice in my head, "*Don't be sad. It's wonderful where I am.*" Her voice repeated the same words over and over. I felt her presence swirling around me and then filling the entire house. Her light was filling the hallways and swelling up the stairs into the bedrooms. All the while her voice in my head said, "*Don't be sad. It's wonderful where I am.*" I opened my eyes to make sure I wasn't dreaming and her voice and presence continued. I felt comforted. Then I felt Ted's light entering the house where he had died many years

before. The love of her life, he was there with her, taking her away. Their light combined and her voice, *“Don’t be sad. It’s wonderful where I am,”* began to fade as her light lessened and slowly disappeared.

I sat up on the bed and as my heightened senses began to calm, I heard a crow cawing outside my window among the twittering of the songbirds, and I knew that the “Caw! Caw!” would always have meaning for me. It would remind me of the love and security my grandmother gave me when I needed it most. It would remind me that I could give of myself to others. That I had the strength to comfort others, to make people feel warm and welcome, to stand up for what I believe, to draw out the best in people, and to love unconditionally. Whenever I see or hear a crow I know that I am strong and can live a good life.

That day in the car with Jon and the crow with the McDonald’s bag, I told him this story. He listened and nodded. He didn’t tell me I was crazy or laugh at me. He simply said, “Who knows what happens after we die?” I always felt sad that Nonnie and Jon never had met. I think they would have liked each other if for no other reason than that they both loved me so much, and I wanted her to know I had met the love of my life, just as she had. But now they are both gone, I wonder if they have met. I like to think they are out there somewhere, in some form, guiding me through life.

Memorial

An acquaintance told me that criminals read the obituaries in the newspaper and then break into and rob the house of the bereaved during the memorial service. So, in the midst of my grief, I tried to find someone who could guard the house until we got back—until *I* got back. Jon would never return to our house. His body was already burned in the crematorium and his ashes in a blue glazed pottery urn at the funeral home.

Eventually, I found someone to block the driveway by parking a car at the end of my road, and that had to do. There was no one to guard the house. It wasn't until later I thought it odd that my acquaintance had suggested this awful thing to me. I wondered why I even cared at the time—nothing in the house was important to me anymore. Even if a burglar came and took the silver or the flat screen, none of those things mattered. The one thing I wanted, I couldn't have. I wanted my husband to burst through the door, tell me a funny story and give me a kiss.

At the memorial service, a long line of people snaked before me wherever I went. As each person came up to me to express sorrow all but a few wanted to physically touch me in some way – a hand on the shoulder or a hug. The hugs varied. They could be quick, as if I had a contagious disease; they could be short, strong embraces full of fortitude and a “you must carry on” attitude, or they could be long, sloppy and wet with tears. They could be couples hugs with both pulling me into their embrace (double the hug meant double their grief or maybe one of them was just unable to share his or her grief alone) or they could be the very personal cheek-to-cheek hug. There was simply a handshake from the uncomfortable boss who knew he had to attend the service, and there was a peck on the cheek from the brother-in-law who hadn't spoken to my husband in

several years and now had lost the chance. Of course, the hug I really wanted was crumbled into ashes in the urn.

Every time I felt I couldn't receive one more word of condolence I would break away from the line and it would immediately disperse, only to form again as soon as I came to a standstill. I kept looking around for Jon to come and rescue me, take me away from these well-meaning people dressed in somber colors. I think he would have liked it better if they'd all worn colorful Hawaiian shirts. I stood by myself, family members were scattered around the room and no one noticed.

Before the service started, even in my deep grief, I was able to look around the room and appreciate all the work our friends had done. Tables were set up with Jon's sculptures and drawings displayed next to easels propping up his paintings. Three screens hanging from the ceiling played a slideshow of our fourteen years of life together. It's not that he didn't exist before we met, but we were both happiest together and our friends knew that. As I looked up a photo of Jon dressed as Santa with me on his lap flashed across the screen.

Jon and I visited Bangkok during Christmas 2004, just two days before the tsunami struck in southern Thailand. That night, as we left a lovely restaurant attached to a mall, we noticed copious Christmas decorations: Christmas trees on every level, red bows decorating store displays, and a life size robotic Santa with a red velvet toy sack on his back climbing up and down a fake ladder spanning the three-story atrium. Jon noticed little children staring at him even as their mothers' hands pulled them along.

He turned to our Thai friend, Ken, and asked “Why are the children staring at me?”

Ken smiled, pointed to Jon’s graying beard and round belly and said simply, “Santa Claus.”

Jon laughed and grinned genially at the children, remembering his two-year stint as a mall Santa in the States. As an artist he often had to take odd jobs for extra money and he became Santa one Christmas early in our marriage.

Like everything else in his life, he immersed himself. Before we’d met he had spent time doing stand-up comedy and acting. He brought this experience to the role of Santa by doing magic tricks and staying in character at all times. In fact, as Santa, he wasn’t even allowed to use the restroom unless he changed into “civilian” clothes first. It wouldn’t do for little boys to see that Santa has to pee like everyone else. Everywhere he went he was accompanied by an entourage of two or three elves—another employer policy. When he took the job, his direct supervisor told me that I’d have to put up with a big ego—Santa gets a lot of adoration. She was right. As the weeks went on, Jon’s sense of his own importance did get a little inflated—I ended up doing a lot more chores and grocery shopping during that period.

About a week into the gig, a particularly self-centered boy who was really a bit too old for Santa’s lap, recited a litany of presents he wanted. When he was finished, he raced off, knocking over the little girl just stepping up to the dais.

Jon picked up the little girl, dusted her off, set her down in his chair and said in a booming voice, “Santa will be right back. Ho ho ho!”

He strode off after the boy and his family and handed over a small gaily-wrapped box. “If you wait until you get home to open this present you will have a wonderful surprise. Ho ho ho!” he bellowed in a deep voice as he returned to Santa’s chair.

A few seconds later, the father tapped him on the shoulder. “Why did you give my son a lump of coal?” he demanded as the boy looked on smugly.

“I didn’t give him a lump of coal. I told him to wait until he got home and he’d have a very special surprise. This is what happens to boys who knock over little girls and don’t apologize.” Jon said all this in his resounding Santa voice.

The father was speechless, realizing he couldn’t very well stand in the middle of the mall and argue with Santa. Later, I asked Jon how he would have felt if the boy had waited to get home to open Santa’s present, but he said he knew the boy wouldn’t wait. He was just that kind of kid from that kind of family.

Other stories weren’t so funny. A little girl in ragged clothing whispered in Santa’s ear that all she wanted for Christmas was for her father to stop drinking. A seven-year-old girl who wished her mother could beat cancer. Jon would put on his best Santa show for those kids, performing a few magic tricks and producing little presents for them to take away. On a brighter side, when the elf said “Smile for the camera!” a very fit sixty-year-old woman answered, “Oh, I’ve been smiling ever since Santa put his hand on my ass.” Jon had a habit of adjusting children so they were balanced on his lap and had unconsciously done the same with her, then pulled his hand away as if he’d been burned.



At Jon’s memorial service, the line snaked before me again, a jagged column with uneven breaks along the way. A colleague I didn’t know well stepped up to me, the focus, the prize, the finality of her experience of the service. As with the rest of the attendees, once she spoke to me, she could put the sorrow aside and continue with her own life. She gave me one of the quick bracing hugs. “All the staff is here, we should have a meeting.” She said with a small laugh.

“Ha, yeah, good idea.” I answered mechanically. This side of me would soon disappear, the part of me that wanted to make people feel comfortable. My colleague’s comment was a silly thing to say, but I knew she was nervous, didn’t know what to say and didn’t realize that widowhood isn’t catchy.

Without experiencing the loss of a spouse, it is impossible to understand how it feels. Often, when I come in contact with another widow or widower there is an instant connection. Eyes meet and hold for a few seconds as if there is a thin cord connecting us heart to heart, and everything around us fades to gray. Then a slight nod breaks the cord, the world whooshes back in, but we’ve recognized a fellow club member. It’s like a secret handshake.

Another picture on the screen—a wedding photo with a small plume of smoke behind the gazebo. Jon had arranged for a small explosion to be set off in the background during our kiss.

Jon and I married when I was 37 and he was 39—a later-in-life meeting of soulmates. If we’d met earlier, it wouldn’t have worked—he with his alcoholism and drug addictions, I

with my traumatized childhood and inability to let anyone truly enter into my heart. We had to practice on other relationships first in order to get it right.

When we first met he was living in a cold-water art studio in an old button factory in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. I went to the button factory the first time on an errand for the non-profit museum I worked for, but I had a premonition that someone was there that would change my life and that I would soon meet him. Sure enough, I later found out he had a studio in the old factory.

I remember the big red, brick building looking somewhat derelict as my colleague and I got out of the car. We climbed the metal stairs that curved around dangerously and narrowly like those in so many factories built back in a time without concerns for worker safety. I inhaled deeply the turpentine and paint emanating from artists' studios. It reminded me of childhood visits to my mother's step-mother's painting studio on Cape Cod, and for a moment a vision of one of her bad Pollock imitations floated through my mind. The old oak floorboards creaked under our steps, as they must have when long-gone factory workers' feet pounded over those floors. I peeked down a hallway lined with closed doors and was startled by a large bright green papier-mâché dragon head hanging at the end of the hall, its mouth gaping open and breathing red papier-mâché fire.

The soft cracking and stretching of the building were the only sounds. Occasionally a far off "Hallo" or "Hold this straight, will you?" could be heard, or a lost bird twittering from somewhere deep inside the building, which itself seemed to be inhaling and exhaling the artists' breaths collectively.

“I want to fall in love with someone who has a studio here.” I whispered to my co-worker as we walked down the opposite hall to the graphic designer’s studio for the brochures.

Then, one evening two weeks later, I walked into the Elvis Room, a dark, smoky, coffee shop reminiscent of the beat era in downtown Portsmouth. Jon sat at the bar wearing khaki shorts, a faded blue Hawaiian shirt, and bright purple wrestling boots. His hair was sandy colored, slightly thinning on the top. He wore wire rimmed glasses and had a goatee. I immediately thought he looked like one of the Holstein paintings of Henry VIII during his youthful, handsome time. Jon had muscular hands with strong fingers. I didn’t know then that those big hands would be gentle enough to stroke my hair, nimble enough to untangle my delicate gold chain, creative enough to paint and sculpt, and patient enough to apply tissue thin gold leaf wanting to float away with a gentle breath. His blue eyes met my green eyes.

The friend I was with, as it turns out, was also his acquaintance. As we walked by, he pulled her aside and asked, “Is your friend married?”

“No.”

“Do you think she’d go out with me?”

“You’d have to ask her.”

She smiled as she repeated the conversation to me a few minutes later.

Jon was sitting at the bar because he had an art show mounted on the walls. And he reigned over his art exhibit. I could see him through the doorway of the next room as I listened to another friend’s band play mid nineteenth-century minstrel music on antique

banjos. Dressed in period costume—jackets, breeches and shirts meticulously made with antique patterns by one of their wives—they sang silly songs.

What shall we do with a drunken sailor?

What shall we do with a drunken sailor?

What shall we do with a drunken sailor?

Early in the morning?

Way-hay, up she rises

Early in the morning

Trying to be cool, I puffed on a cigar and surveyed his paintings to the rhythm of the spoons and the banjo. First, an oil painting on a canvas in the shape of a cross, a bucolic, New England scene with cows, a red barn, a blue sky and fluffy white clouds. The white label affixed to the wall next to the painting read *Evening Prayer (from Night of the Hunter)*. On a long wall next to it hung a series of ten paintings depicting the shower scene from *Psycho*, *Psycho-delic*, film square by square, the colors muted dark green and black. The series was a close up of Janet Leigh's face as she showers, her expression beginning with serenity and ending with terror.

Most riveting to me because of its in-your-face message was a bright, red, blue and yellow painting of a condom wrapper with a bordered pattern of white calla lilies, men and women fornicating, and large red condom-covered penises. In the center, Jesus looked up in part agony, part ecstasy. Words are painted across the wrapper, *Jesus Brand, One Latex Condom, For I Shall Come Again*. The white label on the wall read, *"Reconciling Issues of Health and Religion."*

Even with my limited knowledge based on a college art history class, I could see this was fine art with a sardonic twist, not only poking fun, not only making political or social statements, but all of those things and talent.

I stopped to talk to Jon on my way back from the restroom. He pulled me over to the bar with his smile—instant attraction.

I looked around at the art. “Nice work.” Trying to make small talk, I didn’t know he was the artist.

“What do you like about it?”

“The colors, the beauty and the harshness mixed together.

“I’m the artist.” There was a pause and my interest was piqued. An artist? I’m drawn to creativity. “What kind of music do you like?” He kept the conversation going.

“Opera, classical, rock.”

“I’ve been to the opera.” I assumed he listened to opera, but a few months into our relationship I found out he didn’t like it. When I asked him about this he told me he had said he had been to the opera. He never said he liked it. By then it didn’t matter. I was already in love.

My friend’s band started up again. “Can I have your phone number?” he asked over the banjo and spoons.

He called the next night. We talked every day for the rest of his life, no matter where we were.

The minister who performed the memorial service was a humorless, middle-aged man. (Although, come to think of it, a sense of humor isn’t the first thing most widows are

looking for in a minister.) He had been recommended by the funeral director as neither Jon nor I had attended church.

The funeral home was a Victorian brick mansion with large, high ceilinged parlors and a crematorium out back. As we drove in I imagined Jon's stiff, naked body being slid into an oven. My best friend, confidante, lover, the person who always had my back – burned to ash. This was the stuff of fiction, not real life happening to me.

A few days after Jon died and a week before the service, I had sat with a few friends and family in a small circle of chairs in one of the cavernous parlors as the funeral director talked to us about the service. The room had soaring ceilings with ornate moldings. Long, deep blood-colored velvet curtains were draped back gracefully from the wide entrance, ready to enclose or free the inhabitants of the room. I listened as the funeral director outlined the plan and the cost. I had a choice for Jon's ashes. I could put them all into the ceramic urn that our potter friend had made, have some of them made into a pendant (creepy), shoot some of them into space (very cool, he would have liked that), mix his ashes into a monument (a monument was absolutely his style if it could be in a public square), or used to create a diamond, a glass bead or a bowl. I acknowledged that the craziest, and thus best, idea was to send some of his ashes into space, but after hearing the exorbitant price, I opted for the urn. I figured there was a good chance his soul could be going somewhere even more exciting than space anyway.

As I listened to the funeral director, it suddenly hit me that he was talking about Jon—Jon, whose body was waiting in line to be cremated, who wasn't there to be amused about being sent into space, whom I'd spent the last five sleepless weeks fighting for in various hospitals, who had chosen his urn a couple of years before.

“When I die I want my ashes in one of Steve’s pottery jars.” He’d pointed to a large, lidded, saturated blue jar with a swirled design carved around the sides.

Steve had looked at him and nodded seriously, “We can do that.”

I hadn’t paid much attention. Jon was perfectly healthy at that time and the day we’d need the urn was so far away. Now, I panicked, rose from my chair and ran from the room. If I escaped from those tall ceilings and velvet drapes, if I could run out of the room without them smothering me, then maybe everything would be OK. Maybe none of this had really happened. I ran past staff in their offices who, used to the exhibitions of mourners, continued on with their copying, typing and phone calls. A friend caught up with me in the hallway and led me back to the parlor. This was my life now.

The minister showed up at my house at the appointed hour to plan the service. He was tall and thin with a shock of grey-blond hair. He was wearing kakis and a blue blazer. Right away I knew that Jon would have hated him for his preppy air and stiff upper lip attitude. Granted, he walked into a room crammed with artists and intellectuals who were gathering around me protectively. I don’t remember this but apparently I stood up as he came in and said, “Guess which one is the widow?” My friends laughed. The minister did not.

We went over the service that day. Some of Jon’s friends volunteered to speak and my niece offered to read “Oh the Places You’ll Go” by Dr. Seuss. We’d had it read at our wedding, too, before it became the popular thing to do. I was very specific as I told the minister that I wanted time at the end of the service for people to stand up and talk about Jon.

“Well, people will mill about afterwards and tell stories.” he replied.

“I want everyone to have a chance to share with the whole group.” It was the only thing I was adamant about.

“We’ll see.”

“No, I want this to happen.”

He just smiled indulgently, as if I were a small child and not a grown woman widow. If I had any sort of reserves I would have argued more. Looking back, I actually wish I could have punched him in his sanctimonious face. But, I am not a violent person. It amazed me that five years later I am still angry.

After a year and a half of grieving I began to get small glimmers of hope, then I’d soon be back to feeling the profoundest sense of loss and disbelief. In the first year I couldn’t see anything because I was surrounded by the thickest, blackest clouds. I was suspended in a void with no sense of direction, no contact with the ground or the air around me—just floating in suffocating blackness. As a little more time passed it was still dark and foggy but occasionally my feet could feel the ground. But every time they touched, stabbing pains went through my body—sometimes achy but often searing.

Only when I was in the barn did I find relief. Just after Jon died I was drawn to horses for the first time in my life, and from the first minute entering a horse barn, I felt calmer. Even now, the barn where I board my horse offers solace every time I visit. From the outside, the building looks deceptively simple. A long, low wooden structure with a weathered grey stain, its appearance belies the activity inside, especially in the winter with the doors closed. Just inside the large sliding door, the sweet scent of hay mingles with the pungent smell of horse urine and manure. If the stalls haven’t been

cleaned yet, the odors waft from each door, and the stalls themselves look like unmade beds. During the night the horses have rolled and slept in the bedding until it is stirred around and scattered to each corner of the stall, although the manure piles are usually left in the same corner each night, horses being creatures of habit.

The aisle of the barn is edged with four stalls on one side and three on the other, their doors have metal bars on the tops, preventing horses from eating something in the aisle or unlatching their doors, and bottom halves are made of wood. There is a small, open window in each set of bars, over the grain buckets, so feed can be deposited without having to slide open the door. When the horses are in their stalls, soft, velvety noses peep from those windows, searching for treats. Ears prick straight at the snap of a carrot being broken in half. As the horses reach for their treats, the warm breath smells sweet and grassy. Better yet is sharing peppermints. The sweet taste of the candy melts on the tongue even as the horse crushes his peppermint between his teeth. Afterwards, the horse's breath smells even sweeter as he licks his lips over and over again to get every last taste.

Outside each stall door, blankets are neatly folded on metal racks next to tack trunks of various sizes. The blankets are blue and white striped, brown plaid, dark blue, purple, and even one pink. The lead lines used to bring the horses in and out hang on each stall door. Some are plain colored and others are pink and purple or green and white ropes woven together. Each has a clip on one end that attaches to the halter, and a knot on the other for gripping if the horse spooks and the line slips away. If the horse is being ridden, the tops of the tack trunks often have buckets, brushes, currycombs, hoof picks,

and whips, bulbous helmets, or gloves scattered next to green, blue or black plastic tack boxes.

Horses have only been a part of my life since Jon's death. The barn is a place to escape, a place to be spiritual, a place for endorphins to help in the healing, and a place to lean up against another being and feel life and warmth against my own body.

I sat in the front row at the memorial service. The minister gave his little sermon. I can't remember a word of it. A couple of Jon's best friends stood up and spoke. I can't remember any of that, either. I only remember reaching behind me to hold my sixteen-year-old niece's hand while the *Shaving Cream* song played and I felt a stirring throughout the crowd as Jon's large family recognized the song that he used to sing so loudly and with great abandon.

Then the minister stood at the podium, told the crowd to tell stories amongst themselves, and concluded the service. I wanted to scream. I wanted to lay waste to the room. I'd wanted him to give time for people to stand up and speak about Jon. It was the only thing I'd been able to request in the planning of the service. For a few moments the entire emotional force of my grief was directed at the minister and I hated him as much as I hated the doctors who had failed to save Jon. And then I sank back into my chair, deflated and worn out.

All I could do was cry and wonder how I'd become such a weak thing, unable to stand up for myself—one of the things Jon had admired most about me. I went into the reception room and sat at a table with my family. The snaky line was gone. A few people came up to me, but mostly they talked quietly. If they were telling stories, I

couldn't hear them. All I wanted to hear was how wonderful Jon had been, how funny, smart and unique. A man who always spoke his truth.

Jon created and tied his own flies and then did pen and ink or watercolor drawings of them. They were luminous, colorful things made to attract shiny curious fish. One is called Ally's Shrimp, after our niece who used to spend hours as a little girl watching him draw, paint and tie flies. The drawing looks like fireworks of red, orange, yellow, silver and gold exploding around a cruel, black barbed hook. Fishing and tying flies was a peaceful, artistic activity for him. It was a time when he could revel in nature and wildlife surrounded by beauty and solitude. During our marriage, he would go out for an hour or two after work to a local lake or river in New Hampshire and fish. He always came back serene, happy and cheerful.

There were times, however, when all was not peaceful. Teenagers had thrown rocks at him as he fished in a river, he'd been chased off by territorial restaurant owners fishing for that night's entrée special, and once he even broke his ankle when he slipped in the mud coming out of the river. A pacifist, he never got angry or lashed out. He remembered the angst and anger of being a teenage boy, he figured the restaurant owner was just trying to make a living, and the ankle healed.

One Sunday afternoon Jon came home with a story to tell that had a different outcome. He'd had all of his second hand fishing paraphernalia unloaded and on the shore of the lake—the float tube that he could sit in and fish from the middle of the water, fishing poles, tackle box, flippers, and he was wearing his fly vest and hat with flies, a pair of scissors and random hooks sticking out from every surface like a pin cushion. He

was preparing to spend the afternoon out on the tranquil water, fishing and practicing catch and release.

As he stood by the shore, a man with two small children pulled up and spilled out of a large truck, carrying a six-pack of beer, three regular fishing rods, and some Cheetos and sodas. When the man saw Jon he started to taunt him: “Oh, got all your fancy gear huh? A fly fisherman?”

Jon smiled but declined to respond.

The man continued, “Oh, you’re too good for us? Got so much money to spend on fancy fishing rods.”

Jon smiled wider but said nothing.

The man scowled, “C’mon kids, this guy’s too rich for us. He thinks he’s special.”

As Jon pushed off in his float tube, the man called after him, “I hope you sink your tube, fat ass.”

At this, Jon put his hand to his ear and haltingly yelled back in as sincere a voice as he could muster, “What? Sorry. I can’t hear. I can’t read lips from this far away.”

The man, flustered, called out, “Oh sorry. Have a nice day, buddy.”

As Jon paddled away, he could hear one of the kids saying, “Daddy, did you just make fun of the deaf man?”

Jon and I lived in our private world of love and humor. Not to say that we didn’t argue or become irritated with each other, but we learned how to fight productively and, as the years went on, more often than not, our arguments ended in laughter at our own ridiculousness. One day I was helping stack wood in the garage but was more getting in

the way than helping. I pulled one log out to re-adjust the pile and the entire stack collapsed on my foot. Surprised, Jon yelled, “Why did you do that?” My pride hurt much more than my foot, I limped off in anger and locked the door into the house so he couldn’t get in. After he banged on the door for a few seconds, I unlocked it and opened it. We both stared at each other with anger and hurt in our faces. Then, at the same moment, we burst into gales of laughter. We realized how silly we were, how human our relationship was, and how much we loved each other because we felt perfectly safe being angry, sad, elated, vulnerable, soft and loving with each other.

When I returned from the memorial service, someone had moved the parked car from the end of the driveway, no one had robbed the house, the silver was still there, nothing was missing, except Jon.

Freedom

*I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free
human being with an independent will.*

—Charlotte Brontë

One blustery winter day I was returning Finn to the paddock after a ride. As we neared the gate Finn's paddock mate, Bo, began racing back and forth in front of the gate at top speed. Bo is a lovely thoroughbred with a long, dark mane and tail and a very mischievous eye. He's dominant over Finn and spends his time bossing my horse and herding him around. He tells Finn when he can roll, where he can graze and how far away he can go. If Finn occasionally gets fed up with Bo and protests with a kick, Bo jumps up and down like a deranged Tigger until Finn gives in, realizing that CRAZY is not something he wants to deal with.

And crazy is how Bo was acting on this particular day. Normally when I'm putting Finn out and Bo is overly excited, I yell at him to go away or flick the whip at him and that's the end of it. But this day, he galloped back and forth in front of the gate getting himself more and more worked up. Finn came to an abrupt stop about five feet from the gate and looked at me as if to say, "I am not going to participate in that outrageous behavior."

A friend came over to help. She opened the gate and tried to shoo Bo away. Nope. He continued to jump around like a bucking bronco. She held the white gate open for Finn and me while yelling at Bo to stay away. Finn and I started through and as usual, I unclipped his lead as he moved into the paddock and grabbed for the gate to block his exit. All of this is a daily pattern: I could almost do it with my eyes closed. But as I reached for the gate, I realized it was too far away. Linda was still holding onto it,

and all her attention was on Bo. My routine was interrupted midstream and light dawned in Finn's eyes as he turned in the wide-open gate and realized the lead line was unclipped. He bolted. I really think that he just wanted to get away from bossy Bo but he did have a longing for freedom in his eyes.

As he moved through the gate he missed my foot by an inch and the length of his body brushed lightly against me. He ran down the driveway, and then stopped, attracted by the rest of the herd in another paddock. He stood, head high, alert, and called to the herd ten feet away. I walked toward him, clucking with my tongue and gently calling to him. He watched me from one eye and waited until I was almost close enough to grab his halter, then bolted in between the cars and the fence, ran into the outdoor arena and trotted in circles leaving patterns in the snow. Eventually, he realized it was no fun outside the paddock without another horse and stood still while I walked up to him and clipped the lead line to his halter.

Finn still likes to escape, and occasionally he will get away from the women that bring him in at night. Typically then he will run inside the barn and look confused until he's led into his stall and given dinner. He wants to be free, but he doesn't know how.

I feel that way about grief. I want to be free of it. I want to be happy as I was before my husband died. Although, looking back I don't think I always realized how happy I was. I don't think it's possible to be free from grief. There are a few alternatives, though. Two days after Jon died, I told my therapist, "I don't want to be a bitter widow, and I don't want to be stuck." I made the decision to work at processing grief right from the start. I didn't know how hard it would be, or that it would take the rest of my life.

I could easily have pushed all my feelings down into a tight ball in the middle of my stomach, ignored them and moved on without processing the experience of death and grieving. But if I had done that I would have become grouchy, irritable, intolerant, and repressed. I know myself and I would have shut people out of my life. I've seen other widows do that—shut themselves down to love, friendships, perhaps finding a substitute in alcohol or overeating.

C.S. Lewis said, “Do not dare not to dare.” I knew from the start I needed to use my relationship with my soul mate for growth. And growth can look like Finn when he occasionally escapes from his paddock, but quickly realizes being in the paddock and with the herd are really where he wants to be.

What would be the point of wallowing in my husband's death when I can celebrate his life and everything he brought to me? I know the grief will never go away. I will never stop missing my husband. It's a fact of life for the rest of mine. Now it is a matter of finding freedom in this minute, a balance between looking ahead without constantly wondering if freedom is just on the other side of the fence and accepting life as it comes. What a gift Jon gave me in his death—finding I have the strength to carry on while treasuring every moment I had with him—both good and bad.

My Sweet Demon Horse

I happen to own a magnificent chestnut horse with a big white blaze on his face. Recently we went to a dressage-training clinic. The instructor had never met Finn before, and did not know about his superior quality and winning personality. As I introduced them I watched her carefully to make sure she understood that he is special. Finn is a very tall, beautifully formed, sleek red chestnut.

Some horses have limpid, sweet brown eyes. Finn does not. He has deep, dark brown eyes that exude intelligence, trust, and mischievousness. Just by looking into those eyes, it is obvious there is much more to him than the average horse. The instructor seemed somewhat impressed at first sight, although I thought Finn deserved more adulation from the start. But, this instructor was reserving judgment until my trainer, Judy, rode him and she could see him in action.

In the dressage world, instructors who come in specially to teach clinics are high-level riders and teachers. They demand, and are treated with, the utmost respect and deference. Some instructors use this deference to confirm to themselves their importance by yelling and grumping at the riders, others just want to share their knowledge and help horses. This instructor was definitely the latter. Middle aged and slightly bow legged with short dark hair, she was direct and firm. I stood on the sidelines of the indoor arena with the other spectators as the lesson began. As soon as Judy and Finn were halfway across the arena, the instructor commented that Finn's neck was too short.

“WHAT?” I yelled across the arena shooting daggers from my eyes. Well, actually, I said “Really?” in a mild voice as she invited me to the middle of the arena to show me the divot between his neck and withers.

“DIVOT?” I yelled again. “My horse does NOT have a divot.” I must have said that in my head because otherwise I’d have been thrown out. I really said, “Oh, you mean right here?” as I patted the divot. She showed me the hollow triangle on his neck where the muscle needed to be built up. This, she claimed, would make him use his whole body, not just his hind legs, and would make it easier for him to position his head down with a rounded neck.

“Hmph.” I commented. What did she know about my perfect horse? Well, okay, I didn’t say that either. And I did have to admit that Finn’s strong personality and physical power could be overwhelming at times. Maybe figuring out ways to build his muscles in certain areas could actually make him easier to ride. If I could get Finn into the correct dressage frame, it would make it harder for him to toss his large, strong head and try to wiggle me off balance.

I stood tall and straight admiring my horse as Judy began to put him through his paces for the instructor. I heard murmurings from the spectators.

“Look how long his step is, he covers the whole side of the arena in ten strides.”

“He really has nice conformation, see how his chest, back and flank are all the same size?”

“He’s so big but has nice strong legs to carry him.”

I beamed with pride, and chose to ignore the comments when he tossed his head to get the reins away from the rider, agilely wiggled his body to displace the rider, and tried to avoid the trot by becoming a pretzel—his head to the right and body to the left with his tail going in circles like a pinwheel to express his distaste with the whole

proceeding. “That’s my horse.” I thought with pride. “Even when he’s naughty he’s AWESOME.”

After twenty minutes the tide turned for Finn. Judy hadn’t given in to his tantrums and evasions. She kept kicking him forward while keeping the reins, brushing him with the whip at just the right times, and forcing him to keep his body straight with the pressure of her legs. Finn, sweaty from resistance, finally showed the group how glorious he really was. Head down and back up in the sought-after rounded position of dressage, he cantered and trotted around the arena so light on his feet you’d think he was a gazelle. (Well, not a gazelle but he was really light on his feet, which is unusual in such a big horse.) Oh, he showcased his athleticism causing the instructor to exclaim, “He could be a third or fourth level horse.”

“I know it. I know he could. Of course he can. He’s the best horse here.” This I thought to myself. I mean I don’t want other horse owners to hate me. Just because I have the best horse in the barn, doesn’t mean I should flaunt it. (I also don’t really know what exactly goes into becoming a third or fourth level horse.)

At the end of the clinic after four horses had been ridden we all stood around in the tack room going over the day. I couldn’t understand why everyone wanted to talk about other horses but I tried to patiently and gently bring the conversation back around to Finn as often as possible. With every little silence I would jump in with, “Judy, what were your takeaways for Finn today?” or “What was it the instructor said about flexion exercises for his neck?” But, aargh, every time I just got a good conversation going about my brilliant horse, someone would chime in with a tidbit about *their* horse. Don’t

get me wrong, all the horses in the barn are wonderful, sweet, and talented in their own way. It's just that *my* horse is obviously the *best* horse in the barn!

I've learned a whole new language since I started riding. What does one look for in a horse? Good feet, good conformation, a kind eye, a sweet disposition, legs that aren't too skinny, a full mane and tail, a forward horse but not a bolter, training—first, second, third, fourth level and then grand prix, place in the herd, and it goes on and on. Finn has great feet, they are big and not too flat and not too hollow. He gets new shoes every five to six weeks. I spend more on his shoes than I've ever spent on my own, even when I lived in New York City with very expensive shoe taste.

My horse is very curious and mischievous. He likes people and other horses. The first year of our partnership Finn was in the stall next to Moses. A good friend owns Moses who is a twenty five year old brown and white paint with unusual blue eyes. There are bars on the top half of the wall separating their stalls so they can communicate and feel companionship at night, but not get into too much trouble.

The first night after Finn arrived, Moses dragged his pile of hay over to the corner of his stall closest to Finn so they could eat together. Moses is just that kind of horse. He loves his herd. He and Finn became fast friends although I wouldn't say that Finn was incredibly loyal when he first went out into the herd. He placed elderly, slow moving Moses in between himself and the rest of the herd for protection. It was kind of embarrassing for me. Finn was basically protecting himself with a pony that he towered over. My friend didn't talk to me for a few days after Moses got kicked by one of the other horses trying to get to the newcomer. It was like the Hulk cowering behind Winnie the Pooh.

Finn was just shy of ten years old when I brought him home. Normally, at nine, most horses have had a significant amount of advanced training. They are broken to saddle at four and receive enough training to teach them basic commands and jumps so they can be ridden. Finn was broken at four and then became a backyard, trail riding horse for the next six years. It was obvious by his actions and habits that he'd gotten away with murder in those six years. Judy and I surmise that when he tossed that big head he scared his previous riders who probably immediately got off thereby teaching him to reason, "Hmmm...if I use my size the person on my back asking me to work will get off and I can go eat grass." Horses have brains the size of walnuts. However, I'm certain Finn's brain is probably bigger than your average horse and is full of reasoning and thought processes.

Aside from being athletic, talented, and smart, Finn is a worrier. Fortunately, when he gets worried under saddle and spooks, he tends to frantically run in place, as opposed to bolting. As a novice rider I find this to be an endearing trait. The fact that he likes people so much means he was never mistreated so he doesn't worry too much about people, although he doesn't seem to care for small children. I don't think he understands them and he expects them to act like dogs. When they rear up on two legs and scream he gets a bit troubled. If they remain calm, he is okay.

For example, one day at the barn a mother was visiting with her three year old. The little boy had been around horses quite a bit. He even looked a little like a colt with dark hair and big, deep brown eyes. I had finished grooming Finn after a ride, and needed to turn him around in the barn aisle to lead him back out to the paddock. As I started forward with Finn on the lead line, the little boy came running out of the tack

room despite his mother's command to stay still. I stopped Finn short with a *whoa*, but as he halted, his huge head gracefully continued to descend towards the boy. That boy's face was full of wonderment and a little terror as he watched Finn's head come swooping towards him. And then, Finn pressed his nose forward and nudged the boy on his shoulder pushing him back toward the tack room as if to say, "Listen to your mother. She knows best."

So, Finn doesn't worry about people. He worries about other horses. If he's in a herd he thinks he should be in charge. He's not aggressive or mean, he just feels really, really responsible. When he first came to the barn, he was turned out with the rest of the herd. When winter came, Finn and a fancy black horse began to be bored. So they did the only thing they could think of—play tug of war with each other's halters and blankets. It was funny to watch them drag each other across the field by the halter. It was really silly when the black horse offered up the front of his blanket in his teeth for a game. But then the realization dawns that they are destroying two hundred dollar blankets. And then the question is *who pays for the shredded blankets?* And it turns out that is not an easy question to answer.

Something I've noticed about riders is that a small percentage of them have some kind of personality disorder—borderline personality disorder, Asperger's, full-blown psychosis or just frequent bouts of crabbiness. Because dressage is such a precise discipline, dressage riders tend to be type A personalities on top of the full range of psychological problems. I think these people are drawn to riding because of the connection with another live being who is, in some ways, more forgiving than a human. These riders are not bad people, they don't mistreat their horses, sometimes they just

mistreat the humans around them. The fancy black horse, Ziggy, had such an owner, Shirley.

The games of tug of war between Ziggy and Finn continued for a couple of months. We were using duct tape to try and keep the blankets intact, and spraying them with a bitter formula to deter them from damage. For better or worse, it was Ziggy's blanket getting shredded, not Finn's. Some days Ziggy would come in with the front of his blanket looking like a hula skirt with thin, ripped streamers fluttering in the breeze. The whole thing came to a head when Ziggy managed to get out of his blanket altogether and then spend the day trampling it, ripping out the white stuffing and throwing it in the air. Of course, throughout, I knew that my horse was just an innocent bystander being falsely accused. Well, maybe not.

Ziggy is a high-spirited horse and Shirley had patiently taken the time to train him slowly and properly. She was doing the right thing with him. No one could deny that. So when I look back at the fact that she suggested putting a MUZZLE on Finn to stop the blanket ripping, I can see she was looking out for her horse—er, pocketbook. The fact is that Ziggy and Finn were great friends. They were just kindred spirits that liked to get into a bit of trouble.

The only kind of muzzle that allows a horse to eat but not grab a blanket or halter is made of metal. It is a cage that fits over the mouth and nose and looks like a medieval torture device. I winced at the thought of that device being slid over Finn's velvety soft nose and lips. His lips were so tactile he could open stall doors, and gentle and soft when taking carrots and peppermints from my hand. I knew he would be miserable and I knew I couldn't do it to him.

“If you put a muzzle on Finn, then you need to put one on Ziggy.” Judy said firmly. “It’s not fair to Finn otherwise. Ziggy’ll be dragging him all over the field and Finn won’t be able to defend himself.”

“Oh, no muzzles are dangerous.” Shirley hastily replied.

“You were going to put a muzzle on *her* horse.” Judy jerked her head in my direction. Shirley gazed at her hands folded in her lap, her lips pinched together into a thin white line.

“What about if you move Ziggy to a smaller paddock, away from Finn?” Judy persisted.

“NO! Ziggy needs to be in the field. That’s why I moved him here. So he can run.” The cliché about redheads and tempers often seemed to fit Shirley. She did not like being told what to do, and sometimes a sense of entitlement shone through.

Judy’s patience was starting to wear thin as a friend wandered into the tack room at the tail end of the conversation. Judy turned to her and said, “Linda, would you consider putting Finn and Savannah in a paddock together so we can leave Ziggy in the field?”

“I guess so if it will help.” There was hesitation in Linda’s voice. “But I’ve just gotten her settled in with another horse.”

So Finn ended up separated from Ziggy and sharing a paddock with Savannah, a gray mare with an attitude. Savannah was a horse strictly for lessons in the indoor arena. She spooked at everything and would take off around the arena cantering and bucking when she was nervous. In the herd, Savannah was the mare in charge. No one would mess with her and she made the herd feel safe knowing that she was watching out for all

of them and keeping everyone in line. And she was determined. She once spent a night slowly pulling one of her blankets off the rack on her stall door through the gap in the bars. When she got it inside she trampled it to smithereens.

But, I think Finn was smitten with her and felt *he* needed to take care of *her*. Since neither of them was clearly in charge and they had no one else to boss around, they both decided to be in charge of their owners. This manifested itself almost at once as we started to ride them after the move.

A horse needs to know that his rider is the leader of their herd of two. Their instinct is flight if they feel threatened. In the herd, the dominant horse looks out for the entire group and warns of danger. This allows the other horses to rest and eat without worry. The horse that is responsible can be a worrier. Riding a worried horse is not fun. Savannah reacted by becoming more flighty and spooky, and took off at the slightest provocation. Finn's protest expressed itself in the opposite way. He wouldn't go forward. He wiggled. He bucked. He protested. He tossed his head. It was like an evil demon had taken over my lovely, sweet horse. Even on the ground he was naughty. He started to pick up anything he could in his mouth and wouldn't let go. One time as I was saddling him he reached over and picked up my whip by the handle. I tugged, cajoled, tried to pry his mouth apart, but he would not let go. It did make me laugh. He was looking at me out of the corner of his brown eye with a good deal of roguishness and even more stubbornness. The green leather handle still has teeth marks. At least he didn't try to use it on me.

But it was in the saddle where the most difficulties occurred. As a beginning rider, I still had a lot to learn and Finn was not making it easy. I would squeeze my calves

asking him to walk and he would bend in six different directions to get out of it. I'd ask again, and he'd give a little buck and twist in eight different directions and then walk a little in the opposite way, back up, and buck again. If I used the whip to encourage him, he would give a big buck and go in circles.

I stayed on until one day about a month after the demon took over. It was the first really cold, dark night of the winter, a portent of the next several months to come. Standing outside in the dark looking at the barn with the cheeriness of the lights spilling out its windows and doors, it looked like it should be warm inside. But as I entered I could see my breath, and the soft, moist breath of the horses as they snorted through their noses and stamped their feet. I felt introverted with the cold as I tacked Finn. I brushed him quickly and huddled up to him for his warmth. Next, the saddle pad, saddle and girth. As usual, I tightened the girth slowly out of respect for Finn's feelings. Although, I merely had to touch the buckle without putting the strap through for him to protest and toss his head. Evasion. Maybe it should be his middle name. Finally, I put my black helmet on and grabbed his English bridle with the reins attached from the tack room. I waited for him to finish sneezing before I bridled him — another evasion technique.

That day I got him to trot forward fairly willingly. We were riding with another horse and rider in the arena. All was going well until the other horse stopped in the corner by the aisle. I tried to get Finn to pass but he refused. He squirmed and headed straight for the aisle as I slid to the side of the saddle. I panicked, flung the reins about, righted myself partway as he entered the aisle, and then slid off his side landing flat on my back on the cement floor. Finn stopped, looked at me as if he didn't understand why I was lying on the floor, and then took off out of the barn. Judy came running over

saying, “Are you okay?” The breath knocked out of me, I couldn’t answer immediately. “Are you okay?” she asked again. I choked out a yes and she ran off to find my errant horse who had run outside riderless with stirrups swinging and reins flapping.

I heaved myself up and started swearing, “Dammit! Dammit!” I threw my gloves on the ground as hard as I could, and swore again as they landed lightly next to a tack trunk with an unsatisfying flutter. I swore again and threw my whip, which quietly landed on top of a hay bale. I ran to get a grain bucket to shake and tempt Finn back inside but as I got to the door Judy was leading him back with the broken reins he’d stepped on. And I burst into tears.

I sat on a tack trunk holding Finn’s reins. He kept turning to nuzzle my hand as I cried. I’d like to think he felt sorry for what he’d done but while he certainly felt my emotion, I know he didn’t associate it with his actions. And he probably still thought he deserved a treat. Judy stood next to me and after a few minutes said, “Ok, it’s time to get back on.” I looked at her in disbelief. She wanted me to get back on this crazy horse that I could barely control. But I nodded and led Finn to the mounting block, got on and rode for another ten minutes until Judy said I could get off. And, despite the large black and blue mark on my back, I got back on the next day, and the next, and again after I fell off the second and third times.

I’ve learned that no matter what the circumstances, when it comes to horse back riding as well as life, I will always keep trying to move forward through falling and into life. When I was young, learning seemed more of an annoyance than a joy. In the spirit of youth, I thought I already knew everything. I thought I could control what happened to me. Of course, as I got older I realized one should never say never because there is a

lot about life that can't be controlled. I can't control that my husband died, I can't control the depths that grief has taken me to, or my boss acting like a jerk, or a friend abandoning me during my darkest hour, or how other people act, and certainly I can't always control my horse. But what I do have control over is how hard I try. When I fall off I get back on, when I feel dark I call a friend, when I'm melancholy I make a joke. I've learned to embrace grief and to use it to move on. If I don't get back on the horse, I'm not living. And, I want to live.

And besides, I do have most magnificent horse in the world. I just know it.

The Closet

Two years after Jon died, on a sunny Sunday afternoon I opened his closet door for the first time since becoming a widow. As I expected, his clothes were jumbled in large piles on the floor, the shelves were practically empty, and a few shirts and his blue blazer hung on wire hangers.

Over the years we'd come to an agreement. As long as I couldn't see his disorder, I would ignore it. As we'd moved from apartment to apartment and then to our house, that meant our sides of the bed changed. Jon had to sleep on the side of the bed farthest from the door. That way he could take his clothes off and drop them next to the bed, where I couldn't see them when I walked into the room. I cultivated out of sight, out of mind. When we bought a house with two big closets, one for each of us, I would occasionally scoop up all his clothes, throw them in his closet and shut the door with a satisfying thump. The extra closet made our married life that much better.

One of Jon's prized collections was his fifty or so tee shirts from various concerts and art shows, some of which he'd designed. His particular favorites were the tees from when he lived in New London, Connecticut and became involved in an art show, the Hygienic. He started to work on the show very early on in its birth and it was a testament to his outspokenness and avant garde sensibilities. The show was no prizes, no judging, no fees, no censorship. Anyone could hang a piece of art. Modeled after the late 19th century Salon des Independants in Paris, it was a coming together of an arts community in a blue collar, depressed town and included fine art and low brow art from disparate populations such as house wives, drug addicts, art students and a wide range of community members. The show happened once per year in the winter. The artists

showed up at the gallery, were handed a hammer and a nail and told to hang their piece wherever they wanted. I remember a portrait of a girl in the realism style juxtaposed to a toilet with fake vomit. The show was one night and everyone turned out. Women in fur coats mingled with artists with copious piercings and bright red mohawks.

The Hygienic gave Jon a community when he needed it, and he contributed to its early successes. As his profile on the Hygienic website states, the show, “changed my life. It convinced me that a life of poverty, rejection, and public ridicule could be fun!” All those tee shirts were a testament to his morphing into an artist, like a butterfly coming out of a cocoon. Except his butterfly had a skull and crossbones for a head, lovely colorful wings, and came from an alien planet. That was Jon’s essence—low-brow fine art with a very dark side

Being married to a driven artist is not always easy or fun, but it is never dull. He spent hours in the studio room over the garage. That room was the reason we bought the house in its secluded forest setting. I was the first one to walk into the spacious, light filled room with floor to ceiling windows, and I called back over my shoulder, “Oh Jon, this is the house for us.” I hadn’t even seen the rest of it. I knew that he had sacrificed his art space in the last two rentals we’d had, and it was his turn. In the beginning I sometimes felt lonely as he spent hours in his studio, so I’d open the door and call up the stairs for contact, “Love you honey!”

“Love you too,” His voice distracted, I could tell he was bent over a sculpture or watercolor, or standing at the easel. It didn’t matter. It was enough. Eventually, I started making lampworked glass beads over a flame and Jon took a corner of the studio by a window and set up the small kiln, propane and oxygen fed torch, and built a metal

covered table for me to work at. I filled one large windowsill with mason jars bursting with long, thin glass rods in all shades of green, blue, pink, red, orange, yellow and amber.

My tools were tidily lined up on the table—metal glasscutters, stainless steel rods around which to melt the glass into a bead, and other tools to shape and texture the glass. He and I would work in the studio together silently, concentrating on paint and clay and glass, only occasionally breaking the silence to share a funny or poignant thought. He took such delight in my own talents in writing or making beads, how could I be anything but generous with my admiration of his imagination, talent and intellect?

His part of the studio, too, was chaos. I marveled that he could create in there with the floor strewn with discarded art paper, bits of clay and stone, dust, and other debris. But in the middle of it all would appear a lovely water color of a lady slipper at the base of a tree, many shades of pink and yellow and green, an oil painting of a cherry, or a ceramic sculpture of Humpty Dumpty, a look of abject terror on his face as he knows he's about to fall.

The day I opened Jon's closet door, my friend, the one who'd come to my house every weekend for six months after Jon died, sat in the green chair with the big chintz roses in the bedroom. It was my reading chair where I would curl up late at night while Jon slept. It was the chair that enveloped me when I couldn't sleep and sat engrossed in a book with a small lamp illuminating the page. I could hear his steady, rhythmic breathing and look over to the bed in that dim part of the room to watch him sleep, the comfort of his body, his presence, his companionship, his love, his soul just a few feet away. I would smile to myself and go back to my book.

It was the chair he sat in on his last night in our house. After going to Boston for an overnight procedure, after complications from the anesthesia, after spending five days in the ICU having his body constantly flushed of toxins, and two days on the recovery floor with a pneumonia patient for a roommate who coughed and coughed and coughed, he had finally come home.

I wanted everything to be back to normal so I made meatloaf and mashed potatoes for dinner—comfort food. I rarely cooked. Jon loved to cook, it relaxed him, and he could make something out of anything. And it was all the better with an audience. His presentation was artistic. He loved my meatloaf but he only ate two bites.

“You have to eat, honey,” it was so unlike him not to eat, I was worried.

“I know. And I know it’s delicious but I just can’t,” he got up from the table and went to lie down while I cleaned up. I just wanted everything to be normal. Yet nothing was normal.

That night I woke up around two am and he was sitting in the green chair.

“I have an idea for a sculpture,” he said with a grin.

“You do? What?” I smiled sleepily.

“Three teddy bears in a tableau. One is standing and looking through binoculars, the other is kneeling with his hand shading his eyes, and the other is training a submachine gun to an invisible target.”

I laughed, “Sounds interesting. Sounds like you. Can’t wait to see it.” I kissed his forehead. “How are you feeling? Do you think you need to go to the hospital?” The night before he said he’d wake me if he felt worse.

“No. I’m okay. Just can’t sleep.” Relieved, I went back to bed.

A few hours later I was startled out of a light sleep when I heard him calling me from the chair. “Cathy, I think I need to go to the hospital.”

His breathing was shallow and he leaned over as he came to sit on the end of the bed. He’d gotten dressed and was ready to go. He hadn’t wanted to wake me until he was sure. I threw on some clothes as I dialed 911. The first responder was our neighbor who was an EMT. Later, she told me she’d run up the long hill through the woods to our house as it was quicker than driving, and that she’d never run that hard or fast.

If I had taken him to the hospital the first time I got up instead of going back to bed would he still be alive? Would that sculpture have been created? I regret all the moments I wasted when I could have been with him. I shouldn’t have slept at all that last night, his last night in our home.

If I hadn’t left his hospital room early one night in Boston because I was so, so tired, or if I’d shown up earlier in the morning would he still be alive? I was the one who brought him ice water to drink because the nurses were too busy. I was the one who stayed with him, by his bedside, until one a.m. because the nurse didn’t want to remove his catheter.

“You can take his catheter out now,” the doctor said to the nurse one evening during his rounds. “He’s strong enough to get up and use the bathroom but he might need help.”

“I’d rather wait until the morning so I don’t have to check him every hour,” she answered quickly.

The doctor shrugged, “OK, but every hour you wait, the higher the chance of a urinary tract infection.

“I want it out now,” I interrupted. They both looked startled, as if Jon and I were invisible, not part of the equation, and had no say in his healthcare.

“Remove it now,” the doctor asserted.

“OK. I’ll do it just as soon as I finish with the patient next door.” The nurse looked irritated and turned to me, “I’ll need you to leave now.”

“I’ll leave as soon as his catheter is removed.” I had to use all of my skills to help Jon get better, and one of those was stubbornness and the ability to speak up.

Now my friend sat in the green chair saying just the right things, gently suggesting that many of his clothes could go to Goodwill. But I couldn’t do it. I didn’t want anyone else to wear his clothes. Especially the blue Hawaiian style shirt I’d made for him with the frog pattern and the green plastic frog buttons with googly eyes. He’d been delighted with that one. And the soft brown wool robe I’d made for Christmas covered with cowboys. He’d always wanted cowboy pajamas. Each piece of clothing I pulled out of the closet pierced my heart. The black mock turtleneck he wore to parties—it kind of made him look like a beat artist. It looked good on him. The blue blazer, blue pin striped button down shirt, and several pairs of khakis—his first AA sponsor taught him that outfit could help him fit in anywhere—and he wore it to work events, receptions for my work, Christmas parties, and he did fit in. Although with his charm and intelligence he had the ability to talk to anyone.

I started to put his clothes into a pile for Goodwill and a pile to be thrown away for the worn out clothes. And many of them were worn out. Everything he did, he did with abandon and enthusiasm, including wearing his clothes hard. As I separated the piles, I realized I didn’t want them to go to someone else to wear. I didn’t want someone

else to wash his smell away and replace it with their own. I'd rather they were thrown away and destroyed. No one else deserved to wear his clothes. It may be selfish because there are people who needed those clothes, but I needed to be selfish. I couldn't stand the idea of his clothes out in the world without him, of his clothes out in the world without *me*. I started stuffing everything into large green garbage bags, quickly, without sorting them. I wouldn't let my friend touch them. I wanted to be the last one to handle them, to smell them, to feel the softness of the worn fabrics, to imagine them on his warm, living body, rippling with his movements, shaking slightly with his laughter, wet with his sweat, stained with his food, straining against his back as he held me.

We loaded the bags in the back of her car and she drove away promising to bring them to a dumpster because I knew I couldn't do that part. I knew I could trust her. And, she took on that heavy burden off my shoulders in true friendship.

But, what was I to do with an empty closet? I didn't know, so I closed the closet door, sat in the green chintz chair with the big pink roses and cried.

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