Descansos

Sabrina Reeves

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Andre Furlani Chair

Sina Queyras Reader

Terence Burns Reader

Kate Sterns Supervisor

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ABSTRACT

Sabrina Reeves

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Littered along the treacherous roads that wind through the mountains of New Mexico, *descansos* —handmade wooden crosses—mark the place where someone's beloved died. Haley's mother, Nina, stares at those mountains every day, as she drinks her way through bottle after bottle of wine. On the other side of the country, Haley receives worried calls about her mother from neighbors and friends, who fear the once beautiful and brilliant artist is suffering from Alzheimer's. Haley doesn't correct them; Alzheimer's is more acceptable than alcoholism.

As Haley and her brothers, Jack and Idris, attempt to rescue their mother from the horrors of end-stage alcoholism, they find themselves up against a manipulative new boyfriend, a system that seems intent on thwarting them, doctors who believe a pill will cure anything, and, hardest of all, a mother who doesn't want to be saved. Revisiting all the *descansos* in her mother's life and her own, Haley's struggle becomes increasingly tangled and complex. Who is she really fighting for? Is she truly helping her mother? Caught in the web of inter-generational trauma, Haley needs to find a thread that will lead to redemption: for her mother, herself, and her own daughters.

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PART ONE

Dionysus is the river we hear flowing by in the distance, an incessant booming from far away; then one day it rises and floods everything, as if the normal above-water state of things, the sober delimitation of our existence, were but a brief parenthesis overwhelmed in an instant.

-Roberto Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*

Chapter 1

Summer 1976

"Murph?" my mother called, entering my room. "Did you forget something?"

"No," I said.

Outside, my family was getting in the car. I was looking down on them from my window seat.

"We've read a lot of stories on this strawberry cushion, haven't we," she said, coming over and sitting next to me.

I didn't say anything.

"You know technically this is *your* strawberry cushion, you chose the fabric."

"I know."

"Then you should take it with you."

"Aren't we supposed to leave it for the new owners?"

"Well, let's see—we're leaving them the blinds in the living room, and those blue tiles I got for the kitchen, but I don't recall there being anything in the contract that said *Haley's strawberry cushion*."

"So, I can keep it?"

"We want it, right? So, let's take it. Hop off for a sec, Murph."

I hopped off and she ripped the Velcro attachments holding my cushion in place and handed it to me. "Anything else I can help you with today, ma'am?"

"No, that'll be all, thank you."

"Shall we hit the road?"

"Yeah. Thanks Mom."

"Sure thing, Sweetie."

My mother got into the driver's seat; "Everybody in?" she asked, as she closed her car door.

"Yup!" I answered, and we pulled out of the driveway.

"Wait!" Irene yelled, as she ran through the backyard and along the side of the house, Jack's fireman's helmet in hand. Irene was Mom's best friend and lived in the house one street over, our backyards separated by a broken fence. Mom stopped the car and got out.

"Irene, we're going to see you this weekend."

"I know, I know, it's just that . . ." Irene was crying, "Jack forgot his helmet." Mom hugged her, and then Irene went around to the window next to Jack's car seat and gave him his red fireman's helmet. "I'm going to bring Mila with me when I come to see your new house, OK Jackie?

"OK," Jack said.

"Bye Irene," we all called out, as we pulled away. Paula Kelly was also standing in her doorway, waving to us through her screened door, as we drove away from our old house on Oxford Road in Newton, Massachusetts for the last time.

On the back seat of the light blue station wagon, Idris and I climbed up onto our knees next to Jack's car seat and waved to Irene as we watched our house disappear through the rear window. When we turned the corner of our street, Jack started to wriggle and cry, "I want see! I want see!"

We craned our necks for a last glimpse.

"Move your head," Idris said, pushing me.

"No, you move yours," I said, trying to push him back.

"Mom! Iddie's taking the whole seat!"

Mom popped her Beatles cassette into the player and cranked *Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da* and started singing. "Desmond has a barrow in the marketplace . . ."

Nothing was going to put her in a bad mood that day.

In that great bicentennial 'Summer of '76', my family moved into the Howard Johnson motor lodge on Route 7, where we stayed for a month while our new house was made liveable.

It was hard to say how much of the excitement about the new home was ours, and how much was our mother's. She had been talking about living on a farm for so long, and with such persistence, that I think her dreams had seeped into ours without our realizing

it. “If you want something you have to make it yourself!” she had said, many times. In the car, we talked about filling the place with horses and chickens and goats.

“What about pigs?”

“Can we get a llama?”

“I want a snake,” Idris added, finally turning back around and sitting down. It was a great adventure, and on that day, we were all on board for it one hundred percent.

“This is that waterfall, remember? It’s right there, Nina, after the little market,” said Tom, my stepfather, map in hand, as we turned onto a definitively more countryish street.

“We’re really in the country now,” laughed Idris, pointing. The little market had a sign on the front that read *Ye Olde Towne Market*. A few miles down the wild, green road there was a long row of evergreen hedges, roughly twelve feet tall. The landscaping was striking, in comparison to the brambled stretch of woods that had come before. My mother slowed the car and put on her blinker, turning into a barely visible opening in the middle of the soft evergreen wall. We crept up a long, narrow driveway, until the house finally came into view on the left side. It was a tall, skinny thing that gave the appearance of leaning forward and looking down on you. It had once been white, but the flaking paint gave it the ashy look of an old man. It had been abandoned for at least a decade and was currently serving as home to racoons, birds, rats, and a wide variety of other wildlife; nests poked out from the eves, and tall climbing bushes obscured the first-floor windows. Beyond the house, there were three more structures. The first was a ‘carriage house’—the name the realtor gave it, although really it was a glorified two-story garage. Beyond that was a ‘caretaker’s house’—also the realtor’s name for it—which sat on a small bump of a hill, with a low stonewall all the way around the edge. The building was tiny—roughly 12ft x 18ft—and the same ashy, once-was-white color as the house, with three small stairs leading to the front door. And finally, at the very edge of the property, looming over the tiny caretaker’s house, was a huge barn. It was a massive building, that seemed at once noble and humble. Brown-shingled, like the carriage house, it was—if such a thing were possible—in worse condition than the house. My heart sunk at the sight of the

dilapidated stretch of wreckage. Iddie's mouth was hanging open. As if reading our minds and wanting to keep our spirits up, my mother said, "Isn't this exciting?"

That wasn't the word we were thinking of.

The long driveway ran right down the middle of the property, with the buildings on the left, and an endless field of long grass on the right. The field running up the right side of the driveway connected with seven more acres of the same long, blowing grass, spreading out beyond the barn. Off in the distance, we could see that the long grass descended, on a gradual incline, to a thick wood far beyond the barn. We would later discover that between the field and the wood ran a narrow, rushing brook.

We shut off the car, I undid Jack's car seat, and we all got out. The realtor was poised on the stone walkway between us and the house, in high heels and a short skirt, a manila folder clutched in her hand. The sheen of her grooming was completely at odds with the house she stood before. She began walking towards my mother and stepfather at a clip, as if wanting them to sign before they had a chance to change their minds.

Jack was four at the time, I was eight, and Idris was ten, but that didn't stop my mother from putting us to work. During the day we tossed moldy carpet and old wallpaper out the windows of the house into the rented dumpster below, and in the evenings we ate McDonalds back at the motor lodge. Over burgers and fries, my mother and Tom made a nightly list of what was to be accomplished the next day. They had been married for five years, but Idris and I still called him 'Tom' because we already had a person we called 'Dad.' We had only seen our dad once since the divorce, but I was sure that when we did see him again, he would want to know that he was still our only 'Dad.' So, Idris and I called Tom, 'Tom', and Jack called him 'Dad.' Tom looked so much like Jack Nicholson that people would stop him in the store and ask for his autograph. When he moved in with us he had a tiny green convertible sports car, and he convinced Mom to go for drives with him, just for the fun of it. Normally, Mom never did anything 'just for the fun of it.' I once made the mistake of asking her, many years later, if she had ever been a hippy. A flash of rage crossed her face, and she said that she had been a little too busy raising three kids, to drop acid and dance around Woodstock, thank you very much. But for that brief while after she met Tom, she did drive around 'just for the fun of it,'

with her long blonde hair streaming out behind, feeling the sunshine and the wind as they sped along country roads.

Jack and Idris both had blonde hair like Mom, but they looked very different. Iddie's blonde hair was ashen, and his eyes were deep blue, like winter. His bangs were long—he was always flipping his head so they went to the side—and his face was covered with freckles. Jack was three and all roly-poly, like he was wearing elastic bands all over his body, making the fat puff out in little rolls. His hair was blonde like sunshine. When he was brought home from the hospital, I decided then and there that he was going to be mine. I used to push him around in my doll carriage. Mom was way too busy to take care of him, and Idris wouldn't have the first idea how to take care of a baby, so he was to be mine. I didn't look like Jack though. I had light brown hair that turned auburn in the summer—I never let Mom cut it, so it hung in braids down to my waist—and I had a big space between my two front teeth.

We soon discovered that anybody of any age could peel old wallpaper. Irene came out to help on the weekends and brought Mila with her. Mila was the same age as Jack, and Irene had brought her tricycle, so the two of them rode up and down the driveway as the rest of us worked. Irene was tall, with thin, crinkled hair and a high-pitched voice that seemed an attempt to lessen the strength in her height. She would never dream of taking up too much space—which was challenging at 6' 2". She laughed at all Mom's jokes with bright explosions of laughter. She could make a game out of nearly anything, and while we peeled the layers of old paper, she made the 'wicked witch laugh' from the *Wizard of Oz,* reaching up a large spaghetti fork and dragging it along the paper, loosening several layers with one long claw. "I'll get you, my pretty, and your little dog too!"

By the end of two days the dumpster was full, and we needed another. Things that didn't go in the dumpster included: the hundreds of old canning jars we found in the basement; the antique toys in the attic; a pair of baby booties, so dirty with cobwebs and dust and racoon droppings that it was impossible to say what colour they might have

been; and, found when we pulled down the wall between the living and dining room, a love letter from a soldier named Frank, dated June 8, 1917, to his "Sweet Claudette."

All this dusty old junk was heaven for Idris, who had been an avid trash collector since he could walk. In Newton, the well-to-do suburb of Boston where we used to live, my mother had neighbours complain on more than one occasion, "Your son is in my front yard going through my trash!"

Mom would pretend to assume the neighbour was jealous of Idris ending up with such valuable items, "Hey! You threw it out – that's your tough luck! Finders Keepers!" And she would hang up the phone and wink at Idris, who loved her for it. She would defend any one of us to anyone and she never apologized for anything, ever.

Sometimes she defended us even when we weren't under attack. Like when Idris' teachers commented that he was "special." Miss Saitow—who had kind brown eyes ringed with dark circles, and perfectly straight bangs—told Mom that, on the one hand, Idris remembered everything he'd ever read, or seen, or learned, in its exact details, could write at a level far in advance of the other kids, and was perfectly ambidextrous. He was, "quite astonishing really. But on the other hand," Miss Saitow continued gently, "he seems to be having difficulty focusing on the work at hand, he doesn't grasp basic social skills, and I really think he might benefit from working with a specialist."

To which Mom replied, "Are you a specialist? I didn't think so. Thank you very much for your opinion, but my son is just fine." Even Tom tried to convince Mom to go the specialist route, but she wouldn't budge. Idris was just his own person and that was that. He didn't need any special help.

Once we got our new house emptied of animals, mold, and sharp debris like broken glass and ripped ends of wood, Mom took me to the wallpaper store and told me I could choose any wallpaper I wanted. I chose a white paper with tiny pink rosebuds all over it. Idris made a gagging face when we arrived home with it. He had decided, for himself and Jack, that their walls would simply be painted white. Once the second dumpster was hauled away, Mom said, "OK, let's do it. Come on, everyone grab

something from the car! We're moving in." Never mind that the plumbing wasn't in yet, there was no floor downstairs, and we hadn't fully flushed the mice out.

"It'll be fun! Just like camping," Mom said.

On our first night in the old farmhouse, Tom put three planks across the raw joists of the kitchen, we laid out a picnic blanket, and ate dinner and drank champagne from styrofoam cups.

*

Chickens. That was our first go at farming: twelve chickens. There was a small room, just inside the barn to the left, that had clearly once been a chicken coop, as evidenced by the little, chicken-sized door and ramp that led to the yard in front of the barn. We built a small post and wire fence and cleaned up the inside. The old nesting boxes hung from the wall in broken pieces, with rusted nails sticking out every which way. There was no door. Tom and Mom brought out the table saw and a box of tools, and set to cutting up a piece of plywood that was left over from laying the sub-floor in the kitchen. They made a temporary door, until Mom could find a proper barn door. Tom bought a long hook and eye latch so that we kids could get in and out easily, since, in the very animated discussion of the subject the night before, Idris and I had made it quite clear that we would be the ones collecting the eggs.

So we bought twelve chickens. A dozen eggs, a dozen chickens. Our only experience with animals came from buying them packaged up in the supermarket. We also bought a rooster and named him Ralph. We installed the squawking mass of birds in the new coop, where their feed and water were already set out and waiting for them, with hay in their boxes and the little door to their pen, open. They marched around inspecting their new home, both inside and out. They were a beautiful, perfect flock: five Rhode Island Reds, four Plymouth Rocks, two Leghorns, and one Silkie. Idris and I fought over who got to call that beautiful Silkie theirs. And when Jack heard us arguing, even he joined in, "My Silkie!" Finally, Mom gave in and got two more, bringing our flock to fourteen.

I gave my Silkie the ever-original name of Fluffy, Idris named his Tribble (after some little animals featured on an episode of *Star Trek*) and Jack just called his Silkie. We sat watching them for hours that first day, until finally Mom called us in for dinner.

We came in from the barn and Tom came in from the shop. Tom had turned the carriage house into a leather shop, closing his old shop in Boston. He had moved all his sewing machines, tools, rolls of leather and workbenches out to our glorified garage. He would continue to work every day, as he always had, but at home. The door to his shop faced the back door of the house, a distance of about fifty feet between the two. We knew this because he kept saying, "I only have to walk fifty feet and I'm at work!"

The next morning, I woke at 5:30 a.m. to the sound of Ralph trumpeting in the day. I burst out of bed and ran downstairs, where Mom was already in the kitchen, pouring coffee.

"Shall we go see if we have any eggs?" she smiled down at me.

"Yes!" I slipped into my boots and ran out the door, my nightgown billowing behind me. The grass was still wet with dew, and the birds sang a background melody to Ralph's star tenor squawk. I didn't know the names of those little morning songbirds filling the trees outside our back door at the time. Gradually, I came to know they were wrens and blackbirds and willow Warblers, and that the buzzing in late summer was from the cicadas, and that the wind was strongest in October and November, and that magnolias and crocuses were the first flowers of spring, and that one needed a tractor to shovel a driveway fifty yards long.

Mom was a good distance behind me when I ran through the doors to the barn, lifted the lock of the coop and opened the door. Some of the chickens were in their boxes and some were pecking about on the ground; Fluffy, Tribble, and Silkie were among the awake ones. I lifted the little exterior door and hooked it in place, so they could go out and face the day. Out they all went.

"What've we got, Murph?" Mom asked, arriving just behind me. Mom had called me Murphy for as long as I could remember. I don't know why or where it came from, it was just my name.

"I haven't checked yet. Let me look, please?" I begged, already with my hands in one of the boxes. I fished my hands around gently, but there was only hay. I checked the next box, and the next, and the next, coming up empty in all but one of the boxes, where we found one small, brown egg.

"Oh, poor little chickens! You know, Murph, I think the move might be a little

upsetting for them. You remember when we first moved, and you didn't want to come?"

"Yeah."

"I think it's like that for them. I think we may just need to give them a little time. Oh, and also—you remember that guy at the feed store with the funny curly moustache?"

"Yeah."

"He told me that chickens lay in a cycle of four weeks: three weeks on, one week off. So, this just might be their week off! They're on vacation! Oh—and also, did you know that eggs have a natural protective coating that will keep them fresh so long as we don't wash them? We can just keep them on a bowl in the counter! As soon as you wash them though, they will need to go in the fridge."

"Really?"

"Pretty cool, huh?"

I loved my mornings out in the barn with Mom. When building something, creating a new world, my mother was at her very best. Also, the animals seemed to calm her; she was happy in the barn, she didn't have any bad moods at all, those first few months. And she was determined to learn everything there was to know about the animals we would get. The more she read, and asked questions of Gus, at the feed store, the more she learned. And restating what she learned seemed a necessary part of her process. I was more than happy to be a pair of ears for her "fun farm facts." Jack would often trail along behind on those mornings. Not Idris, though. As the weeks passed, he became less and less interested in the barn. He had made friends with some neighborhood boys, and preferred to play *Dungeons and Dragons* or go exploring in the woods. Gathering eggs was, I would soon learn, uncool. Goat's milk, a year later, would be the pinnacle of uncool. We kids all agreed on that one. We weren't going to have any friends over—not to mention sleepovers—unless an agreement was reached about keeping a carton of cow's milk in the fridge for guests.

The first goat we got was an Alpine named Becky. We went on to get two more—Nubians that we named Rose and Camille. Then Rose had babies, and we added Maggie and Jasmine to our small herd. Then we got a pony, and my mother built two more stalls so that we could board horses for some extra income. Not only was the farm really and truly up and running, but Mom and Tom were breaking in the new house with lots of

entertaining; they wanted Mom's old friends from Newton and Tom's friends from Boston to see their new home, their new life.

The apple cider parties were the best of these housewarming events, because kids were allowed. Seller's Apple Orchard spread across ten acres just beyond the back woods. Idris and I discovered that there was an easy path through the woods leading directly to a side 'entrance' into the orchard. Showing this to Mom and watching her eyes light up was one of our greatest triumphs. There was never a moment when it was suggested by either of our parents that we should resist taking the apples because they weren't ours. "Those apples are just going to go bad," my mother had said. "We are doing them a favour!"

Although, the fact of the matter was, we didn't limit ourselves to the apples on the ground, we climbed the trees, and we didn't just take a few apples, we had our own harvest. We kept grain bags full of apples in the cool of the basement and all winter had pies and crumble and sauce—we even learned how to make apple butter. And then Mom found an old cider-press for $25 tucked into the back of an antique store, one town over. It had a hand crank and iron gears, and a big funnel for pouring the apples in. She hauled it home in the back of the station wagon and we set it up in the space between the house and Tom's shop. That press was the highlight of the parties in which Mom and Tom showed off their success to their old friends. They knew that moving to the country was the dream of many a city-dweller and they had actually done it! So, we had parties to celebrate, where we pressed bushels of apples into jars of cider, where we kids ran around while the adults drank cider and got sloshed.

At one of those parties, Jack and I were playing with his action figures in the lilac bushes, just beyond the table with all the glasses and pitchers of cider. We were in the middle of a battle waged with tiny swords when we heard Mom, Irene and someone named Phil come up to the table to refill the pitchers of cider. Phil was a friend of Irene's and was handsome in a TV-show sort of way, with perfectly straight teeth and hair. Mom was telling Irene and Phil a story.

"I don't understand how he got in," Phil said, standing very close to Mom and sipping from his glass.

"Well, the door only had a hook and eye latch keeping it closed, and the hook was extra long, so the door didn't fully close; there was a gap of about an inch and a half. So the raccoon, it would seem, just reached his arm through the crack and started swiping around. Meanwhile, the stupid chickens panicked and tried to escape—*through* the door where the raccoon was waiting to grab them!"

"So he killed *all* of them?" Irene asked.

Jack, who was sitting directly across from me, made a gasping sound, and I reached out and clapped my hand over his mouth while Mom continued.

"He got them all but the rooster! It was a grim sight to be greeted with first thing in the morning, a pile of birds with their necks all snapped." And here Mom made a gesture of having a noose around her neck, stringing herself up to the side, tongue lolling out of her mouth. Phil laughed, "That's too much!"

Irene's high-pitched laugh cut above the din of the party. "Oh my goodness!"

"I had to replace them all before the kids noticed. Poor brainless birds . . ."

"Oh, how awful!"

"At least we don't need to worry about dinner for the next few weeks!"

"You kept the dead birds? How macabre!" Phil's voice stretched out on the word 'macabre'.

Mom was that kind of sparkly happy that she got at parties.

"This isn't Newbury street, Phil, this is country living! They'll become chicken soup, chicken fingers . . ."

Irene accepted the facts, ". . . chicken pot pie, chicken parmesan."

"Chicken fricassee," added Phil

Mom, Phil, and Irene went away laughing and listing chicken dishes.

The cider turned to vinegar in my stomach, and Jack was white as a sheet. We left the action figures in a pile and went in, and we watched cartoons for the rest of the day.

Chapter 2

January 2018

Snow was falling in great, fat flakes and the world outside my window was losing its shape. I tossed a few pairs of socks, a pair of jeans, and my purple folder of New Mexico documents into the suitcase laid out on the bed. It was my seventh trip to Santa Fe in as many months and I was getting tired of this metallic blue suitcase.

"Mama, where are you going?" Lucy asked, appearing at the top of the stairs. She was a vision in faded red tank top, underwear, and long, unbrushed hair.

"Hi Sweetie. I'm going to visit Grammy again."

Kai was sitting on the bed next to my suitcase and attempted to change the subject. "Hey kiddo, is your show over already?"

She didn't take the bait. "But you just got back from Grammy's."

She was ten years old and wanted to be a teenager like her sister. She didn't want to need her mother still, and she was mad at me for underlining that need by leaving so often.

Kai answered, "Grammy is buying a house, so Mama has to go out and help her with the details. That's all."

Lucy sat on the ledge of the long window at the foot of the bed. Her red top and wild hair, silhouetted against the falling white snow, gave her the air of a queen.

"Why? Why does she need your help?" She wanted a real answer and she wanted it now. She wasn't falling for this 'buying a house' nonsense. I am always amazed by the keen radar kids have for lies. The best solution, I've found, is the old trick of saying something that is true, but not the whole truth.

"Well sweetie, Grammy has been having memory problems, like Yaiya, so she needs a little bit more help these days."

"I know that. You told me that already. So why doesn't she just move into a place like Yaiya's if she has Alzheimer's?" She added the word 'Alzheimer's' to highlight the fact that she was not a child and didn't need to be spoken to like one. "I am presenting my project this week, you know," she said, looking at the floor.

I sat down on the foot of the bed and faced her. “Is your project this week? I thought it was next week.” She shook her head, not looking up. “I’m so sorry sweetie. You’re going to be great, and Daddy will be there. I know I’ve been gone a lot this month, and I miss you so much when I’m not here, but this trip is an important one.” I took her hands, “There’s a hospital that will be able to help Grammy, and hopefully, after this trip, other people—professional people—will be able to take over what Mama has been doing. They’ll be able to help Grammy and I won’t need to go out as much.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“You know what, Sweetie? We’re going to find out exactly that on this trip, and I promise, when I know everything, I will tell you.” She looked at me then. I asked, “Would you like to visit Grammy?”

“Yes! Can I come with you?”

“Not this trip—because you have your project and I have to get Grammy settled, but maybe next time.”

She stood up and gave me a hug, “OK. Are you going to bring me a present?”

My flight took off in spite of the snow. I changed planes in Chicago and landed in Albuquerque at 11 p.m. I rolled my carry-on out the front door and along the walkway that lead to the Sheraton Airport Hotel. Once I had checked in and gotten into my room, I sat on the bed, took the purple folder out of my suitcase, and called my brother, Jack.

“Hi.”

“Hi. Have you arrived?”

“Yeah, I just got in.”

“How was the flight?”

“Fine. Uneventful.” Pause. “I feel a little sick.”

“I know.” He paused. “I think I might have slept two hours last night.”

“What time is your flight tomorrow?”

“Early, like 8 a.m. But I change in L.A., that’s why I don’t get in until 2 p.m .....I feel like shit about not being there to drive up to Santa Fe and get her with you.”

Santa Fe is about an hour from Albuquerque; the hospital where we had arranged for her to be detoxed was in Albuquerque. When planning the whole thing out, the

sticking point had been what to tell her, so that we could get her to drive with us from Santa Fe to Albuquerque. The only thing she ever went there for was the airport. So when it turned out that Jack was unable to get a flight in on Sunday night, it provided us with the excuse we needed. I would fly in Sunday night, stay at the airport hotel, drive up to Santa Fe Monday morning and pick her up, telling her that we had to go back down to Albuquerque to get Jack at the airport. Once Jack was with us, we would go to the hospital.

"I'll call you tomorrow from my layover. Good luck."

"Thanks. See you tomorrow. Try to get some sleep."

"You too."

I opened my folder. Dr. Katz had instructed me to write my mother's psychiatric history as a narrative. She thought it would be easiest that way: to write it in third person, like a story. "Have fun with it," she had said.

Nina met Gabe in college. He had pale blue eyes and sandy brown hair that he kept tucked under a fedora when he played the piano, which he did often. Nina was an art student, a painter, with long blonde hair and a faraway poetic look that Gabe fell in love with instantly. They got married young, as so many kids did back then, and like so many kids, they had married partly from love and partly, secretly, to escape overbearing parents. And maybe they saw having kids as 'sealing the deal', as an act that would prove they were actual adults, rather than, as their parents thought, just kids playing house. But the joke was on them if they thought they were escaping; having children put them about 180 degrees away from any notion of escape.

Nina had a son named Idris when she was 22 and a daughter (me), Haley, when she was 24 and then, at age 25, she sank into a profound depression. I think I may have been the proverbial straw that broke her back. In any case, Gabe didn't know what to do, so he called Nina's father, Eliot; he would know how to handle her. Perhaps if Nina had been in any way cognizant of the fact that her life and her future were being placed back into her father's hands, she would have snapped out of it. But she didn't, she couldn't. It's possible, too, that the news of his involvement only pushed her further into the darkness.

Eliot G. Wentworth, Nina's father, was a Harvard professor, a writer, and a political science analyst. Which is to say that, when called upon, he did his research.

"Electro-convulsive therapy is the most effect treatment for depression," he told his son-in-law Gabe, one afternoon in late autumn, while Nina was out grocery shopping. "The best institution, the leading institution for ECT is Walden Hills. I've scheduled her for admittance on Monday. She'll be back in a month." When I imagine it, I imagine him adding a joke at the end, something like, "That'll curl her hair, alright!" But of course, he didn't say that. It is just my desire to imbue him with some sort of humour. I was sure that he must have had a sense of humour, since Mom had such a wicked one. But if he did, I don't remember ever having been privy to it. He was a tall, hulking man with small, brown eyes and a head as bald as a cue ball. He wore wide wale corduroy jackets with elbow patches and expected perfection from everyone. He had the air of someone who really wanted to like people, but who was, instead, perpetually disappointed.

Eliot flipped Gabe easily, and the two men proceeded with their plan. Nina gave no fight and the following week was sent to Walden Hills to be cured. As promised, she returned a month later, and as predicted, she was indeed much better. It is hard to say, however, if it was the shock therapy that did the trick, or if it was the affair that she had been having with Tom, my soon-to-be stepfather. It turned out that while Gabe and Eliot were making their plans to fix her, Nina was planning an escape of her own. One month after returning from Walden Hills, Nina kicked Gabe out, and Tom was installed in his place. The whirlwind that we kids felt was, for Gabe, a tsunami that wrecked his life for years to come.

It would be three years before Idris and I saw our father again. My mother had pulled the wool over my eyes pretty successfully, "Meet your new Dad," she said as Tom entered, our heads still reeling from the whiz of the revolving door: one father out, another father in. Idris, at four, was wise to the old bait and switch, however. This guy wasn't his father. He might not be able to prove it now, but he would.

*

I was awoken by the hotel operator: “Good morning, this is your wake-up call.” I made coffee in the little, single-cup coffee pot, took a shower and got dressed. And then I knelt down on the light, storm-colored carpet and prayed. Absurd as I felt, I clasped my hands together, there at the foot of the bed, laid them on the crumpled sheets, and bowed my head. It felt like the day needed some ceremonial shape, some sort of ritual to bless the occasion, and only then would it be real. No matter how ill-equipped I felt for the task of praying, I was sure that it was as necessary for what we were attempting as the car keys or the phone. So I knelt, and in a voice just above a whisper, I said, “Today is an important day and we need help. Mom needs help. Please help. Thanks.” I rested my head on top of my hands; the bed felt good under my head. I spread my arms out in front of me, turned my face to the side, and lay on my cheek. I wished I could stay in this hotel room and not go anywhere, just lie in the bed all day, order room service and watch TV.

I pulled myself up and sat on the edge of the bed. There was no coffee left in my cup. My phone pinged with a text.

KAI:

Good luck. I’m thinking about you.

Chapter 3

1976-1983

We started school that fall, Jack in nursery school, me in the third grade, and Idris in the fifth grade. Our farm was one of three large farms, nestled in an otherwise suburban community with street names like Indian Ridge Road and Old Oak Lane. It was filled with young families, and Idris and I fell in with the neighborhood kids easily. When winter came, we went sledding on the little hill beyond the Sassamon Road dead end. To get there we crossed the back field, went through a little cut out in the stone wall, followed a narrow path through a little stretch of woods, and ended up in the Weaver's backyard. At the far edge of the dead end there was a hill that was not very wide, with little evergreens all around it and one single run that we had worn into place with our sleds and toboggans. We would climb up the side of the hill and ride down that run, over and over, for hours. That first winter, on a Saturday morning, Idris and I had finished our breakfast and our barn chores and were suiting up to go to Sassamon Road, when Mom told us she wanted us home before lunch: "They're calling this a real Nor-Easter—could be four feet of snow, so no more than a couple hours." It was snowing lightly when we left, me with the silver disc racer under my arm and Idris pulling the toboggan. Andrew, David, Billy and Ethan were already waiting there in the Weaver's backyard, and we set off together for the hill.

The first time I went with him and his friends, Idris fought it tooth and nail, but Mom and Dad had to run an errand, and Jack was at a friend's, and they didn't want to leave me alone. "Either she goes with you or you don't go. Your choice."

"Fine," he said, and then turned to me, his finger in my face. "Don't say a word to any of my friends! Not a word. Got it?"

"I got it."

My appearance at the dead end with Idris was met with a few glances, but no protest.

"Sorry. I have to babysit my sister," Idris said in apology. There were a few nods and then Andrew took a step towards me.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," I replied. We were in the same class, but I didn't say anything more because I wanted to stay; I wasn't about to anger Iddie

As we walked towards the dead end, Andrew trailed behind, to be with me. Andrew and his brother David looked almost identical, with dirty blonde hair, round faces and green eyes. Andrew didn't say anything right away, but then said, "Miss Kaufman gets spit at the edges of her mouth when she gets excited, did you notice that?"

I laughed and said, "How could I not notice that? She looks like our goat, Becky!"

From then on Andrew and I became friends, and everything changed. I went with Idris more often, because it wasn't like I was going with him, it was like Andrew and I were friends, and he, Billy, Ethan and David were friends; Idris thought he had no choice about Andrew being there, so what difference did it make if I was there too?

Whatever it was, we didn't complain.

Sometimes I played with Mindy, Patty, and Pam, the girls on Indian Ridge Road. But those girls mostly played inside, and it wasn't nearly as fun. So I played with them just enough to not be outcast in school, and then on the weekends I hung out with the dead-end gang.

That early December day it was the usual gang and we were happy to have the early start. The snow had already turned heavy by the time we got to the hill and it was thrilling. The path filled up with snow after each run. After an hour, it was getting hard to climb up the side of the hill. Run after run—until finally Mrs. Weaver came out and told us that it was time to go home now.

"Five more minutes, Mom?" Andrew pleaded.

"No, *now.*" She stood and waited until we were all at the bottom of the hill. We followed her through the deep snow that was now well past our knees, and for me and Andrew, almost to our waists.

"Do you guys want to come over?" Andrew asked as we trudged forward, our bodies slanting into the oncoming snow.

His mother turned around and interrupted, "Sorry kids. Not today. Your mother is going to want you back, the snow's coming fast. This is a real blizzard." And then she

said the magic words, “You probably won’t have school on Monday, so plenty of time for playing. Leave your sleds here. I’m sure you’ll be back soon.”

By the time we got to the edge of the wood, the snow was making it hard to see. There was less snow in the woods, but crossing the stone wall into the field was like diving into a swimming pool of snow—only there was no way to swim up and out, and I was in up to my nose.

“Stay right behind me, I’m going to cut a path,” Iddie said, and taking my hand, kept me close behind him. We plowed slowly through the snow on the ground, which met the snow in the sky as an imperceptible line that we struggled to keep our heads above. In every direction, all was white. We could see no shapes, no barn, or trees, or fences, just white in every direction. I kept my eyes focused on the back of Iddie’s green snowsuit and didn’t look up again. Iddie seemed to be slowing his pace, but we were going so slow already, it was hard to tell—maybe it was just my fear.

Finally, we heard Mom’s voice calling us through the white cloud: “Idd-d-ie! Ha-a-ley!” She was getting closer. “. . . Idd-d-ie! Ha-a-ley!”

Iddie yelled, “Mom! We’re here!”

“I’m coming!” she said, her voice much closer now.

When she got to us, she hugged us both tight and then took us each by the hand, pulling us behind her through the path like a woodcutter might pull two fresh cut Christmas trees. Once safely inside the house, she alternated between yelling at us for not coming home sooner, and kissing us and asking if we were alright. She hung our wet mittens, scarves and hats by the fire and sat us down at the table, next to Jack, with huge mugs of hot chocolate. Tom stoked up the fire, Mom made hot toddies for the two of them, and we all sat around the fire, as the snow came down outside the window and we told them about how deep it was and how we could have drowned! Idris said he would have been home sooner if he didn’t have his “ball and chain sister” with him. He loved that expression and used it all the time. He could say whatever he wanted. I now knew that when push came to shove, he cared. I would hold that snowy Saturday as proof forever more. He had held my hand and carved a path for me.

When Christmas came that year, Tom gave Idris a guitar. The card read, *I hope you like it. Love, Tom*. Tom taught Idris a few chords a week, and for almost a year,

thanks to that guitar, a peace was struck between them. We had our routines and our chores, the dead-end gang played out in the fields or the woods, and all was well. 1976 in our house celebrated not independence, but, rather, togetherness.

1977

In the New Year, Idris and I went out to visit our father in California. In the airport we were children travelling alone, and so afforded special status. And again, Idris held my hand. It was only the second time we had seen our father since the divorce, six years ago. On the plane they gave us little, metal airplane wings that we got to pin to our shirt, and they brought our meal out before the other passengers. The stewardess took us up to see the cockpit, and when she walked us off the plane to meet our father, Idris held my hand then too. After that first visit out to see Dad in California, Idris and I started flying out more regularly, twice a year usually. We would visit him and his new wife and their baby, Julian. Dad had an old milk truck that he had turned into a camper van and we would drive up to Northern California to camp. We always had fun when we visited. I suppose it is easier to make one or two weeks fun than it is 52 weeks. He would take us to the local carnival, or the beach, or on extravagant shopping trips, and once he sent us home with animals: Iddie got a snake and I got two baby bunnies. I didn't realize until later that those animals were half a gift to us, and half a jab at our mother. My rabbits fit easily enough into the life of the farm, but Iddie's snake required a diet of two mice a week. Mom was mad. Really mad.

1981

Tom quit drinking when I was in seventh grade. He sat us down at the dining room table and explained what alcoholism was, and told us that he had been an alcoholic and would always be one because it was a disease, but that now he was going to these meetings and that things would be better. He said some stuff about hitting rock bottom and about having a 'moment of clarity' and then he seemed to be finished, so he told us we could ask him questions if we had any. Jack asked why he drank at all if it was so bad for you. Tom answered that at first alcohol doesn't seem bad at all, that actually "at first it seems like the best thing ever," he said. He said it was like getting a nice warm blanket

after being stuck outside in the cold for a long time with no jacket. But then, somehow, he explained, it went from being something soft and comforting to being a hammer that smashes everything to bits. None of us said anything. I didn't understand how something could go from being a blanket to a hammer. I was pretty sure, from the look on Jack's face, that he didn't understand either. But that was back then. Now we know what that means. Now we know, my brothers and I, exactly how something goes from being a blanket to a hammer.

But back then, for Tom, things did seem better when he stopped drinking. They seemed worse for his relationship with Mom, but better for him. It was as if he had abandoned her at a party, or maybe that he was at the party and she refused to come in. Either way, they were in two different spaces and couldn't seem to come together. At the dinner table one of them would say something to the other, and, all of a sudden, Tom would storm out the door and peel off down the driveway. Mom would say calmly, "Don't worry, he's just going to a *meeting*." But there was something in the way she said "meeting." She'd get up, go to the kitchen to pour herself some wine, and then continue the dinner conversation as if nothing had happened. Mom hadn't drunk wine in front of Tom since he had quit. Sometimes I thought maybe she fought with him so that he'd leave, and she could drink. On those nights, Tom returned after we were all in bed. Sometimes I heard him come in and sometimes not, but he was always there in the morning when we came down for breakfast, usually on his second cup of coffee, already coming in from his shop where he had lit the woodstove and set out the work for the day. Perhaps he had even slept there, I didn't know. The woodstove in the kitchen would be lit and boxes of cereal were on the table. When he stopped drinking, he put all his newfound energy into keeping the house running. It was Tom who made dinner at night.

Over the following months, while Tom started going out to his shop earlier and coming home later, Mom started spending more and more time in the barn. To add to that: the peace between Idris and Tom was about to come to an end.

Tom giving Iddie the guitar for Christmas was a good thing. I want to hold it in my memory as one of the nicest thing Tom ever did for Idris. But gradually that guitar became a wedge, an unintentional instrument of discord. It would be nice if good things were good things and that was that, but sometimes, a good thing can shift, become

slippery and transform into something not good. Idris played that guitar night and day, every day, and he got very good, very fast. So that next summer Tom signed him up to study at the Berkeley School of Music, and he got even better. He seemed to have that guitar attached to him. He still went off to play with the neighborhood kids, but when he came home, he went straight for the guitar. Meanwhile, Tom, no longer a Happy Hour kind of guy, had taken to napping at 4 p.m. every day. Religiously. He protected that time like it was all he had left. And so, every day between 4 and 5:30 p.m., we kids were told to go play outside, or if we were going to be inside, to be quiet. For Jack and me, it wasn't a big deal, and got worked into the fabric of our daily lives very easily. But Idris simply could not or would not respect the 4 p.m. quiet time. Really, that was the question: *could not? or would not?*

Iddie getting disciplined was a regular occurrence and it seemed to start with his room, which was never clean. My mother and Tom yelled at him, and grounded him, and threatened to take away games and books if he didn't clean it. And at first, it really seemed like he tried—he would put some things into a bin—but the room was so messy that it seemed he just didn't know where to start, so he soon gave up altogether. Finally, my mother went into his room and closed the door. She was in there for a long time, and later, when they both came out, Iddie's eyes were red from crying. I heard her say to Tom the next morning, "He really isn't able. He's not doing it on purpose, he just can't organize his mind around the task." Similar battles and concessions were had, and made, around all of the household and barn chores. To me, cleaning a stall in a barn was a simple task that I kept my mind on until the job was finished, and then I moved on to the next task. Iddie seemed unable to do this without his mind wandering. Maybe it was partly A.D.D., but it wasn't just that. I don't think any of us could accurately put a name to it, we didn't have those terms back then. At a certain point, I think Iddie realized that he wasn't going to get any help for whatever it was that he had, and so he just got mad. Instead of being apologetic about having a messy room, it became a sort of 'fuck you.'

The flip side to this deficit of his was with music; Iddie could become so engrossed in playing guitar that he'd spend hours on a single song and completely lose touch with what was happening around him. By senior year, you could name pretty much any song and he either knew it or could listen to it once and play it. With books, he could

read anything once and retain every bit of information in it. It was a little maddening for those of us who had to actually study to do well in English.

So, in this particular war between Iddie and Tom over naptime, it was hard to say if the provocation was intentional on Iddie's part, or if he really was unaware of what he was doing. Naptime falling at 4 p.m. meant that we got home from school and had to immediately be quiet. Right when we needed to let loose from being cooped up all day, we were supposed to make no noise. On the other hand, a period of peace and quiet seemed a fair request from an alcoholic who had sobered up, and 4 p.m. seemed a natural naptime. But then again, the guitar was Iddie's thing, and when was he going to play it if not after school?

If you ask me, I think there was most definitely a part of Iddie that knew exactly what he was doing, as he listened to Prince's 'When Doves Cry' over and over and over, with the volume turned up to 10, as he figured out that guitar solo at the beginning. So when Tom finally came down and smashed *Purple Rain* over his knee, it was hard to point the finger decisively at one or the other of them. On the one hand, of course, Tom was the adult and that was that. He should be the bigger man. But on the other, maybe, just maybe, Idris was antagonizing him intentionally. I guess I'm just saying that after ten of these afternoon naptime battles, I could see how a person could snap. Mom was torn between defending Idris and being angry at him. And she was torn between feeling Tom was right to be angry at Idris, and feeling angry at Tom herself, for needing the nap in the first place. Feeling powerless and confused was not something my mother handled well.

On those nights she made her favorite drink: a Rusty Nail. It was, according to her, "a real doozy." She drank it in front of Tom. It was easy, on those nights, to see where Idris had inherited his talent for antagonizing from. But Tom didn't take the bait. He didn't say a word. He sat at the table with his sparkling water, she with her Rusty Nail, we kids with our tense, churning stomachs, and we all pretended everything was fine. My mother was that strange, electric kind of happy she got when she drank a lot. Tom sat, straight as an arrow, and we shifted in our seats, counting the minutes until we could ask to be excused.

1983

When Andrew and I graduated middle school and moved on to high school with the rest of the dead-end gang, Billy convinced us to audition for the school play. So we did. Billy got the lead, which wasn't surprising; he was a senior, tall with blonde hair and had played the lead or second lead in all the other plays the previous three years. And to be honest, there really wasn't anybody who gave him any competition. The play was *Oklahoma!* and he played Will, while Katy Keohane played Ado Annie. Katy was also a senior, had jet-black hair, chewed gum all the time and was about the height of a fifth-grader. Ado Annie was the part that I had secretly wanted. Andrew and I got parts in the chorus. After *Oklahoma!* Andrew quit doing plays, but I didn't. I wanted more! So I joined the competitive speech team and memorized scenes and monologues and practiced with other kids on the team until I was ready to compete. I wanted to be a star in 'Dramatic Interpretation.'

"Do you even hear yourself?" Idris asked, "'A star of the competitive speech team?' Would you ever say that out loud at school?" I chomped my vegetables. Idris was right. There was nothing geekier than the competitive speech team. Both Idris and Jack were masters of the deadpan comeback, usually made without missing a beat. I desperately wanted to have this talent at moments like this, so I could fire a zinger at him, but I just didn't have it. So, I didn't say anything, just tried to shoot darts at him with my eyes. Idris played soccer, which was *actually* cool and he *was* something of star on that team so there was not much I could say. He grinned at me from under his bangs and gave me the silent *you're a loser with a capital L* look. So I stuck to fantasizing—in the privacy of my own room—about being 'discovered' at one of the competitions.

In the 'Dramatic Interpretation' category, with your chosen duologue, you would play the first character with your head turned 30 degrees in one direction using a very particular voice and posture, and then you would play the other character, 30 degrees in the other direction with a completely different voice and posture. The performance was you switching back and forth between characters to act out a scene. Sometimes I also competed in the Speech category, reciting famous speeches from history. My favorite speech was a speech by Queen Elizabeth I that began, "My loving people . . ." It was the speech she delivered after her historic defeat of the Spanish Armada. My mother made me perform it at dinner parties, which I understood—it was a sure crowd pleaser.

1984

One night at dinner, during the week in which I won first place in the state tournament for 'Dramatic Interpretation', Idris announced that he was moving to California to live with Dad. He had talked to Dad and Dad was OK with it. For a moment there was silence. Tom said nothing. Jack and I froze in our seats. After what seemed like an eternity, Mom said, "Fine." Idris smiled down into his plate. We ate the rest of the meal in silence, and later that night Idris went up to attic and took down the large, brown suitcase he had used when we moved into the house. He flew to California after our school's end-of-year picnic.

'Fine' became Mom's favorite word that summer:

"Mom, can I go to Andrew's?"

"Fine."

"Mom, is it OK if I work on my English paper tomorrow? I'm going to Mindy's now."

"Fine."

As soon as I realized that she would say it to almost anything, I pushed it a little further, sometimes on Jack's behalf.

"Mom, could Jack and I ride down to White Street and watch the little league game?"

"Fine."

It wasn't like one of her black moods, it was more like a permanent gray.

When she was in one of her truly black moods, it was like in the cartoons when the little mice stumble in on the sleeping bear and then tiptoe backwards out of the room. It never occurred to us that Mom's moods were anything other than a really bad version of being in a 'bad mood', it never occurred to us that anything should be done beyond avoiding her at all costs when she was like that. And thankfully, that was the summer she took to vacuuming whenever a mood overcame her. It was a clear signal, that Jack and I appreciated. If we came up the driveway and heard the vacuum cleaner going, we knew to not even bother going in the house. Was she mad at Idris? Mad that she had sided with Tom over him in the last fight? Mad at Tom that Idris had left? Mad at Jack and me

because we were here and not Idris? My grandmother told me once that Idris and Mom were a lot alike: two magnets you can't bring together.

That summer, with Idris gone, I got to use his car. Sometimes, if Mom and Tom were out at a dinner party, I took Jack with me to whatever party was happening that night. I told him that he was not allowed to tell, or I would never bring him again. He never told. I had had plenty of experience being Iddie's little sister, which meant trying to prove myself, to measure up, or get his approval. I was happy it was finally my turn to fulfill my role as elder sibling. With Idris out of the house, I took it upon myself to teach Jack about keg parties and forging dismissal notes and smoking pot, and I taught him all the words to *Boys Don't Cry*—all the things one needs to survive high school. Keeping everything secret from Mom and Tom was rule #1. So much time and focus was given to Idris in those years that Jack and I managed to fly under the radar. But it wasn't just that Mom's attention was turned to Idris, she was also an active non-subscriber to suggested norms. So things like summer camps, or sports clubs, or SAT prep classes, or any of those things that my friends were doing, we were definitely not going to be doing. "My children aren't going to be sheep." Jack and I were "free to be you and me."

I taught him all I knew about the fine art of partying and not getting caught.

But then, at the end of August, Idris came home. Not a word was said or asked about his trip. Everyone acted as if he had never left. He spent a lot of time in his room. I think even Tom felt sorry for him. It was clear that it had not gone well, but I knew better than to ask. Back in June when he had left, I had kept him company while he packed his suitcase. I had helped him organize things. He had told me then, with excitement, that he was going to go to school in Oakland, and that Dad was going to get him a skateboard, and that this time he'd be able to get a snake and keep it, and that when I visited next summer he would be able to show me around, because surely by then he would know his new town.

Chapter 4

January 2018

My grandmother used to tell us this story: *It was a dark and stormy night and the captain and his crew were sitting by the fire and the captain said, Alphonse, tell us a story. So Alphonse hitched up his bootstraps, poked at the fire, and then he began, It was a dark and stormy night and the captain and his crew were sitting by the fire and the captain said, Alphonse tell us a story. So Alphonse hitched up his bootstraps, poked at the fire, and then he began* . . . She would go all out building up the drama, usually making it a full three or four rounds before we started shouting at the injustice, "Grammy! Come on, tell us the real story!" We would refuse to accept that there was no story—we would push her and tell her we forgave her for tricking us, but now, come on! Give us the real story! What happened after the campfire part?

That's what it was like talking to my mother.

*

"Why are we here?" Mom asked again, as we circled past the entrance to the Emergency Room for a third time. I turned up the first row of cars in the small hospital parking lot and started to count the words out of her mouth, as one might count sheep to fall asleep. She was getting agitated and I needed to be calm; I placed her words into the space around me—like when I memorized my blocking for a play. I just needed a simple action, so I could keep at bay a vertiginous sense of freefalling that threatened to overwhelm.

When we passed the one available spot, between the white Toyota pick-up truck with the rusted fender and the light green Subaru, she said, "There's a spot right there!"

I ignored the perfectly good spot, turned left and then left again down the next row; as we passed the red Dodge Caravan that stuck too far out of its spot, she said, "Why we are at the hospital anyway?" Further down the row, passing the silver SUV with the *Make America Great Again* bumper sticker, she said, "Can't we just go back to the compound and have a glass of wine?" And finally, starting back up the first row, past the cop car at the entrance, I handed her the travel mug with the remaining wine, and the

sipping of wine hit a reset button. Fourth loop:

Toyota pick-up with the rusted fender, “There’s a spot right there!”

Red Dodge Caravan sticking out too far, “Why are we at the hospital anyway?”

Trump bumper sticker, “Can’t we just go back to the compound and have a glass of wine?”

Cop Car: drink wine and settle down.

As we were about to begin our fifth loop my phone buzzed. I looked down at the text from my brother. It interrupted the rhythm of my thoughts, like fragments of a clear voice through radio static, each word distinct, isolated, loud.

JACK:
We’re hitting roadblocks.

With several failed detox attempts under our belts, and having contacted seven other hospitals before finding a doctor and a program here at Albuquerque Presbyterian, one would think we had a plan in place for roadblocks, but we didn’t. Quite frankly, we were worn to the quick, and not prepared for any further challenges whatsoever. What we were prepared for was to hear someone say, “What wonderful children you are. Is this your mother? Let us help you! You look so tired. Why don’t you rest here, we’ll take her and fix her up for you and have her back in a jiffy.”

No. We were not prepared for roadblocks. I stopped the car.

I ran through all the possible doctors I could call for help. There was Dr. Katz, who I had only ever spoken to on the phone, the psychotherapist to whom we had been referred a few weeks back for a diagnosis that would allow us to take custody of her. It had been Dr. Katz who had said flatly, “This woman is profoundly demented, that much is clear even on the phone. But I can’t give you an accurate baseline diagnosis until the alcohol and drugs are completely out of her system.” I had asked what a baseline was. She spoke into the phone as if reciting from a textbook, “When detoxed from drugs or alcohol, the body will recalibrate. She could be left the better for it, or she could be worse, but I can’t diagnose her with the substances in her system. She has to be clean. You have to detox her.” I smiled. Maybe I even laughed, I can’t remember. She was casually suggesting detoxing Mom as if it were the easiest thing on the planet, as if we

hadn't already tried, as if the system in this country allowed one person to do that to another without their consent, as if we hadn't been fighting this fight for years. In her defense, she then gave me the piece of the puzzle we had been missing all those other times: the conditions under which you could admit a person involuntarily.

"You will have to show that she is either, A. a danger to herself and others, B. suicidal, or C. wandering."

"Well she did hit her caregiver across the back with a piece of firewood last week."

"Good! That's good!"

We could call Dr. Rasheed, the doctor at this very hospital, who I had called after the other hospitals turned me away. All said variations of the same thing: unless we were her guardians, we couldn't bring her in against her will. Dr. Rasheed had said, "Bring her in!" Again, the urge to laugh. Had we struggled through these last three years for nothing? Could these people have helped us before? Or is it only when the brain is fully gone that something can be done? He had assured me that we wouldn't run into any problems as long as we mentioned his name. I was sure Jack had mentioned his name the moment he got up to the triage nurse. It was at the very top of the bullet point list I had given him. I wanted to call that Dr. Rasheed right now and tell him that his name didn't hold as much water as he thought it did. Dr. Rasheed had spoken to me as one might speak to a small, upset child: "Of course it will be alright. Just tell them that we are taking her into geriatric psychiatry once she is detoxed. We are claiming the responsibility, that's the important part to remember."

We could call Dr. Matthews at the UNM psychiatric unit where, our plan dictated, our mother would go after this hospital, for a week of observation. Dr. Matthews worked with Dr. Rasheed. It seemed to be a standard route—detox then psych ward. Dr. Matthews even described the step after those two places, "After the week of observation, your mother will most likely be transferred to a secured memory unit." I flashed to all of the medical words that health care professionals use to de-scarify concepts: 'locked-up' becomes 'secured,' 'spoon-fed' becomes 'assisted,' 'freaking out' becomes 'agitated,' etc.

"And then?" I had asked.

"There is no 'and then' in this scenario, unfortunately. A secured memory unit is where she will most likely live out the rest of her life."

It wasn't that he was lacking in compassion, exactly. At least, that hadn't been my take; he just seemed to have run out of reassuring words. In this case, it was the simplicity of his tone that was meant to calm me, as if he were saying, "She'll need to take an aspirin and stay off that leg." As if, by virtue of being an inescapable fact, it would relieve me of thinking about nuances and shades of hope. But it didn't relieve me; I had a flash of Mom sitting in a circle led by Nurse Ratched from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Throughout this process there had been things I had shielded Jack from, realities that I thought Idris and I were able to handle better than him. As a firefighter, his raison d'être was something to do with honor and family and helping people in need. To not be able to help his own mother was a torment of a different nature for him. Even though he had seen her fall to the very bottom, he didn't need to see her crawling around in the mud. And so, I hadn't told him *every* detail of the last two months. But I couldn't shield him from this 'secured memory unit' business. If the doctor said she would need to go into a lockdown situation, even if we weren't there yet, the doctor's medical opinion meant there was a high likelihood it would happen. So I had told him.

He hadn't said anything at first, but in a conversation later that day he had said, "This doctor may be very good, but we're not committing her. Hopefully, she's going to be a little better after detox, even if it's just a little—he doesn't know anything about her or her history, what she's already survived. She's not going to be living in one of those places where people are strapped to their beds or propped in wheelchairs with drool spilling from their mouths. No. Sorry. Not happening."

It wasn't the time to say that there were *nice* places; that they weren't all like that. And I definitely wasn't about to suggest that he might be in denial about our mother's state, and her ability—or rather, inability—to care for herself. And I had to consider that, on the flip side, maybe he was right. Maybe there was some hope.

My brother's 'we will save her' stance was not *exactly* denial. It was more complicated than that. Jack was a firefighter, which meant he was also a paramedic. Those guys—rescue guys, first responder guys—have accepted a job description

something along the lines of, “Believe that you can do the impossible.”

It is an absolute necessity to imagine a positive outcome. It is not some New Age positive thinking thing. It is a do or die thing. It is in their job description, in their DNA, to see the impossible and say, “I’m going to do that.” They need that kind of thinking—that and about a gallon of adrenaline.

In my system, however, adrenaline functions more like leaky battery acid in a car engine. When adrenaline shoots through my body, my reasoned responses malfunction and I shut down. I self-destruct. To say that my brother and I handle stress differently would be an understatement. Jack’s first job was working for the Forest Service where he started as a Hotshot and then moved up to Smokejumper. He did that for eight years, then he was a paramedic for three years. He’s been a city firefighter for the last five. With adrenaline, he will achieve his goal.

It hadn’t been necessary to discuss who would speak to the triage nurse. It was a given—and not because Jack had a better grasp of the facts. I had given him a piece of paper with all of the doctors’ names, the lawyer’s info, and which hospital she was to be transferred to afterwards: every detail he could possibly need. I was the one who had been managing the daily crises for the past two years. I would have had an answer for anything that was thrown my way. But, of course, My Dear Watson, therein lay the problem: I had an answer for everything. It was my Achilles heel in situations of stress. The adrenaline leaked through all the working human parts and turned me to rigid steel. In the most important of situations, I forgot that I was a human being speaking to another human being.

I imagined the triage nurse’s exact words that would initiate the chain reaction: “If she doesn’t want to be here, we can’t help you. Detox is voluntary.” Those few short phrases would descend between us like a cloud of smoke, making it impossible to see her as she was. Now, as we circled the lot for a fifth time, I summoned up an image of the triage nurse in my mind, playing the possible scenario through to its end: a woman in her forties, I imagined, attractive but not overly so, short hair. And, a nurse, which meant that she’d chosen to spend her days and nights helping people—in other words, a good person. And if the *Nightline* special I had watched a few weeks back was accurate, she’d probably been the victim of abuse from patients, she may have worked over 60 hours that

week, maybe she was a single mother. She followed the protocols, because saving lives required strict boundaries and that was how the whole system worked. Jack had explained it to me enough times for me to know that.

And this lovely triage nurse, in telling me that my mother must come in voluntarily, would believe that she was protecting my mother's rights. She might even suspect that we were over-protective, meddling children taking unnecessary control. She might give us that slightly distrustful look, that had become so familiar as we tried to get custody of our sinking ship of a mother, no doubt after her non-existent millions. Any potential for seeing the triage nurse as human, or of me behaving in a human way, would be obscured by the cloud created when the adrenaline shot through my body.

Slipping into fighting stance, at first, my words would remain calm, but I knew this drill by heart. I could predict, almost to the letter, the point at which I would lose it. I might begin by telling her that my mother was slowly killing herself and that she did not have the mental capacity to make decisions. We had a psychiatrist who would testify to that fact. The triage nurse would then tell me that we, her children, had to be her guardians officially, in order to admit her. I'd begin to raise my voice and tell her that we couldn't become her guardians until there was an official diagnosis POST-detox, that we'd been told she had to be cleared of alcohol for them to accurately diagnose the level of cognitive damage, that we were just trying to keep our mother alive, and that while we were stuck in this catch-22, my mother was dying. The attractive, but not overly so, triage nurse might, at this point, express compassion for our situation and explain that she understood how difficult it could be to want to help someone you love when they didn't want that help. I might then take that as an opening to begin crying and begging her, "Just test her liver—just do that much—or let a doctor assess her, just please get her to step one and you will see. I promise—you will see!" She would probably refuse, as turning us away was what she was supposed to do. I might have then mentioned the word "lawyer," whilst knowing how utterly absurd it was to do so. It would be a powerful feeling to invoke a lawyer. But once I mentioned the lawyer, it would be over. The triage nurse would become a high stone wall beyond which we would not pass.

This was why my brother was doing the talking and I was circling the parking lot with Mom.

"Why are we here again?"

"We're getting your knee looked at. Have some wine, we'll go in in a second." And the answer came to me all at once: "I just have to call someone, Mom."

I was proud of myself at how calmly I was handling things. My hands were not even shaking as I replied to my brother:

HALEY:
should I call Leslie?

JACK:
yes!

I called Leslie.

"Hi Leslie . . . Yes . . . We're actually *at* the hospital right now. … No, um, we're hitting roadblocks."

"I don't see a roadblock."

"Never mind, Mom. It's just a metaphor."

"A what?"

"OK . . . Yes, if you're nearby. That would be good . . . Thanks Leslie."

Leslie told me to "hang in there," that we were "doing the right thing." She told me that she was ten minutes away and would get here as quickly as she could.

"Who is Leslie?"

"A friend," I told Mom. "Remember? She brought you money and wine last week."

"No, I don't remember. Why would somebody bring me money?"

"Because you went into the bank and closed your bank account."

I wished that I was a Buddhist or something, so I could meditate myself out of barking things at her. I used to be really good at handling her. I was always the one chosen to talk Mom out of her black moods. "You go, Haley. She'll listen to you," my brothers would say. It wasn't so much that she listened to me, but rather that I knew the way to snap her out of it was a specific combination of yelling in her face, then gently comforting her and telling her that I understood, that I knew "how terribly unfair," it was, and so on.

I think this is what I had been doing lately. Thinking that if I yelled at her like I

used to, she would lift her head and look right at me, and behind those flat, dim eyes would be the regular her, the old her. If I yelled the right thing, in the right way, she would magically appear before me, maybe even yell back.

Or, I had to admit, perhaps I was simply being selfish, attacking a woman unable to defend herself, and that this was my pathetic attempt to make her see what a disaster she had made of her life, and consequently our lives. But I knew that she had no idea. She had no ideas, period.

I texted Jack.

HALEY:
Leslie said to invoke 5150 and make it clear that you refuse to leave.

JACK:
Oh man.

HALEY:
Do you know what that is?

JACK:
Ya. Shit. OK.

HALEY:
Are you going to do it?

JACK:
I guess so, but what about that doctor? Can't we call him?

HALEY:
Can you call him? It's a little hard to talk about Mom while I'm with Mom.

JACK:
OK.

5150, also known as the 72-hour law, dictates that when a person is a danger to herself or others, or is suicidal or wandering, the hospital *must* keep her for a 72-hour period.

Leslie texted me that she had arrived. I told her to go straight in and help Jack.

We first met Leslie two years prior, when we had reluctantly come to the realization that our, then 71-year old, mother did not have Alzheimer's—as her neighbors and friends had suggested, in the multiple phone calls they had made to Jack, Idris, and me that autumn—but rather, alcoholism. It is amazing how quickly concerned phone calls stop when it becomes clear that one is not ill, one is simply drunk. We flew out to New Mexico to 'get a handle on' the situation. Google had led us eventually to Leslie: Senior Care Advocate. Leslie was our brass tacks savior. After one assessment session with Mom, lasting a little over an hour, Jack and I went to her office.

"Your mother is an alcoholic in the end stages of the disease. I suggest you conduct an intervention with her as soon as possible, preferably in the morning when she's lucid, with the goal of getting her to commit to detox. If you're successful, we'll take it from there. I'll be honest and tell you that it's more likely that you'll be unsuccessful, in which case I'm afraid there's little you can do to turn things around. You will need to accept that she is walking a path and all you can do is accompany her. She is an adult and has the constitutional right to live her life as she chooses." She laid these facts before us like a street vendor with a limited selection of wares. It took all of a minute. The two years it all took to play out felt like an eternity.

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Chapter 5

1985

In the late fall of 1985, on the night of Susie Merkowitz's birthday dance party, my grandmother died. I was sixteen. When the party was over, Mom picked me up in front of Susie's house and we drove home, listening to Dire Straits and making small talk. In front of our house, she pulled up and shut the radio off, but not the car.

"Murph . . ." she began, and then started to cry.

"Did Grammy die?" I asked, not waiting for her to take a breath or find the words.

She nodded her head and seemed appreciative that I had said it for her.

My grandmother, Florence Jane Heed, had been battling lung cancer for over a year and had spent the last month in a hospital in the Berkshires. It was very small and very clean and sat up on a steep hill, and my grandmother was in a single bed with tubes coming out of her nose. We always parked in the parking lot around the back of the hospital, and brought flowers, or banana bread, or something from the farm. I remember my grandmother's feet. Maybe because they are also my feet; the bend in her toes was more dramatic than mine, but the arch and size and shape were the same. Having her feet massaged was something that brought her comfort in those last months.

Grammy and Pappy owned 130 acres of land in a small town in western Massachusetts, called Otis. When they were younger, and Mom was little, they had lived in a bunch of different houses, moving to wherever Pappy was teaching. Mom said the houses they lived in were so big that sometimes half of the house never even got furnished. One house even had a ballroom. The house in Otis had been purchased much later, when Mom was already off in college, already about to get married herself.

There was a pond up on a hill beyond the house, and beyond the pond were blueberry bushes, that surrounded a large rock outcropping we called Raccoon Rock. Out the front of the house was a long dirt road that led to the Shafiroffs' house. The Shafiroffs were a family of six kids—three of whom were the exact the same ages as Idris, Jack and me—and we all played together in the summers. One of my fondest memories of my grandmother was riding the hay rake, while she drove the tractor. We would ride along,

and she would holler back to me, “Lift!” every ten yards or so. The hay rake was a huge contraption on two wheels—with a seat, and a handle—attached to the back of the tractor by the trailer hitch, and pulled along to rake the fields for hay. I rode the rake and pushed the handle down to make neat piles of hay all across the field. Grammy would wait until our visits to rake the field. That was our thing, her and me.

But I don’t have a consistent stream of memories of my grandmother—I suppose because she wasn’t consistently grandmotherly. The realization that she was a grandmother seemed to hit her from time to time and she would do something out of character with her normal reclusive behaviour. Once she took us to TJ Maxx and set us loose in the store; she told us to choose whatever we wanted and she would buy it for us. We began tentatively, “Is this OK?” I asked holding up a shirt.

“Throw it in the cart!” she nearly hollered, gesturing grandly, with the same fervor as when we were raking hay. As if to say, “We’re getting it done! Let’s do this thing!” Idris asked if he could get a pair of pants, “Toss ’em in!” Jack wanted a water pistol, “Good choice!” The more we threw in, the more involved she got. Like we were out at sea in a great storm, “Hoist the sail! Pull the line! All hands on deck!” We filled the cart and left with four exploding bags of clothes and toys. After the clothing store, she took us for ice creams and insisted we all get double scoops.

Grammy dying was the first in a series of events that would prove too much for Mom to handle.

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One afternoon at the end of winter, when a light snow still covered the ground, a new addition appeared in the barn. Where there had been an empty stall, there was now the most beautiful creature I had ever seen: Foolish Storm. Foolish was a class above the animals that surrounded her. This much was clear in the first instant of seeing her. She was a quarter-bred horse, descended from a famous Kentucky-Derby-winning racehorse. She was chocolate brown with a white diamond on her head, and a shine that highlighted every sinew and muscle on her perfect body. She held her head high, throwing it up and back when we approached.

“Do you want to pet her?” Mom asked.

“Is it OK?”

"Of course. She's very alert right now to her new surroundings, but she'll settle in."

"She's beautiful."

"Yes, she is."

Mom started taking horseback riding seriously. The room behind the chicken coop was set up as a tack room and Mom started riding regularly. She set up arrowhead jumps in the field beyond the garden, and Maureen Whelan came to give her lessons twice a week.

My mother had met Maureen's mother, Kathleen Whelan when we first moved into the house and were fixing the barn. The Whelans had the biggest barn in this corner of Massachusetts, and Kathleen Whelan was the matriarch of the operation. Everyone bought hay from the Whelans, and Kathleen and Mom hit it off, right from the get go. They would gab easily for an hour every time we went to get hay. In addition to the huge hay barn, they also had a restaurant, and sold milk in jars that read: *They came to visit not to stay, return our bottles every day*. In the fall, at harvest time, they gave hay-rides in a huge carriage pulled by four horses, and hosted horse shows and events. Kathleen and John Whelan had eight children: seven daughters and a son. Maureen Whelan was the eldest daughter. Maureen was whip-smart and knew more about horses than anyone. She and Mom became fast friends. We all knew the Whelans and spent a lot of time at their farm.

Mom signed me up for 4H and I showed goats at the 4H events. My claim to fame was winning the 4H goat-milking contest. We were judged on speed and accuracy, most hits in the pan, fastest pan filled. I got a blue ribbon, but kept it in the top drawer of my dresser in case any school friends came over. 4H was not exactly cool, and there was an ever-increasing divide for me between the farming that I loved, and the parties and soap operas and clothing and stuff that I was supposed to love if I was to fit in at school. When it came to my school friends, I feigned indifference to all things related to the barn. All three of us kids protested the serving of goat's milk to our friends, and it was the Whelans' milk that saved us. Mom never bought cow's milk from the grocery store, but somehow getting bottles from the Whelans' farm store was OK with her. Every other Sunday, we had brunch in The Whelan Farm Restaurant.

At the end of February, my mother moved Foolish over to the Whelans' barn to begin training for the spring show. Maureen had suggested that it would be easier to do daily training in their field, rather than ours, because it was already set up as the show course and they could prepare Foolish more fully than they could in our field, which was much smaller. My mother went to the Whelans' every day at 1 p.m., so she would be home in time for us arriving from school. I saw her in her riding pants more than anything else that spring. She was aglow with her love of that horse and of riding. Even her fighting with Tom seemed to let up that spring.

One afternoon in late March, Mom was forced to postpone her lesson until late afternoon, to accommodate a dentist appointment. Foolish was restless in her temporary stall in the Whelans' barn. She was accustomed to being ridden at 1 p.m. and so, by 4 p.m., she wanted out of her stall. Mom saddled her up and rode out to the training field where Maureen was waiting.

"Bring her once around the course to warm her up and then we'll work her combinations," Maureen hollered from the other side of the field.

Mom pulled on the reins and Foolish reared slightly, "Come on, girl. Let's go. Same as every day."

Maureen called out, "Show her who is in charge. The other horses are being fed back at the barn, that's why she wants to go back. You need to show her that you are the boss and it's time to work."

Mom nodded and pulled Foolish around to take the first jump. It was a simple chevron and they had done this course easily a hundred times. Mom dropped her voice lower and tried to sound boss-like, "Let's go Foolish. Come on."

Foolish ran towards the chevron, Mom leaned into the canter, and just as they approached the jump, Foolish skidded to a near stop and reared up, her front leg knocking the post from its support. Whether from the surprise of hitting the post, or her foot slipping in the mud, Foolish then fell backwards, on top of Mom. As Mom would describe it later, the sky passed in slow motion. She described the beauty of the white clouds against their crisp blue bowl. She described cuts in time like splices to a film reel; seeing the clouds, then cut to . . . Maureen standing over her, and her not hearing anything, cut to . . . paramedics cutting her shirt, cut to . . . the inside of the ambulance,

cut to . . . the hospital and the return of sound, hearing "Code blue! Code blue!" cut to . . . water dripping from a bag over her head, Maureen crying, cut to . . . Tom by the side of the bed . . . cut to a bright light at the end of a tunnel, cut to . . . floating up over the entire scene, cut to . . . me and Idris and Jack standing in the door, not entering, cut to . . . Jack, the elected holder of the massive bouquet of lilacs wrapped at the stem in wet paper towels, taken from the bush by the driveway. Cut to . . . her descending back into her body and continuing on . . . not giving up . . . staying.

She would tell us, years later, how it was the smell of the lilacs that brought her back down into her body, and that she can't smell lilacs without thinking of that day in the hospital.

She remained in the hospital for six weeks. The list on her chart included: nine broken ribs, pelvic bone fractured in four places, broken collarbone, punctured lung, cardiac arrest, and concussion with possible further head trauma. Her memory slipped in and out in those weeks. But, the doctor reassured Tom, ". . . that can happen with a concussion. We're keeping an eye on her, nothing to worry about yet." They kept her at the hospital on monitors of every kind, finally releasing her into our care in early June, just before her birthday. That summer we treated her as a broken doll in need of great tenderness, because that's what she was.

In addition to her bi-weekly physiotherapy, Mom began to see a psychotherapist.

In those months of summer and early fall, Mom still had too many bones healing to do stairs, so she and I slept out on the two couches on our screened porch, off the front of the house. The back end of our long, skinny house was the end that saw the most action. It was the only door we used, to go in and out. It was the end of the house that faced the barn, Tom's shop and the rest of the property. The kitchen was at that end, the woodstove was there, the entryway, with all of our coats and boots, was next to the woodstove, and out of that entryway rose a ladder one could climb to get to Idris' and Jack's end of the house. That ladder saved me many a late night, coming home from parties after my curfew. I could get to my bedroom without Mom or Tom hearing me and pretend that I had been there all along. Idris and Jack never told, because they did the same.

The other end of the house, in contrast, was hardly used. It had a beautiful screened porch that jutted out under the magnolia trees. It was mostly used as a place for entertaining guests on hot summer nights. But for one reason or another, as beautiful as it was, it didn't get used as a regular hang out spot. So when Mom and I turned it into her convalescent room that summer, there were no protests. We set up a long bench in the space nestled between the two couches, and that served as our bedside table. We brought out our books, and a small boom box that we set up in the corner.

Mom and Tom not sleeping in the same room was just the actualization of the separation that had begun at least a year before. But there was more going on than any of the rest of us knew at the time; Mom was falling in love with her psychotherapist, Hugh. The man who had reached down to pull her up, in her frailty, had fallen for her, just as she had fallen for him. I haven't seen the wording in the medical Code of Ethics but I'm pretty sure it is a more official version of, "Thou shalt not become romantically involved with your patients." And out of sympathy for Tom, I wanted to be of the righteous opinion that it was simply horrible that this doctor should take advantage of our mother in her weakened state. I did feel bad for Tom the way it all went down, but knowing Hugh as I came to know him, I am obliged to say that Hugh, father #3, was perhaps the best thing that happened to my mother in all of her psychologically-fraught life. He saved her, and she saved him. Ironic as it was, the thing she would be most harshly judged for—marrying her psychotherapist—was perhaps the best decision of her life.

The following spring, when the marriage between my mother and Tom was officially over and it was decided that he was going to move out, Tom took Jack on a camping trip to Nova Scotia, where his family had hailed from in generations past. Tom and Jack drove north and across the Canadian woodlands, pitching their tent and sitting by fires under stars along the way, and then digging for clams up and down the coast. At the time, I thought it was an idyllic father-son retreat. How great, I thought. How sweet, I thought. I had no idea that Tom was desperately trying to keep it together, to not pick up a bottle of scotch, to stay sober, and keep his son by his side as a constant reminder of his responsibilities in this world. To keep himself in nature was the safest thing, away from the grind of the city. I had no idea of the demons he battled on that trip, but I do know that when they returned, he finally moved out. He had found a small apartment in the

Berkshires and Jack would spend every weekend with him out there. It was not even necessary to say that Idris would not go to visit him there, would not see him again if he could help it. But for my part, I was torn. With a clear divide now between Idris and Tom, would it be disloyal to Idris to go with Jack on the weekends? On the other hand, would it hurt Tom (or Jack) if I didn't go? Were we now to be split down biological lines? I decided on visiting 'once in a while.'

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The first dinner that Mom made after Tom left was baked white fish, boiled rice and broccoli. The fish and the rice were as dry as wood and Mom had forgotten to take the rubber band off the broccoli when she cooked it. The taste of burnt rubber rendered it inedible. Yet, those first nights at the table were bittersweet—sad, but calm.
Mom became a better cook in the months that followed, and in any case, we didn't mind the food; we were grateful for the peace and we helped with the chores as much as we could. But Tom's absence was definitely felt. The shop was empty, and Jack was not himself. Mom was seeing Hugh, and he would occasionally come for dinner, but he didn't move in. He was married—unhappily married, but married nonetheless. It would take almost a year for them to come to accept that they would never have a home together in Massachusetts. Hugh wanted to work for Indian Health Services on the Navajo Reservation at Fort Defiance, and convinced Mom to move west. They would live together across the country, far from the ghosts that made Massachusetts uninhabitable. Hugh flew out to Arizona ahead of Mom and began working at the clinic on the reservation. He lived in the house provided by the government. Mom would join him out there the following summer, once I had finished school.

The most important thing to me in high school was probably partying. And so, when I began investigating colleges, and discovered that you could apply to a college in a process called 'early decision' and know by October where you were going, that's what I decided to do. I didn't want to spend my whole senior year focused on where I would go to school and being sure I got good grades—that would seriously interfere with my social life. So, I researched Drama programs and decided to apply to Carnegie-Mellon in Pennsylvania, close to my paternal grandmother's house, with the hopes that I might get to see my dad more often if I went to Grandma's on the weekends. I prepared two

monologues for my audition. Fania Fenelon from *Playing for Time* was my contemporary monologue and *Antigone* was my classical monologue. Mom drove me to Pittsburgh for the audition. We waited in a large auditorium filled with kids who clearly had a lot more experience than I did. Mostly they wore long flowing scarves and were doing tongue twisters and strange vocal exercises, stretching and practicing their monologues in the hallways without any self-consciousness. I was sure I was doomed.

Finally, it was almost my turn, I was 'on deck' and sitting in the chair opposite the room. As I was twisting my fingers and trying to breath evenly, the door to the room burst open and the girl who had just finished auditioning came running out, crying, saying that the auditor was a horrible man, that he had asked her—as she was about to begin her classical monologue—if she had anything else she could do, because he had heard that Hermia monologue at least 50 times in the last two days and he just couldn't listen to it again. When she told him that she didn't have anything else prepared, he said, "OK, thank you." And excused her from the room, having only heard one monologue.

Oh great, why even bother? I thought.

"Haley Reed?" A young woman with a clipboard motioned for me to go in.

I went in.

He didn't say, "Welcome," or "Please begin," or anything at all for that matter. *Fucking jerk*, I thought, in my tough, high-school party-girl voice. But in a measured version of the same tough voice—my 'go ahead, bring it. I'm ready' voice—I said, slowly and with perfect diction, "Hello, my name is Haley and I will be performing a monologue from *Playing for Time* and one from *Antigone*." I waited for him to protest, and when he didn't, I began. When I finished both monologues, he said, "Haley, how do you deal with your father's alcoholism?"

My mind started racing. How did he know that Tom had been an alcoholic? Could he have known? Was there something on the application? And then it hit me all at once. *Oh! He wants me to improvise.* I launched right in.

"It's very hard for me to talk about," I said, turning slightly to the side and folding in on myself, "he locks us in when he goes out, my little brother is only four . . ." And I went on until he interrupted me with, "How did your boyfriend react when you told him you were pregnant?"

I became indignant and threw my hand up in the air, “Typical! So typical!”

“How did you feel when you won the Tony for best actress?”

“Words can’t even describe . . .”

I think he asked me five or six more questions. I felt like a kite. I knew then and there that this was what I wanted to do with my life. If he didn’t take me, I would go somewhere else.

“Thank you, Haley,” he said and started to get out of his chair. I didn’t know what he was doing, but he had excused me, so I left. He followed me out of the room.

Mom was waiting. “Why is he walking out after you?”

“I have no idea,” I said, still reeling.

He was talking to a short man with a moustache, who wore a checkerboard tie hanging over his slight pot-belly. They spoke only for a moment and then the man with the funny tie came over to Mom and me. “Hi there, my name is Don Bonavita and I am the assistant head of the department. Mel was very impressed with your audition. Could we just step over this way and talk for a minute?” And he led us away from the actors warming up, into an empty classroom and closed the door.

“Mel wants to accept you to the program,” said Don.

“Oh. Wow,” was all I said

“That’s great!” said my mother. “That’s excellent! Oh sweetie,” she said and hugged me. When she let go, she turned to Don and asked, “Do you offer financial aid?”

“Mrs. Reed, in my ten years working under Mel, I have not seen him that happy about an audition. Yes, there is financial aid. I am going to go out on a limb—being the assistant head of the department I can do that—and I’m going to say there will be a full scholarship! We want your daughter at our school. We hope you will accept.”

My mother looked at me and we both started laughing.

“Yes, we accept,” she said.

Mom and I went to dinner that night and got huge margaritas with our meal, and back at the hotel we ordered dessert from room service and for the whole ten-hour drive back to Massachusetts we blasted our favourite music and sang at the top of our lungs

Mom gave Foolish to the Whelans. Her thought at the time was that she would visit the barn and be able to see Foolish, and if ever a time came again that she would ride horses, perhaps Foolish would come home. That was optimistic. Mom went to see Foolish once, but never got on a horse again. Sometimes that old expression, 'get back on the horse,' just doesn't apply. And so, when moving time came, all that remained to think about was 3 goats, 14 chickens and 2 pigs. She knew she couldn't keep animals in a small government house on the reservation, but she couldn't bear to part with them. Rose, Becky and Camille, our three goats, had been part of our family for over ten years. Besides, she felt sure that she and Hugh would eventually find a place of their own, and when they did, it would be a place with room for animals.

Maureen Whelan, who never get over her guilt about what happened to Mom that day in the field, would have said yes to anything that Mom asked. And so it happened that, at the end of my senior year—after she got back from a visit to Hugh and announced that they had found a place, a 'fixer-upper', a lovely adobe house on twelve acres of land in the little town of Truchas, in northern New Mexico—Mom went to say goodbye to Foolish. She packed Rose, Becky, Camille, and our two pigs, Harley and Pearl, into one large trailer, and, with her dear friend Irene, drove them all across the country. My mother did that drive on an expired driver's license; I think she and Irene fancied themselves as a middle-aged Thelma and Louise, on the lam from the law, bucking convention and breaking rules with their trailer full of barn animals. Irene and Mom shared a love of the performative aspect of life. Thinking about real consequences, such as what would happen to the animals if she was pulled over and caught driving without a license, would hinder the fun of pretending to be outlaws. They gave each other stage names, like from old Westerns: Irene Bartlett became Rina Bartel, and my mom was Miss Nina. In fact, I don't think I've never heard Irene call her anything but Miss Nina. Even recently, expressing her concern. "How is Miss Nina?" Irene has always reminded me of a very tall, more attractive Edith Bunker, with her high voice bordering on falsetto and her air of finely cultivated hysteria.

Whenever Mom and Irene pulled up at little motels along the way, they parked the trailer a good way from the motel office. Mom insisted later that she was telling the truth when she had said to the motel manager she had no dogs or cats. The manager gave

her a room key and Rina Bartel yelled to Miss Nina, “Back ’er up!” They backed the trailer up to the motel room to bring water and food more easily to the increasingly restless animals in the trailer.

When at last they made it to Truchas, the animals crept off the trailer, stretching their legs and squinting their eyes in the baking desert sun. It took them almost a day to fully realize that all of this land, past what their eyes could see, was theirs to roam. But when it did at last dawn on them, they danced. That day in the long grass, two one-thousand-pound pigs danced and leapt and ran. Our old goat Becky chomped her hay and watched them, deadpan. Mom and Hugh stood arm in arm next to Irene, and they all laughed. Irene was a good friend to Mom then and would continue to be a good friend even through the rough years. In fact, she was the only friend who visited Mom later. After all of the farmhouses and adobe houses had been sold, after the animals were long gone, after Mom’s last piece of furniture was placed in consignment and all that remained of Mom’s possessions were her fragile body and the clothes on her back, Rina Bartel was still there, checking on Miss Nina.

Chapter 6

January 2018

I tried to hold Mom's arm as we walked into the ER, but she brushed me aside—"I'm fine!"

Her agitation had become a near constant. The thermos was empty, and it occurred to me that she was going to begin detoxing before she was officially admitted. When we entered the ER, she saw Jack standing at the triage desk and walked straight over to him.

"What's going on?"

"We're here to see the doctor about your knee," Jack said, eyeing me over her shoulder.

"About her knee?" The nurse looked up from behind the desk.

"Come on, Mom, let's go sit down."

I took her arm more firmly now, realizing that we probably should have stayed in the car a little bit longer. As I led Mom away, allowing Jack to explain our cover story to the triage nurse, a guilty feeling came over me. It was a particular guilty feeling that we had become familiar with these past years. With every one of her rights that we took away or tried to take away, we were confronted with suspicion. "You want to take over her bank account?" "Revoke her driver's license?" "Invoke your Power of Attorney?" "See her medical records?" "Detox her?" "Why?" Side tilt of the head, narrowing of the eyes and—"She seems fine to me." The problem with having a beautiful, blonde mother who was (once) highly intelligent, was that she didn't fit the image of a 'serious alcoholic', and if one didn't speak to her for more than a few minutes, she might appear as " . . . just fine." We seemed like the bad guys. But I couldn't think about that just then.

"Don't touch me!" Mom wriggled her hand away and started to walk down a hallway towards a door that said *Ophthalmology*. I walked alongside her.

I tried to use a gentle voice, "Mom, I know it's hard, but we have to wait for the specific doctor we came to see."

"I'm not waiting. I'm going to tell them I need to see a doctor now or we're

leaving."

"But this is Ophthalmology. They aren't going to be able to help us here." I made the mistake of trying to take her arm again.

"Fuck off!" She yanked her arm free. The realization of just how far out of my depth I was started to dawn on me.

She approached the Ophthalmology desk and launched into an explanation of the pain in her knee: "I can hardly even walk on it. The pain is all the way around the knee and shooting down to my feet. I am not going to just sit and wait, I need to see the doctor now, or else I'm going home."

Just as the receptionist—who looked like she was trying to unscramble a long anagram in a word game—was about to say something, Leslie appeared from behind us. "Nina, the doctor is ready to see you now, we just have to go down this way." She turned Mom around and started down the hall, looking back over her shoulder to silently gesture an apology to the receptionist. Together, we lead Mom back down the hall towards the ER.

"Here, just sit here for a moment while I find out where they want us to go." Leslie walked towards a glass-protected reception area.

"Well, this is good," I said to Mom. She didn't respond.

Leslie returned, "He's just getting the room set up. Why don't we get something to eat?"

After a trip to the vending machine for a chocolate bar, another trip up to the triage counter, and a trip with her to the bathroom, it finally dawned on me that Leslie had lied. There was no doctor ready to see Mom, she had just been buying time. What Leslie knew—just as she knew how to take someone's blood pressure or listen to their heart—was that, with dementia patients, one had to live only in the moment, to do what was needed in a given instant, and most of the time that involved lying. Because it didn't matter what you said: the demented person will not remember it even one minute later. So Leslie kept Mom feeling that she was about to see the doctor at any moment. For Jack and for me, lying to Mom was not something we did lightly. We were her kids, we were walking this path with her every step of her way, we weren't able to zoom out and see her objectively, because we were *on* the path, we were *in* the map.

"Nina Reed?" At last she was called in. Leslie and Jack accompanied her in. I ask Jack if he minded if I took a minute, I had a few calls to make.

I called my agent and asked her to book me out for the rest of the week, apologized for missing the audition, and texted Lucy that I was thinking about her for her presentation. Then I got a Reese's peanut butter cup from the vending machine. It melted all over my fingers when I opened it. Licking my fingers, I used my teeth to scrape off the rest of the wrapper. I glanced up to see a little old woman with broken glasses and pajama bottoms looking at me blankly. I forewent the second cup and dumped the whole thing in the trash. I buzzed at the entry to the ER. When the reedy attendant who worked the locked ER leant forward, I told her through the intercom that I was Nina Reed's daughter.

HALEY
Do you want me to switch with you?

JACK
If you don't mind…

HALEY
How is she?

JACK
She's pissed off and it's hard to keep her in this room.

HALEY
OK, I'm coming.
JACK
It's room 9.

I pressed the buzzer at the entry and the nurse let me in. Jack was having an argument with Mom about the time.

"It's OK, Mom. There's plenty of time, it's only 5 p.m."

"It is not 5 o'clock, it's 7 o'clock!" They were facing a large clock in the corner

of the room and Mom gestured at it angrily.

"OK, fine, Mom. It's 7 o'clock." He took his phone from his pocket, "I'll be back, I need to call Addie."

"Who is Addie?" Mom yelled at him.

"Addie is my wife." He gave me a tight grin and walked out.

"I'm here, Mom. It's OK, it shouldn't be too long now."

There were two plastic chairs against the wall, and I sank down into one of them. Mom was pacing, every so often resting on the bed and closing her eyes. But never for more than a few minutes. She complained about the lack of pillow and the hardness of the bed. She picked up the travel mug and tried to take a sip, though it had been empty for hours. She repeated this, every five minutes. It was hard enough to watch when the mug was full, it was worse when it was empty, when she tipped it all the way upside down with her head bent backwards, like a dying person in a desert.

"I've asked for a pillow, Mom, do you want to try to just close your eyes again for a minute?"

Growing up, whenever we walked into her room and she was napping, we stopped in our tracks, and attempted to slip back out the door, whispering, "Oops, sorry," tiptoeing backwards. From the muffled rumple in the bed we'd hear, "It's OK, I'm not sleeping, I'm just closing my eyes for a minute." According to her, she didn't sleep, she just closed her eyes.

In that room, in the plastic chair, in the half-light, memories came as individual images, clippings from the reel of our life. I sat with my arms crossed and my head tilted back against the wall. I let my eyes go lazy and watched her blurry silhouette pacing the room, opening the cupboards, searching her purse, poking her head out the door, sighing, complaining, and finally lying down.

When at last I closed my eyes, I saw her:

—in her long green robe, standing in the door frame to the farmhouse she had renovated, coffee cup in hand, steam spiralling up into her contented face, watching me lead our horse back through the wet grass to the barn.

—walking back towards me, where I sat in the long grass. It was high school and I had just broken up with my boyfriend. She sat beside me and held me close, telling me

not to worry, that I would meet someone in college. That college wasn't the end: it was the beginning.

—running back to find me on the trail to the apple orchard. I was twelve and had fallen off the horse I was riding, and Rufus, our brilliant sheepdog, ran all the way to the house to get Mom. She comforted me until I was able to hobble back to the barn with one arm slung over her shoulder, supporting me and my sprained ankle.

—When I was thirteen and she threw me a surprise birthday party, inviting a mix of neighbourhood boys, friends from when I was a toddler, and one or two cool kids—and how mortified I was at this crossing of the streams . . . at first. But we played games and Mom made us chilli and we had cake and everything worked out fine. I hated and loved her at the same time, that day; how dare she try to take control of my life, but at the same time, how perfectly it had worked.

The room seemed quiet; I opened my eyes and Mom was gone. I leapt out of my chair and peered through the crack of the door into the hall. She was attempting to talk to a nurse with black, curly hair tied in a loose bun. The nurse was clearly occupied with trying to take the blood pressure of a patient bleeding from his head. I rushed over.

"Mom," I said, trying to touch her gently without actually taking her arm. Steering her required finesse, it had to be done without her realizing. "I just talked to our nurse, Greg, and he is getting a pillow for you. We should get back to the room." I tried the Leslie variety of lying: tell her what she wanted to hear even though it wasn't true. Nobody was getting her a pillow.

"I don't want to lie down, I want to go home."

"I know you do, but the doctor is on his way right now, so we won't have to wait anymore." This second lie worked, and I was able to lead her in the direction of our room. Mom's name and 'Detox' were written in large letters on a white board by the nurses' station. I could tell by this nurse's understanding look and her light nod of acknowledgement that she knew what was up: that Mom was not some random, crazy lady roaming the halls of the ER. Well, not without cause anyway.

As I set Mom in the bed, Jack returned and helped me pull the blanket up over. We sat in the plastic chairs. I whispered to Jack that we were going to need a sedative

soon. He said, “I know, we should get one for Mom too.” I chuckled, and he rose from his chair, “I’ll go talk to our nurse.”

After he left, I followed an impulse to bring my chair closer to Mom’s bed and hold her hand. Surprisingly, she let me.

“I ruined your vacation,” she said to me, sadly.

I don’t know if it was the holding of my hand, or the fatigue of the hours, or the alcohol leaving her system, but she was actually looking at me. Talking to me.

“I didn’t come here for a vacation.” I just said it. “Jack and I came here to help you.”

“With my knee?” She rolled onto her side to face me, and cupped her other hand on top of mine. Her eyes closed for a moment and then opened again. She seemed profoundly tired, like a fighter returning to their corner after a brutal round. Maybe she was tired from fighting us, from fighting whatever chemical reaction was happening in her body with the alcohol leaving it, from fighting being alone, from fighting life for years on end. Life had finally won.

“No Mom, we’re not here for your knee. We’re here to help you get the alcohol out of your body. It’s killing you.”

Jack slipped back into the room and stood at the foot of the bed. She didn’t look up and I continued, “Jack and I planned this trip, we booked our flights and arranged the hospital and the doctor and you are not here for your knee and we are not here for vacation. We came for one thing, and one thing only, and that is to detox you from alcohol.”

There was a long pause and she looked at me with clear understanding, and then up at Jack.

“We love you, Mom. We want to help you,” he said, and wanting to hold her in some way, took hold of her feet through the thin hospital cover. She looked back at me. It was the old her. The old her was seeing both of us. We were talking to her. She understood what I had said. She wasn’t fighting, she was accepting.

She cradled my hand in both of hers. And after a long pause she said, “Wow. That’s impressive.”

And those were the last coherent words my mother spoke.

PART TWO

First you take a drink, then the drink takes a drink, then the drink takes you.

-F. Scott Fitzgerald

Chapter 7

Summer 1987

We had moved into our beautiful old farmhouse together, and we left it in much the same fashion. We were all headed in different directions, but we all said goodbye to it at roughly the same time. The summer of 1986 was to be our last summer there. Jack, in spite of all my lessons on surviving high school, had managed to get himself into trouble. That is to say, he did what all kids do in high school, only he got caught. So, Mom and Tom had decided that boarding school would be the place for him, in a rare civil discussion held at the dining room table, with Jack and I eavesdropping at the top of the stairs. Williston Prep was close to Tom's new place, so Jack would be able to go 'home' on weekends. (My brother hated that school and it would be a large influence on his decision to abandon higher education and join the forest service as a firefighter. But that was years later.)

In the autumn of that year, my mother and Hugh were getting settled into their new home in Truchas, New Mexico, and I moved into my dorm room at Carnegie-Mellon, in Pittsburgh. My secret plan, in which I chose a school close to where my grandmother lived so that my Dad might visit me when visiting her, actually worked. He visited me at college on three separate occasions, which was a lot, considering that he had never, up to that point, been the visiting party in our long-distance relationship. On one visit he saw me perform a scene from the Tennessee Williams play *Summer and Smoke*, and another time he helped me research Russian life at the turn of the century for my role in *The Cherry Orchard*. I was playing Lyuba Ranevsky, the matriarch of the family. Her name, Lyuba, we discovered, means love.

When I graduated from Carnegie-Mellon, he didn't come, but that may have been because Mom and Hugh were there. Mom helped me move out of my apartment. We packed the car to within an inch of its life. On the top of the car we strapped a soft, cushy chair that folded out into a single bed. It was made entirely of foam. When we arrived in NYC, the chair was gone. This had us in stitches for weeks to come. We had been completely oblivious to the chair flying off the roof somewhere between Pittsburgh and

New York City.

My very first apartment in the city was with my friend Brett, a tall gay man with sharp, brown eyes and a devilish smile. We both did the rounds, auditioning part of the week and working our soul-deadening jobs the rest of it. Brett worked the returns desk at Barnes and Noble, and I waitressed at a family dinner spot in midtown. Any extra money Brett had, he spent seeing Broadway musicals. He collected the playbills of every show he saw, and after a few years boasted a collection of playbills that would rival any theatre critic's. For me, having known nothing but the farm, New York City was an aphrodisiac—endless stimulation, both night and day.

After he had seen all of the musicals on Broadway, and been passed over for parts on soap operas and *Law and Order* (the bread and butter of New York actors), not booked a single commercial, and faced the truth of his arid love life, Brett moved to L.A. Almost half of our classmates had already made the move, and Brett's logic was something along the lines of, "If I'm going to be unemployed and loveless, I might as well do it in the sunshine." And so, he left. I moved in with a girl from work, named Mary Jane. If I was 'green,' she was whatever is the opposite of that: a goddess of style, pure coolness. If I have any style or sense of self when I walk down the street today, it is in large part thanks to Mary Jane. She was tall and beautiful, with legs for days, long wavy hair and perfect skin. She had grown up in Connecticut, daughter of first-generation Cuban immigrants; her father was an engineer and her mother a seamstress. Mary Jane always had the most amazing clothes, some from the heyday of Hollywood style, and when I asked where she got a particular dress or outfit, she always said, "Mommy made it." She raged at me about something I was wearing, yet managed to be like a tempest that left the land better than before, making me over for my own good. How had I survived in NYC this long, with my country ways? She took one look at my long, linen skirts and my Laura Ashley tops and asked me, "Dios mio, girl! Why would you hide that hot body of yours under all that frump?"

At night we worked together at The Whiskey Bar, a small, chic bar in one of the many boutique hotels popping up around the downtown area. She was the hostess and I was the cocktail waitress. We worked until all hours of the morning, and then slept in when we could—when I didn't have an audition the next morning and she didn't have a

job interview. 'Sleeping in' usually meant noon, at which time we ordered two bagels, two coffees, and the *NY Times* from the convenience store up the street. We'd watch a re-run of *Friends* or *Law and Order* while we had our coffee and skimmed the paper, and then we'd shower and head down the four flights of stairs to face our day. Mary Jane introduced me to artists, filmmakers, and musicians, and then she introduced me to cocaine and ecstasy and after-hours bars. At The Whiskey Bar, we got through our long shifts by testing out every mixed drink available and doing shots with the bartender. If I closed the bar—the 4 a.m. shift—I wouldn't bother trying to sleep before a 10 a.m. audition. I'd just come home, shower, have some breakfast, make sure I had my lines fully memorized, slip into whatever look the audition called for, and hop on the subway.

I booked a fair number of commercials, one or two theatre jobs, and some very small film parts through people Mary Jane had introduced me to. But I never got any large, 'serious' parts. "How could I expect anyone else to take me seriously if I wasn't taking myself seriously?"—is what, I imagine, a therapist would have asked me, if I had had the money to be in therapy. She would also probably have told me that I had a low-grade depression and would have prescribed something for it.

But since there was no therapist, I went out to New Mexico to visit my mother and Hugh from time to time—sometimes for Christmas, or in the summer—and when I arrived there, in that part of the country that was all earth and sky, a part of me that was perpetually restless, settled. If I had been getting parts, this feeling of landing resembled a soft, gentle sinking into welcoming arms; if I had been drinking and partying more than usual, it felt more like being thrown from a moving vehicle. I slept for days and took walks in the mountain with Mom and Hugh. Hugh was tall and gangly, with eyes like water, and long arms that faced backwards when he walked, giving the impression that he was half walking and half paddling.

I wasn't the only one who felt my feet solidly on the ground when in the desert—Idris had moved out to Truchas after finishing school. Hugh had at last proved to be the father figure he'd needed so desperately. An adult male was actually listening to Idris; they took walks together, joked, went camping, and Hugh took Idris to men's group meetings. Idris seemed different. More mature, less angry: happier.

My relationship with Hugh was more formal. I was impressed with him, this white-haired, wise man. I grilled him about psychology and medicine and history; I wanted to glean wisdom from him. He was very sweet and funny, and tolerated my endless questions with patience, until Mom's inevitable "Murph, give it a rest, he worked all day." But I never felt personally dependent on him the way Idris was. I was genuinely fond of him, but he wasn't filling a father role for me. I already struggled with the question, *Who is your father? The one who raises you? Or the one who gave you your genes—the one you look like, who you see yourself in when he leans his chin on his hands when he's listening, or throws his head back when he laughs?* Adding a third father to this mix was a ridiculous idea.

Back in New York, there was usually a three- to four-day window, in which I was able to sustain the feeling of grounding, of calm, before the frenetic pace of life in the concrete jungle took over again. I tried to hold the feeling of peace that I had gathered, like stones from a river. But anything gathered was eventually lost in the pace of life in New York. It was after one of those trips, in one of those short windows of peace, that I met Kai, the man who would become my husband.

I had just been to an astrologer, prior to my trip home—it was a gift from Mary Jane, who could tell that I was more down than usual. She swore up and down that she had told this man nothing about me other than the coordinates of my birth. The astrologer predicted, among other things, that very soon I would meet someone with whom I would fall in love. This man, the astrologer told me, would be "exotic." He wasn't sure how exactly, but the man was "from somewhere else," and when we met, this man would know right away that he wanted to be with me. But, the astrologer said, it was going to take me some time to decide if I wanted to be with him. He closed by saying, "Your life is going to change radically. The stars are shifting for you." And he was right.

Kai's mother was a Thai Buddhist, his father was a Russian Jew, and he was down visiting from Montreal, Quebec. He was a creative consultant for large corporations, specializing in helping them tailor their internet presences for the "New World"—which is how he referred to the world wide web, as though he were Christopher Columbus. Which is ironic, because when I first saw him, I thought he was Navajo. He looked like the men on the reservation where Mom and Hugh had lived. He had a long

nose, beautiful dark eyes and hair past his shoulder, that he wore tied back in a low ponytail. We went out the very same night we met, and were still together the next morning for breakfast—and then he left and went back to Canada. Mary Jane was so proud that I had had a one-night stand. "My baby is growing up!" But he persisted in calling me, every day or every other day, until finally I went to visit him. Mary Jane explained, tongue in cheek, that a one-night stand was supposed to be "one night" but she smiled and told me she'd take care of things while I was away.

After a year of visiting back and forth, and a feeling of tiredness that had lodged deep in my bones, I accepted Kai's invitation, and moved to Montreal. The concrete jungle had worn me down. I had no idea what Montreal was like, other than that they spoke French there, and it was cold. But I needed to get out of the city and I needed a break from auditioning, from being told I was "too tall" at 5-foot 7-inches, or "too old" at 23, "too serious," "too light," had the "wrong color hair," or "wasn't compatible with the male lead"—or of simply being dismissed with the old standby "We've decided to go another way." I was tired of wearing a tight jumpsuit to serve drinks to drunken Wall Street guys who grabbed my ass. More importantly, though, I needed to get away from all that partying.

The first night I spent in Montreal it snowed. We had rented a house on a cobblestone street, bought kitchenware, furniture, a mattress and box spring but not a frame, and we made love at all hours of the day and night. I slept sometimes 14 hours at a stretch while Kai worked. I slept long and deep and the snow continued to fall. I signed up for art classes and French classes and I cooked and read and we took long walks. I felt happy not acting, not auditioning—like I would be fine if I never did it again. We went to concerts and loft parties and decorated our apartment. I took up photography and sculpture. I signed up for a semester at McGill. Then Kai said he had some old friends from school who were in town doing a show and needed an actor, or at least someone who knew how to speak out loud in front of an audience. I said I'd do it. It was one night. One show. Little did I know, those two school friends of his, John and Betty, would become my creative partners for decades to come. I wouldn't call what I did with them that night 'acting,' and I wouldn't call what we made 'plays,' but it was performance, and it was exciting and creative. Slowly but surely, over the years to come, we would build

shows that won awards and were written about in journals, that toured the world. We had made a real company and we were making Art. Yes, that is how we saw it: Art, with a capital A.

John was an ex-wrestler and a diehard fan of the NY Giants. He was also, simultaneously, an inter-disciplinary artist, with strong opinions about how the proscenium style of performing was causing the slow and painful death of theatre. He preached that performance had to be *experienced* and this meant site-specific, immersive, physical performance. Betty was his foil, a once-hippy who had squeegeed cars for change, she was a dancer who slept late and laughed easily. We were all young and attractive, and our company gradually did well. Apparently, there were a lot of people with strong opinions about proscenium-style theatre.

Chapter 8

1996-1998

Shortly after I moved up to Montreal and started working with John and Betty, my mother called to tell me that Hugh had cancer. Jack and I flew out. Hugh wanted us to do a peyote ceremony with him. So we did. The most spectacular gift my mother ever gave me was the peyote fan I held in that ceremony for Hugh. It was presented to me formally by the medicine man. In the circle I sat next to Herman, Hugh's best friend on the reservation. When I received the gift of the fan, Herman leaned over and pointed to the feathers on the fan. "The red-tailed hawk is your father," he whispered. Herman was an octogenarian, with skin that resembled the dried clay of Arizona. He always wore a gentle smile, as if he were a visitor here on earth, perpetually amused by how little we know of the real way of things.

After the peyote ceremony, Hugh got better for almost two years. It seemed he was completely better, until one day he got completely worse. It happened very fast and he died on July 5th, 1998. We were all there.

When Hugh died, a thin shadow slipped in under the skin of my mother's daily life. Imperceptible at first—just a faint ash added to the rosy glow of her activities, which she kept going at full steam. There was a very short period of sadness, of mourning, but then she took to working hard and without rest. She began with building a house on one of the acres of land way down beyond the house where she and Hugh had lived. Then she bought another piece of land, and built another house. She travelled regularly to visit us kids. She had a string of new boyfriends. She kept herself busy, as was her way. But she began to take on an air of dissatisfaction. She complained about things more often than usual, regularly sent food back at restaurants, got in disputes with builders and suppliers, had arguments with neighbors so severe that she wound up in court. What we came to realize was that, for her, being alone was a terrifying state of being—more so than for most people, I mean. This unbearable state that she had managed to stave off for so many years had finally cornered her and there was no escape. Consequently, she clung to Idris, Jack, and me, as if for dear life.

2003-2011

Kai and I had our first daughter, Isabel, in 2003 and our second daughter, Lucy, in 2008. John, Betty and I built our performance collective into a world-class company that toured the world. Meanwhile, Jack worked as a Hotshot and then as a Smokejumper for the forest service and Idris played music in clubs and bars. He even got an actual manager.

*

I stepped out of the theatre so that I could hear her. The applause was loud, and I held the phone tight to my ear, covered the other ear with my hand. "Mom, I'm at Isabel's award ceremony. What is so important?"

"Well . . . I'm sorry to bother you! I just thought you would want to know. I'm moving."

The anger that had propelled me into the lobby began to meld with confusion. My mother and I had been having roughly the same discussion for four years: she was unhappy in the Santa Fe area and wanted to move—she had moved to the southwest from Boston with Hugh, and now, fifteen years after his death, the reasons for staying had long since dried up. None of this was new information. What *was* new was the sentence structure of what she had just said. She hadn't said, "I have to move," or "I want to move." She had said, "I'm moving." If she was *actually* moving then it was, in fact, news.

"Wow, Mom! That's great! Where are you moving to?"

"Montreal!" she said, waiting for me to express my excitement.

There was a long pause while I tried to locate my breathing. My daughter's math teacher stepped out into the lobby at that moment and whispered, "Vous êtes fière, non?" I found myself unable to produce any words, let alone French ones, but I think I managed to make a thumbs-up sign.

"Hello? Are you there?" My mother was starting to get agitated.

"I thought you hated the winters? You call it the polar ice cap up here. Weren't you thinking California might be more your speed?"

"Yes, but it's almost summer. And you are always saying how wonderful it is in

Montreal in the summer. I thought I'd give it a go."

I walked out of the building and into the sunlight. I needed air and I needed to move. She sounded so happy and I didn't want to spoil that, but at the same time she absolutely could not move to Montreal.

"So you're thinking of coming out soon then?"

"Sweetie, I'm in Oklahoma! Rod's with me and we're halfway across the country."

"You're what?" I shrieked, causing a few heads to turn.

Kai had stepped out of the building and was walking towards me.

"Oh. Well you don't sound very happy about it," she said, her voice dropping down into hurt-angry.

"It's just a little . . . sudden. What will you . . .? . . . where are you going to stay?"

"Well, we'll stay with you until we find a place." Silence. "It'll just be until we find a place … God, Haley, I thought you would be happy to see me."

I told her that Isabel's award was about to be presented and that I had to go, that I would call her back after the ceremony.

"That was my mother," I told Kai

"I figured it was. What did she want?"

"She's in her car, on her way here."

"She's what?" His eyes narrowed sharply and he turned his back to the intermission crowd, closing in on me.

"She's moving to Montreal."

"No! She can't live here—we've talked about this. You have to nip this in the bud right now!"

"What exactly would you like me to do?"

"Call her back and tell her to go to your brother's or something. Can't she live in Massachusetts or something?"

"I can't believe you're doing this right now."

"I can't believe you're doing this right now!"

"I didn't do anything except receive a phone call!"

"Where exactly is she planning to stay? Does she have some apartment lined up?"

"You know that she doesn't. You know that she's planning to stay with us until she finds something." I was becoming furious with him.

"You've got to be kidding me."

"Do I look like I'm kidding? Do you think *I'm* doing this? Why are you yelling at me? I don't want her to come either, but she's my mother. We found your parents an apartment last summer when they wanted to come for a month. You didn't hear me freaking out."

"That is completely different. I can't even count the ways in which that is different."

The bell was ringing to signal that the ceremony was starting up again.

"Can you please not yell at me right now. I didn't do this."

Thankfully we didn't encounter any parents we knew on the way back in. The ceremony began, and we were both still fuming as we stared at the stage and applauded when everyone else did, not hearing a single award announcement. Finally, Gabe reached over and took my hand. There was a momentary battle in my head over whether to forgive or not, and then I realized that I was in no position to be angry. She was my mother, it wasn't my fault, but it was 'on me' to deal with it. I looked at him and he mouthed that he was sorry. I gave his hand a squeeze and then he leaned over and whispered in my ear "It's going to be OK," and then, after the applause died down, he added, "But you have to find her a place. Stat."

Later that night we were both still under the pall cast by her imminent arrival and had difficulty coming up with dinner conversation. Finally, the kids left the table and Kai, refilling my wine glass said, "Listen, it's summertime in Montreal. Even your mother can't be unhappy in Montreal in the summer. It's a contradiction of physics."

"My mother doesn't follow the laws of physics." I said, and took a sip.

But for a moment, I allowed myself to imagine . . . *Maybe it will be great, maybe this is just the change she needs—I could look at it as an opportunity. How can she not be happy in Montreal in the summer?* I resolved to set aside everything I knew about my mother and put a positive spin on the situation.

I found her a 1000 square foot loft space that very next day, with a decent bathroom, a nice kitchen, and a large window at the front. It was hard to imagine her

moving from her sprawling adobe home, looking out over the Sangre de Christo mountains, to this artist's loft in an industrial building, looking out over the garment district. But my role in this relationship was to do what I was told, and that's what I did.

Every night that summer she came to our house for dinner, and every night we discussed her problems: where to live, how to find a partner, what to do with her life. We spent hours, sometimes just listening, other times suggesting places to live, offering to make phone calls, trying to get her to a yoga class, take her to a museum, get her on a bike, help her stretch some canvasses—but nothing worked. She had an answer for everything; she had a reason why each and every thing we suggested was ridiculous and wouldn't work. I was worn out by these dinners—we were all worn out by these dinners. So, near the end of the summer, I told her that the girls needed some time with just their parents, and that I needed some space. I suggested that she come to dinner four nights a week instead of seven. I said that she had a beautiful loft with a big kitchen and that maybe sometimes I could come and eat with her over there.

She did go to her loft that night, but it wasn't to make it dinner, it was to begin packing her things. She was leaving. I went over to the loft and tried to talk to her, to tell her that it wasn't fair for her to make this an all or nothing scenario. And then I made the mistake of including my brothers and speaking as 'we.'

"We want to be there for you, but sometimes it's like it's too much, like it has to be everything; we have to commit all our time and energy, or you want nothing to do with us at all."

To which she said, "Well, if that's how you all feel about it, why don't I just kill myself. It seems that would make everyone happiest."

Anger insists on being absolute. It's a forest fire. The trees are memories and you want to say, "No! Not that one, I like that one!" But the fire doesn't care. It doesn't discriminate: fresh saplings, stately oaks—up they go, smoke billowing into the empty sky.

The only way to preserve is to isolate, which calls for large swaths of bare ground. Hotshots are firefighters who fight fires on the ground. Jack once explained that they do this by cutting a line with a chainsaw. The line is a completely clear strip, all the

way around the fire. When the fire gets to it, it has nothing to burn. In nature, containment is the trick; you've got to outsmart the fire. Sometimes though, if a fire is assisted by wind or if it is simply in the nature of a particular fire, it will jump the line. Or—and according to Jack this is the worst—an animal on fire will run out of the flames, jump the line and run into the untouched part of the woods. In so doing, of course, the little guy brings the fire to the rest of the forest. Any average person, if they saw those furry little creatures, up in flames, running for their lives, would pity them. But firefighters curse them: acres and acres of land scorched to a crisp because of a bunny.

I remembered my Mom coming to visit me at Carnegie-Mellon, to see me as Bernarda in *The House of Bernarda Alba*. She had come with us, the whole cast, to Bar One in Squirrel Hill afterwards. The next day, my friends had kept coming up to me, pulling me aside in class, saying "You have the coolest mom ever. You're so lucky!" And I had felt lucky. She was young and beautiful and able to talk about all the stuff we were talking about. She was charming and artistic and won people over like magic. But even just thinking about it—I felt the anger creeping in to steal away that version of the memory, replace it with its own version*: she dominated the conversation, she was drinking and never once suggested we go home, knowing I had class at 8:30 a.m., a full day and another show that night. No, rather she was the one who kept ordering another and another, this is what my friends thought was so cool, she could out-party us.* I remembered dinner parties when I was little—I had always thought she was the life of the party, because she did all the talking at the dinner table. But maybe she had done all the talking because nobody could get a word in edgewise. I had always thought when she used the pronoun 'we' to do with me, it meant that I was the most important person to her. "We like this person. We don't like that." It had never occurred to me at the time that perhaps she didn't see me as *me*, but rather just an extension of herself. She was proud of us kids when we made her look good, when we reflected positively on her. Rather than seeing Idris for who he was, she imagined him as she wished him to be, so he had never got the help he needed. Nothing could ever be wrong with us; that wouldn't work with the image she had so meticulously constructed of herself. I felt the fire entering the untouched part of the forest, descending into a deep wood. Just when the flames were almost contained, the little beast had jumped the line and my pristine

memories began burning before my eyes. I knew that it would take down anything in its vicinity. I vowed to contain the damage.

I refused to give her the response she wanted.

Sorry Mom, wrong button, I thought, but didn't say.

Instead, I went over to the couch, took up my bag and, taking my keys from it, I said nonchalantly, "I think you know that that's an absurd and unfair thing to say. If you want to leave, that's your decision. I would hope you'd at least come and say goodbye to the girls before you left."

She didn't say anything else to me. She called her current boyfriend, Rod, and he flew out to help her pack her things and make the drive back. There was nothing that could be done to convince her to stay, and to be honest I didn't try very hard. She did come to the house that last day, to say goodbye to the girls. We all ate breakfast together and after we ate, Kai, the girls, and I walked out to see them off. We were standing around the car on the sidewalk, Kai chatting with Rod, and the girls bouncing a ball back and forth. Mom and I stood there awkwardly for a moment, and then Mom announced that she was ". . . just going to use the bathroom one last time," and went inside. I thought maybe I should follow her, so that we could have a moment alone. I thought it could be a good opportunity to tell her that I loved her and that we would figure things out, not to worry. I was just inside the entry when I saw her in the kitchen. She didn't see me. She was trying to reach a bottle of red wine from the top shelf. It was a high shelf and the bottle was at the back. She pulled a bar stool around from the end of the counter and climbed up onto her knees to reach for it. She stretched out her arm, lifted her face and just managed to get hold of the bottom of the wine bottle and slide it off the shelf. She looked like a little kid grabbing for something that they couldn't quite reach, that they know they aren't supposed to have, but that they will do anything to get. She filled her cup, took a few gulps, filled it again, and replaced the bottle on the shelf. As she screwed the lid back on the cup I slipped back out the door, without her seeing me.

That was the first time I had seen her drink in the morning.

We all waved and said goodbye as she and Rod pulled out. I called and emailed in the weeks and months that followed, but she wouldn't answer the phone or return my emails. It would be a year before she spoke to me again, and when she did, I would hear a

different person at the other end of the line.

Chapter 9

June 2015

The day Trump announced his bid for the presidency, my mother drove her car into a ditch. That was our first real sign that we had lost control of the situation. We knew we could no longer sit back and wait, let things follow their natural course. We had to do something. Flash floods had kicked off the summer season in Santa Fe and in addition to the roads being eroded, her claim was, that this particular road, the one she had been driving on, had just ended. That's what she said, "It just ended!" She was adamant about this; there had simply ceased to be a road in front of her. She said there were no signs and ". . . it was *very* dangerous, that whole section of road is under construction, you know." It wasn't. Later, we would learn that this kind of storytelling was called confabulation, and was the symptom of a disease. Later we would call things by their medical names. But my brothers and I didn't see her storytelling as a new symptom. We hardly took note; fabrication was something she had always specialized in. The only difference now, was that she was no longer very good at it. It would be easier to let these small disasters go, to help her find a way to chuckle at them, if she didn't get so fired up when anyone questioned her version of the truth. "They should be sued for not having it properly marked. In fact, I might call the police." For some reason, she had become very fond of saying that she might call the police.

Growing up, we knew not to question her stories. We were accustomed to being told exactly what we were to say to this or that person when they asked why we were late, or why our mother hadn't come to a parent-teacher meeting, or why we had been absent from school. You might wonder why she bothered with these lies, as the truth would have done just as well. But it was as if she saw these occasions of having to explain herself as opportunities to stick it to someone. As in "Screw them for wanting to know our private business." Once I missed a day of school and the simple, real reason was that I had missed the bus and my stepfather had taken the car to work, so she didn't have a vehicle to drive me the five miles to school. But rather than say "I'm sorry" or "It won't happen again," she said, indignantly, that I had gone to work with my father

because parents are the real educators of children and perhaps the school should consider adding a 'bring your child to work' day to the school calendar, as children certainly learn much more from their own parents! I suppose that was part of her genius. She could turn a question around 180 degrees and refashion it into an accusation—repositioning the finger of blame—and before anyone knew what had hit them, they were apologizing to *her*. As clearly as we knew we had to do something, it was equally clear that we had no idea what that might be.

November 2016

Albuquerque airport is small and welcoming, with adobe walls and long banks of windows letting in the warm desert light. Passengers chatted with each other as they disembarked, telling each other what little town they lived in, or who they were visiting, or why they had come home at this particular time. In other places, like Chicago or New York for example, the people getting off of planes are solitary—getting ready for an important meeting, or a week of work, getting ready to step into the flow of a fast-moving city. But in New Mexico, the general feeling was one of release, of sinking into the soft clay of being. I was wishing that I felt the same. I was there at the behest of my brothers. I had been chosen as the point person to answer the question: just how bad is she?

I saw her at the end of the hallway, through the crowd of cowboy-hat-wearing men, and women in flowing skirts. My first observation was: she is minuscule. She must have lost at least twenty pounds. Her hair was long and looked as if it hadn't been washed in a while. She was holding a travel mug and a notebook. I gave her a big hug, she told me how happy she was to see me, and I told her the same. As we walked to the car she told me that she had wanted to get flowers on the way down, but ran out of time, "but," she said, "we can stop at Whole Foods and get some salmon for dinner."

When we got outside, I piled my suitcase into the car and offered to drive.

She told me not to be ridiculous. "You've been on and off planes all day, Murphy. I'll drive." As we pulled out of the lot, she kept hitting the brakes, as she fumbled around on her phone trying to find a John Fogerty song. When, finally, she found it, she blasted it at full volume, taking a sip from her travel mug as we drove up to get the parking ticket stamped. As the car slipped over the yellow line and back again, it came to me in bright

bold letters, “I should be insisting on driving. She has wine in that travel mug and I am taking my life into my hands.”

“Do you like John Fogerty?” she asked happily.

“I guess.”

I have thought often since then—and through every other situation in which I should have ‘taken the reins’—about those moments when one is supposed to act or supposed to say something. In some objective book of right and wrong, I am sure it is clearly written that we should have taken control of ‘the situation’ long before we did. To understand why I white-knuckled that one-hour car ride from Albuquerque to Jacona, where she lived—a car ride in which she weaved back and forth across the dotted lines of the highway, searching for new music on her iPod, even as the sun disappeared behind the mountains and sunk us into complete darkness—to understand why I didn’t force her to pull over and insist on driving, one needs to understand how monolithic she was in the landscape of our lives. Yes, even for me as a grown woman in my forties, she was the Rocky Mountains, the Pacific Ocean, Africa, the Sun . . . One didn’t just say “Mom, from now on you have to do what we tell you.”

Miraculously, we made it to her house alive and in one piece. We brought the groceries into the kitchen and she turned on the lights. She smiled, knowing the effect her house had. She was right. I was in awe. No matter how many times I’d been there, it had the same effect. Hugh used to say that nobody knew space like Mom: “She has so many gifts! She can just look at a space and imagine things that nobody else can.” The redwood floors, the span of the beams jutting out through the house, across the open porch, and over the pond that she dug herself from her natural spring—it was an open space where interior and exterior felt as one.

*

At the end of my week there, I emailed my brothers. Alcohol was definitely a problem, and it was clear she was having memory issues, but did she have Alzheimer’s and was using alcohol to self-medicate? Or was the alcohol use so bad it was causing memory issues? Was there something else involved that we didn’t know about? I couldn’t say anything for sure, so I invited her for Christmas. We went online together

and I booked her a ticket. When we drove back down to Albuquerque to the airport the next morning she was happy knowing that we would be seeing each other in a month.

December 2016

I went to the airport well ahead of Mom's arrival time. Being the holidays, I knew it would be a madhouse and I wanted to get a good spot, so I could see her easily. I was crowded into the corner against the rope where the frosted glass doors opened and the tired passengers streamed out into the space. Drooping faces washed in fatigue, worn luggage dragged along behind, defeated children supported against hips—night flights have a distinctly different energy from daytime ones. Behind the rope, we the hosts scanned for family and friends on the arrival side of the line. Smiles of recognition and relief as children were set down to run into the arms of Grandma, Auntie, or Daddy. I smiled at the sight, keeping one eye on the horizon of bodies passing through the double doors, released into fluorescent freedom—a liminal space betwixt here and there. And then I saw her, a wraith, moving at the wrong speed, slower than even the slowest passengers, drifting, hair dishevelled, pants too short, half checking a purse that was held together with a safety pin, feet barely lifting from the ground as she shuffled forward. I sucked in air, gripped with my toes, and ducked under the rope, ignoring the rules.

"Hi Mom," I said with tentative cheer, getting hold of her bag and gently taking her arm.

She looked at me as though she were waking from a dream and trying to place me.

"You must be tired from your flight. Isabel and Lucy are so happy that you're here. Let's get you home."

She didn't say anything, but let me lead her through the crowd.

*

Christmas 2016 would be the last time she came to my house. That alcoholism is a disease, and that she was suffering from this disease, were undeniable facts and painful to witness. Either the disease had accelerated in the month since I'd seen her, or it was more noticeable when she was out of her own surroundings. I think the latter—there was nowhere to hide. Whether it began with memory loss or the memory loss came

afterwards seemed unimportant now. There would be no hope in any direction if we didn't address the alcohol problem. And I would help her, I would do what I could—but what I would not do, ever again, was to have her around my children. Not like that.

Her ticket home was booked for too early in the morning, I can see that clearly now. Right after the holidays, reasonably priced tickets are not at reasonable times. So her flight was at 7 a.m., which meant I needed to wake her up by 4 a.m. to get her to the airport for the necessary two-hour window. Waking her at 4 a.m. was like pulling her out of the middle of an ocean. She walked from the bed to the bathroom like a zombie. I told her not to worry, that I would take care of the suitcase and make sure she had her passport. I told her that she could sleep in the car, I told her we would get a coffee at the airport. I was operating at a speed far beyond anything that she could handle. As we walked down the stairs and out to the car, she kept looking behind us. "But wait . . . do I have my . . . I can't forget my . . . "

"I've got it Mom. Don't worry. Don't worry about anything."

We talked lightly in the car on the way to the airport; she said that she was going to miss the girls, and how wonderful the trip was. I happily played along with the 'everything was grand' charade because she was leaving, and I was going to have my life back. My mood always improved radically on the way to the airport and I was happy to agree with anything she felt like saying. She asked if I had juice or water; she was dehydrated. I gave her a water bottle. When we got to the airport and up to the counter, we were told that her flight had been cancelled. She was confused and only barely followed the exchange between me and the blue-eye-shadowed, red-lipsticked Delta agent. The Delta agent tapped her long nails on the keys and then told me that the next Delta flight was 1 p.m. and that my mom could wait and they would get her on that next flight. I took a scrap of paper from my bag and scribbled fast: *My mother has dementia and can't be left alone. I have to arrange this now*. She nodded to me and led us down to another counter, where a tall, red-haired agent named Jim was going to take care of us. Jim had his sleeves rolled up and looked like he already had a full day under his belt. He said that there was a United flight at 9 a.m., but it had a five-hour layover in Minneapolis. He suggested that perhaps she would be more comfortable if we went back home and I brought her back tomorrow to fly. I had flashbacks to the last time she had come for

Christmas and her flights through Chicago had kept getting cancelled and re-scheduled and she had ended up staying with us for three extra days. My eyes widened and I shook my head and said today would be better. He seemed to get it. He would put her on the 9 a.m. through Minneapolis. I wasn't completely heartless, I asked him how I could arrange wheelchair service and make sure that she was set up in the Delta lounge for the layover. He said he would take care of that. I thanked him. He booked the ticket. Mom asked me if she was going to miss her flight. I told her that it had been cancelled and that we had her on a different flight leaving an hour later. We would have time to get coffee.

"Oh good. And could we get some juice? I am so thirsty."

I told her "We can go get it right now."

"So the wheelchair will come here?"

I double-checked with the agent. "That's right. You can go get coffee or juice or whatever and when it's time to go through the wheelchair will come for her."

I thanked him profusely, and Mom and I went to get juice and coffee. I was optimistic about her day of travel.

What had I been thinking?

I suppose I was hoping that if I arranged a wheelchair for every step of the way she would make it from point A to point B without too much trouble. But I had been wrong from the get-go. The wheelchair wasn't there when she got off the plane and she was angry and confused and frightened. She called me in a panicky rage; I was to tell her what to do. I asked her what gate she was near.

"What is a gate?" she yelled at me. "I don't know what I am supposed to do. I thought I was going home. I'm in Minneapolis or something!"

"Mom, look around you, do you see any signs that have big numbers?"

"I see B83."

"OK. Good. Go sit close to that sign. Someone is going to come and bring you to a plane that will take you home."

I called the airline and explained the situation. They gave me a different number; I called the different number and a helpful woman told me that she was very sorry about the wheelchair not being there and that someone would go and get her right away.

Mom did make it to the lounge, and she calmed down, and once everything had

been explained to her, she relayed it to me: “They are having a plane come and pick me up and the plane will bring me to Albuquerque. It will take an hour and a half. That’s so short. It takes an hour and a half for Rod to drive to Albuquerque to pick me up, so I don’t understand why he doesn’t just drive here instead? Why do I have to fly *and* drive.” I tried to explain that a plane travels faster than a car and if Rod came to Minneapolis in a car it would take more than a day. Silence. “When are they going to bring the plane for me? Will somebody tell me when my plane is here?”

“Yes, Mom, they’ll tell you.”

Thankfully they have wine in the Delta lounge.

Chapter 10

January 2017

Jack and I had begun getting phone calls from neighbors and friends. They were concerned that our mother might have Alzheimer's or some form of cognitive disorder. We didn't correct them. Alzheimer's evokes more pity than alcoholism. When we arrived, she didn't greet us with a hug or any big 'hello'—in fact it seemed as if she didn't realize that we had only just arrived, that we hadn't been there all along. We exchanged a look. Jack had Chloe with him, because, ". . . wouldn't it be nice for Mom to see the baby." I agreed that he and Chloe should take the bedroom and Mom and I would sleep out in the living room. We decided that we would observe and plan that night, and begin the intervention sessions the next day.

After dinner, Mom stood before me at the edge of the living room as if she were about to turn and go into the kitchen—that sort of midway stance that she does. I was at the opposite end of the room, holding Chloe on my hip. Jack was outside talking on the phone to Addie. Mom lifted her hands and gestured before the words came.

"But . . . I'm sorry, I don't want to sound . . . whose baby is that?"

"It's Chloe, Mom. Jack's daughter."

"Jack? You mean my son, Jack?"

"That's right."

"Jack, the firefighter? Who has all the girlfriends?" I would have to remember to tell him that one—if he ever decided to come back in the house. I could use a little help fielding these waves of distance. Again, she lifted her hands before she spoke, like someone who was trying to get directions straight. As in " . . . so after I take the left . . . I'm going to make a right? . . . or do I stay straight?"

I bounced Chloe on my hip to cover the shaking that was coming over my body.

"I don't mean to sound—I don't know what you'd call it, but I think it is a little rude of him to not tell me that he had a baby."

"But he did, Mom." I wasn't quite sure how to lead her back onto solid ground

with sensitivity. “Remember? We went out to visit them in California?”

“I was in California?”

“Yup. In May, when she was about six weeks old, we went out to visit them.”

“And you were there?”

“Yes, we were visiting Jack and Addie.”

“And Jack lives with Addie?”

“Mm-hmm.” *What the fuck? What was he doing out there? He said he would be five minutes.*

She kept on. “And is he coming here to visit too?”

“He *is* here Mom, that’s how Chloe got here. We all arrived this morning. He’s just outside, talking on the phone, he’ll be in in a second.”

“Oh, I see.” I could feel her coming back onto the path. I could see it in her face. She came over and did a scrunch-y face at Chloe, taking her tiny pink fingers into her own thinning bird hand. “Hi little sweetie, little . . . ”

“Chloe.”

“Little smoochie Chloe.”

Finally the screen door closed and Jack came back in, tucking his cell phone into his back pocket, “Hey.” He looked at Mom and Chloe and smiled at the pretty picture they made.

“I was just explaining to Mom who Chloe is,” I said, ruthlessly.

He looked at me. “What?”

Mom stopped making baby faces to Chloe and looked up again, confused. “Well, I just—I don’t know why you would have a baby and not tell me about it,” she started up again. I watched his face fall. I told him that Chloe needed her diaper changed and walked out of the room, leaving him with Mom. Later, when we found her toiletry bag, he ranted on about the statistics on how addictive Benzodiazepines are. *Jesus Christ*. He read off the bottles: Lorazepam, Diazepam, Zoloft… Hammer, Eraser, Black Ice, Broken bottle, Snake eating rat, Battle cry to empty field, River with no dam, Sentence with no period. Finally he stopped.

The next morning I woke early, as I always do my first day in New Mexico. There is a two-hour time difference between Montreal and Santa Fe and being an early riser, my

normal 6 a.m. wake up time became 4 a.m. I put the kettle on and then checked under the kitchen sink for cleaning products. Nothing. I went to the bathroom and tried not to look at the sink—which looked like it belonged in a Times Square bathroom—or at the toilet, which was worse. You couldn't see in the mirror over the sink for all the splatter. The kettle whistled, and I decided to start a list. Where would I start: the living room, the bathroom, or the kitchen? In addition to the cleaning products already on the list, I would need some massive black trash bags to empty the molding food containers that had taken over the fridge, that were growing new foods.

I looked at the list over coffee and realized that the most important thing wasn't even on there yet: the interventions. We had decided that mornings would be best, since she gradually turned into a full zombie over the course of the day.

We started that morning and continued with them each day that we were there. But by the second day we realized how utterly futile they were. She listened, seemingly happy for the attention, and then would say something like "You kids are so dear. I'm fine. My memory is fine. What do you mean my friends have been calling you? Like who? Oh, well . . . Mary. That figures! Do you know Mary used to complain about the light I had over my garage? She had some problems herself. Well I wouldn't listen to anything Mary—I am listening. Of course I love you. No I'm not trying to torture you. I'm just telling you that I don't have any problems with my brain. I promise that I'm going to cut back. I have actually been meaning to cut back. I don't want to go into a hospital. What would I do, just sit there? Would I have to stay overnight? No, I don't think I want to do that. Well I've had a lot of depression in my life, you know."

The intervention sessions were virtually identical and were always followed by her going immediately to the kitchen and pouring herself some 'orange juice.' She was always very pleased with herself, thinking that she had tricked us.

After we took her to the bank and got ourselves put on her account (the bank manager seemed relieved to see us) we went to see her financial advisor, Mark. He was a gentle man, with salt and pepper hair and long fingers that he held crossed in front of his chin when he was listening. We explained much the same thing to Mark as we had explained at the bank. We chose our words carefully since Mom was in the room with us: "She is under a lot of pressure lately and is just having trouble remembering all of the

details of finances and things like that." We gave him the you-know-what-we-are-here-for-right? look and he gave us the yes-I-do look. He expressed his gratitude for the idea that he would send Mom's monthly statements to us and generally keep us in the loop on her finances. Mark would turn out to be one of our best allies in the fight that lay before us. He was a recovered alcoholic and one of the first to realize that Mom had a drinking problem.

After seeing Mark, we went home to eat something and to attempt some sort of cleaning. Jack said he needed to go for a run. He said it with some desperation. Chloe fell asleep for her nap fairly quickly, so I decided to try to get some cleaning done.

As Mom nibbled her cracker, monologuing on the subject of how inconsiderate her neighbor was, I watched the crumbs fall into the cracks of her 93-inch, pale wheat, down-cushioned sofa, remembering when she had ordered it from the *Crate and Barrel* catalogue. The sofa has moved from house to house with her, each house a little smaller than the previous, shrinking alongside her mental capacity. The enormous sofa was necessary, however, to maintain the illusion that nothing had changed.

I was finding it impossible to sit still and listen as she complained about the woman who had attempted to help her plant some flowers. I suggested that maybe, in this beautifully-landscaped retirement community, a house with a blue tarp nailed to the side, draped over an enormous stack of molding furniture, atop a lawn with long, yellowing grass might be considered an eyesore to some. *Here comes the tone*, I thought and pretended to look something up on my phone.

"No! Now, first of all Haley, it is the *house* that is too small! It's not *my* fault. Where am I supposed to put all of my things? I'm not going to pay for a storage unit when I have a house. It's my lawn, I can do what I want!"

She claimed that she had hung the blue tarp out of consideration for her neighbors. To keep everything contained and protected from the rain. And how was she supposed to know which plants were weeds and which might be considered wildflowers? She liked the look of the wild growth and *wanted* her lawn to be like that, and her neighbors "can damned well deal with it."

I tried to explain that she didn't own the house, she was renting it. She was also part of a community now and she had to sort of "go with the flow." This was such an

outrageous suggestion that she actually laughed. She got up and headed to the kitchen. She needed more wine. There was a part of me that was taking a perverse pleasure in saying things that I knew would inflame. I called out to her in the kitchen "Why don't we just give the furniture to Habitat for Humanity." I realized that I had been doing that a lot lately. Intentionally suggesting something that I knew would send her crazy. I was supposed to be trying to forgive her, but instead I was seeking revenge on a woman who couldn't defend herself. I realized that part of the sickness I felt was with myself.

She came back to the living room, still monologuing angrily, and sat on the couch, just as I walked out. I told her she could keep talking— "I can hear you, I'm just grabbing a sheet from the closet."

"What?" She hardly noticed that I'd gone and come back. Or perhaps she did, but her reflexes were too slow: by the time she paused for my absence, I was back. So she kept on. The current rant was about freeloaders, and how she had worked her whole life and she was not going to give a single thing to Habitat for Humanity. I unfurled the sheet and lifted the couch cushion, only to recoil, letting go of both the cushion and the sheet, stifling a small cry. She hadn't noticed. All around the inner edge of the sofa was a solid ring of black mouse droppings and old crumbs. She continued numbly, telling me not to worry about making the bed, we could do that later. I asked if she had a vacuum cleaner. She chuckled. "You don't need to vacuum, Haley. The house is fine."

I told her that there were "just a few" droppings in the couch, not to worry. "I'll just lightly run a vacuum over it."

"Oh yes, I think we might have a small mouse problem."

Yes. I think you might.

The vacuum drowned out the sound of her voice, but she kept on. She finished the last swallow from her glass and then headed to the kitchen for a refill. She called out "I'm just getting some orange juice. Would you like a glass of juice?"

"No thanks, Mom."

I was remembering when her house was magnificent, when it was featured in *House Beautiful* magazine, when friends would stop by just to "see what she had done with the place."

The next morning, she was in the kitchen making coffee, one of the few things

she still did in the kitchen, but her Bodum didn't work anymore. Grains passed the filter easily and it made the coffee sandy. She refused to get a new one. So, she plunged the coffee and then held a little strainer over her cup, pouring the coffee through to catch the grinds. I told her "We are going to Walmart today." I had started a new list. Lists would, over the coming year, become a kind of security blanket for me. Our list for the day was not very long: silverware tray, dish rack, housecleaning products, mop, shampoo and conditioner. She told me that it really wasn't necessary, that she had everything she needed. But having just discovered that she hadn't showered in four months, I insisted. She reluctantly accommodated me, and we went. We stood in the kitchenware aisle and perused silverware trays. I picked up a nice bamboo tray that was $16.95. "What about this one?"

She took it from my hands, turned it over and back again, and then, catching sight of the price tag, twisted up her face as if she'd just read that it was made of recycled body parts. "Sixteen ninety-five?" She put it back and reached for a tiny white plastic tray on the top shelf. It was $2.95. She handed it to me. "This one is fine."

Chapter 11

June 2017

The tiny plane window vibrated with the hum of the engine. I cupped my hands around the empty plastic cup, its one, lone ice cube jostling around with the turbulence. I looked out into the night. I remembered an old drama teacher explaining, "When an irresistible force comes up against an immovable object, you have dramatic tension." A rivulet of water crawled down the window, determined. The doctor, when I was finally able to reach him, had explained that we couldn't force her to go into rehab, that she had to go in voluntarily and that even if we got her as far as the door, she could leave at any time. And as far as taking her driving license away, he could do it if we really wanted him to, but it would have a negative effect on his relationship with her. He said he would cancel the prescriptions for Ativan and Valium. About this he was apologetic; he said he had had no idea that she was drinking so much, or he wouldn't have prescribed either one.

Kai had become like a broken record on the subject of 'not thinking about it,' telling me that I had to not let this take over my life, I had my own kids who needed me. "Just try to think of something else." I swirled the ice cube in the cup. I set it down. I pulled the *Sky Mall* catalogue out of the seatback pocket in front of me.

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To get to the kitchen in this new small apartment my mother had moved into, after being evicted from the last small apartment, I had to first pass her bedroom door, then the living room. I slipped out of my room without making a sound. Although Mom wouldn't fully wake up until around 11:30, she often gave a false start at around 5 a.m. I was so preoccupied with being extra careful not to wake Mom, that I didn't at first see the man sitting there in the recliner by the window, a specter in silhouette, lit by the faint flickering of the television on mute. I lurched imperceptibly at the sight of him there in the half-light. He was tall—even sitting down this was apparent. He had a red face, a shock of yellow hair, his belly sagged into a dirty, blue-jean lap, his legs ended in worn-out cowboy boots. He held some sort of power drink, clutched in the hand that rested on the arm of the recliner. The other hand scratched the back of his head.

This was my mother's new boyfriend, Kenny. Or 'Kenneth' as she liked to call him, as if using his full name rendered him somehow upscale. They had met two weeks prior to our arrival. I passed in front of him and moved towards the kitchen. I walked the way I used to walk in New York when I finished a late shift, an invisible shield of iron across my every surface. "Breathe slow and steady," I told myself.

"Can't sleep either?" he said to my back as I passed.

"Jet lag." I gave as little as humanly possible.

"Been up since two," he continued, even though I was no longer in the room. His words fell somewhere between speech and slur, his mouth worn down by chewing tobacco and years of drinking hard liquor. "Just watching a movie. You ever seen this one? Got Tom Cruise in it and that colored guy, what's his name again?"

There was no actual door to the kitchen, so I could hear him easily, but I figured the threshold between the rooms gave me a pass on answering. I put the kettle on.

He was an anachronism there in Mom's living room, on the Crate and Barrel couch, light filtering through sheer curtains spilling onto brushed-stone coffee table. But he was more than a glitch in a system, he was that particular symptom, after all the lesser symptoms, that let you know that what you thought might have been the flu, is actually leukemia or maybe a brain tumor. He was the indication of the breadth and depth of the disease. I needed to concentrate.

Why was he awake at 4 a.m.? He had been so drunk the night before, he'd fallen face down on the floor serving our dinner. In the course of the half hour we were at the dinner table, he'd managed to call my mother's octogenarian neighbor, "a bitch," "a cunt," and "a rich she-devil." Mom chuckled, as if he were a naughty child. "Kenneth, watch your language."

Shouldn't he be sleeping that off? Why is he awake? Does he do cocaine too? Crack, maybe? I intuited that he was up because he knew that we, The Kids, were going to be his biggest obstacle in getting his hooks into Mom. I intuited that he was too stupid to have any sort of plan, was just going to feel it out as he went, so the most important thing was that he be there. That he not miss anything.

The kettle whistled and I realized that I was looking over my shoulder—that for all my bluster, I was afraid of him. I recognized 'underbelly' when I saw it.

I walked back through the living room with my coffee. I didn't say a word to him or even look at him. I closed the door to my room behind me. There was no lock on the door, so I pushed my suitcase up against it. Not that this would achieve anything—I did it as a gesture, in the event that he tried to casually enter or . . . God knows what. I set my coffee on the bedside table and took up my pencil and paper and started to write. All at once, there was a knock at my door. I froze. Before I could think what to do, it started to slide open. I held my breath, until I heard my mother's voice. "Murphy? Are you up?" The suitcase slid as she pushed inward. She poked her head in, looked down at the suitcase, and then up at me. "You aren't going anywhere, are you?"

"No Mom. Go back to bed. I'm just still on Montreal time, that's all. Can't sleep. I always wake up really early the first few days that I'm here."

Her hair was all tangled and her eyes were barely open. "OK, so you'll still be here when I wake up?"

"Of course."

Later that day she told me, "Kenneth is moving in"—would I come with her to his old place, so he could pick up his stuff? I tried to get her somewhere private so that I talk her out of this, but he was everywhere. I told her, finally, that I would go with her. I drove, and she sat beside me while Kenny directed us from the backseat. He fit back there about as well as an ogre in Cinderella's carriage. Finally, we pulled up in front of a small adobe house in a suburban neighborhood outside of Santa Fe. There was a man out front, gardening. Kenny went up and spoke to him for a few minutes and then they shook hands. Kenny entered the house through the garage door and moments later exited with a brown paper bag under his arm. He got in the car.

"OK. I'm ready."

And with that single brown paper bag of belongings, he officially moved in, to Mom's house and to her life.

The nature of evil is like that of smoke or of shape-shifters or of illness: it adapts to its host. Just as the cancer cell mimics the healthy cell, so evil infiltrates the vulnerable, attaching itself inseparably.

I could almost see her demons running across the counter, pulling open the fridge, helping her lift the bottle, sitting on her shoulder and petting her long strands of thinning

hair while she filled her glass to the rim with the nectar of withering and sipped herself to a slow death. It was a disappearing act of the first degree. They were showing her the way to the underworld. It was late afternoon and we were in the kitchen. Her arm was as thin as a twig. The veins popped out in her forearms. She didn't like it. It wasn't attractive, she said. Despite myself, I did what I always do, what I knew I would regret later and what I knew would make her angry and sad— I couldn't help it. I asked, "Do you think it might have to do with how much alcohol you drink?"

She slid the sleeve back down and turned away from me, with her glass in hand. "Oh fucking hell, here we go again, you kids have no idea about my life!" I was still looking at her, she knew that she was not off the hook. "I have this much wine with dinner." With the hand that was not holding the glass, she held her fingers apart to indicate an inch.

I tried to speak in the gentlest voice I could summon. "Mom, I'm not going to try to stop you, and you don't even have to tell me, but maybe when you are thinking about it on your own, maybe it's a possibility you could consider."

Chapter 12

June 2017

At some point, I realized I was dreaming. I moved through the darkness to a precipice, where falling water split into ribbons of warblers and starlings, and I landed in a sunlit tangle of legs and sheet and hair. The last of the water slid back through the loose seams of sleep. I was in a room with a door in the corner, in a bed next to a table with a lamp. There would also be a pad of paper and a pencil, if I had remembered to leave them. I scribbled fast and light, holding the pad to my face. *Asleep under waterfall, Dad called on phone I answered but he wouldn't speak. I kept saying, "Dad? Are you there?" I could hear him breathing. Asked if he had talked to the doctor. Apologized for not calling more regularly. After an eternity he said, "That's so sad." Not sure what he was referring to and couldn't tell if he was being serious or sarcastic.* I stopped struggling to hold the pad and pencil up to my face. They fell to my stomach and I turned toward the strong desert light. Through the screen by my bed, I saw a small rabbit eating grass. The grass was long and dry, and she looked at me sideways, the way rabbits do. It was only the second day at Mom's and already I felt utterly defeated. My suitcase was still wedged against the door and would be, as long as Kenny was here. Jack would be here tomorrow and I was thankful for the escape Idris and I had planned for today.

I took my phone and texted him in the next room. We had agreed we would get an early start.

HALEY

are you up?

IDRIS

yup. meet outside in ten?

HALEY

sounds good. I'm just going to walk Bowie

My mother's dog, Bowie, was one of the only positive things remaining in her life. Walking and caring for Bowie gave her purpose and gave her day shape. She was never alone when Bowie was around. She took him to the park three times a day and let

him run, and she let him out in the small backyard in between those walks. She had got him while still living at the big house, when she was alone and didn't feel safe. Bowie was a big dog, but turned out to be scared of everything. When someone knocked at the door, he slunk to the bedroom and hid by the bed. But she felt safer with him and that counted for something.

"Come on boy. You stay here." I undid his leash and filled his water bowl, then closed the door, leaving him in the kitchen. He couldn't come with us this time.

We were going to visit Hugh's grave.

Idris and I slipped around the side of the house and into the car. He put the key in the ignition and turned. We heard the dull sputter of a half-push by the engine and then nothing. He reached for the radio. "Shit. I got this stupid radio off a friend, I have to pop it out every time I get out of the car or it drains the battery." I think Idris currently has five cars and, as always, each one has its own issues. There was the time he drove from Massachusetts to Montreal in January in the Volvo with the broken heater. Or the red Volkswagen Rabbit, whose driver's side door was held closed with a length of rope and some duct tape; the passenger door was the only way in and out.

"Hang on."

He got out of the car and started to push it backwards. It was moving slowly, so I opened my door and stepped out into the pace of backwards pushing. We hit a tiny incline and it started to roll on its own. At this, he jumped in and put the car in gear. I jumped in too and when he turned the ignition, the car started. He put it in first, and off we went.

"What crazy magic was that?" I asked.

"I just had to pop the clutch," he said.

This crafty manoeuver, as he explained it, essentially boiled down to tricking the car into thinking that it was in gear. He smiled. These little moments pleased him. I think he hated that his life was held together by duct tape and rope, so magic counted for a lot.

The road was shiny from the sun. Pinon and sage lined the streets. Idris's arm hung out the window and the Rolling Stones were piping from the battery-draining sound system. "Can you see why I would want to live here?" he said. "Every day is like this . . . every day!" I smiled at him and at the sun and the road and the pale sage poking though

pink clay. I could see why. On the narrow concrete island, a haggard woman was selling newspapers. Idris gestured towards her: “I remember once walking somewhere with Hugh and we stopped to get a paper from one of those people, and as we walked away, Hugh said ‘Schizophrenic, but managing nicely.’” We both laughed.

Hugh always said things like that. Once at dinner, someone said something innocuous like, ‘How was your day?’ and he slammed his fist down on the table and said, “Why do Anglo-Saxons have to be so goddamned happy all the time?” He let it land for just long enough and then began laughing. Or once we were out to dinner and he told us that the couple across the restaurant was separating and that this dinner was a last-ditch effort to get back together, but that the woman would soon get up and leave. And sure enough, a few minutes later, the woman left. Another one that sticks with me: “Be careful with kids-born-by-Caesarean near an open window. They may have the impulse to jump.” Hugh told us that babies can see the birth experience, and what they see is a ‘light at the end of the tunnel.’ His (or maybe someone else’s) theory was that when we die and see the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel, it is, quite simply, us remembering our first trauma: being born. Mom says that they left the east coast to escape ‘ghosts’ but Hugh explained his own reasons differently: he had finally had it with treating rich divorcees from Wellesley and wanted to work for Indian Health Services. So they moved to the Navajo reservation. His own psychiatrist, and good friend, was James Hillman, who’d been part of Robert Bly’s men’s groups, so when he was diagnosed with cancer it was natural that he should take a spiritual approach. It was sweat lodges and peyote ceremonies that he credited with keeping him alive for the extra six years. At that last peyote ceremony when we were all there, he said he thought the cancer had gotten inside of him when he was born, because he was a twin and his twin had died in childbirth. When he was in the hospital actually dying, he had asked to be brought back up to Truchas. He wanted to die there. His friends, Dan and Herman, had come from the reservation. It took three days for him to die and for that entire time Dan and Herman had remained outside of the house chanting and drumming, blessing the Four Directions and preparing the way for his journey.

We each took a turn at his bedside saying goodbye. To me, he said “Have babies.” I knew he meant that as the highest imperative, a form of compliment—birth and death

were ‘where it’s at’ for him – everything was in the moments of birth and death and he wanted me to have that. It wasn’t some sexist ‘go have babies and be barefoot in the kitchen’, he just meant it . . . well, he meant it in the best way. A few hours after he said that, he slipped into a coma. While Dan and Herman circled the house, blessing and chanting, we took turns sitting by Hugh’s side. Four-hour shifts. Jack and I were on shift when he stopped breathing.

Hugh had written clearly in his will that he wanted to be buried in a simple, wooden, box-type coffin. I had gone with Mom to arrange this when the time came. The day after these arrangements were made, and once the body had been prepared, we received a phone-call from the undertaker—a rather delicate matter. Hugh was so tall, he explained, they would need to bend his knees ever so slightly for him to fit in the wooden box coffin.

Idris and I stopped at the Food Co-op to get coffees. *The Santa Fe New Mexican* listed local bands playing in the plaza: poets and drummers who would be in town, and art exhibits not to miss. I noticed that on May 14th, Gary Snyder was speaking at the opening of the New Mexico History Museum’s exhibit *Voices of Counter Culture in the Southwest*. I had missed it by two weeks. Idris said Snyder lived somewhere between Cordova and Truchas. We passed the Rancho de Chimayo and Idris pointed it out as one of the best jobs he had ever had out here, when he lived with Mom and Hugh. “It was a really great place to work. Out in the back the tables are terraced into the hill,” he explained. “In order to bring people their dinner, we had to climb.”

Hugh and I once drove from Wellesley to Amherst to hear Hillman speak. We went in the light blue Mercedes with the plates that said ‘M.D.’ Hugh drove 90 miles an hour down the Mass Pike and he smiled at me with a twinkle in his eye. “What’s the point of having doctor’s plates, if you don’t speed?” We arrived ahead of schedule and got good seats. Hillman spoke for two hours. I’d never been so energized by words. I could have sat for ten hours. *We dull our lives by the way we conceive them*. Afterwards, Hugh, James and I had tea at Hillman’s house under the lilacs in his yard. Later on, he showed me a room filled with books, then went back outside with Hugh, sat under the

lilacs and spoke and laughed. This was what I wanted my whole life to be: words and books that spoke the truth.

After that visit, Hugh arranged that Idris would begin to see Thomas Moore, a Jungian psychotherapist that Hillman had recommended. Idris was put on medication and saw Dr. Moore diligently every week. During this time, I hardly recognized my brother. He was communicative and friendly and, dare I say, organized. His room was clean! But then Thomas Moore wrote a book, a best-selling book called *Care of the Soul*, and dropped all his patients to write a second book, and a third. There is a section in the book about my brother, describing him as eternally boyish.

Right after the Rancho was the Santuario de Chimayo, a famous Catholic pilgrimage destination; at Easter you see streams of people walking along the side of the highway, many carrying huge crosses on their backs. We drove slowly over a cattle guard, set into the road that would lead us up through Cordova. There were no fewer than six descansos at the turn that would bring us up the mountain. I had always loved those little flowered crosses that are spread across the hills in New Mexico. Descansos usually marked the death of someone killed suddenly, as in a car accident. And the roads were so twisty out here and the drinking so rampant, it wasn't hard to imagine people just going off the road over a cliff. I understood the practicalities of graveyards for the dead, but descansos seemed more right somehow. Like death is just out there on the top of a hill, or out the window on the side of the road. We may not like it, but it is right beside us, not tucked away neatly behind an iron fence in a perfectly manicured setting.

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Elaine Hart's gallery had an 'OPEN' sign on it, so we pulled in and parked. On the small gallery door, underneath the 'OPEN' sign, was a note that said, *tap on the back door of the house and holler nicely*, so we did. Elaine hollered back from the bedroom for us to come in, so we did. From where we stood in the small entry, we could see her sitting on the edge of her bed. She got up slowly. It was a strange sensation to be standing in this house that had once been ours, so many years ago when things were good . . . when things were the best that they would be.

We walked a short distance back from the front house—the one by the road, until we came to a second house further down the hill. There were half a dozen Hispanic

workmen constructing what seemed to be a porch with a room above it. We both stood and stared. We didn't recognize this house, but memory is a funny thing. None of the workmen seemed to even notice us, standing there on the lawn. Idris tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to a barely noticeable path off to the right. We stepped onto it and started walking. Once our feet were moving, we began to recognize things. The lone, black tree in the long, yellow grass off to our left always reminded me of the U2 *Joshua Tree* record cover. Blackfoot daisy hung over the arroyo beneath a sign marked 'Coyote Crossing.' I wondered if Idris had the same memory at the sight of that sign. His old girlfriend Carmen had seen a coyote in the peyote ceremony for Hugh. It had just walked in, circled the fire and left, according to her. Carmen was the girl we had all hoped Idris would marry. He broke up with her for no real reason and when he realized his mistake and tried to get her back, it was too late. She had met someone from her own culture and they were to be married. Her parents were happy.

My foot landed soft on the pressed clay and the heat rose as we entered further into the past. Idris was a few paces behind, as always. A long-haired, gray cat ran out of the acacia and trotted along with us. It was her house now, she would show us the way. We rounded the curve that lead over the arroyo and I took a photo of the 'Coyote Crossing' sign. Water trickled through massive corrugated metal pipes. Up ahead I saw the gate. There was some orange rope tied around the wooden pillars.

Idris and I found the spot where Hugh was buried. I stood and looked at it and Idris crouched down and played with the cat. There was a simple bar on two supports that marked the spot. Like something you might hang a saddle on. I turned around and faced the way Hugh would be facing. It was one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen.

When cumulus clouds grow vertically they are becoming thunderclouds. This is due to the heat from the ground that is pushing the cloud upwards. Mountains are your best bet for seeing this in action. The heat nestles in the valleys and its only escape is upwards. When a cloud gets that anvil shape and starts to tilt from the weight of rain, darkening on the bottom, you can be sure it is about to come crashing down. It has become cumulonimbus. The mountains had a large anvil shaped cloud hanging between them. It would rain before nightfall.

Chapter 13

August 2017

That summer, with Kenny neatly tucked into Mom's life, we gave up. We didn't visit and called only rarely. I told myself that this was what she chose, that she was an adult and that there was nothing I could do. It's not that those reassurances were false, exactly, but another truth coincided with that reality and I knew that I would have to step back in at some point.

At the end of August, my dad's wife, Darlene called to tell me that he was dying. Six months was optimistic, the doctors thought. This was the summer of Charlottesville when Trump supported white supremacists, when he said that they had as much right to say, "Death to all Kikes!" as the protesters had to say, "Peace and love conquers all." My Dad and Darlene had voted for Trump. I had a hard time reckoning my Harvard-educated, long-time-Democrat, musician father with any of this. Although—Kai was right—his deathbed might not be the place to get into it.

Getting off the plane in Tennessee felt like stepping in under the Big Top. Darlene met me at the airport and drove me to the house, crying and talking the whole way. She told me about his last stay in the hospital and how the drugs made him hallucinate, made him paranoid, how she was so thankful to have him back at the house but that he was so weak.

Inside the door, the gravity increased: I couldn't move my feet. Time stood still as I took him in, at the other side of the room, near to drowning in the velour recliner that held what was left of his body. His teeth had come loose inside his skull and his eyes were pale blue marbles that looked up at me with the innocence of a lost child. "Haley!" He lifted his arms. Was he making a gesture to hug me? *But what if I break him?* I fought through the gravity, set down my bag and went to his arms. I knelt down and held his bones to me. He was wearing a pressed, dark blue shirt that I guessed he had put on especially for my arrival. Leaning against his shoulder, I caught sight of his turquoise ring on the side table. It was the ring he always wore, that he had worn the day he took me and Idris to the IHOP on Route 9 and told us that he and Mom were getting divorced.

He had twisted the ring back and forth as he spoke, and while Idris moved his strawberry pancake around on his plate I had kept my eyes on that ring. I'd memorized it. The ring was on the table now, atop a copy of Basho's *Haikus*. It would no longer stay on his finger.

I had been hoping that Darlene would leave us alone this week, but instead she came right up beside Dad, leaned against the recliner and fluffed his white hair. We released each other. "Isn't it cute?" she said, indicating his hair. "Grew back all curly after the chemo." I wasn't sure what to say—my father and I didn't have the kind of relationship where I would call him cute. I noticed that she was studying me. She was a pit-bull, Darlene, when it came to defending those she loved, and she loved my Dad. Somehow, she had come to the conclusion that my brother and I were people he needed to be protected from, that our estrangement from him was somehow the result of *us* leaving *him*. That we were the reason he was here, dying in this recliner. Darlene had grown up in profound poverty and thought we were spoiled brats for wanting anything from him. As the week passed, I came to see this as part and parcel of her view that all people in the Northeast were as right-wing politicians painted us: intellectual elites who were never happy and used psychology to try to paint our privileged lives as full of suffering.

"Body doesn't like air in it. Tiny hole is all it took." Darlene was explaining how the radiation created a hole in Dad's remaining lung, and that they just couldn't do any more surgery because he was too fragile.

I looked at the tubes coming out of his nose and at the oxygen tank beside his chair. I asked where the bathroom was. "Oh now, where are my manners? Let me show you to your room. You'll sleep in Brandon's room if that's alright."

"As long as it's alright with Brandon," I said.

"Oh, he'll do what he's told," she said, earnestly. 'Earnest' is her default mode. Brandon is her great-grandson. She and Dad had taken him in when they discovered that his mother, Darlene's granddaughter-in-law, was a crystal meth addict, and that little Brandon had been fed Benadryl and stuck in front of the TV day after day, month after month. When he'd come to them, all his teeth were rotten and he didn't know how to speak. He didn't know language. He was five at the time. Now he was nine. Later that

night, when he was home from school, I helped him with his spelling homework: Jesus is my best f-r-i-e-n-d. He also has bible reading to do.

"What is Heb?" he asked, pronouncing it like web. "I have to memorize Heb 2.1."

I told him I thought it stood for 'Hebrews.' We looked for the passage. He said he thought it had something to do with being blind and then being able to see. I looked through the table of contents and found the passage he was looking for. He studied it until he could almost recite it back to me without looking. Part way through, though, he got distracted and picked up his toy dinosaur, held it in the air making dinosaur sounds while he marched it through an imaginary landscape. Darlene came out of the kitchen, waving a dishtowel at him. "Brandon, no playing with your toys until you finish that homework. You hear me?" He complained that he was tired and had already done a lot. She explained consequences to him. It was much the same as when I explained consequences to Lucy and Isabel, except that in Brandon's case, if he was naughty, rather than being sent to his room, he would be smote by God.

At that moment, Dad woke up from his nap and said, decisively, that he would like to talk to me. Darlene set down the dish she was drying, told Brandon it was time for bed and took him out of the room. I was pretty sure Dad was going to tell me about how with the radiation came the 'light,' that God had saved him and that Jesus was King. I was in the ballpark. He said he wanted to explain his relationship to God to me. I was thankful when he acknowledged that "it must seem a little strange," and he said that it had all been pretty surprising to him too.

My father had grown up in the rolling hills of Pennsylvania. He was at home in the natural world. When he and Darlene had split up for a few years, just before being diagnosed with cancer, he had gone to live in the woods by himself, à la Henry David Thoreau. My brothers and I were pretty sure that, without the cancer, he wouldn't have gone back to Darlene. But that was neither here nor there anymore. He said that when he got back together with Darlene, part of the deal had been that he would go to church with her, that he'd stop swearing and give up being sarcastic. She said that she wouldn't expect any level of participation in church beyond listening. He said that at first he had gone just to appease her, so that on the weekends he would get to live out his side of the arrangement: two nights a week in the cabin by himself. He would go to church on

Sunday and then from Monday to Wednesday he would be at the top of the mountain. Well, as it had turned out, going to church started to be less and less of a chore, he started reading scripture on the mountain and seeing God everywhere he looked. It had turned out that the cabin on the mountain and a pew in church seemed to put one in touch with the same thing. The more he read scripture, the more questions he asked of the pastor. He said he didn't "find God." It was more like, "OK God, I need to see you. Show yourself to me." And God did. Not only in Nature, but in his body. He said that after a year of treatment the cancer disappeared—right at the time he had asked God to show Himself. Also, his relationship with Darlene had flourished the more he had welcomed God into his life. God had saved Darlene, he explained: "Darlene would probably be dead if it weren't for the church. There are levels of poverty down here you just wouldn't believe."

He was having a hard time talking. It took a lot of air, and everything that he had just said to me had come out in little five- and six-word packages, as he struggled for oxygen. Finally, he said "But tell me about your life. How are the girls? How is Kai?" I told him about them, and then, inevitably, we ended up on the subject of Mom. When I gave him the rundown, he sighed "Ah Mary." Nobody called my mother 'Mary' anymore, not since she was a child. She had started calling herself 'Nina' as a teenager, and that had gradually become her name. She even had it on legal documents. I didn't know how she had managed that one, but I didn't know how she managed most things, so I had never given it any thought. In calling her 'Mary' he was refusing to accept her definition of herself.

"Here I am hanging on to life by my fingernails, willing to do anything for a little bit more time, and it seems like she is trying to speed up her departure." Then, after a pause, he added, "She ruined my life."

He said this so matter-of-factly that I didn't feel any impulse to call him on it.

There was a long silence, and then "Have you ever been in a motorboat with a leaky engine?"

I guessed that this was a rhetorical question, so I didn't respond.

"You're going along the river, looking at the beautiful scenery, the fish in the water, the sun shining, the wind blowing through the trees, not realizing that your leaking engine is leaving a wake of oil . . . killing everything, slowly, beneath the surface . . .

Your mother is like a motorboat leaking oil. What a wake of disaster she has left!" He paused, apparently to think about just how much of a disaster that might be. ". . . But we don't need to talk about Mary. Let's talk about you and me."

He closed his eyes then, as if to say, *the words will come when they come, these are things that can't be rushed.* I felt a deep ache for this man dying in front of me, who I had wanted in my life, but never had. How much easier it would be to write him off if he were a tyrant or a drunk or unfeeling, but this man was sensitive and gentle. Everyone who met him liked him and wanted to have him in their life. Even my stepfather had said, "Your father was one of the kindest, most intelligent, people I have ever met. He loved you kids." And then he had added, "Your mother emasculated him in ways you can't imagine."

I can imagine.

Chapter 14

November 2017

NOVEMBER 1, 2017

JACK:
mom just called
she's being evicted again

HALEY:
Shit how long does she have?

JACK:
They're giving her a month.

HALEY:
Jesus. Should I see if Cindy will give her more time?

JACK:
I guess so. I doubt they're going to do anything, but maybe you could find out why they're evicting her

Haley Reed
Re: Lease
To: Gina Mansfield

Hi Gina,
I hope all is well.
Mom received the termination letter and I completely understand the reasons this might be happening. I just wanted to ask you about the date. As I mentioned the last time we spoke, we are working towards assisted living and are just wondering if you could talk to management about extending the eviction deadline a little? Maybe to April 1st? Just to give us a little more time.
Again, I'm sorry for the yard and the carport. I will arrange for that to be cleaned out by the weekend.
Best,
Haley

Gina Mansfield
Re: Lease
To: Haley Reed

Hello Haley, I can't extend your mom's termination date. I discussed the termination of residency with the owners and they flat out refuse to give her more than 30 days. An owner doesn't need a reason to terminate residency just as a tenant doesn't have to give a reason when they give notice to terminate residency. The law only requires a 30-day notice. Maybe if you or your brother would come to Santa Fe to help her it would take less time to find her a place.

Gina
Sent from my iPhone

Haley Reed
Re: Lease
To: Gina Mansfield

Thanks Gina.
Is it because of the extra furniture on the carport?

Gina Mansfield
Re: Lease
To: Haley Reed

It's because of everything. Last week Rich found her passed out in her car with her head hanging down and a bottle of wine in her lap and a six-pack on the console. The residents are complaining. Yes, the carport and the yard as well. We have been asking to have that cleaned since she moved in. I see that you and your brothers cleaned the front yard and mowed the lawn but that was months ago and it is a disaster again. And, so you know, we have photos of her passed out in her car.

Haley Reed
Re: Lease
To: Gina Mansfield

OK. I'm sorry Gina.
Thanks for letting me know.

HALEY
They aren't going to budge

JACK
Big surprise. I'm sure they're not about to give her a reference for a rental … I tried talking to her about independent living

HALEY
How did that go?

JACK
Not well.

HALEY
What are we supposed to do?

JACK
I don't know but whatever we do it has to be soon.

HALEY
Should we call Paul Geoffreys?

JACK
You're thinking we should buy something?

HALEY:
I don't know what I'm thinking other than that we have 30 days to get a roof over her head.

JACK
I guess we should call Paul. Do you have time to do that? My shift starts in five

HALEY
Are you in the ambulance all night?

JACK
Ya.

HALEY
OK, I'll keep you posted. Have good night.

NOVEMBER 3, 2017

Voicemail from Mark to Haley:
Hi Haley, it's Mark here. I just had a visit from your mother. I am guessing you already know about the eviction notice. I tried speaking to her about 'independent living'. I told her I thought that was her best option, but . . . she insisted that she was too young to live in "one of those places." I also thought you should know that her boyfriend was with her . . . and she was asking about her finances. (pause) It is her money and I'm afraid I was obliged to tell her the details of her investments. I tried suggesting that we speak privately and she said that Kenneth was her husband and he would stay in the room. Anything I had to tell her, I could tell him too. I know she was joking when she called him her husband, but it did get me thinking of what the implications of that would be. I'm sorry to be telling you all of this, Haley. But I'm very worried about your mother. She is very vulnerable and now this boyfriend knows exactly how much money she has. Alright, let me know if there is anything that I can do to help the situation. Talk to you soon. Bye Haley.

Voicemail from Haley to Mark:
Hi Mark, thanks for your message. I am going to contact her lawyer. I know he won't be able to speak to me, but at least he can listen. I am wondering if I should contact our friend who is a realtor, Paul Geoffreys. It feels insane to think about buying something, but I don't know what else to do, I spoke to Cindy from the management company and they are definitely not going to extend her lease or give her a reference, so I'm not sure how she will rent. And with renting, I'm

sure eviction would just be a matter of months. OK, talk to you soon. Bye.

NOVEMBER 4, 2017

Voicemail from Nina to Haley:
Hi Haley, it's Mom calling . . . Oh Murphy . . . I hope you are coming out soon; things are just so stressful . . . I got a notice saying that I have 30 days to be out of my apartment. Can you believe that? It is just outrageous, that Cindy is a real bitch. She really is, I don't know if you've met her but she's just awful. Anyway, I am going to see Chris Grazier to show him this notice. I think I may sue them, they can't just kick me out like that. Anyway, maybe you could call Cindy and tell her to let me keep my place? OK Murph, I guess that's it . . . did I ask you already? Are you coming out soon? OK, bye sweetie.

Haley Reed
Re: My Mother
To: Chris Grazier

Hi Chris,
My mother, Nina Reed, is a client of yours.
We spoke last year concerning her health and declining cognitive function. Unfortunately things have gotten worse. At the moment, the urgent issue is that she is being evicted and I think she will be coming in to see you soon about trying to sue the management company. I realize that you can't talk to me about her, but I just wanted to let you know that the management company has very good reasons for evicting her and suing them would not only be pointless, it would bring to light things that would be humiliating for her.
You had recommended a lawyer for issues around guardianship and such. Could you remind me of who that was?
Thanks very much,
Haley Reed

NOVEMBER 5, 2017

Chris Grazier
Re: My Mother
To: Haley Reed

Hi Haley,
Certainly I understand and, like you, want the best for Nina.

The attorney who does adult protective proceedings whom I would strongly recommend is Bryan Biedscheid. It may be worth just getting an understanding of the process and discussing if that is an appropriate action at this time.

Good luck.
-Chris

NOVEMBER 7, 2017

JACK
Have you looked at Mom's account recently?

HALEY
Not since I paid the bills last month, why?

JACK
There are SO many withdrawals. Fucking Kenny.

HALEY
For a whole year, she doesn't get cash out once, and then he comes on the scene and there are withdrawals every week. Does he think we're stupid?

JACK
Well we are stupid if we don't do something.

HALEY
I agree, but what?

JACK
Fuck. I want to kill this guy.

HALEY:
I'm supposed to have a conversation with this adult protective lawyer today, I'll let you know what he says

Voicemail from Haley to Brian:
Hi Brian, I got your information from Chris Grazier. My brothers and I are very concerned about our mother. She is cognitively diminished and there is a boyfriend in the picture who is taking advantage of her. We would like to talk to you about what we can do to protect her. Give me a call when you have a chance. Thanks. Bye.

NOVEMBER 8, 2017

Voicemail from Paul Geoffreys:
Hi Haley, it's Paul Geoffreys here. I just had a phone call from your mother . . . she wants me to show her some houses. I am, of course, happy to show her some places but I want to be sure that you and Jack know about this. Is this something you are involved in? She is even more confused than last year, and I don't know that I can, in good conscience, engage in showing her places with the goal of having her sign a contract, unless I know that you're involved. Give me a call. Thanks.

HALEY
Hi Paul. Sorry to text but I'm expecting a phone call and need to keep the line open. Yes, please do go ahead and show her places. It seems crazy, I realize, but we do need to find her something and she flat out refuses to even look at Independent Living facilities.

NOVEMBER 10, 2017

Pam Vakhar

Re: Meadowbrook
To: Haley Reed

Hi Haley,
This is Pam from Meadowbrook. Thank you for your message expressing interest in our community. I have emailed you our full guide, with all of the details. In there you will see the different options for levels of care, as well as add-on services including dog-sitting—I know you had asked about that. Why don't you have a look at it and give me a call when you have a chance. The sale Leslie told you about is on until the end of the month. If you lock in before December we will be able to give you that rate. OK Thanks Haley. I look forward to talking to you.

Voicemail from Paul to Haley:

Hello Haley, it's Paul here. OK, so I went by and spoke to Nina and it was all very strange. Kenny was there and she seemed confused when she saw me, as though she didn't remember that I had told her I'd be by. Kenny interrupted to say to me, "Thank you but we won't need your help. We have another agent who is showing us property." Then your mother walked outside with me and was very apologetic about my having made a trip out for nothing, but said they have to find a place big enough for Kenny's brother to also have a room. Specifically, they didn't want to see the house I had to show them on Gilmore because it only has one bathroom. Haley, I thought you should know that she also said, when we were outside, that she was really sorry but that she had to go with the house Kenny wanted or he would break up with her. I'm so sorry. I know how difficult all of this is for you and Jack, but I really think this is quite urgent. Your mother is being taken advantage of.

HALEY

Leslie it's URGENT. Kenny is trying to get Mom to sign on a house so that he and his brother can move in (!!!!) And worse – I just tried to talk to the real estate broker – Helen somebody and I don't know if she is completely crooked or what, but she said, your mother seems fine to me. And hung up on me!!!
Please help!

LESLIE:

Got it.
I'm on my way over there right now! Text me the name of the realtor
If still at house- will speak to her directly, if not -will call her after I speak to your Mother and Kenny. Call your mother and keep her on the phone if you can.

Voicemail from Leslie to Haley:

OK. I arrived not a moment too soon. Your mother was pen in hand about to sign a contract with the other realtor. Not only was it way out of her price range, as you said, but it was a reverse mortgage contract — meaning the house would eventually be worthless. Kenny was none too happy to see me, but I made it quite clear that though you and Jack are not in Santa Fe physically, that you are well represented here and he would be wise to back off. I also made it quite clear to Helen that the family is requesting she cease any involvement with your mother. I told her in no uncertain terms that not only is your mother not going to sign for this house but that she is not to show her any future houses. You are absolutely right that she was lacking in morals. There is no mistaking the fact that your mother has dementia. We can talk about this more, but your mother needs to be in assisted living. It is as simple as that. I suggest you discuss with the lawyer just how fast you can get custody. You're going with Brian Biedschied right? He's a good guy. Anyway, crisis averted . . . for now. Call me when you have a sec. Bye.

NOVEMBER 16, 2017

Voicemail from Brian to Haley:
Hi Haley, It's Brian here. I got your message regarding beginning preparations for a custody hearing. Give me a call when you have a moment. I went over the power of attorney documents that Jack sent and the good news is that when your mother prepared these, she had the foresight to prepare for exactly this kind of situation. Jack as first POA and you as second, already have the same amount of control over your mother's Trust as she has, meaning that if she is proven incompetent— we would need to assemble evidence that she is unable to handle her daily affairs and once we have this, Jack need only declare that he is taking over. Only if she 'lawyered-up' so to speak, would you need to defend the action. In any case, give me a call. A full custody hearing would take several months, including the wait to get a date and time for the processing and it would cost you roughly 10,000 dollars. I would advise that it is not necessary at this time. But do give me a call and we can go over this in more detail.

NOVEMBER 20, 2017

Voicemail from James for Haley:
Hi Haley, it's James Feeney here, from adult protective services, I received your message about your mother being potentially taken advantage of and how to go about getting a restraining order. Unfortunately, from what you describe, your mother to have this Kenny character in her life. I have no doubt, as you say, that she is at risk of being taken advantage of by this man. However, restraining orders are a challenge to get when the person in question wants the restraining order. When they don't want it, then it is next to

impossible to get one. It is very good that you called, and I am starting a file now . . . in the event that you need to file more officially, it will be on record that you have contacted us. Give me a call and we can talk about all of this. OK, Bye-bye.

NOVEMBER 22, 2017

Voicemail from Dr. Pacheco for Haley:
Hi Haley, it is Dr. Pacheco here and unfortunately I have some bad news regarding your request that I contact the DMV about your mother's drinking and driving. The Risk Management Department here at the clinic is not going to let that letter be sent. It violates doctor-patient confidentiality and puts the clinic at risk should your mother decide to sue us. I'm so sorry, Haley. I know that you and your brothers are only trying to help your mom and I know that she needs to be off the road, but I am not going to be able to help you. Risk Management did suggest that you contact the police department and arrange to have her pulled over. With elder drivers under the influence, they are most often brought to the clinic rather than to the station and if she was brought to Christus St. Vincent, then we would be able to do something. I am sure that is probably not what you want to hear, and my heart goes out to you, it really does, but my hands are tied on this one. OK. Good luck, Bye-bye.

NOVEMBER 25, 2017

Voicemail from Nina to Haley.
Haley? It's Mom . . . Umm . . . Kenny just went psychotic on me. I mean like . . . I've never seen him like that. I tried to ask him what was the matter and he grabbed me and pushed me down. OK, call me. I'm scared. Love you, Murph. Bye-bye sweetie.

HALEY

I just got off the phone with Mom - Kenny got physical with her, shoved her down on the couch and when she got up he shoved her again. She said that she thinks he is using heavy narcotics. I asked her if she has seen him and she said he smokes something and also he sniffs it. FUCK. We HAVE to do something NOW!

JACK:

I'm calling the police. They may not be able to do anything, but at least they can drive by. Shit…did she lock the door? Shit shit shit.

HALEY:

I told her to lock the door. She said she doesn't think he's coming back. She said, "When he's like this he usually stays out all night." FUCK – when he's like this??
I'm calling you now.

Voicemail from Haley to Greg:

Hi Greg, it's Haley Reed here. I'm sorry to be calling you out of the blue like this, but Jack and I think Mom is in danger and we have to move her into a facility whether she likes it or not. You are a good friend and it was so great of you to have her at your place for Thanksgiving. So . . . we were hoping you might be able to take her to your place up north for a few days so we could, well, so we could move her without her knowing.

Voicemail from Greg to Haley:

Hi Haley. I'm sorry I missed your call, I was working. Gosh I'm so happy to hear you guys are taking care of this! I hate that fucking guy! Ya, sure. I'll pick her up. She doesn't know which end is up anyway—haha! I'll just tell her we're going to my place for dinner and then I'll have a few beers and when she asks for a ride home, I'll tell her she needs to stay the night because I can't drive. She might not like it, but she'll be fine. Better stop and get enough wine to last her for a few days! Haha. She can take my room, I'll sleep downstairs with my Dad. Then tomorrow, I guess I'll just leave for work early before she's awake and she'll be stuck out there. My Dad is there and he has dementia too, they can talk each other's ear off! Ha! I'll be sure to leave them food and all. Don't worry about it. I'll pick her up tomorrow after work. You're doing the right thing and I'll help in any way I can. Bye Haley. Thanks for calling.

Haley Reed
Re: Meadowbrook
To: Pam Vakhar

Hi Pam,

Thank you for the brochure, Meadowbrook seems like the perfect place for my mother. We would like to buy in. If we do so before November 30th, would we still be eligible for the deal?

I have a big question I need to ask because my mother's situation is a particular one. First of all, she is an alcoholic. We are working towards getting her detoxed, but at the moment she is still drinking. Is this a problem?

Also, regarding her dog, Bowie, he is not a small dog. I just want to be sure that I am not misleading you in any way. Is it OK that she has a dog?

Lastly, we need to move her in rather a hurry because she is being exploited by an abusive boyfriend and we want to whisk her out from under him without his knowing where she's gone.

I look forward to hearing from you.
Thank you in advance.
Best,
Haley

Pam Vakhar
Re: Meadowbrook
To: Haley Reed

Hi Haley,

I'm so glad we will be able to help.

First of all, there are no issues with your mother's drinking problem. We have quite a few elders who like their drink! We have a two-glass limit in the dining room, so hopefully we will be able to help her cut back.

And it is quite alright for Bowie. We know how important pets are for the health of our elders. Should I send the paperwork to you? We will need to have it signed and payment made within the next two days in order for you to be eligible for the sale. In any case it sounds like this move is happening quickly, so perhaps that is for the best anyway.

I am attaching the documents here.

I look forward to welcoming your mother to Meadowbrook.

Best,
Pam

HALEY:
I'm sending you the email from Meadowbrook, we need to have everything to them by the end of the day: registration, POA, $$. Can you take care of this and I'll deal with the movers?

JACK:
Yup. I'm on it

Voicemail from Greg to Haley.
Hi Haley, Greg here. Well, so far so good! She and my dad are in the living room talking about building houses. I'm just making dinner and staying over is not going to be an issue. I suggested it when I picked her up and she seemed to want to, so she has a bag with her and everything. Give me a call if you need anything

HALEY:
I'm trying to figure out how to block Kenny's number from Mom's phone.

JACK:
Settings – Privacy – Phone – Block caller

HALEY:
Thanks. Also, just checking that you reserved the storage unit.

JACK:
Yup. Done.

Voicemail from Haley to Greg:
Hi Greg, thanks for your message – you are a saviour. Things are all

lined up for tomorrow. Fingers crossed. Could you get hold of her phone, do you think? I imagine she's pretty easy to distract. We need to block Kenny's calls from coming in. You would go under Settings — then Privacy — then Phone — then Block caller. Also if you could delete his recent calls that would be perfect. She can't remember phone numbers, she calls by hitting the name under recent calls, so I think it will work if we just delete all of his calls. Hopefully anyway. OK talk to you soon. Bye.

Voicemail from Mike's Movers to Haley:
Hi Haley, Mike here from Mike's Movers. Just to confirm that we will be moving your mother tomorrow morning. I will have 3 guys and to confirm that in addition to the actual move we will be doing all the packing as well. I got your list and we will take half to the storage unit you reserved and half to Meadowbrook. Let me know if this is all correct and we will be there tomorrow morning at 8 a.m. OK, you have my cell if you need anything. Talk to you soon. Bye.

NOVEMBER 28, 2017

Voicemail from Mike to Haley:
Hi Haley, it's 7 a.m., I hope you're up! This is Mike from Mike's Movers. Listen, the guys are at the house and they are refusing to do this job without Hazmat levels of protection. The house is disgusting. I am sending you photos. Man . . . I don't know if this is going to work . . . I mean, I'm sorry—I understand your situation, my uncle died of alcoholism. I understand and I want to help you but the guys are refusing to work unless they are paid double. Call me soon, so I know if you want us to go through with this or not.

NOVEMBER 29, 2017

Voicemail from Nina to Haley:
Hi Hales, it's Mom. Oh boy . . . I am out at Greg Woeffel's house, I came for dinner last night and now he is not here! He just left! I have no car and no way to get anywhere. And his father has dementia! How am I supposed to talk to him? What am I supposed to do? I have things to do today and I can't just sit out here. Call me back. Bye.

HALEY:
I'm sorry about the condition of the place… yes please proceed. We will pay double. Go ahead and get whatever your guys need to feel safe. The moldy mattress and the two chairs you describe in the living room with the chewing tobacco, those can be thrown out. For the dog mess in the living room and for the kitchen sink, I have a friend coming by to take care of that. I have also called Merry Maids and they will be there tomorrow morning after the move is done to do what they can. I will call Stanley Steamers about the couch.

MIKE:
Sorry about all of this, I know how hard it is. I just wanted to let you know also… we have a woman who packs all of the women's clothing and personal items and there are no undergarments of any kind. Is this possible?

HALEY:
Are you sure? Has she checked everywhere?

MIKE:
Yup.

HALEY:
OK, thanks for letting me know.

Haley Reed
Re: Meadowbrook
To: Gina Mansfield

Hi Gina,

I just wanted to let you know that we have found a place for Mom and she will be out by the 30th. I am having Merry Maids in to clean it after the movers, so it would be fully cleaned out by December 1st. I have told the movers and I want to make sure that you and Rich know that we don't want Kenny to know where she is going. Please do not give him any forwarding information. We are going to great lengths to try to keep him away.

Thank you for your understanding.
Best,
Haley

NOVEMBER 30, 2017

HALEY:
I don't know how to do conference calling – can you call Mom and then conference me in?

JACK:
Ya, sure.

HALEY:
Shit, I feel sick

JACK:
Me too.

Voicemail from Greg to Haley:
Just wanted to let you know that after she got off the phone with you guys, she was fine. She's talking to my Dad now - she seems to understand and isn't freaking out. I'm not sure what you said, but she seems ready to check it out. She is asking me details and things like that, but she doesn't seem to feel hoodwinked or angry. Good job guys!

HALEY
I think that went pretty well…all things considered

JACK:
But I don't think she really understands.

HALEY:
At least Greg is with her and I'm sure he'll keep reassuring her

JACK:
Is Mark going by?

HALEY:

Shit. I know this is the best thing, really the only thing we could have done, but it feels really shitty. Like we've just tossed her to the wolves. I know it's ridiculous, but it just feels like that.

JACK:
I guess that's why it's called tough love.

DECEMBER 1, 2017

Voicemail from Nina to Haley;
Hi Haley, it's Mom. Oh Murph . . . I need to find a place. Can you come out and help me? This compound is nice and they are helpful but I've been here for a few months now and I just can't stay here anymore. I am trying to call Kenny and I can't find his number. Oh sweetie, I don't like this place. Can you come out? There are so many hallways. What am I supposed to do with Bowie? I think you said you would be out soon? Am I remembering that right? OK, sweetie. Call me.

HALEY:
Hi Lisa, my mother is very confused. Could you tell her that I am coming out in a week? and then remind her as often as you see her? Our family friend Mark should be there soon to help her. She seems to have no sense of time – thinks she's been there for months. Thanks again…

Pam Vakhar
Re: Meadowbrook
To: Haley Reed

Haley,
Ok,
Lots going on here. We have been unpacking, and hanging up clothes, putting away dishes, hanging pictures. Mom is very fragile and frightened. She is having lunch and took Bowie for walk around grounds. We are also doing laundry. You are right about the furniture being dirty. Needs some TLC. TV is also hooked up. Your friend is in dining room with her and she is having some wine to ease her nerves, FYI. I set up a two-hour check in on her tonight. (Every two hours for this p.m.) I have PL services arranged for AM for Bowie's walk.
I've texted you Stacy's phone # (Right at Home caregivers). She knows you are going to call. Her caregiver can start Monday. I will be in again tomorrow starting at 10 a.m.
Pam

Voicemail from Darlene to Haley:
Haley? It's Darlene here . . . your father passed away last night. I'm so sorry. I will call you later in the week to tell you when the service will be. Could you tell your brother? Your father loved you, Haley. He loved you.

PART THREE

I brought home the bleached bones as my symbol of the desert. To me they are as beautiful as anything I know. To me they are strangely more living than the animals walking around – hair, eyes and all with their tails twitching. The bones seem to cut sharply to the center of something that is keenly alive on the desert even tho' it is vast and empty and untouchable.
- Georgia O'Keefe, January 1939

Chapter 15

December 2018

Several months ago, I signed up for a poetry workshop that was scheduled for December 2nd—which, as it turned out, was two days after Darlene had left me the voicemail informing me of my father's passing. Kai thought I should cancel, pleading with me to stay home, I needed some time for myself. My father had just died. I told him I could handle it, really, that he shouldn't worry. I was fine. It was at the public library just up the street from our house and I assured him I'd just walk home if I felt I needed to. It was a free workshop, so it wouldn't be a big deal if I ended up leaving in the middle. But, I told him, I really wanted to do it and maybe poetry would even prove to be a balm. Poetry was one of the last things my father and I shared. When I knew that he was dying, it became a challenge to think about what to say to him on the phone or in an email. He wasn't going to be here for much longer, so why tell him what the kids are up to. So I sent him poems and he sent me back reflections and commentary.

I arrived at the library a few hours before the workshop was scheduled to begin; I thought it would be a good idea to get my bearings. I stationed myself in a cubicle at the end of first floor, by the encyclopaedias. I began to lay phrases down on paper: *words down in poems go / rhyming couplets calm me so.*

An hour went by and I was feeling fine. I decided to take a short walk before the workshop to stretch my legs and get my breath flowing. I put my notebook and pen in my bag and walked to the bathroom to wash my hands. The cool water on my palms was soothing. I walked out and took a drink from the water fountain and then looked at the clock. It was time. I walked up to the second floor where the workshop was being held in room 201.3. It was a board-type of room, down the hall from the stairwell: a smallish room with a largish table. Once we all arrived, the woman leading the workshop asked us to introduce ourselves, which we did. She asked us to talk about our writing background, why we were interested in poetry, if we had ever had anything published in a journal or if that was even our goal, if perhaps we just wanted to write poetry for our own personal reasons. When it came to my turn, I said my name and that I had a performance company

and that our work was non-linear—poetic—that I was interested in poetic writing for that reason, but also that I was just interested in poetry in general.

The teacher sat at the head of the table. She asked if anyone wanted to read one of their poems; a woman named Sia said that she would read a poem. It was a short poem about being an immigrant, about speaking a second language and feeling like an outsider. We listened attentively and then gave her our feedback. We chose our words thoughtfully. There was a lot that we liked about her poem, but we told her simply that the structure needed work. Then the teacher leaned in, Sia was sitting beside me. I was between the teacher and Sia. Sia was holding her pencil ready for note-taking.

"The father in the poems, is that your father?"

I could hear the ticking of the clock.

"Yes."

It was abnormally loud.

"Is he dead?" the teacher asked.

A wave of heat came over my body. Their little words began to separate into big letters that circled my head.

"Yes."

The letters of their words bored holes in the sides of my head.

"Did your father die long ago or is he recently deceased."

"He died about a year ago."

Their words started to become molecules, pieces of the words. The furniture, the people were separating. I was breathing through a tiny hole in the side of my lung. I heard Darlene: "Body doesn't like air in it, tiny hole is all it took."

Then the teacher: "Who is the subject of the poem? You or your father?"

Her voice became dark syrup, slid down the wall behind me. The walls were closing. Facts, faces floated in front of me.

I am OK, I told myself. Silently. In my head. *Make a math equation or a mental painting or think of a song.*

He was born on 03 November and he died on 30 November.

Like a leaf floating along on a river until one day we flip under with the current; tilt, lilt, turn to silt. The air was so thick, the air was not air. I held small breaths in the

opening of my mouth, the size of a stone; my tongue rolled the stone over, allowed for me to hold the thought, *I will show those molecules what form is. Release the leaf, leaves, leaking or not stay in the room, say something, say that—*

"And what of 'Hallelujah?'" asked the teacher, "It took Leonard Cohen years to write that song."

'Hallelujah'? Of all the songs in all the gin joints in all the world.

Did you even like Leonard Cohen? I asked my father in my head. *We could never get you to log a strong opinion, like this you avoided being pinned down. Like this, you escaped. I remember you saying once, about that song, you said, "'. . . the fourth, the fifth, the minor fall and the major lift'. . . how cool. That is what the song is doing exactly at that moment: words and music coming together. Nice."*

I decided to quote his words to the group. They seemed to land. People were slipping back into their bodies. I said only those words. The molecules realigned.

That night I watched *Grace and Frankie* with Isabel, her new favourite show. She said, "You'll love it." Jane Fonda drank martini after martini and had a collection of pill bottles by her bed, a comical amount, like ten. Some were tipped over with pills spilling out, some were stacked on top of others, on top of books she was reading. Yes, Jane Fonda was reading, she was put-together, more well-kept than anyone I knew of any age. She woke early, kept the house immaculate, was perfectly dressed and made-up and in the episode we were watching, was starting a business. Isabel knew this wasn't possible, right? That alcoholism doesn't look like that, right? And then I wondered where my sense of humor had gone. I went back to laughing at Lily Tomlin. She's a hoot!

*

I would like to say that I took some time to mourn my father. A day, maybe a week, but that is not how it happened. What happened was that he was upstaged by my mother, just as he had been his whole life. It was three years now that she had been living her life at a crisis pitch, and each season, with each new danger or disaster, we thought "This is it, it can't possibly get any worse." But we were wrong. It can always get worse.

Kenny had found my mother at Meadowbrook and was back with a vengeance. He seemed to know that we were powerless to get a restraining order against him, and was rubbing that powerlessness in our faces, while my mother, stuck in the middle,

suffered. She was as deep in alcoholism as it is possible to go. In the dining room of the facility, each night at dinner, she would try to break into the kitchen for alcohol. She started breaking into other residents' rooms to search for wine in their fridges. Her caregiver, Gennie, reported that she found the dozen pairs of underwear I had sent, stuffed into a cardboard box in the corner of her bedroom. "They were covered in feces," Gennie added. Mom was becoming incontinent. Bowie was taken away. The DMV hadn't replied to any of our requests, so we got help to disconnect her car battery and hide her keys; when Kenny fixed the battery and got Honda to make a new key, we resorted to hiding the car down a side street.

I had a few friends who knew what has been going on. They wanted to help. For most people, my friends included, helping meant fixing. What became awkward was that this particular problem was not one that could be fixed. It could be managed, badly, but not fixed. This seemed a particularly difficult concept for men to grasp: "Couldn't you just . . .?" "What you need to do is . . ." I wanted to tell them that part of the problem was that I didn't want to help her anymore, that I was tired of it. But instead I'd reply, "Say, that's a good idea. I'm going to try that. Thanks."

I skimmed over Christmas with my family—my days and nights occupied with calling doctors and hospitals. I was persistent; in spite of the fatigue, I stubbornly refused to accept that there was no one to help us. Meadowbrook, the facility that said they could handle an alcoholic elder, conceded they were wrong, that the situation with my mother was "untenable"; they helped speed up our doctors' appointments and found us doctors that accepted extra money for an immediate diagnosis. Embattled and exhausted, we did everything we were told—spent hours on the phone, signed documents, bought plane tickets and at last arrived at a plan for detox. We flew out the week after New Year's.

Chapter 16

January 2018

Jack and I stayed by her side the first few hours of that first night in the hospital. Once the Ativan kicked in, she mostly slept. She had liver disease and Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome; peripheral neuropathy had been causing the pain in her legs. She would be in the hospital for three days for detox, until the alcohol had completely cleared her system. And then, on Thursday, moved to the UNM unit for Geriatric Psychiatry, where she would remain for a week of observation.

At midnight, we left the hospital and went to the hotel. We were due to fly out next morning. We had a plan: Jack would fly back five days later, once she was admitted to the psych unit; Idris, who hated flying, had relented, and would fly out a few days after Jack left and stay for two weeks; after Idris, it was my turn. I had to get back to Montreal immediately, there was no way around it. Isabel was leaving for Spain for four months and I had to be home, to see her off. She had been accepted into an exchange program and we had supplies to get and preparations to make. Though I felt guilty about not being there for my mother when she woke up, I knew that I would feel worse about not being there for my daughter.

In the airport magazine shop, I picked up some lavender perfume for the girls and some gum. I set my coffee on the side table in the lounge area of Gate A12 and checked the boarding time. I pulled out my book. Over these past weeks, any kind of technology— my phone, my computer—had come to be associated, in my mind, with crisis management. I had taken to reading, as a way to maintain my sanity, to switch briefly from caretaking everyone else to caretaking myself.

Women have died a thousand deaths before they are twenty years old . . . Anyone who says otherwise is still asleep. There is a time in our lives, usually in mid-life, when a woman has to make a decision . . . and that is, whether to be bitter or not . . . They are at a point where they are full up to their ears with everything and they've "had it" and "the last straw has broken the camel's back" and they're pissed off and pooped out." Their dreams of their twenties may be lying in a crumpled heap –

*

"Flight 226 to Chicago will now begin boarding. We'll be starting with group one. Group one now boarding. Our elite passengers, those needing a little extra assistance and anyone travelling with small children, may board at this time."

*

. . . Descansos are symbols that mark a death . . . something happened there that altered that person's life and the lives of other persons forever . . . To make descansos means taking a look at your life and marking where the small deaths, las muertas chicitas, and the big deaths, las muertas grandotas, have taken place . . .

*

At my layover in Chicago, I got a sweatshirt for Lucy and a book for Isabel.

*

Lay the wandering orphaned dead to rest . . . there is a lot to be said for pinning things to the earth so they don't follow us around. There is a lot to be said for laying them to rest.

*

I sat Isabel and Lucy down the day after I arrived back in Montreal and told them what had been happening with Grammy. I didn't give them even close to all the details, but simply told them that Grammy had a disease called alcoholism. That alcohol affected her brain differently than it did other people. I wasn't sure how verifiable that was; I had read it on a website about alcohol abuse and it seemed legit enough, medical-ish, and I was trying to keep my description in a medical range, so I went with it. I told them that Grammy was in the hospital getting the alcohol out of her system. That it would take a few days and then, we were hoping, she would be better. I told them that she had lost some of her memory but there were therapies that might help her get some of that back.

Lucy turned her head to face the window while I talked. I knew that she was crying by the way she hung her head slightly and touched her finger to her eye. Isabel looked at the bed and folded the sheet over and back with her fingers. I resisted the impulse to hug them, and instead just left them to feel what they were feeling. Finally, I told them that if they had questions, that they could ask me anything. Their questions

were similar to the ones my adult friends asked: *Couldn't you make her stop? Will she get better? Why did she do that to herself?*

It took a few days of being home to return to my body. I slept a lot. I woke before the sun. I reached for my pen and pad and held it to my face in the dark and wrote as fast as I could, before the dream receded.

In art therapy class—I make a sculpture of Mom. The surface is made of broken mirrors held together with clay, and curled up inside is a tiny doll; broken and missing hair, her dress is torn and she has no shoes. There are some cracks between the broken bits of mirror where you can see the blue of the dress or the light straw colour of the hair or the glisten of a wide eye peeking out.

I let the pad fall to my lap. She really did try to take care of us. I even think that sometimes she was able to reach out and get a hold of that mirrored monster—poke her broken doll-head through the cracks in the glass and be heard.

Kai appeared with a cup of coffee and I sat up in bed, propping the pillows behind me.

"Lucy's awake," he informed me.

I took the coffee from him and set it on the bedside table.

"Do you want me to open these curtains?"

"Yes please."

"Toast?" he offered.

"No thanks. I'll be down in a minute."

He went back downstairs. A moment later I heard little feet on the stairs and Lucy was climbing on top of me and nestling under my arm.

"Mama?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"Are you going to become an alc-o-o-o-lic?" She asked me in that blend of French and English that Montrealers use, 'alcool' being the French word for alcohol. Our family's particular brand of 'Franglais' involves saying a French word with a decidedly American accent, in some cases even a Southern accent. She was doing just that.

I kissed her head and told her calmly, "No sweetie, I'm not."

I said it with confidence, as if I believed it. She was satisfied and went back downstairs. “I’m going to go watch *Avatar*.”

*

I called Mom several times a day during that first period in the detox hospital, and she was sleeping every time I called. When the doctor returned my calls, he told me that they have stopped the Ativan. “She is more somnolent than I would like, so we haven’t had her on anything for twelve hours now. When she wakes she is calm but confused, which is to be expected. There haven’t been any seizures and her heart rate is good. All in all, it’s going well.”

The next day when I called to speak to her, they tell me that she has been released. My heart began to race. “She’s been what?”

“She’s been released into Dr. Matthews’ care at UNM Geriatric Psychiatry. They moved her this morning.”

I called the phone number I’m given.

“Hello, Geriatric Psychiatry.”

“Hello, I’m calling to speak to my mother who is a new patient there, her name is Nina Reed.”

“Connecting you to the common room.”

She connected me to a line that rang and rang and rang . . . After about twenty rings, someone answered.

“Hello?” came an angry voice, scratchy at the edges, possibly a patient.

“Yes, I’m calling to speak to Nina Reed.”

There was the sound of the phone being set down, and I heard, “Who is Nina Reed? Is there a Nina Reed here?” called out into the ward. Then, “It’s for you.”

“Hello?” My mother’s voice sounded half an octave higher and full of air.

“Hi Mom, it’s Murphy.”

“Oh hi sweetie. I’m so glad to talk to you.”

“Me too.”

“Now, there are usually a few people in this area, but it seems everyone is out now. I think they are preparing a big turkey dinner.”

“Oh wow. Well, that’s nice.”

I imagined the patients setting up a huge table with turkey on it. Seemed odd, but I thought: *maybe they cut everything up in advance so there are no knives.*

She had things to tell me. “You know Rod Arquero?”

“Yeah”

“From the Pueblo?”

“I know Rod.”

“Well, he was arrested. We were in school and they just came and took him right from his desk. They took him from school and brought him to the religious place.”

“The religious place?”

“Well, you know I got notice too. I was going to be incarcerated. And this place is very religious, you can’t open a door—or you have to be careful where you put your hands—or the manager will say, ‘That’s the men’s room’ or ‘That’s the women’s room.’ They’re very strict, there’s a lot of religion. I was there for five hours. And I don’t have my purse. The manager took it and I do need that back.”

I asked why the manager took her purse.

“Well now, Jonathan—you know, from Valley National Bank—well, he has the purse and I need to set up a meeting because I need to get it back. I mean I almost couldn’t get on the plane to come here because I didn’t have my ID. And what if my friend and I wanted to get a glass of chardonnay and I don’t have any ID. I can’t go anywhere.”

“You need your purse.”

The full realization that she was making no sense whatsoever sunk in; the terrible realization that something had happened to her, something that had made her worse even than before, was turning into a terror that I funneled into fury about her purse being taken away. I felt months of emotion and rage that had been directed at her, shifting to those who had hurt her. I wanted her words to make sense—I wanted there to be some reality in which she did take a flight, did go speak to the bank manager, a reality in which she was at a school with Rod—but I couldn’t make it fit together. I wanted to think that it must be some medication that was causing this, but a part of me knew that this was not caused by medication, this was the new her. I didn’t feel the tears as they appeared in my eyes, instead I felt them when they rolled down my chin and fell onto my shirt.

"Well, Murphy's on the TV! Now look, look at that, can you see that? I told my friend that I would need money to go out because Murphy's coming and I might need money to go to dinner. Oh, and did I tell you, I think I saw Bowie upstairs. I mean, it could have been my imagination, but he looked just like Bowie. I have to ask the manager about that."

"Mom, Jack is coming, OK? He will be there tomorrow when you wake up. He can help you with everything. Don't worry about anything, Mom. We are here. We are going to help you."

"You're here? Where are you? Are you going to sleep over? If you bring your jammies, we can have a sleepover."

"I will bring my jammies when I come, I promise. I am not there right now, but I will be there soon."

*

I hung up with my mother and called the doctor and asked him why they took her purse away. I was furious. He told me that it was a psych ward and that she couldn't have anything that was pointy or dangerous. I told him right back that she *had* to have her purse, it was her *thing*—carrying the purse everywhere, opening and closing it and checking that she hadn't lost anything, making sure that she had all of her notes, that was what she did all day. Her purse was her thing. It kept her calm. I was enraged with him, "You *have* to give her her purse! She *has* to have that. You are supposed to be taking care of her. Why does she sound like she is on heavy medication? I thought she was supposed to be clean. We trusted you. What is going on?!"

"You mean she doesn't always sound like this?" Dr. Matthews asked.

"No! Not at all. She definitely has memory loss and she talks in a loop around the same four subjects, but when she talks she can put sentences together that have a beginning, a middle, and an end—she doesn't talk about going to the religious place or being in grade school with her old boyfriend or how she just got off of a plane when I know full well she has been in the psych ward all day!"

He told me that she was given Gabapentin this morning, and that yesterday she was given Olanzapine because she was severely agitated and anxious, but that both of medications have a short half-life and would be out of her system by now—and that in

any case they don't cause dementia like that. Dr. Matthews told me that if what I was saying was true—that she wasn't like this before detox—then his guess was that her brain "took an insult" from the withdrawal, and that this was her new normal.

Chapter 17

February 2018

The next morning over coffee, Kai handed me a croissant, warm from the oven—the croissant he had walked all the way to the bakery to get for me—and asked, "Where will she go next?"

I had no answer. Where *w*ould she go next? My brothers and I had been working on this problem, but had dropped the ball, when planning for detox took precedence. She couldn't go back to Meadowbrook. The doctor was right about the secured memory unit. The facilities we had been investigating were out in California, near Jack, Addie, and Chloe, but the good ones were too expensive. I had checked out a few back East, but Jack really didn't want her to be so far away.

"Why don't you call Leslie?" Kai suggested.

"You're right. That's exactly what I'll do."

Leslie recommended a facility, her top recommendation for elders with dementia. I immediately called the facility and spoke to a woman named Yolanda, who told me that a place that had just opened up and they would be ready to receive my mother in two days. Jack, who was in New Mexico, went to check it out. He called me, excited, from the facility. "They have a peacock and rabbits and goats and everyone seems really nice! It is a small adobe building with little bedrooms and a large, open common area. The whole thing wraps around a large courtyard and Yolanda says they spend a lot of time outdoors."

"It sounds like we should sign up right now!"

"I think so."

"Oh my God, I can't believe how easy that was."

"Right? Well, I think we've earned a few easy steps in this thing."

"How does she get from UNM to the facility?"

"Apparently, Yolanda will go and pick her up. She seems really kind. She is going there tomorrow morning and will do an assessment, and if UNM is prepared to

release her, she will take her right then and there. If not, she will go down the following morning."

*

Two weeks later, I flew out to Santa Fe and headed straight to Mom's old unit at Meadowbrook. We had one day left to clean it out or we would be charged for another month. I called Yolanda to let her know I would be visiting the next morning and to find out what I should bring.

"For her room . . . should I bring some paintings? Rugs? A vase of flowers? And what about music? I bought her a boom box that I could bring over . . .?"

"I'll tell you Haley, maybe just one small painting that we could hang on the wall. We generally don't have much else in the elders' rooms because we don't lock anything; the whole facility is open, so the elders can go in any room that they want. And they have a tendency to pick up nice things and take them. They aren't 'taking' things, as we see it, they will just see something and think it looks nice and pick it up. So, if you want to bring the boom box, we can keep it for her in the office. And if you are visiting and want to listen to music, we'll bring it out for you."

"What about pillows?"

"We have pillows and blankets and all of that."

"I'm just worried that if she doesn't recognize anything from her home, she'll feel very disoriented."

"When you come by in the morning, we can take a look at the room together. It is a new home for her, so there will be a period of adjustment, but she's doing really well so far."

"OK sounds good. Thanks Yolanda."

"You're welcome, Haley. I'll see you tomorrow."

*

I tore off a piece of masking tape, stuck it on the Crate and Barrel couch; with a Sharpie, I wrote: *consignment*. Paintings of land, horizons, fire and the pond: these, we would save, but how would we transport them? I wrote: *save (transport?)* There was the chest of drawers from the farmhouse, Mom had always kept her art supplies in it. Its brass pulls were now broken and missing, there was no top, and the drawers were filled

with old screws and hardware. I marked it: *junk*. We had hired a company that would come pick up everything we didn't keep or give to consignment. Back before Christmas, I had thought maybe we could interest her in art again. *Start small*, I had thought, *pencils and a pad of paper*. They sat untouched in her closet. *I will bring this home for Isabel*. The slatted bedroom set: *consignment*. I found a stack of pictures of Hugh in the bottom of a small wooden box with a broken hinge, lacquer chipping on the edges. I sat on the edge of the bed and flipped through the pictures. I didn't want to get back up, I wanted to sit on this bed and not move from this spot. I marked the box: *save*.

I got up. There was the stone bust of our great grandfather, the bust that Mom refused to put in storage, but instead carried from house to house. Even in the smallest of her apartments, that bust had sat visible in the living room or on the front stoop, greeting anyone who entered. This stone head-and-shoulders of one of the forefathers who had borne her into a life of trauma—she has physically carried it with her everywhere, all her life. That bust was part of our mythology—even if I didn't know what it's meaning was or why we had always kept it, I felt its pull: *save*.

A juicer that she had bought at the beginning of the end, when she felt the alcohol taking its toll, when she felt her appetite disappearing and knew that she had to get vitamins somehow—"a juicer will be the thing": *consignment*.

I found a stack of pictures of the house in Jacona and thought of her old neighbour and friend, Andrea. I decided that I should call her before I forgot.

When I told Andrea about Mom, and that she was detoxed, but now spoke in 'word salad' as the caregivers called it, she wailed into the phone. I waited patiently; it was wail-worthy. After about a minute, she switched over to words. My mother was so talented, she loved us kids, this was terrible! This was just awful! She asked me the address of the facility where Mom was and if it would be OK if she visited her? I said that it would.

Bottom drawer bottle of Diazepam; empty wine bottle in the bottom of the bedside table; boxes in the closet from her last move labelled *dining room*, boxes that she hadn't bothered to open. And there were the Navajo rugs, saddle blankets, and turquoise jewellery: memories from Hugh's years on the reservation. When Mom stopped walking Bowie more than twice a day, he'd begun relieving himself on the wall-to-wall carpet.

Her caregiver, in order to protect the beige carpet of Meadowbrook, had laid out a 19th century Navajo weaving; Bowie relieved himself on that instead: *try to salvage*.

It took me five hours to go through the last of Mom's things at Meadowbrook. I picked up some take-out sushi at Whole Foods and entered the address of the Sierra Vista into my navigation. I had brought a few paintings, the boom box, and a bunch more of Mom's clothes. I finished my sushi and headed to the facility.

There were two massive front doors, and a small bell that you rang to be let in. After you passed those doors there was an entry room and another set of doors. This level of security made me feel relieved. I didn't think there was any way that Kenny could find her. It was a very small place and known only within the elder and elder-care community. It was not like Meadowbrook, the corporate giant of old age housing. Once buzzed in, I was in an entry room where I was met by Carol, the director of the facility. Everyone must be approved, and signed in. Carol was not very tall, with kind brown eyes and shoulder-length hair pulled into a low bun.

"She'll be so happy to see you," she said, buzzing us both through the second set of doors. "Wait here, I'll get her for you. They're changing her," Carol said all run-of-the-mill.

"Oh. Okay" I said. Flinch imperceptible.

"I'll be right back."

I waited. Two cockatoos in a cage stared at me silently. After a moment, Carol returned without Mom. "She's not there. Let's check her room." The 'house', as they called it, was small, as these places went. We looked in her room, where there was a single bed with a sea-green bedspread. We left her room and walked down the hall into the living room.

"They always change her after lunch," Carol said again.

"Right, OK," I said again.

We stood by the cockatoos. I heard someone coming down the hall and I turned to see her there, hanging, sad-seeming, on Yolanda's arm. She saw me and her tiny body lurched, a single sob escaped, and, "Oh Haley! I hope I don't disappoint you. You're not going to leave, are you?" Her body curled against me and she started to cry. I lowered her down into a chair and knelt in front.

"I'm here. Don't worry, I'm not going to leave."

Carol asked if I needed anything. I told her we'd be fine. Just as she turned to go, Mom stopped her. "Could I just have a small glass of wine when you have a minute?"

Carol gave me a knowing smile and said, "Of course, dear. I'll get it now."

"I never expected he would go, but he'd go up and knock on the window and that was when I would wave to him. You remember, right? That's my husband, Hugh."

"Yes, I remember."

She was holding onto me with one hand and gesturing with the other. Monologuing always calmed her. She stopped crying. "Well now, when Hugh died, he and his wife were very sad, and I decided I wanted to make a painting for him, and so I took the glass and painted her face and I got everything carefully, especially the sadness, the sad marks just there, on the sides." She ran her hand along the side of her face from her temple to her chin. "But I knew he would be at the window, so I went over there and I thought I would just wave hello. I hadn't seen him for a long time, but I knew he would check his window because it was me and I was always there on the 18th. That was what we decided. And he did walk up and waved and I waved to him and he went to answer the door and I just sent a kiss to him and his wife, and I touched his forehead like this, and he was very . . . you know . . . saying prayers and everything, and for the next 18 years or very long period of time or so I always made a point to go over there. It's for celebrating that point in his life and his wife and her life to say, 'Good Morning' and bless him and his wife. Because they knew that was from me, and so for the last several mornings, several months of mornings, I haven't been able to get over there, I haven't been able to find someone who will just sit here, I haven't felt sure . . ."

She looked up as Carol arrived, setting down a tray with cookies and 'wine'—apple juice in a plastic wine glass. Mom smiled, letting go of her story entirely. There was a glass of apple juice chardonnay for me too. At that point, I hadn't had a drink in almost a year, but I supposed that apple juice chardonnay would be OK.

Carol asked if we needed anything else. I said, "No. Thank you, Carol. We're good." Mom closed her eyes as she sipped. And then she looked at me, holding the glass of apple juice in the air and asked, "Isn't this a nice wine?"

When a forest fire is burning out of control, the Hotshots do what's called a 'controlled burn.' They get way ahead of the fire and burn a large patch of land in its path, so that when the fire gets there, it stops burning. Without something to consume, the fire subsides.

Jack, Idris and I had been her controlled burn for the past three years and we were stripped raw. I wouldn't exactly call it irony, but for Jack and me, at the beginning, alcohol was the way we coped with it. We had talked about it on more than one occasion. I had wanted to think of myself as a good person, but at the same time, I had wanted to give up on my mother, to just leave her to her own devices. I had wanted to walk away and let her drink herself to death if that is what she wanted to do. I had wanted to think of myself as a good person, but I was filled with rage. I had wanted to think of myself as a good person, but I had wanted to drink margaritas until I passed out.

I quit drinking the day after I wrestled a wine bottle from my mother's hands in a car going 80 miles an hour. It was the day she threw a sandwich at my head and I screamed at her "Have you ever cared about us at all? Couldn't you for once be the mother and I be the child? Jack is a paramedic—a *paramedic*! If we were pulled over and he was caught driving your little booze-mobile, his career would be finished. Are you capable for even a second of putting your kids before yourself?" I was ranting and screaming at an almost comical level, my gesticulating more of a danger to Jack's driving than her pouring her wine.

Then she threw a sandwich at my head; the lettuce and everything went flying all over me and Jack, and he swerved a little, and I realized I had to stop. She really and truly had become the child and I the mother, and I was being a bad mother. I immediately felt guilty and horrible. Within five minutes she had forgotten the entire episode; she leaned forward from the back seat and began petting my hair and speaking to me like she used to when I was the child. "What's the matter, Murph? Did somebody upset you?"

That was last June. I had arrived back in Montreal and poured out the bottle of wine in the fridge and the red wine on the shelf. It felt like finding the source of the fire and pulling it back into the depths of the earth. I was done being her controlled burn. I wouldn't be the person who covered for her when she lied to the neighbors, I wouldn't make excuses for her to waiters that she was rude to. I wouldn't lie to our relatives about

why she never called or wrote and why we weren't coming to the family reunions—I was finished absorbing her shocks.

Was I quitting drinking *for* her? Was I doing something that she was incapable of doing? Was it just another attempt to clean up her mess? Maybe. But it was also for me. It was for her, but also for me.

My friend, Jane, who goes to AA, kept casually inviting me to go with her. "It's a great group of women, I think you'd enjoy being there, even just to listen . . . really smart ladies."

Why would I need AA if I'm doing just fine without it? I reasoned with myself. She must have known what I am thinking because one day, out of the blue, she handed me the *Big Book* of Alcoholics Anonymous. And said, as she handed it to me, "Maybe there's something in here that can help your mother." But the thing about my actress friend, Jane, is that her finely-tuned instrument is almost too finely-tuned. She is in possession of an exquisite sensitivity that makes it almost impossible for her to hide what she is feeling. She knows this, of course, and has consequently mastered a version of the stiff upper lip. Which is good, because she is British. But, as she held out the book, her huge brown eyes and the blushing of her translucent skin revealed that she cared, and even worried. I thanked her and took the book.

And I read it. Twice.

We needed to ask ourselves but one short question. "Do I now believe, or am I even willing to believe, that there is a Power greater than myself?"

Jane drove us to the meeting, about half an hour from her house. We were silent most of the drive. Finally, we pulled into the parking lot of a small, white church—the kind of which there are thousands in Quebec—and walked in. She didn't look at me meaningfully, or ask me if I was ready, or in any way mollycoddle me. We just walked in and she asked if I wanted a coffee. I followed her to the tall silver coffee dispenser at the end of the table of baked goods. We got our coffees, then Jane lead me towards a couple of chairs that formed a large circle at the front of the room.

*

Isabel came up to my room and climbed into bed next to me.

"Daddy is watching a movie with Lucy. Do you mind if I read up here with you?"

"Of course not. What are you reading?"

She held up *The Stories of Eva Luna*.

"Nice. How was *House of Spirits*? Did you finish it?"

"She's such a great writer, I love her. You should read it when you're finished your book. What are you reading?"

I held up *Women Who Run with the Wolves* and, with a self-deprecating chuckle, I said, "Listen, if you want any books in the categories of New Age, Astrology, Feminism, Poetry—anything like that—let me know. Santa Fe is the place for all things New Age."

She laughed, more to accommodate my teasing of Santa Fe than for actually finding it funny. "It's supposed to be a good book though, right?" She and her friends were very active, politically and socially, and she was always keen to know what the seminal books were on any subject. She gives me hope for the future.

"It's a great book—a classic, in fact."

There was a pause for a moment and then she asked, "How was the meeting?"

"It was good . . . I didn't say anything this time. I just listened. It's a lot of listening. Maybe next time I will say something."

"That's cool."

"I was thinking that I might go every week. Does it make you uncomfortable that I'm going?"

"Not at all. I think it's awesome … I think you're awesome, Mom."

*

I imagined that, through a pinhole in the night sky over the Badlands, a flash of light was seen. Anyone stargazing might point to it and say that they just saw a shooting star, or they might shake their head and think it was a figment of their imagination. What they had witnessed, though, was a flame passed from a distant generation—perhaps even from Original Mother, who said, long before we were even born, *you were born to carry the torch and shine the brightest, you Daughters who see everything but don't yet know what to do with the knowledge.*

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