

# lemon water

by Deborah Pades

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I've just been to see the poppies in Pacifica. It wasn't the alliteration. It was the crazy warm weather. The flowers lived up to their name, bunches of them blooming up all over the cliffs. I picked one just to break the state law. I was startled by the sight of helicopters—four of them—scooping up from sea-level heading towards me. *Step away from the flower.* I quickly ate the poppy and the big birds vanished.

Now I'm home with a wind burn and a bad left hip. This white terry-cloth bathrobe never suited me. I wear it to pretend it's the last day on earth and I am Moses. I part seas and pay bills. I call my dog pet names as if he's not a pet. *Fuzzylips.* I drop myself into a deep trance and pick up the phone to call my sister. To tell her that I definitely can't come.

"I'm still not sure if I'm coming."

"Fine. I can't force you. We finally have the chance to be together all at one time." Ellie, being annoyed.

"You know it's not a cut and dry thing for me. Did you get my e-mail?" I sent an e-mail. It was dark and from my belly.

"I saw it. Why can't you just show up and not expect the world?"

"Good plan." I watch my dog lick the couch and say good-bye.

Rent is due by 9pm tonight. He'll come and knock and lean against my door like an angry tree. My good friend Tess says I should focus and give myself some undivided attention and then things like this won't sneak up on me. Like my leg did - which just got out of a cast. *Two sheets to the wind.* That's what they thought I was when I fell off the stage. I wasn't drunk but the ground was wobbly just the same.

I was thinking about you.

It's like I have flypaper hanging out here with a no parking sign. I know I'm giving you mixed messages again. But you don't call or write either. Being dead just doesn't suit you, Zoe.

I'm doing the work of tweezers. I'm trying to pull you out of me. Here you are, on one of our rare nights together. We lay on our stomachs facing each other with glitter and glue and paper between us. We type words out and stuck them on wood. *Talk to me about boxing.* Iridescent paint left everywhere. We don't sleep. I learn about Chinese ink and sumi sticks. I draw all my sisters' shoes as I remember them from when I was 12 years old. *Solesisters* was the title.

We track two different recordings of *Oh mio bambino caro* onto my computer. Maria Calas and Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, dueling and looping all night. We steam rice and eat it with our fingers and when the peas are ready they become art and balls of green fire. You try on my jeans 2 sizes too big. I show you how to walk like me.

But then you have to go. You pack up your 17 books and sweatshirts and pens. I bury my face in your neck. You smell like late Sunday afternoon but you also smell like somewhere else. You smell like you were already back to where you were about to go.

Gone.

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I still visit the rest home where my neighbor Mel finally died. I got attached to some of his friends. I come sometimes once a week to sing and play trumpet for them. I play songs they know and some they don't but they sing along anyway.

There's one woman who I'm crazy for. Chantal is from another century. She's thin like origami. She speaks with impeccable diction as if every word is a bird set free. She talks to me about her collection of paintings. She's disturbed by them not being near her. I tell her that her son – she only has one child who lives in Connecticut – most assuredly has them in safe keeping. I know nothing to substantiate this and she knows I don't.

Today I'm weak in the heart like the rest of them. I sit on the couch next to Chantal not ready to move anytime soon.

"Sara, are you going to play some more?" Myrna's all geared up and rolls her wheelchair up in front of me.

"No. You don't pay me enough," I say.

"We *should* pay you." Chantal understands the cost of living.

"I wouldn't take your money." I lie.

\*

I was only inside your house once. I couldn't bear it after that, seeing all of Sam's stuff everywhere. That big dehydrating machine in your kitchen comforted me. It was twice the size of any appliance I had ever seen. I wanted to ride it to the moon. I wanted to sleep inside of it and see if I'd dream in vegetables and fruits. I wanted to lay you down in it, to see if you'd get small and shriveled. If you had, I would've placed you in water immediately to get you back, hydrated and ready.

You told me that when you first saw my eyes, they were the largest set of truths you had ever encountered. And that everything that had defined you up until that moment felt like scratchy wool. No one had ripped you and sewn you together so fast. I was your tailor and your Tinkerbell. You said all that.

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According to Tess, I'm the only female trumpet player she's ever met and that means I've got entrée into an untapped market. Tess says there are millions of people still waiting for the female Chet Baker to make her debut. I look in the mirror and pucker up. I run my hands through my hair and wait for sudden beauty to take hold. I'm thinking more Louis Armstrong.

I have a steady gig with an alt-swing band. We're known for taking songs that were never meant to be swung and we swing them good. Tess shows up with a few other writers from *The Weekly*. They get a kick out of me sitting there with the three other horn players. I make faces and feel loved. I never get to sing though. That's Romeo's part and he barely breathes my way.

I watch Tess and her crew leave and wonder if I'm as lonely as I appear.

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"Time before last you sang *Gee Baby, Ain't I Good to You*. I remember." Myrna remembers, but I only knew the chorus and made up the rest.

"Want that one again?"

I wonder why I do this. The reasons fall in a few columns, but mostly under the one marked *one day we all land up like this*. I have kid's games and old people's smiles in my head when I go to bed some nights. Not a bad combination. It beats Valerian root and brandy.

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"Taxi!" He never comes to me the first time.

"Taxi!" In the park people always look confused when I call his name. That was my original reason. Now I'm over it.

Sometimes I walk and think my head will clear. But it has the opposite effect. I go deeper and get lost and miss the turn into my loft. Taxi knows to pull me back. The Shepherd in him keeps tabs on me. The lab in him rolls in dead worms.

I'm working on sound effects for *Bailey's Brain*, the CD ROM for kids who care about how the brain works. I just sampled the sound of myself sneezing. I faked the sneeze but you wouldn't know it. When the brain tells the eyes to blink, there needs to be a sound for that too. I'm thinking maybe a chime sound, something light. Or I could go the industrial route and sample the sound of a camera shutter. Or a rolling metal door, or the sound of rubber boots sloshing down. Depends on whose eye we're dealing with, really.

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"What's your decision this week?" Tess is the only one who ever knew.

"I can't go. I cry every 2 hours. What's my excuse going to be?"

"Fucking family. Your family is so screwed up."

"Yeah. I'm screwed up too."

"Sara, don't do that. You're so quick to blame yourself for their crap."

I walk to my sink to clean the lettuce.

"Wine?"

"Your shame kills me. It's so not what you should be feeling."

"Shame?" I turn, Romaine in hand. "You're off, Tess. It's not shame. Geez, that's 15 years ago."

Fatigue.

"Wine?"

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I think about your skin. Mozzarella comes to mind, melting all over my red couch. And your hands. I told you once that they reminded me of my grandmother's and you took offense. But her hands spoke her life and so did yours. I held yours in my car for the first time. In front of your house. I wanted all of you, but I settled for holding each finger separately, one after the other, like I was playing notes on you.

On the credit screen of *Bailey's Brain*, they're going to put a special dedication to you, *in memory of Zoe Lerner*. I wanted to throw-up and die last month when I came in for a meeting and you were discussed. Every syllable of your name seemed violated with each utterance. All good things, beautiful things were said, but it all seemed disgusting. I wanted to scream and hit things but all I did was sit there amongst the other contractors who were glad to have made your acquaintance. And they talked about Sam who they never even met. How he should get the iris prints of all your artwork as a gift. A big purple brain to remember his wife by.

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Chet used to play music to disappear, to get drunk and to find comfort in a woman's arms. Louis had higher goals.

Taxi used to hate when I practiced. His little puppy ears didn't understand the sound at first but then I lectured him about the difference between noise and music. I'd explain and then I'd play a pretty note. *Music*. Then I'd go to the kitchen and drop a pot. *Noise*. I would do this for while.

I haven't written anything since you've been gone. It seems stupid. Paul Simon says that the only place good music comes from is pain. Crap, man. My pain feels empty and boring and I'm seriously thinking about cutting my ears off.

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Dear Sam,  
You were a ~~shit~~ good husband. I want to express my ~~outrage~~ condolences for your

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The brainstem helps to direct your blood to all parts south. Bailey's brain is split into 20 sections and we're in the one that reminds me of Woody Allen dressed as a sperm. I'm thinking about calling him to sample his voice. But kids wouldn't get that very, very funny joke.

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I toggle from the Brain to the internet browser. SFO to ROME. Oh, different life. SFO to JFK. \$326 RT. Add to that the cost of living through the trip and I'm into the zillions already. Maybe I'll walk. I'll make the morning shows if I carry the proper sign. *Grieving Adulteress on Route to Hometown Lynching*. Diane Sawyer would be earnest, striding alongside me in her powder blue running suit.

“These are complex, emotional times for you. How have you been dealing all these months?”

“Just fucking fine.” She won’t break me, but she asks me to watch my language. Take two.

“These are complex, emotional times for you. How have you been dealing all these months?”

“My favorite fish died when I was nine, Diane.”

“Tell me more. Why the fish? Why think about that now?”

“Well, I couldn’t just bury it in the ground naked. So I took a bell pepper from our refrigerator. Remember, I was nine.”

“Yes, you were nine with a dead fish and a bell pepper. What’s going on? Take us back there.”

“I cut the top off, emptied out the seeds, and dropped in the fish—Goldie was its name—and put the top of the pepper back on, like a lid. Then I gave it a proper burial.”

“Amazing.”

“Now I can’t eat bell peppers.”

“So what’s your message here. What do you want America to understand about you.”

“We can all learn as a community.” I think I’ve just turned this into a campaign trail. Change signs maybe and go for it maybe.

“We’re all fish and vegetable matter. Zoe’s car wreck just brought that all home for me. We’re trees and hubcaps too. We’re all just a couple of molecules away from being plastic seat covers.”

I never noticed Diane’s lips before. They’re very nice. I wonder what would happen if I am slammed her with a kiss. I’ll probably never know. I’d say there’s a 97% chance I won’t ever know.

Back to *Bailey’s Brain* and the sound of blood. *Woosh*.

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Tess and I go to *Le Video* to see if they have *Let’s Get Lost*. She’s convinced that I need to dig deeper into Chet’s story to really understand my own. That’s cracked, but I go along because one of my favorite sushi bars is right next door.

“I’m bummed. But he said it’s due back this weekend. I’ll come pick it up and we’ll watch it.” Tess, the planner.

“Do you say tomato or *tomaaaaato*.” Louis says tomato. Ella opens up and lets more air out.

We’re in line waiting for a table. I’m standing in front of a little Japanese garden scene with water and bamboo. There’s a tiny figurine in the pond that’s motion sensitive so as people walk in, it greets them in Japanese. I wave my arm back and forth and get greeted several times. Tess pulls my other arm when our table’s ready.

I’ve known Tess since I moved here 12 years ago. We met outside a George Clinton concert at *Bimbo’s*. We were both waiting for the person we were meant to go with.

“Oh fuck it,” she said when it was already 9:15. Her Capetown accent gave fuck such dignity.

“Are you going in?” We hadn’t spoken the entire half-hour that we’d been standing there, but it felt like we had.

“Yeah. He’ll just have to find me in there. You?”

So that was the first of many events that we were late for and then left early. We both bore easily. It’s the number one best thing to have in common with a friend.

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The sushi shimmers like it’s still in the sea.

“Sara, you don’t look great.”

“What? My face, my clothes—what?”

“Your face, your clothes, your walk—you’re depressed. What can I do?”

“Please, if I was depressed I’d kill myself. I’m not. I’m just going through an ugly phase.” It’s true. And on top of it all, my Chi is stuck. An engineer at the game company told me.

“Come to Zack’s playgroup with me tomorrow. It’ll make you laugh.”

“I’m trying to cut down on playgroups.”

I toss around the seaweed salad in silence. I’m getting flushed and I want to cry. Shit.

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Dear Sam,

We’ve never met but we have a love in common. For ~~the past two years~~ quite a while ~~our~~ your beloved

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Ellie has every right to call me. I have every right to look at the caller ID and not answer.

“Hi.”

“Mom just asked me again. Don’t put me in this position, please.”

“Hi.”

“Hi. Listen, Sara. I’ve always been the one most open to you and your life. Don’t lump me in with Hannah and Mom and Dad. I’ve been the most open with you.”

“I don’t glob you all together. I don’t. Why do you think I do?”

“Well then think of me and my kids and make the visit for *us*.”

“Hannah is coming across the globe with her tribe—”

“Yes, which is why it would be so hurtful if you decided not to come.” She’s scolding me like I’m one of her boys.

“She hasn’t thought for a second that I wouldn’t come. She’s assumed that since I have no *real* life that I can just drop everything and come.”

“Sara, people do things for their families.”

Where’s Taxi? I need to bite someone.

“You think I don’t do things for the family.”

“I think you’ve made choices.”

“Like Hannah moving 4 million miles away isn’t a choice?”  
“I’m not saying we all haven’t made choices. I’m not saying that.”  
“Ah, but my choices are bad choices.”  
“I’m not saying that.”  
“Ellie,” I breathe. “You’re not saying it but you’re saying it.”  
“I’m not”.  
“Then maybe it’s me not saying something. Maybe I’m not being clear.”  
“I think you’re being clear. You’re being selfish. That’s clear.”

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In some deep way I know that life’s a test. And I have this gnawing feeling that I totally spaced and forgot to study. To my horror, my arm always shoots up when the teacher asks something. It’s as if someone else just keeps on volunteering me. *She’ll eat it.*

I have my best thoughts about life in the morning. Nothing’s gone to get messed up yet. When I was a very young, I’d create towns under my blanket in the morning. They’d include everything that I’d need to live. I wouldn’t use props. I’d just use the light by how it passed through the stuffing of my comforter, casting elaborate shapes on my sheets. Big patches of light would become bodies of water or factories. Small dots would be cars or people. I’d create trouble in the town. A fire suddenly breaking out or a gorilla on the loose. I’d have recitals and sing in German and French and receive standing ovations from people dressed in gowns and suits. I’d ration food out to the poor and walk through town with my 3 children in tow. I’d sit up straighter when the town began to grow and extend my legs out when new roads were needed.

Life undercover has its problems. Somewhere in my teens I broke out and went for the bleachers. Under the bleachers, there were even more possibilities.

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I’ve decided on the eye-blinking sound. I’m going with the camera shutter because it more closely relates to what’s really going on. But all I have in my loft is a digital camera, which makes a quiet *toof* sound, not a proper shutter sound. This gives me the perfect reason to meet the guy who finally bought the loft that Mel owned. I think he’s a photographer. Mel was into fine gems and his estate took forever to close. Something about gems belonging to people other than Mel.

“Hi. I’m just below you. Number 6. Sara.”

“Wow, yes, hey. I was wondering when we’d do the friendly neighbor thing.”  
This guy definitely has a Pez collection. “I’m John. But you can call me Jo. People call me Jo. Jay- Oh.”

I have just met the Mr. Rogers of the photography world.

“Well Jo, I’m happy to meet you too.”

“Yeah, what a surprise.” Not really.

“So, was the move-in ok?” I ask.

“Oh, yeah. Nice moving company. Really special guys. Very good with all my photography equipment. Very cordial.”

“Great. I’d love to see--”

“The Mighty Movers they were called. Great name. Gives the customer confidence.” Jo bends his arm and flexes.

So we’ve been in the doorway now for six days.

“Great, well you know I have my first neighbor favor to ask you.”

“Oh, well that’s a good thing. I’m sure of it.”

“Well it’s kind of a camera favor,” I ask shyly.

Jo’s face just dropped it’s howdy-doodiness.

“I’ve got lots of cameras but I’m sorry—I don’t lend them out.” Move over Norman Bates.

“I actually don’t need to take pictures.” I’ve confused him. “I just need to record the sound of a camera taking pictures. The shutter sound.”

“The shutter sound.” He frowns.

“Yeah, you know— *ch-cht*.”

“That’s not a shutter sound.”

“Well, yes I know. That’s why--”

“If anything, it’s more like *cla-sht*.”

“Well, you’d certainly be the one to know.” Maybe I should forget this.

“But it depends on what kind of camera, how big the format. Different cameras make different sounds. Geez. All kinds of sounds. To catalogue those sounds – now that’s something that ought to be done. Thinking about it now. Yes. That would be a good thing.”

I don’t say anything right now. What’s there to say?

“What do you need the sound for?”

Progress.

“It’s for an educational game for kids...about the brain. And I’d like to use the shutter sound for when the eyes blink.”

“Well then I’ve got the perfect camera for that. I’ll be right out with that one.”

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What’s the sound of one hand wringing the other? What’s the sound of a man living alone with his stuff? When a camera takes a picture of another camera, does it fall in love?

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Rain. Taxi and I have a love-hate relationship with it. Tonight, the rain keeps us both up and I’m thinking about you. Are you the rain?

When we took our first walk it had just finished raining. We sat in the car at the Embarcadero and watched the rain blow away towards the sea. Then we jumped out to catch the smells. I watched you as you walked ahead of me for a minute. You clasped your hands behind your back. Tree with red leaves. Cello on fire. Your steady-as-you-gone clashing with your unwieldy brain.

I've given up breathing. I have asthma of the soul and everything feels constricted. I need your kiss to make my lips right again, to open my whole body up again. But this longing is so familiar. It's the way it's always been, you being dead or alive.

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Dance with me, Chantal. God, you look gorgeous today. I don't understand how your son doesn't spend every minute he can with you. He must be a complete jerk. I hope I never have to meet him.

*"All of me, why not take all of me. Can't you see I'm no good without you. Take my arms - I'll never use them. Take my eyes - I'll never use them-- "*

"I want to lose them!" Myrna screams this at me. She hates when I butcher the lyrics.

*"I want to lose them. Your good-bye left me with eyes that cry. Darling I cannot live without you. You took the part that once was my heart. So why not take all of me!"*

"I JUST can't live without you."

"I can't live without you either, Myrna."

"No, it's JUST can't live, not I CANNOT live without you."

And I volunteer for this abuse.

"Chantal, let's me and you blow this joint and go watch the sunset."

"You're such a dream," she says.

"No, but you are such my fantasy." It's a bit scary how close to the truth this is.

"I've got a great view right from my room." She jesters behind her.

"Oh no, we're going for a drive. You have other plans?"

We take John Daly Boulevard and drive right up to the sea. The wind is whipping too much so we just stay in the car. I decide to blame this on my fragility, not Chantal's and she's concerned.

"A young woman like you shouldn't have any health issues."

"You can never time these things, I suppose." I put myself in a half-lotus facing Chantal. She looks so small in my car like she belongs glued to my dashboard. She must weigh no more than 90 lbs. Her eyes shine back at me and I know there's no sunset quite as beautiful as she.

"I still have the Playbill from our other outing." I took Chantal to see *Vagina Monologues*. "You really surprised me with that one."

"I thought it was the perfect way to spend your 80<sup>th</sup> birthday."

"Indeed. It kept me laughing all winter."

"Good." I squeeze her hand. Stems of a drying flower. We fall silent and watch the sun drop slowly out of sight.

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In 1963, Louis Armstrong knocked the Beatles off the charts with his version of *Hello Dolly*. During that same year, Chet Baker, after spending a year in an Italian prison, was arrested in West Germany and expelled to Switzerland, then France. It's unclear if the two men ever met during this soaring period of their careers.

My embouchure is weak. I need to kiss more or maybe never again. Blowing a horn uses the same muscles as kissing and one could easily replace the other. That's where the word *horny* came from.

It's upsetting to think that Bailey's brain is inside my head. I suppose that makes me part Irish. My mother would die at the thought. She has trouble ordering German chocolate cake. Her daughter kissing the Blarney stone would send her over the edge. But I suppose I've already done that multiple times, sent her reeling off in horror. Getting caught making-out with the rabbi's daughter might have been the first time. But it's hard to really know without asking her directly.

"So Sheila, take us back to the first time." Diane's back, wearing a red suede skirt a tad too short for the way she's sitting.

"Jack and I love Sara very much." Mom's holding Dad's hand and they're sitting in our living room. Is that a new couch? Must be.

"No doubt, no doubt." Diane, you are so affirming.

"So you can imagine our shock when our neighbor called with the news." Mom gets weepy but indignant. "I mean they were only nine years old! How did they even know about such deviance?"

Nine? Oh, I forgot about Katie. Come on Ma, the dolls were having sex, not us.

"So did you sit down with Sara. Did you help her understand why that kind of play might worry you?" Diane's hand is resting expressively over her perfect breasts.

"Well, not exactly. No, not really."

Pause. Big, empty, no-sound pause.

"You didn't talk about it then, did you?" Diane Sawyer, investigative reporter.

"No, Jack and I didn't."

"Jack, I understand that you and Sara had a special bond. You used to build things together, and eat sardines straight out of the can together. You were close, Jack. What gave way? Tell us what happened." She is really close to his face now and frankly, I'm quite jealous.

"I have three lovely daughters. Ellie, Hannah and Sara. They are wonderful girls."

"No doubt about that, Jack." Maybe if Diane really knew me, she'd like me.

"What my husband is trying to say is that we love all of our daughters equally."

Diane — pull them back to the topic of the segment or your Emmy is dust.

Wait. Diane turns to face the camera.

"After this break, more with Jack and Sheila Bialik and their battle with the female state trouper who served their daughter a lot more than a summons."

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Tess is coughing.

"I can't move. You go without me."

"What part of you can't move. I'll move it for you."

"Sara, you shouldn't blow this off, though. Don't use me as an excuse."

"Did you know that the *amygdala* is the part of the brain that is responsible for our emotions? And it freaks when we're sick. Scientifically proven."

"Did you design a sound for it?" she asks, trying to deflect my interest in her aching gut.

“Not yet but after we get off the phone, I’m going to drive over there and record your whining.”

“Sara, I’m not letting you in. Go. We already paid for it. Go, go, go.”

Pema Chodron is doing a one-day seminar in Oakland. Tess signed us up for it two months ago, just after the accident. She registered us on-line so we didn’t have to show up someplace where people were barefoot, humming. Pema wrote a book, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*. It’s a good book. I even read it. The thought of hearing her speak on the topic just makes me weep. It reminds me of the first time I went to Glide Church, a multi-everything church in San Francisco. I was fresh from New York. Exhilarated and miserable. The service was come-one-come-all and I just needed to hear some big voices singing. The choir was so powerful—I wept and wept. A large lady was next to me and pulled me into her bosom -- lots of bosom. I just blubbered and when I was done, I came up for air a new woman. We didn’t even spoke, but I’ll never forget her.

Pema somehow reminds me of that woman, though she’s 200 pounds less in weight. Her brown robe could conceal a small animal, which could be me if I ask nicely. We’re in a big room with pillows and sweet smells of tea and flowers. I find my spot. I sit. I settle in. Pema suggests that we stop fighting it. That we move towards our pain, to notice its exquisite truth, she says. I go there, I open. I meet a whole bunch of me there, waiting, weeping too.

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Dear Sam,

I wonder if seeing you would bring me comfort. I wonder if I could look you in the eyes. You ~~were so wrong for~~ couldn’t give Zoe what she needed most and

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Parts of the art set you gave me are missing. Taxi chewed one of the colored pencils. But the paints are all still here and full and scream for you. I can’t open them. They’re here where you left them, your fingerprints still all over the covers. I’m hunched over them, over my work table, moaning like one of those crazy widows dressed in black that show up on the Mid-east news reports. Pema tapped me and now I’m just an annoying well of tears. You’d be the one I’d call if ever I’d feel like this. WHERE ARE YOU?.

Maybe I should open the windows or break them altogether and make a noise that’s louder than what’s inside my head. We talked a lot about insanity and the happy exploding mind. I kept you company in a way you never imagined, you said. And you made me realize how lonely I’d always been before you. And this Sunday night is hot lava down my throat. What grows from me tomorrow will take a miracle.

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Chet Baker lost most of his teeth. The papers blamed it on a series of bar room fights but it was his heroin addiction that slowly ate him away. What doesn't eat us will make us stronger.

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It's time to return the camera and I'm scared. I think about leaving it at his door with some Jell-o and a thank you note. But I'm worried the Jell-o might get stolen.

"Well, hello!" Jo says after swinging his door open.

"Hello. Jo, thanks so much for lending me the camera." I hand him back the case. "I wanted to get it back to you first thing this morning. I hope you didn't miss it over the weekend."

"Well, I did for sure." Oh, dear. "But I always knew where it was so that was a comfort."

"Always right below you. You could have—"

"I've got a little GPS chip on all my cameras." He opens up the case and shows me a tiny sea-green computer chip stuck right next to the tripod hole.

"If you had gone to Mexico, I could have tracked you." he says, "right down to the chaise lounge you were sitting in."

At this point I could have two kinds of reactions. One could be that of a scientist's mind, where I'd marvel at the ingenuity, the technology of this bit of news. The other would be of a more genuine nature, that of a neighbor who just felt spied on.

"That's just too creepy, Jo. You had a tracking device on me. Like I was under surveillance all weekend."

"Oh, no. My camera was being tracked, Sara. Not you." Jo's not defensive but instead very excited like we're at a science fair.

"Jo, you should have told me, out of courtesy."

"Would you like to see how it works?" I imagine Jo as a piece in the Amazing House of Wax. Frozen forever, holding a camera. I gently decline his mystery tour and leave. I keep the Jell-o for myself.

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I have a good sense of rhythm but every so often it's not so great...something about my inner ear. There's a lot of distraction. It's a miracle I can even walk. I'm convinced that's why I fell off the stage and broke my leg. There were just too many things going on.

Romeo is late as usual, so we play another improvisational instrumental. We start swinging *Ave Maria* and I find it very funny. The guitarist caught the melody first and now Henry takes it on trombone. Some folks at the table closest to me look horrified. One man's meat is another man's potato.

This is still a boy's club and I'm treated like what I am—a novelty piece. Every time I take a solo, it feels like the waiter just brought out some baked Alaska, still on fire. *Ooh*. I can do a totally average pass and the applause is just a little heavier for me than for the others. I don't know what to think about this. It feels awful good. I went to a women's college and I'm thinking that they might rescind my diploma if I say any of this

out loud. But seeking equanimity in the music world is like trying to get a dog to brush its teeth. Go ahead and explain what halitosis is until you're blue in the face. The dog's still going to breathe its way into your heart without flossing a single tooth.

\*

Bailey explains that his cerebellum controls his balance, movement and coordination. Things I obviously have trouble with. Bailey says "*No matter how cool your surf board is, or how groovy you look in your wetsuit, without your cerebellum you'd have a rough time taking those waves standing up!*"

We haven't even begun auditions for the final voice of Bailey, so I've been recording my own in the meantime. The studio in my loft is the size of a toll booth but that's fine for me. I like the womb-like space to create in and when I hear voices, the room is small enough for me to trace them back to their source, which is usually me.

I have a box of mini discs full of sounds we collected together. Your voice is all over them. We were sitting under a tractor-trailer once on the pier, eavesdropping on seagulls when I started interviewing you about Sam.

"What's 13 years living with a man feel like?"

"Stop it. Turn that thing off." [*sounds of giggling, seagulls, newspaper rustling under us*]

"Why? Tell me. I'm in reporter mode. I don't even love you right now."

"You're cracked."

"What is it already, a half a year? No. Shit – almost 10 months for us. Due time for a documentary. Speak clearly please, directly into the mic and then you won't be misquoted."

"Sara, you don't want to know about Sam."

"No, not about Sam. About life with Sam."

"How about life after Sam". Oh, I remember this kiss. [*sounds of kissing*] My stomach has suddenly squeezed itself up into my throat. I rewind a bit. [*sounds of kissing*] I must have kept the mic right under our necks. What a luxury to have had the choice of keeping my hands wrapped around the mic instead of you. Now I just pull at the sides of my chair like there's a real purpose to it. Like anything I do could make sense of this. I hit 'play' again.

"Leave him."

"I will."

"When?"

"I don't think in a grid like you."

"I'm in a cage, not a grid."

"We're both in a cage"

"No, you live in a house. With Sam." [*sounds of rustling, me getting up. tape stop*]

\*

Louis Armstrong had plenty of heartache and plenty of wives. My favorite was Lillian Hardin. She was the piano player and arranger for Joe Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, the first band that put Louis on the map. Funny how her name isn't a household word.

But she was big in the 1920's. There's still time yet for the buzz to catch on. Rumi wrote in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and I just saw a kid in the Haight wearing a t-shirt that said *Rumi Rocks*.

Lil encouraged Louis to leave Oliver's band, to get out and do his own thing. He left reluctantly but as soon as he landed in New York and began to hit it big, they started having trouble and eventually Louis and Lil split up. It makes me sad to think about Lillian. I'm going to get a t-shirt made that says *Louis- You Owe Lillian Big Time*.

But isn't that the way? Person One helps Person Two. Person Two finds glory. Person Two forgets to call Person One, one too many times.

Taxi and I have an agreement. If he ever feels like I take him for granted, he drags over a microphone cable from my studio and begins to chew on it. It doesn't happen that much. I think we're doing ok.

\*

I know that seeing my nephews would be wonderful. If they ever could meet Taxi, they'd love him. But if I do go there, I'd like to stay in a separate house just with them. We'd make castles out of Cheez-its and I'd tell them about the pooping pigeons that nest in my building. They love all things gross. I told them about how I once tried to dissect a possum that I thought was dead. They shrieked with joy.

Robbie is ten and wearing an elaborate shield made out of toilet paper rolls. Jonah and David are seven, twins, tied back to back around a tree in the yard. It's a freezing April in Westchester, 2 years ago, and I'm the law.

"Let these hostages free. Or I'll do something just rotten, really rotten," I threaten.

"Never!" Robbie has the twins tied up with garden hose and he pulls it tighter. They're giggling and I'm doubting my role here.

"So maybe staying tied up on this desert island is how you want it to be, do you?" Jonah laughs but David has to pee.

"Robbie, I gotta go bad." He giggles in pain.

"How rotten is rotten?" Robbie asks, still stuck on my threat.

"I'll make a deal." I notice that Ellie is watching me from the kitchen window. She looks sad. "Let David go and I'll take his place and then he'll save us big time when he gets back."

"David can't save us!" Jonah heartily protests. David elbows Jonah from around the tree and the two of them wriggle and claw at each other just enough to loosen the hose and break free. They run off and chase into the house. Robbie still wants to know.

"What's really rotten, like give me a clue. What would you do?"

"You just lost your prisoners. Too late. Wave to your mom. Hi, Mom!" Ellie waves back.

On the plane ride home from that trip even Diane Sawyer couldn't have gotten me to talk. The window seat held me in so I wouldn't spill out all over the sky.

"Are you really happy?" Ellie had inquired with a strained face, just before I left.

"I'm many things. Happy, complicated." I didn't understand what she was looking for. "Right now, I'm feeling mostly constipated from all this heavy food we had."

"Me, too."

“Are you asking me because you want details?” I was hoping.

“The boys had such a blast.”

She didn’t.

“I just want to make sure you know that. They think you’re so cool.” She put her thumb up.

“I am cool. Ellie, why do you look like you’re in pain right now?” She suddenly seemed all flustered like she ate something bad. Then she began to cry but she didn’t want me to hold her. But she didn’t want me *not* to hold her. So my hands holding her arms seemed safe. We were standing there in her kitchen alone and the arriving cab made no sense. I felt disgusting and disgusted. I kissed her cheek and walked out of the house crying too.

\*

I know Chantal would adopt me officially if I just asked. She’s up for anything except crawfish.

*You Don’t Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans* has more lyrics than just those but I haven’t a clue as to what they are. I sing the chorus, and I play trumpet for the verses. Myrna wheels over to scold me.

“How’d you get through life so far cheat’n like that?” She’s wearing a necklace made from macaroni. “You ought to be arrested!”

“I only have room for certain things in my brain,” I say, defending myself.

“And what brain might that be?” She wheels back and laughs so hard her dentures click loose. I join her, my teeth firmly in place. It takes restraint to not tell her about Bailey.

“Maybe you should do some entertaining, Momala Myrna.”

“Oh, please dear, don’t.” Chantal warns me of the terrible mistake I just made.

*“It’s not the pale moon that excites me, that thrills and delights me. Oh no. It’s just the nearness of yooh-u!”*

\*

Sometimes I worry that I’ll walk up to my loft’s building and Taxi will be lying by the entrance dead. Chet Baker fell out of his hotel room window and died. Maybe that’s how Taxi will go too.

Pleasant thoughts to clean tubs by.

\*

“Believe me you, I know the temporal lobe deadline can be pushed,” I say, with ridiculous authority. We’re having our weekly production vomit and I’m here to induce. “My back-log is right in line with engineering’s. If we just agree to cut and paste this whole schedule back two weeks we’ll all be in sync again. They haven’t even cast Bailey’s voice yet.”

Michael has come in from the east coast to meet with us. He’s the only producer I’ve worked for that dresses like a CPA.

“I just found out that beta testing is scheduled for July,” he says, “and we left wiggle room in there so I think these next three months will be fine. I’m not really worried.”

“Good then.” I can go home now.

“But I also want to mention that the New York office wants to do some kind of gallery show with Zoe’s work. All the illustrations that she’s done for EnZone over the years.”

My feet feel for the ground. Gone.

“We’ve spoken with her husband and he’s very supportive of the idea. There’s no firm date yet, but the opening would be over a weekend in June or July so maybe some of you could take the trip.”

I wonder how obvious it is, this stake in my heart. If my blood stains the conference room carpet, I’ll pay for it. I’ll steam clean the whole place, suck up the whole building as if it never existed.

I know there’s a discussion going on right now but somehow I’ve gotten myself outside and into my car and I’m driving. I hope I excused myself with a semblance of grace. I pass my street twice and finally turn in and park. The door to the loft is too heavy. I need dynamite. I fall onto my bed expecting nothing.

\*

I wake up in the middle of the night. My head so noisy with thoughts I mistake the sounds for the lights being on.

\*

“Tess, there’s going to be a show.”

“The band’s usual gig, right? Good, we’ll all go again.”

“No, a show of Zoe’s art. An exhibit. But in New York.”

“Oh. New York? I don’t get it. Who’s doing this?” she asks, urgently.

“It’s horrible.”

“Who did she work with in New York?”

“EnZone.”

“Oh my god. Can they do that?”

“Five years worth of work that they paid for. But to put her name on *that* work as if it represents her art. It’s crap. And they’re going to capitalize on it. Memorialize then capitalize. I can just imagine a big print of one of her illustrations and then a stack of rebate cards hanging there underneath to sell the game that it goes with. I’m sick just thinking about it.”

“Sara, this can’t be your battle. No way.”

“I’m just disgusted by it.”

“Take a break from EnZone. Take a break and start fresh somewhere else, anywhere else.”

“Maybe.”

I’m holding Zack on my lap. He’s reciting a poem. I’m sure of it.

“Zack, the pituitary gland is the size of a tiny pea, but without it, you’d stay this size forever.”

\*

The mirror in my bathroom doesn’t lie.

The lighting in my bathroom should be improved so that as the mirror tells the truth, I can look better than this. I’m in front of it now, negotiating. I resolve to call these age spots new freckles.

We’re all three years apart. Ellie just turned 44 and I’ve given her those six years to get ahead of me, to see life first. Hannah’s the monkey in the middle, but not really. It doesn’t feel like we’re in a pecking order or line or even a triangle. It feels like we’re buoys. We’re just bobbing up and down randomly with waves crashing around us.

Hannah has six children. I’ve met the eldest three because they were born while she still lived in the States. We both eventually made moves towards homes that made more sense for us, to places where we didn’t have to explain ourselves all the time. I’ve always found comfort in that similarity. Hannah thinks the comparison is nothing short of sacrilegious.

“I think this zebra-striped wallpaper may have affected our development,” she once remarked when we were sitting in our bedroom. She was just about to go to college. She was leaving me alone with Mom and Dad for three long years.

“I think it’s made me insane,” I said.

“I don’t think it’s affected us negatively necessarily,” Hannah continued, “I’m thinking that maybe it’s kept us awake for a few more hours over the years.” This was Hannah having a moment of nostalgia before she moved away.

“You can tear it off and hang it in your new dorm room. And think of me.”

“I’ll think of you,” she said somewhat reassuringly.

“Me here, with the wallpaper.”

“And the hot-pink carpet.”

“And this black door that looks like a prison entrance,” I say. “As soon as you’re gone, I’m going to re-paint the room.” I never did...too much work.

When Hannah left for Boston, I had two more weeks of summer. I burrowed my head in the sand a lot. I dreamed of mermaids. Anything to avoid the feelings I was having about life at home without Hannah’s company. I called her during her first week away.

“Have you met your husband yet?”

“Don’t be a jerk.”

“I give you a month to meet Shlomo and bring him home for kugel.”

It took a little more time than that. But not much.

\*

Ellie has always been in sync with Hannah and with everyone. Ellie always uses a spoon, never anything too sharp. She scoops gently at life and never digs too deep. When I feel jabbed by her, it’s because I know that when used carelessly, even a spoon can poke somebody’s eye out.

\*

I imagine you in your car. I should have been with you. I see your hands gripping the steering wheel and your eyes flashing around crazily...your mouth taking in its last gorgeous breath.

I fantasize about breaking into your house. Sam's at work and I burst through the door and fall into your clothes. I wrap them around me. They're like layers of sound. Your breath in my ear pounds my body back to life. We're together again. I'm not giving a shit that you're married, that there's a good-bye with every hello. I'm spilling like the ink from Colette's pen...scandalous and prayerful, waiting to be discovered by your eyes again.

I'm wrapped in the shirts of a dead woman, on the floor of a closet.

If I could, I'd stop my head from spinning back to you. Maybe walk with a vice around it to keep me thinking ahead. They wanted to put me in a brace when I was young for my scoliosis. Maybe a contraption like that would do the trick.

\*

I'm thinking about fate.

Bruce Weber took pictures of Chet Baker. Jo is no Bruce Weber but I'm wondering why he moved into my building. Jo's strange enough to make great art.

"What do you photograph mostly? Portraits? Still life?" I'm standing outside near the recycling bins and Jo's been recycling.

"Oh, I'm pretty specialized." He walks back into our building. The soundtrack is a brooding toy piano.

"That's how to make a living these days," I say. "Find a niche and stay there."

"Oh, the niche found me you might say." We're at the second floor and he's about to ascend to the third.

"Do you ever do portraits?"

"Every picture I take is a portrait I suppose." He cocks his head like a bird. "I would like to show you a few. Yes, that would be ok to show you a few of my pictures." He's agreeing with himself and I suppose that's good.

The interior of Jo's loft feels breakable, like the whole place is on a shelf that says "You break it, you buy it". I stand frozen in the entry, like the bull that shouldn't enter the shop.

"Come and sit just right here. It's the best place to see my work. There's no glare here," he says, patting a stool. There's no glare anywhere. He's blackened all the windows except one large one that's on the far end of the room. I sit and watch him pull out a large box from one of the drawers beneath the table.

"I grew up in a small town," he says.

"Where?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter. But in this small town there was one factory and all it made was gravel. Gravel for roads." He opens the box. The first page is blank. "I'd spend hours circling the big piles of gravel, just hours and hours."

"So...gravel inspired you to become a photographer. Well, that's great," I say.

“Pieces of gravel. Little stones that when set together create a path and that path can lead to anything.”

I wonder if getting high with Jo would be any different.

“So parts of a whole—”

“Exactly! But in the case of roads, they are made from so many things.” His eyes are bulging like two hard-boiled eggs. “Stones and glass and sand. And when that’s all heated together it creates movement! Because people GO on roads. They GO!”

I want to say ‘Halleluyah’. I’m expecting to see some photographs of roads now, please. But Jo’s just looking at me, all bug-eyed and expectant, as if I’m the one who’s got some pictures to show.

“Jo, you seem really connected to your subject.”

“As a kid, the gravel really made me think. I used to pretend that I was a piece of gravel. I thought about the whole concept of parts of the whole. I wondered whether I was a part of something bigger and if I was, what was it? Was I the road or was I traveling on the road? I still don’t know, I still don’t know the answer to that one.” Jo looks far away, down the road, as the road. Not sure.

“Well, isn’t that the truth,” I say, suddenly sounding like Jo.

“What’s the truth?”

Whoops. I don’t know.

“Well, your story about roads and pieces. It’s about life, Jo.” Help, please.

“I suppose,” But Jo looks disappointed and then he abruptly says, “I have to go.”

“Oh.” Bummer. “Right now?”

“Yeah, I have an appointment,” he says.

“Well, ok. I have to hit the road too, I suppose.” Jo didn’t get that. “Well, it was nice to talk with you. Maybe I’ll see your photographs another time?”

Jo picks up his camera bag and another knap sack and leads me to the door. We walk down the stairs and I stop at the second floor as he continues down. I wish I had a tracking device on him, like he has on his cameras. So I can follow him on one of his road trips.

\*

The brain is made up of small parts called neurons that are way smaller than pieces of gravel. Each neuron has tiny branches that come out of it that allow it to connect to other neurons. I need a sound for that connection. When that connection is made over and over again, that’s learning. I need to find a sound for learning.

Sometimes when I get stuck, I take a bath. So I’m in the bath now, trying to think of the sound for learning. Two neurons connect enough times and that creates memory, so learning is memory, connection. Knees up, shoulders out, shoulders in, knees out. Why can’t they make tubs for tall people?

I’m in my kitchen—where I usually go to find most of my sounds after I’ve taken a bath. Since learning happens gradually, I’m recording the sound of bubbling water, then the sound of a kettle blowing its whistle. So when Bailey tries to use chop sticks for the first few tries, the water will start to boil slowly, then faster and faster as he drops less and less food onto the floor. And when the food finally reaches his mouth, the kettle will blow.

\*

Tess can't control Zack's tantrum but she really wants to sip some tea with me and talk. Her house is just big enough so that if we locked Zack in his room we wouldn't hear him down in the kitchen. But that would be mean.

He's got the plastic measuring cups all spread out in front of the stove and seems content for a minute.

"This is me and my life," Tess laments.

"It's like Lucy with little Ricky."

"It feels like Martha Stewart sometimes."

Zack just pushed the smallest cup under the refrigerator.

"Martha doesn't even have kids. She has ornaments made out of old keys and lint balls," I say, watching Zack. "Does Zack really think he can fit under there?" I ask. He's trying awful hard, face first.

"No, but he'll try and we can have our tea." The tea is from South Africa, and it's steeping on the table between us. "So what's the score about the trip? And I was thinking maybe if you decide not to go, I could ask Ben to handle Zack alone and you and I could take a trip. Maybe?"

"I've still got time, nearly two months. I'm thinking...having conversations in my head with each family member. It's noisy."

I get up and pull the cup out from under the refrigerator. I can't bear watching Zack fail anymore. I wish I could spit up like him — spontaneously and without shame.

"Taking a trip with you sounds so good," I say whistfully.

"We could go soak somewhere."

The tea is still too hot, so I stir it and imagine our limp bodies sweating under big-sky stars. Our breasts floating like four moons. I see us somewhere up north, no Zack, no *Bailey's Brain*. There's an I.V. slowly dripping strawberry smoothies directly into our veins mixed with just a touch of vodka to keep us from thinking too much.

\*

Taxi walks me to the corner store where I pick up vegetables to keep me alive. This organic communist shop is the only one within walking distance to my loft so I suffer through their system of 'passing very mindfully down the aisles', like the sign tells me to. I thought only video stores had 'employee picks' but this store does too. Under a stack of brewers yeast packets for example, there's an index card pinned on the shelf that tells me why Joyce thinks this brand really is the one to swear by for both taste and medicinal impact. But it's Russia who I really want to date. Her index cards always sound like erotica. In the bulk foods room, she has a note pinned up under the miso paste that reads "*I don't want to talk about this miso. I just want to take you where this miso takes my mouth. I can't use words for that.*" Four pounds, please.

Today, I'm here for fennel. I just read a recipe for fennel and apple salad and it sounded delicious and easy enough to make—only six ingredients total. I can handle that. The fennel looks so awkward and I think it's a vegetable gone wrong. I think it was

meant to be a bagpipe. Just look at it. I love the tufts of hair on top. They're sprigs of dill hitching a ride.

When one lives alone, she can eat a lot of just one thing for dinner. She doesn't need a lot of courses or chit-chat.

\*

Pretty soon I'll be giving Louis and Chet both a run for their money.

\*

I write on post-it notes a lot to feel a sense of accomplishment. When I have a stack done, I might have lyrics ready for music. Or maybe just a shopping list. The 2 x 2 format has promise.

Ellie gets stuff done all the time. She got her law degree while falling successfully in love with Mark. She went on to get a 2<sup>nd</sup> masters in education at night while renovating her kitchen with an Italian craftsman named Benito. Ellie has always been like this, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.

When she married Mark, I was still in college having an affair with Rada, my physics professor. I couldn't bear to have her see the ice sculptures at the reception so I didn't bring her. Also I didn't bring her for a few other reasons.

That midnight-blue taffeta bridesmaid's dress made me a real looker.

*Remind me to introduce you to Josh, he's the man standing with your mother, one lady said.*

*So you're the last one to go, said another. I know a very tall fellow who'd love your height.*

The reception made me cry more than the ceremony did. I felt like a piñata feels after taking a beating. All that violent, good, clean fun just got to me.

The circle dancing made me dizzy. My body walked up to the microphone without asking my permission.

"I have some words of wisdom for you that I learned in physics class this semester." I took a sip of water, and silently toasted Rada.

"When two heavenly bodies meet in the universe, they circle each other, they enter into an orbit. The distance...[something profound]...naturally occurring factors...keep up their perpetual attraction. So for you, Mark and Ellie, let's call those forces love...[something funny and Jewish]...Mark, I know the heavenly body that is my sister Ellie....offering you my lifetime's worth of astrological notes on her ...guide you both towards the happily ever after."

And then I sang something that I forgot most of the words to.

And then years rolled by and Ellie and Hannah kept announcing births every 2 years. Mom and Dad kept placing those announcements in the temple bulletin. I didn't know what to announce, having been clearly told not to announce too much.

\*

Dear Sam,

It's been a while since I've tried to write you. ~~It's kind of tragic the way I~~  
This time I'm starting off with a joke. Knock – knock. *Who's there?* Interrupting Cow.  
*Interrupting Cow w--?* Moooo!

\*

“What makes you so sure they're fake?” I'm usually not skeptical about Chantal's intuition. But Ms. Ohio's breasts look quite natural to me.

“Well, she just turned around so you can't see anymore. They should make them stand still for a few minutes so we can inspect better,” Chantal says, leaning towards the TV.

“We need a bigger screen!” Myrna wants high-definition breasts.

“I wonder if it's illegal? I do think it should be for beauty contests,” Chantal says.

“I think it is. Just like steroids are illegal for Mr. Universe,” I say with authority. I love Mr. Universe. I always flex along with the TV.

“19 inches,” Myrna mutters. “Shouldn't we ask for a 27 inch one?”

Thinking about Mr. Universe, 19 inches seems terrifying.

“The bathing suit competition's next. We'll see Ms. Ohio again and then I'll show you. I do think I'm right. A woman knows,” Chantal says.

She settles in closer to the screen as the procession begins with the A states. I pick up my trumpet, turn off the volume and play *America the Beautiful*. The other residents in the room stir into consciousness. I hope they don't think I'm a patriot.

“I should teach you the Canadian anthem some time.” Chantal is from Quebec, which accounts for her slight French accent. She moved to the west coast nearly fifty years ago to teach ethics at a theological seminary. She says she met her husband there, unethically.

“He was six years my junior, but we were certainly to be married. Bradley looked like he was from somewhere else. I felt that way until the day he died.”

Iowa was the somewhere else. Bradley became a landscape architect by way of divinity school. Just to meet his wife, Chantal says. “That's the only reason a man like Bradley would sit through an ethics class. Something brought us to each other.”

Luke was their one child who Chantal says was delightful until puberty hit.

“He just went from being a monkey to a monster. It took two weeks.” My neighbor Mel was still alive when she told us this and he tried to explain Luke to us. Mel had one lung still working.

“It's all very confusing for a young man.” *Breath*. “Imagine opening up your wallet.” *Wheeze*. “You are expecting to find a dollar. One dollar.” *Bigger longer wheeze*. “But what you find instead is a thousand dollars. You want to spend it all at once!”

“Luke is 51.” Chantal gets exhausted just saying his name. “You'd think he'd be all spent by now, all that empty energy used up. My son doesn't understand how to just sit down. How to sit and just think for moment. I think that Luke would sooner break down a door before he'd think to try the handle.”

I wonder about Luke and whether I could take him on. I wonder if he thinks of his mother. Maybe there's someone visiting Sheila and Jack in New Jersey right now, thinking big, bad thoughts about me. But they would be wrong, mostly.

\*

I'm reading the paper on the steps of Tess's house, waiting for her. The personals section is the only real news I read. Here's one from a guy who's looking to go for a long drive with someone... *'something about traveling makes me feel alive. Come with me!'*

But I don't judge. I answered a similar ad to go cross country when I decided to move out here from New York. I was young and broke enough to justify splitting the gas with a total stranger.

Snow was going to Seattle. It would be a fast trip, her ad said, and she was looking for a second driver. I went to meet her in Chinatown where she was an apprentice with an acupuncturist. When she came out from the back of the store to greet me, I knew we'd be ok in a car together. She seemed sturdy.

I let her prick me with her Chinese pins a few times while going across the country, somewhere in Ohio, then again in South Dakota. She let me kiss her a few times. It was all fine except for our pit stop burial. I hadn't seen her pack the antelope skull in the car. It was on its journey home, she said. She'd taken it from Yellowstone Park years ago. But since studying Chinese medicine, she'd realized the importance of laying souls to rest.

"So does the antelope know it's going back home?" I strain to ask.

"I suppose so," Snow said. Snow wasn't her real name but I was afraid of what was. Flake, maybe.

"It's only a 16-mile hike in. I remember exactly where I found it."

I thought that a five-mile walk with lots of snacks seemed like a better plan. We ran into some hail and some moose. The hail I took a photo of, just incase Snow was pelted to death. I could prove that I didn't do it. But the moose froze me. I couldn't even blink. And there was Snow carrying the head of a dead antelope...bad message to the moose.

Snow was calm though, like a professional bird-watcher. She explained that the mama was the problem here. It was sort of like this: A moose walks in to a bar, but it turns out that the moose is actually a baby moose and its mama has been waiting for her at a table in the back. The guy sitting at the bar doesn't know about the mama moose and tries to pick-up the baby moose with a line like *nice nose* and suddenly he's stamped by the mama moose from behind.

Snow instructed me to do something but I forget what. I do remember that we stood perfectly still until the moose finally left. Snow knew what to do. She gained my respect. I even buried the antelope skull with her. I burned some sage and pretended to cry.

We arrived in San Francisco intact. Snow primed me for what was to be series of tests to see how long the New Yorker in me would survive.

\*

Tess is back but without Zack.

"Did you lose Zack? So sad."

“Ben’s parents are here for the weekend. They’re off sight-seeing. That’s why I thought we could go be decadent somewhere. Sorry I’m late.”

“I was early.” We stay on the steps for while. There’s something dead and small on the sidewalk that’s being pecked at by pigeons. We move inside to her kitchen table.

“I’m not allowed to tell you this but I will anyway,” Tess says.

“What?” Tess always gets the dirt first by working at the paper.

“You know that old age home you volunteer at?”

“What about it?”

“City College is clearing the lot that it’s on. They own the land. They’re building some housing and lecture halls there. We’re doing a story on it.”

“What about the home?” I imagine Myrna’s wheelchair, rolling empty down the street.

“Demolishing it, I guess. They have this whole high-tech thing going in with broadband this and that. But the story is bigger. Lots of political issues. Bond issues, who will pay. All that stuff that makes for good articles.”

“What about the residents of the home?”

“They’ll be moved, I guess.”

“What do you mean ‘they’ll be moved’? They’re not cattle.”

“It’s big business. Developers kick tenants around all the time.”

“So is that the controversy?” I ask in a huff.

“No, not really,” Tess says calmly. “There’s no real controversy. Just a lot of players who want their names on the new buildings.”

“Do the tenants know? How long will it be before they have to leave?”

“Six months, two years. It’s not clear because they haven’t raised all the funds yet. I knew you’d be upset,” she says with doe eyes. “I’m really sorry. So I thought it would be good to tell you.”

I’m thinking about Chantal car camping for the rest of her life. I’ll have to go with her because she doesn’t have a car. We’ll have several coolers full of fine food. I’ll watch her sleep every night and wonder if she dreams in French.

\*

I’m in my loft counting the holes in my cement ceiling. One of Taxi’s ears keeps on flipping back. It’s your fault.

It’s coming up on three months and I still think of Sam with you somewhere stupid and unnatural like at a gathering in another couple’s house. You were always bored at those things, and you’d go find an empty room and call me. “I miss you,” you’d say. I’d really resent you in that moment, while still trying to climb through the phone towards your voice.

I take my phone and stick it under my bed.

\*

My trumpet resents me this week. I put it back in its case so I don't have to see it glaring at me. Chet used to play trombone but it proved to be too big for his young-boy body, so he switched. I never even thought of the trombone as an option. Hang-gliding maybe, at one point.

When Chet got out of jail the first time, he released an album called "Chet is Back". He assumed that people knew he was gone. I'm thinking about naming my first album "Sara is Back" to make people think they missed me the first time.

I have enough songs to fill a few albums, but only three or four songs are good enough. Romeo has sung them with the band. He says that the lyrics are from a guy's perspective. He wonders always how I could understand a man's heart so well. I tell him it starts by appreciating a woman's heart first. Romeo doesn't deserve his namesake.

\*

Mom and Dad want me to come east too. I hear this through Ellie mostly. They want me there for the family photo. The last one with all of us there had only three of Hannah's kids. Now there will be all six plus Ellie's three boys.

Kiev will be missing. The vet put him down after finding a brain tumor. My Dad buried him in the yard a few years ago and we spoke on the phone that day. He sounded empty.

"The worms will have a good meal this week." Dad had his theories about death and dying. I wondered if he cried and whether Mom had caught his tears earlier that day. I asked him where he buried Kiev and he said right near my goldfish. He remembered.

On days when I feel brave, I sit and think of Dad. I let his language fill my head, his explanations of how and why things work, like clocks and waves. When times were less complicated, I'd ask him luxurious questions about space travel and black holes. His astronomy students made me jealous. They got most of his attention.

Dad has always wanted me to be happy and once told me that if I dressed nice and took care of myself, then the men would come. That, coming from a man who wore the same tweed jacket for 30 years, but I still knew what he meant. His mastery of the universe didn't extend to what made me tick. He had no charts for me or my sky. He insisted that between science and God, there were great arguments for why a woman should only lay down with a man. He wrote these to me in letters that I've saved for the past 15 years.

*"...We're not animals, so we have reasoning to help us make choices. These choices are informed by the greater good, the bigger picture....physical impulse should not drive your life, especially given the needs of the world today and the laws laid down for us thousands of years ago..."*

I've Xeroxed these letters to use in collages or as wrapping paper. I went begrudgingly to a bridal shower once for an EnZone employee. She found the wrapping as bizarre as I found her shower.

I wonder what Dad would say about Zoe, a woman who made choices based on some of those theories that he continues to believe in even more so today. What would he say about her falling in love with me while laying down properly with her man? I've always wondered how the heart figures into his equations about why things are the way they are.

\*

I run and run and run all the way to the end of my block. My hip still hurts but I have no one to sue or even harass about it. The x-rays show that my bones have healed up nicely. The doctor suggested that maybe my hip over-compensated when the cast was still on, so that's why it's sore now, even after weeks with no crutches or cast.

I can't believe I played that night. I was so dizzy with sadness about the crash, so sick and lonely. I was on autopilot when I showed up at the gig. Falling off the stage was maybe just me screaming for help. It was a bad choice. But in the moment, my puppet strings just broke and down I fell. When Tess showed up in the emergency room, I finally had a melt down. I just needed to break my leg to get there.

Walking is better for me now than running, even though the adrenaline hit would do me good. I'm so behind with work that I'm thinking an hour away won't make or break Bailey's future or mine.

I sit on a bench in a small park near the freeway entrance. The sign reads '*No adults allowed unless accompanied by a child*'. I figure Taxi can be my cover story, since no species is specified. There are no children in the park anyway, so I know the woman sitting next to me is also guilty. She's wearing a t-shirt that says '*Five Mile Nun Run*'. I can't resist.

"Great t-shirt. Did you run? Are you a nun?"

She has a delightful laugh.

"No, it's funny though, isn't it? I bought it because I loved it."

"The idea of a bunch of nuns running – it's great"

"Yeah, and the rhyme. The whole thing," she agrees.

We both continue to smile at the thought. Taxi poops near the swing set.

Charming.

"My cue." I get up to scoop and as I return to sit, she gets up.

"Bye!" The nun run lady runs off.

So that was quick. I was ready for a hearty exchange...an excuse to not walk further and to not go back to work. To just sit and make sense of things like the value of funny t-shirts. I'm devastated for a few seconds. She'll miss me terribly in a block or so, for sure.

\*

Some muscles have involuntary movements controlled by the brain stem. Without them, hearts wouldn't pump blood and stomachs wouldn't digest food. Designing sounds for the heart muscle is easy, but the digestion sounds all seem too real and gurgly. I think I should go macro and use the sounds of the ocean, churning stones to bits.

Keeping sand away from the microphone is critical, so I take it out of its case only at the very last minute when I'm right up to the water. It's mid-day and Baker Beach is mostly empty except for a few stragglers looking for shells. No naked people today. I left Taxi home, for fear that he'd knock me and all my sound gear into the water. If he did that, I'd have to put him to sleep so he wouldn't have to bear me hating him for the rest of his life.

The surf is loud and I get a perfect sample. It's moments like these when I remember why I wanted to be an oceanographer as a kid. I loved screaming at the beach. No matter how loud I screamed, it still wasn't enough to be shushed quiet. I imagined working for years and years in vast spaces above and below the sea, where my bigness would be ok, unnoticed and not curtailed. I spent days after school on the jetties. There were still seahorses back then. I suppose my collecting them didn't help with their being so rare now.

Back in the studio, I import the sound file of the sea. This tech stuff is still a miracle to me. Just twenty minutes ago, I was ankle deep in saltwater listening to these same sounds. Bailey, do you appreciate this? I'm making you sound like a chamber orchestra. And you look better than you deserve to look, thanks to Zoe. You are one lucky toy.

\*

I don't suppose I can skip this week's production meeting, but I try my best. I sit in my car in the parking lot staring at the back door of the building. People are walking in who I've seen for years but whose names I've never cared to learn. I know what most of them do. There's so-and-so who does industrial design stuff for the packaging.

I had called Tess the second I got home from the first production meeting for the new series called *Bailey's Brain*. The meeting required the presence of all outside contractors.

"...and then directly across from me, sits the most gorgeous woman I have ever seen."

"Uh oh."

"She's like a dart. Piercing. Measured but crazy all at once," I said breathlessly.

"She sounds scary."

"We are." I already knew.

\*

Sitting here now in that same conference room is tearing a hole in me from my throat to my stomach. The tiled ceiling above me is lowering down and down and I am a squashed sad woman.

"Bright shirt, Sara." I think that was a compliment sort of from someone. These meeting are so unnecessary. But if I don't show up, I become dispensable, I'm told.

"We're almost there," I report, using the 'we' to include Taxi. "Engineering still owes me a timing list." Blame things on entire departments. Today's meeting is just dumb. Nothing huge is going to come out of it and we could've met somewhere like Six Flags amusement park or Marine World. I think all meetings should be held while standing on line for something else. It would feel like we're getting somewhere.

\*

If it were only that easy...I would quit what ever I was doing and tour the world. I would live in Prague and Paris. Gigs would just come. I'd learn to paint on the side, too. Maybe I would fall in love again with someone available. Maybe single even.

I have a sensible shoe fetish so I'd buy shoes and ship them back to my P.O. box along with money every month to support Taxi. I'd build up a European following that would rival that of Chet's. I couldn't compete with his prison gigs, but he could've never cornered the synagogue circuit the way I would. I'd play trumpet for high-holiday services in Morocco. National Geographic once did a photo essay on the temples there. They were all missing a female trumpet player from San Francisco. The market's wide open.

I have traveled and not just in my head. But I'd always assumed music would take me around and around the world throughout my whole life. Sitting here making sounds for *Bailey's Brain* seems limited compared to what I'd thought about I'd be doing just inches away from middle-age. But I blame that on me not getting into the scene quite enough. Like me not getting tattoos and me not chit-chatting.

Louis lost wives for his career. Chet created his career to look for wives. I play trumpet mostly for retired people who sit in chairs attached to tubes. I'm acknowledging this fact completely.

\*

Maybe I should bring Jo home to my parents. At this point, anything with a penis would do, I'm sure. Dad and him would talk about the speed of light and Mom would buy him sweaters and man things. Our marriage would make the society pages. Diane Sawyer wouldn't miss this chance for an exclusive. She always has the first right of refusal from our family.

"When you met, did you know? Did you both just know?"

"I knew." Jo knew.

"And you Sara? Take us back to the first moment you met Jo." Diane still has a crush on me and this news is devastating to her probably, at some level. She's doing a great acting job right now.

"You ever scuba dive, Diane?" I ask her.

"Yes, many times."

"You have to coordinate your breathing just right or you'll gasp for air and maybe die," I say.

"Yes, that's very true." Diane Sawyer, chicken of the sea.

"And all the time you're focusing on the breathing, you're also going 'ooh' and 'ahh' as beautiful fish are dancing before your eyes."

"So is that what it's like, being in love with Jo?" she asks.

"No, not at all." What on earth gave her that idea?

"I see," she says but doesn't. I imagine her lips around the big breathing apparatus. I'm submerged with her, telling her in sign language that her hair looks lovely entwined with the seaweed.

"So there you are with pounds of air tanks strapped to your back," I continue. "Your body's wrapped in thick black rubber and the fish are looking at you like you're pathetic."

“Are you feeling humiliated in some way, Sara? Has falling in love with Jo been difficult?”

It’s not just about her looks, it’s also about that razor-sharp intuition.

“You ever get the bends, Diane?”

“Thank God, no.” She adjusts in her chair like she just went through some cobwebs.

“I did once,” Jo interjects. “Not scuba diving but when I was a young man, the doctor said that what I had was like having the bends. He said that my body experienced a dramatic change in pressure.”

Diane shows interest. This annoys me.

“What Jo is alluding to is the fact that life is filled with fluctuating experiences,” I say. “There’s no sense in trying to predict when the next wave might hit.” I’m trying to keep with the water theme while also insinuating my erotic intentions.

“You two are so beautiful.” Are not. “What’s the plan?” she asks. “How are you going to celebrate each other’s lives and your lives together?”

“Scuba dive, I suppose.” With you, Diane. Let’s snuggle in coral reefs and live according to the buddy system.

“We’re going to spend lots of time in the outdoors.” Coming from Jo, that’s a threat. I wince.

“Your parents seem so happy, Sara. With all that’s gone on before you met Jo, can you tell us how this might repair some damaged bridges between all of you?”

“Bridges? You mean the ones that were burned down, and completely and utterly demolished? Those are all being replaced by tight-ropes. If they can hold a big elephant, they can surely hold all of us.”

Diane turns to the camera. That’s our cue to look there, too. Jo loves this part. He walks up and puts his whole face in the lens.

“Hello America!”

\*

I decide not to tell Chantal about City College’s demolition plans. At least for now, we can all have a normal Thursday morning together.

Chantal has known that I’ve been sad about a very special friend’s death. I don’t think she knows exactly how special the friendship was, but she’s seen how devastated I’ve been for the past few months and that’s enough for her to go on. She knew my broken leg wasn’t the only source of my aches and pains.

Today, it’s taken me a while to find her. I walk past the kitchen where the smell of melting crayons is wafting out. She’s sitting in a room in the back of the building, the one with the birds and exercise bikes.

“I suppose these finches are happy,” Chantal says. “They have each other and plenty of food and visitors.”

“I’m sure they’d rather be outside.”

“Maybe not,” she says. “It scary out there with all the oil spills and pollution. I think they’re better off here with us.”

I have this flash of Chantal sleeping under a freeway clutching a birdcage with two purple finches.

“Do you think they understand they’re in captivity? When they see birds outside the window, they must know,” I say and I think about a recurring dream that I have of being a fish in a fish bowl, watching fish swim by outside.

“These birds were born into cages. They know no other way, I suppose.” Chantal seems sleepy today, or something. I sit next to her and watch the birds hop around their little poles.

“Happy to see me?” I ask.

“Always. Always a delight.” She perks up a bit. “How are you, sweet Sara? Where’s your trumpet today?”

“No trumpet today. I’m just here to visit with you.” Sometimes I feel like I want to tell her how important she is to me. But I don’t.

“Well that’s lovely. If I had known I would have baked you a cake.” She laughs sadly. “Tell me, how has it been for you lately? I worry about you. You need a girlfriend to take care of your big heart. Wish I knew someone.”

“I wish too. I suppose all the great catches are back in Canada. None left in this country.”

“When I moved out here in the 50’s, I had my first taste of your world.”

I think that’s a strange choice of words.

“It was in the water back then too, I suppose. How were you with it?” I asked.

“Intrigued.” Chantal smiles comfortably to herself.

“Have you ever been with a woman?” I ask.

“You mean in that way?”

“In whatever way,” I say.

“Oh, heavens no. Never had the inclination really but I just have always loved the idea of it.” She laughs. “I remember when Mel first told me about you after you left us one day.”

“I’m the one who told you,” I say with assurance.

“No, dear. Sorry. Mel had told me before. But I let you go right on ahead and come out to me. You can never come out too many times in your life. It’s rejuvenating.”

“I think I feel betrayed,” I say. Mel, that dirty old man. Glad the diamond thief is dead.

“Oh don’t feel any such thing. Mel was proud of you being gay. You made him feel liberal. But he said in all the years he’d known you that he’d never met any of your lovers. Neither have I come to think of it. Are you sure you’re gay?”

“Yes.” I feel self-conscious now. “I have quiet affairs.”

“I’ll say.”

Chantal waits a moment and then puts her arm around my shoulder.

“You’re quite a catch.”

“Thanks. You are too.”

“I don’t think you know that though. You’re quite a wonderful woman.”

We sit and watch the birds.

“You don’t deserve bits and pieces of love,” she implores. “You deserve whole portions. You know that, right?”

I wonder how much Chantal understands about me. If I find out that it’s a lot more than I thought, I may never be able to let her go. Ever.

“I deserve a truck load full of love,” I say to both of us.

“You deserve more than that. Thousands of truck-loads. I keep my eye out for you. Always do.”

Maybe she’ll find me a night nurse, or an aerobics instructor.

“Thanks.”

We stare at the birds in silence. I’ll stay here today as long as I possibly can.

\*

I look at the boot on my wall often and think of what you said when you gave me the drawing. *Sometimes they work, sometimes they hurt.* You later wrote those words in the picture using charcoal and spit. You smudged up my face and neck.

I miss the language between us.

“Pick a word between one and ten,” you’d say.

I’d say, “albatross” and you’d say “word not bird.”

“Pick a word between black and green,” I’d say, and you’d say something like ‘languid’.

I remember falling asleep with you in my ear.

“The moon is huge here. Over there, too?” I asked when I had a horrible cold and fever one night. You couldn’t come to see me. Not possible.

“No, just by you. It’s black here.”

“I know that. I was just reminding you.”

I listened to your breathing. I couldn’t think of being in the same house with you. It was like dying of thirst while imagining rainfall.

“Have Sam deliver me some soup,” I said to get a rise out of you maybe. You said that he actually made great soup. I didn’t want to hear this.

\*

Hannah is on the phone. It’s night for her, morning for me. I’m still brushing.

“I have to rinse. Hold on.” I spit, rinse and check the mirror. My face is still mushed from sleep. “Sorry. Back. Hi.”

“At least I didn’t wake you. Hi.”

“I just got up.”

“So how are you, Saralah! How’s work?”

“Good, good. Steady. Did you get my message on your machine? I missed your birthday by a smidge. Sorry,” I say.

“Oh, that was almost two months ago. But I remember getting it. Thanks.”

I was busy dealing with small issues like death and isolation. But I remembered to call, just little after the fact.

“So how’s life after 40?” I ask.

“Good, thank God. I can’t believe it. You’ll catch up soon. Don’t worry.”

“No, I think I’ll hover in my thirties for a few more years. Don’t rush me please.”

I climb back in bed, without feeding Taxi. He’s sitting, staring at me. “So did you do something special?”

“For my birthday? Yes, we went on a picnic. Oh and I stopped nursing Rachel. She’s past two. I closed the kitchen.”

“Wow, that’s great,” I say, trusting that it is.

“So Sara, I’m also calling because Ellie tells me that you might not come out in June?”

That phrase was once so sacred.

“It’s just a little complicated,” I say.

Sacred scrambled is scared.

“What’s complicated?” she asks. “God, what’s complicated for me is getting a family of eight across the ocean. It’s so much. Logistics are filling my head all the time. It’s more than six weeks away and I’m already packing. Ari’s on reserve duty, so he’s not even around this month. Sara, I know about complicated. Please.”

My eyes dart around my loft. This is where I live and make sounds for a living. I am a good person.

“I’m not saying that is not a huge trek for you. I was talking about me. This trip and how it’s complicated for *me*.”

“But I don’t understand what the problem is. You get on a plane. Just you. And you spend 10 days with us.”

“It’s not about logistics, Hannah. It’s—”

“OK, I know you have a dog. But I’m sure you have some friends who can feed it.”

Taxi, she called you ‘it’. I won’t let that happen again.

“Hannah, it’s not about Taxi!”

“Oh that’s right. That’s his name. I love that. That’s very funny.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that it might be somewhat hard for me to make this trip?” I ask.

“Sara, I’m not asking you to move. I’m not even asking you to come visit us in Israel. God forbid you come visit us after us living here for so many years.”

“See?”

“See what see? I’ve let you be, Sara. I’ve never asked you to come. So now we’re coming to the states again. Are you so uninterested in us, in meeting two nieces and a nephew whom you’ve never even met? What’s wrong with you?”

What is wrong with me? Truly, I am questioning this because if I were seeing out through Hannah’s eyeballs, I’d see a sister with no apparent redeeming qualities.

“Hannah, do your kids know about me? Do they want to see me?”

“Of course they do! They know you play trumpet and they are so excited about that. In fact, Natan may take it in school. He was so small when you last saw him. Now he’s nearly twelve and piano is not working out at all. Of course they want to see you. Is that what this is about?”

“No, not completely.” Taxi needs to go out.

“What do you need me to say?” Hannah’s upset. Me too. I don’t remember the last time I wasn’t upset.

“Ask me about my life, Hannah.”

“What? I did ask.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I asked you the second we started talking,” she says defensively.

“No, you asked about work. And I said it was good.”

“So what are you punishing me for?” she asks. Guilt for breakfast.

“I may not have six kids and a husband. But—”

“That’s your choice.” She interrupts me like she’s done since forever.

“But I do have a heart,” I say slowly, trying not to react to her last comment.

“Of course you have a heart. I worry about your heart more than you’ll ever know. OK, so how’s your heart?”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Excuse me, Sara, but I have a little bit on my plate here. What do you expect from me?”

“Nothing.”

“Great. That’s obviously not true,” she says.

“I expect nothing from you. That’s the point,” I say.

“No, you’re lying. You expect me to be rah-rah about your life. But that’s not going to happen.”

“I’m not expecting anything.” This must be a huge lie because I am red in the ears. “Just don’t expect much from me then.”

She says nothing.

“Let me get back to you, Hannah.”

\*

And then all the little ducks follow each other into the dark forest.

“Are we lost?” asks one duck.

“No,” says another duck. “It’s just too dark to see the path. But we’re on it alright.”

\*

Taxi pulls me along and I nearly trip over a pinecone. It’s days like this when dogs save lives. I need fresh air and things that smell pretty. I don’t need Tess to tell me how right I am, and how I’m entitled to feel all the things that I feel. Not right this second.

There’s a dog run where I rarely take Taxi, but today I go there for an easy distraction. Taxi feels embarrassed in it, I think. He probably feels like he’s playing ‘dog’. There are six other canines in there this morning. It’s always the tiny dogs that egg Taxi on. He rolls them on the ground with his nose and dutifully pretends to be chased. He looks at me like I used to look at my mom when she made me go up to the store clerk and apologize. *I’m sorry for toppling over the displays.* To this day, I am nervous in all stores everywhere.

The worst part is when dog owners want to talk about dogs. But I’ve trained Taxi to know when I need to leave before I start telling people things about themselves that are none of my business. I scratch my right shin with my left foot. I do this until Taxi notices and then he comes over and sits next to me and whines.

“Oh, here’s Taxi needing to go home, I guess.”

“Oh, I guess your taxi’s here!” someone says. Never heard that before. “Well don’t forget about the dog owner’s association meeting. It’s coming up.”

One day I might show up. Just not in the very near future.

\*

Robbie answers the phone.

“How are you Mr. Man? It’s your Aunt Sara calling.”

“Hi Aunt Sara. The twins are sick.”

“With what?”

“Stuff. Colds I think. I’ve got a busted toe.”

“How’d you bust it?”

“Rock.”

“Falling rock?”

“Dropped from the top of my tree house. It was holding down the roof.”

“Is it really broken or just hurt?”

“Busted but not broken.”

“You’re lucky.”

“Yeah. You want mom?”

“That would be great. Bye Robbie.”

His voice is almost changing. That is so unsettling. He screams for Ellie and I think my eardrum just blew.

“Sara, I have to call you back. I’m trying to get the twins some dinner. Or hold on. Maybe I can do this with one hand. Yams.” Sure she can.

“It’s ok. I’ll be here. Just call me when you’re less hectic,” I say. “Yams?”

“Packed with vitamins and they’re sweet. The boys are so sick.”

“Sorry. I wish I could help.”

“They just need to sleep. Robbie needs to stop terrorizing them.”

“So... why don’t you just call me later.”

“No, no I want to talk. I’m ok. So, what’s going on?” She asks this like she expects bad news. I hear lots of commotion in the background.

“You sound like you’re nuts right now, Ellie. Let’s talk later.”

“No, now. You caught me busy, but I’m here. I spoke to Hannah. She’s so excited. The kids can’t stop talking about it.”

“Did she tell you we spoke?”

“Yeah. She said you spoke.”

“And?”

“She hopes you’ll come.”

“Did she mention the conversation we had?”

“No, why? Was it a big deal? Did you fight? She didn’t mention a fight to me.”

I hear one of her son’s voices. “Hold on just for a second, Sara.”

I’m sitting on pillow in front of the coffee table. I’m eye level with a bowl of words. I pick out a word without looking: *cellophane*.

“Sorry. Jonah spilled some soup. Where were we?”

I could lie but I don’t.

“My conversation with Hannah.”

“Oh, she hopes that you’ll come. We all do. I’m not sure how much more we need to process this.”

“Not too much more, I hope,” I say.

“We always do. Every time there’s a family event that we ask you to come to. Every bar and bat mitzvah that we’ve ever had. You’ve put us through this charade that you’re not coming. You don’t need to do that.”

“I just need a little consideration.” I’m sounding flustered.

“We all do, Sara. Not just you.” I hear a son. “I have to go.”

Good-bye, Ellie. Glad we talked.

\*

I convince Tess to lend me Zack for the day. Last time I had him on my own he was younger and asleep mostly. Now he’s alert and calls trees and cars *tees and caws*. Today he’ll learn new words with me. Like manicotti.

I rent a buggy from the buggy and rollerblade place on the pier. It’s like a four wheeled bicycle with a big awning over the top. It’s got a sign on the top of it that asks the existential question, *How’s my driving?*

Zack’s strapped into his side of the seat. He looks like a bag of groceries.

“Zack, we’re going to see the wizard.”

“Zird,” he says back.

“Yes.” I pedal us down the Embarcadero. The bay is to my right and traffic to my left. I get tired.

“Tired yet, Zack?” He’s big-eyed and his curly hair is all tangled from the wind. “Let’s park and rest and talk about your past. I know so little about you.”

Zack sits on my lap and stares at all the pigeons. He tells me about his time as a court reporter back during the Nuremburg trials. How he got repetitive stress injury in both of his wrists and how he is still trying to collect workman’s compensation.

Zack seems worried about me when he pokes at my face and pulls my eye lids out until they permanently stay that way. He lets me talk as much as I need to about wanting to see a clear way out of where I seem to be stuck. I tell him how great his mom is for trying to help me, for sending me on retreats to places where people go to not talk. Zack doesn’t think that’s for me, though. He suggests scream therapy and gives me some examples right here on the pier.

I order some pasta for me and a bowl of parmesan cheese for Zack. I figure he can’t choke on the little bits of that.

“People think you’re cute, Zack. They’re looking at you. But I know you’ve got a lot more than just your good looks.”

Zack tells me about the affair he had with a toy store clerk when he lived in Korea. He tells me how he saved an entire village once by teaching them how to yodel.

“Dessert?” But Zack declines. He’s in training for a swim to Alcatraz and sugar slows him down.

\*

Now Jo has come to my door. I see him through the peep-hole and I’m scared. And I’m glad I only married him for that one short time, just long enough to see Diane again.

“I just wanted you to know I’ll be making some noise,” he says when I open the door.

“Oh,” I say, knowing that my studio isn’t sound proofed very well.

“Since you live right below me, and I know you do sound recording in here,” he says, peering past me. I’ve never invited him in, but maybe he’s already planted tiny cameras everywhere. “I would never want to disturb you,” Jo continues, “so I wanted to coordinate —maybe around your work time today.”

“That’s very considerate of you Jo. What’s the nature of your noise?”

“I’d rather not say.”

“Will it be thumping or crashing or drilling. Just give me a sense.”

Jo looks thoughtful.

“It will be a combination or banging – metal on metal – and sort of loud suction sounds. No, not suction but more like popping sounds.”

I am supposed to not be curious. The book I got out from the library called *How to Handle Vampires and Other Strange Neighbors* says this. It says when you have a neighbor that creeps you out, refrain from trying to find out too much about him. This will avoid any confusion on his part, and leave him thinking that you don’t want to know him better.

“Jo, it just so happens that I’m doing paperwork today – all paper work. No recording.”

“Oh good. I might go on until very late, but today’s the only day. I only have it for today.”

It. I suppose *it* has places to be tomorrow.

“No problem, Jo. Thanks again for the heads-up.” I start to close the door.

“Sara, you’re a very considerate person. I can tell.”

“Yes well I hope I am. Try to be.”

“So I was just trying to be considerate too.”

I think he wants an appreciation plaque. Fresh out.

“And I so appreciate it, Jo. Thank you again, so much. Have a good session today.” Door close attempt, round two.

“It’s not really a session per say. But thank you just the same,” he says.

Jo waves and walks away. I watch him disappear through the peep-hole.

I go back into my loft and sit on the couch. I wait. I do start to hear a noise but not a banging. It’s more like a boinging. Boing, boing, boing.

\*

I’m more like Chet for tonight’s gig. I order a ginger ale and spin the ice in my mouth. I’m ready for a good time.

Some people are sitting up close at the tables, but the rest of the room is still empty. If they ever decided to change the sign outside from *Latin American Club* to something else, we’d probably draw better. But the owner says that it’s a vintage sign and it’s cool. “It’s like the box factory down on Harrison Street,” he says. “It still says *Box Factory* even though it’s filled with a bunch of lofts. That’s very trendy.”

After almost two years playing here, all six of us have finally figured out how to fit on the stage. I’m on the end out front, which has proven to be unsafe.

The bartender's name is Lurch but I think he lies about that. I just heard him tell a woman that his name was Lincoln. She's leaning in over the bar and wants him. I'd like to monitor the situation carefully but Romeo is ready to start the first set. From my vantage point, I only can see the back of her. Lurch usually doesn't fall for types like her, all retro and lip-sticked. I've seen him mostly glom onto the preppy-with-maybe-a-small-flower-tattoo kind.

I take my solos tonight, praying that they'll take me. But every time I open my eyes, the bar is still right there along with Lurch. The woman seems to have been enjoying us. I wouldn't have predicted that.

It's almost midnight and we're breaking before the second set. The woman has walked up to me.

"You're not only the only woman, you're also the tallest member of the band."

She's right. The other five guys happen to be shorter than me. Romeo wears platforms but he's still the singing Napoleon.

"So it's that noticeable," I say.

"I think it's great," she says.

"Not as great as Lurch there behind the bar," I say, nodding towards him.

"You call him Lurch? He said it was Lincoln. But that's OK. I didn't tell him my real name either. More fun that way."

Why is she talking to me?

"So I'm visiting from LA..." she says.

That makes sense, given the fake name thing. I wonder what else is.

"...and I'm scouting for a band to be at this bar scene we're shooting. It's a film set in the swing era. There aren't many working bands down in LA who play swing and stuff like that. San Francisco has quite a few I'm told."

"We're alt-swing. Our material is a little unconventional."

"Well, they'd all learn the music, I'm sure. It's more about the look. We're after a certain look."

"A look...of course. Like in the movies," I say.

"I think the band sounds great and the look is workable," she says, looking past me towards the stage. Her eyes begin to follow Romeo, who's walking towards the bar. She follows him and begins talking. I go back to the stage to clean my horn. When Romeo walks back up he's all a-buzz. He tells the band that we have a shot at being in the movies. He says the band will be flown down to LA next week for a screen test. Then he looks at me like I have a terminal disease.

"Sara, don't be too mad, but she said the woman in the band would be distracting. She says your playing would pull the scene out of its time sort of. Bummer."

The other guys seem uncomfortable. Not as much as me.

"Wow, well you can't fight that I suppose. I personally think it would make the movie better, but what do I know?"

"Well, it's not up for debate I don't think," Romeo says.

"Even if it was, I'd pass." The woman is watching us in our huddle. I glare back and walk off the stage towards her. She looks unnerved.

"You know how you noticed that I was the only girl and that I was the tallest?"

"Yes. And you real—"

"You forgot to notice that they all have patches on their necks. But not me."

“What are you talking about?”

“Well all these guys in the band are getting constant doses of Thorazine.

She’s staring at me with a blank look that I saw once on a refrigerator magnet.

“It’s a drug to keep them from acting up. I’m their doctor. I’ve take them out of the male ward just for shows, but I can certainly get them all ready for travel down to LA. I’ll just need you to sign a guardian consent form, taking full responsibility for their safety and well-being.”

She’s believing me. I am believing myself. It’s all making sense now.

\*

I’m amazed at how important the spinal chord is. This makes me think that we’re made all wrong. Too much depends on that one bundle of nerves. I stare at the screen and imagine a redesign. There should be other ways for the brain to communicate with the toes. Alternative routes.

I find the sound of a traffic jam in my audio library and also the sound of cars speeding by. I mix them together, alternating the volumes of each back and forth, back and forth.

*From up here in the chopper, it looks like we’ve got some walking and gum chewing going on at the same time. Expect delays.*

Bailey is about to sit on a cactus. But his eyes see the spikes just in time. They send a message to the brain to tell the butt not to sit. *Vroom*. Message sent. But Bailey stills sits. The kids will love this part. Bailey’s legs didn’t get the message in time. They were already bent too far. So his butt gets pricked. This is where the two way traffic causes problems. *Honk, honk*. Message sent back up to the brain from the butt. *Pain*. Brain tells hand to rub butt. Brain tells mouth to yell *ouch* and *fuck’n cactus*.

This all happens so fast—within 2 seconds—so the animation department has made the scene play out in slow motion. The user can even see the action in reverse, so I have to make all the sounds play in reverse too. Bailey looks humiliated going up and down on the cactus. Some sadistic child is going to loop this section and call his friends over to watch. I am not proud of this child but I bear him in mind when I do my work.

\*

The doctor wanted me to schedule a follow-up visit one month from when the cast came off. So here I am sitting in his god-forsaken waiting room.

“Fill this out please. Make sure you give back the pen.”

Question One: *Any unusual pain or numbness since your last visit?* Yes, I ache for my dead, married lover and the pain is unbearable and I am numb to the outside world.

Question Two: *Have you been going about your normal routine or are you still accommodating for your injury?* I still accommodate for the fact that life is meaningless if it can be stolen so fast. I see no reason to have hope for deep happiness because even when I had it, I wasn’t mine to have. I accommodate for this all the time, except when there’s a fresh piece of sushi in front of me.

Question Three: *Are you taking any medications related or unrelated to your injury?* Port, pop rocks, kava-kava, marijuana (brownie form only), tiger balm, essential oils, omega something.

Question Four: *Do you have any specific questions for the doctor?* Yes, I'd like a clear explanation for eye cookies. For my whole life, I've woken up to find those little grains in the corner of both my eyes. What the hell are they made of?

\*

Tess is on deadline but I don't mind.

"What's it about?"

"Nude beach review for the summer pull-out section."

I watch her type and shift her sitting position every few minutes. I'm hoping we'll eat dinner soon, since my refrigerator is empty at home.

"When's Ben coming?"

"Six or so. But this is due. I have to cram this next hour. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I'll let you be." I walk out of her office, which is actually more of a nook off her bedroom. Real estate people would call it a sunroom, on the count of the bay window. I stop in the doorway.

"How do you review nude beaches? Is it rated by body types?" She doesn't answer immediately so I continue walking.

"How crowded it gets or if it's got a gay scene going on. Stuff like that."

I walk back in.

"Mostly guy scenes, right?"

She turns around. Her hair is black and short and it looks like she's been running her hands through it all day.

"Definitely. There's usually places where they go and have sex."

"That's so unnecessary."

"Not to them." She turns again to write.

"I think I'm just jealous, maybe."

I plop down on the couch in the next room. I can't turn on the TV. It would disturb her. I move to the carpet and do thirty push-ups. Then I stretch. I am Gumby at 100, brittle but still a joy to play with.

\*

I awake to the front door opening. Ben's home with Zack in his arms.

"What are you doing on the floor?"

"Hi. I must have dozed off here. I was just stretching." I drooled on their carpet. "Was it 'bring the kid to work' day?"

"No, I picked him up from play group on the way home." Zack is pointing at me. "I heard you two had an adventure. Take him anytime you want."

Ben has long black side burns and is not afraid to wear pink, which is the color of the sweater he's wearing today. He sits on the couch and unties his Doc Martins.

"Big jelly fish invasion down by Ocean Beach. Did you hear?" he asks.

Zack's dragging one of Ben's boots down the hall.

“Can’t say that I have.”

“I heard it on the radio just now. Thousands washed up all at once.”

“Strange.”

Tess just came in with Zack and the boot.

“Hi. What’s strange?” Tess kisses Ben.

“Jellyfish invasion,” I say, “speaking of nude beaches. Ouch.”

“Food?” Tess asks and I’m relieved. “I have stuff I think.” She stands looking at the open refrigerator. In Capetown, her family had cooks who cooked. She watched but didn’t really learn.

“So I hear you and Tess might soak for a few days.” Ben is holding Zack upside down between us.

“When?”

“If you don’t go east to see your family.” Tess answers from the kitchen.

“That’s more than a month away.” I say.

“Yes, but I’d need to take two half-days at work,” Ben says. “Gotta ask ahead or my boss will say no.”

“You two are making me feel pressured.”

Tess walks back in, holding a jar of olives.

“We can go another week besides that week. I just thought it would be good for you to treat yourself. You’ll be stressed whether you go or not.”

I go for the olives. I didn’t even have to think about it.

\*

Dear Sam,

...and once Zoe was wearing one of your shirts. I know ~~she looked better in it than you ever could~~ she wore it to remind me in some subconscious way that

\*

Myrna’s been taken to the hospital and Chantal is a bit shaken. I’m peeling one of the oranges I brought for her. We’re in her room and she’s been sitting on the edge of her bed like she’s about to get up.

“They took her in the middle of the night. I’m not quite sure what’s wrong really. Could be a number of things.”

“I suppose we can ask.” I sit next to her. “Have some.”

We share the orange in silence.

“Let’s ask,” I say. “It’s late enough in the morning. They probably have called here to update the staff.”

We walk through the dining area. They’re setting up for Sunday lunch, which is usually nicer than the rest of the week. But the flowers in the vases are still plastic. You’d think they’d get fresh ones, to cut the odor of ammonia—at least for Sunday.

The administrative office has a reception area that’s kept up just enough to not immediately scare away prospective residents. The desk has a bowl of hard candy. There’s a battery cradle for 5 walkie-talkies and a dispatch unit like the ones cab

companies use. I fight the temptation to push the button and talk. It takes focus and control to keep me away. My hands are reaching.

“Hello, Mrs. Mallen. Can I help you?” Saved by the lady holding three fat magic markers. “Is this your friend?”

“Yes, this is Sara. She was Melvin Peter’s neighbor.”

The lady smiles. She’s very small and Chinese.

“We’re concerned about Myrna,” I say.

“Yes, she’s in the hospital. We think she’ll be there for a while.”

“What’s wrong? Do they know?” Chantal’s voice is strained.

The lady says they don’t know has the charm of one of those plastic flowers, so I lead Chantal back to her room.

“Myrna’s such a difficult person, you know ,” Chantal says sitting back on her bed. “I bet the hospital nurses are having a rough time.”

“We’ll go visit if it turns out she’ll be there for a while,” I say.

“I suppose we could,” Chantal says. She looks so sad I just want to massage her face into a smile.

“Would you like to eat? I’ll stay and eat the gourmet lunch with you.”

Chantal smiles.

“In honor of Myrna, I think we should eat,” she says. “And we should complain about every morsel of food that goes into our mouths. Just like she would.”

\*

It’s not a bad habit but it’s enough to upset people. I stare. Once someone catches my interest, I just stare at them. I try to be subtle but there’s nothing really subtle about staring. That’s why it’s called that.

Like right now. I’m here just to have some coffee before I pick up a pound to take back home. I’m sitting near the window with a book to read even, but my eyes have wandered and they’ve caught the guy sitting there, at two o’clock. He’s got a crushed nose, really crushed. Maybe from football but judging by his body type, I’d say it was more from years of walking into doors. He seems clumsy but brilliant definitely and he should quit his job at the bookstore and travel for a year.

This is what I do when I stare.

But once a young couple took real offense. They were sitting next to me in the waiting room of a brake shop. I was watching them and decided that they met at a Payless shoe store. He sold her shoes and followed her home. She thought that was so bold. They used the same hair gel and that clinched the deal. Somewhere around the time I had them screwing in a photo booth, the woman got out of her chair and walked up to me.

“You’ve been looking at my boyfriend a little too carefully,” she said. I was shocked.

“I was looking at both of you.”

The guy calls from his seat. “What are you – some kind of pervert?”

“No, sorry. Wow. Didn’t mean to freak you out.”

The girl walked back and sat in his lap.

“I have this eye problem. They stick in one place. It’s a handicap,” I said.

They didn't care. But the whole experience was enough to make me think twice before getting a brake job done in Daly City again. San Francisco may be more expensive, but it's safer for people like me, for sure...away from that riff-raff.

\*

In my head, Chantal is on the street. She's wearing the same clothes I saw her in on Sunday, but now they're black with the soot of carbon monoxide. She's holding a sign that reads: *Rest Home Closed on Me. Will Rest For Food.*

\*

The band is going down to LA for that stupid blond girl's dream movie. They have no integrity. I'm thinking about going down too, just to spy on them. I'd wear a wig and limp, which I sort of do now anyway come to think of it. They've learned some real period pieces and my fear is that when they come home, they'll want to be a boring straight swing band. I'd get kicked out for two reasons then.

I mope a bit about all this and then I think about how lucky I am not to have to make the trip. Me and five guys in a van. I stop moping and get back to what I was doing. Building up a wall of tiny magnetized pieces of metal.

I have many waste-time and space-my-mind-out-without-abusing-my-body-with-drugs kind of gadgets. This is one of my favorites. It's a magnet about the size of a deck of cards. Tiny pieces of metal desperately cling to it, asking to be manipulated into meaningful shapes. Today I'm going abstract and I'm just doing a vertical scream.

It's 7:45 and I haven't eaten dinner yet. There's a ring and it's Mom and Dad on speakerphone.

"Hello Sara." Mom's voice has that valium calm to it.

"Hi," I say. I'm now twelve. Notice the sneakers with writing on every inch of the canvas.

"How are you?" *We don't want to know details. Please, spare us.*

"I'm good." *I suck. I need love from a dead woman and money to pay property taxes.*

"Are you healthy? Is your cast off yet?" *If you had a husband you wouldn't have fallen off of that stage.*

"It's been off for about a month. I'm still a bit wobbly. My hip mostly." *And I haven't had sex in three months. That's very bad for circulation.*

"Well Dad and I hope we'll see you at the end of June." *How selfish are you? Is family not important anymore? Do they teach you that there?*

"It should be pretty out there in June. Ellie says Mark's been planting." *And he's built a shed for me to sleep in. Me and lots of tools.*

"The east coast is always pretty. I don't know how you can live out there for so many years without seasons." *No seasons, no morality.*

"We do so have seasons. Winter and summer most of the time. Wool shorts, that's all you need." *And character. Lots of character to fight the stereo types. And strong calf*

*muscles and at least two hard helmets, one in the car and one in the house, in case of falling objects.*

No one's talking now. Was it something we didn't say?

"So we hope to see you. Hannah's kids are delightful. We have to go now. It's so late here. Be well, Sara. We love you."

"Bye. And bye Dad."

"Bye Sara," Dad says. Their phone clicks. That was short. They must have been tired. Maybe they'll call back in the morning. *Or me. Maybe I'll call back.*

\*

I sleep on the deck of ship. There's rain pounding on my face and the wind is whipping around my body and back out to the sea. It's pitch black except for the streaks of lightening pulsing under my eyelids. My feet suddenly feel like they're bound and are slowly being eaten by a dragon. I struggle to wiggle them free and I hear a thud.

I've thrown Taxi off the couch onto the floor. *Sorry.*

It's 4:30 am and I fell asleep on the couch again. It's morning I suppose so maybe I'll take a walk with Taxi. But the sun is still missing from the sky. It's not morning then. I'm encouraged. I fall back asleep.

\*

The email reads like this:

*Sara – So as I mentioned at the last production meeting, we're having a show here in NYC for Zoe Lerner's work. Now it's set for end of June. It's at the time of the big education multi-media convention here at the Javitz Center so we're planning around that. We'll do invites to attendees etc. We figure why not kill two birds? We're already exhibiting there.*

*So Zoe's show will obviously feature some of her work for Bailey's Brain. We're thinking maybe we'll run some screen shot demos of the actual product, including sound. Kind of a sneak peak. Good, huh?*

*We're thinking segments 7 (the rope jumping thing) and 12 (the sandwich making). Can you get us tracks for that? In the next couple of weeks will be fine.*

*Great of you, Sara – thanks.*

*Michael*

I pace in front of my computer until Taxi starts whining.

"Shut-up!" Not nice of me, but the world seems crap right now. Fuck, man! is all I have to say.

\*

Kabuki Hot Springs. Place of peaceful nakedness. I pay my \$18 dollars and get the little key to the little locker.

It's a Wednesday morning so it's just me, and several older Japanese ladies who take their hygiene very seriously. They scrub and scrub and scrub.

I'm in the hot tub sweating and crying. My toes look like ten little people under the water. They're each staring at me wondering what they can do to help.

The sauna's my favorite part because I always feel athletic while lying doing nothing. It's the best way. Today, there's a very old lady squatting and farting. I'm very scared that I'm going to die now, by breathing in toxic fumes. She doesn't seem to notice me lying here in this sauna about fifteen feet from her. Maybe she's blind and just knows her way around the place. I'm too fascinated to leave, which is part of my sickness too, I suppose. A normal person would leave her be, to fart by herself.

The showers here have cucumber soap and cucumber shampoo. I'm sudsing up my body, trying to wash away my sad. Scrub, scrub, scrub.

The lady at the desk bows to me as I leave. I bow back and drop my keys and sunglasses. Clumsy me.

\*

"No, I'm not going to go to that exhibit! I'd rather drip acid on my face."

"I was just asking." Tess was just asking. "Do you have sound for those sections done yet? You told me last week you were running behind."

"No, I still have to do them. I'm just going to record static. Or maybe some raunchy sex noises. Hold on." I switch to my headset. "I'm in the car and there's a cop behind me."

"It's not illegal to use cell phones yet," Tess reminds me.

"I'm a cop magnet. You know that. Anything I do pulls me over."

The cop just passed.

"He's gone. Are you still on Valencia Street?"

"Yes. My toes are almost dry."

I walk into *Nice Nails*. I don't have any.

"No thanks," I tell the nice lady, "I'm just here to visit that gal over there. The one waving."

Tess gets her toes done but never her fingers, as being a mom tears up your hands, she says. I hate the smell in here.

"You done soon?" I ask hopefully.

"5 more minutes. Here, sit on the stool."

"Ok, but I'm not using a pumice stone on you."

"Just a rub would be divine," Tess says and she's completely serious.

We leave before I faint from the fumes.

"I hope those ladies are unionized," I say.

"I doubt it. They need you. Drop everything and go back and tell them their rights. I'll wait here."

There's nothing wrong with caring about the working class, but I know one day I'll get tired of having compassion and I'll turn nasty.

"Do you ever wonder about me?" I ask Tess as we walk to nowhere in particular.

"Meaning..?"

“Meaning do you ever wonder if it’s me and not them? Like my family is perfectly healthy, and that EnZone is a great company?”

“No, never,” Tess reassures me, a bit annoyed. “Most normal families scream and shout but stuff gets figured out eventually. It doesn’t take a hundred years to pass the salt.”

“Hmm.”

“I do think you’re becoming more of a hermit than you were when I met you,” she admits.

“For now,” I say.

“It doesn’t suit you, I don’t think. But I get it. For now.”

“Where did you park?” I ask.

“Two blocks. Where were you going when you called from your car?” she asks.

“Mexico.”

“And...?”

“I stopped to buy some flip-flops. And to say good-bye to you.”

“I appreciate that. I would have worried,” she says, trying not to laugh.

“When? How long until you think you’d figure out I was gone?”

“Hour. Maybe two.”

“Hmm.”

“I have to go pick up Zack. Come.”

I get in Tess’s car. We drive and pass mine, parked in a loading zone. I’ll get a ticket but the DPT hasn’t made a deal with Mexico yet so I’m ok.

\*

Louis Armstrong once recorded with the *Red Onion Jazz Babies*. That’s the best band name ever and I’m thinking about resurrecting it again, after more than 75 years since it’s heyday.

Screw Romeo’s swing and his inmates. I’m going to start my own thing.

\*

It’s been nearly two weeks since my last shopping and I’m down to chick peas and oatmeal. I walk to my shop and hope that I can catch Russia putting up one of her food-pick index cards. I’ve never met her, but knowing her taste in foods is close enough.

It’s crowded this evening. There must be a sale on flax seed or something. Lot’s of these women could be Russia.

“Russia,” I yell, but only in my head.

I walk to the counter. There’s an Indian man working tonight wearing two big earrings in one ear and a tight white tank top.

“I’m looking for a glucosamine blend. What do you have?” I ask. I’ve been told to take these for my hip ache.

“Right there on the back wall with all the vitamins,” he says. He says ‘vitamins’ like it has no vowels.

\$17.50 for fifty tablets. What a rip. These worker-owned places have a lot of nerve.

“What’s up with you price-gouging communists?” I scream, but only to myself.

Taxi’s been waiting outside patiently. So I try to shop fast. But for me that means I’ve already knocked some things off the shelves that I’ve needed to pick up. There are always chores to be done.

I’m choosing my favorite food now—cereal. I love the names. *Bursting Grains* or *Blends of Harmony*. I’m partial to cereals that have the word ‘puff’ in the title. Today, I go for *Puff Trio* – a mixture of corn, berries and sunshine.

While I pay at the counter, I see someone’s petting Taxi. I think I know her, but don’t know from where. This is my brain on drugs.

“I hope he didn’t jump on you,” I say. My arms are full so I have to put a bag down to untie his leash.

“No. I’m just saying hi. We met the other day.”

“Was I there too?”

She laughs. Oh! It’s the nun run t-shirt lady.

“Oh!” I say.

“You liked my t-shirt,” she says.

“Yes, I’m sorry. I was distracted. Sorry.”

“That’s ok. I remember your dog.”

“You shouldn’t change t-shirts. I didn’t change dogs.”

She laughs.

“I saved you some food in there,” I say. That was a stupid comment.

She laughs.

“Thanks. I was trying to get here before the rush. Guess that didn’t happen.”

“Yeah, it’s packed,” I say. “Seaweed sale or something.”

“Or something.” She says as she walks towards the door. “Nice to see you both again. Bye.”

She did it again. She got to do the good-bye. I’ll get it next time. I’ll say good-bye the second I see her next time.

\*

I’m sitting in the studio now and it’s quiet except for the slight hum of my computer. My eyes are closed. I’m watching my hands run slowly over each of your eyebrows then around the sides of your face, down your neck and then down each of your arms. Now our hands are entwined and I am kissing you as hard and as deeply as I can remember. I sit here and conjure up almost every sensation. As if you’re wanting me from where you are now, too. Are you?

I slide onto the floor. I refuse to cry this time.

I want the release you gave me.

Come inside and shake me back into myself.

I’ve been so flattened with grief.

Breathe your way back into me.

Pass through where you’ve been, back to here.

I want to die with you again.

It must have been brilliant.

To just give in to something.

So completely huge.  
Bigger than you.  
It's ok to come here now and tell me.  
Take me, Zoe.  
It's ok.  
I won't hold on too tight.  
I'm going to only let go.  
Like I do with you.  
Be here now.  
Stay.  
Just for now.  
In me, stay.  
Thank—  
Thank you.

\*

I'm so cold. I put on a wool cap with Curious George on the brim. I stare at the screen for section 12. It must be past midnight already. Great things are going to happen.

Bailey's in the kitchen reading instructions, for how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I decide to get into the motivation behind this scene so I go out into my own kitchen and pull out the same ingredients. I have fig jam. That should pass for jelly. And I have cashew butter—twice the calories of peanut butter with twice the taste. My spelt bread rivals the white bread. It'll do fine.

I get out my minidisk recorder just to catch a great sound or thoughts I may come up with. Like how a doctor talks into a recorder about an important case. This is an important case.

Bailey's brain tells the hands all sorts of things: take out a spreading knife, open the jars, spread the jelly and peanut butter, close the sandwich, close the jars, cut the sandwich, and open your mouth to eat it. Taste and digestion are in other sections. This is all about step-by-step instructions and how the brain helps the body follow them.

I make the sandwich, eat the sandwich and forget to have big thoughts about the process. I was too hungry.

Back in the studio, I've brought up some library sounds of factories but they are all wrong...too much clanking for a gentle sandwich scene. I switch on the synthesizer. 2000 sounds. Some must be instruction-following sounds.

I use lots of ding-dong sounds made from marimbas. But I use a Rhodes piano sound for the spreading of the jelly because that's very sexy. The peanut butter moves less gracefully, given that Zoe clearly drew the kind with bits of nuts, not smooth and creamy. I use a slap-bass moving in octaves up and down. It sounds like the intro to a bad sit-com.

I finish the sounds. And then I send an email back to Michael saying that I'm done and that he has the heart of a tape dispenser. He should be ashamed of his opportunistic self, I say. Maybe he'll see that he's a bad, insensitive man and that memorials should not be mixed with product roll-outs. He'll email me back, calling me

un-American. I'll time it to see how long it takes for him to get back to me using that exact phrase.

\*

I'm serious about the *Red Onion Jazz Babies*. But not right this second. I can't run auditions now. I'd look for the wrong things in people.,,like empathy.

\*

I'm horrible with birthdays but I know today is somebody's.

"Ellie, is it one of your kid's birthday's?"

"No."

"Anybody's in our family?" I ask.

"No, but you never remember my sons'. Get a calendar out. And mark them now. So you'll know. A card from you would be great."

"Do you have Hannah's kids' too?"

This is a huge thing. I'm sounding like a regular aunt. Like on TV.

"It's all in my computer calendar. I'll e-mail all the dates to you."

"Please. That would be great," I say.

"Sara, I've done this before. I think even last year."

"Thank you. Once a year would be great," I say.

"But it doesn't help you."

"Not yet, but now it will. For sure."

"Great. But once you have them, you can keep them. They don't change each year. They stay the same."

They do change if you count re-births. In California, we have those.

"You're right. Well, happy birthday to all of you anyway."

"You ok, Sara?"

"Yeah. It's just definitely someone's birthday today and I can't figure out whose."

"It will come to you. Wait until you have kids. Then you'll really start losing your mind."

"Can't wait."

Silence.

"Didn't mean that though. Sorry," Ellie says.

"What?"

"To be so cavalier about the kid thing."

"Oh. I've still got time. It's not a taboo topic," I say.

"Sara, please. I hope you'd never really do that."

"What, have kids? You just said I would."

"Yeah, but I wasn't thinking straight. I mean I was actually."

Ellie thinks that was funny.

"Ellie, the jury's out still. It all depends on who I spend my life with."

"Sara, as a mother, I have no grey around this issue. Gay environments are not for kids."

"You are so evolved. I keep on forgetting."

"Sara, sometimes I really think you just say things to push my buttons."

“Now what would I get out of pushing your buttons? And I could say the same about you. I mean here you are talking about ‘gay environments’ like they’re seething dens of iniquity. Like my life is just above a sewer treatment plant. No buttons there, none.”

“You are an exception to what is known about the gay community. It’s no place to bring up kids. If there’s a choice in the matter, than choose not to. It’s so basic, Sara. How lax has your mind gotten? Is everything just ‘ok’ with you? Every which way is ok with you?”

“You know what? This is not about me and you finding out more about each other. This is about you spooning out your conservative politics. Please, Ellie.”

“While your dishing out your gay agenda. Please, Sara.”

Silence.

“I don’t understand you,” Ellie says.

“No you don’t,” I say, “and you also don’t understand your own phobias.”

“Don’t start diagnosing me, Sara. You are so young sometimes.”

“No, I am so wise sometimes, Ellie. Every thing is flipped for you. You listen to me with closed ears because what I have to say upsets you somehow, so it must be wrong. I don’t mean to be offensive, Ellie. I have never meant for who I am to be offensive to you.”

“You are different from them, Sara. You’re not like them, so I hate when you talk like you’re defending a whole nation.”

“I’m defending just me,” I say and I’m tired. “It may sound like big slogans coming out of my mouth because maybe you’ve had to depersonalize me to say such insensitive things, like I should never even think of having kids. As if I’m not a real woman, with desires that may remotely resemble yours. That’s just too much contradiction for you.”

“All I’m saying, Sara, is that you don’t need to bring a kid into your world. That’s all I’m saying. You can create a life for yourself that works for you. But to create a life that works for a kid—you have to think beyond your own needs.”

“Is that what you do?”

“Every day,” Ellie defends. “Every day I think of my life in terms of them.”

“And you think that I wouldn’t? That I wouldn’t do that and more and be an amazing mom?”

“No, you would be an extraordinary mother, Sara!” Ellie’s voice cracks. “And I guess that’s what it comes down to. You do still have time— if you wanted that life. Then you would find a way. But you say you know you’re gay. So you’ve made a choice. And there’s a cost attached to every choice. For you, for me, for everyone.”

“You haven’t heard a word here, Ellie. I still have a choice. Being gay is not going to exclude me.”

“It’s wrong. Wrong for the kid.”

“How did you get so clear? Your arrogance astounds me,” I say.

“It’s hard being a child of gay parents for one thing.”

“It’s hard being a Muslim! It’s hard missing an eye! It’s hard being brilliant!” I argue back.

“Those are not choices made for you,” Ellie says.

“Bullshit.”

“Fine. I hope you find out whose birthday you missed.”  
“I haven’t missed it yet.”

\*

When I was a kid, Hannah and Ellie were always on some kind of diet. They weren’t fat, neither of them. But as their bodies changed they hated what was happening to their thighs. I never could see what they were talking about.

My mother tried to help them out. She cooked meals with the fat skimmed off. But then we’d all always have ice cream soda that Dad would make. All the time, even after fat-free meals. It never made sense to me, or to my Dad. He once tried to pour some ice cream directly onto Ellie’s lap, saying that it was a more direct route. I was the only one who laughed as hard as he did.

All the diets had one thing in common: water—drink lots of water. Water with lots of lemon squeezed into it to help with digestion. My sisters would leave glasses all over the house, half-filled with lemon water. After a few hours, the pulp of the lemon would stick to the sides of the glass, looking like little stuck sperm. I tasted some once and it was awfully bitter to my young mouth. Now I have water with lemon in it all the time, but I always think of my sisters when I drink it. I think of them on their diets and me watching.

\*

Outside the window of my loft, I can see the sun set. Tonight, it’s baby blanket colors. I go to the roof to get some air and watch the light change. When I remember to do this, I really sleep better, with the sky in my head and my throat filled with chilled oxygen. If I spot a naked person through a window in the next building, I look away fast. Then I peak back to make sure I don’t miss an opportunity to learn something. That’s the thing to be aware of always. The opposite of learning is death.

I never meet anyone up here and I think I’m the only one who comes. On some nights that are crazy warm, I sleep out here with Taxi. He sleeps on me and I sleep on an air mattress that I got for free by ordering a magazine on-line. I don’t think adventures like this should be exclusively for the young and the homeless. Sleeping outside can be an amazing release. I dream differently when I sleep on the roof, for one thing. Taxi however doesn’t relax that much. His Shepherd goes in watchdog mode and his Lab is just too scared to close its eyes.

Tonight though, it’s too cold to sleep out and I have to go in to work some more anyway. So I just take some big holey breathes, like Pema instructed me to do at her workshop. Maybe I should read her *‘falling apart’* book one more time. Maybe I should set some chapters to music so I’d have an easier time remembering their lessons.

\*

I remember! Oh, it’s so disturbing that I know this. How fucked up is this? It’s Sam’s birthday. Oh, Jesus. Of all the sorry-ass things to stick in my empty head, it has to be the date of your husband’s birthday. The only reason I know this is because you once

said that it was the same as his height—5’11” —and you thought that was interesting. Oh, get this out of my head!

Are you lighting a candle for him somewhere? Please tell me that you’re not. How do I know that you don’t miss him more than you miss me?

You would have left him by his 45<sup>th</sup> birthday. That much I know. I do. So this would have been the year. Deconstruction not destruction, you always said.

\*

Dear Sam,

May your birthday hold memories of her light and magic.

\*

Trombone player Henry is on the phone to tell me about LA.

“So we’re back from LA and I thought you should know,” Henry says. He’s got a non-distinct accent from somewhere below Delaware. He’s a security guard at Macy’s.

“Thanks Henry. I actually forgot you all were gone.” I lie.

“Well, it wasn’t like we were gone for a long while. Whirl-wind tour. Wish we stayed for more than just a few days. But the hotel room was expensive.”

“You paid for rooms? I thought they did.”

“We paid for it so we only rented one room for the five of us.”

Shame.

“So how did the audition go?” I ask.

“It was scream’n weird. We get there and there’s no one there. No lights, no action. Nothing.”

“Wait. Where’s there? Was it on a studio lot? What kind of place?” I ask.

“No, no. We were told to meet her at the first floor of this building. It was on LaBrea. Some kind of a warehouse space.”

“So what happened?” I ask.

“Well, that’s why I’m calling. We got it. After all that—we got the gig!”

“After all what? You skipped a bit there, Henry.”

“We never saw her actually, but we met up with a guy when we were loading back in the van. Romeo was pissed after we waited for an hour and just wanted to leave. So as we were packing up, this guy walks up to us. He’s a little young but like a speedy bullet. And he said the auditions were being held at a club around the corner. Now that made a hell of a lot more sense to me.”

“Lucky he caught you, I guess.”

“Then we followed him to the club. Kyle didn’t even need to set up his drums. We used a kit that was already on stage. It belonged to the band that went before us.”

“How were they?”

“Aw, they sucked but we swung the room good. So, Sara we are going to be in this cool movie!”

“How do you know it’s so cool?”

“Don’t know really, I suppose, but it’s a movie and that’s alright by me. We’ll be shooting for a few days they said. Next month. In Pasadena, they said.”

“And what about the pay?”

“Romeo’s still working that out.”

“I guess it’s not a union gig, because none of you are in the union. Make sure there aren’t any big heavy lights above your head on the set.”

“You should come with! It’s going to be fun. The crew we met seems really nice.”

“Why the hell would I come? To watch myself not play? You’re cracked.”

“Aw, Sara, you’re not too mad are you? You gotta understand it from their perspective.”

Henry goes on to explain the history of bop and swing to me. I put him on speaker and start sweeping my kitchen.

“You still there?”

“No, Henry. I hung up around the time you started to treat me like an idiot.”

“Hey, I’m just trying to keep you from getting all bent out of shape.”

Henry means well. He was kind enough to call to tell me the not so exiting news. And I’m now even more skeptical. What if they’re playing music for a scene in a porn movie? Sounds likely.

Can’t wait to see the whole band soon, so I can get each of their autographs.

\*

On my way to see Chantal, I stop at a bookstore.

“Do you have any big-print books?” I ask. I’m looking for a gift for Myrna. The clerk looks up from the computer and points behind me.

“We’ve got a few,” she says, “but they’re not that updated. I mean, no current bestsellers to speak of. But we do have some classics. They’re all right there, under the atlases.”

I browse a strange assortment. They’ve got Elie Wiesel’s *Night* next to Hank Aaron’s biography. Russel Baker is in big print and so is the Chicken Soup for the Soul series. Myrna, Myrna. What would make you smile? Ah! Here’s a collection of Studs Terkel interviews. She might even be in here. Perfect!

\*

Chantal is all ready to go. She’s wearing a gorgeous lime green wool coat and looks like a dream.

“I am the luckiest woman alive,” I say, meeting her at the entrance of the *Grandview Rest Home*. I hate that name.

“Why is that? Why are you the luckiest woman alive?” She asks as I walk her out to my car.

“You love me. You’re cute. I’m in heaven.”

“Just stop it,” she laughs. “You’re very strange, Sara.”

“I’m not so strange,” I say.

“Well, in the best, most creative way strange could mean,” she says. “I think about you often – about all the effort you make to come see me. It’s just unusual. And

mind you, I am grateful.” She laughs, and puts on a little black hat, then tries to pull the seat belt around her. It’s jammed. I help her clip it closed.

“Well thank you, I suppose. It’s my pleasure to spend all the time with you that I can,” I say. We drive in towards the hospital.

“I called Mrs. Lim in the office and she told me that Myrna is going to be there for awhile longer. It’s good that we’re going to see her.”

“Yes,” Chantal says. She sounds a bit uneasy. “I just hope she’s not in any pain.”

“But back to me,” I say to switch the topic, “and you and us. I think it’s the greatest thing to sit with you each week and talk. And when I bring my trumpet, well that’s just so the others don’t get jealous.”

Chantal laughs.

“People get jealous,” I say, “and then things get ugly. Walkers start flying. Pills get thrown. A regular rest home riot could break out if we’re not careful.”

We pull into the parking lot of St. Mary’s Hospital. They seem to have a whole wing for older people. We walk past room after room, filled with I.V. poles standing watch over beds. Eyes bewildered and lonely catch ours as we pass by them. Blue TV screen lights flash out of the rooms like some kind of Morse code asking for help. By the time we get to Myrna’s room, both Chantal and I are relieved to see her propped up and alert.

“What the hell?” Myrna is surprised. Chantal sits on a chair and pulls in up close to Myrna’s bed.

“We thought we’d come visit,” she says.

“You did, did you? And you too, missy,” she says, looking over at me. “You can’t play trumpet in the hospital, you know.” Myrna laughs, then she starts to cough uncontrollably. Chantal reaches out to comfort her but Myrna motions her not to. I put my hands on Chantal’s shoulders.

“I’ll call the nurse,” I say. Myrna motions me not to. I wait. Myrna seems so determined. She wants to win this one. The cough does subside. She’s broken out in a sweat.

“Damn,” she says, catching her breath. “Damn. It’s a problem. Just like that. Out of nowhere.”

Chantal seems so rattled. I pull up a chair too.

“Myrna, you want some help from the nurse? Maybe a hit of some oxygen from the tank down here?” I ask, pleading almost. She seems better though. Every second that goes by, she seems stronger.

“It’s like this, you two. I’m not going to say I’m superman. But I’ve got a cough and I’m not going to let myself die by some cough. That’s humiliating.”

“No, you most certainly will not,” Chantal says. Now no one talks. Myrna lets out a long sigh.

“Well, it was sure nice of you both to come. You didn’t have to.”

“Sure we did,” I reassure her.

“You know, missy, your neighbor Mel died coughing,” Myrna reminds me.

“I know, he had emphysema. He smoked a hundred packs a week.”

“No, not a hundred,” Chantal says.

“Ok, not a hundred but too much. One cigarette is too much,” I say.

“The night he died, we all just sat there and watched,” Myrna remembers. “There he was in the TV room with the rest of us, coughing away as usual. Next thing we know, he’s gone.”

“Let’s not talk about that now, Myrna,” Chantal implores. “Please.”

“It gave us all a fright. I’ll say that,” Myrna says.

“I can’t imagine,” I say.

“Oh, a dead man right there next to you. It’s a sight.” Myrna will continue unless I stop her.

“Chantal and I brought you a gift.” I pull out the book from my bag. “It’s called *Coming of Age*. Studs Terkel interviewed a bunch of people. Had them talk about their lives.”

“Well, that’s sweet of you both. Hey and it’s in big print for us old people!”

“No, it’s also for people like me who like to read from across the room,” I say.

“You do no such thing,” Chantal laughs.

“Chicago Tribune says here that the book is about people who have never taken no for an answer. I like it already!” says Myrna.

“I’m so glad,” I say.

“I ever tell you about when my husband proposed to me? I said no to him first, just so I could see his reaction!” Myrna starts to laugh and then starts to cough again. This time, I do call the nurse because Myrna is holding her stomach like it hurts. The nurse comes in and increases the drip on the I.V. and that seems to help after a few seconds. I don’t ask what the drip is filled with. The nurse thinks we should go and come back later because Myrna needs to rest. Myrna looks sad to see us leave.

“Myrna, we’ll come back in a few days. With more books. And I want to hear that story about your husband proposing to you.”

Myrna has an oxygen mask on now and waves as we walk out the door. Chantal holds my arm tightly as we walk down the hallway to the elevator and out towards the car. She’s quiet on the ride back and I’m inclined to not disturb her thinking. Maybe she’s thinking about Bradley, how he died too young for her to understand. Or maybe she’s just focused on Myrna the way I am. Sending little prayers out for her to get better soon.

\*

Relative to some things, this wouldn’t register as important at all. But I’ve been putting off my clogged sink for six months already and it’s getting bad. I’m home now standing in my bathroom staring at this misleading hole in the center of the sink. It looks clear, but when I run the water, the sink fills up in 8.6 seconds flat. I’ve timed it only because I often wear a stopwatch around my neck for work.

So I finally get a flashlight and peer down the hole, but not before I shine the light down Taxi’s ear. Oh! That’s enough of that.

The drain definitely is not clear. It looks like it’s got a little hair. Could be mine. All bets say it is, but I don’t remember losing any hair. I get some long nose pliers and pull some out. There’s more than I thought and it’s all goo and it keep on coming, lumps and lumps of hair and goo and I have to stop.

Breathe.

Ok. Plumbers. This is what they're good at and trained to do. But they're too expensive.

Jo.

I knock, knowing I'm asking for weird trouble. But I remind myself of the goo and the plumber with his crack showing as he hands me a huge bill.

"Well, hello neighbor!" Jo is wearing a big black rubber apron. He's holding a jar filled with dark liquid in his hand.

"Hi Jo. I hope I'm not disturbing you. But I seem to be having a problem with my sink."

"Well that's no good," Jo says.

"No, it's not but I think I just need to unfasten the trap and drain it from the bottom. There must be something clogging it."

"Must be, yes."

"Trouble is, I don't know anything about this sort of thing. No plumber's wrench in my toolbox for sure. What about you?"

Jo starts walking back into his loft.

"Hold on there, Sara."

I wait in the hallway and realize that I've just invited Jo and his toolbox into my loft. Who would ever know if something were to happen to me? Jo would know how to get rid of the evidence, with the rubber apron and all. He'd chop me up for sure. Oh, but Taxi would save me anyway. Sure he sleeps a lot during the day. But eventually he'll notice a limb or two.

Jo comes out in the hall, turns and double locks his door. He's holding a closed shoebox. I'm praying its got tools in it and not something suspicious. We walk into my loft and Jo stands back by the entrance.

"You don't lock up?" He asks.

"Usually, yes, but I was just popping up to see you. Two seconds."

"Someone could have robbed you clean while you were upstairs," he scolds me.

"That's true," I say, "but that's why I have Taxi."

"What's Taxi – is that a new alarm system?" Jo is excited.

"No, Taxi's my dog," I say, knowing I've just disappointed him. "He's old-school security."

So we're in the bathroom now and Jo opens his box. There's lots of white cotton cloth wrapped around something. Oh god, please don't let it be alive.

"This is a beauty, this one," Jo says as he slowly unwraps a plumber's wrench. It's the prettiest, most shiny wrench I have ever seen.

"That sure is a beauty," I say. I'm a tobacco-chewing, card-swapping wrench aficionado. We're both sitting on the floor of my bathroom. If there's an earthquake right now and I die, and I'm found by Tess, I'll have some explaining to do.

"Yeah, she's a real beauty. I picked her up in Denver," Jo says in a dream state.

I picture Jo, going cross-country on a search for the most perfect plumber's wrench.

"So let's try her out," I encourage him. Please don't hurt me, Jo. That would be wrong.

Jo turns the water valves off. Glad he remembered that. He puts on some latex gloves. Please let this be over soon.

“She’s tight,” he says as he moves the wrench around the pipe. Why must everything that men twist or sail or steer be referred to as a woman? I don’t ask Jo this because he might answer for 3 hours.

“Here she comes,” Jo says, as the ring around the pipe twists free. He pulls the pipe out of alignment to see what’s in there. I turn away and count my toes.

“Whoa, Nelly! You have a colony of happy campers in there,” he says. “Need something longer than my fingers to get at them.”

I come back with some chopsticks.

“Perfect. I’m good at using these.” Jo is so happy right now. Maybe my inviting him here counts as community service and I can get my traffic tickets reduced.

Jo starts filling my trash can with hair from before I was born for sure. This is not all my hair. Nope. Sorry, but someone else has been coming in here to dump their wads of hair. I have to start making sure my doors are locked. Jo is right.

He screws back on the pipe and runs the water good and hard. Jo is squeaky proud.

“Will you look at that,” He beams. “I knew when I bought this puppy, I’d get good use out of her.” He rolls his puppy back up in the cloth and while closing the box he actually talks to her. “Till next time, champ.”

I’m grateful, I am. It’s not that I’m not. But people like Jo walk that thin line between the refrigerator and the freezer. Just a few notches more and he’d be in a whole different state.

Jo gives me the chills. I suppose that I must give him something.

\*

You once said to me, “Time is sacred—don’t just give it away to people.” I had just been to a party the night before and you were listening to me complain. You said they’re like vampires—people at parties chit-chatting your ear away. I asked you to say that closer to my ear so I’d be scared.

Today, I’m looking at my calendar trying to see how many days our lives have been entwined—more for me of course because I’m still alive and still in love, if that’s fair to say. I still feel in love. And according to this, dating back to the first time we saw each other, we’ve been in love for 712 days.

Tess is still the only one who knows, but I think Chantal might know something, though I haven’t a clue how she’d know. I think for a split second maybe that by me choosing to keep our little secret a secret, I’ve inadvertently kept myself pretty scarce from the rest of the planet. But that’s my loneliness talking, not me regretting anything.

You once said to me, “It always makes me feel like my hair’s on fire,” and you just kept on eating the Thai peppers raw, one by one. I developed a taste for them too, and now I always feel like I’m working out when I eat them, breaking a sweat half way through a bowl of rice. It’s hard to eat hot peppers without thinking of you. So I just do and I can’t tell the difference sometimes between you and the pepper and what burns my insides more.

Today, our 712<sup>th</sup> day, I’m flipping through the pages of the Jane Hirshfield book you gave me. *For What Binds Us* is the poem that gets me. Especially this part:

*And when two people have loved each other  
see how it is like a  
scar between their bodies,  
stronger, darker, and proud;  
how the black cord makes of them a single fabric  
that nothing can tear or mend.*

You aren't so far away right now and I'm thinking maybe you're inside this tangerine that I'm about to peel. You've been waiting in there, all sweet and wet, juggling three pits, patiently waiting for me to find you.

\*

Taxi knows that my hip's killing me today. He sees me limp and he comes back around and licks my hand. I lean up against a fence. The sign says: *Public Open Space. Keep dogs on leash. No motorized bikes.* We're someplace near Redwood City, where we eventually have to get to, so I can pick up a new tube to replace the one that blew in my compressor. Things blow up in my studio. I have no idea why.

But there's always time for a walk and Taxi loves new trails. I found this one in the guidebook for dog-friendly places. It's overcast today, but Taxi puts on his shades just to look cool. We're going to do a 2-mile loop and I've packed enough water for both of us to last a summer.

We walk and walk. I recite recipes. I sing songs—original ones that I write for Taxi right on the spot. *Oh Ta Ta Ta Taxi you are bubble gum...you are candy and sunshine to me. Oh Ta Ta Ta Taxi—* There's a horse up ahead, saddled with no rider. Taxi growls and I leash him and hold tight.

"Hello horse," I say to the horse. The horse looks agitated and now I'm thinking its rider might be have been thrown. That's equestrian talk for fallen-off.

"Where's your mommy?" I ask. Taxi is so jealous and growls more and he freaks out a bit. I tie him to a tree a few feet back and walk towards the horse again. It nays loudly and moves back.

"I'm not here to pull your teeth out. That's somebody else," I say in a comforting voice. I start looking around for the rider. Taxi has stopped barking and now he's lying on the ground eating a stick. I walk down the path a bit and the horse starts to follow me.

"Hey, you lead," I tell the horse. And he does. Sara, horse whisperer.

Around the next bend I see somebody. It's a woman, sitting up with her head between her legs. I walk up just a little closer. I don't want to startle her.

"Excuse me, but is this your horse?" I ask, thinking that I have never asked that question ever before. She looks up quickly. I've startled her anyway.

"Oh, yes." She's dazed and I'm thinking she's been hurt.

"Are you ok? Were you thrown?"

"Yes. It's so strange. I don't know how. It's never happened before," she says.

She looks like she's a horseback rider, riding pants and all. She has short blond hair and steel blue eyes that are wobbling around right now trying to figure things out. Her face is smudged with dirt. She could be 20, 30 or 40. I can't tell yet.

"Do you need help getting up?" I ask.

“Not yet I don’t think. I should sit for a second more. It just happened, I think. Where did you find Cabby?”

“No!” I exclaim.

“No what?”

“Your horse’s name. It’s Cabby. My dog’s name is Taxi. That’s a coincidence.”

She doesn’t quite seem to care. Her head is back between her legs.

“It’s actually short for Cabernet,” she said quietly, her head still between her legs. I frown. She should be drinking water.

“I have lots of water. Here, please.” I hand her a bottle.

“Thanks.” She drinks it slowly, but eventually drinks the whole thing.

“It’s important to stay hydrated, especially if you’re injured internally,” I say as if I know.

“You think I am?” she asks nervously.

“Maybe,” I say. “But we should get out of the sun and go under that tree as soon as you think you can get up for a second.”

“Yeah,” she says and she really is starting to look weak.

“Here. Let’s just shimmy over to the tree. Don’t even get up. I’m going to sort of pull you.” And I do. I pull her from behind while she’s still sitting. I pretend she’s a lawn chair that needs re-arranging.

“Thanks. God, this is weird. Thank you. I feel so pathetic,” she says.

“You’re not. I think you must have been thrown pretty hard. I’d be crying and carrying on and throwing sticks. I’d probably light a fire to make sure the whole world knew I was in pain. No, you’re an inspiration.”

I remember Taxi waiting around the corner tied to a tree. Maybe he’s been eaten alive by ants.

“I have to go get my dog. He’s tied to a tree. Be right back.”

I run around the bend and get Taxi. He’s mad but not so mad on the count of the this big stick he’s been grinding down. As we walk back, I notice what a gorgeous view this hill has. I can see down the Andreas Fault line. Big trees going on forever. I have to come back here again when there’s no big medical emergencies.

“Are you good?” I ask, as if me being gone for 3 minutes has healed her.

“Getting less wheezy,” she says. “Are you Taxi?” she asks him as he licks her face. “What a pretty dog. Hey, Taxi.”

She very pretty, this lady sitting here. She’s about my age I think. I bet she’s pure bred. Shame. WASPs always die younger than Russian-Polish mutts like me.

“Do you live far? Should I go find someone?”

“I keep Cabby at a stable not far from here. I live back up in the city.” She starts to get up but it hurts.

“Lean on me. See if that helps.” And she does. She leans and stands but she’s very unsure of her footing. “Keep holding. I’m not sure you should be doing this. Maybe sit down again.”

“No, I just need to wait for a second before I walk. I think I’m banged up but I don’t think anything’s broken. I would know that.”

“Yes, you would,” I say with authority.

“You’ve broken something, huh?”

“Right leg.”

“How?”

“Skiing”

“Tahoe?”

“No, stage.”

“Stage?”

“Well, yeah. It wasn’t skiing. It was more sliding. Sliding off a stage.”

“Oh,” she sighs. “That sounds even worse.”

“I wish I broke it skiing. It sounds so much more dignified.”

“Is that why you said skiing first?”

“Oh, I wasn’t going to lie,” I say. “I just wanted to use a verb more graceful than ‘falling’ off the stage. ‘Skiing’ off the stage sounds ok. Sounds almost like dancing.”

“Were you dancing? Did you dance right off the stage?”

“No, I was playing trumpet and just lost my balance,” I say and for some reason my ears are burning. That happens when I’m lying, angry or embarrassed.

“I’d say that’s a pretty cool way to break your leg.”

“Well compared to falling off of a horse, I don’t know. I rode a horse once. On a dude ranch in Bandera, Texas.”

“Once?” She’s amusing.

“Well, I went for a week. Bought new Wrangler jeans and everything. Fifteen years ago, I was still living in New York City and I thought a dude ranch would just kick my butt.”

“You wanted your butt kicked?”

“So to speak. I thought it would be fun. I went with another New Yorker and we just laughed at ourselves for 6 days straight.”

“So how was the horse? The one you rode once?”

“The horse was lovely. I was just not meant to sit on him. The second we started moving, I just started screaming. It just felt so uncomfortable and scary and unnatural for me to be that high and moving forward and up and down and up and down all at the same time.”

“So you got off soon, I hope.”

“Well, I honestly was willing to give it a go for a while but the guide ordered me off almost immediately. He said my screaming was spooking all the other horses.”

“So that was it?”

“That was it. But I had a great time anyway. Made friends with the pigs and cows. Didn’t have to ride them.”

“No, that’s true,” she says. She’s shielding her eyes from the sun now, trying to look at me.

“How’s your head? You want to try to walk?”

She takes some steps and looks ok. Her walk back to the stables is all down hill. I’m wondering if I should offer.

“We could walk you back. To make sure. We should, really.”

She agrees and seems relieved.

“I’m Lauren. You are so nice to do this.”

“I’m Sara.” I’m uncomfortable. I’m ok playing trumpet on stage or sitting in my studio with the door closed. But people make me uncomfortable these days. I wasn’t always like this.

We walk the trail back slowly. It takes us about forty minutes. We don't talk much. Lauren is getting more and more aware of her pain as we descend.

"I don't know how I feel, but probably flat on my back. It's hurting. Low back especially."

We go slow. I sort of push the pace though because I think she needs to just get home and get into a bath or something.

"You have a tub?" I ask.

"Yes."

"Use it when you get home. If you have sea salt, pour it all in. It helps."

"Ok," she says, wincing. We're at the bottom and the stable is mostly empty except for the boy who comes to get Cabby. We walk towards Lauren's car. I was expecting something fancy, like what people who ride horses drive. But her Honda looks worse than mine. Stupid me for assuming anything.

"Let me take you over the hill to get you to your car. Did you park it at the head of the trail?"

"Yes. Are you ok driving, though?"

"I think so. Maybe follow my car back to the city as we drive. Just in case."

I follow her car very closely. I'm really worried about her getting home ok. I'm hoping her bath helps a lot. I'll check in on her maybe. Call and check in. That would be the decent thing to do.

\*

Never did get to pick up that new tube for my compressor. Note to self.

\*

It's midnight my time, so it's 10 am her time. She's probably not there. I'll leave a message.

*Shalom. You've reached the Grovenfeld household. We're out picking olives. Come join us, or leave your message.*

"Hey, last month, it was oranges you were picking. You're confusing us here in America, Hannah. Hi. I'm actually calling for Shoshi. Hi Shoshi! According to Aunt Ellie's calendar, you are six today. Yeah Shoshi. This is your Aunt Sara saying Happy Birthday. I bought you a car but you have to come to California to drive it. Ok, maybe we'll talk again. Love to you all."

\*

I am really upset with how this turned out.

"Tess, either I messed up or I'm going to sue." She recommended this do-it-yourself stuff. "I'm calling to lodge a complaint."

"Will that be all?" she asks.

"Tess, seriously. My carpet is pink. It was white and dirty. Now it's pink and dirty."

“I’m sure it’s not dirty anymore. And don’t blame me. My housecleaner swears by it.”

“You don’t have any white carpets I bet.”

“No. But yours isn’t white either. Isn’t it kind of tan?”

“No, white. Always has been white until now. Now it’s pink. It’s some chemical reaction, maybe.”

“If it’s a pale pink, that could be nice.”

I thought that once every five years or so, I should shampoo the carpet. Silly me.

“Tess, I’m not cut out for this.”

“You’ve always had trauma around housecleaning. You should get a maid like me.”

“You have two incomes.”

“Sara, we’ll get you a second income. Hold on. I thought I had an extra one here in my kitchen.”

“Funny.”

\*

I’m done with the sound design for scenes 7 and 12. I’ve heard that Sam is all aglow about the New York exhibit and that he’ll be there next month to accept praise on behalf of his dear departed wife. I cringe at the thought of him agreeing to this. Maybe he’s part of all this insane exploitation. He wouldn’t know fine art if it were shoved up his nose.

I would never call what I do for EnZone a representation of my art. It’s my craft maybe. It’s how I pay my mortgage. It doesn’t broadcast my soul out to anyone. And Zoe’s art has nothing to do with what they’re showing in New York, so they shouldn’t dare call it an art exhibit. They should call it a work exhibit.

*To : Michael @ enzone.com*

*M – I just passed on the sound files to engineering. So 7 and 12 are good to go.*

*I doubt I’ll be joining you in New York. I have a different take on how to honor Zoe, and the art that she made.*

*Next time you’re in town, I’d like to talk with you about this, if you have an interest. - S*

\*

You have to really like people to run a band. I don’t know if I have it in me. Maybe I’m too old to have a band called *Red Onion Jazz Babies*. Too old like Miles Davis, who’s dead already. They’re all dead.

I’m not happy about seeing Romeo tonight or the other players. I feel disconnected. It’s been building for a while. Since the day I met them really. Sometimes, I let things go on for a bit before I nip them in the bud.

Kyle is still setting up his drums. The *Latin American Club* is more crowded than usual. Some colleges have held graduations this week and people are toasting to

themselves. Lurch will do well tonight. Just by sloshing some drinks around, Lurch will take home a couple hundred, tax free.

“Hi Lurch,” I say, spraying some soda water into a glass. “I smell summer.”

“Do you, now?” he says and I remember that I hate talking to Lurch.

“Yeah. School’s out. Gotta go.”

I go back to the stage and pick up my horn. I start to run some scales but my mouth drops open when he walks in the door. It’s him. I’ve seen him in photos only but I know it’s him. Sam can’t come into my world. It’s wrong. I go behind stage and frantically dial Tess.

“Tess, breathe with me. Fuck.”

“Sara, what’s going on? Are you being chased? What?”

“Tess, Zoe’s husband just walked in the club.”

“Alone?”

“I don’t know. I have to not be here. There’s no way I can play.”

“Does he know you?”

“He knows of me. I know that. But we never actually met”

“Well that’s good.”

“But he’ll put two and two together if he finds out my name. He’ll see me, Sara, the girl trumpet player that Zoe knew. Shit. Tess. What should I do?”

I’ve now managed to wedge myself between a beer keg and the emergency exit behind stage. It smells like pee and wet clothes.

“Tell Romeo not to introduce you tonight. He always forgets anyway.”

“Oh God, what if Sam comes up to the stage and wants to bond.”

“Leave. Get sick. You’ve done that a million times.”

“Yeah, to go meet Zoe. Oh this is karma coming back.”

“You have to calm down.”

“That’s why I fucking called you. Tess, is Ben asleep?”

“No, it’s only ten o’clock.”

“Would it be weird if you came out?”

“Sara, I would if I thought it would help. What are you thinking?”

“Oh I don’t know. Nothing”

“Sara, just play and then leave the back way.”

“Ok I will. I gotta go.”

The band’s on stage already. Romeo turns to say something to me but he can’t step around the other players.

“Sara, glad you could make it,” he calls out to me. “And we did miss you in LA. I know you think we didn’t.”

So now that he said most of that into the microphone, Sam’s sure to have heard my name. This is why James Bond has cyanide tablets sewn into his jacket. Just in case he needs to die quickly.

I don’t even know what song this is that we’re playing. I think it’s a Tom Petty song. We’ll swing anything shamelessly. Tonight, I want to switch places with my trumpet and be blown till I burst.

Sam’s been looking at me through the whole set. I’ve tried to avoid eye contact. He looks sad and mean. Or maybe just sad but I have to believe mean too, because it

helps. If some doctor was scanning my brain right now, she'd see a traffic jam of emotions in there. I could sound design it easy.

I'm light headed and this is what happened the first time I broke my leg.

The set's over and I'm sitting on my trumpet case like a kid lost in a bus stop. Sam's walking over to the stage and my heart is doing laps in my throat.

"You guys are great," he says. His voice is soft like a therapist's. I barely look up.

"Thanks," Henry says. Oh Henry, please engage him. Tell him it's your pleasure and all that.

But there's silence for a beat too long so I finally look up to see the back of Sam. He's walking away and is leaving the club. I'm frozen, and don't know if I was just horribly rude or if he simply came up to say thanks. Maybe Henry's exchange was all he wanted. I don't know. Maybe he didn't even know who I was.

I'm sitting on my trumpet case shaking because there's a part of me that wants to go follow him.

\*

The fog is so thick right now. It's inside the car with me. It's so late that the traffic lights are all blinking yellow already. I shouldn't be driving tonight, but I haven't designated anyone else. I'm alone, stone sober and a probable danger to myself. I keep on checking my rearview mirror to make sure I'm following up on what I said I'd do. I said I would not slip into some pathetic dark place and grow facial hair. I swore I would continue to function and even thrive. Life is obviously fleeting, I said, so I can't just flit it away. I promised myself that I'd read the newspaper to keep the days straight.

I've parked, and this is exactly where I live because I recognize it. It was here when I left it and it's here again. These are the small comforts of permanent housing. I have keys that fit into this hole and pajamas somewhere here to keep me warm. I will not feed you now, Taxi, because I know you'll understand when I talk to you in the morning. Now I'm horizontal, spinning, like a ceiling fan.

\*

In the event of a change in loft pressure, little masks will drop down from Jo's loft above and fill me with fumes. I am to strap on my own mask before assisting Taxi with his.

"Jo, I'm sorry to bother you, but remember when you once told me about lots of noise you were about to make?"

"Yes."

"Well, today you're making noise again. Wish I knew because as fate would have it, I'm recording."

Jo looks mortified.

"Jo, it's not a real big deal. But maybe if you could give me just two solid hours. That would be great."

"I would have come down to warn you again this time. But I had no idea about today. I don't always know."

Jo's wearing spotless mechanic's overalls and white sneakers. With all the banging I heard, I expected maybe a little sweat or dust. But he's all squeaky clean, ready for church. But I don't ask. The book says don't ask.

"Jo, as an artist, I understand the mystery of spontaneous creation. When banging has to happen, it just has to. So I feel badly. Look, how about I give you two hours now and then you give me two hours?"

"That would be fair, Sara. You're very fair."

"Well, thank you, Jo. Bye."

"So two hours starting from now."

"From now would be great, Jo."

As I walk down the stairs back to my loft, I hear the banging start up again. I do want to know what and why. Eventually, I will know. Either he'll tell me himself. Or I'll read it in the newspaper after something big happens.

\*

The article came out today.

*City College to Build New Facility  
...4.2 million will be raised...private and  
public funding...The chancellor is pleased...  
...This lot currently has properties rented to  
a Shiny Penny Diner and Grandview  
Rest Home. Both structures will be demolished  
in order for new construction...  
The developers hope to begin the project by early Fall.  
...There's talk about growing tensions between  
funding partners. The student body and faculty...*

No mention of how perhaps the demolition may impact 50 or so lives. No mention of lives flying everywhere. Great reporting. Let's give this guy Diane Sawyer's job. I think he's ready.

I don't know if Grandview gets *the Weekly*. I doubt it, but I'm worried that Chantal will find out about this the wrong way. Though I'm not sure what the right way would be.

\*

Myrna is still in the hospital and she's not doing so well. She's been on and off breathing machines for two weeks. The nurses have been keeping her comfortable, she says, but she can't tell night from day sometimes because her sleep pattern is so off. Myrna used to love to sleep so she could be fresh in the morning, ready to boss people around and try to get what she wants.

Today is better than yesterday, she says.

"Go ahead. Open it," I say and Myrna opens our present. Chantal looks shocked when Myrna pulls out a purple and green felt jester hat, complete with bells. I pinch Chantal's arm gently.

"Chantal picked it out," I say and Chantal looks at me as if to say 'I did no such thing!'

“Well, this is a first,” Myrna says.

“It gets cold here at night, I know. Chinese doctors always say to cover your head so the wind doesn’t get in. We thought a hat would come in handy.”

Myrna tries to put it on but has trouble pulling her arms through all the tubes and patches. I put it on her head for her and ring one of the bells.

“I hope the bells don’t ring and wake you,” Chantal says.

“You should have thought of that before you bought it,” I say and she laughs.

Myrna looks so pale in contrast to the purple and green felt. It’s exhausting just for her to breathe, it seems. Her condition has deteriorated so fast.

A young guy just walked in.

“Hi,” he says, “I’m Gary. Myrna’s my grandmother.”

“I’m Sara and this is Chantal.”

He shakes both our hands. He looks like a college kid, sweet hair cut and trendy Diesel jacket.

“How are you, Grandma?”

“This is my joy, ladies. Hello, Gary,” she says and beckons him over.

“What’s with the hat?” he asks.

“It’s a present from my friends. I hope you brought me something,” she says and laughs and coughs.

“Just me today,” he says and goes to stand at the end of the bed. “Mom’s coming by later. I’ll miss her though, because I have to leave. Mom told me today that you’ll be living with us in Oakland when you get better.”

“Oh, no. If I get better, I’m going back to the home.” Myrna starts to cough again. Then stops. It hurts to watch her fight with her own body. She wins this round.

“And your Mom doesn’t want me around again. It was murder for the both of us the first time. My wheelchair scuffed her floors, for one thing.”

“Can’t go back. Papers this week talked about your home being crushed for some lecture halls.”

My eyes shoot over to catch Chantal’s, but she seems unshaken.

“Myrna, we were talking about that today. Seems they’re closing at some point,” Chantal says. I make a decision to play dumb.

“Chantal, why didn’t you tell me?” I ask.

“We’re not all that worried though. These things can take years.” She looks over at Gary, probably wishing he had more tact. Myrna has said nothing, but looks busy in her head.

“Grandma, Mom loves living with you. And I’ll come around all the time. I’ll make you cook for me again.”

“I can’t cook anymore,” Myrna snaps. Gary’s sorry he said that.

“Ok, we’ll order out,” he says, but the room still feels heavy.

I’m watching Chantal and can’t quite read her. Myrna is obviously distraught.

“I’ll look into all of this. I’m not sure we have the whole story straight, “ I say. “They can’t just kick 50 residents out onto the street.”

“My dear Sara, there’s nothing to figure out. It’s big business and we’re little people.”

“No, it’s an educational institute not the stock exchange. They teach the humanities. I would assume they have some.”

“I’ve never known you to be such an idealist,” Chantal says. Neither have I, but this is too close to the bone.

“Well we’re not here to plot a revolution just yet,” I say. “Myrna, we want you to get better first.”

“Don’t count on anything from me,” she says bitterly. Her jester hat struggles to stay on her head, like it knows it’s fighting against the odds.

\*

There’s a message on my machine.

*“Aunt Sara, dis iz Shoshi. Tank you for calink. Umm, my bird day was gut. I am six. (whisper in back ground) and very bick and tall. (back ground whisper again) I luf you, Aunt Sara. (noises of phone being passed) Hi Sara. Shoshi loved your message. She played it again and again. Thanks for calling. It meant a lot to her. I hope you’re good. Bye Sara!”*

\*

It turns out that City College is one of the biggest landlords in the area. Articles that I’m reading here on the internet date back 20 years. They have a few other lots with abandoned buildings on them that probably could be turned into things other than big decaying spaces. But if they sell them off, a big tacky developer might take over. Don’t know what’s worse.

Grandview Rest Home was built in the late-60’s by a Chinese family, who still owns it today. They signed a thirty-year lease and have been paying month-to-month for the last five years, since the property ownership changed hands. They’ve been unable to renew a long-term contract again. They probably knew this was coming it seems. Sad for them too, I suppose.

I can’t figure Chantal out on this one. Her pension pays for the rent here, fine. Perhaps she just plans on moving to another facility. But the decent ones all have long waiting lists. I know this because I know what Mel’s family went through to find him a space at Grandview.

Maybe Luke will step in. Lumbering Luke who lives somewhere in Connecticut and who supposedly has been keeping Chantal’s art collection safe and sound. I can’t imagine him stepping forward on this one, and if he does, I don’t trust his intentions. Luke doesn’t sound like the type of guy who’d move mountains for his mom. Maybe I’ll have to go to some bowling alley and track him down.

\*

It’s 7 am and it has been a while.

Ok, so I’ll be the one.

“Mom, it’s Sara. I’d thought I’d say hi.”

“Jack. It’s Sara. Sara, hold on I’ll put you on speaker phone.” *Better not to have you directly in our ears. We don’t know where your mouth has been.*

“So how are things on the east coast?” *I would like to go surfing with you.*

“Beautiful,” Mom says. “Dad’s collecting prizes for the raffle. The temple fundraiser is coming up.” *But you wouldn’t know about that since you’ve tossed God in the garbage.*

“Dad, that’s great. Maybe I can get some games donated by the company I work for.” *I will donate these games and you will love me more.*

“Sara, that would be wonderful,” Dad says, “and I know they’d go over great with the kids.” *We want to change you Sara. We know people here who can help straighten your life out.*

“Definitely then. I’ll get them to ship a few games directly to you.” *I know I’m old but I could use some cash for a pair of rollerblades.*

“Sara, Ellie has invited some of your cousins to visit while Hannah is here. We’ll have a brunch.” *When you were a kid you used to entertain us at parties. You still are such a talent. No one can argue with that.*

You can say that out loud. It’s kind of sweet.

“Thanks.”

“For what?” Mom asks.

Whoops.

“For inviting me.”

“Sara. You have always been invited. You’re the one who feels uninvited.” *You live in a ghetto out there. What do you expect—a red carpet?*

“I know, Mom. It sounds fun. I love the cousins.” *Maybe I’ll bring my knife collection. But I don’t juggle like I used to.*

“Sara, bring something nice to wear.” *Whatever you wear will be wrong. That’s just the rule.*

“Mom, I haven’t even said I’m coming and you’re already telling me what to wear. That’s not a good strategy.” *Bungy-jumping is an exact science. One degree off and you’re splat.*

“Sara,” Dad says, “we hope you’ll come. Mom especially hopes you’ll come.” *You’ve caused her to age twice the rate that’s normal. Twice.*

“Shoshi was six this week. Amazing, huh.” *See, I remembered. Two points.*

“Hannah said you called. That’s wonderful that you called.” *Shocked us all. You’re just screaming out for help. We hear you. We’ll help you get out of your mess.*

“Well, I’m glad.” *I got her a subscription to Off Our Backs – a really liberating magazine. Good for young girls.*

“It’s early there? Are you on your way to work,” Dad asks.

“Yeah. It’s a long commute. I have to walk down these stairs from my bed into my studio. If I do it enough times, it can be quite a workout.”

They both laugh.

“Sometimes, I wear sweats and shower and change at the studio.” *I work naked sometimes because I can.*

“Well, thanks for calling, Sara.” *We still are your parents. We worry about you being dead somewhere and us not knowing.*

“I’m glad I caught you. Have a great week. Dad, good luck with the raffle.”

“Bye.”

\*

Dear Sam,

You looked sad. Or maybe ~~that was me projecting~~ that's just how you look. Some people have faces that just always look sad even when they're ecstatic. I had a professor once who

\*

I'm on line at the post office, to mail in my quarterly taxes. It beats having to serve jail time. I was in jail once in Baltimore for swimming nude in a public fountain. I know jail.

What's really weird is there's a guy directly behind me who's wearing a five-mile nun run t-shirt. I have to ask.

"Excuse me, but I have to ask you about your t-shirt. Where did you get it?"

He looks down to see what shirt he's wearing.

"Honestly? I think it got mixed in with my clothes at the laundry mat."

He's not embarrassed but I think he should be.

"I think I know the woman who lost that."

"No – you serious?" A 'dude' would have followed nicely but he forgot.

Take two.

"No – you serious, dude?"

"Yes. Completely. I think you should take it off and give it to me."

"Here? What are you, nuts?"

"No, but you're a thief."

"Am not! This T just landed in my pile. Scouts honor. Cross my toes!"

"Well, now that you know someone who knows who lost it – it's your duty as a good citizen to get it back to its owner."

"You want me to take my shirt off right here on line at the post office."

"What do you need – stamps?"

"One stamp, yeah. For my phone bill."

"Here, give me your bill. I'll mail it. 37 cents for a stolen t-shirt. I think that's fair."

He thinks for a second. That may be his limit.

"Cool," he says and takes off the T, hands it to me along with his phone bill.

"You've made the right choice," I say as he bolts out the door.

People have been staring. I stare back. They have no idea who they're dealing with.

\*

"I'm pregnant."

"No."

"I don't want to be"

"Shit."

"I just don't want to be."

"Shit."

“Ben is so happy. I haven’t told him that I’m feeling this way.”  
“Tell him. Tess, you have to tell him. You talk about everything with him.”  
“Not this.”  
“Why? Especially this!”  
“Sara, it would break his heart.”  
“How far along are you?”  
“Doctor says 5 weeks.”  
“Accident?”  
“Obviously. I didn’t want to get pregnant.”  
“Did he?”  
“I doubt it. I mean, we weren’t planning on having another kid.”  
“So maybe he’ll feel the same way you do once you tell him what’s going on with you.”  
“No way. Ben is so fatalistic. He already said it’s meant to be.”  
“But you’re half the equation here.”  
“A third actually. Zack counts.”  
“What does Zack say?”  
“Very funny.”  
“Well, does Zack want a sister?”  
“Why do you think it’s a girl?”  
“Because. I don’t know.”  
“Zack would be fine with a sister. Or a garden snake.”  
“True.”  
“You talk to him.”  
“Who, Zack?”  
“No, Ben.”  
“What? Tess this is so between you and him.”  
“No, not about how I’m feeling. Go meet him for lunch and see how he’s feeling. You’re so good at that. Maybe there’s some ambiguity on his part too, and he’s just overcompensating to make it all ok for us.”  
“So you want me to eat with Ben to see if he doesn’t want another kid. Tess, you’re cracked.”  
“Please, Sara. Remember when a bunch of us went canoeing like three years ago and you and Ben got lost together?”  
“Vaguely.”  
“Well, I’ll never forget what Ben said on the ride back to the city. He said that he could spill his guts to you like nobody’s business. He said that.”  
“I should have sent him a bill for that day. Now I remember.”  
“Please?”  
“Tess, I’ll go. But regardless of what Ben says, you’ve got to sort this through too. For everyone’s sake. But I’m worried about you mostly. If I have to hear you complain for the next 35 years about a decision you regret, I’ll be mad.”  
“Thank you, Sara.”  
“Ok.”  
“I love you big time.”  
“Hmmm.”

\*

New Jersey is not the shape of Italy, but when I was growing up there I used to imagine us kicking Delaware in the head. I didn't like New York and Pennsylvania crowding us in much either. If I had my way, New Jersey would have physically seceded from the US and floated out east, to become an exotic island off the coast of France.

\*

"Ben, we're meeting for lunch. I'll be there in a minute."

Ben works as a lab technician. He tests blood most of the day. He's interested in forensics but needs to take special classes which he hasn't found time for yet.

I walk up to the glass door of his lab and motion to get buzzed in. He holds up his finger and I sit down to wait for him. There are no magazines. I feel like I'm in a holding tank waiting to be deported somewhere cold.

"Sorry, Sara. But you didn't give me much notice."

"I was in the neighborhood. Couldn't resist."

"Oh, no—I'm so glad. It's been awhile."

"Where should we go?"

We land up at Cancun Taqueria, just a few blocks from the lab. My stuffed jalapenos are soggy but hot and good for the overcast day. I can't recognize what Ben ordered, because it's completely covered with cheese.

"Ben, I had to see you because I heard the news today from Tess. Congrats, Dad."

"The baby. I know. I can't believe it."

I'm trying to read between his bites.

"How does it feel? What was your first thought when you heard?"

"First thought? Very first thought?"

"Yeah."

He laughs a little and takes a bite.

"Honestly, my first thought was 'oh shit.'"

"That's not surprising."

"Well, it's just that we were being careful. We didn't think we wanted more than one kid. I'm sure Tess has told you that."

"Yeah, she did."

"And now we just have to readjust. I think that's what we're both doing right now." He continues to eat, then stops and looks up at me. "Did she send you here? I know she sent you here. She is so funny."

"What? Why do you say that? I wanted to come here to congratulate you."

"No doubt, but she sent you here."

He's looking at me like he's waiting for his change.

"Ok, so maybe she encouraged me. I kept on asking how you felt and she finally said 'go ask him yourself.'"

"She didn't say it quite like that. No, she said, 'go ask him and tell me every word he says because he'll tell you stuff he might not tell me.'"

"Is that true?" I ask.

“Sara, Tess and I are very close obviously. No offense, but if I have something to tell her, I tell her. And I know whatever I tell you, it would get to her eventually.”

“So you don’t trust me to keep a secret?”

“Never had a reason to.”

“Until now.”

“Until now?” he asks.

“Do you?”

He takes some more bites and finishes off his beer.

“Sara. This is weird. Am I talking to you or Tess? Let’s just get her on the phone so we can avoid anything getting lost in the translation.”

I’m starting to not enjoy this, or my food.

“You’re right. Call her and talk. Better yet, go home and talk. I feel stupid.”

“Didn’t mean to make you feel stupid.”

“No, but I do.”

“Sara, you’re such a good friend. To both of us. And I will go home tonight and talk. Obviously, that’s what’s supposed to happen.”

“It wasn’t so obvious 10 minutes ago.”

“No, that’s true.”

“Well good then, I guess.”

“Thank you, Sara. So mission accomplished.”

“Hmm.”

“Chip?”

\*

I’m praying for this wind to die down or I’ll have to go in. Trying to read the Sunday *Times* on the roof is exhausting. I’m going inside.

There’s an article in the style section about teenage girls using Botox to prevent aging. They should just kill themselves to avoid getting older altogether, I say.

Maybe there’s something worth reading in the travel section. Hot tubbing in Iceland. Yes, that’s what I’ll plan for next. I haven’t been to Paris yet, but Iceland is now a priority. I could stand to go there alone. But being in Paris single is like using a vibrator with no batteries. You don’t get the full effect. But Iceland with me and the penguins soaking in natural hot springs—that’s acceptable.

Get the phone, Taxi. Please? Years of asking and still—nothing.

“Hello?”

“Sara?”

“Who’s this?”

“Sara, this is Lauren.”

“Lauren.”

“The horseback rider you saved.”

“Oh! Lauren. Are you still ok?”

“Yes, thanks for your message that next day.”

“And thanks for your message back. Glad you’re ok. Good thing you went to the doctor. Just to be sure.”

“Yeah, I’m much better. It’s taken a couple of weeks to shake off the fall.”

“Wow. You really were lucky. You should enter Lotto or something. Maybe you’re on a streak.”

“You know, I’ve never bought one of those tickets. Not once.”

“Neither have I.”

“What’s that about?”

“Don’t know. Skepticism maybe.”

“Maybe,” she says skeptically, “but I do think it’s a scam.”

“Life’s a scam,” I say. Oh, that sounded cheery.

“How so?”

“It’s not really. I don’t know why I said that. I’ve been reading the paper all morning. Maybe it’s getting to me.”

“Stop reading then,” she says.

“I am,” I say. “Now I’m just drawing mustaches on penguins.”

“I read that article – about Iceland and the hot tubs.”

“I’m going,” I say, as if I’ve just finished packing my fleece bikini.

“I’ll go,” she says.

“Ok. I’ll pick you up in 20 minutes.”

She laughs.

“But I am calling to see you,” she says. “To invite you to dinner or something. I want to thank you for helping me the way you did. You were amazing.”

“It was nothing,” I say.

“I know. Exactly. You acted like it *was* nothing. I think it’s just who you are and that’s rare and I want to feed you or something to show my appreciation.”

“Ok,” I say. “Thank you.”

“Great. When? What’s good for you?”

I hesitate. Bad sign.

“You know, it’s a crazy time for me right now.”

Shit.

“Oh.” She sounds disappointed. Me too.

“I mean it won’t be, always. But right now I’m on deadline and I’m in that deadline kind of space these days.”

Making the sound for Bailey scratching his nose has suddenly become a national emergency.

“Well ok,” she says, gracefully. She has more grace in her pinky than I do in my pinky. “Let’s plan for a couple of weeks?”

“Yes, for sure.”

“Want to pick a date now, or do you just want to see how your schedule pans out?”

She deserves flowers and a card from me saying ‘Dear Lauren, I’m paralyzed from the heart down. Forgot to mention that.’

“How about I call you at the end of this week. Is that ok?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

Don’t be mad.

“Great.”

“So go finish your doodling, Sara, but don’t read the paper anymore.”

“Lauren,” I say, “will you do me a favor?”

“Sure.”

“Go buy a Lotto ticket. I’ll split it with you.”

“Done.”

\*

I’m sinking into my couch. I feel better now, as a cushion with eyes. It’s illegal to pull my tags off. I am highly flammable. Look under me, and you’ll find loose change, olive pits and the remote. Put me on the ground and I will make your room look more exotic. Hold me, and I’ll do my best to hold you back.

\*

What makes the least sense to me right now is seeing your number still programmed into my cell phone. I want to call it so badly, but instead I erase it. I’m leaning against a tree. Taxi’s running around and I’m dizzy enough to be thankful there’s a tree. Erasing it is good, though. Your number. Not the tree.

I don’t know how to open up without your hands opening me. When did I give myself over to you? Was it through a sentence or a thing that we did?

I still fantasize about screaming your name in public. Would that free me from how it gags me now?

“Zoeeee!” I scream. Taxi barks and barks. Calm down. It’s just me doing Gestalt. Go dig.

\*

The weekend is almost over and there’s no call from Tess yet. Perhaps the three of them went fishing. I’ve always imagined that if I had a family, we’d work out all of our problems in the middle of a lake. We’d be in the boat together, with no way to storm out of a room to avoid conversation. The worse that could happen is that someone might get a little wet.

My family lived on a houseboat for a week up in Lake George one summer. It was a big deal hauling all the food onto the boat and all of our bedding. By the time we were ready to push off from land, we were all sweaty and tired. I remember thinking for a second then that our family was normal. By all appearances we looked normal, all of us sitting on the deck in shorts waiting to catch our breath.

I was five that summer and I found out that I could swim. It was a moment of sheer terror turned into triumph. I had fallen overboard for no particular reason and instead of drowning, I decided to save myself by swimming to the stairs that hung off the back of the boat. As I pulled myself up, my heart was pumping so fast and I expected the whole world to be different. But no one was there. No one had even seen me fall. I sat down dripping wet, staring at what just happened like it was a film inside my head. I was thinking about how I’d retell the story to everyone when I walked to the front deck. But it sounded like nothing in the telling, so I never did.

I learned then that huge things can happen in my life that have very little to do with anyone else but me. It was my rite of passage into what I guess I now treasure as privacy.

\*

I decide to drop flowers off at the door of Tess and Ben's house. This is a heavy time for them and I can't really share in the load. I've never felt like a third wheel, but today it's clear that I've been pulled in enough to feel the gravity of what's going on. I don't quite know how to sit with it. I write a quick note.

*Ben and Tess – Long weekend? My thoughts have been with you. Can I have them back now, please? love you – S.*

As I put the flowers down, I see Zack's face come around the curtain through the living room window. He's on the floor and he sees me. He puts both his hands on the window and starts banging and smiling. I decide to leave though, so I just wave and walk away.

\*

There's something really wrong with Bailey's brain. It has no imagination. It's too functional. I want to send it on an acid trip. Sound design for that would be wonderful to create. If I wasn't so behind schedule, I'd press engineering to make Bailey's acid trip as a secret button, a hidden track. But engineering has no imagination either, so what am I thinking?

Come this July, I will have been working on this narcissistic android series for 2 years. I'm so ready to move on to something else. But today, I have to focus on Bailey's hand-eye coordination. I have trouble with that myself. Maybe I'll get some tips.

Bailey's throwing darts. His eyes focus in on the dart board. I'll use a drill sound for that. As the screen zooms in on the target, the pitch of the drill will get higher.

The part of the cerebrum that controls throwing a dart is called the motor area, and it stretches across the two halves of the cerebrum from ear to ear. It looks like a set of headphones. Bailey's motor area is blinking now, giving off a lime green glow. My studio is a tiny disco inside Bailey's brain and I am a tiny DJ. I was a tiny dancer, but with my bad hip, I had to make a switch.

Bailey's arm pulls back in preparation for a throw. His eyes are sending desperate messages to his wrist. I'd love to use Gregorian chants here. It would be so wrong and funny, but just to me. I opt instead for something standard like the sound of a ratchet wrench. I'll process it, flange it, play it backwards and lay that sound on top of itself. It's crazy what I can do to manipulate a sound around here.

But first, I have to find the drill to sample the drill sound. My loft is small but things get lost in it all the time. I don't lose them. They just get lost all by themselves. That's an important distinction. The drill was most certainly put in my junk chest. It's a big plastic tub where I keep everything that's not soft. Screw drivers, extension chords, drills – all kept there. I find my drill though, under my sink. I did not put it there.

I run the drill and Taxi gets all undone. Just like he does when I use the blender. It's got something to do with women and tools. I'm convinced. I'm glad Taxi can't vote.

I wouldn't want to know how he feels about certain issues concerning my freedoms. One time, I came home and found him listening to Rush Limbaugh. Now I keep the radio up too high for him to reach. Not in my house, you don't.

The first sound design job I ever did was nearly 20 years ago. I worked for the college radio station once in awhile as a reporter. I did a five-minute show called "Won't You be My Neighbor." I basically tracked how student life impacted the locals. I'd interview people on the streets of New York's upper west side. I'd say, "Hi. I'm doing a story on how you feel about us. So, today for instance—how are you feeling about us?" And I'd get a variety of answers. Sometimes, I got free food.

For the final show before I graduated, I did a montage of sound bites from past segments. I didn't want a clean music track connecting the voices. I wanted something that sounded more like time stretching and people changing. I collected sound from inside buses and behind deli counters and on top of roofs and under stairwells. I had more fun doing that than I ever had doing the actual reporting. And it showed because that last show was the best show.

Today, I'm trying to appreciate the fun of this job and the freedoms that come with it. I'm able to work at home with my dog. I can have soup anytime I want. I'm grateful. It's Bailey I have a problem with but this is what happens in one-sided relationships. One person does all the work and the other person just sits there in the screen, with his motor area blinking lime green.

\*

I'm wearing a feather boa that I got in New Orleans. It helps me cope. Ellie's left two messages already and I've got to call back. If she's not quite done lecturing me about childbearing, I'll have to hang up. I better keep her far away from Tess right now. I couldn't bear what that conversation might sound like.

When Ellie was giving birth to her first son Robbie, I flew in to surprise her. The nurses in the hospital tried to direct me to her room, but I got terribly lost and landed in the radiology department two floors below. I remember walking up the stairs back to the maternity ward and thinking that the stairwell would be a great place to record a trumpet solo in, given the cement and the great acoustics. "Helloooo!" I said to the walls. When I got to floor six, I didn't understand why the door wouldn't open. Or floor five. The ground floor out to the street opened. For god sakes.

"You ought to have a sign," I said to the security guard as I walked back through the lobby. "I just got stuck in the stairwell and had to walk all the way down here."

"Stairs are for roof and street access only," he said, wanting me not to bother him.

"That's dumb," I said. "That makes no sense."

"Sorry ma'am?" he said like a school principal. "You say something about dumb?"

"Forget it now," I said as I walked past him towards the elevators.

Getting lost took 20 minutes. Robbie had been born during those 20 minutes. After just a four-hour labor Robbie squirmed out. Hi, little person.

When I held him in my arms for the first time, I whispered to him. I said "Little man, I was coming down the stairwell into the lobby when you were coming out of your

mommy into the world. Am I pushing it, or is there some kind of symbolism going on here?”

Ellie said hi to me like she didn't realize that I was a surprise, like me being there had been planned all along. Robbie was the big news. I don't know what I expected. I have to get over myself, I said on the plane ride home.

\*

“Ellie, is it too late there?” I ask.

“I just got in bed. I'm still up, but Mark's asleep so I have to talk softly.”

“Good. I'll try not to get you riled up,” I say.

“You don't rile me, Sara,” she says. Is that Amnesia you're wearing? Who makes that?

“I got both your messages. I've been cramming on work stuff. Sorry.”

“How's that going?” she asks and yawns, but I know she's interested. *Bailey's Brain* is riveting stuff.

“It pays bills and I'm getting better at it. It's fun.” I say. I'm lying on the carpet with my legs up, balancing a pillow on the balls of my feet. “I think of your kids a lot when I'm creating the sounds. They're our demographic actually. I wish they lived here. I'd test stuff on them all the time.”

“They work for scale,” Ellie says and laughs.

“I was thinking about Robbie today. His Bar Mitzvah's next year, right?”

“Yes. We've already started him on private lessons.”

“Why?”

“He needs help. All his classmates have tutors.”

“Big business out there, huh?”

“It's part of life's expense,” she says. “It's a priority so it's not a problem.”

“Wow.” I sit up and hug the pillow.

“God, we live in such different worlds, don't we?” Ellie says, half to herself.

“Not so different. We have temples here, and Bar Mitzvahs,” I say defensively.

“I'm not saying you don't, Sara.”

“You're implying it,” I say coolly. “Our worlds are not so different.”

“Ok, I don't want to fight, Sara. What else is going on?”

I don't know what to say. With anyone in my family for that matter.

“Millet,” I say.

“What?”

“I've started to eat millet. I discovered it in my health food store. You make it like rice. It's nuttier though and tastes just as good cold.”

What the hell am I talking about?

“I've had millet before. Never made it though. Maybe I'll try it.” She yawns.

“Well, I'm glad I caught you,” I say, acknowledging her yawn.

“God, I am so tired. Sorry. Sara, can I call you back tomorrow?”

“Yeah. Sure. Give kisses to the kids.”

“I will. Bye.” She hangs up, but I keep the phone to my ear, waiting for something to surprise me, maybe.

\*

I burn the millet because I get absorbed in watching *Now Voyager*. 'Why ask for the moon when we have the stars?' Or something like that.

\*

I'm not one of those dog owners who takes her dog in the car with her all the time. I think it's mean. Dogs aren't dashboard ornaments. But there are people cleaning the windows of my building today and Taxi freaks when men with big sticks start dangling from the roof. I've given up trying to explain.

"Stay and be good, Taxi. Here, you can read this." I leave Taxi in the back of my Civic with a Chinese menu.

I ring the bell. *Working Bodies* is supposedly the best physical therapy group on the planet.

"Come on up," says the voice in the buzzer. The stairs are steep and I think this is ridiculous. How do the truly disabled get up there? Half-way up, I decide that I am one of the truly disabled. The door at the top opens and a voice calls down.

"Sara?"

"I'm coming," I say panting.

"Oh Jesus, Sara. Why are you taking the stairs? There was an elevator just a little further down the entrance way. I should have told you. It's on our web site. Sorry."

"What's it doing on your web site," I ask, stopped in amazement. "It would serve us better right here on the premises." I could spend this \$75 on so many CDs. I can't even think about it that way.

"You want to go back down and take it?" She says. "I could come and help you back down."

"No, I'm coming up. It's part of the therapy. I'll see you in about 20 minutes."

It really is a bad thing though, going up all these stairs. My hip is screaming at me. Sorry, hip. I finally get up to the clinic, which looks more like a torture chamber. Parker Drew is ready for me. She looks like a coach.

"Hi, Sara. I'm Parker. Sorry for the stairs. How's your hip?"

"It's here. Throbbing actually, right about now," I say trying to be tough.

"Well I saw the x-rays of your leg. That looks healed. Have you had an MRI of your hip and low-back?"

"No."

"Hmm."

I feel like I didn't hand in my homework.

"Should I get those?" I ask, like I can order an MRI on-line.

"No, not necessarily. It would just be another reference for us. But we don't need it."

We, like we're a team already. Not so fast, missy.

"So I have to tell you that for the last six weeks or so I've been waiting for this to go away. I'm surprised that the pain is still here. Maybe something is really wrong?"

"We have to realign and strengthen your muscles to support your bones. What's really wrong is that you've gotten yourself into a nasty pattern."

“What do you mean?” I ask, not wanting to be blamed for anything. I’m thinking maybe I should have brought Taxi in for protection.

“I can see from how you walk that you’re limping. That’s a pattern you’ll have to break.”

“I limp because I limp—it’s what my leg is doing.”

“We’ll fix that.”

Maybe she got her training at Jiffy-Lube.

“I’ll need to see you twice a week for a while,” she says.

“Really,” I say, fascinated by how she could know that already. “So can I go now?”

“Very funny,” she says without a hint of a smile.

She does some muscle testing on me. She asks me about my shoes and what position I sleep in. By the time she gets me on one of the machines, I feel like everything I said was the wrong answer. I start to think about all my failures. I think about this one day in New York when I failed the aptitude tests at four different temp agencies. That was the first and last time I ate Kentucky Fried Chicken. I was trying to punish myself, but that was going too far.

“Breathe into it,” she says.

“Into what?” I ask, barely breathing.

“Into the pain,” she says and it doesn’t sound the least bit kinky.

“Oh, oh, oh!” I scream.

“What’s happening is good,” she says, and I see a smile on her face for the first time. Note to self: Parker smiles when I experience pain.

“Oh, oh, oh!” I scream.

“You have spread out with buttocks muscles engaged. Engage them.”

“What do you mean, ‘engage them’?” I ask. Is anybody watching this? I want a witness.

“Flex your butt muscles to take the load off of your hip,” she says like I’m dumb.

I get it, though. I flex and spread and flex and spread. I will not get turned on. I will not.

“Good,” she screams like she’s the one getting turned on and I’m scared. “Do you feel the difference?”

“My butt’s tired.”

“Better your butt than your hip,” she says. “Ok, I don’t want to wear you out on the first day. This is enough.”

“I’ll see you Thursday at 4pm. And Sara, please wear more comfortable clothes. Jeans are hard to move in.”

I look down at my jeans.

“Oh, you said on the phone to wear something comfortable. But I know what you mean – like sweats, right?”

“Right,” she says, and again I feel unworthy.

“Do you know about your Medulla Oblongata?” I ask. Time for *me* to stump her.

“It’s above the brain stem,” she says without flinching.

Damn.

\*

My week is getting crammed and today I have to choose between going over to Grandview and stopping by EnZone's start of the summer bar-b-que lunch thing. I could do one quickly and then the other I suppose. Like go to EnZone first for a bite of a pickle and then leave suddenly, blaming it on an allergic reaction to the pickle. Good plan.

I see the smoke from the grill as I park my car and I hope I've dressed ok. Everyone seems to be in summer garb and I'm wearing a white down vest and cargo pants. At least I'm wearing flip-flops. That's summer-ish.

Oh! I don't fucking believe it. Is he stalking me?

Sam is here, with all the other invited spouses. Except his spouse is dead. What's he doing here? I turn around quickly and walk back to my car and sit on the hood. Ok, it makes sense. It does. So Sam has gotten to know some people at EnZone because of Zoe's exhibit. All the planning and hooplah has gotten him chummy I guess. Get your own life, Sam.

"You're angry," Diane says, trying to subtly clip a lapel mic onto my vest.

"Wouldn't you be?" I ask, annoyed with her for the first time ever.

"We're not talking about me. We're talking about you, Sara."

Reporters hate when you turn the tables on them.

"He should just move," I say. Diane is trying to shimmy her way onto the hood to sit next to me, but her cream-colored slacks are glaring back at her saying 'don't you dare'.

"You want help up?" I ask. She's battling a bit, trying to balance holding her notes. She's using the bumper as a step. She sits on a sheet of paper and finally composes herself.

"Move? Why should Sam Lerner move? He's got a life here just like you do."

"Maybe he should move to New York. Become a big art dealer. He seems to enjoy that sort of thing."

"How would that help you, Sara. You just seem so tied in knots. Do you think Sam's leaving would really change that?"

Diane should put on some sun screen. She's very fair-skinned.

"I don't want him creeping around my life," I say.

"Aren't you being a little paranoid?" Diane suggests. "Our sources tell us that Sam has no knowledge of your affair with Zoe. It seems that he does know that you two had a friendship though."

"No shit, Diane." Oops. Sorry.

*Cut! Again, please.*

"Of course he does, Diane. Zoe talked about me. She told me she did. Probably to let out some steam. To have my name be out there somehow. What do I know?"

Diane can't quite get her legs in a comfortable position. Right now they're tucked under her and bent to the right. I think the windshield wipers are digging into the tops of her feet. That must hurt.

"Maybe Sam wants a friendship with you, because he knows that you were friends with Zoe."

"That's sick," I say.

"Why do you say that, Sara. Help us understand."

“We weren’t friends. Zoe and I were not just friends. So it’s sick to think of me talking to Sam.”

“But you two have more in common than most people that knew Zoe,” Diane says matter-of-factly.

“Diane, if you and I had an affair—”

*Cut!*

“I’m not going to warn you again,” Diane scolds me. I love when she scolds me. Her nostrils flare and her hair moves out of place. But just for a split second.

*Action!*

“Diane, don’t confuse my repulsion of Sam with any kind of shame or guilt. Let’s get that straight.”

“Continue, Sara. Flesh that out for us.”

Flesh that out? I would never have said it quite that way. Diane needs a brush up.

“All I’m saying is that the thought of speaking with Sam — about anything — seems tragic and sad to me. We both lost Zoe but we have nothing in common and no reason to reminisce. If we didn’t meet while she was alive, we most certainly don’t need to meet after she’s gone.”

“You seem clear.”

“Clear as the sky is blue,” I say.

“Sam’s not going anywhere,” Diane says abruptly, in a foreboding tone.

“What, have you two talked?” I ask. “Is he a guest on the next hour?” I am furious now, and I feel betrayed. I thought we had something exclusive here.

“Sara, you’re not the only one in pain.”

“Are you in pain too, Diane?” I ask putting my nose very close to hers.

“Sara,” she says nearly gritting her teeth, “America is trying very hard to understand you and your situation and what you must be going through right now.” She’s piercing me with her stare. We could easily kiss right now. “But you’re making it very hard for us, putting up the walls that you do.”

I kiss her hard.

“No walls here,” I say, as she pushes me off in horror.

*Cut!*

\*

Sometimes when I walk into Grandview, I imagine myself being old too. I’m using a walker and I’m wearing a sun visor and ski goggles. I’ve got a tool belt strapped around me with no tools in it. I’m rapping to myself. My rhythm is pretty good actually.

But today, I’m on a mission to get to the administrative offices without Chantal seeing me first. I have some questions. When I walk in, the Chinese lady is there, watering what looks like a fake fern. I don’t ask.

“Excuse me,” I say gently as I walk through the door. The lady turns and smiles.

“Yes, can I help you?” she asks.

“I’m the friend of Chantal Mallen’s.”

“Oh yes, we just met a few weeks back. Yes. Is she ok? I just saw her at lunch.”

“Yes, she’s fine. I’m actually here to talk with you about something I read in the paper. About the closure of Grandview.”

Her face flattens.

“Yes, we’ve had several people call already extremely concerned.”

“Shouldn’t we be?” I ask.

“Yes. We all are concerned. This is a very complicated situation,” she says. She walks behind the desk and sits down.

“Sit,” she says.

“What are most people saying to you?” I ask as I sit down opposite her. “Are people making plans to move now or are they waiting until they hear about an actual date?”

“Everyone has to do what they have to do,” she says vaguely.

“I’d like to know what you have to do. What you do impacts everyone obviously. What are your plans as a business?”

She doesn’t seem to appreciate my question.

“We are talking to our lawyers about what’s best. This is a family business, you know. Nearly 30 years old. It’s not simply a matter of shutting the doors.”

She seems sad but annoyed enough to keep from getting too soft with me.

“I’m sorry. I know,” I say. “The Lim family owns this. Are you a Lim?”

“My husband was. He died. Now I work with his brother and his brother’s children.”

“I see. So what’s likely to happen over the next few months?” I ask pushing for some clarity.

“Demolition is set for September,” she says coldly, but behind her eyes there’s hot fear. “They might not start construction for another year but they want to clear the land. My brother-in-law said it’s easier to raise development money for a land that’s clear of old structures, where people can imagine better what might be possible.”

“I understand,” I say trying to comfort her. But my mind is already spinning around Chantal’s future. “Well, thank you for taking the time to speak with me. I—”

“We care very much about our residents,” she says emphatically. “We are looking into opening another home on another lot.”

“That’s great,” I say, half-believing her.

“Timing is not on our side,” she says and she’s looking at me fiercely, like she doesn’t want to be accused of any negligence.

“It would be great if you found a place before the demolition date. Then you can move all the residents with you.”

“Yes,” she says, but she looks tired just thinking about it.

“Or maybe 30 years is just about enough?” I ask, leading the question.

She looks at me, softening for the first time.

“Maybe,” she says.

\*

Chantal has been napping. When I lightly knock on her door, she takes an extra moment to answer.

“Well, hello!” she says, sleepily but delighted. She still seems to be navigating the two worlds. “Come sit.”

“I wish I took a nap today, too,” I say. “Dreaming during the day is the best.”

“Oh, yes,” she says, while she applies some pink lipstick to her thin lips. “I’ll just be a minute.” She disappears into her bathroom.

I’ve never spent much time in her room. We mostly meet in what they call the Day Room. I want to snoop but I don’t dare. I just scan what’s out on her dresser. A picture of Bradley, a brush from last century, a small bottle of perfume, and what appears to be an unopened letter addressed to her. I can’t make out the return address from where I’m sitting. The envelope is hand written.

Chantal comes out of the bathroom. She is so beautiful, she seems unreal. If I had skin as translucent as hers, I’d just stare in the mirror all day.

“Sara,” she says sitting down on her bed. She slips into her shoes. “Myrna has moved to her daughter’s house in Oakland. They came for her things over the weekend.”

“So does that mean she’s better?” I ask hopefully.

“I don’t really know,” Chantal says, looking uneasy. “I don’t have a number or a forwarding address. I’d like to stay in contact.”

“I’m sure Myrna does too.”

“I’m not so sure,” Chantal says. “If she’s not doing well, I’m sure she doesn’t want to see anyone. And if she’s getting better, she’s probably too busy complaining to think about us.”

“Let’s call either way. I’m sure Mrs. Lim in the office has a phone number at least.”

Chantal seems to be looking for something.

“Now where’s my sweater? Let get out of here. It’s stuffy, don’t you think?”

Chantal’s French accent just came out so strong. It does that when she’s tired.

“It’s fine,” I say, handing her the sweater that was hanging on the back of the chair I am in. “But it’s a sunny afternoon. Let’s get some air.”

Chantal passes by her dresser and the letter. I can’t resist.

“Aren’t you going to open that?” I ask, pointing behind her.

“Oh,” she says, looking disappointed. “That’s a letter from Luke. I get one every few months. Mostly pictures of him and his new wife on some vacation.”

“Does he have any kids?”

She hesitates.

“I have one grandson. Terry. He’s lived in an institution for most of his 25 years.”

Chantal looks sad.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“He was born severely disabled,” she says thoughtfully. “Luke was so quick to send him off, at whatever the cost.”

“Chantal—tell me about Terry. You’ve never spoken of him,” I say, genuinely shocked.

Chantal sits back down on her bed.

“His face was angelic. Usually small babies can’t focus on what’s in front of them for several weeks. But Terry really looked at me during those first few days of his life.”

Chantal’s eyes start to tear but she continues.

“His arms and legs were already clearly deformed, all curled up on themselves. But I was sure his brain and heart were ready for a full life. Luke and his first wife, Cindy, were wrapped up in their own pain. They couldn’t even spend time with Terry. So I did. I flew out to Connecticut as much as I could, around teaching classes and giving

exams. I was still teaching. They kept him for almost three years in the house, with a full-time nurse.”

“And then what?” I ask.

“Then as soon as they found a facility to take him, he was gone.” Chantal is weeping a bit more now and I sit down next to her on the bed.

“Terry is so lucky to have you as a grandmother,” I say.

“Oh not really,” she says, finding her composure. “I didn’t visit him nearly as often I could have. And since Bradley died, I haven’t been out east to see him at all.”

I have my arm around Chantal and we’re just sitting on her bed now. I look above her dresser into her mirror, seeing our two bodies huddled together. Chantal is looking out the window.

“Chantal, maybe skip the letter for now. You’re right. Who needs to see old Luke wearing some ghastly outfit on the streets of wherever, right?”

“Right,” she says, wiping her eyes.

\*

Maybe I won’t ever have an appetite again. Imagine the money I could save?

\*

Ok, so now I’ve moved past curious to pissed. Tess owes me at least an e-mail. But nothing. Maybe Ben finally told her about our affair. It was brief but he looked so cute dressed in drag that one Halloween night, years ago. We both couldn’t resist.

I knock on their door. It happens to be dinner time so maybe they’ll let me wash their dishes.

“Trick or treat,” I say as Ben opens the door.

“Hey Sara—what’s up? Come in. We’re just done eating.”

Bring on the suds.

“I thought you guys left the country,” I say walking in.

“Sara,” Tess calls from the kitchen. “I know why you’re here. Don’t be mad.”

I walk in and she’s cleaning Zack’s face, which is caked with melted cheese.

“I even dropped off flowers. You’re just plain rude. Both of you. You could have called and said ‘hey, we’re going underground for awhile about this kid thing’. That would be so understandable. But you involved me completely and then I hear nothing for over a week.”

I pick at some macaroni and cheese that’s still left in Zack’s plate. Ben’s back is to me and he’s about to do the dishes, but he turns around.

“You are so right, Sara. Tess, apologize to Sara.”

“You apologize, too, Ben,” I say.

“I thought you guys talked every 2 hours. Don’t look at me,” he says and turns to run the water.

I look back at Tess, who’s unreadable.

“Tess, do we need to go to counseling? I don’t feel like we’re communicating very well,” I say. She throws the dish towel she was using at me. I catch it and start to make a bunny for Zack.

“Sawa!” At least Zack knows how to love me.

“Ben’s lying,” Tess says. “He wanted me to think without you in my ear.”

“What?” I ask, outraged at the suggestion. “Ben, do you think I influence Tess like that—like I have some spell over her? Jesus. And Tess, since when do you listen to Ben?”

I put the towel down as stand against the wall, arms crossed. Ben stops washing and turns away from the sink.

“Sara, that day you came to eat with me and talk about the baby. That freaked me out a little bit. And when I came home to talk with Tess about everything, nothing seemed clear. So we both – BOTH – decided to take a few days to just sit with what’s happening. Without broadcasting anything to anyone else or even discussing it with each other for while. We just sat with it. And when we were ready, we talked and it was the best thing we could have done.”

“Sara, I am so sorry that I didn’t give you a heads-up about this. That was stupid. But the good news is that it worked. We got really clear.”

“And...?” I ask.

“And we’re hoping it’s a girl and we’re really excited.”

I’m all choked up. That figures.

“Well, yeah for you two. Zack —did you hear that?”

Zack looks at me and laughs.

“Sorry,” Tess says, “about putting you off. That wasn’t the plan. Sorry.”

“I know. And frankly, I need to get a clue about things that are not about me.”

“I’ve always wanted two wives,” Ben says walking over to us. “Don’t leave us now.”

“No, I’m being serious. Maybe I love you both too much. It’s disgusting. Maybe we need to set some real boundaries.”

“You are so strange,” Ben says. “Don’t start acting all normal. It’s too late.”

I look at Tess.

“He’s so lucky that I really am not attracted to you.”

“Sad for me and sad for him,” she says.

“Don’t you dare start flirting with me, missy. You’re 1000 years too late.”

I pick up Zack and steal out into the living room.

\*

It takes a lot of willpower to keep myself from wearing the nun run t-shirt. I even washed it after I saved its life from Dude-boy in the post office. It’s folded neatly on a chair next to my bed.

I’ve already decided about the nun run lady. She’s engaged to a guy who’s out of town a lot. She keeps the apartment she shares with him really neat, but when he’s away she lets go a little bit. Maybe she even has some parties and leaves dishes in the sink to soak overnight. When she met me that first time, it probably didn’t dawn on her that I was a famous musician. But when she saw me that second time, I’m sure she realized then who I was—the future leader of the *Red Onion Jazz Babies*. If she had had a pen at the time, I’m sure she would have asked me to sign her shopping bag or something.

There's a section in *The Weekly* that's called 'missed connections'. I'm thinking that I should place an ad in there for the nun run lady to retrieve her lost item. I should really be thinking about running an ad to find musicians for the *Babies*, but not just yet.

I place the ad, paying 30 cents a word on my credit card.

**Nun Run Lady! Come get your t – shirt. I found it on someone who wasn't you.**

\*

It's nearly 11 pm and I've got to get to work. I flip on my computer and kick Taxi off my swivel chair. After about ten minutes, everything shuts off. I walk out of the studio. The street has no lights. I can't tell how far into the city the blackout goes.

If my dad were on the roof with me right now, he'd tell me all about the stars and how city lights always just kill our view of them. The one time he and I went camping alone together, we couldn't see the stars the way we had hoped. It was an overcast night on Bear Mountain. But we stayed up late enough to watch the clouds blow past and then everything changed. It was as if the stars had shined up especially for us. We hardly slept and just talked about the forever of the universe, and how we were just tiny specks trying to not make too much trouble.

Tonight, I'm up here trying to see how the rest of the city looks. I'm a bit impatient about the power being out. It's not so unusual. It seems that our particular neighborhood is on a bad grid or something. A few blocks down, there are houses and streets that all have power. I'll just go inside and light a candle and see if I can talk to the dead. One dead person in particular.

The door of the roof opens as I walk towards it.

"Hi Sara." It's Jo. Maybe he can see the planet he comes from better when the lights are all off.

"Hi Jo. I guess it's just our grid again. Power will come back up in a few hours," I say, continuing towards the door. "I guess I'll go in and read by candlelight."

"There's something going on," Jo says, standing at the door, blocking my path. "Don't you feel it?"

I have to pee. But he couldn't possibly be referring to that.

"No," I say.

"The gravitation of the earth is off. Here, let me show you."

Jo walks past me into the middle of the roof. I could leave now, but something pulls me to stay. Gravity, maybe.

"Watch my keys," he says, holding his keys above his head. "I'm going to drop them and they are going to fall slower than usual. Watch carefully."

Jo drops his keys onto the roof by his feet. They fell just like keys always fall.

"They fell like normal keys fall," I say. "Maybe your eyes are doing funny things because of the lights being out or something."

"I'm a photographer. I go from light to dark to light all day long. It's my business."

"Fair enough," I say. "I think I'm going blind anyway."

We both stare out into the city.

"Alright then, Jo. I just came up here to see how far the blackout goes."

"Brownout," he says, correcting me. "Blackout is more comprehensive."

“Ok, well my guess is that the power will flip back on soon enough. I’m going back down.” I open the door. “G’night.”

“Wait!” Jo says like he’s got one last joke to tell. I turn.

“Yes?”

“How’s your sink?”

Sink.

“Good. Better. Thanks for that, Jo. It runs great now. Drains fast.”

I want to ask him about his banging project, but I’m too spooked already tonight. Jo walks back towards me. I assume we’re both going in now, but he slowly leans against the door.

“Jo, can you lean somewhere else please. I really have to go,” I say, with my hand on the doorknob..

“Sara, we move so fast through life. Nights like these are gifts,” he says, clearly ignoring my request. “We’ve become so addicted to our own chaos. And now we’re afraid to submit to things that are way more powerful than our man-made machines will ever be.”

He’s channeling Carl Sagan.

“Jo, I can appreciate that. I’ve thought about living in the woods, away from it all. I’d eat sticks and chant. But right now, I need to go inside and pee.”

I open the door and shimmy his body along with it.

“Jo! Move,” I finally say to him, in a tone that I haven’t used since slumber party days. “What’s up with you?”

Jo moves aside and let’s me open the door.

“You’re just like all the rest. I thought you were different.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Most people are thinking about when the lights will come back on. But only very special people are just starting to see life with the lights off,” he says and walks away from me back into the darkness of the rooftop.

I let the door shut behind me again and watch him walk away for a minute. I’m so tempted to re-engage with him, and to defend myself as one who is capable of stargazing and mind-bending. But I stop myself because he’s obviously right.

\*

The best thing about the lights being out is that I don’t have to look at this white-carpet-gone-pink.

\*

I’m thinking about what my mother said about having a cousin’s party. It puts a point in the ‘yes, I’m going’ column.

My cousins have no reason not to love me completely for who I am. On the Bialik side, which is my father’s side, all the cousins are boys and none of them take life so seriously that they can’t play with the cards they’re dealt. All four still work in the family shoe business and life is just about toe room and arches for them.

“Make sure there’s enough toe room for the feet to breathe, and the rest of your life will be ok,” they’ve been saying for almost 20 years.

On my mother’s side, the cousins are all girls. There’s nine all together and I’m the youngest cousin except for Shari who lives in England and does textile something or other. A disproportionate amount of my cousins are in the mental health field. According to them, I am self-actualized and need to keep myself from being squashed by other people’s fears. I’ve never been billed by any of them. Some things in life *are* free.

\*

Once a week now, my stomach gnarls into knots at the mere thought of Sam showing up at the club again. But I know he’s got better things to do than be a groupie. He’s got his burgeoning career as an art dealer to think about.

I haven’t picked up my horn since I put it down here last week. But it’s been like that a lot lately. I’m not even bringing it to Grandview anymore. I just go there now to spend time with Chantal. My contract as an entertainer expired when I found Vics Vapor Rub smeared on the outside of my case. When I got home, Taxi discovered it and licked it. Then he ran in circles until the menthol wore off his tongue.

Either I’m experiencing complete trumpet burn-out or I just need to quit Romeo’s Swing and start my own thing. But I’ve been saying this now for awhile. Like right now, I’m saying it again.

Tess has come tonight with some work friends again. Maybe one of those writers is responsible for that shadow of an article about City College. I better not ask. I’ll get Diane on the case later anyway. Sometimes, we just need a professional to handle these big stories.

I feel ridiculous tonight. It reminds me of those bad dreams I’ve had where everyone has their clothes on but me. That’s how it feels right now and I’m glad Tess and her friends are talking and far enough back in the bar to not make eye contact with me. On some nights, we’re the main attraction, center stage. Other nights, we might as well be coming out the juke box. Tonight, we’re catching a weak AM signal, and intermittently one might hear some real art happening. I’m not taking any of this too personally, which is part of the problem I’m sure.

“Hey, great as usual,” Tess says, walking up to me as I pack up. “Have you all met?”

“We’ve always said hi from afar,” I say. “But I don’t know any of you from up close. Hi. Now you can see how funny-looking I am without the stage lights.”

They sort of laugh.

“This is Heather, Michael and Tim,” Tess says, pointing to three bodies that are baring down on top of me as I crouch to close my gig bag. I stand up and shake everyone’s hand. That’s what I do. I don’t kiss strangers hello unless I’m in Senegal or France.

“Thanks for coming,” I say, not really meaning it, since deep down I’m mad at them all for talking through our entire set. No matter how miserable I was up there, they were being rude.

“You have time for a drink?” the Heather person asks.

“Always,” I say and we sit down at a table. I don’t think I’ve ever sat at this particular table. I’ve sat at all the rest though, for sure.

We talk about this and that and I’m getting just bored enough to raise the stakes.

“So which one of you wrote the article about City College’s development plans?”

Tess shoots a stare at me that might leave a permanent mark.

“Oh, that was me,” Tim says, proudly. He’s a non-descript person, more flora than fauna.

“Is it part of a series or was that it?” I ask coldly.

“That was it. A one-off,” he says, clueless.

“Were you happy with how it came out?”

“God, I barely remember it at this point. I wrote it pretty far back. But, sure, I thought it read ok.”

Tess is starting to peel the label off of her beer bottle. Bad, nervous habit, but she’s not my wife.

“Well I thought it really missed the biggest issue,” I say.

“And what issue might that be?” Tim asks, half-smiling.

“As a reporter, didn’t it occur to you that by City College demolishing that rest home, some people might be affected?”

“It wasn’t a human interest story,” he says flatly, “It was just fact-based reporting. It wasn’t an expose or anything like that.”

He’s such a putz. Tess, please just keep on peeling and let me have my way with him.

“So when you set out to cover a story, do you always decide on the outcome before you write it? So, for instance, say you set out to cover a nasty crack in the road but upon first look, you already see that the crack is caused by a monster that lives just beneath the surface. Do you talk about the life-span of tar or the monster, Tim?”

“Is she always this tweaked?” Tim asks Tess, ignoring me.

“Don’t avoid the question,” I say, pulling him back into the ring.

“It’s not a question, it’s an accusation and I’m curious actually. What are you all riled up about?” he asks, trying to enroll the others into thinking that I’m nuts. I can do that myself, thank you very much.

“You so nonchalantly mentioned in your article the existence of the Grandview Rest Home. Did you ever think about how the college’s demolition plans were going to impact the lives of nearly 50 residents of that home? I think it would have been better balanced reporting if you had made even the smallest effort to include at least a quote from someone in that camp.”

“Why? What’s the point? That’s not news, that’s stating the obvious,” Tim says.

“It’s not so obvious. People have become desensitized. True, tenants are thrown out all the time in situations like this one. But these specific tenants are severely disadvantaged. They can’t just pop in their cars every Sunday this summer and go to look at Open Houses.”

“That wasn’t the focus of the article,” Tim says.

“Neither is the monster!” I say.

“What monster?”

I’ve confused him.

“I see her point.” Oh. Heather talks. Maybe she has something to say.

“We should do a follow-up on the fall-out of City College’s plans,” she says.  
“Heather, I assign you,” I say. “Don’t let Tim steal your thunder. I see him just chomping on the bit to snatch this away from you.”  
I glare at Tim but he’s such an unsatisfying target.  
“You know someone there, don’t you?” Heather asks.  
“Yes, she does,” Tess chimes in, feeling slightly guilty, I detect. She ought to.  
“Sara has volunteered there for years.”  
The table falls silent. The halo drops gently atop my head. I brush it aside before it messes up my hair.  
“I have a good friend there now and it’s her I’m mostly concerned about. It’s a shitty situation to be in.”  
“No doubt,” Tim says, barely.  
“Well, it looks like we might have a story here,” Heather says hopefully.  
“Maybe you should be our editor,” Tess says. “I’m serious.”  
“How about I just edit the four of you, on the side,” I say.  
“Oh, that sounds fun,” Tim says.  
Later, I hug everyone good-bye. Everyone except for Tim.

\*

I’m taking the survey on the back of my *Puff Trio* cereal box. I’ll be able to rate how much ‘life force’ I have each day. I have to find my pulse but I seem not to have one.

Taxi’s looking at me like he knows I haven’t called the horse lady like I said I would. He remembers the horse lady very well. “Her name is Lauren, Taxi. Stop calling her ‘horse lady’.”

I’m too twisted up to start a conversation. It’s smack in the middle of the week. It’s no time for conversation.

Taxi is trying to swim in the toilet. I lock him in the bathroom so I can have some privacy.

“Lauren, this is Sara. Sorry I missed you. I—”

She picks up and the machine gives a long squeal, like we just killed the operator who was connecting our call.

“Sorry. I screen,” she says. “Hi.”

“Is it a bad time?” I ask, half-wishing it is. Ok, bye now.

“Well I do have a friend over, but she’s out on the balcony having a smoke.”

“Ooh. Bad thing, smoking,” I say. Why am I talking like Yoda?

“That’s her vice,” Lauren says. “We’re old friends. But it’s not my department.”

“So it’s taken me a bit longer to climb out from under my work. But things are a little better right now so I wanted to call. Sorry for not calling sooner.”

I am such a liar. When will I repent and become good and pure?

“I assumed you would when you could,” she says warmly.

“So you have a friend over though, so I don’t want to keep you,” I say.

“Well, let’s just quickly make a plan to meet. My treat, remember. When’s good and where?”

I’m not prepared.

“Oh, so maybe... So maybe like a Sunday morning brunch thing? Does that work?”

“No, I teach.”

“Sunday school?” I ask. Maybe she’s a nun who runs.

“No,” she laughs, “far from it. I teach ASL – American Sign Language. My sister’s deaf so I grew up using it. So... how about next Tuesday night?”

“Wow,” I say distracted by the teaching. “Tuesday. Yes, great.”

We agree to meet at The Glove. It’s a new place in the Fillmore district.

“Ok. Meet you at the restaurant, though – that’s best for me,” I say.

“Me too. Great. I’m glad you called.”

“Hey Lauren, did you ever buy that ticket – the Lotto ticket?” I ask.

“Oh, yes. And we won. And we took a trip for three years around the world. You had a great time.”

“Oh, good. Just checking.”

Three years. How decadent.

\*

No one ever said it would be easy, but didn’t somebody say it would be over before we knew it? I could swear I heard somebody say that.

\*

I’m reading about a doctor in Sydney, Australia who has figured out a way to tap into the parts of our brains that have always been naturally brilliant. He bases his work on the fact that we only use a tiny portion of our minds, and that as we gain ‘knowledge’, we actually cut off our connections to the smarts we’re originally born with. I was a baby genius, so I know exactly what he means.

In the article, there’s a picture of a man with electrodes all over his body. It’s uncanny how much his features match those of Bailey. Same ears, same furrowed brow and surprise eyes. Even the rosy patches around their mouths are the same. Could they be related? No, get a grip. They have completely different noses.

I got an all-contractor e-mail announcing the final plans for the *Bailey* series. After the *Brain* is done, they want to sign us all on for the life-and-death CD ROM. EnZone plans to give birth to Bailey and take him through all the human development stages. Then they plan to kill him, by natural causes. They’re calling it *Bailey’s Life Cycle*. If I do this, I want to decide how all of his crises manifest. If it were up to EnZone, he’d never have a pimple or a wet dream. He’d never cross-dress and he’d never grow ear hair. What’s the point? I e-mail Michael back

*M – Thanks for cc-ing us on the future plans. Sounds exciting, but I worry about true intentions here. Who’s writing the script and are they bold enough to make this real? I can do crazy good sound design for first crushes and mid-life crisis. But I’d be hard pressed to make a peep for a Bailey who never tries helium – at least once. If this is sterile, count me out. As always – S.*

If I were Michael, I’d fight to promote me to some high important place.

\*

More out of courtesy than anything else I suspect, EnZone has asked me to sit in on the auditions for Bailey's voice. The Star Agency has sent over ten men with voices that meet our specs. They were chosen from a CD that has snips from over 100 voice-over actors. Their voices are way more attractive than the actors are in person. Go figure.

Four of us are sitting in the control booth of the studio. The idea is for us not to see the actor speak. It's his voice that matters, and there is to be no distraction. I'm always slightly distracted so this is a particular challenge for me. I swivel my chair around and face away from the window that separates us from the sound booth. I'm looking at the opposite wall and I'm staring at a group photo. It's from the day of the launch party for the first *Bailey* product. It was taken about a year ago. I've never seen this picture before so I get out of my chair to look at it up close.

You're in this photo. So am I. We're next to each other and we're both looking down, away from the camera. I remember this exact moment. You were holding a ladybug that had flown onto your hand. It had three spots – I remember because I was worried that having uneven spots would cause it to fly lop-sided. We watched it crawl over your knuckles. To be this physically close to each other out in public was so strange for us. I remember wanting that moment to freeze right then. And looking at this photo now, I guess I got my wish.

That day lasted forever, I remember, because Sam was out of town. I always wished that there were more conventions for high school principals. But I would take whatever crumbs. In-service days. Anything to give us more time together.

When I talk to Tess about you and any of this, I know that she doesn't say everything that she's thinking. She's never quite known how to support my relationship with you.

She liked you when she met you, but she hated what you were doing to me, she said.

"She's not doing anything *to* me," I said, defending you. "I'm complicit. She hasn't tied me up in her basement."

Tess always pushed me on the self-esteem point.

"If you really loved yourself, you'd demand a whole person not just the parts she's able to give," she said. "I'm afraid that soon you'll just be tired and heart-broken."

But she never said these kinds of things while pointing a finger or shaking her head.

"If you told me that this was a perfect situation – then I'd let go of the other stuff. I'd stop making you see the what-ifs and I'd be happy for you," she said.

"What's a perfect situation, Tess?" I asked, like I was dipping my toe into very cold water.

I've never had words to explain us and still don't. It's like putting a cell phone up to a sunset expecting the friend on the other end to see it. *Listen to the colors*. But it's so hard.

\*

You're beautiful and far away and you really mess me up good.

\*

Today, I'm sending Hannah a package. It's a greatest hits collection of the band *Boston* – and it's on 8-track tape. She won't be able to play it, but she'll laugh. We were once listening to the same music and had the same crush on a lead singer. Maybe she'll remember.

It was only later that something wedged itself in between us.

\*

“You're resisting.”

“I am not resisting.”

“You're not letting go.”

“How can I let go when you're gripping onto me?”

Parker Drew is pulling my leg in an unnatural direction.

“Sara, you have to trust me.”

“I pay you. Why do I have to trust you?”

“We have to un-train your muscles or your hip is never going to feel any different.”

I sit up on my elbows.

“Parker, I don't have control over my muscles. They do what they do. I swear to you. I swear, I swear.”

Parker releases my leg and sits back down on the metal chair next to my head.

“Sara, I've been seeing you for a couple of weeks now and I'm noticing a pattern.”

“Twice a week is definitely a pattern. I see you more than I see people I actually like.” Whoops. “Just kidding. Ha, ha.”

“That's sort of what I want to talk with you about.”

“I like you. It was a joke.”

“You don't have to like me, Sara, but you have to feel comfortable enough to let go. You've got some stuff stuck..”

“You mean like chi- stuck? I know all about chi. I went cross-country with an acupuncturist once. I know chi.”

“You can call it chi. You can call it whatever you want. I just know when things are working against me. It's hard to progress.”

“Parker, I got nothing against you, or the work we're doing.”

“No, believe me. I don't take any of this personally.”

“Please don't,” I say, half-thinking she should.

“You're just distracted.”

“I'm very focused.”

“You're not focused on this.”

“Parker, look. I'm wearing sweats. That's huge.”

She gets up from her chair like she's done eating.

“I just thought it was worth bringing up. I look at the whole picture. You are not a hip to me, Sara.. You're a whole person.”

“I feel like a whole person.”

“You’re mocking me.”

“No, I’m agreeing with you.” For a split second, I feel like crying. I’m not a well woman.

“I really want to be out of pain, Parker. Bottom line.”

“So don’t work against me. That’s a start.”

“Don’t blame me though. I mean, you’re making it sound like I’m doing something wrong here.”

“You’re not doing something wrong necessarily. It’s more about what you’re not doing period.”

“I’m confused.”

“Are you doing the exercises that I showed you to do at home?”

“No.”

“Hmm.”

“Ok.”

“Ok what?” she asks.

“Ok to what you’re saying.” Line, please.

“I just want to get you out of pain.”

“Please, thank you. Let’s start on that right away.”

Parker breathes heavy. “Sara, I don’t want to sound like a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher, but let’s make a deal. Something to motivate you to do your exercises everyday.”

“A car. I’d like a new car.”

She stares at me blankly. I don’t recall the exact moment when I turned into a brat.

“Parker, I’m sorry. I’ll do them from now on. I just needed you to threaten me. I’m like that.”

“Noted.”

I lie back down and sink into the table as far as I think I can go.

“Parker, the body is just a vessel. You know that don’t you? It’s just a vessel.”

She curls my legs into my chest. “Your point being?”

“It’s just important to keep that perspective. My soul is fine. My vessel just has a bad hip. I – me, the Sara speaking – is perfectly fine.”

“I hear you,” she says. “I disagree, but I hear you.”

“Hmm.”

\*

Taking a shower feels less lonely than taking a bath, but half-way through, I switch the flow and lay down in the tub. I reach over to flick off the light, but can’t reach it. I try with my scrub brush and have success. I didn’t think to get matches though, so I’m sitting here in the dark.

Suddenly, Cabby pops into my head. He’s a beautiful horse actually. I didn’t pay him much attention that day on the hill. How does Lauren afford to keep a horse?

So Cabby’s in the tub with me in the dark. Doesn’t leave much room for Taxi. We say very little. Eventually I drift asleep.

\*

I wake up shriveled. There's a loud crash outside. There's no way to see from my bathroom, so I throw on my robe and go look out the window to the street. It's barely morning. What I see makes me just so completely sad. It's not my year.

A garbage truck has somehow dropped a trash can on top of my car. My car, not somebody else's. From the second floor, it looks like a cartoon. The roof and front hood of my Honda are covered with other people's garbage. The can has dropped to the ground and there's a man half-attempting to scoop some of the garbage back into it. The driver motions him to hurry up, and the man with the bin brings it back on to the curb, leaves it there, hops back into the truck and the truck drives off.

I'm half-way down the block, in my robe. I catch up to the truck. I stand in front of it, preventing the driver from moving any further.

"Are you nuts, lady?" the driver says, poking his ugly head out the window.

"Yes," I say not moving. The second guy walks up to me. The one who trashed my car.

"Can I help you?"

"Oh, yes. You can go back to my car and get the trash off it. Then you can wash the car and wax it. Or don't you do that sort of work?"

This guy is a looker. Like in those underwear ads. Shame.

"I saw the whole thing," I say, "and you can't just leave it there. I can't believe you were just going to leave it there."

"I was leaving it there just temporarily." He's staring at me stone cold in the face. "I'm coming back later. At the end of the shift."

"At the end of the shift," I say, not believing him.

"Yes. We're on a schedule."

"A schedule," I say.

The driver from inside the truck yells out.

"What's the deal, John?" he says. "You two having coffee or what?"

I walk to the driver's window.

"Schedule's changed. You're going back around to my block so your buddy here can clean off my car."

The driver shoots a glare over to John.

"Let's just go over there," John says.

They leave me standing in the middle of the road. I walk back towards my car, while they spin around the block. John jumps off the back of the truck.

"I'm sorry about your car," he says not looking at me. He's picking off the garbage.

I suddenly feel badly for him, and not so much for my car.

"Well I'm glad you agreed to clean it off," I say. "I'm going in now."

He doesn't say anything.

"The hose is just there off to the side. Just give it a good spray."

"Not a problem," he says flatly.

I go back up to my loft and look out the window again. I see John hosing down my Honda. I guess I'm supposed to feel big now. Big car owner. But I suddenly feel so

uninteresting. It's this damn robe. I feel better when I throw it off and dance naked to the morning news.

\*

I haven't heard from the nun run lady yet, but *The Weekly* only came out two days ago. And people are lying half-clothed and hungry in streets all over the world.

\*

"No, that's interesting to you maybe, but not to me," I say to Taxi as I pull him away from a dead mouse. We're standing in front of my car. It's never been this clean before.

I start the week out with a foreign, good attitude. Tess is having a baby. Myrna's not dead yet. Zoe still is. I don't need some pug-nosed therapist to help me take inventory. I know what I've got to work with here.

The new tube for my compressor needs picking up in Redwood City. I never did get around to that. I have a car and my health, as my grandmother never said.

With public radio up full blast, I boost the bass so I can hear everyone clear their throats. Today's morning talk show topic is on rituals. People are calling in to share theirs.

I get through on my cell phone.

"Yes, It's Sara calling from San Francisco. Great topic today. Thanks."

It's not so great. It's just not offensive or boring.

"So tell us your ritual," the host says. She sounds like she's wearing a retainer. How did she get to be on air?

"It's not daily—it's a weekly ritual. Does that count?" I ask.

"Sure. Christmas is a ritual. That's once a year."

"No, Christmas is the marketing of a ritual," I say to myself I thought, but it turns out not.

"Well, that's one perspective."

"Yes," I say.

"So your weekly ritual," she says trying to move us along. "What might that be?"

"I made a bunch of word cards when I was 15. Random words. I put them on little pieces of card board. I pick one of them out every Wednesday morning. I've been doing it for over 20 years. Once a week."

"That's incredible."

"I made about 35 originally. Now I have about 100. They've grown in number over the years." I'm wondering if other listeners are jealous of my life.

"So every Wednesday morning you pick a word for the week. Give us an example of some of the words."

"No," I say. "I can't. It's part of the ritual. Privacy."

"That's interesting," she says. She sounds a little annoyed.

"I wanted to share the idea of the ritual though, because it has saved my life."

The soundtrack slides in a flurry of bass clarinets.

"How so?" she asks.

“A couple of times. Like once when I was dead broke living in New York City. I didn’t have money enough for the subway let alone for smoked salmon or tickets to the Opera. I was hard pressed. I was thinking bad thoughts, if you know what I mean.”

“I think we do,” she says, speaking for all 6 million listeners.

“So Wednesday came around and I picked a word. And it set me on a path. Saved my life.”

“If you don’t tell us what that word was, I think we’ll have a lot of unhappy listeners on our hands.”

Cut to millions of radios flying out of homes and cars. *We’re not going to take it anymore.*

“Confabulate. That was the word,” I say.

There’s silence.

“Well, if confabulation saved your life, that’s great.”

“Yes,” I say.

“Well thank you for the call, Sara from San Francisco.”

“Thanks for listening. I’m glad I got through. I’ve always wanted to, since I was very young,” I confabulate.

\*

Redwood City is no place to leave a dog in the car.

“Sorry Taxi. It was selfish of me to take you in the first place.”

Audio Barn is on a side street next to a bowling alley that’s been closed since forever.

“I guess people still don’t bowl much,” I say to the guy behind the counter of the audio shop. He’s got headphones on so he doesn’t hear me.

“Just got these in. Best Sony has ever made. You should try them.”

I do. I put them on and I hear what sounds like a movie soundtrack. There’s swelling cellos and footsteps.

“What is that?” I ask.

“The sound of great headphones,” he says.

“No, the music.”

“Oh. It’s the CD that came packed in with the phones. There’s a bunch of weird tracks on there. But check out the sound. It’s really stellar.”

This guy is a gear-head who doesn’t know music, just sound. Scary and sad.

“I can’t afford anything new. Just here to pick up a tube. It’s under Bialik.”

He goes to the back and I put the phones back on. Suddenly two fingers are poking in my back. I spin around.

“Kyle,” I say pulling off the headphones. “Funny meeting you here.”

“Hey Sara, and funny meeting you here too. What are you up to?”

Kyle is the youngest guy in *Romeo’s Swing*. His drumming is impeccable, especially for a 16 year old. No, he must be older. That young would be illegal.

“I’m doing some shopping,” I say. I realize that in all these years of playing with him, I don’t think I’ve ever seen him outside of a gig.

“You live down here, don’t you?” I ask.

“Yeah. Born and raised. I come up to the city all the time, though. For gigs and stuff at night.” Kyle tosses his blond bangs away from his eyes. He could pass for royalty if he would just bathe.

“All your life you’ve lived in Redwood City? That’s amazing. Ever want to move up to San Francisco?”

“I thought of going to college a few years back up at SF State, but I couldn’t break away from work. Now it’s too late.”

“No, it’s too late,” I say. “But what’s the work? Do you like it at least?”

Kyle’s hands are in his pockets and he’s bouncing up and down a little like he has to pee.

“I work about 12 miles south. Family business. Rest home.”

“Rest home?” I ask. “You mean like a retirement place?”

“Sullivan Gateway Living. Sullivan as in Kyle Sullivan.”

“No. That’s amazing.”

“Why,” Kyle asks, confused by my reaction.

“Well because – long story short – I have a friend in my life living at Grandview Rest Home. She’s been there for nearly eight years. I’ve been visiting her. They’re closing down.”

“I know all about Grandview,” Kyle says. “She can come to us. But there’s a wait list.”

“How long?” I ask

“Long,” Kyle says and chews on something I can’t see.

My hope is deflated.

“Kyle, Chantal is amazing. She can’t just go anywhere.”

“Is Chantal your friend?” Kyle asks.

“Yes. She’s like family. I plan to help her. I’m not going to let her stress over this. She’s too frail.”

“How frail?” he asks, not like Kyle, but like Mr. Sullivan of SGL.

“She’s in great health. She’s just delicate. Like a flower.”

“How many years you think?” he asks.

“What do you mean? I don’t know. That’s not a nice question to ask. How many years do you have left?”

“Statistically plenty,” he says. “And sometimes when we have to wade through a list of applicants, we look at longevity as a plus.”

“You run a rest home for old people. How can longevity be part of the criteria?” I ask.

“It’s all relative, Sara. It costs us money to move people in and out. So turn-over is a consideration always when figuring out yearly numbers.”

“Jesus, Kyle. You sound like a used car salesman.”

“No way. We pride ourselves on service and comfort and once people come in, they are really glad with the choice they’ve made.”

“Sounds corporate,” I say.

“It is a business and has to be run right. Look, if you want Chantal to see the place, I’ll give you a special tour. And I’ll see what I can do if she really likes it.”

“Kyle, thanks – I’ll take you up on that. You have a card?”

He pulls out a bright yellow business card.

“Let me talk to her and I’ll call you.”

“This is too weird. Never in a million years would I think I’d be doing business with you.”

“This isn’t business to me, Kyle. It’s about my friend, Chantal.”

“Yep, but it’s still business,” Kyle says as he waves and disappears into the drum room.

\*

Chantal’s on my mind but I focus back onto my week’s worth of greens.

Vegetables are calling me, but they all look the same today. It’s the lighting in this place. A thunderstorm sounds over the PA and the sprinklers let off a mist all over the lettuces. I stick my head above some endive and get refreshed.

“Can you not put your hair all over the vegetables?”

I don’t see who said that, but I pull my head out and walk down into the bulk room to see what Russia likes this week.

*“Red rice dates back farther than its sisters, brown and white. Red rice holds the wisdom that informs all other grains. Soak it over night. Soak with it over night. Upon eating it the next day, you’ll feel parts of yourself in yourself. This is truly organic living.”*

I pin up my own note.

*Russia – I did what you said. I soaked with the rice. It was such a tactile culinary moment. I have photos. Please call: 283.4434.*

\*

Dear Sam,

So what now  
is your relationship  
to death?

\*

I’m hoping Tess doesn’t mind. Hoping, hoping, hoping.

“I used your name,” I say. “I said I was you.”

“Did it work?” she asks and she doesn’t seem to mind.

“Yes. They think *The Weekly* is on their side.”

“We don’t take sides,” she says.

“Oh, boloney. Come on, Tess.”

“Ok, but only during elections. All papers endorse.”

“Tess, it doesn’t matter. Listen, can I borrow your press pass too, just in case?”

“First my identity, then what?” she asks. “If you need it today, you’ll have to meet me at playgroup. I’m on my way over there. You know where it is, right?”

“Yeah. I get my crack right on that block, remember?”

“That tenant was kicked out in February. The block is safe now.”

“Oh, good. It was scary for awhile. I was afraid they’d sell to Zack.”

“Parking is bad though. Call me when you’re outside. I’ll run out and give it to you.”

“Thanks,” I say and now I have to find something to wear. I’ve been on the phone all morning trying to get someone to talk with me at the chancellor’s office of City College. I got the Vice Chancellor’s promise to give me five minutes of his time today. I said we’re doing a story and that he’d better weigh in.

What do reporters wear?

I call Tess when I’m outside of Happy Tomorrows. It sounds better in Spanish. She runs out and hands me her press pass.

“Unless you’re trying to get a free movie pass, you won’t need this. But here it is. I have to go. I left Zack on a big green plastic thing.”

I drive slower than usual today because of these mile-high boots. I’m hoping to tower over this guy. I’m now 6’1”.

I can’t find his office at first, and land up in the registrar. I break out into a sweat immediately. Sense memory.

“Vice Chancellor Bloom’s office? This way?” I ask meekly, like I’m about to be punished.

“No, that way,” the lady says and points. She hates me for no reason.

The office of the Vice Chancellor is so 1970s in the worst way. Everything is rectangular and brown.

“He’s ready to see you,” his assistant says. “Just go right in.”

“Have a seat,” Bloom says without looking up. We’re on a last name basis.

I sit and he looks up.

“Tess Klein. How’s *The Weekly* doing. Good?”

“Good. It’s been a good year.”

“Busy year. Lots to cover.”

“Lots,” I say, noticing that his tie has tiny flying guitars on it. He’s lost his hair, but not his taste in ties.

“So our plans for the new property are pretty exciting, huh? High-tech, modular. We’re planning for the unknown, you might say.”

“Talk to me about this summer, Vice Chancellor. About your demolition plans.”

“Oh, it’s quite simple actually. If all goes well with the financing, we’ll be breaking ground September 1<sup>st</sup>.”

“You skipped a step though. The current tenants and the demolition of their buildings.”

He doesn’t break his stride.

“Oh, there’s a couple of structures – a run-down diner and a convalescent home. They’ve all been notified.”

“What’s the deadline date? When do they have to leave?” I ask.

“Soon as they can, I suppose. We’re not really involved with that.”

“How so?” I ask.

“Well, they’ve all got leases. Month-to-month. I assume they’ve been given their notice to vacate the premises in whatever time is required by law.”

“And what is the timing of that? What’s required by law?”

“Ms. Klein, what’s the angle of your questioning here? Or I should ask, what’s the story you’re trying to cover?”

Trying?

“There are a bunch of elderly folks – about 50 of them – who live in one of those ‘structures’ you refer to. I just want to understand very clearly what they have been told. And then I’d like to understand if any of their rights are being violated here.”

“I see,” Bloom says as he leans back in his chair. “Ms. Klein, there’s no story here. Grandview’s communications with its tenants have nothing to do with us. Grandview has been notified, in writing, that their lease is up. I don’t have the exact date for you. I can furnish you with that date if you’d like. But as far as the rights of the elderly folks you speak of, we are no way in violation of their rights. Our legal agreement is with their landlord and not with them.”

“I’d like that actual date very much. Thank you,” I say, feeling kind of sick.

Bloom makes one call and gets the date.

“Seems they need to be off the property by August 1<sup>st</sup>. That probably means that their tenants will have to be out in the beginning of July. Have I answered your questions to your satisfaction?”

He’s wiping his hands clean.

“Yes, you’ve been helpful. Can I call you if I have any questions before we go to press?” I ask, not sure why I asked.

“Sure, sure,” he says leading me to the door. “I believe your concerns for those residents of Grandview are very legitimate. If there’s a story to be told, I’m sure you’ll tell it.”

“Thanks,” I say.

There’s no way I’m offering him a free movie pass.

\*

I’m sitting in the dark. It’s 4pm. The movie’s about the migration of birds. I’m wanting to reach over to hold your hand. I’m terrified when I actually do. My longing is so able to transform even my sense of here and now. I fall back into a conversation with you that we had only weeks before you died.

“I know nothing, but I feel everything.” You were about to go on a plane with Sam. You seemed different.

“You’re doing what you have to do,” I said, catching your tears with my thumb. It was usually me who cried.

“You think I’m a monster,” you said.

“Yes,” I said sadly.

“I should just disappear and give you back your life,” you said.

“You’ve given me my life,” I said with the certainty of a poet. “I wasn’t alive before.”

“What’s this now?” you asked.

“Life. In all it’s messiness.”

“You sound like me,” you said.

“Yes I do,” I said.

“I’m scared to leave you.”

“I’m here.”

“No, I’m flying to London with Sam. It’s a big lie. I miss you.”

“Pack me in your carry-on.”

“I’m not going.”

“Don’t.”

“I’m not.”

“Stay.”

“I’m staying.”

“Tell him why.”

“I will.”

“Tonight.”

You looked up, your eyes swollen and frightened.

“We’re huge,” I said.

“Enormous.”

“Tell him.”

You were holding my suede jacket so tight, your fingers left indentations. When we said good-bye I gave you an extra long breath of me. I wanted to be tucked inside you when you walked back into your house.

Your e-mail from the airport wiped all the patterns off my clothes. I was ashen head to toe.

*I’m with you so completely, even when I am so completely far away.*

\*

“I was down in Redwood City this week. Have you been?”

Chantal is looking outside the window. There’s a squirrel just a few inches from a cat.

“Norman is going to get bit,” she says, pointing. She laughs lightly then turns to me. We’re sitting in the day room alone. Most of the residents are attending a workshop on dreams.

“Redwood City? No,” she says.

“I have a friend whose family runs a retirement place there,” I say.

“Oh,” she says and turns back to look out the window.

“He knows about Grandview. He knows it’s going to close soon.”

“Oh, we’ll see about all that when the time comes,” she says.

I wonder how clearly she’s been told, and how clearly she listens.

“Let’s go see it, though,” I say.

“Not today.”

“No, not today. Someday soon thought. Sooner than later.”

“Sara,” Chantal says, putting her hand on my knee, “I am so appreciative sweetheart, but I’m going to be fine.”

We get up to walk around a little. We’re at the room where the workshop’s being held and we peak in.

“Interested?” I whisper.

“In dreams? Sure,” she whispers back.

“Do you want to go in? I’ll sit with you.”

“No.” But she stays to listen more.

“Chantal, why won’t you let me help you,” I ask. I’m right behind her, and speaking down to the top of her head.

“I’ll be fine,” she says, sort of shooshing me.

“No doubt,” I say.

The instructor has drawn a diagram on the black board. It’s circles with in circles. He’s talking about recurring images. He’s bald with a bushy beard and he’s wearing clogs.

“I think he’s a dream therapist,” Chantal says.

“I hope so, or he shouldn’t be doing this,” I say.

I’m not feeling patient today. I walk away, back down the hall and lean against the wall. Chantal continues to watch the workshop for a moment and then she turns to look for me.

“Oh, I thought you’d gone,” she says, a little unsettled.

“It’s horrible isn’t it,” I say pointedly.

“What?” she asks.

I just look at her for a moment.

“Yes,” she says and starts walking with me. She takes my arm. “I never imagined this.”

We walk and sit back down by the window.

“What did you imagine?” I ask.

“Life with Bradley until the end. But I outlived him. 17 long years I’ve outlived him.”

Her words reverberate in the room and in my head.

“Where’s your trumpet these days,” she says softly, from somewhere else.

I promise her that I’ll bring it again, like I used to. For a second I want to ask her to live with me. It’s a moment so thick with feelings, I drop my head into my hands.

“Not you too,” she says. “You’re looking so sad. I’m not much fun anymore.”

I shoot up in attention.

“Actually, I was just thinking the opposite.”

\*

It wasn’t about falling *out* of love with Sam, you said. It was about falling *in* love with me.

\*

Tuesday comes and I had no business arranging this. I am a plane after a 14-hour flight. People have left their mess behind in me.

The Glove is empty. No sign of Lauren yet so I loiter in the entrance planning my departure. I put a book of matches in my pocket and glance at the menu. I’m hungry for gingersnaps and soy milk but they’re not on the menu anywhere. What kind of place is this, I wonder.

Here she is. We say hi and semi-hug. She smells like sweet corn. No, it’s vanilla.

“We should have made a reservation,” I say as we stare out into the mostly empty dining area.

“I did,” she says. “The whole place is ours. That party of 3 is going to have to go.”

We sit and I order hot tea. I’m coming down with a cold but I don’t complain just yet. She raises her glass of water.

“To your saving me from wild bush of San Mateo. Thank you.”

“To you falling from a horse without breaking anything,” I say.

Her laugh lines have tiny sparkles on them. I watch them twinkle as she talks.

“So I know nothing about you,” she says smiling.

“That’s ok,” I say, and bring the tea up to steam my face. I watch her for a moment. “You haven’t missed much up until now.”

“I don’t believe that,” she says.

“It’s true. I made it here to dinner. That’s a good start to getting to know me. It implies that I follow directions and can keep track of the time.”

“Good. You’re hired,” she says.

“That’s a relief.”

Lauren breathes like she’s in a yoga pose.

“So no big life stories though, huh?” she says.

“No, I mean sure. But they come out over time.” I say.

“Over time,” she says.

“I guess. Or in big bursts,” I say. What I mean, I have no idea.

“Hmm,” she says, curiously.

“I was just thinking that,” I say and laugh. “Honestly, my life’s kind of messy right now. I guess the shades are drawn a little.”

Lauren sits back in her chair.

“No, you’re right,” she says. “I didn’t mean to ask you to do a monologue or anything. Especially if you’re not in that kind of space.”

I smile at the clumsiness of us. She does too.

“Let’s go back to the toast again,” I say, “and then we’ll order and stuff our mouths full.”

We toast again. This time, to the three people eating by the window. We order food and talk about deaf people and siblings. I tell her about Louis Armstrong’s obsession with veal and my problem with balance. She thinks I may have an inner ear problem. I think her story about potato peel art is funny. She kisses me good-bye on the cheek, with perfect aim and intention.

\*

There’s a message on my machine about Bailey’s voice. The guy we chose can’t do it. There’s one more audition. What parent would name their kid Lucifer?

Lucifer Wailing. I close my eyes until he’s completely inside the door of EnZone’s studio. To see if I’m right. I am. He’s black and taller than a tree. He’s 30-ish. He’s wearing khakis and hi-tops and I like him immediately. He sits down next me before he goes into the booth.

“Hi,” he says.

“Hi. I love your name,” I say.

“Thanks,” he says. I’m so glad he didn’t use the ‘had it all my life’ line.

“I’m Sara. I do the sound design for *Bailey’s Brain*.”

“That sounds fun,” he says.

“It’s ok,” I say. “Busy time for you?”

“Yes, actually,” he says.

I say ‘hmm’ and look at him for a moment. He goes into the booth to read. I look at him, not the photo this time.

“Whenever you’re ready. We’re rolling,” the engineer says.

*“My brain is more powerful and much faster than any computer I’ve ever used. It fills up most of my head. It looks like a soft, wrinkly gray sponge, and it’s almost as heavy as a gallon of milk! By the time I’m grown up, it will weigh about 3 pounds.”*

I push that talk-back button.

“You can sound even older. Think 15 rather than 12 years old and take it again.”

He reads again and we like him. It’s such a random process. People here seem tired. It’s easy to pass an audition when you have more energy than the five people listening to you.

I’m walking to my car and Lucifer is getting into his. He talks over his roof.

“That was fun. I hope we get to work together,” he says.

“Sure,” I say opening my trunk. He sees my trumpet case.

“Horn player?” he asks. I look down at it as if I’ve never seen it before.

“I play with a band called *Romeo’s Swing*. Trumpet. I have a gig later tonight.” I make it sound as if I have a dentist appointment. “It’s an old folk’s band. We’re all old folks.”

“Doubt that.” He’s seen our name in the paper he says and he threatens to come tonight.

“Don’t. I mean don’t come on my account. Come if you like horns and swing I guess. Come with a sense of humor.”

“I’m a jazz drummer. I used to play around. Not much anymore.”

“Did you play with Charlie Parker?” I ask seriously.

“Oh, yes,” he says and smiles. “You and I should jam sometime.”

“You know much about Louis Armstrong?” I ask.

“Played with him too,” Lucifer says.

“He had a band called the *Red Onion Jazz Babies*. I want to resurrect the name.”

“Great. You should do it,” he says, sounding like my coach.

“You should play in it,” I say.

“Sure—I’d love to hook up and hear what you’re thinking about.”

I like how he said that.

“You’re not an ax murderer, are you?” I ask.

“Nope,” he says. “You?”

“No, but my neighbor upstairs might be.”

I get his number. I don’t give him mine. Old habit.

I drive home thinking about Lucifer Wailing. He should just start his own band using that name. It’s the best name. Maybe it’s better than the *Babies*. But if he’s such a good drummer, why isn’t he playing? He didn’t actually say he was a good drummer.

\*

Maybe I've become one of those people addicted to pain. If my hip got better, maybe I'd find another injury to give me grief. I read about a woman like this who lived in Austin, Texas. All the hospitals knew her. Her cover was finally blown when she was seen slamming the door on her own hand in the parking lot outside of an emergency room.

\*

"Barbara, what if I bail at the last minute?" I ask. My travel agent has saved my life before. I've never even met this person, but I can always smell her perfume through the telephone.

"Sweetheart, the airlines want your business. You go ahead and book your flight to New York. It'll be good for a year. Now give me your dates."

I want to sit on her lap.

"June 29<sup>th</sup> from here. Then return the night of July 6<sup>th</sup>."

"Does your family do a big celebration for the 4<sup>th</sup>?"

"No," I say. "They don't believe much in independence. It's a cult thing."

"Your family is something else," she says. "I remember the time you flew your parents out here and they left the very next morning."

"It was my cooking," I say.

"Well, I think you're just precious. I'd eat your food any day," Barbara says.

"Thanks, Barbara. I'll send you over some of my stew."

"What credit card are you using?"

"The same one you have on file. They haven't come after me yet."

"Well, I'll run this through," she says. "I'll email you the confirmation. How's your life?"

Sweet of her to ask. I have no idea how to answer. I should just say fine.

"You know how when you watch a video tape and the tracking is off?" I ask.

"Yes," she answers expectantly.

"My life's kind of like that."

"What movie?" she asks.

"What?"

"Well, I understand the idea of your tracking being off, but what movie are you?"

"I don't know," I say.

"That's your problem right there," she says. "Choose a movie first. If that's really your movie, then the tracking won't be off."

\*

I park my car right in front of the Latin American Club and turn the radio off after hearing news of death and destruction. Everything feels crowded tonight. A Mexican woman is offering to wash my windshield. I wave her to go ahead. Romeo's smoking outside.

I stay in my car. Romeo is watching me watch the woman clean my window. We're in a music video. It's grainy, and shot with a borrowed camera. There's a silver tear tattooed on my cheek. I work with the camera.

*The leather man is dying  
and the tangerines are gone  
the sweating ballerinas  
are shooting up their arms  
I am only one more memory  
that you've chosen to forget  
You've become my only secret  
and I haven't told you yet*

The camera moves around my jaw and follows an ant crawling down my arm. The lens magnifies and becomes the ant's eyes looking up at me. Slightly out of focus, Romeo is seen coming into the back seat cradling a goat. I turn and sing to him.

*...Fahrenheit is falling  
and I'm beating on your coils  
the window washing widow  
is left with all your spoils  
Better not to sacrifice  
the life we've fallen in  
shards of broken English  
point to where we've been*

“Hey!” Romeo is knocking on my window.  
“Yes?” I ask, annoyed by the interruption. *Cut!*  
“What are you doing in there?” he asks.  
“Waiting.”  
“Why don't you come out?”  
“I'm thinking,” I say.

“You can think out here,” Romeo says and points to a pigeon-poop-covered stoop next to the club.

I come out to sit with him. The sun has set and it's me and Romeo on a stoop. I pull out my trumpet and spit shine some spots. Romeo takes big puffs of his cigarette, stamps it out and gets up.

“Should be a decent crowd tonight,” he says and disappears inside the club. I'm left on the stoop alone. I see my contorted reflection on the side of my horn, with the neon lights of the marquee lighting up my face. I frown and smile and frown, to test all my muscles. I cover my ears. Something's pounding out the wrong notes. I put my trumpet back in my case. The door to the club is blood red and looks like a stop sign. I get in my car and drive home.

\*

Chet Baker played a version of himself in 1963, in a film called “Stolen Hours.” It was one of the hardest roles he ever played, he said.

\*

I'm standing in front of the mailboxes in the foyer of my building. I have flowers in one hand, my trumpet case on the floor between my legs, and my mail in the other hand. I only want the mail that is kind to me. Jo comes out from the garbage room.

"Hi Sara", he says and cocks his head like a dog. "What a great picture this is."

"Me, right now?" I ask.

"Sure. It would fit great in my portfolio of work."

"What is your work?" I bark out, kind of annoyed.

"You know," he says. I lock my mailbox and I'm ready to go upstairs.

"No, you never actually told me or showed me, but I hear banging. That's all I hear." I turn to leave.

"Wait Sara. Please, I'm always right about these things. It will only take me but a few quick minutes to get my camera down here. I don't even need to light this. It's perfect."

He's much too happy.

"Ok. But hurry," I say.

I stand where he leaves me, feeling unsure of just about everything. He returns as fast as he said he would.

"Destruction and decay," he says as he sets up his camera. "I photograph things in the moments of their decomposition. Fruit, buildings, land."

That makes sense, but me standing as a subject does not.

"So why are you photographing me?" I ask perturbed.

"Oh, Sara," he says snapping as he talks. "Everything about you is about to explode."

"What that hell are you talking about?" I ask. I want to drop the flower and the mail, and kick away the trumpet from between my legs. I want to ruin his picture. But I don't move.

"The flowers are for yourself but they're not the freshest. Your mail is all bills. Your trumpet is stuck in its case. I can't see what it might be doing in there. It may seem like a stretch to you, but to me – your picture tells a great story."

Pez man thinks I'm eroding. This is not a feel-good moment.

"Are you done yet?" I ask.

"I'm done for now, but this could be a series," he says.

I suddenly have a sick feeling that he's already installed surveillance cameras in my loft.

"Jo, what you're saying actually hurts," I say. "My life is not in decay. These flowers smell great. My bills are for on-going services like heat. I'm quite the thriving organism. But why am I telling you this?"

"You couldn't look at the sky for one more second, could you?" he asks.

"What sky? What are you talking about?"

"See, you already forgot. The night of the brown-out. You couldn't just stay on the roof and live. You were too busy dying."

"Oh, Jo," I say. "You should take your theory somewhere else."

"I am a visual artist. I see things," he says and slings his camera bag over his shoulder. "We're all going away as fast as we came in. I like to capture that on film. That's all."

"That's fine, Jo." I say walking up the stairs behind him.

“You don’t like me very much,” he says not looking back. I stand at the door of my floor and watch Jo continue up the stairwell.

“That’s not true, Jo,” I say and he stops and turns around. “I’m just not used to you. I feel like maybe I need a manual or something.”

“Like a new piece of equipment. Sure, I understand,” he says. “G’night.”

\*

I hate slip-on shoes. Clogs in particular. I have to work to keep them on my feet. It’s annoying. If you’re going to call them shoes, then finish them off. Give them a back. Something to depend on.

Tess just thinks I’m just in a bad mood and maybe I am.

“You never did tell me the whole play-by-play,” I say.

“Did so,” Tess says.

“When?” I ask.

“Ben and I both told you.”

“Oh come on,” I say, finally putting down my alphabet book. We’re pretending to read in the library. Zack is sitting in the front row of the friendship reading circle, and being read to by a volunteer who looks like Kissinger. We’re in the way back sitting at a table by the Xerox machine. It’s hum lets us talk.

“Ok. Ben came home and asked me what was going on. I broke down. Said having another kid just terrified me. He said he felt confused more than terrified.”

“Tess, please take your sunglasses off. I can’t see your eyes. It’s not that sunny in the library.”

“Forgot they were on.”

“Go on,” I say.

“So we both admitted we had issues.”

“What were his?”

“School, starting and finished the forensic stuff.”

“So what shifted? I have to know because I’ve been thinking these last couple of weeks about all of this.”

“What?” Tess asks.

“It’s not even about Ben and you. But this whole thing triggered it. So—wait, finish your story. What shifted to get you all cozy with the decision.”

“Thinking about God. Can you fucking believe it?”

“No,” I say in disbelief.

“We had our time apart when we didn’t talk about it. Then when we finally did, we both mentioned God. The whole don’t-mess-with-the-big-party-planner-in-the-sky thing.”

“Hmm,” I say.

“Hmm?” Tess asks.

“That’s amazing. My family would approve.”

“Who said anything about wanting your family’s approval?”

“I’m just saying that deferring to God is a very Bialik thing to do.”

“So has God told them all to be horrible to you?”

“They’re not horrible. They’re just wrong,” I say.

“So what’s your big story. What was triggered for you?”  
Zack just looked back at us to make sure we’re here. We wave. Hi, we haven’t left you.

“I was jealous,” I say and as soon as I hear my voice I feel ashamed.

“Jealous?”

“It’s strange what triggers what, huh?”

“God, I thought you would have felt so free compared to us at that moment.”

“Making decisions with someone else is so different from making them all alone. I felt jealous of you and Ben. All tied in knots, working together. I know, it sounds pathetic.”

“It sounds honest,” Tess says, stopping me from twirling her glasses on the table. “You are so hard on yourself.”

“I love my lonely life, honestly. I do. I hate moments when I want it to change and be full of joy. So you can imagine my discomfort right now.”

“I can see. It’s huge.”

“So that’s my story,” I say and look away.

“Sara,” Tess says pulling me back, “you’ve been gritting your teeth for the past few months. I don’t know how you do it. I worry, but I don’t know what to do.”

“You can’t do anything,” I say. “I’m just a little tired. That’s all.”

“No doubt,” she says and puts her arm around me. Don’t do that. If I cry all the kids will get scared.

“Anyway.” I say.

“Don’t dismiss this. I’m sure being around Ben and me all the time has its drawbacks.”

“Yeah, really,” I say wiping my eyes.

“You should take a break. I keep on telling you.”

“I can’t vacation from this. It’s my life.”

“I’m afraid you’re going to crack.”

“Cracking isn’t a bad thing,” I say. I open the alphabet book back up.

“Offer still stands to go away with me.”

“No, let’s just stay right here. The children’s library is perfect.”

“Ok,” she says.

“They have Twizzlers in the vending machine. And juice. We’ll be set for months.”

Zack walks over. I want to stay but Zack puts out his hand for me to take, so I do.

\*

Chantal tells me her theory.

“Your dream life gets better when you body starts dying,” she says. “That’s why the dream therapist came. Old people dream a lot.”

“Are you dreaming a lot lately?” I ask.

“Quite a bit.”

“But you’re not dying,” I say like she couldn’t possibly be.

“Last night I dreamed about my sister Maurine. It was so amazing,” Chantal says. “I was still in graduate school in Quebec. Maurine seemed older than she was back then. She seemed my mother’s age. It was so strange.”

“What happened?” I ask.

“I guess I announced I was moving to California because Maurine was distraught. She was crying in my dream so deeply. I feel like if I had changed my mind in my dream, she would have stopped, and her graying hair would have gone back to its auburn. Maurine was so beautiful.”

“So did you leave her there in Quebec?”

“In real life, yes, but in my dream I just was sitting with her and weeping. It was as if she was right here in this room, growing old with me right here.”

“Where is she now?” I ask.

“She’s buried in Quebec and still always a bit sore at me.”

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Oh, I plan to go back in that dream tonight and fix things with her. Maybe I’ll bring her with me to California this time and see how it all would have turned out.”

I want to tell her not to. I’m afraid if she dreams, it’ll mean she’s dying. Just like she said.

\*

I can’t listen to anything right now. Music is making me itch. My loft has an odor that I can’t place, so I lock myself in my studio. No, not you too, Taxi. You might be what smells.

I’ll send Romeo an e-mail. It’s the least I can do.

*Romeo – I know I left you in a lurch (say hi to him for me) this past weekend, but I snapped and the fallout is that I quit. It’s been a good three years or so. That’s amazing. Time flies. If I continued to play with you while not really wanting to, that would be bad for everyone.*

*I hope you replace me with another woman trumpet player. There are a few out there.*

*Thank you for understanding Romeo, and for sharing this note with the others.*

A twinge of sad just passed through me. Ok, it’s gone. All better.

*Kyle – I meant to get back to you earlier. See note attached re: me leaving the group. Just so much on my plate, and I’m being pulled in a different direction.*

*My friend Chantal is not jumping at the chance to check out your place. But I’ll work on her and keep you posted. Thanks for offering VIP treatment. It means a lot.*

*Swing on – Sara*

Swing on? That is not me sounding like that. That must be somebody else.

\*

I dial and I agree with myself that I won't mention the 8-track tape that's on its way. I'd ruin the surprise.

"Ari – it's your sister-in-law. The other one."

"Sara – Shalom!" he says in a Danish accent. From Copenhagen to Tel Aviv. A hop and a skip. My goal now is to try to keep him on the phone for more than one sentence.

"Hold on. I'll get Hannah," he says.

"Wait!" I say.

"Oh," he says, startled. I used to think he was shy. But I think I just frighten him.

"Tell me, tell me. You're back from reserve duty. Was everything ok?"

"No, I mean it's not ok. The whole country is not ok. But we do what we must do."

"So..." Line, please. "Coming home must have been great. Was it great?"

"Sure," he says, like a man selling deli. Sure it's fresh. What are you, nuts?

"Are the kids doing well?"

"Wonderful. Batya, Natan, Josh, Yuri, Shoshi and Rachel – all good."

He's memorized their names and I'm impressed.

"I'm so glad," I say.

"I'll get your sister," he says and puts the phone down hard. That was my ear.

"Sara. Dis iz Yuri. I like you to hear my mouth. Do you like me to?"

"Yes!" I say surprised. "You mother told me you can sing. Please do!"

"Ok," Yuri says and sings a little song in Hebrew that I don't recognize. He sounds so grown up at eight years old.

"What was that about?" I ask him.

"Two birds. Different kindz. Dey learn to give one nest together."

"You mean they share a nest together?" I ask.

"Yes, dats de song."

I'm hoping Hannah gets on the phone and sings me a song too. I'm reminded of a science fiction book I read once where the whole universe communicated through song. No record labels. No need.

"It's not everyday he does that," Hannah says.

"It was great," I said.

"We're eating a late lunch. It must be really late there, huh?"

"I'm just getting started," I say. But I'm ready for bed so I'm not sure what I'm referring to.

"I'm never sure when to call you. When I try, I always miss," Hannah says.

"I'm calling to tell you that I booked my tickets," I say.

"Oh, good."

"They're good for a year," I say.

"Meaning what?"

"Nothing. I'm just saying."

"You still want some kind of red carpet," she says sort of laughing. "You're unbelievable."

"What?" I ask.

"Why not just say you got tickets. Why the exit clause?"

I wait a moment, trying to quiet the voices in my head.

“Do you have a minute?” I ask.

I feel like I’m tugging on her pant leg.

“I have a minute.”

“Open up the top of your head for second. Make lots of room,” I say. I swallow some air.

“Opened,” she says reluctantly.

“I’ve been thinking,” I say.

“About what?” she says, but not gently enough.

“Hannah, if I come to see you, I want to make something of it. I don’t just want to sit and change diapers with you.”

“I understand,” she offers.

“Do you?” I ask.

“Yes. We’ll make time for other stuff. I’m dying to see some movies. Mom and Dad can baby-sit Ellie’s kids too. It can be the three of us.”

“I wasn’t exactly thinking that. I just need to know that if I make the trip, that we’ll try to talk about things...again.”

Hannah sighs like she wants to change the channel.

“Sara, first of all, you’re making it sound like you’re the one crossing the ocean. And yes, we can talk. Of course. But you have this tendency to imply that you have all the answers.”

“I have all the answers?”

“Well, when it comes to how you think I should handle your...situation, you always say how I need to be more this or more that. If you can respect my perspective, it would be easier.”

“See that’s the problem,” I say and start to walk around my couch. Taxi, don’t do that. I’ll trip. “I don’t think I need to accept your perspective. I think your perspective is wrong. The way you sweep my entire heart under one bible heading of ‘though-shalt-not’, I think that’s wrong. I don’t have to respect that. No.”

“See?” she screeches. “You have your mind made up. You don’t really want to process. It’s all a charade. You just want to make a scene, bring the attention on to you.”

“No, Sara, I don’t. Show me that there’s some room left for you to wiggle out of your stuck position. Show me,” I say exacerbated.

“This is so unbearable,” she says. I agree.

“Hannah, it *is* unbearable. Don’t you want it to change?”

“I can’t change you.”

“God, that’s amazing. Did you just hear yourself?” I ask.

“What? It’s true. You’ve been screaming that for years, Sara. You’ve said verbatim: you can’t change me.”

“Hannah, I’m not talking about changing either of us. It’s about us feeling no need to. Genuinely feeling no desire to change either of us.”

“I think we’ve been there. We’re there now. What do you want?”

“Me? What do I want?” I ask. “Disassociation can be just as hurtful. Do you get that?”

“No,” she says flatly.

“Am I single or am I with someone?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she says.

“Do you find that slightly strange?”

“Look, I hope you’re happy. I don’t wish loneliness on you.”

“So if I said I was lonely, what would you say?”

There’s silence.

“Are you lonely?” she asks. I don’t trust her and it’s the worst feeling.

“Hannah, if I said I was lonely, what would you wish for me?”

“I’d be sorry for you. I’d wish that you weren’t lonely.” Her voice is tight.

“So taking that a step further, Hannah, so I can make my point...”

“What?” she asks, annoyed.

“The opposite of being lonely is to be in company.”

“So I hope you’re keeping company!” She throws that one out like hot potato.

“Do I hope it’s a woman? No. I hope it’s a guy. And you know that. I think this whole tired inquiry is some kind of sport to you.”

“Suddenly I’m being the rough one? No way. I’m just responding to you. All I want are some words from you that show that you know I have a pulse. That I have a pulse, a heart, a desire for love. Can you believe it? Words that indicate that you want to move towards some kind of comfort zone with me, where I can say, ‘Hey, I’m seeing someone and she makes me happy’ or ‘My heart is broken, thanks for asking.’ But as it stands now, I have no clue that you even care because you’re too afraid to ask. You’re so afraid I might use a woman’s name. And that just still can’t be, can it?”

Silence.

“Are you there?” I ask.

“Maybe you shouldn’t come,” she says from a place that feels cold and sad.

“What?”

“No, really, “ she says. “I’m not up for your campaigning. I’m just not up for it. I’m packing six kids into a plane. I’m spending money we don’t have. And all you care about are your gay rights.”

“I’m sorry you see it that way.” I’m stunned into retreat. “Believe it or not, Hannah, this is about me wanting to get real and be closer. It’s got fuck-all to do with politics.”

“Nice language.”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“Good-bye, Sara.”

\*

This phone is evil or at the very least, it’s good for nothing.

\*

I’m all twisted out of shape like a soggy pretzel. That’s what I get for walking in fog so thick I have to wear a flashing light at the end of my nose. It’s 1:30 am which is no time for a lady to be out for a walk, but the soundtrack just screams for it. Cellos are winding through a labyrinth of metal drums, crashing against livestock. Hens, I think.

Taxi seems tired of me. He shouldn’t be so obvious about it. We’re a few blocks away from the house but I still don’t feel any better. I’m wondering if Hannah hung up

the phone and took a walk too. With six kids, she probably picked up one them and said, “Your Aunt Sara is kook!” and spun her around the kitchen or something.

It’s during these kinds of moments when things in my life come to a screeching halt. The air is frozen all around me. My mouth’s hung open a bit. I think, maybe I didn’t read the directions on the outside of my box carefully. I’ve come out wrong.

Taxi finds our way home. A sleepless night awaits me. I do some of Parker’s exercises on the floor. My white-gone-pink carpet gives me a rug burn. Parker says if I do these every night, my hip will stop aching. It’s taken me a month to get down to it. Now that I’m down here, I notice all the crazy things under my couch. I start cleaning. Need music. Some Al Green maybe.

Hannah means well, or else she wouldn’t even take the time.

\*

Against the better advise of Tess and even Taxi, I go ahead and sign the contract for *Bailey’s Life Cycle*. Production won’t start until September, so I still have the summer to win Lotto (which I still haven’t played). Michael did e-mail me back a response to the questions I had about the quality of Bailey’s life. He said it’s more biologically based than experiential. He’s a nerd.

He also mentioned the exhibit.

*...and your sound design is great. Especially the peanut butter spreading sound. I hope you come out. It’s going to be a blast...*

A blast?

\*

Dear Sam,

~~Get off the coat tails of Zo~~ I think you should make sure Zoe’s exhibit doesn’t misrepresent the artist that she truly

\*

I wear the nun run t-shirt myself. What the hell.

Lucifer Wailing is meeting me for coffee. To talk about music.

“See that girl over there?” I point to a girl wearing all purple sitting alone by the window. Lucifer looks. “She’s the daughter of a butcher and she’s spending her summer vacation cutting meat. Today, she’s contemplating becoming a vegan. It’s a big day for her.”

“How do you know?” he asks.

“How old are you, Lucifer?”

“27.”

“Give yourself 10 years. You’ll start to see these things.” 27? God, I swear he looks 28.

“Hmm.” Lucifer is thinking something. Maybe he likes her. Attraction is a funny bird.

“So congratulations on the gig, Bailey.”

“Yeah, thanks to you.”

“No, it was unanimous. We were all tired.”

“It’s great to be the last resort. The odds are good,” he says. He stands up and gets us our coffees. Just now, when the barrister called his name, people looked up to see who Lucifer was.

Some where in our conversation, Lucifer says this:

“I’m out of here in January. Going to live in Spain.”

And I say:

“*I’m* out of here in January. Going to live in Spain.”

“Very funny,” he says.

“Ideas are like that. You have to seize them.”

“You’re joking right?”

“No. I’ve never been to Spain. When you said it, I wanted to say it too.”

“Saying is different than going,” he commands.

“True. But only in the 3-dimensional sense.”

“Meaning..”

“Meaning that if I just left it up to my body to take me places, I’d be feeling like a caged animal all the time.”

“Do you do drugs?” he flatly inquires.

“No. No need. You? Because if you do, you’re fired from the *Red Onion Jazz Babies*.”

“Speaking of which, how’s that going?”

I tell him how I quit *Romeo’s Swing*. In the telling, I realize how relieved I am.

“Sounds like you need a break.” Lucifer has no idea.

“Yeah. The *Babies* may never be birthed. Not sure yet.”

“What you need, girlie, is some inspiration.”

“Girlie?”

“I’m serious. Go to New Orleans and just walk the streets, hear the music.”

“Did that a few years back,” I say, dismissing his suggestion.

“A few years? You just got finished saying what a world traveler you were. Go to Turkey. There’s great music in Turkey.”

“Was your dad an airline pilot?” I ask.

“Shit, you’re good. You’re really good.”

“Where else have you heard music?”

“Zimbabwe, Mozambique. I spent a year in Africa.”

“Why are you doing voice over work?” I ask accusingly.

“Why are you doing sound design?”

“I’m out of here in January. Going to live in Spain.”

Lucifer stares at me and grows a smile.

“I’m going to this party next weekend. It’s an art jam. I want you to come with me.”

I listen to his offer and realize how long it’s been since I’ve been to anything that remotely resembled a party. I went to that post office a few weeks back. Lots of people were standing around in a room. I wonder if that counts.

“Thanks, Lucifer, but I’m not that great at those things,” I declare.

“What makes you think you have to be great, like people are coming just to check *you* out. Be part of the furniture. Just come. My gut says come,” he says, leaning back in his chair.

“Woe,” I say. “Now, you’re Mr. Clairvoyant.”

“You’re the one who told me the life story of Ms. Purple over there,” he says. I look over and Ms. Purple has left. She’s been replaced by Mr. Worldly.

“See that guy?” I point to him.

“Oh here we go!” Lucifer’s waiting.

“He’s locked his keys in his car and he’s trying to play it cool.”

Lucifer doesn’t buy it.

I lift *The Weekly* in front of me and pretend I’m reading. He pulls it down to see my eyes.

“Glad you’re coming to that party with me.”

“Spain. I’ll go to Spain, but not the party.”

“Friday night. 9:30. It’s on Capp Street. Give me your e-mail, I’ll send you the address.”

“Is Capp Street in Spain?”

\*

Twice a week is a pain in the hip. But Parker whips me and beats me and there’s something to that.

\*

Dame Sawyer is back on location with me. We’re on the way to see Chantal. She’s nuts to trust my driving.

“See that tree over there?” I ask her.

“Yes.”

“Objects are closer than they appear. The mirror says so.”

Diane’s taking notes. Nice nails.

“Why red?” I ask. She looks up.

“To what are you referring?”

“To your nails, I am referring.”

“We’ll be going live soon. Can you stay focused?” She asks. I pout and continue to drive. We haven’t had enough time alone together since that kiss on the hood of my car. I think she’s sore at me.

As I pull into Grandview’s parking lot, Diane clips on my mic. I shudder.

“So take us back, to before you even knew about the closing of Grandview. How many years have you lived here?”

“What?” I’m confused.

“As a resident. How long have you called Grandview your home? And did you feel young compared to the others?”

“I’ve been volunteering here. I’ve never lived here.”

“Oh,” Diane says and transitions like pro. “So Grandview has been like a second home to you then?” She kicks my leg like a pro too.

“Yes, Diane. You called that one straight on. These people who live here are like my family.”

“You have no real family members here of your own though, do you Sara?” She looks concerned. She wants to adopt me.

“No. The crucifixes on the wall are a dead give-away. They don’t serve kosher food. My family would starve.”

“So why the love of this place? Why accuse City College of human rights violations? That was a strong letter you sent to the paper.”

“Good though, huh?” I ask.

“Darn good,” she affirms. I glow. “But you’ve stirred things up. Are you ready for the fight?”

“I want you to meet Chantal. She’s worth any fight.”

Chantal is camera shy at first.

“Oh, dear,” she says, when Diane sticks a mic in front of her face. “I don’t want to cause a ruckus. Sara has been quite feisty about all of this.”

“Tell us about you and Sara. She said you two met on-line.”

“Yes, we were both standing on line waiting for the dining room to open. She was visiting her neighbor, Mel.”

Diane shoots a look at me. I think she thought we met on-line, like in a chat room for girls looking for older women. Diane has a filthy mind.

“Oh,” she says. “How very interesting.”

“There’s a whole sub-culture going on here,” I jump in, taking charge. America’s watching and getting restless. “Ideas are being exchanged and shot out into the collective consciousness of the planet. This home is the birth-place of neo-post-futurism. Have you heard?”

“Of course,” Diane says. “That’s why we’re doing this story.”

Now it’s my turn to stare. She needs me badly. What does she even know about neo-post-futurism? We’re not talking about cereal box babble. This is cutting-edge theory.

“If they demolish Grandview, they destroy a think-tank that’s critical to our humanity.”

“Oh, hooey,” Chantal exclaims. I’m shocked.

“Hooey?” Diane inquires.

“Sara has quite an imagination,” Chantal says.

“You think?” Diane asks.

“Oh, yes,” Chantal says.

“Some of our greatest minds didn’t know their worth until after they were dead,” I say. That made no sense.

“So what’s your strategy?” Diane asks.

“Hunger strike,” I say.

“Who’ll fast?” Diane asks. “Surely not the residents. They’ll starve!” Diane looks into the camera. “Starve Starve Starve Starve.”

“I’ll fast alone,” I say, whipping my cape around my body and pulling off my mask. “I’ll go down for the cause if I have to.”

“Have you checked in with the others? Are they going to support you?” Diane asks, pulling at my cape. It’s polyester and I’m ashamed.

“Of course they’ll support me. I’m trying to save their home,” I say.

“What’s plan B?”

“B?” I ask. Diane looks at Chantal.

“Chantal, what are you thinking about doing, assuming all things go as planned and Grandview closes its doors?” Diane moves next to her. They’ve completely blocked me. I no longer matter.

“I’ll find my way, Diane. Don’t you worry. You’re such a dear.”

“As are you,” Diane says. This is not good reporting.

“Now do tell me if you wouldn’t mind.” Chantal holds Diane’s arm and pulls her in. “Those beauty pageants that we see on TV. Are the ladies permitted to enter if they have breast implants? Because, around here, we’ve been having a little debate.”

\*

Jonah and David love super heroes and capes and masks. For their fifth birthdays, I got them Batman and Superman outfits. On the plane ride out there, I tucked the presents under my seat. The man sitting next to me asked if I was going to the super heroes convention that weekend. He was. I had trouble switching seats at first, but the flight attendants helped make it happen. Nothing against super hero conventions, its just that he wanted to talk about them.

I wasn’t going east especially for the twin’s birthdays. I was also going to attend a screening of an indie film that featured some of my music in the soundtrack. The movie was called *Belly Gone Full* and it was about a homeless pregnant girl who discovers God’s face in a Styrofoam cup. They wanted some minimal sounds with sporadic surges of musical epiphany. I had some.

The boys loved their gifts.

“Cool!” Jonah chose Batman. “Watch out, Joker!”

“Watch out, Batman,” David said holding an empty squirt gun, which he threw at Jonah. “I’m Superman!” Jonah began hitting David and I left the room, knowing that my gifts would keep on giving at least for the next 15 minutes.

Ellie was genuinely happy to see me. She had just suffered from a two-day migraine and was through seeing spots in front of her eyes.

“Hate that,” she said.

“Me too,” I said. “Did you lie down and let the kids take care of you?”

“Robbie actually made me Cream of Wheat, but he spilled it all on my comforter. Sweet of him, though. None of them has ever seen me laid up like this. Thank God it’s passed.” She was over it completely. She didn’t need a cape to be Super Mom.

That was also the visit when Mark and I took a walk to pick up some videos for the kids.

“Sara, I know you think you get the short end of the stick,” he said.

“The stick’s not even offered to me, Mark,” I reply.

“It is. Or else you wouldn’t be here.”

“There was a sale on super heroes. That’s all,” I said.

“I watch your family dance around the elephant in the room. I know it burns you every time,” he said. I never knew what Mark made of our charade.

“Lesser of two evils,” I said.

“There’s a lot at stake,” he said.

“Yeah. There’s my heart, with a big stake in it.”

“There’s everyone’s discomfort.” His too maybe, I wondered.

“It’s been over 10 years already.”

“When you have kids, you see the world differently,” he said.

“Don’t tell me you think I have the kooties too. You think your kids are at risk?” I stopped and back up against a tree.

“Not at all. It’s about timing and exposure to difficult issues.”

“What’s difficult about talking about love?” I asked

“We’re not talking about love,” he said, dismissing me.

“True. You’re talking about fear.”

Mark pulled me from the tree and we started walking again.

“I swear, Sara, you picked a hard family to be you in.”

“What about your family?”

“Better than yours. We grew up going to Liberaci concerts. You take it from there.”

“Hmm.”

We arrived at the video store and I went straight to the back. The adult porn section pulled me right in, being for deviants and all. Mark followed me in disbelief.

“Just kidding,” I said.

\*

You drew pictures of my family. Abstract images based on the stories I told you. You were protective of me. What about now? If you were here, would you put more sun-screen on me or more paint?

I’m adding new words to my word-for-the-week bowl. Words for you. *beneath, velvet, hole, vex, shadow, symphony, minute, slice*. I’m terrible at things this week. I can’t say yes. You’re stuck inside my mouth again, sitting on my tongue. I’ve got important things to say. What’s the best way? My trumpet is lead. My ears are ringing. All the dissonance inside this loft, inside my head would make a doctor think twice, maybe three times. Should I turn myself in? To what authority, Zoe?

I don’t want to leave this thought of you. It’s holding me in like a girdle. If I spill out into other things, would you be like phosphorus and spark in anger? I’m not challenging you. I’m holding you between two chopsticks like you’re curious to me. It’s easier to examine you rather than myself. I wouldn’t fit between two chopsticks. Forklifts maybe.

Rumi twirled in pain and people wrote down what he said. Maybe I should get an intern to just sit in my loft and take notes. I’d read them back, vomit, and get on with my life.

\*

Movie time.

“Lauren,” I say into the phone like it’s the answer to a quiz.

“Sara.”

“What say you to a movie?”

“Now?”

“Yes. I’ll narrate the whole thing over the phone. There’s a lion roaring. It’s says MGM on the screen. Screen’s now black. Credits are in pink script.”

“Hmm. You want to rent one? It’s kind of too late to catch one at a theater,” she says. I think: Couch, darkness. No.

“I was kind of in the mood for popcorn,” I clarify.

“Oh.” She sounds disappointed. No, don’t be sad.

“Or one better than a movie. We can still go to a movie theater, and wait until people come out of the late show and ask them what they thought. Pretend we’re radio people. I have all the equipment.”

“Sure.”

“Really?” I was only kidding.

“Why not? It’s Sunday night. Lots of movie goers have been out.” She’s serious and I pack my mini-disk recorder and microphone and try to drive without thinking too much. Life is camp and the counselors have fallen asleep drunk. We’re on our own.

Lauren’s house is on the top of Potrero Hill, overlooking the bay and a maze of freeway ramps. I call her from my cell phone while standing in front of her door.

“I’m standing in front of your door.”

“Oh. Did you try the bell?”

“No.”

“So...you’re calling instead of knocking,” she says as she opens the door. She looks at me. “Let me guess,” she says into the phone, “You’re wearing yellow corduroys and a sweatshirt that says...wait...I think it says Brooklyn on it.”

“Wrong,” I say still talking on the phone. “I’m naked standing on top of City Hall.” I close my phone. “Hi,” I say. I hug her. I catch some bare skin on her back.

“Come in for a second.” She leads me in to her office / living room. The floor is strewn with papers.

“Sorry for the mess. I’m writing an article and this is me in editing mode.”

“What’s it on?”

“You know that I work as a counselor for hearing-impaired kids in schools, right?”

“Yes,” I say. I realize that my hands have been digging deep into my pockets like I’m a 10-year old boy. I pull them out.

“The article’s for a journal that goes out to guidance counselors. It was due yesterday.”

We sit down amidst the mess. I’m on the couch, and she’s kneeling on the floor making some neater piles. I suddenly get a bad flash of what-am-I-doing-here-ness.

“It’s late. Maybe I should let you be so you can finish editing,” I suggest. She looks up.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was just straightening up a little. No, we should go.” She shoots up and grabs her keys. “I’m glad you called and came over. I was going stir crazy. I’m so glad you called. Did I mention that, when you called?”

It’s an awkward moment. If I had some gum in my mouth, I’d snap it.

“Me too you. Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“Opera Plaza Theater. Smart people go there,” I say, meaning us. But I’m suddenly not in the mood to interview strangers as they walk out of a dark theater rubbing their eyes. I feel like I want to cry. Maybe I need Prozac. Maybe two months in a quiet place with white walls.

While we park, I ask Lauren about Cabbie.

“He’s good. I just rode yesterday.”

“How long have you had him?”

“I saved up for years and bought him in 1994. I eat beans and rice, but I own a horse.”

“That makes more sense to me than anything I’ve heard in the last year.”

“At least I know where to get immediate joy. Most people run around their whole lives looking for the thing that flips their lid. I found mine early on. I’m lucky about that.”

We stand outside the theater.

“Are we really doing this?” Lauren asks.

“I collect sounds all the time. Snips of conversation.” I turn on my recorder and hold out my mic. “You’ll hear stuff later that you can’t hear now. Just stand next to me, close your eyes and listen. We don’t have to ask people anything.”

Lauren slips her arm through mine and closes her eyes. She looks different with her eyes closed. Or maybe I’m less afraid when she’s not looking at me.

The mic picks up voices from all sides of us. Three movies are letting out within ten minutes of each other. We’re standing about 20 feet from the door, so people have 20 feet of talking before their words hit my recorder.

Five minutes go by. Lauren has traveled somewhere else, here on my arm. I could have walked her smack into a tree.

“You there,” I ask, breaking my own silence.

“Hmm,” she says opening her eyes. “That was amazing. Did you get all that?”

“Who needs to trip on anything else? In my studio, it’ll sound like a symphony. Wait.”

It’s almost midnight when we pull up in front of her house.

“I’m so happy that you’re spontaneous,” I say, hoping that sounded like a compliment.

“That was ridiculous and wonderful.”

“It was. I hope you get your paper in,” I say. She has that grateful look on her face, like I saved her puppy.

“You’re really fun.”

“It’s my way of rebelling against depression.”

“It’s a great way.” Our hands find each other and lock. “Call me when you load the sounds in. I want to hear what you do with them.” She stops. “It’s so strange. I just thought of something.”

“What?” This hand-holding is not a ho-hum thing. But I’m pretending.

“You make sounds all day long and I work with people all day long who can’t hear them.”

“That’s true. Ying, yang.”

“Ying, yang,” she says. We kiss good-bye. On the lips this time. Longer this time.

“Bye,” she says softly. I’m barely able to respond. I watch her close her door and I look straight ahead. The bay is still. I am not.

\*

Come to think of it, I still haven’t rented *Let’s Get Lost* with Tess. By the time Zack’s asleep, Ben and Tess just collapse these days. Chet and I just get in the way.

I’m more interested in do-it-yourself wiring. This *Time Life* book can help me protect my equipment with a ground-fault circuit interrupter. It can teach me how to buy a conduit nipple without laughing at the name. “One conduit nipple, please,” I’ll ask the nice man.

I turn to page 30. “Deviant Currents” it says. We’re everywhere – even in electricity. These currents can kill. I look around my loft and spy all the outlets. They look so peaceful, little faces with no noses. Who knew? The Scooby-Do night lights have never burned out, not in all the years I’ve lived here. Now it’s all different. They might be charged with deviant current.

When I started working at home full-time, electricity was the only thing that came in from the outside for days at a time. But now I’m better at getting things like air into the loft and the occasional delivery person. Tess thinks I should start a story-telling group, kind of like a book club without the book. A salon, I thought in a weak moment, I’ll host a monthly salon! But the thought of people sitting on my couch telling stories and poems seemed very wrong. I imagined only bad people coming. Just my luck.

Now I’m thinking of something. A self-help group. People addicted to dead people, and afraid of living people and who do show signs of brilliance when around old people and crazy people. I’ll advertise in fish tackle stores. That would be very strategic.

\*

In the mid 1980’s, I had a thought. Wear a tie like Keaton, I thought.

\*

If I took Zack to New York with me, he’d be the wrong surprise. “Who’s this?” mom would ask, assuming a rent-a-kid cult kind of scenario.

Lucifer maybe? Oh! Look who’s coming for Sabbath dinner.

I’m not wanting to get a rise out of anyone. I just want everyone to rise. It’s that simple. I’m seeking guidance. Maybe the Amish can help. Them and their baked goods and pure thoughts. What’s taken me until now?

Back to *Bailey* work. Noses never stop growing. How lucky we are that penises peak. We’d be in a worse mess if they kept on extending out into everywhere. At least now they have a brain following not far behind. Still a bit too far behind though. Bailey is too sterile to have genitals. The rating keeps him mostly neutered.

If breasts kept on expanding, the world would be a softer gentler place. We’d all just lean all over each other and feel nurtured and fall asleep so easily.

But back to work. The nose can smell and help us remember smell. I record my own deep breath in. Garlic. Bailey has his eyes closed and he's trying to guess what he's smelling. His brain is going through filing cabinets of smells. I record me slowly flipping through a deck of cards that I got at the Grand Canyon. Bailey thinks he knows the smell. Pine cones. No. He's wrong. Dirty socks. No. Peppermint. Correct.

I'm looking at a screen shot of his nasal passage. Thousands of olfactory glands are staring at me with their smiling faces. Zoe, this is not your best work.

\*

I'm hanging down from an inversion table and Parker is talking to me about discipline.

"How can we get you on some kind of routine?" Parker for sure played soccer, tennis, softball, and basketball but only after she found out how bad she was at Jax.

"I loathe routine," I say. I'm having trouble using my tongue in the position. Note to self.

"You haven't missed a session with me. So you can't hate all kinds of schedules," she refutes.

"I spare you and do all my complaining about this during the drive over," I say. "Can I come down?"

"Not yet. This is good for your whole pelvis area. It shifts blood flow, and it opens things up."

From down here I can see outside. When I was a baby bat, the world looked just like this.

"Now slowly flex your butt muscles like I've shown you. Isometrics. Tiny deliberate flexing. One, two, three..." Parker can count well. She obviously didn't skip that class for an archery tournament. "Keep on going. Think about what would motivate you to exercise more. For most people, the idea of getting rid of the pain would."

"I'm motivated." I can hardly speak through these contractions. If a baby came out of this, it might be worth it.

"Ok, stop." Parker places her hands around my hips like she's measuring a watermelon. "Your alignment right now is good. But as soon as you start walking, you shift back out."

"See?" I exclaim panting. "If I just stay still, I'd be better off."

"No. If you started training your muscles through a routine of exercises, you'd be better off."

"Am I the only client you have who has trouble squatting and rolling every morning before coffee?"

"No. Everyone has trouble."

"Maybe we all need to meet," I say, sounding perfectly insane.

"There are PT camps for people going through long-term physical therapy."

"Poke me in the eye, please. I was just kidding," I say, well aware that I'm beginning to sound like a puffed-up teenager. "Parker, are you seeing any improvement after all these weeks? I see you more than I see anyone else. It's like we're going steady."

"Any improvement? Yes. Definitely."

“Of course you’re going to say that. You have to make a living,” I say. Parker glares at me like I pushed the puck out of bounds.

“There’s no way I’d keep you here if I was doing no good,” she says.

“Ok, so if pain is a measurement, I have to say that sometimes *after* I see you, I’m in more pain.”

“That should wear off and then you should feel better. Better than before the session. Is that what happens?” she asks, leading the question.

“No.”

“No?”

“Don’t be mad. Wait. Here’s the deal we need to make. I do my exercises regularly for two days straight and –”

“Two days is not a routine. Give me five days straight,” she bargains.

“Five days, and if the pain is not gone, you have to admit that I’m a rare special case. I want lots of referrals and lots of pills.”

“You need to flush your system. Go to the sauna if you can. Drink tons of water. I’m not making any deals with you. You’re free to stop coming anytime you want, Sara. I think you’ll know when you’re ready.”

“You’re right,” I say, slipping on my flip-flops. “I’m going to do that sauna thing. Good idea.”

“Stretch while you’re in there,” she says. I’m at the door and turn back towards her.

“Thanks,” I say and start to descend the evil stairs, expecting the usual shooting pains. They’re not shooting. Well, what do you know.

\*

I’m not having a slow-motion affair. Lauren is a canvas with a coat of primer. I’m at the art store, staring at a shelf of paint.

\*

I swing by to see Chantal. I scuddle. I whisk over. I do all these things. All for Chantal. If they made a fragrance after her, it would smell like the wink of her eye. Exactly like that.

I’m in a scary good mood and I don’t know why. Lack of hormones today, maybe. I find Chantal sitting in her room looking dreadfully sad.

“We forgot to go see her,” she says stone-faced. I know she means Myrna. Myrna must have died. I sit down next her and drop my joy to the floor.

“When did you find out?”

“Just this morning. She died 3 days ago. I’d like to go pay a visit to her daughter.”

“Of course,” I say.

“I’ve been missing her, and now she’s gone. But you’d think I’d be used to this.” She wipes her eyes and looks up at me. “It’s never easy, you know. Little parts of me break off when friends die.”

“I know,” I say. “I’m glad to be here with you.” Chantal feels so tiny. My reach around her shoulders comes too easily.

“Yes, I was going to call,” she says. “You always seem to show up at the right time though. After all these years. You’re such a dear.”

“You can always call me anytime.”

Chantal wants to go over to Oakland now. My afternoon plans seem inconsequential.

“Bring a sweater. The fog’s rolling in,” I say.

I have one of those out-of-body experiences as we drive over the bridge. I disassociate and hover. There’s me in a car with an elderly lady driving to a house in Oakland to pay our respects.

We ring the bell and Myrna’s grandson answers. He remembers us.

“Hi,” Gary says quietly. “Thanks for coming. My mom knows about you two. She knows you went to see Myrna.”

Our visit lasts only a little while. Myrna’s daughter, Beverly, is a woman in her mid-fifties wearing a black sweater to match her cropped black hair. She has very little to say to us. She seems more bothered than comforted. I want to pinch her for some reason. Like I even have the right.

“It was sweet of you both to come,” she says, indicating it’s time to go. “Myrna was lucky to have made your acquaintance.”

On our ride back, Chantal tells me a story that she says she wants me to remember. She knows about how I forget things.

“When I was still living in Quebec, I shared a flat with my sister Maurine. One night we went out late to have dinner at a Greek place that was owned by our new neighbors. George Koporos owned the place and that night he died right there by our table. Dead from a heart attack. 53 years old. Maurine was frozen but I got up and tried to resuscitate him. His mouth kissed mine as I breathed air into him. He kissed me. A real kiss – tongue – the whole thing. And then he died.”

“That’s incredible,” I said, trying to imagine a dying Greek man with his tongue in my mouth.

“What’s incredible is the idea of kissing life before you give it away. That’s a great lesson.”

We drive the rest of the way home in silence. I’m thinking about who I’d like to be kissing with my last breath of life. But she’s already dead.

\*

My sisters and I have never shared a flat together, like Chantal had with Maurine. I suppose that my taste in bathroom ornaments never suited them. Or maybe my penchant for loud noises at late hours, or my channeling TV characters at the breakfast table just didn’t make it an attractive possibility.

\*

I get over myself and show up at this party. Lucifer is no where in sight and I’d like to leave before someone says hello. Too late.

“Hello.” This person is suddenly standing so close to me, I can hardly see their face. I take a step back. It’s a he. I like his shirt. It zips.

“Hi,” I say. “It’s packed in here, I guess.”

“Drinks in the kitchen. Is that a trumpet?” He looks down at my case. I want to lie.

“Martini shaker set. I never go to parties without it.”

“Really?” He seems thrilled.

“No, no. It is a trumpet.”

“There are some people on the deck jamming. Go for it,” he says and shimmies further down the hallway. I’m next to a door. It’s a closet. I slip my trumpet in on the floor next to a vacuum cleaner. Getting to the kitchen takes a few excuse me’s. There’s lots of people here too. Maybe I’ll go back to the closet.

“Don’t you play in Romeo’s Swing? You do! Trumpet. I’ve seen you. Great band!” This woman just had a whole conversation with herself.

“Thanks,” I say.

“Lot’s of musicians here tonight. God love’m.” She’s not one, I guess.

“We’re a funny lot,” I say, struggling with a twist-off.

“That’s not a twist-off. Here’s an opener.” She hands me an opener and I’m a little embarrassed. I’m not a big beer drinker. I know some bottles do twist-off, though. “So how long have you been playing trumpet?”

“20-ish years,” I say.

“Good long time,” another voice says. It’s Lucifer. He’s been standing behind me. “But no more Romeo for you, huh?”

“What? You got fired?” the lady asks like I popped her balloon.

“No, not fired. That would be funny. No, I’ve just moved on,” I say. “Hi Lucifer.”

“Glad you came,” he says. I turn away from the woman slightly. I’m trying not to be rude, but she scares me. She has the energy of someone who clips a lot of coupons.

Lucifer looks like a poster boy for a ‘Have a nice day’ campaign. They have those, in some mid-western states.

“Where’s your trumpet?” he asks.

“No trumpet today,” I lie. “Spain sure is crowded.”

“I met a friend of yours today,” he says. “Ben Spicer. Bizarre coincidence.”

“Where did you meet Ben? His wife Tess and I—”

“Yeah, he told me. My brother had an after work thing for his birthday. He works with Ben in the lab. I was talking about my gig with EnZone and Ben overheard.”

“Small world,” I say.

“Indeed,” Lucifer agrees. He raises his beer and drinks. “Ben was psyched that you were going to meet me here.”

“Psyched. Like how psyched?”

“Like he thought you needed to get out and hang more.”

“Oh,” I say. “That’s pathetic.”

“What?”

“The idea of Ben and you nodding in agreement about me needing to get out more. You – who barely knows me. It’s odd. It’s depressing.”

“Chill,” Lucifer suggests. “The night is too young for you to get so intense already.”

“Maybe I’m too old. I’m bored already and I can’t believe you and Ben talked about me like I was someone’s case load.”

“It was one or two sentences. You’re not that interesting, Sara,” Lucifer says and laughs a little.

“True,” I say.

“Bad news though,” Lucifer says. “About EnZone, huh?”

“What are you talking about?”

“My sessions have been postponed. You didn’t know? That’s odd.”

“I work at home,” I say. “I’m not there for the day-to-day. Why were your sessions cancelled?”

“Big break in. Inside job – they’re sure of it. Major amount of stuff got taken. Computers, sound gear, monitors.”

“When? When did you find out?” I’m shocked.

“Yesterday. I think it happened really early yesterday morning. I got there around noon, and the police were still there.”

“No one’s called me yet.”

“I’m sure they will. Everyone’s a suspect.”

“Not me – I’m barely there,” I correct him.

“You have keys?” he asks.

“Yes. Somewhere. I got them a couple of years ago.”

“Then you’re a suspect

“OK. I did it. Damn, don’t turn me in,” I plead.

“Seriously, don’t joke. People seemed freaked out. I’d play it cool if I were you.”

“Oooh,” I say. We squeeze out of the kitchen and I follow Lucifer to a back room. I mumble something to myself about bad smells. Marilyn Monroe’s double is blocking the entrance.

“Pardon us,” Lucifer says very close to her face. She puckers and acquiesces.

“Nice dress,” I say as I pass her.

“Ya think?” she bursts.

“Very.”

We’re in a room filled with slam poets slamming. Finally, some good conversation’s flying. Lucifer winks at me as we both settle into a black leather couch. This room has more flavors of people than a Gap ad.

*How fat is your mind? How deep is your soul? Last time I checked there was a great big hole. You gonna get me some fill’n? I’m thrill’n.*

\*

I’ve taken to this basic wiring book a little too much. But now I can fix the light outside the door of my loft in no time flat. I move my California pear poster over and open the circuit box. I flip the one marked ‘hllwy’ off. Was I right? I’ll only know when I lick my finger and stick it into the socket. This is good, clean fun.

I’m on a chair unfastening the sconce. Jo’s in the stairwell and sees me. I think he lurks around sometimes for opportunities just like this.

“May I photograph you?” he asks. He’s wearing suspenders today. I wonder if he woke up and had a suspender moment.

“No, Jo,” I say from up here. “I have to concentrate. I might fry otherwise.”

“That’s my point. Incineration would fit well into my book,” he says too seriously. I give him a horrified look. The best I can come up with. My mouth gapes opens and the bubble above my head says *Gasp!* “I made a little joke.” He’s smiling sideways.

“How did the other photos of my decay turn out?” I ask without turning this time. The sconce is off now and I need to rest it on the ground.

“Here, I can get that,” Jo says taking the sconce from me. “I’ll put it right here. But if you fall, make sure to avoid it. That glass all smashed inside you could be very dangerous.”

Jo, I suddenly think, would make a twisted good flight attendant.

*If we should experience a sudden change in cabin pressure, your lungs will have trouble taking in the amount of oxygen that is necessary to feed your blood. Your brain will starve in a matter of seconds and all your muscular and neurological functions will be severely compromised. Avoid convulsing on the person next to you. Restraints are stored under your seat should you voluntarily choose to use them.*

*Dinner will be served as soon as we’re at a safe altitude. Tonight’s choices are chicken or fish, both of which have been prepared by a staff that lacks basic hygiene practices. Bacteria comes in many forms, so watch out for it. Some objects may have shifted during flight. If you’re not sure which is your entrée and which is your dessert, please hit the light above you and one of us will come over to help.*

Jo is still watching me. I ignore him as I re-read the section on stripping and crimping barrels.

“You need some linemans’s pliers. Hold on. I’ll be right back.” Jo dashes down the hall. I continue to read. *..then squeeze the barrel tightly against the wires with lineman’s pliers.* He’s been reading my wiring book. Creepy.

“Long-nose never do the job that lineman’s can do,” Jo says as he walks back up to me. He’s been thinking about pliers. “You have your rippers and your pullers. They can vary and all be effective. But when it comes to pliers, don’t fool yourself.”

He hands me these big red pliers.

“Thanks.” I’m grateful, but I’d like him to leave or just do this for me. One or the other.

“I can do that in a – ”

“Please. Do,” I say. I watch Jo operate on my hallway light, with his tongue sticking out of his mouth and his suspenders holding him in.

“I appreciate this, Jo. I really do.”

“Done. Give me a bulb and let’s test her,” he says, licking the beads of sweat that have formed on his lip. I go in, get a bulb and switch the circuit on my way out.

“Ta-da!” Jo says. “I’ve had these pliers for years. They’re lucky pliers”

He talked about his plumber’s wrench with the same affection as I recall. I wonder if he plays favorites. I imagine that at night, he takes all his tools out and has them do a little parade around the room.

\*

“Taxi, that bagel will never fit inside your mouth whole like that. And who knows where it’s been?” I kick it down a storm drain and yank him away. “White flour has nothing good for you anyway. Spelt. Now there’s a rich grain.”

We pass *Dog Eared Books* and Taxi whines. He knows they have treats. He eats and I browse. No more Pema books on healing. I want a book on reflexology. But I’m distracted by a book called *Liver Secrets - Cleansing Your Future*.

I’m tripping in the travel section and Taxi is sitting at my feet. *The Promise of Peru*. I’m reading about the music scene in Baranka. People drum on boxes in the streets there and sing all night long. I’d like go, with just a box on my back and a dream in my heart. And seven hundred thousand dollars in my pocket. Why that number, I don’t know.

Taxi’s down with *Zanzibar and You*. I wonder if they meant him.

\*

I finally pick up a package at UPS that’s been sitting there for a week.

“Almost shipped it back,” the lady says.

“Almost, huh?” I say. She hands me a shoebox size package. It’s from my mother. I walk back to the car and put it in the front seat. I turn on the car then turn it off. Better open it now just in case. It may include instructions on where to go next, like a treasure hunt.

It’s a pair of shoes. Shoes so inappropriate for me – my car alarm goes off. There’s a note. Maybe these are the instructions on how to safely dispose of these before they poke somebody’s eye out.

*Hi Sara. We’re going to be hosting a few things when Hannah’s in town. You should look nice. These were 25% off. They’ll go with anything. I’m still looking for a dress for you, just in case you forget to bring the one I sent you last time. Love, Mom.*

\*

“Mom, I got the box. Thanks for the thought, but how many times have I told you?” *I already have last year’s pumps filled with potting soil. I’m hoping for sweet peas this summer.*

“It took that long? I sent them weeks ago. I know you hate getting shoes from me, but these are something special.” *Are you going to wear flip-flops to your own funeral?*

“I hate when you waste your time and money on shoes that you know I don’t wear.” *Rollerblades are a much better investment. I asked for those last time. Were you not listening?*

“Wear them for me.” *When you were 6, you started wearing your sheets like togas. I should have known then something was wrong.*

“If I come home, I’ll bring appropriate clothing. I always do.” *Like that lime-green sundress I wore that said SLOW on the back. Even Dad commented.*

“What do you mean ‘if’? Hannah said you bought tickets already?” *God knows what you wear out there. Spikes, I read somewhere.*

“We’re working it out,” I say. “I got tickets. It’s all good.” *I might need an emergency appendectomy instead. I haven’t decided.*

“Dad got new glasses.” *Shot glasses or brandy sniffers?*

“Oh. Great. How are his eyes?” *Dad never complains about my flip-flops.*

“Gorgeous as always. He got a stronger prescription. It’s what happens.” *You’ll see.*

“Nice frames?” *Anything’s better than those goggles.*

“Stunning. Black with a thin gold stripe.” *Getting old is no picnic.*

“My eyes are good so far. I look at the computer screen too much though. I’m worried the glare is killing them.” *Bet I’ll need a hip replacement before I need glasses. Send flowers now and avoid the rush fees.*

“What do you do on the computer? E-mail?” *I know about those chat rooms. Spare me.*

“Mom, all my work is on computer. Digital sound design. Digital...” *I quit the circus 8 years ago.*

“Oh. I still don’t understand all that. It’s amazing. Ellie’s boys are all into computer games. Such bright boys.” *Don’t give them any strange ideas.*

“Mom, so back to the shoes. Thanks. But they’re wrong for me. What should I do – can I ship them back?” *Or I can give them away. To Jo maybe.*

“Bring them with you when you come. I’ll take them back with me when I leave Ellie’s.” *Fine. Reject my values, my gifts. Forget the jacket I got you. I won’t even ship it. That khaki is this year’s color, though. It’s tailored yet sporty. But just forget it.*

\*

I hang the shoes with dental floss from an exposed water pipe that runs across my ceiling. They’re tan, with small square heels that look like saltines stacked up. The leather is shiny but not patent. It came from an old Buick.

My aim is off but I keep trying until I manage to hit the shoes with rubber bands that I’m shooting. This is not me whiling away the hours. It’s a healthy form of meditation. Every time I successfully hit one of the shoes, I take a deep breath and say hello to my inner self. Shoes have plagued me my whole life. Mom knows better than to be so cavalier about sending me shoes in the mail, as if she doesn’t remember.

When I was in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, my feet were size 12. I was convinced that as a freshman in college, the cycle would start over again and my feet would grow four more sizes. Logic would have it. I’m the daughter of an astronomer. I understand the universe better than most. According to my calculations, my feet would have extended out over three feet if I went for my doctorate. So I bound them up and moved to a mountainous region three hours north of Hong Kong. Upon my return, my feet had not grown, I spoke three dialects of Chinese and I was gay.

During my first shopping spree in San Francisco, I got a black eye when a drag queen accidentally elbowed me while reaching for the same pair of red boots. This is my life.

\*

The cops do in fact want to talk with me. I am so excited. What to wear to a police station? Last time I was arrested, it was for swimming in that public fountain. I

was wearing nothing at the time. As a 20 -old, I was ok with that. Now, I'd scream until a nice silk-woven shawl was found and draped gently over me. Then I'd go quietly.

You'd think the front desk here would have a bell or something. What if I was being robbed right now? Public safety isn't what it used to be. I'm about ready to leave.

"You being helped?" Officer Boyle has appeared

"No, actually. I'm here to see...wait." I put the post-it in my pocket and it's stuck. "Here it is. I'm here to see Detective Lake."

"Regarding what case, ma'am?"

"Missing poodle."

"I'm not familiar with that case ma'am. Are you sure you've got the right precinct?"

"Oh. I'm sorry. That's another matter. Busy day for me. I'm here for routine questioning," I say. This is no laughing matter.

"Pertaining to what case, ma'am?" Boyle seems annoyed.

"EnZone robbery by Industrial Park," I say.

He takes me to a room that smells like chocolate wafers. Makes me hungry for long ago, when I liked chocolate wafers. A lady walks in. She looks like Diane Sawyer only with brown hair and she weighs about 200 pounds more. But they have similar earlobes. It's uncanny.

"Thanks for your cooperation," she says. "We have to cover all the bases, Ms. Bialik. Did I say that right?" She's carrying a clip board and I hope she doesn't make me do push-ups.

"Yes," I say. I decide not to say too much until I hear my rights.

"So, can you tell me where you were early Thursday morning June 13<sup>th</sup>?"

"Aren't you going to read me my rights?"

"You're not under arrest. And you can always plead the fifth," she says. She's annoyed too. I bet Boyle talked to her. What a web I've walked into!

"No need," I say. "I was at home finishing up a Little Mermaid puzzle."

"From what time to what time exactly?"

"Well, I started the puzzle about 10 days ago. I got it for my nieces and nephews. I had it all wrapped and ready to go on the plane. But something called me to just rip into it. I couldn't resist."

"You haven't answered my question," Lake complains. She obviously didn't see the movie, let alone buy the sippy-cup collection.

"So on Thursday, I was about to go to bed after working late but I only had 50 or so pieces left so I couldn't rest until—"

"You said you worked late Thursday night? At EnZone?"

"I work at home. I don't know how people get work done at that place. All this chit-chat going on. Like they never had recess and they've still got running around to do. If I was in charge that company, I'd—"

"Can you stay on topic, ma'am?" she interrupts. "So you worked at home all night, did the puzzle and went to sleep. Is there anyone who can corroborate these claims?"

"Taxi."

"Excuse me? What about a taxi? Did you go somewhere that night?"

“Taxi’s my dog. He’s the only one who was with me all night. I don’t live with any humans, and I saw no humans that night.” I did dream though, and had human contact there. She’s likely not to care.

“You have keys to EnZone, correct?” She practices this stuff in the mirror at home. I can tell.

“Yes. I hardly ever use them. I go there for production meetings once a month, during business hours. I don’t even know where they are,” I say. Her expression changes.

“You don’t know where the keys are? You mean you lost your keys to EnZone?”

“No. I didn’t. I just have to go find them,” I say defensively. “Not knowing where they are is very different than losing them.”

“No, not in our business. I’m going to have to ask you to produce your copy of these keys. If they in fact are not in your possession, that will change our strategy a bit.”

“How so?”

“A stranger might have picked up your keys.”

“They weren’t marked.”

“Maybe you dropped them by EnZone’s building.”

“Did not.”

“Then you know exactly where you dropped them?”

“I didn’t drop them!”

“Ok, so you didn’t drop them but you can’t find them and you never use them.

When’s the last time you saw your keys to EnZone, Ms. Bialik?”

“I have no idea? Like I said, I have never used them. Not once. And specifically not 3 am on Thursday morning!”

“Who ever said anything about 3 am?”

“No body.”

“Is that the time your robbed EnZone?”

“Are you cracked?”

“Just doing my job, Ms. Bialik. As a detective, my job is to listen very carefully.”

“We’ve got that in common,” I say catching my breath. She’s insane. “I listen too. I do sound design for EnZone. I’m a quiet contractor who works at home.”

“Ms. Bialik, if you did lose the keys, I’ll have to let Brian Porter know over at EnZone. Lost keys could be the link here.”

“Brian Porter?”

“He’s the director of operations. You don’t know him?”

“Never heard of him. Maybe he did it. New guy on the block. Don’t miss what’s dripping under your nose,” I warn her.

“Thanks.” She’s insulted. “I’m here until 6pm. Come back with those keys, or call me. Here’s my pager number.”

I take Detective Lake’s card and leave. She forgot to frisk me. Her loss.

\*

I search in my things-that-aren’t-soft drawer. Then my glove compartment. I even look in my jewelry box. Kitchen utensils drawer. Bread box. I sing to the missing keys. “Oh keys, oh keys.” One last place maybe. Taxi’s drawer. I rustle through old collars that jingle like keys. False hopes. I find an old chew toy from when Taxi was just a little

scooter. I squeeze it and Taxi comes. He sniffs and walks away, leaving me alone with the memories. "Taxi." I call him back. He turns and cocks his head. "Nothing," I say.

\*

"This is Detective Lake's line. Please leave your number clearly at the beep."

\*

I was lost in a parking lot once. Lost by my entire family. I was wondering in a maze of cars on what seemed was the hottest day on the planet earth. My rubber shoes melted into my Good 'n Plenty socks. I was six and had enough life experience to know that when shoes started to melt, things were getting bad.

Heading back into the park seemed to make sense to me. I still had my stamp on my hand and figured that someone would eventually notice I was gone. Mini Mouse stood at the entry and asked me why I was alone. Looking back now, I see the foreshadowing. I told her I was lost and she held me. Her fur smelled like French fries but I didn't care.

We drove back from Florida for two straight days and all I remember is clutching a Mini Mouse doll while Mom talked about all the horrible things that could have happened to me. Some of them sounded interesting. Like being sold into a crime ring. I'd pick pockets for dirty old men, just like Oliver Twist did. I imagined meeting that wonderful lady Nancy and everything seemed right in the world.

\*

Lauren tells me about her plans for vacation. She gets away every year sometime during summer break.. She's leaving tomorrow. I tell her I will either be in New York or in jail when she returns in two weeks.

"They can't keep you there," she says.

"My family has done worse," I say.

"I meant the cops. Losing keys is not a crime."

"If this was a video phone, I'd show you my mug shot. I look mean and nasty."

"Seriously, Sara."

"Tess says I should leave that place altogether."

"Not now you shouldn't. That would look suspicious," Lauren warns. "I could just see that detective putting one and one together and getting some bizarre story that would incriminate you."

"Ya think?"

"Sara, seriously. You should get a lawyer."

"My sister Ellie has a law degree."

"Ask her."

"She never practiced law. But maybe she'll know. Maybe she'll agree that losing keys is a capital offense."

"I hope this blows over."

“Maybe they’ll deny me the privilege of travel. That would go over great with my family. ‘Sorry everyone. I’m under house arrest, so the decision has been made for me. Can’t come for the family hoo-hah’.”

“You don’t sound too disappointed.”

“Long story, for another day. Maybe I’ll just go Costa Rica with you. I’d like to see turtles lay eggs too.”

“I don’t want the police snooping around our cabana.”

“Maybe next time?” I ask.

“I wish it could be this time, really,” she says.

“Hmm,” I say. I always know exactly what to say.

\*

*Bailey’s Brain In Jail: A View of Life from the Inside.*

I sample the sound of a nail-file against metal and of the echo of keys dropping, dropping, dropping, dropping.

\*

I plead with Chantal. Me pleading is something for the books.

“Chantal, there’s no harm in looking. Is there?”

“Of course there’s no harm.”

“So you’ll come. It’s a 20-minute drive. Kyle’s there all day today. Please?” I have been asking her for a while now.

“Sara, Luke has been notified. As soon as he gets back from being out of town, I’m sure he’ll call and help me settle all this.” She hardly sounds convinced.

“So consider this a lead for you and Luke. Better yet, consider this a drive on a nice sunny day? I’ll let you drive, even. I’ll play trumpet.”

Chantal laughs. Her first laugh in a long while.

“I haven’t driven in years.”

“And I haven’t played trumpet in weeks. What a crazy bunch of folks we are. Here we go.”

Chantal stops me.

“Sara, I don’t mean to be ungrateful.”

“I’m not looking for gratitude. We’re friends. I’d ask you to do the same for me.”

“You’ve got no time to run around and look for a place for me to live. I know that,” Chantal says. “That’s all I’m saying.”

“I love you. You’re so important to me it’s ridiculous.” Chantal smiles with embarrassment. “I mean it,” I say, reassuring her.

Before we get in the car, I warn her.

“You’re driving with a woman under investigation. If the cops seem like they’re getting too close, just ignore them and keep on drinking.”

\*

We're in one of the single, private rooms and Chantal is looking out the window. I turn to Kyle in disbelief.

"130 names? You'd think this place had a free spa service."

"There aren't that many places like ours. We have a good reputation and people sign up early."

"What do you mean early? They sign up ahead?" I ask perplexed.

"Exactly. Deposits and all. We're not talking about spring chickens here. Just older folks who are timing things out a bit."

Chantal turns and puts her hands on both of our shoulders.

"This room is very nice. Who died here last?" Chantal asks nonchalantly.

"Her name was Fiona Billings. She died in her sleep peacefully," Kyle says.

"Can we not talk about this? This isn't a mortuary." I say. But Kyle and Chantal have struck a chord with each other. I leave them for a moment and walk down the hall. I pass by some residents that share a double room. One waves. I wave back and pause.

"Hello," I say. They wave again. I'm sure I shouldn't walk in there and re-arrange the sock drawer. I loiter for a second in the doorway and then walk on nervously. I'm feeling strange and lean against the wall. Bad tummy. Tumor most likely.

On the drive home, Chantal seems lighter.

"Was that ok for you?" I ask.

"Kyle was very sweet to take the time," she says.

"What are you thinking? Right now. Really."

"I'm thinking I made a big mistake eight years ago." She seems resolute. "Luke suggested I sell my house during the boom. I did. I've got money, Sara. Lots of money from that sale. My health was bad then though. But the pills have been fine. I'm stronger now than I was then. Older but stronger."

"I've only known you as strong," I say. Chantal's eyes are tightly focused on the road.

"I don't like these homes, Sara. I'd rather do something else," she says, testing the words as they come out. "I'd rather...I'd rather not go to a home. It's very depressing, Sara. I'm not afraid to be alone. I'm afraid to be around all that again."

"Chantal, I've never thought you were profoundly stimulated at Grandview, but I never knew you felt trapped."

"I didn't. Now I do. With all this news of having to move, I do."

"80 is a perfect age to do whatever the hell makes sense for you," I say.

"I have to think," Chantal says, buttoning and unbuttoning her sweater.

"Can I say something?"

"Please."

"Don't think about Luke while you think. He may have his own ideas about what you should do. He wants you safe and sound, for his own peace of mind. You may just need to float down the Nile for a year," I say. Chantal pats my knee.

"I know. He helped me make decisions then. He has a right. I am a burden in some ways."

"Oh, stop. You are reading the wrong script. Stop. Ugh!" I'm incensed. Chantal laughs.

"You know what I mean, sweetheart. He's my son."

“Let me just balance out things then. I say you plan whatever feels right. Unless he lives in two places at once, he has no right to impose,” I say. I think about Luke. He reminds me of an owner of a corner coffee shop. All greased up, pretending to know you. I still hope I never meet him.

“The Nile, huh?” Chantal winks.

\*

If you were here, you’d find the keys. And if you couldn’t find them, you’d help me come up with a glorious story. I know you had a set of keys. Did they melt into the ignition with the rest of the keys?

Tonight, my heart is floating in the soup of us again. It’s bobbing and thrashing along with yours. It reminds me of a bath we took in my loft. We read some poetry by a Chinese poet. I forget his name but he stretched my understanding of love that afternoon. I felt perfectly small around his words, like a pearl on a string of pearls. Like a bead of sweat. Like something formed from sheer will.

I’m drinking some water now and it’s both of us going down.

\*

Tess is showing.

“Cute profile,” I say. “You’re starting to look like Hitchcock.”

“I’m ready for these glamour months ahead,” she says. We’re sitting in my loft. She’s come to escape.

“Ben got Zack some horrible drum toy,” she says. “Ben works during the day, so he doesn’t get how wrong that is.”

“Sounds bad,” I say in sympathy. I walk to the refrigerator. “Peach? No, better yet, try this mango-apricot. Genetically made. I got it at a fruit stand today.”

“No way. They shouldn’t sell those. Mutated genes in my body go into hers.”

“Hers?” I asks excitedly.

“Yes. We found out. Woops. I was supposed to tell you.”

“You don’t love me half as much as you used to,” I pout. “Maybe you think I’m guilty.”

“Your studio door *is* shut. Let me in to prove you have no new equipment.”

“Shut up,” I say. “Yeah! A girl!” I hug Tess from behind. I walk back to the sink. “I love girls.”

“No, really?” Tess adjusts her new body on my couch. “Sara, the whole EnZone thing is absurd. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“Lauren thinks I should get a lawyer.”

“Until I meet this Lauren horse-back-rider-of-the-west-sign-language-girl, you can’t just randomly reference her in our conversations.”

“She’s gone on vacation. Then I’m gone. You’ll meet her in July,” I say.

“You’re gone? Where gone?”

“Oh. While you were busy having sonograms without me, I was busy making a decision,” I say.

“Back east? What made you decide?” Tess asks. She leans up against the counter that I’m now sitting on.

“I decided that I’m sick of the phone and what happens on the phone.”

“I don’t get it,” Tess says. I move her in front of me and start kneading her neck. Sweaty. “Ooh, that’s good.”

“You need to be gentle with me right now,” I say to the back of her head. There a piece of food in it. I flick it off and say ‘gross’.

“What was that?”

“Food.”

“I’m always gentle with you,” she says to the rhythm of my rub.

“No, I know. But my going feels sort of like a repeat performance of the last time I went. It doesn’t make sense but I can’t be challenged. I’m just going. No big explanation.”

Tess turns around. “I don’t challenge you for the sport of it. I’m just protective of you. You have amnesia sometimes. I picked you up from the airport last time. I know what a wreck you were.”

“I was,” I say in flat agreement.

“And now you have even more going on in your life.”

“I do.”

“So what’s your strategy?”

“No strategy.”

She turns back around and I continue to rub. “Bring a good book,” she says. “Or a coat of armor or something. How long are you going for?”

“Nine days total. I’ll pretend each day is a month. I’ll re-birth on the plane ride home.”

“I’ll take you to the airport.”

“Yes, that’s would be good.”

“I’ll pick you up too.”

“Just come with.”

“No. I don’t go places where I’m not welcome,” Tess says. “Are you sure about this?”

“No,” I say. “That’s mostly why I’m going.”

\*

I watch Tess close the door behind her. It’s after midnight and I’m curled up on my couch holding the peels of the orange we just shared. I start to piece them back together and the fruit is taking shape again. I need some glue and a bolt of electricity. I can rebuild this orange and make it better than it was. I think about mutations. If I don’t abandon this now, I could have a killer citrus on my hands. I resist the temptation to play God and put the peels in the garbage.

\*

Dear Sam,

Maybe you still have Zoe's keys. Maybe you robbed EnZone. Grief makes all of us do strange things. I know.

\*

Parker's seeing progress while I'm seeing stars.

"Right there! That's still amazingly sore," I moan. I'm helping her find the trigger point where my periformis muscle attaches to my something-or-other. I have been doing my exercises at home...sort of. "Why do you continue to push on that spot if you know it's sore?"

"Palpating brings the blood over," Parkers says as she pokes me like piece of rising dough. "But the whole area seems less inflamed than it was."

"I know. The disease has moved to my stomach."

"Your stomach hurts?" Parker is concerned. If she starts palpating there, I'll have to hit her.

"All the anti-inflammatory pills have ripped my tummy up. I'm thinking about suing."

"You should stop taking those."

"I have. But I think there's a hole in my ozone already." Parker moves her hand over to my abdomen. "Don't – please don't. It's really sore there."

"Where, exactly?" she asks.

"In there," I say and point to my belly. "I'm pissed about it too. If it's not one thing – it's another. Oh, I just sounded like my grandmother."

Parkers seems fixated on my navel. "That can't be good. If you're really having pains, you should get it looked at."

"Why? I know it's going to go away. Besides, you're my doctor."

"I'm not a doctor. I'm a physical therapist."

"Whatever." I've been on my back and roll over on my side. Parker rolls me over to my back again. "By the way, I'm missing my sessions with you starting the end of next week through the following week. I'll be out of town. I'll miss you terribly."

Parker doesn't look up. She's been poking around my belly. I'm just about to hit her. "This hurt?" she asks.

"Oh, oh yes!"

"You may have an ulcer."

I get up on my elbows. "If I do, you gave me it."

Parker smiles. "Are you always this appreciative of people who try to help you?"

"Sorry, you're right," I say, surprised at myself. "Ulcers go away too. So I assume that if I do have one, then it will go away."

"No, sometimes they stay and get worse."

"Sometimes the sky falls."

"True," she says. "Sometimes people die while playing Chess. What's your point?"

"I've got enough on my plate," I say.

"Fine. But you should watch what's on your plate. Watch what you eat. Nothing too spicy."

“I’m going home to kugel and challah. Jewish food wasn’t spicy the last time I ate it.”

Parker looks perplexed. “What’s kugel and challah?”

“It’s stuff you eat to avoid talking. In some families, it’s thrown around the table amidst loud discussions about books and politics. But not in mine.”

“Sounds unhealthy,” she says.

\*

Brian Porter. What a boring name. He calls me from EnZone. Operations boy. I bet he goes to sleep with a walkie-talkie under his pillow. He’s concerned about my keys. He has a theory, he says. I don’t have time for his theories. I have some of my own theories. I let him talk and then I say, “I’ll let you know if they turn up.” Brian hopes they do. I tell him to change the locks just in case. “Duh,” he says.

I doodle his name while he finishes up this annoying phone call on his own. Just a one-letter flip and I get ‘brain’.

\*

I pack early and often. I pack for a week. Putting things in, then taking things out. The nun run t-shirt is a must-come.

If I pack my red boots, it means that I plan to stop in Manhattan. Stepping foot in EnZone’s exhibit would be bad for my lungs and my heart, not to mention my newly adopted ulcer. I leave the boots out. I put them in. I take them out. I put them in.

Taxi has a sense of things. He knows I’ll be gone for a bit. I look over and he’s staring at me. “Let’s go to the ocean, ok?”

The beach is filled with flying fairies at sunset, especially this sunset right now. Taxi and I can see them but the other passers-by haven’t the vision or the will. I let Taxi off his leash and he runs straight out to the water.

I feel my face covered by wings and whispers. I pull my hood up and lay down in the sand. My secrets come out and sit around me, knowing they’re safe here amongst the surf and the fairies. I stretch my arms out and grab clumps of sand in my hands. I could die now, or I could decide to live knowing that moments like these can be mine.

These fairies are homeless by choice. They’re perpetual. Unborn ideas live inside them and they move around fast enough to keep faith from falling out of them. Tonight, I watch them so I can learn a little about the aerodynamics of my own heart, because sometimes it slugs behind me. Fairies don’t separate themselves like that. That’s why they’re hard to find unless you’re willing to see what’s really possible.

\*

“Why is everyone blabbing at once?” I ask, my voice rising above the rest. The entire production team for *Bailey’s Brain* has assembled. There’s ten of us. What a sorry looking bunch we are. This Brian guy is here. Michael is on speakerphone from New York.

“Can we just get down to the schedule so we know what we’re dealing with?” Michael asks, sounding tired.

“Voice Over has been pushed. Lucifer’s ready, but we’re not,” French says. He’s the main sound engineer. He was hit the hardest.

“Break it down though,” I say to him. “We’re talking about one talking head here, not a symphony that needs 63 mic positions.”

French looks at me like I’ve just insulted his mother. “The guy took all of our best microphones and half of our outboard gear!”

“How do you know it’s a guy?” I ask.

Michael comes in on speaker. “Look. The compiling is all done. Engineering – done. Architecture – done. Sara, where are you?”

“I’m right here, Michael.”

“No, I mean in terms of sound design.”

“Well, I think I’ve got three more sequences. And I intend to finish them this week, because I’m on a plane to New York on Friday.” As I say this, I realize I shouldn’t have.

“Are you coming to the exhibit?” Michael asks. Some faces in the room look over at me. “That’s wonderful.”

“No. I have a family reunion in Westchester County so—”

“That’s 40 minutes away. So you can stop in. That’ll be great.”

Brian doesn’t care about any of this. “I don’t mean to interrupt your conversation, but can you two take this off-line?” He peers over at me. He’s got ruddy skin and small teeth. “I’ve just got some notes here about how things are going to be run operationally from now on. Then I’ll leave you all to talk about production and so forth.”

Brian has a clip board and proceeds to tell us about company policy and new security protocol.

“Only those on full-time staff will be getting keys to the new locks and security pass codes,” He says. Some contractors argue about late hours and the in-and-out process. I don’t want keys anyway. I’m bored and want to leave.

“I have to go,” I say.

“I have to talk with you,” Brian snaps at me. French cuts in.

“Actually, I wanted to talk with you too, Sara. We can get Lucifer into your studio. Worst case scenario.”

“That’s not worst case. I have great mics and I’m already dialed into the project.”

Brain feels like he’s being ignored. “Excuse me, but can we not break off into little meetings?”

I ignore him. “French, I’m gone for a week starting Friday. Get Lucifer into my studio. By the time I’m back, you’ll be done.”

“That would be great.”

“I need to work out a rental rate. This is not a free offer.” We get Michael on the phone and agree on a price. Brain has been flailing about. Some people have already dispersed to get food or leave altogether.

“Come by tomorrow, French. I’ll give you keys and a rundown of my studio set up. If the electricity is up, you won’t have to use the hand crank.”

He laughs. “Are you sure you want to give me keys?”

Brain chimes in. “Are you sure you haven’t lost those keys too, Sara?”

I glare at him, then I look back at French. “I trust you, French. If you land up stealing everything I own, I’ll put Brian on the case. He’s really good at solving big mysteries.”

Brian follows me out to the parking lot. “I’m not so sure you should be acting so cocky.”

I stop and turn. “And why is that?”

“EnZone is pretty serious about finding out who robbed us.”

“Well, that’s a good thing I suppose. And what does that have to do with me acting as you say, cocky?”

“You lost EnZone property which may have lead to the robbery. We can hold you accountable for that.”

“No, not really. But if you are excited about the prospect of blaming me, then by all means, blame me. Thank God the law protects me from random people like you and the random thoughts you might have.” I turn and walk towards my car. He follows. I turn again annoyed. “You ever lose anything, Porter?”

He steps back from me. “Sure.”

“Have you found it yet?”

“Some things.”

“But not all things? My God? What’s wrong with you? You mean you have lost some things and they remain lost? Who knows what crimes might have been committed with all the things that you’ve lost. Come to think of it, I should have you investigated. You’re probably an accomplice to some murders. Stay away from me, you criminal.”

I get in my car and spin around the parking lot to where Brian is still standing. I roll down the window. “Are you lost too? Office is that way.”

\*

I haven’t a morsel of food in my house. If I shop, things will spoil when I’m gone. I could always give my perishables to Jo. He’ll photograph their decay.

This afternoon, I grab two yogurts from the corner market. I bring a spoon and a cloth napkin for Chantal. Even in the car as we ride over to the library together, she can snack in elegance.

The library offers its regular mix today of the elderly, the homeless, and over-zealous students. “We fit in with all three”, I point out to Chantal as we walk to the map room. She wants to show me Quebec.

“It’s not the Nile I want, it’s home.” Chantal focuses in like a scientist. “Right here is where I was born.” Her finger lands on the page, and it makes me think of light trapped inside a tunnel. Each of her fingers reminds me of that.

“I’ll come see you,” I say.

“I’m not there yet. But yes, indeed. You must.” Chantal rests her arms over the map and looks around the library. “I’ve got to talk with Maurine. Who am I kidding?”

“Didn’t she die?” I ask carefully.

Chantal looks over at me and waits a beat before speaking. “When you get to be my age, there’s not such great distance between their world and ours.”

I swallow. “Really? You feel that?”

“Absolutely. So much so that Maurine helped me make my decision a few days ago. She helped me untie the knots in my stomach. I couldn’t have imagined moving back to Quebec after 50 years. It’s a different place now.”

Chantal starts thumbing through the book in front of her.

“I think you’re brave and amazing. I want to be more like you,” I say. “I’m not just saying that because I’m jealous of your sexy accent. It’s more than that.”

“You need to learn French.” She puts her hand on my cheek and softens her tone. “And you need to stop being so clever all the time.”

“Oui Oui,” I say.

\*

I dream about flying. There’s a bag of roasted peanuts taped across my forehead like a third eye. My lips are chapped and I’m falling into the aisle of the first-class cabin. “Sorry, sorry,” I say to the man whose drink I just spilled. I can’t find my seat. People are staring. I pass the toilets and stumble back into coach. My body resembles a wad of cotton candy. The sound track from *God Spell* is playing over the speakers. We’re losing altitude fast and everyone is looking at me for help. I show them a pair of egg beaters that I have successfully smuggled on board. “Look,” I say. “These are very useful.”

\*

Taxi, please don’t eat Zack this time.

Tess and Ben are going to watch Taxi. They do big favors like this for me so I’ll owe them for the rest of my life. I’ve rung the bell now twice. Taxi’s wining, eager to get inside to terrorize Zack. Or is it the other way around? I can’t recall.

I knock now and knock again. “Hello?” The door finally opens. Ben looks stressed.

“Sorry. Come in. I have Zack in the tub. Just hang for a bit.”

“Where’s Tess?”

“She went to get some take-out.” Ben disappears down the hall. Taxi follows. The house is all messed up, like some director said, “Ok, set dressers—come in here and make this place look lived in, please.” Tess is on deadline. Her computer is up and running and I sneak a peak. She’s been working on a series about yoga instructors. Each one has his or her own story, I guess. No two snowflakes are alike.

“Need any help?” I yell to the air.

“No,” Ben says. “We’ll be there in a second.” Taxi comes running back in. He’s got a big tuft of suds on his head.

“Nice.” I start collecting some toys that are strewn on the floor from where I’m standing all the way into the kitchen. I toss them into the laundry basket that doubles as a toy trunk. I throw a plastic frog and miss, tipping over a cactus plant.

“Shit.” I put it upright again but there’s dirt on the floor. Ben walks in with Zack in his arms, wrapped up in a towel.

“Sawa!” He laughs. Ben sees the dirt by my feet.

“Sorry,” I say. “The frog tipped I over.”

“The frog?” Ben obviously doesn’t keep track of Zack’s toys.

“Fwoggie!” Zack screams and waddles naked over to the laundry basket. Ben gets a dust buster.

“Oh, Taxi hates that noise. Hold on.” I take Taxi by his collar and sit on the opposite side of the room until Ben’s done. As he cleans up, Tess walks in with two bags of food. She stands at the door admiring the chaos. I shrug my shoulders.

“We’re thinking about tearing down this wall here next. Do you have some gloves I can borrow?” I motion to the wall behind me. Ben is done dust busting and stands up. His shirt is still soaked from the bath. I suddenly feel hunger. “What kind of take out?”

Over Indian food and Thai beers, we manage to get Zack to be silent by putting his food on the floor beneath the table. He’s smashing rice onto my bare feet. I make no mention of this. It’s our little secret.

Ben doesn’t sense the level of anxiety that’s oozing out of me. Tess, however, is trying to help me breathe.

“Take time for yourself. If you stop hearing yourself think, you’ll freak out. Don’t drink their poison.”

“Got it.”

“Just because they can’t bear to see all of you doesn’t mean you’re invisible.”

“Got it. That’s good.” I’m eating too fast.

“You’re huge. That’s why you’re big enough to make this trip. I think you’re amazingly strong. You’re too generous. Don’t give away your insides. You know what I mean?”

“I do.”

“And you can always leave. Anytime.”

“I know.” I play with some green sauce. “I think everyone is going to be on their best behavior.”

Tess knows what that means. “Yeah, but you hear what’s not being said louder than what’s spoken. That’s why these trips destroy you.”

“I know.” I notice Ben looking at me. “Ben, what are you thinking?”

Ben adjusts in his chair. “I’m thinking that it’s hard for you to go in there alone every time.”

“Yes but it would be worse to watch someone else be swept into this.”

“But an outsider can’t be hurt like you can. It’s not their battle,” Ben says

“Ok, so come with.”

“Me?”

“Mom and Dad – this is Ben. He’s my best friend’s husband. Go figure.”

Tess looks at me. “Little do they know...” she says.

“Woe,” I say. “Not nice.”

Tess reads my face. “Sorry. I am. Sorry.” She glances over at Ben, who as far as I understand, has no knowledge of my affair with Zoe. He shrugs the exchange off too fast though, like he’s protecting all of us. I’m confused.

“Tess?” I breathe for a moment and realize the absurdity. “Ben, I know you know. It’s ok. It’s just been so hard and so strange.” I look over at Tess. “Tess, please. It’s ok. You two talk. Of course he’s known about Zoe. I assumed.”

Ben jumps in. “I guessed. A long time ago. I know you too well. You seemed too happy being single. I just knew that you weren’t. I knew something was up.”

“It’s been a really complicated unimagined situa—”

“You don’t have to explain,” Ben interrupts. “And please don’t be mad at Tess.”

“I’m not,” I say. “Tess, I’m not. Really. You’ve been my sole confidante. I guess you’ve needed one too. No kidding. Of course you did.”

We all eat in an unfamiliar silence. Zack’s nearly covered my entire foot with jasmine rice. I peak under the table and marvel at his progress.

“Can I just say,” I break into their thoughts. “that it’s fucking amazing that your son finds my feet so delightful. Let’s just acknowledge that.”

Ben and Tess look under the table then back up to me.

“When you get back, we’ll have a party,” Tess declares.

“Let’s do that,” I say delighted.

“That gives you incentive to get back here in one piece,” Ben says.

“One piece,” I say.

\*

My loft feels strange without Taxi. I can’t sleep so I decide to dust my studio. French has the keys to get in and probably expects some mints left on the chair. But that’s not my style. I’ll leave a banana with his name written on it. A French banana.

I’ve been packed for days now and can’t remember what I put in here. So I put more socks in. Never too many socks. I throw in a squeeze ball for tension release. The knife set should stay though, so I pull it out and place it back on my kitchen counter.

I have a scar on my left thigh that came from a big knife that belonged to my father. Astronomers and their knives. I was playing with it and the next thing I knew... blood everywhere. I can’t recall another time when I lost so much blood. If I wasn’t so busy screaming, I might have really enjoyed the light-headed feeling that goes along with blood loss. That sense of floating and flying. Things start to slowly not matter much anymore...

Jo is working at this late hour. I can’t see for sure but I’m betting on it.

“Jo, I hope I didn’t disturb you.” He has answered his door while still wearing rubber gloves. Not the tight ones for surgery. These are the ones you can wear to rip the heads of fish off for 10-hours straight.

“Hi. I was just thinking about you,” he says. I’m disconcerted by that but press forward with my request.

“I know that I mentioned to you that I’ll be away starting tomorrow through the 6<sup>th</sup> of July.”

“That’s right. And I’ll be keeping an eye on your place for you. No problem,” he says like a boy scout.

“Well that’s what I wanted to talk with you about. I have two people from work who’ll be coming in and out. They have keys. I wanted you to know so—”

“You gave them keys to our building?” Joe seems exacerbated. Keys are not my lucky charm these days. “That’s a big risk, you know. A big bad risk.”

“Jo, you can calm down about that. These are trustworthy folks. I’ve known French for nearly four years.”

“French? What an odd name. I don’t like it very much. I have a bad feeling about these people. Who’s the other guy?”

I'm not eager to say. "Lucifer," I say. "Lucifer and French work on children's educational games. They are ok. They passed my security test."

"Lucifer? That's the devil's name!" Jo has stretched his rubber-clad hands out like he's posing for a cartoon. "You're joking about all this, right?"

"Jo, I didn't have to tell you any of this. I just didn't want you to be surprised if you saw two people entering my loft while I was away. Don't be freaked, please."

"Do you have pictures of these men?" he asks, squinting his eyes. "I'd like to ID them before I actually encounter them. That would be helpful."

"Jo, you're not the welcoming committee. I don't expect that your paths will even cross." I pause. "At least not intentionally."

"I'll keep an eye out – that's all."

"Jo, I appreciate that. Just know that they'll be here on and off at all hours. And they are my welcome guests." I squint back at him.

"So you've come here to tell me not to worry about anything. Then I won't." He claps his rubber hands together. "Frenchie and Lucifer won't phase me a bit. If I see them carting away your stuff, I'll hold the door open for them."

"Jo, you're not listening to me."

"I've just heard this kind of story before. I'm always the bad guy for seeing things before they happen."

I step away from the door and tread lightly. "Jo, thanks for understanding. They're good hard-working folks. Just like me and you."

Jo leans out of the door frame and watches me walk away. "Sara, I'll keep the fort down while you're gone. Don't you worry."

\*

Tess and I are curbside at the airport.

"You ok?"

"Totally," I say. "I am. Thank you so much for shlepping me this early."

"You've done the same."

"Yes, but when I drive you this early, I complained the entire ride," I say. I hug her. "Come with."

"Ok. Let me turn the motor off first."

"Wish you could."

I roll my suitcase onto the curb and turn to wave. Zack's in the back seat and waves, by opening and closing his hand like a pumping heart.

\*

I'm grateful that Diane picked up the tab for my first class seat. I don't have that kind of cash. She's arranged for me to sit right next to her – we're on location in the friendly skies. She's aisle, already seated. I'm window and need to squeeze by her. Shame.

I buckle up. "You'd think these would have rhinestones. Belts in first class should be distinct like that," I say.

Diane looks down at hers. “Clever thought. Do you have a flare for design? I haven’t picked up on that thus far.”

“Well, I considered a career in interior design for a while. But then I discovered that I’m slightly,” I pause, “colorblind.” I raise an eyebrow towards the camera.

“Tell us about now. What’s going on? How have you prepared for this trip?”

“First, I made little paper-doll cut-outs of my family members. All of them. I worked for several days on this, making sure the little dolls were as accurate as possible. Like, for instance, my sister Ellie has one eyebrow that has mostly white hair because of a birthmark. Stuff like that has to be accurate. Even on paper-dolls.”

“So once you were done…”

“So once I was done making all the dolls – there were 16 all together because I left out all of my cousins – I lined them up on little stands all around the edge of my bathroom sink.”

“On the edge of her bathroom sink,” Diane repeats, winking towards the camera.

“I ran the hot water and steam started to rise all around them. I sat on the toilet seat cover and closed the door. I turned the shower on and boy, was it steamy then. We just had this huge family shvitz – like the native Americans do in their sweat lodges. I must have stayed in there shvitzing with them for at least an hour. We talked, we sang, we cried. It was transformative.”

Diane gets the shvitz concept. “It’s amazing what can happen when a group of people chooses to sweat in a small space together. Things happen. Things are shared.”

“Yes they are, Diane.”

“So what have you learned? Have you gotten in touch with some truths?”

“Wait,” I say, acknowledging the flight attendant offering us champagne. “Yes, please. Thank you.”

“Oh yes,” Diane says eagerly. “Two, please.” The flight attendant obliges but has a concerned look on her face.

“Don’t worry,” I say. “She’s with me.” The flight attendant looks relieved. Button is her name.

“What sort of name is that?” I ask. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Oh,” she says, talking over Diane’s head. “It’s just what my parents named me. It’s what they used to call each other when they were in love as kids.” Button smiles and walks away. Diane seems annoyed.

“If you intend to interview everyone who passes by, we’re never going to get anywhere,” she says and gulps some champagne.

“We’re in constant motion flying east. I’d say we’re getting somewhere fast.”

“Don’t be clever with me,” she snaps.

“I’m sorry. Go ahead. Plunge through the depths of my soul.”

“Ok then,” she says. “Tell me this. And tell me true. I want to know and America wants to know.”

“Ask me anything,” I say. Our noses are almost touching. She’s thinking about kissing me again. But she’s fighting it. I can tell. Her breath is sweet and I’m being pulled in. Our kiss is longer than a laugh but shorter than a scream. Just when our lips part, the captain butts in.

*This is your captain speaking. We’re now at a safe altitude for you to turn on any electronic devices you may have brought with you on board. Here in the cockpit, we’re*

*partial to the game 'Operation'. It's battery run actually which means we can play it at any altitude, even on the runway if things get a bit slow. It's a real challenge to use the tweezers while trying not to hit the edge. Our second-in-command, Jeb Dempsy is a pro. He beats me every time, but I'm still hopeful I'll get him one of these days. So sit back and enjoy the rest of your flight. We'll be on the ground in New York in just about five hours from now.*

Diane's gulping champagne and seems annoyed with herself.

"Oh, get over it," I say. "You're so hard on yourself. It was just a kiss. It could have been mouth-to-mouth." I feel ignored. "Ok, we'll never kiss again. Never, never, never. It wasn't that great a kiss anyway."

Diane motions for Button. "Button, do you have any eye pillows?"

"Eye pillows?" I ask. "We're in the middle of an interview – you can't just go to sleep!"

"I have a headache," she says leaning back and flipping out her foot rest. "Let America fry."

I turn to the camera. "She didn't mean that," I say, trying to explain Diane's sudden brushing off of her people. "She's narcoleptic. Sleeps immediately. Especially after emotionally traumatic experiences like kissing. There's more to this story but I'm not at liberty to tell it."

Diane's out. Her heads tossing back and forth and I can tell she's having a bad dream.

"Button, what's the airline protocol for passengers who are asleep. What can and can you not do?"

Button is laying a blanket over Diane's jittering body. "We're restricted quite a bit. Why?"

"Just wondering," I say, patting Diane gently on the head.

\*

The JFK Airport has one of the best sushi bars in the nation. I read that somewhere. A porter points me in the right direction and within minutes, I'm twirling some seaweed around my tongue. Life at this very moment, is good. I could stay sitting at this counter here for weeks. I'd raise my hand every once in a while and ask for this or that roll. I'd learn Japanese.

I catch a cab that's driven by a very small old man. He has to get out of the cab at the toll to pay the nice man because his arms can't quite reach from the inside. I'm just grateful that he can see over the steering wheel.

"How's traffic been?" I ask, as we start our trek across town towards Chelsea.

"Same," he says in a vintage New York accent. "Some days are horrible. Some days are worse than horrible."

"I understand. I really do."

"Of course you do. Traffic is just like life. Life is just like traffic."

I look at his eyes in the rear-view mirror. "That's probably true, huh?"

"Sure it's true. Of course it's true," he says, like he's been saying this his entire life.

I'm glad I've decided to spend my first 24 hours in the city before going to the family. The city offers me a madness I can relate to.

"Here is fine," I say as the cabbie pulls up to the corner of 21<sup>st</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>. "Thanks a lot."

The New York air smells sharp like the mustard. I'm staying with my friend Ken Mostumi. He's never home but his doorman has a key for me. Ken left a note on the kitchen table.

*Sara – Hey! You made it. I'll find you by midnight or in the morning. We're in tech rehearsals. yuck. xx*

His apartment is gay-boy clean and I stack my things neatly in the corner of the living room where the fold-out bed is. I rest on the couch and begin deliberations. To go or not to go tonight. I regret that I gave myself the option, booking my flight so I'd get in right before EnZone's reception at the gallery. I miss Taxi.

I strike a deal with myself. I'll go and just peak in the gallery window, observe the travesty no more than a minute and then start walking and continue to walk. Maybe I'll hit Brooklyn and buy another sweatshirt that says 'Brooklyn'.

\*

There's a blue shuttle in front of the gallery that says 'Javitz Center' on it. Michael is standing just inside the door greeting teachers who were driven over from the convention. He looks like one of those automatic bird feeders that bob up and down. I stand still, across 27<sup>th</sup> street which is already swarming with people and bumper to bumper cabs. I wish I had my mini-disc recorder on me to catch snips of this urban hum.

With a big breath in, I cough out fumes and cross the street. I wave to the truck driver and thank him for not running over my foot. Looking into the window now, I see how Michael whipped up an EnZone special using Zoe's work. He's made huge prints and he's lit the whole gallery to make it feel like the inside of a computer screen. EnZone products are mounted on the walls in between Zoe's work like they're art too. Boudin Gallery has been turned into an EnZone showroom. The gallery owners are probably hiding in the Hamptons until this is over. They surely got Michael to pay for that expense too.

I've seen enough and turn away from the gallery to get on with my night.

"Oh, excuse me." A man brushes into my shoulder. He starts to move on but stops. "Wait – you're Sara."

Sam Lerner appears suddenly like a popped piece of corn. I was sure I'd avoid seeing him by staying outside. He spoke my name. "Yes." My heart starts to throb.

"I didn't expect you to be here." He doesn't smile.

"I'm sorry but I'm not quite sure how we know each other." I dig my hands into one another so hard that I expect blood will drip soon.

"I've seen you play," he says.

"Oh, with *Romeo's Swing*. Yeah, I played with them for a while, but I recently left the group." I avert my eyes from his, which have been locked onto my face.

"I went to see you play because I wanted to see who you were." He pauses. "I finally had the strength."

I realize reluctantly what he is saying. The thick air around us stops moving. I follow each word I speak as if my mouth is a ticker-tape machine, spitting out symbols and code. “You’re Sam Lerner. I know that. I never thought we’d meet.”

“There would have never been a reason for us to meet,” he says with a quiet bitterness.

Where we are standing is not strategic. “Can we cross the street? There’s a stoop over there.”

“I have no interest in talking with you, Sara. I’m sorry we bumped into each other.”

“Well, as fate would have it – we did,” I say, trying to steady my voice.

“Yeah.” Sam takes a step back. “Before I go though, I’d like to tell you something. I always knew Zoe was with you. I knew *how* she was with you.” His jaw clenches shut. I don’t know what to say. A wash of sadness drenches me and I’m too heavy to steer clear of a crash.

“She loved you, Sam.”

“You don’t need to tell me that, Sara,” he says, stone-faced. “You don’t need to tell me how or if my wife loved me. You don’t need to help me interpret my wife’s feelings.”

“No. No I don’t,” I say, trying to stay strong. “Look, Sam. I don’t know how much we should get into this. She was never going to leave you. She – ”

“She did leave me!” He grits his teeth, attempting to keep his voice down. “She left me. And she left everyone, everything. That was her fucking solution!” Sam starts walking away, down the street.

“What are you talking about?” I follow him. He stops and turns.

“What – are you kidding me? Oh, Jesus. Wait – let me guess.” Sam starts to walk again and talks more to the sky. “You thought that Zoe just happened to take a fast turn and crash into the side of a mountain? Oh, give me a break!”

“What? What?” I’m flailing behind him, outraged by his words. “You think Zoe killed herself?”

Sam turns around and runs his hands through his hair. “Oh, God. Why am I even talking with you?”

“Why are you saying Zoe killed herself?”

“Of course,” he says, looking away from me. “This all makes sense. It really does,”

“What are you talking about?” I ask, nearly pushing at his chest impatiently.

“What was she to you? An experiment? Did you ever think you were killing her?”

“Killing her?” I step back from him like he’s suddenly contagious. “I don’t know what you’re insinuating here.”

“I’m not insinuating anything. I’m accusing you are of taking advantage of my wife. Of sucking her into your...world...at her weakest moment.”

Sam’s eyes are thin like all the tears and light have drained away. I can tell that he’s had this conversation with me before, maybe in his house, throwing me against the wall again and again, waiting for me to break.

“No, Sam,” I say quietly.

“No what?” he asks, still on fire.

“Zoe was happy. We had -- between us, we had a great deal of happiness,” I say. I’m suddenly drenched with memories. “It was also terribly sad.”

“Terribly sad? You don’t know anything about terribly sad. Terribly sad is a place you haven’t been.”

“I’ve been there.”

“You have been no where!” Sam points at me with the determination of a preacher. “Zoe was...messed up. At some point, she just got messed up. She turned...inward. You...you just played into it. You took her at her weakest point and you got what you wanted, right? You got this beautiful woman. You got Zoe! But you had no business!”

“Sam, I’m not going to stand here and be accused of some kind of crime.”

“What are you doing these days? Are you fine? I saw you on stage. You looked fine. Where does this whole thing fit into your life? What were you doing with my wife??”

“How should I answer that?” I ask. “Do you want me to try to convince you of my integrity?”

“You don’t have any integrity.”

I gulp away tears. “My love for Zoe was deep and it was real. It *is* deep and real. I won’t defend that or deny that. And I won’t ask you to understand or to forgive anything.”

“You sent my wife over the edge.”

“I sent her nowhere,” I say, raising my voice loudly for the first time. We’re both nearly nose to nose like two bulldogs. “Zoe did not kill herself, Sam.”

“How could you be so stupid?”

“Sam,” I say, but stop. I continue to look at him as if the conversation is continuing. Sam’s face softens slightly. “Zoe was so alive. She would never kill herself. She was full of life and love. She loved you, Sam.”

“Don’t you dare tell me that again!”

I lean back against the building and slide to ground. I look up at Sam, who seems unsure of what to do.

“I won’t,” I say.

“Don’t you ever speak to me again,” he says, with a crack in his voice.

“I won’t.”

Neither of us speak. Our horns are locked.

“You saw her that day, didn’t you?” He says more than asks.

I look down at the ground, hoping for the earth to crack and take me in. “Yes,” I say.

“Tell me something,” he says, kneeling down. I’m scared for the first time. I’m scared of his desperate sadness. “Did she tell you she was going to do it?”

“Sam! Zoe didn’t kill herself!”

He stands up as if he’s dodging my words.

“The reports aren’t clear. The police were never quite clear.”

“Sam, I know her.” The second I say this, I’m not so sure.

“You know nothing,” he says, walking backwards away from me. “Nothing.”

Sam turns away and disappears into the traffic. I strain to try to follow him with my eyes. My body is frozen as if I'm holding up the side of this building. In fact, it's the one thing in the world I'm sure of right now. This building not falling gives me purpose.

\*

I don't know the time. The streets are swallowing me and then spitting me up onto corners I don't even recognize. New York doesn't notice me, with my red boots and my swollen eyes. I'm looking for you everywhere. I feel like you just died again, just a second ago, and the scent of you is still fresh. Were you there against that building watching Sam and I slam against each other's memory of you?

These people around me all look like they have a plan. I give away power so fast when I'm sad like this. I find a place to sit, a stoop on a brownstone. People are inside sitting down for dinner maybe. Or making love or looking for something they misplaced. They're inside protecting their lives somehow. Folding a sweater and putting it neatly on a shelf to say something about the future. To say that they don't want it wrinkled for the next time they'll be wearing it.

Please tell me Sam is wrong. You took vitamins that day. You poured them into a glass and we watched them fizz together. Vitamins are for getting old gracefully. You planned on that. Right?

\*

The door man asks me if I'm ok. I half wave and find my way to the elevators. The sun is about to rise. I walked the city all night, until I could no longer see in front of me.

I curl up on Ken's couch and cover myself with the sheets I never used. I remember with great pain that I'm due in Westchester by dinner tonight. I pass out at the thought.

\*

I've managed to get on the train to New Rochelle. I watch the telephone poles and their connecting wires wiz by. They look like quarter notes passing on a staff of sad music. I'm terrified of these next few days. I can see them lining up in front of me like bullets.

It's too much. It's not enough. Zoe, you can't stay here, curled inside me like a question mark. Sam's grief has poisoned his thinking. He's wrong. Tell me he's wrong.

\*

Downtown New Rochelle should not be confused with La Rochelle, which is on the coast of France. We are not in France.

\*

Dad asks me a favor as he carries my bag upstairs. "I'm an old man. Do an old man a favor."

"Stop saying that, Dad."

"Listen. Let's all get along this week. You and your sisters. Let's all really have a good time. Ok?" he asks, already sounding tired.

"Why are you asking *me*?" I plop onto the single guest bed that's way up here in the attic. Back in the day, they used to keep hay up here, or so it smells.

"If you see a storm coming, just sail into the opposite direction," he says.

\*

I unpack. I wish I could unpack my insides. Lay them all out in front of me and choose which parts to put back in. If Taxi were here, he'd eat them like pieces of liver and I'd have to depend on him to replace my gut instinct.

Your breath is no longer steady. Or is that me no longer feeling your mouth constantly near me? If you speak now, will it sound hollow or warm? That night you died, I was never so sure of how strongly you lived in me. I screamed you into me, like a siren. If I screamed again tonight, in this crowded house, I wouldn't reach you. I continue to unpack my clothes, looking for you.

\*

Mom is in the kitchen on the phone. I wave.

"Oh, my daughter is here from California. I have to go." She hangs up and takes in a long look. "Sara, hello!" She pulls me in for a hug. "You look good. You must have slept on the plane."

"It was bumpy."

"Turbulence. It's the worse. It scares Dad. I always say there's nothing we can do. Here, have some orange juice."

I drink.

"Hannah is so happy you came." Mom has her back to me. She's cleaning one of the six counters. "Isn't she gorgeous with all her kids? It seems effortless. They're such good kids."

There's a box of spices in front of me. I open up the cayenne pepper and make my index finger red. "All the kids have grown so much," I say. I lick my finger. I steady myself and meditate on the heat of my tongue.

"It's wonderful," Mom says, still with her back to me. "It'll be great for you all to spend time. We'll have to take lots of photos."

I need liquid. "I plan to," I say and drink more juice. Mom turns around.

"Dad's very happy you're here," she says almost in a whisper. My mouth is on fire. "He hasn't been sleeping well."

"Me too," I say drinking more juice..

"You were thirsty," Mom says.

"Yes, very."

"More?" she offers, holding up the juice.

"Please."

\*

There are 16 of us around the table. I try to balance a spoon on my nose. I've made all the kids giggle, but I've lost my status with the adults.

"I'm sorry. I was just getting ready to talk about the economy, when this spoon caught my attention."

"Sara once made a spaghetti wig," Hannah announces. "Remember that?"

"Oh that's brilliant," Ellie injects. "Now we can't serve spaghetti."

Mom lights the Sabbath candles in silence. The flames dance like they're trying to escape.

\*

Sam's taller than I remembered from first seeing him at the club. I can't get him out of my head. He's standing over me with a pointed finger. I never imagined him possessing you, owning your memory. He has no right. It's like he sprayed graffiti all over our painting.

I am pressing him down into this plate of food. He is escaping to the edges, like water runs from oil.

\*

I tell the kids about how Parker said that one of my legs is slightly longer than the other. They want to see.

"You can't actually see it. But if you measure them really carefully, the numbers would be different."

I'm on the floor being measured, when Hannah walks in with her baby, Rachael, in her arms. I put my arms up to the sky and take Rachael back onto my chest. I pat her and she spits up immediately.

"Did you train her to do that?" I ask, while Hannah wipes me off.

"Since she's been weaned, her stomach has been a little upset. Huh, Rachael?" Rachael is a happy baby, especially after vomiting on her aunt's chest.

"I know the feeling," I say to Rachael. I point to my stomach. "Two weeks ago, I decided that I have an ulcer. It'll go away but in the meantime, it burns and makes me feel sick."

Hannah looks concerned. "That's not good. What did the doctor say?"

"She says I have a bad hip."

Hannah goes on to tell me about how people can die from ulcers. Then she moves on to some other great stories that include her telling me about this loose piece of bone that moves around in her husband's calf. "I play with it. I can move it up and down and side to side."

"Thanks for sharing that, Hannah. It's gross, though."

"Only at first I thought it was," she says.

“Trust me, it still is,” I say. The boys have gone, bored with my legs, I guess. Rachael finds them as good as any jungle gym. “I had a girlfriend once who was double jointed.”

Hannah shifts her weight. “Bones are funny things. Don’t you think?”

Rachael looks up and giggles. I’m still staring at the ceiling thinking about Simone and her double joints. “It ran in her family.”

“Who’s family?” Hannah asks, with Rachael now in her arms.

“Her name was Simone. She came from a family of people who had a lot of double joints.”

“Oh,” Hannah says. She’s standing now. Her feet are next to my head. “I think Rachael needs a diaper change. I’ll be back in a second.”

I lay on the floor for a long time and get tired of waiting. I know that if the double joints had belonged to somebody else, Rachael’s clean diaper would not have been wasted.

\*

You didn’t just go crash into a mountain. You would have never left me like that. You would have covered my eyes and walked me around my loft. “Don’t peek,” you would have said, and I wouldn’t have. Then you’d have said, “Ok, now look.” I would have opened my eyes and I’d be staring at a brand new painting that you made. It would have had all the broken parts of you, untouchable but very much alive. It would have had pieces of metal and glass, but it wouldn’t have been you crushed inside. It would have had police tape stuck in it some where, but it wouldn’t have kept me from seeing what remained of you.

\*

I’m in my room upstairs, trying to hide behind a kid’s book about making your own pond. Batya walks in holding her own book. “Hi,” she says. She’s Hannah’s oldest.

“Hi. Do you want to switch?” I ask holding out my book. “There’s a great chase scene in here between two fish.”

She laughs when she reads the title. “No. I have to read this for school next year.” She’s clutching *Diary of Anne Frank*.

“She’s my hero,” I say.

“Really?”

“She found magic even when living inside a shoebox.” I take the book from her and look at the back cover. “Tell me why you love the book?”

Batya’s wearing a brown sundress. With her light freckles and brown hair, she looks like cinnamon toast.

“Every time I think she’s going to cry, then I start crying. But then she never lands up crying. So I feel like I cry so she doesn’t have to. So she can just keep on writing.” Batya twists her arms together. “Do you understand? I guess I didn’t say that right.”

“No, you said it great,” I jump in. “I understand exactly what you just said.”

Batya smiles. “Oh.”

“I saw her hiding place.”

“Anne Frank’s house?” Batya says excitedly.

“Yes. I’ll never forget going up those stairs.”

“Tell me! I can’t believe you saw her house – in Amsterdam!”

I tell Batya about my trip and all about visiting the house where Anne Frank was hiding. She’s listening, clutching her book to her chest, taking every step along with me. I think about writing a thank you note to Anne Frank for making this little moment possible.

\*

I’m thinking about my unborn child. Or maybe he or she is already born. I’ll adopt an older kid maybe. I’ll join a support group, of course. No matter how great the kid is, I’ll still be fucked up. I’ll need support for that.

Ellie’s son, Robbie, is in my room looking at a book about the desert. Books are all over the place in this house.

“Cool,” he says, thumbing slowly through the pages..

“It’s not mine. I found it on the desk,” I say.

“This place Death Valley looks awesome,” he says. I stare at his profile as he peers in to the book. At 12, he already looks like a little man.

“It *is* awesome. Tell your mom I’m giving you a trip out west for your Bar Mitzvah present. We’ll go there.”

“To Death Valley? Are you serious?”

“Sure,” I say, sitting up.

“You think she’ll let me go?” Robbie asks eagerly.

“Of course. I’ll send a secret agent to escort you on the plane if that will make her feel better.”

“That’s great. I thought I’d never get out there,” Robbie says.

“I don’t live in Mongolia anymore. That was years ago.”

“Mom says San Francisco is kind of like a circus.”

“When did she say that?”

“I don’t know,” Robbie shrugs.

“No, really. Robbie. When did she say San Francisco was kind of like a circus? It’s not like a circus.”

“Oh, she always says San Francisco’s kind of nuts. We always think it’s funny,” Robbie says innocently.

I scoot up to Robbie, while I’m still under the blankets. “Robbie, there’s a lot of great things about where I live. It’s not just nuts. I have to educate your Mom.”

“Why don’t we ever visit you?” Robbie asks. “We’ve gone to Israel like five times already. You live way closer than Israel.”

I look hard at the desert book. “I don’t know. Let’s ask your mom and dad maybe.”

“Maybe you should invite us,” he says.

“I have. But I will again. But in the meantime, we’ll work on getting you out there just by yourself. And we’ll camp in Death Valley. We’ll get really thirsty but then find water – just in the nick of time. We won’t die like the others, I promise.”

\*

I get Tess's voice mail.

"Wish you were here. Actually I wish Zack was here. There are incredible toys to play with. And boys, lots of boys. I'm feeling totally fucked, actually. I'm going to crack, probably at some point. Maybe, maybe. Not big news, I know. Lot's to say. Too much for your machine to hold. So I hope you're good and doing ok. Miss you. I'll call again."

\*

*And please note: You are invited to attend a brunch on Sunday July 2<sup>nd</sup> hosted by Sheila and Jack Bialik in honor of all their daughters. All congregants and their families are welcome.*

\*

Mom is talking to a gaggle of women. I take a deep breath and walk up. I'm introduced. At one point, a woman wearing Kissinger glasses says, "The west coast is all about alternatives. My nutritionist grew up in California. She's always going back there for seminars. It's the land of the workshop, she says."

"That's true," I say and turn to my mother. "I actually gave a workshop a couple of years ago. Remember I told you about that?"

"No," she says, troubled that she forgot.

"I gave a series of workshops sponsored by the radio station. They were about building sound-scapes in your home."

"What are sound-scapes? Sounds like landscapes," one woman says.

"That's sort of right," I say.

"Explain, please. We're very interested," says a woman wearing a pin made from a soda can. They all have their hands on their chins, like they were choreographed by the Rabbi.

"Are we talking stereo systems?" one woman asks.

"That's just one part. I introduce other resonant devices like chimes and clocks and running fountains."

"That's it. I want you over my house," the lady wearing Kissinger glasses says. I'm scared.

"Oh, there's no time."

"Oh, nonsense," she says.

"No, really," I insist.

\*

In my dream, I hear my name over the hospital loud speaker. It's my sixth procedure of the day, but this is what I was trained for.

I ask for my violet scrubs. The green ones make me think about war and dying. The nurse is swift and deliberate as she ties my hair piece and snaps my surgical gloves on my hands. I wink but she misses it.

The patient has an ear ache. I am to remove part of a q-tip that's stuck. But x-rays reveal that there's an earring deeper inside. Thus, the cause of the ear ache.

I request the soundtrack of "Hairspray". I demand better lighting. There's so much that's not quite right.

I'm inside the ear and my own ear begins to throb. Transference. I've only read about it.

"Ouch! Oh!" I yell, but no one responds. "I'm in pain!" I feel a hand on my back. I turn around quickly. It's a orderly who seems to think I'm delusional.

"Are you a patient here?" he asks.

"No, not yet," I say. I wake up.

\*

Hannah, Ellie and I just saw a movie. Our one night out. They're both exhausted. I offer to drive home.

"You'll have to direct me," I say. Ellie's already nodding off. I poke her gently. She gives me directions with her eyes closed. Hannah bends forward from the back seat.

"She probably didn't sleep."

"Did you?" I ask.

"What – sleep? Yeah, sort of. Ari snores. I haven't slept well for 15 years," she says and laughs a little. "You sleep when you can catch a few winks."

Ellie raises her hand in agreement, still with her eyes closed. "I clean in my sleep." She laughs like she's drunk. "Sometimes when I wake up, I'm pissed that what I cleaned in my sleep is still dirty when I awake." She sighs.

"She sounds drunk." I say to Hannah.

"That's what we all need. A good drinking," Ellie says.

"Ok," I say.

"Too bad none of us drink," Hannah says.

"I'm a drunk back in San Francisco," I say.

"You are not," Hannah says, then cocks her head. "Are you?"

"No," I say rolling my eyes. I see a 7-11 store and pull into the parking lot. "What'll it be?"

"Oh, God. I'd puke," Ellie says.

"I'll take a Shirley Temple," Hannah says.

"God, you are so weird," I say laughing. I've stopped the engine and we're sitting in the parking lot. "Pork rinds maybe? Twinkies?"

Ellie leans her seat back down so that her head is nearly in the second seat next to Hannah.

"When was the last time it was just the three of us sitting in a parked car together?" Ellie asks.

"Never." I would remember. "That would be what normal sisters do."

"We're not so abnormal," Hannah says.

"Hmph," I say.

“We fight like normal sisters fight,” Ellie says.

“I could do without that,” I say.

“Then stop picking them,” Hannah says, breaking her smile. “You’re always starting them.”

“I’m not starting them on purpose, Hannah.”

“You run hot, Sara,” Ellie says with assurance.

“Really?” I ask, annoyed. “I run hot.”

“Hot,” Ellie reiterates.

“Like intense. Since college. You’ve been very intense,” Hannah says.

I shift around in the seat and sit on my feet. “Gay. I’ve been gay. Not intense or hot. Gay.”

There’s a long silence. I fidget with the keys in the ignition. Hannah and Ellie both settle back in their seats and close their eyes. They are purposely defying the gravity of what I just said. I guess I’m supposed to drive home now.

There’s a tap-tap on my car-door window. I turn and see Diane Sawyer’s face pressed up against it. Her lipstick is leaving a mark. I roll down the window just a smidge.

“You missed the all the drama. There’s no story here, Diane. You’re too late. Wipe my window clean, won’t you?”

Diane calls over one of her crew to do it. She opens the back door and slides in next to Hannah.

“Your sister certainly has rage. We’ve been covering it,” she says to Hannah.

“It’s worth an exposé at least, if not a full-length documentary,” Hannah says, straightening herself for the camera.

“Docudrama would be the best genre,” Ellie says with a pretentious nod. She flips her seat up straight again.

“You think?” Diane asks.

“Diane, please just go get me a Slurpy,” I ask.

“I will not,” she says indignantly.

“You’ve lost your neutrality, Diane,” I say, settling for a Slim Jim that her camera man offers me. “Your love for me has warped your sense of professionalism. You should leave before it destroys your career. Good-bye, please.” I wave her away like she’s someone’s bad breath.

“Hannah, you’ve come all this way,” Diane says, ignoring me. “What do you expect from this visit?”

“Not what I’m getting. I’ll tell you that much,” she says with a huff.

“Be more specific please,” Diane asks.

“Oh, give me a break,” I say.

“What?” Hannah asks. “Can’t I have some unmet expectations too? It’s not just you who gets to complain about how disappointing life is all the time”

“Would you two not howl in front of everyone?” Ellie says. “Do you want to get labeled?”

“Labeled? What do you mean ‘labeled’?” I ask

“Diane Sawyer is here. People are watching. Do you want to be seen as one more dysfunctional family? We don’t need to be advertising.”

“Ellie, please,” Diane says in a consoling tone. “There’s a lot of compassion out there. Don’t hold back for fear of being judged. I’m talking with you all because I care. I want to know. We all want to understand.”

“Oh, God,” I say. Diane glares at me but quickly redirects her energy.

“Hannah—”

I cut her off. “Don’t answer her, Hannah,” I snap.

“I will so answer her,” Hannah says. “Diane, I will not let Sara or Ellie deny me the chance to speak.”

“I’m not denying you, Hannah,” Ellie says. “I just think Diane doesn’t need to hear all our dirty laundry.”

“How can you ‘hear’ dirty laundry,” I ask annoyed. “Maybe you both shouldn’t talk. Diane, you want to do a story on rage? Better to do a story on fear.”

“Ok, who’s afraid of who?” Diane asks with a renewed interest. “What’s going on? Let’s take this slowly. Everyone calm down. Everyone gets the chance to talk.”

“Are you paying us?” Ellie asks curiously.

“I’ve never seen a dime,” I say.

“Fear,” Diane pushes past the question. “What are you afraid of, Ellie?”

“Nothing,” Ellie says defensively.

“Bull,” I say.

“Steady,” Diane says.

“Bull what?” Ellie asks.

“You’re afraid. We’re all afraid,” I say.

“What’s this got to do with Sara’s rage?” Hannah asks. “Isn’t that the story here? Why can’t we stick to the story?”

“Hannah, you said you were disappointed,” Diane says. “About what?”

“She’s just afraid,” I interject.

“Shut the hell up, Sara.” Hannah says. “She’s messed up, Diane. I try to be loving but she’s really just still so messed up.”

“How messed up? How do you see her as being messed up?” Diane asks. I like the question, so I wait and look at Hannah.

“She’s under the illusion that she gets it and everyone else doesn’t,” Hannah says.

“Gets what?” Diane asks.

Ellie’s frustrated. “Hannah, you’re making no sense. Look, Diane. Is this live or are you going to edit this?”

“What difference does that make to you?” Diane asks curiously. “Don’t speak in sound bites on our account. We get it. We get that you’re all here right now inside this car, parked in front of a 7-11. The circumstances are tense. Emotions are running high. Feelings are being hurt. Dreams are being deferred.”

“You really have lost it, Diane,” I say. “I met you when you were at the top of your game and now – God, I can’t even listen to you. Every word is sensationalized.”

“Nice try.” Diane deflects.

“Ratings low?” I push.

“Maybe Hannah’s right.” She punts.

“Mabeline might need a hand model.” I rush.

“Is fantasy all you have?” Ouch. “Really, Sara. And if this is all fantasy, then what’s the harm in letting Hannah speak?” Diane asks.

“Yeah, Sara. You don’t know what you don’t know,” Hannah says.

“Diane, there’s a better way to do this,” Ellie interrupts. “If you want to get at the root here, you won’t get there by trimming the hedges.”

“What?” I ask. “You’re all mad.”

“You don’t need to start name-calling, Sara,” Diane says. “But to be frank, you’re behavior is giving us all the footage we need to tighten up this story.”

“What story?” Hannah’s frustrated. “I don’t get what you’re getting at?”

“I think I’ve already gotten to what I’m getting at,” Diane says and opens the door to leave. “That’s a wrap.”

The 7/11 sign starts to flicker at twice the speed it was before.

“Please drive now,” Ellie says.

“Ok,” I say. “I was just about to pull out. Hold your horses.”

\*

It must be around 2 am. My body clock is so completely off. It thinks Oprah’s on soon. I write a postcard to Chantal.

*Dear Chantal,*

*I’m about 60 miles from your dear son, Luke. Should I drive over there now and bop him on the head for you? Hmmm...*

*Family life is all I expected and more. I’ll have stories for you.. I told my Dad about maybe going to Quebec to visit with you. He says it’s beautiful there. I hope all your plans are still feeling right. I’m coming home to help you. Fit me in the suitcase?. Miss you very much. Love, Sara*

I turn over the postcard which I got free from a rack at the sushi bar in the airport. It has a picture of a young man standing with his pants half-down in front of a young lady. His head’s turned back towards the camera. He says we should use a condom, like him. I look for another postcard to write on. This one is uncalled for.

\*

It’s Saturday and everyone’s at temple except me and Jonah, who says he’s got the flu.

“Here, this will make you leap in a single bound,” I say, handing him a bowl of cereal.

“Thanks,” he says and he starts to eat. I sit and watch him for a moment and then get up to look around his room for a suitable toy to play with. I avoid the Transformers – I can never get them to transform without me cursing. I spot a game that still in it’s shrink wrap. The packaging is written in Japanese.

“What’s in this?”

“Don’t know,” Jonah says with his mouth full of cereal. He swallows. “I got it as a present from a guy in Dad’s office. I forgot to open it.”

“Well, can I?” I ask.

“Yeah. Bring it onto the bed. I want to see.”

I slash open the cellophane and lift the top of the box off.

“What is it?” Jonah asks, not recognizing any of the contents.

“Um, I think it’s a gizmo,” I say definitively.

“A gizmo?”

“A something-or-other for sure,” I confirm.

“Take it out. Let see it,” he commands.

I lift out what looks like an over-sized stapler. I flip it over and place it on Jonah’s stomach. There are several packs of metal disks and paper disks in little baggies still in the box. I empty all the contents onto the bed and at the bottom of the box, there’s an illustration along with instructions – in Japanese.

“Wait – I know what this is!” I declare with delight. “It’s a button maker. It’s a good one too. I had one when I was in high school. These things are great.”

“A button maker?” Jonah says, looking very disappointed. “What do I need buttons for?”

“It’s doesn’t make buttons for clothes. It makes buttons you can wear. See the pins on the back of these disks? You can put in any design or words or slogan inside. Then you pop them in here and you press and then – boom! You’ve made a button.”

Jonah picks up one of the disks. “Show me.”

“Ok, let’s choose something basic. Like a peace sign. Make a peace sign on this circle,” I say, handing Jonah a circle and the pack of makers that came with the kit.

“How about a ‘thumbs-up’ sign?”

“Great,” I say. I discover that Jonah has a huge talent for drawing. “Wow, that’s really good. Really good.”

“I have whole books of sketches,” he says.

“Can I see some?” I ask excitedly.

“Sure. Over there,” he says and points to a stack of drawing books at the bottom shelf. I life one out and open it to a page with a picture of tree with a tire leaned up against it. It’s drawn all in pencil and it’s remarkable.

Jonah leans over to see which page I turned to. “Oh, that one I drew in camp last year. There was this tree with a tire leaned up against it and I liked the way that looked.”

“I can see that. Jonah, this is amazing.”

“Yeah, it’s alright. David can’t draw. He’s my twin but he can’t draw. I think it’s funny.”

“I’d love how you draw,” I say.

“You can have one. You can have any one of those. I’ll rip it out and put it in a plastic sleeve for you. I gave Grandpa one for his birthday. I framed it and everything.”

“Jonah, I’d love one.”

He’s finished his ‘thumbs-up’ sign. “Let’s make one,” he says, handing me the disk. I match it to it’s metal back and place it in the button maker.

I press down hard and pull out the button. “Here you go!”

Jonah is delighted. “Here *you* go,” he says and hands me the button.

\*

I find Dad in the kitchen.

“Can’t sleep?” he asks.

“Thirsty,” I say.  
I pour some water and sit next to him.  
“You?” I ask.  
“Can’t sleep. I’m fine, though.”  
“What time is it?”  
He looks up at the wall. “11:30.”  
“Too early for me,” I say.  
Dad carefully cuts into an apple. He eats a thin slice, then spits out a little piece of paper. “Tag,” he says.  
“Organic fruit shouldn’t have tags,” I say.  
“I think the tag said ‘organic.’”  
“Isn’t that silly,” I say, cutting a slice of apple. “You’d hope the glue is organic.”  
“I’m sure it is.”  
“Yeah, I’m sure it is,” I say.  
We sit for a while, chewing apple.  
“Remember when we capsized in the Toms River Inlet?”  
“Oh, that was way back,” Dad answers.  
“You saved the bag of apples. It was so funny.”  
“I remember. We sat on the hull eating them,” he says  
“So funny,” I say, remembering the smell of apples mixed with water and sun.  
“That was great. So great.”  
“I’m selling her, finally,” Dad says after a long stare at the table.  
“I know. You’ll get a good price, though. That’s good for something,” I say, trying to be encouraging. He’s had that boat since I left college.  
“End of an era,” he says.  
“Start of a new one,” I say.  
“Suppose so.”  
“For sure.”  
He taps the knife on the plate, like he’s adjourning a meeting. “Round two for me,” he says. “I think I’ll try to sleep now.”  
I look up at him. He bends down and kisses my forehead like he did a million times when I was a kid.  
“Sleep, Sara,” he says. “I hope you sleep well.”  
“You too,” I say to his back as he walks into the dark of the hallway. There’s still half the apple to eat. I start slicing it in paper-thin pieces. I hold one slice up to my eyes, to see how life looks through the veil of an apple.

\*

My cab arrives early morning. Originally, the plan was the train to a bus to the plane, but I decide to make it one long ride. The house is still asleep. No big waffle send-off, but one hadn’t been planned.

“Is someone picking you up from the airport?” Ellie asks.

“Yes,” I say, standing in the doorway with my bags.

“Good,” she says.

“I promised Robbie a trip to Death Valley. For his Bar Mitzvah present next year.”

“He must have been thrilled.”

“Yes. Very.”

“We’ll see.”

“Good. It’s an amazing place to see. Life just fights its way through out there. No matter what.”

“I’ve seen pictures.”

“Yeah, but you have to go there to really get a sense of it,” I say. The cab driver has gotten out the car. “I have to go.”

“Thanks for coming.”

We hug. I feel a mutual exhaustion fall over us like a thick blanket. I find it strangely hard to pull away.

I wave to her as the cab goes down the driveway.

\*

From up here, I can’t see the ground. I look out and there’s only blue space. It happened fast. From the cab to many thousands of feet up.

My hands are resting on the tray, spread out like wings. I clench them open and closed, open and closed like two hearts. Wings with hearts. Hearts with wings. I push the button that makes my seat recline. My eyes burn from the dry air, so I close them. I’m about to drift asleep but I shake my head to stay awake for one more second. I try to remember a poem. A line from it just popped into my head. ‘*Angels sit on pins of joy*’. Or something like that. Not sure, exactly.

\*

I’m secretly hoping that my luggage gets lost. Nothing like a good exchange with the airline people to get one’s confidence back.

\*

Tess is late for picking me up so I stand at the arrival curb in a spot where the sun cuts through the cement beams above. It’s 6 pm but it’s still so bright out. The fog forgot to come today.

When Tess finally arrives, there’s another kid sitting next to Zack in the back of her car. If she’s adopted on my behalf, I’m going to be mad. Taxi gets very jealous when we have to share the loft. The whole thing will be a mess. I’m too unstable to be a parent now. I consider hiding behind my suitcase.

She beeps and rolls the window down. “Hi. Sorry we’re late. I popped the trunk.”

I throw my bags in the trunk and get in the car. “It’s ok,” I say, giving her a hug. “I’m so glad you were able to get me.” I turn around to greet Zack.

“This is Zack’s friend Polo.”

“Hi Zack. Hi Polo,” I say. Polo smiles, Zack shrieks something inaudible and then he says, “Big plane!” He points up.

“Yes, up there. Lots of planes.”

As we pull out of the airport and onto the freeway, I start to decompress.

“Sara, I have to take Polo home. I’ll drop you first. Sorry I can’t come in. Will you call me in about an hour so we can talk?”

I can’t think past this minute. “I’ll throw my bags on my couch and get in the bath. I can’t promise past that.”

“Ok, then first thing in the morning,” she says.

“Yes, I want to hear what going on with you, too. And your belly.”

“Belly’s fine. Second pregnancies are always easier.”

Zack is pulling my hair. It feels kind of good.

\*

I’d rather come home to anything but this.

“Oh hi!” Jo says, sitting on my beanbag chair. French and Lucifer are on the couch.

“What are you all doing here?” I ask in shock.

“Hi,” says Lucifer.

“Hi, Sara. We just finished. Just about an hour ago,” says French.

“Finished what?” I say, and then I remember. “Oh. Ok. The voiceover stuff. God, I forgot.” I take a hard look at Jo. “Jo? What are you doing here?”

“I live here.”

“Not in this loft, you don’t.”

“That’s kind of rude,” says Lucifer. “Jo saved our asses.”

“What?” I ask. I put down my bags and take a few steps forward, acting like it’s not even my home. “Can someone fill me in?”

French smiles and hands me a beer he just opened. “Sit down. Welcome home. Sara, sorry we’re still here.”

“I’m just confused,” I say, sitting on the carpet. “And I’m in a bad, tired mood. Jo, can you tell me what’s been happening, please? Last time we spoke, I told you these guys were ok – they were my friends. Did something happen?”

All three laugh a little.

“Sara, if it wasn’t for Jo, we wouldn’t have been able to even start the job,” Lucifer says. “But it’s all good. It came out great. How are you? How was the big trip?”

“Trip was fine. So what happened?” I ask urgently.

“You gave us the wrong keys,” French says. “We were standing there trying to get into your building. We were fiddling with the keys for a while, and then Jo walked up. He knew all about us.”

“I knew all about them because, like you said, you told me. So I let them in,” Jo says with pride.

“What keys did I give you?” I ask. Lucifer throws me the set. “Oh dear. I think these are the EnZone keys. God, I don’t believe this.”

“It’s cool. It’s all cool,” says Lucifer.

“Wait. So Jo lets you into the building,” I say and look at Jo. “But how does Jo get you into my loft?”

Jo smiles cautiously. “I’m good with locks.”

“Good with locks,” I say sternly.

“Picking locks – any locks. All of our doors in this building have the same tumblers. I just knew based on mine how to pick yours.”

“Jo!” I’m upset.

“Sara, Jo made a deal with us though,” French said. “He said that we’d always have to be let in by him. He’s chaperoned us the entire time.”

“I don’t believe this,” I say.

“I think we’re going to give him assistant engineering credits. Jo, you’ve been a blast to work with,” French says.

Jo is smiling ear to ear. He looks like the guy from Mad Libs only older and probably more mad.

“Great,” I say taking a sip of beer, which I temporarily forget that I hate. “I’m glad we’re all friends now.”

“Don’t be sore,” Lucifer says. “This is how great business relationships are built. This is like the cheeseburger story. It’s like the peanut-butter cup story. Fates colliding to make new, great combinations.”

I look at Lucifer like he’s cracked the code of life. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Well, we’ve all been talking about a lot of things,” Lucifer says.

“A lot of things, including how great your studio is,” French adds. “You have an amazing set-up in here. I never had a clue.”

“Neither did I,” Jo says innocently.

“Are you sure?” I snap at Jo. “I thought you had a surveillance camera in here somewhere. I was certain of it.”

Jo looks sad. “No, I did not. Never.”

French and Lucifer look at me like I’m a meanie.

“What?” I ask. “Listen. Jo tracked a camera he lent me once.”

“We know all about his GPS system, Sara,” French says. “Jo’s got some amazing things up there. Between the two of you and me and Lucifer – who by the way, knows more about the world than do the Atlas makers themselves – between the four of us, I think there’s something here. Something that will help us leave EnZone in the dust.”

I gulp more beer. “Here’s what I think. I think I’m still flying and I need to come down and unpack and sleep. You guys are way too stimulating for me right now. Can we pick up this conversation later? I’m not blowing you off, I swear. You’re all just too excited about life right now, and I’m still waking up sort of. Please understand.”

There are three men looking very intensely at me right now.

“Understood. Totally,” says French. “Ok, so a day or two and then we’ll connect. I have to get these sound files to EnZone. We’re going to wrap mid-week.”

“Thank God,” I say, escorting them all to the door. “It all sounds very intriguing, really. I just don’t have the head space.”

“Of course, Sara,” Lucifer says. “Welcome home, though, seriously. We should have had balloons or something.”

“Balloons?” I ask. They are all standing in the hall. Jo looks happy with his new friends. “Jo, if you had your camera with you, I’d take a photo of you all.”

“Are we decomposing?” he asks. Lucifer and French cock their heads. “Private joke,” Jo says, “between me and Sara.”

\*

My body clock says midnight. But one more hour without Taxi seems wrong. I figure 9 pm isn't too late to pop over.

"Aren't you going to come in?" Ben says after hugging me hello in the doorway.

"Please, no," I say in a hush. "I was going to come by in the morning. I'm not really here. I just want Taxi. Please tell me I'm not rude."

Taxi has just run to greet me. He nearly knocked Ben down.

"He's all yours. Should I get Tess? She's putting Zack to bed."

"No, no, no. Shhhh. I'll find her tomorrow. Sleep well."

"You're not rude."

\*

I'm starting to look like Taxi. I knew this day would come.

\*

I pin Jonah's button to my vest and parade it around my loft. It's the only thing I brought back with me that's not in the wash right now. It's Monday late morning and I'm taking the day slow so I don't fall and break another leg. I'm getting wise that way, knowing when to just not move.

I go through my mail and stop short when I get to a post-card from Costa Rica. Lauren wrote me with her declaration of love. She's fallen in love with Costa Rica and has made arrangements to stay down there another five weeks. She says her bother will be watching her place and that he's a real hoot.

I'm not sure what this emotion is, the one gurgling up in my right now. It's a cross between moved and annoyed. If I name it correctly, maybe I'll win something like a mug or a calendar.

\*

Russia has no pin-ups tonight. I go by every bulk bin in the health food store and there's no sign of her or her wonderful opinions.

"Does Russia not work here anymore?" I ask the cashier guy.

He doesn't look up. "She does."

"So is she not putting up index cards anymore?"

He looks up. "We got complaints."

"Who would complain about those?" I ask. "They were the best part of my shopping experience here."

He squints his eyes. "Really? I'll let the management know that too." He looks down again. He's busy with a word search puzzle.

"Thanks," I say and walk away. It's sad. So many things can change when you pop out of town for a few days. Things here have gotten completely out of control.

\*

As I pull into the parking lot, I get a bad feeling about Grandview. It's the first time I've gotten this vibe and it makes me nervous as I walk down the hall towards Chantal's room. I'm so eager to see her.

She opens her door after my first light knock. "Sara, my dear!" she says and beckons me in. "Come in. I received your postcard. Thank you." She hugs me. It feels so good. "Welcome home, Sara. You look like you made it back here safely."

"I did, I did," I say, sitting down next to her on the bed. "How are you? You look gorgeous. How do you look so gorgeous?"

"Sea air."

"I know. I miss it. Would you like to go to the beach? Let's go," I insist.

"No, I have to too much to do. Oh, it's good to see you. How's your heart, dear?"

"It's good. I'm ok. But let's go to the beach. Wouldn't that be great?"

"Oh no, no," Chantal says, as she motions around her room like she's conducting. "I have to get stuff in order."

"Chantal, what's been happening? I feel like you've got this big plan." I suddenly have a lump in my throat. "Fill me in."

"Oh, it's nothing that we haven't talked about, Sara. I'm just more clear." She gets up thoughtfully and walks around a bit then stops. "I spoke to Maurine."

"You're sister who died."

"Yes, I told you how I talk to her now and then. And I told you how she thinks going back to live in Quebec makes good sense. So I called her daughter. She says that she knows of some places perfect for me. Just perfect, she says. Eleanor – that's her name – she's invited me to stay with her for awhile. Just until I settle in. She said I'm welcome anytime."

I'm looking at Chantal very carefully, very closely, like she's a miniature of herself. I suck in my breath but there's a hi-cup. "Wow. So you're leaving."

Chantal sits beside me again. I feel my chest cave in. "Well, not right away," she says cautiously. "I'm just planning things out a bit. I wanted to wait for you to come home before I made too many plans. I was so glad to get your postcard."

I hold her hand in mine. It's wobbly with emotion. "Eleanor. I didn't know that Maurine had a daughter. She sounds lovely."

Chantal squeezes my hand. "She is. You'll meet her and you'll see. I couldn't live with her for more than a little while. She sort of square, if you know what I mean."

"I do," I say. "So in a couple of weeks though, right? You'll be leaving. We have to make arrangements. The flight, the shipping."

"Yes, all that. But for now let's just sit. I want to hear about your trip. All the details. Please."

I tell her about my trip. Our hands are clasped together the whole time. We sit on the edge of the bed, lit by the late afternoon sun. I look down on us from the ceiling, as I try desperately to escape from an excruciating pain that's brewing inside of me. I'm hoping not to burst. I want to stay whole enough to contain this gift, which right now feels like it's being wrenched away from me.

\*

To be open-hearted is to be broken-hearted. I heard that once. Pisses me off. Sitting here in my loft on this cold Tuesday night in July, I'm thinking about closing up shop. Swallow of tray of ice and just be numb for a week.

Do ghosts get jet lag too? What's happening in your tummy and do you really expect me to twist myself around and around the idea of you killing yourself? Show up for a second. Please. Sam planted a seed that's burning a whole in my stomach. Climb inside and do something. Take it out. Water it. Something.

\*

I call Ellie to see if she can ship me my flip-flops, which I inadvertently left there. "Shipping will cost more than they're worth," she says and laughs. "I know," I say, slightly embarrassed. "Then will you hang them on a wall like a plaque?"

"Sure. They might be worth something one day."

"They're worth something right now."

"Even more one day, though," she says. "Are you going around barefoot?"

"No, I've got back-ups," I say. I wiggle my toes to say 'hi'. They know they're being discussed. "You ok?"

"Packing lunch for the boys. They're going back to camp. I'm ok."

"Hannah left already, I assume."

"Tonight. You two should talk."

"Hmm"

"No, really. Can I go get her?"

"No—no. I'm not going to get into it with her."

"Who said anything about getting into it? Sara, just wish her a good trip. Not every conversation has to be a big encounter."

My toes look up at me in agreement.

I suck in some breath. "Put her on." I hear Ellie call Hannah's name and then the rustle of the phone. Some inaudible words are exchanged.

"Hi, Sara. So, I'm glad you got home ok." Her voice sounds tight. "How's Taxi?"

"Taxi's good. Thanks," I say. "You all packed?"

"Not quite. I can't find any of Rachel's clothes. It's like someone threw them out after she wore them."

"I know where they are. They're in a pile downstairs by the dryer. I thought you washed them. I guess Mom did. Go check. They're right there."

Hannah laughs. "You're 3000 miles away. And I'm twenty feet and couldn't find them."

"Sometimes it's like that," I say. "Well... Hey Hannah, you know Batya is amazing. She's really such a great person. I got to know her differently than the others."

"Yes, I knew you two would get along well," Hannah says. I have a flash of fierce protectiveness.

"She's a real thoughtful girl."

"That she is."

"We talked about Anne Frank."

"She told me."

“She did?” I’m happy she did.

“Now you’ve got her wanting to go to Amsterdam,” Hannah says.

“That would be great for her. You guys should go.”

“Doubtful. This trip wiped us clean for awhile.”

“Save up. Maybe for her 16<sup>th</sup> in two years,” I suggest.

“Maybe,” she says and pauses. “She might be into something else by then.”

“Maybe,” I say. “But a trip’s a trip.”

“True. This was our big trip, at least for a while.”

I switch ears and walk to look out my window. “I’m glad I came then,” I say.

“Yeah, it was good you came.”

“Great kids. All of them.”

“Thanks. Glad you got to spend time with them.”

“Glad they met me,” I say and picture each of them in my head. “They all packed?”

“All packed.”

“Travel safe.”

“Always.”

“Bye for now then, Hannah.”

“Hugs from all the kids”

“Thanks. Hugs back.”

I stand at the window with the phone to my ear even after she hangs up.

\*

Why does every drop of rain feel like an eclipse? I didn’t even know the two were related. I watch the sky like it’s my enemy.

I remember bits of last week, like it happened years ago. Sam stole my trip. After seeing him, I went to Westchester in a trance. If I dared to feel everything that was inside me, I would have splattered all over Ellie’s kitchen, like an over-rip melon. I don’t think they even noticed me. I was my own ghost there, walking into rooms causing a chill, sad.

I’m home now, feeling homeless, or maybe just caught between two different ideas of home.

\*

I sit down for coffee with French and Lucifer with my ears open and waiting.

“I’m not sure of the ‘what’ yet, but I definitely know the ‘how’,” French says.

“Uh, huh,” I say.

“Jo not only takes great pictures, but he creates these amazing 3-dimensional collages with them using metal and stone. And he’s a wiz at digital imaging. And Lucifer’s business background is incredible. And with your ear and my engineering – I don’t see how we can lose.”

“Lose at what?” I ask, wanting to understand.

“That’s just it,” Lucifer says. “We have to figure that out. I think we can come up with a product – a toy, a teaching tool – I don’t know yet.”

“Ok, well I don’t know either,” I say. “I’m not really in the space to take huge leaps right now. I don’t have good balance. Bad hip.”

“There’s no danger in talking about it though,” French says.

“Like I said, that’s how all great things get started. On a cocktail napkin,” Lucifer says, pointing to a napkin on the table.

“You see that woman who just walked in?” I say, pointing to a police officer.

“She wanted to go to culinary school but got sidetracked.”

“Here we go,” French says.

“Has she always been like this?” Lucifer says. “How does she ever stay focused long enough to get her work done?”

“It’s what makes her work so good,” French says.

“Thanks, French,” I say and give Lucifer a long, mean look.

\*

I must still be catching my breath from the visit back east. I’m speaking less than usual. It feels like it takes more effort than I remember. Maybe I’m heading towards a coma.

Tess has taken this personally. “What did I do?”

“Everything. You’re a horrible friend.”

“What?” she asks. I pull the phone away to get my hearing back.

“Tess, I’m joking. Please don’t be upset. I’m just not in the mood to leave my loft for the next year or so.”

“That’s no good. I know you. You could actually pull that off.”

“I’m just tired.”

“I’m sure you are.”

“And everyone is leaving me. Chantal is leaving me.”

“But you knew that.”

“Yeah, but now it’s real. It feels awful. She’s my one true love.”

Tess laughs.

“It’s not funny. She is. She’s been my steady girlfriend. It’s been the most solid relationship I’ve ever had. Over three years. So what if it was platonic? It’s the latest craze, you know.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah,” I say, not believing anything I say anymore. “What’s Zack wearing today?”

“What? Why?”

“I love how you dress him. What’s he wearing?”

“Actually, he’s wearing that frog shirt you gave him. It’s doesn’t squeak anymore, though. One too many washings. And he’s wearing red shorts. Nothing too exciting.”

“That is very exciting. Some kids have no clothes at all,” I say.

“Ok, Sara. I see that you’re into deep thoughts today. I don’t want to keep you from them. But if you have the urge, we’re having Ben’s mother’s food tonight. She froze a bunch while she was here.”

“It’s that incredible mystery stew, isn’t it?”

“That’s the one,” Tess says.

I raise one eyebrow.  
“Sara,” Tess says with a new tone. “You mentioned something about Zoe.  
What—”  
“Oh, yeah. Just some head stuff. It’s seems stupid to bring it up now.”  
“It’s not stupid.”  
“Yeah it is,” I lie.  
“Ok,” Tess says. I know she feels locked out.  
“It’s just that I’m tired. The jet lag is still pulling me down a little.”  
“Ok,” she says. “Just come over whenever. Think ‘stew’ and ‘frog shirt’.”  
“Thanks, Tess.”

\*

And the little ducks finally came out of the forest to behold a great, big, sparkling lake.

“What’s that?” asked the baby duck, who had lived in the forest its entire life.  
“You’ll know as soon as you touch it,” said the mommy duck.

\*

I hold my finger over the buzzer like a hovercraft. It’s not quite on it, so the bell doesn’t ring. What I’m waiting for is something better to come along at this instant, so I don’t have to go in. Maybe an ice cream truck will come by. I’ll get a push-up pop, not to be confused with a push-up bra, though the thought of melding of the two brings me great joy.

“It’s Sara,” I say to the wall after finally pressing the button. Parker buzzes me in.  
“Hip,” I say to my hip, “vacation’s over.”

Midway through our first set of stretches, Parker says, “Not bad.”

“Really,” I say.

“Feel this?” she says and rotates my bent leg around like it’s a big spoon in a soup of me. “The movement is just more fluid.”

I lift my neck up with hands clasped behind my head. “I’ve been drinking a lot. Maybe that’s it.”

“Try to do it on your own,” she says, letting me go. I wiggle by leg, then rest it back down on the pad.

“Honestly, Parker. On my trip I didn’t think much about my hip.”

“Did it hurt?”

“I don’t remember.”

“So it probably didn’t. That’s great.”

“No, it might have,” I say.

“Well, you would have remembered then, don’t you think?”

“Not necessarily,” I say.

“Are you losing your memory?”

“Always. Everyday.”

“But pain – you don’t forget if you have pain. Look, if your hip didn’t hurt – that’s a great sign.”

“I just don’t want to jump to any conclusions here,” I say.

“No jumping. That would be hard on your hip.”

“Lot’s of stuff was going on. I was distracted. Maybe enough not to notice my hip at all.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” she says.

“No, I don’t think it is either. Not having pain is a good thing,” I say. “I just don’t want to misrepresent my hip solely based on my inattention to it. You understand?”

“I do,” she says. “You can think yourself out or into anything, can’t you?”

“Can’t you?”

“Not like you. I doubt it. I mean here you are. For some reason, you’re not wanting your hip to show signs of improvement, so you’re figuring out that it’s not really better.”

“That’s not true. I think it might be getting better. I do. I just know that I was out on the east coast and that’s not proof positive.”

“Maybe east coast air is good for you,” she suggests.

“Doubt that very much,” I say.

“Well, let’s not waste anymore time debating.”

“It’s not a debate.”

“What ever this is,” she says.

“It *is* interesting that maybe my hip is a little better.”

“Exactly my point.”

“Hmm.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to stop our work.”

“Worry? Are you kidding?” I ask.

“Separation anxiety.”

“I could leave here right now. Hobble away and be fine.”

“I’d be crushed,” Parker says with a smile.

“See? It’s not just about me and my miraculous healing.”

“You’re not miraculously healed, first of all. You’re out of acute pain and your mobility is getting better.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“So let’s just stay the course, shall we?”

“And not get so bent out of shape.”

“We’re making good progress, Sara.”

“Exactly my point,” I say.

\*

Taxi seems mad at me. It’s my first night free after a week of catch-up. We’re taking a long walk, and Taxi’s saying *it’s about fucking time* with his eyes. It tell him *you’re a spoiled dog* with mine. *You live better than 90 percent of the people on this planet*, I say to him.

We walk two miles to the top of Bernal Hill. There’s no fog tonight and the sunset is giving way to more stars than usual. I let Taxi off his leash and sit on a rock. I empty my head out onto the ground, watching conversations fall out like coins from another country.

I can't get Sam's words of my head. Sitting on this hill, I can see the lights of North Beach, and I know he's in his house over there. I have a pang of pain for him that I flick off me like a blood-sucking mosquito. It's not helpful that I know his pain. But it's contagious and since our meeting in New York, I've come down with it.

*You've been no where*, he said to me, like I don't know pain like he knows pain. I pick up a stone and throw it down. Taxi looks up, with scolding eyes. *Sam has every right to hate you*, he says.

I've managed up until this point to veer away from Sam and what he must be going through. But he spilled his pain onto me like tar that's only now starting to harden around me and cake into little gothic statues with gaping mouths, screaming at me.

The stars aren't twinkling tonight. They're shying away from me, not sure what to think.

\*

I arrive at Chantal's with an map.

"I've done my homework," I say. "I want to build a house here." I point to an area right next to the St. Lawrence.

"Perfect," Chantal says, bring her hands together without a clap. "You have no idea how pretty it is there."

"No, I do a little. I've been on the internet. Right there – that's where I'm building it."

"You can, you know," she says.

"Sure I can."

"What's to stop you?"

"I was only kidding, Chantal. I can no sooner build a house than I can get porcelain teeth."

"Porcelain teeth?"

"I read an article on the plane about them."

"You've got gorgeous teeth," Chantal says peering up into my mouth. "Gorgeous. When I was your age, I was already having problems."

"Bad teeth?"

"Horrible. Now they have all these new treatments. Your lucky."

"I feel lucky. I do. I could have wood teeth. I know that."

"You could have no teeth at all," she says smiling.

"Then I'd really have a case for getting porcelain teeth. Why not? I'm mean while I'm at it."

"Sure," she says, thoughtfully. We sit for awhile, staring at the map.

"There's a few things I want to do before I leave," she says.

"I'll help you pack."

"No, I mean nice things. Outings."

"Oh!"

"Yes," she continues, "I've been thinking about two or three things. I want to go back to the seminary campus. To visit."

"I'll take you."

“Thank you, dear. And I want to go to Angel Island. Bradley and I used to go there.”

“I’ll go there.”

“Yes. And lastly, I’d like to cable car to up Hyde street and eat at this little bistro that an old friend of mine owns. I’ve already called him to tell him I’m coming.”

I smile, not wanting to invite myself, overtly anyway.

“And you must join me for that,” she says with a twinkle in her eye. “There, I’ve shanghai’d you for at least three days.”

“Between now and the time you leave, I’m yours. You know that,” I say.

She pats my thigh. “You’ve got plenty on your plate, Sara. I’m not going to the moon, you know.”

“You might as well be,” I say with a frown.

“You’d come there, too, wouldn’t you?” she asks.

“Absolutely,” I say.

\*

I’m driving home but in my head I’m working in a stuffed animal factory. This helps me breathe, though the fibers from the stuffing are not that great for the lungs. I switch fantasies, and now I’m an inchworm on a leaf. Much better.

\*

“Well, what do you think?” Jo surprises me on the stairs. No surprise.

“About what?” I ask him. I’m carrying two bags of dog food and I wish he’d offer to help.

“Want help?”

Wow. Let me try another. I wish my cuticles were tidy. I hand him one bag and look down at my hands. Still, bad-looking cuticles.

“What about French and Lucifer? Did you meet?” he asks.

We’re at my door and I drop down my bag to get my keys. As I unlock the door, Jo picks up both bags, and lets himself in with me.

“We did,” I say flatly, watching him walk past me towards to kitchen. “We talked about ideas that weren’t quite ideas yet.”

“That’s when great ideas are born,” Jo says, making himself comfortable on a stool against the wall. My stool.

“You sound like Lucifer,” I say.

“He sounds like me,” Jo says defiantly.

I stack the bags on top of each other and sit on them against my pantry. I’m wondering what I’m doing exactly and glance over to the center of the loft where the couch is. Jo watches my eyes.

“You want me to leave?” he asks.

“No,” I say, unconvincingly.

“I know you think I’m a creep.”

“Jo – I do not!”

“Why the sudden change of heart? I know what you’ve thought about me.”

“Jo, you’re not very forthcoming, if you want to know the truth. One has to draw her own conclusions.”

“I find it funny,” he says, not smiling.

“That you creeped me out? You think that’s funny.”

“You’re no welcome mat yourself.”

“Jo, I don’t bang late at night and collect dying things. You have to admit that seems a little creepy.”

“What’s creepy is your associations with what I do. You imagine the worst.”

“Maybe,” I say. “Can’t help that.”

“And I don’t collect dying things,” he says with a huff. “I photograph decomposition. And I do a lot more than that.”

I walk to the counter and hold up a banana. “I know you do. Would you like a banana?”

“Is that your last one?” he asks.

I look around. “As a matter of fact, it is. But I’m offering it to you.”

“Did you know that rotten bananas have more vitamin B in them? The browner they are, the more fermented the sugar, the more vitamin B, the more potassium.”

I look at the perfectly yellow peel. “So I take it that’s a ‘no’, because this banana is fresh off the vine.”

“Tree.”

“Whatever,” I say, a little embarrassed. I wave the banana. “Yes? No?”

“No thanks,” he says. “So back to Lucifer and French.”

“We met and talked about things evolving.”

“That’s not a bad talk.”

“No,” I say. “It wasn’t a bad talk. It just wasn’t a conclusive talk. So I can’t report much back to you.”

“Well, at least you’re open.”

“I have to be open,” I say leaning on the counter. I peel the banana and take a bite.

“Like the sky,” Jo says.

I look at him accusingly, because I’m concerned that he’s channeling my father.

“Why like the sky?” I ask.

“The sky can’t help but be open. That’s why it’s sky and not ground.”

“Ok,” I say slowly. “I am open like the sky. So we’ll see what we shall see. Who knows?”

“Someone always knows,” Jo says, getting off the stool. “There are no secrets, only secret places.” Jo walks towards the door.

“Got that,” I say. “That’s the thought for the week.”

\*

There are unfinished symphonies everywhere.

Ink still dripping off quills.

Dead notes lying, mid-staff.

My trumpet aches in my hands.

I’m trembling.

You are not finished.

We are not sung yet.

But at that concert – the one with the solo cellist who looked like you – you held my hand under your coat and I tasted mint in my mouth. Something fresh and alive blew into me, hitched on the notes like witches to their brooms.

I find the bottom of this night at five AM.

I'm no closer to rising or understanding.

I'm flat-lined and soundless.

\*

I'm with Zack. Alone, together, finally. It's Saturday and I've given Tess and Ben the chance to shop in peace, on the condition that they'd get my birthday present too. It's coming up fast.

We're swinging. Zack's on my lap and we're both saying 'whee!'. He's louder than me.

"Budapest," Zack says and points up as we swing. I have no idea.

"Budapest? Is that what you said?"

"Budapest!" He shrieks again. I ask him to name the capitol of Egypt next. He's amazing.

After we swing and eat sand, I take Zack back to my loft. Tess and Ben are coming for dinner. It's my once-a-year treat. Zack has offered to prep the rice. Taxi licks up what Zack throws from the bowl.

"Taxi loves your cooking," I tell Zack. He pulls Taxi's ear. I'm afraid he's thrown rice down there. "Taxi, can you hear me? Is your ear filled with rice? Zack, no rice in Taxi's ear."

Zack pours all the grains of rice over Taxi's head and squeals with excitement. Taxi shakes his head and lies down near my feet. Zack does the same. They both nap like some Hallmark writer cued them. I walk around them and dice and chop and pretend I'm on some family cooking show.

"Yes," I say squarely to the camera, "cooking can involve the whole family. Sometimes, it can be downright tiring."

A close-up on my peeling technique is interrupted by Tess and Ben's arrival.

"Shhh," I say as they come in.

"When did he go down?" Tess asks, standing over Zack. "And what's all over his face?"

I hadn't noticed.

"Looks like chocolate," Ben says.

"I'm sure it's chocolate then," I say. "This is a sit-down meal. No standing up. Sit."

I realize I forgot to cook an entrée. Shame.

"In most countries, all they eat is side dishes," I say passing the bowl of rice.

"Tell me about New York," Tess asks, poking at her salad. I look at her and Ben like they're new neighbors over for a visit. They look too pleasant to trust.

"Hello?" Ben says cocking his head.

"What?" I say. "Ok. I've been in shock, really. Sort of not dealing."

"I know," Tess says.

“I know you know.”

“Your family always puts you into shock,” Tess says.

“It wasn’t them. I was barely there.”

“Ten days you were there,” Ben says.

“Ten days but they weren’t bad days. It wasn’t about my family this time,” I say cautiously. “I was in Manhattan for one night.”

Tess and Ben are waiting for me, like they’re passengers in my car.

“I bumped into Sam.”

“Who’s Sam,” Ben asks.

Tess looks over at him and talks to his plate. “Zoe’s husband,” she says.

“Oh.”

“So long story short,” I say.

“No way,” Tess says.

“Look. It was just bad luck that we met.”

“What was he doing in New York?” Ben asks.

“Long story,” I say.

“Zoe had an exhibit there,” Tess answers.

“She didn’t have an exhibit,” I snap. “Enzone had a product party and used her art work. I didn’t even go in.”

“So how did you see Sam?” Tess asks.

“I bumped into him outside.”

“No!” Ben says. “That *is* bad luck.”

“Yeah. So that’s what this whole thing is really,” I say. “Bad luck. Bad timing.”

“Wait. So what happened?” Tess asked.

“We talked. He knew my name. He knew who I was. I pretended I didn’t know him. It was just horrible.”

“Did you fight?” Ben asks.

“Why would we fight?”

“What do you mean? I’m assuming he knew,” Ben says.

“Why?” I ask.

“Well how could he not know? If he recognized you, then he knew.”

“Not necessarily,” Tess says.

“Oh, come on,” Ben says. “He knew. He knew, Sara, right?”

I give Ben a sad, cold stare. “He knew. But he had no interest in talking with me.”

“So you didn’t land up really talking,” Tess says.

“No, we did talk,” I say.

“What’s there to say, really?” Ben says in a new tone.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I mean, I’m sorry, but Zoe’s gone. He’s not about to fight for her now,” says Ben.

“There’s other reasons for them to talk maybe,” Tess says, annoyed.

“I’m just putting myself in Sam’s shoes,” Ben says.

I flatten some rice with my fork. “And?”

“And if I were Sam, I wouldn’t want to look at you let alone talk with you. It would be too fucking painful.”

I'm feeling chills. I might be dying. "I could relate to that," I say. "It was horrible seeing him."

"For both of you," Ben says.

"Yes, Ben. You've made it clear how you can empathize with Sam," I say sorely.

"Hey, I'm just thinking about both of you and how it must have been horrible to meet."

I suddenly don't feel I'm in my kitchen. I can't feel the warmth of the food or see the colors of the plates and cups in front of me. Tess and Ben are disembodied from their voices. The air between us feels like glue, viscous and blurry. It's no one's fault, but I suddenly can't bare another moment of storytelling. The room rests inside the silence, like it's another course being served. As Zack stirs awake, I'm ready to be alone.

\*

Dear Sam,

In my head we duel. But somewhere else, we dance in mournful sweeps across gravel. We trip but don't help each other up. My knees are scraped. Your face is torn. The music is sad and beautiful.

\*

There are stairs near my loft that wind into a hidden cobble street that has no car access. Residents there have masterfully devised pulley systems to handle heavy loads. There are gorgeous gardens in front of every house. I don't go there very often because it feels private. It feels like I'm walking though people's yards.

Today these stairs are pulling me towards the hidden street. I didn't bring Taxi. Now as I talk out loud, I have to own that behavior completely.

I've packed a bag filled with Zoe, Sam, Chantal, Ellie, Hannah and Tess. I take each of them out as I walk, one by one. The walk will do us good. I wonder if the houses will begin to notice the onslaught of visitors, and whether their shutters will flap back and forth in protest. We're a motley crew, all busy inside each of our heads, all dizzy with thoughts.

Chantal walks ahead with Zoe and I want to catch up with them. But Hannah and Sam have handcuffed me to each of their arms. Ellie and Tess are behind us, engaged in a lively debate about processed food.

Sam talks over my head to Hannah. "Twenty, maybe thirty of them left in the world."

"There aren't any condors in Israel," Hannah says.

"Nope. Wouldn't expect there to be," Sam says. "California condors pretty much stick around here."

"Hmm," she says. She jerks my arm up to scratch her nose.

"Hey!" I say, nearly losing my balance. No response.

"You ever think of flying?" Sam asks Hannah.

"Sure," she says. "They say it's like death. That kind of wooshing feeling."

"It is," says Sam. "It's extreme. Nothing like it in the world."

"You've flown?" I ask Sam. He ignores me too.

“Most people never know how good it feels,” he says to Hannah. “They spend their whole lives on the ground.”

“Our neighbor died when he fell off his roof,” Hannah says.

“Shame,” Sam says.

“I wonder if he felt like he was flying on the way down,” Hannah says.

“How tall was his house?” I ask Hannah, but she ignores me.

“Life snuffed out – just like that,” she says to Sam.

We walk in silence and I can hear Chantal tell Zoe about Bradley.

“He’d go out in the moonlight,” she said. “Plant under the stars.”

“What an image to hold in your memory,” Zoe says.

“I’ve got plenty,” Chantal says wistfully.

“Do you garden?” Zoe asks.

“I don’t,” Chantal answers curiously.

“I do,” Zoe says.

“You don’t garden,” I call out to Zoe. She stops and stretches her arms to the sky, like she’s just woken up.

“Vegetables or flowers?” Chantal asks. They begin to walk again. I try to catch up but Sam and Hannah are walking at the pace of a funeral procession.

“You hate gardening,” I shout.

“Birds of Paradise,” Zoe says.

“Lovely,” Chantal says.

I turn to Sam. “Back me up here, Sam.”

“You’ve got to control the weeds,” Sam says to Hannah. “Keep them from killing everything.”

“In Israel, we grow tons of vegetables all around our house,” Hannah says.

I start yanking both their arms for attention. Ellie calls from behind.

“Tin foil keeps the rodents from eating off the vine,” she says.

“I hate gardening,” Tess says. “The produce store has everything all neatly stacked. No mud.”

“I garden with the kids,” Ellie says.

“Zack would eat the mud,” Tess says.

“Where’s Zack?” I ask, suddenly wondering.

“Kids need mud. Helps them grow,” Ellie says.

I scream. No one flinches. They’ve soundproofed me.

“These days, kids are kept too clean,” Tess says. “That’s why they get sick more often. They don’t develop enough antibodies.”

Sam stops us by a bench in the middle of the path. “Kids get sick so they can miss school,” he says flatly and sits. I nearly lose my balance but manage to plop down along with Hannah. Chantal sits too. The others remain standing. Zoe’s leaned up against a tree with her arms folded.

“We all do things for different reasons,” she says.

“My kids don’t get sick that often,” Hannah says. “They like school. Wouldn’t want to miss it.”

“Well aren’t they just angels,” Tess says, sarcastically.

“No, not angels,” Hannah says, defensively.

“I’m an angel,” Zoe says and laughs.

“You are,” says Sam wistfully.

“Oh, give me a break,” I say.

“You don’t have to stay there,” he continues. “You can come back. I miss you.”

Chantal pats his knee lightly. “They can never come back, Sam, dear.”

“Wouldn’t want to,” Zoe says. “No offense.”

“What do you mean ‘no offense’?” I ask impatiently. “Since when are you opposed to being offensive?”

Zoe sits down against the trunk of the tree and picks up a perfect fallen leaf. “The cycle of life is amazing, Sam. It’s not a circle – it’s a spiral. It goes out and out and out.”

“Like a slinky,” I say. “Did you kill yourself, Zoe?”

Sam pulls my handcuffed arm up so he can wipe his eyes. “It’s a dead end, Zoe.”

“You’re wrong, Sam,” Zoe says gently.

“Oh, really?” Sam says. “Are you not dead?”

“It doesn’t make life a dead end,” she says.

“It feels that way right now,” Chantal says to Sam.

Ellie studies Sam’s face. “She’s yours to remember forever, Sam. No one can take that away from you.”

“Oh no? What about your sister?” He asks and yanks at my arm.

Hannah steadies me. “She’s out of control,” she says.

I scream again, to no avail.

“I wouldn’t give Sara that kind of power, Sam.” Ellie says. “She didn’t have what you had with Zoe.”

“She had more,” Zoe says softly to the ground. Everyone looks at her. Sam’s face stays open though, like he’s just washed it.

“You were in such pain, Zoe,” he says.

“No, Sam,” she says.

“You don’t know, Sam,” I say.

“Sara was a symptom,” he says.

“I’m sorry, Sam,” she says.

“Don’t be sorry, sweet Zoe,” he says. “You made a mistake.”

Chantal eases in. “Sam, you need to hold on to what makes you feel closest to Zoe.”

“I do,” he says gently.

“Are you going to let him see us this way?” I ask Zoe. I watch her finger the edges of a pinecone. I never wanted to be a pinecone before.

“I’m sorry Sara hurt you so badly,” Hannah says.

“Don’t say that,” Tess says. “It’s not a simple equation like that.”

“No one is saying it’s simple,” Ellie says.

“None of you have any idea – none of you have any right to say anything!” I say.

No one says anything, as if they heard me, but I know they didn’t. Chantal clears her throat gently.

“We all bring out different sides of each other. We all offer different gifts in that way.”

“That’s true,” Zoe says calmly.

“One person can change in the company of another,” Chantal continues. “It’s a chemistry thing. It’s a spiritual thing.”

Sam looks at Zoe. “It that what you had with Sara? A spiritual thing?”

Chantal cuts in before Zoe can answer. “Sam, you don’t need to do this. Just look at Zoe. She’s not a paper doll. She’s been shaped by a full life. She’s been open enough to feel life.”

“She can’t feel life anymore,” he says bitterly.

“But I do,” Zoe says.

“Remember the slinky,” I say.

“If you felt so much life – why didn’t you hold on to it?” he asks.

“I’m holding. Here I am.”

“You’re not here,” he says.

“She is,” I say.

“I am,” Zoe says and throws the pinecone. Our handcuffed hands rise and we both catch it. Sam yanks it away and lays it in his lap.

“Where are the keys?” I scream in Sam’s ears, but he still can’t hear me.

“Hannah, get these cuffs off of me!”

Tess has walked over to Zoe and is now sitting next to her.

“She’s suffering,” Tess says to Zoe, nodding towards me with her chin.

“She’s ok,” Zoe says.

“No, she’s not,” Tess says. “She’s completely not ok. Do you need to believe that she is?”

“No,” Zoe says, coolly. “I see her moving, not suffering.”

They’re both staring at me. I scream. I writhe and wriggle. Nothing.

“Where is she moving to?” Tess asks sincerely.

“I don’t know, but she’d not stuck. She’s ok.” Zoe says

“I’m not ok!” I say.

“Help me,” Tess says to Zoe.

“With what?” Zoe asks.

“You left a huge hole in Sara’s life,” Tess says.

Zoe looks small as she grabs her knees to her chest. “It’s filling up.”

“It’s not,” Tess insists.

“I’m not in control here,” Zoe says.

“I’m not so sure,” Tess says.

“I’m not,” Zoe says. “Do you paint?”

“What? Do I paint?” Tess asks, surprised. “No, I write.”

“That’s right. I knew that,” Zoe says. “So as a writer, you know that as you set out to create a story and as you get deeper into it, you get deeper into yourself and you find incredible things in there.”

“It depends on what I ate that day,” Tess says.

“But you understand the process I’m talking about, right?” Zoe asks.

“Yes,” Tess answers.

“It would be wrong of you to think that you knew the shape and feeling of the ending until you arrived there, pen in hand,” Zoe says.

“I’m a journalist,” Tess says. “Facts over fiction.”

“It’s the same process of discovery,” Zoe says.

“What’s this have to do with Sara’s misery?” Tess asks.

“It doesn’t. It has to do with your comment about me having some control,” Zoe says. “I don’t. Just like you don’t.”

“That sounds cold coming out of your mouth,” Tess says.

“I’m sorry if that’s how you hear it,” Zoe says.

“Me too,” Tess says. She studies Zoe’s face for awhile. “Will you be sad forever?”

Zoe smiles. “No. Why have that emotion above all the others?”

“It falls over you. You don’t choose it,” Tess says.

“Yes, you do,” she says. “We welcome it or not.”

“Maybe where you are you do,” Tess says.

“No, where you are, the same holds true. It’s just a big truth to own, that’s all.”

Zoe gets up and brushes leaves off of her. “It’s the biggest weight but it’s also the biggest freedom.”

Chantal rises from the bench as well. She holds out her arm to me. “Help me walk back, Sara.”

I walk towards her, free from the handcuffs. “Thanks,” I say, and grab hold of her arm.

“Lovely street,” she says.

\*

My head always takes me farther than my feet. I’m still here, at the top of the stairs, alone, looking down.

\*

Tonight, we’re taking the cable car up Hyde Street, just as Chantal requested.

“Just like it was 50 years back,” she says, after we suffer through another jolting stop. “Nothing like it anywhere else.”

Her small frame sits between me and the railing. She’s wearing that fabulous lime-green coat and a green and black hat. Her face is so small underneath. I have to duck to catch her eyes as we talk.

“You look lovely,” she says to me, tapping on my pants. “I’ve never seen those.”

“I dressed up for your friend at the Bistro. I can’t wait to meet him,” I say.

“You’ve never told me about him.”

“He a young man. Early sixties,” she says and laughs. “That’s not young to you, I suppose.”

“Spring chicken,” I say. “Makes me some sort of an egg, I guess.”

“An old-soul egg,” she says. A group of kids hop on board. I watch Chantal watch them.

“So my friend Claude – Joseph Claude – he’s Québécois too. He and I grew up in the same town,” she says, smiling.

“Did you know each other?” I ask

“Not there, but funnily enough we met here, in the Bay Area. We’ve known each other for quite a while,” she says. “Oh, we need to get off here.”

We walk slowly for a block towards Claude's Bistro. We step together, like we're listening to the same tap-tap in our heads. I like how Chantal paces me. I hold onto this moment so tightly, as if by force of will I can extend it across my whole life.

When we arrive, Claude and Chantal embrace and exchange words in French. I usually fake my French. I know not to do that this time.

"Pleased to meet you," I say as we're seated. He kisses my cheeks.

"Chantal has kept you a secret," he says.

"She's kept you as one, too," I say. "Hmm."

"Oh, you two stop," she says laying out her napkin. Her cheeks are pink with emotion. "I love surprises, Sara. You know that. So I've asked Claude to choose the menu for us. I hope that's ok."

A flash of flying frogs and crickets distracts me for a moment. "Sounds lovely," I finally say.

"Sara," Chantal says, leaning towards me after Claude leaves. "I know you prefer lighter foods, but this will be a treat. Keep your mind open."

"Mind and mouth are open," I say. "Everything in moderation. That's my thing."

Chantal looks around and beholds the room for a moment. "Bradley and I used to come here. I haven't been here since he passed away."

I watch her eyes glisten with memory. "I'm glad we're here. So glad, Chantal."

"There are so many things that I've kept myself from," she says thoughtfully.

"Grandview put me in such a strange holding pattern."

"We never would have met, had it not been for that place," I say carefully.

"Oh, yes," she says with intensity. "And in my mid-seventies, I became tired. My son got too worried."

I pause, marveling at her gentleness with Luke. "He could have helped you make different choices."

"But like you said, I would never have met you," she says, smiling.

"Well, yes, that's fate."

"Indeed," she says.

"And here we are on the eve of a second wind of sorts," I say. I raise a glass of water. "Here's to your next adventure."

She raises her glass and we clink.

"And what about your next adventure?" Chantal asks.

"That cable car ride might have been it," I say.

"Sara, you're a delight, you know."

"As are you."

"You're generous and funny."

"Are you writing me a personal ad?" I ask.

"Who else is telling you this?"

"My physical therapist does. Sort of."

Chantal gives me a look.

"Ok, she actually picks on me an awful lot. I'm a terrible patient."

"I just want you to feel abundance in your life, in your heart," Chantal says. "I'm not getting a sense that you are. This year has drained you in some way."

"I know," I say softly. "It has. It's not forever, though."

"Nothing's forever," she says.

“It’s a been a clarifying few months for me, though. This past month especially.”  
“I’m not convinced,” Chantal says, sounding like a professor again. “I’m not convinced at all.”

“About what?” I ask.

“I’m not quite clear that you’ve found your elixir,” she says.

“What do you mean by ‘elixir’?”

“I wrote a paper once – many, many years ago – called ‘The Alchemy of Happiness’.”

“Great title.”

“It focused on the combining of people, places and things into one’s life. I hypothesized that what connects those all together is our behavior around each of them – our behaviors which are informed by lots of things.”

“I’m following you,” I say, half-following her.

“So all I’m saying to you is that I’m not convinced you know all the ingredients yet. Of your elixir...the elements that will make you happy.”

I stare at her for a moment, amazed that I actually do understand her point.

“Let me name a few that I do know,” I say, surprised at my own offer.

“Ok!” she says, delighted.

Claude has walked up to our table holding two bowls of soup.

“Enjoy,” he says. “I will tell you this: there are four kind of mushrooms in this soup. If you can guess the names of all four, I will dance on your table.”

Chantal laughs and says, “I will dance with you!”

“Do you have a mushroom dictionary?” I ask.

“In my back pocket,” he says and takes out an imaginary book and pretends to flip the pages. “But that would be cheating.”

After he walks away, Chantal takes a sip of soup.

“Oh!” she says. “This is what I remember.”

It is delicious.

“I’m going to guess the mushroom names and get Claude dancing,” I say

“Back to your elixir,” Chantal says.

“Oh,” I say, disappointed that she remembered. “So, there’s air, sky, Taxi, Tess, music, spices, Zack, sculpture, speeding, Zoe, laughter, napping, and you.”

Chantal looks up from her soup. “Hmm.”

“What’s hmm? Did I pass?”

“It’s not about passing,” she says, laughing. “You’re so clever and quick with words.”

“Is that bad?” I ask.

“It’s misleading,” she clarifies and looks at me carefully. “What are you thinking about right now? Which of those ingredients?”

“I miss those finches at Grandview. I’m going to visit them when I’m there next week to help you pack,” I say.

“Birds weren’t on your list,” she says, tapping her lips with a napkin.

“I just had the feeling of them flying in, so I thought I’d share it.”

“Then you should add finches to your list,” she says.

“So what happens when you lose one of your main ingredients?” I ask.

“Alchemy doesn’t depend on exact science,” she says excitedly. “It’s about magic. It’s about knowing the chemistry of your life at each exact moment. So...ingredients can change. They have to.”

“But you started this whole thing off by telling my that I don’t know my ‘elixir’ – as if it’s this finite thing,” I say.

“Right now, tonight –you may not know. I’m asking you,” she says.

“Your challenging me,” I say, with a wink.

“Always,” she says. “So I’m assuming that you’re friend who died is a missing ingredient.”

“Yes,” I say breathing deeply. “I’ve been meaning to talk with you about her – about Zoe.”

“I know how much she meant to you,” Chantal says.

“No, I don’t think you do,” I say cautiously.

Chantal reaches across the table and touches my hand. “I do.”

I’m washed over with at least four emotions right now. I stare into my soup as if I’ll find myself in there, whole and happy, smiling back at me.

Claude has just come to the table.

“Have you guessed the four mushrooms yet?” he asks.

I’m far away and Chantal speaks for both of us.

“No. But we haven’t given up yet,” she says. There’s a split second shared between Claude and Chantal that only old friends can have. He discreetly walks away with our empty soup bowls. I sit for moment watching the shadow of the candle dance on Chantal’s face.

“And then there’s you and your whole move to Quebec,” I say steadily. “You’ve been a big part of my happiness.”

“Are you firing me?” she asks.

“No, but I’ll miss our visits,” I say. “And that’s a huge understatement.”

“We’ll have different kinds of visits,” she says.

“I hate the phone,” I say.

“So not the phone. You’ll come out and stay. You’ll stay as long as you like.”

“Would years be acceptable?” I ask.

“No,” she says laughing. “You just named a long list of things that keep you here and happy.”

“I did,” I say, only half-agreeing.

“And I won’t be around for years anyway,” she says.

“Don’t go there,” I say.

Chantal laughs. “I’ve been dreaming a lot lately. That’s a good, sure sign.”

“Stop,” I say.

“Maurine is tapping her fingers waiting,” she says, tapping her small hand on the table.

“You’re not being kind,” I say.

“Sara, dear, I’m in great shape compared to you and your hip,” she says. “If I go, I’ll just drift off in my sleep painlessly.”

“I’ll come screaming after you,” I say.

“You’ll do no such thing,” Chantal says, in a scolding tone.

“Well then don’t die,” I say, louder than I meant to.

Claude has been waiting to put down two small plates.

“Who’s dying?” Claude asks as he places them down in front of us. I look down at a dark mass of something.

“These have already died, it seems,” I say.

“Oh, but only just a moment ago back in the kitchen,” he says. “Enjoy!”

I look at Chantal in desperation. “I’m scared.”

“About this or me dying,” she says and laughs.

“Both,” I say.

I take a deep breath and a mouthful of something that came from the sea apparently. It has the most amazing flavor. I look up at Chantal. She’s smiling at me so big I can hear her happiness.

“Add this to your list, too,” she says.

\*

I’m staring at the wall in my kitchen when it dawns on me. Chantal is flying to Quebec on my birthday. Happy birthday.

\*

Lucifer says he’s coming over to ‘jam’. I’m skeptical.

“Hi,” he says, into the intercom.

“Have your brought drums or just ideas of drums?” I ask into my phone, which connects to the security system downstairs.

“Loaded with drums. And the bags are heavy – are you helping?”

“No. Bad hip,” I say, buzzing him in.

He loads a small trap set into my loft. My trumpet practically jumps out of the case by itself.

“It’s been awhile,” I say.

“No excuses,” he says.

“None,” I say, and blow a long sour note.

“Nice,” he says.

“Production is starting for ‘Bailey’s Life Cycle’ in a week,” I say, realizing that thought came out of no where.

“French says ‘no way’,” Lucifer says, tuning his snare.

“No way to what?” I ask.

“He’s not getting caught up in it again,” Lucifer says.

“He’s on staff. Either he’s in or out. He’s not freelance. Is he quitting?”

Lucifer does a drum roll then stops. “Nope.”

“Well that’s that then,” I say.

“He’s waiting. Then he’ll quit,” he says.

“Waiting for what?” I ask.

“Our thing,” Lucifer says.

“The thing that’s not a thing yet?” I ask.

“It’ll be a thing soon,” he says.

“How much savings do you have?” I ask. “What are willing to drop into this?”

“Enough,” he says. “And you?”  
“Me? Not enough. It’s never enough.”  
“You just calm down,” he says.  
I laugh. “I am so calm.”  
“We’ll all be doing something together by Christmas. You’ll see,” Lucifer says.  
“I was hoping to play a little bit by today,” I say  
“Alright then,” he says and lays down a popping groove. I start out sounding like a sick goose.  
“It’s good I’ve got until Christmas,” I shout over the drums.

\*

There’s a storm-a-brewing in Tess’s eyes.  
“He does this just to annoy me,” she says, taking Zack out of the car again. “We’ll be right back, I swear.”

Zack is potty training and decided to get in the car just in time for a big accident. We’re on our way to the garbage dump to see the recycled art exhibit they have. It’s a little secret sculpture garden kept behind the sanitation truck yard.

Tess is strapping Zack back into his seat.  
“You’re really showing now. I see a definite bump,” I say to Tess and her protruding belly.

“You were once just a bump,” she says to Zack.  
“Dump!” Zack says. He’s ready to go.  
“You feeling ok?” I ask, as we set out.  
“I’m done vomiting, if that’s what you mean.”  
“Lovely,” I say.  
“And you?”  
“No vomit. None,” I say.  
“You still pissed at Ben?”  
“I wasn’t pissed at Ben.”  
“It’s ok. He was out of line,” Tess says.  
“No, he was just saying how he saw things. That’s his right.”  
“It was insensitive. It wasn’t like him. We fought about it.”  
“You fought about him seeing Sam’s perspective?”  
“No, I fought with him about his choosing to lay that out there in front of you.”  
“I can handle it,” I said.  
“Apparently not.”

I think for a moment. “True,” I say. “I’m not quite sure what I can handle lately. It’s strange.”

“That’s my point. Ben could have picked up on that.”  
“It’s no big deal. It’s not as if I’ve talked with him about Zoe and this whole thing before. It’s probably pretty black and white to him.”  
“No. You can give him more credit than that.”  
“Really?”  
“Yes. But not too much more,” she says and laughs.

We drive down the road towards the dump. Zack is tracking all the crows that are circling the sky.

“It’s really kind of gross,” Tess says, pulling into the lot. “But good gross. I’m up for it.”

“It’s ok. You’ll get used to the smell. In about a week, you won’t even notice it.”

We walk up the long ramp. Zack disagrees with us.

“He wants to stay near the trucks,” Tess says, as we stare at him waddling away. “Zack, there are trucks up here too.”

“Not really,” I say.

“Shush,” she says.

“Zack, there’s garbage up here too,” I say. “And there’s a buggy made out of bottles.”

“Buggy?” he asks and cocks his head. He moves towards us a few steps.

“He thinks you mean bugs not a car,” Tess says.

“I do mean a bug,” I say. “There’s a giant ant made out of bottles.”

I’m more excited than she is. As we wind our way around the sculpture garden, I find a metaphor.

“The garbage of life can just be scrapped or it can be built back up into something again,” I say, staring into a long tube of welded metal. At the other end, there are hundreds of tile chips pouring out. The title of the work is ‘memory lapse’.

“There are always other uses for things,” Tess says

“That’s not really what I mean.”

“But that’s what you said.”

“Your son’s about to be impaled.” I motion to Zack who’s poking at a dog made from broken glass.

“Sara, you were going somewhere deep with that comment. I can tell,” she says veering Zack away from the jagged edges of death. “Your life is far from garbage, if that’s what you’re even slightly inferring. That’s all I’m saying.”

“I’m not saying my life’s garbage. I’m not saying anything about *my* life. These sculptures just make me think.”

“Everything makes you think.”

“So that’s what I’m saying,” I say.

“So what constitutes the garbage of life? Garbage as in real garbage?” she asks, pointing back towards the dump. “Or garbage as ‘garbage of our minds’?”

“Your mocking me,” I say.

“No,” she says. “But what’s the garbage of life?”

“It’s the crap things that happen to us,” I say. “Like flat tires and bad checks.”

“Ok.”

“So if the San Francisco garbage company can encourage the making of art out of old razor blades, then that’s encouraging to me,” I say.

Zack has walked up to me holding a muddy golf ball. “Ball,” he says dropping it between us.

“I get it,” Tess says, watching the ball roll down the path. Zack follows it, mumbling something about saffron rice. “It’s a good sign.”

“What?” I ask.

“You seem inspired by all this junk.”

“It’s sparks me. I like to come here,” I say, looking around.  
“You do seem sparked,” she says, looking at me like I’m one of the sculptures. “I was beginning to worry.”  
“Oh, don’t stop worrying,” I say. “That wouldn’t be good.”  
“Ok. I’m worried again. Right now. Worried,” she says, reassuring me.  
“Good. Because I’m still very dark and cynical,” I say.  
“Yes you are. Dark. Dark and black. Black as coffee black.”  
“Thank you,” I say.

\*

For my birthday, I plan to do nothing except take Chantal to the airport and loiter at the curb. The cops there will tell me to move on, but I’ll stay. They’ll blow their whistles and I’ll blow mine right back. They’ll flail their arms in frustration. I’ll stare back at them coldly. This confrontation will distract me from my birth, Chantal’s desertion, and a future that looms ahead of me like a cobweb on a door.

\*

Jo is overly excited.  
“French quit,” he says, standing in my doorway. I don’t invite him in.  
“No. French said he’s not quitting until we have something concrete,” I say.  
Jo walks past me into my loft. He’s wearing his mechanic’s suit. “He called me today to see if he could borrow a vice. I asked how he was doing and he said he quit.”  
“A vice?” I ask, watching Joe sit on my couch. “What does he need a vice for?”  
“He’s building out a wall or something in his place. He needs a vice. I’m going over now to help him. He said he called you.”  
“He didn’t call me.”  
“Left a message he said.”  
“I haven’t checked my messages.”  
“He just up and quit and is ready to go.” Jo punches up to the ceiling.  
“Well, good for French,” I say  
“It’s all good,” Jo says.  
“Jo, I have to take a bath.”  
“No problem. I just wanted to let you know.”  
“Thanks.”  
“What about you?”  
“Bath,” I say motioning behind me.  
“September’s a second away. They’re going to call you.”  
“Look, I can do both. I always have time for other things. I’m freelance.”  
“Me too,” Jo says.  
“Right,” I say. “So then you know.”  
“But things don’t just happen. Entrepreneurs work around the clock to get things off the ground.”  
“That’s Lucifer’s job.”  
“I suppose,” Jo says.

“How old are you, Jo?”

He thinks for a moment. “42.”

“So you know the ways of the world,” I say.

“For sure,” he says.

“So we’ll see what happens.”

“Glad French quit, though. That’s a good sign,” Jo says, like a boy scout grasping his compass.

“Tell French I say hi,” I say, encouraging Jo towards the door.

“I will. You want to come?”

“Bath,” I say, motioning behind me again.

\*

I was nearly 10 by the time I had my first good fight with a boy. Vascal reminds me of Jo. He was from Poland and he transferred to our school mid-year. He found out that I liked to dissect dead animals and asked if he could come over. I had a sophisticated set-up by then, but I was steadily losing interest after nearly five years of autopsies. My breasts were starting to sprout and I needed to focus on them more and more everyday. No time for much else.

But on this one day, I thought I’d cut open a bird with Vascal. I knew where to find dead birds, and we brought one back to my laboratory. It turned out that Vascal used to cut open live birds and when he told me this, I punched him using all the force I could muster. He punched back and we began what turned out to be a bloody mess. Biting and hair-pulling were the least of it. We dented the garage wall, two little bodies slamming into it with such a force, the plaster split. No one heard the brawl as it happened, but when we finally stopped from exhaustion, we did expect the world to be different. We lay their panting and bruised. I was ready to go at him again – the bird killer called Vascal. But he started crying and left the house before I could damage him further.

I’ve told Taxi this story more than once. He understands the warrior in me and feels protected by her. She stands tall over him right now, pulling him away from something dead, that she probably would have picked up and brought home 28 years ago.

Birthdays make me remember things like this.

\*

Tonight, I finally understand why every piece of art you made for me has sparkles in it. You knew that each time the sun moved through my loft, it would always catch pieces of you left behind.

Tonight, I’m thinking about bare walls and what that would feel like for a change.

\*

Chantal only has 12 small boxes to ship to her niece’s house. They’re stacked for pick-up just outside her room in the hallway of the Grandview. Most of the residents have moved out this week. I saw Mrs. Lim as I walked in and she waved and half-smiled. It’s a sad time here at the Grandview.

I'm sitting on a bare mattress. Chantal's standing by the window across from me all ready to go to the airport. I'm not.

"I'll drive you there," I say.

"Yes and I'm so grateful. We should really go soon," Chantal says.

"No, not to the airport. To Quebec," I say.

Chantal smiles and sits beside me. "It's a bit far."

"That's my point. If it's too far for us to drive, then it's too far for you to move there."

"Sara, this is hard for me, too," she says. "I've grown very attached to you."

"I just whine way louder than you ever will," I say.

"That's true."

"But how else would you know how sad I was?" I ask.

"Sara, your face is honest about everything."

"My face?"

"It expresses – much more than your words sometimes," she says.

"Hmm," I say. "What am I feeling right now?" I ask, looking at her with a deeply furrowed brow.

"Sad, very sad," Chantal says, like a doctor to a patient. She looks at her watch.

"We really ought to leave."

"I'm going to speed," I say walking her down the hall. "We'll get pulled over by the cops and they'll keep you in California for questioning."

"Please don't speed," she says.

Chantal looks back at the Grandview as we pull out of the parking lot for the last time.

"It is much better where you're going," I say, sounding slightly positive for the first time.

"Much better," she says quietly.

I want to say things now but don't quite know what they are. As we drive, I realize how bad at good-byes I am. Horribly bad. I should take a course or something.

We pull up to the arrival curb and I burst out crying.

"Sorry," I say through my sobs.

"For crying?" Chantal asks. "Here, I'm crying too. That makes it ok."

We hug and my arms resist her finally pulling away from me. Her small frame is so full of will. It's held me up for so long.

"I'll call you as soon as I get to Eleanor's," she says as she rolls her small bag toward a porter. He takes it from her and she waves at me with both hands. "Thank you, Sara. I love you will all my heart."

"You have my heart," I say through my tears.

"Oh, nonsense," she says. "I have just a beautiful piece. I'll take just a piece."

"Ok, just a piece," I concede.

I watch her fold into the flow of bodies inside the terminal. My sadness holds me still until I'm carried back inside my car by the honking sounds around me. Everything feels abrupt and unforgiving.

\*

Instead of driving straight home from the airport, I drive to the beach. It's a foggy August day, and I'm bound to see a mermaid. It's my birthday, so I figure she'll cut me a break and come out to talk for awhile. How will she breathe? Maybe she'll offer me a ride somewhere. I'll take it and tell the story for years to come. Taxi will just have to deal and pretend he hasn't heard it already.

I dig my feet into the sand as I sit a few feet from the surf. My breath has notes attached to it and I hum 'Happy Birthday' to myself. I think of Chantal's theory about the alchemy of happiness and I remember reading once about the chemistry of poetry, how it mixes its elements with the reader. Poetry never ends at the end of a poem. I think it only truly begins then.

My head feels heavy as I lay back and think about this. The sky lowers itself down over me like a blanket. I listen to all the murmurs around me and laugh at the sounds of the waves inside my own belly. Butterflies flapping. Midgets surfing. Things are happening inside me. There's never a moment's peace in here. But that's ok. If I had sudden peace, I'd worry that I was dead. I'd call Parker and have her check my pulse over the phone. "I'm dead" I'd say. "I have no pain and there's peace inside me!" She'd ask me to breathe and stretch. That would snap my chaos right back into place.

I'm watching for the mermaid. I think that's her – the lady with the fins and scales. I had hoped she'd be singing. Maybe she's humming and I just can't hear her yet. I hope she has a sense of humor. Nothing like a morose mermaid on your hands.

I shake the sand from my hair, fix my eyebrows and gaze at the sea. I don't want her to think I've been waiting anxiously. I want to appear cool and other-wise occupied.

*The End*