

DIALOGIC DISCOURSE IN CREATIVE NONFICTION:  
WHEN MY DEAD MOTHER SPEAKS

Regan Benson Schaeffer

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

Department of English Language and Literature

Central Michigan University  
Mount Pleasant, Michigan  
February 2013

Copyright by  
Regan Benson Schaeffer  
2013

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the quiet support of my husband, Jeff, the direction of my advisor, Dr. Susan Schiller, and committee members, Dr. Steven Bailey and Dr. Mary Wendt. I'm especially grateful for the friendship and examples of my companions in the Lifeboat: Jonathan Barefield, Michelle Campbell, and Ameer Schmidt.

## ABSTRACT

### DIALOGIC DISCOURSE IN CREATIVE NONFICTION: WHEN MY DEAD MOTHER SPEAKS

by Regan Benson Schaeffer

This thesis presents a hybrid creative nonfiction text, blending nonfiction and fiction at levels not often attempted. Its experimental avant-garde structure relies on segments, which swing between present and past, reality and fantasy. The primary structure of the thesis is a creative nonfiction memoir narrative, the episodic segments of which are interspersed with shorter segments of fictional dialogue. The dramatic tension of the piece rises from the initial dialogue, in which my mother, who died five years ago, suddenly and without explanation initiates a private Facebook conversation with me. Although this complex narrative form is unusual within the genre of creative non-fiction, its discursive shape, moving creatively in two different directions, follows the pattern of its examination of complex identity issues.

My primary purpose in exploring my own history and family issues in this document is creative rather than therapeutic, and my commitment is to remain an honest and reliable narrator. Memoirists examine and reexamine the raw material of an individual life, attempting to discover and then convey some few universal conclusions to readers. The experience of memoir, transmitted from writer to reader, is an exploration of the Self in its continually reiterated journey. The stories we hear and read, true and fiction, become tools for us to turn and shake and squint at life. If readers recognize their own patterns in an echo of mine, and if this hybrid form of creative non-fiction works as I hope it does, it may join other creative non-fiction works that stretch the boundaries of the genre.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTERLUDE I..... 1

CHAPTER I: FIRST CRACK..... 7

INTERLUDE II ..... 20

CHAPTER II: PRESSURE ..... 23

INTERLUDE III..... 32

CHAPTER III: KING OF HEARTS ..... 35

INTERLUDE IV..... 46

CHAPTER IV: CRYING HAVOC..... 48

INTERLUDE V ..... 61

CHAPTER V: STORMY WEATHER MAGGIE ..... 63

CHAPTER VI: STAYING UP ALL NIGHT WITH MARY LOU ..... 73

INTERLUDE VII..... 84

CHAPTER VII: SPLINTERS..... 86

INTERLUDE VIII ..... 91

CHAPTER VIII: SOCK KNITTING..... 92

POSTSCRIPT ..... 103

## INTERLUDE I

### REGAN'S BEDROOM, SUNDAY MORNING

Regan wakes, listening to the downstairs whine of the coffee maker and Jeff, talking to the dog. She stretches, and reaches for her phone on the bedside table, punching in her security code and tapping the Facebook icon with the speed of habitual practice. She feels a familiar lurch at the sight of the red dot on the messages symbol, but the name in bold at the head of the message is unfamiliar, sort of...

GINGER: Hi, Claire. I just wanted to say hi.

REGAN: Hi. I'm sorry, but I'm not sure who this is?

GINGER: I know this might be hard, but try to keep an open mind...

REGAN: What's going on?

GINGER: There isn't a good way to introduce this. I'm using my real name.

REGAN: Well, *Ginger Dodge* was my mother's name, at least when she was young.

GINGER: It seemed like a good idea. I notice you don't really talk much to anyone your own age.

REGAN: Well, these days, that's probably true, but how would you know that?

GINGER: I know a lot more that you ever gave me credit for. You should probably take a look at my profile, now, and message me back after you think about it. I really do want to talk to you, Claire.

REGAN: Okay, now you're creeping me out. I don't know what all this is, but I don't like it, so let's just drop it.

Regan punches the dimpled control button on the iPhone to close the application, and then clicks the top bar to switch off the screen. She tosses the phone onto the

pillow pile on the chair beside the bed, but then changes her mind and scoops it up to carry with her into the bathroom. She hesitates a moment, then opens the left side drawer and drops the phone onto a pile of hairbrushes, combs and disposable razors, before closing the drawer and sitting down on the toilet.

#### REGAN'S OFFICE, AN HOUR LATER

Regan has been sitting on the living room couch drinking coffee and pretending to watch the Tour de France with Jeff, but is actually thinking about those messages. She's agitated, passing it off as restlessness and anxiousness to get to her schoolwork. She excuses herself to go upstairs and turn on her laptop, open Facebook, and return to Messages. She reads them over, then clicks on the name *Ginger Dodge*, to look at that person's profile.

REGAN: Who are you?

GINGER: Obviously, I'm your mother.

REGAN: Bullshit. Knock it off, whoever you are. Everyone knows it's possible to find out all kinds of details about people to fool the idiots who want to be fooled.

GINGER: Claire, I'd appreciate it if you don't swear at me. You're right, of course, but I know you aren't an idiot wanting to be fooled. Who else would know the details about me I've provided?

REGAN: I don't know, lots of people. Oh, my God, what's going on here?

GINGER: I wanted to talk to you, and this is the only way I have.

REGAN: Why? How? Oh, fuck, this is sick. Why are you doing this, and why am I even still talking to you?

GINGER: I'm interested in you, and I guess you're curious enough to keep talking to me. That's enough.

REGAN: But you never used to be interested in me. You were interested in Chris.

GINGER: Chris isn't on Facebook.

REGAN: Actually, he is, he just never logs on. But I could tell him. I could tell him and shift this whole thing off onto him. And what about Dad? Do I have to get him on Facebook now, too? Why is this happening? Did *you* make this happen? You *never* believed in an afterlife. It's not that I'm not happy to talk to you. Shit. I mean, are you still even the same person? Ah, you always *did* used to pitch a fit if I used the word *shit*, much less *fuck*. Oh, we aren't still dealing on that level, are we? How are you doing this? How long have you been here? How much do you know?

GINGER: I know all of your interactions on Facebook.

REGAN: Oh, *fuck*.

GINGER: And, for the record, I've always been interested in you.

REGAN: (*breathing hard*) Okay, maybe on some level, I believe that. I didn't used to, but maybe I do now. But, what do you mean, you want to talk to me? I don't want to hurt your feelings, but honestly, I don't much want talk to you, and certainly not like this.

GINGER: I understand, but it will be good for you. I have insights.

REGAN: All right, that's it. This is over.

Regan signs off Facebook without reading Ginger's final comment:

GINGER: Claire, as your mother, I'm telling you, you swear too much.



KAYA COFFEE HOUSE, THE NEXT AFTERNOON

Regan is sitting on the big couch with her back to the wall, a large iced latte and her bare feet on the table in front of her, her laptop on her lap. She stares at the red number 2 on the Facebook messages symbol, then touches it with the cursor, revealing that the top two messages are showing the blue dot which identifies them as unread. She opens and reads the first message, from Michelle, about a change in the scheduling of a committee meeting the next day, then arrows back to the message queue to contemplate the blue dot next to the name Ginger Dodge.

REGAN: Listen, despite your long-expressed wishes, I've been swearing viciously since I was nineteen. I'm an angry person.

GINGER: Swearing is unnecessary to make a point.

REGAN: Agreed. I do it for the immature thrill.

GINGER: Well, you said it, not me.

REGAN: Oh, for God's sake! Is this what this is going to be? Are you haunting me just to nag and bitch at me? They call this trolling, you know. There's a whole Facebook social psychology identified. Apparently, teenagers taunt each other to the point of suicide.

GINGER: You're being childish and overly dramatic.

Regan sighs audibly.

REGAN: I know. But, seriously, it probably isn't possible to be over-dramatic about all this—what is it? Communication? I can't really get my head around it.

GINGER: You're doing very well.

REGAN: Thanks. It's all that meditation and religious fringe thinking, not to mention the drugs.

GINGER: Please don't start.

REGAN: I'm not. Really. You always thought I was a flake, but what is all this, but magical thinking?

Five minutes pass without a reply.

REGAN: Oh, okay, are we done, now?

#### KAYA COFFEE HOUSE, AN HOUR LATER

Regan has been trying to prepare for an upcoming meeting, reading a how-to grant-writing document, but without success. She clicks obsessively back and forth to Facebook, reading even the inane comment postings of friends-of-friends, though she refrains from posting any comments or status updates of her own. *After all, what could I say?* she thinks. *Anything I posted, I'd just want to delete immediately, before anyone saw it.* She snorts at the memory of once having deleted late-night drunken comments early in the morning before most people were, hopefully, up to read them, not that her comments were any more idiotic than anyone else's. *Maybe I could think of a classic, cryptic, metaphorical status update, like, "Regan is tapping into other-worldly sources, or her own subconscious." But then, a whole bunch of people would either interrogate me or hijack the thread into a clever direction of their own. Active communication with others is its own reward and punishment. The urge to share myself is at war with my compulsion to avoid exposure. Okay, just jump off the cliff,* she thinks, not for the first time, though never before referring to mediumistic activity.

REGAN: Okay, Mom, I apologize for bringing up old, sore subjects. Are you talking to me anymore?

GINGER: I'm happy to talk to you, Claire. Thank you for the apology, though I'm not feeling

touchy about old wounds. I needed some time to think about your characterization of this as "magical thinking."

REGAN: Hmmm. Whose thinking, mine or yours?

GINGER: Exactly. I confess, I don't know how or why this is happening, but I don't think I'm solely responsible.

REGAN: Well, as far as I'm concerned, this came out of left field. I haven't been longing for it, or anything. No offense.

GINGER: None taken. But I hope you aren't feeling psychologically fragile.

REGAN: Look at you, using psychological jargon to project empathic concern.

GINGER: Don't be snotty, Claire. I only meant, I don't want you to begin to compare yourself with your brother.

REGAN: I'm not feeling emotionally competitive with Chris, at all anymore. That was with you. Dad is attached to me, regardless of how well or poorly I'm performing as a daughter.

GINGER: Honey, I'm talking about Stuart.

REGAN: Oh...right.

REGAN: God damn it, *you* know I'm not having a psychotic break! Why the fuck would you even put that in my head?

GINGER: Claire, please at least *consider* your language. Stop and think before you work yourself up. If, as I believe, I am actually existing as an autonomous entity talking to you, then, obviously, I don't think that you're having a mental breakdown of reality, talking to yourself, but thinking it's me. As far as putting it into your head is concerned, I'd rather we

discuss it, now, while we are in contact, than have it occur to you in the middle of the night alone.

REGAN: I'm not alone in the middle of the night.

GINGER: Obviously, but have you told Jeff about all this?

REGAN: No. I haven't told anyone.

GINGER: Okay, you've made my point.

REGAN: What point?

## CHAPTER I: FIRST CRACK

November, 2012, Mt. Pleasant, MI

While I was brushing my teeth this morning, this suddenly burst out, garbled by my toothbrush, but fairly loudly, “I hate you, you asshole!” I knew that Jeff was still at home, downstairs, and had surely heard me. I scuttled back into bed and pulled the covers over my head to wait for him to leave. For years, he had politely ignored these outbursts from me, but a few years ago, perhaps finally feeling that he should officially check my hold on reality, he had finally began to ask me *who are you yelling at?* I’d actually had to admit, *myself, I guess*. It was mortifying. Almost thirty years of marriage has not taken away my shame at being heard in these habitual out-blurtings of my anger. I know they aren’t dissociative—that is, I know I’m not hallucinating and talking to an imaginary someone else, but on the other hand, it is a spontaneous, not-very-controllable, Tourette’s-like blurt. Thinking about it this morning, under the covers, I realized that it has actually been quite a long time since my last out-loud outburst. But the psychic back-pressure of high academic stress has recently been causing me to behave very assertively with other people, and it’s indicative of my issue that I have such a hard time even expressing it clearly. I’ve been bossy, lately, and when I somehow feel I’ve spoken or behaved too forwardly, I usually need to purge my anger at myself, later, like after-shocks, or electrical discharges. It’s not that this is confusing me. It’s always been clear enough, that this phenomenon is somehow related to chronic insecurity, but over the years, as my skills and confidence in myself have grown, and my social anxiety has receded, under it all, enough fear and anger remains to stab out on occasion, reminding me that no matter how old I am, or how much I achieve, I’m still the same me.

May, 1963, at 10, Saranac, MI

While I was under twelve, I played general to a small, warlike gang of boys, the Mouse Patrol, which included my two younger brothers and the two next-door neighbor boys, Greg and Doug Hendrick. My brothers and I were most often together, but were rarely a united gang of three, except on the occasions we were fighting the Hendricks. Three always breaks down to two- against-one, so the stand-off sides were either Stuart and I against the baby Chris; more often, the two boys against me; and occasionally, Chris and I ganging up on our middle brother, Stuart. The Three Stooges were our role models in violence. We didn't use frying pans, but there was a lot of head smacking, and a fingers-in-the-eye gag that we practiced until our reflexes were fast enough to keep us from blinding each other.



As soon as it was warm enough to shed our shoes in the spring, we began our competition to toughen the soles of our feet. We all slept in T-shirts and underpants, and could pull on a pair of shorts, slide down the curve of the bare wooden stairs, and be outside, sprinting and wincing up the gravel driveway, moments after we woke, gone out of the house and out of our mother's mind, usually until dark. Our elementary school was directly across the street from our house, so,

evenings, weekends and all summer the school playground was part of our yard. We rode our bikes no-hands around and around the perimeter of the double-wide tennis court, counting the revolutions: twenty, thirty, thirty-two, thirty-five. It felt like we could go as long as we wanted. We pumped ourselves up to horizontal on the big ten-foot-high steel swings and launched ourselves up and out in a contest to see who could fly up like aerialists and drop straight back down, as close to the chain link fence as possible. We raced each other, running, balancing along the top bars of the bike racks.

Our two-story wood frame house, driveway and side yard stood close to the front of our several acre plot, half a block up the tree-lined street from our grandparents' house, where my mother had grown up. Three huge pines, their tops visible from anywhere along the block, shaded our back yard. Our father had cut the lower pine branches off up to a height above our heads on all but the largest, our Climbing Tree, leaving fat, kitchen-counter width branches springing out horizontally before they curved up toward the sky. We couldn't remember the barn that used to stand at the back of the Backyard. Dad had torn it down long before, but left us the floor as a giant barn-sized sand box. We dug a foxhole in the middle of the Barn Floor and



covered it with an old door. Behind the Barn Floor and the shed was the Back Backyard. Chris, the youngest and lightest, was the first of us to leap, shrieking, from the roof of the Backyard shed, tucking and rolling and coming up already running. Soon, we could all three leap and roll in quick succession, having devoted ourselves to hours of war-craft study, watching World War II movies and the

forbidden TV show *Combat*, sprawled together on our stomachs in front of the black and white TV in the front playroom.

The back of our property ran up against the back of the Arbogasts' and the wild center of all the properties on the block joined together to form a central no-man's, only kids' acreage.

When we staged BB-gun battles with the Arbogasts, luckily, we fired on each other mostly across the width of this area, so the few wounds we suffered stung more than damaged us. The Foxhole was our hospital during these battles, and

Doug Hendrick once had to be carried out of the combat zone, down into the hospital, and fed Redhots, as pills, until he recovered.

Our old house had what, in those parts, was called a Michigan basement: a basic hole with a tamped and hardened dirt floor and fieldstone walls, lit by bare, hanging bulbs. Our basement was only under the two front rooms of the house, although directly behind it, under the dining room, was the remnant of a huge cement water cistern that we could reach by squeezing ourselves through the small opening at the top of the back basement wall. There were two small rectangular windows in the basement room. The one facing the Wilton's side of the house looked out into the large field of grass between the properties, and standing on the wooden stairs we could watch our father and Mr. Wilton scan the sky for tornadoes during the evening warning periods we spent with our mother down in the basement room.





The window on the other side of the basement looked onto the sidewalk along the house and the driveway beyond. A sort of half-wall of concrete extended out about three feet below this window. Its angled top was a coal slide, our Dad said. They could back a truck up next to the house and shovel the coal in through the small, rectangular window, which was hinged at the top, and the coal would slide down into a pile in the middle of the floor. We soon incorporated this feature into our daily routine.

The Mouse Patrol ran, we fought passionately; we rode our bikes shrieking down Schwiger's hill, we flung ourselves off the shed roof and raced around the house at top speed. Correcting our approach to the basement window to perpendicular, we would run as fast as we could and hit the sidewalk beside the house in a baseball slide, and, the tough bottoms of our feet smacking into the bottom rail of the window, we would shoot inside, down the angled top of the chute wall, and land, already running for the stairs on the opposite wall, up the steps and out the door to the outside at the top of the stairs, bank right, and fly fast, in combat formation, around the back of the house again, level off, and hit the window, three in succession, bang, bang, bang, again and again.

Of the three of us, it was Stuart who could remember the names of all the authors of the stories that my mother's sister Mary Lou read to us. He could remind us in detail what we had eaten for lunch at the campsite on Lake Gogebic the morning after the cloudburst that had us floating on our air mattresses in the lean-to tent, but he wasn't good in school, even after he had surgery to correct his crooked eye. He was sweet, but had a low frustration level and a quick temper, and it wasn't fair to tease him, as Mom said.

Our mother was back in graduate school and gone from the house for long hours. She didn't spend all day with these little beasts, like I did. I was supposed to be in charge, and they were supposed to mind me. One Saturday morning, they kept screaming and squabbling and I kept breaking them up, but just as I would get back to my book, one of them would kick or pinch or bite the other, and, like the volume knob had been turned up on the TV, everything got practically shake-the-floor loud, until I dived into the middle and separated them. I put one in the rocker and one on the couch and *made* them stay. Some of my authority was conferred by our mother, but at that time, I still outweighed them both, and we all three understood that my generalship was ultimately based on my continued ability to beat them in a fight. I was really, really mean, and made them stay in those chairs for a long time, so, before long, they had become best buddies again, sending each other secret signals while I wasn't looking, and soon, I could allow them to escape my supervision, leaving me to read in peace. When I told Mom about it later, she practically twinkled with glee.

"That's exactly what works," she said, "Get them on the same side against you, and they'll leave you alone!" I knew she was right. She'd put thought into these things. She told me once that she kept a wet washcloth beside her while she was reading, to wash our faces with. After a couple of times, we'd stop bothering her.

I don't remember the beginning of the crowbar incident, just the climax. Uncharacteristically, Chris and I had been teasing Stuart. We didn't mean any harm, but it was just too easy. There were always plenty of openings, little stuff we knew would drive him crazy, but we didn't usually act on them. We knew it wasn't right to tease him, but this time, once we started, we just couldn't seem to stop. In this family, no-one got to be weak, or the other chickens

would peck and peck until they drew blood. I saw the blowup coming, but just watched, until finally, Stuart literally exploded up from the ground, and I was off running, leading him away from Chris, out across the Barn Floor and around the shed and the Climbing Tree and up the side yard with him howling and sobbing, in such a rage that he seemed to be growing bigger and faster and scarier. I knew I couldn't ever let him catch me.

We flew around the house in close formation, and I slid, hit the coal chute window, and I was up the stairs in seconds, through the door into the front playroom. I flipped the lever on the top of the cast steel lock with him right behind me, pounding on the door from the basement and screaming, then, just as fast, he was out the outside door and around the front of the house, but I was scrambling past Chris, through the house to lock the dining room and kitchen doors just as he reached the big side porch. He tried each door once, then he was gone again, and suddenly, the door to the basement was vibrating to deafening blows on the wood and incoherent screaming. Chris and I stood there petrified in place, listening to a monster, not our brother, screaming on the other side of the door.

Stuart got a licking when Dad got home, and Dad had to replace the door, which was deeply gouged from Stuart battering it with the crowbar until he was exhausted. I didn't get punished, but I knew I was at fault. I had wanted to see what would happen, and all unaware, I had set it off.

May, 1964, at 11, Saranac, MI

In the summer of 1964, when my mother was 35 and my father 37, they had owned our home on Vosper Street for ten years. They had scraped and painted and wallpapered, my father had torn down walls and rewired, and together they had created a huge set of flowerbeds in an

interlocking Greek-key pattern down one side of the Back Backyard, in which they raised roses to enter in the garden club competition at the Ionia county fair. Saranac in the 1950's was the kind of small Midwestern town where the local paper, the Advertiser, published the weather, the results of town elections, and news of local interest: *Charles Sparks has installed the Delco lights in his home and out buildings*, and: *Little Sue Walter, one-year-old daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Jay Walter south of town, fell off the bed and broke her arm last week.*

Anyone who has grown up in a small town understands the pleasure and the pain of overfamiliarity. Nowadays, most middle-class parents' attention revolves around the hourly activities, achievements, and moods of their children, and in comparison, my parents seem shockingly neglectful. But in a town where everyone knew who you were and had likely gone to high school with your mother or was a volunteer fireman with your father, or was sitting having coffee with your grandmother or aunt, right now, there was no shortage of eyes watching from kitchen windows and on downtown sidewalks, ready to pick up the telephone and tattle on you for your wrongdoing.

So, I happily roller-skated for hours, up and down the concrete sidewalks of our block, cracked and tipped by the thick, deep roots of the big trees that lined both sides of our street, and my brothers and I drove our small toy trucks up and around the driveways and garages we imagined in and around those roots. Indoors, we raced slot cars on the track mounted by our father on an immense sheet of plywood, or slid, screaming, in cardboard boxes, down the u-curve of our stairway. One Christmas, my parents built me a huge dollhouse, also on a full sheet of plywood, rooms open from the top, with wallpaper on the walls and furniture for each room, sized for my Barbie and Skipper dolls. Mary Lou wrote an entire novel, based on *The Prisoner of*

*Zenda*, chronicling the royal history of my Barbie, Serena, and her little sister. Every birthday and Christmas for years, I received from her a wardrobe case made from an empty box that had once held a ream of paper with the lid attached on one side to create a door and a rod installed to hold that season's ball gowns, capes, tea frocks, and riding clothes.

I remember my mother talking about the garden club because of its funny name, *The Dirt Diggers*, and I knew the names of the people around town, the men on the volunteer fire department with my father and those on the board of the downtown library, because, sitting at the dining room table down the street at my grandparents, my mother would report on their latest squabbles. For several years she had been enrolled, one class at a time, in University of Michigan graduate extension classes in library science, and she had, more than once, butted heads with the elderly librarian over her intentions to have her minister censor books and her seeming opinion that the smallness of the library excused it from a lack of system. Matters came to a head when it was discovered the librarian had removed the most shocking of the titles, including *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Lolita*, and *The Naked and the Dead*, to the library's back room and hidden their cards. The story goes that my mother demanded that they be returned to the shelves, claiming that my uncle had wanted to read *Lady Chatterley*, and she later quoted the librarian as having, in response to the challenge, demanded to know why he wanted to read it and claiming that if he had a right to read it, she had a right to know why.

At about this time, at eleven, my friend Dorothy and I conceived an ambition to become doctors and decided to begin our self-training. When this same librarian found us at a table in the library with a medical textbook, she took it from us and told us we weren't allowed to read it. I wasn't there when my mother confronted her, but I've never forgotten what she told me when I

was older. She had told the librarian, “*My daughter is allowed to read any book she chooses.*” When I told this story at my mother’s funeral, I added, truthfully, that I have never forgotten that empowering gift she had given me.

In 1964, I was eleven, Stuart nine, and Chris had turned seven in March. I was the oldest cousin and the only one who cared to stay indoors and listen to the various configurations of my mother and her three sisters and my grandmother talking for hours at my grandmother’s dining room table. I had earned that if I kept quiet and didn’t annoy or call attention to myself by interrupting or asking questions, I was welcome to stay and listen to the adult conversation, those women talking and talking, and on holidays, the men sitting in chairs on the periphery, or rarely, watching sports in the living room. Eventually, the ones who chose to watch sports and not listen, Darrell and Bob, were disappeared by divorce. My father, the husband who mostly listened and occasionally chimed in, was retained.

My father and grandfather were good friends, I’ve realized, lately, listening to his stories at my father’s kitchen table. I don’t remember seeing them interact very much. They were both always at work, but must have spent time together out in my grandfather’s shop, a large shed, connected to the concrete slab of the back porch by a wooden footbridge. Inside, the walls were completely covered with racks and shelves of tools and under the workbenches were drawers and bins of bits and screws, nails, hasps and pins and wood and steel in sheets and dowels. Sometimes, I went in there by myself, to look and touch and open and finger through a drawer, but I didn’t move anything. My grandfather was an electronics engineer at a recording studio in Detroit. For years and years, since my mother and her sisters were young, on Friday afternoons he had driven home to Saranac from his weeks’ work in the city and then driven back on

Monday morning. While my mother was in college at Michigan State, he had stopped in East Lansing on Fridays to bring her home and then dropped her back off on Mondays. When she met her apartment mate's brother, my father, she began spending more weekends at school. It was those years in an unleavened household of smart, strong-willed women that made my mother and her sisters all so formidable and impenetrable, of course.

My mother and Mary Lou had taught me to read when I was four, and since then, I had been reading constantly, for as long as I could remember, everything from Kipling to science fiction. At our house, there was a wall of bookshelves in the front room where my father's desk was, which we called our playroom because of the TV and the storage closet under the stairs where our toys were kept. The real book trove, though, was down the block at our grandparents, where a large shelf in the living room held our grandfather's adventure books and Mary Lou's opera books and bound years of Opera Digests and ghost stories and mysteries, and the historical fiction my grandmother liked and we all read. The stairs to the upstairs were behind a door in the dining room, and took you up partway, and then curved around to the left to bring you up into a central hallway lined on three walls with floor-to-ceiling shelves, completely filled with books. Mary Lou's desk and typewriter lived there, too, where she stayed up late into the night, every night, writing her books. On the bottom shelf of one wall, stretching all the way across the room, were the scrapbooks my mother and her sisters had filled, each with her favorite Sunday comic strip, through the war years and beyond: *Flash Gordon*, *Jungle Jim*, *Prince Valiant*, and *Rip Kirby*. For years, I would pull the next book out a few inches to mark my place, bring three scrapbooks at a time down to the living room couch, lie down, read my way through them, bring the finished books back up to the shelves, and mark my place, and carry down the next three

books. When I got to the end of the wall, I'd begin reading them over again. When I was nine, I graduated to the Edgar Rice Burroughs *Tarzan* and John Carter *Mars* books and the Leslie Charteris' *Saint* novels and, soon, all of the detective and mystery fiction.

I tell my creative writing friends, truthfully, that I wrote my first fiction only last year, but more accurately, I had been a self-blocked fiction writer since the two-page novel I began when I was nine. I had opened the story with the female spy heroine being chased down a New York city subway track and escaping through a trap door in the tunnel floor, but I had given up the writing abruptly, leaving her, poised there in the trap door opening and me in a frenzy of anxiety and despair, having realized that I actually knew absolutely nothing about subways, or New York, or what spies really thought about or did. I had decided, then, that I couldn't write anything more until I grew up and got a lot of experience, and, since no one knew I had tried to write, I didn't have anyone to tell me otherwise.

I was in my fifth grade classroom in the grade school across the street from our house and my mother was at home when the news came that Kennedy had been shot. My teacher must have suggested that I run home and ask; I only remember the kids cheering as my mother and I carried our small black-and-white portable television into the classroom and then, watching all the shocking drama as a class for the rest of the school day. A few years ago, my father gave me photocopied pages of a journal my mother had kept for about a year and a half during this time. She mentions taking the TV over to the school with me and then writes several more pages about her disbelief and horror and the national sadness she was watching on that terrible day, sitting back by herself at home, while I sat across the street and watched it all with my classmates.

At school, I was teased quite a bit, though I wouldn't characterize what went on as *bullying*, exactly, just a bit of *Four Eyes*, and *Claire Bare, ain't got no underwear*, and such stuff.



Even if at home I was only one quark in the zoo, at least I held a mid-level role in the family power structure—I was the oldest and smartest kid and the leader of my crew. But, across the street during school hours, my at-home persona was weightless and insubstantial. In that larger arena, I was the most insignificant of particles. Because my birthday was in October, and because I could already read, I had started kindergarten when I was four, so most of my classmates were a year or more older than I was. By the eighth grade, while I was struggling to grow breasts and begging to shave my legs, the only boys available to eye with interest were the same kids I had begun first grade with, the same ones who had run past on the school sidewalk and tried to rip my skirt up over my head, the same ones who every week in sixth grade gym class would form a dog pack to pound the cowering dodgeball weaklings to jelly against the old brown bricks of the gym wall. Being smart only helped to nail me into place as lowest of the low.

## INTERLUDE II

REGAN: What's your point? And, why Facebook? By rights, alone in the middle of the night would be the traditional setting for me to be communing with spirits. If you were going to haunt me, you should be able to do it free-form, unconfined by something like Internet access.

GINGER: You're changing the subject. Or—maybe not. My point was, if you believe that I'm real, that this is real and that you're not just talking to yourself, sooner or later, you will think to compare your experience to Stuart's, and I don't want you to over-react to that line of thinking. Were you planning to tell Jeff about this?

REGAN: I don't know. It's too weird. I don't know. I don't mind not telling him.

GINGER: I noticed that you keep a lot to yourself. You seem to have a different personality, here online. But, as far as why Facebook, I told you, before—this seemed like the best communication avenue, and having chosen it, I do seem to be confined by it.

REGAN: I can't believe we're discussing the psychological ramifications of social media use, but okay, I *am* different on Facebook, although, probably everyone is. It's just another form of being able to show different parts of yourself in different settings, the way everyone has different work and family personas. But, you do know that a Facebook conversation is actually much more public than a conversation you might have with an officemate, right? Since, depending on how you have your privacy settings fixed, the friends of your friends can see your conversations with them. You can't forget that you're actually visible to many more people than you have directly friended. *Wait*, are you actually posting statuses and interacting with *other* people on Facebook? Other than me, I mean? *Oh, fuck*, do you have a wall?

GINGER: For God's sake, Claire, can you simply *try* to control yourself and your language? No, I have a very minimal profile, and nothing on my wall. No friends. Think about it, please. I can't even friend you, because then I would be visible on your friends list, and someone might notice and become curious. You are friends with Gusta, after all.

REGAN: Okay, sorry. But, come on now, why are you still reacting to bad language, anyway? You're dead...Okay, sorry, again. Gusta sent me the friend request first, and I've always liked her. I figured, even though she's your cousin and your generation, she *was* a firefighter and does have a gay son, so she was less likely to friend me and then become upset and disillusioned with me, after she figured out what I'm really like.

GINGER: I don't know why your language still upsets me. It always has.

REGAN: Well, I'm not nineteen any more, and I don't have to swear to make a point, so I guess I could be more polite. Obviously, I watch my language at work and in school, except with my corporeal friends, the ones who know me well enough, and I know well enough. You catch me off guard, sometimes, is all. And, I guess, part of me figures you should get to know the real me, finally.

GINGER: Oh, the vulgar you is the real one?

REGAN: Yes, it is, and ***don't you start in***. You came to me, right? If you don't want to talk to me, don't. *I don't have to hide* who I am from you, anymore. I *refuse* to hide who I am from you. Fuck off. Go creep Facebook.

Regan lifts both hands up from the laptop keyboard, fingers splayed rigidly in the air, before flicking her right hand down to stab the Command Q sequence with thumb and middle finger, closing the open internet window. She stands so quickly, the chair rocks.

She turns and kicks it hard enough to topple it with a crash that startles the dog awake, then clutches her hair with both fists, and bursts out, "Fuck you! Fuck you! I hate you, you asshole," before bursting into tears.

## CHAPTER II: PRESSURE

September, 1966, at 13, freshman at SLHS

In the summer of 1966, when I was thirteen, we moved from Saranac to Spring Lake. My father had been offered a partnership in a tool and die shop and, years later, my mother told me that one of their deciding factors about the move was the chance to distance me from the influence of Mary Lou. Saranac, where everyone knew me, what I was and had always been, had felt like a straitjacket. I had hopes for myself in this new and larger place, although I wasn't going alone, since my mother had been hired as one of the high school librarians.

I was scheduled for a drivers' training class at the end of August, right before school started. Every night I dreamt I was driving, and because I had never been behind the wheel of a car before, in the dreams, the only way I could slow or stop the car was to drag my foot on the ground outside the open driver's side door. The afternoon before my training, my father took me over to the nearby high school parking lot, where I drove in circles for an hour or so. My training partner and I, with our instructor Mr. Hall, a heavy, balding, jowly man, who would be my Latin teacher for the next four years, spent several hours a day for the next two weeks stopping at stop signs on residential streets, using our turn signals to change lanes, and, finally, venturing out onto the eastbound expressway for a few miles, before returning home. On the last day of the second week, our final session, my partner drove the twelve miles or so up the northbound expressway to Muskegon and parked triumphantly in the Meijer parking lot. I took the wheel for the drive home down Seaway Drive, a divided four-lane highway spiked with cross streets, not a particularly difficult driving experience, even in traffic, for anyone who has driven for more than a week. In front of me, a Volkswagen beetle's stoplights flared and I applied the brakes, but I

wasn't capable of checking the rearview mirror and changing lanes at the same time. Well, I wasn't capable of any concurrent thought and action, of changing lanes, period, or of steering around an obstacle. Mr. Hall, a very large man, was standing on his instructor's brake pedal while I was standing on my brake pedal and holding a perfectly straight course for the rear of the VW, which almost managed to complete its right turn off the highway before the floor plate of Mr. Hall's brake pedal broke and we sailed gently into its left rear taillight.

I steered the car carefully off onto the shoulder of the busy road, and Mr. Hall got out to go and talk to the driver of the VW. My partner in the back seat said, "That was..." and then, "wow..." and then was silent. I put my forehead down on the steering wheel, and whispered, *shit, shit, shit* to myself while I considered my loss of hope. I would never get a driver's license, I would never make any friends, I would never be cool, I would be the laughing stock of my new school before the first day...

I was given my license, after all, because Mr. Hall said the Volkswagen driver hadn't signaled her turn and the instructors' foot brake pedal had broken and I had been very calm and collected in the aftermath of the accident. I did make friends, with the other band geeks and nerds. We were the debate team, the Honor Society, and the drama club—but the tech crew, not the cool kids who got the leads in shows. We were the readers, shy, even with each other, living solitary, different lives inside our heads. I was carrying around whole worlds inside, of fantasy and science fiction, mystery and detective thrillers, historical romance, the occult, the Holocaust and sex, all highly preferable to the outside self-consciousness of my mouse-like public persona. Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, kept on a shelf behind the desk in the high school library, was available to me, the librarian's daughter, and I would lend it to my friends. None of us were having sex, but we were studying the adult world as hard as we could.

One school day, when I came into the library, my mother, in great gossip-gee, pulled me aside to ask, low-voiced, about the buzz in the teacher's lounge: what girl in Mr. Boinks sociology class discussion that morning had said that maybe prostitution should be legalized? The unholy delight in her face when I told her it had been me was, in my mind, a continuation of what I had thought of in my childhood as her-and-me-against-the-world. I realize now how annoyed she had been by people she saw as narrow-minded or shallow, but, like me, she seldom spoke out her opinions. *Count to ten*, I remember her counseling me, at our kitchen table. I can't imagine my mother's voice without also hearing the pause and indrawn breath of her cigarette inhale, and the slight distortion of a few words spoken through the exhale of smoke, *and then, if you're still mad, count to ten again*. She taught me self-control, but really, she taught us all silence and to leave her alone.

While I was in high school, I thought, because they approved of my academic standing and seemed to talk to me like an adult, that my parents understood me and knew who I really was. Once, on an evening walk with my mother when I was a senior, this sense of empathy misled me into asking her a question like, "what is sex like?" Again and again, I was surprised to be jerked up short, like a dog on a leash, by her defensive shutter slamming down in response to questions like that. "I'm not your friend, I'm your mother," she said. I was wrong to think it was she and I against the world. I know now that she was alone, and my only role was to be her silent companion, and only as long as I remained compliant.

May, 1970, at 17, Spring Lake, MI

By the time I graduated from high school in the spring of 1970, I was more than ready to abandon timid Claire and re-create myself, in Ann Arbor, as Regan, my unused first name.

Sex and drugs were on the top of my experiential agenda. My curiosity was natural, but also driven by my extreme craving to be touched and feel loved. That summer, I began smoking pot with a few people I had gone to high school with, the cool people, most of them a few years older, who had probably never been stirred to say a word to Claire in high school. I, too, was working to get as far from her as I comfortably could. In the fall, I moved into Stockwell Hall, the only remaining all-girls dorm at UM, and registered as a Classics major, taking ancient Greek, history and archaeology. I was thrilled to be out in the world at last.

May, 1971, at 18, Spring Lake, MI

What was I thinking when I left that letter to Carolyn lying open on my dresser? At the end of my freshman year, I had arranged a ride home with Michael Abbot, who I had always had a crush on in high school. On a whim, we had decided to take mescaline before we left Ann Arbor, and drive the entire way across the state to Spring Lake on Grand River Avenue, once a major East-West two-lane highway, but now a clogged artery pumping slowly through every little town across the state. The drive took forever, but we were having a wonderful time, and when we got to Michael's house in Spring Lake, we went to bed and had unprotected sex. I don't remember the sex, just that I woke up in the morning and knew I had to hitchhike back to Ann Arbor to the University health service to get the morning-after pill, which I was sure I could get, since I had it taken once before, the morning after I lost my virginity to that beautiful, blonde Vietnam vet. I remember the trip down and back being quick and efficient—the expressway route, this time. I spent about half an hour in the clinic at U Hospital, walked back out the front door onto Washtenaw Avenue, put my thumb out, and headed back up the highway.

Looking back on it now, as a parent myself, of course I would have been frightened and angry to discover my 18-year-old daughter taking these kinds of risks, but at the time, I was



simply dealing with my life. When I got back, I went home and pretended I had just arrived in town, and, indeed, my parents were very angry. They had been worried because I had said I was coming home the day before, but I kept to my story and insisted that they had been mistaken about the day. Over the next day or so they seemed to settle down, some, but then I wrote that letter telling Carolyn all about my adventure, left it lying out in my room, and my father found it while I was out of the house. When I came home that day, he was still out, driving around town,



looking for Michael's red Volkswagen beetle, and when he got home, he told me he had found one and run it off the road. I wasn't in it, so he had gone to the police station and given them Michael's name and mine and those of all our friends he could remember, reporting that we were using drugs.

While waiting for me, he had broken the glass out of the copy of the framed family portrait on the desk in my room and torn the photo in two, leaving the pieces lying next to my letter. I taped up the photo and put it back into the frame and it's still

that way, on the bookshelf in my living room—unprotected by glass, its mended rip visible, if you look closely. That summer, I lived at home and worked as a cashier at the Holiday Inn, and

we made it through until fall, somehow, when I moved back out and into a farmhouse outside of Ann Arbor with a group of my friends, including my then-boyfriend. My parents then announced that the only way they would continue to pay for my school was if I would move into a studio apartment of my own, which with great resentment, I did, for one semester, protesting all the way that my grades were good and that was what they were paying for, after all. At the end of the term I gave up the studio, where I seldom stayed, anyway, and moved back onto the farm with my friends. My parents gave me a final ultimatum, and in a dramatic show-down, I eloquently replied, "Fuck your money." Having left themselves no alternative, my parents cut off my school funds and I was forced to look for a job. I wound up working as a greeter at Meijer, my first real, self-supporting full-time job, and that fall, for the first time in my memory, while everyone I knew went back to class, I just kept going to my job. I was miserable, but too angry to back down. It wouldn't have worked, anyway. My mother wasn't speaking to me.

As it happened, the most intense upheavals of the 60s were winding down, and the 70s would soon shift into a different cultural climate, but while you're being driven through an era, it isn't possible to anticipate and brace yourself for the speeding and slowing and turning of the ride. For all we knew then, the boiling, angry upset of the late 60s would go on and on and on, faster, and more out of control. I know that my parents, and their entire generation were scared, and their response was anger, but I wasn't scared, not a bit. I was riding along. I trusted my friends, who listened to me, not my parents, who didn't.

I learned first hand about that parental fear when it was my turn. I was appropriately afraid for my younger daughter, Leah, at that age, although we had always talked and I had always believed what she told me. I was afraid because I couldn't believe she always understood everything she might be getting herself into, but I did, at least, know and understand that she

wasn't self-destructive, and I knew that because she never stopped talking to me. Of course, the major difference between my parents and me was that I expected that she would do drugs and have sex, so I concentrated on convincing her to wait as long as possible for those experiences. Apparently, my parents had been living through-the-looking-glass about me, really believing that they could manage to rule adolescents in the 1960s and 70s by the standards they themselves had been ruled by in the 1940s. The idea still makes me angry, not at the difference in the expected behaviors of the generations—many young people my age never rebelled, and their parents were never put between the rock and the hard place of accepting new limits of their authority, or losing their children. I am still incredulous, though, that so many of my parents' generation never recognized that the social changes manifesting so uncomfortably in their children and their homes were real, and that they could not send the genie of social change back into the bottle with a parental dictum.

I used to be angry and hurt that my parents didn't know me well enough that they would think that I was self-destructive, that they didn't or couldn't believe me when I said I was okay. I see now that they could never have come to believe that I was okay, since nothing that was going on, for their half of the American population, was okay. We were all going to hell in a handbasket, as the saying went, and they might have really thought that the pendulum would swing back and crush us all, with Dick Nixon riding on the front. But, technically, my parents didn't believe in Hell, and I think by the 1970s they had completed their transformation from Eisenhower Republicans to Kennedy-esque Democrats, considering themselves socially and politically liberal. No, I can no longer rationalize their reaction to me as mostly fear for my welfare. My guilt over the years had magnified for me the terrible pain I must have put them through. I know that was part of it, but most of what my parents felt, especially my mother, I'm afraid, was simply rage that I wouldn't do what I was told.

April, 1974, at 21, Ann Arbor, MI

In the spring of 1974, thanks to student loans, I was back in school, re-invented as a religion major. The streets of Ann Arbor were thick with alternative ways to see the world. Years before, during my first weeks in town, late one night, I had been with a friend down on the Campus Corners end of State street when we had been stopped by a small, older lady who had asked us directions to Chabad House in a thick Eastern-European accent. Small-town Mid-Western girls, we had no idea what she had been talking about—had never heard of the Hasadim—but we had obligingly walked up and down the block, examining the street numbers and finally knocking on doors until we had found the place, hiding in plain sight.

I knew my town, by now, how much was there, if I opened my eyes. I knew, now, about Lubavitcher and Kabbalah, and that Mohammed at the Persian rug store was Bahai. I'd been preached to by Moonies, and eaten with the Krishnas. John, leader of The Children of God, preached on South University near the Engineering Arch, always wearing that long black cape with the red lining. I enjoyed listening to him when he got a grip on someone, but I made sure to keep myself out of his line of sight.

A few years before, I had picked a paperback copy of a scary looking book off the circular wire rack in the store across from John's preaching corner. I bought it because I saw on the first page that the main character had my name. That book, *The Exorcist*, terrifying as it was, hadn't shaken me as much as Carlos Castaneda was doing. I didn't believe in the religion of *The Exorcist*, but the limitless world of the mind, whether haphazardly accessed by drugs or deliberately entered and perhaps controlled by meditation or by personal power was fascinating to me. It's not a huge step from studying classics to studying religion, but the change felt

profound to me, the difference between the precise control of the grid at an archaeological dig, and jumping off a cliff, looking for, what? I didn't think God, at that point, but just:

What's Out There.

### INTERLUDE III

#### REGAN'S SHOP, FRIDAY MORNING

The Facebook icon on Regan's iPhone shows a red circle with the number 3 in it, which she has been ignoring with the typical self-control of an addictive personality—that is, while trying to focus on cutting a base plate for the knife rack she has promised Jeff she will install above the kitchen backsplash, *this morning*, she has pulled the phone out of her pocket every few minutes to stare at the number 3. While she watches, now, it blinks into a number 4. She shoves the phone back into her pocket and flips the switch on the table saw. *After the knife rack is installed and the tools put away, she decides, I'll see who's looking to talk to me.*



GINGER: Claire, I want to apologize.

REGAN: I appreciate that, but I'm the one who lost my temper, so I'm sorry, too. I just don't understand any of this. What do you want, Mom? In fact, I'm back to doubting that you really are my mother. How many times, when I would try to apologize to you, did you tell me that apologies don't fix anything? That, once respect was lost, you could never get it back? The mother I knew never compromised.

GINGER: Well, I've changed.

REGAN: Hahaha! Good one! ☺ See these cute little faces you can make in the digital world?

Yes, you have changed. Probably, the lack of a body is useful. No more hunger, tiredness, pain, hormones, brain chemistry imbalances, addictions...if you want to stick around, I could

maybe start a psychology degree. You could be a secret advisor on my body/mind research.

GINGER: We'll see. I don't feel tiredness, but I do feel thinly charged. I doubt I'll be here all that long.

REGAN: Then, really, Mom, what do you want? And why would you want anything any more? I feel like all of my wants are driven by my chemistry.

GINGER: I want to feel smoothed out. Right now, I'm all ruffled up, and I want to put some effort into getting things straightened, and that apparently involves putting up with your humor.

REGAN: Well, I'll take it as progress that you find me funny.

GINGER: I only said your humor, Claire, not that I find it funny.

REGAN: Touche. You're a piece of work, Mom. But neither one of us is as defensive as we used to be. I'll try not to swear, and you can try not to be mean, and maybe we can smooth some stuff out.

GINGER: When was I mean? I only called your language vulgar, which it is.

REGAN: It wasn't that. It was your being nasty about "the real me." I know you were always dismissive about my generation and our need to "find ourselves," but you could try to see that language as just the code we used at that time for the process of growing up.

GINGER: There was nothing grownup about the way you were acting, then.

REGAN: Maybe not, but I think that young people don't really grow up until parents start treating them like adults. I'll give you this, Mom, and I think I've told you this before: I never really had an issue with the tough-love approach. You told me the deal, take it or leave it, and I chose to leave it. I didn't mind being made to live with the consequences of that

choice, which was that I had to grow up and take care of myself. It was good for me. But I did mind the baby=with-the-bathwater emotional punishment.

GINGER: I remember telling you that we had decided that we probably were wrong to cut you off.

REGAN: You did tell me that, and I've always appreciated hearing it. Having to drop out of school was hard, and I wish I hadn't. I would have had a different life if I had finished my undergrad back in my twenties, instead of my fifties, but that's all on me. I made my life choices, and some of them have been stupid. But like I just said, it was being emotionally exiled that was unfair. For God's sake, after we moved back to Michigan you took Jeff out to lunch, told him about our big fight when I was *fucking nineteen years old*, and when he said that had been almost fifteen years ago, you told him you would ***never forgive me***. I was 33 years old, with a husband and two daughters and you were never forgiving me for defying you when I was still a punk kid?

REGAN: Sorry. I'm sorry I swore, just now. I know I disappointed you, then.

GINGER: You're probably right about the benefits of having no body. I'm much less reactionary in this state. You are a mess, though. Are you taking hormone replacements, still?



### CHAPTER III: KING OF HEARTS

April, 1974, at 21, Ann Arbor, MI

I fell in love with Alan because he was the smartest person in my Buddhism class. I couldn't believe the way I would read and pore over the text, drawing my ideas in circles connected by arrows, finally to agonizingly scrape out an A on the one page essay required at every class meeting. Alan always got an A, too, but I knew since we'd begun hanging out together that he wrote his essays in twenty minutes, either the last thing before bed at night or first thing in the morning. His father was a professor at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. I'd never seen Princeton, or anywhere on the East Coast. We decided together that we'd take the plane ticket money his parents sent him to come home for the summer, and use it to finance driving together, first to Princeton to see his parents, and then to Amherst, Massachusetts, to live for the summer with his good friends Nancy and Jim and Michael. We'd drive my car, the '63 Chevy Biscayne my father bought me at the end of my freshman year; I would take my essentials: my dog Nikos and my portable sewing machine. It would be an adventure.

Things started well. I was excited about the trip, and about Alan, who'd done so much more, been to so many more places, just *was* so much more than I was. My obsessive reading since I was four had created a picture of adventure in my head: a strange mixture of *The Odyssey*, the Edgar Rice Burroughs *Tarzan* novels, Leslie Charteris' *The Saint* and Dorothy Sayer's Peter Wimsey crime mysteries, Tolkien's Middle Earth, Thor Heyerdahl's Pacific raft adventure *Kon-Tiki*, and bizarrely, all the Holocaust literature I devoured in high school. I loved my car, though I had been originally mortified by it. It was a big, flattened, chocolate brown rectangle with a

white top and tasteful fins. I adored my dog, whom I'd raised from a small black and white fuzzball puppy with a long pipe-handle of a nose. He was named after Nikos Kazantzakis, who had written *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and *The Odyssey, A Modern Sequel*.

I had everything I needed for this trip except the self-confidence of experience. I'd been making the occasional solo drive from Ann Arbor to my parents' home in Spring Lake, not often, it's true, because of the level of emotional discomfort between us, but, really, that was the only independent traveling I'd done. Like everyone from Michigan, I'd been to Canada quite a few times, to the UP, and for two weeks of the summer before my senior year in high school I'd gone to Greece and Rome on a study tour group, but all that travel had been supervised. Since I'd been in Ann Arbor, I'd not only met people from around the world, but even more impressively, from the East and West Coasts. I was about to expand myself.

The learning began almost immediately. Since this was my first driving trip East, I didn't yet know that the route I had chosen was a mistake. I was at the wheel, white-knuckled and regretful, as we came over the bridge from Ontario to meet Buffalo, New York at rush hour. I only then realized that I just wasn't ready to drive in that kind of traffic. What had I been thinking? I didn't want to be a little girl and admit I couldn't do it, but the next second, when I tore my eyes for a moment away from the pinball game of high-speed cars, I was horrified to see Alan in a fetal curl on the passenger-side floor board.

April, 1974, Princeton, NJ

When we got to Princeton, Alan went into his room, and wouldn't come out. I could come in, he could talk to me, but he was in a panic of anxiety and couldn't come out. I ate meals with his wonderful parents, I sat in his father's study and talked for hours to his mother. I deeply

envied his life in this family, in this house, with these books and this education, but not his psychological breakdown. His mother kindly told me how much they liked me, but, surely, I could see that I couldn't stay with them indefinitely. Secretly, I was crushed. I didn't want to venture out from this haven, but I made plans to continue to Amherst. Where else could I have gone?

Out on the turnpike, in my head, I didn't really believe I was going to die at any second, but all the adrenaline had my body convinced. I told myself that all these thousands of people drove this road this fast, every day, all day long, and they could clearly see me driving here, me and Nikos and the sewing machine in the trunk. Well, they couldn't see that, and they wouldn't, because it was not going to be lying out on top of a pile of twisted chocolate brown metal for them to gawk at while driving slowly by, or slower, at least.

I was wound up so tight, and I had no stamina for this kind of tension, so I edged timidly into the far right lane and, with relief, began to slow for the exit. Nikos needed water, and I had earned a break. I steered into a strip mall, and slid the car into a parking slot in front of a Chinese restaurant and an auto parts store, but when I braked, my foot fell all the way to the floor panel. The front tires bounced gently off the sidewalk curb. I slowly pushed the gear shift on the steering column into PARK and stared at my foot as I first lifted it off the flaccid brake pedal and then pressed it again into the floor. Moments ago, I had been out in the middle of that roaring eighty-mile-an-hour stream of metal, not exactly keeping up, it's true, but not completely losing it, while traffic had flowed around me on both sides. Now, I was sitting in a strip mall beside the New Jersey Turnpike with \$84 to my name. My dog was thirsty, but we weren't mangled corpses being gawped at. We were in front of an auto parts store.

The guys in the auto parts store were engrossed in my plight. They dug out a Chilton's manual for my Chevy and the tools I would need, and had shown me diagrams of how the brake line connects and what I was supposed to do, which was fairly straightforward: take out the old line, put in the new one, add brake fluid to the reservoir, bleed the lines, and I'd be good to go. But, I couldn't get the old line off. It was an old car, and there was a lot of rust under there. Nikos had had a drink and was watching me from the back seat, either my legs sticking out from under the car, or squatting among the borrowed tools next to the car, or back in the store, in conference with my advisors, who decided, after the failure of the penetrating oil, and the filing down of some flat sides on the nut that I had stripped round, that I might be able to break the rusted part loose with the application of heat. The whole idea of being under my car with a propane torch had me completely spooked, but the guys were off-hand. I did realize that I was their floor show, but they were also being genuinely kind, at least, I didn't believe they meant for me to blow myself up in a fireball in front of their store. Probably they all crawled under *their* cars with torches. I could do it, if they could. I just needed to suck it up, and not girl out.

My imagination was just too good. I was writing the headlines in my head: *Young Woman and Collie Friend Immolated at Jersey Strip Mall*. Or, I was being a baby. *Just get under there and do it, you fucking pussy! Just get it done, already, and get on the road, because we can't stay here!*

I crawled under to examine the brake line for the tenth time, but this time, I lit the torch. I was shaking as I held the flame to the metal, then pointed it awkwardly away as I tried to alternately use the wrench with one hand then apply the torch again. There was a sudden, very loud bang right next to my head, and in the next second I found myself standing, with no

memory of having moved, holding the still-lit torch, ten feet away from the car. The car had not blown up, but the hydraulic fluid in the brake line I had been heating had expanded, and it had blown up, which had exposed the nub of recalcitrant threaded metal I'd been struggling so hard to get a purchase on.

Beyond fear now, I attacked the nub with everything I had, and it turned under my borrowed wrench. I soon had the new line on, fluid in the reservoir, bled the lines, thank you, thank you, to my inside helpers. *You guys didn't come out to do the job for me, but I'm glad of that, now.* I was riding high on having done it myself, and I'd also had one of my first demonstrations of an awareness that I will have to reteach myself repeatedly in the years to come:

*Sometimes to get the job done, you have to stop circling, and just wale on it.*

May, 1974, Amherst, MA

I was happy there in Amherst, living with Alan's friends, my friends, now, since the night I had showed up at their door and announced, *Hi, I'm Regan, and I've come to live with you.* I was working at the GNC in the mall down the highway in Northampton. Nancy was working on batch recipes for health bars for the natural foods bakery she intended to open, and she and Jim were looking at land to buy in Vermont. We were all trying not to pay too much attention to Watergate. We hated Nixon and distrusted the government and big business as a matter of course, but we didn't have a TV, anyway. Instead, we played two on two basketball for several hours every day, and I had a card for the UMass library.

I fell asleep one Saturday afternoon in the field near our house, and in my dream I met my father on the downtown street in Saranac.

*It is evening, and he has been hunting for me all day. "Come on along, now, and have some supper," he says. I go to the truck with him and my brothers are there, and my mother, but when she sees me she gets out and goes around to the back of the truck. I think she must be still very angry with me. I look into the truck from the cab, and I see it is very large and tall like a moving van and it is filled with things. I think they are mine.*

---

I missed Alan. I realized by then that he was a bit of a wussy baby, or, maybe he was just too deeply gentle and spiritual and sensitive for this world. Nancy and Jim and Michael told me he had been hospitalized a few years ago in a private clinic where he had been analyzed and fussed over, but then the insurance had run out, and he had had to go to Trenton State. It had been bad there, and he had straightened himself out quickly, and gone back to school. He and Nancy both had done mega-vitamin therapy, which Nancy said saved her life. Back in New Jersey, Nancy and Jim and Michael had all worked together at a private psychiatric clinic near Princeton, and they all thought I could get a job there, so I could move back to be near Alan.

July, 1974, Princeton, NJ

So, I applied to the Carrier Clinic in Belle Meade, they hired me, and I packed Nikos and the sewing machine and the books, drove back down the Turnpike and found a room in a house in the country with four Princeton students. At the clinic, I was impressed by the full week of orientation and training given us, and by the evidence of money there. The grounds were lovely, wooded and well kept, the buildings and facilities were modern and pleasant. When I was scheduled on the day shift I mostly rode the ten speed I had bought in Amherst the seven miles to work and back.

I had known what I was getting into when I had hired in there. The ward I was placed on had thirty two patients, most of them moderately to severely depressed. Some were just old and sad, some were young and melancholy. All of them had electro-convulsive therapy treatments scheduled twice a week, and it was part of my job to assist. I didn't know how I actually felt about this. I mostly hated it because it seemed so hard on the patients, and I didn't want to believe that it worked. A lot of my notions about mental illness were still informed by books and movies like *The King of Hearts*, which I didn't yet recognize as allegorical. I wanted to believe that with enough love and care, everyone, especially me, could be healed. There wasn't a lot of external drama around the process, though. On treatment days, which were most days, since only half of the patients were treated at a time on alternate days, I needed to prep the rooms, that is, make the beds and check and restock the carts, if necessary, and then prep the patients, which meant go and find them and bring them to the rooms in good time for the docs to make their swing through. The patients saw their psychiatrists during appointments off the ward, but we, the aides, only saw the 'trists, as they were known, during this ritualized daily sortie.

All this had been well explained to us during orientation. Treatment didn't hurt. The first thing the doctor did was give the patient a shot of sodium pentothal which acted as a short-term anesthetic, then he (all the doctors were men while I worked there) inserted an airway, then gave a second injection of a powerful muscle relaxant to dampen the physical effects of the seizure. I helped the nurse strap the band around the patient's head, apply the conducting jelly to the electrodes and position them correctly on the temples. The nurse checked the patient's vitals, the doctor checked the machine, and I lifted the patient's hands and folded them on top of each other on his or her chest. Then I stood and placed both my hands on top of the patient's hands and leaned my weight on them.

The doctor pressed the button on the machine and the patient's face scrunched up for three or four seconds, his or her toes curled and torso stiffened, and then, off came the electrodes, I gently wiped off the jelly, the nurse checked vitals again while the doc briefly administered oxygen to encourage the body to begin to breathe on its own after the atropine. The 'trist stayed until the patient was breathing on his or her own, then he was off into the next room.

It all took less than fifteen minutes, not counting the coaxing people into the room and waking them up afterward, which were my and the other aides' responsibilities. Rounding them up for treatment was the worst for me. Nobody wanted to go, but they did because of how gently and sweetly we promised them, again and again, that everything was okay, that everything would be okay, that they would be okay. I had serious doubts about whether I was lying to them, because when they woke up in the treatment bed after their bodies had remembered how to breathe alone, they didn't remember where they were, or who they were.

*We* were who and what they experienced when they woke, our faces and voices and some orange juice and toast. We told them where they were, what their names were, and why they were there, and they had to believe us. Most of them began to remember on their own by the time the snack was over, and they shuffled off to their rooms, their own spaces in the world of the ward. Occasionally, the confusion hung on longer. There was one man on the ward who'd been lost for months.

Anytime I wasn't working at the Clinic, I spent with Alan, at his parents' house in Princeton, talking about consciousness and meditation. He was feeling better, but didn't want to leave the safety of his room to return to school in the fall. As we walked around his neighborhood and he pointed out the houses of famous Princeton professors and scholars, I struggled with my anxiety about what I should do. I had no loans arranged for school, and no real



career options to pay back the debts I already had. I was trying hard to figure out what else I was good for.

The Biscayne was showing her age. One day while we were out, Alan got back into the car and there was a distinct crunch from somewhere underneath, as the passenger side of the front seat settled slightly lower. I crawled under, and saw that the frame was rusted and a weld had broken under that side. There wasn't anything I could do but put a cardboard box on the front passenger seat as a warning not to sit there. There were also bad noises starting to happen from around the center underneath area. Mark, part of my Princeton housemates' extended gang, was working for his father as an electrician and had access to tools, so I borrowed another Chilton's and spent a day replacing the center universal joint.

One of the pitfalls of teaching yourself anything is coping with the results of your own ignorance of what's important. As it turned out, in mechanics, every action you take is important. If you strip a screw, it will fail, eventually, and about a week after my repair, I was driving home from work and the Biscayne died beside the road. Underneath, I saw the rear of the drive train resting on the ground. I'd damaged the rear u-bolts reattaching that end—I remembered forcing the nuts on and realized what I'd done.

I hitched into town and got two new u-bolts. Luckily, it was the rear bolts that had failed, since if the front of the drive train had fallen, it would have been driven into the ground by the car's forward motion and I would have had a lot more to fix. As it was, my worst moment was when the cap came off one end of the universal joint and a bunch of tiny needle bearings dropped into the dirt. I didn't panic. Lying in the dirt under my car beside a country road, I found every one. I wiped off every grain of dirt, fit the bearings carefully back into the joint, smeared the lithium grease over them with my finger, and put the cover on. I methodically attached each

u-bolt nut, not rushing. The whole operation took me about an hour, and I realized the correct mental state for mechanics is meditative, not anxious.

I couldn't cope with the sadness of the shock treatments any longer, and asked for a transfer to the acute ward. This was a whole new world: these people weren't in defeated retreat from the world, they were operating at right angles from the rest of us. Some of them were drug-addled, some genuinely psychotic, and most were angry at someone, something, the world they couldn't fit into. Their janglely, manic energy felt sort of familiar. It was the same off-kilter, dangerous energy that came off every Vietnam veteran I'd known, and that of John, the preacher for The Children of God. I liked it there. I recognized my own anger and fear in them.

Without warning, one day, Alan told me he had decided to go back to Ann Arbor to school, and within days, he was gone. I maybe should have considered this, but it hadn't occurred to me. Despite his mental unmooring, it was Alan who was still on the grid, and me who was drifting. Mark gave me a manual of house wiring, and offered me a job as an electrician, Nanc and Jim and Mike told me to come back to Amherst. Nikos didn't care. He was happy where I was.

*I dream I am in my old house in Saranac with Alan, and we are listening to the birds calling outside the windows. In the dream, Alan says he wishes he could hear them and understand them better and then I notice that he is holding a sort of microphone out the window and birdsong is coming out of a recorder to attract the birds outside. I can hear them singing back. I stick my head out the window and see a nest on the side of the house with eggs in it. Then I am outside and there is a large group of town people looking at the nest. They are exclaiming over it and when they all leave I go up and look in the nest and all the eggs are gone. I am very angry and go running after the people and stop them all and ask who took the eggs? I want them to go back*

*to the nest and put the eggs back and I explain very angrily, still, that if they took those eggs home they would just end up in the jar with the rubber bands or in the junk drawer in the kitchen, and I see some of the women smile in agreement, and then I tell them all that if the eggs stay in the nest, the next time they come back they could see baby birds. One of the women starts to argue with me, telling me that it's all my fault for not showing the training film earlier like I was supposed to.*

---

Back in Michigan in his tool and die shop, my father and I pulled the front seats from the Biscayne and took up the floor covering. We cut out the rusted sheet metal and supported the frame as he welded it back in place, then cut a clean, new piece of sheet steel for the passenger floor. He let me do the welds on that. While we worked, I hinted that I'd like to go back to school, but he didn't respond. I didn't expect him to. My mother was still leaving a room when I came into it. I went back to Ann Arbor and crashed on the dining room floor of the house I had left in the spring. It would be three years before I got back into school, part time, while I was working full time at Ypsilanti State Hospital.

In bed one night, soon after I returned, Alan asked me if I had slept with anyone in New Jersey after he had left. In keeping with our policy of full honesty, I answered, truthfully, that one of my Princeton housemates who had maintained a crush on me the whole time I had lived there had crept into my bed one night and had begged me to let him stay, promising he wouldn't try anything, and he hadn't, I assured Alan, who sat up in bed, anyway, and slapped my face, hard. I was so shocked, I slapped him back, also hard, got out of bed, got dressed, collected my things and left. I never saw or talked to him again, though I heard from Nancy and Jim, in later years, that he was working for Amnesty International.

## INTERLUDE IV

### REGAN'S OFFICE, EVENING

GINGER: I am glad you're back in school, Claire. You seem happy with your little friends.

REGAN: I'm going to assume that was a joke.

GINGER: It was. I don't appreciate all the crudity of language, of course, but I do admit that many of the conversations going on and the articles being passed around are very interesting.

REGAN: They are. That's what I found the most difficult all those years I was just working and it was hard to find friends interested in the same things I was. The most I could usually manage was discussions about movies and popular fiction, and I wasn't reading much challenging non-fiction, anyway. I've always had highly educated friends, but some subjects you need to study to be able to converse about.

GINGER: I always enjoyed being in school.

REGAN: It's very impressive to me that you got your Masters one class at a time, and while we were still pretty young.

GINGER: I did that six-week summer session in Ann Arbor. That was fun. I was lucky we were in Saranac and your grandmother and Mary Lou could help with you kids, although, over all, that was a mixed blessing.

REGAN: Are you being a bit hypocritical? I remember being told *repeatedly* that you would *not* babysit my kids.

GINGER: I suppose I am. But you need to draw the line. I also told you, frankly, that I didn't like kids.

REGAN: And I didn't take offense. I knew you didn't like kids. It was probably a relief when we grew up. I'm just pointing out that you did reap some life advantages from your family helping you achieve your goals.

GINGER: I gave you a lot of money over the years.

REGAN: Yes, you did, and thank you again. We really needed it, back then. And I'm not complaining about my life. I made my choices. I actually still remember the lecture from while I was in high school: *If You Get Pregnant, Your Life Will Be Over*.

GINGER: Well, that is basically how it works.

REGAN: You probably never listened, but I know I must have told you this more than once: I never had an abortion and both my babies were planned, even if the plans for Maggie got very complicated. Also, as long as I'm reiterating old life lists: I've never been on welfare, not even unemployment, I've always found a job, and, for the record, I never took heroin or worked as a prostitute.

GINGER: Although, I seem to remember you took a lot of other drugs, and bragged about it, too, and I don't want to talk about your sex life.

REGAN: Good, because I have no intention of telling you about it. And I wasn't bragging.

## CHAPTER IV: CRYING HAVOC

### The Capes

April, 1975, at 22, Ann Arbor, MI

I had met Loney at the 1972 Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festival. His hair was longer and prettier than mine and his beard was red. He had showed me his business card, a photo of one of the lathe-turned candlesticks he sold at art fairs and he had told me about his big 750 BMW motorcycle and the log cabin on seventy-five acres of back-country land on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia he had just built. I had been dazzled by him. When his girlfriend Claudia had introduced us, I had noticed the way his attention had focused on me. He had been hard to ignore. We had spent some time talking that day, sitting in the sun on the grass, listening to Miles Davis and Otis Rush, surrounded by the crowd. Occasionally then, I'd seen him around town or when I had hung out at my friend Larry's. Larry had been in love with his friend Claudia, Claudia had been in love with Loney, and it was pretty clear to me, in those early days, that Loney was in love with himself, but he was undeniably charming. He and Claudia split up while my boyfriend and I were also in break-up mode and Loney turned his full attention onto me. I just defenselessly went up in flames.

He welded a tow bar in the shop at Eastern, which we bolted onto the front frame of my old Biscayne, and hitched to his car. We drove out of Michigan on the same route I had followed the year before with Alan, Loney with his tools and this and that, and I with my sewing machine and Nikos and a different box of books, this time. We were headed for Cape Cod to paint houses for the summer and amass some cash before continuing on to the cabin on Cape Breton. Only a few weeks had shifted how I saw Loney. Obsession had created a new reality.

## Cape Cod, MA

I was *sooo* happy. Cartoon Disney bluebirds were flying around my head when I stepped out onto the back porch of the big, old Cape Cod cottage owned by a friend of Loney's family that we were painting in exchange for living there for the summer. He and I scraped down the whole house, then Loney painted the siding, production painting, while I painted the detail, the eight-over-eight window sash the way he taught me.

As a painter, you have to be brave with heights, and I was busily repainting over all my timid Claire years. I was still too young and inexperienced to believe that I could ever really die, or even fail, while my heart was still pure. This house had an upstairs bathroom window we just couldn't figure out how to reach with our one extension ladder, until we laid the ladder across the fulcrum of the lower roof, like a teeter-totter. Loney sat on one side of the ladder while I crept out to the other end and sat and painted the window, legs dangling, floating twenty-five feet in the air, neither me or the ladder attached or secure, held only by Loney's weight as a counterbalance on the other side of the ladder.

Within our first week on the Cape, Fran and Ricky arrived from Novi, Michigan. I had met Fran and her husband, Loney's best friend Rick, before. Rick was another wild-child boy, though his long, pretty hair was blonde. Their marriage was now in pieces, and Fran and four-year-old Ricky were the flotsam washing up on our Cape Cod cottage shore. Fran and I got along, right away, and the four of us settled in for the summer. Loney and I had impressed our Boston businessman neighbor with the quality of our work and attention to detail, and he had hired us to paint the exterior of and some interiors in their cottage across the street, and we spent a week in Boston painting the interiors of a Beacon Hill apartment.

June, 1975, Cape Cod, MA

Loney, it now appeared, was planning, or had been planning all along, to meet his former girlfriend Claudia in Nova Scotia. We decided that I would stay behind on the Cape to finish the motel job we'd begun: seventy-five wooden windows to re-glaze, prime, and paint. It would take me at least a month to finish, plenty of time for whatever was going to happen in Nova Scotia to happen. And what was happening here? Loney and Fran were spending time, spinning up some obvious sexual energy together. It had only taken about six weeks for my pretty little internal world to thin and waver.

Even now, all of my anger has an element of self-loathing. I suppose I was angry at myself as well as at Loney. After all, I had been able to see, before, how he was. I had just let myself be blinded by the hero fiction I had spun up and tossed over him. Well, we all do that about the objects of our desire, more or less, and then most of us try to blame those objects when the mask begins to slip off.

But, I couldn't stand the feeling of evaporation of that great, wonderful, tripped-out love as I watched Loney and Fran flirt. Loney and I were working long hours painting every day and were tired at night, but he began staying up, occasionally, after I said good night, and I began to be afraid of what they were saying and doing down in the living room while I lay in bed, waiting and imagining and digging myself deeper into a pit of insecurity and despair.

I was sitting on the foot of the bed when he came in, smiling at me, that pretty man. I still believed, at that age, in honest, idealistic rhetoric, that all problems could and should be reasoned and loved away. I don't remember what I said, but he was all charm and denial. I'd felt that before, with Loney, that I was speaking one language, and he another, that we were separated by glass that kept him from understanding me, but I hadn't, before that night, felt as voiceless as in



a nightmare. I hadn't yet had much experience with crying havoc and letting slip my dogs of war. I'd been taught silence and endurance, but I'd also seen my father's rages and felt my mother's cold enmity. As I tried to tell Loney how I felt, I had begun to cry and then to become afraid when he couldn't or wouldn't understand or acknowledge what I was saying, and then, a moment came when a tide rose up in me. I wasn't overcome by it, no, I felt the choice to hold on or to let go, and I decided to give in to it and let go. It was almost sexual. I didn't decide to put my fist through the window, but I did choose to let the moment take me, and that's what happened.

We couldn't stop the bleeding. Loney and Fran were frantic. Loney drove me to the emergency room, where the young intern on duty made hard eye contact with me and I stared back at him from my stone-cold calm, while he stitched me up. The scar is a three-quarter inch, raised white thread along the base of my thumb, flanked by four raised pairs of dots. I had just learned the only way I would ever win an argument with Loney, and I didn't know it, yet—I would spend years denying it to myself—but I didn't believe in my fiction of him any more.

Loney left for Nova Scotia, and I painted all day long, every day, ate soda crackers for dinner and drank in the bar, watching the same band every night while I thought about Loney and Claudia together. With Loney gone, Fran and I slipped easily back into best girlfriend mode, but I was miserable, smashing myself around on the rocks of destructive depression. At 2 am one morning, I brazenly knocked on the band's lead singer's door, which Bruce opened, looked at me standing there, said, "Oh, thank God," and took me to bed. It was the absolute best thing anyone had ever said to me.

Far from reaping the punishment that could have resulted from such reckless, self-destructive promiscuity, I was suddenly happy again. We were happy together. The sun seemed

to be shining in our windows all the time, our morning coffee tasted wonderful, and Bruce would remark casually to his bandmates and Fran about how comfortably we slept like spoons together. During the days, I glazed and painted windows at the motel while the band practiced and at night at the bar, I said to the bouncers, "I'm with the band." On our days off we went to Provincetown and worked on the Biscayne. I felt secure and happy. I felt comfortable, like I knew this person and he knew me, but I was still preparing to go on to Nova Scotia when I finished my job. Bruce's stepfather owned a garage and he had worked there as a mechanic. Together, we pulled the old leaky radiator in the Biscayne, installed the replacement we had found at a junkyard, and tuned the engine. I celebrated my 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday on the Cape, then I loaded up my sewing machine and Nikos, kissed Bruce and Fran goodbye and drove north.

October, 1975, Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia

It took me two days to arrive on Cape Breton, because I had been stopped at the Canadian border. Loney had warned me about Canadian immigration, that they would examine my documents and ask how long I was staying and how much money I had with me. In the late 60s and early 70s, Canada had grown into a Shangri-La of affordable land and national health service in the minds of counterculture hippies interested in a life of self-sufficiency and in escaping the crassness and strife of



a United States that had been embroiled in Vietnam and Watergate for the whole of our young-adult years. Loney had bought 75 back-country acres, accessible only by a logging road, for \$70 an acre, with the plan to apply for Landed Immigrant status and move up there to live. The Canadian border officials weren't as concerned about my potential defection to Canada as with Nikos' lack of a rabies vaccination certificate, so Nikos and I had to sleep in a field outside of Woodstock, Maine until morning, before we could find a vet to give him a shot and me the piece of paper and we could continue on.

Loney was very happy to see me, loving and attentive, and we didn't discuss Claudia's visit, or Bruce. I loved Cape Breton Island and I loved everything about being at the cabin, the mile and a half walk from the farming valley, hauling water from the artesian well, cooking on the green and white enameled cookstove that was both kitchen and heat source, the artistry of Loney's construction: the skylights, stained glass, and bay windows, the beauty of land visible



from a seat on the porch, and the silence and loneliness at night under the stars. I wanted to stay there forever.

The second summer, we built a fieldstone chimney to replace the stovepipe through the log wall. We had worked both Chris' haying, and Herman's as well, and the following Sunday, as we sat on the porch with our coffee, we heard the sound of a tractor down on our road. We had learned to tidy up for potential company on Sundays, the only day off for the hard-working farmers of our valley. That Sunday, the tractor was carrying Herman and Anne and both their little boys, a packed lunch, and was pulling a wagon loaded with cement blocks,

enough for our chimney and the foundation of the shed we would build the following year.

Reciprocation of labor hadn't been discussed. We had provided extra hands with the haying and Herman had seen a need in our building materials he could fill. This work ethic and reticence reminded me of my father, who had also been raised on a farm, by his grandmother and uncles, and, who would be able to out-work me well into his eighties.

January 1977, Ypsi State Hospital, Ypsilanti, MI

After almost two years of house painting with Loney, I was tired. It was a perfect job for transients, which we were, since after we had returned to Ann Arbor in December of our first year in Nova Scotia, we had spent the rest of the winter painting until we had enough cash in hand and enough recycled windows and other building materials collected into the 4X4 pickup truck we had bought. Our pattern was to drive up to Cape Breton and stay, working on the cabin, until we ran out of cash and it got too cold. But, the distance between Michigan and Nova Scotia was too far to continue to commute. We needed a transition plan. Loney re-enrolled full time at Eastern Michigan University in an Industrial Arts Education program and I took the civil service exam and was hired as an aide on a ward at Ypsilanti State Hospital. Our long-term plan was that Loney would get his teaching certificate and then we would move to New England, cutting our travel distance to Cape Breton by more than half.

Into the Fire

Loney was three years older than me and had more experience and real-world skills, which made him seem, not only older, but more mature than I felt. He also had an insatiable need for attention, my attention and everyone's around. He was an organizer, a life of the party guy, popular and extroverted. In his orbit, I was reserved and silent, by comparison. Long used to

struggling with my own lack of focus and attention, I was both attracted and repelled by Loney's energy. He was always busy, busy, doing or planning something, and he wanted me with him and involved, constantly. Used to the solitude and emotional independence expected in my family, I found this existence exhausting and intrusive. I loved Loney's family, his parents and sister, but the way they flung their emotions and freely attacked each other at the dinner table had more than once sent me off to hide, crying, up in the tree house in their Detroit back yard. At home with Loney on my days off from the hospital, I wanted to escape all day into a book, not draw plans for a windmill or build toolchests for the truck. I felt childish and lazy, and ashamed of my petulance and need to be alone, and my worry and sense of superiority that Loney didn't read much of anything. At 24, I thought I should be ready to settle down and commit to the relationship and my responsibilities and our plans, even though, at the same time, I often longed to just get away.

October 1977, at 25, Townsend, TN

I was staring out at the creek outside the windows of the cabin when I called my parents from Tennessee to tell them I was all right and to try to explain to them why I had run away. I had married Loney three months before, and after the wedding we had driven up to work on the cabin in Nova Scotia. By the time we got back to Michigan, it had sunken in, what I had done. Inside, it made sense to me, why I had to run, but I was convinced that I could never explain myself to anyone who knew Loney and me together. How could I be unhappy with him? I knew that everyone loved Loney, so I had run to friends who didn't know him, Wendy, who had graduated from UM a few years before, and her boyfriend Dan, who was working on his Master's degree, studying the bears in Smokey Mountain National Park. I fled to the extra bedroom of their small cabin in Townsend, Tennessee, a few feet away from the Park boundary.

I was braced for my parents' anger at the inexcusable mess I had made of everything. Since the deep breach in our relationship more than five years before, we spoke only occasionally and I visited rarely, and when I did, my mother still mostly avoided me. They had come to the wedding in the Catholic chapel at Eastern, and the reception that followed on the big lawn of the farmhouse in Ypsilanti we shared with our five housemates, a classic hippie affair, featuring the live folk music of our musician friends, volleyball, and a sheet carrot cake that halfway through the afternoon, someone realized we hadn't remembered to pick up from the bakery. But, what did my parents even know about me? The thought would only make me cringe. What they knew about me, they hated. What did they really know about Loney, and our relationship? I assumed that because they hated me, they loved him, but they didn't actually know any real thing about me, or my friends, or my marriage, or what I wanted and desperately needed, but couldn't seem to find, or even identify.

May-June, 1978, Ann Arbor, MI

I had gone back to Ann Arbor to explain once and for all to Loney why I couldn't stay with him. We began marriage counseling so that I could accomplish that, but after five months of communicating with the aid of interpreters, we no longer seemed so far apart. I moved back in with him and we resumed our plan to move to New England as soon as he graduated. We wrote and mailed resumes to high schools in Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine, and he was called to three interviews. We discussed the options on the phone and in the late summer of 1978, we packed and moved to Brandon, Vermont. We also agreed that we should begin a family, so I stopped using birth control.

Loney was teaching at Brandon High School and I began substitute teaching, first at the high school and elementary school, but soon, when my experience and competence with the

population was discovered, for special education substitute jobs. Our second year in Brandon I was hired by the Vermont State Department of Education as a one-on-one special education instructor for a severely impaired, deaf, and often violent young man, who specialized in spectacular destructive events, the louder the better.

March 27, 1979, at 26, Brandon, VT

Our friends were other teachers at the high school and their spouses. They were nice enough, but that first winter, I fell back into loneliness and melancholy, which I only expressed in random pages in notebooks:

*I'm never going to be able to do anything with my life. I don't want to face myself. I don't want to face my parents, Loney, anyone.*

*"When Loney left the house tonight, I went upstairs and got in bed and cried out loud, until the dog came up and lay on the floor by the bed. Then, I was ashamed. Loney told me tonight I am a tease with him and everybody. I was ashamed. I want to scream sometimes. I shriek and feel like a monster is behind me ready to grab me. I'm afraid, I mutter to myself and speak aloud when I'm alone: I'm afraid, I'm afraid, or, shit, shit, shit, you creep, you shit. I say it when I'm ashamed. I pretend to be angry at whomever I exposed myself to, but I'm angry at myself. I'm failing at my dreams—I'm failing at what I want to be."*

*Shame*

*I'm ashamed I'm me,*

*I'm not better, I'm not her, I'm not best.*

*I'm ashamed everyone doesn't love me.*

*I dreamt last night that the cat was mad and trying to kill me, and Loney had a gun to shoot it. It kept leaping out and down on me and I would hold it off*

*with my hands and me ripped and bloody. Finally, I was able to throw the cat away from me and Loney shot it once and it didn't die and then he shot it again and it died and I cried and cried because I love it and it died.*

---

November 1979, at 27, Brandon, VT

My brothers were living together in Mesa, Arizona, in a trailer my parents bought for them. Chris was twenty-two and was majoring in computer programming at Arizona State and Stuart was twenty-five. He was working in Phoenix in a carpentry production factory, assembling kitchen cabinetry, after graduating from a Michigan community college with an Associate's degree in carpentry and construction.

I wasn't talking much with my family, at the time, so it was a surprise when my mother called to say that they needed our help, actually, my husband's help. Stuart had apparently had a breakdown of some sort. He had been in bed, his back to the room, unmoving for several days, and finally, in desperation, Chris had called our parents and my father had flown to Phoenix. He and Chris had assumed Stuart's state was drug-related and when they couldn't influence him, had tried to take him to a hospital by force, but Stuart had escaped them and had been missing in Phoenix for three days. They had eventually found him, but he had then refused to get in an airplane or car with either my father or Chris. All of this had gone on and on, without anyone telling me, but then, Stuart had said that he would drive home with my husband, but only with Loney. Would Loney consider flying to Phoenix and driving back to Michigan with Stuart?

Loney took an emergency leave from school to drive across the country with my brother. He said it was very strange, but rather pleasant and peaceful. Loney did all the driving, of course. Back in Michigan, Stuart was diagnosed as having suffered a schizophrenic breakdown and was



admitted to a private clinic in Grand Rapids, from where he walked away after several weeks and was found twenty miles away three days later, half way to Spring Lake. He had apparently been walking home. He was returned to the clinic and his medication increased. A month or so later, my parents' insurance coverage on private hospitalization ran out, and Stuart was sent to Kalamazoo State Hospital. I visited him there when we came back to Michigan at Christmas time. I had spent a year and a half working at Ypsi State and seen and done difficult things without losing my competence, but seeing Stuart there, in a twin dayroom, in a twin building to the several looming, brown brick institutional piles I knew so well was too much for me. I couldn't stay—I knew everything about that place and I couldn't look at him in there.

At home, Loney and I bickered every day about something and nothing, my power struggle with him right out in the open. He wanted all of my attention, and I wanted my own attention. I remember the relief I felt when I set up the other bedroom upstairs to be my office. My space, my books, my pictures. It's not just me, everyone knows that's an important thing, but at the time, it felt like no one but Virginia Woolf and me had ever known the need for a room of our own. And, it's true, with a private space comes secrets, if only diary entries. Segregating a part of myself away, and barricading myself against him, was the first trench in a deepening gap between us.

Jan, 1980, Brandon Training School

I fell for Jeff while we were both working at Brandon Training School, he in the psychology department, writing the residents' behavioral programs, and me assigned to one problem student, the most destructive and difficult on his caseload. While I sat in meetings with him, red-faced and silent, inside my head I was ranting at myself. *Why can't I just accept that my*

*marriage has been a mistake all along? I need to go back on birth control. Why did I entangle myself in these emotional weeds, thrashing around, muddying the waters? Why am I so afraid to leave Loney? What if what I feel is just infatuation?*

I felt incredible guilt. I felt that even if I was unhappy, we were married, and I should keep trying harder with Loney. But, then I would flip back to knowing that I had to leave. Finally, I told Loney, thinking one thing in my mind, but saying another, “I don’t want to get pregnant now, Loney. I like my job and want to keep doing it for at least another year.” He was angry, and argued with me. I was frightened that I would never escape his undertow. A week later, after almost three years off birth control, I discovered I was pregnant, and there was nothing to do but stay and be happy together.

## INTERLUDE V

### A STUDY ROOM IN THE PARK LIBRARY, TUESDAY MORNING

Although always before, she has waited to be contacted, Regan has just left a Facebook message for her mother.

REGAN: Breaker, breaker, 1-9: I just remembered something I wanted to tell you.

GINGER: Really? Are you upset? Are you going to yell and swear at me?

REGAN: Oh, knock it off. I don't think anyone got upset the last time we talked. I mean, yes, I get angry sometimes, because I'm still angry at you about a lot of things. I assume you're still angry, too, unless that disembodied thing is working for you. No, this was something else. Remember the Pot of Basil?

GINGER: Isabella?

REGAN: Yeah, I had a huge revelation last spring, but you were still dead, and I couldn't tell you.

I wrote an essay for my Creative Non-fiction class about all the Family Stuff I have in this house, and how it all has layers of meaning for me. I was telling about Isabella and the pot of basil, and the Keats poem and the John Alexander White Art Nouveau painting of Isabella being tragic, and your Christmas gift of the framed print and the red, cut-glass bowl with a packet of basil seed in it. For the essay, I had to look up the details of the painter and the story, and I had actually finished writing and was revising the essay before it dawned on me that Isabella's lover, who is killed by her brothers and whose head is in the pot of basil—his name is Lorenzo. You always used to call Loney Alonzo. I always thought the gift was funny, but I never got the whole joke.

GINGER: I've always said, for a smart girl, you aren't too bright.

REGAN: Yeah, that's certainly true, sometimes. Actually, what you always said was, I was a smart girl, but you were smarter.

GINGER: That, too.

REGAN: Well, thanks for coming back from the grave so I could tell you I finally got your whole joke. And thanks, again, for paying for my divorce.

GINGER: You're welcome. It seemed a better solution than having your brothers murder him.

REGAN: Right. That would have really messed Maggie up. And I would have had to go insane and carry his head around in a pot, out of guilt. I was nutty enough in that relationship. I really and truly believed that you liked him more than you liked me.

GINGER: I probably didn't like either one of you. Your constant bickering drove me insane.

## CHAPTER V: STORMY WEATHER MAGGIE

April, 1982, Chappaqua, NY

On April 3, 1982, there was a blizzard in New England, a rare event that left ten inches of snow on the streets of New York City, and twenty-five inches on the ground upstate. Sixty mile-per-hour gales raged, as the primary storm resurfaced off coastal New Jersey on the morning of the sixth of April. There had been worse storms before in New England and would be again, but this storm was the most devastating I've ever found myself forced to travel through. I was in Chappaqua, New York, roughly 200 miles from Brandon, Vermont, where it was absolutely essential that I show up the next morning on schedule to pick up my fifteen-month-old daughter Maggie from her father. I knew mistakes would have consequences. I'd been learning about cascading consequences.



February, 1982, Brandon, VT

I had left Loney, finally, several months before, when Maggie was a year old, after variations of the same conversation.

“I won't let you go,” he would say, at first.

“What I do isn’t up to you,” I would answer, to make myself believe it.

“You made a vow. You can’t leave.”

“I know, Loney, and I am sorry. I know it’s all wrong, this way, but I should have left before this. I shouldn’t have come back after I left that first time.”

“We had an agreement. You can’t leave, and if you do leave, you can’t take her.”

“I can’t leave without her.” I would whisper.

“Well, then you have to stay,” Loney would say.

There is no excuse for my stupidity. I had been struggling upstream against Loney for so many years, I had really come to believe I had no ability to go my own way, so I had counseled myself that in time he would come to see my perspective. I had been honestly shocked when, six months after I left him, Loney had preemptively filed for divorce himself, asking for sole custody of Maggie. Initially, my strongest emotional reaction had been insult, not fear. Surely, beneath his hurt and anger, he knew it would be wrong to deprive her of either parent. Didn’t our generation pride ourselves on different values? He would settle down, eventually, I continued to tell myself, if I could just be patient. I immediately counter-filed for joint custody.

### Storm Warnings

Partly to get away, and partly to begin to stitch together a new life, the weekend of the storm, Jeff and I had driven down to Westchester County to visit his best friend Bob. The drive down from central Vermont had taken about five hours, and although we’d gone into Manhattan to eat, and for Jeff and Bob to show me the city, we’d spent most of two days relaxing at Bob’s, listening to music and talking comfortably. I had arranged to pick up Maggie first thing in the morning at home in Vermont, so we planned to leave about 5 o’clock that evening.

## Vermont

I didn't officially live with Jeff at Split Rock Farm. When I left Loney, I had taken a job



at a group home in Barre, and had found my own place, a farmhouse that I shared with my roommate, Angela. In fear that Loney would use any weapon against me in his pursuit of sole custody of Maggie, I maintained a separate residence of my own until my divorce was final in

December of 1983. On my days off, I drove the hour and a half from Barre to Brandon, rehearsing a reasonable calm: *I will not give way; I will stay focused and not rise to provocation; I will not get angry; I will not cry.* Every week, I knocked on Loney's door, squealed and scooped up my baby, strapped her into her car seat, and Loney and I would repeat the same doorstep conversation, at his door, with 1-year-old Maggie, 18-month-old Maggie, 2-year-old Maggie, to drop off her off, or pick her up for the weekend, resolving again this time, I will not lose my temper, but always losing my temper.

"We need to be discussing joint custody," I would tell Loney, again.

"I've been talking to people, and they say the experts say that joint custody is not in the best interests of the child," Loney would say. This had become his fallback response, and it infuriated and was beginning to terrify me, because it did sound so wisdom-of-Solomon reasonable. People liked Loney—he was handsome and entertaining and they were drawn to his effusiveness. Loney frothed up a constant party around himself and fed on the admiration he

drew, while I was quiet and uncomfortable in groups and, incredibly, had left this perfect man and our beautiful baby. I hadn't made any friends of my own in Brandon, except Jeff, and didn't have anyone to explain myself to. I didn't want to, anyway, but I was terribly afraid of the difference between my perception of what was happening and how I expected people were judging me.

"What people, what experts? You can't expect to separate me from her." My words would still be reasonable, but my voice would rise. "You're punishing me for leaving you, and that's wrong. We're both her parents, and she needs both of us."

"You should come back, so we could all be together," he would say, again and again, until I thought I must be insane. Was he an idiot? Why does he want someone who **doesn't want him**?

*Time to leave, I would think, every time, before this fury boiling up inside me pours out, all over me and him and the baby and burns us all to death.* I would drive with Maggie down the road and up the hill to Jeff, who would be waiting for us at Split Rock Farm. After Maggie was fed and asleep, Jeff would pour me a glass of wine, turn on the stereo, put the headphones on me, and go to make our dinner. Everything would be okay, while I didn't have to leave that place.

## Storm

It was snowing hard when Jeff and I left Chappaqua, and the roads were much slipperier than we expected. The Taconic Parkway was always beautiful, the two northbound lanes often separated by a wooded stretch of land from the southbound lanes. We weren't twenty miles north of Chappaqua, though, when we crested a rise that looked down into a big hollow, which, in a normal April, should have been a leafy dark green panorama in the springtime dusk. That night,



through the haze of the snowfall, we could see the headlights of the cars in the two southbound lanes coming down the hill opposite us, the asphalt grey of two-tracks in the white snow, and then a confusing pattern of head and tail-lights of cars that were sideways in the road, and off the road at all angles on the way down and at the bottom of the hollow. Then we began our own slide down the hill, straight down, at first, then suddenly tacking around in a graceful, weightless, double revolution.

Jeff was saying, "It's okay, it's okay, I got it," and before the adrenaline could hit my heart, we were rolling forward again in the right direction, still in our lane, having, incredibly, not left the road to join the pileups there, having missed all the other cars and Jeff was actually giving the car more gas, in a bid to make it up the hill on the other side, which, amazingly, we did.

"Maybe we should go back," I said, over the crest of the hill and down the road a bit. "We're still not too far from Bob's, and I can call Loney and tell him we won't be back until later tomorrow."

"No," insisted Jeff, "It will be okay. That was probably the worst, and if we can get further north, we have better equipment for dealing with snowfall closer to home. I think we should keep going."

"Okay," I said, in a small voice, clamping down on the storm inside my head.

We kept creeping slowly north on the Taconic to the junction with Interstate 84 at Hopewell Junction, then west past the small town of Fishkill, where, unknown to us on that wild night, in three years we would be living with our baby daughter, Leah, and four-year old Maggie. We drove across the Hudson River on the Beacon-Newburgh bridge, under which, as locals, we

would be attending an area-wide block party and Shad Fest, listening to Pete Seeger sing, and taking a Clean-Up-the-Hudson-River ride on his sloop, the Clearwater.

But that night, heading north on the New York State Thruway in an April blizzard, it was full dark, the snow was very deep, and the visibility worse. Fewer cars were on the road, and more cars were off beside the road. Somewhere on this stretch of road we had another conversation.

“Why don’t we stop?” I asked.

“Where can we stop?” Jeff replied. “We don’t have any money to stay anywhere. We can’t just sit in a restaurant all night.”

“We could,” I barely whispered. “I wish we would stop.” But we didn’t.

I was quiet. I had been trained to endurance, but my inner voice was getting shrill with anxiety. *Just because I love this guy so much doesn’t mean he’s infallible, and we won’t die tonight. I really hate this macho bullshit,* I was thinking, *that teaches them that when they actually pull off an incredible feat, some kind of Immunity Game Point has been bestowed upon them.* I stayed quiet because I was really scared, the kind of scared when you’re afraid to turn your head, or take your eyes from the road, or talk, or breathe. Jeff thought it was his skill and focus that kept us on the road, but I knew it was my concentration, too. It was exhausting us both, but it was working, so far.

At almost 1 am on the road east from Whitehall, New York, in the gateway to Vermont and home, we slid into our second spin of the night, and again, we twirled through a perfect 360°, no crashing into the other car, no off the road, right way forward down the rest of the hill, safely across the bridge and into Vermont, but resistance had crumpled inside me. I had given it

all up. I knew I couldn't keep us safe by concentrating, by being careful, by being reasonable. I couldn't control anything, anybody, anywhere, anyhow. There was nothing I could affect.

Whatever was coming for me could have me, and whatever was going to happen, would.

Our hope that the conditions would be better further north was misplaced. Out there at 4 AM in west-central Vermont, there was no road. The headlights illuminated a single set of tire tracks cutting down into two feet of snow, tracks that stretched east across a wide, flat, night-white space. For almost twelve hours, and through two multiple spins out of control, we had been staring out at the snow coming down thick in front of us, and Jeff had been gripping the steering wheel, keeping the car pointed forward. We stared down that two-track, and then came the slightest sound of concussion, as the sky to the north lit up blue-white above, and then faded. Jeff flicked his eyes at me, our gaze met, and then returned to the night-white field ahead. We didn't move our heads, and we said nothing for several minutes. Then came second soft pop and a blue flash, and we realized simultaneously that this was not nuclear war or alien invasion. The electrical transformers were blowing up, almost silently, as the power lines broke under the weight of the snow.

## Vermont

I've never believed that guns should be so available. I think about the growing fear I would feel while caught in another and another and another whirlpool of dispute with Loney and the rage that would rise up in me; how tempting it was to let it take me, as I had only a few times in the past seven years. The power I felt when I threw something and broke it was seductive because I could use it to win a struggle that reason couldn't seem to affect. I was coming to hate Loney for the punishment he was inflicting on me and how far beyond civilized rationality the

experience was sending me. I was feeling so much rage, that at some point I would say, to prove my anti-gun point, if only to myself, *if I'd had a gun, I would have shot him.*

## Storm Damage

As the sky began to lighten, we began to emerge, as well, from the bad dream of the night. We were close to West Rutland, finally, practically into our back yard, and the daylight showed us white, deep white snow everywhere. The world had disappeared beneath it, the cars, the houses, the people, all gone, buried. Every tree was bowed to the ground with the weight of the snow, and as the sun rose fully, every snow-covered lump sparkled in the light.

I had been told that Vermont in the 1980s, like many states, apparently, would go to great lengths to avoid a full-out custody battle in court. The strategy in a contested custody case was to continue to delay final court dates. Six months after he filed for divorce, Loney was granted temporary custody, pending review, and our court date was postponed, and then postponed again. Finally, after the second six months, I wised up and changed my filing to sole custody as well, but it was too late. We came to court eighteen months after that. I had hired a vicious, fighting lawyer, but had muzzled him with my own naïve delays. *He'll settle down*, I had kept telling myself. *He'll settle down, and realize that it's wrong for either of us to keep her from the other*, I was saying to myself.

## June, 1983, Vermont

When Maggie was two and I was thirty, the State of Vermont granted Loney sole custody, on the grounds that he had proved to be a stable custodial parent for the previous eighteen months. I came back from court to Jeff's apartment at Split Rock Farm, my home, now that there was no more need to live alone, and slid down into a fetal curl, with my back in the corner of the

living room and wailed and wailed. I was hearing Loney's voice during those doorstep meetings, *I've talked to a lot of people and they all agree that it's in the best interest of the child to have a primary custodial home.*

The eighteen months after I left my marriage and the year following the custody decision were some of the truly, most ecstatically happy times of my life with Jeff and the deepest pit of the worst time of my life, as well. I was beside myself, literally divided, and insane, all the clichés: a bad dream from which you can't wake, drowning, trapped in a terrible, surreal mistake, just a *mistake*, but whose? How could it have been my mistake, when I had become so happy, from being so miserable, before? How could Loney be right to do this to me and to her?

Maggie had always been an anxious, high-strung baby, who couldn't fall asleep without being held and rocked or driven in the car for a half an hour. She needed movement to relax and let go of control and she stayed that anxious as she grew up. I truly don't know if that's the way she would have been, or if we did that to her.

What is this emotional distancing we learn to save us from ourselves? I have lived with so much fear and pain swirling about and around them that, now, I can barely react to the thought of my mother and my elder daughter. When I left Loney, and Maggie was only a year old, I missed her constantly, so terribly much. I thought about her every minute of every day. She had her second birthday with her father, visiting his parents and sisters in southern California and she became extremely sick there. When he called to tell me, I remember being distraught, so frustrated and frightened to not be with her when she needed me. I remember feeling that, but I can't remember the feeling itself. Then, in the years that followed, while she lived primarily with her father, the pain of separation gradually diminished. My wild anticipation of her arrival to live

with us during the summer would be rewarded by the satisfaction of the first week's lovely closeness, before the inevitable frictions and then the battles would begin.

While apart, her shape and my shape were solidifying, so that when we were together we just couldn't seem to fit anymore. My smallest, most gently presented requests would precipitate, first her resistance, then her defiance. Each time, I would examine my motives and needs. Did I really have to win? Did she have to obey? I would fight my fear and frustration by counting to ten, as my mother had taught me. I would review, in my mind, parenting manuals' advice about patience. I would remind myself to be the adult, but I would feel such an anger rising, looking down at her fixed little face, compressed lips, glaring eyes. In her face, I could see the echo of my own rage. She has my nose and mouth. I have my mother's.

## CHAPTER VI: STAYING UP ALL NIGHT WITH MARY LOU

October, 1997, Saranac, MI

My mother's older sister, Mary Lou, is dying at sixty-six, in her own living room, while I am holding her hand. My mother is in the dining room with Barb's husband, Joe, uncomfortable with the emotional demands of the moment, maybe angry that her younger sister Barb and I, her daughter, are hogging the limelight of the deathbed, or perhaps just caught up in some combination of anxiety and resentment known only to herself. My father, husband, and thirteen-year-old daughter are sitting on the poured concrete porch steps in the yellow light of the street lamp, waiting for it to be over.

---

My younger daughter Leah had wanted to be at the house for this, but not here in the room where it was actively happening. She had spent some time in the living room by herself with Mary Lou, while she was still conscious, earlier in the day. Leah had cried, she says, and Mary Lou had held her hand and told her not to be afraid, that it was okay. She loved Mary Lou as I had as a child: as a strange, fey, half-adult, half-child.

It had always been an adventure for me, staying overnight in this house, roughly a dozen two-story wood-frame houses down the cracked, tipped sidewalk from the house where I had lived until I was thirteen. In this living room, now dim and dominated by the hospital bed, I had spent more of my childhood than in my own home, leaning up against Mary Lou's plump, pillowy side on that couch as she read to me for hours. She read aloud well, with dramatic emphasis, and some small attempt at character dialect. She was a dramatic little person, anyway, and passionate about the subjects she knew very well, including opera, the occult, Star Trek, and British history, literature and detective fiction of any period up to around the 1960s. When I was

ten, I could recite the entire British monarchical succession, and had listened, captive, repeatedly, to most of the major operas, except Aida, which Mary Lou thought would be too upsetting for me. When we were twelve, Mary Lou had instituted Latin lessons for my friend Dorothy and me, and taught us seriously, too, though I remember us using the lessons mostly to admire our nail-polished fingers turning the pages of the impressive grown-up Latin text.

I enjoyed the idea of Leah reliving this part of my childhood when she stayed over, but I did ask Mary Lou not to read Leah the ghost stories she had read me. I've looked, but not yet found the story collection with the really bad one, though it must be in one of the hundred or so boxes of inherited books now in my basement, the story in which the protagonist, visiting an acquaintance, is given the tower room in which to sleep, and you *know* he shouldn't go, because Mary Lou's voice is very deep and slow and dramatic as she reads how he climbs the tall stairway to the tower room, where he goes to sleep, only to awake to a feeling of terror, and a tall, white, indistinct figure stooping over him, laying a hand on his shoulder, and he kicks out, knocking it back (ahhh, proving that ghosts have form, and can hurt you!) and then escapes down the stairs, rousing the household, where his acquaintance, suddenly, with a low moan, points: to the *bloody handprint* on his shoulder, and I, seven or eight years old, had nightmares for years over this damn story, and every night of my childhood, no matter how hot, and well into my twenties, to the puzzlement of men in my bed, I could not sleep without tucking the sheets behind my shoulders. I loved her, but Mary Lou didn't have a lick of sense about a lot of things.

That night in the living room, my cousin Lisa, five or six years younger than I, was on the couch on the other side of the hospital bed. Of all the cousins, Lisa and I were the readers, drinkers of the Mary Lou Kool-Aid. Like me, Lisa had two daughters, and over the years had



also driven back regularly to this tiny town and the connection with our childhood, to spend the day and the night with Mary Lou. I am the oldest of the cousins, the first baby the sisters practiced on. Mary Lou once left the infant me, she said, lying on that couch while she went to check on something in the kitchen. I rolled off, and then underneath, and she couldn't find me for a while, because I wasn't crying, just lying under there.

April, 1997, Grand Rapids, MI

Six months before, Lisa and I had driven Mary Lou to her exploratory surgery in Grand Rapids and had waited optimistically in the cafeteria for the results. She'd been complaining of vaginal bleeding for several years. I hadn't know the implications of this; such things hadn't yet been part of my own life experience. Mary Lou had no insurance, and so had just lived with it, and we had all just let her. Lisa and I had been waiting in the cafeteria when they paged us over the hospital intercom, to come and speak with the surgeon, who had offered us each a chair in a cramped little closet of an office off the surgical waiting room, where they can give you bad news privately.

"It's cervical cancer," he had said, "and it's too widespread to be operable." They had closed her up, and would make an appointment to discuss chemotherapy. Did the family want to be there the next day when she was told?

"Yes," we had said, "We'll arrange it."

"I'm sorry," he had said, and had shaken our hands, leaving Lisa and me to stand weeping in the waiting room.

It had been late when we made it back to Saranac, but Barb and Joe had been awake and waiting for us. When we had told our news, Joe had stood and said, "That doesn't mean that I

have cancer,” before walking out of the living room. Lisa and I had been too stunned to even take in what he had said, but he did have cancer. He was dead six months after Mary Lou.

Lisa and I had shared a bottle of wine up in the middle bedroom that night, talking about ourselves, and Mary Lou. Lisa's mother Elaine, the youngest of the four sisters, and my mother's closest friend, had died very suddenly, of a heart attack, four years before—the incessant cigarettes they smoke. Smoked. All our lives, Mary Lou had been an emotional constancy for us both. Did we really know her at all, our life-long spinster aunt, with her books and tea with milk, her all-night typing of her Star Trek fanzine, two bad—but non-the-less published—gothic novels, and the dozen or so rejected ones we'd also both read? She certainly was facile with words. She had spent her childhood in this house, had gone to high school down the block and across the corner, in the same big, square, brown brick building where I suffered through 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades. She had walked downtown to work every weekday for years, to the Advertiser and her work as the secretary who efficiently ran the storefront insurance agency in the same block as the grocery store where her mother, my grandmother, worked as a cashier. She had spent almost every other hour of her entire life, in fact, in the rooms of this house, listening to opera and reading Leslie Charteris and staying up all night, every night, to write, but about what? Her characters all sail through implausible events, fall gently in love, marry with dignity, and speak to each other in the mannered style of British novels of the 1930s that Lisa and I had each spent our childhood and adolescence reading, lying on the couch, downstairs. That night, Lisa and I had wrestled with the irreconcilable contradiction of our unworldly little aunt dying of cervical cancer, which we both had known to be linked to a sexually transmitted virus, though we would never, in the future, mention this to anyone else in the family.

It had been arranged that the family would all meet at the hospital in Grand Rapids the next morning, my parents driving over from Spring Lake; Barb and Joe, and Lisa and I from Saranac, all converging on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor nurses' station and hallway outside Mary Lou's hospital room, as if into a foxhole where we were trapped and bound together by our involuntary enlistment in this death-and-dying action.

The doctor arrived, greeted us, and entered the room, followed by my father, and Barb and Joe. Lisa slipped in, but in the doorway, my mother rounded on me. "Not you," she spat out. "Stop pushing your way in where you don't belong." Alone outside the door, I stared back at her in disbelief. She was doing this now? Well, of course, she was.

October, 1997, Saranac, MI

The living room is dim, lit only from a side lamp in the dining room. The house seems full, as people come quietly in and go quietly out the front door. Someone puts an opera record on the stereo in the living room, but Mary Lou frowns and shifts restlessly and then nods slightly when we lean down to whisper, "Do you want quiet?" She doesn't open her eyes or move as visitors slip onto the couch to sit quietly, some leaning in to whisper a few words.

My head jerks up, as a man I don't know sits down across from me, begins to read from the Bible, and then to speak softly, inviting Mary Lou to accept Jesus into her heart. Calm down, I tell myself, no atheists in foxholes, right? Let him have his say. In the last conversation on the subject I had with her, Mary Lou had solemnly and seriously promised to come back to haunt me, if at all possible, and I had agreed to look for her. Even if I do, this family doesn't believe in God, but I stay silent until the minister finishes and slips away, and then, after a doubtful hesitation, I lean in myself. "You don't

have to believe him unless you want to,” I breathe into her ear, and as I lean back, I see her lips twitch.

---

### Gutting 93 Vosper St.

Immediately after Mary Lou’s funeral, my mother and aunt Barbara began the task of sorting records, old bills, boxes of letters, clothing, dishes, and jewelry, staying at the old house on Vosper Street for a week or so. I was there for a few days, too. The whole family is compulsive about Stuff, but I thought the two of them were insane, the way they seemed to be examining every piece of paper in the house. When I would come downstairs for a sandwich, they would show me 25-year-old checks Mary Lou had written for books or records. I was, meanwhile, upstairs in the hall, reading my way through Mary Lou’s Star Trek Welcommittee correspondence files. She had been a prolific writer, of both her novels and her letters to other rabid Star Trek fans all over the country. I wasn’t surprised by the weight of the files, but opened my eyes at the content of the letters she was typing and sending out, with almost daily regularity, to the same people, for what appeared to be for years.

These letters, a primitive form of corporeal Facebook, connected fans who had written to Paramount or NBC, begging them to bring back the series. These devotees were often, somehow, given the address of the Welcommittee, who wrote, published, and mailed out a fan newsletter, a primitive, corporeal form of a fan webpage. Mary Lou, as one of the three or four self-elected executive staff, answered every fan letter they received, and she became close to a number of her fellow believers. As with everything she did, she poured herself with gusto onto the page, responding to the Star Trek news and personal stories she heard with her own vigorous opinions and updates on events in her own life.

Mary Lou didn't travel much, and saw the same few people every day, so visiting her had always been a strange timewarp-fugue experience. She would begin to talk when she first saw you and could keep up her pace for hours. If you were interested in politics, opera, British mysteries, science fiction in general, and Star Trek in particular, you were in for a treat. Even if you weren't, it had been fun to listen to Mary Lou go on and on about stuff you knew nothing about and stuff you knew she knew nothing about, but didn't know she didn't know. As far as we knew, for example, she hadn't known about sex or marriage or raising children, except through outside observation, so it was disconcerting and a bit hurtful to sit on the floor of the upstairs hallway reading her intricate versions of her life, and my and my cousins' and her sisters' and her cousins' life choices, marriages, and child-rearing, recounted and interpreted with humor and apparent candor to people whom I'd never met and mostly not even heard of. I've never admitted that during that first day, I lifted two of the letters that are particularly pointed and mean about my younger daughter Leah's comic, attention-craving performances when she was seven or eight, and our parenting that allowed such self-centeredness to go on. The letters both hurt my feelings and made me angry. I never wanted Leah to see them. It's always hard to take criticism, especially about aspects of your personality and behavior that you already feel shame about, and it's difficult and painful to discover a previously unknown nasty side of someone you greatly loved, and from whom you had ever before only felt positive acceptance.

Her facts were mostly right. She and my grandma had continued to host the centralized family communication hub, maintained by both telephone calls and physical visits to their dining room table for long informational and rhetorical speaking, so they knew everything that was going on in the family. Occasionally, she'd accidentally or on purpose throw in a whopper, but



reading her installment editions of our family saga was more surreal than anything else. Sitting there reading, I felt introspective and insecure enough to wonder if this version of reality was really how people generally perceived me, for example. On the other hand, I didn't perceive Mary Lou as the same wry and heroic figure, very wise and patient with the rest of her unheeding family, that her writerly skills portrayed. She wasn't really nasty about anyone, except once or twice, but mostly came across as tired and dissatisfied with the life she was forced to lead by the

inability of publishers to recognize the quality of vision so fortuitously delivered to them via her manuscripts. It's true that her life was tedious and confined—she had little but her books and opera records, a small income and no car or medical insurance, although no debts, either. She was fiercely intelligent and had been very beautiful. My parents had told me that long ago, as young marrieds, they had offered to help her find an apartment and enroll at Michigan State, but she had been afraid, and wouldn't go.

Over the next few years, my mother transcribed and compiled all the sections of Mary Lou's correspondence that mentioned family events and members and printed and bound three or four copies. My older daughter Maggie asked for and received a copy, though I doubt she has

enough memories or perspective to recognize Mary Lou's self-aggrandizement throughout. Since she is mentioned only rarely and never critically, Maggie finds the barbed comments about other family members hilarious.

In the years since the youngest sister, Lisa's mother Elaine, had died and with or without consulting with her sisters Barbara and my mother, Mary Lou had, at some time, added Lisa's name to the title of the house on Vosper Street. Lisa had been expending noticeable energy trying to step up into an adult role in the family. After all, we were in our 40s, and now, with Mary Lou gone, even without her name on the deed, Lisa should, by all legal and ethical standards, be able to represent the inheritance interests of her branch of the Dodge Sisters Concerns. I agreed with Lisa. I had agreed with her on this issue during that long-talking night sharing Mary Lou's bed after her inoperable diagnosis. I had agreed with her since then, in front of my mother and Barb, and I took her side when Barb and my mother sat and smoked at the dining room table downstairs and vented their extreme annoyance at how inappropriately pushy Lisa had become. Legal or ethical or no, Barb and my mother would never see things in any way other than they two, alone, representing the remaining family authority. Indeed, they shared it poorly with each other. And the whole power struggle was over Stuff, since it was through the recitation of the providence of Our Stuff that we as a family had always told the story of who we are. Not expensive stuff, not for monetary retail value, but to hold onto the reins of the family through possession of its symbolic immortality.

I watched and listened with awe and some fear as Lisa pushed back at my mother and Barb. I knew it wasn't her opinions they objected to—any of us were free to chime in during discussions of whether to sell or whether to rent the house and what books or furniture we may

covet—no, it was her attitude that ground on them, her expectation that she carried any weight with which to sway anything, when, in reality, they knew that they alone would divide goods and plot the course of events as they saw fit. Her persistence wound them both up and made them even more tense with each other, as they each acted as agents for their own children's interests in the family spoils.

I received a letter from my mother during this time, recounting how Barb didn't think that I, Claire, should get to have the entire scrapbook collection, and I found it difficult to detach myself from my emotional reactions to this. I didn't want to covet all these things from my childhood, this Stuff, but I did, and especially the scrapbooks, which, while everyone in the family knew the story of their creation, as far as I knew, no one but me had ever touched or opened them. After my years of repetitive reading, I had the scrapbooks memorized, the words and the pictures part of me and myself imprinted into them. But, I could also say that, to a lesser degree, about the Robin Hood castle and the penny china dolls and the Danny Kaye records and any number of books and...Stuff, and I understood that we all felt that same addiction.

I did try not to become enmeshed in the escalating tensions. I backed off commenting on the Lisa wars, although I would continue to object to *ad hominem* outbursts against her character. I took the things my mother said I could have, including the scrapbooks, although several years later, Barb asked me to give her two of the four collections, and I did, albeit reluctantly. I was a good girl, and my mother rewarded me with the Stuff I most desired. Lisa, the cousin I had always been closest to, after being given her mother's Stuff, gradually became a family persona non grata, not spoken to or of. I saw her once, in the following years, but it was awkward, as she clearly and correctly felt that I had not gone to bat for her against Barb and my mother's tyranny,





but the fact was, I hadn't been capable of risking the fragile rapprochement I had achieved with my mother. After my mother died, Lisa called and visited my father. He was thrilled to hear from her and see her, and they apparently had a very good time over lunch

and through several hours of visiting, but my father was vague for several weeks about how the visit had ended and why Lisa wasn't returning his repeated phone calls. I'm not entirely sure, but I think that she asked to borrow the only current copy of Mary Lou Family Saga, promising that she would copy and return it immediately, but my father had balked and said instead that he would find another copy that he believed was down the basement, somewhere, to give to her next time. It sounded as if they were both a bit too adamant and feelings were bruised, and since then, Lisa has returned to being incommunicado.

### Working for Chris

In a power coup for my mother, the decision was made to sell my grandparents' house on Vosper St. to my brother Chris, and the estate was divided between Mary Lou's three sisters, with Lisa given the share allotted to her mother, Elaine. My mother planned and Chris began an ambitious renovation project to which we all devoted major amounts of time and energy for the next few years.

## INTERLUDE VII

REGAN: So, Mom? I have a confession and a question, if you're around.

GINGER: What did you do?

REGAN: I can just hear your voice saying that—so resigned and deadpan. It's not that serious, I don't think. I mean, you might not have liked it at the time, but I found a couple of Mary Lou's diaries while we were going through things at the house, after she died, and I started reading them and they were so strange and fascinating. I knew that if I showed them to you and Barb, you would take them, and I wanted to read and think about them, so I stole them.

GINGER: You always were a rotten kid. Well, you're probably right. I would have liked to decide for myself whether they should be read. Barb certainly would. But I don't care, now, of course. What was she going on about?

REGAN: Be nice. One is from eighth grade and the other from high school and the year after she graduated. She was very depressed in both of them. And she had a very intense fixation on a Yugoslavian freedom fighter during the 40s and was desolated when he was captured and executed. I mean, *destroyed*. For me, Mary Lou was always fun because she was so intense, but I wouldn't have said that she was out of touch with reality.

GINGER: No, but she wasn't very attached to it, either.

REGAN: I guess that's a good way of putting it. She really hated everyday life and resented having to live it. She talked a number of times about how she wished she could die.

GINGER: I know you were close to Mary Lou, Claire, and sympathy is fine, but I remember her as full of self-pity and drama when we were that age. And too good for anyone or anything. I know I told you before that one reason we moved was to get you away from her.

REGAN: I know. And I certainly recognize the self-pity and self-importance. But I can't help but feel bad for her, too. She talked a lot about no one caring about her. Of course, she also mentioned a lot of nice things that people did for her, too. But, I wanted to talk to you about the way we all are in this family—we aren't sympathetic in any way to what we see as weakness. If anything, we're harder on each other, and that can cause a lot of pain and insecurity. I've been insecure my whole life.

GINGER: Well, it's true we aren't a sweet bunch. But, don't you think it's sort of a chicken or egg question? Where does the insecurity really begin? And how do you fix it? I've always found that buckling down and succeeding at something is how to feel better.

REGAN: We're back to the brain chemistry, again, I think. I don't think, for example, that Stuart's state is a really strong emotional reaction to life, I think his chemistry is bad, and he can't be fixed by love alone. The rest of us, though, I think could use more love.

## CHAPTER VII: SPLINTERS

### Splinters

Sometimes splinters work their own way to the surface, but my mother liked to dig them out with a pin. I thought for a long time that, because my father was always sweet to me, all the anger came from her, but although they were a team, she was the captain, and he followed her in all things. When I jumped the family ship at nineteen, they made some strong moves to reel me in, but after I eluded those, she appeared to cut me out of her heart, throw me off the plank. For a year, she had left a room if I entered it, and she hadn't spoken directly to me for almost three years.

My youngest brother was her baby, though, and he stayed that for the rest of her life, supported and aided, emotionally and financially. In the years of my exile and beyond, I told myself a lot of things: that he deserved the parental good graces for being smarter than me and keeping his own opinions and objectionable behavior to himself, that I didn't mind, anyway, since he so clearly needed help and I didn't, that I could never submit to the level of control she exerted over him, so I was better off out of it.

I knew I was bitter and angry, but, as a grownup, it was clear that it was my own job to work it through. In my thirties, with children of my own, I had begun to accept that my mother would never change, that she felt no need, had no intentions to change, but I wanted a better relationship. After Jeff and the girls and I moved to Michigan from New York, I wouldn't put myself back under her sway, but it seemed pointless and unfair to continually throw my differences up in her face, so I kept quiet, instead. I would show up to visit my parents regularly, every three or four weeks. I'd sit at the kitchen table and hear all about Chris' troubles and my

mother's latest genealogy discoveries. My daughters used to say that all their grandma ever talked about was dead relatives. She wouldn't ask about the girls, or Jeff, or what I was doing, but wait for me to break into her stream of concern. I always felt stupid, as if I was bragging uninvited to strangers, but I was afraid to actually put it to the test, to see if she would let me sit there for three hours listening and then say goodbye and leave without ever asking about my life and my family.

After I stopped fighting her directly, the biggest clue that my mother loved me and cared about me was the way she was scrupulous in portioning out the same amount of financial aid to me that she was giving to Chris. She would never willingly have a direct conversation about our mutual feelings, so, for years, we remained damaged below the surface, while for the most part, playing nicely day-to-day.

### More Working for Chris

For a number of years, I punished myself for having caused our rift and tried to redeem myself by trying to be what I thought my family wanted and needed. When my parents and I flew to Arizona to attend Chris and Eydie's wedding, and I saw the way Chris was still living in his thirties, with giant piles of clothing and trash on the floors and dirty dishes piled in the sink and on the counters, I knew that when my parents went to visit him, my mother would spend a day cleaning. I knew why, being a parent myself. I would get so frustrated nagging the girls about the pigsties in their rooms, but I would tell myself to leave it alone and just shut the door. That would work for a few days, but then I would break down and begin to threaten, and bribe, and finally I would break down and tell myself I would clean it just this once and maybe they would like it clean and keep it that way. How do you influence someone else's behavior? You

can't, unless you have a carrot or a stick. Why do I hate deliberately running behavioral programs on other people? I did it with the girls, but never liked it. I know it's partially a reaction to the years I spent programming residents in institutions, but mostly it's shying away, as I always do, from Doing Unto Others the things I hate having done unto me. Feeling myself being managed enrages me, so I don't much like managing others.

Over the years, I'd had to adapt to my mother's seeming avoidance of hearing anything about my life. I would sit at their kitchen table, listening to another update on a genealogical puzzle piece related to Grandpa Wallen's nephew unearthed, and join in the constant, on-going, obsessive discussion of my brother Chris' rental houses, their repair status, what task I might take on in the coming weeks, since Chris's job kept him so busy and exhausted, as well as his addictive behavior in bidding on yet another rental property, and the inappropriateness of his current girlfriend's daughter's latest tattoo.

Every few weeks for fifteen years, my father would call me: what was I doing this week? This weekend? Well, if I had some time, Chris could sure use some help with the Vosper street house: the floors are all sanded and we have to get a coat of finish on them. Or: you're probably really busy, but the water is off at the Church street house; the pipes froze because they were installed too close to the outside wall. Chris has the siding off, but he sure could use some help insulating and rebuilding the outside wall.

I always went. I knew that some of it was expiation of guilt, but bottom line, family is family, and you have to help.

When my father developed heart and circulatory problems from the cigarettes they both smoked unceasingly, my mother and I spent the long day of his angioplasty waiting in plastic

waiting room chairs, on the benches outside while my mother smoked, and sitting across from each other in a booth at a Dennys down the street from the hospital. We'd been talking about it being hard on Chris, that he couldn't be there at the hospital all day because of his work, and she said softly, in that tone you use when you don't mean to say it out loud, "If your father dies, Chris will still have me, but you won't have any..." She stopped abruptly before she finished the word, and looked up into my eyes for a long minute, not a look of hostility, but level and honest, and I looked back the same way, appreciatively, as an equal.

June, 1999, Southern Colorado

As the car slid around 10,000 feet high curves on the Million Dollar Highway the centrifugal force of each curve pushed me right out of the passenger seat window to fly with my gaze locked onto the dents in each heavy steel guardrail. Jeff and Leah were snickering at my twitching and whimpering, and scoring witty points, entertaining each other. To be fair, I knew they had no idea what was really happening in my head, and I didn't either. I was just trying to hold it together until we could get lower down the side of the mountain, until we could get off that road, which was really unfair, because it was so beautiful there, but, for me, that car had become a runaway roller coaster, and the ride was going on for miles and miles and miles. My wits were vibrating and stretching, thinner and tighter. Each quip bounced off my quivering self-control until, finally, something shredded, and, as I came apart, I surprised us all by screaming, *"SHUT THE FUCK UP!"*

Into the appalled silence, my gentle mother-in-law leaned forward from the back seat to pat my shoulder. "It's okay, honey," she said.

April 15, 2001, Spring Lake, MI

Kitchen table talk was in progress at my parents' when the TV in the background announced rocker Joey Ramone's death. "Good," said my mother, moving onto the next topic, without a hitch in her train of thought. *Good?* I thought. *What? You don't know a single thing about that person's life, let alone his worth or the Ramones' music.* This blanket negativity was insidious. In that sort of environment, it's possible to stop actively noticing the attitude, like a foul odor you live with for eight hours at work, but at home, your roommate complains about the stench that clings to your clothes and hair, like cigarette smoke.

After my first panic attack on the highway in Colorado, I began to suffer from a series of anxiety reactions to being a passenger in a car in traffic, ranging from acute nervousness to outright terror. Late one rainy evening on a drive home from the airport in Detroit, I lay back in the seat, crying, with my jacket over my head all the way from Jackson until north of Lansing. I finally made an appointment with a therapist recommended by a psychologist friend, the first successful therapeutic relationship I had ever experienced. I expected my mother would figure heavily in our discussions, but the therapist actually focused much of his interest on my relationship with Jeff, the driver. I came home and had a long conversation with Jeff about my apparent emotional need to feel loved and cared for, and the therapist's suggestion that even though Jeff knew there was nothing wrong with the way he was driving, slowing down in response to my fear would demonstrate that he cared about me. Because Jeff and I had met while working in an institution, implementing behavioral programs with residents, the idea of *apparently* reinforcing an unwanted emotional reaction was very difficult for us both to accept, but Jeff agreed to try, and over time, because he was showing that he noticed and responded to my feelings, my anxiety in the car did recede. I've done a lot of thinking about that, since.



## INTERLUDE VIII

### JEFF AND REGAN'S BEDROOM, MONDAY AFTERNOON

Regan is in pajamas, propped against the head of the bed with a laptop on a lapdesk and several books and notebooks spread around her, trying to finish the final project paper for her Alternative Rhetoric class. She completes a section, formats it, and then toggles over to Facebook to see what's going on. A red number 1 indicates a waiting message, and when she opens Messages, her stomach lurches when she sees a blue dot next to the name *Ginger Dodge*. It's been three weeks since their last conversation, and, caught up in the pressure to finish this paper, she had half decided that she's made up the whole ridiculous experience.

GINGER: I've been thinking, and I need to talk to you about your father.

## CHAPTER VIII: SOCK KNITTING

March, 2006, Spring Lake, MI

My mother and father knew about her diagnosis with stage three ovarian cancer for a week or so before they told my brother Chris and me. My mother broke the news in an e-mail, which was typical, and typically made me upset and angry that she would choose such an impersonal method of announcement. I believed, then, that her perception of me was of an emotionally-intrusive bull in the china shop of her feelings, which she would fight, sometimes viciously, to keep from expressing directly. I believe, now, that she could not have told us this news in person. We might have, probably would have, cried and tried to hug her. I cried at home, and told myself it was hurt and anger at her emotional distance.

Sometime in the year before my mother's diagnosis, my father had suffered an incident of bleeding into his retina, which he stubbornly refused to communicate to anyone about for several days. After my mother forced him, reluctantly, to the eye doctor, who, in alarm, had sent him immediately to the ophthalmic specialist, he had driven himself and my mother, one-eye-blind and the other dilated, up the highway to Muskegon, but the sight in his right eye had already been permanently destroyed. My father was able to drive my mother, one-eyed, to her early oncologist appointments in Muskegon, but by the time she had been referred to an oncological surgeon in Grand Rapids, the sight in his remaining eye was also deteriorating. Jeff and I shopped for and bought me a little, red Honda CRV, in preparation for my many upcoming road miles as family medical transporter.

My puppy Diego was six months old and spent the day of my mother's surgery in the backseat of my car, parked out of the sun in the depths of St. Mary's Hospital parking structure.

Every hour and a half, or so, I came out of the surgical waiting room to check on him and walk him along the grass verges of the hospital neighborhood, calling my daughters in Chicago and San Diego to update them on the no changes of status, too distracted to realize, until afternoon, that I should be picking up and disposing of the puppy poop. It was well into the evening before the surgeon finally appeared in the waiting room to tell my father, Chris, and me that he had removed all of the major tumors and all the small ones that he had been able to find. She had a colostomy. She spent a week in the hospital, and asked for a cigarette on the ride home.

I had been taking one class at a time at Central Michigan University, trying to collect the 12 credits I needed to transfer back to the University of Michigan for graduation. That fall, I worked at my decorative painting business and went to my class, did my reading and wrote my papers, and drove several times a week to Spring Lake to drive my parents to my father's eye specialist in Muskegon or my mother's surgical oncologist in Grand Rapids and to our weekly visit to my brother Stuart, either at the adult care facility or his day program in Holland. I had a current job, painting variations of a coordinating paint treatment in all three rooms of a large finished basement. I worked in that house for weeks, first painting the basecoats and then the laborious, time-consuming wall treatments in a bedroom, bathroom, and huge family room.

I was very good at my work. I took pride in my skill at listening and discerning what a client was looking for, interpreting that vision, first, into samples, and then, steadily and consistently covering walls with sophisticated patterns of color. Physically though, it was difficult, nasty work, first rolling and blending a translucent film of oil colors onto the wall, then dipping rags into a bucket of paint thinner, wringing and twisting, and finally systematically rolling off, scraping out, and blending the pattern, for hours at a time, up on ladders into high

corners, across wide walls, around windows and doors and furniture, behind refrigerators. Every time I found myself on my hands and knees once more, or lying on my side, twisted face-up into a tiny space, laying a pretty pattern across the base of a wall around toilet water supply lines, I'd laugh and tell myself, again, that this was why I'd originally gone to college.

Since I had begun my career as a decorative painter in Mount Pleasant, I had been trusted, both to deliver the agreed-upon product, and with the security of my clients' homes. I was routinely given house keys and alarm codes. I painted, at times, while families were out of town on vacation, so it was routine for me to be alone in the house, working my way around the walls of the basement apartment suite bathroom on a Saturday afternoon. I had carefully taped the edges of the sink, double-wide inset shower stall, and ceiling, and was working my pattern across the shallow wall space above the shower stall. I moved my little step-stool, rung the paint thinner out of my rag, stepped up, and was stopped by an awful, cracking sound. I stepped down, dropped the rag back into the bucket, and moved the step-stool, revealing a dark dimple right where the smooth floor of the shower stall began to curve up into the wall. On my knees, from a vantage point of 6 inches, the break made by the bare metal end of the leg of the stool looked like the result of violence: a tiny skull fracture, puncturing my brain. I couldn't think. I sat and stared at the broken-egg dimple. It would cost more than what I was being paid for this job to replace the double shower stall. It wasn't a one-person job I could do myself—I would have to hire it done, and overall, this would add several weeks to the job, which I had been determined to finish before my daughter Leah arrived from California for a two week holiday visit. I carried contractor insurance, but my rates would increase if I put in a claim, and actually, I couldn't bear the thought of officially admitting to such an error. I cleaned my brushes and packed up all my equipment neatly over the little hole in the shower stall, and went home to think.

You have to roll with the punches. You have to fix what breaks. You have to recognize and learn from what you do wrong, and it's usually clear what has to be done. You have to keep your heart in the game. I went home, made myself something to eat, and went out to my shop. My very first high-end client had recently given me five very expensive outdoor carriage lanterns to change their look to copper verdigris. I had already disassembled and sprayed the assorted parts with a new green-blue exterior enamel base coat, then transformed them with a treatment to make them look like weathered metal. The lamps were overdue to be reassembled and delivered. I collected their packing boxes and my tools and began to carefully tighten each of the clamps holding the six hand-blown glass panes into each frame.

I needed the money I would get when I delivered them. I had done auto-body repair successfully in the past, and I was proud of the several difficult ceramic repair jobs I had recently completed, as well. I didn't doubt my skills at re-creating a smooth surface if I could attempt a shower-tub repair, but had no idea how to achieve a seamless finish. No, I was resigned to the need for a full replacement, but I did put a piece of cleverly-repaired ceramic into my bag to take with me to the job the next day, when I returned to confess my mistake in person and talk to my clients about how they wanted to proceed.

I had three of the five carriage lamps reassembled and packed into their boxes for delivery, and was tightening the last glass section into place on the fourth, when I heard a tiny tick, and watched a crack spread across the curve of blown glass. My mouth dropped open and my screwdriver fell on the floor. I was still standing, in motionless silence a minute later, so I was able to hear the second tiny tick from inside one of the re-packed boxes. I swore, then, and took a deep breath before slowly and methodically un-packing and surveying all the lamps.

Three cracked panes, in all. I assembled four lamps with the intact glass panes I still had, then turned off the lights and locked the shop door to go inside and pour myself a drink before getting on the Internet to price replacement hand-blown glass.

I called my parents that night to tell them the sad, funny story. The fact is, everyone who works with his or her hands, maybe everyone who works in the real world, understands how I was feeling. You do your absolute best, then sometimes you eat the bear and sometimes the bear eats you. No use crying over your mistakes, you make them into a funny story, instead, to tell to others who have also made mistakes and can appreciate and laugh at the slapstick, banana-peel nature of the universe. I was also happy to be given a properly self-deprecating story to tell my parents, who laughed and commiserated. The next morning, when I told my clients about the damage, they only laughed, themselves, and told me that the husband had done the same thing, dropping a hammer in the stall while it was being installed. I called the repair service they had used before, and in the end, it cost me only about \$150 to put things right.

A few weeks later, I received my grandmother's wooden workbox for Christmas, and inside, five skeins of bamboo sock yarn, a set of double-pointed needles, instructions for knitting



socks, and a note from my mother: *Your father and I feel that, in light of your increasing age, you should consider taking up a safer, more sedentary occupation.*

Using those double-points and instructions, I began my first pair of socks that Christmas day, but soon graduated to circular needles and complex patterns and color schemes. I knit socks obsessively for the next several years—at parties, in bed, on airplanes, and in hospital waiting rooms. When

you're knitting socks, strangers begin conversations with you: *Is it hard?* It's not hard, if you are patient with details and good with your hands. *How long does it take to knit a pair?* It usually took me about a week to knit each sock, if I was only knitting during my relaxation times from other work. I enjoyed chatting to airline attendants, or whoever was interested. During those several weeks I had spent in Jeff's hometown, Pottsville, working on the family house on 20<sup>th</sup> Street in the morning, and sitting in the afternoon sun with Mom in the rockers out front at Providence Place, several of the care facility's resident ladies had kept up a running conversation with me about my knitting.

I have thought a lot, over the years, about my aversion to even *appearing* to have been following in my mother's footsteps, even to the point of cutting off my own nose to spite my face. When I dropped out of school at nineteen, after our epic family drama, I had vowed, childishly, that I would never give my mother the satisfaction of seeing me complete my degree while she was alive. When I did go back to school, despite my passion for books and reading, because she had earned a Master's degree in library science, I shied away from studying literature or writing, but chose religion instead, a move certain to baffle and confound my atheist parents. For my entire adult life, I had been hearing how much I look like my mother, and I'd learned to smile and nod while grinding my teeth. We all experience the occasional flash of being possessed by our parents, listening to their voices emerge while we lecture our own children, but for me, that experience was panic-inducing. To avoid turning into my mother, I deliberately cultivated my father's skills, even initially marrying a man uninterested in books, but who could build or fix anything with tools.

Working with your hands is relaxing in a way that working with people or ideas is not. It feels cleaner and more precise. You study and think about the result that is your goal, figure out a

process, refine it, and begin to shape your materials. It was revelatory, years ago, when I realized that the ability to visualize a three-dimensional process is the key to working with any material, not the material itself, or the necessary tools. I have a healthy fear of dangerous tools and working conditions, but not of the processes themselves. I'll just as happily do masonry or welding or wiring or painting as sewing or knitting, and I have little patience for the surprise, or even admiration, expressed by people about my non-gender-traditional skills and interests.

My mother had taught me to sew and knit when I was young. She also taught me how to make a bed with hospital corners, scrub a floor, and iron a shirt properly. I do think all she wanted for her children was our success, and for her, success came from working hard at the details, then doing each step correctly and completely. When I was a freshman in college, friends would laugh at my obsessing over the precision and tautness of my dorm room bedspread. She taught me how to do things properly, but could never model how to achieve emotional balance, being herself a model of immoderation and imbalance. Indeed, she always seemed to radiate disdain for the idea of psychological balance, as if it was some sort of New Age quackery. I never knew her to compromise on a position, but to hold her ground, as if under attack. The first year after Jeff and the girls and I moved back to Michigan, we hosted Christmas at our newly purchased home. My brother Chris and I had collaborated on a gift for our mother, one we knew would be controversial, a certificate for a quit-smoking clinic. We were nervous when she opened it, but I hadn't anticipated that she would simply get up in anger and leave Christmas morning with her granddaughters.

As her children, we learned, not only how to do tasks correctly, but also a deep sense of shame and self-loathing at our inevitable failure to achieve perfection or to ever predict and do exactly what she wanted. I don't think my mother was pre-meditatively destructive, that is, I've



never considered her abusive. I think that she was highly self-critical and, in turn, crushingly hard on everyone around her. I think that she blamed all of us, especially me, and not herself, for her unhappiness. And, I think this is one of my own worst learned traits, the depth to which I judge my husband, for example, for his utter inability to fold a pair of pants. Although, who knows how much of my own psychology I learned through dysfunctional family dynamics, and how much was already genetically there within me, to be nurtured and watered and shone on by a mirroring sun?

2008, Spring Lake, MI

By the winter of 2007, two and a half years after her massive surgery, my mother's blood work markers were indicating that her cancer had resurged, and the conversations at her oncology appointments began to fall into a pattern. The doctor would explain the latest test results, talk about the falling statistics for positive responses to chemotherapy after a certain point, remind my parents of the usefulness of hospice, and ask what they wanted to do. I would sit silently, my father would say, "We want to keep on with treatments," my mother would look at him, and then say, "Yes." I would take them home and schedule my next trip down for chemotherapy transportation. Jeff and I would talk about the challenge of acceptance and he would usually reiterate that when his time came, he would want to just be put out on an iceberg, but I wasn't so sure. I doubt that most of us will let go of life easily, even if we think we are certain of a better existence beyond. I didn't feel that I could judge my parents' decisions; I just showed up and did my job. I drove, I grocery shopped, I began to surreptitiously, and then openly clean the bathrooms and sweep the floors, and I didn't initiate any conversations about any arrangements for the future.

Unlike Mary Lou, who seemed to experience no pain, only an increasing weakness, and who finally slipped silently from semi-consciousness to unconsciousness and then out of life in that bed in the dim living room of the Vosper Street house, my mother's fight was long, angry, very painful, and ultimately also conducted in a hospital bed in my parents' living room. Only a few weeks into that fall semester, I withdrew from my class and moved onto my parents' couch. Ovarian cancer is particularly brutal, originating as it does, in the abdomen, and in its final stages, affecting all the vital organs, but especially the intestines and bowels. Twice, my mother needed to be taken by ambulance and admitted to the hospital for treatment of partial bowel blockages, and the waiting room conversations with the doctors during these times followed the same pattern as previous ones. My father would insist that more could be done and I would make eye contact with the doctor while he answered our questions and talked even more firmly about hospice. They tried to be as direct and honest as they could, without being cold or hiding behind medical jargon, but, because science demands precision in thinking and language, it's not until you are far, far down that path, that a doctor will make any unequivocal statement like, *no, there are no more options, this is over.*

Part of my job, all along, had been to understand, repeat, and explain what the doctors, and now, finally, the hospice nurses were saying to us. It was a huge relief to finally have hospice in the house. Their presence changed the conversation completely and acknowledged what we had been doing for quite a while, but what neither of my parents had been able to admit: we were caring for my mother while she died.

She didn't sleep much, and became increasingly unsteady on her feet, so my father began taking care of her during the day while I slept, and I stayed awake at night to steady her to the

bathroom, or from bed to chair and back. We did talk then, about my father and his future. She explained the finances and insurance and extracted my promises, once again, to take care of my father and my brother Stuart and not to argue with Chris about Stuff we might both want. To that end, she and I divided up her valuable antique doll collection to our mutual satisfaction, although I've since forgotten exactly which of the hundreds of dolls are to go to Chris and which to me. One middle-of-the-night, we had our only conversation about mortality, when apropos of nothing, she suddenly asked me, "Do you think I will just fade away?"

I hesitated, then said, only, "I don't know, Mom." I waited for her to say more, but she didn't. I had been trained to leave her alone, so I left it at that.

The hospice nurse was there on the morning of the day she died. Hospice had supported us well, training me to help with her pain and in what we should expect each step of the way, but they, of course, could move and bathe her with so much more confidence and efficiency than I could manage. After a trip to the bathroom, a sponge bath, and some beauty ritual, the nurse tucked her into the bed I had just changed, and took a moment to chat. She asked about the socks I was knitting, and unlike other times people had asked, I told her the whole story. I told her about my jobs and breaking the shower stall and the expensive lamp glass and my grandmother's workbox and what bamboo yarn was and the note my mother had written and how I had begun to knit socks that day and hadn't stopped since, dozens of pairs later. My mother lay in the bed, her body wasted down to skin over bone, no longer able to speak, and listened and nodded, grinning, while I talked.

Later that afternoon, her breathing changed the way they had told us it would, the way I had heard Mary Lou's change. My father stood on one side of the bed, holding one of her hands

and Chris, on the other side, held the other. Stuart hovered in the doorway to the hall and I stood at the foot of the bed. Afterward, we called hospice and the funeral home in Saranac, and they both arrived quickly. Her body was gone within an hour and a half, and cremated before the service we arranged for several days later, so that afternoon was the last we saw her.

Since her death, I feel better. I like that she's gone. Every night, I call my father and when we say goodbye, I say, *I love you, Da*, and he says, with the same intensity and inflection each night, as if he's lowering himself into a cool pool on a sweltering, hot day, *Ah, I love you, Sis*. He had never said that to me, before the past few years, and I had never said it to him, either, since that had been forbidden language, before.

## POSTSCRIPT

### JEFF AND REGAN'S BEDROOM, 2 AM, TUESDAY

Regan wakes with these words in her head: no-one is finished until she hides the true length of her reach. She lies still for a moment, coming out of the grip of the nightmare, and wondering. She had been trying to escape something or some people, and had been told to “just run through here.” She had gone further, kept going further, pushing through brush to the other side, to others who would hide her from the coming search. She had practiced hiding beneath the slipcover on the back of a couch, how to hold her arm to counterfeit the furniture, and then had felt fear, or, at least, uncertainty when she had realized that a small child, a little girl, was climbing around on the couch over her. Would she be discovered? Was she supposed to do something more active to escape? She had been afraid, but not terrified, as if she very much wanted to escape, but knew she could continue to survive in bondage, if necessary, if she was caught.

She pulls up her left leg and rolls onto her side, sliding her leg to the other side of the cat who has apparently been sleeping between her legs. She lays still, thinking for a few more minutes, then reaches for her phone, ducking under the covers to shield the light from Jeff's sleeping face and tapping the Facebook logo.

REGAN: Mom, I wanted to tell you that Chris probably has a job interview back here in Michigan. He might very well be able to move back from Iowa.

GINGER: That's wonderful news. When will he know?

REGAN: I didn't talk to him and Dad didn't know that much, last night. I agree—it would be

great. Chris could use a break. I think he's getting really worn out with driving back and forth for five years, since before you died...and...the other thing I wanted to tell you is that I'm going to reapply for another assistantship, and hopefully begin another Masters program next fall.

GINGER: That doesn't surprise me in the least. Did you tell your father?

REGAN: I did. He didn't seem surprised, either, or put out, but I know that he'd like it if I were more available. If Chris gets a job back in Grand Rapids, he and Julie will undoubtedly do so much better at taking care of Dad and Stuart than I do. If he doesn't move back, we'll all just keep on the way we are, I suppose.

GINGER: And when your father starts to need more help?

REGAN: We'll figure it out as we go, Mom. Can you see that I can't deliberately *not* make commitments because Dad *might* sometime need more care? If I have to drop out of a program or go on hiatus or something, I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. And, if and when Dad can't go on living alone, then we and he will have to face that when the time comes.

GINGER: I don't want your Dad to have to leave the house and go into a nursing home.

REGAN: Nor do I, Mom. Your insurance and pension were very good, so Dad could afford to pay for some home care, if necessary, and Jeff and I could afford to supplement that. And I will do whatever I need to do, whatever he needs me to do.

GINGER: I know you will.

REGAN: Thank you for saying that. I really will. But, Mom, between you and me, I think you

must recognize the part of me that is just like a part of you. I don't really want to spend my time and energy taking care of anyone, especially not any more. The bondage of it makes me angry, even though I take pleasure in the love I get back from devoting myself to others. If Chris moves back to Michigan, I will end up being jealous of Chris and Julie for doing all the right things, for being the right kind of children to deserve to get all the love from Dad. I think, somehow, deep down, I've come to believe that all love is conditional, and I need to purchase it with my compliance, but I just *can't* submit. I hate having to be someone or something for other people. That's why I behave so poorly when I can feel others' expectations. I both love and hate being "good" and "valued." I want to be perceived those ways and loved, but then in rebellion, I begin to sabotage my value and self-worth by deliberately not meeting peoples' expectations. I HATE the constraint, and then feel compelled to sacrifice any love that comes to me that way. Pretty messed up, huh?

GINGER: Hmm. I can see myself in the "fleeing the bondage of devotion" part, but I don't know if I relate to the self-sabotage part.

REGAN: It's okay, Mom. Self-analysis has always been more my thing, anyway. It's a confirmed practice of my generation. You know we're all so devoted to "finding ourselves."