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FROM SAFE, a MEMOIR

by
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CHAPTER 1. CUT OUT THE MOTHER

I. THE LAND OF FORGETTING, 2002

Last week I found this information scrawled on a mailing label in my mother's bathroom: "Zimbabwe is on the right-hand side of the Kalahari Desert."

Each time I come to rescue my father from the shifting sands of Mom's Alzheimer's, I discover new notes she has written to herself. On kitchen counters, stuffed in pockets, dresser drawers. One surfaced recently with the words, "BARN" in all caps, followed by "ON WAY HOME WHITE OWL ON WIRE." I couldn't imagine what this referred to until I recalled that months earlier I'd told her—much to her pleasure—about my headlights illuminating the wings of a barn owl.

Words have always served as a compass for my mother— and as a guide for helping her children on their journeys, too. She welcomed the detailed accounts of our days at school, offering a thoughtful response to whatever crisis loomed at the moment. Even in adult life, things from boyfriend problems to grad school applications were part of the current conversation. Language, both spoken and written, helped her make sense of the world. "I love novels," she told me once, peeking over the top of Far From the Madding Crowd, "because they take you right inside how other people think."

Sometimes I find books by Mom's favorite writers—Iris Murdock, Thomas Hardy, and Eudora Welty—stacked near her bed, their physical proximity still a vague source of comfort. I find her sitting with a book open and she is mouthing sentences, though I don't know if they are what she sees. She always valued the beauty of words.

On the days I visit, I wash, cut, and blow-dry my mother's lovely hair. When combing hurts her tender scalp, she whimpers and I remind her how "we must suffer for beauty." We laugh the laugh we used to laugh. For a moment, on the safe island of a familiar phrase, I am fooled

into thinking that I have my mother back. When we recover from our hilarity, I help her into her pajamas and she says, “You’re so good to do this awful thing.” “Well,” I reply, “you taught me how.”

I then squeeze some toothpaste on her toothbrush, show her how to brush her teeth, and go turn down her bed. When I return to the bathroom, my mother is quietly brushing her hair with her toothbrush, huge white streaks of paste smearing through her fresh new haircut.

Each day the landscape of Mom’s life erodes. Where once she knew each of her children’s friend’s names, my father’s business budget, and the variety of finch that hovered at the feeder, she now struggles with naming a spoon. Soon she will inhabit a long stretch of desert, a geography I am less and less equipped to explore. Literature has yet to chart the Land of Forgetting.

Until she disappears to the other side of words, I will accompany her to the borderlands, learning as I go that language and memory are merely constructions of our mortal world. But—for now at least—language and memory remain my most reliable tools for navigation. So I press on, trying to believe as my mother once did, that words can make

shape out of something I do not understand. I write poems, hoping they will keep me on course; the most recent one is titled “So Soon Gone.”

I imagine a day when Mom and I can sit around the kitchen table and we’ll laugh in the way we always do, creased up with hysteria, and she’ll say to me, “Wasn’t that a dumb thing I had there, toward the end?”

II. POET-FINDING, 1981

After my first day of teaching high school English, I call my mother. I want to tell her how my students smell of cow manure. And how, by the time they get to school they can barely stay awake since they’ve been milking since 3:00 a.m. I want to tell her that I’ve made it through five classes and a study hall. We have a joke in our family that when we’re emotionally, intellectually, or socially drained, we “have to go take a shower now.” I tell her I definitely have to take a shower.

“But how did the teaching go?” she asks eagerly.

“It went just great,” I say, and review the lessons, the writing assignments, the poems I read aloud to them, “But what will I do

tomorrow?” My mother laughs on the other end of the line and says, “I know you’ll think of something.”

In the spring, my mother flies from the Northwest to New England to see how things have progressed since September. I take her to the high school where I work every day, a turn-of-the-century brick building in a depressed New Hampshire railroad town called Woodsville. This village, across the Connecticut River from Vermont where I live, limps along in a kind of time warp. According to a Robert Frost poem, it was once a town of “shrieks and wandering lamps,” but few trains rattle through here now. It is a town of one mini-mart where my student Joanne pumps gas, a grocery called Kelly’s Shop ‘n’ Save, and Hovey’s Department Store where you can buy red-checked woolen shirts and felt boot liners.

After school is out, my mother and I explore the valley in my tiny Honda. She is delighted by her young daughter’s life here, even though my job includes not only teaching, but directing the school plays--all for a whopping \$8,500 a year. Miraculously, this sum manages to cover rent on

an upstairs apartment in a Vermont farmhouse where I sleep tucked under the eaves and stab at writing poems in my evening hours.

On Saturday my mother and I decide to take a road trip. We think it would be fun to drive by the house of Donald Hall, a poet my mother and I have recently read and admired. His poem called “Names of Horses” has touched both of us in its fierce and loving litany of his grandfather’s teams—long dead—who did everything from plowing to taking the family to church on Sundays. “. . . old toilers, soil makers:/ Oh Roger, Mackerel, Riley, Ned, Nellie, Chester, Lady Ghost.”

He has now written a memoir called String Too Short To Be Saved, an account of moving back to live in his grandparents’ house where he spent his childhood summers. On the front cover of the book a daguerreotype of his 18th Century house charms those of us who grew up on the shores of Puget Sound where “old” houses seldom predate the 1920’s. We look at a map and decide that Wilmot, New Hampshire can’t be too far from where I live.

“Surely there can’t be that many houses there,” my mother says. “At least Hall describes it as sparsely populated. Plus, we know what the house looks like, don’t we?”

An hour or so of driving through New England hamlets gets us to the village of Andover. At the post office we get out of the car and ask the postmaster which way to Wilmot. He laughs, “What are you looking for?” Sheepishly we tell him that we want to see Donald Hall’s house, the one on the cover of his new book.

“Oh! Don would love to see you! Why don’t I give him a call?”

“No no no!” we protest. “We only want to see the house.” The thought of the human encounter is more than we can contemplate, but the postmaster already has the phone in his hand and the poet on the line.

“Don! There are a couple of ladies here who would love to stop by and see you. Uh-huh. Sure!” He hangs up and grins. “He says come over right away. He’s expecting you for tea.” My mother and I gasp but don’t want to appear ungrateful. We thank the postmaster and topple into the car nervous and giggly, then follow his directions to Hall’s house.

“Why, it’s backwards,” points out Mom as we pull in the driveway. “The photograph must have been put on the cover wrong.”

“They thought it looked better that way on the book for design,” Hall laughs as he welcomes us in his driveway. He is a big man with a furry beard, full of enthusiasm. Hall’s wife, the poet Jane Kenyon, waves from the garden where she is clearing sticks and weeds left over from winter. Hall introduces us to her, then ushers us into the living room, and I notice the wide, smooth floor boards. We know from the book, but he tells us that he has recently moved from Michigan where he has left university teaching to pursue writing full-time. I can practically smell his grandmother’s and grandfather’s presence, and I look around at the walls with old mirrors and shelves of books.

Hall learns I am a teacher, a budding poet, and encourages me to write. At one point he leaps up out of his chair and bounds up the narrow stairs. We hear him rummaging around until he comes down with a shiny new book in his hands called “Writing Well,” a manual he’s just completed for schools and colleges. “I have some extra copies!” he says;

I am flattered and thank him profusely. This is all so exciting I can hardly wait for it to be over so I can go home and think about it.

“I’ve just been to see my good friend James Wright,” he tells us, his voice growing more serious as he takes a slurp of tea. “He has throat cancer and can no longer talk or eat through his mouth.” Mom and I lean forward, remembering it was James Wright who composed the poem that Mom clipped from the New Yorker and tucked into my bedroom mirror the first Thanksgiving I came home from college. It’s called “A Blessing,” about stopping by the highway and encountering two soft horses at dusk. I have always been moved by the last lines, and it occurs to me that I feel this way right now:

“Suddenly I realize/That if I stepped out of my body I would break/Into blossom.”

Hall tells us about his friendship with Wright and how, even without a voice, his poetic voice is still very much alive. “He is sitting in his hospital bed,” Hall explains. “And he looks terrible. I sit next to him

on the bed and I think how awful this is. What can I say? But he manages to write me a note. ‘Don’ it says, ‘I’m dying’ and then he stops and looks up at me. I am speechless. Then, in his inimitable genius for line breaks, he writes another line: ‘to eat ice cream from a tray.’” Hall lets out a deep breath, leans back into his chair, and grins. “Isn’t that great?”

I am amazed by this story, that poets think and talk about poetry all the time— even when they are dying in a hospital bed. Poetry is not just a poem on a page. It is about the whole of life--and death. Words like “line breaks” and “metaphor” make me dizzy with the bigness of it all. Don Hall belies any clichéd notion one might conjure about poets being meek, pretentious, or grim. He is a robust man with a truthful manner. His eyes shine. When we have finished our tea and cookies it is time to go and my mother and I, fearful of overstaying our welcome, thank him again. We wave goodbye.

Once we are safely in the car and pointed West to Vermont, my mother says, “I have to go and take a shower now.” We howl. It will take us awhile to recover. “He was even nice to the mother,” she says, rolling down the window to let in the spring air. We laugh again, and I shift into

third to tackle the uphill grade. We recount the details – the grandfather’s house, the poet wife, the poet stories, and the immense force of Hall.

“Poet-finding,” Mom says, remembering our “stud-finding” excursions during my horse days. The 4-H girls and our leader would go look at stallions for possible breeding of their mares. Though my horse Lightfoot was a gelding, I often went on these local trips with Mom. We’d nearly collapse when our leader, Mrs. Clark (with a behind big enough for a man-sized saddle, according to my father, and who did no small stud-finding on her own) used to say in all seriousness, “Today is stud-finding day.”

“Today, the poet-finding was good,” Mom says and I agree. We head toward home, crossing the Swiftwater covered bridge in Bath which spans the Wild Amanoosuc River. The wooden cross-pieces go clunk clunk clunk as I slow down, and we see that the surface of the river – still covered with ice – is criss-crossed with dark cracks. The late afternoon with its long shadows calls us out. We pull over and walk down along the bank.

“Listen,” Mom says. And like some primordial groan, the river begins to talk. First, deep creaking, then cracks like thunder and lightning make us jump and step back. Blue chunks buckle and break in front of us, slowly churning and inching downstream. Like fingernails scratching a blackboard, the sound is both crazy-making and thrilling. We know we have hit this at just the right moment. Then another crack and the ice is severed all the way across to the other bank. Rocks emerge from underneath and the ice piles against them in a dam while other bergs smash past. The screeching continues until “pop!” “pop!” like gunfire several cracks converge and the surface rises like a geologic uplift, a giant frost heave in motion.

We watch the water take the ice far downstream over riffles and around the bend, on its way to melting into nothing. If we stepped out of our bodies, I think we might just blossom.

III. BUT WHAT WILL I DO TOMORROW? 2002

MONDAY

I am looking after Mom again, and this morning at breakfast the newspaper has a front-page story about Mt. Rainier, glaciers, and lost climbers. “Oh, I’ve been up there,” Mom tells me. “Not with Daddy. He was down there—“ she points and squares her hands as if to indicate a precipice. Her stories these days are often about being somewhere “way up high.” or “on a river.” It’s an image that holds a lot of power for her, but she can’t quite pinpoint where that place is. When I tell her the newspaper also says that a new foot ferry might be in the offing from Kingston to Seattle, she says, “Oh, really? How many feet would it go?”

TUESDAY

She would be startled at the person she is becoming, one who picks up my jacket, carries it to another part of the room or stashes it in her own dresser drawer. She was always so careful about boundaries and privacy; the kleptomania goes against her very nature. The other day I was getting ready to leave, and I’d piled my purse and briefcase by the front door before Dad got home. I was finishing the dishes when I heard pawing noises in my purse. I looked around the corner and in one hand my mother held a letter I was going to mail. Her other hand was rifling through the papers in my briefcase. When I said, “Mom, what are you doing?” she looked up vaguely – wearing my sunglasses—and said, “Oh, you know...”

WEDNESDAY

My sister and I lie in the guest bed together and listen for the stirrings of my niece and our mother, praying they will both stay down after repeated jack-in-the-box pop-ups from their respective bedrooms. Tonight just after Mom has been carefully tucked in for the third or fourth time, and Celia has been given her second bottle, we hear the creak of the bedroom door again. Out comes Mom wearing her dark glasses, fully dressed in two pair of khakis, her underpants pulled over them. “Hey,” she says in her familiar looking-for-fun voice, “Am I missing anything out here? How about some lunch?”

THURSDAY

Around the house I now also find notes from my father to my mother. Imperatives like DO NOT FLUSH UNDERPANTS DOWN THE TOILET are attached to the inside lid of the toilet. THESE ARE CLEAN CLOTHES is taped to the washing machine. On the kitchen counter I find a line drawing he has made of a table setting with labels:

PLATE, FORK, KNIFE, SPOON. At the bottom of the rectangle, he has written the word CHAIR with an arrow pointing down.

Though her memory is breaking off--chunk by chunk-- and floating down the river, my mother continues to write, too, trying to keep track of basic facts on her yellow-lined paper. Things like “Son, Paul. Editor of the Harvard Business Review, Boston, Mass.” Then in pencil, circled: “11:32 PM to bed.”

FRIDAY

This morning my father sends me an email message to tell me he’s been up in the night again. He was awakened by Mom whimpering under the bed. “What are you doing, Mary?” he asks. “I’m helping a little bird who is trying to find its mother.” she sobs. “It can’t find its nest....”

SATURDAY

Today I take Mom with me to the mall so I can look at new laptops. We jump around rain puddles and hurry into the surreal world of the super-electronics store. At first she is nervous with all the noise and

commotion. Wall-sized television screens blare out some daytime show and sporting event. Stereo speakers thump out a rap tune. Shelf upon shelf of gadgets, toys, palm pilots, and printers blink and shine. The sterile lighting casts no shadows and pretty soon I find Mom wandering toward the televisions, fascinated in a drugged sort of way. I veer her toward the laptops, and we comment on the different models. Weak with the number of options, I encourage Mom to consider one I like. “Nice color,” she says. We chuckle, and I flash on a day years ago when she came to England where I was studying Blake, Keats, and Shelley at Oxford. We visited the Bodleian Library where a glass case filled with Shelley relics contained, among other things, a lock of his hair. After taking this in, Mom and I looked at one another and she said, “Well, why bother reading Shelley now that we’ve seen his hair?”

The clerk in the computer aisle chirps at us about the current laptop deals, and I can now see Mom going limp. The woman hurries on, “If you need any more help, just look for me or anyone in a blue shirt!” Mom tugs at the front of her sweater and replies, “I’m wearing a blue shirt.”

SUNDAY

Today on her night table I find a remnant of her driver’s license. All the vital stats are there, but she has carefully clipped away her I.D. picture. I remember ten years ago when she sent me a photo of my Boston boyfriend and me taken during one of her visits East. She happened to be in the picture, too, smiling and standing next to us in the evening light of an open door. The enclosed letter says, “Remember this wonderful night? Wasn’t it fun? You and P. are so cute together. After you look at this, just cut out the mother.”

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