

# the vulnerables



**sigrid nunez**

national book award winner for *the friend*

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# The Vulnerables

SIGRID NUNEZ



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There lies behind everything . . . a certain quality which we may call grief.

• JAMES SAUNDERS,  
*Next Time I'll Sing to You*

Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it.

• GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ,  
*Living to Tell the Tale*

How do you reveal yourself without asking for love or pity?

• MARGO JEFFERSON,  
seminar on writing *Negroland*

# Part One

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It was an uncertain spring.”

I had read the book a long time ago, and, except for this sentence, I remembered almost nothing about it. I could not have told you about the people who appeared in the book or what happened to them. I could not have told you (until later, after I’d looked it up) that the book began in the year 1880. Not that it mattered. Only when I was young did I believe that it was important to remember what happened in every novel I read. Now I know the truth: what matters is what you experience while reading, the states of feeling that the story evokes, the questions that rise to your mind, rather than the fictional events described. They should teach you this in school, but they don’t. Always instead the emphasis is on what you remembered. Otherwise, how could you write a critique? How could you pass an exam? How could you ever get a degree in literature?

I like the novelist who confessed that the only thing to have stayed with him after reading *Anna Karenina* was the detail of a picnic basket holding a jar of honey.

What stayed with me all this time after reading *The Years* was how it opened, with that first sentence, followed by a description of the weather.

*Never open a book with the weather* is one of the first rules of writing. I have never understood why not.

“Implacable November weather” is the third sentence of *Bleak House*. After which Dickens famously goes on a lot about fog.

“It was a dark and stormy night.” I have never understood why this phrase has been universally acknowledged to be the worst way for (I forget who: something else to look up) to begin a novel. Scorned for being both unexciting and, at the same time, too melodramatic.

(Edward Bulwer-Lytton, originally. In a book called *Paul Clifford*, in 1830. Others thereafter, in mockery, most memorably Ray Bradbury,

Madeleine L'Engle, and Snoopy.)

*Unimaginative* was the word Oscar Wilde used to describe people for whom weather is a topic of conversation. Of course, in his day, weather—English weather in particular—was boring. Not the far more erratic, often apocalyptic event people all over the world obsess about today.

Important to point out, however, that it wasn't normal fog—condensed vapor, a low cloud—that Dickens was talking about, but a miasma caused by London's appalling industrial pollution.

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IT WAS an uncertain spring.

Early each morning I went for a walk. It was my chief pleasure in a dearth of pleasures, observing day by day the arrival of a new season: the magnolias putting out their petals and—so poignantly soon, as it seemed to me every year, but never more so than the spring of 2020—shedding their petals. The cherry blossoms, even lovelier—loveliest, agreed—but likewise short-lived. The daffodils and the narcissus—narcisuses? narcissi?—and the gaudy tulips that seemed almost like wild mouths screaming for attention. “Too excitable” is how Sylvia Plath once saw a vase of “too red” ones. Like Rilke's frightened flowers “rising up to say: Red.” To Elizabeth Bishop, the spots on the tips of the dogwood petals were like burns from a cigarette butt. Poets.

Can it be accidental that the names for flowers are also always beautiful words? Rose. Violet. Lily. Names so appealing that people choose them for their baby girls. Jasmine. Camellia. I once knew a bulldog named Petunia. A cat named Mimosa.

So many other beautiful ones I can think of: anemone, lilac, azalea. Of course, there must be an exception. There are always exceptions. But though I'm not so keen about *phlox*, I can't come up with a single really ugly flower name, can you?

There are other plants, though, like weeds and herbs, with hideous names, like vetch. We're thinking of naming the baby Vetch. Meet the twins:

Mugwort and Milkvetch. Horehound. Bugbane. Wormwood: the name C. S. Lewis gave the devil apprentice in *The Screwtape Letters*.

Snapdragon! Not for a baby girl, never, but a good name for a cat.

There were days when I stayed out a long time—up to three or four hours. I made a loop. I went from park to park. That's where the flowers were. Early on, before the playgrounds were closed, I took comfort in watching the young children, or even just hearing their trilling voices as I sat on a bench nearby. (Not reading, as I would have been doing in ordinary times. I had lost the ability to concentrate. It was only the news that gripped my attention, the one thing I wished I could ignore.) I enjoyed watching the dogs play, too, before the dog runs were closed. Weren't we all reduced to the state of children now. These were the rules: break them and you'll be punished, your happy-making privileges taken away. For the good of all: understood. But the dogs—what had *they* done?

Of course, I still saw plenty of dogs being walked. But it seemed to me there was something different about them. They knew something was up. The somber way they plodded along, brows furrowed, heads low. *Now* what have they gotten themselves into, those brows seemed to say.

A young friend of mine disapproved of my spending so much time outdoors.

You're allowed to get a breath of air, she said. But that doesn't mean wandering about the streets for hours.

But why put it like that, *wandering about*, as if I were some dotty, driftless old lady.

A quick turn around the block, a trip to the grocery store, get in, get out, no dawdling. *Stay home*. That's the rule.

Don't play dumb, she said. You're breaking the rules, and you know it.

*A vulnerable*, she called me. You're a vulnerable, she said. And you need to act like one.

The governor of New York, the man making the rules, agreed.

Social media fanned a tale of quarantined women masturbating while watching his daily press briefings.

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THIS MORNING an email from a stranger, a woman angry about something I wrote. It is trash, she says. Every word of it.

Which could mean only one thing: I must be trash myself.

Like that other woman, many years ago, who wrote to express her disgust with me for writing about two characters apparently based on my parents. English was not her first language.

Only sick person do mother and father so wrong, she wrote. For this I hope you punish.

I like this true story, about a writer who wanted to base a fictional character on someone he knew. He disguised her, for example giving his character close-cropped hair instead of the pageboy the real-life model had worn since high school, and a pair of eyeglasses with striking cat-eye tortoiseshell frames. Though in real life the woman was childless, in the book she has a twenty-something-year-old son.

Some weeks before the book came out, the woman developed a bad case of dry eye and could no longer tolerate wearing her contact lenses. For her new glasses, needless to say, she chose cat-eye tortoiseshell frames. Now that she was no longer young and her hair was thinning and fading, at her stylist's suggestion she got a pixie cut. Neither the writer nor anyone else in the woman's life at the time knew that, as a teenager, she'd had a baby that she'd given up for adoption. It was just now, having reached his twenties, that her son chose to seek out his birth mother.

I have heard that Chekhov wanted to write a novel that he was going to call *Stories from the Lives of My Friends*. Probably his friends did not want him to write it.

Another angry message, earlier this week, from a person who hadn't read, but happened to know about, something I wrote. As he understood it—better say misunderstood it—I had attacked a professor for sexually harassing young women.

Where were YOU, this person wrote, when an OLDER WOMAN took advantage of ME? Where were YOU?

Where was I? Where was *I*? Why does his question pierce me? When I tell people I am tempted to write him back, every one of them jumps to say, *Don't*.

But not every stranger getting in touch with me these days is angry. There is the woman writing from Albania who thinks I'm a Dear Gentleman and offers to be my wife. She will love me good, she promises. She will make me feel like Real Man. (Which reminds me: What stopped all the many emails I used to get with offers for ways to enlarge my penis?) And about once a week, a voicemail from some woman identifying herself as a volunteer who is calling just to check on me. The same message each time: God loves you. Followed by a Bible verse.

Thus from different points of the cosmos do good wishes and bad wishes blow my way. Love and hate.

Meanwhile, I have been working on a survey for a literary symposium, trying to answer a question I am asked all the time.

I know of research studies of twins, including some whose co-twin did not survive birth. For many of the survivors, the result has been lifelong feelings of loss, pain, emptiness, and guilt. In one case, a man who was not told about his stillborn twin until he was well into adulthood described experiencing huge relief. At last he had an explanation for the aching void he had always known; why through every joy in his life, no matter how rich, ran a seam of grief.

I never had a twin—so why did this man's story strike a chord in me? Why did it feel like a revelation? *Something is missing. Something has been lost*. I believe this is at the heart of why I write.

For a while, during the same time I found myself unable to read, I wasn't sure whether I'd be able to write again—just one of the many uncertainties of that spring. (Not a writer I know who didn't experience the same.) But the feeling has survived and will not go away: I want to know why I feel as though I have been mourning all my life.



Every story worth telling is a love story, said someone I used to love very much.

But this is not that story.

I remember a boy. His name was Charles. Blond hair raked sideways. Cowlick. Small for his age (twelve, thirteen) and his ears stuck out, which, with the cowlick, gave him a somewhat comical look. Could have been the model for Dennis the Menace.

A boy, an ordinary boy, one day possessed. One ordinary Saturday afternoon, he calls, this classmate I hardly know. What does he want? Why can't he speak? It sounds as if he's being smothered.

*Speak!*

I want to see you, he blurts out at last. He wants to know if he can come to my house.

I say no and hang up.

My mother is there (she is always there: no privacy, ever, from that woman). She wants to know who called, and when I explain she goes back to what she was doing, staring out the window of our third-floor apartment. (I've never known anyone who spent as much time at the window as she did, watching the neighborhood for hours, like television, now and then commenting on how fat Mrs. Prysock was getting, say, or alerting us to a sight to bring us all running: a fight—there were lots of fights—or a tenant being evicted, or once, most memorably, a body: a jumper, dead on the ground.)

What does this boy look like? she asks. Does he have blond hair?

He must have called from a phone booth. How he learned where I lived I don't know, but he had come on his bike, and now, for the rest of the afternoon, he will ride up and down the block, under my mother's watchful,

sympathetic, and even admiring eye (it took guts for a stranger—a pint-sized blond white boy no less—to ride alone into that neighborhood).

From time to time he stopped to phone and plead with me again.

I remember that I had no pity. Something had possessed me, too. I was not flattered. I was like the princess in the story, casting appalled glances over her shoulder at the frog that was following her home and that she could not outrun. But *she* had made a promise: to be the frog's BFF if it got back the golden ball she'd stupidly dropped down a well.

As it grew late and he would not be gone, my mother wrung her hands—*He shouldn't be here after dark!*—and I began to cry. Such drama on an otherwise ordinary Saturday afternoon. It was spring, and I can still summon my humiliation at the sight of his small, pathetic figure pedaling slowly along the privet hedge.

The more sympathy my mother expressed—he'd come all this way, the least I could do was talk to him—the more I despised him.

Later, she ordered me not to tell anyone—meaning, of course, the other kids at school. Her anxiety irked me. Like many women, she would always find it easier to feel for a male (except, of course, her husband, against whom she bore innumerable, lifelong, deadly grudges) than for any female. But what was it in her manner that suggested that I was somehow to blame? That even though I'd done nothing to encourage him, I did in fact owe this frog something, maybe even a lot.

Tenderness for a boy she'd never met, harshness toward her own daughter. Beholding me as if she were seeing something new in me. Something she did not like.

At school that Monday, he would not meet my eye. He met no one's eye. He sat with his head down and his face like stone, as if one of his grandparents had died. When I passed the word in homeroom, my friends were as indignant as I was.

I remember his ears: sized and shaped to catch every whisper and titter. He sat in one of the front rows, hunched and absolutely still. Prey-still. You could see the blush creeping up the back of his neck, darkly, steadily, as if red paint were being poured into a hole in his skull, and then his ears,



seeming to grow even larger as they engorged with blood. It was this that set everyone off—*Look at his ears! Look at his ears!*—until the teacher had to shout to quiet us down.

Bad of me, yes. But I take issue with the gods for making me pay for it not just once but so many times.

He never bothered me again. In fact, he forgot all about me. Not that he turned his attention to some other girl. He'd lost all interest in girls. It was as if, having tried and failed, he'd learned all he needed to know about love, and moved on.

I forgot to say that he was a new boy; his family had just arrived in our town. But he was a good kid, he fit in right away, making friends with the other kids—including me. We became friends and we stayed friends, as if there'd never been any trouble between us. Children forgive and forget more readily than do grown-ups—or gods—and I remember it felt perfectly natural; it would have been strange if Charlie had held a grudge.

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I REMEMBER playing Estella in a school performance based on scenes from *Great Expectations*.

Remember how, despite the way she mistreats him, Pip goes on loving her—always. Remember the teacher-writer-director and what an oddball *she* was (one of those teachers whom children find it almost a duty to torment), and how one of the oddest things about her was how much this junior high school playlet meant to her. At rehearsals, she kicked off her shoes and tore around the stage, demonstrating, cajoling, moving so energetically that her skirt waistband twisted askew and the sweat shone on her skin (while we shivered: it was cold in the auditorium after school). It is her voice I hear animating the lines:

*Don't loiter, boy.*

*I think she is very pretty.*

*Why, he is a common laboring-boy!*

*Well? You can break his heart.*

I hear an accent, too, and unless memory has invented it, she was from the South. I remember her disappointment with Pip, who would not get into the spirit; her frustration with me for not being able to project; and how she wrested from another girl the likeness of a witchy old British spinster that was truly uncanny.

In another class, we read an abridged *David Copperfield*.

I am called on to describe Steerforth. The good and the bad.

Steerforth is handsome, he is clever and rich, Steerforth is charming, romantic, and popular. Steerforth is selfish, he is dishonest, he is bad to Little Em'ly and mean to the poor.

And do I think there are many people in the world like Steerforth? asks Mr. Rosenberg.

Quite sure of the answer, I say there are not.

Really? asks Mr. Rosenberg, giving me another chance. And when I nod he says, Then I think you are very naïve.

The world is full of Steerforths, he says, looking straight into my eyes.

I had been warned.

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ANOTHER BOY: his name was Larry. Though he went to a different school, a Catholic school, he lived near our junior high and often hung out with kids from there. He fell for a girl named Jill, and as was the ritual in that place at that time, he offered her his engraved ID bracelet. She turned him down, and then, almost immediately, she changed her mind. Or maybe, in fact, she'd never really meant to reject him—you know how these things can happen.

But now, though almost no time at all had passed, Larry changed *his* mind. Maybe it was just a question of pride. In any case, all was lost. He did nothing cruel; he was a nice boy, more Copperfield than Steerforth, who lived with his single mother (a rare type of household back then). He did not gloat. He did not torment our Jill. But for sure her heart was broken. How all the life went out of her, as if she had some wasting disease. She sat through

the school day with a stunned expression on her pale face—Helen Keller, one boy teased—oblivious.

Sometimes she wept, silently, discreetly, but at least once that I recall she broke into a violent fit of raucous sobbing that brought the class to a halt. I remember that, without asking what was wrong, the teacher tried to make a joke of it: Good God, has someone died?

I remember that she would not talk about it with us, her girlfriends, though we shared most things with one another, especially anything having to do with boys. And this silence scared us, seeming to put her suffering on a level with other crises that no one would talk about: a molested altar boy, a father who beat a mother so badly she had to call in sick to work, a mother with cancer of the breast, a girl or woman who'd been raped.

Although there was nothing theatrical (in the sense of phony) about her suffering, there was something of the tragedienne about her. She had always been a pretty girl, but now her ordeal transformed her, aging her into someone large and serious. She sat among us schoolchildren, large and serious. Silent, regal, and very beautiful.

It didn't last forever—but surely it must have marked her for the rest of her life? I, a mere witness, never thought about love in the same way again. It was in all the songs, but here was proof that those songs were no exaggeration. A thing that could come on you and devour you like an illness. An ordinary boy who had nothing against you could take you down, could make it so that, even with your whole life ahead of you, you could want not to live anymore.

Most frightening of all, perhaps, was that she had only herself to blame, for having spurned her admirer in the first place. Love as punishment, as mockery and cruelty. The horror of that.

In Dickens, of course, where this kind of thing happened all the time, it would all have been brought right in the end. There would have been heaps of suffering, heaps of trouble and misunderstanding. But even as you wept over those parts, you knew you were on your way to a happy ending, and you felt soothed.

No wonder I loved Dickens then. No wonder I can't read him today.

Long out of school, I decide to read *Our Mutual Friend* for the first time. Anticipating the old rapture, I am crushed to feel—boredom. But that happens: writers who once meant everything don't always thrill in the same way anymore.

Or did the trouble have something to do with knowing what I hadn't known before: his son Charley's doleful revelation that the child characters his father invented were at times much more real to him than his flesh-and-blood ones. His famous cruelty toward his wife, whom he continued to abuse even after he'd dumped her for a teenage actress.

The world is full of Dickenses.

And what about my Charles? What sort of man did he grow up to be? Kind? Mean? And what, if anything, does he remember about that time?

The last I heard about Larry was that he'd enlisted, like so many other boys I knew back then. (How his ID bracelet came into my possession is a different story, another love story, though not what you think.) My mother is five years dead. The old neighborhood. Called a slum, though it wasn't a slum. Called a ghetto, though it wasn't a ghetto.

On a whim, I google the neighborhood where I lived until I was seventeen. Under the heading "Are You Thinking of Living in . . . ?," these "official statistics":

Transportation: Poor. Daily Life: Poor. Safety: Poor. Health: Poor. Sports and Leisure: Poor. Entertainment: Poor. Demographics: Poor.



A mong the last to bloom were the hydrangeas. Also known as hortensia: *of the garden*. Hardier than the other flowers and lasting much longer—almost all summer. The ones I saw were mostly blue—baby blue—but there were also some white ones, and cream-colored ones, there were pink ones, and some that were a blend of pink and blue—lavender, or lilac (is there a difference?)—depending on the park.

But, because lilac and lavender are also kinds of flowers, you can't say, The hydrangea is lilac, or The hydrangea is lavender. It would be like saying, That cat is sick as a dog, or His eyes are his Achilles' heel. (I did not make those up, I read them somewhere.)

Old-lady flowers. I grew up hearing them called that, but I never knew why. Could it have been the color, like the blue rinse many women used back then to cover their white hair? Though, given that blue hair was a sure sign of old age, every bit as much a sign as is white hair, how it was supposed to disguise the fact was a mystery to me.

By the way, what do you smell when you hear "old-lady perfume"? I would guess something cloyingly floral. Thinking about those old-lady hugs that can bring a child close to suffocation.

Another mystery: Why do so many people dislike hydrangeas? You may have seen the video, or at least heard the story: what happened when a fan offered a bloom to Madonna. Later speculation had it that her extreme response—I *absolutely loathe hydrangeas*, immediately placing the flower out of her sight—might have had something to do with its association with cronehood. An aging sex symbol's reflexive horror. (She was fifty-three at the time.)

I too once disliked them. I remember seeing them growing all around houses and the borders of lawns, like grape clusters, or fat corsages on

bosomy bushes, and I thought if I had that house, that lawn, or a garden of my own, I wouldn't want them. I would replace them all with peonies.

But now, in park after park, the sight of hydrangeas lifted me up, and I had to wonder how I could have failed to appreciate their great beauty before. (A friend who has had the same experience gives this explanation: It happened to me the year I retired. You reach a certain age, and it all kicks in: Social Security, Medicare, and a fondness for hydrangeas.)

"A Fondness for Hydrangeas" sounds like an old-fashioned book title. And Hortensia, of course, sounds like an old lady's name. Like Myrtle. Or Matilda. Or Henrietta. (Heard recently that giving babies old-lady names was back in style.)

Another friend of mine says that, where she grew up, it was rhododendrons that were known as old-lady flowers.

Apparently there is a difference: lavender is purple on the blue side, lilac is purple on the pink side.

"Blue Hydrangea," "Pink Hydrangea." Two poems by Rilke.

I once wrote something in which I made a reference to Madonna, though I no longer remember the context. The editor took it out, saying it would not be long before readers would have forgotten who Madonna was. The same editor who, upon hearing that Jonathan Franzen's novel in progress was called *The Corrections*, said, That's a terrible title. It will sell three copies.

That hog farm is a pigsty. He uses his wheelchair as a crutch.

She absolutely loathed hydrangeas!

Peonies are still my favorite flower.

• • •

DURING THE time I was *wandering about* locked-down Manhattan, Colm Tóibín was wandering about Venice—the most beautiful city in the world now become the most beautiful ghost town—where this thought occurred to him: "One of the subjects to muse on as old age begins is how unfair life is."

Indeed. *He* got to be in Venice.

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WHAT COMES in late life to many writers, according to J. M. Coetzee: “an ideal of a simple, subdued, unornamented language and a concentration on questions of real import, even questions of life and death.”

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T. S. ELIOT, on listening to Beethoven’s late string quartets: “There is a sort of heavenly, or at least more than human, gaiety about some of his later things which one imagines might come to oneself as the fruit of reconciliation and relief after immense suffering; I should like to get some of that into verse once before I die.”

Note that Beethoven, though at the end of his life, was only in his mid-fifties when he wrote the music that inspired Eliot, who was around the same age when he composed *Four Quartets*, but who lived to be seventy-six.





I could call her Rose, or Violet, or Lily.

The first one of us to get married. The first to have a baby. The first to die.

Lily.

For us, her funeral would also be a reunion. As I suppose most funerals are.

At the gathering following the burial, in the home where he now lived alone, her husband told us how, for some time, she'd been convinced that something was happening to her. Not something bad, he said, but something strange.

She was superstitious. She had always been superstitious, she believed in signs. Why were people she hadn't been in touch with for years seeking her out just now? In one day, messages from two different men, her husband said, boyfriends of her youth. I had a dream about you, said one. Your face just swam into my head, said the other. A handwritten letter from a childhood friend she barely recalled. All these years it's been weighing on me, this person wrote. I let you take the blame when in fact I was to blame. This, over some petty incident of which his wife had not even the slightest recollection, her husband said. She remembered very well, though, the old acquaintance who'd borrowed fifty dollars, then vanished without paying it back. And now that man, too, had popped up, sending deepest apologies along with a check!

Dreams, Lily's husband said. She had stopped remembering her dreams long ago. Except for rare instances, she had no memory ever of what she had dreamed, not even fragments, her nights might as well have been without dreams at all. If she woke up in the night, she'd know for sure that she had been in the midst of some dream landscape or event, but no mental effort could bring it back.

This worried her, he said. It wasn't just a sign of growing older—it didn't happen to everyone—but what if it was some age-related impairment? What if it was an early sign of Alzheimer's?

Now this changed, her husband said. Every morning, without exception, she woke up with a clear memory of certain dreams. It wasn't the content of the dreams that interested her. They were the same sort of dreams she'd always had, that everyone has, mostly incoherent nonsense that, fascinating as it might seem to the dreamers themselves, when narrated at breakfast only bores anyone listening.

She had no interest in hidden meanings, her husband said. The interpretation of dreams as a clinical tool had always struck her as a questionable, if not disreputable, practice. So it was not what she dreamed about but the clarity and vividness of what she later recalled, her husband explained. Not just one or two elements, but elaborate scenes, little one-act plays, rich in detail. And whatever the reason could have been for this change—this was what she would have liked to have known.

And then, in the last week, she started smelling things, he said. You don't smell that? she'd ask, sniffing the air. Always the same type of smell, something cooking. Like French toast, she described it. She smelled cinnamon and brown butter. And now, struggling not only with his loss but with the many regrets that so often torment the bereaved, he marveled that, at the time, he had made so little of this. Would he—would they both—have been more alarmed had the smell been something bad, something sickening?

It would not have made a difference, he'd been told; by then, nothing could have been done.

It would have made an enormous difference! he said, unthinkingly balling his fists. We would at least have had some time to prepare. *We would have had time to say goodbye.*

He looked disheveled in spite of his pressed black suit, white shirt, and black tie. Earlier, he had spoken at the service, and though it was into that dense silence that is characteristic of funeral homes, his voice was so frail that we had to strain to hear.

None of us knew him well. The children we never knew at all. The elder, the son, was threading his way through the crowded living room, his own young son on his hip, thanking people for having come. The daughter sat with us, her chair pulled close to her father's. They were all still in the state of shock that the sudden death of a loved one brings. It was as though, while she was walking around, while she was doing whatever needed to be done, she were actually unconscious, Lily's daughter said.

The last time I was here was for the holidays, she said, and I did notice some changes in Mother's behavior. Much as she loved them, Mother always found the holidays stressful, and the turn of yet another year tended to make her melancholy. But this year it was different, she did not seem stressed or melancholy at all, on the contrary, she seemed—carefree.

There were times, though, when I'd catch her looking around as if she were surprised to find herself where she was, though it was her home of thirty years. But those moments were rare and so brief that I thought maybe I was misinterpreting or even imagining them, she said. Also, I was distracted. My youngest had started doing poorly at school, and an employee at my company was suing us for discrimination, so I was more than a little stressed myself.

Whenever I came to visit, we usually took an afternoon walk, and that's when I noticed something else, Lily's daughter said. Mother kept stopping to point things out—Christmas lights on a neighbor's house, clouds, squirrels scampering—as if she had never seen such things before. It reminded me of going out with the kids when they were small and all the world, even the most ordinary things, made them gape.

Another thing was the way she laughed, Lily's daughter said. I don't mean her normal laugh, but the way she laughed for no reason, or at least none that we could tell. Someone would make a remark that had nothing funny about it and Mother would nod her head and chuckle. It wasn't that she had no sense of humor, but she was never one to laugh easily. She wasn't what you'd call a jolly person, her humor was always on the sardonic side.

Dad noticed it, too, she said, patting his hand.

But neither of us brought it up, he said. We just didn't think to make a big deal of it.

A silence fell, during which each could be sensed acknowledging and seeking to assuage the other's feelings of guilt.

Lily's husband said, It was odd, her behavior, but it was also harmless, even charming, some of it. And if it hadn't been that way, if she hadn't seemed perfectly happy—not to mention, according to the results of her last physical, in good health—

She was fine! his daughter broke in. She was still going to work every day, no sign of trouble there, she said, glancing across the room at a large, shaggy-gray-haired man helping himself to tea sandwiches and poppy seed cake: the head of the textbook firm where Lily had worked for much of her life (and with whom, I recalled, in his shaggy-black-haired days, she had once had a secret affair). She was still meeting with her book group, she still volunteered as a docent for the local zoo.

But something must have happened, her husband said. Because it was she who finally announced that she should see the doctor. She wouldn't say why except that she was not herself. I am not myself, she said. I can't explain it, but I am not myself.

She made an appointment for the following morning.

I was downstairs waiting, he told us. I had taken the day off, I was planning to go with her.

When the time came for them to leave the house and she hadn't appeared, he went upstairs. He paused now, shaking his head. He covered his eyes with his hand.

She was not ready to go, she was not even dressed, she was still in her robe. She was holding her arms up, he said, lifting his own arms into the position of someone dancing with a partner. She was waltzing around the room. Her eyes were open, but it was obvious she didn't see me. She was in another place altogether. And she was singing a little, under her breath.

She didn't seem to be in any kind of distress, he said. Her face was relaxed, with a dreamy smile.

It could only have been seconds between the time he saw her and the time he said her name.

It was as if I'd shot her, he said.

She didn't crumple, the way a person usually does when they faint. She went down like a chopped tree.



I am not superstitious. I don't believe they were signs. (I was talking about the people from the past who'd gotten in touch with Lily out of the blue.) They were just coincidences, I said.

Can't a coincidence be a sign? said Rose.

Three of us were in the bar of the inn where we'd each booked a room for the night. Live music every weekend. Fridays, folk music; Saturdays, jazz. It was a Friday, and so it happened, by poignant coincidence, that the background to our conversation included some songs that Lily herself used to sing, in the days of her youth—our youth, when we had all first known one another—and her dream was to be the next Joan Baez or Judy Collins.

*If you miss the train I'm on . . .*

I didn't mind this, Rose didn't mind, but Violet did. If we weren't in a strange town, she said, I'd insist we go somewhere else.

Violet and Lily had been freshman roommates.

In fact, she said, that's often how I see her when I think back. Sitting on her bed hunched over her guitar, all that hair rippling over her like a waterfall. (It was one of Lily's distinctions: she hadn't cut her hair since she was ten, a look that regularly turned heads, but also caused problems for the dorm's shower drains.)

She had a beautiful voice, but she could hardly play at all, Violet said. I always wanted to scream at her to stop. Sometimes I did ask her to stop—in a nice way—and she would be hurt. You know how she could make you feel like a monster, with that big-eyed waif look of hers and that motherless childhood we'd all heard so much about always in the air.

It was true. It was like a rain cloud following wherever she went. Not that she was literally motherless, but her mother had been criminally—literally—neglectful, having been, also literally, if only periodically, mentally ill. And it was true: if you didn't treat Lily like a sensitive child, you felt like a brute.

Do you think her husband ever knew about all the other men? Rose asked.

All the other men, said Violet. You make her sound like a whore. There were, like, two or three. Maybe four.

But that's kind of a lot for one marriage, isn't it? said Rose. At least for a woman? A wife?

Violet said she had no idea what Lily's husband knew. She had no idea what kind of a lot for one marriage meant, either.

I wonder who she was dancing with, said Rose.

Oh, Rose, said Violet.

*Danse macabre*. That's what had come to my own mind when her husband described the scene. Skeletons dancing people to their graves. Death appearing, taking a bow: May I have this waltz?

By the way, said Violet, he lied. Lily wasn't wearing a robe. She wasn't wearing anything.

This she had learned from another friend of hers who was close to Lily's family.

I thought of how her husband had covered his eyes with his hand before telling the story, and I wanted to weep.

Violet's husband was a neurologist. He had explained to her—and she to us—how it could have happened: the unsuspected tumor, the idiosyncratic symptoms, the explosion in Lily's head.

Do you remember when she first got pregnant, said Rose, and how upset she was because she couldn't be absolutely sure he was the father?

We sure did. But then the baby had turned out to look just like him.

And her daughter, I pointed out, was the spit and image of her mother.

Why do you say that? Violet asked.

Because it's true, don't you think?

No, I mean, why do you say spit and image?

Because that's the expression.

Yes, I know. But nobody says that. Nobody says spit and image. Everyone says spitting image.

Well, that's wrong.



It is not *wrong*. It's a modernization, which is not *wrong*. Spit and image sounds wrong now. In fact, it sounds idiotic. Why don't you catch up with the rest of us here in the modern age?

Spitting image sounds idiotic, too, said Rose. It makes no sense. Why would a likeness be spitting?

This is a stupid conversation, said Violet.

Which you started! Rose and I said in unison.

Yes, you're the one making a big deal out of it, I said.

Why are you being so irritable? said Rose.

*Because someone I used to love very much lies in a cold dark hole in the ground and I'll never see her again.*

Applause. The singer had finished her set. She looked as young as a high school girl and was dressed not at all like a folk singer, but more like a chanteuse: shimmery red cocktail dress, platinum blond hair upswept. Her voice was not exceptional, but it had a soulful, tugging warmth. Though it was a Friday night, almost half the tables were empty, and she seemed to sing more to herself than to us, as performers often do when hired only to make background music.

She rested her guitar on a chair and crossed the room to the bar, which was being tended that night by a young man whose looks had drawn our attention earlier, when we first sat down. It's rare that a person's neck is one of the first things you notice about them. His was a muscular column rising out of a loose-fitting, black sateen V-neck shirt. He had a headful of tight black curls, a clipped mustache, and large dark lustrous eyes that matched the shirt. A swashbuckling look.

The only customer at the bar was an old man in overalls sitting at one end with his back to the room and absorbed in a TV game show.

We watched as the singer climbed onto a stool and leaned so far across the bar that her feet left the floor. The bartender clasped her by the waist, pulled her to him, and they shared an endless kiss.

It was such an intimate display that we were taken aback. Then a yearning silence fell over our table, and we sat still for a moment: hushed, remembering.



The next morning we sat together again, this time at a table in the breakfast room. Now we were five. Jasmine, who'd flown home for the funeral from a trip abroad, had been too jet-lagged to stay up with us the night before. Camellia, who happened to live in the same county, was not staying at the inn. She had driven home yesterday after the funeral and back again today to join us.

We were in a lingering mood. Breakfast done, each of us would be off in a different direction with no idea when we might all see one another again.

Jasmine had some trouble on her mind.

Family trouble, she said. She didn't like to talk about it.

But once begun, it came pouring out.

Jasmine's thirty-eight-year-old daughter had recently married an older woman, the mother of four grown children, one of whom was still in college where, up to now (his third year), he'd been thriving.

Last semester, said Jasmine, at a Halloween party, he met a girl, or a young woman I should say, though she's only eighteen, and they ended up in her dorm. They were in her room, where they put on some loud music—for the sake of privacy, they later explained, because the walls were so flimsy you could hear the person on the other side so much as yawn.

According to the young woman, said Jasmine, at a certain point she asked him to stop. But her daughter's stepson did not stop, because he never heard her, he said. Between the loud music and his own heavy breathing, he didn't hear her, he said. And oh, said Jasmine, I should have said that apparently they were both drunk.

Afterward, said Jasmine, the woman wasn't sure what to think. In her gut she felt that she had been assaulted. It was true that she had only asked him to stop once. But that was because there wouldn't have been any point in asking him again, it was too late, the young woman said. But she also thought she

herself might have been to blame. That night she had asked him to tie her up, which he did. She had asked him to hit her, which he did. So he might have thought she wanted him to use force, that no meant yes, and that she had not really wanted him to stop at all. Exactly what had happened to a high school friend of hers, Jasmine said the young woman said.

But, as the young woman later explained to those charged with investigating the matter, although she did want him to tie her up and she did want him to hit her, she did not want to have intercourse with him—of this she had been absolutely sure—and she had made her feelings known, and she did not believe him when he said that he didn't hear.

He heard *something*, he told those charged with investigating the matter. A moan, he said. At least, that's what he thought it was. A moan that meant yes.

It turns out, Jasmine said, that he was wearing a condom. The woman had watched him put the condom on, he said. She hadn't said anything, though. She hadn't said then, lying in bed, watching him put the condom on, I don't want to have intercourse with you.

This he was told was a bad excuse, or rather that it was no excuse. It would have been better if he had never made that point at all. He was reminded that, at the start of the school year, he had received the guidelines for appropriate sexual conduct that the school had established and that all students were required to follow. You did not lay a finger on another person without asking their permission. Even while engaged in sexual activity with a consenting other, you presumed nothing. You must ask first, you must get spoken permission for every act of sexual behavior, including foreplay, every move, every touch.

He had been told all that, like everyone else. But he had not followed the guidelines.

He wanted to say that the woman had not asked permission to come up behind him at the party while he was talking to another woman, slip her arms around his waist, and press her breasts and her pelvis against his back. But he figured that, like mention of the condom, this would only have made things worse for him.

At the moment, said Jasmine, pending a final deliberation of some sort, the situation remained unresolved. But her daughter's stepson had nevertheless been suspended and might even be expelled. The story, or various versions of it, some with colorful embellishments, had inevitably become public, and before he left campus he'd had to put up with a certain amount of harassment—people raising their voices when they spoke to him, *Heard you were hard of hearing, hah hah*, that sort of thing, she said.

But it was far worse for the young woman, who was now subjected to relentless trolling, said Jasmine, much of it obscene and frightening, as that kind of trolling always is. Unable to finish her courses or take final exams, she, too, had left campus for home, where, according to her parents, she was in treatment for depression.

If he is expelled for sexual assault, his life will be finished, he keeps telling his mother; he might as well kill himself. She has tried to prepare him for the worst, while also trying to convince him that they will get through it somehow, that life will go on, and that whatever happens she'll stand by him.

Unfortunately, said Jasmine, his father did not feel the same. His father was old-school, very conservative, the son of a rabbi, and from the beginning had expressed nothing but outrage. He did not care what the young woman did, what she said or what she asked for, he did not care what kind of person she was, a man who would behave as his son had behaved was a dishonorable man, unworthy of sympathy. Picking up a stranger like that and jumping into bed with her—was it a school party, or an orgy? Tying her up, hitting her—who would do that? An eighteen-year-old girl. It had never occurred to him that any son of his could ever grow up to be a man like that. A swine. A disgrace.

When, having fallen in love with Jasmine's daughter, his wife had broken the news that she was leaving him, she had been thankful that, although shocked and hurt, he'd found the grace to accept it, Jasmine said. It helped that he almost immediately started seeing someone else, whom he later married, and, after his ex-wife also remarried, and in spite of remaining firmly opposed to same-sex marriage, he managed to keep up a cordial relationship with her. After all, they had once loved each other very much,

Jasmine explained, and she was the mother of his children. Three of the children had by then already left home, and the youngest, their only boy, began splitting his time between his parents' households.

But now that peace had been shattered, Jasmine said. Now the scales had fallen from the father's eyes. Now he understood what could happen when a child was exposed to the iniquity of two women living in wedlock. No wonder his son had lost his moral bearings. No wonder he'd come to believe that anything goes. His father should have known, he should never have tolerated it. This was his punishment. His son, his only son, was ruined.

*He's the swine*, interjected Camellia.

Jasmine shook her head. She couldn't help feeling as bad for him as for everyone else, she said. The man loved his son, he had always taken such pride in him, especially for how well he did in school. Now the scandal had crushed him.

Sometimes I wish I'd never been told anything about it, Jasmine said. Selfish, I know, but since there really isn't anything I can do, I just end up feeling sad and helpless and wanting only to put it out of my mind. It's been good to get away, to be distracted for a bit. Well, you know things are bad when a funeral feels like an escape.

But I got to see all of you, she finished brightly.

She didn't say, and we didn't ask, whether she believed her daughter's stepson's version of events or not.

Then Camellia told a story, meant to be a funny story, about a woman who'd gotten so high before having sex that she couldn't remember the safe word.

The idea of safe words has always confused me, said Rose. Why would you need to agree on a color, or a piece of fruit—colors and fruit being the most popular safe words, apparently—when you could just say stop?

Silence.

I'm asking, said Rose, why is saying red a better way to say stop than stop?

Well, ob-vi-ous-ly, drawled Camellia, because, during sex, stop might be part of the play—you know, as in fake resistance? You've heard of it? The

person says stop, but they don't mean it? But if they say red, they do. And of course stop *can* be the safe word, it's just that some people like using a synonym.

*Synonyms*, said Jasmine. Now, that's kinky.

Why pieces of fruit? was what I myself was wondering.

"Forgetting the Safe Word," murmured Violet, who works in publishing and is forever hearing titles.

Rose was still confused. But if stop can *not* mean stop, why can't red not mean red? You say stop, stop! and your partner thinks, Ah, but you don't mean it, bitch, you mean more, more! What's to keep them from deciding that red also means more?

I suppose that, on occasion, such a thing may happen, Camellia said, exaggeratedly whispering. (Rose had raised her voice to make her point, drawing vexed looks from the elderly couple at the next table.)

Here I thought of something I had read some time before: a story that was written in the 1950s and in which the narrator recalls how, as a young child living in a rural village several decades earlier, she was startled awake one night by the church bell clanging and a house in uproar. A neighbor's barn was burning. The child lies in bed, listening to the noise of the several relations with whom she lives as they rush about outside her open bedroom door. Now and then someone peeks in and tells her to go back to sleep. Nothing to fear, an aunt assures her. "The men will take care of it."

Which gave me pause. That sentence, I said. "The men will take care of it." At first I wasn't sure why, but then I realized it was because it sounded archaic. It sounded quaint. And it struck me how unused I'd become to reading anything about men that puts them in a noble—or even a decent—light.

Not that it was like that in real life, I said. Most first responders are men, and we tend to heroize them more than ever. A cop gets killed in the line of duty and he's called a martyr. But when men appear in fiction now it's usually to be criticized or denounced for something. The one thing you're never prepared to hear is that the men will do the right thing.

I think you're exaggerating, said Violet. But it's true that things have changed. Men as dangerous—that's always been central to literature. But there was never this relentless focus on men as selfish and clueless and abusive almost by nature. It used to be that a man could be a misogynist and also something else, something admirable, even valiant. The worst womanizer could have any number of good traits, including strong moral qualities. That seems to be no longer credible.

But it wasn't just women choosing to show men in a bad light, she said. I see the same thing in most of the manuscripts I read by male writers now, too. And very often, if he isn't an outright monster, the white male character is still a shit, a bungler or loser or some kind of creep. And now male writers bend over backward to emphasize the superiority of their female characters. I meet the same paragon in book after book: high IQ, great personality, firm moral purpose, dazzling wit. And the trick is to get it across that she's also very attractive without ever appearing to be somehow disrespecting her. It would be funny if it weren't so boring. But the truth is, no man today would ever attempt to create an Emma Bovary or an Anna Karenina.

It's like the new image of priests, she went on. If a priest or other clergyman appears on the same page as a child, I brace myself. And I can't say how many stories I now see that deal seriously with the question of how we'd all be better off in a world without men.

Jasmine said, I had a similar response watching a documentary about *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. I thought, Imagine today, if you wanted to create a show like that. The last kind of human being you'd choose as the embodiment of kindness, fairness, and decency, or to give children a sense of inclusion and safety, would be a straight white man in a classic white-bread wardrobe.

Who was a clergyman, added Violet. Not to mention a registered Republican.

Camellia giggled. How did we get from safe words to Mister Rogers?

Rose, who teaches college, said, I had a student who wrote in a paper that she'd have a different attitude toward mortality if she'd been born male, because then, quote, I would've always gotten what I wanted in life. When I

pointed out that this wasn't true, that it was not just hyperbolic but completely false, she doubled down. But men have all the power, she kept saying. Well, I'm the mother of four grown sons, and not one of them has come even close to getting everything he wanted in life.

Then Rose, to me: I haven't read the story, but I'm guessing that in fact the men did take care of it. That would have been the expected outcome, a completely realistic scene, the women staying home with the child and the men going to fight the fire without anyone questioning that that's what should happen.

I nodded, and she went on: Maybe it's because I'm from a military family (generations of Rose's people have served, with several members achieving high rank), but I believe that, whatever else they are, men are brave. Don't roll your eyes! I'm just saying that there's a form of bravery particular to men, and however many exceptions there might be, it's part of the male character to want to take care of those who are more vulnerable. And I have depended on that quality in men, and I have benefited from it. We all have. Would I feel as safe in the hands of a woman surgeon or a woman pilot as I would in the hands of a man? Absolutely. But I would hate to be in a situation of danger like a burning house or some natural disaster with no men around.

But you cannot deny, said Camellia, that much of the danger people find themselves in is *caused* by men.

True, said Rose. But I also know that, very often, when I take comfort from the presence of men, it has everything to do with their masculinity. And as a child I always knew that there was a difference between the ways your mother could protect you and the ways your father could protect you. There is no woman who could make me feel safe the way my sons do, or the way my husband does, even though he's not young anymore. Which doesn't mean I don't cringe when he says, Ladies first, every time he holds open a damned door for a woman, or when he doesn't get what's offensive about someone saying women talk too much. Just getting him to acknowledge sexism has been mostly a losing battle, I admit. Thank God my sons turned out to be much more teachable.



Then Camellia told us how, the week before, her ex-husband had gotten in trouble for giving his assistant roses on Valentine's Day.

That was dumb, said Violet. What was he thinking?

Well, he wasn't thinking, Camellia said. He was on his way to his office and he saw that the newsstand in his building was selling roses, and he thought it would be a nice gesture. It wasn't his assistant who complained about it, either. It was another woman, one of the partners, in fact, who reported it. So now he's been accused of inappropriate conduct, and, far from being contrite, he's livid.

He said he remembered being in grade school, Camellia said, and how kids sent other kids in their class valentine cards—there was even a special mailbox set up by the teacher in a corner of the room. He remembered that this was a tradition when our own kids were in grade school, too. He googled it and found that it's still a common practice, kids making and sending each other valentine cards. This isn't little kids sexually harassing each other, he said, it's a show of goddamn friendship! I said, Sweetheart, we're not talking about little kids, and we're not talking about friends, we're talking about you and a young woman who works for you.

I once saw an amazing thing on Valentine's Day, I said. Outside an apartment building, a vase smashed to bits and a dozen roses scattered all over the sidewalk.

*Someone* was pissed, said Camellia.

What does it mean, said Rose, our stubborn Rose, to say that the world would be better off without men? Women are less violent, but what about all the other wicked traits, like racism and greed and malignant narcissism? There'd still be plenty of that.

Oh, I don't know, said Camellia. Just to have less violence—less warmongering, less bloodshed, less crime—wouldn't that be grand?

I hate being at the mercy of male strength, said Jasmine. A window gets stuck and I have to call the super. When you live alone, this kind of thing happens all the time. And every time, I hate my weak little woman self. But take male strength away and the world grinds to a halt.

Camellia said, I once lived with this guy who, whenever he took a shower, would twist the faucets off so hard that when I went to take a shower I couldn't twist them on. He was a contractor, and I'd call him at work and demand that he come home and turn the fucking faucets on, and of course he wouldn't—he couldn't just leave the job like that, he said. He'd promise to be more careful in the future, but he kept forgetting.

That's the thing about men: they're always forgetting, said Jasmine.

The other day, I said, I had to go downstairs to ask the doorman to unscrew a jar of honey. He could see I wasn't happy about it, and he said, You think you're the only lady to come down here to ask the same thing?

Why don't you just buy one of those rubber-disk thingies, said Camellia. What's it called?

A rubber husband, said Rose. Don't give me that look. I didn't name it that.

Oh my God, the time! said Jasmine. I've got a plane to catch, and I still have to pack.

Rose is right, said Violet. A world without men would hardly be a utopia. There'd still be some kind of hierarchy, that's inevitable. There'd still be one group trying to dominate everyone else, because that's human nature. There'd still be plenty of abused children. On the other hand, I can't quite picture Orwell's "boot stamping on a human face forever" on a female foot.

But why do we keep having this ridiculous conversation? she said. The more we know, the more we have to fear that the human race is headed toward extinction. Yet here we sit, seriously discussing the fantasy of a world without men.

And, satisfied to have had the last word, she signaled to the innkeeper, standing by across the room.

Actually, it was he who had the last word. He smiled and shook his head as he laid down the check.

You ladies sure can talk.



*If you miss the train I'm on . . .*

I almost missed it myself. Like Jasmine, I had lost track of the time during breakfast, and I had to scramble to make it to the station, arriving just as my train was pulling in.

It was the last trip I'd be taking—the last time any of us would be traveling anywhere—for more than a year.

A long ride, miles through countryside, which I searched for signs of spring, though it was too soon, there were still patches of snow on the ground. I was thinking about a trip abroad that was scheduled to begin the following week, and the things I had to do before leaving. On the train I read several articles about the new virus, coming upon words that would soon be overfamiliar—*Wuhan, wet market, lockdown, quarantine*—and the first doubts were sown. Maybe I wouldn't be making that trip next week after all.

If Lily had to die, Violet told me a few weeks later, I'm glad it happened when it did and not in the middle of—all this.

We would not have been able to attend the funeral; we would not have spent that time together at the inn. I would have ended up quarantined in a foreign country, like another friend of mine, who'd gone with her family to visit relatives in India for what they'd thought would be three weeks and who, almost a year later, would still not know when they'd be allowed to come home.

. . .

I, too, remember sending valentines to my classmates in grade school. The mailbox made out of cardboard and wrapping paper covered with hearts. I remember that it was an assignment—we were required to do it—and the rule: every child must give every other child, whether you liked the person or

not—even those you hated or who hated you, who might have bullied or otherwise mistreated you—a valentine card. You were given a list with each student's name. No one was to be left out. Everyone was equal, the teacher said.

You didn't think about it, you just went down the list. You didn't question that the cards your mother had bought for you to sign and stuff into the little envelopes said things like *I Love You*, *You're the Sweetest*, and *Be Mine*. Though you did ponder which would be the least loving to give the boy who kept calling you a half-breed and you and your best friend dykes.

I remember that there were always some kids who didn't have any cards to give. Their mothers hadn't provided any, because they didn't have the money or they were too busy or for some other reason. Those kids weren't punished, as I recall. They just sat with their heads down as the cards that the teacher's pet delivered piled up on their desks. These were usually the same kids who didn't have the money for class trips (but they still had to come to school on those days and were given some assignment to pass the time), or to contribute to a collection for a gift for the teacher.

Everyone was not equal.

After the valentine cards were distributed, there were treats: Hershey's Kisses and those tiny candy hearts engraved with the same words of love as the ones written on the cards.

Our Brownie troop also had a Valentine's Day assignment: turning red construction paper, red ribbon, white lace doilies, and small sachets into gifts—not for one another but for the residents of a nursing home. We made the valentines at one of our meetings and, for our next meeting, were taken to present them in person.

Not a duty we looked forward to. We did not want to go to that place. Those people—holy moly, what had happened to them? What calamity had bleached and bent and shriveled them? They all looked enough alike to be blood related, but so unlike us—I don't believe these are *Homo sapiens*, the troop smart aleck said.

The warbly voices, the shakes, the drool, the munching mouths. The world's smallest woman sitting up on so high a bed—a hospital bed, it must

have been—reached down and almost ripped the valentine from my hands. (Very careful, I was, not to let her gnarled ones touch mine.) A clown: she breathed in the scent and pretended to swoon back on her pillows. This made her *Homo sapiens*, and we laughed.

Once the valentines had been handed out, we gathered in the dayroom to sing to those not confined to bed. We sang the “Smile Song” and “Make New Friends,” trying not to take too many deep breaths. A nauseating mixture, the cheap perfume of the sachets and the stench in the air. Among the audience were a few who clearly had no idea we were even there. They gaped, unseeing, while others tapped slippered feet off beat or showed their appreciation with lipless rictus grins.

It was almost done. We were almost out of there. Soon we’d be able to breathe freely again.

But here a man struggled to his feet and shuffled our way. His right arm jiggled wildly. At the end of the arm: a hand with long curled fingers, like a giant pink spider. He came straight for me—why me?—and the spider crawled up my arm, over my shoulder, my neck, my chin.

Afterward, there was no forgiveness. Imagine how you made him feel, my mother said. I must have had at least some sense of this at the time. But what I remember is how it struck me later, much later, reading Baudelaire’s prose poem “The Old Woman’s Despair.” A bald, toothless old woman devastated when a baby she wants to cuddle struggles against her with shrieks of fear.

Now there are certain powdery or sickly-sweet scents that can bring it back. The fear. The shame. The old man sadly shuffling back to his seat. My mother’s anger. The Baudelaire.

Some years ago, a student of mine who knew little about Christian holy days was puzzled by the sight of people going about with dirt smudged on their foreheads. Because that year Ash Wednesday fell just days after the fourteenth of February, she figured it must be some kind of anti-Valentine’s Day statement, she said.

And once, near the end of a long relationship, the man I was living with came up with the idea that we should go out for dinner at a fancy restaurant to celebrate Valentine’s Day. In all the time we’d been together he had never

made a suggestion like that, it was not his style, and the way he made it now, softly, looking down at the floor—that's when I knew for sure that it was over between us.



Violet was wrong about the number of Lily's affairs. It was more than two or three or four. I always wanted to be married, Lily once told me, but I never wanted to be with just one man. It had always seemed wrong to her, to expect a person to stay true to one other person—to one other body—till death did them part. To her, it was an example of society's cruelty: to condemn the kind of excitement and adventure and human connection that could make a person feel happiest and most alive. She insisted that she, at least, had managed to be a good wife to her husband without giving up other men. She thought many troubled marriages could be saved if people were more honest about—and freer to act on—their sexual needs and desires.

I was lucky, she said. Coming of age with the pill and in a liberated generation. I hate to think what my life would have been like had I been born sooner. I would have been one of those mad, alcoholic, barbiturate-popping housewives.

How many women have I heard say the same thing.

Once the children came along, she said, she worried more about them finding out than about her husband doing so. She always suspected her husband knew anyway and chose to pretend otherwise—but not because he was equally untrue, she said; even if he wasn't entirely faithful, she didn't believe he had anywhere near as much sex outside their marriage as she did. I of all people would know the signs, she said.

Of course, everything changed with age.

There's a period of time, in middle age, that's a real minefield, she told me. You're not quite ready to give up, but your sexual radar can get a bit skewed, and you have to worry more and more about making a spectacle of yourself.

And she remained—always—haunted by the spectacle of her mother.

She was ten when a boy from the neighborhood said, My mother says your mother is a nymphomaniac. From the way he said it, she could tell that he did not know what the word meant and was hoping she would enlighten him. Instead, she scratched his face.

It was one of her symptoms, she said. (It was Lily's turn: one of those nights when a group of us sat up late in a candlelit room, passing a joint, sharing backstories.) I would come home from school to find her with some man, usually a stranger, but sometimes a man that I knew, a neighbor. Once a cop, and once the father of a friend of Lily's.

It was part of the illness that had scared Lily's own father away years before and that would force her mother to give Lily up to the care of an aunt and uncle.

I didn't miss her, she confessed. I felt guilty, but I didn't miss her. I had become too scared and ashamed to want to live with her. I was so grateful to move to another town, where no one knew anything about her. In fact, though she came to visit us fairly often, and though she and I spoke at least once a week on the phone, we never shared a home again.

In time, thanks to new medications, her mother became stable enough that they were able to have something like a normal relationship. But the same medications were also responsible for the side effects that would shorten her life. She died the same day Lily's first child was born.

There was something about Lily—there was everything about Lily—that inspired rescue fantasies. In a sea of fragile young women she stood out as the one most likely to drown. One of her suite mates, sickly hungover, walked out of a lecture to return to the dorm, found Lily's note, and raised the alarm. A search of the building led to the roof just in time.

She spent a week or so in the local hospital, after which her aunt and uncle bowed to her wishes to return to the dorm rather than go home. She was our problem again. Her bleak moods, her seizure-like bouts of weeping, her threats to end it all—no one would say this wasn't disruptive. But few held it against her. We who wanted to save her were willing to forgive her everything. Even that damn guitar.



But the Lily we first met and the Lily who graduated four years later were different people. She began by doing poorly in school, but by senior year had more than made up for it. Then, while the rest of us continued to drift, unsure what we wanted to do next—or ever—she marched steadily on, finding lucrative work, paying off student loans, marrying well, starting a family. She alone now seemed always sure of what she wanted and how to get it, and whatever her share of ups and downs over the years, she rarely complained about her life; she most certainly never expressed anything like a desire to end it.

The sanest woman we knew, a happy, loving, and responsible wife and mother who just liked to fuck a lot and who, to keep everything running smoothly, needed a slew of lovers, supplemented with one-night stands.

Some of the transformation was a result of her getting older, of course, and she was hardly the only one to grow more mature over those college years. But if you asked Lily, she would say simply: Olaf.

Not his real name. I don't think anyone ever knew what his real name was, just as no one knew for sure where he was from. Not a student, not on the faculty, not a member of the staff, but nevertheless a campus fixture. Unmissable. Six and a half feet tall, lean but muscular, long unkempt dirty-blond hair, eyes the cold blue of mountain lakes: hence "Olaf." Also known as the Viking. Age, another mystery. Past thirty, for sure; closer to forty. You could ask him about these things, but you would not get straight answers. In fact, Olaf didn't talk much. He didn't smile much, either.

Rumors: He was an MD who had lost his license. He had started out on another campus—Harvard—where he'd been part of the circle around Timothy Leary. True or not, he was, like Leary, an ardent believer in the beneficial powers of psychoactive drugs who deemed it a tragedy that, owing to their recreational popularity, their clinical use had been banned.

What Olaf was known for was zeroing in on someone—always female, always young and pretty in the same big-eyed underfed way, some clearly troubled and emotionally vulnerable thing—and taking her under his wing. He would befriend the woman, win her trust (which he seemed to do with incredible ease), and then, over a period of time, he would feed her doses of

mushrooms or mescaline or LSD. He would carefully guide her through her trips, encouraging her to talk freely, while rarely speaking himself, only listening. And to have Olaf listen to you, Lily said, was to know that no one in your life had ever listened to you before.

She couldn't think of anything especially wise or wonderful he had ever told her, she said. But somehow in the safety of his rooms (a basement apartment not far from campus) and his arms (you knew sex had to be a part of it), she found herself thinking things through, she found herself understanding things she had never hoped to understand before—about her childhood, for example; about her unbalanced mother and her cowardly, deserting father—and, for the first time, able to talk about them.

There were lots of facts I'd shared with other people before, she said, but this was the first time I was able to put feelings into words. And she held back nothing, she said.

However voodoo the whole business sounded, the results were real. The more time Lily spent with Olaf, the more together she became. Her moods stabilized. Her grades went up. Even her guitar playing got better.

So why didn't everyone turn to this miracle worker? Many would have, but however much you might have been suffering, you couldn't just go to Olaf. You had to be chosen. He had to pick you.

The break, when it came, was brutal. And for a time we feared that all of Olaf's good work might come undone. But it seemed Lily was too strong for that now. She grieved, but she moved on. She was soon dating someone she'd met in the library, and now that she was able to concentrate so much better than before, she began taking her courses seriously and discovered how satisfying academic work could be.

She was too grateful to Olaf to feel betrayed when he replaced her with another young woman, she said. Besides, she had always known this was his way, he had promised nothing, he had never told her that he loved her. And now that it was over she saw that, in fact, she had never really been in love with him, not in a romantic way. What kind of relationship was it, then? Not quite love, not quite friendship, not quite guru and disciple. A whole other

kind of bond, she said. (Therapist and patient, if of a most unorthodox kind, seemed closest to me.)

What she would always regret, though, was having lost touch with him. She would often think about him, and over the years she tried several times to reach him, or at least to learn something about him, without luck.

He just vanished, she said. Had he ever truly existed? Olaf. Not his real name. The Viking. With the years he seemed less and less like a real person. More like a hallucination she might have had during one of her trips, she said.

But one day, she told me, around the time she turned fifty, she was on a beach, she was taking a walk along the shore, alone, when a breeze blew off the water, and—

I don't know how to explain it, she said, but he was there. I remember I woke up just before dawn that morning wanting to take a walk while the beach was deserted.

The last day of a family vacation, everyone else still asleep.

The air was very still, even on the water, she said, but then came this sudden gust filled with cool droplets. And he was there. It was such a shock, I had to stop and sit down on the sand. And the next minute it was as if everything from our time together came back to me in the most amazing rush: every look, every word, every touch. And the longing, the pain of that loss—it was unbearable, she said. I started crying so hard I thought my gut would tear.

At first I thought I was having an acid flashback, she recalled, though Olaf always said those were a myth. I was afraid I might be having some kind of brain attack, that I might even die. Very soon, though, it passed. The pain stopped, the fear stopped, and I was calm. I felt—rocked. Someone was rocking me. I couldn't hear the waves or the gulls anymore. There was only deep silence all around me—around us.

She was certain that Olaf had just died, and that he had come to her to let her know this. And to let her know that everything was all right.

The part that wasn't new to me, she said—the part that I knew only too well—was that devastating sense of loss. It was exactly what I'd felt when

I'd lost other people, she said. The same yearning, the same grief. It's what you feel when someone dies.

But it had never happened to her before, she said, that someone's spirit sought her out.

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I THOUGHT maybe the mourning Lily felt in that moment by the sea was in fact not for Olaf alone but for that particular time of her life: those long-gone days, those lost days of youth.

And here is another thing. Another strange thing. Many times since hearing this story it has come back to me. Out of nowhere I imagine Lily on that shore and remember how she described the overwhelming sense of loss, and how Olaf was there to comfort her. In moments of grief—as when, not long ago, a close relation died unexpectedly—I have drawn comfort from remembering her words.

She would have said that it was Olaf's spirit. But I'd never even known him—why would his spirit seek me out?

I am not superstitious. I don't believe in spirits. And yet, the comfort was real.



The first problem was this. One of Violet's authors, Iris, was in California with her husband, where they'd gone to visit his parents. It was Iris's father-in-law's seventieth birthday, and a big party had been planned. They had meant to be gone for about a week, but no sooner had they arrived than the lockdown began. The party had been canceled—thank God, they would all soon say, when the very idea of a big party had become terrifying—and now their flight home was canceled, too. They had no idea when they'd get back.

Luckily, the in-laws had a spacious house in Palo Alto where they could all quarantine comfortably together. But Iris was anxious to return home as soon as possible. After much trying, on the cusp of middle age, she had at last conceived, and her first baby was due in ten weeks.

Before leaving for California, they had arranged for someone to stay in their apartment. They had a bird that could not be left alone for more than a couple of days. It was a parrot—a macaw—a highly intelligent and sociable breed that needed lots of attention. Neglected parrots were known to have drastic personality changes, Iris explained, sometimes even to the point of insanity. (In junior high school I had a teacher who had a whole aviary of rescued parrots, and I knew Iris was not exaggerating.)

The person who'd agreed to take care of the bird was the son of a friend, a student at NYU, someone who'd bird-sat for them before. But now he didn't want to be there. In fact, he was already gone. The university had closed, all his friends had left town, he had no desire to be cooped up alone in a strange apartment in a city where a deadly virus was raging out of control. He wanted to go home to Vermont. He had taken off with only a moment's notice so that he could catch a ride with another Vermont-bound student. He had left extra food and water for the bird and split, Iris said, with no intention of returning until classes were scheduled to meet in person again.

Though Iris had friends among her neighbors whom she might have turned to, they were all gone, too, having fled, like so many other New Yorkers, to their country homes. In fact, all ten apartments in Iris's building, a condo near Madison Square Park, were empty.

She'd rather not ask someone who'd need to take some kind of transportation, Violet explained. She's looking for someone who's within walking distance, which is why I thought of you.

I saw it less as a favor than a godsend. An excuse to spend at least part of every day in another space. And what a space.

Call it the collision of great imagination, great taste, and a whole lot of money, Violet said.

She and Iris had become friends when Violet was editing a coffee-table book Iris had written about home design. Iris and her husband, who was an architect, had worked together on several projects, including their apartment in NoMad and another home that they'd created out of what had been an old monastery somewhere upstate. They had a third place, in Marfa, Texas, that was still a work in progress.

I had seen photographs of all three homes when I'd looked through Iris's book at the party Violet gave for its launch, and I knew why Violet said about the apartment, You may never want to leave.

The student, who struck me as an irresponsible jerk, had been in such a rush to get away that he forgot to leave the key. But it didn't matter, Iris said; she had alerted the building's super, who could leave another key for me with the doorman. Though the residents were gone for now, the building staff had been designated essential workers and were showing up every day. Just one of countless bizarreries of lockdown life: an entire luxury boutique building and a full staff, all for one little old bird and me.

It would be ideal if you could be there for several hours a day, Iris told me. Not that you have to spend every minute with him, but just so he knows he hasn't been abandoned. He does need daily physical and mental exercise—and a whole lot of admiration. He really likes to strut his stuff. He's seen himself in the mirror, and he knows how gorgeous he is.

(That parrot is a peacock.)

His name was Eureka, and he was a miniature breed, only about half the length of most full-sized macaws. All green except for a dab of scarlet on each shoulder and white patches around his eyes. A shade of green so bright and lush it was refreshing to look at, like a clump of tropical flora. One of those breeds famous for being able to mimic speech but, according to Iris, not much of a talker.

We were never really into that, she said, the way so many other parrot owners are. All those people who get such a kick out of teaching their birds to swear. We love looking at him and playing with him and of course we talk to him, but we never tried to train him to repeat after us. He does pick things up, though. I used to do an online yoga class every morning, and I couldn't believe it the first time I heard him chant *Om*.

We had a cat, Iris said. A Bengal. Now *she* was a talker. She meowed constantly, and Eureka would meow back. In fact, he discovered that if he was in his cage and she was in some other part of the house and he meowed persistently enough, he could make her appear. He loved that trick. And when they were together it was not unusual for the two of them to have a whole conversation. It was adorable, even if it could also get on your nerves. He sometimes mimicked her purr, too, or so we thought, though it came out more like trilling.

The cat was already pretty old when they got Eureka, Iris said, and had died last year. And for some time after that, Eureka would meow, and when she didn't come he'd go quiet and slump on his perch.

I thought he must be missing her just like I was and it broke my heart, she said. Even now sometimes he'll meow, and we figure he must have been remembering her just then and thinking, Let's give it another try, maybe this time she'll come.

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If I HAD a parrot myself, I don't think I'd be able to resist teaching it to talk. I remember how excited we were when the schoolteacher invited us to visit his aviary. I couldn't believe how big some of the birds were. A few were scary,

too. Like Lucifer, who was not a parrot but an enormous raven, staring us down from the teacher's shoulder. We were warned not even to point at Lucifer. Trust me, the teacher said, he's just waiting for one of you to make his day.

There was a cockatoo that kept swiveling its head back and forth, saying, What a dump! And a scarlet macaw screeching over and over, Say something! Say something! The teacher said it was probably expressing frustration at hearing people say this all day long (its previous home had been an exotic pet store in a busy shopping mall).

And yes, more than one of them had come from homes where they'd learned to swear, which embarrassed the teacher and ruffled the feathers of no few mothers, but had us kids nearly pissing our pants for glee.

Most impressive of all was Figaro, who sang snatches of opera. Off-key, but still. I've since discovered, though, that singing, dancing, meowing, potty-mouthed parrots are not rare. (See: YouTube.)

Given how old parrots can live to be—some even up to a hundred—it occurs to me that some of the teacher's birds might still be with us. The teacher himself, as I recall, had been middle-aged. What happened to the birds that survived him? I remember him telling us that one reason there was such an abundance of rescue birds was that many of them outlived their people.

Eureka was about five, Iris said, and could live another twenty-five years or so. (2045, I thought. What would the world be like then?)

Sometimes, Iris said, Eureka talks to himself. At least that's what it sounds like. You'll hear him muttering—quite a different vocalization from when he's addressing someone else. He squawks when he wants attention, and if that attention isn't sufficient he might go on a rant. But though he can be quite noisy at times, thank God he's not a screamer.

Another main reason for the large number of rescue birds: people discovering that they—or their neighbors—can't stand the racket.

We're lucky we live where we do, Iris said. (The apartments in her solidly constructed building were all floor-throughs with soaring ceilings and thick material between stories.)



All the more startling was it, then, that Eureka did scream. He screamed the first time he saw me. And given that a parrot screaming is a parrot in distress, this was hardly a promising introduction.

I took it as perhaps surprise—he could hardly have been expecting me (*Meow?*). Or it could have been sheer disappointment. I was a stranger, after all, not one of his flock.

But like all his kind, Eureka was smart. It didn't take him long to figure things out. I was there to serve him, and however much he may have missed his flock, he'd make the best of it. If I was the only one around to play fetch with, he could do that. And if the test was how much a person admired him, well, that was a test I easily passed. He was so pretty that each time I saw him was like seeing him again for the first time.

In any case, he could hardly have been more grateful for my company than I was for his. No hours of those strange and anxious days went by more quickly than those I spent hanging out with him. I woke up every day looking forward to this simple chore on my agenda: walk several blocks through the weirdly empty streets and see to my feathered charge. It was one of the few things I felt confident about being able to accomplish that didn't have me asking myself, *Why am I doing this?*



A cure for many ills, it's been called. For the alleviation of stress and anxiety; for comfort in mourning, sadness, and loss: find someone who needs your help.

It was not just people living in isolation who chose to foster or adopt a pet during lockdown. Even those stuck day in, day out in crowded homes, weary of the lack of privacy, saw caring for an animal not as yet another imposition but as a comfort and distraction. Some who, for whatever reason, couldn't keep a dog or a cat got another kind of pet, a bird, say, or a guinea pig. One person I know got a pair of rats. Another got a snake. Whatever gets you through the night: I've never met one, but I know there are people who keep insects and spiders as pets, favorites among them being hissing cockroaches and tarantulas.

All those shared stories of some creature or other seeing a human through, instilling this one with hope, saving that one's sanity. The solace taken from watching animal videos, including wildlife and zoo live streams. (I know a psychiatrist who has been prescribing watching animal videos to her depressed patients for years.) The cheering and calming effect of observing live creatures going about their innocent business, exempt from the crisis that had turned the human world upside down, even if some animals were also susceptible to infection. Pandas in a locked-down zoo mating successfully for the first time in ten years, a parrot playing peekaboo with a neighbor's cat: some confessed to watching these videos over and over.

It strikes me that so many animal videos show animals having fun. Like the one that caught a crow repeatedly sledding down a snowy roof on the lid of a jar.

Eureka made me long to have a bird of my own. But this was a familiar feeling. I can't drive past a farm without dreaming of having my own cow. My own goat, my own pig. If not a horse, maybe a pony or a donkey. In any

case, though I've had several pets, I count not having had more animals in my life among my biggest regrets.

I'm never sure how to answer the surprisingly common question: What would you have been had you not been a writer? (Why do you want to know?) But I've always thought I could have found satisfaction working with animals. Not as a veterinarian—I could never have made it as any type of medical doctor—but maybe as some kind of zoologist or animal trainer. (Like many who lack patience dealing with other humans, when it comes to animals I have all the time in the world.)

Once, in my youth, I had a job interview for which I was asked to name a person whose life I envied and to say why, and I immediately said Jane Goodall. (Still true. More so than ever, perhaps, now that, although she has reached a very old age, she is still hard at her conservationist work and has asserted that, in spite of all the dire portents, she has not yet given up hope for the world.)

Goodall and her chimps, Penny Patterson and Koko, Irene Pepperberg and Alex. People who develop extraordinary bonds with members of other species will always have my envy. (A related fantasy: Who wouldn't want to be the boy who won the trust of E.T.?)

Like most deep longings, this one began in childhood. I saw the movie version of *Born Free* first, then read the book. Give me one reason I couldn't grow up to be Joy Adamson, move to Kenya, raise my own orphaned lioness, and—since I already knew I was going to be a writer—publish a bestseller about it.

“Jane Goodall” might not have been the best answer, given that the job, which I did not get, was as a secretary for a management consulting firm. And as it turned out, the interviewer had never heard of her.

Years earlier, I had annoyed a grade school teacher with my response to the question: What did I want to be when I grew up? She thought I said lion tamer just to make the class laugh. To be fair, I did sometimes say things just to make the class laugh.

As a child, Goodall had loved the Tarzan and the Doctor Dolittle books. Playing with her toy chimpanzee, Jubilee, she dreamed of going to Africa one

day and a chance to observe the real thing. Meanwhile, she became a birder.

Among pandemic hobbies, birding rose high on the list of most popular. Count it a blessing that the first wave coincided with the spring migration. The vicarious joy of watching creatures who were free to fly and socialize with one another. Part of the charm came from paying close attention to something one had always been too distracted to notice before. Something ordinary. Something beautiful. Nest building, mating, squabbling, feeding. To think that all this had been going on just outside the window. And with the usual racket of human activity stilled, how much easier to appreciate birdsong.

Conservationists were encouraging birders to be on the lookout for dead birds, too, many of which would have been victims of collisions with buildings. A woman walking around the World Trade Center found more than two hundred corpses in one hour. If you found an injured bird, of which there were also many, you were asked to help by bringing it to a wildlife hospital. “It’s the best thing in the world to help a wild animal,” blogged one rescuer. “They feel so magical in your hand.”

From a trailer for a French nature documentary that would be the first movie I’d see once theaters opened again: “Encountering an animal is a rejuvenation. It opens a door on the other side. The incommunicable.”

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*NO GREATER FEELING ON EARTH* is how one naturalist describes the experience of bonding with a wild creature. In his case, an octopus living in an undersea kelp forest in the Western Cape, South Africa. Their encounter came at a moment of crisis for Craig Foster, who’d been suffering from depression for about two years and found himself unable to carry on with his work as a filmmaker. He diagnoses part of his trouble as a deep longing to be inside rather than outside the natural world, as he has been for some time painfully feeling. And so he begins daily diving.

Early on, he says, soon after he saw the octopus for the first time, he sensed there was something to learn from her. He decides to visit her every

day and observe how she lives. He could not have done this without her trust, though, and the moment she reveals not only that she trusts him but that the curiosity is mutual is the beginning of his salvation.

For about a year—the octopus’s life span—man and mollusk are friends. His despair lifts. He is able to work again. He begins shooting the footage that will be used for a documentary about the two of them. The unforgettable scene where she reaches out a tentacle to touch his hand for the first time. And another, near the end, when she clings to his chest in an embrace.

Anthropomorphism, some scientists said. Projection. Not really friendship, but rather the elimination of a fear barrier, and a familiarity that allows for greater intimacy. (In a word, friendship, no?)

Animals having fun. There is a scene in which, though he can’t be sure, it appears to Foster that the octopus is playing with a school of fish.

It was the wildness that the octopus represented that changed him, Foster says. By allowing him to enter her world, she became not merely his friend but his teacher. During the months he tracked and studied her, she taught him to become sensitized to the environment and to wild creatures, and changed his relationship with humans, too.

He had never been sentimental about animals before, he tells us. But now he found himself feeling not only affection for the octopus but pride at her ability to survive. Outwitting predators, devising strategies for hunting food, recovering from a maiming shark attack: what intelligence, what ingenuity, he marvels. What gumption.

Her struggle through the often challenging course of her life seems to him to mirror his own life as he rebounds, putting the pieces back together, regaining confidence. It’s the kind of self-confidence he now feels ready to instill in his son, a budding naturalist, who begins diving with him. And he observes the boy absorbing an even greater lesson: gentleness.

Gentleness is the most important thing that hours and hours in nature can teach, Foster says.

She made me feel just how precious wild places are, he says. You start to care about all the animals, even the tiniest ones, you understand how highly

vulnerable these animals' lives are, how vulnerable all lives are. You start to think about your own vulnerability and about death, your own death.

And in the hours and hours he spent exploring the kelp forest, he was stunned repeatedly by the intelligence—the genius—of what he calls the forest mind, a great underwater brain developed over eons, and the intricate work it does to keep everything balanced.

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MOST PEOPLE probably would have trouble believing a wild octopus had interacted affectionately with a human had not proof been caught on film. *I* would have had trouble believing it. But then, our estimation of the capacity of nonhumans to think and feel has always been way off—as we are at long last coming to understand. If we'd paid more attention, from the beginning, how much might we have learned about what it means to be an animal, how to live in nature, with which human animals have so often been at such destructive odds. (To feel that you are not a visitor but a part of the natural world—that's an amazing difference, Foster says.) How much less depression among us might there have been. Think of all the extinctions that might have been prevented, how our own species, how the whole planet might have been saved.

Anthropomorphism: we should have made it our religion, I once heard an environmental activist say. Irrational, but then what religion is not. And consider how many more irrational beliefs people have always embraced.

Before we leave the water, I want to quote another sea diver and documentary filmmaker. I hate being old, said then eighty-five-year-old Valerie Taylor. But at least it means I was in the ocean when it was pristine. Now it's like going to where there was a rainforest and seeing a field of corn.

Here, as a curb against misanthropy, into which these days it is all too easy to fall, and into which one should never allow oneself to fall, I remind myself that there was something about Foster that told the octopus that making herself vulnerable to this man was worth the risk. After all, he might have been a hunter, a predator, as men so often are. (All animals mistrust

man, observed Rousseau, and they are not wrong.) As bad as the sharks from which she must constantly flee and hide.

Question: What made her trust him? Bigger question: What made her fond of him?

Foster thought that, given her high intelligence, it was her own interest and a desire for stimulation that must have motivated her. Convincing. But don't you think there must have been something else, too, some human quality, some goodness she sensed, that made their unlikely bond possible?

I believe in human biophilia. I believe that an affinity with other living things, a desire to be near and connect with them, and a love of natural beauty are in our DNA. How to square this, though, with what anyone living in our day can see: the human drive to make the world increasingly ugly, and, in the end, to trash it.

A new fear: that enraged anti-environmentalists and climate denialists, identifying conservation efforts with their leftist, pro-government enemy, will foment ecocide, taking out their hatred on nature itself.

T-shirt seen on a plane passenger: "Shoot a Wolf, Make a Liberal Cry."

Valerie Taylor's passion was sharks. Sometimes they bite. When that's happened, she said, I've just stayed still and waited for it to let go—because they've made a mistake. (Anthropomorphism?) Not that she expects other people to behave as she does, she said. She just wants us to stop slaughtering them.

When *My Octopus Teacher* appeared—after half a year of pandemic misery and in the midst of a relentless news cycle about racial and social injustice, climate crisis, rising violent crime, and the decline of democracy—many watchers found it a mercy.

It was the kind of story that makes me think I should have changed my life. Instead, I have wasted it.



The second problem was this: I'd been bird-sitting for about a week when I heard from another friend in need. Actually, it was the friend's sister. She was a retired pulmonologist from Oregon who'd come to New York as a volunteer to help treat the growing number of coronavirus patients. My friend and his family had moved to their country house in Connecticut, and he was letting his sister stay in his apartment for the duration. But now, under pressure from frightened tenants, the building's manager had demanded that the doctor leave.

Uncivilized, to be sure. But at least they didn't stone her, or throw bleach on her, as happened in other parts of the world.

The obvious solution, at least for the uncertain time being (and weren't we all sick of hearing it: uncertainty was the only certainty to be had), was for her to stay in my place and for me to stay at Iris's.

We're actually relieved, said Iris, who'd been feeling more and more anxious about Eureka being left too much alone.

. . .

IT WAS not the first time in my life that I'd found myself wanting a bird, and in fact a parrot was exactly the kind of bird I'd have wanted. A great big beautiful parrot like the ones I'd seen in my teacher's aviary and at the zoo. Or, if that was asking too much, perhaps something more manageable: a parakeet or a canary.

What always stopped me, though, was the cage. Living with an animal born to fly confined to a cage would have bothered me, and the idea of clipping its wings sounded appalling. (Luckily, wing clipping was not one of my duties. Iris used the services of a visiting professional groomer, a man



who came completely disguised by a full-face respirator mask and who never spoke a word to me. He also saw to Eureka's claws.)

I wondered about Eureka. Where had he come from? Iris hadn't said, but I assumed she'd gotten him from a breeder: the only ethical—and I was sure the only legal—way. I knew that some wild parrots, including most macaws, were endangered, that some species had already gone extinct, and that one of the main reasons for this, besides habitat loss, was the capturing of the birds for the pet trade. I knew that many tropical birds not yet designated as endangered were on the lists of those considered threatened or vulnerable.

For a captive, Eureka was unusually fortunate. He had more than a cage. He had his own room. To which the famous design team of Iris and her husband had applied their skills, just as they had to the rest of the apartment, creating something like a zoo enclosure. The room was lush with ferns and other plants, for the time being now also under my care.

We did our research, Iris told me, to make sure nothing was toxic to macaws. The walls had been painted with what other research had told them would look like a part of the South American rainforest that Eureka's breed inhabited in the wild. To remind him of home, I supposed, though it was a home he'd never known or ever would know. Among the foliage were bright butterflies and exotic flowers and other wild birds, all exquisitely drawn and vibrantly colored, as well as a pair of monkeys with keenly expressive, lifelike features.

It all reminded me of the jungle scenes of Henri Rousseau—and in fact the murals were the work of a professional artist who'd been commissioned to paint them.

The smallest of the apartment's three bedrooms, it was still large enough to hold an immense dome-topped stainless-steel cage, which took up about a quarter of the space. (I thought of this several months later when I read an article about the impossibility, for some people, of keeping their distance from others while in lockdown. For example, in a certain area of tenement housing in Hong Kong, where, according to the *Times*, the average living space per person was forty-eight square feet—less than one-third the size of a New York City parking space. And again, when I remembered that the

basement apartment that the poet Marianne Moore had shared with her mother was so cramped that they ate meals sitting on the edge of the bathtub. Which in turn made me think of another poet, Joseph Brodsky, recalling the tiny space he carved out for himself while living in the single room that was the whole of his and his parents' Leningrad home: "These ten square meters were mine, and they were the best ten square meters I've ever known.")

Inside the cage were perches of different heights and climbing ropes and a swinging rope ladder. Outside the cage was a specially designed play area with a wooden perch like a small tree where Eureka was used to spending most of his day. The tree had a series of branches of various heights so that he could climb up and down, which he seemed to enjoy doing. But his preferred spot was the top branch, which placed him at about eye level with me. He could spend a long time inching his way along it, going almost to the end of one side, then inching back to the other end—was it a game?—and I could spend a long time watching him. Watching him watching me, really. First with one eye, then with the other, pupils contracting and dilating—small medium large, small medium large—which, I would later learn, was called pinning. (In the cabinet where Eureka's food and other pet products were stored, I found some literature about parrots, which I read.) Sometimes he'd go so far he'd tip off the edge, and then he'd have to catch himself, opening his wings, squawking in what I believed was only mock alarm, almost but never in fact losing his balance. A game for sure.

The room had two large windows and got good light. This was important because a parrot needs sunlight, and though Iris sometimes took Eureka out to the park, she did not want me to try this, since even a bird with clipped wings can fly some distance, especially if there's a wind. And there were many ways a bird might come to grief outdoors. There were cars. There were dogs. Apparently the well-known (though often exaggerated) value of parrots was tempting a growing number of thieves. A blue hyacinth macaw tied to a perch in a Brooklyn backyard had been snatched and held by someone demanding a ransom of fifty thousand dollars.

Eureka was well trained—he hopped obediently onto my arm when it was time to move him in and out of his cage—but, like most of his kind, he could

be capricious, and there was no way of telling how he might behave with someone he didn't know. I must always remember to keep the room door closed when he was out of the cage, Iris said, because the rest of the apartment was not bird proofed. And of course we don't want his droppings all over, she said. His standing perch also served as a pooping station, and he was trained to use it (who knew you could toilet train a bird!), but I should be prepared for accidents.

Looking out the window excites him, she said. Pigeons in particular excite him, and if a flock passes by or one lands on the outer sill, he's almost sure to poop. (Oh, Eureka, what did that feel like, seeing other birds flying up in the sky, free free free?)

The man who'd been bird-sitting before me clearly had not followed instructions. I found crusted poop on the back of one of the living room sofas. He'd been sleeping in the master bedroom and had left it in disarray, the bed unmade and a pair of balled-up socks and a T-shirt on the floor. Also an unwashed cereal bowl in the kitchen sink, a dirty ashtray on the dining room table, and the lingering odor of cannabis.

Our housekeeper lives in Queens, Iris told me. She usually comes twice a week, but she's staying home with her kids until it's safe for their school to reopen. I believe cleaners are considered essential workers, Iris said. If you want, I can find a service to have the apartment cleaned while you're there.

I told her I did not want that. But neither did I want the burden of having to take care of such a big place myself. The solution, I thought, was to limit my use of it. I'd need the kitchen, of course, but I wouldn't do any more cooking than I did at home, which was to say almost none.

There was a mammoth stove with six burners and a griddle, two ovens, and eight different cooking modes. I searched Google for the difference between Bake and Convection Bake and True Convection and whatever Proof was for.

Good to know, but I would not be proofing any dough while I was there. I would not be touched by the baking mania—so widespread that it had caused a flour shortage—no matter how tempting the viral recipes for the cakes and cookies being touted as the Comfort Food We All Need Now. (At the same

time: reports of a crisis in weight gain, the quarantine fifteen quickly becoming the quarantine twenty, and more, until we'd reached a national average of twenty-nine pounds. One teenage boy reported having put on twice that amount.)

The first day I set foot in the kitchen, I didn't understand why there was no refrigerator, but of course there was one—mammoth, to match the stove—hidden behind a panel. Another panel concealed a second, much smaller refrigerator, for wine. And behind a third panel (I couldn't help thinking of one of those big-prize-giveaway TV shows, like *Queen for a Day*) was a washer and dryer.

The kitchen had a large marble-topped elliptical island and tall upholstered chairs: no need ever to use the dining room. And though the living room was probably the most beautiful room in the house, it didn't beckon. Without other people it felt empty and formal, almost like a public space, albeit a luxurious one, like the lounge of a posh hotel.

Much safer, we were told, to have groceries and whatever else we might need or want delivered straight to our doors. (What lockdown? went the viral tweet, describing it as rather “the middle class hiding while working-class people bring them things.” Another version: white people hiding while Black and brown people bring them things. An uncomfortable reality that it was hoped might be at least mitigated by rewarding the bringers with exorbitant tips.) But I had no need for food delivery. The neighborhood farmers' market was open four days a week, and a nearby bakery was open seven days a week, and between the two, however long the lockdown endured, I'd be fine.

Unlike the man before me, I chose to sleep in the third bedroom, the one that would no doubt become the baby's room, though I noticed that nothing so far had been done to turn it into a nursery. I assumed Iris and her husband had been waiting till they were closer to the due date, never dreaming they'd find themselves stuck thousands of miles away.

The room had a double bed with the kind of extra-firm mattress I like, blackout shades, and its own attached bath. And though the screen was only a quarter of the size of the one in the living room, there was a TV. There was a small TV in a corner of Eureka's room as well. (We were told parrots like

watching TV, Iris said. But though curious at first, he quickly lost interest—not like watching the pigeons.) He didn't particularly care for music either, it seemed, though many parrots do.

And, in another corner of Eureka's room, was my own perch, a cognac-colored leather armchair with a matching ottoman. The first week, when I was still going back and forth between two apartments, after taking care of Eureka's needs I'd settle in with my laptop until it was time to go. Although he never resisted being returned to his cage, I could tell that my going caused him anxiety. Or so I interpreted the little head-ducking, hopping-from-foot-to-foot dance this moment always triggered.

Always, *always* be sure to say goodbye to him when you leave, Iris had warned, leaving me to imagine what dire consequences might ensue should I forget. But I never forgot, and, once home, I sometimes found it hard to think of him all alone there, caged, in the silent, darkening room. I wondered how much he slept. And did he dream? (I myself had a dream in which he appeared as the passenger in the airplane seat next to mine, many times his actual size.)

He had a slew of toys designed for activities parrots do in the wild—foraging, climbing, chewing, shredding—and for the simple pleasure of making noise: bells and rattles and a dollar-coin-sized tambourine. Iris had left instructions for versions of various games to play, like fetch and hide-and-seek. He had a bowling set: three tiny pins that he knocked down expertly every single time with a small rubber ball. He also had a miniature shopping cart that he liked to fill with toy groceries and roll around the floor. (Whoever thought of that, for a bird?) He seemed to enjoy most being asked to pick which of three cups the cashew was hidden under after I'd rapidly switched them around—not because it was much of a challenge, I thought, but because he got to eat the cashew.

I know it might be boring for you to play with him every day, Iris said, but it really is important for his health. When he does something right, like hit the pins with the ball, say, it would be good if you'd make a bit of a fuss. Say "Good boy" and clap your hands, maybe stroke his head and neck with your

thumb. I know it sounds silly, but you'll see how happy it makes him. And you'll probably hear him say "Good boy" back.

I did see. I did hear. At first I had trouble believing a creature as smart as Eureka wouldn't himself be bored by these simple repetitive games, or feel silly pushing that cart around, which seemed quite undignified to me. (I've since seen videos of birds playing more sophisticated games, like one trained to keel over and play dead after being shot with a toy gun. Also, numerous videos of birds doing various things specifically intended to annoy cats.) But he did seem happy. He had a way of blinking his eyes—batting them, really—and partially opening his beak in a smile. Or, since according to science birds cannot actually physically smile, I'll just call it his happy face.

When I thought about it, though, it seemed to me that this happiness might have been his response to my response; in other words, he was happy that he'd succeeded in making *me* happy. When I say, "Good boy," of course I sound pleased. Then he repeats it to please me even more. Every talking bird familiar with people must know how gaga we are about hearing our own words said back to us.

For God's sake, Violet said. Stop overthinking. What difference does it make, so long as he's happy?

But it did make a difference, to me. I wouldn't have told this to her or to Iris or to anyone else for that matter, but playtime with Eureka could make me melancholy. Animals having fun can be a poignant spectacle—I suppose partly because it narrows the gap between us and them. And if you gave too much thought to what an animal might be feeling and how close to, even indistinguishable from, a human (say, your own) emotion that feeling might be, you could find yourself, well, melancholy.

Still, witnessing innocent animal happiness is, as everyone knows, one of our species' great joys.

See how he smiles? says Valerie Taylor about a shark that she's photographed. Tenderly, even though she knows perfectly well that he does not.

I liked to watch Eureka more when we weren't playing, when he seemed to have forgotten I was even there. Birds: the world's only surviving

dinosaurs. I liked watching him with this amazing fact in mind. There was a time in childhood when I was obsessed with dinosaurs. You could never have made me believe that, in later life, years would go by without a brontosaurus lumbering across my mind.

Unable to fly, he was deliberate about exercising his legs, marching in circles around the room or—more often—pacing the same few feet of floor. There was something stately in his bearing that, with his measured stride and downward-tilted head, gave him the air of a thinker.

As Iris had said would happen, I sometimes caught him talking to himself, softly murmuring and clucking, and when I did it was usually while he was pacing. (Working out equations was her guess.) But once, after dozing off in my comfy chair, I woke to find him addressing the air from his perch. No distinct words, but the rhythm and tone of his burbling were those of someone trying to work something out, not a math problem, but a dialectical argument of some intensity.

When I thoughtlessly called his name, he was so startled he swayed and almost lost his balance. He stretched his neck and fixed me with a look. This was not his happy face. There followed a meaningful, chastising silence. Who knows what great idea I might have just prevented from coming to him? Slowly he turned his back, lifting his tail feathers, and I was sure that what plopped to the floor had been figuratively aimed at me.



The third problem arrived unannounced one night while I was asleep. I didn't hear him come in. The next morning he appeared in the kitchen, yawning, barefoot, dressed in gray sweatpants and a stained white T-shirt.

I almost dropped my orange juice, but I wasn't afraid. I knew immediately this must be the man who'd been there earlier, the student who'd forgotten to leave the key when he took off for Vermont. Someone already known to the doorman and whose name was still on the list of people with permission to enter the apartment.

He was not surprised to see me, either. When he arrived, having caught a ride with a friend headed for Brooklyn, he'd seen signs of my presence. Before that, though, he'd assumed that the place was vacant, at least at night. He knew that Iris had found a new bird sitter, but there'd been no reason for her to update him about my moving in.

You mean Iris doesn't know you're here?

Not yet, he said with a casualness that irked me.

I don't understand, I said.

He had taken a glass from the drainboard and was filling it with water at the sink. He kept yawning and shaking his head as if he couldn't quite wake up. He made me wait, drinking the water to the last drop before saying, It was kind of a spur-of-the-moment thing. An emergency thing.

What was?

I just changed my mind, he said.

You mean, you've come back to stay? Without asking or saying anything to anyone?

Look, it's no big deal, he said, sounding a little irked himself. I've crashed here before. Iris is big friends with my parents. Anyway, now I can take care of Eureka again. In fact, that's partly why I came back. I missed the little guy.



A spur-of-the-moment thing, an emergency thing, I just changed my mind, I missed the little guy. *Which was it?* I wanted to shout at him. I didn't bother to explain that my own place was still being used by the pulmonologist, the hospital's need for whom was clearly not going to end any day soon, that in any case it was too small for two people to maintain a safe distance from each other, and furthermore, her heavy daily exposure to Covid patients made sharing a living space with her a considerable risk.

I didn't want to discuss anything with him. I just wanted Iris to tell him that his help was no longer needed and that he should go back to Vermont or wherever. At once.

I'll have to talk to Iris myself, I said stiffly.

No problem, he said. He was looking distractedly around the kitchen. Is it okay if I make myself something to eat? I'm starving.

He was already rummaging in the refrigerator.

Before I could leave, he asked me my name. I told him, but he didn't retain it, and just a few hours later I had to tell him again. Still he didn't retain it, and later that evening I had to tell him yet again. The next morning he remembered the second syllable, but got the first one wrong. (To be fair, this happens to me a lot.) This time I didn't bother to correct him.

His name was an uncommon one that begins with V. I'm going to call him Vetch.

. . .

I DECIDED to talk to Violet first. Which is when I learned about the fourth problem.

Poor Iris! I just heard from her last night, said Violet. As if it wasn't scary enough expecting your first baby in the middle of a pandemic and being stranded so far from home. And locked down with your father-in-law, who, I happen to know, has always gotten on Iris's nerves. And now he has the virus! Mild symptoms, but still. He's seventy, and there they all are in the same house together, though so far no one else has tested positive. They have

no idea how this happened, since he's hardly left the house—none of them has. I really wish we knew more about this virus and how it spreads.

From the way it looks, though, she's going to have to have the baby there, Violet said. It's not safe to travel, it's not safe to be in New York, and soon she's going to be too far along to fly. She was just trying to get used to the idea when her father-in-law got sick. It's a big house and they've isolated him, of course, but no wonder she's freaking out. She's in excellent health, but a pregnancy at her age is considered high risk. And now her blood pressure is up, which could be a danger sign. Poor Iris.

I confess that, although I did feel something for Iris, I was at the moment quite a bit more focused on poor me.

I have to tell her right away, I said. She has to explain the situation and get him to leave. I mean, obviously he and I can't stay here together for the duration, especially since we have no idea how long that will be. And how can I trust him? From what we know he's not exactly the responsible type. If he goes out, how do I know he won't be going to parties or secret raves or whatever, the way some people—especially young people—are doing these days?

When Violet suggested that maybe the doctor could find another place to stay, I raised my voice.

How is that fair? What—we're all supposed to change our plans to accommodate this flaky kid? The woman has already been kicked out of one place since she came here, I'm not going to force her to move again. Helping her out makes me feel like I'm doing at least my tiny bit for the health care workers, a lot more useful than banging on some stupid pan out the window every night. Besides, I've settled in here. I like it here. I like having Eureka for company.

Don't be so territorial, said Violet. I don't see why the two of you can't share a space that big. Just keep different schedules and stay away from each other.

Are you kidding? Who wants to be locked down with a total stranger?

He's not a total stranger. He's a family friend who was asked to stay in that apartment before you were. He's not just some guy who walked in off

the street.

Well, to me he might as well be, I said, and I think it's crazy to expect us to live together.

These are crazy times, said Violet. People are being forced to do all kinds of things they'd rather not do. Everyone's having to adjust, to make it up as they go along.

Easy for you to say, from all the safety and privacy of your country manse. (I'd never really thought about it before, but with the pandemic I was struck by how many of the people I knew had second homes.) What would you do if he showed up on your doorstep?

Think, said Violet. He could be a help to you. We don't know how bad things are going to get. They say the people in lockdown most vulnerable to depression are the ones who are completely isolated. It might be good for you to have someone else around, especially a young person. I can see how this would be really awkward if you were closer to his age, but—

He didn't forget to leave the key, I said.

He said that?

No. I'm saying it. I think he kept the key just in case he wanted to come back.

Whatever, Violet said. This really isn't worth getting worked up about. I guess you could ask him to leave, tell him you're uncomfortable with the two of you there, see what he says.

I think it should be Iris or her husband who talks to him, I said. It's their house.

Okay. All I'm asking is that, when you talk to Iris, please, try not to put pressure on her. She was crying when we spoke.

• • •

I DECIDED to email Iris instead of calling her. It was two days before she got back to me. Despite his saying that he, too, would be in touch with her, she had yet to hear from Vetch.

But I've been in touch with his mother, she said. I wanted to get the whole story before I called you.

It's a bad story, she said.

His parents had kicked him out.

This isn't a big surprise, she said. He's been at war with them for a very long time. You might ask Violet about that.

Though Violet hadn't mentioned it, I now learned that Vetch's mother, who I vaguely recalled being told wrote poetry, had written a memoir that she'd submitted to Violet and that Violet had turned down.

I'm very sorry about all this, Iris said. But I'm wondering if, for now, you could just bear with him? I do wish he'd given us some warning, of course, but things aren't exactly normal for anyone these days, are they. I can assure you, though, he's a good kid. We used to live in the same building. His parents still live there.

Wait, what? I said. They have a place in New York?

Yes, in Tribeca. Vermont is their country place.

Well, for God's sake, why can't he stay there?

Iris paused. That's a bit complicated, she said. He hates that apartment. Too many triggers, apparently. Even his therapist thought he should avoid it. That's why he was living in a dorm. To be honest, though, his parents aren't comfortable having him stay in their apartment alone. They took away his key a while ago.

Why?

It seems one time when they were on vacation and he was there alone, he trashed the place.

Seriously?

No. I take that back: *trashed* is too strong. But he did do some damage. He broke things. He must have been drunk or high at the time. He got angry about something—he's had issues with anger—and he broke some things. And I take it some of those things were valuable. Since then his mother's been a little afraid of him—well, not of him exactly, but of what he might do.

I wanted to point out that there really was no such distinction.

He's a good person, she insisted again. And though he had some problems when he was younger, he was doing so much better—until this damn pandemic. He wanted to get out of the city, she said. He wanted to be with his parents, but I guess it was just too much for them, being locked down together in a small mountain town. For one thing, he refused to attend classes remotely. And he kept fighting with his parents about it, until one day he announced that he didn't have to go to class anymore because he was dropping out. Halfway through his final semester and this is what he decides. You can imagine how that went over.

But according to his mother, said Iris, he was impossible to live with from the day he arrived—without any warning, as seems to be his way. (She laughed, I didn't.) He just showed up. Moody and hostile, his mother complained, and he kept saying the most awful things to her—she didn't say exactly what, but his behavior was causing a lot of tension between her and her husband, too. Every day there was at least one explosion, and they started having trouble focusing on their work. And after one really bad bout, she and her husband decided they had no choice but to ask him to leave.

I feel bad telling you all this, Iris said, because I know it must make him sound terrible. But I've known him a long time, and if I didn't trust him I would never have let him stay in our house. It's just that with his parents—well, the truth is, he's always been a big problem for them.

And now he was one for me.

After we hung up, it occurred to me that she had never once asked me about Eureka.

I guess she's got too many other worries now, Violet said. He's not the first thing on her mind.

. . .

INTERMITTENT EXPLOSIVE disorder. That's the clinical term, said Violet. It started around the time he reached puberty.

That was in his mother's book?

Yes.

His mother wrote a book about that?

No. The book was about her own life, her childhood—which was an unusual one because her father was a diplomat and she grew up traveling all over the world—and about becoming a poet. You know, one of those writer’s beginnings memoirs. But she did also write about being a wife and mother. Her husband is a researcher for a political consulting firm, semiretired and quite a bit older than her. She was in her forties when she got pregnant, and her husband already had children and grandchildren from another marriage. They probably wouldn’t have had the energy to raise a normal child, let alone a difficult one. In fact, they hadn’t been planning to have a child at all. But the pregnancy came as such a surprise that it seemed a kind of miracle to her. She decided motherhood was something she didn’t want to miss after all. And she’s quite blunt about the fact that she came to regret it.

As I recall, Violet went on, he had a nanny until he started school, which is when things started to go wrong. He was a shy, pudgy little boy who got bullied a lot. He was always a crybaby—not in the sense of a whiner, but one of those kids who’s always in tears.

Like Lily, I said.

Yes, like Lily. And if you’re like Lily and happen also to be a boy, there’s a good chance you’re going to be a loner—and a target. So there he was, this very sensitive and emotional only child. Who had no friends. You know, *that* kid.

I did know—and cringed to recall a certain Brillo-haired runt in my own elementary school, and the joy even the girls took in shoving and kicking him.

Then finally, continued Violet, in middle school, he managed to bond with another boy. For a whole year the two were inseparable. So what happens? Every summer this boy’s family went to Hawaii to visit relatives. And this one summer the boy was learning how to surf—I didn’t know kids that young were allowed to surf, but so they are—and he drowned. You’d have thought his classmates might have given the poor kid a break—

But the bullying only got worse, I interjected. (Was there ever anything more predictable than human unkindness? Or more chilling than seeing how

early it starts?)

His parents let him skip school for a few weeks, Violet said, but they were impatient with his tears and his inability to move on, even with the help of a grief counselor. In fact, his father, who sounds like something of a bully himself, was always put off by his son's emotionalism. All he wanted was for the kid to grow up.

Though his grades were always bad, Violet went on, it was clear that he was in fact very bright. And once he got to high school, he became competitive. He'd never cared before, but now he wanted to prove how smart he was, he wanted to show people. He wanted to outdo everyone else, he wanted straight As, and he actually managed to come close to that. At the same time, he became obsessed with his looks, with his body, his weight and physique.

I met him once, Violet said. He was working as a waiter at one of Iris's Christmas parties, this striking, long-haired, muscle-bound kid. He'd started bodybuilding and exercising fanatically at around fourteen, fifteen. There were days when he worked out for as long as eight hours, his mother said. Then he discovered dieting. By the time they understood what was happening, he'd developed a major eating disorder. Everyone thinks of it as a girl thing—you had one, I had one, Lily had one—but boys can have it, too. In fact, I hear eating disorders among males are on the rise. Anyway, he spent the summer between his junior and senior years in a psychiatric hospital, somewhere in New Jersey. His parents were worried he might never make it to college. But as we see, he did, and he's supposed to graduate this year. Why he's now talking about quitting I have no idea. Maybe it's just talk. But I blame the situation, this completely warped time that we're all living in now. No one I know is thinking straight or behaving normally these days.

You know how it was, when the pandemic started, everyone panicked, Violet said. Everyone just wanted to be somewhere they thought they'd be safe. I guess, like most of the other students, he thought he should go home to Mom.

(But legions of dismayed college students had sent up a cry: *You can't throw me out of the dorm, I don't want to go home, it's not safe for me to be*

*locked down at home!)*

Why'd you turn down her book? I asked. Wasn't it any good?

Some of it was quite good, Violet said. She wrote about what happens when a child drives a wedge between a happy couple and threatens their marriage, and when your love for your husband outweighs your love for your child. And that I did find interesting, and admirable for its honesty—none of that pious sentimentality you usually get on the subject of motherhood. But the rest of the book wasn't so focused. Personal memoirs are a hard sell, and that includes writers' memoirs. And it's not as if she's a famous writer. In the end the book was more of an autobiography than a memoir, and that's not something booksellers are looking for. But besides all that, the book made me squeamish.

Why?

A mother writing about her child like that—it just didn't feel right to me, exposing him and his problems.

What about children who write about their parents?

That's different.

Why?

Well, let's just say it's where I draw the line. I couldn't help thinking: she's his mother, she's supposed to protect him.

But if you knew the book would sell a million copies, you'd have accepted it.

Yes, of course. But getting back to *you*, I think you can trust Iris's judgment. This is a person she's known since he was a kid. In fact, there was a time when he was practically living in her apartment. She didn't know if she was ever going to be able to have a child herself, and he was a magnet for her maternal feelings. And though she and his parents were friends, she was always appalled at how incompetent they were at raising him, how impatient and critical. Anyway, given how Iris feels about Eureka, you know she'd never have left him in the hands of someone unstable.

Not that I'm saying he doesn't probably still have issues, she added. Anyone with a history like his, they always remain vulnerable. How does it go? How did I know that one day the bell jar wouldn't descend again?



It goes: “How did I know that someday—at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere—the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn’t descend again?”

And how do I know that he won’t have one of his rage attacks again? I said. That he won’t decide to break things again?

Violet laughed. She was more worried about me doing that, she said.



Violet was right (Violet was usually right): it wasn't hard for Vetch and me to avoid each other. We had our separate rooms with—mercifully—our own baths; we had our different routines. I got up early, he got up late, by which time I'd already be gone. With the milder weather I stayed out longer and longer, venturing farther and farther, stopping in parks along the way. Though I never took my phone with me, I always brought something to read.

In recollection it seems less memory than dream, how transformed the stricken city was. For years I'd been disheartened by its growing defacement: the brutal high-rises, the piled-up trash and hellish din, the garish advertising no matter where you looked.

In the city I was never free, said a man who became a hermit. In the city there is always someone in your way. Twenty years of cave dwelling had brought contentment, he said. (About the sow who was his sole companion, he told a reporter: I love her, and she listens to me.)

Now I couldn't help feeling guilty about the pleasure I took in the lifeless streets. To be the only pedestrian, block after block, to have an acre of Central Park to yourself. (And oh, the red-tailed hawks, the bald eagle landing almost at your feet.) If in the past I'd often found myself wishing to be elsewhere, grateful for any reason that took me temporarily away from New York, once the pandemic began I had no wish to leave. I didn't share the widespread resentment toward those who'd fled to their country homes, but I understood the common fantasy that the many now gone—along with the millions of missing tourists—would not return.



THINGS A person with a cell phone might have been tempted to snap and share:

Young lovers huddled on a stoop, passionately making out through their face masks.

A standard black poodle wearing matching leopard-skin-print raincoat, booties, and mask. (Is there nothing dogs won't put up with from us?)

In the window of a shuttered florist's, left over from Before: *Help wanted. Must have a clue.*

Movie house marquee: SEE YOU ON THE OTHER SIDE.

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HE, TOO, went out every day, not to walk but to ride his bike. (My breath caught in my throat the first time I saw him: an action hero in his cycling jersey and tights.) He was usually gone by the time I got back. We didn't often end up using the kitchen at the same time, and almost always when I ran into him he'd have his earbuds in. Once, when he was sitting at the island counter, I was able to go behind his back to the fridge, take out what I wanted, and leave again without his ever even noticing me. I was surprised that he always cleaned up after himself and even more surprised to see his groceries: he was eating a more varied and healthful (vegan) diet than I was.

Without any discussion, he simply took over Eureka's care (but the plants he left for me). I still spent time each day with Eureka, but I couldn't stand to be in the room when Vetch was also there. How it hurt to see them together in *my* chair. How humiliating to feel jealous. Iris had specifically asked me not to let Eureka out of his room, but Vetch often walked about the apartment with him on his shoulder.

We're bros, he explained, to make me feel even more left out.

One day I was playing with Eureka and Vetch happened to walk in. He took a hard look around the room as if he were seeing it for the first time and said, This place is so fucked up.

I didn't want to get into a conversation with him, but I was curious. What did he mean?

I mean, just look at it, he said with a sweep of his arm. Creating a whole fake jungle for him when he shouldn't be here in the first place. Like these paintings are supposed to make up for taking him out of the wild and putting him in jail. A giant cage is still a cage. And for him, that's all this whole place is: a cage inside a cage inside a cage.

I was startled. I wondered if he'd ever made his disapproval known to Iris.

She didn't take him out of the wild, I said. She got him from a breeder.

He shot me a look of disdain.

A captive-bred wild animal is still a wild animal, he said. And why do people breed parrots that they know are never going to live in the wild? And when they can't be sure what kind of people those birds are going to end up with? To make money, that's all. That's the only reason. They're the ones who should be in jail.

There's only one excuse for owning a wild bird, he said, and that's if it's a rescue. And there are plenty of those.

He told me something I hadn't known before: Eureka had been a birthday present to Iris from her husband.

He should have adopted one, Vetch said. But he was afraid to do that because, like all rescue animals, rescue birds often come with problems—problems that made them rescues in the first place, problems usually caused by the very people who ended up dumping them. And why should his precious wife have to deal with that?

It was jarring to hear him attack Iris like this—she who was so fond and tolerant and forgiving of him.

See this? he said, taking a paperback from the stack of bird books in the cabinet. When it came out it was hugely popular—you know how everyone loves a good human-animal love story, right? So what happens? All these people who read the book decide they want to have the same magical experience. They want an Alex in their life, too! But then a whole lot of these Alexes turn out to be much more work than they'd thought, or the Alex they got wasn't like the celebrity Alex, it wasn't as smart or as entertaining, and in one way or another the person was disappointed, or maybe they just got

bored. And now there's a fucking plethora of homeless African gray parrots. Most of them with decades of life still to live.

It's like what happens every Christmas, he went on. People get puppies they don't end up keeping. Like the little chicks and bunnies people give their kids at Easter time. They're like, Oh, you mean they don't stay cute little babies? You mean they grow up?

I thought of the poet Ogden Nash's famous complaint about kittens.

I thought of the depressed family therapist I once heard say that he'd met far too many people who'd somehow failed to calculate that having a baby meant one day having an adult.

I thought of all those pandemic pets.

But I didn't say anything. Discomforted, I supposed, by my silence, he apologized.

I didn't mean to go off like that, he said. And I didn't mean to interrupt your game with Eureka. (From the moment Vetch entered the room, Eureka had been trying to get his attention, jumping on and off the toe of his shoe, tugging his pant cuff with his beak.) Finally, to my relief, he left.

Only a few days later, though, he went off again. This time it was about the kitchen, where he'd walked in on me while I was having lunch. As he was preparing his own lunch, he made sneery remarks about the appliance-concealing panels. The stove and refrigerator had each cost about twenty thousand dollars, he said. How did he know? They were the same brands as the ones his parents had in their loft. And, like Iris and her husband, his parents had three homes.

He thought owning multiple homes should be illegal, he said. Not because there were so many homeless people in the world—though there was that, of course—but because such a lifestyle wasn't sustainable. And everyone knows it, he said. But rather than downsize, people find excuses. Second homes are good for the economy!

Same with travel, he said. Flying is one of the most harmful things a person can do to the environment, but suggest that they travel less and people start talking about tourism, and how bad it would be for all those vacation destinations' economies if people stopped going there.

I'm not saying there's no truth to that, he said. But what about the bigger truth? Our only hope is if everyone agrees right now to live the way millions of people all over the world have no choice but to live, which is consuming as little as possible. Make society more equitable, liberals say, and sure, that sounds great. But bringing more people up to our affluent level is only going to destroy more ecosystems, kill off millions more plant and animal species, and make more and more of the earth uninhabitable. What really needs to be done is to get everyone living closer to poverty. But of course no one wants to hear that.

I didn't say that, right at the moment, I didn't want to hear it. Or that he needn't lecture me about things I already knew. I didn't argue when he said that owning multiple homes should be illegal. I did give thanks that, because the kitchen was so grand, he and I were able to eat lunch sitting well over six feet apart.

I imagined this sort of ranting had played some part in his parents' not being able to stand living with him. (In fact, he'd since told me that his real reason for going to Vermont had not been to be with Mom. It seemed one of the dogs—an aged border collie that had been in the family since he was a boy—was near the end, and he couldn't bear the thought of not seeing her one last time to say goodbye.)

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WAS HE accurate about the price of those appliances? He was. But my Google search also turned up a stove that cost half a million. No doubt another few clicks would have turned up one that cost more; they who could afford the half-a-million-dollar one must be given something to strive for.

He said, Don't you ever eat anything besides grilled cheese sandwiches and avocado toast?

It was my way of keeping things simple: eat the same food every day. A habit I'd developed well before lockdown and a part of my life that hadn't changed. I kept things simple also because I didn't like to cook, and I didn't like to cook partly because when I did I was more likely to overeat, and in

general, grazing was more satisfying to me than three squares. But mainly I didn't like to cook because I was no good at it, I never had been good at it, though there were periods in my life when I spent a lot of time and energy trying to be, if not good, at least competent at it. Those were invariably the same periods when I was attempting to sustain one or another domestic relationship, and although the ends of those relationships could hardly be blamed on my lack of cooking or any other domestic skills, the two kinds of failure remained linked in my mind. The two kinds of failure represented, for me, some kind of female failure, if many notches below the failure to have children—she who spurns motherhood being disesteemed by so many, including no less an authority than the pope, who recently condemned a preference for *fur* children as “a sign of cultural degradation.”

Why was it that the dish I cooked never turned out to taste as good as the recipe made me think it would, or as one that had been cooked by someone else? Maybe because, often, in the mess I'd made while cooking (never having mastered the essential “clean up as you go”), I later discovered one ingredient I'd set out beforehand but which I'd somehow managed to forget.

(I am always amazed to see recipes described as quick and easy that turn out to call for quite a few ingredients and the use of a food processor. Not to mention shopping for the ingredients and cleaning up after the meal.)

When a passion for decluttering struck, one of the first things I got rid of was a shelf of cookbooks, none of which had been opened in I couldn't tell you how long. And once, when my oven stopped working, it was more than two years before I got around to replacing it.

In a therapy group for patients with eating disorders—each of us a young woman—one person reported the intense satisfaction of cooking an elaborate meal and flushing it forkful by forkful down the toilet, and another of killing her appetite by coating her tongue with Tiger Balm. Another lamented the fact that there was no such thing as an innocent mouthful. Anything that appeared on your plate had inevitably, somewhere along the way, be it field or farm or plant, entailed the exploitation of human laborers or the torture or slaughter of animals—or all those evils together.

No way to live except by hurting others—why was the world made so? How could such a world be the creation of a *loving* God?

When Simone Weil, age thirty-four and afflicted with tuberculosis, starved to death after refusing to eat more than the rations allotted to French soldiers fighting in World War II, she wasn't trying to die (she still had far too much work to do), she was trying to be a good person.

Gripe on an internet chat devoted to bulimia: tell us over and over that we're ruining our health, ruining our looks, then show us image after image of longtime bulimic Princess Diana looking never less than perfect till the day she died.

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UNLIKE ME, Vetch enjoyed cooking. He had learned all about vegan cuisine as part of his therapy during his summer in the psychiatric hospital, he said. He made mostly simple dishes of vegetables and beans or vegetables and tofu, he made tacos and curries, a heavy hand with the spices, and he made a lot of smoothies. He cooked too much: the refrigerator was full of leftovers, which he kept encouraging me to eat and which I kept ignoring.

Recently he'd stopped drinking. He'd been drinking heavily—beer or vodka—before he'd had to move out of his dorm. He had even blacked out a few times. One of those times he was at a party at someone's apartment, where it turned out a sexual assault occurred. Though he hadn't been in the room where it happened, he had to admit when questioned by police that he had no memory at all of much of that night, including when and how he'd left the party. That scared me, he said. But he did self-medicate—daily—with cannabis. He also gorged on nondairy ice cream.

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A MISANTHROPE. A mansplainer. Possibly a budding ecoterrorist, I told friends during one of our Zoom cocktail hours. I just wish he would leave.



The first time I met people like Vetch was when I went away to college: young people born to privilege, raised in privilege, and forever railing against privilege. The ones I knew all ended up living much the same lifestyle as their parents: elite professions, investment portfolios, global travel, vacation homes.

I used to get annoyed with a man I lived with for the way he often referred to the country house he saw in our future. We don't need two microwaves, I'd say, let's get rid of one. To which he'd object: No, let's keep it for when we have our country house. My annoyance arose from the fact that, at the time, we were having serious trouble making ends meet, overburdened with debt (mostly his), ever late with the rent, living on cheap meals in a desolate industrial part of Brooklyn, and that, given this, and the lives we'd chosen, the unremunerative artistic work we'd decided to devote our lives to, the idea of a country house seemed so far out of reach as to be a complete fantasy. And in the midst of that struggle—a struggle that played no small part, I can tell you, in our breaking up—I had little patience for fantasy.

In time a country house did indeed materialize. By then we two had long since separated. When the pandemic began, he retreated there with his wife.

A further irony: that desolate old corner of Brooklyn now holds some of the city's most expensive real estate. But you knew I was going to say that.

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ONE DAY, as I was on my way out, I heard shouting. It was Vetch, on the phone with someone I at first figured must be one of his parents but was in fact his girlfriend. She was a classmate of his, now sheltering with her family in Chicago.

*How many times do I have to tell you? You know what I want. I've told you a hundred times. I love you. I love you, but I can't go on like this anymore. Whenever we talk now, we fight. It's killing me. You say I don't listen to you, but you're the one who won't listen. Please, just make up your fucking mind. Do whatever you want, only please, just please, please stop jerking me around.*

You have to learn from experience what a character in a story by Edna O'Brien states: that the reason love is so painful is that it always amounts to two people wanting more than two people can give.

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WHEN I was a child I thought I would grow up to write children's books. When I was a little older it was love stories I thought I'd write: great romantic love stories. Later I learned that you couldn't write that kind of story anymore. I'm talking about the marriage plot that was central to those classic novels that had made me want to write novels myself. Courtship to marriage was no longer a promising story line. A wedding at the end couldn't possibly mean all was now right with the world. Fornication wasn't a sure path to ruin, adultery didn't mean someone had to die, and falling in love was not the key to understanding the self. Literature was done with that.

So why does it still hit me at times, the wish to write an old-fashioned love story? Pure fiction, not based on my own experiences.

Wagner was said to have composed his opera *Tristan und Isolde* because he wished to write about a great love such as he himself had never experienced. Which for him meant a violent tragedy of epic proportions in which both lovers go through anguished suffering and end up dead.

The part of us that wants to be married and have a family is the part that wants to be normal, like other people, set on the path we were raised to believe was the right path—not just to happiness, but to respectability, acceptance, community. The part of us that wants love-potion-strength romance is the part that wants to go mad.

Of the men in my life, I did not love them all equally, and I sometimes wonder: Does the one I loved best know it was him? Or does each of them think he was the One?

Even if I did write about my own experiences, much of it would still be fiction: there is no narrative more prone to distortion than the memory of a love gone wrong.

In a hit song of the sixties, a man hopes to find a job so that he can buy the car and the “pretty presents” that will have him and his girl making history—just like Romeo and Juliet. And if he doesn’t find a job, he says, their love will end in a tragedy, just like Romeo and Juliet.

Over the memory of my first love lies a shadow. I was around Juliet’s age when it began, and he was two years older. We went to the same high school, which was nearly a hundred percent white. He came from a world totally different from mine: big house on a hill, country club, WASP. To his father, the match was a disgrace. He kept trying to break us up. When nothing else worked, he threatened to take his son’s car keys away. That was close. But we carried on, love conquering all, our lives like a rock and roll song. And in the end it wasn’t bigotry that wrote our last line. It was Vietnam.

## *Interlude*

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I like the way Rousseau declares in the first sentence of his autobiography that he is about to do something that has never been done before and that will never be done again.

The problem with any first sentence, said Joan Didion, is that you're stuck with it. Everything else is going to flow out of that sentence. And by the time you've laid down the first two sentences, your options are all gone.

*Before* beginning, too many options. Then, in the next breath, none.

When you can't sleep, goes an old cure for insomnia, start telling yourself the story of your life. For some reason, writer's block has always felt to me like a kind of insomnia.

I like that Norman Mailer said there's a touch of writer's block in a writer's work every day.

I don't remember who said, Insomnia is the inability to forget.

When you're having trouble writing, get up, go out, take a walk in the street. You will discover that certain streets exist precisely for this purpose. Once, I saw a man—homeless by the look of him—digging through the trash. He pulled out a couple of sheets of newspaper, examined them, and threw them back. Fishing deeper, he hauled up a magazine, squinted at the cover, and threw it back. Shit, he said, walking away. There ain't nothing to read in these fucking cans anymore.

Rousseau goes on to say that he has embellished the story of his life only to fill a void when his memory failed. But of course he never gives you the heads-up.

Never write "I don't remember," Editor says; it undermines your authority.

But write as if you remember everything and Reader will smell a rat.

I like the student in my graduate fiction-writing class who said, I've read your novels and there's one thing I have to ask: Do you make some of that

stuff up?

I like that Allen Ginsberg told a teenager who wanted to know what he should write about that he should write about his love for his friends.

I once made the mistake of writing about a love too soon after it was over. Forgetting Chekhov's advice that you should sit down to write only when you feel as cold as ice.

How can a man who knows nothing about love be a great novelist? a character in a novel by J. M. Coetzee says about a character named John Coetzee.

I like that Virginia Woolf said, Everything I read these days, including my own work, seems to me too long.

That Borges said, Unlike the novel, a short story may be, for all purposes, essential.

But not that Jeanette Winterson said, I think long books are rude.

Not that Céline said, Novels are something like lace, an art that went out with the convent.

More and more, I like the idea of a pen name.

Sugared Nouns was the computer's suggestion, after spell-checking my name.

Some writers use pen names so that they can be more truthful; others, so that they can tell more lies.

I like how Lily Tomlin used to introduce one part of her act: The following skit is about my parents. I have changed their names to protect their identities.

You can start with fiction or start with documentary, according to Jean-Luc Godard. Either way, you will inevitably find the other.

I like the sliver of ice in the heart that Graham Greene thought every writer must have. I have it.

And the grain of stupidity Flannery O'Connor said the writer of fiction can't do without. I have that, too.

I like that Alan Bennett said, For a writer, nothing is ever quite as bad as it is for other people, because, however dreadful, it may be of use.

Oncologist says, That doesn't sound like any writer *I* know.

I like John Banville's paraphrase of Bennett: Writers don't suffer as much as other people.

An enormous stroke of luck is how García Márquez described his cancer diagnosis, for it goaded him to start writing his autobiography.

There is always a sheet of paper. There is always a pen. There is always a way out, wrote H. L. Mencken. Who nevertheless hoped that his life would not last too long.

*Write . . . paper . . . pencil* are said to have been the dying words of the poet Heine. Unless they were: Of course God will forgive me; that's his job, as has also been reported.

I like that, at the end of his life, Darwin said he wished that he had read more poetry.

That Keynes said he wished that he had drunk more champagne.

That Chekhov said, It's a long time since I drank champagne, then drained his glass and died.

I like last words. Beethoven: I shall hear in Heaven.

Käthe Kollwitz: Good luck, everyone.

Bring me a ladder. Quickly, a ladder! (Gogol)

And nutty epitaphs: I know not everyone is unhappy about this.

I wanted to write a comic novel, then realized I had my own life to hand.

*Sugared Nouns: My Life and Death as a Writer.*

Once you start on the road to autobiography, fretted Calvino, where do you stop?

I can tell the story of my life in just four words. Good times, bad times.

There will always be lacemakers. There will always be convents.

But about you, my love, I will never feel as cold as ice.

# Part Two

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I saw the notebook as soon as I entered the park. Someone had left it behind, on a bench, where its bright red cover caught my eye: a medium-sized leatherbound Moleskine (I happened to have one just like it). Surely not on purpose, I thought. Someone must have been sitting there, probably writing in the book, then laid it aside and forgot about it. It was the kind of mistake people everywhere were reporting these days, mistakes owing to unusual absent-mindedness: a symptom of pandemic brain fog. (Twice so far I had forgotten to pull my bank card after using an ATM.) I looked around but saw no one except a parks department worker up ahead, collecting trash.

I picked the book up and opened it to the flyleaf, where I knew I'd find a place for information about how to return the journal—even a blank for the amount of a reward. But no such information had been filled in.

Just then she appeared, walking rapidly in my direction. She wore a coat that was the same scarlet color as the notebook, and a felt beret that was also red, though a shade lighter. From where I stood I could read her anxiety—in her gait and, as she neared, in her expression. She must have realized she'd forgotten the notebook and rushed back to retrieve it; she must have been worried that it would be gone.

But when she saw me standing there, the notebook in my hand, the woman froze, and, rather than happy or thankful or relieved, she looked dismayed.

Confused, but with what I hoped was a reassuring look of my own, I held the book out to her: Is this yours?

She shook her head—once, but most definitely—avoiding my eyes, before hurrying past, walking ever more quickly until she was almost jogging away.

What had just happened? I was certain that the notebook belonged to this woman. Why wouldn't she take it?

I thought I knew. She must have suspected that I'd opened it—and not just to the flyleaf. Say it was her private journal, a place for recording intimate

thoughts, for baring heart and soul. That a stranger could have invaded this privacy, could have seen something that was never meant to be shared, was distressing to her. It was humiliating. She would rather lose the book for good than face that embarrassment. After all, she had chosen not to provide the information “In case of loss . . .”

(If this were a mystery novel, our story could now take a sinister turn. Inside the notebook: proof of a crime already committed or clues to a future one . . . )

Not knowing what else to do, I laid the notebook down where I’d found it. At once a squirrel hopped from the ground to sit squarely on it, like a storybook creature whose task was to guard it. But when he begged for food and I turned up empty palms, he took off.

I told myself there was at least a chance that the woman would come back later to look for the notebook again. And after I’d taken my usual long walk, I circled back to see if it was still where I’d left it. It was not. I tried to convince myself that it was now safely in its owner’s possession. But, remembering the trash collector who’d been there before, I knew it had more likely landed in his cart.

This whole episode had an exaggerated effect on me. Whenever it came to mind—and it did so frequently—I felt a wave of regret. If only I had delayed my arrival in the park by five minutes! Rationally, of course, I knew I’d done nothing wrong. But it is possible—it is common, in fact—to feel guilt for something for which you are not at fault. With the exception of psychopaths, humans are made this way. There are those who’ve destroyed themselves because they were unable to prevent others from being destroyed. There is the phenomenon of survivor’s guilt.

I kept seeing the woman as she hurried away from me, head down, shoulders hunched: that look of defeat. I thought about her matching coat and notebook and her almost-matching beret, and how red must have been her favorite color. Red is my favorite color.

Returning home, she climbs the stairs to her apartment, where she lives alone. She climbs slowly, step by weary step. Once inside, she removes her hat but not her coat. The coat she unbuttons, but without taking it off she

drops onto a chair at the kitchen table. She sits at the table in her winter coat and stares out the window. Her view is of other windows—there is an apartment house opposite—and because the day is late many windows are lit, and several of them show television screens, some tuned to the same channel. The daily coronavirus press briefing. Dr. Birx. President Trump. She should turn on her own TV, she thinks—in a time of crisis, stay informed—but she makes no move to do so.

She sits staring across the way as if hypnotized by the screens' flicker-flicker, not bothering to remove her coat or get up to turn on a light. She sits in the gloaming and the silence—that silence broken only by the sirens that have become so familiar and will always haunt the memories of those who were at the pandemic's epicenter.

A figure in an Edward Hopper painting. One of his ordinary people, isolated and vulnerable looking, prompting the viewer to think, Something sad has happened to them.

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MAYBE SHE was afraid of infection, suggests one friend of mine. Like everyone is these days.

But I had been wearing gloves.

Well, what were you supposed to do? says another. Run after her and insist that she take the damn thing? And besides, you don't even know it was a journal.

But I did know. I was sure of it.

There's no understanding people's behavior these days. Don't even try.

Maybe I shouldn't have smiled at her. She might have misinterpreted that.

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THE INABILITY to let it go, the irrational guilt, the self-anger: I knew these signs.

*Wrong thinking.* There are methods to stop it, psychologists say. And mental health requires that it be stopped. For the writer, a dilemma. For the writer, obsessive rumination is a must. Imagination must follow dark thoughts to dark places, you can't ever just say, Stop, don't go there. And isn't that the job, to imagine the lives of others and what they are going through?

I could invent a whole novel out of that Moleskine. (Don't worry, I'm not about to.)

Which isn't to say that I was glad my encounter with this woman had happened.

I have this fear. I am so myopic that, without glasses, the hand I see at the end of my arm is blurred. What if I were to find myself one day in some bad place—in a prison or some kind of detention camp, say, or forced to flee for my life—and then somehow I lost my glasses, or they got broken or taken away? What then?

I mentioned this once to some guests at a party and everyone cracked up. As if anything like that could ever happen to you!

But think of all the people in the world to whom this has already happened, including the many who thought it never could.

*Catastrophizing.* A tendency to believe that the worst possible outcome is the inevitable one. The kind of wrong thinking that can lead to anxiety and depression.

With the world on fire and its systems collapsing, here, there, and everywhere—with hope after hope turning out to have been merely false hope—what use is this diagnosis anymore?

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ANOTHER SIGN: I am waiting for my cappuccino-to-go when I thoughtlessly rest a hand on the counter, and the barista scolds me like a child. It says Do Not Touch, he says, slapping a sheet of paper taped to the countertop. His voice is loud enough to be heard by a fellow worker and by those waiting in line behind me.

I know the barista, I've known him for years, it's always been a pleasure to see him—this friendly, good-looking, curly-bearded man of an age and with an accent I can't quite place. In fact, in these days of severely restricted social contact, I've been especially grateful for my brief interactions with him, and never before has he been less than nice to me.

Of course I remove my hand from the counter at once. Of course I apologize. But he won't look at me. He keeps frowning, and when I take my cup and thank him he doesn't respond.

Outside, I am appalled to find myself close to tears. I no longer want the coffee, which I dump in the nearest trash can. I just want to go home. He has scolded me like a child and I have become a child. He didn't have to yell at me! Now I'll never go back. (I do go back, though only after a long time, when, from his behavior, as friendly as ever, it would seem no such trouble between us had ever occurred.)

Why did he become so angry over such a small thing?

Why did I feel so hurt over such a small thing?

Maybe being one of those people who had to go to work every day while others stayed safe at home was getting to him.

There's no understanding people's behavior these days. Don't even try.



Now that the weather was warmer, Vetch had taken to sleeping on the roof. It turned out there was a terrace with an overhang and several pieces of outdoor furniture. He carried up a pillow and the duvet from his bed and slept on one of the padded recliners.

I've always slept well outdoors, he said. I don't know why more people don't do it. Before there was air-conditioning, during heat waves city people camped out with their neighbors on roofs and fire escapes. It's so peaceful up there at night. I wish the stars were visible, but at least there's the moon. And there's nothing like waking up early and seeing the sun rise.

It wasn't something I wanted to do. Nevertheless, I felt a stab of envy. He made me feel like I was really missing something. That I could not even imagine doing such a thing made me feel old. More: there wasn't much doubt in my mind that, had we been closer in age, I would have been sleeping up there with him.

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I'D STARTED waking up earlier and earlier. Often it was still dark when I went out. One Sunday morning, as I walked and walked without seeing another person, I was taken back to New Year's Day 2001. I was in Rome. I had skipped all the New Year's Eve celebrations, gone to bed early, and was awake before dawn. In the villa where I was staying, no one would be up for hours yet—which seemed to be the case everywhere that morning. The temperature was unusually mild—more like October than January. I had the Eternal City to myself as I set out on what may have been the most beautiful walk of my life.

Now, crossing Union Square, I heard a shout from behind. *Yo! Outta my way!*

A cyclist. Out of *his* way? But this was a pedestrian plaza. And what did he mean by bearing down on me, when there was plenty of space around us?

A crazy. Faceless in dark goggles and a black balaclava. As he wheeled past, he said, *Ain't you scared, lady?*

I'm not quite sure why I wasn't. Partly because in my head I was still in Rome, partly because of his own relaxed and even playful manner. Or maybe because I'd grown used to people's pandemic quirks, the weirdness that now characterized everyday life. He turned a slow circle around me, forcing me to stand still, before taking off with a maniacal laugh that sent some nearby pigeons into the air.

I walked on. A couple of other people were now in sight. Another cyclist, a jogger, a woman and a boy with a Frisbee playing monkey in the middle with their dog.

After a few minutes, I saw him again. He had turned his bike around and was heading back in my direction. He was moving fast and barely slowed as he approached.

What was I supposed to do? Run? Scream?

*Ain't you scared, lady?*

Leaning toward me, he jerked the balaclava down to his chin, hawked, and coughed in my face. Then he rode off, both arms raised and his head thrown back, letting out a string of coyote-like yips.

Across the plaza, the woman and the boy and the dog all stopped to stare my way briefly before going back to their game.

Ill-advised, trying to walk and look over your shoulder at the same time while crying. Luckily I didn't fall, and luckily the sprain wasn't so bad that I couldn't hobble home. By the next day, though, my right ankle was swollen and stiff, the skin mottled with bruises.

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THERE HAD to be a connection, it seemed to me, between this incident and the vertigo that began troubling me. Even after the swelling was down, the vertigo kept me from going out. I'd be dressed and ready to leave, but as I

reached the door, I'd find myself dizzy. Sometimes the dizziness was bad enough to cause nausea, and sometimes the nausea was bad enough to cause vomiting. Of course it occurred to me that I might be coming down with the virus—that the man had infected me, had maybe even been aiming to do just that—but this was not the case. Later I decided probably there was no connection: vertigo is common in people over sixty-five.

But I was reminded of Joan Didion's remark about the symptoms that had caused her to seek psychiatric help in June 1968. She was thirty-three. Looking back some years later, she wrote, "An attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968."

Too glib. She knew the attack was not likely to have been a response to the summer of 1968.

In the psychiatric report written at the time, which Didion shared, an evaluation revealed "her fundamentally pessimistic, fatalistic, and depressive view of the world around her. . . . In her view she lives in a world of people moved by strange, conflicted, poorly comprehended, and, above all, devious motivations which commit them inevitably to conflict and failure."

This would describe, more or less, the current view of most Americans I know. Though I would add: an overwhelming sense of shame.

If it is true that an inability to deal with the future is a sign of mental disturbance, I don't know anyone who is not now disturbed; who has not been disturbed for some time.

In 2016, the election of Donald Trump stopped the renowned speculative fiction writer William Gibson's novel in progress. The election had taken him, like so many others (at least partly thanks to those wildly off polls) by utter surprise. It changed everything, he said; the emotions and the reasons for the characters' behavior no longer made sense.

A genius at foretelling near-future events, Gibson had never imagined the United States would come to this. In interviews after the revised novel was published, he confessed to a creative block. When he looks at the future of civilization now, his prodigious visionary imagination fails. No way out of the mess we've gotten ourselves into comes to him.



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I REMEMBER 1968. The Year That Shattered America. I knew why Didion had chosen “Slouching Towards Bethlehem” for the title of her famous essay about the sixties, published the year before, and why she began it with lines from Yeats’s poem. Things falling apart, the center not holding, anarchy loosed upon the world. *There’s something happening here* went the song. Something really bad, even if its exact nature *ain’t exactly clear*. Then, as now, high anxiety, paranoia, apocalyptic fears. But though environmentalists had already begun raising the alarm, the end of civilization was seen as most likely the outcome of nuclear warfare—or nuclear accident. Not climate change. Not pandemic.

“Slouching Towards Bethlehem” took shape at a moment in Didion’s life when she, too, found herself blocked, “paralyzed by the conviction that writing was an irrelevant act, that the world as I had understood it no longer existed. If I was to work again at all, it would be necessary for me to come to terms with disorder.”

Coming to terms with disorder did not, for her, include finding reasons for hope—although that the world that no longer existed was about to be replaced by a more just, peaceful, and beautiful one was, of course, the sixties’ big dream. Marches, shutdowns, and other demonstrations of protest were useless, she believed, for “the heart of darkness lay not in some error of social organization but in man’s own blood”—a belief she saw as common among her (the so-called silent) generation. There was reason to work, and to work hard, because there was no better way to cope in troubled times. But this was not the same thing as hope.

I remember my first encounter with the myth of Pandora’s box, the version told in Edith Hamilton’s *Mythology*—that seminal text, for me, revealing as it did the central place of storytelling in understanding life. Discovered in grade school and beloved ever after. I remember how puzzled it left me—as, I later learned, scholars down through the ages have felt, too.

Actually, Hamilton gives two versions.

In the first version, there is the woman Pandora, but no box. Out of rage against the Titan Prometheus, whose love for men had led him to steal divine fire to give them and to show them how to obey the law regarding animal sacrifices in such a way as to keep the choice parts for themselves, Zeus created a “beautiful disaster”: Pandora, endowed by each of the gods with some alluring trait, would be the ruin of men (at the time—the Golden Age—the only humans that existed were men). *From her, the first woman, comes the race of women, who are an evil to men, with a nature to do evil.* (Thus, the creation of women meant that the Golden Age was done.)

In the second version, the gods fill a box with every pain and sickness and sorrow that could possibly befall a mortal. Then, without revealing its contents, they give the box to Pandora, forbidding her ever to open it. But when curiosity gets the better of her (as they knew it would, the goal being the revenge of Zeus for Prometheus’s beneficence toward men), she lifts the lid, loosing all the evils upon the world. By the time she slams the lid shut, one thing only remains, and that is hope.

What? Meaning that, as part of Zeus’s punishment, hope would always be withheld? But what was hope doing in a box of evils to begin with?

That *hope remains* has been a common reading of the myth: no matter what evils are visited upon us, no matter how much suffering we must endure, there is always the blessing and comfort of hope to help us through.

But had those evils remained inside the box, they would have had no power to harm. Shouldn’t this mean that, in order to do its good work, hope would have to be let out, too?

How Nietzsche saw it: *Of course hope is an evil.* In reality it is the worst of all evils, he said, for it prolongs the torments of man. And of course this was part of the punishment the Father of Gods and Men had in mind.

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AMONG THE many torments of Nietzsche, we know, were various bodily ailments, and it would not be surprising to learn that, on the day he came up with this idea, he was having one of his horrible migraines.

As it happens, Didion also suffered badly from migraines. In fact, she reported that, while writing “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” she was as “sick as I have ever been,” relying on “gin-and-hot-water to blunt the pain and . . . Dexedrine to blunt the gin.” She also tells us that the meaning of the essay, of such great importance to her, appeared to have been lost on many readers: “I had never gotten a feedback so universally beside the point.”

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“Box” is said to be a mistranslation. It really should be Pandora’s jar. A large storage jar was supposedly the container in question. The illustration in Hamilton shows a vamp distressfully waving her arms as personified ghostlike curses stream like smoke from out of a large open chest, looking much like you’d imagine a treasure chest, at her feet.

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I HAVE always wondered about the fact-checking that was—or was not—done for Didion’s essay, which was first published as a cover story under the title “The Hippie Generation: Slouching Towards Bethlehem” in *The Saturday Evening Post*. I am thinking in particular of the anecdote that comes near the end, when, as a guest in a living room in Haight-Ashbury, Didion is introduced to a five-year-old who is said to be at that moment on acid. Didion reports that the child—Susan—is reading a comic book with concentration, and when Didion interrupts her to chat, she responds in a perfectly lucid manner. Indeed, according to Didion, “the only off thing about her is that she’s wearing white lipstick.” In other words, there is nothing about either Susan’s appearance or her behavior that reflects someone who has taken a powerful hallucinogenic drug.

“For a year now her mother has given her both acid and peyote.” Didion states this as if she’s indirectly quoting Susan, though it doesn’t sound like something a tripping kindergartner would offer. In any case, Didion appears to take it as fact, leaving us uncertain as to why she didn’t then probe further

into what effects this year of mind-altering drug use has had on such a small child.

Didion meets Susan through someone called Otto (whether the names of the people mentioned in the essay are real or fictitious is another thing I've been curious about). Otto is one of several hippies she's spent time with in the Haight while writing her piece. "I got something at my place that'll blow your mind," he tells her, which turns out to mean Susan, who has for some ungiven reason been brought to Otto's by a friend of her mother's.

When some friends and I first read Didion's essay, as an assignment for one of our college courses, these words, and the fact that Susan does not appear to be at all high, made us think that Otto—along with the friend of Susan's mother—might have been goofing on Didion. We thought this because we knew that goofing on people—especially members of the Establishment, and above all members of the Establishment who were writing about them (at one point Didion acknowledges that she is seen as a "media poisoner," a creature no hippie should even be talking to)—was the kind of behavior the generation was famous for. Pranksterism: counterculture MO.

We could just picture it: this decidedly unhip Republican in her lady's skirt and blouse, her stockings and pumps, and carrying a pocketbook, come to San Francisco, "where the missing children were gathering and calling themselves 'hippies,'" on assignment for her conservative, middle-class magazine. (Never trust anyone over thirty, went the movement saying, and Didion herself felt so estranged from her subjects that she keeps referring to female teenagers as "little girls.")

Hippies were acutely aware of the national attention that had come to be focused on them, and of the many crazy rumors in the air, especially in regard to sex and drugs. (We want to see the wild ones, you know, the gypsies, I once heard some tourists tell a New York cop, who nodded and directed them to Washington Square Park.)

Assuring the prurient and credulous that the rumors were fact—*Yes, of course we go around naked all the time, and it's true that we never bathe, and everyone fucks everyone else all day long*—was part of the fun. That hippies fed LSD to their kids was one of those scare stories that went around,

like the one about the group who'd dropped acid and then sat staring at the sun till they all went blind, and not unlike the various myths about poisoned Halloween candy that get repeated year after year.

"I got something at my place that'll blow your mind."

If there was one precaution you'd think any hippie would have been sure to take, it would have been not to attract notice from the Man. How strange, then, that Otto has no fear at all that this outsider, this straight investigative journalist, might report what she'd witnessed in his living room—and wasn't she in fact required by child welfare laws to do so?

Didion knows so little about hallucinogens that she concludes that a certain man (and the men are never "little boys") is on a bad trip, just because he keeps staring at his toes. That she would believe what Otto tells her about Susan isn't surprising. What is more than surprising, though, is the missing follow-up.

Sometime earlier, Otto had told Didion another horror story, this one about a fourteen-year-old girl who, while innocently walking through Golden Gate Park, had just been arrested, booked, and subjected by police to "a pelvic." Otto explains to Didion what a bad trip this would be for someone coming down from acid, though—confusingly—there doesn't seem to be any reason to think this girl had been coming down from acid.

When Didion asks Otto if he could get in touch with the girl, he says she's busy rehearsing for her junior high school play. What? Every minute of every day? And what about the girl's parents and teachers? Here, too, a door you'd think any reporter would want to look behind is never even cracked. We never hear another word about this girl, or about her false arrest, or her "pelvic," beyond that the play she is rehearsing for is *The Wizard of Oz*.

Decades later, after the release of a documentary in which Didion is asked how she felt about her famous encounter with Susan, even admirers will confess to being disconcerted by her response. It's a moment she looks back on with fond satisfaction, an instance of fabulous journalist's luck, what she calls "gold." "You live for moments like that, if you're doing a piece," she says.

“Slouching Towards Bethlehem” gave people the unmistakable impression that the neglect and abuse of minors, along with other examples of criminal and degenerate behavior, was a main characteristic of “the hippie generation.” Not that there were ever anywhere near enough hippies to make a generation, but if her sensationalist portrait had been true, that unprecedented historic gathering—those three days of peace and music that took place on an upstate New York farm about two years after the essay was published—would have been three days of mayhem.

When we told this to our professor, and when we told him we thought Didion might have been played, he assured us that she was much too smart for that to have happened. When we said we had never heard of any hippie giving acid to a little kid, and that we found her essay offensive, the way she made every hippie she met sound either depraved or mental or moronic, he shrugged. Maybe West Coast hippies are different, he said.

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I READ somewhere that, around 2015, psychotherapists started hearing from people about dreams they were having about Donald Trump. Many of the dreams were similar. There was the group of people who dreamed that their mothers had begun dating Trump, and another group that dreamed that Trump was their schoolteacher. Some of the dreams were violent; some included acts of sexual abuse. There were dreams in which Trump appeared as the world’s savior and others in which he was its destroyer. He might be terrifying—a monster or some kind of alien invader—or he might be a sympathetic figure, a troubled man in need of love and compassion.

Whatever he was, however he appeared, it was clear that he had sunk deep, deep into Americans’ heads.

I was among those whose dream was a violent one, a dream of sexual abuse.

I remember the shaken condition of some of my young female students the day after the third presidential debate, during which he had delivered one of

his most boorish and menacingly misogynistic performances. Their hushed, trembly voices. Their disbelief.

I discovered that, besides being one of those who'd dreamed about Trump, I belonged to a group of people who'd been visited by a particular fantasy, embarrassing to tell. Our worst fears would not come to pass, went the fantasy. Because once in office Trump would change. Like the Grinch who stole Christmas, like Ebenezer Scrooge, he would have somehow come to see the light. He would understand how much happier everyone—including himself!—would be, were he to use all his might, the might of the most powerful human on earth, to do good. ("Everyone is going to have beautiful health insurance, such beautiful health insurance, you're not going to believe it.")

Pitiful, yes. But fear turns people into children.

After the election, it was hard to know what to do with a certain reality. The Black journalist who reported how gleeful her mother was that Trump had won, because *now white America will have to face who they really are*. The Chinese American man who said he'd voted for Trump because *liberals don't care about Asian people*. The young leftist bro whose hatred for Hillary Clinton was so spiteful that *all that mattered was that she lose*. The millennial who told me about all the millennials he knew who loathed Trump but had been hoping he'd beat Clinton anyway because, *with Trump, politics would be more interesting*.

Every one of these people no doubt believed themselves sane.

Day by day, the results of two tallies. The number of American lives lost to the coronavirus: about 115,500 by the end of spring, a total that will almost triple by the end of the year. The number of lies told by Trump from the beginning of his presidency: about 15,000, a number that will more than double by Election Day.

He would win again, and if he didn't he'd seize power and make himself president for life: *half the nation thrilled to this*. ("So many people love me. So many, many. It's so true.") For the first time, an American presidency would be assessed in terms of its threat to American citizens' mental health.

*I believe people are more good than bad.* When Obama said this he was only repeating what many have said before. Another version: *I believe there are more good people in the world than bad people.* What does not follow, though, is that, thanks to the numbers, the good will prevail. What cannot be left out of account is that, under certain circumstances, the bad can get the good to act badly, and furthermore, in order to achieve certain goals—victory in wartime, for example—getting the good to act badly rises to the level of a necessity.

Which is why Joan Didion said that she did not believe going to a barricade could change man's fate in the slightest.

According to Flannery O'Connor, people without hope don't write novels.

People without hope don't write novels. I am writing a novel. Therefore I must have hope.

Does that work?





Good news from California: Iris's father-in-law was over his illness, no one else in the family had become infected, and Iris's blood pressure was down. It had been decided, though, that the safest thing for her to do would be to remain in Palo Alto for the last weeks of her pregnancy and have her baby there.

I assured Iris that, back home, all was well. Vetch and I were getting along, Eureka was being lovingly cared for, there was nothing for her to be concerned about.

I was not at all surprised to learn that the doctor staying in my apartment had come down with the virus and was now quarantined there. Once she recovered she would decide whether to continue working as a hospital volunteer or go home to Oregon. (By now Covid was so widespread, there'd be plenty of need for her there, too.) I was hoping she'd go. It wasn't just that I wanted to get away from Vetch. I had an idea that, if I were back in my own place, I might be able to work again.

Looking back, I would always wonder: However did I pass the time? Keeping my foot elevated as much as possible, I read a lot of news, but other reading—reading for pleasure—had become too hard. I simply didn't have the concentration to get very far into a book. I had to keep starting over from the beginning. I watched a lot of news, too, and I also watched a lot of movies and TV shows. The news was too scary not to be riveting, but though movies and TV shows required less concentration than reading, I found myself tuning out so often that I lost the thread of the story.

It didn't seem to matter what I turned my mind to, it was always prey to intrusive thoughts. And here I come to a dilemma: to describe, or not to describe, those thoughts. I don't want to describe them, but I also don't want you to think it's because I'm being lazy. The truth is, this is one of those rare moments in writing when I can't see the advantage in specificity. Isn't it

enough if I tell you that these thoughts, which could arise at any moment and sometimes did so as much as a dozen times an hour, were disturbing? Brief waking nightmares. I'm not talking about flashbacks to anything I'd actually experienced; in fact, I myself rarely appeared. It was more as if some vast catalog of violent and inhumane possibilities had become lodged in my mind, which, all against my will, kept turning pages. A kind of Pandora's *book*.

At night it was different. At night I woke frequently in some kind of swivet. Apparently I'd forgotten something of utmost importance. But, long though I lay awake trying, I could never name it. Fears of the future roiled me—not just the big ones I shared with everyone else, like the fear of contracting the virus and perhaps even dying, or of the consequences of our increasingly dark and chaotic politics—but petty ones inspired by the most mundane aspects of my life.

I had lost all confidence in myself to accomplish ordinary tasks. I would lie in bed, obsessing about my to-do list, watching helplessly as—thanks to the many obstacles my mind kept generating—it twisted into a list of the not-doable. That I could order a piece of furniture and not somehow screw up was so unlikely—better not even try. (For me, the words *Assembly required* or even *Some assembly required* on any product have always been a deal breaker.)

What travel plans I'd made for that spring had had to be canceled, of course, and it was certain I wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. So why was I kept awake by imaginary worries about my passport, luggage, or wallet being lost or stolen while I was abroad? Not to mention fears of getting lost myself. (But this has been a lifelong phobia.) Why did the possibility of such mishaps, which after all in real life are not without fixes, fill me with the kind of dread appropriate to a real calamity?

The most unrelenting anxiety was that my laptop would crash, or that I'd lose my internet connection. Might as well drop me down an oubliette.

By day I may have been so forgetful that I couldn't recall what I'd had for breakfast, but in the dark hours of the night I was a memory genius. I could recall every regrettable moment of my life. Every mistake I'd ever made, every humiliation, every failure, every sin, every harm I'd ever caused

another person, deliberately or by accident, every bad or stupid thing I'd ever said or done.

Veering dangerously close to self-pity here: not good.

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YOU'VE BEEN CRYING, said Vetch.

I didn't bother to respond, just got the glass of water I'd come into the kitchen for and retreated to my room.

I was now spending most of my time in bed. Upright, I continued to have episodes of vertigo and nausea. The nausea cut my appetite. Out of convenience I'd started accepting Vetch's offer to share whatever he cooked, but I rarely took more than a few bites, and we never sat down to eat together. Most food tasted so bland to me that, for a while, I worried I might be experiencing the loss of taste that was a known Covid symptom.

"Cave syndrome" as a response to the pandemic would soon be getting a lot of attention, but in fact I'd experienced it before, when it was called agoraphobia.

"You know nothing good ever happens going out of the house," went Larry David's quarantine public service announcement. "It's just trouble."

Among the trouble I feared was running into that creep on his bike again.

I could still laugh at Larry David, or at any good joke—and I could still take joy in Eureka. There was a day when I woke up and thought something was wrong with my sight. It was as if the color had been bled out of things. I saw only gray or beige or black. This was not a symptom of the virus, as far as I knew, but I panicked anyway. I got up and went to Eureka's room and took in his gaudy plumage with relief.

I still played with him every day. Vetch had shown me how, if you took a ball and sent it bouncing down the apartment's long hallway, Eureka would follow behind it with perfectly timed matching bounces. (Many birds make music, but what other animal has the kind of rhythm parrots do?) A hilarious performance that always made me laugh out loud—and then Eureka would

laugh, too! But though I knew I'd miss him, I still wanted to leave. I was afraid that if I didn't start writing again soon I would never write again.

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IF YOU'RE having trouble concentrating, goes the advice, try writing very short things. One writer I know suggests experimenting with just a title and a single sentence.

### *The Celebrated Novelist*

Explained in an interview that he went from writing novels to writing poetry after learning that the celebrated poet John Ashbery wrote for only one hour a day.

Among those I knew who died of Covid that spring was a man I'd first met several years before, at a writers' conference, where we taught a weeklong workshop together. We had met a second time, some years later, at a literary award ceremony. He was on the board of directors of the foundation that was bestowing the award. He was also on the faculty of a university English department whose chair had asked me to evaluate some of the man's work for a tenure review. He was about to turn sixty when he died of complications of the coronavirus.

What came out about a month later was that the man we thought we knew had been a fraud. An African American man from Detroit, he had invented an identity for himself as a Latino immigrant who'd escaped with his family from Cuba to the United States when he was seven. So successfully had he maintained this pretense, even those closest to him were deceived. He had written a whole book based on his experiences as a Cuban American, including learning English as a second language. His position in academia and in the literary community was based entirely on this bogus vita.

Now that the truth was out, people were torn. Many were outraged by what they saw as a betrayal of trust and an unforgivable act of cultural appropriation. Others believed that, wrong though it was, the deception might be pardoned in light of what a good teacher he was known to have been.

Writers reinvent themselves all the time, said some. What he'd done was really no more of a crime than taking a pen name. Say, for whatever mysterious reason, in his heart he'd always felt like a Latino. (I thought of a certain author of a fraudulent Holocaust memoir, a woman who was not Jewish, whose defense had indeed been that she had always *felt* Jewish.) Some argued that if people had the right to choose their gender, why not also the right to choose their race, or their ethnicity?

I was asked whether I was angry about having been duped—after all, I had written in support of the man's work. I was not. I was among those who felt mostly sad and confused. Painful to think what a toll such a long-running masquerade must have taken. We did not know the full extent of his duplicity, we could not say for sure what about him and his past had been real and what had been a sham. We did not know the man's true life—and if we didn't know his life, how could we know his death? Whom, exactly, were we mourning?

No, I wasn't angry. But nor was I much surprised, so seamlessly did this episode blend with the times, when we were all living with the sense that, at any moment, some inexplicable new story would unfold.

Let me tell you something I heard just yesterday: two women on the bus I was riding, talking about the threat of a nuclear war. You know, this could be God's plan, said one. A nuclear winter to fix global warming. An absolutely brilliant idea on God's part, this woman's tone implied. The other woman nodded. Let's hope that's the case, she said. And then, What did your doctor say about that rash?

### *Proud Author*

The pleasure of seeing a beautiful young woman reading his novel on the L train was somewhat spoiled by the fact that she was moving her lips.

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ONE NIGHT, after Vetch had gone up to the roof, I saw that he'd left a portion of some kind of stew for me to have for dinner: tofu and spinach. I was

hungry, but not for tofu and spinach. In the freezer I found a pint of Vetch's favorite dessert: caramel oat milk ice cream. I read the ingredients with irritation. *If it isn't dairy, it isn't ice cream.* Too impatient to let it soften, I heated the pint in the microwave, though I remembered hearing that microwaving ice cream diminished its flavor. I didn't know—or care—if that was also true for the nondairy kind. I ate every spoonful in one sitting, which was actually not a sitting: I ate standing up.

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I SEE you had a little rage attack last night, said Vetch.

I said, What are you talking about?

Well, when you take something that doesn't belong to you—

It was rude, I conceded. It was selfish. It showed a complete lack of control. It was shameful, okay? *None of that made it a rage attack.*

Don't get excited, he said. He was grinning. As if my weakness were some kind of triumph for him. I'm just glad to see you eat something, he said. Just as long as you didn't throw it up afterward.

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THE NERVE, I seethed to Violet. Wagging a finger at me like that.

He's been so nice to you, she said. Why can't you be nice back?

I admitted that he hadn't behaved as badly as I'd predicted he would, that all in all he'd been, well, nice enough. But I still wanted him gone.

It's not anything he *does*, I said. And it's not like the apartment isn't big enough for both of us. But it's so different with him here. He can't help it, I know, but he fills the whole place with testosterone.

Violet laughed. That's the real problem, isn't it, she said. There you are, living in close proximity to this very handsome, very sexy young man, a glaring reminder of what you can't have, what you've lost, that thrilling part of life that's now behind you and that you can never have back, and though it's not his fault you blame him.

It's only natural, Violet said. Everyone past a certain age is in a state of mourning for their youth. But if he didn't look the way he does, I doubt you'd be this resentful.

I won't take back what I said earlier, about Violet usually being right.

I was upset by her words—at the time, I denied them—but in the end they helped calm me. Whatever else might be wrong with me, this pain, this grief was normal.

That same day he went out and bought four pints of caramel oat milk ice cream.

Eat as much as you want, he said.

Which made my stomach start to churn.

I should have asked, he said. Maybe you'd prefer another flavor.

Which made tears come to my eyes.

### *Even Worse*

After a night of troubled dreams, Gregor Samsa awoke to discover that his wife had been transformed into a gigantic cockroach.

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IT TOOK me a minute to realize that the inedible-looking chunk on the plate of food he'd left for me—what looked like a bite of rancid candy bar—was in fact an edible.

Beside it, a note: Helpful in the treatment of nausea and anxiety, as well as an appetite stimulant.

I tried to remember the last time I'd gotten high, but I couldn't.

By what algorithm had the internet reasoned that, among the books I might like, was *It's Not Easy Being a Bunny*?

It seems young P. J. Funnybunny doesn't want to be a bunny anymore. So off he goes to live with various other animals, one after another, only to learn that being a bunny is the best thing for him to be after all.

An object lesson about self-acceptance and how to be comfortable with who you are.

Maybe it was partly the effect of the edible, but this kind of pedagogical thinking tends to confuse me. Wouldn't at least some children conclude that, whatever they feel about being themselves, being a bunny would be better? I'm pretty sure that's how I would have read the book as a kid.

A schoolteacher once told me that she'd asked her third graders, If you could ask a dog one question, what would it be? And one boy said, Dog, when I grow up, what will I be?

I thought of a well-known writer who rolled her eyes at the way the internet was forever suggesting that her own novels might be of interest to her.

I've always had recommended to me far more books I know I'd never like than ones I probably would like. But I am curious what in my browsing and buying history inspired this particular book: a "beginners book," reading level age three to seven.

Certainly it was the edible that caused me to nod off with my hands on the keyboard. I dreamed that I'd been kidnapped. The kidnapper was taking me somewhere on a train. I sat terrified beside him, until a passenger approached. She had a book in her hand and she asked if I'd sign it. This being a dream, it was a book written by someone else. The kidnapper made no objection, so I took the book and wrote my name and beneath it "Call 911!" As I was handing the book back to her, I woke up.





There is a foolproof cure for writer's block, according to a teacher I know: start with the words *I remember*.

It's true that whenever I see those words—wherever they might appear—I want to read on. And one of my favorite books is *I Remember* by Joe Brainard. Another question writers are sometimes asked: What's a book you've read that you wish you had written? The miracle of Brainard's book is that you *can* write it. You simply do what he did: put down one memory after another as it comes to mind (arranging them all later however you might wish), always beginning with the phrase *I remember*.

Actually, Brainard wrote more than one memoir of this kind over the years, but in time they were collected into one volume (usually referred to as a work of autobiographical nonfiction, but by some as a work of poetry).

Miraculous: a book in which just about every sentence begins with "I," but whose author cannot be called a narcissist. Except if you share the popular view that all writers are narcissists to some degree and that those who write about themselves are so to an extreme degree. (I like this clarification by the narrator of a book by Stendhal: "It is not out of egotism that I say 'I'; it is simply the quickest way to tell the story.")

Brainard, who was also a visual artist, was born in 1942, and *I Remember* is largely about growing up queer in mid-twentieth-century Tulsa, Oklahoma. Among the many things he remembers are: poodle skirts and Perry Como shirts, people dancing "The Swing," "The Chicken," and "The Bop," grade school classmates sending each other valentines, Davy Crockett hats, blue suede shoes, "bouffants" and "beehives," roller skate keys, raccoon tails hanging from car antennas, milkmen, jeweled bottle openers, the Campbell Soup Kids, Jane and Dick and Sally and Spot, pedal pushers, and pillbox hats.

From which it can be seen that *I Remember* is also an enduring piece of Americana.

Also remembered: coming-of-age anxieties, wonders, pleasures, shames. Erotic yearnings and bewilderments. Questions. If God is omnipotent, why doesn't He end polio and wars? How can a baby come out of such a small hole? Do goats really eat tin cans?

Numerous memories—a majority, in fact—are so common that many other people will remember them, too. The day John Kennedy was shot. And lots of “firsts”: cigarette, erection, getting jerked off, getting drunk. For most readers I know, this is one of the joys of reading *I Remember*: a memoir of one person's life that is also about a collective past. But I have also known some who've been irritated: *I remember pillbox hats, too. So what?*

Imitations of Brainard are abundant, and “I remember” exercises have been used in writing classes for people of all ages as well as in various clinical settings, such as therapy sessions intended to treat post-traumatic stress.

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THE FRENCH writer Georges Perec started writing sentences beginning “*Je me souviens*” as an exercise and, like Brainard, ended up with a book. It delighted him that anyone at all could do what Brainard and he had done—here was literature you didn't have to be a writer to create—and he requested that, at the end of his book, a few pages be left blank “for readers to write their own ‘I remembers’ which the reading of these ones will hopefully have inspired.”

About a century and a half before Brainard's memoir, an English poet named Thomas Hood wrote “I Remember, I Remember,” in which, as the feverish and despondent speaker looks back, he remembers, he remembers the house where he was born and several lovely images, such as a flower-filled garden, from what seems to have been an idyllic childhood.

Hood's piercingly nostalgic lyric inspired another English poet, Philip Larkin, to write his own “I Remember, I Remember,” in which the speaker

finds himself a passenger at a train station stop in Coventry, which happens to be where he was born, a place “where my childhood was unspent,” he quips: a void recalled in bleakly sardonic verses.

I like Günter Grass’s definition of a writer as “a professional rememberer.”

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WHEN I wanted to assign students an exercise based on Brainard’s book, I was concerned that some of them might feel inhibited. (*What I remember is none of your business.*) So I suggested that they make two sets, one in which they wrote down true reminiscences, another in which they made things up, and intersplice them. It was always easy, though, to tell true from false. I could tell by the wording. And it was a revelation how many of the true ones were about abuse.

“I remember how my mother would make her girlfriends laugh by pinching me till I started crying.”

Most often remembered: a grandparent dying, an abandoning father, parents divorcing.

Conspicuously missing: academic accomplishment of any kind, first love.

“I remember after I had my appendix out, I cried when I had to go home, because in the hospital everyone was nice to me.”

Now and then an arresting detail, such as this, from a daughter of Eastern European immigrants: “I remember the loaf of white bread under the Christmas tree.”

The inevitable—and invariably male—smart-ass: “I remember when I shot Mom between the eyes. She looked surprised, but she shouldn’t have been.” “I remember the time Kim Kardashian begged me for a date.”

And once, that rare thing in students’ writing, a good joke: “I remember how hard my thirtieth birthday was for me. I was thirty-four at the time.”

I remember how enthusiastic most of the students were about this particular assignment, and how for many of them it was the best work they did all semester.

I remember thinking, Wouldn't it be great, to have written something as *useful* as Joe Brainard's book? (Like the feeling I had when I saw that someone whose work I greatly admired had published a book of her collected stories. To have your complete oeuvre all in one place—how I envied that. One thick handsome volume. A plain cover—no image, just the author's name and the book's title. Reminding me of the first French books I ever owned, those serious-looking paperbacks: Gallimard's *Collection Blanche*. The white collection, so called for the books' cream-colored covers—though it might just as well have been for the authors' skin. Against the pale background, the titles standing out in red: *L'Étranger*, *La Nausée*.)

All your work fitting neatly into just one book—how elegant. How dignified. Not taking up too much space in the world. Not asking for too much attention. What writer wants to look back and think, *I wrote too much*? But probably true of most. How often reading the latest offering by some well-established novelist have I thought, It's terrible, what happens to writers. And, of course, since that volume of collected stories by the person I was telling you about appeared, she has produced a whole book of new ones.)

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I REMEMBER the end of childhood. It was June. I had finished sixth grade, it was the day of my graduation from elementary school. In September I'd be starting junior high. No more walking to school. I'd be taking the bus—not the yellow school bus I'd taken in kindergarten and first grade, but the regular city bus. I'd be commuting like any grown-up, but instead of paying the fare I'd have a pass. Cause for anxiety: What happened if you lost your pass and didn't have any money? How would you get home? Then you'd just have to walk (my mother). And in fact it was only about a mile and a half, not too far to walk—even in a storm, as I learned that winter when a blizzard cut the school day short.

And instead of sitting in the same room with the same teacher all day, in junior high you moved from classroom to classroom and had a different teacher for each subject. More cause for anxiety: Would they be kind?

(Elementary school had had its share of monsters, including some who not only believed in but took pleasure in corporal punishment.) And besides the usual classes, like English and math, there'd be new ones, like phys ed, for which I needed a special uniform.

I'd be taking a language class—French—for the first time. I'd be taking instrumental music. I'd be taking art. *The world was opening up to me.* It was all a bit overwhelming.

I remember the wistful feeling that sometimes came over me in the days leading up to graduation and which gave the day itself such poignancy.

The only school I'd ever known, that I'd attended all those years—as far back as I could recall—everything that had happened there, years of life and learning, work and play—

And now I'd never see elementary school again!

I remember an assignment from that first year of junior high: Write an essay describing an important day in your life. Tell why the day was important to you then and how you feel about it now.

*It was a happy day, it was a sad day, it was a beginning, it was an end, it was a new world beckoning, it was an old world lost to time.*

It was me, obviously under the giddy spell of Dickens.

Not all of us would be going to the same junior high. I knew I'd never see some of my classmates again. Or my teachers, or the principal, or the cafeteria ladies, or the janitor, a humble, kindly Sicilian immigrant whose love of children was so intense it illumined her like an aureole.

I remember how I popped awake that morning, hours before it was time to get up. Saw the sun rise for the first time in my life. Saw the pale light on the dress that my mother had made me—the prettiest dress I'd ever owned—now hanging on the back of the bedroom door: light-blue cotton voile, full skirt, cap sleeves, white midriff embroidered with flowers. To be worn with a new pair of white anklet socks and new white patent leather Mary Janes. (A look that, only a year later, when I was twelve, would have been greeted with nothing but derision.)

I remember how my excitement grew with each fitting. Standing on a chair, my mother talking through the pins she held in her mouth—somehow

she could do that without dropping or swallowing them. Another image of her: evenings in a rocking chair, bent over her embroidery—like a scene from a hundred years before. And really, it was from her, wasn't it, that I took in, early on, how much of life is shaped by sadness for what's left behind. Hers was the abiding nostalgia of the immigrant, one who'd come of age in wartime and for whom leaving home had been experienced as a mortal injury.

I remember sitting on a rock in the middle of a stream one hot summer day. Girl Scout camp. On a hike, we had stopped to rest. I remember dipping a hand in the cold water and how it came to me—I don't know whether it was something I'd heard before or something I'd arrived at just then on my own—that this was a way of describing time: a stream flowing swiftly along; it goes in one direction, it cannot be seized or stopped. And I remember finally getting why people (grown-ups) were forever pointing out how quickly time passed, which had up till then seemed so plainly false to me (always happier at school than when stuck at home, I found summers endless), and why my mother often said things like *Sunday already!* and *I can't believe it's 1964!* And this I connected with something else she said all the time, whenever we ran into someone we hadn't seen in a while. No sooner was that person out of earshot than she'd say, *My God, he (or she) got so old!*

Sitting on the rock that day, my hand starting to ache from the cold water, but I left it there because of the feeling I had, of being on the brink of some Idea, not wanting to lose focus.

*Time* passing was *life* passing, I thought. It was *life* that flowed swiftly along in one direction and could not be seized or stopped. And this was something that weighed on grown-ups, an inexorable force that they feared. *My* life, like everyone else's, was passing, too—I got that. But I was still a child, I knew nothing of that fear. I knew only the excitement of my own mind turning over. I felt immensely proud.

*I'm going to be a poet.*

I remember how much I wanted to share this startling revelation—to tell all about the very strange thing that had just happened to me sitting there on the rock in the stream—but with whom? Not the girls sunning themselves on

other rocks, or on the grassy banks, and who, at someone's suggestion, had just launched into "Go Tell It on the Mountain," a favorite troop song. I knew that if I tried to explain to them what had happened I would only sound weird. It wasn't a scout thing. It was a thing that belonged to Introvert Me. Scout Me was Extrovert Me. I knew the distinction, if not yet the words.

Our leaders were forever hammering us about the need to look outside ourselves. *Do a good turn daily* was our slogan; our promise, *To help people at all times*. Self-reliance was encouraged, but not introspection (navel-gazing, *ugh*). Not self-expression.

I pulled my numb hand from the water and joined in the song.

I remember earning Girl Scout badges in first aid, horseback riding, weather watching, and camping. There was no such thing as a scribe badge, for writing, as there is now. Good God, there's even a badge for novel writing.

"Purpose: When I've earned this badge, I'll know what it takes to write a great novel and I'll have written at least 20 pages of my own. Step 1: Deconstruct a novel. Step 2: Create great characters. Step 3: Develop a plot. Step 4: Write at least 20 pages. Step 5: Edit your pages."

Easy peasy.

. . .

I REMEMBER how we marched into the auditorium, just as we always did for assembly, single file through two separate doors, boys on the left, girls on the right, Mr. Quin playing "Pomp and Circumstance" on the piano.

We had to line up according to height. Ahead of me was Emma, ahead of Emma was Diane, and first in line was a girl whose name I forget (along with what country she was from), though I can see her so well. A tiny thing—stunted, it was said, from early-childhood illness or malnutrition. Tiny cross at her throat, tiny rings in her tiny pierced ears. In her pink organza dress with its giant bow at the back, a doll come to life. Half the size of those toward the end of the line.

I remember the last girl of all—the distinction most likely an agony to her—as big as the last boy, as big as some of the mothers and fathers watching us from their seats in the auditorium.

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HERE ARE the most recent statistics I could find for my elementary school, from the National Center for Education Statistics and the New York City Department of Education:

Gender: 51% male, 49% female  
Minority enrollment: 96%  
Overall New York State test ranking: 4,157 out of 4,228 schools  
Math Test Scores proficiency: 14%  
Reading/Language Arts Test Scores proficiency: 14%  
Eligible for free lunch: 93%

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I DIDN'T become a poet after all.

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*I REMEMBER, I remember.* O beautiful refrain.





If you could ask a dog one question, what would it be?

We could hear but not see each other, lying as we were on two perpendicularly arranged sofas, our heads at the right angle. It was the first time we'd ever been in the living room together. Eureka was there, too, perched on the coffee table, eyeing us quizzically, the unusualness of the situation not lost on him.

Shortly before, in the kitchen, we were eating the ice cream sundaes we'd started craving after smoking a joint. Endless discussion about whether honey or maple syrup would go better with the caramel oat milk ice cream, bananas, and walnuts. Agreed that chocolate syrup would have been best of all, but we didn't have any.

And for Eureka: bananas and walnuts with no ice cream. (Another thing that was not lost on him, but it was for his own good.)

But wait—why was it called a sundae?

For Sunday, I was pretty sure. But why was it spelled with an *e*?

Vetch pulled out his phone. A disputed history, apparently, with several different American towns claiming to have been where the dessert was born. Called a sundae either because it was first created on a Sunday, or as an alternative in response to an Illinois blue law that prohibited the sale of ice cream *sodas* on Sunday, or because its inventor was a Mr. Sonntag (*Sunday*, in German) who named it after himself.

As for the changed spelling: possibly because some people objected to a dessert dish being named after the Sabbath.

We wanted to go up to the roof when we finished eating, but it was a day of steady, drenching rain.

New search: Why “cats and dogs”?

Another uncertain origin, most likely jocular. Elsewhere, in other lands, in other tongues, it rained dog shit or cow piss, ropes, axes, crowbars, snakes,

lizards, toads, frogs, shoemakers or shoemakers' apprentices, old women, old women with clubs, old women with sticks, husbands.

The last in particular puzzled me until I realized it wasn't for something in abundance (as in the song "It's Raining Men"), but for beatings (like those old women with their sticks and clubs).

The usually perfectly comfortable high kitchen chairs weren't so comfortable when you were stoned. Even worse, when you were stoned and had just eaten too much. Downright precarious when you were rocking with laughter.

I've got an idea, said Vetch. You want to do something kinky? Let's go sit in the living room.

So completely lost was our sense of time, it was like changing terminals in an airport.

If he could ask a dog one question, said Vetch, it would be: Why do you love people so much?

But you know the answer to that already, I said. *Because that's the way you bred us.*

Okay, what would you ask?

I had no idea. The question was meaningless, I said. Whatever answer the dog came up with would only be coming from the same place as the question. Which was not from the dog, I said.

I don't follow.

The question presumes the possibility of an answer coming from the dog's consciousness, I said, when in fact it would be coming from a human consciousness—mine—that being the only option.

After an eternity Vetch said, I don't understand.

Understand what? I said, paddling back to my place in the dialogue.

We started over.

If I could ask a dog one question, it would be: If I can ask you *one* question, why can't I ask you *more* than one?

That's not playing the game, said Vetch. That's being cute.

Never mind. I'm not good at thought experiments. I find them frustrating. Have you ever had a job interview where you were asked, If you were an

animal, what kind would you be?

No, said Vetch. I've never had a job interview.

Well, it happens. You have to say what kind of animal you'd be and explain why. And apparently most people say dog.

Really?

Mm-hmm. But according to career coaches, that's not a good answer.

Why not?

You don't want to say what most people say. You want to stand out.

So you're supposed to lie?

I guess.

And what would be a good answer? What kind of animal?

As I recall, saying you'd be a lion or an elephant was recommended—and you should never say snake, even if it's true.

We giggled ourselves weak at the thought of someone saying snake. But, we reasoned, a snaky person would never say they'd be a snake.

I don't get it, said Vetch. Someone tells me if they were an animal they'd be the king of the jungle, and I think, This person is a major narcissist, an egomaniac. Do I want to hire someone like that?

I can't imagine a woman saying, I'd be a lion, I said. Or an elephant, for that matter. I can't imagine any woman, no matter how much she loved and respected elephants, saying she'd be an elephant.

What about a bird? Would that be considered a good answer? A really smart bird, like Eureka here?

Somehow I don't think "I'd be a parrot" would go over well. Maybe some other kind of bird, though. A hawk or an eagle—or a wise old owl? Of course, the best workers in the world are insects, like bees and ants. But how would it sound to say you'd be an insect?

Yeah, that's almost as bad as snake.

I said, Once, when I was on the train, I listened to the woman sitting next to me talking on the phone, sizing up someone she'd just interviewed for a job, and she sniffed, This one's a box checker, not a problem solver. And I almost blurted out, How could you know that just from an interview?

So how would you answer the question? asked Vetch.

About the animal? I told you, I'm not good at that kind of thing. I don't have an answer.

I don't know what kind of animal I'd be, either, said Vetch. But what happens if you say that to the interviewer?

Kiss that job goodbye, I guess.

Probably for the best.

And so it went, the two of us idling another lockdown day away while the rain poured down like all those things aforementioned.



Vetch was the first person I knew who started microdosing psilocybin. (I have since met more and more people who do.) He'd been prescribed various psychotropic medications since childhood, he said, and nothing had worked especially well. Or something might work for a while and then it stopped working. But weed and psilocybin had done wonders, he said; they could always be counted on.

I thought of Olaf and the drug therapy he'd developed to help Lily and other young women.

With the psilocybin, even just a little can take the edge off and keep you out of Hell's basement, Vetch said.

I think it was his saying "Hell's basement" that convinced me, I told Violet. Plus it's supposed to help writer's block. And it's not like it's addictive.

Sounds like the name of a band, said Violet. Who also saw fit to remind me: anything that gets you high can be addictive.

Speaking of which, Vetch had just shown me a video of opium-addicted wild parrots ripping apart an Indian farmer's poppy field.

Now that we were either smoking weed or microdosing every day, Vetch and I had regular conversations. They tended to start off trivially when we were high and to wax increasingly serious as we came down.

One day I asked about his girlfriend, and he told me what I'd already guessed: they were breaking up. He accused her of wanting to break up with him for some time, but not wanting to take responsibility for it. (I'm not sure what he meant by "some time"; they'd only been together for eight months. But that was the longest he'd ever been with anyone, he said. Though he never showed me a photo of her, I always pictured a great beauty, out of that prejudice—albeit contradicted by reality—that says a man with his looks would never be with anyone less than ravishing.)

She won't admit it, he said, but she's afraid to commit to someone who's been in the loony bin. (He always called it that: the loony bin.) And I get it, he said, I really do. She should say it, though. She should be honest, he said. But see, that would make her feel too guilty. So instead she keeps pretending that she doesn't believe I really care about her. When I ask her what makes her believe this obviously untrue thing, she gets all vague, he said. Like, sometimes when she talks to me, she says she can tell I'm not really listening. Apparently I get this look in my eyes that says I'm not listening. And maybe it's true, sometimes I'm not, maybe sometimes I get distracted—she knows I have a history of ADHD—but that's not exactly proof that I don't care, is it?

I have to admit, when Vetch talked like this, I sometimes felt a little seasick.

Anyway, he said, it's for the best. She can do better than me, that's for sure. It's easy for me to see her happily married to some normal guy. She's pretty normal herself, which is I guess a big reason I was attracted to her. In fact, there were times when it helped me, when her being so normal made me feel I must be, too—or at least normal enough.

Which wasn't how he felt about himself most of the time, he said.

Anyway, it's for the best, he said again. And, after a long pause: I hope she has a good life. She deserves it.

He swallowed then and I felt the pain in my own throat.

I asked him why he thought it was his psychiatric history that made her want to break up with him, and he said it was because she never asked him about it, and the few times he'd even mentioned it she immediately changed the subject.

It was like I was telling her I'd been in jail, he said. She just didn't want to know. And then I made the mistake of telling her something one of the doctors told me just before I was discharged. He said there was a chance that I'd find myself back there again—maybe even more than once—because I had a certain vulnerability, and that I should always be aware of that and try to avoid possible triggers.

*(How did I know that someday the bell jar wouldn't descend again?)*

Yeah, he said, I can see her years from now, married with kids. But me, when I try to imagine myself like that, a husband? Oh my God, a father? Well, that's just it, I can't imagine it. I don't think I'll ever be ready to be with anyone.

I had to object, needless to say. I had to state the obvious: he was still so young, far too young to be thinking like this, to be coming to any sweeping conclusions about his life.

How come you never got married?

Exactly what I was hoping he would not ask. I wasn't cut out for it, was all I would say.

Well, that's what I'm saying, too. I don't think I am, either.

But you can't know that at your age, I insisted.

When did you know?

Oh, I'm not sure. (Early on, it was. After the first couple of relationships that didn't work out. Still, I didn't want to give up—every man is different, after all, and I didn't have a type. I kept choosing men who were radically different from one another, but in the end they might as well have been the same.)

I just wasn't cut out for it, I said. I just couldn't make it work.

It's funny, he said. People have always commented on my parents' marriage. My whole life I heard people say they envied my parents because of their happy marriage. But I don't feel anything like that. When I look at them I know I wouldn't want that—what they have.

Why? I asked, though even without having met them I was sure I would not envy them in the slightest.

I think it's bad the way they always think alike. Or at least so they say. Like, if they weren't in total lockstep the whole relationship would fall apart. Even my therapist says there's something wrong with a couple that never fights.

Maybe you're exaggerating, I said. Maybe your parents disagreed about lots of things, but never in front of their child.

All I know is that they always side with each other, he said. I can't remember a single time when one of them sided with me. That's why I

always wanted a brother or sister. So I'd have some kind of ally. So it wasn't always me against them.

One day he told me what had happened to make his parents throw him out of the house.

My mother's big thing is poetry, he said. She always says poetry is what helps her get through life. Though if you ask me, it's only made her life harder.

When I was growing up, he said, whenever we had company she would read some of her poems out loud. Every dinner party, every holiday, there'd be a reading, he said, and she always acted like it was a special treat for everyone, like she was doing it for them and not for herself.

I felt embarrassed for her, he said. My father never tried to stop her, but he didn't look too happy while she was reading, and neither did other people. As soon as she finished, though, he'd start to clap, really loud, so that everyone else would take the hint. And usually no one had anything to say afterward, except maybe, Oh, that was beautiful, but in a way you could tell they were just being polite. And my mother would be disappointed. Over and over this happened, and I kept wondering why she kept doing it. But it was like some crazy masochistic compulsion. She just couldn't stop herself.

Sometimes, after everyone had gone home, she'd bitch about their lack of appreciation. I should have known none of them would get it, she'd say. Like: What do those commoners know about poetry! Poetry was this sacred thing for her, and if you loved poetry you were a superior person.

She read poetry for a few hours every day, Vetch said. Books by the poets she loved best she reread every year.

I asked him who were these poets his mother loved best, but he couldn't name one.

She'd had some of her own poems published, he said, but that wasn't very satisfying, not only because it was a tiny fraction of what she wrote, but because it seemed the journals that published her weren't the ones she esteemed.

I asked him which journals had published her work and he couldn't tell me that, either.



She was always sending poems out and they were always being rejected, said Vetch. I remember once, when I asked her why she didn't give up, she said, I don't write to get published. If I never got published at all, I'd still write. Besides, I know my best stuff is as good as what gets printed out there.

Her day job was writing, too. She wrote press releases and other literature for an Indigenous arts museum, and she did grant writing for various nonprofit foundations.

That was bread, she said, according to Vetch, and the poetry was roses.

I've never been interested in poetry, hers or anyone else's, said Vetch. Which wasn't an issue when I was little but started to bother her later. My dad kept trying to tell me I should be more supportive, that she didn't get a lot of encouragement out in the world, because poetry was a hard competitive business, and she didn't have the right literary connections, et cetera.

I'm no judge, said Vetch. But one time I asked my dad about it. I asked him what he thought of her poems, and he said he was no judge, either, most poetry he didn't even understand, but from what he could tell she definitely had a way with words. Not that she was a pro, his father said, not like the big poets she admired, of course. But anyone could see she had talent. So maybe somewhere in between a pro and an amateur, his father said. Better than average, he meant.

But that wasn't the point, Vetch said his father said. The point was that writing poetry was a very meaningful part of his mother's life, she put so much into it, and she deserved more attention.

I knew there was a flaw in his logic, said Vetch. But I also knew that he knew it, too, so I dropped it. In fact, I forgot all about that conversation.

Until the big fight.

His parents became upset when they realized he wasn't attending classes online as he was required to. What they didn't know was that he'd stopped attending classes even before the lockdown. He'd already given up on school, he told me. I was so sick of it, I couldn't bring myself to care about finishing.

In fact, he'd never been happy in college, he said; he'd never felt like he fit in there.

He'd had a lot of trouble deciding on a major, he went on. At first he thought it might be anthropology, but he didn't do well in his introductory courses and he'd ended up in political science. This was partly due to the influence of his grandfather the diplomat, who told interesting stories about working in the foreign service and who convinced Vetch he, too, might be cut out for a government career. For a while Vetch thought he could see a path for himself; he homed in on the possibility of some sort of job in intelligence. He could see how that might have been awesome, he said. But he'd since soured on the idea of working for the government—or any other institution, for that matter.

The whole system is fucked, he said. Just look at what a shit job they've done with the pandemic. Everything—it's all just one big cesspool. There's really nothing you can do without dirtying your hands. And if he was honest, he had to admit there wasn't any kind of work he felt enthusiastic about. And he sure as hell didn't want to go to grad school. He didn't care about making money. And what could he do that wouldn't just cement his identity as a privileged white cisgender hetero male? Wasn't any promising opportunity available to him something he was morally obliged to leave open for someone from some historically marginalized group?

And how was anyone supposed to make long-term plans anyway? How were you supposed to think about your future at all, when the fate of the earth itself was so uncertain?

It was here that I wished that we—or at least I—weren't still high.

Not knowing where to begin, I simply asked him what *did* he want?

It scares me, he said, but the truth is I don't really want anything—not badly, anyway, not anything that I could actually have. Like, it scares me how so much of the time I don't seem to feel anything. I guess I wish I could've been born in a time when everything and everyone wasn't so fucked up.

My parents act like I'm the only one who's fucked up, he said, but you know, maybe not everyone ends up in the loony bin, but why is everyone I know either on prescription meds or self-medicating with one legal or illegal substance or another? And I can't remember when this wasn't true.

Even his girlfriend, he said. Just because she was normal didn't mean she didn't need Xanax. And her doctor had started her on that back in high school.

Sophomore year I took this course, he said: The American Novel Since World War II. We read *On the Road*—I read it twice, I liked it so much. Now, there's something I'd like to be able to have. That kind of freedom, he said. To be able to hit the road like that, no baggage, no plan, just stick out your thumb. Or hop a bus, ride all the way cross-country. Meeting all these different types. How cool that must have been.

(It made me wonder: Why had things changed so? Hitchhiking was still legal in most of the United States—why had it become so rare? Partly, I knew, because of law enforcement's campaign to discourage it by broadcasting how dangerous it was, especially for women, though in fact it never was particularly dangerous, not even for women. At some point any American needing a ride began to look suspect: Why didn't that person have a car? But what a great thing it would be to bring hitchhiking back. Fewer cars on the road: Who wouldn't want that? Not going to happen, though. Not in a society where fear of strangers is only growing. There was still the Greyhound, of course, but ride one today and you'll see: no one's getting to know a stranger, no one's even looking out the window, everyone's on a device.

An "I remember" of Brainard's that's also one of mine: There's always one soldier on every bus.

About a year after this conversation with Vetch, when it's become possible to go out to eat in a restaurant again, I'll be having dinner with a female friend. Toward the end of the meal, our waiter, a young woman, will approach our table with a rueful expression and say, I can't tell you how jealous it makes me, seeing you sitting together here all this time, talking to each other. My friends and I, whenever we're together, everyone has their phone out.)

Vetch: The professor for that course told us it was still the same a decade after *On the Road*, that when he was in college the names California and Colorado were synonymous with Paradise, and the dream of traveling out

west was at its peak. During the sixties, he himself had made that cross-country trip several times, he told us. The highways were full of people holding signs saying Denver or San Francisco or Mexico City, the professor said. Usually a single person, but sometimes a couple, maybe even a family hitching together. Once, a dog all by itself with a sign around its neck saying *Anywhere*.

A freedom we never should have let slip away, lamented the professor of Vetch's class. After graduation, he'd hitched all over Europe, too, he said, with hardly any cash and of course no credit cards. It was all just part of being young, it was all you needed back then, the professor told the class: to be young. You didn't need money. You needed friends, and it was always much easier to make friends when you were young, he said, and back then making friends with all kinds of people was easier than it is today.

(Here I couldn't help thinking of lines spoken by a character played by Burt Lancaster in the film *Atlantic City*. "The Atlantic Ocean was something then. Yes, you should've seen the Atlantic Ocean in those days.")

And, as with the friendships of the book's characters, who were based on Jack Kerouac and his friends in real life, those were the most intense and significant friendships of the professor's own life, those road trips some of the best times he'd ever known, and he thought it would always be like that, he told Vetch's class. He thought there'd always be the open road, there'd always be hitchhikers and drivers happy to pick them up, and there'd always be California, of course (or at least until the Big One, which no one seemed to seriously worry about), and California would always be worth the trip, no matter how long or tough, California of the magnificent mountains and beaches and mind-blowing Pacific sunsets and crazy, friendly, beautiful people. And now, said the professor, as if it wasn't heartbreaking enough what overpopulation and overdevelopment had done, there were year-round wildfires and drought threatening utter devastation.

I asked Vetch what he'd thought of this nostalgic old professor, and he said he guessed he was all right, but that he hadn't really liked the course. He'd never been a big reader, Vetch said, and unlike the Kerouac, he couldn't get into most of the other books on the reading list.

I asked him what other books had been on the reading list, but he couldn't remember.

He did remember some favorite bits from *On the Road*. Where Sal talks about waking up in a hotel somewhere and not knowing who he is: "I wasn't scared; I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost."

I wake up feeling like that all the time, Vetch said. Only, I do feel scared.

"Nothing behind me, everything ahead of me, as is ever so on the road"—everyone remembers that.

And: "The only people for me are the mad ones . . ."

I remember a postcard, received one day in 1970: a scene from some national park, sent by someone who'd dropped out of college in his first year. On the back, a borrowing from Kerouac: "I am halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future." Then: "Baby, are you sorry yet that you didn't come along?"

Same era. Stranded in downtown Manhattan without enough money for a subway token to get home, about to panhandle, when I see a man with a ponytail at the wheel of a white Bonneville convertible stopped at a light. Guitar on the backseat. The Doors on the radio. As we're driving uptown, I learn that tomorrow he's taking that car to New Mexico. Did I want to go along? And I can say for certain that, if there hadn't been another man at home waiting for me, I would have gone.

But right now it feels as if none of this could really have happened, that I must be making it all up.

. . .

VETCH: So there we were, the three of us, arguing about my future. And my mother was putting me down, saying I was just being lazy, cutting those stupid Zoom classes, and how I was going to ruin my life. Anyone without a college degree was hopeless, she said. You couldn't get anywhere without a degree, and as a dropout I'd be branded a loser, someone who was too dumb to finish school, and no one would respect me, and blah blah blah.

And I said she was wrong. I said what she said just wasn't true. I could name some brilliant guys who'd never finished school. Maybe she heard of Bill Gates? Mark Zuckerberg? Steve Jobs? Who just happened to be some of the smartest and most successful people that ever lived?

And it wasn't like I was comparing myself to those guys, said Vetch. I mean, I would never do that. But that's what she chose to think, and she laughed. And she said, But that's the whole problem! You're not that smart! You're not anything like those men, you just *think* you are. And that's when I said—I can't remember exactly what I said, but something about her not being a great poet, but just someone who *thinks* they are, and I repeated what my father said, about her not being a pro.

And I guess that was the worst thing I could've done, said Vetch, because they were both as mad at me as I've ever seen them. And she was really mad at my father, too. Which never happens. After that, things were too ugly in that house for me to stay. If they hadn't asked me to leave, I'd have left anyway.

A long silence passed. Finally Vetch spoke again. Do you think it was so bad, what I said?

It was mean, I said. It was really mean. So, yeah, I'd say it was bad.

And what about what she said to me?

I sighed. Also mean, I said. Also bad.

I was afraid he was going to ask me who I thought was right, but he changed the subject then, and only later did I remember the memoir Violet had mentioned, in which Vetch's mother had described what it had been like raising him. I was sure he didn't know anything about it.



Why novels? Vetch wanted to know. Why not poetry?

I told him Faulkner's supposition: every novelist was a writer who began by wanting to write poetry but failed, then tried to write short stories and failed, and so finally turned to writing novels.

An idea Vetch had trouble wrapping his head around.

You're saying poetry is harder to write than stories, and stories are harder to write than novels.

Yes. Or: more people are capable of writing novels than are capable of writing poems or stories, which are more difficult forms.

How can that be, when novels are the longest and must take the most time to write?

It's not about length. It's not about time.

Does that mean a long novel is easier to write than a short one?

Um, no. But, to borrow from a certain critic, in almost every long book I read I see a short one shirking its job.

. . .

ASKED TO name the most important life experience for artistic success, a Nobel laureate said, Failure.

"Most failures come too easily" was the unusual opinion of R. P. Blackmur. "A genuine failure comes hard and slow, and, as in a tragedy, is only fully realized at the end."

Blackmur believed that his own life, which brought him fame as perhaps America's most brilliant literary critic and a revered Princeton professor, had succeeded in being a genuine failure. (Yet another prodigy who not only didn't go to college but never even finished high school, having been expelled at the age of fourteen after some confrontation with the headmaster.)

I like the poet who included in her acknowledgments her thanks to the National Endowment for the Arts and to the Guggenheim Foundation, “whose rejections prompted me to finish this book.”

Also Brian Moore’s idea that, while success makes you something that you weren’t before, failure makes you “a more intense distillation” of who you are.

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WHEN YOU tell someone you’re having trouble writing, why does no one ever say, So stop writing?

Imagine Editor saying: It doesn’t have to be perfect.

“It is bound to be very imperfect,” Virginia Woolf told her diary as she began work on a new novel. Enthusiastic, nevertheless.

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WITH THE LOCKDOWN, people started to think about what it meant that the work they did was deemed not essential. Some confessed to finding it a little deflating. Many were prompted to reconsider the work they did, to contemplate finding new work, or at least quitting their current job—just as many students were quitting college. Others planned to keep their job, but vowed in the future to take it less seriously.

For writers, the distinction was easy. Only journalists are essential.

I hear protests—a chorus quoting the good poet on men dying miserably for lack of what is to be found in “despised poems.” But if everyone except journalists stopped writing, we’d still have a vast treasure of fiction and poetry to fall back on. Silence all the journalists and we’d have the end of human rights. Every authoritarian political leader knows this well, which is why it’s the journalists who have to worry about being murdered. As, according to the annual report of the Committee to Protect Journalists, in the years since 1992 more than two thousand of them were.



And of course the target isn't always a journalist. Thinking of Salman Rushdie.

But images of harrowed health care workers made it hard to see inventing stories about made-up people as a heroic profession.

"Has anyone else noticed how strange the world is becoming?" asked Salman Rushdie in a speech at the PEN America Literary Gala in 2004.

We are now a world that is defined by continuous disaster. And Beckett was right. Eloquence about disaster will not do.

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FROM THE BEGINNING, pandemic humor was prolific and a blessing; for even more than hope, humor helps us to endure. Not forgetting the unintentionally comic. People attempting to make face masks out of whatever they had to hand: panty liners, bra cups, cone party hats, cabbage leaves. The doubly cursed family quarantined along with a bad infestation of bedbugs.

On the other hand, it grew tiresome, hearing so many quote Brecht: "In the dark times / Will there also be singing? / There will also be singing. / Of the dark times."

The irony being that I've now gone and done it myself.

Quoting Brecht, a literary organization hosts a Zoom talk: *What kind of singing do you believe matters most in our own dark times? And is there still a place for fiction?*

Growing consensus: The traditional novel has lost its place as the major genre of our time. It may not be dead yet, but it will not long abide. No matter how well done, it seems to lack urgency. No matter how imaginative, it seems to lack originality. While still a powerful means of portraying human character and human experience, somehow, more and more, fictional storytelling is coming across as beside the point. More and more writers are having difficulty quieting a voice that says, *Why are you making things up?*

Conclusion: Perhaps what is wanted in our own dark anti-truth times, with all our blatant hypocrisy and the growing use of story as a means to distort

and obscure reality, is a literature of personal history and reflection: direct, authentic, scrupulous about fact.

Perhaps also relevant: the wish to avoid accusations of cultural appropriation, of not staying in one's lane.

On a literary panel once, Ian Frazier gave his reason for not reading novels: "When you read a novel it begins, Johnny was walking down the street, and all I can think of is, no he wasn't."

Art that takes us away from daily life, that takes us to another state, was the vision of the Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami. "The time for Scheherazade and the King—the storytelling time—is over."



Vetch is gone. He has moved in with two roommates who needed a third to share their loft in Long Island City. He also has a job. A neighborhood restaurant flooded with take-out and delivery orders found itself with so many workers out sick, the owner hired him over the phone before even meeting him.

I could've told him if I were an animal I'd be a sloth and he still would've hired me, Vetch said.

Not a big paycheck, but he still had most of the money his father had deposited in his checking account at the beginning of the semester, and he was still authorized to use one of his parents' credit cards.

They'd never cut me off, he said. (Cold. Unthankful.) They'd be too scared of what I might do. (Shameless.)

He was taking Eureka with him. It hadn't been hard to get Iris to agree to this, he said. All he had to do was ask. She knew how well he and Eureka had always gotten along, and now she felt sorry for Vetch. Falling out with his parents, breaking up with his girlfriend—she understood how much he needed someone to care for. And at the moment all her attention was on her new baby, who'd been born prematurely and had only just been brought home from the NICU.

Nobody asked me. Nobody had discussed any of this with me.

He was going to let Eureka's wings grow out, he said. He'd found a video online that showed how it was possible to teach a bird whose wings had always been clipped to fly. This could be done safely indoors because the loft was huge—a former factory floor—with very little furniture. Outdoors, of course, Eureka would always have to be harnessed. But if all went well, he'd never have his wings clipped again.

That's wonderful, I said, my heart breaking.

And watched them go: out of my life, out of my novel.

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BEFORE THE doctor staying in my apartment left to return to Oregon, she and I met briefly in Union Square Park. The pandemic was far from over, she said. Most likely it would be with us, in some form or other, for years to come. She was optimistic that a vaccine would be available even sooner than had been hoped, she said, but not so optimistic about getting people to accept it.

If everyone on the planet had agreed to wear a mask and keep six feet apart from one another for a given period of time—and a short time at that—Covid wouldn't have had a chance, she said. Now it's too late, and it's the most vulnerable among us who don't have a chance.

Years from now, the doctor said, I believe people will look back on all this and see it as yet another example of human barbarism. (Note the hopeful assumption that our descendants will be more humane than we are.)

Doctors are used to seeing people behave irrationally, she said. In the face of illness, pain, and death—what do you expect?—irrational behavior is perfectly natural. And we're used to dealing with denial, too, for the same reason. But what's so ominous is seeing this behavior on a massive scale. It's like the whole world woke up one day and took a giant stupid pill.

I've always known how foolish human beings can be, the doctor said, and there've been anti-vaccination groups since there've been vaccines. But I must say, I never thought I was living in a time so perverse, among so many people so deranged, that, faced with a choice of killing the virus or killing Dr. Fauci, they'd kill Dr. Fauci.

What the pandemic had taught her: in spite of the spectacular advances in science and technology that are one of the greatest benefits of living in our day, our ability to solve the existential problems now facing the world was something she no longer had faith in.

I had seen it before: the anger, the exhaustion, the thousand-yard stare. Like those combat veterans of other wars, she had stories to tell—big ones—but for her, as for them, only someone who'd been through it, too, would understand; would be worth talking to.

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“It is bound to be very imperfect. But I think it possible that I have got my statues against the sky.”

It was *The Waves* Woolf was talking about. A year earlier, when she first began planning the novel, she wrote: “Autobiography it might be called.”

Her most ambitious novel yet. Written “to a rhythm not to a plot.” (And for which, like her friend T. S. Eliot, she drew inspiration from listening to late Beethoven.)

For her next major novel (in between came *Flush*, a mock biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s cocker spaniel), she had an even higher aspiration: to invent a new form. The essay-novel. Chapters of fiction alternating with nonfiction chapters, “a terrific affair” that would include, well, everything: “satire, comedy, poetry, narrative . . . And there are to be millions of ideas but no preaching—history, politics, feminism, art, literature—in short a summing up of all I know, feel, laugh at, despise, like, admire hate & so on.”

An experiment that failed, however. In the end, the work in progress had to be split into two separate books: *Three Guineas*, a polemic on the connections among patriarchal society, fascism, war, and the oppression of women; and a novel, *The Years*, the history of a family called Pargiter from 1880 to the “Present Day” of the 1930s.

“It was an uncertain spring.”

Though a big bestseller, and initially more popular than any of her previous books (imagine, if you can: even an Armed Services Edition issued for the reading pleasure of American soldiers during World War II), it was not a great novel. It was not even a very good novel, though she had worked harder on it than on any other book thus far, and finishing it brought her to the edge of breakdown. When she gave the manuscript to her husband—always her first, most important, and most trusted reader—out of fear of what his honest opinion might do to her in such a vulnerable state, he lied.

More than half a century after *The Years* appeared, another writer would tell her diary about her own idea for a wildly ambitious literary project:

“Tonight, I know I have to write ‘the story of a woman’ over time and History.” About twenty years later, Annie Ernaux published a personal narrative spanning the period between 1941—the year after she was born, the same year that Woolf died—and what was then the present day, 2006: the autobiography of a woman that was also a kind of collective autobiography of her generation.

Among Ernaux’s inspirations were the “I remembers” of Georges Perec.

She too would call her book *The Years*.

One of Gallimard’s *Collection Blanche*.

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(I HAD forgotten that Woolf once wrote a story about a woman and a parrot. The woman, an old widow named Mrs. Gage, is “in spite of her poverty . . . devoted to animals, and often went short herself rather than stint her dog of his bone.” The parrot, James, whose language is described as “very extreme,” helps Mrs. Gage in a moment of great need. A fable about “the reward of kindness to animals,” it had been commissioned by her two young nephews for their daily family newspaper. Although they published it, they did so only not to hurt her feelings. A moral tale in the Victorian manner was not at all what they’d hoped for, and both thought it was terrible.)

• • •

I LIKE the way a translator of Proust straightened us out about *In Search of Lost Time*: not autobiography wearing a thin disguise of fiction but, rather, the opposite—fiction in the guise of autobiography.

(Disconcerted as always to recall that the man who gave the world its most sublime novel was someone who, according to his biographer, enjoyed jerking off to the squeals of live rats being pierced with hat pins.)

Dueling mentors. Why not say what happened? said the first. But the second one scoffed: That’s too easy. “This is *not* a subject: one delicate sensibility confronting the slimy, heartless, disappointing world. Go get

yourself an agon.” Each of them warned me that the other one secretly wanted me to fail.

“Write, live what happens,” advised Christopher Isherwood. “Life is too sacred for invention—though we may lie about it at times, to heighten it.”

I like Elizabeth Bishop’s grumble regarding poets who write what happened: “You wish they’d keep some of these things to themselves.”

There once was a poet who read to an audience a poem about a brother’s death. After the reading, a woman came up to the poet to say how meaningful the poem had been for her, for she, too, had lost a brother. When the poet told her that in fact he didn’t have a brother, the woman was outraged. He might as well have slapped her in the face.

• • •

ONCE BACK in my own apartment I see my neighbors again, or at least the half of them who have not fled the city. Next door for a while lived a young woman who used to practice the violin. She was from somewhere abroad and now she is gone and I cannot say how much I miss hearing her play, however imperfectly.

The elderly man who lives alone upstairs has survived the virus and the lockdown. For months to come, he will be diligent about always wearing a mask. He will be among the first to get vaccinated. When, early one morning, he takes the gun from a safe in his apartment and shoots himself, I want to know: Did he plan it? Did he stay up all night, wavering? Or did he just wake up that day and think: Now.

• • •

FACING THE mortifying fact that I spent all that time with this troubled young person who was clearly in dire need of guidance, and all I could think to do was get stoned with him.

Not to mention collaborating in breaking the law, reminds Violet.

One day when we were lying on our separate sofas and a long period of silence had gone by, I sat up and saw that he had fallen asleep. Thought of Psyche: stealing up to a dark bed, dagger in hand, shining a lamp on the sleeping body of what she has been deceived into believing is a monster serpent that she is meant to kill, and finding Eros.

Proud of myself for having resisted the temptation to show him photographs of myself when I was his age.

It must be an effect of all those hours of drug-enhanced conversation that even now sometimes I find myself talking to him. But when I do, he is never “Vetch.” Always his real name. His sweet name.

But how could any of this have really happened? I must be making it up.

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REQUEST FROM a book club moderator for a reader’s guide to one of my books. Sample questions helpfully included.

Which character do you find most sympathetic, and why?

In what way do the novel’s themes reflect your own experiences and values?

Which of the characters would you like most to have a coffee with? How do you imagine your conversation with that person would go?

Imagine that you are the main character: How would you have behaved differently from her/him/them?

If you could ask the author one question, what would it be?

I give it a go:

Which of the characters in the book would you like most to go to bed with? How do you imagine sex with that person would be?

Rewrite the novel in your own words. Explain why your version is superior.

Draw a mustache on the author photo. Would you have liked the book better if it had been written by a man?

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I SOMETIMES remember a time when I was around Vetch's age and a new boyfriend and I were walking down the street. We came to a densely crowded corner and, as the light changed, an old woman, panicked by all the rushing and jostling around her, caught my eye and cried, Miss! Miss! Please help me, miss!

When I'd escorted her safely across and on her way, my boyfriend said, See how, out of all the people she could have asked, she turned to you.

Proof, for him—proof that I guess he was seeking—that I must be a kind person.

Now sometimes when I'm out by myself, in this neighborhood swarming with college students, I remember that time, and I glance into one young face after another. *Miss! Miss! Please help me, miss!*

• • •

A NEW memoir by an old friend brings it back. "We were told it could take decades for us to achieve the life we dreamed of. What we weren't told was that by the time we did, that life would soon disappear."

Elegy plus comedy, she says, is the only way to express how we live now. And just because something isn't funny in real life doesn't mean it can't be written about as if it were. Funny might even be the best way to write about it.

• • •

AT SOME point early on I must have understood that all the great writers whom I so loved, all those white Europeans whose works I revered and hoped to emulate, I must have understood that they—either for reasons of my class, or gender, or mixed race, or for being a crass, shallow American—would have looked down on me. But I can't remember this ever mattering to me. Now, in our brave new cultural world, I keep being told that it's the only thing that should matter to me.

• • •

A NEW survey of 1,500 college graduates reveals that journalism tops the list of the Ten Most Regretted Majors (87 percent). Education and English language and literature also make the list at, respectively, number five and number ten. According to another survey, more than 80 percent of Americans believe that they have a book in them and that they should write that book.

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IT'S NOT that writers are saying that other professions, such as dancer, actor, or musician, are easier; it's that the rules are clearer. These days, the writer strikes me as someone who is becoming less like a creative artist and more like a politician: ever evasive, fixated on construal.

• • •

RESIGNED TO the fact that, whenever I write something about writing or being a writer, I am annoying the hell out of some people.

(How can one reflect on life without also reflecting on writing? asks Annie Ernaux, in her Nobel Prize lecture.)

• • •

ONCE, when I was a girl, I leaned over a wall and watched a line of schoolgirls led by a nun entering a park. The girls were in uniform: white blouses and flared navy-blue skirts. They walked hand in hand, two abreast. The nun stopped, turned, said something I couldn't hear. At which the girls went skipping off in pairs: twelve butterflies out of one caterpillar.

In all the years since it came to me, I have wanted to find a place to use that metaphor. But I never did. Afraid that now I never will, I put it here.

• • •

WHICH THREE authors, dead or alive, would you invite to a literary dinner party? is a question often asked of authors interviewed for *The New York Times Book Review*.

What Edmund White said James Merrill said about a young fan: “Why does he want to meet us in the flesh? Doesn’t he realize the best part of us is on the page and all he’ll be meeting is an empty hive?”

• • •

ASKED WHICH writers or what books I believe will still be read in a hundred years, I remember what Stephen Hawking said: Humanity has only about a hundred years left on Earth.

In 2017, Stephen Hawking said that.

• • •

RILKE’S WORDS above my desk: “I have taken action against fear. I have sat up all night writing.”

• • •

ASKED: Whom would you want to write your life story?

Someone with a gorgeous style and a great big loving and forgiving heart.

## *Acknowledgments*



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## About the Author



**Sigrid Nunez** is the author of the novels *A Feather on the Breath of God*, *The Last of Her Kind*, *The Friend*, and *What Are You Going Through*, among others. She is also the author of *Sempre Susan: A Memoir of Susan Sontag*. She has been the recipient of several awards, including the National Book Award, the Rome Prize in Literature, and a Guggenheim. Her books have been translated into thirty languages. She lives in New York City.



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