THE LIFESPAN OF CHICKADEES

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by

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Moving Along at the Speed Of...

The ants are on the move again. They're streaming east to west along the gentle slope beside the driveway, trekking up each grass blade in their way, then down the other side, cradling rice-grain eggs in their mandibles to create a new nursery wherever they end up. The line starts at a crumble-pile of dirt outside the kitchen windows and squirms horizontally a good twenty feet before disappearing into a tiny hole with fresh dirt crumbles around it. A few wander off for a while, but they always seem to find their way back to the line before too long. They all race at top ant-speed, as if an eviction notice has arrived. *Quick! Get everything out before they lock up the crumble pile!* They'll make the deadline with no problem if they keep up this pace.

I've been sitting in the driveway for at least an hour, cross-legged, joints stiffening, as I watch their single minded migration. This is the third time in as many months that they've made the same trip, first in one direction, then back the way they just came a few weeks earlier. I poke an ant with a dried ailanthus stem as it marches up a grass blade. It topples into the mat of vegetation below, then nudges its way back into line to continue the epic journey.

Most of nature migrates, mainly to reproduce or find food. Ruby-throated hummingbirds leave Ohio every September and fly all the way to Central America. Banding studies have found that many follow the Texas coastline, while others zoom 500 miles straight across the Gulf of Mexico, an 18-22 hour non-stop flight. Then they make the reverse trip north in the spring, just to drink sugar water from the feeders in our yard so they can go back to Central America in a few months. During the first warm rains in late March or early April, frogs, newts, and salamanders cross driveways, parking lots, and major roads to get from their winter hibernation site to a breeding pond. Back when we were newly married, Dan and I stopped one evening on our way

through Brecksville Reservation because our usual route was blocked by saw-horse barriers and signs stating that salamanders needed the road to migrate. We parked the car, jumped out, and hiked around the barriers to find them. Among the fog tendrils caused by warm rain on cold asphalt, spotted red amphibian bodies shone in the car's headlights, determinedly trekking from one side of the road to the other, all going the same way. Salamanders pick their legs up the way most lizards do—right front and back left, then left front and back right—rocking from side to side as they walk. There were dozens on the road that night, legs like pistons, right/left left/right right/left left/right, wobbling and lurching their way across the road as fast as they could go. We walked around for a little while, lukewarm raindrops soaking the shoulders and backs of our clothes, laughing and shouting to each other in excitement, cheering the participants of this watery exodus, trying not to step on them with our 1970s chunky-heeled platform shoes. Both of us were in dressier-than-normal clothes, yet I don't remember where we were going. All I remember is the salamanders.

I wish I could migrate right now. I've been torturing myself with the housing sale ads in the Saturday paper, and going online to find every For Sale sign I drive past. It's not the first time I've wanted to leave, either, more like the fourth or fifth since we moved here, but it's happening more often now. For me, the "seven year itch" means an uncontrollable desire to move rather than have a love affair. I used to wonder why I get this ant-like impulse to migrate. I thought maybe it was because I moved a lot as a child, and the longest I ever stayed anywhere was twelve years—four in Cleveland, eight in Chesterland, one-and-a-half in Northfield Village, twelve in Macedonia. Then I got married and was off to five more places with Dan over seven years' time, until we landed in a rental duplex in Stow. We were there for nine years. Then we moved to Kent.

The place had almost no closets, no attic, there was a 1930s sea-green gas stove in the kitchen that terrified me, and a basement that leaked so badly it was useless for storage. We found that out when it rained the day after the mortgage was signed. But it was ours, and we couldn't have been more thrilled. I had a wonderful time setting up the kitchen cabinets—what goes in which drawers, where to put the things we use most so they're close to hand, where the cereal goes, what to put under the sink. I have a mania for organizing—bookcases, room layouts, desk drawers, closets. Whenever we move, I have a legitimate reason for haunting every office supply store in a twenty-five-mile radius, not to mention the housewares section of every WalMart, Target, Home Depot or Lowes I can reach. I'm usually not allowed in those places without a good reason and a list.

Now we've been here more than twenty years and, like the ants, I can't wait to move again. The thought of staying in this house until I die makes my skin crawl. When we left Stow, I was so happy to get away from the sardine-can duplexes and finally have our own space. We were only going four miles, about the equivalent of the ants' march down the driveway hill, so it wasn't like we were moving away from everything familiar. I guess I just didn't realize that we were trading one sardine can for something only slightly larger. At the time, the house was fine for two adults and two children. Now, it's nowhere near large enough for four adults. And moving away from rotten neighbors doesn't guarantee that you won't end up with a new set. The neighborhood was a bit run down back then, but the majority of the residences on our block were owner occupied. Many people were in the process of fixing up their homes. Except for the hotel behind the house, there were only four standard rental units on our block, and no student rentals. Now, there are three or four owner occupied homes, and I think they're all on the same side of the block as us. Most of the other houses are student rentals. A couple are known drug houses.

The first time we pulled in the drive and saw police three doors down, crouched behind open squad car doors with handguns drawn, we cowered inside the house and peaked through the curtains until they went away. Last fall, I saw a lone officer creeping up our driveway, shotgun pointing the way as he snuck into the yard on the other side of the drive. I simply closed the back door and told the guys, "Don't go outside. The druggies are at it again." After nothing else out of the ordinary occurred for fifteen minutes, I called the police station and asked if I could leave. I had an appointment, and I wasn't about to go outside until I got the all clear, but I was more annoyed by the inconvenience than anything else.

It's not that I like moving, really. The trip to Kent was certainly not something I want to repeat. We decided moving day would be two days before Christmas: after sixteen years of renting, we didn't want to spend another holiday in someone else's house. The weather was abysmal, pissing down a cold, rotten drizzle all day and well into the night. We'd already set up the Christmas tree in the new house the week before and brought over the stereo, so at least we had festive music to look forward to. With Dan's sister and nephew helping, it took until about two in the morning to get all the major stuff moved, holiday carols warbling away whenever someone had a moment to change the record. Dan got up at five the next morning and staggered through Christmas Eve day, delivering mail. The boys and I got up, ate breakfast, and started putting everything away. And we weren't even finished moving, really. We paid an extra month's rent on the duplex so we could have more time to finish sorting through everything. But in the end, most of the remaining packing was done on the day before the lease ran out, pitching everything that was left into boxes without any attempt at sorting, just to get it done.

If the previous move was horrific, the next one will be worse—over twenty years of accumulated junk, all needing to be sorted, packed and moved at once. (Some boxes haven't been

opened since we got here!) Plus, Dan and I are twenty years less physically fit than we were last time. If the general idea of leaving this place is seductive, knowing exactly how much work it will be makes me cringe. Yet I can't wait to go.

I'm not sure itchy feet, or our deteriorating neighborhood, is enough of a reason for my wanderlust. Getting older is certainly part of it, but not the main drive. Feeling like I haven't accomplished a lot of the things I've always wanted to do makes my anxious. Even though I love the familiarity of living in one place so long that the waiters at the Chinese buffet bring our drinks without asking what we want, I also feel like I'm stagnating here, everything is slowing down instead of speeding up. Like the ants, I want to pick up and go somewhere else. And, like the ants, I don't know why. I just do.

The Lifespan of Chickadees

In October of 1980, the Brownberry Ovens warehouse in Twinsburg, Ohio, burned to the ground, and my husband's job with it. A massive fire that broke out during the early hours of the morning in a remote corner of the warehouse destroyed that part of the plant, as well as the recently-completed run of holiday croutons. Dan had worked there for four years, and we'd been married for five. We heard the news on the radio as he was getting ready to leave for his afternoon shift. When no one from Brownberry called to say he shouldn't report for work, we hopped in the car to see for ourselves. On the thirty minute drive we speculated about what had happened, what might happen, and what we should do if Dan got the rest of the day off. By the time we arrived at the plant, the fire department had packed up and left. A few other employees milled around, chatting and marveling at the destruction. The hangar-sized storage area had been reduced to a smoldering five-foot-high pile of blackened sage-and-onion croutons. The odor of burnt Thanksgiving stuffing made us gag.

The next day we found out I was pregnant for the first time, after years of trying. I'd recently been let go from a seasonal job at Brownberry and hadn't found a new position yet. The company's post-conflagration advice was less than encouraging: Good luck finding another job. Now we were both out of work. We'd signed a year lease at an adults-only apartment complex in the Cuyahoga Valley the month before and were past any hope of getting out of it. We didn't know it at the time, but we were only two individuals in the ever-increasing ranks of the unemployed that eventually totaled several hundred thousand over the next two years as a major economic recession swept the country. We couldn't have been happier.

Dan was the only one eligible for unemployment compensation, and it would take several weeks for that to begin, but we saw the entire situation as a wonderful opportunity—two mid-twenty-somethings on an extended snow day. We'd just spent eighteen months living with my family, partly due to zoning issues at our first apartment that forced us to move, and partly so that I could help my mother after breast cancer surgery and a hysterectomy. I didn't mind living at home again—it was familiar and far too convenient. Dan, however, felt like an intruder. Naturally shy and quiet under the best of circumstances, he gradually withdrew, rarely engaging in anything more than small talk with anyone, including me, spending his free time running the hills at nearby Brecksville Reservation. I let things slide instead of confronting the tension, unsure of how to fix a relationship with someone who refused to discuss it. When my father transferred to a job in Florida, Dan and I found the Cuyahoga Valley apartment and began reconnecting. Thanks to a serendipitous fire, suddenly we had all day, every day, to spend together.

Our new home backed up onto forested land at the edge of what was then Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area. Deer sometimes peered into the grass-level bedroom window of our below-ground unit. The sunken patio invited skunks to wobble along the edge of the retaining wall. We quickly removed a tiered plant stand inside the patio after watching one chubby, inquisitive guest scope it out as a potential ladder. Red-tailed hawks and barred owls soared overhead or hooted through the night. Some days we stayed home and hiked around the apartment buildings, searching for wildlife. We bought guidebooks on Ohio wildflowers and stalked jewelweed, lamb's ears, ironweed, angelica along the road and between the nearby stores. The rest of the time we spent at Brecksville Reservation's Nature Center.

* * * * *

The rustic wooden doors of the nature center are heavy and sturdy, a small multi-paned window set at the top of each side with white letters and numbers stenciled on the clear glass to the left.

Center Hours

9:30 – 5:00

Daily

Opening the doors on this cold, drizzly first day of March releases a warm rush of air scented with dusty carpeting, damp timbers, a hint of wood ash wafted from the fireplace by a gust of wind down the chimney. A young, dark-haired woman in forest green khakis tosses out a cheery welcome and an offer to answer questions. When I decline, she goes back to a computer in an alcove near the office, her tap-tap-tap-click in opposition to my pre-home-computer memories of this building.

A feeling of having stepped backward in time disorients me, as if this place, which meant so much to us for so many years long ago, has been waiting, Brigadoon-like, for my return. It all looks the same. Examples of the taxidermist's art stand on shelves around the room or appear to swoop from black iron chandeliers with glaring spiral light bulbs. Coyote, Eastern screech owl, pileated woodpecker, groundhog, all labeled, victims of man or nature now useful as teaching tools, but each one a bit more tattered than I remember. A circular glass display case in the middle of the floor holds diminutive stuffed songbirds perched on individual twigs jutting from the central wooden pillar next to a label with information about each one's habitat and behavior, if they were still alive. Heat lamps hum above dry aquariums in paneled niches where turtles and snakes snooze, surrounded by poster backdrops of the forest they no longer occupy.

Wood is everywhere—rough hewn, hand planed, aged to brownish-black, shiny with polishing and the caress of fingers. Built in 1939 as part of a Works Progress Administration project, pride in craftsmanship is evident throughout the center. Inside the front door, a row of thick square pillars supports the entry overhang, each post bracketed by two wooden curves at the top that form a pitchfork-like Greek letter Psi. The outline of a leaf is carved into the apex of the posts. The central space rises two stories, ending at the alternating brown wood beams and rough cream stucco of the ceiling.

Even on such a cloudy day, the barn-sized building is flooded with dull light, saved from being downright dreary by numerous windows large and small, high and low: floor-to-ceiling on the peaked end wall opposite the soaring stone fireplace; tucked into alcoves on the long side walls where the natural light is washed out by buzzing florescent fixtures with dead bugs silhouetted inside.

The wall of windows with the bird feeders outside draws me as it always has. Large, triangular panes at the peak frame the leafless trees in twin forty-five-degree angles, while the four long panes of the main window provide a stage for the constantly changing forest floor. I remember half-log benches in front of this window, instead of the thin-slatted Amish-style rocking chairs flanking the glider bench there now. A concrete birdbath shaped like a flower head sits on the ground outside, far enough away from the feeders to keep the sunflower seed shells from turning the water into porridge. There's a platform on a pole for the sparrows and juncos and rusty-red cardinals so they don't have to compete with the chipmunks, squirrels, and mourning doves foraging in the leaves. Goldfinches in their tarnished winter plumage daintily pick at the thistle tube, while nuthatches mince head-first down nearby tree trunks, sneaking

closer as they wait for a chance to zip into an empty place at the suet cage. The screeching of impatient diners and the fluttering of many wings is loud enough to be audible through the glass.

I first discovered the nature center in the early 1970s as a teenager with a new boyfriend (and future husband). Dan lived near Brecksville and already knew about its picnic areas, and miles of pathways and roads that were closed in the winter for sledding. In need of a place to get to know each other, away from his four siblings and my three and our combined quartet of parents, we splashed through Chippewa Creek and climbed the mossy rocks, hiked the trails and talked for hours, always returning to the center and the wall of windows. We became fledgling bird watchers, binoculars in hand and a guide book in someone's hip pocket, stopping at the center each day to learn where we might find warblers passing through or to pencil our own sightings into the log book. We spent hours with Karl, the head naturalist—a generously knowledgeable man with wavy hair that matched his sandy beard, a ready laugh, and an endless capacity for talking.

One winter we taught the chickadees to eat out of our hands. They would chide us from the trees around the feeding area as we walked past, the cockier punks strutting down a limb within arm's reach, daring us to just go ahead and try something. An outstretched hand only made them cautiously curious. Sometimes one would flutter close and hover for a few wing beats over an empty palm before hopping back into the trees with a reproachful *chickadee-dee-dee*. Karl began taking down the feeders for us, an hour at a time, amused by our audacity and figuring the birds would be more likely to fall for our nefarious plan while the dead of winter offered a limited food supply.

We would stand absolutely still for half an hour or more at a time, a gloveless hand extended toward a tree limb. Every so often a chickadee whirred down, suspicious but greedy, snatched a seed and then bolted back into the trees to hammer at the shell clutched between its toes. Their weight barely registered on my skin, only a slight pressure at the point of contact and the fleeting sensation of tiny, cold talons curled around a finger. I had to constantly remind myself not to move, not to whisper or blink or gasp at the thrill of holding a wild bird until my feathered visitor was gone with its seed. Switching arms when our muscles ached from holding a hand aloft and motionless, we would play feeder-statue until neither arm could bear the strain anymore.

In the beginning, only one or two birds would stop by in our allotted hour, as the hair inside my nose froze and my fingers burned with cold. Gradually word spread, or they got used to us, or they realized there was no other way to get food while we were there, but more chickadees (and only chickadees) began to visit the human feeders. They would line up on my arm, perch on my fingers, light on my head with pointy claws digging into my scalp as they waited for their turn. Their twittery scolding seemed to indicate that, as birdfeeders, we were somehow defective, but they would condescend to accept our tribute. I didn't take it personally.

After several weeks of success, Karl was convinced. Sundays became Hand Feed the Chickadees Day at the Brecksville Nature Center. Signs were posted explaining how to become a human platform feeder. Families made a point of stopping after church every week between noon and two, when the feeders were taken down, solely to hand feed the birds. Often Dan and I would be there at the same time, accidental demonstrators, sharing "our" birds with the other visitors. Eventually, annoyed by our own success and the noisy glee of ever-expanding numbers of people who made enticing the birds increasingly difficult, we stopped going on Sundays.

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As fall of 1980 turned to winter, Dan searched for work in vain, applying for a dozen jobs every week, ranging farther and farther from home, never hearing anything back. The nature center became a refuge, an oasis with thick timbers rising from the floor, surrounded by the forest without braving the cold and snow outside. My waistline increased as our options shrank. For a while, Dan's unemployment checks were just barely enough to cover our rent, most of the utilities, my prenatal vitamins, and a semi-regular check to the credit card company. We kept his Toyota Landcruiser and got rid of my car. We usually had about twenty dollars left for food each week, and while food was comparatively cheap then, meals tended to include the cheapest of the cheap—ground beef, hot dogs, pasta, and rice. I developed cravings for shrimp and watermelon, which would have gone unsatisfied if Casey's Restaurant on State Road hadn't opened the area's first all-you-can-eat buffet for ninety-nine cents per person, including cold shrimp and watermelon on Fridays. Tuesdays at the B&K Drive-In we would split two hot dogs, fries and a root beer for ninety-nine cents, too. We squirreled away change from other purchases in order to splurge.

Gasoline prices inched toward a dollar a gallon for the first time in history, but we didn't let that keep us home. When reality became insistent enough, we would hop into the car and drive thirty minutes through the Cuyahoga Valley to reach Brecksville. We shortened our walks and picked the less-hilly trails through the woods around the center as my pregnancy advanced. Oaks, hickories, maples, and tulip poplars rained leaves in all shades of brown, yellow, red, and flaming orange, the pungent decay of them pulled along by our passage as they crushed underfoot. The dried stalks of meadow weeds clanked together in the clearings, seeds showering over the brittle undergrowth to wait for a new start in spring. On cold or rainy days, we liked to

sit at the nature center's wall of windows and watch the feeders for hours, despite the unyielding hardness of the split-log benches. Karl would let us light a fire in the fireplace at the other end of the room, even though the warmth simply fogged up the windows near the fireplace without ever reaching the benches. We'd periodically desert the viewing area to huddle in front of the blaze and talk to the naturalists. Like prairie dogs, we hunkered down in our burrow and pretended there were no predators skulking closer and closer every month.

One late autumn day we arrived at the center to find nearly-invisible black mesh nets, called mist nets, strung around the feeder area, and an unfamiliar woman de-tangling squawking birds from the mesh pockets that dangled at intervals over the net's surface. Karl was helping her, and he introduced us. Marie was tall, only a little shorter than Dan's 6' 1", solidly built and Amazon elegant despite her green rubber barn boots, clay-colored canvas pants, and heavy forest green coat whose innumerable patch pockets bulged with unknown treasures. She wore fuzzy earmuffs instead of a stocking cap, her shoulder-length wavy black hair flecked with strands of white. We shook hands and she explained that she was beginning a project to color-band chickadees in order to track their movements. We had been lucky enough to stumble upon her first day of banding. She was there the following Saturday as well, and most Saturdays after that. Before a month had passed, backed by Karl's endorsement, we were also lucky enough to be accepted as Marie's volunteer assistants.

Throughout the fall and early winter, Dan and I would wake up at dawn every Saturday in order to be at the park to help set up the mist nets for an hour or so during the early morning, when birds are most active. Stretched between aluminum poles, the nets almost disappeared in the sketchy shadows under the trees and were hard to see if you hadn't been present while the poles were driven into the ground. More than once, an unsuspecting hiker would wander a little

too close and end up with a face-full of spidery netting. The mist nets looked like giant volleyball nets for fairies.

Marie's chickadee banding project was part of a larger study to better understand the species' life span and territorial movements. Every bander in the study used a different and distinct series of three colored metal bands from a personal pool of four colors. Marie's colors were bright green, white, orange, and black, each band a scant one-eighth inch wide and about as long as an average pinkie-finger nail. She crimped the bands around an individual bird's leg in a color order unique to that bird, allowing it to be tracked and identified everywhere it went. Each bird's length, weight, wingspan, sex, and the amount of fat visible under the feathers was recorded in an official log book along with that bird's specific color band arrangement. The chickadee's other leg also received a silver band with a tracking number stamped on it. All species of birds are banded on a regular basis, all over the world, to help track populations and migration patterns. Any bird, alive or dead, found with a silver band on its leg is traceable by the number.

Banding birds requires great patience and dexterity. Marie was a psychologist in private practice by day, and had taken ornithology classes in her free time to qualify as a bander. She needed to be able to recognize any bird based on a single feather; to know the difference between summer and winter plumage; to know when a bare patch on the breast indicated a brooding female and when it meant mange. Dan's job was to set the net poles in the ground and to retrieve the birds, bringing them into the Nature Center one or two at a time for banding. Grasping the minute bands themselves presented a challenge that sometimes resulted in all of us nose-to-the-floor looking for one that she'd dropped. My timidity at possibly damaging frightened birds, my clear handwriting, and the fact that Dan is severely dyslexic (especially with numbers) made me

the logical choice for record keeper. With Marie no longer having to hold a bird in one hand and record its data with the other, she was able to almost double the number of banded birds.

Even though Marie was solely banding chickadees, the nets weren't picky about which birds they captured. Anything that came near the feeders was liable to be ensnared. There were droopy pockets of netting descending every two feet down the main expanse to catch the birds who bounced off. Titmice, juncos, house sparrows, and goldfinches all ended up in the nets, their dinosaur-descendant shrieks of alarm alerting the entire forest to our human intrusion as they were let go. The thick, hooked bills of cardinals and grosbeaks were a particular hazard to the person who tried to untangle them from the net, and captive woodpeckers required the protection of leather gloves. Northern Orioles are such an intense, radioactive orange close up that the sport-clothing industry must have seen one and decided the same neon bright color would be perfect for running shorts. Hummingbirds are downright mean. Because of their tiny size and tendency to become shocky under stress, a special license is needed to band them, but we sometimes had to deal with one that landed in the mist nets. I once held a male hummingbird in my loosely-closed fist to keep it warm, only the tip of its beak visible outside my hand. Its heart thrummed so fast against my palm, it tickled. When the bird began to wiggle, Marie said, "Open your hand, and duck." As I released my fingers, the hummingbird shot straight for my face, like an emerald green torpedo. Without the warning, I would have been sporting a dent shaped like a hummingbird beak in my forehead. I've never been able to see that bird as merely beautiful since.

Fall became winter and then early spring. Dan continued to apply for jobs several times a week, still with no results. Unemployment compensation was extended for an unprecedented thirteen weeks, nationwide. Still, as time passed we started to fall behind—half a payment here, a late payment there—on the rent, the car, the credit card. My silhouette blossomed like the

swelling buds on the trees, making walking problematic on anything but the most level trails. The baby's due date was pushed from late April to early May. By Easter Sunday 1981, I'd gained fifty pounds, and the doctor moved the due date to the middle of May. Despite the size of the baby, I wasn't as far along as he thought. The cliché of a pregnant woman unable to see her feet was true for me. By the beginning of June I couldn't move any faster than a leisurely toddle.

When we weren't helping Marie with the banding, Dan and I sat at the feeder windows and recorded information on individual chickadees. Time of day, weather conditions, location, and band colors were all written by hand on slips of paper Xeroxed by the naturalists. On a good day we could go through the small pile of freshly-printed slips on the center's information ledge by ourselves. As the project progressed, Dan and Marie spent a lot of Saturdays playing catch-and-release while waiting for unbanded birds to land in the nets. Fewer and fewer "naked" chickadees were seen, and by mid-spring, Marie declared the banding part of the project finished. Dan and I continued to record sightings no matter where we were inside the park. The specific color band order of each banded bird created a community of individuals—white/black/green, orange/white/orange, green/green/white. We called them by their color "names" and got to know them as friends.

Under the trees, across the park road from the Brecksville Nature Center, sits a large picnic shelter. The building is elevated on a platform of rough-cut sandstone, the foundation stones, steps, and stairwell faintly green with lichen in the shady places, soft tones of brown, tan, dusty rose in the sun. The roof shingles are furred with cushiony waterfalls of brilliant green moss. Railings with a classic western feel outline the entire perimeter in sections from one post to the next. I walk up the rear steps and wander around inside the shelter, cool and dim despite

bright sunshine outside. Built by the WPA at the same time as the nature center, careful craftsmanship is evident in the solidness unmoved by the passage of years. The open sides of the shelter funnel a passing breeze, creating a chill, shadowy cave surrounded by sunlight.

The high interior arch of the ceiling is surprisingly free of cobwebs, but a few desiccated insect husks whirl between the railing banisters on spider strings. The T-shaped structure is crisscrossed by beams and second-story supports, overlapping and interconnected, an organic M. C. Escher maze. Peeled tree limbs create a canopy of timber struts, hand notched by hatchets so that angled supports fit perfectly into the sides of massive posts. The pitchfork Y's of the posts under the eaves give place to interior pillars with three or four or five stiffened fingers, like half-closed scarecrow hands pointing skyward to hold up the roof.

I last stood inside this shelter house on June 8, 1982, celebrating our son's first birthday. The soundless Super8 movie from that day shows long stripes of light tiger-painting the tables, the miniature chocolate cake, the baby, us, in alternating sun and shadow as the sun beams low through the tree branches. It shows a chubby little boy with peach-fuzzy blonde hair, sitting Buddha-like in Daddy's yellow t-shirt to protect his own clothes from cake frosting, little feet hidden under the hem, sleeves rolled up over and over to expose his hands. On top of the cake in front of him, a flame flickers on a candle shaped like the number one. It shows him chewing on the envelope from a card as I mouth the words in it, and simple, inexpensive gifts from parents wanting to commemorate their son's milestone but still struggling financially.

We'd coasted through my pregnancy, not exactly in denial, but unsure of what else we could do to avert disaster when there was still no hope of employment. Phone calls from creditors consisted of "Does Dan have work yet?" with my reply cut off by the slam of the phone on the other end before I could get out more than "No, but—" So we tried to put it out of our

minds and enjoy our time together, blissfully preparing for our baby's arrival, until a quick succession of realities came crashing down one after another. In Florida, my mother died from cancer near the beginning of June, her last words asking if I was coming to see her. At three weeks past my due date, it wasn't even a remote possibility. Two days later, the day of Mom's funeral, our first son was born. When Danny was five days old, Dan's unemployment benefits ended and we went on welfare. Before the apartment lease could run out on its own, we were served with an eviction notice, sued by our credit card company, and when Dan went out to buy formula one morning, he found that the Landcruiser had been repossessed during the night. His parents gave us a broken-down 1960s Chevy Suburban station wagon that they weren't using anymore, partly because the driver's door didn't open. The baby carrier sat between us on the front bench seat—a hole under the back seat let exhaust into the rear of the car where his car seat should have been. This meant that every time the three of us went somewhere, I had to slide out on the passenger's side, dragging the baby in his carrier with me, so Dan could get out. Often I would climb back in with the baby rather than stand outside the car with the carrier. When Dan returned, we repeated the process in reverse, like a clown car with two-and-a-half clowns and only one working door.

At one month old, the baby began vomiting after almost every feeding. Emergency stomach surgery followed six weeks later. The day he was released from the hospital, we moved into the smallest bedroom at Dan's parents' house. They didn't welcome us, preferring that we live with an uncle in Cleveland whose house had been broken into four times, but at least they didn't tell us to leave when Dan refused. The following week Dan started a job with the Akron Metroparks, making just over minimum wage, but at least he was finally working.

* * * * *

The lifespan of a chickadee is anywhere from eighteen months to two-and-a-half years. Their territories range from six to thirteen acres. Well before we stopped going to Brecksville, all of the birds Marie banded had died and the records were closed. We never located any color banded birds outside the nature center's radius, and never heard that anyone else had either. Close to ninety percent of the sightings recorded came from me and Dan.

In July of 1982, we moved to a rented duplex in Stow. After thirteen months with Dan's parents and two youngest siblings, we were back on our own in a ticky-tacky two-bedroom box with a refrigerator from the 1950s that refused to freeze ice cream, let alone meat. We were still driving the station wagon. Before we'd moved, another car T-boned the Suburban on a morning noted for freezing fog that the other driver neglected to scrape off his windshield. The insurance company totaled our car for $450. We bought a driver-side door that opened, a gas tank that didn't need to be held on with baling wire, new headlights, and a few other luxuries like gaskets, belts, and filters. Dan patched the hole in the floor while the gas tank was removed and drove it for another six months.

The following October, two years and two weeks after the Brownberry Ovens fire, Dan started working as a letter carrier for the US Postal Service in Chagrin Falls, an hour's drive away. He'd applied for an opening at the local post office while he was still working at Brownberry. Despite severe dyslexia, he passed the civil service test with the lowest score possible to still make it onto the list of future hires. It had taken four years for his name to get to the top of the list.

In June it will be thirty years since that first birthday celebration at Brecksville Reservation. Rough plank picnic tables still sit among the nearby trees. Boxy metal camping

grills perch atop rusty poles near each table, waiting for someone to brave the early spring chill with a bag of charcoal. Slow growing redbud trees stand sentry in the less-shady spots, twiggy limbs outlined by tiny pinkish-red flowers unfurling. I don't remember them being there before.

A sense of nostalgia takes hold of me, and I wonder why we ever stopped coming to the park. Our dislike of the increasing Sunday crowds as the park service added new paths and made improvements to old ones certainly didn't help, but that can't be the only reason. Since Dan's parents lived nearby, we continued to take our first son to the park every so often, probably until he was five or so, because he remembers the mill stone next to the flag pole outside the shelter house, and some of the paths and the nature center. But we didn't have another picnic in the shelter house, and by the time our second son was born in 1989, we hadn't been to Brecksville Reservation at all in three years, even though we were still visiting my in-laws nearly every month. It seems impossible that we have *never* taken him to the park, but it's true. As little as our older son still remembers of it, the younger one has nothing at all to remember.

We didn't need the park as our refuge anymore by then. Even though we agreed that I would be a stay-at-home mom, our finances improved. We junked the beaten-down station wagon in favor of a marginally less-beaten Toyota Corolla for $750 cash. Dan pop-riveted flattened beer cans from the hood to the rusted-through fenders to keep them from falling off, but that was the extent of the car repairs. Our older son still remembers watching the road race by through a hole in the floor under his car seat. At least no exhaust fumes came in, and it was the only vehicle in our neighborhood that would run during the record-breaking frigid temperatures in February 1985. When fixing the Corolla was no longer cost effective, we moved on to a Ford Escort sedan only a couple years old, with all parts intact and operating. After nine years in the Stow duplex, we bought a house a few miles down the road in Kent, and while we visited Dan's

family regularly, the drive was longer, making side trips into the park less feasible. We found other parks in our own area and built memories in them with both of our sons. Very simply, we've grown up and moved on.

The how-to-feed-the-birds signs are still at the head of the path to the nature center, but the feeders are left hanging these days. Skeletal winter trees thrust their arms overhead, still-leafless finger branches waving slightly in a cold breeze. A red-bellied woodpecker hogs the suet feeder cage, its sheer size enough to keep away the smaller downy woodpeckers who try to muscle in. A brazen chickadee lands on the opposite side of the cage, pecks out a mouthful of fatty goodness and flits off again.

Generations of chickadees have come and gone since their ancestors first perched on our palms, yet twenty-five years later it feels as if nothing has changed except me and the naturalist on duty. I've often wondered what happened to the records we left behind, so I ask the young woman if she knows anything about them. She says they've been in the back storage room for years, at the mercy of mice and silverfish. Much of the information had been thrown away but she thought some of it might still be in folders back there. I wonder to myself if they need a volunteer to clean it up and digitize it.

I sit in one of the Amish rockers and watch a man stop beside the feeder area with his hand extended for no more than thirty seconds before he walks away, and I want to call through the glass that he'll have to wait a lot longer than *that*. Instead, I ask the naturalist for some sunflower seeds and go outside to feed the chickadees.

Confessions of A Would-Be Gardener

My husband claims our yard is where plants go to die. He stares at me whenever he says this. I'd like to object to his implied finger of blame, but if I'm being honest with myself, I know it's at least partly my fault that our yard doesn't look like the ones in *Better Homes and Gardens*. It hasn't been for lack of trying, but no matter how carefully I research a particular flower (and I've researched a *lot*), I can never seem to find the right growing conditions. I spent years in apartments collecting and reading gardening books and magazines, anticipating the day when we'd have a yard of our own to fill with beds of vegetables and fragrant blooms. I can recognize individual annuals and perennials and wildflowers by sight. I unconsciously rattle off the Latin names of *monarda* and *nicotiana*, *digitalis* and *cleome spinosa*, *dianthus* and *astilbe* when shopping at garden centers, and have memorized the habitat and nutrient needs of all my favorites. When we moved to Kent, the 200' long yard just screamed for roses along the house foundation and hanging baskets dripping pansies from the front porch edges and half barrels of petunias on either side of the back door and garden beds packed with color everywhere else.

We tried the hanging baskets for a few years, but after five simply disappeared overnight from the big hooks screwed into the porch ceiling, it became obvious that something more would be needed. So we wrapped thin wire or duct tape around and around the basket hook and porch hook to keep the flower pots in place, but that meant using a screwdriver as a lever to crank the hooks back and forth so the flowers wouldn't grow lopsided from too much sun on one side, and taking them down at the end of the season was a bit of a pain. Plus it seemed like coleus was the only plant that could thrive in the partial-shade conditions under the porch overhang and, as much as I enjoy the multitude of scalloped/bumpy/vivid leaf shapes and colorings of coleus, they

just aren't the jewel-bright petunias and pansies and lobelia I'd always imagined. And of course there was the issue of 5' 4" me dumping a full watering can into containers hanging above my head. Either the plants didn't get watered enough, or I became drenched on a daily basis. We haven't bothered with hanging baskets for several years now.

Thanks to our home being a bootlegger's house during Prohibition, our first pair of half barrels came straight out of the basement. According to our elderly neighbor (his mother also became a bootlegger after her husband abandoned his family, and that basement still contains wells in the floor for hiding jugs of whiskey), the owner of our house mashed grapes in the basement, then piped the juice to an outbuilding at the back of the yard for bottling and storage until it was sold. We've never dug up any pipes, but we did find the wooden mashing tub when we moved in, along with a wine barrel that, despite being at least forty (if not fifty) years old, still contained sludgy wine residue. We cut the barrel in half to use as planters, dumped the sludge in the back yard, then filled the barrels with bag after bag of topsoil to hold the flats of flowers we brought home.

Concentrated grape residue plus decades of time for fermentation resulted in drunken robins, starlings, and grackles all over our yard for more than a week. Being ground feeders, the birds would pick at the pile of sludge, then stagger and floundered around the yard, wings flapping to no purpose. Occasionally one managed to fly up into a nearby shrub or the maple tree, only to fall back out again. We may have saved ourselves some money on flower barrels, but in the process we were guilty of contributing to the delinquency of the neighborhood birds. Dan and I still feel a little guilty about that. The barrels themselves seemed to punish us by refusing to grow most of the plants I put in them. Clumps of leafy basil, clouds of snow-white alyssum, dollhouse-sized miniature roses, shrubs of regal purple heliotrope with a scent like

vanilla beans—none of them survived the dry, hot summers, no matter how much water or attention they got. By the time fall arrived, holding out a last opportunity for lush growth before shutting down for winter, my barrel plants were already brown twigs and crumbling leaves, dying in anticipation of the first frost. Adding topsoil, watering more frequently, spacing the plants so they weren't too crowded, all were useless. It was as if the plants died to prove that the green thumb I'd always envisioned was nothing but moss.

The rest of the yard hasn't been much more successful. No matter how hard I tried over the years, deep rose bells of foxglove and bluebird-hued delphiniums grew for a season or two, then didn't return. Lupines never achieved candelabras of blossoms for me the way they grow in the magazines or the greenhouses or the vast, untended fields around electric power lines that we saw in New Hampshire on vacation. Instead, their columns of mauve and orchid and sweet-pea-pink flowers started out weak and sickly, individual legume-family petals scattered haphazardly in patches up the stalks, as if they had mange. They lasted one or two seasons, no more than three, each blossom gradually becoming more spindly and weedy and sparse than the next, until they finally stopped coming up at all. Neither watering nor mulching nor Miracle-Gro helped. Perennials morphed into biennials at best, annuals more often than not. They simply disliked our yard, or me, or both.

It's not like I deliberately set out to murder plants every spring, it's just that I have delusions of gardening grandeur. I blame my mother. She could grow anything, so I always thought it was easy. If she wanted a rose bush just like the one growing at someone else's house, she clipped off a long stalk that had recently bloomed, sank it deep into the ground at home, stuck a canning jar over it, and waited for her rose bush. It rarely failed to work. When we moved to Macedonia in the late '60s, that's exactly how Mom cloned a white rose that her own

mother had cloned from a bush belonging to *her* mother. Mom's rose bush grew to be over four feet tall and six feet wide, a vigorous bloomer whose snowy rosettes were displayed in vases all summer. My parents sold that house in 1980 and moved to Florida, but I don't think Mom took any cuttings with her. Roses tend not to do well in southern humidity that promotes blackspot. I didn't take a cutting, either, but then I had nowhere to plant a rose at the time, so the idea didn't occur to me. I regret that now. By the time I thought to look for it a good twenty years later, intent on asking the owner for a cutting to make a clone of my own, I discovered that someone had dug out the huge canes. There was no trace left. Not that I would have necessarily succeeded in cloning the bush. Dan once brought me cuttings from a wild Cherokee rose he saw in a field on his way home from work. The single-petal, flat pink flowers smelled of warm, spiced fruit. I sank the cuttings in south-facing soil near the back door, and stuck canning jars over them, just as I'd seen my mother do it. They all turned brown died, so maybe I wouldn't have succeed with the white rose bush, either. Still, I would have liked the chance to hold onto such a tangible link to my family, and especially my mother. I've come to realize that a big part of why I continue trying to grow things is because I feel close to Mom in the garden. It was just my luck that I didn't inherit her gardening skill.

The sound of an Indians baseball game broadcast is all I need to access one of my earliest memories—Mom brandishing her garden trowel at the transistor radio, shouting at the umpire about a questionable call. A burst of the announcer's voice shrieking in excitement over the clamor of an entire stadium, and I am suddenly six years old again. Crickets and grasshoppers drone as the summer sun's heat scorches the back of my sundress. Honeybees dart from one pink-tipped clover flower to the next in the grass nearby. I sit cross-legged on the scorching

sidewalk and grub in the dirt triangle between the walk and the driveway, trying to scrape up enough of the hard-packed clay to create a hole for a marigold. But the soil is as coarse and dense and dry as sandstone, the yellow-brown dust in my shovel no more substantial than a sprinkling of baby powder. I seem to scrape for ages without ever making the hole bigger. Mom comes to my rescue, her strong arm gouging out a wider dent, but the hole is barely deep enough for the flower's root ball. We squash it into the divot and she sifts some of the talcum-like dirt into the gaps, patting it down with a half-hearted "Good enough, I guess." She waters it and I watch the trickles stream off in different directions, damp worm-like trails on top of the dirt, which never really soak in.

My parents' first home was built on clay fill dirt, a heavy, solid, impermeable substance devoid of plant nutrients. Clay is one of the worst soil compositions to garden in, but Mom didn't let that keep her from trying. Creating a bed of annuals every year took her an entire season of constant watering and adding as much peat moss as her arms could work in. The vegetable plot next to the rear patio grew more garden spiders than garden. She managed to eke out a few tomatoes and green peppers, some cucumbers and zucchini by having Dad replace a couple feet of clay with purchased topsoil, but they were a periodic novelty rather than a substantial addition to the family menu. The condition of the back yard should have been a hint as to the soil's fertility, or lack thereof—Queen Anne's lace, hawk weed, sticktight, nettles, and plantains, all typically found in arid fields and waste places, made up the bulk of the "grass" in our yard. Dad didn't let that deter him, either. He planted a buffer of knee-high evergreens between the yard and the road in the hopeful belief that the pint-sized shrubs would keep his boisterous offspring from running into the street. We grew faster than the trees did. By the time we left eight years later, those trees were no more than hip high. For some reason, the hedge roses between us and our

neighbor flourished, but the baby future-Christmas-trees Dad optimistically planted in the back corner of the yard died off one by one in a gruesome display of brown needles clumping to the ground with every breeze. Mom continued coaxing and worrying her veggies and flowers through summers without rain, the snow belt's early-onset frosts and freak blizzards, and unforgiving soil. I suspect that, like most first-time home buyers, my parents were just happy to have found a place they liked and could afford. They probably figured that, since the house was the model home for the development, not as much trouble was taken with the yard as with the interior. Conditions were sure to improve once they started working the soil, but it never got any better.

The challenges of clay soil aside, Mom really could grow just about anything. Every house she lived in had several urns of mother-in-law's tongue—long, thick, succulent blades of green that are notorious for being indestructible, unless they end up at my house. I've killed those with no problem at all. There were always spider plants dangling from the ceiling or a plant pole, little fountain-like offshoots with naked roots hanging at face level, just waiting for one of us to walk into them. Air plants grew inside seashells on end tables and bookcase shelves. Any avocado that made it to our house (so much more rare back in the '60s and '70s than today), was skewered with a ring of toothpicks around its slippery, tear-shaped body, then perched point up on a glass of water to split and sprout and drop roots into the water—an exotic new houseplant until water alone couldn't provide enough nourishment, and then it ended up in the compost heap. Clay pots of cacti sat on various windowsills and, despite the cold Ohio winters, my mother kept them alive from year to year. My only attempts at cactus cultivation resulted in either shriveled carcasses or soggy stumps, depending on whether I watered them too little or too

much. I grew up with a grapefruit tree that Mom sprouted from a seed out of a fruit she'd eaten in Florida. It resided in a huge pot on the dining room floor at our last house, the flat, shiny, kelly-green leaves gently wiped down one at a time by my mother whenever they got dusty. We would hang thimble-sized glass ornaments on the thorns every Christmas, the richly colored, holiday-candy shapes of acorns, berries, pillows, winkling in the light every time someone walked past and shook the seven-foot tall trunk of the grapefruit. I still have every one of those tiny ornaments. They go at the top of our Christmas tree every December, reminding me of my mother and her grapefruit tree. My own record with houseplants is too dismal for me to ever attempt growing one for myself.

The house in Macedonia turned out to be Mom's gardening nirvana. It had two acres of elderberries, currants, and blackberries already in place. There was actual *grass* in the yard, something that needed regular cutting since it didn't dry up and die on its own. The first spring after we moved in, Mom tilled the soil, carefully distributed vegetable seeds, watered, and tended her fledgling garden. The dirt was rich, dark brown and loose—such a contrast to clay. She positioned the vegetable beds right in the middle of the flat, wide-open back yard, roped it off with sticks and string to keep the four of us out. Slowly shoots emerged, promising bounty for her family in a few short months.

One morning, several of her precious plants lay on the ground, dug up and set to one side. She tenderly replaced each one, nurturing them with water and soft soil. Mom assumed it was an animal, although most animals just eat the plants they want, rather than digging them out and leaving them behind. Two days later, more uprooted plants. Mom started to spend her mornings near the door that overlooked the garden until, a couple days later, she caught the culprit—an elderly man. A friend of the last homeowners, he was visiting every few days to "help" tend the

garden—only he was doing it in the wrong direction. The previous owners laid out their garden in the opposite direction from the one Mom chose, and nothing she said would convince Mr. Lattimer that it wasn't still laid out that way. Up and down the phantom rows he went with his hoe, blissfully unplanting and trampling all her careful work. Even though Mom was never a late sleeper, she couldn't get up early enough to head off Mr. Lattimer. Dad asked if she wanted a fence around the garden, but Mom refused, afraid it might hurt his feelings. After a couple years of uprooted tomatoes, peppers, and bean plants, she finally gave in, planting her rows of vegetables in the "right" direction. Mr. Lattimer didn't seem to notice the change. He continued to help with the gardening for a few more years, and then we didn't see him for a while. After Mom found out that he'd died, she moved her garden to a completely different part of the yard.

That yard became her pride and joy, and the source of my own love for gardening, canning, and cooking. Currants from the bushes near the back door became yearly batches of jam and jelly. Dan and I bottle about three dozen jars of sour cherry, peach, citrus, and black raspberry jams (the last from the canes in our yard) as needed every year or two. I can't remember the last time we bought jelly or jam from a store. Mom's elderberries were harvested once to make wine, but when a gray crusty foam appeared and gave off a smell like sour bread, she threw it out. She didn't realize that was simply part of the fermentation process until a horrified friend told her. Dan just started his first batch of wine from a kit I bought him for Christmas, and I recognized the sour, yeasty smell of wine in the making. We won't be throwing it out.

The vegetable garden eventually expanded to a quarter of an acre and included things like elephant ears, which I called "weeds" and Mom called "cardoons." She would cut the thick, rhubarb-like stalks, then roll them in breading and pan fry. I never cared for the bitter flavor, but

that hasn't stopped me from trying out dandelion salad, candied violets, pansy flowers sprinkled on a salad, or batter-dipped, fried squash blossoms. The idea of found food when I was growing up came from Mom's Depression-era parents, and she passed that along. I get a primal sense of exhilaration and satisfaction from stumbling across a patch of wild raspberries in a meadow or butternuts in the woods that shopping at a grocery store will never equal.

The sloping hill in my parents' front yard became a rock garden filled with hens and chicks, sea pinks, and wind flowers in between rocks and shells we picked up on vacations. The long, wide front yard was edged with lilacs and almond shrubs that we dug out of the field across the street. Flower beds sprang up around the front porch and down the walkway to the drive and outside the back door, filled with gladiolus, iris, roses, daylilies, oriental lilies, carnations, peonies. There were always flowers to pick and arrange whenever I wanted. There was also always weeding to do on a warm day with an Indian's game on the radio nearby, and we often did it together.

I know that my less-than-green thumb has to take some of the blame for our gardening failures, I think Mother Nature has to take some of the blame. There's something about the geographic location of Kent that results in a lack of summer rain for weeks at a time. While the rest of Northeast Ohio was getting deluged one summer, Kent remained bone dry for a record five straight months. We could find our town on the radar map by looking for the only hole in the rain pattern. Since we pay for city water, it quickly became too expensive to keep everything properly hydrated, so we abandoned the flower and veggie beds and let everything die except for three tomato plants, which produced a few stunted fruit with blossom end rot. That year was an extreme example of our gardening history in Kent, but it's closer to the norm than the exception.

When the weather is perfectly balanced with rain twice a week and plenty of sun but not too much heat, our yard produces baskets and baskets of vegetables, to the point where we donate bags of green beans and tomatoes twice a week. So it can't just be my fault when things don't grow right, and I refuse to shoulder all the blame myself.

Years of experimentation have led to a garden that specializes in certain plants. A bleeding heart bush is the last remnant of my twenty-year-old perennial shade garden, and I've noticed that it's been looking smaller every spring for a few years as the roots of the oak tree it's planted under close in. I'm pleased that it's lasted so long, but it won't be there much longer. The tiger lilies are rapidly taking over that bed, as well as anywhere else they've been planted. Daylilies seem to like our yard, as do roses and hostas, but not many other flowers do. The crown fritillaria bulbs that Dan plants every few years don't spread, only producing a couple weedy stalks at a time. Nothing at all came up last year. As good a gardener as Dan is, even he has problems with certain plants. So we've decided that it's time to stop trying to grow tulips. The ones that aren't dug up and eaten by squirrels or chipmunks only last a couple of years, rather like the fritillaria. We're finally learning to pick our battles.

Roses are Dan's pet project, and he keeps careful track of how many we have. Forty-two to forty-seven at last count, depending on whether you're including the actual number of plants (him) or the individual species (me). I used to be the rose grower in the family, but I got tired of ripping my hands open on the thorns, so now he takes care of all of them. Pruning out dead branches, weeding, and watering—that's all he does, but they flourish under his care. Dan also grows the majority of the vegetables, although back and knee pain are making that a more difficult, lengthy process these days. Most years, we get a nice crop of tomatoes, carrots, green beans, potatoes, and garlic. He's celebrated in the family and among his mail patrons for the

garlic he shares every fall. Since I put the flower gardening chores in Dan's hands a number of years ago, too, there's been a much higher survival rate for any plants we bring into the yard. I tell him what to plant, and he lets me weed them. I'm good at weeding. I can tell a purslane sprout from cilantro seedling, so I'm handy that way. I haven't given up completely on growing plants myself, but it gets discouraging when it feels like the plants are playing favorites. Like my mother, though, I'm going to keep trying. If I ever want a *Better Homes and Gardens* yard, though, like Mom, I may have to move.

The Accidental Cat

I met Lily in my vegetable garden one bright morning in late May 2007. I was sitting on the cobbled garden pathway yanking purslane from between the stones, enjoying the first clear day after three solid weeks of rain. She staggered in from the hotel parking lot behind my house, a skeletal cat with tortoiseshell fur that resembled the walkway slabs, lichen-patches of pink and tan blotched randomly over her gray surface. Jagged hipbones peaked the fur on her flanks, void of fatty padding to round them off. Naturally dainty, she probably weighed no more than four pounds at that time—possibly less. She stumbled within arm's reach, then flopped onto the warm paving stones, mewing a whispery call for attention before rolling on her back, hollowed-out belly and ribcage exposed for potential rubbing, in case I was so inclined. There was no demand for food or water, although it was obvious the tiny sack of cat-bones-and-skin needed both. "Go ahead. Rub my belly." That was all she asked.

So I did for a few minutes, just to get acquainted. Then I jumped up and sprinted to the house for a can of tuna and some water, afraid she might leave if I didn't hurry. We had a dog, but I didn't think she'd like dry dog chow much. Tuna seemed like something she might eat. I put a spoonful in a plastic container lid and set it near her. She didn't pay much attention to it until I dabbed some of the oil on her nose. She licked it off and then wobbled upright to stand over the lid, nibbling at tiny bites of fish with a ragged purr rattling in her throat. She gagged over every couple of morsels, probably due to extreme dehydration, but she didn't stop eating until half of the spoonful was gone. She also tried a few sips of the water I'd brought before stretching out in the sun again. Her eyes closed, and I could hear her purr vibrating against the warm stones while I went back to my weeding. She kept me company, silently enjoying the sunshine, until I had to

go inside to make supper. When I went back later that evening, she was gone. Months later I learned how unusual it is for a cat to expose its belly to a stranger on first sight.

The cat returned the next time I went out to the garden, and the next time, and the one after that as well. I took her food and water every day, finally switching from tuna to canned cat food when it became obvious that she wasn't going anywhere. Rather than referring to her as That Cat the way my husband did, I named her Lily after her favorite place to sleep—the daylily bed over by the garden fence. It seemed like an appropriately delicate name for a fragile-looking creature. In reality, she wasn't fragile in the least, just physically tiny. If she'd actually been delicate, maybe it wouldn't have taken two months to catch her.

Lily never followed me to the house, even though I bribed her with a trail of cheese, one of her favorite foods. She made it halfway down the yard once, before bolting back to the safety of the daylilies. She would disappear for a day or two, and I worried that she was dead, but then I'd be weeding and she'd stalk in from the parking lot again. When it was time for belly rubs she'd flop down next to me and roll on her back, purr grinding away in her throat. Other times she just blended into the shadows around the daylily plants and soaked up the warmth of approaching summer. I left food on the garden path even when I wasn't working outside, just in case she needed it. No matter how often I fed her, Lily never ate very much and didn't seem to gain any weight. I worried about that, too.

I'd never tried to rescue a stray animal, but I couldn't simply feed her and forget her until she showed up again, no matter how many times Dan stated that we didn't need a cat. He told me (for the first time) that he didn't like cats and didn't want one, but I felt as if Lily had found me for a reason. And, to be honest, I missed having a cat. We'd gotten a cat years before, a big, leopard-sleek black male named Spooky. I don't remember why we stopped at the Humane

Society that day, but I do remember how Spooky purred and wrapped his paws around my neck when I picked him up.

"We'll take him," I said.

Spooky slept on my belly whenever I stretched out on the couch to read or watch TV. When I became pregnant with our second son and Spooky was banished from my stomach, he curled up behind my knees for afternoon naps. After we'd had him a couple of years, we realized that he'd been peeing in the basement for a while, ruining a box of family recipe books and an artificial Christmas tree before we noticed what was happening. Dan insisted the cat had to go, and I reluctantly agreed. He returned Spooky to the Humane Society where we'd gotten him and I cried for the rest of the day. I was so miserable Dan called the shelter the next day to see if we could get the cat back, but he'd already found a new home. I hope they were more cat savvy than we were. Years later, someone told us that Spooky probably just had a urinary tract infection, which could have been treated, but we didn't know that at the time.

I never stopped missing Spooky, but I hadn't thought of getting another cat until Lily came along. By the beginning of June I was constantly worrying about her. I checked the food I'd left out several times a day to see if she'd eaten any, and obsessed over prolonged absences. I felt like it was up to me to save her, in spite of Dan's protests.

But first I'd have to catch her.

The initial attempt in early June was a complete disaster. I brought her some cheese and sat on the pathway with her while she ate it, fully intending to pick her up and carry her into the house as soon as she was finished. Maybe I telegraphed my intentions somehow. I could have been giving off nervous pheromones detectable to animals. I was definitely afraid of hurting her, still not much more than bones and purr, so I was probably too tentative when I tried to scoop her

off the walkway. Suddenly, I was holding a handful of whirling cat paws, claws out. I let go and she shot off toward the parking lot. My stomach knotted with guilt when she didn't come back for a few days, but she did eventually return, a bit wary and watchful. The slightest hint that I might pick her up sent Lily running for the flower bed. It took the rest of the month to rebuild her trust.

Then I tried again.

I knew Lily was most likely pregnant. I'd heard mating yowls in mid June, after the previous capture attempt and before she gave me a second chance, and now it was early July. I called the Humane Society to see if they would take Lily because she was so sick. She continued to eat every day, but she still gagged on her food and wasn't filling out. The shelter said if she was also pregnant, they'd do an evaluation and then decide. Dan agreed to help me catch her, as long as she was going to the shelter and not into the house. Maybe that was my first mistake.

Lily had to have known something was up when Dan joined me in the garden. He usually did his own gardening in the evening after work, when Lily wasn't around, so him showing up in the middle of the day must have looked damned suspicious. Plus he was carrying a large towel and a cardboard box. I sat down on the pathway stones and fed her cheese, petting and crooning as she nibbled it, keeping her eye on Dan at the same time.

My second mistake was trying not to hurt her. Again. I was afraid to grab her too hard, afraid that I would break her tiny, slender bones. I thought it would be easier if I wrapped her in the towel. That had worked whenever we needed to give Spooky ear drops for mites, so I decided it would work to capture Lily, too. Only I hadn't accounted for Lily's street smarts and wariness. She slipped out of the towel the minute it covered her back, and I didn't clamp down

fast enough. I scrabbled to hang on, but the towel itself got in my way and Lily shot off into the parking lot again.

She stayed away for two weeks that time. I stopped leaving food in the garden after I saw a raccoon helping himself.

It was getting close to the end of July when she came back. I'm not sure why she returned, or why the third kidnapping attempt worked, but it did. We spent a week or so getting reacquainted, until I was finally able to simply pick her up and cradle her in my arms. I carried her toward the house, talking to her the whole way as she stared at me, purring against my chest. I took her straight inside and up the stairs, telling her all the wonderful comforts to be had in her new home. She only looked around once, halfway up the stairs. I held her tighter when she wiggled, as if she was going to jump down, determined not to let her go this time. I don't know if Lily understood what was going on, or if she'd finally decided to let me have my way, but apparently she was ready to be my cat. I took her into the bathroom and closed the door behind us.

Dan isn't a shouter when he's angry, but he came as close as I've ever seen when I told him what I'd done. He didn't want a cat. (I knew that.) We already had a dog. (Yes, and I had no idea how I was going to introduce the two when the time came.) We'd agreed to take That Cat to the Humane Society, not to take her in ourselves. (He'd agreed to the shelter. I'd always intended to keep her, but he never wanted to talk about it.) When he demanded that I take That Cat to a shelter or the woods or anywhere except our only bathroom, I pitched what might rightly be called a tantrum. All the worrying and stress and yearning bubbled out at once. Why could he have a dog but I couldn't have a cat just because he liked dogs? How dare he condemn Lily's kittens to be eaten by raccoons or 'possums or other neighborhood cats? Why did everything

have to be his way and never mine? I don't even remember all the things I yelled. I *am* a shouter, and I was shrill, out of control, ugly and unfair and ruthlessly determined to have my way. Our sons wisely hid behind their computers in another part of the house.

Dan grudgingly said I could keep Lily until her kittens were born, but then they'd all have to find homes when they were old enough. Even Lily. I agreed, even though I had no real intention of getting rid of every cat. I wanted to keep Lily and at least one of the kittens, but I'd face that argument when it showed up. It would be months before it became an issue, anyway. My main concern was making sure their mother stayed comfortable and confined.

Having to keep Lily in the bathroom was definitely a hardship for everyone, but the only logical choice if I was going to keep her at all. I wasn't about to let her roam the house and have her kittens somewhere inaccessible, and our house only has four rooms that can be closed off. Two of them are bedrooms. The third is euphemistically called "the sewing room," but it's really just a glorified junk room, packed with empty shipping boxes and everything else that has no regular storage place. The fourth is the bathroom. I cleared out the door-less closet and put a litter box on one side. Dan graciously helped me partition off the litter box to create a nesting box on the other side. He said if we were actually going to do this, we should do it right. Now, Lily and her family had somewhere to sleep without me worrying about tottering kittens falling into the dirty litter.

Dan hated having to get ready for work every morning with the cat in the bathroom. He complained that she stared at him when he was in the tub. He refused to take her food, clean the litter box, or say anything more to her than "Get out of the way, cat!" but he also didn't say anything again about getting rid of her. Lily's favorite perch was inside the single window, set at ceiling height, where she could chatter at the birds on the kitchen roof outside and oversee the

miniscule room. Danny and Jay liked having her there, but they weren't interested in taking care of her, either. Lily was my sole responsibility. Our twelve-year-old Sheltie/Husky mix dog, Gracie, was the only one at all interested in the cat, and she wasn't allowed in the bathroom anymore. At first she spent a lot of time sprawled outside the door, sniffing underneath, but she eventually lost interest. The cat wasn't coming out. Gracie wasn't going in. *Boring*.

Lily didn't spend a lot of time crying or trying to get out of the bathroom, seemingly content to remain a prisoner with three squares a day and a litter box in the closet. Maybe she was happy to be in out of the heat and elements. She was safer than she'd been in months. By the beginning of August, Lily's pregnancy was obvious. I contacted a veterinarian friend in Texas for advice on how to make her healthy enough to give birth. Lily's ribs and hip bones still stuck out, but her face was rounder. Supporting the kittens growing inside her was going to take a lot of energy, and she barely had enough to keep herself going. My friend came up with a diet heavy in chicken and milk. That may have been the one thing that saved Lily and her babies.

The kittens were born without any warning in late August. I'd been watching Lily for any new behavior or lack of appetite or signs of nest building, but she was acting the same as always right up until the whole family left the house to go out for the day. I don't even remember where we were going, but at some point we returned to the house briefly to use the bathroom and pick up something we'd left behind before heading out again. Lily was on the braided rug in front of the toilet, cleaning herself.

"Not a good spot, cat," I said, gingerly trying to move around her so I could use the toilet.

Then I realized that she wasn't alone. A tiny, damp gray ball lay near her feet, and she was licking another damp ball of orange. She was having the babies!

I gently picked up the rug, cats and all, moved it to the nesting box in the closet, quickly peed, then ran downstairs to tell the rest of the family. By the time we got back that evening, Lily had given birth to four kittens, but the fifth one was stuck halfway out and she was too exhausted to finish. I helped her to complete the birth, but that baby, a second orange kitten, half again as big as all the others, was stillborn, the amniotic sack unbroken over its face. We buried it under the Mock Orange bush in the back yard.

The bathroom became the favorite room in the house for everyone except Dan. I dug out a plastic baby gate that had been in the basement for ten years, cleaned it up and used it to block off the doorway so Lily could leave the bathroom without letting Gracie in. Their first few encounters were noisy and energetic, but as long as no one interfered, no blood was drawn. Once Lily made it downstairs, Gracie would bark the cat through the house at high speed until she ran back to the bathroom, hissing through the safety of the baby gate mesh. I suspect Lily secretly enjoyed the exercise after a month cooped up in one room.

The first-born kitten, a gray tabby/tortoiseshell combo, we named Sir Edmund Hilary because that one was always the first to try something new: climbing out of the nesting box, crawling under the claw-foot tub, using the litter box, scaling the baby gate. Once a new barrier was broken, the other three would give it a try. When the kittens were nine weeks old, we found out that Sir Edmund was a girl and changed her name to Eddie. Two of the others were girls as well. Only the surviving orange kitten was a boy. One of our sons named him Fireball, because he looked like the bouncing fire ball in a Super Mario Bros. game.

Lily was a calm, attentive mother. As the kittens grew, she gave them room to explore the small space that was their home, perching on a shelf over the bathroom sink to keep an eye on everything. She rarely meowed under any circumstances, until she became a mother. Apparently

cats have an instinct for something that I learned the hard way—volume is more important than what you say when disciplining children. Hit a certain decibel level, and you'll have their attention. My kids often ignored me until the tone of my voice left no doubt that they'd ticked me off. When Lily was annoyed, her normally whispery, raspy meow rose loud and clear, leaving no question about her mood.

The kittens were three months old before we started taking them downstairs to explore other rooms in the house. They skittered around the kitchen floor, unable to get any purchase on the slickly painted wood. Gracie stood outside the baby gate I'd put in the doorway, prancing in place and whining to see the new toys. Lily let them interact through the gate, keeping a wary eye on the dog, but she didn't interfere. Dan picked up one of the babies to show Gracie, holding it by her nose to sniff. The kitten hissed, spit, and shot backwards up his arm. Gracie yipped and ran up the stairs. Lily stalked over to check out her kid, but then went back to keeping an eye on all of them as if the encounter was just another life lesson.

After the four month mark, we got everyone vaccinated and found homes for the girls. I would have kept all five cats if that had been possible, but I would have needed to get rid of my husband first. Or move myself. Nevertheless, I informed Dan that I intended to keep Lily and Fireball. I didn't ask, because I knew he'd say no—I just told him. He took it about as well as I expected. The cats would be locked in the laundry room at night, where they would also have access to the basement with a second litter box in it. Cats were not allowed on the counters or dinner table. No feeding people food to the cats. No cats in the bedroom, on the bed, or anywhere near the bed. I chose not to point out that we fed Gracie people food, allowed her in our bedroom, *and* he was the one who put her on our bed the day we got her. Most nights I slept with one leg hanging out of the blankets, or both of them curled up to my stomach, to accommodate

the dog. But these were cats, so there were different rules now. Whatever. At least they could stay.

During the fall and into winter, Gracie and Lily gradually reached something that couldn't exactly be called detente, but at least was a degree below outright hostility. They gave each other plenty of space when passing through a room at the same time, a low growl and answering hiss issued to clarify the hierarchy as needed. This was Gracie's house and she wasn't about to let some interloper cat off easy. Lily had the sense to stay out of the dog's food bowl. Gracie, on the other hand, would steal cat food whenever possible, as fast as possible, so we took to putting the cat bowls on a tall end table in a corner of the living room. The dog was too short to reach and the cats felt safer up off the floor.

Fireball's relationship with Gracie was mostly in his own head. He seemed to consider her a second mother. He followed her around the house as if he was a dog himself, fascinated by whatever she was doing. His favorite game was to rub his body back and forth under her chin until she snapped at him. Lily didn't seem to care that he was hanging out with the dog, so I left them alone. Gracie probably would have preferred that I get rid of the pest, but his hero worship was so comical, I couldn't stand to deprive him of his idol.

Once warmer spring weather rolled around, Lily insisted on going outside again. I guess she'd gotten used to being outdoors, and apparently she wanted to make sure Fireball could take care of himself in the wild world. She taught him to climb trees, then left him to figure out how to get down on his own. It was unnerving to look up in the huge maple tree and see him Cheshire-Cat-ing on a big limb, thirty feet off the ground. Fireball never did learn to defend himself –Lily fought all his battles with the neighborhood cats, while the son twice her size cowered under a bush. She taught him how to catch mice in the basement and shared the bounty

with her human family. The first time she brought me a rodent gift, purring and stiff with pride, I shrieked. It's not that I dislike mice, it's just that coming upon dead ones unexpectedly is a bit unnerving. I thanked Lily a bit insincerely, then picked up the deceased mouse with a gloved hand and tossed it in the rose hedge at the back of the yard. Lily ignored me for three days afterward.

Tortoiseshell cats are often stand-offish and disinclined to physical affection, but Lily very gradually came to enjoy being handled. She didn't like sitting on my lap, but she would jump onto the keyboard tray of my computer desk and hunker down next to me while I typed. That was her sign for "time to pet the cat." She was still tiny, never reaching more than six pounds on a good day, and none of her paws were much bigger than the end of my thumb. I could always feel her spine, and while she filled out after the kittens were born, she didn't have much more than skin over her ribs. Fireball quickly shot past his mother in size, and he looked nothing like her. Whereas Lily's fur was short and mottled gray, Fireball's fur was medium length, and a solid, un-striped orange with white chest and legs. The vet called him a "buff calico," which apparently are always male and usually sterile. We had him neutered, just to be safe. He was easily twice Lily's size by his first birthday. People who met our cats couldn't believe she'd actually given birth to him, but then my own sons are a foot taller than me, so Lily and Fireball never struck me as anything out of the ordinary.

Dan disliked having cats but slowly learned to cope, setting down new rules as infractions arose. He always went to sleep while the cats were still roaming the house, so he started sleeping with the bedroom door closed, just in case one of them had the nerve to invade our room. Despite sleeping soundly with the clank of Gracie's nails on the bare wood floor as she moved around under the bed, the barely audible tick of cat nails inside the bedroom was enough

to make Dan shoot bolt upright in bed. They learned very quickly that he didn't like them, so they never even tried to come into our bedroom unless I was in there by myself. We resurrected the squirt bottle of water we'd used on Spooky to keep him out of the Christmas tree, but Lily and Fireball never bothered the tree. The counters, however, were a different matter. It only took one hit in the butt with a hard jet of water to break them of jumping on the counters and table, but several times I caught Dan squirting them for minor infractions as well. Lily kept out of his way. Fireball seemed to enjoy it.

Gracie probably had the biggest adjustment to cats in the house. She'd spent twelve years as household queen, and suddenly her kingdom was overrun by peasants. Once the other kittens were gone, I made her share the water bowl in the kitchen corner with Lily and Fireball. Water was best kept on the floor, not on the food table where it could be knocked over and splashed everywhere. Gracie got used to seeing them at the bowl, but I noticed that Lily timed her visits when the coast was clear. Fireball considered getting chased away to be a good game. Either that, or he had no sense of timing. Gracie had to get used to sharing her people food treats, too. Most days she got a little cheese or egg yolks or cooked pasta or whatever was for supper, dropped onto the floor next to the kitchen island. (Dan initiated that habit, too.) Lily eventually started showing up when we were cooking as well, just in case there was something edible on offer. She would stand on the opposite side of the kitchen island from Gracie and wait for a morsel to come her way. She never ate much: a shred of cheese, a lump of hard-cooked yolk, slivers of chicken, a dab of plain yogurt or sour cream. Pasta turned out to be Not Food, as far as Lily was concerned, so Gracie had that all to herself. But having nearly starved to death, Lily wasn't terribly choosy about food for the most part. After a while, even Dan would drop bits to her.

* * * * *

2009 was a bad year to be a pet in our house. Gracie was fourteen years old by then and had already blown out both knees from chasing squirrels. The knees healed to a certain extent without surgery, but the residual pain and stiffness slowed her down. She quit chasing squirrels and sprawled underfoot more. She couldn't jump onto the bed at night, so Dan picked her up and put her there. When he had to help her off in the morning as well, she started sleeping on the floor under the bed instead. Fireball seemed to know that there was something wrong, spending more time nearby during the day, bumping her in the chin with his head. She even let him, without complaining. Gracie died in mid May, probably from congestive heart failure. She'd been coughing off and on for about a week. We had an appointment to take her to the vet, but I didn't have a car, so we were going after Dan got home from work. She keeled over on her way through the dining room and died hours before that. We ended up taking her to the vet that night to have her cremated instead.

The emptiness left by Gracie's death wasn't a surprise to any of us. The way the cats reacted was. Both of them had walked over and sniffed Gracie's body right after she died, then walked away again. They understood that something had happened, but her loss didn't affect them the same way it affected us. The surprise came over the next week or so, as Fireball kept searching for Gracie in her usual haunts throughout the house. He crawled under the bed in our room, pushed her sleeping mat around the dining room, and ran down the basement steps, calling to her, even though she hated the basement and never went downstairs voluntarily. He slept in her favorite place under the kitchen table for weeks. I read that cats aren't bothered by loss, but he'd always viewed Gracie as the head pet and seemed to consider himself part dog. For a few weeks, he mourned as if he really were a dog.

That August, Lily started acting oddly. She still went outside every morning, but sometimes she didn't come home at dusk as usual. She *might* show up before midnight, or not until the following morning. Fireball always came inside around supper time, no matter what his mother did. He didn't like rain, or wind, or loud noises, or other cats, so the outdoors didn't call to him in quite the same way that it called Lily. Fireball was found crying outside the back door one morning when Dan left for work, apparently having gotten himself locked out all night. He refused to go anywhere near the door for months. But Lily preferred to be outside if the weather was nice, and "nice" was a very flexible concept that even included snow. She knew how to take care of herself, so I didn't worry unless she stayed out after dark.

I did start to worry when Lily began wailing to go out at odd moments. She'd been spayed after the kittens were born, so she wasn't in heat. I had no idea why she would hang by her claws from the screen door well after dark, yowling in a tone I'd never heard from her before. She ran from door to door and window to window, trying to find a way out. Each time it happened, she became more insistent, more desperate. I would hold her, reluctant and struggling, until she stopped. But she was always her normal, calm self in the morning, when it was time to go outside for the day.

One night in September, she didn't come home. I kept calling out the back door, even though I know cats don't usually come when called, and Lily wasn't any different, but I needed to do *something*. When I left to pick my older son up from work right before dusk, I saw a round, dark mound in the middle of the road near the post office. I decided to check it out when we got home, but by then it was gone. I continued calling for Lily until midnight, then went to bed.

Danny found her dead the next morning, lying on the front yard hill that slopes down to the sidewalk. Her little body was stiff and hard, her legs jutting out straight as if frozen in mid

stretch. I couldn't find any evidence that she'd been hurt, but then I really didn't know what I was looking for. I wrapped her in a towel and carried her out to the garden. She seemed to weigh even less than she had when I first met her. We buried Lily near the mock orange bush, under a paving stone with an angel on it. She'd only lived with us a little over two years.

It says a lot about my husband that, four years later, we still own a cat. Dan has gotten used to Fireball, more commonly called Your Cat. Dan still doesn't feed him, but then Fireball only eats dry cat food and cat treats. As far as he's concerned, nothing else except deli ham is food, and he only eats one tiny sliver of that before he's full. Dan *will* open the kitchen door and let him into the laundry room, though, so Fireball can look out the screen door or go down to the basement. Recently Dan's been grumbling that it's time to teach the cat to shut the kitchen door behind himself. It's winter, and he's letting in cold air. My husband takes delight in finding new ways to torment Fireball, which our masochistic cat loves. The fact that Fireball likes to be abused may stem from his older sister, Eddie, beating the crap out of him on a daily basis. If two kittens were locked in a death struggle, rolling around on the floor, it was usually Fireball and Eddie. Fireball purrs like a cement mixer full of rocks when we bop him on the head with an empty wrapping paper tube. In our house, those long stuffed dog toys that look like a stretched-out Dachshund are called Cat Bludgeons, and getting whacked with them is one of Fireball's favorite games. Dan won't beat on the cat, but he does bring home wind-up toys to chase him with, and he frequently suggests that Your Cat would like a Roomba vacuum cleaner. Never mind that it would probably scare Fireball into fits. Dan figures that, even if he won't ride on it like the cats in the Internet videos, it would still be useful for chasing him.

Dan and I still miss Gracie every day, especially when we drop food on the floor and have to bend our arthritic backs to pick it up ourselves. For a while, I swore I heard her shifting around under the bed. Nothing sounds quite the same as dog claws on a wooden floor, or that deep sigh she would let out when she was finally settled for the night. She was terrified of thunder, so I don't exactly miss having her underfoot when it storms, but I keep expecting to see her huddled by my feet. Dan still finds it hard to talk about her.

We never figured out why Lily died. Our older son thinks she was hit by a car—that she was the dark lump I'd seen in the road. I hate to admit that he's probably right, because that means I might have saved her if I'd stopped for a moment, instead of waiting. Then again, maybe nothing would have helped at that point. Plus, his theory doesn't explain her odd behavior during the weeks before that night. I'd rather think that she knew she was dying, and that her last act was to crawl to where she felt the safest. With no other indicators, we never thought about taking her to the vet. I guess we'll never know, and that still bothers me.

I feel like we failed both Gracie and Lily, even though I'm not sure what else we could have done. Being the "parent" of an animal is very similar to being the parent of a human child. If we care about them at all, we want to do the best we can, which often involves a lot of guessing and second guessing and guilt. It's a feeling I'm become familiar with because of my children, ever since my first son was one month old and vomiting after almost every feeding. I checked out baby care books from the library and kept coming up against one possibility—pyloric stenosis, a narrowing of the outlet from stomach to intestines. If the food has no way of going down, logically it would come back up. After a few days of wearing vomited baby formula, with careful research in hand, we took Danny to the family doctor. He looked at the pages I'd bookmarked, listened to my theory, then declared, "Stop stuffing a bottle in his mouth

every time he cries. You're overfeeding him." For someone who had spent five agonizing years trying to get pregnant, whose entire life revolved around being the best mother possible, he couldn't have hit me with a more crushing rebuke. So when Danny was eighteen months old, and had a bad reaction to his DPT vaccine, I spent an anxious, restless night as his fever relentlessly climbed over 102, unable to decide whether I should wake Dan and take him to the hospital, or wait. Any faith I had in my own mothering ability was gone. I waited, bathing my son's face and chest in warm water, praying that he wouldn't have a seizure before his fever broke. We both got lucky. The fever went down, and there seemed to be no lasting ill effects, but every decision a parent makes is a gamble one way or another, regardless of who the decision affects. It's all too easy to play "what if" when things go wrong, without any hope of knowing whether outcome might have been different or not.

We could have taken Gracie to the vet sooner, but the cough hadn't been around all that long. We were certainly concerned but not really worried. Maybe we should have been. Maybe there was something wrong with Lily, too, that could have been diagnosed and cured. Or maybe it wouldn't have mattered what we did. I don't know, anymore than I know how things would have been different had we taken Danny to the hospital. It takes a while to forgive myself, but I've learned that wallowing in guilt is pointless. We did the best that we could. Gracie and Lily both had a good life, they were both loved and appreciated, and maybe that's enough. Maybe that's all we can ask from any relationship.

Dan and I have finally started talking about adopting another dog. Losing two pets in the same year was hard, and facing that kind of loss again is something we're having trouble with, but I miss the companionship. Fireball is lonely, too, and I can't think of anything he'd enjoy more than being chased around by a puppy. I want two dogs this time, siblings if possible. Dan

isn't so sure about that part, but he agrees that it's time. We won't be taking in any more cats, for obvious reasons, but I'm okay with that. Lily found me, not the other way around. I can't count on getting that lucky a second time, and anyway, I'm getting a bit too old to throw tantrums.

Pennsylvania in My Blood

There's a special kind of morning that pulls memories from my brain in wisps and swirls, flashes and sparks. It starts at sunrise, or slightly before, that unnaturally still pre-dawn period when only the robins are abroad and gearing up to serenade the world awake whether it wants to be or not. The sky is just beginning to flush golden at the edges and the dark places show faint shadows that tremble. A cool, light, damp breeze through the open window tickles my skin with the scents of water vapor and growing things and earthworms. These are my Pennsylvania mornings. They always catch me unaware, usually in late spring or summer, but sometimes in the midst of a mild winter, too—most unexpected. I've tried looking for them, sniffing at the silent darkness, searching for that soft, dewy fragrance that will open my well of recollection, but they show up on their schedule, not mine. Their rarity makes them all the more precious and sought after. One deep breath and I'm a child again, visiting Great-Uncle Walter and Great-Aunt Margaret's house in Ada, in the southwest hills of Pennsylvania.

I remember the drive south from Ohio seemed to take forever, hours and hours, up and down the roller-coaster Appalachians, jerking around the switch-back turns, until we were all dizzy and giggling and nauseated. Dad always got lost in Brownsville. The town seemed to have a Brigadoon quality that made him forget where he was going and how to get there. I remember driving past my mother's birthplace, the former town of Gates Mines, now nothing but a heap of coal slag, a sign, and the acrid, cloying smell of warm sulfur. In Mom's mind, she could still see the tiny coal-company house where she was born behind the sofa, despite having moved to

Cleveland when she was three or four, and she would point out its space in time every year as if she had never shown us before.

I remember the last thrilling turn in the road just before we reached Uncle Walter's house—up, down, lean left, lean right, lose your lunch on the final dip if Dad turned the wheel too hard—then there it was, the neatly painted house gleaming in the afternoon sun, perched white and welcoming on top of a grassy hill. A porch extended all the way across the front, the floor of it casting shadows over the basement door in the hillside underneath. The whole building snuggled into the lap of the rolling hills, cradled by the earth at its back, while the land on either side rose up like a parents' protective arms to keep it securely in place.

We first pulled in at the road-level garage, four kids piling out of the car and racing up the long flight of hillside steps toward the welcome of beloved family. Then Dad would back out onto the road again and drive all the way around the house, up a steep gravel track to the top of the hill behind. He'd park next to the outhouse before hiking downhill for his turn at hugs.

I remember that we were never the only visitors. No matter what time of the summer, there were aunts and uncles, great and otherwise, first, second and third cousins, and possibly plain old friends and neighbors. It took years before I grasped how they were all related to me. Mom's mother and grandfather were usually there, too. Grandpap spent most of his life on disability after losing half his fingers on each hand in a mine explosion as a young man. He delighted in shaking hands with us, his scar-crossed palms puffy and soft and foreign-feeling, making us flinch back in shock even though we knew what to expect. He would chortle and babble something in Hungarian to Gram, because he didn't speak much English and no one ever taught us Hungarian, but we knew he was laughing at us. Gram scolded him for teasing and he

pretended to hang his head in shame, but his eyes twinkled and turned up at the corners, and he never stopped putting out his maimed hand for us to shake.

I remember Uncle Walter's outhouse so clearly; a classic one-holer with its personal plague of flies and a smell that could curl the hair in your nose on a hot day. A shaggy, half-wild mutt named King was left chained to the outhouse during the day whenever we were there to keep him out of the way, but he guarded it at night all the time, to discourage vandalism. Sometimes we stayed in the "radio shack" where Uncle Walter repaired electronics, the long, low building set on the same plateau of the hill as the outhouse. I remember waking in the middle of the night and running barefoot out the door of the radio shack, nightgown flapping about my ten-year-old shins, toward the narrow, wooden hut silhouetted against the summer moon, anticipating the cool kiss of the metal handle in my palm as I reached out. King sprang into my face from the bushes, snarling as if I were a nefarious stranger intent on burglarizing the tiny shit house. I don't remember if I actually made it into the outhouse, but I never liked staying in the radio shack.

Other times, I remember lying in the sweltering attic bedroom of the main house, siblings and cousins scrunched end to end and side by side on beds, sofas, the carpeted floor. I remember peering through the open, gravity-feed heater grate in the floor at the adults gathered around the kitchen table below playing Canasta or Euchre. Grandpap liked to cheat, hiding cards in the folds of his crippled hands or under other cards on the table until someone else called him out. Then he'd express his astonishment and innocence in a high-pitched voice of surprise and injured dignitythat set the grown-ups laughing and blowing raspberries. I remember we thought we were

so quiet and clever, staying up well past our bedtime, giggling and whispering until a parent inevitably looked straight up at the grate and said, "Go to sleep."

But sleep was never easy in the attic. As if everyone else's snuffling and snoring and sibilant giggling and elbow or knee gouging a dent in my back weren't enough, there was also the heavy void of darkness glowering behind the dwarf-high screen door leading to the eaves. A fan inside blew furnace-hot air into the room, whipping our hair and sheets without cooling anything. Older cousins swore a crazy man lived in there, a killer of multiple mysterious victims without names, hideous torments only hinted at. I remember many gritty-eyed hours staring at the black hole until the dawn sun lightened the high-set window, certain he couldn't get me if I didn't sleep. But the Pennsylvania morning air was soft and cool and scented with unfamiliar smells as it rolled out of the hills above us and misted over the valley below, fogging the long, anxious night with sensible daylight and comfort.

I remember the best visits revolved around weddings. It seemed as though there were hundreds of people, my grandmother's thirteen younger siblings and their spouses and dozens of children, one adult after another exclaiming "You look just like Aunt Ethel" and "Goodness how big you've grown" and "Why don't you visit more often?" The wood-floored church hall vibrated with deafening polka music and loud conversations, family news shouted over the enthusiastic push-pull of a live band with accordions and fiddles. Wall-to-wall tables sagged under the weight of platters and bowls of homemade Hungarian stuffed cabbage, pierogies, baked chicken, mashed potatoes and potato salad, homemade cakes and pies, Jell-O molds and whole watermelons sliced into dripping triangular wedges. After dinner the kids would slalom through dancing legs, weaving around swirling chiffon and long, lean worsted wool, adult hands reaching

down to slow us "before you knock someone over!" Spread a little sawdust to make the polka turns easier, and smooth-soled dress shoes became ice skates on wooden floors.

There were always cousins to play with on Pennsylvania vacations. I remember four or five of us crammed onto the swaying porch swing, almost-too-short legs kicking toe tips on the floor just enough to move the bench back and forth until it bumped into the house. Someone always shouted, "Stop hitting the house!" and I wondered why the swing was there if we weren't supposed to swing on it. We watched from that swing as rain storms skimmed the hilltops, gray gauze curtains swishing through the trees in their rush toward our valley, wavering back and forth like cloth strips dangling from the roof inside a car wash. The wind smelled like dust and worms and bruised leaves. Thunder ricocheted off the rocky Appalachian bumper pads as Henry Hudson's spectral team bowled for the regional trophy. I wished for thunderstorms daily at Uncle Walter's house.

I remember my favorite second cousin was Paul, dark haired, taller than me, which most boys weren't until I got into my teens. He liked to make up stories about space and the stars, and I believed whatever he told me. I remember the last time I saw him was at another cousin's wedding. I was fourteen and he was close to twenty—too grown up to ice skate on the dance floor anymore. So we stood in a side room away from the thumping polka music and talked and I developed the kind of crush that cousins have when they see each infrequently. He wore a 1960s suit with a fringed denim jacket. I felt very mature and sophisticated in my mother's black sheath with the Chinese lotus flowers and Mandarin collar clinging to my newly emerging, but still-boyish, figure. I don't remember what we talked about, but I know we talked for hours. Ten years later, I remember Gram called to tell us that Paul had killed himself over a married woman, somewhere in Oregon.

* * * * *

I remember one year Uncle Walter enlarged the basement, "digging" the existing cellar larger with dynamite. I can still see all the handles on the kitchen cupboard doors roped shut, large vases and platters and pictures removed from their usual chiffoniers and shelves to rest on the floor. I remember Aunt Margaret chasing us out of the house.

"Up the hill, all the way to the outhouse. Get now!"

We waited for what seemed like a long time, not even allowed to roll down the hill to pass the time. Then Uncle Walter and several other men sprinted out the back door, over the concrete stoop, up the hill. Before they made it to where we stood, a sudden, deep pressure rose under our feet, a muffled concussion against our eardrums. Small wisps of dust and smoke drifted out the house doors and windows. We weren't allowed back inside until the building was thoroughly inspected and deemed structurally safe. We left for home not long after so I didn't get to see the dynamite's aftereffects, or what they did with all the rocks and dirt, until later. The next summer, I remember helping my mother with the laundry in the basement, turning the heavy crank on the round wringer washer as she fed sopping wet clothes between the long rollers to squeeze out the water, listening to the grumbling chug-chug of the motor, my nose tingling from the sneezy smell of bleach and starch. The walls of chunky cement blocks and stones looked like they'd always been that way, and I wondered how they made it look that way and where Aunt Margaret did laundry before they blasted the basement bigger.

I remember watching out the basement door as my 4' 9" great-aunt chased a 400 pound sow and eight piglets around her yard. Several of us kids had seen the pig lying in tufts of cool, high buckgrass by the side of the road and ran squealing to tell our parents. Aunt Margaret chased us into the house, forbidding anyone to step foot outside until it was gone, then she

snatched up her broom and chased that pig. The smack of her broom against the huge sow's back echoed off the hills as she herded the behemoth toward the road, piglets shrieking underfoot on all sides as they tried to keep up and stay out of the way at the same time. Mom said sows with babies could be dangerous, but I remember we laughed as we watched from the safety of the basement door underneath the porch. The size difference between Aunt Margaret and the pig was comical and cartoonlike and we were too young to understand. But Mom didn't laugh and neither did Aunt Margaret.

I remember the last time I went to a wedding in Pennsylvania it was 1981, and I was one of the adults, with a two-month-old first born. The music still blared at deafening levels and the food still bowed the tables and the children still skated through the dancers, but I wasn't with them and I felt out of place, rudderless, uncomfortable. My mother had just died and this was her family, people she'd always been close to. I wanted her there to tell me their names and smooth out the awkwardness with relatives who didn't know what to say to me or how to comfort me. The cousin my mother had considered a sister tried to apologize for shunning Mom after the cancer diagnosis, treating her as if she were contagious, but we were both awkward about it and my mother wasn't there to forgive her. I wasn't sure I wanted to.

My son and I had a multi-generation picture taken with seventy-six-year-old Gram and ninety-six-year-old Grandpap—a photo with a gaping emptiness where the third generation should have been. I remember that I was twenty-six, and still getting used to being a mother myself. In the picture, all four of us look a bit lost and uncertain. I cherish that picture now that both of them are gone as well. Grandpap died in 1988 at 103 years old, still smoking stogies and drinking whiskey if Gram wasn't around to yell at him. He lived with Aunt Margaret and Uncle

Walter for the last twenty years of his life. My grandmother was 91 when she died in 1997. My sons remember Gram but, without my mother to mediate for us, they never had Pennsylvania vacations, so my memories are nothing but stories without a context about people they've never met.

I remember asking Gram once, many years ago, if the house was still the same. "Oh no! It's all different!" she said. One of the second cousins had moved into the house and changed this and added that and it wasn't the same at all. She seems to be quite pleased about it. I remember a tightness in my chest and thinking, I can never go back now. Uncle Walter died a year after Gram. Aunt Margaret died this past July, the youngest and last of Gram's siblings. I first heard the news when one of her children sent me a note in January, after they got our yearly family newsletter in Aunt Margaret's Christmas card.

I haven't wanted to go back to Pennsylvania for a long time, yet I would love to see the house nestled in the hills again. Other times, I wonder if returning would be any different than my mother pointing out a house that had only existed in her memory for decades. When everything you remember is gone or changed and the people barely know you by name, what reason is there to go back? Living in my memories is unsatisfying at times, but I don't want those memories to be altered as well. So I will have to wait for the cool, misty dew of a Pennsylvania morning to creep up unawares and take me back to that place I remember.

Bells! The Ride Begins

Panda. Giraffe. Ostrich. Stork. Cat holding a fish in its mouth. Tiger. Horses in tan, white, black, pie-bald, frozen in mid-rear or prance, sculpted manes blown by an imaginary wind, saddles sparkling with faux gems. The carousel inside the Chapel Hill Mall food court is still, absent of riders. Globe light bulbs outline each swoop and peak of the canopy. A golden egg crowns the center tent pole. The curlicue facing boards painted in rich burgundy and federal blue, now slightly faded and dusty, evoke an old-time midway. Alternating blue and white panels form a big-top tent over a double ring of carved steeds of every kind. All unmoving.

The traditional music of the merry-go-round oompahs continuously, while the ride attendant in her red polo shirt and black slacks robotically sweeps the same spot she just swept ten minutes ago. Slapping snare drums, wheezy band organ, cymbals—distinctively unlike any other type of music—are provided by a hidden stereo system instead of a player-piano roll full of holes. Piped-in music is audible only as a thumping bass underneath endless repetitions of "In the Good Old Summertime" or "Toot, Toot, Tootsie Goodbye," occasionally becoming clear when the tune changes, only to be submerged under the next song. Sometimes the melodies support each other or blend for an instant, but mostly they muddle and clash.

The PA system suddenly blares, words alternately swooshing past and caroming off each other, like verbal Dodge-'ems. Every third or forth word is almost intelligible, but then it bounces against another word, setting off a Domino effect until the message is lost among the twenty-foot-high tan pillars that hold up the vaulted ceiling.

The smell of grease, fried batter, sugar, and cold swirls back and forth as the mammoth mall doors open and close every few minutes. Beeeeep. Someone's food is done. A sudden waft

of caramel corn rushes side-by-side with a baby's vocal protests down the entire length of the food court.

The tables seem deserted at 3:00 in the afternoon, but maybe that's because it's too late for lunch and too early for supper. A few people gather at the small, gray Formica pedestal tables farthest from the children's play area, shoved together like Siamese twins to get the maximum seating from gunmetal aluminum chairs with wooden seats, two per table. A small family group, an older couple, a few late-dining store clerks in professional suits and ties and skirts, some eating, some talking, some still, like the carousel.

An auburn-haired woman in a lavender fleece sweater trails behind two small bouncing girls, their long hair flapping up and down as they skip toward the machine that dispenses ride tokens. The woman stops to read the signs taped to the squat, gray-metal case.

This machine does not give change

$1.00=1 token $5.00=5 tokens

Carousel tokens only please

A short, white metal fence stands guard to the right of the token machine. It's meant to hold back eager crowds, but no crowds push to board, only two little girls, dancing in rubber snow boots and parkas, while the woman feeds bills into the machine to cries of "Mommy Mommy Mommy!" She gives each child a token, which is passed to the waiting attendant before the girls scramble to board, racing back and forth in their hunt for exactly the right mount.

A bell rings. The carousel rotates, slowly picking up speed as the animals rise and fall, up and down, around and around, two minutes, three minutes, five. Wave to Mommy. Scenes from the Akron area painted around the inner core spin in time with the music—E. J. Thomas Hall, Firestone Country Club, Akron Air Dock, the Akron Skyline with a blimp flying across its face,

Derby Downs—producing a feeling of nausea as the eye tries to pick out each one in passing. Machinery scrapes and grinds to a rising rhythm of meshing metal parts, the sound advancing and retreating like waves on a shore. Little heels kick the horses' sides, as if to make their carved wooden bodies go faster. Around and around, imperceptibly slowing, taking its own sweet time until it comes to a complete stop.

The girls climb off their mounts with the attendant's help and run back to Mommy, waving at the attendant (or maybe the horses), smiles of wonder on their faces, and I remember that feeling of excitement at the mere sight of the horses, the flashing lights, the sound of the whining music. The tactile anticipation of smoothly-painted manes and saddles and cold metal poles that moved up and down, up and down with my small hands clasped around them. Candy apples on a stick or cones of cotton candy carried along in the single-minded search for the perfect horse instead of being set down or handed off to an adult, precariously juggled on the slippery mountain climb up the horse's side. Hoping to get the horse with the red-rose-covered saddle this time, or maybe the one they say is haunted that makes the carousel turn by itself late at night and which one was that again?

No one wants to ride the benches. Those are for babies and old people.

Merry-go-rounds of an older day and other places, outdoors rather than in. Cedar Point, Geauga Lake, barely-remembered Euclid Beach Park. Most amusement parks are gone now, their carousels bought and moved to other parks, or collections, or museums, or trash heaps. Or malls. I would have liked to ride with the girls, but I chose to stay outside the fence, like their mother. To be waved at instead of to wave.

I miss the magic of the carousel, the music, the lights, the steeds of all shapes and sizes. I miss that split second when my mother or father would come into view again so I could shout my

joy to them as I whirled past. I miss the feel of the hard, smooth horse underneath me, rising and falling, surging and pulling back, the speed of our rotations rippling my hair like a horse's mane. I miss the belief that all it takes is a ride on the carousel to make everything better.

For now, I sit and watch the wonder on children's faces and remember back a few decades when I was the one waving.

Wishes Like Shooting Stars

It's one in the morning and I've been grading my students' essays for hours, but I've finally made enough progress to earn some sleep. I fumble to shut off my computer, then stagger-shuffle into the living room where my younger son is blasting the crap out of WWII video-game bad guys with his online friends. The rest of the house is dark—we're the only ones left awake. Even the cat has gone to his bed in the laundry room. The furnace snaps on, puffing warm, musty-smelling air out of the ancient ductwork, twirling bits of cat hair into thermal updrafts as I pass through the arched doorway of the living room. I sway to a stop beside Jay's desk at the far end of the room and tap his shoulder. He shoves his headphones off one ear and turns toward me.

"I'm going to bed," I mutter. "Don't forget about the meteor shower."

It's a perfunctory reminder without any expectation that he'll follow through. He expressed interest when we first heard that the Geminid meteors would be visible tonight and I feel obligated by motherhood to be my child's human Post-it Note. But now he's busy with his friends and the mid-December temperature is just below freezing. I'm two hours past my bedtime and he's still three or four hours from his and neither of us really enjoy cold weather, so I'm expecting his usual "Eh, maybe I'll check it out later."

Instead he says "I'll be right back" into the headset mic, then he takes the headphones off and hooks them over his computer monitor. "Good thing you reminded me! Let's go see." He lumbers out of his chair, 350 pounds of 6' 4" animated 23-year-old, excited by the possibility of something that doesn't involve the virtual storming of Normandy Beach.

He apparently missed the first part where I said I was off to bed. I'm tired, and the Geminid meteors are visible every year around the same date, but it's rare that my younger son is eager to spend time away from his computer, by himself or with me, especially if it involves going outdoors. Jay has never really enjoyed being outside for its own sake. Even as a child he treated the backyard like an extended play space when friends were available but preferred to remain inside watching Disney movies or playing video games whenever possible. We know now that the multiple sensory stimuli of nature were probably difficult for someone with Asperger's Syndrome to handle, but back then, before we knew about the Asperger's, we just chalked it up to being "Jay." His encounters with nature were often startling and unexpected and unique to our second born. Like the sweltering summer day he scooped a live chipmunk out of his inflatable wading pool when he was four. I had one of those "mommy-sense" moments where I just knew something was up. When I got to the back door Jay was standing on the patio, hand outstretched, a very wet chipmunk stomach-down on his palm, all four legs fastened around the sides of his hand like a shipwreck survivor clinging to the only floating plank in sight. Both child and chipmunk had the same look on their faces—wide eyes, panting breath, an expression of barely-contained fight-or-flight uncertainty.

"I found him fwimming in my pool," my son announced.

Mommy-sense abandoned me. As much as I'd always enjoyed nature I couldn't quell a gibbering sense of panic. Small wild animal! Rabies! Tetanus! What should I *do*?

"Don't move," I said, hoping my vivid mental picture of a shrieking child racing around the yard with a frightened chipmunk fastened to his body wouldn't ooze out and scare either of them more.

I grabbed a leather glove from the gardening basket behind the door, carefully opened the outer screen, and eased myself onto the patio. I reached for the chipmunk gingerly, not wanting it to scratch or bite either of us or run up Jay's arm onto his head or anything else unexpected and possibly menacing. Instead the chipmunk jumped down to the patio, ran to the rain spout at the corner of the house and disappeared into it. Nothing awful happened, other than a noxious odor from the downspout a few days later and some minor chipmunk-claw dents on the back of Jay's hand, but he refused to go outside to play for weeks afterward. Bees, wasps, and spiders already terrified him. Suddenly he wasn't so sure about chipmunks and squirrels, either. In his mind, nature was best experienced a little at a time, and infrequently at that. Even after almost twenty years not much has changed, so his current interest in the meteor shower feels like a gift.

Now that I'm in graduate school our schedules no longer coincide except for very late evening (usually after eleven o'clock), which is when he wants to talk about life, the universe, and what ingredients he needs to make a new recipe he saw on YouTube, while I struggle to keep my eyes open. Tonight I let his enthusiasm re-energize and pull me along, pleased that he's willing to abandon his video-game friends for even a slight chance at witnessing something natural and mysterious, delighted that he wants me there with him.

Jay turns off the outside light over the patio and the one around the corner over the driveway. The screen door squeals as he pushes it open, the metal stingingly cold against my hand when I catch it on the backswing. The sudden contact with the outside air pinches the end of my nose and I inhale involuntarily, relishing the raw icy freshness that swirls into my lungs. The grass along the driveway crunches as I step on it. Late-season leaves edged with hoar frost lie scattered on the gravel drive. The air is still, breathless—like me. All of a sudden I feel more awake than I have in hours.

By some miracle of nature the night is clear. The moon is absent, in a new phase—no moonlight washes out the stars. I can't help standing with my mouth hanging open in wonder, facing southwest into the largest expanse of sky available past the tops of neighboring houses. Points of light glitter overhead—glow-in-the-dark specks inside an obsidian bowl—more stars than I can remember seeing for years and years, so many stars it's hard to take them all in. I recognize Orion's Belt but I don't care what the rest are. I'm just happy that, for once, clouds don't block my view.

Jay throws an arm out and points. "There's one!"

A bright flash in my peripheral vision is all I get, but it is enough. We're going to see meteors tonight!

Frosty air that smells of dirt and ice crystals and smoke from the neighbor's wood stove creeps inside my hooded sweatshirt, burrowing through the clothing underneath, raising goosebumps on my skin. We pull our sweatshirt hoods up to block out the street lights and house lights, to frame the vast sky with our own personal window. My face tingles and burns. I shove my hands in the sweatshirt pockets, fingers curled into balls to stave off the numbness that is already nipping at them. Our breaths puff out in visible mist that drifts toward the stars, creating false clouds in the sky just for an instant. My awareness of the neighborhood around us exists on a subconscious level tonight. An occasional car growls past the end of the driveway, headlights a pale imitation of the stars, but their hulking metal presence barely registers on my sense of awe. The night feels muted and other-worldly, isolating the two of us inside the spangled dome of a sky that appears to stretch all the way to Alpha Centauri.

My family loves astronomy. We own a number of constellation field guides and both of the boys learned to recognize specific star clusters by the time they were five. My husband

periodically buys telescopes, each one a little more powerful than the last, in the hope that we'll get to see something amazing through its lens, then eventually he sells them in resignation because this is Northeast Ohio, where clouds congregate as if by magic to obscure eclipses (both lunar and solar), meteor showers, and any unusual moon configurations that are "must see" viewing. I can't remember the last time the sky was clear for a celestial event. Plus we live in the middle of Kent—a moderately-sized college town with a hotel behind our house, the bar district one block away, streetlights on every side road, and the fear of late night strangers floodlighting every yard, including ours. From spring through summer, we stand on the patio at dusk to watch bats skitter out of the trees along the Cuyahoga River across the street. Once it gets dark, though, we go back inside as the thumping bass and shrieking laughter of almost-nightly neighborhood parties makes contemplation of the night sky a less-than-Zen experience.

But tonight it's too cold for parties, for which I am thankful. Jay and I stand side by side on the gravel drive with our heads cocked so far back our voices squeeze out like toothpaste from a pinched tube, speaking in hushed tones as if we would scare the stars away by talking. I can feel the earth's rotation and it urges me toward the ground. I reach out to steady myself on Jay's arm as I tilt my head further backward. He puts a hand under my elbow to prop me up, an automatic response almost as rare as tonight's sky. Jay has never liked to be touched or cuddled or held, something he has in common with many other people with Asperger's, but which makes emotional and physical closeness a continual struggle for me to suppress and for him to accept. Over the years the entire family have gotten used to not intruding on his comfort zone, so his unconscious gesture is doubly precious and I hug it to myself to enjoy in private later. For now, Jay recalls my attention to the meteors. We take turns shouting out sightings over top of each other, our words tangling in an eagerness to share.

"There's another one!" and it's gone.

"There's another!" too fast to turn and catch its trail.

A stripe of light blazes right past Orion's Belt. I'm glad I didn't blink or I would have missed it, but maybe it wouldn't have mattered because more keep coming. I've never seen so many shooting stars before, previous luck extending to an occasional unexpected flare followed by a startled "What was that?" Tonight they flash past, one after another, almost before we've had a chance to point out the last one. As bright as the stars are, the meteors make them seem dim for the length of time it takes to slash a trail of white fire across the inky sky.

I remember star-choked skies like this when I was a child, visiting Great-Uncle Walter's house, lying on the rolling Pennsylvania hills with second and third cousins I wouldn't recognize anymore, waiting for the meteors we just knew we would see.

"There goes one!" somebody would shout, and we'd all roll toward the speaker to see it, but of course by the time you turn to look for a shooting star, it's gone.

Usually, though, the streak was still there —"Aww, shoot. It's just an airplane."—and we would roll back to continue scanning the skies.

Or sometimes, in those mid-'60s days of the infant space program, we would mistake Sputnik for a shooting star, blinking a slow path across the heavens. Hushed whispers about what it must be like to shoot off into space would quickly devolve into a contest to see who could roll down the pitch-black hills fastest without getting sick.

Most often it would be a lightning bug's come-hither wink caught out of the corner of the eye and we'd scramble to our feet to chase them around the yard. But we always started out looking for meteor showers, whether it was the right time of year for them or not. We just knew

they were out there. We believed in shooting stars with the same faith that we had in the story an uncle or a cousin or maybe Great-Grandpap told about land crabs living in all the holes that dotted the hills around Uncle Walter's house. We spent our days patiently poking sticks and long grass stalks into those holes in the breathless hope that a crab would latch on so we could draw it out and do I'm-not-sure-what with it. And we began each night with the same air of steadfast determination, reclining on those cool, grassy hills waiting for a random bolt across the sky that would make it all worthwhile.

The immensity of the sky tonight makes my head hurt. Or is it the cold, or the angle of my neck? I've always avoided thinking about the vastness of the universe and where it ends and what might be out there, but tonight is a time for considering such things. I've never been able to comprehend what eternity or death mean—endlessness and nothingness? I was raised to believe death means eternal life in Heaven but I lost faith in that idea a long time ago, and the thought of infinity or eternity frightens me in the same way the unknown edges of the world frightened ancient sailors—here there be monsters. Will some future cartographer fill in the black voids of space for us someday, too? Would that make it less scary, or more?

I can't stop looking up and I worry about cutting off the blood supply to my brain if I keep my head tilted back for too long. They say you can do that and pass out or give yourself a stroke and I wonder if that is any more true than the story about the land crabs. Seeing the meteors is worth the risk, yet I don't want to faint and miss anything, either.

Behind the branches above our house a blurry line bisects the bowl of the night. Jay points it out, his voice reverent and authoritative. "That's a galaxy arm!"

"What's a galaxy arm?" I ask.

He tells me about how sometimes you can see the arms of the Milky Way when you look in the right direction on a night that's clear enough and usually we can't see it here because of the light pollution but tonight there's no moon and maybe that wide fuzzy band that looks like a pile of dandelion fluff hanging near the treetops is a galaxy arm.

I study it more closely but I've only seen a piece of the Milky Way a couple times many many years ago so I can't say for sure, but I agree with him anyway. It *could* be a galaxy arm. It could be a piece of the Milky Way sprawled out across the sky just in case we happened to go looking for it tonight. Or it could be a cloud. There were wispy cirrus clouds as the sun set, glowing pinky-orange and Aztec gold, and it's hard to tell at this hour if perhaps a straggler got left behind. Or it could just be our accumulated breath, gathering together in shared excitement and floating up into the void, *pretending* to be the Milky Way. It doesn't matter, really. Tonight, anything is possible.

After a while my legs begin to vibrate from the cold and the driveway gravel jabs my slippered feet. Even with the sweatshirt hood up my ears have gone numb around the edges. I clench my jaws to keep my teeth from chattering.

Jay tells me things he remembers about space from school science classes and astronomy books and YouTube videos, enthusiasm cranking his volume up to a level usually reserved for directing his "men" as they waste video-game foes. I smile often, nod when appropriate, throw out a periodic "You'll have to show me that video" to keep him talking, but I suspect he doesn't really need the encouragement. I couldn't stop the flow of words if I tried, nor predict what will come out of his mouth. He barrels from one topic to the next at the same speed that he ran through the Cleveland Museum of Art as a child, nodding at the exhibits—Okay. Okay. Okay. Next room! —which led to a family ban on all museums, including the Planetarium. He only

pauses when a train blasts its whistle through the rail crossing down by the river or to shout out another meteor sighting. He runs out of information on space and moves on to videos of neat explosions then to weird musical instruments like the glass armonica then to Rube Goldberg perpetual-motion machines and the last Dr. Who episode he watched on YouTube. I fight down the urge to laugh out of pure agreement with his enthusiasm. Jay doesn't stop to think that he might be disturbing the neighbors on the other side of the driveway and I don't remind him. They've disturbed us enough with their parties in the past, and at least he's drunk on Mother Nature instead of Budweiser or Miller Lite.

I've spent over thirty years in suburban Ohio cities where cloud cover and light pollution makes stargazing problematic. I'd forgotten how mesmerizing the night sky can be, what a profound sense of wonder there is to be found in something as simple as looking at the stars. My feet are freezing cold inside my slippers, sensation-less lumps of inanimate matter that will prickle and burn when they finally warm up and become feet again. I'll have to go inside soon, but I don't want to leave this moment with my son and the stars, to lose this fleeting closeness. The Geminids may come back again next year, but I don't plan to wait that long to feel such a connection again.

Besides, I'm not really tired anymore.

Emptying the Nest

Emerald green bullet-like bodies shimmer in the sunlight as two male Ruby-throated Hummingbirds feint at each other with rapier-like beaks, dodging and gliding, thrusting and parrying. They're the only birds who can fly backwards—something you really don't realize until you see it in action. These two zip forward and back, looping around each other in a dizzying dance of glucose lust until one of them surrenders and rockets off into the trees. The victor hovers for a second, chittering a shrill "And don't come back!" to speed its adversary's retreat, before returning to the sugar-water feeder.

It's been a good season for hummers, with as many as four at one time outside the kitchen window, glistening green males slurping their fill, while duller females and young lurk off to one side until they can sneak in for a turn. The nectar bottles need refilling at least every three days instead of the usual five to seven. The feeders are sucked dry if we wait four, and then we get scolded by the hungry and impatient.

Male hummingbirds set up territories based on available food sources and they don't like competition—not even from a female they've mated with. Their metabolism needs a constant supply of sugar, and nectar in the wild fluctuates from year to year, so they really can't share and risk going without. Hummingbirds don't mate for life, or even for a single season. There's no sense of family unit solidarity or bonding. Today's loser may be the other bird's son, now fully grown into his iridescent plumage and a threat to his father's territory.

I've seen a lot of fights at the feeder this year.

Birds are programmed to cut their offspring loose, to deliberately "give them wings" (as the saying goes) for their own good. Hummingbirds are especially ruthless, not just pushing their

young away, but actively driving them from the nest, and the surrounding area as well. Their children have to set up their own territories, and they're not allowed to return home, no matter what.

Left to themselves, people would probably live at home forever. In many cultures it's understood that the younger generation will care for their elders once they're too old to take care of themselves. In the 1800s and early 1900s, there was an unspoken assumption that unmarried children would be the family caretakers. My husband's bachelor uncle and my dad's only unmarried brother lived with their respective parents after they returned following WWII. Both remained single and retained possession of their parents' house after the second parent died, which was another unspoken assumption. But the expectation of assured care has lessened as more young people go off to college, and family members move farther away from home to find jobs. Dan and I have already told our guys that we don't want them putting their lives on hold to take care of us in our old age. Put us in a nursing home and visit as often as possible. Call if you can't visit. We're fine with that.

But first they need to leave.

Most teenagers want the adventure of living away from mom and dad, so they don't really need to be pushed out of the nest very hard. They've been raised to see the end of high school as the start of bigger and better things. But for those with learning disabilities, anxiety disorders, or social awkwardness, home is a safer place than the outside world and emptying the nest is more complicated than it should be. Our adult sons still live at home. Wings are useless for those who have no idea how to fly.

* * * * *

We never realized that our first born might have Asperger's Syndrome until he was in his early 20s. It wasn't a well recognized disorder when he was born in 1981, and Danny never exhibited any of the repetitive, hyperactive behaviors that are typical of his younger brother and now acknowledged as Asperger's indicators. He was always outside the curve for his age physically as well as mentally: saying his first words at six months; speaking in full sentences at a year and a half; picking up Spanish words from Sesame Street and using them correctly to point out things like danger signs (*peligro*) at construction sites on the side of the road. When he got frustrated with a toy one day and blurted out, "How do you do dis damn ting?" I stopped swearing around the little voice recorder until he was much older. He learned to read before kindergarten.

Everything seemed fine. I did wonder why Danny appeared to have abandonment issues for a couple years after starting elementary school. He would get hysterical if I wasn't exactly where he expected me to be at the exact moment he expected me to be there. I spent a lot of time drying tears during kindergarten. When he moved to first grade, I decided to volunteer at the school library on the days that his class used it. After a month of my son bursting into tears every time they had to go back to the classroom, I changed my volunteer day. It never appeared to be a problem after first grade. Danny told me years later that he just got better at keeping his panic inside.

Still, he excelled at school, even the social stuff that Aspies tend to struggle with. Danny wasn't interested in sports or music or theater, the main activities at our high school, and so in that sense he was a misfit. But his friends were all misfits as well, the geeks and the gamers and the ones with a weird sense of humor that most of their peers didn't get. Danny fit right in, even though he was the oldest, as well as the tallest. They liked to hang out by the school elevator

during lunch, because students weren't allowed to use it unless they were physically disabled, so there was rarely any need to move. That didn't stop the principal from telling them they were "fire hazards" and they'd have to find somewhere else to gather. Danny and his friends took great pride in being The Fire Hazards for the rest of their school career. He's still friends with most of them.

Danny has always loved languages, but especially English. He knows all the proper names for parts of speech. (Need a dangling participle? Gerund? Pluperfect subjunctive? He's got it covered.) We bought him *The Superior Person's Book of Words* for Christmas his senior year in high school. He tormented his English teacher the rest of the school year, using obscure words from that book in his weekly vocabulary exercises. Our son gave himself an awesome set of wings when he won a full academic scholarship to Wright State University in 1999. As far as Danny was concerned, college was the only acceptable future, post-high school. He wasn't entirely sure what he wanted to study—he just knew he was going. He couldn't see himself working in fast food, and he always enjoyed learning for its own sake, so a life in academia seemed like a good place for him. Looking back, I honestly can't imagine what he might have done instead.

Going off to college seemed to be a better experience for him than it was for me. We could count on one phone call a week to get a family recipe, and another one to get help with a registration problem or an issue with his paperwork. They always seemed like such minor, commonsense types of problems, but then Danny never seemed to have much common sense, so we just put it down to being Danny. In reality, it was another potential indicator of Asperger's anxiety spectrum. Still, he was coping for the most part and enjoying his first taste of living away from home. If we'd known then what we know now, we would never have let him come home.

The reasons for Danny to still be with us are complicated and embarrassing to him, a combination of a masters degree in teaching English as a second language that he doesn't know how to use, an economy that tanked the same year he finished the degree, and anxieties that grow worse the longer his situation remains unchanged. Fear of failure has kept him from trying anything he isn't absolutely certain he can succeed at. Everyday mistakes that most of us learn from become disasters to him. He was in a car accident when he was seventeen and broke his hand. He was the only one injured. It freaked him out so badly, he refused to learn how to drive. Of course if he'd told us why, we could have gotten him some help, but he didn't. He just kept insisting that he wasn't interested. It took seven years before he finally learned to drive, but he was never comfortable with being in traffic. Then he took the driving test and knocked over a cone. We haven't gotten him back behind the wheel since.

Chances are good the car accident is where the anxieties started to snowball. It's taken fifteen years, but he's finally getting help. He's never had a formal diagnosis of Asperger's, but he fits so many of the indicators, that's where we operate from. Still, all he can see is that he's a 32-year-old man living with his parents. He doesn't live in the basement playing video games and watching porn, but he's sure that's how it must look to people who don't know us.

Sadly, I don't mind that he's still at home. Since I started graduate school, Danny has taken over the laundry chores and dishes. He helps with the cooking. We have the same sense of humor, and spend a lot of time just talking. I have someone to go grocery shopping with, share Internet pictures of cats with, and he's a built-in editor for my writing. I'd hate to lose all of that, but I know it would be better for him if he left. And he wants to go. I just wonder, after all this time, if I even know how to let him leave.

* * * * *

I swore I would never be a clingy, enabling parent like my mother. My younger brother was brilliant at math, unlike the rest of us. He often got bored in school and would refuse to do his homework, saying that it was a waste of his time. So my mother would make excuses for him, or help to the point of writing his papers and doing the homework he wouldn't do. I never understood it, because Mom was usually a very common-sense, level-headed person, except when it came to my brother. But then I also hadn't met Asperger's or OCD yet, or become intimate with a parent's need to help their child succeed at all costs. Now that I have, I'm pretty sure that my brother has classic Asperger's. What I remember of his school years reminds me so much of my younger son, Jay, it frightens me, especially since my brother chose to alleviate his boredom with drugs and alcohol before he was out of high school. Jay also had a distressing tendency to decide that his classes were boring and that he wasn't going to do the work. By the time he was in middle school, we knew he had Asperger's but couldn't get the school system to provide an official diagnosis. I suppose it was understandable: if he was diagnosed by their specialists the school would have to pay for support and intervention. Jay was never a behavior problem, so he was pushed aside for those who were. He flunked out of two courses during high school, but, unlike my brother, Jay has always been willing to accept the consequences of his decisions. He ended up not being able to take some classes he wanted his senior year, and he was fine with that. Both my brother and my son graduated, but with the minimum grade point necessary.

My brother was 19 when Mom died from breast cancer. She made Dad promise to take care of him, and I completely understand why she did, but I wish she hadn't. At 84 years old, Dad is still trying his best with the 50-year-old youngest in the family, with no better results than when he was in high school. The last I heard, my younger brother was in Portland, Oregon. Our

older brother keeps in touch with him, but the younger sister and I don't. Every time he calls, all he does is ask for money, and my family rarely has anything to spare. I told him that the last time we talked. He hasn't called again in over fifteen years.

I vowed never to get into the same trap that my mother did. Mom was a smart woman most of the time, but I was going to be smarter when it came to my kids. They would be allowed to do their own work, make their own mistakes, and be given wings as soon as possible, so they could lead their own lives. And yet they're still here. In my ignorant arrogance, I hadn't allowed for Aspergers, or any of the other myriad wrenches that get thrown into life. After all the struggles my children have been through, I understand my mother much better these days.

Danny met with a psychologist this week who's going to help him figure out what kind of work he'd be good at. I know what that is already, but my son doesn't listen to me. I can't blame him for being careful. He already owes a small starter home in student loans for a useless master's degree, so he's hesitant to add to that debt unless he's sure he'll be able to do something with the resulting diploma. The problem is that you can't be absolutely sure about anything, job-wise, especially these days. The face of employment has undergone a radical shift over the past five years, so there's no way to know for certain what jobs will be desirable in another three or four years. Still, at least he's trying. He knows what his issues are and is finally getting help to cope with them. He had a job as a shipping clerk for a year, but quit shortly after his assistant went plunging off the dock while loading a truck that pulled out from under him. He hated every day he worked there, but it turned out to be a good experience for him overall. For one thing, he learned that he *can* adapt. He pretty much had to when orders were late or shorted or missing altogether. He learned to drive a forklift, which made him a little more confident about trying to

get his license again at some point. He learned a lot from that job, and not all of it was about shipping. He's been trying to find another job, but without a driver's license, he knows it's going to take some luck. Still, he applied for an editing job in Wichita last week. When I asked how he was going to get there if they hire him, he said, "I'll figure that out if it happens." For someone with major anxiety and failure issues, that's a huge step. I'm proud of him for even trying.

Bird parents don't have these kinds of worries. Then again, their children either leave the nest or they die. Bird babies get eaten by predators a lot more often than human babies do, on top of all the other hazards birds have to face. Maybe that's why birds are programmed not to become attached to their offspring. I wish I could be like a bird. I think part of my inability to let go stems from a deep belief that I'm the only one who can keep them safe. That's probably normal for most parents, but I have no doubt that my early issues with Danny's first doctor didn't help. That man has a lot to answer for, including my paranoia-level mistrust of doctors, yet in all honesty, I can't blame him for my parenting choices since then.

I'm actually fine with both of my sons living at home, but they're not. Neither is Dan. Friends and family like to say things like, "Just throw them out! They'll be fine." But how are we supposed to do that when we know that not only will they not be "fine," but they won't even know where to start looking for help? Without any help from the schools, we've had to figure things out on our own, slowly. So I've stopped giving them advice unless I'm asked. I let them make their own mistakes, and hopefully I'll be able to shove them out of the nest when their wings start working properly.

Unlike bird parents, I'm going to cry really hard when they leave, though.

An Invitation to the Battle: November 2012, Kent, Ohio

My Dear Sons:

There's a political war being waged on women's rights at this very minute and I was wondering how the two of you feel about that. I know you're aware of what's being said: you couldn't *not* be, what with all the campaign commercials on radio and TV, not to mention my ranting about every fresh development in the news. I just can't help getting worked up. I wouldn't blame you if you've been tuning me out the same way I change radio channels as soon as a political ad comes on and you only nod along for politeness' sake. We've heard it all before and we're tired of the constant bombardment, but I really hope you've been paying attention anyway. The election is just a couple weeks away. So much more is riding on this one than on any other election in my lifetime, and I need you to understand why it's so important to me. You two have only been around for thirty-one and twenty-three years respectively, which must seem like a long time to you, but in voting terms you're babies. You may not realize what kind of ripple effect the results of this election could have on both of your lives, not to mention your future girlfriends or wives or daughters or nieces. Don't imagine for a second that these attacks on women's rights have nothing to do with you. This isn't just "my" fight or "their" fight—it's been your fight too, since the day you were born.

I don't suppose either of you put in an order for a feminist mother, but then I didn't start out being a feminist. It just sort of happened. I was born in 1954, less than ten years after the end of World War II, and about the same number of years before the beginning of the Feminist movement, sandwiched between two of the biggest society-changing developments to hit twentieth-century America. I never thought much about women's issues while growing up.

Wholesome housewives were the accepted media role models in the new era of television—women who stayed at home, took care of the family, and never yearned for any other line of work. Yet the modern women's movement was also a part of my childhood. The National Organization of Women formed in 1966, when I was twelve. (I had to look up the date.) NOW's existence wasn't even a blip on my radar at that time, or for years afterward until very recently. Back in the '50s and '60s I was too busy being a little girl to care that there were only a few socially sanctioned career paths in my future. Women were allowed to be nurses or teachers or librarians or secretaries, but a career was more acceptable if you weren't married. Women who worked outside the home were frowned upon, especially if they had children, because everyone assumed that either her husband couldn't support the family or she needed to be more frugal with their money or (horrified whisper) she was divorced, and no better than she should be. I remember my mother's embarrassment when she was forced to get a job when I was nine. There were four children by then and Dad's paycheck from Ohio Bell for climbing telephone poles wasn't enough anymore. Gram came to live with us for a few years while Mom worked as a key-punch operator, encoding insurance cards for Allstate. Mom enjoyed her job but she would have rather been home with us. She really did prefer running after kids and cooking and taking care of her family more than getting her own paycheck. She quit working as soon as it was economically feasible, and Dad made sure she never had to beg for grocery money from "the breadwinner" of the family, the way many housewives did. I don't think either of them ever regretted it. I always looked up to my parents, modeling my own goals on their lives. I wanted to be just like Mom.

By the time I started having you children in the early '80s the needle pointing to socially approved occupations for women had swung 180 degrees. Women became as common in positions of power as they were behind a receptionist's desk. A lot of women wanted something

more than to stay home with their kids, and other "women's work" wasn't going to cut it for them, either. Ironically enough, I ended up being one of the frowned-upon because it was no longer enough to be a stay-at-home mom. I was supposed to be Supermom, wearing my power suit while making baby food and closing million-dollar deals over the kitchen phone. Unfortunately, my marketable job skills were non-existent. (I passed typing class but my speed was abysmal.) Any work I might find would only bring in enough money to cover someone else watching you while I wasn't home. Despite any small potential benefit my working might have had on our finances, staying home made better sense for us. That was my choice, one I never regretted, yet I was often the recipient of raised eyebrows from women in Donna Karan suits who curled their upper lip as they drawled, "Oh. So you don't work?" Your Aunt Nancy (my own sister!) actually asked me what daytime TV shows I watched. I didn't begin to feel restless until one of you was in college and the other was in middle school, and you didn't need me as much at home.

I've never been the banner-carrying, speech-making type of Feminist (with a capital F) who wants to carve a name for herself. I was just happy to finally have time for that college education I'd always wanted. Over the past eleven years, I've watched the college student dynamic change as more and more young women major in math, the hard sciences, and justice studies. Where I was often one of a handful of women in class my first couple of years, now girls make up half of most classes in every discipline. Some of the most scientific, most deep-thinking minds I know—physicists, nuclear chemists, engineers—are female. Women aren't only going into nursing school, library science or elementary education anymore. Unless that's what they want to do.

It took well into the '70s and '80s before the idea of women working outside the home caught on. In fact, it's taken a long time for women to be accepted in most traditionally-male activities and occupations. Both of you are used to seeing female police officers, firefighters, mail carriers and military personnel. Your cousin Kristi is one of the top airmen in the country, a former Air Force photographer for the Thunderbirds, and on her way to officer training school as we speak. I'm sure it would never occur to you to look on her achievements in awe, but then you've never witnessed sex-based discrimination the way I have. I always wanted to be a teacher or a librarian, to the point of making your aunt and uncles play "school" all summer. But once I reached high school, I wasn't encouraged to attend college, despite straight A's and a general love of learning. The school counselors (all men) told my parents it would be a waste of time and money; they should send my older brother instead, even though his grades weren't as good and he wasn't interested in going. They implied that I would just get married and start a family in a couple years anyway, so why bother. Maybe if there had been even one person to give me any hope at all I wouldn't have fulfilled their prediction—but I did. I majored in Home Economics, becoming proficient at sewing (I actually made my own wedding dress), and a fairly decent cook. I was told that if I wanted to go to college, I could major in Home Ec. there, too, get a doctorate, and teach sewing and cooking to the high school girls who weren't majoring in nursing or secretarial skills.

While all of that was going on, an Equal Rights Amendment was proposed in 1968 with the express purpose of, among other things, making sure women were allowed to work in whatever job they chose, weren't discriminated against on the job, and were paid the same as a man doing the same job. There were actually a lot more proposals in the original document: too many to go into here. If you want to learn more, go look it up. But the main point is that the ERA

was finally presented to Congress in 1972, the year your father graduated from high school. (I vaguely remember this, and thinking that it was A Good Thing, but I was too busy studying how to cook and sew and date your dad to pay much attention.) It is now 2012. Can you believe the ERA *still* hasn't been ratified? A number of states have adopted a version of it (Ohio is one of them! I'm astonished, too), but as of February 14th this year, when it was killed in the Virginia House of Delegates for the second straight time (a new St. Valentine's Day massacre), the Amendment still hadn't gained the approval of the thirty-eight states it needs to pass. It's been forty years since the idea of equal pay was introduced; forty years that have seen women astronauts fly to space and back; forty years of women becoming high-powered CEOs of major corporations; forty years of women advancing science and literature and medicine; forty years of women putting their lives in jeopardy to serve in law enforcement and the military. Wouldn't you think their hard work and dedication deserve pay equal to what a man gets? Not according to the states that refuse to ratify.

Speaking of the fight for equal pay, your father recently clued me in to a possible sneak attack that I totally missed. Remember the big shouting match over Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker trying to bust the state's public-employee unions last year? Remember how we could never figure out *why* the conservatives want to get rid of the unions? The claim that benefits for unionized labor are a drain on the economy somehow never made any sense. Unions are needed to assure a safer work environment and better job stability, which makes for a better economy, too. Well, your dad and I were talking about it a couple weeks ago and he said, "I never could understand why women claimed they weren't getting paid the same as men. Every place I've ever worked they got paid what I did, but then I've always worked at union jobs." If we were in a cartoon, a little light bulb would have flashed on over my head. Women in union jobs get equal

pay. Women in union jobs can't be fired for going on maternity leave. Women in union jobs have the same health benefits, vacation time, and sick leave as their male coworkers. Wow! What if Walker wasn't just trying to get more tax money for the state, as he claimed? What if part of his plan was to strip women of the right to equal pay at the same time? Paranoid and cynical? Maybe. But it's not paranoia if they really are out to get you. In April of this year, Scott Walker repealed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act. President Obama passed that act in 2009. It's been in force in Wisconsin ever since. Yet Walker repealed it exactly one year after his union-busting drive failed. Coincidence? I have no idea, but I hope so.

Katherine Hepburn once said, "I was totally unaware that we were the second-rate sex." I wish I could say that I was unaware too, but I can't. I've been exposed to plenty of proof on how a good part of society feels about women. Remember that used car salesman?

"Oh, you don't want a truck! Here's a nice family sedan, just what you need for grocery shopping and taking your boys to baseball practice."

Baseball? *You two*? We wanted a truck. We actually *needed* a truck. We already had the family van your dad drove to work, but we needed something larger for hauling drywall, bags of concrete, and loads of manure. You can't do that with a sedan. We also wouldn't be able to fit either of you guys into a sedan's back seat—you were both already at least six feet tall and neither of you was done growing. But this salesman appeared to be stuck in the 1950s and the idea of me driving a truck horrified him. Toddler-like, he fretted until I agreed to test drive one of his "nice family sedans." I can still see you two in the rearview mirror, hunched in the back seat with your knees around your ears, like giant grasshoppers. We turned down his kind offer. After he suggested "a nice family van" instead, we went to another car dealer.

"You want a truck?" the new salesman asked. "Sure, I've got a used full-size Dodge Ram here. Half ton, full bed, only four years old. You want to test drive it?"

I loved that truck, and I loved that salesman. It's kind of pathetic how much I appreciated being taken seriously. True, I had to haul myself into the cab using the steering wheel if I parked in a low spot, and getting out could be an undignified scramble, and everyone I knew teased me about it (especially you two), but I never regretted buying it, only having to sell it when filling the gas tank became too expensive. But if that first salesman had had his way, we never would have owned a truck, because *he* believed it wasn't suitable for a woman. I can only imagine what he thought of your father for agreeing with me.

The sad thing is it's not just men who feel that way. Like the neighbor woman we used to walk to school with in Stow. Remember her? I've forgotten her name but she was married and had four boys, and she was a stay-at-home mom like me. Unlike me, though, she stayed home because her religion's doctrine told her that she should be subservient to all of her husband's wishes. So she took care of the boys, made a hot meal from scratch every night, and slept naked—her husband would be offended if she wasn't "accessible" to him at all times. Besides the fact that it was way too much information from an acquaintance, the way she said it gave me the creeps. He was allowed to have sex with her when she was tired, in pain, sick, post-childbirth, not in the mood, whatever. Her feelings weren't even considered. And she accepted this so completely that she constantly tried to make me see how the Devil was leading me astray. I didn't defer to your father enough. I shouldn't put my wants and pleasures before his. I should never make decisions about anything (even my own body) without his permission. Obviously, I was going to Hell.

It took some planning, but we eventually started "missing" her whenever we left the house in the morning. They moved before the end of the school year and I was glad to see her go, but that was twenty-five years ago and not much has changed for some people. I've overheard women of all different ages expressing their boredom with politics and "who really cares about that stuff anyway besides my boyfriend / husband / boss / father told me all about how I should vote so maybe I'll go do that but only if I don't need to get my nails done that day." As long as women don't take an active part in their own future, other people will continue seeing us, and treating us, as second-rate.

And speaking of religious ultra-conservatives, reproductive rights seem to be at the top of their hit list this year. Abortion and contraception have always been hot topics because of the religious implications, and they just get hotter before a presidential election. Part of the problem is that men are still in charge, even when it comes to the most intimate aspects of female bodies. I couldn't believe it when the House convened a committee to look at women's reproductive health *without any women on the committee*. Even worse, the young woman who testified before the committee on the cost of birth control pills was called a "slut" and a "prostitute" by Rush Limbaugh for wanting contraceptives to be free to all women! (I've never liked that man, but you guys really shouldn't have called him a "douchebag." Even if he is one. That's stooping to his level, but still, thank you for caring.) Young women your age probably take access to birth control for granted: it's always been available so they assume it always will be. But if the religious right has any say in the matter, birth control may not be a sure thing after this election. Religions have always tried to control what they consider to be moral issues, and I saw how that impacted my own Catholic family.

I didn't find out that Mom used birth control until I was in my late teens or early twenties. It really wasn't the type of thing we talked about on a regular basis (I mean, who wants to know *that* about their parents?), but the topic came up at some point, as these things do. Despite their Catholic upbringing and the church's stance on birth control (The Rhythm Method (tm), endorsed by the Pope himself!), my parents chose to limit the size of their family through contraception. They felt every child deserved to be wanted, not regretted, and so they either needed to abstain from sex completely or use birth control. In the first four years of their marriage, they'd already proven four times that the rhythm method didn't work. Mom's first pregnancy miscarried and then she got pregnant a fifth time when I was six. Their decision didn't seem to bother Dad, who was more of a Holiday Catholic, but Mom refused to take Communion for more than ten years, until the day of my wedding in 1975, by which time the Catholic church had relaxed their stance on birth control a bit. We all went to confession two days before the wedding and Mom left the confessional with joyful tears streaming down her face, finally absolved of the sin of loving my father too much to abstain.

I never used birth control, but not because I agreed with the Church's views. I consider contraception (like abortion) to be a personal choice involving a woman, her significant other, her doctor, and whatever deity she believes in. Or doesn't. My own plan was to get married at nineteen and have six boys by the time I was thirty. That was my post-war role model, on display in my friends' families, my classmates' families, and the numerous cousins on both sides of my own extended family. Things didn't quite work out that way for me, as you know. It took thirteen years to have you two and that turned out to be enough for us. I thought it would be nice to have a large family like the ones I grew up in and around, but I hadn't accounted for the vagaries of personal biology. I'd assumed that I would be as fertile as Mom (Dad always said all he had to do

was look at her sideways...) but apparently I wasn't made for having babies like my mother and many of the women I knew. In fact, the first doctor I went to about my inability to get pregnant told me exactly that: "You're just not meant to have children." No blood work, no pelvic exam. The doctor was male. He didn't even bother to check your father's sperm count or ask about his health. Just a list of questions for me and a pronouncement of doom, because (obviously) it was all my fault. We'd been married for two years. I cried all the way home.

Mom was a firm believer in a woman's right to choose. She would have been horrified that religious groups are trying to make what she thought of as a private matter into a federal mandate. She would never have considered an abortion, but she also thought (as I do) that she had no right to dictate another woman's choice. She ultimately chose to use birth control, in spite of Papal prohibition. When this election is over, will other woman still have that choice?

Did you know that this November marks forty years since I cast my first ballot? November 7th, 1972, was a presidential election, too. I remember how excited I was to be part of the first group of eighteen-years-olds allowed to vote—*ever*. Your father was already nineteen and upset that he'd had to wait an extra year. Even though election day was also my eighteenth birthday, I had no intentions of waiting. I'd been forced to wait a year before starting kindergarten because of my birthday (so did your dad, which is why he was ticked off about voting) and I wasn't going to let anything similar happen this time. My parents got special permission from the Ohio Board of Elections so I could register to vote two months *before* my birthday instead of after it. And I was at the polls bright and early on voting day, by God, eager to be part of the great political machine! The ladies overseeing the polling station wished me a happy birthday and seemed pleased to see me there. Over the years I'd forgotten who I voted for in my first election—I just knew it wasn't "Tricky Dick" Nixon. But then I saw in the news last

week that George McGovern died, and I realized that he must have been my chosen candidate. Who I voted for was never quite as important as the fact that I made sure to vote. After this past year, I'm not sure that's still true.

I always wondered why voting was such a big deal in my family. I don't ever remember a time when politics wasn't discussed. We were encouraged to develop our own sense of political awareness, but we were never required to hang our party affiliation or candidate choices out for public display. How we voted was no one's business, not even the family's, only the fact that we did vote. I never realized how unusual my family was until I started dating your father. His parents never even registered to vote. Since potential jury members are pulled from the ranks of registered voters and they didn't want to be called for jury duty, they simply didn't register to vote. I guess it's understandable, with Grandpa working six days a week to support five kids. He couldn't afford to take time off to be on a jury, and I don't suppose Grandma could either. I know your dad's sister has never registered. I don't know about his brothers, but I wouldn't be surprised if they haven't. Of course, not voting has never stopped all of them from being vocal about their political choices. It always amazed me how seven people could have seven different opinions, and each of them was the only right one. We've never been able to talk to your father's family about politics.

My Mom and Dad liked to talk about politics at the dinner table (like we do), so we couldn't help being aware of their affiliations, but they never pushed us to follow their beliefs as long as we had some of our own. That's where I got my political views from, as yours have most likely come from us. My mother was especially adamant that her daughters be responsible voters and she made a point to talk with us about the issues before every election, whether we were personally old enough to go to the polls or not. She made sure we understood that voting is a

privilege women had to fight to obtain, and that we shouldn't take it for granted. I never realized how hard they fought until I was watching a PBS special on women's suffrage quite a few years ago. The one thing I remember from it is Alice Paul. She was part of a group of women who picketed the White House in the early 1900s, still trying to win women's suffrage close to seventy years after the idea was first suggested. It was a non-violent protest, rather like that McDonald's picket line I stood on every school day for a year. Remember that? We were peaceful, too, and we still got hassled by the police and various McDonald's workers, but we never had to deal with much more than blaring horns and obscenities, unlike the suffragettes. They were arrested and sent to a workhouse instead of a jail. The conditions there were so horrendous, Alice Paul went on a hunger strike in protest. Rather than address the complaint, though, the authorities moved her to a psychiatric hospital where they inserted a tube down her throat and force-fed her raw eggs. Can you believe that? And she wasn't the only woman who suffered abuse at the hands of men (it was always men) who wanted to keep women from voting. She's just the one I remember so vividly from that PBS show. You can look up "women's suffrage" on Wikipedia if you want more information, but I needed you to know at least a little of the story so that you're aware of what women had to endure to get us this far. The right to vote was the grandmother of all women's rights battles. We won that one, but the attacks have continued for generations, right up until today. When will we be able to stop fighting?

Women won the right to vote in 1920, but you already knew that. Here's something you may not know because I only realized it very recently: My mother was born *nine years* later. Nine years! When Mom cast her first ballot, women had only been voting for *twenty-seven* years. Her own mother, your Great-Gram, was *fifteen* when women voted for the first time! It's kind of mind-boggling when you connect the dots that way. Neither of them talked about what that

meant to them, and I have no idea if Gram ever voted, but I remember a picture of her wedding dress—a Flapper-straight sheath that barely covered her knees. True, that was the style of the mid-1920s, but Gram never struck me as a slave to fashion. If she wore Flapper dresses, she was probably a Flapper to some degree—strong, opinionated, and not afraid to stand up for herself. That sounds like Gram all right. She always followed her conscience. And if Mom's passion for voting was influenced by anyone, I'm betting it was her own mother. I can see Gram embracing the right to vote when she was finally old enough, and then passing its importance along to her only daughter. Gram's been gone for fifteen years now, Mom for thirty. I wish they were here so we could talk about everything that's been happening on today's political front. I'm sure they would both have strong opinions, whatever those might be. They lived through some incredibly important events in women's history, but so have we, and at no time more so than right now.

This year's election is important to me, just as it should be important to every other woman in this country—as I know it is important to both of you. There's so much more riding on this election than who gets to be president, so much more at stake than any election I've ever participated in before. The beliefs of our next commander in chief could end up reshaping the rights women have scratched and clawed for over the past 150 years or more. We can either continue going forward, insisting on job equality and autonomy over our own bodies, or we can end up back in the kitchen with our Betty Crocker cookbooks and ruffled aprons, having coffee with June Cleaver and driving "a nice family sedan." That might be a slightly melodramatic prediction, but if even one skirmish is lost in this war, how can we tell what other women's rights will come under fire next? Because you can be sure the attacks aren't going to stop. We've been battling it out for so long, maybe we don't know how to reach an accord. Obama signs the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act into law in 2009, Wisconsin's governor repeals it in 2012. How do we

stop it? Can we stop it? Maybe we can't, but we have to try. Our only hope is to use our one weapon in this war—the polls. We can all watch the results come in on November 6 as we bite our nails. I'll make popcorn and hot chocolate. You two collect up all the Nerf darts you can find to throw at the TV. We'll make a night of it and see it through together, whatever the final ballot count.

Love,

Mom

A Night Owl at the Break of Day

A bald eagle flies alongside our car as we drive down Canal Road in Cuyahoga Valley National Park. Twenty feet away and thirty-five-miles-per-hour, it effortlessly rows the air with walnut-brown wings of an astonishing length. The feather-fingers at the rounded wing tips spread and grope on the downbeat to clasp the air. Its pure white head looks as if someone had held the bird's feet and dipped it upside-down into high-grade Sherwin Williams Ceiling Flat. The contrast between body and head is distinctive and useful for identification at a distance, but stark and startling up close. The end of the dandelion-yellow beak sports a wicked curve, and a pair of matching yellow talons are tucked up, fist-like, under the squared-off tail. The bird's black eyes look straight ahead, glistening like the smooth, cracked edge of a piece of coal. The clichéd description would be to say that it looks "regal" but today I think "determined" is a better word. It's 5:30 in the morning, the sun has just barely pinked the horizon, and this eagle has somewhere it needs to go. So do my husband and I. Otherwise I wouldn't be up at an hour when I'm normally still in the depths of REM sleep.

I've never been a morning person. Maybe that has something to do with not being a coffee drinker, either. I have no way to artificially jumpstart my system until my synapses shake off the fog of sleep. Even as a teenager, Mom had to work to get me up for school, stomping up the stairs more than once every morning, shaking my shoulder and pulling off blankets that I simply pulled back up after she left, siccing the family beagles on me as a last resort. I only ever left myself enough time to shower, blow-dry my hip-length hair for a few minutes, slap on make-up, and dash for the bus—forty-five minutes at the most. I never ate breakfast because I didn't have time. Now, being older and wiser, I factor in fifteen minutes to eat. But I still prefer to start

my day with just enough time to get ready, even though I run the risk of sudden, minor disruptions throwing my schedule into chaos. I've learned the hard way that if I allow myself more time, say ninety minutes, the way Dan has done every morning for over thirty years, I will end up surfing the Internet, getting lost in articles and pictures of cats and emails, until I only have ten minutes to get ready before I'm late. More time isn't necessarily good for me first thing in the morning.

I do see the benefits in rising early, though, enjoying the softly warming atmosphere as the horizon slowly blushes to the east. Fewer people are awake in the early morning, which means less noise, fewer distractions, more time to think quietly. Before dawn, the air feels dense with expectation and promise. From early spring through late fall, robins shout for joy well before the sun rises, and if I'm not already awake, the way I was today, I'm likely to throw a pillow at the window in an attempt to shut them up. When the birds are awake, they believe *everyone* should be awake.

More than once, Dan has told me that he saw a fox running through a field or a family of turkeys in a ditch or a Cooper's hawk darting down in front of the car to snatch a mouse off the road on his way to work. Dan is a morning person by necessity, with an hour's drive to get to work by seven or seven-thirty, yet he also sometimes gets up early on his days off to go bird watching. I'd love to go with him if we could do it later in the day, but by then the less common birds have moved into the shadows of the woods and only the fringe dwellers are still easy to spot—the house sparrows, blue jays, black-capped chickadees, and goldfinches that we can see any day at our feeders. To find the scarlet tanagers, blue-winged warblers, and vireos who may only be passing through, you have to get out early, when there's just enough light to see, and wait for the day to catch up with you.

Several decades ago, before we had children, Dan and I were out so early one morning that it was still pitch black, especially down in the valley where the Cuyahoga River runs alongside the old paper mill town of Jaite. I don't remember why we were there at that hour, but chances are good we weren't so much awake early as we were still awake. Dan was working second shift until one a.m. and I didn't have a job, so we often went grocery shopping in the middle of the night at the 24-hour Krogers on State Road, or played Space Invaders at a little bar on the edge of Brecksville Reservation until closing, then headed to bed just before dawn. On that particular pre-sunrise morning, as we drove past a misty bottom-land meadow, a flock of bright green birds flashed through the headlights, each one lit up for a millisecond like winged limes darting into the shadowy fields and trees along the river. The only bright green birds in Ohio are ruby-throated hummingbirds. But these were too big to be hummers, and besides, hummingbirds don't travel in flocks.

Dan pulled the car over and we got out, hoping to see some rare visitor passing through during spring migration, or maybe even something never recorded in our state. Green is one of the rarest colors in birds except for hummingbirds and parrots, and these weren't likely to be parrots, either. Tree swallows have green backs, but it's a darker emerald green, and only on the back between the wings, not the whole body. We strained to see into the darkness, cool, damp tendrils of fog tickling our eyelashes, hissing questions at each other, listening to the birds clearing their throats to greet the sun—and realized that they were indigo buntings, as richly royal blue as their name implies. Not necessarily rare, but we hadn't seen them very often, and never in a flock. Buntings travel in flocks for migration, then go their separate ways to pair off and nest in hedgerows and field edges for the summer. If we hadn't been out so early, at exactly

the right time on just the right day, we might have missed seeing them at all. And we certainly would never have learned that their deep blue feathers glow brilliant green in headlights.

We had never seen this phenomenon before, and we haven't seen it since, either.

As much as I would love to be a morning person, I just can't trade the loss of quiet evening hours when everyone else is asleep—my most productive writing time—for the remote possibility of witnessing something special. I *could* get used to waking up early and going to bed early if I had to, but I don't, so why torment myself? And it is torment to wake up at four or five or six in the morning to go fishing or bird banding or to leave myself enough time to make an early doctor's appointment. I've done it before and I'll do it again, but the older I get, the less willing I am to make the effort for a chance at the unique experiences hidden in early morning. There are wonders to be seen at night, too, like early evening flights of little brown bats chasing a meal or spring peeper frogs tuning up for their nightly serenade or shooting stars streaking the inky sky with fire. Today, like the eagle, I have somewhere to go, and I got lucky. Tomorrow, I'll contentedly sleep until eight or nine without regret, like the night owl I am, and probably will always be.

The Neighborly Way

A drunk tried to break into our house in the wee hours last night. Apparently he thought he lived there and was weakly ramming his shoulder against the inside door when our younger son heard the noise. Thankfully Jay was still awake, playing online games with his friends, and called the police. I didn't hear a thing, and I don't think Dan did, either. I found a text message from Jay on my cell phone this morning, promising to tell me all about it when he wakes up. I'm trying not to be impatient, but it could be a five or six hour wait, so it's hard. I'm not especially upset, though, just curious. This isn't the first time something of the sort has happened to us. When we were renting a duplex in Stow, an extremely drunken man showed up late one night and pounded on the door, insisting that he needed to talk to Cindy. Dan and I leaned out our upstairs bedroom window and argued with him for far too long, trying to convince him that he had the wrong place and we didn't know anyone named Cindy. We had to call the police on him, too. I have no idea if he ever found Cindy.

Not long after we moved to Kent, a dirty, scruffy-looking guy opened the front porch screen door and walked into the vestibule between it and the front door. He was rattling the doorknob, trying to get in, when I went to check out the noise. I shouted "What do you want?" through the door's window. He mumbled that his car had broken down and he needed to use my phone. I offered to call the police and send them to help, but he shook his head, told me "Never mind" and left. There was no broken-down car on the road outside the house, and none that I could see up toward the post office, either. I have no idea why he picked our house, but I was a stay-at-home-mom, alone with a toddler, and not about to let him inside. We quickly learned that it's not a good idea to be the first driveway past an intersection. Anyone who needs to pull over

or turn around for any reason will pick the next convenient spot, which often ends up being the first driveway they come to. As many as twenty times a month, that driveway is ours. Sometimes an occupant of the car will knock on the door and ask to use the phone, or they'll be looking for someone I've never heard of. Sometimes they'll just sit and have a nice long conversation on their cell phone, or pick up somebody walking on the sidewalk, or deliver a pizza to one of the houses next to us. When we had a dog, it would go into "stranger danger" mode, barking and snarling until one of us gave the all clear, so every incursion into the drive, no matter how late, meant somebody had to deal with it. Since Dan has gotten up for work before sunrise five to six days a week for the past thirty years, that somebody was usually me.

Thanks to strangers at the door and late-night pizza deliveries, plus a former landlord who felt he had the right to walk into our home whenever he wanted because he owned it, I eventually spent two years dealing with an obsessive compulsion to check door and window locks ten to fifteen times a night. It took months and months of consciously reminding myself multiple times every night that I'd already locked everything before I broke the habit. I still get anxious every so often and have to run back downstairs to check, but I only allow myself one trip, and only if I can't clearly remember doing it. Once in a great while, a door is left unlocked or a window is open all night, and the compulsion returns for a couple weeks. Last night's visitor may result in a regression, but I wasn't awake when it happened, so maybe not.

I've gradually come to understand why there were so many locks on all the doors when we moved in. The woman we bought the house from was eighty-five and suffering from senile dementia. Dorothy would call her daughter and insist that someone had stolen all her food when the cupboards where actually full. Dorothy let a jungle of firethorn bushes and hydrangea shrubs grow into a tangle high enough to cover the windows. Heavy curtains were always kept closed,

especially in the sun porch, which is nothing *but* windows less than ten feet from the sidewalk. The week after we moved in, someone who had lived in the neighborhood for ten years stopped by because he'd never seen the curtains open before. Every exterior door (there were four) had three bolt locks each on the inside. The downstairs double-hung windows were painted shut. A moat would have completed the fortress-like atmosphere, but the hedge of thorn bushes wasn't a bad substitute. The longer I live here, the more I understand Dorothy, and the more I fear becoming like her.

We hadn't experienced another scruffy-guy incident for several years until last night, but we always use every one of those door locks, even when we're inside the house. If the interior doors are open, the screen doors are locked, much to the annoyance of UPS. It sounds unfriendly, but it's the only way I can feel secure. Dan's nephew and his wife chided us about it once, smugly insisting that their isolated house in the boonies was so much safer than ours in a college town—until the night their children were home with a babysitter and a man tried to break in. The sitter had locked the doors (since she was in charge) so he didn't get in, but he could have if he'd shown up any other night. They never even locked the house when everyone was gone, let alone when they were home. Now they keep the doors locked *except* when they're home, which I suppose is an improvement. The necessity grates on their sense of hospitality, and I have to agree. When I was growing up, we never locked our doors, either. It just wasn't the neighborly thing to do.

My parents moved several times when I was growing up. I don't remember the duplex they were renting on East 141st in Cleveland when I was born, although I do have vague recollections of my four-year-old self dancing in the rain in my underwear. I don't know if my

memory of being bitten on the shoulder by another child is a true remembrance, though, or one of many stories told to me later in life. We might have stayed there, close to extended family and familiar places, but after my younger sister was born, the third child in as many years, my parents lost no time moving to a new development in the expanding suburbs of Geauga County—part of an exodus in the late 1950s which helped to ease city crowding. The spacious feeling of the one- and two-acre lots must have been a relief after the cheek-by-jowl city neighborhood. There was more than enough space for a swing set, sandbox, and horseshoe pits. And with that space came neighborhood children of all ages.

Mom thought a good way to meet our new playmates would be to throw a combined birthday party for my two siblings and me. We were spaced so close together it made sense that my older brother, younger sister and I should celebrate our fourth, fifth and sixth birthdays together. The grainy, black-and-white 8-mm movies show a scene of total chaos, children with faces I don't recognize racing in circles, open mouths issuing silent shrieks of delight. A photograph from that day shows my mother with disheveled hair, a pained look on her face, and cake smeared on the shoulder of her blouse. We never had a joint birthday party again, but we always had neighborhood children to play with.

Thanks to that party, my parents became close friends with a family up the street. Kate and Eric had eight children, so even when there was no one else in the neighborhood to play with, we could usually find someone at their house. One summer, all of us went on a road trip to Maine, pulling Airstream travel trailers behind the cars, parking at campgrounds all the way there and back. I remember how small and cramped my family's trailer was. I can't imagine how a family twice as big managed to fit everyone into theirs. Bowling was popular in the 1960s, so the grown-ups went bowling together every couple of weeks, leaving Kate and Eric's older kids

to watch all the younger ones. It worked out well, until The Great Popcorn Blizzard. That evening's sibling-in-charge decided that it would be fun to make popcorn without putting a lid on the saucepan so we could watch it pop. And if one little scoop of kernels was good enough for a regular batch of popcorn, then three heaping scoops would be three times better. Shrieks of delight alternated with yips of pain as exploded puffs covered in hot oil hit us in the face and arms. Slippery popcorn rapidly filled the kitchen ankle deep, crushed into the linoleum floor as everyone jumped around in excitement. When our parents returned, new ground rules having to do with popcorn were generated on the spot. They also switched from bowling to playing Canasta at our house every other week.

I recall few boundaries when I was growing up, traveling by foot or bike all over the development. Our only limitations were to stay on our side of the main road, don't talk to strangers, and be polite to grown-ups. Chesterland was the kind of place where everyone knew everyone else, along with all their business and extended family. The police chief drove our school bus. The mailman knew each of us by name. If one of us misbehaved at a friend's house, Mom would be waiting by the door when we got home, arms crossed and eyebrows raised. If a strange car pulled into our driveway, Mom would get at least three phone calls within ten minutes after they left to find out who was visiting. Our family grew to four kids when I was seven. In the week after Mom and my new brother came home, a steady stream of neighborhood women trooped through the unlocked door with arms full of food. Sometimes they stopped to coo over the new arrival. Other times they pitched in to do the laundry or dishes. My parents didn't have to worry about the rest of us because there was always someone keeping an eye on us and ask if they needed anything.

That's what good neighbors did.

In the 1960s America's sense of security began to change at home and abroad, helped along by the Cold War, the McCarthy hearings to root out commies, the fear of nuclear weapons in Russia and missiles in Cuba, and the increase of crime as reported through the much more accessible medium of television. The assassination of President Kennedy didn't help at all. The world seemed a bit less safe in general, and parents stopped letting their kids go trick-or-treating alone. All of a sudden, Chesterland felt uncomfortably close to Cleveland—a possible atomic bomb target if the commies ever attacked. I remember participating in bomb drills at my elementary school, crouched under my desk on the cold, gritty floor, arms over my head, completely confused and terrified. Then news started to circulate about the rise of drug use on the streets and in the schools. Marijuana was considered a scourge and entire communities went on high alert to stamp out its use. Rumor had it that pot was found at the junior high my older brother attended. Petty vandalism was no longer considered "sowing wild oats." Instead, it was part of the rampant "gang" problem you heard so much about on the news. Many of our neighbors started to feel less secure in their homes. More and more often we had to knock and ask to enter instead of being able to open the door and walk in.

My dad got a job transfer so we could move from Geauga County when I was twelve.

Our next neighborhood was in Summit County, a good hour's drive from Chesterland on pre-freeway back roads. Northfield Village is a lot bigger than it sounds from the name. The main street had one of those new shopping plazas anchored by a JCPenney store in the middle, a Kroger supermarket at one end, and a drive-in movie theater next door. It also had a McDonald's restaurant, which was where we ate every time we went there, first to look at houses, then to get our new home fixed up for moving in. Almost fifty years later, I still can't bear the smell of a Big Mac. The Northfield Park horserace track was less than a mile down the street.

Many of the houses on the hilly side roads were actually cottages, left over from summer visitors to Fell Lake Park in nearby Northfield. The summer cottages had become permanent homes, and then newer houses were built on lots in between, until the village became a mishmash of architectural eras on "postage-stamp" lots. The homes were almost as close together as the ones in the old Cleveland neighborhoods, including the tiny split level my parents bought. The cathedral ceiling in the living room was offset by bedrooms the size of large closets. The one my sister and I shared was so small the double bed had to be shoved into a corner to make room for our two dressers. I crawled across the mattress every night to get to my side. To open a drawer, we sprawled or sat cross-legged on the bed to avoid smacking our kneecaps. Mom was thrilled to find a fish tank already filled with guppies in the family room. Unschooled as we were in the reproductive tendencies of guppies, it seemed like a neighborly thing for the previous owners to do. (When we moved out, in true neighborly spirit, we left behind *two* tanks of guppies.) The house was totally inadequate for six people, but my parents bought it to avoid the long round trip drives on house hunting expeditions. They didn't realize until after we moved in that a rather shabby-looking building at the main-street end of our road, which they thought was an abandoned motel office, was actually a bar.

A large part of our neighborhood was composed of people from West Virginia. They weren't the best about keeping their houses and vehicles in good repair, but they'd give you their very last spark plug, even if they needed it themselves. Mom didn't have her own car, so the woman across the street took it upon herself to drive us wherever we needed to go, whether it was the grocery store, the doctor, or to pick up a sick kid at school. I was fascinated by Zola's thick, raven-black hair and twangy speech. I'd lived my whole life up to that point in an accent-less suburb of Northeast Ohio. Zola was different from my mother's relatives who still spoke

Hungarian—I could understand what she said, but her words sounded deliciously foreign and exotic. Her favorite phrase was "My door's always open!" and she meant it. Mom, on the other hand, started locking the doors more often. She left the kitchen door into the garage and the sliding glass doors into the miniscule backyard open during the day, but never the front door. She kept a close eye on us, despite the tiny yard, checking on our whereabouts frequently, and rarely let us wander the neighborhood alone, the way we had in Chesterland.

In spite of their new-found sense of wariness, my parents made long lasting friends in the Village. Benny and Rose lived right next door, behind a corroded chain-link fence. I only remember them as being very short, round, mostly gray, and incredibly old to my pre-teen eyes. They welcomed our noisy family, and their patio stuffed with hanging spider plants and prayer plants and flower baskets was always open to us for cookies and lemonade. Rose shared plant offshoots and cuttings with Mom, starting her on an enduring passion for houseplants. Rose's husband was a retired barber nicknamed Benny the Butcher by the neighborhood kids. We heard that Benny earned his nickname thanks to the one-cut-fits-all barbering style he used on every customer, whether it suited them or not.

We were also welcomed to the neighborhood by Anne, a large, heavy, overly-jolly woman who lived down the street within sight of our house. She loved to talk for long stretches about nothing in particular and with no regard for her listeners' possible time constraints. Her numerous health problems, like diabetes and high blood pressure from her excessive weight, were the usual topics of her conversations. She brought us fresh cookies and bread, which Mom gratefully accepted, but she quickly took to avoiding Anne whenever possible. However, she couldn't stop Anne showing up at the kitchen door to borrow a cup of this or a couple spoonfuls of that and then holding up whatever my mother was doing by gabbing for an hour or more.

Mom never went out of her way to get to know this particular neighbor until after my four-year-old brother, Daniel, nearly died from an allergic reaction.

We'd been living in the Village for about six months and still didn't know some of the neighbors very well, including Anne. All four of us kids had been across the street at Zola's house and were on our way back home when my younger sister and brother walked into a yellow jacket nest. I stopped to check for traffic before darting across the street. Then I heard screams behind me and saw my sister running, pulling Daniel by the arm. I could see yellow jackets biting both of them. We all ran into the house to get away from the dive-bombers still chasing us and killed the ones that got past the door. Mom sat down in a living room chair and took Daniel onto her lap, trying to quiet his crying, shushing and cooing at him, sending the rest of us for cool clothes and baking soda to put on his stings. But the stings rapidly turned to welts and the crying to wheezing, his breaths growing shallower and shallower every minute. My mother was always calm in a crisis and had the enviable ability to deal with a problem, then go into hysterics afterward, something I wish I'd inherited from her. This was the only time in her life that I ever saw Mom panic.

She picked Daniel up and ran outside. We all followed because we didn't know what else to do. I'm not sure if she had any clear idea about where she was going, but Anne just happened to come out of her house at the same time. Anne shouted down the street to ask what was wrong, then jumped in her car as Mom ran toward her, and had it ready to roll the minute they got there. By then Zola was in our yard and herding us back into the house so she could tend to my sister's stings. I saw Mom look back once as she was running, and then I don't think she gave us another thought. She knew Zola would take care of us.

Mom brought Daniel home hours later, groggy but alive. He'd been given a shot of adrenalin into his heart and more than one shot of epinephrine to counteract the reaction. The doctor said it was only Anne's quick thinking that saved his life. Mom returned with a bee sting kit containing an injector pen full of epinephrine and a brand new fear of stinging insects. Mom and Anne became close friends after that. She always held up what Anne did for our family as an example of what it means to be a real neighbor. We moved again a year later, but continued to exchange holiday and birthday cards with Anne, Zola, and Benny and Rose. Anne died unexpectedly of a heart attack four years after we left. For the rest of her life, Mom never mentioned Anne without tears in her eyes.

Fences make good neighbors, according to Robert Frost. I used to feel sorry for anyone with such a bitter, cynical attitude. I was sure it could only stem from a sad, anti-social personality, reinforced by local children picking the flowers in his garden. That was before the type of neighbor Mr. Frost had in mind moved in next door to me and Dan.

I wasn't prepared for life in the middle of a small city. Kent isn't as big as Cleveland, but it still contains more people per square mile than the towns where I grew up, especially during the nine months when college classes are in session. Our backyard ends at the parking lot of a former hotel, now year-round apartments—seven stories full of human drama and rows of blaring car alarms when thunder cracks too loudly. We probably should have paid more attention to the railroad tracks across the street and the rows of bars that start on the next block, stretching a mile to Main Street. But I'd been pregnant with Jay when we first started looking for something that fit our very limited budget, and by the time he was more than two years old, Dan and I grabbed the first house we could afford. I've wished many times that we'd kept looking.

In some ways, we got lucky. While many of the houses are only set the width of two driveways apart, our yard is big for a city lot, with enough space for two kids and their friends. The house itself wasn't in great shape, but we felt it had potential. We patched and painted the plaster walls, and ripped up carpeting so old the padding underneath had turned to powder. The elderly couple on the other side of the driveway came out to welcome us the day we took possession of the house. Edith was tiny and slim, her short graying hair always perfectly coiffed in teased rolls, her movements quick, decisive, and energetic. She referred to herself as a "firecracker" because she was born on the fourth of July, but her personality fit that word, too. Edith brought us homemade cinnamon bread, directions to the grocery and drug stores, and the name of a heating company that could keep the mammoth, antique cast-iron furnace running. Edith often borrowed a cupful of this or a bit of that, just like Anne, and she enjoyed gossiping just as much. Her husband, George, wasn't much taller but temperamentally he was Edith's complete opposite. Hair still mostly black, he moved with deliberation and care, spoke softly with a twinkle in his eyes, and always let Edith have the last word. George became a surrogate grandfather to our two sons, listening to their chatter, and letting them mess around in his garage workshop. He helped Dan install our clothesline even though we hadn't asked for help.

George had been born in the house he and Edith owned, and had lived in ours for a time when it belonged to a cousin, before Dorothy owned it. They were both Kent natives and knew everything about the neighborhood. George said our house was built with lumber stolen from the lumberyard that used to be across the street, where the post office is now. According to George, our home was the neighborhood funeral parlor back when stand-alone mortuaries didn't exist yet. Whenever we went on vacation, Edith and George picked up our mail and newspaper, and we did the same for them. They introduced us to the family who lived on the other side of their

house. One of the daughters became a good friend of Jay's, and could be found playing in our yard all summer and most weekends. Everyone kept an eye on each others' houses. I could expect a visit from Edith to make sure nothing was wrong (and get any gossip) if a strange car pulled in the drive—just like Chesterland. Through stories about the people and the neighborhood, they helped us acclimate to our new environment and feel at home.

The house on the other side of us from Edith and George was set a lot closer than theirs, our kitchen and living room windows only twenty feet apart at most. A tall, Victorian-style house with two-story bay windows in the front, it had been subdivided into two rental units. The rear apartment was empty when we moved in. The young couple living in the front apartment also welcomed us to the neighborhood, offering any kind of help we might need. An ancient wire fence ran between the yards, too crumpled and rusted to be of any real use as a barricade, and it certainly didn't impede neighborly conversations, so we put off removing it. Clearing out a forty-year overgrowth of trees, and other home improvement projects, took precedence for a number of years.

Eventually, a single man moved into the rear apartment of the Victorian house next door. Average height, with dark curly hair and a mustache, he'd been there a few days before I saw him in his yard. I scampered out the door, eager for my first opportunity to be the good neighbor. I waited until he was walking toward me and had looked in my direction.

I chirped "Hi!" and gave a cheery wave.

He stared at me as if I'd just uttered the most obnoxious thing he'd ever heard and kept walking until he disappeared into the house. I stood there for a moment, mouth open, hand still in the air, feeling like an idiot. That night, my family christened him Asshole.

Right from the start, our newest neighbor ignored us as if we didn't exist and behaved as if he lived in the wilds of Geauga County. Drinking beer appeared to be his hobby, if not his job. He didn't seem to work much, his pick-up truck spending days at a time in its parking spot, although he always had beer to share when his friends showed up. Parties lasted until three in the morning, obscenity-laced conversations carried on at the top of their lungs. Every third word was "fuckin'" this and "motherfuckin" that and "shittin'" everything else for hours at a time.

I've used those kinds of words myself, and still do. I don't believe in "bad" words. Growing up, we were allowed to use whatever words we wanted as long as they were age-appropriate and used in the proper context. So swearing usually doesn't bother me, *except* when it's the middle of the night, within clear earshot of my children's bedroom window. The younger one had just turned five the first time it happened, and was already enough of a parrot that I didn't feel he needed the exposure. I tried to stop our neighbor the next day as he was walking toward his house so we could talk about it. He ignored me again, not even acknowledging that he was being spoken to. It was a humiliating repeat of my attempt to wish him welcome, with the added aggravation of having my parental concern dismissed.

So the next time it happened, at two thirty in the morning, I called the police.

The patrol car rolled up, lights flashing. The backyard drinkers grew quieter, whispering to each other to hide the beer and let Asshole do the talking. He was all conciliatory cooperation and promises not to do it again. Even I could hear the fake contrition in his voice, so I'm sure the officer didn't believe him any better than I did, but they piped down for the rest of the night and I went back to bed.

The next day, empty beer bottles and caps littered our yard under the clothes line. It appeared we finally had his attention.

It felt wrong to use the police to deal with Asshole, but it became a regular necessity. Dan was all in favor of just ignoring him, but then Dan was usually in bed when the most egregious offenses occurred. I didn't like to wake him since he had to get up so early, and it seemed like I should be able to deal with such relatively trivial matters myself. I didn't call the police as often as I could have, but that was still too much as far as Asshole was concerned. Periodic rainfalls of beer bottle caps expanded to include black walnuts and dead branches from the trees on the property line every time we lodged a complaint. He took to loudly declaiming about what jerks we were to every drinking buddy who showed up.

After the young couple in the front apartment moved out (they told us Asshole used a door in a closet that linked the apartments to make surprise visits when the woman was alone), he started informing any new tenants about our unreasonable expectations. One night, as Asshole and his buddies were sitting in his yard drinking, our older son, home from college at the time, returned to the house with some friends. They parked in the hotel lot and walked down the yard toward the back door, laughing and talking.

One of Asshole's buddies called out, "Hey, you guys better be careful. Those people are real shitty about noise."

"That's okay," Danny replied. "I live here."

I have no idea why, but the drinking parties ended earlier for a while after that.

Asshole's first dog was named Harley, after his motorcycle—a medium-sized, tan, shorthair mixed-breed. He brought it home one sunny summer day, tied it to a tree, then went inside. For two days. We waited, wondering if our neighbor was simply watching someone else's dog, but also curious as to how the dog's owner would feel about this abandonment. Sadly for

Harley, he was a permanent resident. I finally called the dog warden on the third day. All he could do was provide a doghouse and advise Asshole that feeding the dog was an absolute must.

Harley appeared to get fed a bit more regularly after that, but other issues continued to require a police presence. We became very familiar with our beat officer. I apologized once for bothering him with relatively trivial calls, but he assured me, "It's better than rolling drunks at the bars. Call us any time you have a problem with him."

So I did.

Harley was left alone for entire weekends, without food or water. I called the police. He whined when his water bowl froze solid in the dead of winter and no one replaced it. I called the police. Harley barked for two hours in the middle of the night. I called the police. Harley howled and whined for attention he rarely got. I called the police.

Harley lived in the doghouse year-round, having no interaction with his owner unless there was a drinking buddy to impress. On those occasions, he was allowed to race around the yard, play fetch, and heard what a good dog he was. As soon as the friend left, Harley was chained to the doghouse and told to "Shut the fuck up and lay down!" My children agonized over his mistreatment, trying to find a way to ease his suffering. There was little anyone could do. Even though I suspected nothing would come of it, I once left a note on Asshole's door, begging him to let someone else have the dog if he couldn't stand to deal with its care and company. I was right. He ignored the note as thoroughly as he'd ignored me to my face.

One Sunday, Harley's whining went on for hours. He'd been chained up next door for about a year and we'd gotten somewhat used to the constant barking, but that day he sounded distressed, in pain, and desperate. I couldn't blame him. It was forty degrees outside and had been raining for days. The doghouse sat in the middle of an enormous puddle (later christened

"Doghouse Lake"), that appeared in Asshole's yard during the spring rainy season. I wondered why the dog didn't just go inside his house, where it would be relatively dry. Dan was home so I called him to come see. As we watched, Harley walked toward the doghouse, stopped, strained forward, then paced back the way he'd come. His chain was caught on something, and he couldn't reach shelter.

We waited for our neighbor to help his dog, but Asshole threw the window open several times over the span of an hour, swearing at the dog to shut up and then slamming the window again. Harley didn't stop whining. Instead, he fell down in the water around his doghouse and went into convulsions. His rigid body jerked and bucked, splashing in the muddy water as high-pitched whines and gurgles issued from his throat. Asshole opened the window once more, yelled "Shut the fuck up, God damn it!" and slammed it closed. Dan called the police. Our own dog at the time was severely epileptic and we recognized the signs. The next day, Harley sported a neon pink bandage on his leg, also recognizable since our dog received one every time she had blood drawn. Asshole didn't thank us for possibly saving his dog's life, though. When he saw me outside a couple days later, he shouted, "Next time why don't you call the fucking FBI!" I seriously considered it later on, but dogs aren't exactly part of their jurisdiction.

Harley stayed for a total of eighteen months. Despite the continued supply of bottle caps, beer bottles, and dead branches, the kids and I were relieved when Harley wasn't there anymore, for his sake as much as our own. It wasn't until years later that Dan told me he heard Asshole sadly murmuring to a friend about having to put Harley down because of the seizures. Dan said he sounded the way a bad actor would play a grieving relative. Knowing how much work it is to keep seizures under control with medication, I suspect it was more like Asshole got tired of the bother.

The doghouse sat empty for six years.

Asshole's second dog was named Seven. He looked like Harley, only black with a white chest patch, and no more than a puppy, eager to please and quick to learn. He was chained to the doghouse within ten minutes of his arrival, bewilderment on his face and in his high-pitched, pleading yelps. That fall and winter, he stayed inside Asshole's house at night and we breathed easier and tried to ignore the daytime barking. As long as it had been since Harley died, we were disappointed to see another dog next door. We hoped that Asshole taking the dog in at night meant he was going to treat this one better, but it was a short-lived hope. As soon as the weather warmed up, Seven became a permanent resident of the doghouse. He barked constantly, unable to understand what he'd done to deserve banishment. Jay and his friends talked to him whenever they were outside, but that only encouraged him to expect attention when anyone was working in the yard. Nothing could stop him from hoping for rescue, not even the dark of night. Anyone who walked down the alley behind Asshole's house or through the hotel parking lot was a potential savior.

Being barked awake became a constant occurrence after Seven arrived. One-thirty in the morning is well outside the limits of the city's noise ordinance, so after a solid week's worth of broken sleep not long after his arrival, I called the police to complain. The result was nothing I could have anticipated.

As soon as the responding officer left, Asshole appeared in his side yard, directly under my sons' bedroom window.

"Come down here, you little faggot! I'll teach you to fuckin' lie about me!"

He stomped up and down between the houses, apparently under the erroneous assumption that my children were the ones who called the cops. He sounded drunk.

"My fuckin' dog don't fuckin' bark! Come outside, you fuckin' faggot! I'll teach you a fuckin' lesson you'll never fuckin' forget!"

I stood in our kitchen, unable to process what I was hearing. The boys, now thirteen and twenty-one years old, huddled with me, eyes wide. I called the police back to ask what I should do as the slurred threats continued. They offered to return, but I refused, afraid of what else Asshole might do. It was Friday and Dan needed to get up for work in a few hours, so I didn't want to disturb him. He slept straight through the whole thing. The shouting continued for about ten minutes, then I heard Asshole's door slam on the far side of his house. I spent at least two hours waiting for him to do something else, but when nothing happened, I was finally able to sleep. The next day, I informed Dan that we were going to put up a fence. He agreed after he overheard Asshole telling his tale of woe to a drinking buddy. When the buddy offered to help him beat us up, Asshole brushed him off.

"Ah, don't worry about them. They're fuckin' liars, fuckin' retards, and fuckin' inbreds."

I might have given him an opinion of my own, but to say that I'm not comfortable with confrontation would be like saying Asshole doesn't treat dogs well. Arguing face to face leaves me feeling shaky and weak. My face grows hot as my blood pressure skyrockets. I hyperventilate, heart pounding and hands sweating. The trembling of my body is audible if I try to speak, coming out as childish terror instead of adult indignation. I *can* stand up for myself and my family, and have, but not often and I really prefer to avoid it if at all possible. I have to wonder if this discomfort bordering on phobia stems from one time in the fifth grade when I got beat up by a boy who rode my bus. I was a member of Safety Patrol because our house was a school bus stop, and I was proud of my responsibility to keep the younger children safe when getting on or off the bus. That particular day as we left the bus, I saw an older boy I wasn't

familiar with stealing a lunchbox from a child younger than both of us. I ran over, shouting to him to give it back, and was suddenly face down on the ground with the older boy straddling me, pummeling my head and shoulders. Other than wispy impressions of an adult voice yelling, I really don't remember much of what happened after that. The boy on my back was gone just as suddenly as he'd appeared, at which point I jumped to my feet and ran home. I don't know if someone from a car waiting for the bus stepped in, or if it was the police chief driving the bus, but I've always been grateful that someone did. It was the last time I went looking for a confrontation.

It took me, Dan, and both sons an entire summer and a few thousand dollars to install 200 feet of 6' high board fencing down the property line between our house and Asshole's. While Dan and the boys cut down trees and augered post holes, I painted the fence panels, laid out across the entire backyard, with a roller and brush.

Any time I went outside to work, if Asshole wasn't already out there, he'd show up after a few minutes and stand in the middle of his yard, glaring at me with a scowl on his face. He didn't even pretend to be doing anything else. I tried to ignore him because the painting needed to be done, but I could feel his eyes everywhere I went in the yard for weeks. He was nowhere to be seen while we did the back-breaking work of cementing posts and attaching fencing panels, but then he rarely says anything when Dan is around. Cowards don't strike out at people they consider equals, or who might strike back.

We would have moved years ago if we could have afforded higher mortgage payments, but we couldn't. Plus we'd hoped Asshole would leave six years ago when his landlord came to talk to us one day. Rental tenants in Kent are fined $150 for every police call after the third one in a six month period. So is their landlord. That summer, we filed six barking complaints. After

the fourth one, we heard Asshole's landlord over there chewing him out like he was ten years old. After the sixth, his landlord showed up at our door. He was sick of his tenant. The guy was a mooch. He hadn't had a job in almost a year and owed months of back rent. The fines were costing the landlord money he shouldn't have to pay. He was fed up with the complaints. Asshole would be history as soon as the eviction notice was filed. Only then he gave his tenant another chance, and Asshole got a new job, and twenty years later, here we all are.

If we had known, we would have moved.

I don't even try to kid myself that he's mad at anyone but me. Other than the very first time he cussed us all out, the verbal abuse has been directed at me. He's called me bitch, slut, whore, cunt, and, most recently, sea bass. Apparently he'd been watching The Discovery Channel around the time his vocabulary words for women were depleted. He also tried to run me down one day when I was crossing the street on my way home from classes. As I jumped backward onto the sidewalk, he flipped me off, but it would have been my word against his so I never filed a report. As far as he was concerned, I deserved any abuse he could think of. The day the fence was finished and we'd blocked off sight access from his yard, I felt giddy with delight. Things *had to* get better.

In the eight years since we put up the privacy fence, a few things have changed. Seven's muzzle is now totally gray, and Asshole's gone a bit paunchy around the middle, but the gray in *his* black hair comes and goes, like the lake around the doghouse. Dan is sixty and I'm fifty-nine, so Asshole has to be in his early fifties, though he refuses to act like it. Branches, garbage, and black walnuts still make their way into our yard, sailing over the fence at night, when no one is around to bear witness. Beer bottle caps plink against the kitchen window. Several pieces of

watermelon rind and the gasket from a truck air filter showed up in the grass the morning after Asshole did some vehicle repairs. Late night parties are very infrequent and the individual drinkers have changed many times, but when they do party, obscenities still flow as copiously as the beer. People who rent the front apartment next door are welcomed by Asshole with a beer and a public service announcement about the shitty people on the other side of the fence. We've never met a single new tenant, but we've noticed that, after a few months, they don't spend as much time drinking with Asshole as they once did. Most of them move when their lease is up. Seven no longer barks at all hours—he gave up last year and spends his time lying in whatever sunshine he can find. I don't regret the money or effort it took to install the fence, but I think it's pretty obvious that it hasn't had any more effect than ignoring him did. I was always told that if you don't react to bullying, then the bully has no reason to continue, but Asshole sees it as permission to do whatever he wants.

We still have to call the police regularly. Even Dan calls now, especially since the day he watched Asshole dump an armload of leaves and branches over the fence right in front of him. Dan yelled at him to keep his shit in his own yard.

Asshole laughed. "It's your shit now."

Malevolent eyes continue to watch my every move, inside the house and out. We ended up attaching large pieces of plywood to the fence, situated to block our view of his kitchen and bathroom windows, and if the city zoning commission finds out we'll get in trouble. We don't care. Asshole's newest stunt is to flip me the bird every time he sees me looking out a window or working in the yard. The first time it happened, the whole family was standing around the work island near the kitchen sink, talking, with the window open. As I looked out at the bird feeders, a raised hand with the middle finger extended went by over the top of the fence. I yelped. When it

happened a second time, the rest of my family saw it, too. Dan said we should ignore him. Easy for him to say, since I ended up being the one taking the brunt of it. Whenever I went near the kitchen sink, Asshole plastered his hand against the bathroom window and flipped me off. When I so much as walked through the kitchen, nowhere near the sink, he flipped me off. He was obviously looking in our windows, through the fence as well as from his windows, and watching for me.

I called the police.

They said he wasn't doing anything wrong. I begged to differ but they didn't relent. So we put up the plywood. Since then Asshole has only flipped me off twice, when I was out in the yard. He has to work for it now.

Maybe the main thing that's changed since we put the fence up is me. I'm pushing back these days. For some reason, when Asshole started flipping me off, he suddenly struck me as sad and pathetic rather than a threat. We hadn't called the cops on him in over a year at that point, but he still felt the need to punish me for something that began almost two decades ago. All we ever asked was for him to treat his dogs decently and to be a good neighbor. Apparently he's never learned how to do either. He reminded me of the boy who beat me up in fifth grade, as if he's stuck being a playground bully for the rest of his life. I've decided that I can't live in fear of him anymore. That's a whole different kind of pathetic and I don't want to be that person any longer. So when I find branches and black walnuts in our yard, they go back over the fence. When I heard him mumbling about "stupid whores" on the other side of the fence last month, my reaction was automatic and from the gut.

"God!" I said. "Would you grow the hell up already?"

Silence.

I went inside and didn't stick around to see if he had anything further to say. In fact, I couldn't have cared less if he did. It felt good. The old fear of confrontation reared its nasty snout for a moment or two, but the longer he stayed silent, the calmer I felt. I haven't heard anything out of him since, either, but I really don't hold much hope that the silence will last. I'm sure he'll come up with a new retaliation at some point, because he never actually stops, he just regroups. I'm regrouping, too, and chances are good I'll be ready for him. I'm going to keep pushing back.

20 Years Gone, 40 Years Ago

An unseasonably bitter late-March wind slaps me across the face as I exit the car onto the shoulder of State Route 303, making me gasp clouds. The wide strip of dirt is covered in soggy, water-filled tire tracks warning of places where I shouldn't try to walk. Traffic swooshes by continuously on I-271 in the near distance, and less often on 303, directly behind me. A white panel van sits on the shoulder farther down the flat road, but close enough that I can see an orange cone set out near the back bumper and a surveyor's tripod in the ditch next to it. I shut my car door and turn to face an enormous, empty field of last year's weed remnants, now withered, tan, and flattened in sections, as if combed into place by the ever-present wind. The openness of the space is disorienting, probably a mile across in each direction. Neon-pink surveyor's flags sprout here and there not far from the road, like plastic artificial flowers. It's only early afternoon but apparently the surveyors have already done their work at this end of the field. I imagine they've been coming out between snowstorms, as I have today. Dark brown thistle heads and matted-dry ironweed flowers rattle as the wind picks up, whistling past my stocking cap, wrapping my long, graying hair around my neck and face. My ears are already numbing from the cold. A stiff breeze sweeps under my glasses and my eyes well with stinging tears that overflow down my cheeks. I blink, blind to the surroundings for a moment.

Returning to a place that no longer exists creates a weird Jekyll-and-Hyde dichotomy. Once upon a time, forty years ago, a great concrete palace called The Coliseum hunkered next to where I shiver on the side of the road in Richfield, Ohio—a strange, castle-like structure without a castle's ancient character and charm. I remember that there was something massive here, but

the empty field in front of me doesn't match up. I remember concrete rising from the ground surrounded by acres of parking lot, but see a hibernating winter field.

When the Coliseum was mentioned in a recent conversation, I felt compelled to look up a picture online. I remembered how it looked, but I'd forgotten how ugly it was. There was nothing classic or graceful in the architecture: just tons and tons of homely concrete. Twenty years after the Coliseum opened, it was torn down again. Even though I knew The Coliseum wouldn't be there anymore, I decided to go back, to find out what had taken its place, to remember.

We would take State Route 8 in Macedonia to I-271, then get off at the 303 exit, and it was just *there*. The entrance drive was directly across from the freeway exit and it still is, but also it's not. The demolition removed the driveway completely, so now the exit ramp leads to nothing more than the road, like any other freeway exit. I remember a boxy, rectangular structure with smooth, evenly spaced pillars jutting from a sea of asphalt, expanses of windows ringing the bottom half, and a flattened mushroom cap of bleached concrete on top. Buildings have a past you can feel in their presence. Churches, schools, and homes all exude a character and personality that's unique to each structure. But the space where the Coliseum once stood is now a void. There's not even a faint echo of the mighty edifice that occupied this spot. Not so much as a phantom driveway apron, those cement leftovers of torn-down houses and abandoned strip malls, remains. The Richfield Coliseum only exists inside individual memories now.

As soon as the Coliseum project was proposed in 1971, the controversy was loud, protracted, and fierce. Nick Mileti, owner of the downtown Cleveland Arena, was looking to replace that aging venue with a state-of-the-art sports showplace for his teams. His goal was to move the Cleveland Cavaliers, the Cleveland Indians, and the Cleveland Crusaders hockey team

to a single complex. He'd already bought several farms in Richfield and gotten a variance from the town zoning board. The freeway-building boom of the 1960s helped to make Richfield the perfect location for such a project. One leg of the new I-271 ended up in Richfield, creating an ideal development destination, with I-77 and State Route 303 joining directly to 271, and the Ohio Turnpike not far to the north. The higher interstate speeds meant the Coliseum would be within an hour's drive of over five million Ohioans, and no more than two hours from many towns in eastern Pennsylvania The growth of suburbs after World War II helped to fuel the emptying of large inner city neighborhoods as middle-class, white residents left for the perceived safety of the countryside. And where they went, freeways and new businesses sprang up. By the 1970s, many families owned more than one car to drive from their homes in the country to their jobs in the city, but they wanted all of their retail conveniences nearby. Strip plazas, then indoor malls, crowded around the edges of bedroom communities. Businesses in the large city centers closed, the buildings boarded over, as their customers began to frequent shops and entertainment nearby. The abandonment of the Cleveland Arena and Mileti's move to Richfield typified the middle-class exodus from cities all over the country.

Mileti was all set to break ground in 1971, but numerous objections and lawsuits delayed construction for nearly two years. Arguments pro and con became a regular feature in the local papers and nightly newscasts—so much open land wasted on a sports arena, bringing strangers with their traffic and noise and litter and disregard for the rural atmosphere of the community. The area proposed for the Coliseum was so remote that water runoff from the parking lot and sewage disposal from 20,000 sports fans were major issues. The EPA rejected every proposal for dealing with the problems, and opposed the building's construction all the way to the Ohio

Supreme Court. Ultimately, the court ruled in Mileti's favor, allowing him to begin construction of the Coliseum in 1973 without an EPA-approved sewage plan.

All of that was worlds away from my teenage life at the time, though. My interests lay in homework and dating, getting a driver's license and job, not going out into the middle of nowhere to see sports I had no interest in watching. My parents read newspaper articles at the dinner table as construction updates were published, but the reality of such a monumental project was secondary to whether or not I had a date on the weekends.

Then one day, there it was in the far distance—a giant, gray block squatting on the highest point of land visible from the upper floor of any home that looked out over the treetops of the Cuyahoga River. The Coliseum looked like an enormous pimple on the verdant cheek of the Cuyahoga Valley, green and green and green and *GRAY*. Stark, solid, elephantine gray. The slash in the landscape could be seen for miles. I saw it from the Old Route 8 bridge over the Ohio Turnpike as I drove to work at Allstate Insurance in Hudson every day. I remember when it opened in 1974, the year after I graduated from high school.

The Coliseum was unlike any other structure I'd seen in Northeast Ohio. The wide interior concourse of the building curved around the arena itself like a snake coiled around a galvanized washtub in an old cowboy movie. The snake's concrete ribs rose and rose overhead, straight up into exposed metal beams, banks of multi-paned windows allowing light to flood between the ribs. The 154,000 square foot interior could hold 20,000 people for sporting events—more for music concerts when folding chairs were set up on the wooden arena floor. Frank Sinatra sold out the opening day performance. Rumor had it the parking lot wasn't even finished yet, which contributed to traffic backing up onto I-271 for miles. People in tuxedos and elegant gowns parked their cars on the side of the freeway and hiked the rest of the way. Many

were still being seated well after the concert started. And since the parking lot only had a single access point, getting out could take hours when the arena was at capacity.

Coliseum events were a constant refrain on the radio and TV, in newspapers, and on flyers all over Northeast Ohio. Basketball and hockey games displayed full-page ads in the Plain Dealer and Cleveland Press sports sections. The event calendar became a recurring topic of conversation all over town.

Are you going to the Richfield Coliseum tomorrow?

Guess what I saw at the Coliseum last week.

Did you hear who's coming to the Coliseum?

It was omnipresent and other-worldly and we couldn't get away from it. The Coliseum became *the* special-event location. The Ice Capades, music concerts, and the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus were all hosted there on a regular basis over the years, and people flocked to attend.

Even a couple of low-paid teenagers couldn't avoid the pull of the Coliseum for long. My boyfriend/future-husband, Dan, took me to the circus for my twentieth birthday the month after the Coliseum opened, then a variety of events over the years, including the Black Watch bagpipe corps, and the Lipizzaner Stallions dressage exhibition. The birthday-present circus stubs I found recently show that Dan paid $4.50 for each of us. The stubs from our Ice Capades trip the following month cost $3.50 per seat. Translated into current prices, those tickets would cost $16 – $21, which doesn't seem like all that much when a lot of special event tickets start at $50 these days. In 1974, Dan and I were each making just over fifty dollars a week—around $250 in today's money. In comparison to current event prices, Coliseum tickets were surprisingly reasonable. We felt the novelty was worth the price, and, for us, Richfield was closer than

Cleveland. Parking was even free for a while, until they figured out a way to charge for it. Apparently other people thought it was a good deal, too. Many events sold out, especially the music concerts, even though tickets initially were only available at the Coliseum box office. Ticketmaster quickly opened an office in the Sears Roebuck store at Randall Mall, which meant sellouts happened even faster. Aside from sports, there were over 200 events of all kinds to choose from every year, and we tried to catch one or two a year as we could afford it.

Dan and I went to John Denver's first concert at the Coliseum in 1975. We drove out to Richfield to buy tickets months in advance, arriving well before the box office opened. When we got there, the line already stretched all the way around the building. We joined the end of the line and stood for half an hour until the ticket window opened, then shuffled forward a few inches at a time for 45 minutes. Then word came down the line that the show had sold out. We were nowhere near the ticket window yet. Many people left the line and headed back to their cars. Dan said we should stick around a little longer. It paid off—ticket sales for a second concert opened up, and we were able to buy two. As often as concerts sold out, second shows were often needed, so our gamble really was almost a sure bet.

Our seats for the show were on the arena floor, fourteen rows back at stage level. Being a second concert, the house was full but not packed. Denver's voice soared into the metal rafters, bounced back down, and battered us about the ears. We owned at least four of his albums and sang along enthusiastically. Apparently, everyone else there had the albums, too. Swelling harmonies from his fans crowded out Denver's vocals at times, to the point where he would stop singing in order to listen and laugh while he played his guitar.

The Coliseum was the first place I ever saw electric hand dryers. Tucked underneath the stairways, the roar of the hand dryers made it easy to locate the restrooms. It felt weird to stand facing a wall, rubbing my hands under a howling column of warm air, instead of crumpling a paper towel. Children clustered under a nearby dryer nozzle, while one of them repeatedly punched the power button. I wished I could join them, but grownups had to behave themselves. Mostly. A young woman, with her pants pulled down, dried her underwear beneath an air nozzle farther along the wall. She would stand for a minute or so with her back to it and rub the fabric on her butt, then turn around and do the same to her front. I didn't stay to find out how long it took to dry her clothes.

After the concert, Dan and I waited with a group of other fans outside the performer's entrance in hopes of getting an autograph or just a chance to say hello. It seemed like a better use of our time than sitting in the bumper-to-bumper chain of cars creeping toward the exit. We stood and paced for over an hour, but Denver never showed. Maybe there was a suite for the performers to stay in, like a hotel room. The building contained ninety-six luxury loges, so a performer's suite wasn't out of the question. Or maybe there was another exit and he was smuggled past us while we looked in the wrong direction. We never did find out. Tired and footsore from waiting, we eventually gave up and headed for the car. There were plenty of lights by the building itself but they grew fewer and fewer toward the outer reaches near the grass. Due to our chronic inability to compensate for Coliseum traffic volume, that's where we'd ended up parking. But even more than an hour after the concert's end, there were still plenty of cars in the lot. No matter which direction you walked outside the building, the whole parking lot tended to look the same, especially in the dark. We added half an hour to the night by walking around and around, holding hands, while trying to locate our ride home.

* * * * *

The Coliseum's former location is just a massive empty field now, with deer trails parting the flattened grass as they meander off into the distance. Bits of trash stick in the weeds alongside the road. Two cell-phone towers rise into the air at least half a mile to my left. Blinking red lights on the sides and peak warn off low-flying aircraft. An owl nesting box has been nailed about ten feet up a wooden power pole to my right, its large, circular "door" facing away from traffic. Rusty barbed wire fencing edges the opposite side of the ditch, held up by weathered wooden posts. Two starlings squawk as they race overhead, startled from their previous hiding place by something I can't see, but no other birds call out. Perhaps it's too cold, or maybe there's not enough cover to hide in. A small stand of pine trees in a swampy patch halfway across the field rises behind desiccated bull grass fronds that quiver and bend their feathery tops in the swirling wind, but it's the only forested area on the huge open expanse. The deep green pines stand out against smoky-looking deciduous tree trunks that ring the former home and parking lot of the Richfield Coliseum.

Nick Mileti was disappointed that moving his teams out of Cleveland hadn't started the empire building he anticipated. He thought his Coliseum would connect Cleveland and Akron, and bring prosperity to Richfield, but the rural farming community never did become a boomtown. Richfield remained unchanged for the most part, despite a steady stream of tax revenue from concerts and circuses and a large variety of sporting events. The Coliseum was never able to overcome its location in the middle of nowhere, which turned out to be convenient for people in the suburbs but too far for many Clevelanders. The double tier of expensive loges was too high up, and had the worst view in the entire arena. The 6,200 parking spots were never enough for popular events, and late arrivals objected to being charged to park on the grass.

Traffic congestion on the freeway, narrow concourses, and uncomfortable seats also didn't help. Dwindling attendance at sporting events made keeping the Coliseum running more and more of a financial burden. Mileti sold a controlling interest in the Coliseum to George and Gordon Gund in 1981. They purchased the Cavaliers two years later.

The Gunds allowed the venue to limp along for another ten years before they announced in 1991 that they planned to build a new sports arena in downtown Cleveland. It was time to leave the middle of nowhere and return to the city. Gund Arena (now Quicken Loans Arena) wouldn't be any bigger than the Coliseum, but the same number of seats could be sold for more money per ticket. In September 1994, the Coliseum's doors were permanently locked. The building sat empty for five years while other uses for the site were debated. Some thought it would be a perfect spot for an outlet or mega mall, while others suggested a special event destination (without the sports), or even a prison.

There was one good thing that had come from all the controversy surrounding Mileti's plans in the early '70s—the possible disruption of ecology in the Cuyahoga Valley led to heightened awareness of the need to preserve it at all costs. The direct result was the creation of the Cuyahoga Valley Association, an organization whose main purpose was to oppose the Coliseum's construction. They obviously weren't successful, but the group didn't give up on the idea of preservation, leading to the creation of the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area in 1974—Ohio's first national park—which became Cuyahoga Valley National Park in 2000.

In 1999, the Trust for Public Land bought the property from the Gunds, and demolition of The Coliseum began in May. It took three months to complete. Much of the steel framework was recycled, and wood from the floors was donated to make toys. Then the 327-acre site was covered with fill dirt and reseeded. After 25 years, nature was given a chance to reclaim the land.

The Coliseum's former site is now an official part of Cuyahoga Valley National Park, which strikes me as appropriately ironic considering how much nature was originally displaced by all that concrete. It took a couple of decades, but the organization originally formed to fight the Coliseum finally won by default.

I'm not sure how long I've been standing on the side of the road, but my hands have gone numb inside their gloves. My nose is running and all I can smell is cold. I get back into the car, but instead of leaving, I drive down the shoulder toward where the surveyor is packing the van. I stop next to him and roll down the window to ask what he's been doing.

"We're just marking oil and gas lines," he says.

I tell him that I'd been hoping he was laying out trails and a future parking area.

He laughs. "Yeah, that would make sense, wouldn't it?"

He gets into his van and I continue a little further down the road. I haven't seen a single sign indicating that the land is part of the national park, even though I drove past the field, down a side road, and then turned around to go back before I parked. There are no designated pathways or parking lots. No big tan-and-green wooden sign with words carved into it to indicate that this is more than an empty farmer's field. Nothing except a small rutted drive over a ditch at the far left of the former parking lot. It's only wide enough for one car and the ruts look even deeper than the ones where I was just standing. There's a split-rail fence with a small sign on it about 500' further down the drive. I park next to the ruts rather than chance getting stuck, and climb out again. A red-painted house and outbuildings sit on the other side of a rusty chain-link fence to the left. The metal fence goes all the way down the property line until it disappears into a stand of trees in the distance. It looks like it may have been there since 1974. I finally see birds

hopping around behind the fence, and a continuous chorus of *chicka-dee-dee-dee* bounces up and down with the birds, more noticeable because of its absence until now.

I walk down the drive, which opens out into a 100' wide pathway once it gets past the watery ruts over the ditch. Its position on the extreme edge of the property and the fact that it keeps going without any hindrance until it too vanishes into the distant trees leads me to think that this was once an access road for The Coliseum. A high ridge hems in the right side of the pathway, gnarled trees of some kind growing on its upper edge. Apples? Not straight enough for Redbud. Chinese Crabapple? Only time and warmer weather will tell. I continue on to where the split-rail fence blocks the rest of the path except for a narrow opening large enough to walk through, the wood weathered gray, cracked, and looking like a hand full of splinters if I touch it. I want to keep walking out onto the longer pathway but the grass is full of frozen hillocks that I stumble over when I'm not squishing through slushy pools in between. Despite my foresight in wearing winter boots, I decide to simply read the sign instead.

Important Bird Area

This site is part of a global network of places recognized for their outstanding value to bird conservation. Audubon

And that's it—the only indication that this site is anything special. Nothing about its history, its repurposing, its continuing revitalization. I wonder why. To keep hoards of birders from descending on it every Spring? I imagine they do that anyway. Word of mouth is the birdwatcher's telegraph system and now, with the proliferation of social media, there's not much to stop a juicy sighting from reaching thousands of birders in moments. Plus this field is an important sanctuary for several birds that are rare for Northeast Ohio. Sedge wrens and

Henslow's sparrows now make their homes here, and nesting bobolinks are safe because this field won't be mowed before the chicks have left the nest, the way most farmer's fields are. Is that one reason why it hasn't been turned into a proper park? Other areas of the national park have become interpretative center. Why not here? I'd heard there were plans to create parking or a visitors center, but it's been decades and obviously nothing has been done yet. I'm not exactly complaining because the less public the park, the fewer the visitors, and I do like nature to myself, but I have to wonder about a number of things.

I wonder if the ridge along the pathway and a couple more on the left side of the field are piles of the Coliseum debris they couldn't be bothered to cart off. I can't be sure, but they seem out of place in all that flat, wide openness, too carefully positioned to be coincidence. I remember when the building was closed in 1994 but I don't quite remember when it was torn down five years later. By then we were living in Kent with our two sons, and probably hadn't been to Richfield in a decade. It seems like such an enormous waste of materials, manpower, and natural resources to just tear it down after such a relatively short time. Why intrude on nature in the first place? It's not like the Gunds made a conscious decision to return the land to nature, to create a bird sanctuary in atonement. That just happened on its own, the way nature will always take over when left to itself, but it's a scarred type of nature, not the farmland and open fields that were here before it was all replaced by tons of concrete. The truth is that the Coliseum was considered obsolete, a boondoggle that hadn't worked out. The farms and history connected with the area weren't nearly as important as having a magnificent "palace" for Cleveland's sports teams, and now the palace itself has gone to seed.

I wonder what the field looks like in summer. Right now it's cold and dead, but full of promise once the weather warms up. Are there blackbirds in the bull grass? Scarlet tanagers in the pine trees? Does an owl nest in the box? Is one inside there right now? I hope so.

I wonder if you can still see the scar across the valley. The Coliseum itself was visible from Dan's bedroom in his parents' house so I have to wonder if you can see its absence as well, but there's no way for me to find out. His parents have both been gone for many years now, and the house was sold after Father died. I'm reminded of how quickly time passes, of how I have fewer years ahead of me than behind. Maybe, less than two years away from my sixtieth birthday, I'm feeling my mortality. Or maybe I'm just getting nostalgic in my old age. The Coliseum's presence was part of my early life, simply knowing that it existed and would be there if we wanted to take in an event, but it was never all that special to me. Getting there was a fairly long drive with the chance of a traffic jam at the end, and long restroom lines to look forward to. Really, I'm glad it's gone, and in awe of what nature has done with the place. I know it's been more than two decades, but the lack of any trace at all is impressive.

I wonder when the national park will finally get that parking area put in. It would be nice to park the car, get out and walk on trails through the field, or even around the edges, instead of standing on the side of the road, exposed and vulnerable to passing cars.

I wonder when I'll be able to come back again.

Counting Moments

I used to visit Brecksville Reservation when the tallgrass prairie was a plain old meadow filled with scraggly weeds, thistles, small trees and shrubs, like sumac and forsythia, tangled among desiccated goldenrods and Queen Anne's lace. There was nothing special about it, other than a bright, refreshing openness after the encircling shade of the forest. Dan and I often walked the flat, dirt path around the perimeter, enjoying the contrast between woods and meadow before following the path back into the trees again. The meadow was seeded with prairie plants in 1984, so Dan and I never had more than a glimpse of its infancy before we stopped going to the park. This will be my first view of the results.

The drive from Kent to Brecksville is forty-five minutes of barely controlled frustration. I'd planned to eat a quick breakfast and get out early, to avoid the hottest part of the day, which arrives much earlier on the first day of August. But I usually read the front page of the newspaper while I eat so I *had to* finish the two articles I'd started. Then the cat wouldn't let me out of the house without his morning brushing, and by the time I packed a lunch, stuffed it into my backpack along with a camera and notebook, and peed one more time, it was 9:30, past the point when I'd hoped to already be in the park. Every driver I encounter seems determined to make me even later than I already am. It feels like no one is even going as fast as the speed limit. Every stop light turns red, just to spite me. Another driver flashes through a red light I'm already stopped for, apparently in an even bigger hurry than I am. Despite reminders to myself that there's really no rush, my impatience boils over in periodic outbursts of profanity. There is nothing relaxing or pleasant about this drive, which strikes me as supremely ironic considering I'm making the trip to find someplace quiet where I can wind down and enjoy nature away from

the city. The combination of graduate school, teaching, and getting older generates an ever-increasing need to return to nature, peace, somewhere familiar. I want to find that still center where human issues subside for a bit and nature takes center stage. The timelessness of nature, the way it renews itself every year, without consideration for humanity's petty concerns, is comforting. There is a kind of serenity in knowing that nature doesn't care about me, and will continue on from season to season whether I'm there or not. Remembering how much I enjoyed spending time at Brecksville Reservation in the past, I thought I might find what I was looking for there.

The Ohio Tallgrass Prairie is warmly lit by late-morning sun when I finally arrive. I can see the waving stretch of field plants from where I park. I hitch the backpack over my shoulders and take the asphalt pathway from the main parking lot through the trees toward the nature center, but veer off onto the right hand fork near the outhouse As I exit the cool dimness under the trees, a monarch butterfly welcomes me, flying across the pathway at eye level. I raise my camera to snap a photo but its orange-and-black stained glass wings are moving away too fast, so I simply stand and smile as it flutters off into the grasses, feeling a tiny bit of my tension float off with it. The wind rattles last year's dried stalks against the green stems from earlier this spring and hums in my ears.

The warming breeze brushes the scent of Earl Gray tea from the spiny tops of monarda planted in a formal garden bed next to the path. Red tubes circling the spiky flower heads invite bees and wasps inside for a sip of the spicy nectar at the very end. I tug a tube away from its plant and suck the miniscule drop of sweetness from the narrow tip. Shiny-rumped carpenter bees and honey bees and small, brilliant-green flower bees crowd the prickly pads of echinacea, clinging to the ring of drooping lavender petals as they wait for a turn. Goldfinches swoop up

and down over the fading meadow flowers in search of seeds to pick, their shrill "whee-hee, whee-hee" sounding like kids on a rollercoaster. Cicadas buzz in surround sound, the sizzling cadence rising and falling, shifting from right to left and back again along the tops of the trees, most noticeable by its absence when a buzzard's shadow crosses the treetops and the prairie and me. Field sparrows peeping in the woodland fringe go silent, unsure of the shadow's identity, unwilling to take a chance that it's not a hawk. There is so much going on in this single moment before entering the prairie that coming here to relax feels like a contradiction.

All of nature is busy today, but it's a slower kind of busyness that tells me to breathe deep. Take your time. Pay attention. Appreciate. I used to know how to do all of that when I was a child. I knew how to lie on my back and point out shapes in clouds sliding past on the breeze, or how to sprawl stomach down on the sidewalk and poke grass blades at a line of ants piggy-backing eggs the size and color of miniature rice grains to a new nest. I knew how to stretch out on my bed, nose three inches from an open book, and sink for hours into the world it contained, detested glasses lurking somewhere on the blankets nearby, daring me to roll over on them. I spent long portions of my childhood in taped-up plastic frames until my parents could afford a new pair of glasses. Now, between graduate school homework and searching for new teaching materials, I rarely read for fun anymore, or look at the clouds, or watch ants. I never stop and listen to birds outside the windows, despite having two feeders. Noise from people, trains, planes, and traffic drowns out the birds, makes relaxing and enjoying nature too much bother. After thirty years in small cities, I worry that I've forgotten how.

I continue toward a long, wooden platform a couple hundred feet farther down the path that promises a view over the entire prairie. Unexpected pools of pink hibiscus beside the pathway raise their heads out of the grass, reaching for the light, taller than most other plants in

the area. I've never thought of hibiscus as a prairie plant, yet there they are among the scrawny blackberry bushes. A few black berries are visible, the rest either still red or missing, the button-shaped cores left at the end of stems where berries once grew. I can't resist snitching a black one. Even though ostensibly ripe, it's mouth-puckeringly sour, more suited to bird palates than human. Occasional patches of spiderwort poke up through the brambles, one tri-lobed flower here, another one there, the season for their special brand of purpley-blue nearly at an end.

The trail splits halfway to the platform, a fork to the right wandering into the prairie grass. A stanchion near the fork holds a sign that has seen better days.

TALLGRASS PRAIRIE RESTORATION

You can help
bring back an
endangered
ecosystem by
not picking or
removing
flowers or
grasses

thank you

Have questions? Like to volunteer?
Call 440- **O**

A large, flat, rusty nail head obliterates the next numbers and the edges of the sign have been scraped, peeled, picked-at, manhandled until they're as fragile as a butterfly's wings. I read the sign and realize that, in my excitement, I've already violated the standard park rule against disturbing wildlife. Twice. After all the years I've spent in parks it's hard to justify ignoring a dictum that I insisted my own children follow. I grimace with guilt and mentally apologize as I walk on, veering to the left, toward the platform. The weathered, sage-green railings try to blend into the grass stems, but the modern, angular, recycled-lumber structure just looks non-organic

and foreign and not even close to blending in. A wheelchair ramp rises across the platform's front and turns onto the main level. Two built-in benches place anyone who sits on them at the same height as birds in the grass tops. Steps at the far end connect to a second level where the main railing looks out over the prairie. I climb to the upper deck and stand in front of two plastic-encased boards displaying illustrations of the Ohio wildflowers planted here. Hands braced on the sun-warmed railing, I scan the nature preserve in front of me.

Brecksville's prairie doesn't look the way I've always expected a prairie to appear from the *Little House on the Prairie* books I read over and over as a child. I imagined grass so tall and thick it engulfed travelers in a living sea of vegetation. Sunflowers would be the only plants tall enough to peek over the waving grass tops. Birds would pop in and out of the dense pasture like feathered Jack-in-the-Boxes. But the central plains that the Ingalls family traveled through were covered in Buffalo grass and this is a restored tallgrass prairie, which apparently is different. These grasses are shorter and more open, even sparse. There's less green than I imagined and more dried-out stalks with periodic patches of wildflowers—no sunflowers at all.

There are still a number of prairies left in Ohio, mostly scattered along a north/south line from Sandusky to the southern tip of the state, but Brecksville's prairie and one in Hinckley are the only officially recognized tallgrass prairies in the northeastern region. Even in the 18th century, Ohio's prairies were never extensive. They only covered a few percentage of the state's total area, not the miles and days of plains prairies that pioneers moving west traveled through. European farmers thought the treeless prairie meadows meant the soil was infertile, when in fact it was exactly the opposite. Native Americans kept the prairie lands open for grazing by setting fire to them in the spring. Prairies can't grow in the shade of dogwoods or sumac or deciduous trees and will die within a couple of years unless burned regularly. The yearly burning kept trees

and shrubs from taking over, and gave the prairie plants' seeds needed nutrients. Plus, prairie plants need fire to germinate. When European settlers moved into Ohio and began plowing, they destroyed the prairie plants that lived in the fields. By the 1970s, except for the Castalia Prairie near Sandusky, only a few tiny patches existed along railroad tracks and in cemeteries. The Castalia area is extremely rocky, so most of it was never plowed. That prairie survived intact and contains plants found nowhere else in the state. The Ohio Division of Wildlife took it over in the 1940s for preservation, making Castalia one of the state's first wildlife areas, and the mother of future prairies.

Looking out over the prairie in front of me, I marvel at the diversity of the late summer plants. Broad-leaved pink globes of milkweed crowd together in bunches dotted across the field. The royal purple Joe-pye weed, just starting to unfurl its brushy petals, stands alone, a solitary soldier waiting for invading pollinators. Fuzzy candelabras of blue vervain shiver in the wind. Black-eyed Susans, just beginning their bloom cycle, lift sun-like faces skyward. Clusters of Virginia mountain mint create seas of white in the ocean of tan and soft green. Last autumn's sticky burr balls hide patiently in the field margins, waiting for a ride on someone's jeans or backpack or dog, nature's ancestor of Velcro. A slight smell of baking bread puffs out of the sun-drenched grasses whenever the wind gusts.

I can't believe we almost lost all of this.

Perhaps it was the hippie movement of the 1960s, or the beginning of environmental awareness in the '70s that said it's not enough to bulldoze nature now and restore it later, but preservation organizations suddenly began to crop up. Areas all across the United States that once had prairies began holding onto whatever was left, hoping to resurrect what had already been destroyed. Land survey records from the 1800s helped to pinpoint where prairies once

existed. Many personal journals and letters from pioneers traveling west reinforced the locations of these large, open meadows, so unlike the forests of their homelands, providing detailed descriptions and drawings of the unique plants the prairies contained. Ditches and railroad beds were scoured for prairie plants that had survived so their seeds could be collected. Using the historical records, many cities and states began restoration projects on old prairie sites, or chose to create a prairie where none had grown before, like Brecksville's prairie, sown with seeds from Castalia. Private projects continue to this day, creating faux prairies in the name of preservation.

I've come to Brecksville's prairie looking for a peaceful retreat, but it soon becomes obvious that such a quest may be unreasonable. Peace and quiet is an illusion in a public park. It seems like people visit parks these days to get the kids out of the house for a while, to have a picnic or a weenie roast, to meet up with friends or exercise, rather than to commune with nature. I can see a group of middle-aged men opening primary-colored Igloo coolers in the big shelter house across the parking lot, talking and laughing and putting plastic containers on the picnic tables. It must be lunchtime. No wonder I'm hungry. A woman at a table under the trees throws out crinkly wrappings, while two children race ahead of her toward the swings. She pushes them a few times, then shoos them back to the car as they cry that they want to keep swinging. In less than five minutes the kids are strapped in, mom's behind the wheel, and the car backs out of the parking lot headed toward the main entrance.

Today's lifestyle is so fast-paced, every minute is accounted for and rushed through, from fast food meals to high-speed highways to self-scan checkouts at the grocery. Outdoors is only for getting from one place to another. I know parents who don't allow their children to play outside with their friends, preferring to host indoor "play dates" and supervised activities, dependent on antibacterial hand sanitizers and climate-controlled homes to feel secure as they

rush from here to there. Society has forgotten how to relax, and I'm just as much at fault as the kids who go from baseball to soccer to marching band in endless succession, as if free time is a thing to be feared and avoided at all costs. I no longer know how to just sit without feeling antsy and guilty. I always have to be doing more than one thing at a time to quiet the voices in my head, chiding that I'm wasting time, that I have to do this and that as well, that I'm not busy enough. If I'm watching TV, I also have to check my e-mail or play with the cat. Or both. If I take a lawn chair outside to enjoy the lovely weather, I have to be reading too, but even then I can only keep my nose in a book for so long before I climb out of my chair and start weeding a garden bed. Living in a city, even a small one, makes me long for the rural spaces where I grew up, a slower pace, less stress, time to just sit. But apparently I don't know how anymore—I've been taking notes, as well as pictures, today. I thought it would be nice to write down impressions and flower names, but now I realize that I've defeated the purpose of coming here in the first place and I'm no more relaxed than when I arrived.

The sunshine is hot on my face and arms, and I'm starting to sweat. I swipe a hand across my face, sniff, and discover that I forgot to put on sunscreen. I dig a tube out of my backpack and start smearing. A small grasshopper with gray-striped legs, not even as big as a bumblebee, hops onto the railing to warm itself in the midday sunshine. I dab a pinprick of sunscreen on the rail for him but he ignores it. Grasshoppers don't have to worry about their dermatologist pitching a fit over another spot of skin cancer, but I do. I rub cream on my ears and neck, while I check out the open space in front of me. The prairie is split by three pathways: one trail mowed through the middle of the field, an asphalt path along the tree line that continues around the whole perimeter with bluebird houses spaced every 100 feet, a third around a peninsula that includes the formal flower bed near the entrance. I put the sunscreen away and consider which

path I'd like to follow. I decide that it doesn't matter when a bald-faced hornet buzzes in close, possibly drawn by the sunscreen, and chases me off the platform. Any direction is better than sticking around to see if it's in a non-stinging mood.

The sun is high overhead now, so I start on the outer pathway where it leads into deep shade under the trees. The cooler breeze is a pleasant relief from the heat. I stop in a patch of shadow by a bench peeling brown paint, and sit for a few minutes. I can smell freshly trimmed grass near my feet. A lone ironweed plant stretches away from a blob of shade falling on the edge of the prairie grass. A monarch flies out of the prairie and into the woods, perhaps to cool its wings. I've seen them sitting on leaves along the tree line before, wings slowly fanning the air like festive palm fronds, and I watch to see where it will land, but it keeps going into the dim forest until I lose sight of it.

I follow the perimeter trail until it meets up with the mowed path and turn right into the meadow, feeling a need to be surrounded by the prairie. A sign at the pathway's head designates it as a "Monarch Waystation: Creating stepping stones of habitat across the country." The words continue with the story of how monarch butterflies migrate two thousand miles each spring and fall between Mexico and parts of the US, illustrated with photos of a cocoon, a black-yellow-white striped caterpillar and an adult butterfly. The sign's final text cautions, "Please do not disturb the caterpillars, butterflies or plants in this area." I look eagerly through the nearby vegetation, hopeful of seeing a caterpillar munching away at a milkweed leaf, but the plants are too far outside the pathway zone to pick out anything. My family has raised monarchs from cocoons gathered in local fields, diligently feeding them milkweed leaves and waiting anxiously for the gold-studded pale green chrysalides to develop. I'm tempted to follow some impromptu trails I can see trampled into the grass to get closer to the milkweeds, but am loath to further

disturb the ecology. It's only the beginning of August and the butterflies may not have laid their eggs yet. I can come back another time to check again.

Tiny green leaf hoppers blend into the grass-blade highways they run along next to the pathway, animated isosceles triangles with wings. They leap away as I pass, audible pings of lime green hopping farther into the meadow. I laugh at their frantic scurrying—until I walk right into a spider web's anchor lines. The sticky strands, light as a breath, hit me in the face and collarbone and, despite an honest appreciation for some arachnids, my reaction is instinctive. Hands flailing, feet prancing, I quickly brush at my head and clothes, hoping the web's owner hasn't invaded my hair or T-shirt, hoping no one is on the paths around me to witness my primeval spider dance. Fairly satisfied that I'm arachnid-free, I straighten out my clothing and my dignity and continue down the trail, albeit a bit more wary than before. A bright blue damsel fly hovers in front of my face for a moment, as if to ask whether I'm okay, but more likely to decide if I'm a safe and suitable landing platform. I'm not, and it zooms away again.

Out beyond the trees, civilization takes a weed whacker to the base of the sign posts, cutting down wildflowers that are only weeds by virtue of growing in the wrong place. The high-pitched squeal doesn't seem to bother the field sparrows, but when a broad-winged hawk screams in the distance, the birds go silent, certain of the danger. Motorcycles thunder past on the main road, their souped-up mufflers vibrating the air. A steady stream of cars creates a continuous whooshing noise in the background. When the breeze dies down, I can hear a large group of children, maybe on a school field trip, shouting somewhere in the park nearby, but I also hear the goldfinches "whee-hee"ing through the meadow and in the trees cicadas still sizzle—always cicadas behind everything else, the sound of summer.

I check my watch and see that it's after one o'clock. I head back to the bench in the shade and take out the sandwich I brought with me, prolonging the stolen hours of free time for another thirty minutes. The park doesn't close until dusk. I could stay here a lot longer if I didn't have other obligations. But I do, and all too soon I'll need to make the long drive back to them. My quest for a moment of calmness to alleviate the hectic pace of life is over, and, sadly, I never really found what I was looking for. But then, what did I honestly think could be gained from a few hours in a public park? Inner peace can't be turned on and off at will, and three hours isn't nearly long enough to reverse the stress I've accumulated the past few years.

My sandwich is gone and the water bottle is empty. I stuff everything into my backpack and hoist it onto my back again. Time to go home.

As I walk past the formal garden on my way out, two hummingbirds race across the path in front of me, one behind the other, chittering as they dart into a flame-red stand of cardinal flowers. They swoop through the stems then out the other side of the flower bed. I stand for a few minutes, waiting to see if they'll come back, and am shrilly cussed out from overhead by one of the hummers, most likely a male and the flower patch's owner. A tattered spicebush swallowtail butterfly flails around the echinacea in the bed, its one battered wing beating lopsidedly. The male hummingbird shows no mercy, chasing the butterfly into wobbly flight when it ventures too close to his cardinal flowers. A female hummer takes advantage of the male's distraction to zip back, darting among the blossoms, sipping here, guzzling there, long proboscis stabbing into the heart of the red trumpets for the liquid energy at the back. Despite the heat and the spider-web close encounter and civilization still within reach, I'd like to stay longer, to strengthen my connection with this part of Brecksville I never had the chance to experience before. But I'll have to return another day, because I've run out of time to relax.

The Death of a Tree

The maple tree in our backyard is at least 60 feet high, maybe 70, higher than our house standing on end. It was a fully mature tree when we moved in 21 years ago, but we don't know how old it really is. The branches arch out and up, like a candelabra of twigs and leaves, reaching for the sun and throwing the back half of the yard into cool shadow all year. In fact, it provides the only shade in that part of the yard. It also provides music on windy days. The leafed-out branches swish in the wind, and the bare ones clank. In the spring, warblers twitter at the ends of branches when the maple flowers are round balls of pale Luna-moth green that make the entire yard smell like sugar syrup. In autumn, the maple's crispy-brown "whirlybird" seeds have been a favorite of mine since childhood, their corkscrew descent urging me to go out and dance around the yard as I try to snatch them out of the air. Ice storms in winter turn the denuded branches into a glistening glass sculpture. The tree's canopy veils a lot of the eastern sky for half the year, drops piles of leaves in the fall, and blocks a good portion of our view of the hotel behind the house. Its loss will be a big change, but we've decided that it has to come down. Mueller Tree Service will be arriving sometime today.

It was the yard that first attracted us. Narrow, but long, 60' x 200', it's surprisingly big for a city lot. Unfortunately, sixteen years of renting and living paycheck-to-paycheck made it hard to find anything cheap enough. We didn't mind an old house that needed fixing up, but even in the hinterlands of Trumbull County, we weren't finding anything with a decent yard in our price range. Thanks to a friend handing me her local paper, we backed up and started looking in Kent, four miles from Stow. Dan wasn't crazy about continuing to drive an hour to work and back, but

anything closer to Chagrin Falls was out of our price range. The first house we looked at in Kent wasn't in great shape, but it had a large enough yard in a neighborhood that appeared to be on the upswing. Better than that, we could afford the mortgage payments. We stopped looking and made an offer.

When we moved in 1991, the rear of the yard was a jungle of mock orange bushes, weigela shrubs, poison ivy, 40' ailanthus trees filled with seed panicles, and weedy maples growing in their shade. Using his grandfather's ax and a shiny new chainsaw, Dan ruthlessly hacked it all out, dropping the unwanted ailanthus trees with precise care to avoid damaging the towering maple specimen nearby. We'd spent many summers in the past cutting down massive willow trees in his parents' rural backyard. The practice came in handy for the challenge of tall trees on a city lot. We ultimately left two smaller maples to serve as future hammock posts in the vegetable garden, but the one on the right broke during a storm, leaving the left one to stretch for nourishment all by itself, the lowest branches 30 feet from the ground as it tried to hold its own in the dim light of the much larger tree.

The loss of the jungle revealed a seven-story hotel that we'd somehow missed when we originally checked out the place. The fact that we also missed the beginning of the bar district a quarter mile away and the railroad crossing on the next corner probably had a lot to do with finally finding a house we could afford after looking for two years. At least the row of maples, oaks and black walnuts down the left property line, and the huge maple blocking the right side of the hotel's bulk, made it easier to ignore the building.

The maple had always leaned a bit to the rear of the yard, toward the sea of cars in the hotel parking lot. Maybe it was stepped on while still young. Or maybe the fact that it was on the peak of the only rise in the yard made the weight of its own expanding branches too heavy to

hold upright. Yet while the trunk itself leaned, the branches gradually curved away, soaring up and out, up and out, until they created a rounded, fingered canopy of green.

It was a noble tree, with a low branch on the right just perfect for the traditional childhood swing. So we put one up for our boys, more for the two-year-old than his ten-year-old brother. It was a simple rubber sling, a classic on modern playgrounds. The swing became a favorite gathering place for the boys and the few neighbor children. They took turns pushing each other, or twisting a passenger around and around until the rope kinked. Then they'd let go and hoot with laughter as the swing spun in a dizzying whirl that left the rider too woozy to walk. They'd take turns and keep at it for hours until everyone was dizzied out. Eventually the friends moved and the boys got older. The swing on the branch sat unused year after year. We finally cut the sling down, just before the branch got too high to reach without a ladder.

Over time, almost unnoticed, small imperfections cropped up in the tree's bark—cracks and wrinkles and bumps in its aging skin not so different from the signs of aging in my own body. But I wasn't likely to fall onto the parking lot without warning, and the tree was. The ropey, knobby roots rose higher and higher out of the ground, creating unexpected tripping hazards that hadn't been there the week before. Dan swore it was starting to lean more. It may have just been an illusion. There was no way for us to accurately calculate the amount of lean, although we often talked about pounding a stake into the ground next to the trunk and measuring the gap between the tree and vertical plumb, but we couldn't figure out how, so we never did. I was perfectly fine with letting it fall and take out half the parking lot cars, especially the broken-down pickup truck that had been sitting there for two years, accumulating random bits of trash and neighborhood cats. The truck had been backed into the only opening in the shrubs along the rear property line, tires slowly deflating, blocking our one exit out the back to reach the bus stop,

downtown, and CVS. I felt that truck *deserved* to be squashed under the hammer blow of a falling tree. I pictured it rather like the Wicked Witch of the West underneath the house that Dorothy accidently dropped on her. Would it be any less accidental if we did nothing and let nature take its course? Dan vetoed my vindictive fantasy, but we talked more and more often about having the tree cut down.

The death of the maple tree begins with the clang of four huge tree-cutting trucks on the road in front of our house at two in the afternoon. It seems like an awful lot of equipment to cut down one tree, albeit a fairly large one. The crew meets my husband at the end of the driveway to confer over how they are going to get all that equipment up our narrow, sloping drive. They aren't. Half of it will have to stay parked on the other side of the street, blocking cars passing by and necessitating regular trips out to the road for new equipment. But some of the rig is needed right under the tree. We've already moved our cars to the hotel parking lot, so they have whatever yard is available—admittedly not much when you're talking about monstrous trucks in a 60-foot-wide yard.

The first vehicle up the driveway has a cherry-picker arm and "bucket" on the back, like the trucks the electric and cable companies use, only more open and less tidy. It's towing a mammoth red wood chipper that someone unhitches at the top of the drive. Then the truck pulls all the way around behind the tree and parks off to the left, perfectly situated so I can't see what's going on. And I want to see. I want to be a witness to this tree's loss. I feel like it's the least I can do, even though the tree isn't going to know I'm there, so I've set up a chair on the patio to the left of the back door, but now I can't see what's happening.

I abandon the patio, moving to stand near a rugosa rosebush in the middle of the yard to observe the preliminaries. The crew boss directs a giant dump truck full of wood chips to back right toward me. I quickly return to the patio. Dan asked that they give us some wood chips, so they agree to leave behind what they have from their previous job and haul ours away. The driver angles the truck left, over Dan's usual parking spot in front of the maple, then onto the grass and as close to the property-line trees and fence as possible without getting snagged on the clotheslines. The dump bed squeals and tilts; bits of wood gush out the open tailgate, a blur of tan and green, crackling and hissing as the finer bits blast into the air, clouding my vision with wood dust. Within the space of ninety seconds we have a mountain of wood chips settling on the grass between the rose and the fire pit. Now I *really* can't see what's going on. The mound is at least seven feet high at its peak, but a good five feet high everywhere else, mottled tans and greens all over, but mostly green at the end that came out of the dump truck last. Sticks and twigs and chunks of wood rattle down the hill's sides, spreading into foothills at the bottom. A thick ash-tree log rolls down the rear slope as the dump truck heads back down the driveway to the street. The crew chief promises to chop the log up a bit before they leave.

I move closer to the fence, coughing and swatting at the woodchip "gnats" flying everywhere. The smell of ripped leaves and raw wood is tangy and bitter. My tongue feels squeaky, like I've been sucking on a rubber band, and I want to spit. It's already hard to hear over the clanging trucks and revving chainsaws.

The cherry-picker bucket hoists a man into the tree canopy, a human squirrel with a chattering blade in his hand. BucketMan looks to be in his mid 40s, tall and hefty with a sloping gut that droops more than protrudes. He's wearing a sleeveless green t-shirt with the company name and a folded bandana tied around the bald, glistening crown of his head. Wisps of light-

colored hair flutter out from the back and sides of the bandana, but his long, silver-blond moustache has more hair than his head. Reflective blue sunglasses make it impossible to tell what color eyes he has. He handles the chainsaw effortlessly, familiarly, with a confidence and assurance that says he's been doing this a long time. The men shout to each other and Dan, exchanging information about the plan of attack, but no one shouts to me except to ask for some water.

I go inside and find the large Thermos jug, fill it with ice, then water. I grab the stack of metal drinking glasses out of the cupboard, rather than the fragile clear glass ones. The metal cups are reproductions of a set we used at my great-uncle's house on summer visits, their rich, deep jewel tones cool to the touch and slick on the lips. I set the Thermos and cups on the edge of the fire pit, and move back to my observation post by the fence. The metal cups are an immediate hit.

The wood chipper trailer, hooked to the now empty dump truck, backs up the driveway next, and stops in my parking spot under the right side of the tree, taking up the entire top of the drive. Men with chainsaws have already been at work lopping off the lowest branches and piling them next to the neighbor's garage, waiting for the chipper. BucketMan takes over, thinning out the limbs on the right side of the tree, tossing them to the ground, wielding the chainsaw in swinging arcs, like a battle axe in combat. The ground crew cuts the branches into smaller bites. The chipper roars to life and the crew feeds a continuous stream of branch bundles into the hopper at one end. It growls and crunches the smaller branches down, leaves and all, then blows them out Paul Bunyan's funnel into the back of the dump truck at the other end. The whine of the chainsaws sounds like a mosquito in comparison. Smoke fills the air, but it's not really smoke. It's fresh wood dust drifting down on the yard, the flowers, my clothes, my hair, diving behind

my glasses and into my eyes. I move by the back door again, between barrels filled with basil and oregano plants on either side of the stoop. Bumblebees go about their business in the herb flowers, bolted into seeding too early because of my poor stewardship. One rotund black-and-yellow bee hovers for a moment near my face, checking me out as a potential food source, but I have no nectar to offer so it bumbles off again. This spot seems like it will work, and I settle in to witness the maple's demise.

The tree's death really began ten years ago, when English ivy started its Velcro climb up the trunk toward the lower branches. We pulled it off, but it latched on again within a few weeks, the main stem of the ivy becoming thicker with each futile assault until removing it wasn't worth the time and effort anymore. We let the ivy win. The tree's deterioration continued when ants moved into an open bole in one of the side branches, spending hours every day marching up and down the trunk. We talked about what might be done to get rid of them, but other than setting out poison (which, being strictly organic gardeners, we were reluctant to do), there didn't seem to be many options. We let the ants win as well.

The tree's end seemed certain last year when a third of the leaves turned brown, shriveled, and drifted onto the stone fire pit below like desiccated bits of skin. The pit was there when we moved in, the rectangular bottom and tapering chimney engulfed in so much ivy we couldn't see more than its general shape. Removing the ivy uncovered a long box built of large stones held together with sloppy concrete patches, open at one short end and sporting a stone chimney capped by a piece of narrow, square drainage pipe sticking out of the top. The glazed, chestnut-red pipe concentrated a bonfire's heat into a blast furnace that roared straight up, roasting whole clumps of leaves right on the tree, the bitter tang of toasted chlorophyll the first hint that the fire

was too large, the leaves' sizzling vaporization audible as we sat on folding chairs turning hot dogs and marshmallows over the blaze below.

Every fall our love of bonfires caused some unintentional leaf damage to the maple's outer branches. Every spring the leaves re-grew, only to be roasted again in the fall. Last year, even though we had stopped using the fire pit as often when the chimney began to collapse in on itself, the leaves above the pit still turned brown and crumpled up. Dead, bare skeleton-finger branches appeared among the leaves. At first small, twiggy bits rained to earth on windy days. When the supply of twigs was exhausted, the shower became sticks as thick around as the garden hose, then branches as big as my wrist, then entire limbs that shattered on impact with the ground. Many recently-broken branches remained in the tree. Hung up on their more robust fellows, out of reach of the ladder and trimming pole, they clanked accusingly in the wind and stubbornly refused to let go. The tree's vicinity became increasingly dangerous to both pedestrians and cars parked underneath.

BucketMan works on the right side of the tree first, his chainsaw revving and idling in accordance with the need to sever a limb or reposition the bucket. He ties a rope to the near end of a large branch, cuts it and lets someone on the ground lower it to the chipper. Off to one side, crew members move branches, cut them smaller, feed the chipper in well-timed synchronicity. I wonder if the ants are still living in the tree, perhaps in panicked retreat. The combined noise of the chainsaw and chipper vibrates my eardrums and makes them tickle deep inside. The strong odor of fresh-cut wood pinches my nose and throat. The chainsaw calls out a high-pitched vroom room roooooooom roooom and another branch falls.

The bucket pushes higher on the right. Almost all of the leaves are gone on that side. Suddenly there is a new patch of blue visible, cotton-ball twists of clouds moseying through an eastern sky we've never seen from our yard except through a filter of leaves. A lollipop cluster of foliage crowns the top left of the tree. A quick breeze wafts the bitter scent of crushed green leaves under my nose. Bits of chipped wood bounce in the sunshine like a swarm of newly-hatched insects. BucketMan shifts toward the middle of the tree, trimming out the smallest branches, creating access to the main trunk. The middle branch is lopped and lowered. More sky appears.

We tied our first puppy to the maple tree the day we got her. It was an impulse adoption, since we hadn't really talked about getting a dog yet. But we'd had the house for a couple years, plus our two-point-whatever kids, and a yard big enough for a dog to play in. So when I saw "$25 Australian Shepherd puppies" in the paper one Sunday morning, we called the local number, ran right over, and picked out a four-month-old, rusty-red female with a loud, shrill bark. The fact that the dog's "breeder" housed his animals in a dirt-floor garage and apparently let them mate indiscriminately should have set off alarm bells. But we were so thrilled to have found a popular breed that we could afford right in our own town we really didn't think about it until later. I cuddled her wiggling body on my lap the short drive home. We hadn't even brought a box with us.

No plans to adopt a dog meant we also had nothing in the house *for* a dog. Not even a collar. Dan tied a long length of rope around her neck and then around the base of the maple tree, rather than let her run amok in the house, and told our thirteen-year-old to watch her while we

went to the store for supplies. And she still needed a name. As we tried to wrap the rope around the tree, she kept "helping" and being a "nosy Nelly" in general. We decided to call her Nell.

She was rambunctious, as all herding dogs can be, but she was a marvelous companion, even when she insisted on "protecting" us by barking at people down at the post office, five houses away. We didn't know that herding dogs would create their own jobs if you didn't give them enough to do. Nell decided hers was barking at threats, even imagined ones. We were her family, and she wasn't about to let anything happen to us.

Our four-year-old developed a special bond with Nell, and she put up with anything he did to her. When she was still being crate trained, he'd climb inside and share her incarceration, until they both grew too big for the crate. She herded the kids and their friends around the yard with her true Aussie instincts, trying to make them go where she wanted with limited success. Her coat lengthened and darkened to a rich chestnut red with white booties and a white chest patch. Australian Shepherds don't shed; they "blow" their coats in hunks of floating fur twice a year—another thing we didn't know about the breed. It was like picking up guinea pig pelts all over the house and yard for weeks at a time. Nell grew to be knee high and stocky, an overly-sturdy specimen for a female Aussie, which should have been another red flag. When her seizures started at eighteen months, we rushed her to the vet, thinking she'd eaten something poisonous.

Blood tests found no trace of poison. Instead, the vet said that Nell had genetic epilepsy, and she came home with a bottle of Phenobarbital pills and a pink bandage around her leg from the blood draw. Controlling her seizures was simply a matter of giving her a pill twice a day. That first evening, it took both me and Dan to open her mouth and get the pill in far enough that she couldn't spit it out. The next morning it was just me and Nell on our own. We eyed each

other while I apologized for all future unpleasantness. Then she lay down on the floor, rolled onto her back, and opened her mouth. Startled, I dropped the pill in on reflex. And that's how we did it, twice a day, for the next year or more.

Sadly, it turned out that Nell's breeding was *very* bad. Her seizures gradually became more frequent and more severe. We visited the vet every month to check her blood levels, a fresh pink bandage wrapped around her leg on our return home each time. Medication was increased from one pill twice a day to two, then two and a half. But each bump up in dosage only lasted a few months before the epilepsy got worse again. Twice a day meds changed to three times. Then a liquid Phenobarbital chaser was added to the pills to enhance the drug's effects. Eventually Nell began to lose her hearing. We realized that her sight was going, too, when she started to miss the bottom stair step on her way down, or run into the table legs. She wasn't even four years old yet. Nell was fully blind and deaf by Christmas that year, yet we kept putting off the decision we knew we couldn't avoid. It took three months before we finally called the vet to have her put down. We've never been good at the hard choices.

The decision to have the maple cut down reminds me of that call to the vet. I know it's way too late for regrets now, but I can't stop wishing we weren't doing this. Maybe we should have waited a couple more years. We made sure to be home while the tree was cut down, the same way we chose to stay with Nell in her last minutes, even as the vet's assistant urged us to leave. Neither of us wanted to come home to the suddenly-empty space where a tree once stood.

Dan and I talk sparingly, but always in a shout, as he snaps one picture after another. We need to document this loss in any way we can. He takes pictures. I write. The chainsaw screams its song of destruction, not cruelly but matter-of-factly. The tree is dying. It needs to be put out

of its misery before we let it linger and grow feeble. This is the kindest thing we could do, but it doesn't feel kind. It feels strange and wrong and melancholy. I worry about where the squirrels will nest next year. I checked to make sure there were no nests right now, but usually there's at least one huge clump of dried leaves and long strands of grass, tucked into the crook of a limb toward the back. We could always tell when nesting time arrived by the snipped branch ends that suddenly littered the ground as the squirrels cleared out a nook. There are other trees nearby, oaks and black walnuts and more maples, including the one we've left standing at the garden edge, but are they big enough for squirrel nests? Chances are good the squirrels will adapt better than I will, but I can't help worrying.

The left side of the tree is being denuded of branches now, carefully but quickly and methodically. BucketMan ties a rope to the branch he's cutting, above where the chainsaw bites, then knocks the cut piece over and lowers it. Where will he tie the rope once the top branches are gone? Men wander back and forth, dragging limbs to the chipper, walking to the vehicles in the road for different equipment, getting water. Dan watches the angle of the Thermos when they tilt it up. He refills it every time the tilt is full vertical. White cabbage moths twirl in pairs above the pile of wood chips, looking for I'm-not-sure-what since they don't eat wood or tree leaves. Maybe the torn leaves smell like cabbage or mustard plants to them. We will spend days, possibly weeks, moving the mountain of chips into other spots around the yard, steamy tendrils of decomposition drifting from their tops on cold mornings, like miniature volcanoes rotting into future mulch. A 4x4 wooden post sticks out the top of the pile, a toothpick in a giant's salad. It wasn't there earlier and I have no idea where it came from.

A turkey vulture sails overhead, its airplane shadow cruising by so fast I can't look up quickly enough to see the bird itself. The top of the center limb is lopped off like a stalk of

broccoli, leaves, branches and all, then lowered to the waiting crew. The last leaves are dragged to the chipper. The tree's "hair" has been shorn. All that's left is a living tuning fork. A Greek letter Psi. A devil's pitchfork.

The chipper goes quiet and is hauled back out to the street. Everything that's left is too big for the grinding blades, and will be cut into fireplace-sized logs for us to use in the barbecue pit. A white-and-orange mini Bobcat earth mover whines up the drive to take the chipper's place. The branches being lowered to the ground are now bare of leaves and as thick around as a man. The driver uses the Bobcat to pick up these limbs and take them to where they can be cut into smaller lengths. Voices farther than two feet away can be heard again. The chainsaw gasps and goes silent. The bucket lowers behind the main trunk. BucketMan steps out and walks to the fire pit to discuss his next plan of attack with Dan and the crew boss, pointing, nodding, wiping off sweat onto his shoulder as it runs out from under his bandana, leaving wood chips behind. One of the crew brings up a longer saw but he waves it off.

BucketMan pours himself a cup of water, then another, and another. The Thermos is empty again. He climbs back into his bucket, and rises effortlessly into the sunshine. The crew members reposition themselves to lower the last, largest pieces. The tree that remains behind him, the one left over from the hammock project, is fully exposed now. The sky due east is visible over the smaller maple for the first time. The tree is shockingly bare on one side, facing the house with naked branches—dead, or perhaps simply discouraged from decades of putting out leaves that never felt the sun. It will be interesting to note whether those branches leaf out next spring, or maybe the spring after, once it's recovered from the shock. Plenty of leaves remain in the rest of the canopy, though, making the tree look flattened on one side, like it just

woke up with bed-head. The sudden influx of light contributes to its startled appearance. This tree has spent its whole life in the larger maple's shadow. Now it blinks in surprise and wonder.

BucketMan begins working on the left Psi arm, tying a rope near the top of the limb and threading it over branch stumps to use as a pulley. He cuts straight across the branch but his aim is off—the top half drops too quickly and hits the truck attached to the cherry-picker bucket. He grabs the bucket as it rocks. Incoherent voices shout and laugh until the chainsaw drowns them out again. There's a fresh dent in the flatbed's floor, next to where the bucket arm is anchored, but the whole truck is full of rusty scratches and dents. Our tree has simply contributed a new battle scar. The crew retrieves the newly-made log and begins cutting it into smaller chunks.

The scent of wood on the breeze has changed. It's sharp and acrid, like a penny jar opened up after a long time shut. BucketMan positions himself behind the middle arm of the tuning fork. The chainsaw revs then bites, pushing the blade downward on a slant, carving almost all the way through before backing out of the cut. Reposition the bucket. Rev. A second slice comes from the opposite side at the same downward angle, nearly meeting in the middle before the blade retreats. The blade quiets, puttering and purring in BucketMan's right hand. It only takes a firm wiggle from his left to crack the top away from the rest of the trunk, and it plummets to earth.

BucketMan works from one limb to the next, removing five to six feet from each before starting the rotation again. When he's done, the tree appears to have its arms up in surrender, the shorter middle trunk sticking up like a head. The bucket lowers on its single grasshopper-like leg, and BucketMan trades up to a two-foot blade for the thick main trunk arms. Only about ten feet of barrel-thick limb remains of each tine in the tuning fork, three curving fingers pointing skyward. The ground crew uses the longer saw BucketMan waved off earlier to cut the downed

limbs into short lengths. The limbs' thickness makes creating logs a slower process now, the chainsaw's previous whine transformed to a sustained, even-pitched growl.

The bucket moves left and the rest of that arm clumps to the ground in sections, no longer guided down with ropes. What remains standing is a peace sign. A victory symbol. A Vulcan salute with a limb-stump thumb. The Bobcat picks the last, thickest piece up, and carries it toward the chip pile. It holds the huge, bent log three feet in the air so a crewman can section it into smaller chunks that vibrate the ground on impact. In less than three minutes, the trunk arm is five fireplace logs.

The right arm goes the same way, smoothly and inevitably. The main trunk is all that's left, a folded hand with a middle finger flipping off Heaven, ivy crawling up the wrist and back to the first knuckles. The Bobcat darts in to retrieve the limb, whisking it out of the drop zone, to be chopped up. The bucket lowers to the ground and disgorges BucketMan, then folds its arm onto the truck bed. The bucket truck backs down the drive to the street. The remains of the tree aren't tall enough to need it now. The crew is going to take down the rest of the trunk and haul it away. We've got plenty of wood lying all over the yard.

BucketMan walks over to the fire pit and gets some more water. He's just the high flyer; someone else will deal with this final cut. One of the crew members holds up a chainsaw with a wide, three-foot-long blade, unwieldy and awkward looking. The blade bites into the tree's base with a tenor scream, not too close to the ground. It seems to take a long time for it to carve out two lines, one on top of another. This is also the widest and most-alive part of the tree. It almost seems to be fighting back. The saw man circles the tree, cutting for a few moments in one spot, then moving around to another. He carves one half to one third of the way into the tree's heart, never more. When he reaches the original starting point, the blade cuts down into those lines at a

45 degree angle, kicking out a chunk of tree shaped like a cheese wedge. Another crew member steps up to the other side of the trunk and pushes. The saw man joins him. The crack of the heartwood splitting is loud and sharp, like a firecracker, like a bullet. The trunk falls with a supersonic thud. It reverberates under my feet, thumps my ears, echoes in my chest.

I can see to the back of the yard. The tree is gone.

Adjusting to change gets harder as I age. Children go off to college, come home, then depart again, an empty space left gaping in the routines and conversations that they used to fill. Parents, pets, friends, other relatives die, each new loss wrenching and numbing for weeks, months, years, until we incorporate their absence. When Nell died we were all devastated, but we missed her company so much it was only three weeks before we adopted a shelter puppy. Gracie bounced into our lives like a wind-up dog toy and was with us for fourteen years. She's been gone for four, but we still don't have another dog. We will not replace this tree, either.

On the one hand, it will be harder to ignore the hotel now, but on the other, the vegetable gardens will get full sun instead of being plunged into deep shade in mid-afternoon. I won't have to dig maple leaves and seeds out from under the windshield wipers every fall, but Dan won't have mounds and mounds of leaves for mulching the gardens, either. I'm sure the warblers will be back in the spring because there are other maples in our yard and next door. There may be fewer flowers to choose from, but the flowers will still bloom.

The tree is gone. We've spent over twenty years living with it. Now we'll find out what it's like to live without it.

Home Again, Home Again

I think I've been cured of ever wanting another old house. I spent my teens and twenties in a fairly large house that dated from 100 years before I was born, and I loved it. The house we live in now isn't much younger, but the difference is that, back then, I wasn't the one who had to take care of it. I thought it was fun hanging wallpaper, painting, fixing broken pipes. Dad always seemed to be doing something interesting, although I remember that he swore a lot, too. My father just happened to be visiting from Florida while Dan and I were in the process of getting our first mortgage loan, so we took him on a tour of our potential new home. The paneled alcove at the base of the stairs caused visions of a twinkling Christmas tree there every year to dance through my head. The old claw-foot tub under the sloping ceiling in the bathroom was enchanting, if a bit the worse for wear and lacking shower capabilities because there wasn't enough height for a shower curtain frame. I was smitten, but I think Dad was simply appalled. I'm sure he could see the amount of work needed to make it livable, and keep it that way. He'd been there and done that to the point where he hired people to take care of everything for him. We bought the house anyway, but the dream of what we could afford never really matched up with the reality of what we could maintain. Over the years, my criteria for what I want in a home has changed.

In hindsight, I can see so many parallels between the house we own and the one I grew up in that I marvel at our naïveté in thinking this one would be any different. Structurally, they both had major issues. My parents' house had originally been a general store in the center of Macedonia, but it was moved a mile down the street when a bank took over the property, a few years before Mom and Dad bought the house. The neighbors thought it was full of water because

of the blue tinted glass in the downstairs windows. Rooms were added on as needed until, by the time it was moved, the trees along the road had to be mutilated to let the house pass. You could still see the damage decades later. Somebody screwed up when they built the new foundation, though—the basement rafters were facing the same way as the floor joists instead of at right angles. When the house was lowered onto the foundation, there was no support for the joists—everything buckled and sagged. None of the floors was ever level again. Every time my sister or I flipped the light switch in the bedroom we shared, there was an audible tinkle of broken plaster falling inside the wall. One of our beagles quickly learned that she could drop a ball at the kitchen end of the dining room and chase it toward the living room. Liquids spilled at the table were best mopped up by going to the other end of the room and following the flow back to the source. Floorboards groaned and squeaked so much, I don't think any of us would have reacted to a break-in. None of it seemed at all unusual to us.

Dan and I knew when we moved to Kent that the house had termite damage—in the stair landing, the two-story outside wall next to it, and the window that got stranded in mid-wall when the attic floor was taken out to put in a staircase to the second floor. The former owner knocked off a couple thousand from the selling price to cover future repair expenses, and we figured we'd get around to fixing all of that at some point. Instead, we ignored it until we were forced to slap plastic over the window because the sill was honeycombed with holes to the outdoors. We got used to walking close to the newel post going upstairs to avoid the spongy top step on the far side of the landing. We taped up some of the peeling sizing paper on the plaster walls and ceiling in the euphemistically-named "sewing" room, and filled it up with junk. The peeling hasn't gotten any better in the past twenty years. In fact, parts of the ceiling fell down a while back. We screwed drywall scraps over the exposed lath and crossed our fingers that it wouldn't spread. It

hasn't so far. When a third of the kitchen ceiling came down on top of the fridge and china hutch, we really should have slapped drywall over that, too, and sold the place, rather than taking it as a hint to remodel. Seven years later, we're still trying to come up with both free time and money (at the same time) to finish the cabinet sheathing, toe-kicks, and molding. But first, we'll need to replace the floor again—we never found a sturdy enough sealer to keep the kitchen chairs from scraping off the black-and-white checkerboard paint job that took Dan three weeks to complete. We've learned the hard way that those who live paycheck to paycheck should never own an old home.

Nature getting into the houses was a problem then, as well as now. Both houses had floor-to-ceiling bead-board cabinets in the kitchen, likely custom built for the room. In ours, the sage green cabinets were moved to the enclosed back porch/laundry room because adding heating ductwork to the second floor had displaced them, and they were too tall to fit anywhere else. In my parents' house, cupboard doors and drawers, also sage green, covered two walls at one end of the kitchen. The tiers of shelves were big enough to hold pantry supplies for a large family—holiday platters, cookie sheets, baking supplies, and Jell-O molds—and were so tall we had to climb the cupboard shelves to reach the upper ones. The cabinets also held mice. After Mom found tiny, white footprints leading from a bag of flour to a crack in the back of one cabinet, Dad boxed the area in and set up traps. If we didn't hear the snap when a new victim was caught, Mom's Siamese cat would let us know by staring at the door in horror. Hsu Ling was terrified of mice. We frequently heard mouse fights inside the walls and under the living room stairs. There must have been an old staircase underneath the visible steps, because frantic squeaking was usually followed by the rhythmic thumps of a small body rolling down a set of invisible steps. When my younger brother was in kindergarten, he received daily visits from a

diminutive, charcoal-gray mouse with enormous ears. The Disneyesque rodent would appear from inside the coat closet and sit on the floor next to my brother while he watched TV before school. After a while, the mouse would scamper back to the closet, take whatever tasty offering Mom had left in the trap, and disappear into the wall. It was too small to trip the trap's spring, and we never caught it.

Our house tends to attract moles, although we have periodically caught mice in the attic over the kitchen, found piles of empty sunflower shells inside the sage green cabinets, and been presented with mouse corpses by the family cats. Moles, however, can often be found swimming in the pets' water bowl, foraging in the back porch trash, and, most memorably, inside rolled-closed bags of dog food. We're still not sure how they get in there, but it's happened more than once. The first time, one of the kids came to me, wide-eyed and whispering that something was moving inside the dog food bag. I hesitantly unrolled the top of the bag, leaning away, unsure about what I was likely to find. But once the bag was open all the way, there was just a solitary mole, not even three inches long from stubby tail to plushy dark gray back to pink nose button. All four legs (with surprisingly lethal-looking claws) scrabbled at the kibble as it ran around and around and around inside the bag. I scooped it out with an old plastic margarine tub, plunked a lid on top, and trotted to the blackberry brambles at the far back of the yard. Chances are good that was the same mole we found half drowned in the dog's water bowl a week later. Moles always seemed to find their way back.

Basements were another similarity between the two houses. The basement walls of my parents' house leaked like a fountain—literally. I never got tired of going to the basement when it rained so I could watch jets of water shoot from the walls. I doubt my parents appreciated the beauty as much as I did. Unfortunately, they weren't told about the water problem when they

bought the house in the pre-full-disclosure '60s, and we didn't find out until the basement was flooded with three feet of icy, melted snow six months after we moved in. Boxes of books bobbled like cardboard corks in the wake produced by the knee high boots of three kids and Dad wading around in the frigid water, the three of us having a much better time than the homeowner. Even sloshing through water in the basement has charm when you're not the one footing the bill and dealing with the damage. Both beagles yodeled enthusiastic support from the basement steps. Mom cried as we threw out ruined, soggy masses of paper that used to be her library. The sump pump sunk into the basement floor finally made sense—flooding was an event as regular as the spring thaw. Dad bought a portable pump for the basement-level garage to send water back into a ditch next to the drive. We could never be sure when a rain storm would produce enough water to require bailing. The dogs slept in the basement, acting as a vocal early warning system. If water accumulated on the floor, they were sure to sound the alarm.

The water problem with the house Dan and I bought wasn't obvious, either, and full disclosure laws wouldn't go into effect for at least another ten years. It rained the day we got the house keys, Northeast Ohio's five-year drought came to an end, and water began to trickle across the floor of our seemingly-dry basement. The combination of a high water table and poor/elderly/inadequate foundation materials means a continuous stream of water runs through the cement block walls and across the basement floor most of the year, except during the summer drought season. Maybe we would have changed our minds if we'd known the basement was such a mess. Then again, maybe not considering how cheap it was.

There's a chance that my family will need to move in the next couple of years. Dan's ready to retire, and I'd like to find a permanent job teaching writing, but we're not going to have much luck with either if we stick around Kent. The list of what I want in a house has evolved

over the years, so if we go looking again, we'll be more particular this time. Potential future homes need to have a garage. After this past winter, I've realized that I'm way too old to clear 8" of snow off my car without damaging myself. If the garage is attached, so much the better for avoiding falls on ice.

I want decent sized closets in each bedroom, the bathrooms, and at least two closets somewhere else in the house for visitors' coats, golf clubs, and the junk from the sewing room. I want at least two bathrooms. Another half bath wouldn't be a bad idea, either. Spending over twenty years with a family of four and only one bathroom has created in each of us either a very flexible concept of privacy, or a complete inability to perform bodily functions if anyone else is within earshot.

I want a writing office for myself, and a woodworking shop for Dan. I'm not going to be picky about the size of my own space, as long as I can line the room with bookshelves and still fit a desk in the middle of it. I want a basement that doesn't leak. I really don't think that's too much to ask, but apparently it is if you live in Kent. Plus I'm the only one who can stand upright down there without bumping the floor joists, and I refuse to go downstairs unless I absolutely have to. It would be nice if the basement was a useable room.

I want fewer neighbors. The fewer the better. I know we're getting too old to live out in the boonies with on one around for miles, but I'm tired of feeling the living room floor vibrate from the thumping bass line of the stereo next door. In the very first apartment Dan and I had, the mournful, guttural hoot of barred owls echoed through the woods outside our bedroom window every night. I want that back. I want to hear the wind in the trees without having to listen for it in the gaps between trains on the tracks and neighborhood dogs barking and drunks screaming at the top of their lungs for no reason other than being drunk. I want to kneel in the

dirt and dig weeds from a garden bed without worrying about a rock suddenly hitting the other side of the fence, right by my head. I want to be so distracted by bluebirds flying past that I can't read the book I took outside. I want to see snakes and toads and praying mantises and other creatures that won't come near a yard sprayed with chemicals. I want to listen to rain drumming outside without hearing cars splash past on the street, too. I want to have picnics without worrying about who we're bothering, or getting bothered by anyone else. Once I thought all I wanted was a house, somewhere to call our own and raise our children. I took for granted all the places we'd lived close to nature and away from the claustrophobia of cities. I thought it didn't really matter where we ended up.

It's taken a while, but I've finally changed my mind.