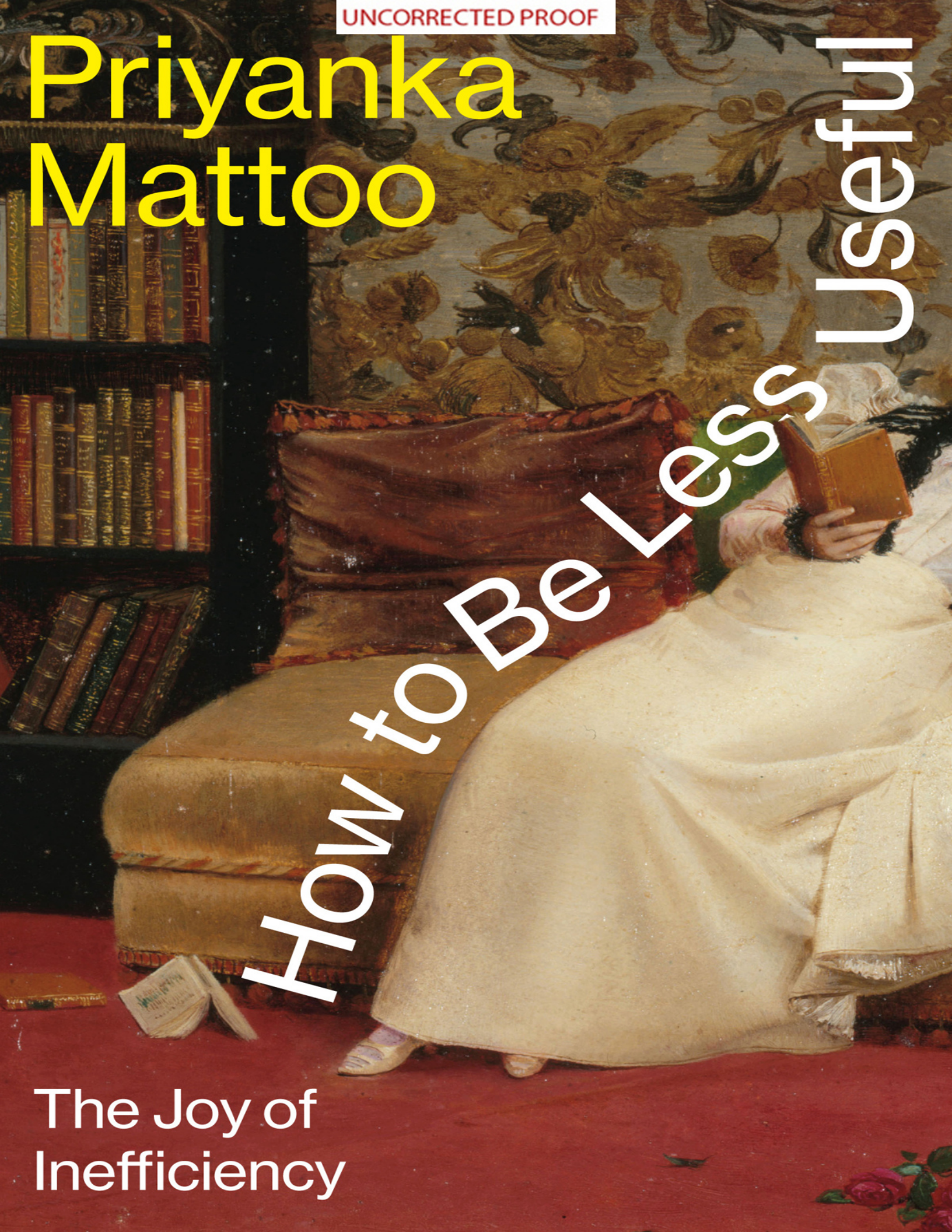
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Priyanka Mattoo

How to Be Less Useful

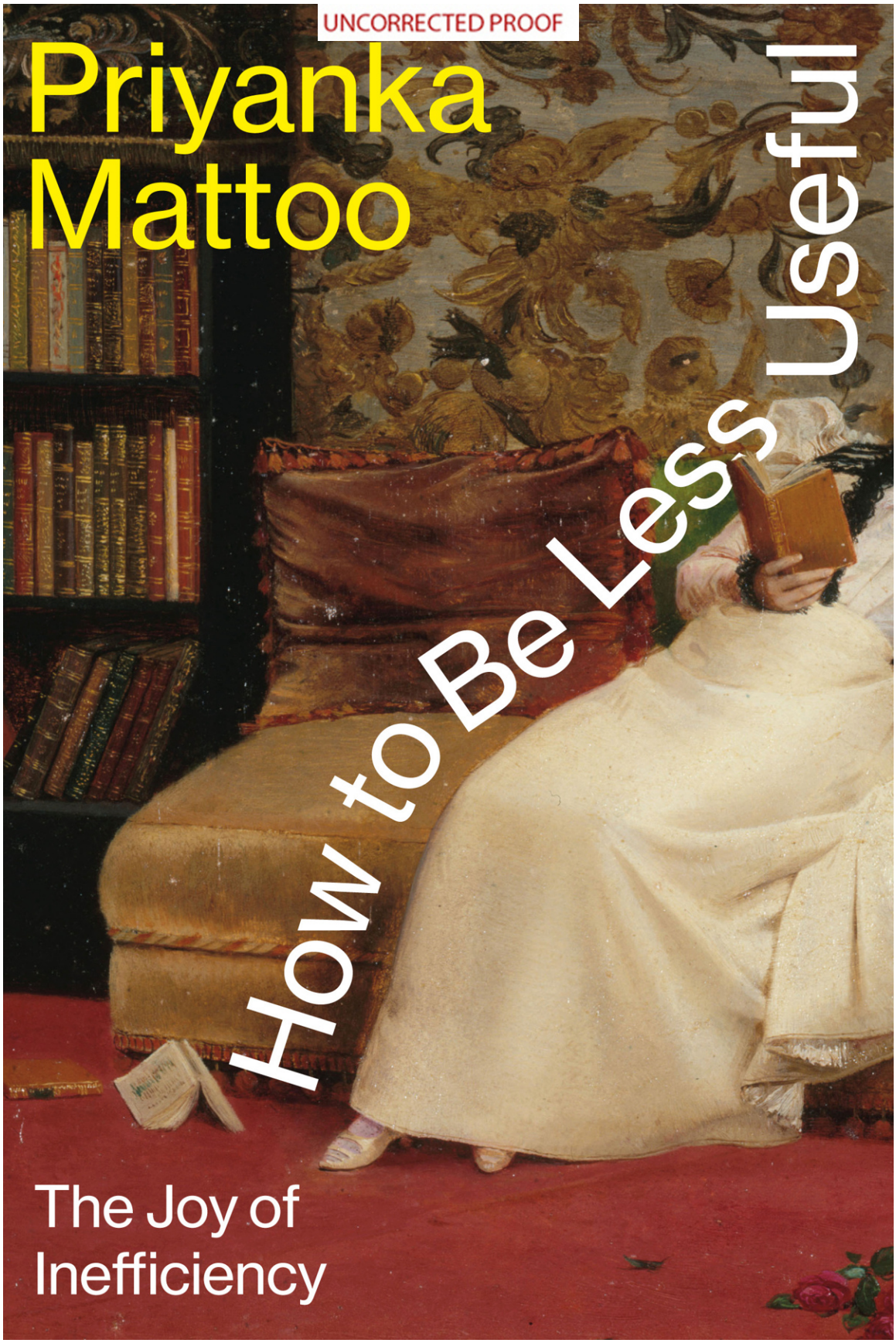


The Joy of Inefficiency

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Priyanka Mattoo

How to Be Less Useful



The Joy of Inefficiency

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ABOUT THE BOOK

A delightful book about reclaiming pleasure in mid-life—a potent mix of self-help and memoir, from one of today's wittiest, wisest voices.

"I have done everything right, and I have missed everything."

When did our lives become entirely about efficiency and optimization? Especially as office workers, as parents, as consumers, as exercisers and healthy eaters. Wouldn't it be nice if we could all be less useful?

With self-deprecating humor, devastating insight, and bracing honesty, Priyanka Mattoo shares her own journey toward being a less useful human, to investigate why pleasure gets back-burnered in American culture.

Think about what we choose to systematically cut out or overlook as we mature: Solo travel. Dessert. Sweaty dancing. "Pointless" hangs with friends. And then there are the activities that used to be fun and have somehow lost their luster, usually in the decade between 30 and 40: Cooking (ruined by exhaustion). Bad tv (the algorithm). Other humans (bandwidth). *Eating at restaurants (Instagram).*

Mattoo takes on the zeitgeist, delivering invaluable, laugh-out-loud entertaining life lessons without an ounce of preachiness or pressure. She looks at where pleasure begins, what it serves, how we learn to repress it—in families, in friendships and romantic relationships, in jobs. And she shows us a way back: to identify and accept the things that give us pleasure, then to welcome them into our lives. What if, instead of being useful, we could all learn how to be happier, lighter, more present, more engaged? *How to Be Less Useful* is refreshing, funny, sparklingly astute, unignorable--a book for the current moment.

Published by Knopf, November 2026

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Priyanka Mattoo is the author of the memoir *Bird Milk & Mosquito Bones*, as well as a filmmaker and former Hollywood talent agent. She is a contributor to *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker,* and columnist at *Vulture*.

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ALSO BY PRIYANKA MATTOO

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How to Be Less Useful

The Joy of Inefficiency

PRIYANKA MATTOO



ALFRED A. KNOPF
NEW YORK 2026

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A BORZOI BOOK
FIRST HARDCOVER EDITION
PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF 2026

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
[CIP data TK]
ISBN: 978-0-593-80318-9 (hardcover)
ISBN: 978-0-593-80319-6 (ebook)

penguinrandomhouse.com | aaknopf.com

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland, https://eu-contact.penguin.ie.

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To my children, D and L:

I love you beyond the limits of human comprehension (even mine).

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I

SUMMER

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Please Look After This Bear

The car is already too warm one weekday morning as I stare into the middle distance. It is just before summer, the kids in school. I am back from an appointment with my ob-gyn. “We’ll have to remove the entire ovary,” she said.

I responded to this information like an uptight college student fighting an A-minus. I asked about the decades of lifestyle changes I’d taken on in the belief that I could manage this condition. First I had been told to cut out sweets. Then bread and rice and pasta. Then even fruit and beans. I barely drink anymore. Allow myself one cup of coffee, before noon, with unsweetened almond milk, which is disgusting. Turn down every social invite so that I can jump into bed before ten. And it has worked, for decades. Until now, in fact. Was this always going to happen? “Yeah,” she said. “But you delayed getting here a little.” As I buttoned up my jeans after the exam, she noticed me make a face. She, a mother of three, laughed with me, in the way women do, at our collective lot.

I sit for hours this morning, parked on the street outside my house. With the windows cracked open, I think about every dessert I have skipped for a decade, and marinate in self-pity. I’ve bent myself into unnatural shapes to make sure I’m healthy, well rested, and alert, mostly in service of my family. I’m doing everything a financially stable, fortysomething working parent is supposed to do. I’m up around six to make a protein-rich breakfast and pack a nut-free lunch for the children. I gently nudge them in the directions of their backpacks, packing lists, and toothbrushes, counting down the minutes until they need to be out the door and into my husband’s car. Once they’re at school, I am singularly focused on the seamless execution of my extremely detailed, good-working-mom calendar. If the school nurse doesn’t reach out, if no variables manage to invade my day, I try to squeeze in some steps while on a call. I eat a nutrient-rich salad at my desk. I work some more, deal with house admin, handle child-rearing speed bumps. Work a little more. I pick up the kids from school, offer them a balanced dinner, and oversee homework and piano before my husband whisks them away for bedtime.

I try to do all of this without losing my patience, and often I fail. By 8 p.m., I've expended so much energy on optimizing and regulating, powering through my schedule—a Jenga of color-coded obligations—that I collapse, mushy-brained, into a pile on my bed. Of course it's big-picture satisfying to have built this life—the one I always dreamed of—through consistency and routine, glued together by sheer force of will. But every second of every day has become just . . . so . . . efficient.

And all for what? I think now. Bum ovaries, and not one indulgence, while the world lights itself on fire?

I'm so bored. And even worse, I'm boring. My perfect schedule, my perfect eating habits, have left me no space or time for joy. The joy that I might get out of a candy bar, for example. If I even ate candy bars.

I shine with sweat this day in my car, as I take in the Los Angeles sky. A beautiful blue, not a cloud in sight. I stick my fingertips out the window to feel the lightest, most pleasant breeze. Even this annoys me. Because the weather in LA is so famously consistent, it messes with my perception of time. I've lived in this strange place for more than twenty years, which bend and stretch behind me, blending together in a sun-dappled shimmer. Layer on top of that the lengths I've gone to make every day as orderly as possible, and the last decade feels like a well-lit blur of automation. Like a neat row of widgets, one laid after another. A refrain pings around in my head as I climb out of the steamy car, now dizzy from the heat: *I have done everything right, and I have missed everything.*

It's a small, silly thing to fixate on, but I know I used to eat candy bars with gusto. As I leaf through my old *Paddington* collection with my five-year-old daughter later on that day, I am pummeled by a happy memory from my own childhood, of flipping through these pages while sitting under a window in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, the city where my family spent eight years. Now, as I snuggle up to introduce my daughter to the Browns and their funny little bear, I have to use some force to unstick a few pages. Suddenly I am back in that patch of Saudi sunlight. My father had brought back a box of Ferrero Rocher from a work trip. I carefully consumed one at a time—layer by layer, crunching into the central hazelnut last—while reading my new book, and it's my tiny chocolate fingerprints that still dot most of the pages. I feel a sharp pang, missing that little girl who used to smear her books with chocolate. The one who used to sit still.

It wasn't just the chocolate, and it wasn't just being that little girl. *I used to be fun,* I think, really wallowing now, as I fulfill the remainder of my motherly duties that evening, and the following. I used to *have* fun. I was the first person to a party and the last one to leave. I was usually the one throwing the party, in fact. What happened to that girl? Can I become that girl again? Sure, she participated in a lot of all-night dancing in drunken, sweaty rooms, which seems incompatible with my current lifestyle, but how might I channel her? I feel like I've so severed my connection to pleasure that I don't even remember what it feels like. What did I once enjoy? What can I even enjoy now, as an adult with a family and a job, and a thorough understanding of the horrors? I, like everyone else, guzzle up those stories about women who wake up one day at a certain age—mine—and realize they have to burn it all down. But I like my life, mostly. How can I feel the intensity of the joy I used to feel without sacrificing the parts that I love?

My husband, Rodney, tries to help me figure it out, once I start grumbling about this. "What do you need?" he asks one night, as he does often, and my mind goes blank, as it does often. There is a buzzing sound in my ears. I can't remember a time I've been able to answer this question, which sends me into an inexplicable, silent rage. Every time anyone asks me what I need, they set off a knee-jerk reaction that protects my core sense of self. "I don't need much," I respond proudly, cheerfully, echoing my parents' praise of me as a child. "Just a book, and she's happy," they used to say, as I probably sat, in silence, on hour nine of my cacao-fueled *Paddington* expedition.

I'm still weirdly mad about it. "I need peace and quiet!" I spit out at him, like a harried sitcom mom. Ten hours of sleep each night, for a week. A month. "There must be more than that," he prods. *There is only so much time in a day,* I think. And so much to do, in maintaining my screenwriting, and book-writing, and a household and a marriage and two kids. How am I going to set aside time to figure out another person's needs: mine? The very thought exhausts me.

While I try to figure it out, I keep thinking about Paddington, and I keep getting annoyed with myself for thinking about Paddington. What a strange thing, at this age, to find a small bear in a red felt hat and blue toggle coat swishing around in my thoughts. I walk along the beach one morning, glaring at another blue sky, and restrain my fist from shaking at it. And I am

reminded of Paddington Bear's "hard stare," an effective disciplinary tactic when he disapproves of someone's behavior. And then, instead of shoving him out of my mind, I accept that my intrusive ursine thoughts might have a purpose. Fine! *What does Paddington mean to me?* I ask myself, feeling ridiculous.

It isn't just my nostalgia for the books, I realize. It is because he is a model of something I yearn for. The Browns consider Paddington an eminently useful bear, and I think of myself as the same. Beyond that, he also has a well-balanced life—between his tight-knit family, his close, intergenerational friendship with Mr. Gruber, his interests in cricket and gardening, the vigor with which he approaches each meal. He doesn't go out of his way to avoid a scrape—no efficiency planning for him—and he meets each one, of which there are plenty, with humility and a gentle sense of humor. Maybe not everyone dips their toes into an existential crisis and identifies Paddington Bear as their lifestyle guru, but I can't discount the fact that I've held him close for forty years.

I am in the car, listening to a children's debate podcast with my children. The episode we are listening to is called "Peanut Butter vs. Marshmallows." I detest marshmallows, and I love peanut butter, so I tune out and my mind wanders, instead, to our upcoming grocery shop. That is, until the kids' chatter in the back rings an alarm in me. "Marshmallows take three minutes off your life?" shouts my daughter, repeating what she's heard. "But I love marshmallows!" She is almost in tears, and I am irate. "They're *lying*," I say. "Are they as healthy as peanut butter?" she asks through tears, and I tell her that "healthy" doesn't even matter in this case. Marshmallows are a treat, and treats exist solely to make us happy. "Not everything is there to fill you up with nutrients," I grumble. "Sometimes we just want things." She cheers up, and so do I.

Because I finally understand what has been eluding me. My husband has gotten close, in his continued insistence on asking me what I need, and braving the grumpiness. However, my response to that question might forever remain the same, if I'm lucky: Technically nothing. If I have done everything right (I have), and I have missed everything (also yes), what of this theoretical "everything" do I *want*? For this I have a hundred ready answers. Good chocolate, for one. Dancing, singing, kissing for ages. Laughing until I cry with old friends. Overstuffed cheese boards. Luxe hand

cream. A perfectly timed, frivolous cocktail. Exploratory train travel. Pretty bras. Rambling walks through new terrain. And some bigger wants! Here we are, on the cusp of summer, and I want it to feel like a distinct season, one bursting with all the things I enjoyed about it as a child. Not just for the kids—for me as well. I do not want to pass it in a whirr of mechanized caregiving, but instead, as I once did, find it filled with joy and play.

I haven't even noticed I have lost the ability to ask myself what I want. It feels like opening the door to a closet bursting with jewels I somehow forgot existed. Now that my "baby" is in school, and my son is ten, and both kids spend the day inhabiting a world entirely their own, they are much less demanding of my constant presence. Things are still busy, but their immediate requests are getting less frequent, and I am starting to have a little space. I wonder how I'm going to fill it.

A few weeks later, I take the kids to visit their cousins in Orange County, and instead of getting there and calculating immediately what time we would need to leave to avoid certain traffic patterns, I relax into the rhythm of the day. My daughter runs up to me with a new snack—little Japanese crackers shaped like mushrooms. They're adorable, with a mini cookie stalk and a glossy chocolate cap. She asks me to try them. Normally I'd demur, preoccupied with the instant impact on my blood sugar, on my ovary, but this time—*what would Paddington do?*—I take a handful. They're . . . perfect. The crunch of the cookie, the taste and texture of the chocolate. I inspect how they're made—layers of milk and dark chocolate, molded over a crisp, airy biscuit stalk. They're so ridiculous that it's almost elegant. I eat another few. My daughter grins up at me, and I beam right back at her, understanding that our smiles aren't just about the snack. We are, both of us, enjoying my joy.

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How to Be Less Useful

My favorite restaurant in Ann Arbor nearly burned down once, which I found out when I walked by for a sandwich and saw fire trucks instead. Through a scrum of firefighters, I locked eyes with the manager, a slender Lebanese man who was used to me coming in a couple of times a week, to sit in the picture window between law school classes and read while I munched on my *shish tawook.* There was another place—still in business today—where most students went to scratch their itches for falafel, but I grew up mostly in the Middle East. I knew this place was vastly superior, and the owner *knew* I knew—about the crunch of the pita, the balance and texture of their *toum*. They used chicken thighs, not dry breasts. We never talked about it—he just punched in my order and I handed over the cash, but we shared the unspoken bond of setting high culinary standards for a seven-dollar sandwich.

As I tried to scurry away from the fire trucks that day, he caught my startled look, and ran back into the restaurant, emerging with my usual order in a to-go bag. I fumbled for the cash and he waved me off. I understood the significance of this. The panic on the manager's face briefly calmed as he held out my order, and I thought for a moment that I should insist I couldn't take it, but I did, because it was an urgent offering, and I understood I needed to accept. I knew what it signified, that he brought me food while everything fell apart around him. It meant he cared for me.

Obviously, it wasn't when this was formed, my idea that feeding was a form of care and affection. Of love. My mother fed. Many-course dinners. Birthday parties to rival a wedding banquet, all from scratch, and not just when entertaining. It's how she expressed every one of her feelings. Making up after an argument? No talking: just a sandwich, or a cup of tea, depending on time of day. If I hadn't been the opposing party, the peace offering was delivered through me, a grumbled "Ask if Dad wants a cup" or "Here's a snack." If Mum was back in feeding mode, the brief storm had passed.

So I am, of course, a feeder. Not a fancy one, by any means. Sometimes I cook for a crowd, but we'll have a group of neighborhood kids over on a Sunday and I order pizza and put compostable plates on a tablecloth on the ground, in an invention I call "kitchen picnic." The kids love it, and it's easy for me to clean up. Which brings us to why, as we are folding into summer, it rattles me to read a request for advice in *The New York Times*. This woman explains that her neighbor's kids—six and eight years old—come over frequently to play, and they eat a lot of food. She loves the family, but already shops and preps for a family of five, and the cost and time of throwing extra sandwiches or fruit in the mix stresses her out.

The idea of not feeding a neighborhood child as I would my own fills me with horror. The obvious next step is to screenshot her letter for a number of my group chats, whose overwhelming response is that she is an absolute monster who should go to prison. Then a quieter, smaller crew makes note of the ever-rising price of groceries, which makes me realize that I'm not giving this woman a fair shake. The thing I have been ignoring is her undercurrent of fear. She mentions three kids, all of whom probably eat a lot—and if they're anything like my kids, at a rate I'm almost unable to replenish. What she's dealing with is two little neighbor girls asking for everything they see, and not wanting to disappoint them, but something is stopping her from just putting out some cheapie snacks and skedaddling. What could it be? The answer could be that that variety of entertaining simply was not modeled for her. We all grew up in different homes, which I somehow forget too often.

The cluster of ethnicities closest to my own—Brown, Black, Latin, Mediterranean, Jewish, etc.—reply as almost one voice, because our cultural shorthand is to feed others. And one dear friend asserts that she finds the woman's question "middle-class-coded." She explains that being able to be generous, especially when growing up with nothing, is considered a gift in her community. She will always treasure and attempt to replicate the feeling she has that the poor people she is surrounded by give what they have. She also points out that the stingiest community members are often the ones who have everything, and are paranoid that it might be taken away from them.

The remainder, the "Cold Climate Whites," as one friend calls her people, offers a fascinating anthropological lesson. One mom says her

parents didn’t entertain much, and theirs was never the house that kids flocked to. Now that she oversees that kind of kid-packed home, it has taken her a while to figure out she can just put out a tub of, say, crackers and call it a day. Another says they lived on a farm so far away from people—a rather American problem—that no one ever came over. Yet another woman, from New England, says they never ate at a friend’s or offered food to friends at their place, as it was considered rude to inconvenience your parents or anyone else’s: “When I was a kid, your parent would lay into you for dirtying cups.” Here she echoes #SwedenGate, the online chatter a few years ago that Swedes supposedly don’t feed their guests dinner unless it’s been organized beforehand. She relays a memory of having to stay alone in the playroom while a friend had dinner, because it wasn’t polite to eat in front of people. This one I may never understand, and she still doesn’t, either.

Then things get meaty: “Withholding food is an important vector common among my father’s people—this is totally a thing,” says a self-identified WASP, and I find that, as freakish as this may seem to me, our traditions are just as bizarre to her people: “The whole guests/food/abundance thing in Asian, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean cultures is totally alien to them, and they regard it with suspicion,” she says, neatly distancing herself from her community. “Like, ‘What are you all up to?’” Another respondent notes that her mom had a strange pattern of overfeeding, then sabotaging, which she’d enact by serving meals either slightly too hot or too cold.

All of these non-feeder instincts are foreign to me, but in all of them the withholding belies an emotional state, a sense of food dispersal as control, a tap to turn on and off. As I examine my own urge to feed, it suddenly doesn’t read as generous. It feels almost manipulative. Feeding is how I make friends, and how I recruit friends for my children. There are probably other ways to build community, but it’s the only way I know. I innately understood that restaurant manager’s desperation as he pushed a sandwich at me. He didn’t want a minor emergency to sever our connection. I feel the same as I push dinner guests to take seconds, thirds, because that’s how I nurture our bonds. It’s how I show people I like them when it’s too early to say the words, or when I’m not sure what else I can offer them. I am bartering for their affection, and when people accept my offerings, I am at peace.

Feeding is integral to my sense of self. As a kid, I fed my brother, and sometimes my parents. I know this was unusual, but they claim I had a way with a sandwich, and had mastered an apple crumble, which they craved from time to time. I fed my college friends back when nobody else our age could cook. I fed my boyfriend, then my husband, then our kids. I love cooking for people not just out of a generosity of spirit, but because I'm trapped in a heady positive-feedback loop. I love to be perceived a certain way—as a caretaker, apron on, pulling out an extra plate for a surprise guest. I want to project abundance. Ultimately, I want people to lean on me, so that I can feel needed and important. "We should cook for you sometime," I get from dinner guests, many of them food professionals, and that doesn't please me the way you'd think. Cooking is my gift to others, and there's no expectation of reciprocity. It's not an incoming gift I want.

When I began thinking about my joy, I would have said yes, feeding people brings me joy, on the purest, highest level. But does it? As I think about it more, I wonder if this definition of self was formed as I molded myself into someone everyone saw as useful and self-sufficient. First as big sister, when I remember reaching for my mother's book *Household Hints & Tips.* It was a *Good Housekeeping* special issue that taught 1980s women (always women, usually moms) tips and tricks that might lighten the load. As I stirred, chopped, and boiled whatever needed to be stirred, chopped, or boiled, as I packed my brother's peanut butter sandwiches and made him ramen or "cheesy toast" after school, it never occurred to me to ask why anyone else in the house wasn't helping my mother in the same way. I just relished my own efficiency and competence.

And what a party trick! By my twenties, I could help a friend freshen up her stinky towels (vinegar), treat a burn (white toothpaste), get wine out of her rug (OxiClean), and batch-clean Thanksgiving silver with a magical solution of hot water and salt poured into an aluminum pan. I was celebrated for these things, and I enjoyed them myself. I really did—even when I review the memories. I got a warm, full sense of satisfaction. And when we got married I commandeered and ran a household, gleefully . . . until I had a kid. And I see now that this is the point where it shifted.

Unlike what the baby-book industrial complex led me to believe, there was not one hot tip that helped me with a newborn, and certainly no way to

ensure an orderly home. Our first baby couldn't rest—he was a specific kind of nonsleeper who was prone to a prolonged, overtired hysteria, and the only way to get him back to normal was to put him to bed at 4 p.m. to reset him for future sleep. The second child, of course, was the kind who yawned one day and said, "Somebody needs to put me to bed—I'm tired." One kid gleefully ate everything, from sushi to salsa. The other gave herself a literal gold star for tasting water with cucumber in it ("Explore New Foods Chart!"). There is no control, no sparkling silver at the end of a child-rearing day. There is only the endless series of tasks, exhaustion in the muck. There may be laughter there, piles of it, and transmuting bolts of happiness, but it doesn't dissolve the muck.

And after a series of long days, adding up to long years, in the service of our tiny overlords, it's no wonder I have misplaced my sense of what I actually need. In my best moments I am to be reasonable and kind, but you should hear my tired nighttime whines! I get into bed and yammer to my husband that I'm tired of taking care of people. "It's a one-way street!" I will yell when I feel a friendship is entirely my output and no input. "They're trying to kill me," I'll say about the kids, after enduring hours of their shouting.

In one of these moments, Rodney reminds me I don't exactly signal that I need anything. He points out—as he has many times before—that I have a tendency to wave away any offers of help, often without even realizing they're being sent my way, which can condition people to stop offering. His argument that I should be slightly more . . . *useless,* and allow people to step in, has never made much sense to me. Why wouldn't I want to continue to operate in the efficient way that I always have? I can finally see that the returns on this approach are diminishing, and my feeling that I've missed everything might stem from my never slowing down to take anything in. I'm now more willing to listen to him.

Even though I prickle at this—enacting a change sounds like more work for me—I start to pay attention. I notice how often I brush off simple gestures of generosity and kindness. My husband offers me tea or a blanket most evenings (relentless!), or asks if I need a water refill. I usually auto-respond that I'm fine, but now that my antennae are up, I start to say yes to him, circumventing my reflexive responses. The tea I thought I didn't want warms my hands and my heart. One morning my daughter offers to make

me breakfast, a messy, dangerous, and, above all, wildly time-consuming task I would usually discourage. After much clanging around, she brings me a coffee and grapes on a plate. I'm not even hungry, but I feel her love, and think back to the man who elbowed his way through those fire trucks to offer me a shawarma. My friend Margot, after a beach morning with our kids, offers to hold open my tote while I struggle to pack everything back up. "Oh, I'm fine," I tell her again—I have never noticed before how often I say this—and she puts a hand on my arm to stop me. "Accept the help," she says, and holds the bag open for me as I fill it. I feel gently bullied, and also loved.

I still can't entirely unlearn my aggressive caretaking ways, which start to feel more and more oppressive as the weeks go on. There are times I'm in the kitchen while the kids eat that I feel like their robot assistant. "More food coming up, more water coming up, that plate is not satisfactory, new plate coming up," I say. *I'll just do that—it's easier for me, it's faster if I do it,* I think, as I clean up after dinner, put the food away, make breakfast in the morning, clean up after breakfast, check for snacks, and pack their bags. Sometimes I grumble under my breath that the kids should get their own water or silverware, but I don't want to have a fight about it, and I am standing closer to the cups, so . . . I just do it, on autopilot.

Until, one fateful week, I notice a creeping pain in my foot. The area behind my left ankle is a little tight on a walk, so I stretch it for the next few walks, to no avail. Then one night, standing in the kitchen while I put together dinner for the kids, I notice I am basically hopping around on one foot—my left heel is painful to the touch. I make an appointment with a podiatrist, an outrageously attractive Persian woman in her late fifties whom I immediately decide I would follow off a cliff. "A foot needs the right support," she tells me, "like breasts need the right bra." This woman's bras are much righter than mine, I can tell already. She pokes around and tells me I have strained my Achilles. "Lie down for a week," she tells me sternly. "I have children," I remind her. "Throw them a rotisserie chicken," she says. "They'll survive." I joke that night with my husband about it, as he is packing for a work trip to France. He asks if he should cancel, and I am struck by what I know is a so-bizarre-it-might-work idea. No, I tell him. I am going to take this opportunity to be much less useful.

The children are furious, at first. What do I mean, I am just going to sit in a chair while they do everything themselves? Pack bags, get snacks, refill water? How can I expect them to do all of it, when these are services I've provided for so long? I explain that I am resting my foot, and I've done everything for them for so long that I didn't even realize it was time to pull back. I tell them I have faith they can do it all themselves. I ice my foot and praise their attempts, even through the dramatic sighs and flopping on the couch.

My daughter is the least enthusiastic, but she is the baby. She eyes my bandage. "But when your foot's better, you'll go back to doing things again, right?"

"Nope," I say, cheerful at the prospect.

They quickly have the basics down—getting themselves ready, packing their bags for school, throwing in the laundry, and unloading the dishwasher. I am impressed, and embarrassed that I haven't noticed how capable they are. They were babies just a blink ago, and now they aren't, but I never stepped back to let them fill the space. And after they have the basics down, I pile on a few responsibilities that are kind of fun—my ten-year-old is suddenly in charge of making sure all the doors are locked and turning on the security system at night. I see him puff a little with pride.

On the one hand, it's sad that it's required physical incapacitation for me to take action on my self-imposed drudgery. On the other, I don't know that I would ever have made the transition on my own. When someone in the house expresses a need, my body gets up to respond to it before I've even thought it through, much like my mother before me. I know this is because of how much praise I got for being a good big sister and caretaker. Doing things for other people is integral to my sense of self; it's my default setting. But there's only one me, and it has started to feel like a treadmill I can't get off. My family gently teased me on the days I'd walk downstairs grumpy, clanking around in the kitchen, feeling put-upon. I'd feed everyone, like I always had, because it was how I knew how to show love. Like the women before me, the only way to get me to press pause has been an unspecified pain. This time, instead of a pause, I have used the pain to pivot. Being forced to sit helplessly while the kids figured out how to be more independent has taught me how often I jump in and take over when I should allow them to wobble through, and grow.

“I want to be a baby bird,” I announce to my husband, after he returns from his trip. He is used to me setting vague intentions and then turning them into my whole personality for a time. I’m tired of being capable, I tell him. “I don’t want to be ‘fine.’ I don’t want to take care of everyone all the time. I want people to take care of me. I want to lean on the people in my life. To be soft and squishy. To be less useful.” He nods and gives me a hug. He’s been waiting for me to get here for sixteen years, I think, but it had to be my decision. I don’t even know how to begin the journey to this new person, but I’m hoping that identifying a destination is a start. I don’t think I will ever stop being a feeder. I take too much selfish joy in it, and it’s not an urge I can repress. What I can try to do is tune in to how my loved ones are trying to feed me back.

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Art Monstress

The French visual artist Françoise Gilot was wildly prolific in her eighty years of work across multiple continents, but I'm preoccupied by the portraits of her done by her artist partner during her early child-rearing years, 1947–1953. In my favorite of them, a 1953 lithograph called *Mother and Children (La Mere et les Infants),* her son and daughter play just under her feet while she seems to read and write. This is a placement that's repeated in much of her partner's work at the time—mother cradling children, mother drawing while surrounded by her children, mother and children reading and playing. To the untrained eye—and I mean training in *children*—it's an idyllic family scene, but anyone who's ever tried to read and write with children playing at their feet knows it's a losing game, a futile attempt at maintaining some autonomy while the children need your absolute presence and attention. It makes for a nice image, though, even while making me feel for her. *Touched out*, I think. *Exhausted. Not a moment or square inch to herself.* I know how she feels.

I've also been the subject of many ragged portraits of me with the children, mostly at the hands of Rodney, who delights in posting them to Instagram. I understand why many women hate this rite of passage—ladies' group chats explode every Mother's Day over the collective betrayal—and I once hated it, too. Like many women I know, on every special occasion, my husband carefully selects the large array of photos to post in a tribute to my birth or my maternal spirit. He's not one to rush a decision, so he pores over them carefully, in another room, as a special surprise for me. And then I screech, looking at the post: "Oh my *God. Why these?* There are so many nicer pictures. Why are you doing this to me?" Because in my husband's saved favorites, I'm often in my rattiest pajamas, actively navigating a mental-health crisis, with a half-naked child climbing on my body. It's puzzling enough to me that he can love these images, when I so adamantly do not, but underneath that is a prickliness—the idea that, like the Gilot portraits, the beholder might see these images of me and think, "Ah, a vision of the feminine ideal, trapped right where we want her," and not "Let's get this poor lady some help."

Gilot seems to have felt the same about her portraits. She jokingly referred to her painter partner as “Bluebeard,” because of the women he had previously conquered and discarded, and swore she would avoid the same fate. She didn’t allow him to use her name in his titles, because she wanted to stand as a person on her own, not simply a muse, or subject. And “In order not to become fixed and congealed by him, and to maintain control over her own image, Françoise responded in self-portraits,” says her biographer and friend Annie Maïllis. One telling self-portrait from 1946, the year Gilot moved in with her partner, she painted a portrait of herself looking up, smiling, holding a brush, wreathed in laurels and halos. She called it *The Painter (Self-Portrait at Work),* firmly casting herself as the creator, and not the subject, of a strong piece.

As an exercise, I scroll through the photos I like of myself, which now look like professional headshots in comparison to my husband’s. I prefer the shots where I look poised, serene, in control of my surroundings. In short, the exact opposite of my lived experience, and my family’s experience with me. This folder of preapproved photos is technically perfect, signifying almost nothing except a good hair-and-makeup day. Each one is ready to upload to a “How Does She Do It All??”-type profile of my own imagining, when the real answer is that I mostly don’t. I think a part of me yearns to remember what I can look like once I remove the ground-in wear and tear of the children—the gray patches, the eye bags, the distracted gaze. Who am I, outside of my role to them?

When Bluebeard convinced Gilot to have children, he suggested it would enhance not only her life, but her work: “[A child] will bring you back to nature and put you in tune with the rest of the world,” he told her, as detailed in her memoir. She argued that there were other forms of creation, but he shut her down. “You won’t know what it means to be a woman until you have a child,” he said. “I’ve seen it work before and I assure you that you’ll be completely transformed. Please don’t deny it until you’ve at least tried.” Like so many women before her, she tried one, and then, at his urging, another. “I had been an only child and I hadn’t liked it a bit; I wanted my son to have a brother or sister. And so I didn’t raise any objections,” she writes. And like any woman of her time, she also felt responsible for everyone’s well-being: She recalls only ever seeing Bluebeard in a sustained good mood when she was pregnant with her first child, Claude: “It was the only time he was cheerful, relaxed, and happy,

with no problems," she writes. "That had been very nice, I reflected, and I hoped it would work again, for both our sakes. I knew I couldn't have ten children just to keep him that way, but I could try once more at least, and I did."

This is the fear, I think, that grips me when I see my husband's pictures of myself wrestling a kid on the floor during a baking project, surrounded by eggshells—that the real me, person-artist me, has been consumed by mom me. I prickle against it. *That's not a true representation of who I am,* I think. And it makes me want to pick a fight with Rodney every time, as though he's the one who convinced me to do all this, and entrapped me domestically.

One day when I grumble about the pictures, I look up at him and see that his face is bewildered and upset. I suddenly realize *I* am the monster. All he wanted to do was share his love for me with the world. And so finally I ask, "What do you like about these photos?" He comes to sit beside me, and we go through them so I can understand.

First up is a shot in which I'm flanked by the kids at a restaurant, and clearly dissociating. "How could you possibly like this?" I ask. "You look pretty and distracted," he tells me. "You're gripping that hand sanitizer and staring into space," he continues, as if this were objectively a good thing. I wonder sometimes if we speak the same language. He shrugs. "I like a photo that looks the way our life looks."

He's not wrong, I think, as I examine the photo with new eyes. I can see how it expressly telegraphs the joy and exhaustion of trying to carve out an artistic life with two children in tow. My affection for the kids is so clear, as is their attachment to me, with their little monkey arms around my neck. It's a bond of which I could not be more proud. I also know that I must have been thinking about my languishing work, and the last time I properly showered.

I didn't start my creative life until my son was a toddler, when I left my film-producing job to pursue writing full-time. I was preoccupied with taking care of him and our home life, while I tentatively drafted my first scripts and personal essays. Once my writing was being published, the scripts selling, I assumed that my work life would easily expand to fill the school day. I would walk the kids to school and then plug into my artist

brain, unplugging it before pickup. After school, we'd hang out and have family dinner, and everything would be perfectly balanced.

Of course I foresaw none of the whiplash of what my actual schedule would become, with two kids: school drop-off dovetailing with parent group coffee and one kid's presentation on climate change, followed by imagining two party scenes for a mystery pilot, followed by scratching out a grocery list, followed by editing a freelance piece, which I hand in before I rush off to the other kid's roller-skating demonstration, and then bringing the whole party home for a dinner that I have not yet made. Technically there are enough hours in my day to type thousands of words, but I need to access a place of mental stillness if I want those words to make any sense. Because that stillness is so fleeting in our daily lives, I spend much of the workday suspended in a widening gap between my creative desires and my creative output.

Maïllis points out that Gilot turned to drawing after having children because she also couldn't devote to oil painting the intense hours and concentration that she needed. But what drawings they were. In Gilot's own drawn self-portraits of motherhood, unlike her partner's renderings of a woman conquered, she's vibrant, enjoying herself. In a 1948 drawing she swings her one-year-old son high as he giggles. In 1949 there is a cocoon of love around a sweet baby daughter's face, with she and her mother looking on lovingly at the line of women they have continued. In the 1950s we start to see the image of her separate from her children—loving drawings of her chubby toddler laughing in a high chair or sleeping in that sweaty little way toddlers do.

My husband and I next look over a photo from one of my own happiest family memories, a vacation in rural Washington. We are three days into a camper-van trip, and our preschooler is climbing my shoulders while I try to scarf down some instant ramen. Food, interrupted, is a recurring motif in Rodney's family photography, and while this picture reminds me of the rarity of a moment's peace, I wonder how he sees it. "You went camping for me, and you liked it, and you were good at it," he tells me. That meant a lot to him, an outdoor enthusiast. For my part, it made me feel good to give myself over to that part of his life, and learn I enjoyed it. "Unfortunately for you," he continues—turns out he has a lot to say—"it kind of captures the way you generally have a kid growing out of your back. It captures the

burden and the joy you carry." I wrinkle my nose, but soften. Being described as a pack animal should bother me, but I can't deny the deep satisfaction I feel in their belief that our bodies are extensions of each other's. I take it for granted, being so tied to them, and even though he gets plenty of cuddles himself, sometimes I can see a slight envy in my husband's face as he watches us, because he will never know the extent of it. I know that over time the kids will peel away, as we all did. So even if the constant contact can exhaust me at times, I also respect and marvel at this physical kind of love that nothing could have prepared me to feel.

After her children were born, Gilot was also surprised to learn from them that she needed a less spartan kind of love from her partner—her love for them and exposure to their warmth seeded a need for it in her partnership as well. She realized as her daughter grew into a toddler that Bluebeard would never become what she needed, and furthermore was feeling stifled in his domesticity. He had started to withdraw. "His vision of my role was that of the unresisting saint, sitting quietly in her cave, sanctifying or at least neutralizing by an exemplary existence the worst aspects of his own way of life. At one time I had been able to accept that concept. But now the distance between us had grown too great," says Gilot in her memoir.

In 1952, Gilot began a series of solo self-portraits in which she was able to see herself as a full person, outside of her children. She portrayed herself in a sun hat against a bright blue sky, a portrait where she appears to laugh incredulously into a telephone. She turned out a portrait with "a silly face," even. There were drawings of herself with friends, in stark defiance of her partner's simultaneous renderings of her as Mother. This, the moment she integrated her artist self with her mother- and personhood, overlapped with the year when she realized their relationship was over. It would take two more years, but she'd be known, for the rest of her life, as the only woman who'd ever left Pablo Picasso.

Now, the father of my own children is also an artist, and, objectively, one far more successful than I. He was technically the kind of man I worried I might fall in love with as a young woman—devoted to his profession, brilliant. "Never date a writer," friends and I mumbled to each other. "Your life will revolve around his work. Directors are even worse," we decided, based on anecdotal evidence. "Those egomaniacs." And of course, he does both. And the work does often threaten to take center stage, but it's not

1940, and he's not an infamous ogre. He's a kindhearted man who is always ready to switch into problem-solving mode when I feel overwhelmed by the demands of working motherhood. "Should we look into getting some real help?" he'll ask. *Did Françoise Gilot have help?* I screech, in my own mind—the answer to this is yes, she did, live-in help, from day one. It actually wouldn't be that hard to get my writing done the way I want to, if I weren't also incapacitated by the fear of missing out on even one mothering experience. I still think that to give myself the actual time and space I need for my writing, and mother the way I was mothered and want to mother, there would have to be two of me.

I'm already seeing the rest of my husband's posts in a new light when we get to the most puzzling category: a picture of me fast asleep in bed at 8 p.m., in my daytime clothes. I cringe, thinking about the times we are so exhausted from the circus of working parenthood that I can't even do my evening routine. He just loves these nights, he says, and he can't explain why. I insist that he must.

"You're just never like this," he says.

"Like what?" I press.

"Like . . . a nearsighted baby penguin who's half asleep," he responds. "You've probably kicked one sock off, and are whining for someone to brush your teeth."

I laugh, and I see it. While I often fall into bed, kicking myself for not mustering the energy to do more, that does sound pretty cute. I never think of myself as cute, and it's sweet that he does.

There's also a picture where I'm livid that we've gotten kicked off a Spanish train. I'm not going to tell you whose fault it was, but I don't think it was mine. And as I keep scrolling through his choices, I start to understand the through line. To him, this collection represents everything he loves about our long life together. It celebrates my steadiness, my warmth, my commitment—sometimes to him, sometimes to a travel itinerary. He doesn't care, as I do, that I look frumpy in this one, have a breakout in the other, lanky hair in a third. Each photo captures a memory, a wave of emotion. And learning to see myself as he sees me has gone a long way in unwinding that critical voice in my head that views my face and body as a fixed identity, or a collection of flaws to be managed.

The ones that are hardest to make peace with, I think, are the ones we experienced so disparately—some of the newborn collection, where he was floating on a cloud of joy, while I was trying not to get sucked into a whirlpool of postpartum anxiety and depression. Those moments represented, to me, my rage about the unfairness of the enterprise—why should I be photographed at rock bottom, to have my broken brain and body on display? But those photos give us a way to talk about that now, too—how two people sharing a life, a room, can experience the same moments so differently. I doubt it's the kind of conversation that Gilot, in the forties and fifties, could even have fathomed having with a mate. With time and distance, I can now feel my partner's joy, and my pride at having knit myself back together. And in starting to understand how he views these images—filled with awe that I'm some kind of life-giving warrior, brimming with gratitude for the family we get to build together—I appreciate them anew.

For a million reasons—one of them Picasso—we are full up on the male gaze. It's given us one suffocating version of womanhood: lithe, decorative, and quietly helpful. It's enraging, and a feminine standard we still can't escape. We talk a big game about body acceptance, about celebrating beauty of all kinds, but that critical inner voice still pops up for me when I look at a candid of myself that anyone else has taken: Is that my real shape, is that my posture, what's going on with my hair, my skin, my teeth?

Perhaps my partner's unfiltered, loving gaze can be a welcome correction to the occasional cruelty of my own. I see myself only in glimpses, after all, while his eyes are trained on me all the time, including before coffee and after midnight. Frazzled and furious, sleepy or strange. He can see what I can't: what I look like when I'm most alive, and how I make him feel. It's taken determination and practice to pull myself up the mountain of self-acceptance, to look back at the photos he's posted of me in the last few years—most of which I tolerated with a tight smile in the moment—and now enjoy them, because I see a version of what he sees.

In the weeks since that conversation where I invited him to look at the pictures together, my thoughts around this have continued to shift. I've started to trade the idea of polished beauty for the contentment of feeling I've lived a full life. I've learned to love and appreciate myself a little more through his eyes. And in doing so, I've begun to crave something other than

the boring, posed, hair-and-makeup static family shot that's become ubiquitous—pulling an apple pie out of the oven, surrounded by corn-fed children. Give me a break. And give me the real: I want to see more tired eyes, filled with love. Hair in disarray. I want updates on a hormonal zit, and pillow drool, and grumpy-ass kids. I want to enjoy all of it.

A few years ago, I rented a writing office nearby. So that when I was there I could be a writer, and at home I could be Mama. That has changed—as I've become more fluent in my own voice, my definition of myself less rigid, I can make my writing schedule work, more or less, within the rhythm of the average school day. And now that my kids are a little older, they can sometimes keep themselves busy if I absolutely need to meet a deadline and need to slip away for a few hours to make my art instead, with my partner's support. It reminds me of this story Gilot tells in her memoir that haunts and delights me, while reminding me that not everything has changed:

> Once as I was working at a painting that had been giving me a great deal of trouble, I heard a small, timid knock at the door. "Yes," I called out and kept on working. I heard Claude's voice, softly, from the other side of the door. "Mama, I love you." I wanted to go out, but I couldn't put down my brushes, not just then. "I love you too, my darling," I said, and kept at my work. A few minutes passed. Then I heard him again, "Mama, I like your painting." "Thank you, darling," I said. "You're an angel." In another minute, he spoke out again. "Mama, what you do is very nice. It's got fantasy in it but it's not fantastic." That stayed my hand, but I said nothing. He must have felt me hesitate. He spoke up, louder now. "It's better than Papa's," he said. I went to the door and let him in.

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A Tea Leaf Unfurls

Something nice happened for my friend Annie at work, and as we enjoy our midweek coffee, she tells me she's going to celebrate that night. My ears perk up, and I ask her what such a ritual looks like. She's used to me asking questions like this, and she tells me that she'll bring up her good news at dinner with her husband and kids, and they'll all be happy for her.

"Maybe Andre will pour us a nice glass of wine," she says, her eyes lighting up, her cheeks rosy. She's visibly excited about the prospect.

"And they care about this?" I ask skeptically.

She claims they do. I can't say I ever do this with my family—I never observed it in my own—and I'm writing down this idea, to try. "How does it feel?" I ask her, and she says like a warm flush inside her body. I'm repelled—she makes it sound like peeing herself—but also intrigued.

I don't think I've ever experienced the feeling Annie is talking about. At my fortieth birthday party, many years ago now, I bathed in the attention like a cat in a lake. On the outside I was a serene and gracious host, leading people over to the drinks and tacos. I was just hosting a party, I thought. No big deal. The problem, as it turned out, was that the party was about me, and people kept trying to say things that indicated as such. There were a few toasts, there was much misty eye contact, a lot of warm, too-long hugs. I felt like I was being addressed at my own wake. My brain kept vacating the proceedings, going elsewhere in a yowl instead of having to deal with the intensity of everyone's feelings. I don't think anybody noticed that I was being slightly insane, but I went to bed in my clothes, worn out, by half past eight, and woke up mad at myself. Why couldn't I just let nice things happen? Why couldn't I absorb and enjoy the kind words of my loved ones? Why did I have to be so weird about it all?

The birthday party had held the possibility of joy, the kind of thing I supposedly was desperately seeking, but I had experienced it like a howling, soaked cat. I knew true joy came from within; years of therapy and meditation hadn't been for naught. But I seemed to have a specific resistance to it being handed to me. I had somehow become a person who

body-blocked infusions of joys from my loved ones, and I wanted to become the sort of person who could picture celebrating with them, like my friend Annie.

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I have no problem marinating in bad feelings. If something terrible happens, I'll sit with the discomfort for days, weeks, however long it takes for the circumstances to pass. I credit a bumpy childhood, with long periods of distress. We lost our home in the Himalayan valley of Kashmir to mounting violence in the region, slept in gas masks in Riyadh during the Gulf War, endured all manner of family tragedy in the early nineties, before landing in the United States when I was in high school. One of the upsides of turmoil is that I could sit with a festering toothache, literally or figuratively, for months. I carried this into a career in Hollywood, where I met criticism and cruelty with a shrug. Hostile environments and hostile people were my comfort zone.

But niceness? Forget it. If a producer emails me to say she loved my latest script pages, I smile and move on to the next item on my to-do list. A compliment from a friend elicits a quick thanks and change of subject. I looked at my phone not ninety seconds ago to respond to two friends, thanking me for a favor, with: "Oh, shut up." The absolute worst, says Rodney, is when he compliments me and I give him what he says is a high, tight "thanks," and a smile that doesn't reach my eyes. "What do you want me to do?" I grumble. An extemporaneous speech? "I'm not sure," he says, "but not . . . whatever that is."

I carry around some self-righteousness about this—he can't dictate how I should respond!—but then I calm down and mull over my prickliness for a while. Here, in the summer of 2024, it is already clear that the upcoming election is going to be disheartening. The state of the world beyond that, not much better. Layer this on top of working-parent stress, and I am lately awash in terrible feelings. I know that little crumbs of joy come my way all day every day, but I might not be doing enough to notice and hold on to them—they feel as ephemeral as dust motes in a ray of sunlight. In theory, it sounds wonderful to be able to slow down and actually feel the good feelings, as I do the bad. It might even be a balm, or inoculation against

letting the bad ones overwhelm me. I just don't actually know how or where to begin.

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A brief, useless internet search tells me that I might be bad at taking a compliment because I have low self-esteem, but—how do I put this delicately—that's not the problem. I was dearly loved as a child, and am still. My parents made distinct choices to raise me with a strong sense of self: praising and encouraging my self-knowledge, my moral compass, fostering independence and responsibility from an early age. My general impression is that they always thought highly of me, and I never thought to question their opinion.

I think, with a smile, of the happiest news I've given my parents in the last few years. Both of my pregnancies made my calm, rational father split into a giant grin. "Excellent progress," he told me, and . . . that was about it. "Eeeeeeee!" said my excitable mother, fit to burst, before she clammed up. As I linger on this moment, I suspect a pattern: For an otherwise chatty pair, they don't waste a lot of words when something nice happens. My memory reaches back further, to years before the babies, when my engagement elicited a "This is wonderful!" from my father, followed by a request for a wedding timeline. My mother had been given a heads-up, and had tried to call me thirteen times in the previous twenty-four hours. When I finally picked up, she pretended she had just been calling to say hi. I telescope back further into my childhood, and have clear memories of my mother beaming at my report card, next to the warm smile that lit up my father's eyes. The words I remember most often when I brought home As were "Yes, of course you did." Their support of me was steady and mostly unspoken, their expectations high, and always met.

Because my father was a pediatrician and both my parents were educators, so much of their parenting was more deliberate than that of many of their peers. I have no doubt that their brand of quiet support was meant to raise a girl with a solid sense of self and a thirst for achievement. I became internally driven, not outwardly competitive. I never felt the need to best anyone else; I internalized my parents' high standards, and strove to execute them. However, if a teacher or anyone in our community wanted to praise

me for this, I brushed it off. I thought it was because I was specifically raised (in my parents' home lab) not to need external validation.

I have been fine living like this for forty-plus years—puttering around, striving for the best version of myself, rejecting positive feedback, even when it comes from my husband. Annie's approach intrigues me, but, as with so much else, I am finally spurred to change by something I notice in my children. I say something nice to my ten-year-old, and I startle when I see him freeze, the same way I do. All of a sudden I find our situation unacceptable. It can't go on. Maybe I didn't need praise as a child, but I want him to feel the warmth of it. *I* might have liked to feel the warmth of it, I think. I never considered it strange before, but now I am as disturbed as Rodney is by my inability to take in a kind word.

In the days following, I start seeing proof of this everywhere. When nice words are thrown in my direction, I brace myself until the moment has passed, even if I throw out a "thanks," for politesse, and then move on. Never do I actually allow myself to absorb the compliment. My body feels the need to deflect it.

I start to understand why, one afternoon when I'm having a phone conversation with my mother, and she asks after the children. "They're doing great," I say, and she murmurs under her breath. I catch her—what did she say? "Touch wood," or maybe it was "*Dushmanan*"—"To your enemies"—in Kashmiri. A knee-jerk incantation to ward off *nazar,* or the evil eye. Weeks pass, and I notice this pattern every time I say something cheerful to her about the kids, as though she's constantly patching holes in her blanket of protection around them. I get, suddenly, why I might be so jumpy about compliments.

I'd never thought of myself as a superstitious person, but one who bemusedly tolerated my mother's old-world superstitions—the "touch wood," but also the Sneeze, a ritual so pervasive it was highlighted in a 1952 article on Kashmiri superstitions from *Eastern Anthropologist*:

> Sneezing noses are the bane of all people. When some one is about to leave for some work, or about to take meals, or about to go to sleep, or to do any other important work, such work has to be abandoned, irrespective of the pressure of time, if some one else sneezes. One's

> own sneeze is not excluded. It is believed that such work as one was about to undertake would have been a failure or brought ill-luck.

This is a convenient snapshot of my people in the year after my mother was born, but also meant that for my entire life, anytime we were leaving the house for the store, say, or the airport, if anyone sneezed, we were sent back with a shout, to pretend we had never left. We might sit down and have a glass of water or a handful of almonds during this extended charade, before setting out "anew." Then there were other rituals: passing someone on an unlucky side when walking into or out of a house, or kissing a book if it touched my foot. My mother collected superstitious rituals along with her utterances, and I played along, amused. How could it hurt, I thought. It tied us to my culture, and me to my mother.

In his 1997 book *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition*, the psychologist Stuart Vyse details a number of superstitions that were designed to cope with anxiety about the unknown. In Morocco, the evil eye was meant to ward off ill will toward children, and had a specifically social construct—the idea was that others in the community might wish a child harm, and they had to be protected by magic at all costs. In India, a mole—be it real or drawn on with a stick of eyeliner—does the same job.

I'm sure for billions of people these little rituals provide a measure of temporary psychological comfort in the face of so much uncertainty. The behavioral scientist B. F. Skinner explored this in a 1948 experiment in which he put a bunch of pigeons in a cage and then fed them at regular intervals. After a time, they started repeating little rituals like circling, head swinging, and pecking, which they seemed to believe was a behavior that would earn them more food. While papers have been published in the interim pointing out that the behavior could be species-specific, "'Superstition' in the Pigeon" is widely accepted as a foundational study on superstitious behavior, and certainly reflects my own anecdotal observations.

While I laughed at my mother's "quirky" rituals, I developed my own. I disguised them as hyper-competence. For example, when my husband and I first met and started traveling together, I liked to prepare. Every time we left for a trip I'd type up and print out an itinerary, placing multiple copies in different bags and making sure I had copies stored in a hard drive and cloud drive. Crazy-making stuff. As we left, I'd check and triple-check every

single electrical appliance and door, any possibilities of standing water, anything that might lead to disaster while we were away. Then, as we locked the door on our way out, I'd hold my breath. When Rodney would look at me with his impish grin and say, "Nothing could possibly go wrong!" I'd stifle a scream.

A ritual starts to hurt when it becomes a compulsion, or a tic, underlying an anxious creep. The edge of fear in my mother's voice I sometimes noticed was echoed by a Ukrainian friend—also terrible at taking a compliment—who describes how her mother raised her to believe that a neighbor harbored ill will toward their family. Every time my friend was sick, her mother would blame the neighbor. And once I had children myself, I, too, became irrational with my love for them, and imprisoned myself in a cage of rituals. *If the baby eats at this time, naps exactly ninety minutes, during which I shower and nap, the day will go perfectly,* I'd tell myself, and it would never go perfectly, and I'd blame myself for not executing the steps well enough.

As a young mother I was one of Skinner's pigeons, hoping my head waggles would bring peace and contentment, not understanding that life was going to continue to happen to me, side hop or not. "A few accidental connections between a ritual and favorable consequences suffice to set up and maintain the behavior in spite of many unreinforced instances," said Skinner in his 1948 paper, and I know now that I was trapped in a web of my own anxiety, afraid to abandon the steps. "How many times are you going to say that?" I snapped at my mother during another "touch wood" conversation while in the throes of my own postpartum mania. "As many times as it takes," she said.

As I grew into parenthood, the only consistent lesson was how little I could control, and how the only way to get through it was to let go. With two kids and too many things to prepare, a trip was no longer the organized, overprepared experience of the time before. It was booking a flight and place to stay, and allowing everything else to fall into place, or not. It was navigating crises that came up, hour by hour. It was both of us saying, "Nothing could possibly go wrong," and laughing, because we knew everything would, and we'd have to figure it out together. It was knowing that whatever rituals we performed to ward off a crisis, we'd be surprised by every other shape of emergency. We surrendered.

It’s still difficult to escape the “touch wood” I feel when people say nice things to me. It’s not that I ever question the praise giver’s motives, but I do have a reflexive feeling that if I accept a nice word, the cosmos will find a way to make me pay for it. The ancient shackles of the evil eye remain. I know I’m not alone, because now, in early summer, when I put the question to the internet, I am inundated with responses. One Greek woman was raised to ward off envy with protective jewelry. Other Indians with incense. Arab friends with a *hamsa*, or *nazar,* the symbol so ubiquitous it’s now an emoji.

A Persian friend speaks of burning rue. A Moroccan friend was told to pretend she was wiping sweat off her forehead, as holding her hand there would protect her. A Jamaican friend says they were never meant to hide their light, but certainly protect it with a variety of crystals and such. A woman from Ohio tells me she’s terrible at taking compliments but has no explanation, just that she generally responds to compliments with an “Oh, no.” Other friends feel quite secure in their ability to take a compliment, with “a sincere thank-you, and a compliment back,” says one, quite concerned that I can’t master this simple task. “That’s just etiquette,” I tell her. “That’s a script.” Does she actually take *in* the compliment? Does it feel good, in her body? She’s not so smug now.

What I’m learning is that so many of us are masters at deflecting a compliment because, for whatever psychological reasons, we were trained to feel bad if it pierced our defenses and we took it in or absorbed it. Something terrible might happen, or the giver might think us cocky if we did not undercut it with a joke. But what happens if we do let it in? If I can learn a behavior, that means it can be unlearned, but like all new habits, it’s going to feel strange at first.

So one day in June I make an email folder. It’s called “Pleasure Scraps,” and I decide to save nice things that people say, take the time to read them, and let them soak in. It’s a deeply uncomfortable exercise. Even typing out the word “Pleasure” makes me feel icky, but I force myself to do it, and I save some emails, while noting how often I want to type out “Thanks” and promptly delete a nice message.

Opening one email and then another, I reread them and force myself to sit with the pieces of kindness. I try to absorb, instead of deflect or refract. In one email, my friend Alex introduces me to a friend in Portugal, because

I'm planning a trip to Lisbon. He says I'm "funny and charming, with wonderful taste in people." My eyes roll up into my head, and I roll them right back. "That was really nice of him," I force myself to say, out loud, to my computer. A friend accompanying her sick mother in hospice writes to thank me for a book recommendation that she's quoted from in the room, and believes is keeping her mother alive. This can't be true, but I know people need to cling to hope, and I'm moved. Next I see a little update from a writer who reached out to me many years ago for career advice. I had read his comedy samples, which were terrific, and passed them along.

He's written on a number of great TV shows since, and I usually smile and delete his messages, glad he's continuing to do well. This time, I stop to think about what it means that he updates me and thanks me every year or so, replying to the same chain, so that I have an uninterrupted string of thanks. He's been emailing regularly for the last five years, with very little from me in response other than a brief, supportive message, and I finally let myself absorb his gratitude. "It's no big deal—it's easy for me," I've been saying to him, and other young writers like him. "It's a big deal to *me*," he is emphasizing. A small thing I did was hugely important to him. I feel silly for having brushed off the size of what he believes to be my impact. People have been kind to me, I always tell him, and I want to extend that kindness forward. I close my eyes and try to figure out where I might feel *his* kindness in my body, and there it is. One single tea leaf unfurling, in my lower gut. A spreading warmth, an incontinent happiness. I stop immediately. I'm not ready for more, yet.

That is the beginning. Weeks pass, then a month, during which I continue to check in on more scraps, and to work on taking in compliments in real time. It's patchy, this practice, but as the summer continues, that tea leaf becomes a patch the size of a fist. There are reversals and steps back, as I note one night when Rodney compliments my cooking, and my response is, "Yes, well, you married into one of the world's great food cultures." He pauses and, with his eyes, implores me to be normal. I briefly consider stopping to absorb the compliment, but I decide to enjoy my own joke instead. There's happiness to be found in this as well.

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Vagus, Baby

I know my voice is average at best, and I know exactly what's wrong with it: It's thin and high-pitched, tends toward shrill, and there's a whole middle range I cannot access. For the most part, I can carry a tune, and I do often, without reservation, no matter who is around. I don't even know I'm doing it most of the time. "You hum when you're nervous," said my husband shortly after we met. *I hum when I'm* . . . everything, I think. I just hum. It means I don't know the words to whatever I want to sing. Once I get into the physical act of singing, I'm as elated as a kid too high on a swing. Remember how the chain goes slack sometimes, and you don't know if you'll head back down to earth or fly away? That's how singing feels to me.

I don't mean to mortify my family, but my urge to sing in public is uncontrollable. It's not theatrical or performance-based—you'll never see me in the basement of a sweaty piano bar, belting out Sondheim. My favorite singalong songs are rarely revered within the profession. The songs that compel me to sing along are their own shortlist, sourced via trial and error, and grouped together solely by my own physical response. Many (most?) are songs I would never listen to just sitting around ("Sundown" by Gordon Lightfoot? Anything by One Direction?) but when I hear their opening chords, I start to feel a tremor in my belly that goes all the way up through my diaphragm and into my throat. The songs I'm most drawn to often require tricky key changes or are written in uncommon time—think "Chiquitita" by ABBA, and "Bohemian Rhapsody." I love a full-body singing workout. Usually, I know most of the words to them, but even if I don't, a loud la-la-la-ing or a humming works almost as well.

I have sheafs upon sheafs of memories of my mother singing around the house. Also too high, also enthusiastically. Sometimes a tape in another room blared out a classic Bollywood soundtrack. Often I could smell dinner cooking, see the steam wafting away from the stove as she puttered around the apartment. As I entered my teens, I started rolling my eyes at so many things my mother did, but never the singing. Her beautiful face, all lit up as she crooned along to Lata Mangeshkar, was pure happiness. I don't

remember when I started to join in, probably humming along in my room while I read, but I don't remember a before.

I do remember that into one high school summer burst my toddler cousin Aditi, a doll-faced, obstinate child. She had a curly topknot and a second kid's casual understanding that the adults in the room were held fully in her thrall. As the far-oldest cousin of eight, I counted myself as one of the adults, but she held most of them at arm's length while letting me snuggle her to bits. Aditi had developed a couple of quirks in her first year. One was that she liked to fall asleep sucking on a corner of her mother's shawl, which she sensibly called "Shawl." It was a brown Kashmiri *shahtoosh*, a wildly expensive heirloom made of the underfur of the Tibetan antelope. A *shahtoosh* is no longer legal to buy, as the antelope became critically endangered, so for generations it was handed down through families, and quality-tested by passing it through a ring—they were that light, but warm enough to make a difference in our Himalayan winters. We spoke of them in hushed tones, with due respect, at least until Aditi was born. As if it weren't an extravagant enough habit already, it quickly became clear that dragging one brown shawl around all day and then chewing on it all night was unsustainable and unsanitary, so her mother sacrificed it by cutting it into small pieces so that Aditi could fall asleep holding a clean section each evening.

The other issue with Aditi was that she was impossible to put to bed. As an overly responsible teen, I welcomed the challenge. We fell into a nice routine, where I'd take her to bed, lay her on my lap, and sing a song called "Nani Teri Morni"—"Nani, Your Peahen"—until she fell asleep. From the 1960 Hindi film *Masoom*, the song weaves a tale of a peacock who steals a grandmother's peahen, while thieves loot the rest of her belongings. Like most lullabies, there's nothing relaxing about it other than the melody, but my mother had sung it to me, so I knew its powers. Every time my little cousin drifted off, I puffed with a quiet pride. *Yes, of course*, I thought. *I have a way with kids.* I was basically raising my brother, or so my parents let me believe. The singing was a newly discovered element of my natural gift.

Nearly thirty years later, my daughter has an equal and opposite response when we're standing in line at a Trader Joe's. I'm loading snacks onto the counter when one of my activating songs comes on—I don't even know

what it's called, but I know every word. The young, supercool biracial cashier shares a guilty moment of eye contact—this song is beyond dorky—before joining me. The "baby," almost six, is *mortified.* She yanks on my arm, trying to get me to stop. I point out the cashier—see, he's singing, too! *He's not my mom* is the thing she's trying to telegraph with her appalled face. As I walk her out, she tells me I was embarrassing her. I'm chastened but try to defend myself. "Embarrassing isn't a thing!" I tell her. Poor girl, whose mother shares all of her business for a living. She shuts me down: "It's a word, so it's a thing."

Her disapproval puts a damper on an impulse I've never once thought to curb my whole adult life. In other areas I've piled efficiency over my joy, but singing is the place where I steadily experience the joy. After the summer I helped Aditi sleep, I developed my mother's habit of singing or humming around the house. When I moved to LA in my twenties, I fell in love with its myriad of karaoke studios, where I could rent a padded cell with my friends and flip through a giant book of laminated hits. What I learned at Max Karaoke, on the corner of Alameda and Third in Little Tokyo, was that my ears wanted transcendent melodies, singer-songwriters, irresistible beats. But my lungs were in charge, and they wanted songs that were base, and rich with melodrama—I channeled Heart, Patsy Cline, even Avril Lavigne—women who snarled, or were broken-hearted. I karaoked regularly right until the week before I went into labor with my firstborn. I had dragged my friends to a morning session at Max Karaoke, where I dimmed the lights, so that no one felt self-conscious, and turned the song volume all the way up, with our mics set to just below. Drowning out our actual voices has been my longtime trick to get nervous singers to give over their whole bodies, so we can find our way into a euphoric crescendo.

The karaoke stopped when the kids showed up, but singing showed up in other areas. I remember the first time I sang "Baby Beluga" around the house, not necessarily on purpose, just because we had been listening to a lot of Raffi in the car. Our ten-month-old lay her head down in her high chair, pretending to fall asleep. I was delighted, remembering how my singing had put Aditi in a trance. I tried out "Nani Teri Morni" on the baby, and she, too, loved it. Nearly six years later, she's usually fast asleep by the time I get to the part about the thieves overeating in their jail cell. My love of singing has always been firmly rooted in these foundational memories:

my mother's aimless singing around the house, and the babies' satisfactory bedtime. Then came the stomachaches.

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There's not much that I used to find more boring than hearing about people's physical ailments, maybe because I thought a litany of physical complaints were the hallmark of the aging Kashmiri woman. Ever since I was little, I was accustomed to women dashing back and forth, keeping their families and in-laws afloat, making sure everyone was fed and happy, until they had to lie down with an unspecified illness. "*Emis che do'ed*," we said. "She has a pain." A woman would take to her bed for a week, clutching the offending part of her, while the household did the best it could with her out of commission. The women on my father's side had "ladies' pains" that led to early hysterectomies, and on my mother's I remember my *masi* taking to bed with a cool scarf tied around her head to combat the combination of migraines and vertigo that left her unable to sit upright or open her eyes for days at a time. The symptoms were unusually dramatic for a set of otherwise no-nonsense women, and I prayed the *do'ed* wouldn't come for me, too.

But of course it did. After a meal, about three years ago, my belly blew up like a basketball. I crawled to bed, in excruciating pain, for half the day. Then it kept happening. I didn't know what caused it, just that it would arrive out of nowhere and take chunks out of my week. The household hobbled on around me. I would recover from the physical pain and drag myself out of bed, wildly depressed and terrified for the next bout. These events became more frequent and painful and took me out for longer and longer. I had a series of inconclusive doctor visits, and became scared of food, unable to eat anything other than brothy soups and teas, and a few bland solids. My clothes hung on me, and my hair thinned. "You look amazing," said a certain type of Los Angeles lady. "I feel terrible," I told them. They wished they had stomach issues, they said.

I managed to avoid most of the pain by only eating a few foods I knew were safe—white rice, the plainest protein—but one night I was out with my friend Bolu, and stupidly had one sip of her cocktail. It hit again immediately. As my belly swelled up, she helped me sweatily hobble out the front door and into a cab, where I lay down in the back seat. I startled

the driver, who had a needle sticking out of his arm. “I’m diabetic,” he explained, which I believed through my haze, and less so now. It would be a few more minutes before we could move. I nearly fainted on the floor, but I got home and stayed in bed, clutching my belly, for a full twenty-four hours.

The doctors called the whole unholy mess IBS, and my flare-ups were followed by somehow-worse dips into depression, because the tummy can’t make happy chemicals when it’s all jacked up. My gut was not only clenched from the pain, it was clenched while it anticipated the next wave. Plus I had developed something called a “visceral sensitivity,” where a normal amount of pain rang fire-alarm bells in my already-jangly system. I knew that waves of anticipatory anxiety were exacerbating the problem, but I couldn’t break the loop.

Until desperation led me to an app called Nerva. Developed by an Australian gastroenterologist, Nerva promised that its six-week, gut-directed hypnotherapy program would relieve my symptoms and allow for healing. I was willing to try anything, and while I started out puzzled by the exercises, hope was a steadfast engine. One visualization exercise had me in an old-fashioned apothecary, pulling a potion off a shelf. I drank the potion, which coated my insides with a warm, healing salve. As I went through the exercise, I did feel a warming, and a break in discomfort. I felt silly doing it, but I also felt my midsection relax as it allowed for a spreading, temporary reprieve. Another exercise had me at a board of dials, like a sound engineer, turning knobs to quiet the amplitude of my physical pain. This one seemed to address the alarming distress signals that my gut had started to send up to my brain multiple times an hour, warning me I was in huge danger of a flare-up. Learning to turn the dial down in my own head did, little by little, actually help me manage the discomfort. These started out as active mental exercises I had to engage every time I felt a twinge of pain, but by the six-week mark my brain had started to rewire itself, and the soothing became reflexive. I remember getting an email that should have caused an instant gut clench, but when I went looking for the feeling, it wasn’t there. It was a miracle, and two months in, regular day-to-day stress was not making its way to my gut at all. The loop had been broken.

After the stress loop dissolved, and the medicine healed whatever was going on in there, the dietitian suggested I start stimulating my vagus nerve,

the nerve that connects the brain to the gut, as well as the heart and lungs. This would improve not just gut motility but also my depression symptoms, she claimed.

She added that there were less invasive methods to make incremental changes, and they all sounded, frankly, ridiculous. “Tickle the back of your throat with a Popsicle stick until you gag,” she said. “Or try a cold plunge.” Nope—both awful. “Or you could sing loudly,” she said, and my ears perked up. That I could do. “It has to be *very* loud,” she warned. I assured her that would not be a problem and hurried back home.

I fully submitted to this last piece of advice, and even if it is my brain playing tricks on me, I have noticed a difference. I haven’t had a belly issue in ages now, and my mood does lift every time I sing. Sadly, karaoke nights are still rare, but this summer I am excited when we get an invitation to a karaoke birthday party. It’s still not high on Rodney’s list of preferred activities, but on the way there I remind him that I was dropped into his life to change him (and vice versa), and one of my goals has been to get him to enjoy things he’s not the absolute best in the world at (he is the absolute best in the world at many things). At the party, we sing an enthusiastic duet of “Falling Slowly” from *Once*—his lovely, rumbly voice a perfect counter to mine, his eyes crinkled in a smile, and we share this joy. On the way home, we create a singalong playlist for the drive. I notice, too, that I am in a grand mood—a smiley, cheerful one—for an entire week. It seems almost too good to be true, but I’ve continued adding to the singalong playlist that Rodney and I made, and man, does it make me happy. It also makes the karaoke high more portable—like having a dose of chemicals in the car.

My behavior is, of course, still mortifying to my children, but I tell them I’m under a doctor’s orders, and remind them of other things I do that they used to find embarrassing. “Remember when you hated me dancing at the supermarket?” I ask. They don’t remember this at all—how could they possibly hate dancing at the supermarket, if they love doing it themselves? “But the music at the supermarket is so good,” the almost-six-year-old says. “It’s my job as your mother to help you express your joy,” I say. Because we talk a lot about sitting in the uncomfortable feelings, but we have to roll around in the good ones, too. Life can’t all be stomachaches.

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A year ago, I had to drive four hours from my parents' place in Detroit to Toronto. I was in a wonky mental space, one of those fallow periods after a massive work push, where I was mentally and emotionally depleted, but still a little twitchy and high-strung from the feverish pace of the work I'd just been engaging in. I felt constitutionally unable to rest. I had had a month straight home with the kids, with all of its attendant duties, and was only just barely tethered to myself. I wasn't looking forward to the drive, exactly—the idea of a quickie trip to Toronto for a book event was making me jumpy. I tried to shake it off as I buckled myself in, telling myself I wasn't going to waste one moment of the alone time by being in a weird mood. I'd had enough of that.

As I maneuvered out of my parents' driveway, I pulled up the singalong playlist to keep me company. The air was warm and heavy, summer-thick with haze. I was hoping the singing would knock me out of my funk, and I thought briefly about how awful I used to be at public speaking: lightheaded, sweaty, mired in brain fog. I had to expose myself to it for years, forcing myself to sign up to give toasts and offer to moderate panels until crowds stopped scaring me. It seemed important at the time, for my professional goals. I realized, with a laugh, that I'd been singing pretty consistently for almost thirty years now, and I hadn't gotten the slightest bit better at it. That might be why I loved it so much. I was excellent at so many things, and I'd worked so hard at them. Thanks to my training in the demanding jobs I left for writing—Hollywood agenting and film producing—I was pretty great at being in charge, running meetings, doing sales of any kind, managing impossible people, navigating office politics, snagging clients, resolving work conflicts. But I *hated* doing them. They were the opposite of the singing. Sure, the neuroscience was interesting, but I was also floating on the sheer lack of expectation; that there was no relevant metric of success, that it could never be useful to my work or my life, was what made it so freeing.

Three hours of driving passed in a blink as I sang. I was belting "Possession" by Sarah McLachlan (Canadian, naturally) when I noticed, surprised, that I'd reached the outskirts of Toronto. I smiled as a message came in—an updated address from my baby cousin Aditi, now all grown up and living with her sweet husband in Toronto. He was making us a traditional Egyptian dinner that night, and I was looking forward to it, as our whole extended family, for years, had been praising his cooking. I

thought warmly of the local members of our clan who would be at the book event later, but then my nerves kicked in again. Glimpsing them before being whisked away didn't seem like enough time. And speaking of time, how had Aditi gone from a small baby falling asleep in my lap to a grown woman offering up her husband's culinary talent? How many special dinners with her had I missed, and why had I missed them? It hit me hard, as the contraction of time often does, and I gripped the steering wheel in an attempt to right myself. That wasn't enough, so I turned up the music to be just the tiniest bit louder than my voice, and went for it again, making sure I squeezed the air out of every square inch of my lungs.

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A Pleasant Peninsula

An intense child, I approached summer vacation with the same ferocity as my studies. I cannonballed into that three-month cycle of making and consuming ice pops and limeade, hardly getting out of my bathing suit, staying up too late with my cousins in Kashmir. I remember Delhi's oppressive heat breaking into the relief of monsoon, and running outside to get drenched through to my now-saggy undies. I remember late dinners outdoors, night markets after the heat burned off, and having unfettered access to my parents' attention, for while they worked hard during the rest of the year, they softened and blossomed on vacation. With work out of the way, their only concern when we traveled was where we might eat our next meal, and where we'd fit in a nap, all piled into one room.

As a parent, though, I've found that summer "vacation" has traditionally wrung me dry, and not in a good way. I'm now decidedly my least fun when the school year ends. My work habits don't agree with our patchwork of kid camp schedules, and I worry about getting enough writing done. I'm always preoccupied with family stuff while I'm working, and preoccupied with work stuff when I should be family-ing. I can get very cranky about it all, probably because I'm not taking those naps every day. Everyone loses, basically. I wonder if my beloved memories of childhood summers only exist because my parents were working themselves to nubs ensuring we had a beautiful experience.

I crave the vacation rhythms that I remember from childhood, but daydreams about Popsicles and belly flops have been replaced by adult aspirations. I no longer want to approach our vacation as I've approached everything else—as a fortress of efficiency, deflecting both help and compliments. I don't want to startle every time someone says "vacation" because I'm instantly agitated by the mountain of prep work I will have to do so that everyone else can have a good time. I want to join my kids in the season I once loved, to feel once again that sense of time slowing down, as a family. I want to set work aside and spend every day in pursuit of small pleasures: buying a good tomato at the farmers' market, and idly thinking about what I might do to it for dinner. Catching up on family movies we

haven’t watched yet. Chatting about minutiae while we do a puzzle at the table. The gulf between who I want to be and who I currently am looms wide. I’m not yet certain how to traverse it, but I am gazing, appraisingly, single-mindedly, at the other side.

Family summer planning does require an endless prep list—there’s no getting around it. We usually pick a far-flung locale, because it’s the one time of year we can, and then there are tickets to purchase, bags to pack, camps to schedule around, activities to plan, lodging to find, calendars to wrangle, kid nerves to soothe, screen-time limits to renegotiate, friends to miss, bug bites to prevent, work to finish, projects to pause. It would be a lot to get done even without everybody at home all the time, but without school, the kids are around more, and their immediate needs are numerous.

My kids come to me with a litany of requests all year long, but they’re usually during limited (nonschool) hours. I notice that, in summer, with no place to go, the pace becomes relentless. I maybe didn’t realize how many questions I field in a day, like I’m their human search engine—“How many buses is a whale?”; “What’s the weather outside?” (we have windows and doors). I find myself jumping in to answer all of their questions and solve all of their problems, which paints me into a very tiring corner. “I’m thirsty”; “I can’t find x”; “Y is bothering me.” My usual approach—trying to fix it—is laughably ineffective. Nobody is ever happy with my solutions, and I get crankier the more I’m asked to do.

I’m washing dishes one day when my ten-year-old son walks into the kitchen and asks me where the milk is. And I know it’s time for something to change. “Use your brain,” I blurt out, and he’s stunned.

I know immediately that I’ve been hurtful. I apologize, and try again later with my daughter, when she asks how to spell out “dearly” (why?). I take a deep breath and reach for the right words. “Use your *beautiful* brain,” I say. “I know you can figure it out.” She wanders off, glowing, and (mostly) figures it out. That’s an improvement.

As with my Achilles injury, it seems the lesson here is to find places where I’m doing too much, and step back. Instead of rushing from the dishes to help them, which only prolongs and intensifies my drudgery, I experiment with a new tactic, putting myself in the role of well-meaning friend: “Oh, no!” I say, when they present a tiny problem. “What are you going to do about it?” They’re stunned, their faces blank, before the wheels

start to turn, and they wander off, muttering imperfect solutions, which I hold myself back from editing. They can tell something is up, but at least the expectation is not on me to solve it. This style of non-meddling proves difficult for me to maintain consistently. I blame having been an insufferable know-it-all as a child, which kids hated and grown-ups loved. “She’s so resourceful,” said my teachers. “You can drop her off anywhere, and she’d be fine,” said my mother, beaming with pride. “You don’t have to worry about her,” everyone agreed. Sure, fine, entirely correct, but I don’t think my kids will grow up resourceful if they look to me, and not the refrigerator, to find milk.

On the phone that week, I ask my mother if she felt like she was tap-dancing during all of our vacations, worrying about planning them just so, and she laughs. She spent most of the year as our primary parent while Dad worked around the clock, but in the summer we went home to India, where her entire family lived, and life was much easier for her there. She points out now that my own family summers are usually exploratory travel to a new place, where I do have to get everyone packed up, transported and settled in. “But this summer will be different,” she says. “This summer you’ll have us.” I startle, wondering why I, not a stupid person, have taken so long to realize I should plan to be around family in the summer. Two decades ago, at twenty-four, I screeched out of my parents’ home without a backward glance, driving off to my fate in Los Angeles. I loved my parents, but we were making each other crazy. And because I had been so duty-bound, I needed to be as far away from them as humanly possible. I wanted to muddle through building a life determined only by my own choices, without them worrying over my shoulder. My parents were rightly nervous about my choosing a life in entertainment, but I deflected any offers of help with often-false cheer, knowing that I needed to get things going on my own. And get them going I did, building a career and a family in California that they are now proud of and participate in, and I did it entirely on my own—as did my mother before me, I note. I’ve done things without their presence and input for so long that I never relaxed that standard, sometimes forgetting that their presence and input is available to me.

This summer we’re meant to spend a full month in Michigan, with my entire extended family, as they descend upon my parents’ house for a pre-wedding event for my brother. And my mother is right: Before this trip home, I feel none of the usual preparatory dread, or the weight of the

endless checklist. Anything we don't bring, I know my mother will provide. After weeks of line-cookery, I also can't wait to get to my parents' from the airport so that I can dive into the fridge and eat Mum's cooking. Not only because I love it, but because I welcome any home-cooked meal that appears without my having to activate a single brain cell. I'm also strangely looking forward to a specific ritual I have engaged in with my *masis*—Mum's sisters—since I was a teenager. Almost without fail, whenever I pack, the thing I always forget is my pajamas. For decades, my *masis* have run back to their suitcases to pull out an assortment of "maxis," which is what Desi women of a certain age (and region) call nightgowns. On them, these gowns reach their ankles, because they may have towering personalities, but less actual height. "This one won't be short, will it?" I ask every time, and they tut, "Nooooo, it's too long. I was tripping in it!" I put it on, and then they—engineers, all—stand around me in a circle wondering why it only reaches mid-shin. It's been repeated every time we've gotten together for the last thirty years, and I share with my husband that I strangely can't wait to get put in a too-short maxi by my *masis*.

A global IT outage the next day usurps my plans. Our flight is delayed, and we spend seven annoying hours at the airport. The confused message we are given every twenty minutes is that we are "waiting on a pilot," which we soon understand to mean for a pilot to be assigned to the flight, thanks to glitches in their crew software. Sixty-five percent of Delta flights are canceled or delayed during the outage, so at least we aren't alone.

I told myself on the way to the airport that this year I would navigate the emotional speed bumps of summer with grace and humor, but there's nothing like being gaslit at the airport to test one's resolve. One bright light is our ten-year-old's emerging resourcefulness that day. I honestly didn't think he was listening all those times I touted the value of a rich inner life, but when I ask him how he has patiently waited for the entire delay without distraction or complaint, he says he goes into the headspace of "time is an illusion," and thinks about other stuff. An elegant solution, perhaps borne of me no longer fixing his every little problem. Our flight is ultimately canceled. They unload the plane—an additional ninety minutes, during which the illusion of time becomes all too real—we get back to our own house, and it is, once again, somehow, dinner, for which I have to be an adult. I scowl into the fridge, scramble some eggs, toast some bagels, and call it "breakfast for dinner." My mother's cooking it is not.

I book the next available direct flight out—for two days later—and hope for the best. Our new booking is on Spirit, which I haven't flown since my early negative-bank-balance days. I remember taking those bare-bones red-eyes, freezing in a narrow seat, dreading having to hear my parents' concerns about my professional and romantic choices. The time comes for our flight, and I board a yellow plane to Michigan with all the fruits of those choices.

When we arrive, I hand over our kids to a crowd hungry for cuddles and spend my first afternoon freely running errands in verdant, traffic-free, suburban Detroit, feeling my jaw unclench. I may have left to find myself in LA, but I come back here a fully formed writer, mother, partner. Over the intervening years, my sense of self has become as solid as a tree trunk.

As I roll from one stop to the next, one question accompanies me: Now that I've gotten what I left to find, should I move back? My nervous system is so happy in Michigan, I always think. The kids are enchanted by the idea of the day camp I enrolled them in down the street, confident they'll meet some nice midwestern kids. The local schools are great. We could also live on acres. Is my happiness in Michigan about the actual state of Michigan? Partly, yes. Our governor, Gretchen Whitmer, is a powerhouse in a pink pantsuit. Then there's our state motto: *If you seek a pleasant peninsula, look about you.* Was that not written specifically to relax the nervous system? I'm also just starting to feel able to lean into my loved ones, after twenty years of a fierce and sometimes lonely independence.

As I execute a Michigan left—a system of medians set up whereby you never actually make a left turn at a major intersection; you just turn right and then curve around a U-turn in your intended direction—I wonder about my lost ability to depend on anyone, and I start to feel sorry for myself. When I was a child, being praised for my self-reliance led to incredible confidence and competence, but now I'm a grown woman who cringes at the idea of having needs, let alone expressing them. A woman who hears most offers of help as an insult, or a vote of no-confidence. And then, at the end of another exhausting day/week/month, I wonder why I'm so drained. "You don't need to worry about her," said all those people, showering me with their approval when I was a kid. But what if I *wanted* to be worried about, just a little?

I think that's why I like the maxi thing, I tell my husband. There's something about being a little helpless around this group of women who mothered me, and the way they rush in to fix a problem I should have been able to solve. It's like getting paid back the energy I put into the world. Rodney laughs, but there's a sigh in there, too, because he's constantly expressing concern about my well-being, and instead of me admitting to *him* that I feel helpless, I snap, "I'm fine, I'm always fine." Thankfully he's also just as stubborn as I am. So now, as I try to tiptoe away from that version of myself, I do sometimes give myself over to being held when I feel prickly. I do sometimes tell him I feel terrible before I yell at everyone in the house about it. Not every time, but practice makes progress, and I will eventually learn to accept all of his loving gestures. Maybe even a compliment.

We've finally reached a point this summer where he'll offer me a cup of tea, and instead of saying, "I'll make it myself" (why?), I say, "Yes, thank you. I really appreciate that." If I truly want to be a baby bird sometimes, like I recently told him, we will have to continue my forced march toward interdependence. I envision our married future as two birch saplings leaning on each other, stronger against a wind, instead of me bent double, shouting that I don't need any support. I think I can get there, but it will take a lot of deprogramming.

The deprogramming doesn't end with my partner. Because when I left home so many years ago, it was important to prove to my parents that I was absolutely fine without them. Without anyone. But all this summer I've been noticing how the hard parts could be so much better if I just let everyone all the way back into my business. The second day of vacation, I'm walking my parents through the kids' daily routine. We're having breakfast at the kitchen island of their sprawling house in Michigan, and I catch them sneaking glances at each other. I prickle, knowing what they're thinking, because they've expressed as much before—I'm being rigid, and should just let them do their grandparent thing. Before this summer, I would have said something out loud about this. "I do things this way because we have to; the kids need their routine; I don't want to deal with them when you've worn them out and dysregulated them." Now I stop myself and wonder if they're right. Do I need to be doing all this micromanaging? Isn't this the extra work I'm trying to shed, so that I can relax into summer? My parents are right here, trying to wrestle my load from me, so why won't I

hand it over? They're a pediatrician and an educator, for goodness' sake. They successfully raised two children!

I think back to my Achilles injury, when I started to understand that I might be the problem. Maybe it's time I started doing much less. In all my talk about kid routines, I have to acknowledge now that they are no longer babies, and have become so much more portable and easy to take care of. They read, they keep themselves busy, they love an outing, they're friendly and enjoy their time with others. I relax into the handoff, giving my parents full control of the day. Does it matter what the kids eat or watch, for a week or so? Or what time anyone goes to sleep? Within reason, maybe it doesn't.

As the day goes on, I tune out my urge to prove I can handle everything by myself, and we're all happier. That evening, after putting the kids to sleep, I walk into the kitchen and find Mum and her sisters chatting around the kitchen island. I mention my need for a nightgown, and, as predicted, they scurry off and bring back an array of options. I laugh at how much sleepwear these women travel with, but it's also comforting that they've never changed. I pick one of Asha Masi's maxis, covered in bold red flowers. It stops just above the ankle, and I know already that I'm not just borrowing it; she wants me to take it home, and think of her whenever I look at it. I wear it to bed, feeling taken care of. I don't mention that I packed pajamas.

I allow my family to take care of me for the rest of the week. After the first day or two, when I stop obsessively following the kids around and monitoring them, I honestly don't see much of them. They're busy playing with cousins, or off with an aunt or uncle, or watering my mother's abundant flowers. My parents are so much happier when I let them all *be*. I lean into this lifestyle—one where I'm not the only adult in charge—and start enjoying a summer break as Mum must have, back when I was little.

As the week comes to an end, Rodney and I pack up again to take the kids to a cabin on Lake Michigan, one of my favorite places on earth. I've never taken the family, and am excited to introduce them to the region. I've been talking it up maybe a little too much, and I wonder if they know what they're in for.

"New Yorkers have been doing this all wrong," says Rodney, a native New Yorker. He takes in the vastness of the blue and the unspoiled dunes of the northwest shore of Michigan. "That's not a lake. That's an ocean," says

our son, and he refuses to accept otherwise. The kids play nearby in a freshwater shallow while we perch on soft white sand, downing hearty Italian sandwiches made with local sourdough. Rodney's flabbergasted by the area's natural beauty. He's flabbergasted by the sandwiches, even. "I told you they were good," I say, shrugging, and he says "good" isn't enough. "This reminds me of the Hamptons in the eighties." he says. "Except it's not full of a-holes," I joke.

That evening I take a deep breath and look around the little cabin, mentally preparing myself for a grocery haul, lots of dishes, and endless laundry while we slap on smiles and make memories for the kids. *No help here*, I think. I miss my army of *masis*, and recall, ruefully, the timeless Onion headline MOM SPENDS BEACH VACATION ASSUMING ALL HOUSEHOLD DUTIES IN CLOSER PROXIMITY TO OCEAN. I'd laugh, if it weren't so annoying and true. Then I think about how relaxed I was at my parents', and then I wonder, *What if I don't?* What if I don't really cook anything? What if we get a grilled cheese or hot dog from the diner every night, and slice up a cucumber here and there? What then? What if we eat our food walking around, without any plates? What if we just watch movies every night, and jump in the lake every morning, and sleep in our clothes, and don't exactly shower that much? What if I leave a pile of dishes, or I make the dishes a group project? What if, instead of anticipating everyone's needs and anxiously refilling the fridge with bread-milk-eggs-yogurt-fruit-veg, I let them express their hunger in real time, and then we simply . . . go get things from the store as we need them?

What happens is that everyone is fine, and I love summer vacation again. "Best vacation ever," says my daughter. My son loads up on Michigan sweatshirts, wondering why we can't just move here. I stifle a sigh, because I'm right there with him. I can so easily see how rich our life could be here, in a kind and familiar community, surrounded by trees and family, in a neighborhood the kids could wander on their own. The only thing interfering with this vision is that the bulk of our work is still in LA. I reach into my well of responsible parenting and pull out the thing I know I'm supposed to say. "I'm not sure if a cross-country shift is in the cards for us right now," I tell him, hoping this spackles over my conflicted feelings. "But we'll be back next summer."

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II

AUTUMN

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Blowup

I’m visiting Rome, just as the air starts to cool and the tourists start to thin out, and I’m idly wondering what it would look like to blow up my life. I don’t think I’m in actual danger of it—am simply participating in the daydreams of your average middle-aged woman. I step out of the shower and putter around my apartment rental in Trastevere, cool tile under my feet, and pour a glass of water from a ceramic pitcher painted with pomegranates. I make my way through the living room to the front windows, peeking through the lace curtains at people strolling below. This is everything I’ve ever loved about Rome, and I allow myself to fantasize about an alternate life here. One in which I live and write in this gorgeous little apartment, and have a friend or two over on the too-small patio for a Campari before dinner. I luxuriate in this thought as I finish my water and pour some more. I grab my lotion, overly excited to have as long as I want to moisturize each limb. It’s decadent, this amount of free time. I check my watch—the hours move so slowly when I’m by myself—and plop myself down on the couch.

It turns out that even a languid lotion application doesn’t take more than a few minutes. I itch to call the kids, but the entire point is to be away, and I’m worried I’ll miss them too much. I would grab my book and pass the time reading, but I’ve foolishly only packed one: a novel that begins with a mother abandoning her family on a vacation, so I’ve had to stop reading it. Children in peril, or even children sad at all, is an expansive genre I’m no longer able to experience without inserting my own into the story, and I’m not trying to make myself heartsick on a solo trip. I’m only just barely repressing (in a healthy way?) the guilt I feel at being away from the family. I know rationally that I haven’t abandoned them at all, but an anxious part of me wants to speak up. I silence her, and I smile into the silence of the room, with the knowledge that I have a few days to do whatever I’d like, free from responsibility.

I take a short nap, and stretch, and realize it’s time to leave to meet a friend for an aperitivo. After I pull the front door closed and make my way to the Ponte Sisto, a tiny pedestrian bridge, a startling thing happens. I

wiggle my way past some rowdy kids with their rowdy guitars in the Piazza Trilussa, race across the street, squeeze through the bike barrier, and gasp as I turn into six distinct people.

I first came to Italy for a year in college, and I am suddenly the nineteen-year-old who fell in love with Rome at first sight, singing along to my friend Joe's guitar in that same piazza while we passed around a Peroni. I am now that teenager, but I am also the twenty-one-year-old who needed to come back so badly that I wrangled a summer job here, spending evenings on long, roundabout walks with my drummer crush. I am rushing to dinner at twenty-six with a friend I'd invited on a post-breakup summer train trip. I am thirty-three and back with Rodney, our first baby swelling in my belly. I am here again with that "baby," almost three, as I teach him to drink from a *fontanella* on Via Benedetta—just over there—where he soaks himself, shrieking and giggling up and down the cobblestone street. And I am also here now, on a beautiful fall day in my mid-forties, while the people who make up my actual life wake up back home in Los Angeles. I feel the tonnage of every person I've ever been, all at once, but I also feel weightless, those women layered like tissue paper trying not to blow away. I slowly make it across the bridge, overwhelmed by the thought. I have to remind myself to breathe.

I don't think this is what people think is happening when I'm traveling by myself. When I first mentioned I was taking off for a walkabout week—to clear my mind, gather acorns for writing, and maintain my sanity, I became a canvas on which friends projected their own hidden desires. "Are you going to eat chocolate and lie in bed," they asked. "Are you going to watch movies in a hotel robe?"; "Are you going to eat all the pasta and drink all the wine, whilst in a claw-footed bathtub?" And, inevitably, came the salacious glances. "Any exes . . . ?" someone asked, waggling an eyebrow. "If I wanted to hang out with them, I'd be hanging out with them," I said with a laugh.

This immediate associative flip from eating chocolate alone on a bed to areas more risqué feels distinctly American to me. I remember, when I moved to the U.S. in high school, that one friend told me her father woke up at 4 a.m. so he could work out and head to the office. This fact was presented as a point of pride. I still remember the chipper neighborhood mom, every perfect hair in place, who casually told me that only small

children took naps. I remember noticing that magazines at the grocery store seemed to be all about exerting control over your impulse to eat, rather than enjoying your food. I wonder if it's because in the U.S. so many small desires—baths, chocolate, real breaks—are repressed in service of earnings or the family that people seem to imagine that when I'm away, the urges will all come roaring out in an orgiastic, Dionysian revel.

I'm thinking about this now, after I've crossed the bridge and am closing in on this new cocktail bar near the Campo de' Fiori. As I turn a corner into the square, I see the farmers' market wrapping up, but also catch the disheveled ghost of my teenage self—specifically at the Irish pub on the corner, where we may or may not have danced on top of the bar in exchange for free booze. A cackle escapes as I remember the smell of cheap beer, the splashes of sugary well drinks that made my shoes stick to that bar, and then I shudder. I'm all good on Dionysian revels. A fancy cocktail with my friend Sheila sounds more appropriate. We greet each other with the customary two kisses, and I ask her, pretty much right away, if she thinks Americans know how to enjoy things. She—an American who has been married to an Italian and has lived here for ages—laughs. "Of course not," she says. "That's why we run away," I tell her. We clink.

I think I ended up in Italy that first time, and second time, and now my twentysomethingth time, because I was born into a family of nappers and vacation-enjoyers. My parents worked hard, obviously, but the hard work fueled the seeking of pleasure, and also rewarded it. The two went hand in hand, one feeding the other. I somehow lost touch with this balance as I spent more time in the U.S. and was slowly converted to its singular zeal for things. I sought out a brief respite as an undergraduate in Italy and laughed off the strong pull it exerted on me. "Everyone loves Italy," I said. Yet I have to admit that something about getting there that first time felt like a reset of some fundamental values. When they visited, my parents agreed. This was a country that napped, and prized things other than efficiency, and where people enjoyed their food.

Like most of us Americans, I soon left that mindset behind when I matriculated into real adulthood. After I finished law school, my job was everything to me, and then the kids took first position. Each pursuit, if I wanted to do it well, seemed to expect that I resist all pleasure, that the pursuit, and its ensuing rewards, was all the pleasure I needed. "Only small

children nap," that lady had told me; 4 a.m. is an optimal wakeup time. I had somehow bought into all of it. But with the kids both in school, and my growing suspicion that I might still be a person who wanted things, I once again had the strong urge to fly back to Italy, by myself.

So I brought this up with my husband, and said I wanted to give myself permission to go. I had left before, but always for work reasons. I didn't need to leave, I told him, I just wanted to. I wanted to spend some time in a place that I loved. I was a little nervous because it felt like too much. He was immediately, sweetly, onboard. "I wish I could do that," he said. He's someone who only ever travels solo when work requires it. "You can," I told him, and he admitted he probably could, but just won't allow himself to. When I announced to our friends and family that I was about to go to Italy alone, for absolutely no reason, I also received a wave of concern for him. "Is he okay with that?" friends asked, and it bugged me. They knew that other times he'd stayed home with the kids while I traveled for work—what made this trip different was that nobody was making me do it. None of the naysayers wanted to articulate why that would make this inherently more difficult or unfair for him. Even though I disagreed with them, the idea still made me feel uneasy, like I was doing something selfish.

The other obstacle, I found, was actually booking the trip. "How much is that going to cost?" asked people, scandalized, and this, too, was irritating. For all of the cooing pleas for self-care I feel like I've been getting since I pushed out that first baby, I've never wanted to answer even one of them. I've never wanted to get my nails done, and massages bore me. The more I think about this, the more agitated I get. I laugh when my friend Jessica jokes that "self-care" is code for "stay hot." A round-trip coach ticket to Rome, when I looked, was about seven hundred dollars, and I figured out how to pay for that in air miles. Even as I cobbled them together for a free ticket, I wished that I were sassy enough about this to just throw it on a credit card and shout that I was worth it. To be honest, I didn't actually feel worth it at the time. I was hoping I might, by the time I landed. I booked a weeklong apartment stay for about a thousand euros, which felt entirely reasonable for a potential reawakening.

In Rome, after the aperitivo with Sheila, I meet my friend Paola for dinner, and try to explain my agita about this. She is child-free and happily single, and cackles at the mental pretzels I've had to twist myself into for

taking a trip I felt like taking. She moved from the Midwest decades ago and built a career in hospitality, and “Moms come here all the time,” she says. “As they should!” Right then, as happens in Rome, a woman walks by who Paola knows, and she joins us for a drink. Anna is of Czech origin and about my age, and has been in the country leading an architectural tour, with the idea of leading more every fall. Her husband is holding down the fort with their toddler son back in Texas, she tells us, and she’s starting to miss the baby. “Isn’t it wonderful you’re able to get away, though?” I say, trying to be encouraging. She is grateful for the quiet, and admits she hadn’t slept as well in a couple of years.

She’s been so happy in Italy, she continues, that she’s planning a trip back to look at apartments in a small town just outside the city. I’m impressed. To move her entire family, and their work, from Texas is big change. She smiles, serene, and I wonder if maybe these kinds of decisions are easier to make with one child, who hasn’t yet started school. I briefly modify my apartment fantasy to include moving the family to Italy. It makes sense that we’d all be happy in my happy place, right? Maybe things are easier with a partner who is open to moving—she and her husband have lived in a couple of countries already, which probably makes a third much easier.

I can’t help being envious. I think about my Rodney, who is decidedly *not* gripped by a desire to move abroad. He was born and raised in the U.S., as were generations of his family, his roots there deep. After an itinerant childhood, I have appreciated the firm grounding. But my American life was never meant to be permanent, which sounds ridiculous to say now, almost thirty years in. In my defense, I’ve been busy. Busy creating an American family that outnumbers me when it comes to voting on which country we should live in. There is an alternate-universe me, probably—a me who never gelled with the compromises of married life—who would have an utter meltdown and demand that we all leave immediately to settle in London or somewhere closer to the rest of the world. As I play out this fantasy, I believe that after a struggle, my husband would support it to make me happy. But is it something I’d push for without an impending emergency? Probably not.

The three of us, Anna, Paola and I, are becoming quite nice friends as dusk falls purple over Rome. People wander by, gelato in hand, reminding

me that my window for gelato is closing. Anna looks at her phone and startles. Would it be okay if her friend joined, she asks. The twenty-two-year-old in me is feeling generous, the one who used to sit at that fountain right over there, with my roommate after work, for as long as we wanted. “The more the merrier,” I say, mentally reassigning gelato to tomorrow and thinking again how nice it is to be eating under these stars, in this city, in its cooling-off season. We order another bottle of wine and lasagne, in case the friend might be hungry.

Then the friend shows up, and the friend is a man. A flirty man, at that. He is an art history professor who contributes to Anna’s tours, and they meant to meet up and make some tweaks before tomorrow’s. As the conversation goes on, I notice their intimacy. The arm touches, the giggles at things that aren’t actually funny. I can sense what it all means.

Rodney and I talk sometimes about whether we could see ourselves with anyone else, either someone we know, or an unknown, theoretical “type.” Maybe this isn’t standard marriage conversation, but if each relationship is its own planet, ours is one where we’ve turned over every piece of conversational gravel to examine together, as though it’s a precious gem. When this topic comes up, my response is “I already had a lot of fun.” That’s me trying not to be indelicate. I had all the fun, in fact. For a long time, I was the girl on the bar, and the one laughing next to the fountain at all hours of night. I met lots of wonderful men. I meet men still.

“But if anything happens to you,” I told Rodney once, “I’m not pairing up again. I’m just going to read and garden in peace for the rest of my life.”

“That’s so romantic,” he said, touched.

“I don’t think it is,” I joked. “I’m just saying it would be quieter.”

I understand, as I watch this charming Roman man and riffle through the mental checklist of similarly charming men I’ve met, then project into the future to charming men I have yet to meet, that I legitimately can’t imagine a life with any other charming man than mine.

There is a rich and fruitful tradition of books about women approximately my age who wake up one day feeling trapped and decide to burn down their lives. In most of these books the catalyst for this woman is a genuinely horrible man, or the wrong job. I love many of these books, and at times, I relate to feeling trapped. But I also love my husband and children, and, hassles aside, I enjoy my job. I wonder what the path to a

more satisfying, peaceful, less restrictive life is, for those of us who don't want to burn it all down.

At the dinner in Rome, that charming man eventually walks off to get his car. I stare at Anna, expectant. She sighs, and then hesitates before telling us that her husband probably won't be moving with her to Italy. That she hasn't told him about her plans yet. She told us earlier that running away from her life the first time led her to her husband. And now she's running away from him, toward another sparkly, romantic dream. She wanted a baby and a partner, and instead of staying and polishing up that tarnished mirror that marriage can become, she has her reasons to go in search of a new one. She leaves with her friend. I admire their easy flirting—how often that kind of thing used to happen to me, and how often I engaged in it—but even if I trip into it now, I can't imagine feeling an impulse strong or sustained enough to destroy everything I've spent the last sixteen years building.

Anna's situation differs vastly from mine. She didn't speak of her partner much at dinner, other than to contextualize the strain they feel when she's away. A strain she feels he sort of deserves. I stayed quiet, understanding how deeply unhappy she must be to feel this. Her solution likely lays elsewhere, but our conversation clarifies even further the kind of escape that I'm looking for here. It's not from my life. My supportive husband is cheerfully hanging out with our wacky kids so I can waltz off to Europe. I also love the peace I feel when I'm just a carefree lady in Rome whose brain isn't buzzing with a running monologue of all of the things that everyone might need this instant. I know that a more satisfying life won't be obtained by running away to Italy. But Italy has again reminded me of the version of myself that I'd like to be at home.

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Beginning, Middle, End

What if every time I opened my mouth to talk, a burbling shriek came out instead? Long and erratic, like an old-timey fax machine, or a dial-up modem. As the noise continues—it's twice as long as any human should tolerate—I make apologetic eyes, conveying my desperate intention to communicate something important and meaningful, if the listener is patient enough to wait this out. This imaginary sound is how my handwriting looks.

I don't know what most people think causes my chicken scratch, which makes otherwise respectful friends point and laugh. I tell them it feels like the connection between my brain and my hand are broken. I know what I intend to write when the pen hits the paper, but my hand doesn't want to listen, crossing sticks that aren't *t*'s, or squiggling off into a piggy tail when it should close a loop. Sometimes it will even start a word that doesn't come until much later in the intended sentence. "It's like my hand is haunted," I try to explain. My neurons send a signal, and my hands do whatever they want. Nobody believes me.

It's always been like this, although it was even harder at the beginning. I remember staring for a "mad minute" at a math quiz in second grade, deeply upset. Seeing it, I felt my stomach drop. I knew the answers, but why did I have to write them all down? I'd never finish. Still, I managed to mask this as a little bit of laziness until third grade, when we started getting homework, and I'd crumple it in the bottom of my bag and throw it away. Eventually, Mrs. Worley called my parents to ask why I wasn't doing my homework. I knew the material, I said, but the actual execution of it seemed too hard. Maybe I wasn't a writer, I said. My teachers had to strain to read my writing, but it basically worked, and there it has stayed forever. But I was never a writer, because writers journaled and doodled. Writers organized their thoughts through the tip of a flying pen. I was a reader, and a thinker, for sure. And I could talk! I knew all the answers to everything, was first to raise my hand in class. By fourth grade, I was motivated enough by a teacher I really loved to slow down when writing and make my work legible, even though I took twice as long as everyone else. I knew some

kids took twice as long to read, but I didn't have a word for what was happening when I tried to write, and I was too embarrassed to talk about it, in any case. Meanwhile, I flew through reading, gulping up ten books at a time, and chattering at length about how much I loved them. "Maybe you'll be a writer," said Mrs. Viola, and I laughed. Writers could *write.*

"Kids are smart little critters," says a friend who is a child therapist, and it's true. As a child, I developed a million workarounds to avoid writing. Because note-taking was a burden, I honed my ability to recall. In group projects, I took a lead role and assigned a classmate to act as stenographer. I could give an oral presentation that made a teacher weep. I spoke in complete thoughts, in paragraphs. I had *a voice*, said my teachers, but it wasn't one I could wrestle down on paper.

By the time I reached middle school, I caught up enough to be okay at an essay test. I'd have to outline and then mutter the answers under my breath as I wrote out the words coming out of my mouth—my mouth was the detour, the processing station, on the way to my hand. Every time, it felt like trying to tape a frisky cat to a desk. I was stubborn enough to keep trying. I found sweet relief in our word processor, and then a computer, finally. My thoughts still came out in completely the wrong order, but I could copy/paste them into the correct places to cover up that fact. Besides, I wouldn't have to write for long, I thought. I was headed to other things, more important things, that required less writing. The writing would fall away—I could read and remember, and work in a lab, as I was obviously meant to do—because I wasn't a writer. I didn't do any writerly things. I didn't journal, I just kept everything that I'd ever heard or experienced in my head. Writers didn't have to do that. Writers could *write.*

By high school my scrawl was better and my interpretation of my own vague glyphs was, too, so a shorthand note-taking process was born, though it served more to jog my memory. This was all going to be behind me, I thought. Soon. It was for a while, through my twenties as an agent and producer, tied to a BlackBerry and a laptop. Then came kids, and much more life. The previously ideal systems, my finely organized memory cabinet, didn't work as well. Recall was crap. My systems tumbled down. I still didn't think to convert the information in my head to the written word, which made it exceedingly difficult to convey information to my husband, who, try as he might, could not read my mind.

I remember telling a story about my childhood as I grabbed a string cheese in the agency kitchen. A colleague said, “Write that down for the book,” and I laughed. I wasn’t a writer, I said. Writers could *write.* I wished I could. I loved to tell stories, mostly because the women before me did. Made-up morality tales about a bunny who didn’t eat his dinner. Scary stories of forbidden love. Tales about my eccentric, lovable family. That wasn’t writing, was it? That was talking—something that writers famously hated to do. I didn’t have to think so hard to talk—it just flowed out of me, the connection between my brain and mouth a superhighway. That’s what defined us agents, right? The gift of gab.

Then I took one of those genetic tests after *Nani*’s Alzheimer’s diagnosis, and it turned out I have the genes, which rattled me. Our Kashmiri community is strong but scattered—I’m the oldest cousin on this side, and the last one who actually remembers life in Kashmir and the breadth of our family’s tales. So I sat down at my computer and typed out a disjointed, hundred-page brain dump of every scrap of memory, my own and the ones that had been shared with me. I kept the file on a laptop for years, unsure of what to do with it, but glad it was there. I kept reading and loving books, furiously not writing, or even entertaining the idea that I might someday. The file sat in some haphazard corner of my hard drive, like a padlocked attaché case in a dusty closet, to be brought out only in an undefined future emergency. In the rare instances I allowed myself to think about it, I was both drawn to open it and frightened by the thought, so it was much easier to pretend it didn’t exist.

After I had the kids, almost everything else felt less scary and impossible. So I finally sat down at my computer and started the laborious process of organizing my pages and pages of disjointed thoughts. *If only I could dictate these stories,* I thought, *and then someone could write them down for me.* I was hesitant to share with anyone that I was writing, so I turned to the next best thing: the voice-notes app on my phone. I thought maybe I could read some stories out loud, then turn them into a few short pieces without my brain getting too scrambled. Essays seemed like a natural fit. They were a pleasing, reliable shape, that of a story I’d told out loud, and a conversation I might have about that story with a friend. So I started there. I wrote and published a couple of essays, voice-noting my way through each tiny first draft, until they flowed in a way that was not quite easy, but easier. Maybe it was the childbirth, but I didn’t feel so tortured about defining

myself as a real writer. I knew that I had figured out a way to express what I needed to express on the page, and I took some pride in that leap.

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My son also entered the thick of grade school right around when I started to establish my writing career, and he exhibited a similar dysgraphia, as I now know to call it. I saw it all in him: the writing avoidance, the jarring level of mental recall, the debate-level preparedness for any oral argument. I knew enough to tell his teachers what was happening—essentially that writing could be difficult, but we'd get him support until he was old enough to type. For longer projects, we used voice notes, and I sat next to him to help organize and transcribe his thoughts as he spoke them out loud. I alleviated his frustration by constantly encouraging him. "Your ideas are incredible," I told him. "It's just a little harder getting them out." He heard me, eventually starting a binder in the school library for handmade graphic novels and zines, many of which he drew and wrote himself. He's much more comfortable at school than I was at this age—the writing has caught up enough, and he's not hiding any homework from me at the moment, but he recently brought home a flyer for the school talent show and said he was excited to take part. "Oh, what do you want to perform?" I asked him as I made dinner, and grinned at the answer: He wanted to MC, thanks to the gift of gab.

In helping him accept the handwriting as a technical issue, and not an intellectual failure, I've now accepted my own mechanical limitations. Words may never go straight from my brain and out of my fingers, but that doesn't prevent me from expressing myself in writing, and I've figured out the support I need to process my thoughts through my hands, as needed. As I got into writing my memoir, we were in the throes of the pandemic, but I stayed in close touch with a couple of friends who were also working on their own projects, and I got in the habit of leaving them long messages, voice notes and video notes on the Marco Polo app, telling them what I was working on. Sometimes I found that when I sat down at the computer and felt my usual block, I could go back to these messages, where I had so breezily distilled the intention of my day, and set it up as the structure of a chapter—beginning, middle, and end, all there in a voice note.

The notes sometimes turned into long calls, during which I could ask questions and tell my friends where I was stuck and receive input in real time. “What are you writing about today?” one novelist friend asked, and I would be able to tell her, even if I hadn’t been able to type it out yet. “What’s bugging you?” asked another, and all of a sudden I’d produce a twelve-minute lecture on my tussle with intertwining themes, which I could then type out. It was a tag-team literary workshop.

I’m often surrounded by people who have been doing this a lot longer than me, and with fewer mechanical issues, and I’m quiet about the fact that I can’t usually just sit down and write what’s in my head. I listen to novelist friends talk about waking up with voices in their heads, entire characters from scratch, and writing out their voices longhand, “seeing where the character wants to go.”

Unfortunately, *I’m* my character, and I’m reporting on my insides, and I can’t make anything up about them. “Shouldn’t this be getting easier?” I ask my friend, and she laughs. “This is exactly the process,” she tells me.

Eventually I pulled together enough essays to constitute my first book. I could no longer claim to not be a writer, because I actually wrote quite a lot. My handwriting is still mostly illegible, but I’ve managed to transcribe my voice—from my speaking voice, to a recorded voice, to a voice on the page, one MP3 file at a time.

Mechanics aside, whenever I hold the book in my hand, I marvel at the journey taken by that one disorganized computer file containing my jumbled stories of Kashmir. My grandfather’s waxed mustache, my grandmother’s laugh, the mazelike homes we lost, picnics next to mountain streams, my cousins running up and down stairs, shrieking, during family weddings. Every joyous, painful moment of my childhood has been unlocked from that attaché case, and they are dormant no longer. Assembled over the years it took to write it, the book forms a near-complete picture of my adult self. My husband says that reading it is exactly like hanging out with me, and I nod. I also wonder, as I examine my current life, about the locked-away parts of me I have yet to meet.

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After the kids go back to school, settling into kindergarten and fifth grade, I notice my friend Samantha post a handwritten list online, and I combust with jealousy. I love her handwriting so much that I can't even process the words she's written; I am just ogling the effortless shape of her letters. I will never be able to handwrite like that. I think of the hard work I put into getting my book in shape, and I wonder if I could ever love writing by hand, because I so want to be the kind of person who does. The process won't be pretty, I think, but I can still try. Possessed by a back-to-school spirit that has never left me, I buy a handwriting workbook subtitled *35 Lessons to Improve Your Penmanship*. The author, Sally Sanders, is a professional calligrapher who talks about handwriting as a distinct expression of self. After her foundational lessons on alphabet, slope, rhythm, and "joins," she says "you are ready to revise and shape your writing to match your personality."

I'm skeptical, but her words bring me some solace. I realize that I spent too much time as a child trying to perfect my letters and make them match the models in the books, in an effort to please my teachers. While my letters never became perfect, Sally says there are ways I can make writing longhand more tolerable for myself now. She understands that my thoughts move much faster than my hand, and she reminds me that if I can slow down both, I'll allow the process to become much less tortured, and more deliberate. Writing by hand is still effortful, like trying to drawing a series of tiny, beautiful pictures, but I have to think of each letter as a calligraphy stroke, and enjoy my own pace, and the pleasing curve of each word.

I think about my last birthday party, almost a year ago now. I had asked everyone to bring a note, and looking through the pile of handwritten cards swells my heart. I've always wanted to be able to return that kind of gesture. As September ends, I find myself staring down an overdue pile of notecards I meant to send to fellow writers, along with copies of my book, and it would normally feel excruciating. But I gather my supplies. Thick, new personalized stationery, a nice pen, my laptop, voice notes. And I get to writing. I think about the recipients in my mind's eye and pretend I'm talking to them. I say I greatly admire their work, and it's thrilling that they're reading mine. If they enjoy it, I'd be over the moon. If they don't, we can pretend this never happened. I say these words out loud into the voice-notes app, and then play it back at half-speed while I type it into a blank document. Then I turn to the card stock and languidly, like Sally

taught me, transcribe the words that I've typed out. I take breaks as my hands cramp, and I sigh, and get frustrated with myself. Eventually I have written them all. They're not perfect, but they're quite legible, and, more important, they're done.

Much like the writing of the book, I suspect this might always be strangely effortful for me. And it's not like the recipients have any idea how difficult they were to produce. "My notes mean more than yours," I joke to a friend. As I walk back from the mailbox, I feel a tired, quiet joy in having gotten them all out. I also feel a deeper satisfaction, at working past my need to conquer my handwriting, or the sense of failure over its not meeting some unattainable ideal. No one would call my handwritten notes beautiful, but the contents are enthusiastic and honest. The writing is, like Sally Sanders promised, an extension of me.

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The Girl in You

When I see teenagers out and about, I cross the street. I won't watch teen movies, I won't watch teen shows. The underbaked yearnings of teen pop stars leave me cold. Merely glimpsing a teen causes me to turn away and initiate an emotional lockdown protocol. Pictures of teenagers in the eighties? Get them out of my sight. The revulsion is so strong, so sudden and overwhelming, that it's one of the few things in the world, and definitely my life, that I find it difficult to investigate, let alone discuss out loud.

I carefully frosted around this in my first book, but there's not much about my teen years in there. I mention a rift between my parents and me that opened when we moved to the United States on my fourteenth birthday. Our family had been living in Saudi Arabia, in relative comfort and safety, and the reality of raising a girl through adolescence in suburban New York terrified my parents. My father was working in a busy hospital in the Bronx, and I think the ER's steady stream of pregnant teens and gunshot victims catalyzed an insistence that I leave the house only to go to school, and almost never anywhere at night. I mention my uncontrollable rage and a river of tears, but stop there, because I remain protective of them. They have always overflowed with love for me, and I know they were doing what they thought was best. I am aware that this is a period of my life where my voice is often elided. While other stages—the toddler, the war baby, the new mom, are fully embodied, and I can slip into and out of experiencing those moments when reading about them, I recall teen me from a safe distance, and my discomfort with examining that time makes me so itchy I have to look away.

Unlike the rest of my life, 1994–1997—the ages of fourteen to seventeen—is a black hole of sense memories, except one: I remember how the bathroom tile felt under my back when I lay on the ground and cried. I cried, in those years, like I've never cried in my life. I cried until all my muscles hurt, until my throat was raw, until I couldn't muster another tear for a week. I'm certain I experienced some happy teen moments: a handful of school dances, and a first (secret) boyfriend. I had a couple of kind

friends, even. I find it difficult to summon any of those happy memories. I've never even been back to the town we lived in then—a perfectly lovely place, but impossible to separate from my sadness.

I remember, at that age, wanting to exorcise the girl in me. I had been so at peace with my physical nature in early grade school, when I was a little kid and activity was baked into our days. I hopped on my bike to get around the sprawling expat compound we lived in in Riyadh. We spent hours every afternoon and weekend splashing around, pruney, at the local swimming pool. Activity wasn't something I had to seek out, beyond simply living. Running track in middle school made me understand how strong my body could be, and what my limbs could do. But then came everyone's periods, with our cramps and moods, and, finally, the teenage move that ruined everything.

In New York I was frustrated that my body could betray me, now that it wanted things. I decided that if I was imprisoned for being a girl, I would reject my girlish form. High school photos show me dressed in baggy, thrift-store corduroys and my dad's button-downs, in sweats and oversize flannels. It was a choice to dress like that back then, when spaghetti straps ruled our hallways, and my armor took gender entirely out of the equation. Being a girl was a burden, I had learned. Womanhood was painful and confusing and made people—even my own parents—see me through a certain lens, so I would snuff out any evidence of it. With my sartorial choices and my insistence on being invisible, I effectively became the brain in a jar that I had always wanted to be. I hated the emotional weight of having a female body, so to me, it ceased to exist. Today, when I cross the street to avoid a group of teens, I believe I'm trying to avoid any reminders of that self-hatred and misery.

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As I get older, I might feel more free, but my body has shown me a million worse ways that it hates me: My handwriting, which is still mostly terrible. B,. . . . umps and bruises from awkwardly walking into doorways. Extreme myopia. Wobbly ankles that sometimes give out even when I'm standing still. Knock-knees. These wonky ovaries, of course. Wild hormone swings. An antagonistic relationship with my pancreas. A bald patch. Clogged pores. Not enough hair on my head, but so much in my nose, somehow. My

two-year stomachache. The rice-size grain of plaque in my carotid artery that we have to monitor so I don't have a stroke. General anatomical entropy.

Pregnancy eventually tested my invented brain-in-jar delusion, because I was, suddenly, undeniably, a biological woman. I didn't carry with any elegance, and I was relieved when it was over and I could slink back to androgyny. Other than creating my two wonderful babies, it's hard for me to identify what my body has done right. Their gestational growth and development was preprogrammed, thank goodness, and they managed to pluck off whatever resources I had available to attain perfection in the womb. Incredulous at the thought that they would simply . . . happen, I gladly gave them everything. More than a decade later, I still gaze in wonder at every toenail, every curl of their lips, that something so beautiful should have come out of this insolent bag of organs.

After birthing the babies, I was incensed to find that my body refused to do the things I had been told it would continue to do on its own. It ached when I tried to walk around the block, and refused to make anything but a trickle of milk. My disdain for it doubled. To be a woman was a prison, I decided one day, after my son was born, when I was chained to a wheezing breast pump. No daughter of mine was going to be stuck in it. My daughter would wear unisex clothing, I determined. No pinks, purples, rainbows for her. No feathers or sequins or frills. I wasn't going to let her get caught in the gender trap. And then this one showed up, wanting *all of it.*

Everything my daughter wears requires a bow, some shimmer, a color. She's drawn to the sparkly leotards of gymnastics, and the fussy preparations of a tea party—all the girliest girly things. I was confused and horrified at first, wondering if I should be discouraging her. If not, would she end up in the prison of girlhood, forever making symbolic tea and sandwiches for her patriarchal overlords, a fate I couldn't bear? Now, as I watch her happily feed a macaron to a felt mouse in a tiara, I investigate the panic in my response to these trappings. Who told me pink was bad? Who told me dressing up was frivolous? And why is frivolous such a bad thing, especially for a small child? Why do I feel the need to impose austerity measures on this bouncing beam of light? My heart leaps at the possibility of making her happy. I remember, often, a Sinead O'Connor interview where she talked about a daughter bringing out the girl in her, and I see how

mine has done the same to me. When my daughter tells me she wants her room to be painted pink and have red curtains, we absolutely do it. It's hard enough being a girl, I think. We should all get to enjoy it.

It's a wonder to behold her growing relationship with her own body, which couldn't be more different than mine. As a toddler, she joined an outdoor dance class at a park, and her teacher later started a ballet studio, where my daughter has danced weekly ever since. As she now runs in to join the studio's first fall class, I am enchanted, in awe. She knows where all of her body parts are, and she delights in using them. Each toe, each finger. She always knows what to do with her hands, holds her arms out with comfort and confidence. She knows where she begins and ends, and her relationship with space is the opposite of mine. For me, simply walking around feels like I'm constantly reversing my body into a parking spot with no mirrors, and movement can often trigger discomfort or pain. It sometimes makes me not want to move at all. I wonder if I've been applying an unfair logic to my body: I didn't consider myself a writer because I couldn't write, and I don't consider myself a physical being because my body is such a foreign object to me. I don't understand it, and I don't trust it, because inhabiting my body feels nothing like the fluidity of using my brain. At the same time, I watch my daughter and wonder if it's possible to find my way back to that girl who loved to swim and ride her bike after school, at ease with her limbs. I must have been comfortable in this body once.

I'm yeeted into a midlife fitness journey, per usual, by my tut-tutting doctor. We mentally high-five at having gotten the ovary relatively under control—we're back to "keeping an eye on it"—but now she's looking at my blood work. Normally my blood results are a good thing, as I am the queen of the lifestyle change. "A perfect student," my doctor always says. Something comes up, I make an adjustment, the number goes down. It's been simple. Now that I'm approaching menopause, my tweaks are not enough to counteract the hormonal storm that's coming. She says I have to exercise every day. Strength training *and* cardio. For forty-five minutes. Every day! This is so foreign a concept to me that I'm briefly at a loss for words. I tell her I walk plenty, and she tells me walking isn't enough. That I have to become familiar with a level of exertion called "zone two," where activity makes my breath heavy, but not short. "Forever?" I ask. "Well, let's try it for three months and see where the blood work is at. You can do that,

right?” She looks at me with pride. I’m pretty sure I’m her best patient, and nearly sure they keep track of who is. “Of course I can do it,” I say.

I unearth my sneakers and head out into the neighborhood to speedwalk with purpose. I know immediately that I will soon be bored. I’ve done this route nine billion times for a decade; I am familiar with every brick and plant in a two-mile radius, it seems. I do notice that the neighborhood is unusually overgrown for this time of year—by autumn, things usually start to dry out and we start getting nervous about fire season. Even the lush green can’t tease out my sense of wonder. I don’t know how anyone does this—virtuous daily exercise—which is what I complain about to my friends when I call them. But they’re all busy at their offices. “Listen to a podcast,” they say. “Find a good playlist.” But podcasts agitate me further. I have playlists for singing and dancing—do I need to make one for walking, now, too? I don’t know why this feels like so much work for me. Why can’t I just enjoy it?

I ask my mother this question, and she jumps in with an answer even before I’ve finished my sentence. For one, my nature isn’t to be highly active, she tells me. She remembers that I spoke early and often, but my movements were less fluid. “Sometimes you’d try to hitch a ride on the cat that hung around,” she says. “Or you’d ask your cousin to get you something from the next room. It was probably our fault for carrying you everywhere.”

As I continue my boring walk around the neighborhood, I try to think about what kind of movement I actually enjoy. I could probably dance for eight straight hours—that would meet my zone-two requirements—but I’m not sure how to incorporate this into my life. Clubbing is logistically improbable when every day starts at 6 a.m., but it was all the activity I needed two decades ago. The thing that bugs me the most is the artificial nature of the movement required at this age. Most exercise suggestions I find online or through friends are to drive somewhere to get on a machine to watch a screen to simulate steps. To join a class where someone shouts dance moves at us. It all seems so dystopian to me. I’ll gladly walk nine miles a day in any walkable city, in the countryside, anyplace where it’s incorporated into daily life. But I’ve done as much as I can in this patch of Los Angeles, I really have. We live in a dense neighborhood, with bike paths nearby, but I’m convinced that continuing on this endless loop will

kill me before the lack of exercise will. It's always up to Rose, down Main Street, over to the beach. Sometimes I reverse direction. Sometimes I can be convinced to join a friend for a hike, but I've also done all of the hikes. Every single hike. The repetition is a pounding in my skull.

Even with the boring power walks, I notice a slight change in my mood. A positive one, I'm chagrined to report. I have so much energy! I happily make plans with friends for the next few weeks, something I never have enough zip to do, and doing those things gives me even more energy, completing a loop I was not expecting. I may not love the activity of my neighborhood walk, but I do like the aftereffects, of being farther out in the world and excited about it. So I suck up the boredom and think of it as a habit as essential as brushing my teeth. I slap a Post-it on my bathroom mirror that says: 45 MIN EXERCISE, 20 MIN MEDITATION, 1K WORDS. I used to calculate these activities in terms of time, and they'd often get shoved aside in favor of other obligations, but I now think of this trifecta as a nonnegotiable checklist.

I love that I'm feeling more vital, but my body still just hangs out, mostly in the way. My daughter moseys into my room in the morning while I'm getting dressed, and looks me up and down, uninspired. She asks to dress me, and then goes through my drawers, sighing. "Jeans again?" she asks. "You wear jeans, too," I say, knowing I'm about to lose this fight. "But not all the time," she grumbles. I tell her I'll surprise her. The way her face lights up when I walk downstairs! "MAMA!" she screams, approving. "Lipstick! Skirt! Shoes! Real shoes!"—not muddy sneakers. It's not me lighting up the room, it's her smile. I understand that there might be no amount of exercise that will help me enjoy my corporeal form. But she—with ribbons in her hair and a bedazzled feather headband she made herself—does. I'd do anything for her.

One day she watches me put on a bra, her mouth a straight line. "Why do you do it like that?" she sighs. "With the hook on the front?"

"Oh. It's so I can just snap it together and turn it around," I tell her, demonstrating how efficient a routine it is.

She sighs again. "Someday I'll show you a beautiful way to put it on," she says, grabbing a necklace from my jewelry drawer, and reaching up behind her neck to clasp it. She's the picture of elegance, a three-foot

Audrey Hepburn. I gasp. Why does she know how to do these things? Why did I never know how to do these things?

I think back to when the rift between body and mind started, somewhere in those uncomfortable teen years, the ones I never want to think about. I'm six years into a Transcendental Meditation practice, ten years into therapy, sixteen years into this relationship (plus kids). I've had to become an infinitely more serene and happy version of myself than I was when I fled my parents' house at seventeen. Still, if I'm at my parents' house with them, and we get on the topic of my teen years, I'm instantly possessed. That old sadness flips into rage and I'm snapping at them for thirty-year-old slights, almost before I know what's going on. Mum might make a joke about locking me in the house, and that's it, I'm trembling with anger, and making them aware of it. I don't want to be this way anymore.

I bring this up to a friend who had a similarly hard time in high school, and she mentions that her therapist asked her to tend to her "inner teen." I'm startled. "I can't imagine wanting to hang out with mine," I say. "She's so miserable and so furious. I'd be terrified of her." She laughs and says I'd have to ignore all that. I need to get in there, and get to know teen me again—what made her happy? What were her hopes and dreams? What did she yearn for? I feel so unprepared to ask or answer any of these questions.

I keep a mental file of my middle-aged friends who love teen-type things. Brat Pack movies, coming-of-age novels, popular teen TV series. I've always thought this is weird, and have definitely told them as much. So now I ask *why* they love them, and a few of them say a version of the same thing: They felt so deeply as teenagers, and they don't get to now. My friend Sarah references a quote from *The Breakfast Club:* "When you grow up your heart dies." I take this in, wondering if, as I suspect, my heart died at fourteen. With the tumult of our big move and the emotional roller coaster of adolescence, I wonder if I had to snuff out those deep feelings to survive my emotional isolation. I wonder if I've spent the years since resuscitating those feelings, piece by piece.

Out here in my real life, outside of my head, outside of my past, in addition to my girl, I am raising a preteen son. He's always been my loving little boy, always burrowed into my side, holding my hand, seeking my approval, confiding in me. An open book, an open wound—my heart outside my body, as they say. "When will you stop letting me kiss you in

public?” I asked him a few months ago. “Not yet,” he said, but lately I’m jarred by his eye rolls, the flashes of anger in his eyes. The hurt, the betrayal, the tears welling up when he’s trying to make me understand something I am simply not getting. I freeze in these moments, fearful I’m staring down a version of the self I have tried so hard to avoid. Fearful I’m going to lose him to an upcoming rift if I can’t figure out how to navigate it.

I remember being that miserable, and I think I aimed my misery at my body, because I wished so badly I could escape it. Every instinct tells me that this next leg of our journey, getting comfortable with the girl I was, and the woman I can be, starts by reacquainting myself with the surly teen I’ve been avoiding. In my mind, she’s currently inside a storage closet under the stairs, but the door is papered over. The wallpaper is a blue-and-white floral pattern on butter yellow, its colors calming, cheerful. The opposite of the sturm und drang that awaits me within. She’s comfortable in there, with a book and her simmering rage. She likes to be left alone, I know this, so I have mostly left her alone. But because she’s me, I also know that she’s secretly hoping someone will care enough to check. So far I’ve found the seams at the door’s edge, and sometimes run my fingers over them. I’m almost ready to slice my way in.

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Is Everyone Texting Without Me?

I'm a cat in a family of dogs, which is a cosmic joke that's playing me for every waking moment of our lives. My perfect day would find me alone in a cozy spot near a window so that I can daydream, sometimes wandering into the kitchen in search of food. Naturally, the other people I live with—two of whom I *made*—were born banging down the door to leave by 7 a.m. "They'll sleep soundly tonight," say well-meaning parents, watching hour four of my kids' red-faced jumping at the trampoline park. "Never," I say. "Their stamina only grows." Their appetite for being out in the world is unparalleled. My father, also catlike, confirms this. He says my kids have the most physical and mental energy of any children he's ever met, and he's met thousands.

I wish there were a training routine that could make me a morning person, or suffuse me with their boundless energy. No matter how much I sleep, exercise, or meditate, my brain wants to wake up at eight, and my body resists even longer. On weekends, when the others burst out of bed like so many pieces of crisp toast at six o'clock, I drag myself downstairs and sleepwalk through making their breakfast. For the rest of the day, my husband and I chauffeur them around to keep the house and everyone's mental health intact. "Should we go home and relax, or keep going?" I'll ask in the car halfway through a packed day, already knowing the answer. They consider going home a defeat. I take a deep breath and keep moving.

The children are also extremely friendly, to an unusual degree. We met our neighbors Ben and Anne, for example, when our son was hanging out of a tree in the yard, and jumped down onto the pavement to say hi to them, the new family passing by. "How 'bout the weather," he'll cheerfully say to any stranger on the street. The weather in LA is, of course, usually the same.

The little one was born more restrained, but her brother is so outgoing that she's also perfectly comfortable talking to any kid at a playground. Like me, though, she's been known to short-circuit halfway through a large social gathering, and then I have to whisk her off somewhere quiet to wipe

her little face with a cool cloth while she hiccups and cries, not understanding why she's so upset. "Sometimes it's nice to get a break from people, right?" I say, and she agrees. Breathing returned to almost normal, she skips down the stairs to reenter the fray. I know what this is, or I *think* I know what this is, because a long-ago online personality test, which I should never have taken, diagnosed me as an introvert—someone whose energy is sapped by social interactions and needs time alone to recharge.

My son's friendliness isn't entirely foreign to me, because it reminds me of my mother, and is technically a skill set I can turn on, too, because after a surly childhood where I rejected all of her friendliness, I've come around to thinking it's a nice way to be. My social circle consists of a handful of dear friends with whom I insist on spending quality time so that we can *really* catch up. Then, after these catch-ups, whether one-on-one or as a group, I scurry home to languish under my duvet, refusing to talk to anyone until I've recovered.

I wonder about the potential introversion of my daughter as I wipe her overwhelmed tears away. *Maybe we are the same,* I think silently. Sort of. Although I hope not, because I do wonder at times if my need for alone time is extreme and off-putting. After the kids have fallen asleep and I've flung myself into bed with a book to decompress, my husband will sometimes walk in to have chat or ask if I want to watch a movie, and I'm ashamed at how often I grunt, "I can't." I need a total reset, a sensory deprivation chamber, after the long days we have. It's not ideal to message this to the man with whom I share my life and my room, but it sometimes feels like how I have to live, because people—even the ones I love the most—wear me out.

Until one day my friend the writer Alexander Chee, posits online, *Are you an introvert, or are you an extrovert who never learned about boundaries?* I sit up. *Thanks for ruining my life,* I text him, and he laughs. I'm not the first person who's felt this way, he says. I'll admit I've never been entirely sure what a boundary is, but I've also never properly investigated, because it sounds awful, withholding. Like a wall, or a border. It sounds like I'm trying to limit access to myself. I suppose I can wrap my mind around limiting access to strangers or professional acquaintances. Here is me, and there is you, and here's what I'm willing to do to maintain a warm, effective relationship. But with loved ones? I can't imagine a world

in which I'm not entirely available to them at all times. I bring this up to my mother, who laughs. Boundaries might be an *Angrez* thing, she says. *Angrez*, or "English," is how we refer to English speakers, wherever they're from. We Indians don't do boundaries, I'm sure of it. We're all still haunted by the ghosts of Partition. We would never create our own.

Sometime in early October, as I start to unearth our warm layers from the back of the closet, I notice I'm having a strange response to my closest ones, supposedly among the people I love most. I sigh when the phone rings, and I screen my calls. *What do they want now?* I ask myself uncharitably, when they've texted a few times in a row. I start to feel like emails asking to hang out are poking my skin, siphoning off my already-limited energy. *I simply can't*, I think. Between my family and work, I don't have enough to give. One evening, I come home cranky after a dinner with friends. "She's just . . . *take take take*," I say about one friend, an otherwise sweet woman with whom I'm always rolling up my sleeves to fix her parade of life problems. Rodney asks if she's actually asking me for help, and I brush him off. "She's having a hard time," I say. "I just wish she'd return the energy." But his questions rattle around in my brain.

I wonder where it came from, this idea that I volunteer my all to problem-solve every friendship. My thoughts naturally turn to the prime suspect, my role model and greatest influence: my mother. Her inner circle includes two sisters, six cousins who grew up in the same house whom she treats like sisters, and a best friend, whom she's known since she was five. As the eldest of them all, she was mother hen and camp counselor in one, and, in her adoration and sense of duty, would have given them her blood. I suppose this explains, in broad strokes, why I can't just be normal.

Mum modeled a love I give freely and happily to my treasured younger brother—my favorite doll, the helpless little creature whom my parents allowed me to believe I was raising. I did—and fixed—everything for him for so long, with such undiluted admiration and loyalty in return, that I might be guilty of replicating it in every relationship since. Full-blast is, perhaps, the only way I know how to express affection to the people I care about. For decades now I've overfed and entertained friends at our home—we're that house. It's why, maybe, every session with a friend inevitably turns into a strategy meeting. By the end I'm rolling up my sleeves and finding them a handyman or a therapist. I'm helping people plan out their

careers or rethink their romantic lives. Like my mother before me, I aim to be Mama Bear and their camp counselor in one. They might not be my actual family, but family is what they're going to get.

I'm starting to suspect there must be value in other settings on the dial—surely there are more options for friendship than "all" or "nothing," and I'm trying to figure out how I missed the lesson on how to achieve them. I don't have to think that hard, honestly. An image immediately comes to me of that unhappy teen girl, crying in her room because she wasn't allowed to go anywhere, and I groan. Time to slice that door open and see why she's so upset, I guess.

"What do you need friends for?" joked my mother, after so many fights about my house arrest. "You have us!" Despite our disagreements over what constituted safe social interaction, I was protective of my parents' strict limits. "You don't understand what they've been through," I told my peers, who wondered why I couldn't simply join them at the diner on a Friday night. "They've lost a lot." They were going through a lot, still, as new immigrants, and I knew my job was to make their lives easier instead of harder. This meant that instead of being out with other teenagers, stumbling through social faux pas and figuring out how the dials of friendship worked, I was reading in my room, dissociating from my substantial rage. It's no wonder that I now often interact with other humans like I'm water bursting free from a dam. It's how I always treated my brother, the best friend I lived with. After being released into the wild at seventeen, I may never have learned how to adjust my flow.

It also makes sense now that socializing, for me, always comes with a task list. It's true that people rarely ask me outright to perform the duties that I perform, but I suspect it's a pattern of behavior borne of old eldest-daughter habits: It's how I prove my worth. But I hope, or I want to hope, that my friends might like me outside of the quantifiable services I can provide. This is a scary thought, but one I am ready to test. I wonder what would happen if I sat back and observed, as I'm doing with my children, as I've done with my husband. Is it possible I could just . . . hang? Would "hanging" make my social interactions feel less taxing? Over the next week, as I chat with friends in person or on the phone, I notice how often I feel the urge to jump in with action. But now, when people tell me they're having a hard time, I hold back, offering words of consolation instead of

ten-point plans to fix their feelings. Already my friendships feel lighter, and emails and voicemails from friends feel like less of an attack on my nerves. I kick myself, thinking about how arrogant I've been to think that anyone needs me to jump in and save them that much.

I don't know yet how hungry I will soon become for friendship—the New Year holds some surprises around the corner—but here, now, I already feel ridiculous for taking this long to wake up to the idea that my friendships could be more of a gentle back-and-forth than a fraught one-way street. While I can give myself some credit for having been a kind and generous friend, I also realize that I need to learn to how to *receive* friendship, instead of reflexively giving and giving, even when nobody asked. This thought makes me as uncomfortable as receiving a compliment used to. I'm guessing that, like those compliments, receiving acts of friendship instead of spraying mine all over people—and wearing myself out in the process—will also take practice.

Immersive exposure arrives in the form of a rental house to which we invite a group of dear friends in upstate New York. I gird myself to feed and entertain everyone, as I've always done. As the familiar tension starts to take over my neck and shoulders, I remind myself of the lesson I learned over summer vacation, with the kids: *What if I don't?* What if I simply exist? What happens is that my friends cook the food, and make cocktails, and come up with party games, and feed the children, and do the dishes. I host, and tell people where the ice is, and solve absolutely no problems. I almost have to laugh at how dumb I've been, to have to learn the same lesson so many times. A boundary isn't a wall. It's a chalk outline of my personhood, an understanding of where I end and my loved ones begin. *I'm here for you,* I learn to telegraph with my friends, as I did with my kids. *But I am not here to service you.* It's not quite comfortable yet. I still have to bite my tongue when anyone presents me with something I feel I can fix. It's hard to accept that my friends might love me for reasons other than my usefulness. I still can't pinpoint exactly what they do love if I'm not being of service, but that's a question I don't mind spending the time to answer.

While I am finally tuning in to the quality of friendship I'm seeking—rich and reciprocal—I find, back home, that I can't often muster the energy to invest in them. Between work and the kids, I want to crawl into bed around eight every night. I feel depleted, and and it's difficult to imagine

having enough gas left to burn on a real social life. I wish I could say I have figured out how to enjoy my evenings again via some brilliant, heartfelt series of revelations. Instead, an unrelated action leads me to a solution I haven't been expecting.

Sometime in October, in a fit of pique about the evils of the internet, I delete social media for a month. Whenever I feel tempted to reach for the phone and engage again, I force myself to do something with my hands, like crochet or read a book. I crack open a new puzzle. At first, it's horribly uncomfortable. I'm embarrassed by how many times a day my hand involuntarily reaches out for the phone. Only a few days in, I'm amazed by what I start to notice: My appetite for face-to-face social interaction becomes ravenous. I realize that the cacophony of strangers I interact with online all day, every day, causes a strange kind of social overwhelm that might be stealing the energy I should put into my real relationships. Without the online chatter—the DMs and texts, comments, and likes, my brain is so much calmer. By eight I'm not feeling depleted or overstimulated. I'm not even close to falling asleep. In fact, I am dying to see my own friends. As I start going out with them once or twice a week—applying my new give-and-take setting, I notice that I am energized, and not drained, by making social plans.

As the kids settle into their new school routines and start their extracurriculars, my day is longer, and I can properly attend to my own needs. The more I stay (mostly) off the internet, the deeper my desire to get out there and forge new, healthy friendships. I've never been one for group activity, but now I'm questioning every single one of my social instincts, so I join a book club of incredible readers. They're almost total strangers—I know one of the moms from school—and instead of burdened, I feel excited to be tasked with a book, and I start a conversation about what restaurant to meet up in. I push against every instinct I have to let this take up my entire brain, to find the perfect restaurant that everyone can love, and throw out the name of a pretty good one I've been to before. Each of them responds to my restaurant suggestion with a hearty no—the aggregate opinion is that the place is a little loud and far. Cowed, I once again feel the impulse to roll up my sleeves and show them—finding a place that will blow everyone's minds, cementing myself as the kind of indispensable friend you need to have around. Then I wonder where this desire comes from, and think once again of that lonely teen, for whom friendship seemed so out of reach. She

may have “learned” that she had to work doubly hard to earn it. I set aside that impulse, think, *We are all adults*, and say, “I’ll show up wherever you guys want!” They figure it out. Quickly, easily, and with no disappointment directed at me. This is a huge step for me, and not one of them notices or cares—in a good way.

I’m feeling pretty good about my new approach to friendships when I realize that I might need to reassess the children’s, as well. When our son was little, the pandemic struck and isolated us, so that even now, nearly five years later, we still fall into the pattern of spending weekends as little nuclear units. It’s not the best setup for spending time with my kids’ new classmates, and four years heavy with writing deadlines haven’t allowed me to dive into a remedy. I thought all of my kids’ peers were dealing with the same thing, but my son and daughter start coming home with reports of playdates and birthday parties happening without them. I’m gobsmacked—I haven’t been hearing anything from the other parents, and I get the creeping sense that everyone else is on some kind of group chat without me.

I shake this off as paranoid, but I still want my children to have active social lives, so I call a parent who’s heavily involved in school-type things, and ask her to coffee. I bring up that all the other families seem to meet up more easily, and I ask if I’m missing something.

Heather informs me that they absolutely are on a group chat without me. “I didn’t want to bother you,” she says, and I feel bad about whatever I’ve done to make everyone think that I might be bothered. She adds me to the chat immediately, and my jaw drops at the fast and furious exchange of information. On this thread, people casually throw out playdates I don’t even have to organize—we just . . . *go over to places.* I don’t have to sift through emails for every detail of school information, because I can just text the parents if I’ve missed any. Some of them even go to dinners, or happy hours, or concerts, without the children. There is a winery weekend in the works! The kids soon have more social plans than the laws of physics will allow us to attend, and after a few years of relative isolation and confusion, this upcoming year feels bursting with social promise.

In the spirit of embracing human connection without allowing myself to be drained by it, my daughter and I attend a birthday party for a little girl at her school whose family I don’t know too well. We take a gift, make crafts, eat pizza. I have exactly one margarita, and catch up with some parents.

“It’s nice to see you out,” says Valerie, one of my favorite school moms.

“I’m trying to be more social, for my girl,” I say.

It isn’t until we get home that I realize we weren’t supposed to be invited. All of the invitees were from a different class—one girl was conspicuously missing, and she shares a first name with our daughter. But my baby had a great time, so I do not need to point this out.

I can’t believe there was this whole group chat without me on it, I text Heather, having dived into our new, super-social life. *Don’t you remember? I asked you if you wanted to be,* she insists. *You said you didn’t have the bandwidth.* Oops.

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Nobody Cares but Mama

My son runs to hug me every day I pick him up from school, and I press myself against the playground wall so I don't fall down. He's ten now, and he's done this since his very first day of school. I enter the yard like a deer in a clearing, and wait to be knocked over by a force that could show up from any direction. At the age of two, he used to zip off the slide like a little bowling ball and wrap himself around my knees. By kindergarten he was up to my waist, and now he's almost my size. So I brace myself for impact, he tries his best to bowl me over, and then we laugh our giant laugh.

In our brief squeeze I still manage to ruffle his hair and massage his scalp. I touch his neck and ears. *My neck, my neck, my neck, my ears, my ears,* I think. *I made these ears,* I think, and try not to say it out loud, because he's his own person. I can smell his recess-stinky hair. It's disgusting, but it's my disgusting. He tells me he has math homework; I murmur/pray we'll get through it. I rest my hand on his shoulder as we walk over to grab his bag (*my shoulders, my shoulders*). At this point, his sister has usually caught sight of us, but she's too busy with her arts and crafts for more than a wave. After she's finished, though, she, too, is wrapped around my legs, her hair a wavy, coconut-scented tangle in my face. *My hair, my limbs.*

No matter how neutral-to-exasperated I may feel about my body, the enchantment of theirs remains. Whatever trouble my corporeal form has given me, it also managed to piece together these vibrant creatures of flesh, blood and bone, snot and tears. They were a part of me once, and I admit they feel part of me still, even as they now wander the halls of school, tossing about their glorious heads of hair, thinking things in their wild, beautiful brains, which I also made. I wonder if I'll ever stop marveling at this fact. I'm proud of many achievements, but there's no contest: Making two humans is the coolest thing I've ever done. The things I've been trying to learn lately—boundaries, defining myself, relaxing into being instead of just doing—is all in a valiant and maybe misguided attempt to drown out the siren my body blares: that they are a part of me, and I am a part of them.

Sometimes I get to roll around in this simple truth. In the weeks that I don't have any work looming over my head, I find a peace in being "just Mom." I putter around the house, noticing what's missing, meal-planning, thinking up activities and snacks that will surprise and delight. Things are still hard, but since I started reassessing where I put my energy and why, I have freed up much more mental space. On vacations, I'm learning to spend weeks together just open to what the day brings, and laughing, not worrying too much about who needs to eat and do what when. They're a beautiful age for just hanging. I love these times. It's not the motherhood that drives me crazy. It's the wanting of other things.

Maybe if I worked a regular office job I'd find it all easier to compartmentalize, but as a writer of personal essays, my work and my identity overlap extensively. Not because the work defines my whole self—I'm nowhere near a workaholic—but because my specific kind of writing involves digging deep into myself and then collaging the results onto a page, in hopes that someone else might recognize themselves in the pieces. I write to remember who I am and what I care about outside of the softness of my daughter's earlobe, or my son's emotional wobble, or if everyone in my house understands new math. I write because the gravitational pull to be everything for these little people is too strong, and I don't want to lose myself.

A friend who is having her first baby in a few months asked me why the mom groups she's just joined are so weird. *A little intense,* she called them. I hesitated, because of the unspoken agreement that we shouldn't scare people about post-kid life before they're done baking the babies. Then I thought . . . I don't want to be accused of lying. "Motherhood is the loneliest you'll ever feel," I told her, and she was dismayed. What about her partner and her family? "No one else will have birthed this child," I told her. You're connected forever in a way that you'll only start to understand when the baby shows up. Your constant companion will be a little creature who is made of your own flesh and relies on you for everything. You two will be your own little star system. Your partner will be a wonderful partner, but he's not going through the same physical and emotional shift that you are. He's going through his own, which will be very different from yours, but you'll awaken to the world of mothers, and soon you, too, will be in constant contact with all of them, twinkling alongside their babies, around you.

I think of my own ever-expanding constellation of moms when a friend, one who's been trying for a baby, shares the perfect internet video.

I press play and see a frazzled woman in her late fifties shout: "They fixed my nemesis pothole!" as she stomps off snow from her feet. A cut and then she is saying: "I walked by the travel agent's, and there were people there!" A brief, tinny musical jingle cuts in, with a singsongy chorus of "Nobody cares!" Delighted, I click through to learn more about the creator, Sue. Her TikTok channel, *Nobody Cares but Mama,* is followed by more than eighty thousand people, with millions of views.

Sue makes me laugh so hard I choke on my own spit. I recognize myself in it. I too, was puttering around the house earlier, and making cheerful announcements about things that no one else even registers. "Guess who stocked the antihistamine I like!" I shouted, coming back from the pharmacy. "The taco guy got a better corner!" I announced, never mind that tacos had no relevance to our evening. Every day, I find another thousand things around the house fascinating, too. I think back to being enamored of my mother's household-hint books, and how even child me wanted to learn how to clean an oven with baking soda and vinegar, or catch fruit flies with old wine and some peels, or cure hiccups by drinking from the wrong side of the glass. This is the sort of domestic minutiae I now regurgitate as I stomp around the house, entirely pleased with myself. "The stain came out, like magic!" I say, after hydrogen peroxide erases all evidence of my son's bloody nose. I don't usually look around because I know what I'll see: boredom and indifference.

I know who I take after in these moments: my mother. On any car drive longer than ten minutes, she'll begin reading out signs and offering constant commentary: "Well, that didn't used to be there, did it? Hmmmmm. Castle Road. Is it a house that looks like a castle? A real castle? What's the story there?" Or, around the house—"Look how sparkly I got this pan! And guess how much?" Why do we all become like this? What's the deal with my tone? Why isn't anyone else interested in the weird little things I am? Is domesticity a self-imposed prison, or do I actually enjoy it? Instead of answering these questions, I go to my phone and text my girlfriends about a new trivet instead. I walk away to heat up dinner and come back to twenty-four texts. They want to know all about it. I smile. Nobody in my house may care, but the women in my life do.

I reach out to Sue online, and like all strange moms who make the effort to find each other, we are instantly friends. She tells me that she was sorting through her kids' art supplies one day, taking outsize pride in her layout, before it dawned on her that "nobody gave a shit." She realized: "They don't care about all those things. It's all for me." She was lurking around TikTok because she works in advertising and likes to keep an eye on the zeitgeist, but it was the first time she thought to share her tidbits. "I thought they might say, 'Get out of here, you old nasty,'" she says. The response was immediately warm, if puzzled. "Are you twenty, or are you sixty?" one commentator asked, but they soon decided they didn't need to know, and she's grown a massive following.

I tell her that she's captured the specific despair of being really excited about a small parenting win—a compostable zip-lock bag! The olives are still good! She says she doesn't feel despair at all. Her kids are a little older than mine, and she's way past caring about anybody else caring. "I think blank stares are funny!" she says, "My fifteen-year-old tries, just to spare my feelings, but he can't get excited about the same things." She describes her kids' befuddled responses as "caterpillars trying to grow—they cannot help themselves." I ask if they think she's funny, and she shrugs. "They'll be like, 'Gunnar's mom is so funny,' and I have to remind them, 'She's not funnier than me.'"

I show my son the videos, and at first he refuses to acknowledge why they make him laugh. After I promise him it's okay, he's relieved that it doesn't hurt my feelings that he identifies with Sue's kids. At the end of one video, Sue's tween son sits, bored out of his mind, and mumbles, "I don't caaaare." In the sweetest way, like it pains him to say it. He doesn't want to hurt his mother's feelings, he expresses. She's just being so very boring.

My mother and I often revisit a fight we once had that still rattles around in her head. She expressed some frustration about . . . actually, neither one of us remembers what, exactly, but I'm going to guess it was about a mess in my room. I was a shockingly untidy child, total Pig-Pen. I must have been twelve, and I calmly told her that I didn't ask to be born. That she made the choice, and that she'd have to live with it. "Can you imagine hearing that from your own kids," she says, and I say I have! They remind me of it all the time. "And what do you tell them?" she asks. I say it's a pay-it-forward situation.

It’s the same approach Sue takes in her delightful videos. Unlike the churn of content creators who are flipping their TikTok presence into alternative revenue streams, Sue posts whenever she feels the compulsion to, an average of three times a month, and she enjoys the freedom of posting whatever comes into her head. The magic is in the underthinking, she says. “Here’s the good thing about social media—it used to be all one guy saying whether or not you could get your book published or whatever, and now we let the consensus decide,” she says. In old-timey agenting we called this a “calling card.” One easy thing to pass around, or invite people to, that got the buyers in town intrigued. Sue couldn’t care less about buyers, or the outcome. She just wants to put her stuff out there. She might do some improv this year, she says, but who wants to leave the house after eight?

Surely she looks at the numbers, I say.

“They tell me to look at the analytics but I don’t know how to do that,” she says with a shrug. “I make ’em because I have to.” She’s summing up the act of creation, be it a reel or a child: an entirely one-sided urge to make something, craft it, and unleash it upon the world.

It’s similar for me with writing. The difference is that I do get paid for my art, while I raise my children entirely for the laughs, and out of a hopeful vision for the planet. For that I’m paid enough in hugs, and intangibles. When my own spicy kids work up enough of a head of steam to yell that I’m a mean mom, I tell them I love them so much, but I understand if they’d like to make an exchange. “You can pick another mom. I’ll drive you myself. Maybe Liz Dinerstein,” I say, naming a neighborhood mom we all adore. “She’s so great,” everyone murmurs, before thinking it over. “But we love you more.”

As for my other, nonhuman creations, they chug along. I still run a fruitful side hustle in selling my screenplay wares. Two decades into working in comedy, I’ve heard a lot of nonsense, but I now understand why there’s one conversation that sets my teeth on edge every time I replay it.

“Can’t you just write a funny-mom sitcom?” asked a comedy producer when one of my network comedy pilot scripts—about star-crossed lovers and their warring Indian families—got passed on a few years back. “You’re a funny mom.”

I was instantly annoyed by this, his reductive elevator pitch of my "brand." He'd produced a number of big TV comedies, and I could guess the poster he was envisioning. Harried mom, kids hanging off her, dopey husband, the whole schtick. I'm not interested in hackneyed stories that lean on sitcom tropes. I sighed. "What does this funny mom . . . do?" I asked him.

He didn't have an answer, and my guess is he still doesn't.

My feeling is that if ninety percent of scripts that are written aren't going to get made, I might as well be specific. I might as well be as weird as I want. I might as well just make things for myself. *The Nobody Cares but Mama* jingle is running through my head when I run a crazy idea by a producer friend. Inspired by a mystery I've just read, it's a show about a cantankerous Indian detective who still lives with her parents. There is a passion and excitement in my voice that I can never muster when I'm pitching a standard sitcom. It's the thrill I feel when the taco guy gets a better corner, combined with the self-assurance of being messy-haired with my kids on vacation. This producer runs it by a buyer, who snatches it up immediately. They haven't made it yet, but I've been paid to write it three times, so it's got to work one of these days. I don't feel the need to control the outcome. I just need to keep putting the purest form of my own self-expression out there.

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The Division of Perceptual Studies

One reliable seasonal marker is when my daughter starts rooting around the house for the Halloween decorations. I try to keep them hidden, because she'd have them up the second summer ends, but this past Halloween I managed to hold her off until mid-October. Every year she asks for a fresh piece for the decor stash, and this time she chose a light-up gravestone she was convinced was going to terrify people. This was a big step for her, as previous years have been "more jolly than spooky," under her art direction. Cheerful pumpkins grinned from the front windows, and the cobwebs on the bushes contained fluffy spiders instead of the plastic ones, which she always thought looked too real. "We don't want to scare kids, we want to get them excited," she told me the year before, when I was her assistant. This year, early on Halloween morning, she smiled at the gravestones, adjusted the height of one of the skeletons hanging from the trees—also jolly—and declared it perfect.

The day was to start with a costume parade at our kids' school. At home, as I finessed my girl's witch hat twenty minutes before we were due at the parade, she chattered on about the Day of the Dead, and the *ofrenda* she wanted to make for "our ancestors." She'd moved on to the subject of preferred vs. non-preferred candy when she noticed that I was only half listening and grumbled, "Aren't you going to be a cat, like we agreed?" I sighed. Was Dad not going to be a pig? "We don't have time for that—I'm sorry," I said. "We need to get you to school." Disappointed, but in the way kids are always disappointed by a world that's not as fun as them, she climbed into my car.

After the parade—where I had to shake off some guilt about wearing jeans and sneakers and my goofy Michigan cap—I ran some household errands and made plans to meet my best friend, Jenny, for lunch. I was driving through an intersection downtown, on my way to a salad, when out of the corner of my right eye I caught a flash of an SUV barreling at me at a high speed, trailed by two police cars, sirens blaring. Time slowed down and my thoughts sped up. My senses heightened. I smelled burning tires and heard my own heartbeat.

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I would revisit this moment when I read, much later, about Al Pacino's near-death experience as he lay in a hospital bed, dehydrated, at the height of Covid. As he told *The New York Times* while promoting his memoir, *Sonny Boy*, his pulse went out, he was gone, but then he woke up to the hospital staff staring down at him, telling him that he was back.

His conclusion? "I didn't see the white light or anything," he admitted. "There's nothing there."

If a regular person expressed this opinion, we'd sort of chitchat about the magic of the human experience and the vastness of the great unknown. Who knows what our brains are doing that close to death? Certainly not all the same thing. Because Pacino's a famous person, he received a sternly worded letter from Janice Holden, the president of an organization called the International Association for Near-Death Studies.

The letter seemed to have been sent to the wrong talent agency, so I doubt anyone in Pacino's orbit ever saw it, but it made for an interesting press release, smack-dab in the middle of the IANDS website.

"From your description, you did not have an NDE; you had a close brush with death without an NDE," the letter states, pointing out that only fifteen percent of people who have brushes with death are confirmed to have had an official near-death experience—all of which pass some sort of spooky checklist, one that this organization has defined via the research of a psychiatrist named Dr. Bruce Greyson at the University of Virginia School of Medicine. Because of the consistency in reports of NDEs across cultures, The Greyson scale measures sixteen factors, encompassing things like:

A sensation of leaving the body

The mind functioning more clearly and rapidly than usual

A sensation of entering an unearthly world

A brilliant light, sometimes at the end of the tunnel

A sense of peace, well-being, and/or unconditional love

A sense of having access to unlimited knowledge

A "life review," or recall of important events in the past

A preview of future events yet to come

Encounters with deceased spirits, or other beings generally identified as religious figures

On one hand, for me to get hung up on this Pacino letter seems ridiculous. On the other, I feel the need to weigh in, thanks to my expertise in the taste of imminent death. After my terrible car crash on Halloween, I'm up to four potential NDEs, but I'm wondering how the rubric of Dr. Greyson's Division of Perceptual Studies might categorize them.

I think they might scoff at my first time, and so do I, now. I was ten, and it was my first night of sirens in Riyadh during the Gulf War. As I write this, I almost don't want to include it, because with all the context I have many decades later, I understand how safe we were. Then, as a scared child, I woke up to the sirens in a panic and ran to my parents' room. I mentally scanned my long list of hopes and dreams, certain they were about to be snuffed out—here, the "preview of future events yet to come." My mother, an old hand at sirens, laughed and brought me into her bed, where I stared at the air-conditioning unit we had just sealed up with duct tape, in case of a mustard gas attack. I haven't reached out to the IANDS team for confirmation, because I don't want my child self to be laughed at, but I suspect they might dismiss it as a "time I thought I might die, but didn't."

The second time ticked a few more boxes. I was in my early twenties, and it was a rainy night in Hollywood. I was driving around a bend on the 101 freeway when I saw a stalled car and jammed on my brakes. As I watched the car behind me skid up in the rearview, I thought I was done, and my "life review" felt bleak. It was all going to end, in my Civic, in a city I didn't like very much (yet), and without having achieved anything of note. As that car made impact, my trunk crumpled, and I did not. Four more cars behind us skidded, one after the next, and I braced myself each time, feeling the impact less and less. I walked away from the accident, but the car went to the scrapyard.

The third time I approached death was an actual medical crisis, and it's with this one that I think the NDE researchers would really start paying attention. Five days after the birth of my second baby, a small headache in the morning turned into the worst pain I had ever felt—and I had birthed two children, so I knew pain. It felt like my brain was trying to hammer its way out of my skull with an ice pick. We rushed to the ER, where they hooked me up to a morphine drip, then fentanyl, neither of which did

anything. The hammering had me screaming on a gurney while I mentally prepared never to see my new baby, my four-year-old, or the rest of my family ever again. It felt too soon, I would have said, if I had been capable of saying anything. I sobbed at the thought I might not get to know my children. I was trapped in this torment, half blacked-out, half out of my body, praying for any relief. I remember my mother was visiting, and she was on the phone with my father, who was at a conference in Istanbul. He asked if he should fly home. "She's okay," she said reflexively. *I'm not okay!* I wanted to scream. I understood, much later, that she was saying that to convince herself that I would be. The ER finally thought to call my ob-gyn, who figured out I was dealing with postpartum preeclampsia, a sudden spike in blood pressure that, unchecked, leads to seizures and strokes. "You're lucky you came in when you did," said the ER doctor, after they replaced the pain meds with blood pressure meds and the pain finally began to subside. "You could have had an aneurysm."

This one hit more markers on the list: the out-of-body moments, the preview of future events, the life review. But there was no peace, no tunnel, nothing like that.

As I worked my way through Greyson's book, and the original book on NDEs, *Life After Life* by Raymond Moody, I realized that I've only been death-adjacent, although creeping closer all the time. To have achieved a research-worthy NDE, I would probably have to have been considered dead, the kind of flatlining, dramatic "She's dead! No, she isn't!" death that you see on medical procedurals. I thought I'd have to at least see a light, or a tunnel. Which brings us to Halloween.

• • •

This can't be happening, I thought, even as my entire life appeared in one single burst. *I cannot die in a police chase.* The car rammed my passenger side, blowing up the airbags and causing me to spin through an intersection. As the car spun, glass flying everywhere, I braced myself for a second impact, thinking, *Okay, turns out I die in a police chase.* Even as I felt like I was moving out of body, I felt a sharp jab of sadness about my family, and then a strange sort of peace, as I accepted my fate. *I've lived a good life,* I thought. *I've tried to be the best person I can be. This will be sad, but it will*

be okay. Thanks to the laws of physics, the car's rear end smashed into a lamppost, and it finally stopped moving.

My therapist friend Annie tells clients to manage intrusive thoughts about scary experiences by thinking about the moment they knew they were safe. When I hit that pole and the car stopped moving, I did a body scan—everything seemed to hurt, but I could move my limbs. I knew I was safe, but I couldn't believe it. A woman nearby opened the door and helped me out as I burst into hysterical tears. The first person I saw behind her was an older Asian man in a Michigan sweatshirt. I would have laughed at the aptness in any other circumstance. "I'm alive I'm alive I'm alive," I said. "I'm alive. I'm okay." The woman helping me said, "God loves you," walked me over to a folding chair, and handed me a Fresca from her taco cart.

When I stopped crying and shaking, I called my husband and texted Jenny, and they both made their way to me. Strangers walked up to me to stare at my destroyed car and wonder at the miracle of my life. A number of these strangers offered me hugs, and I accepted all of them, tearing up each time. A camera lady for the news showed up, with worry in her soft green eyes, and whispered that I should get numbers from witnesses, and tape the segment, in case I needed it for insurance. I learned that the other driver had robbed a store, and then taken off on foot after the crash, but was now in custody. I got checked out by a band of firefighters in their mid-twenties. They looked like hipster bartenders in protective gear, and I tried not to giggle at their ironic mustaches as they told me I was going to be okay. The police . . . I know I'm not supposed to befriend any police, but one of them was from Michigan (of course) and told me she wanted to retire in Costa Rica. I hope she gets to.

• • •

When enough time has passed, post-accident, that I'm reading about Al Pacino, I also self-administer the Greyson scale, which measures an NDE at seven points or above. I score a fourteen—my hospital visit was a five, the pileup on the freeway a three. It's not an accomplishment, exactly, to meet this measure, but it makes me reflect on this part of the letter to Pacino:

> Because you don’t remember anything from your cardiac arrest, it makes sense that you would conclude that nothing exists beyond this life. However, among people who have had multiple close brushes with death . . . they sometimes report an NDE and other times do not . . . Be prepared for the possibility of a very different experience the next time you come close to death!

Scientists who are near-death skeptics—there are, understandably, many—offer such explanations as dissociation or hallucinations, which could be valid. I find I’m less interested in the explanation of what I’ve experienced as I am in the aftereffects.

My own new development, this time, has been the incredible outpouring of love I started to feel over the course of four pretty weird hours at the intersection of Alvarado and James M. Wood, in downtown Los Angeles. Love for Rodney, who brought me hugs and tacos. Love for Jenny, who helped me clean out my wrecked car while I talked to the police, but sensibly put on my sun hat first—she has a delicate complexion. But also love for the thirtysomething man in his pajamas and a soft green hoodie who called me “baby” and hugged me while I cried, and every other person I met that day, even the guy at the car rental place who had somehow also gotten T-boned at another intersection, and was eyeing my tacos, so I gave him one. A love for everyone, never-ending. A love loop, uniting us all.

This love is reflected in Greyson’s research experience. Before he started in the field, Greyson says he “saw things like the Golden Rule as things we were supposed to try to live up to. People come back from near-death experiences and say, ‘It’s not a guideline for you. This is the way the universe works. We’re all in this together. If I hurt you, I’m hurting myself. There’s no distinction between you and me.’” I can confirm that while this feeling was a theoretical principle for me before last fall, I’ve never felt more closely connected to all of humanity, and it’s a feeling that only grows.

Greyson says that near-death experiencers are so transformed by the light and love they encounter, and by the review of their actions, that it’s often to the chagrin of their friends and family—he gives the example of a mob operative whose girlfriend left him after a shooting neutralized his desire to accumulate worldly goods.

I can’t say I come out of the accident wanting to make any major life changes, maybe because I’m already on my path to being less useful. After a lifetime of tasting death, though, the only way I can refer to these incidents is like an eye exam, where the doctor walks me through progressively sharper lenses. I walk away with clearer vision every time. As with the other incidents, which may not have registered on the Greyson scale, I do come home with slightly more focused eyes, wheels turning as I clarify what I wanted my marriage, my family, my life, my impact on the world to look like.

In a 2007 interview with *Virginia* magazine, Greyson details this story while pointing out that the power of such an experience often is life-altering. It can alleviate a fear of death, enhance love of life, and strengthen spirituality. I have no real fear of my own death, and have an unusual love of life. As for that last element, I don’t consider myself a spiritual person, but I return over and over again to the symbolism of the timing: Halloween, Day of the Dead, Samhain—the time of the year that the veil between our world and the world of the spirits is supposedly thinnest, allowing for an easier communication between the two. I must reluctantly admit to seeing the shimmer of cosmic dust.

Of course, I wish there were a way to get here without almost dying, because I’d rather have avoided all of it. I often think about the peace I felt in the car, the self-acceptance. The feeling that I was living my values. As I sat on the folding chair at the scene, checking and rechecking my body for damage and taking deep breaths, I took in the chaos of that intersection and I fixed my mind on my priority: I needed to be home in time to take the kids trick-or-treating. So I called insurance, and AAA, and a body shop, and a rental car company. My husband kept trying to take my phone and do it himself, but I told him I needed things to keep me busy. He went to get me food, because I never made it to that lunch. I asked him to drive me straight to the car rental place, and he couldn’t believe I was ready to get in another car. “I don’t think I’ll get caught in another police chase today,” I told him.

I do have one little bone to pick with the writer of the Pacino letter, which refers to people like me as “unlucky.” I’m still not entirely sure what the universe is trying to tell me, or why I have the specific fortune of knowing the rhythm of this kind of thing so well, but I believe it has something to do with understanding how profoundly fortunate I have been

to live the life I've lived, and the chances I've been given to be able to do so. There was a lot of religious chatter around me that day, and I was moved and touched by all of it, but I also know I've never seen a light, or heard a voice; I just felt with absolute certainty that the lights were about to be turned off and my time would be done. As I process the accident, which I know will take a while and come out in strange ways, I already know what the lesson is, because it's the same every time: to live as richly and purposefully as I can. In a life this fragile, I've learned, I can't waste time on self-pity or fear. There's only pursuing my Technicolor daydreams and squeezing everyone close.

When we finally got home that afternoon after the accident, I showered off my day and pulled on black leggings and a sweatshirt. With eyeliner, I colored a triangle onto the tip of my nose and drew long whiskers on my cheeks. I grabbed a sequined cat-eared headband from my daughter's dress-up stash, and went downstairs, achy, to surprise her for trick-or-treating. She was so pleased.

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III

WINTER

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Galaxy Brain

I’m in London soon after the election, visiting my brother and his fiancée, and lying low. Everyone back home is still dazed, and I’m grateful for the temporary escape.

The Londoners I’ve seen today can’t stop apologizing for the weather, as though I leave Los Angeles for more sunshine. It’s hard to explain to my local friends that sunny and seventy at year’s end still doesn’t feel right to me. I’ve come to visit my brother, yes, but I was also born into a snowy Himalayan winter, and to winter weather I must periodically return. It removes me from that unease I feel in Los Angeles—of every day blending into the next—and anchors me to the passage of time. I was six when my brother was born, and we lived in London at the time. In the years after, I underwent more than two dozen moves across three continents, but we frequently returned to visit England, so it feels closest to home. A system reset when the world feels scrambled. As I hop off the Tube and walk to my hotel, I zip up my wool coat and adjust a cashmere beanie. This is what winter is supposed to feel like.

It’s the kind of trip where I am relishing spending most of my time alone with my thoughts. I haven’t told anyone except my brother that I was coming, and I’ve made no plans, bought no tickets to any things. I’m not anticipating eating any life-changing meals or seeing any mind-blowing art. My brother and I have some meals and drinks planned. Beyond that, I’m really looking forward to some long walks with my old friend my brain. Our relationship has suffered these last few years, as she’s gathered so much anxiety, clumped around a web of task lists. I’m hoping I haven’t carried all of that across the ocean, and if I have, I’m looking forward to shaking some of it loose. On day two, my phone mysteriously stops working, and I groan. See, I’m finally good at leaving, especially after that trip to Rome. My kids release me with minimal complaint, my husband does a pretty seamless parental takeover, and my worry and guilt are held at bay by how much fun they all seem to be having while I’m gone. I now understand that this state of acceptance and enjoyment is being held

together by the knowledge that if there's an emergency, I'll be reachable wherever I go.

So I connect to Wi-Fi at the hotel and make sure my husband, parents, and our sitter have the number for the hotel landline. That should be enough, right? I'll be at the hotel multiple times a day. Any message will get through. Yet I find that whenever I'm away from the room, I feel a twinge of fear, the kind I hoped I could leave at home. *Something important could be happening right now and you'll miss it,* my body tries to tell me during the walks I'm supposed to be enjoying. No matter how many deep breaths I take, no matter how strongly my rational brain tries to argue otherwise, the fear holds on in my chest.

My mother laughs at this, because she remembers parenting before cell phones: "If something happens, we'll find you," she tells me. She reminds me of the strangely timed phone calls we used to get from India, delivering updates. The important news finds a way. "The point of being away is to be away," she adds, and I take this in. In the grand scheme of things, I'm probably more reachable than she ever was when she was away from us, and she didn't fall apart about it. So in an attempt to fake calm before I actually am, I get into a routine of checking in with my family in the evening, or calling them whenever I pop into a Boots pharmacy, which I do often, because they all have free Wi-Fi.

No sooner do I put that worry to bed than I literally wake up with a new one: My left arm is tingling, and the tingling keeps up all day. By nightfall, it feels almost numb. After the accident, the doctor told me to watch out for this, because it can indicate permanent nerve damage. I Google chiropractors nearby, quickly learn I'm using the wrong word, and book Jerome the *osteopath* for a session.

Jerome the osteopath isn't British, but French—a tall, burly, soft-spoken man hidden away in a single office at the back of a posh pharmacy in Marylebone. My friend Tahmima warned me that osteopaths talk a lot, but I find Jerome comforting. He tells me that my arm isn't asleep, it is exhausted, because my brain keeps telling my shoulder muscles to clench, in anticipation of being hit again. He says that he can physically manipulate the pieces of my body back to where they were meant to be, but I still have to sort out my brain.

"Have you worked through your feelings?" he asks.

I sigh in frustration. “Do I really have to keep processing this? I’m kind of tired of talking about the car accident.”

Jerome is patient. He’s obviously dealt with my kind before, but he’s not talking about the swirl of mortality. As his fingertips dig gently under my right shoulder blade, on the side my car was hit, I start to feel some relief.

“You have been on the receiving end of social violence,” he says, about the accident.

I make a sound somewhere between a gasp and a groan.

“You’re allowed to say it’s unfair, you’re allowed to say, ‘Why me?’” He shakes a fist as he summons some righteous indignation on my behalf, and, honestly, I’m touched. These were two things I have definitely not said out loud, or even let myself consider after the accident, because I am so grateful to be alive.

“If it makes you more comfortable to do so, you can write this down on a piece of paper and burn it,” he says, done now with my shoulder, and moving on to my whiplashed neck. “Maybe you’re not ready for that,” he murmurs, as my neck won’t budge.

During my visit with Jerome, he also said another thing, and I realize it sounds like I’m making this up, because it seems too silly that a gigantic, soft-spoken French man should show up on this particular day to prod me into character development. I guess this is sometimes how the world works. “It’s not nerve damage, right?” I asked him sheepishly, early in the appointment. He laughed. “You’ve spent too much time online.” He pointed out that the internet will most often tell us the absolute worst that can happen, instead of what’s actually happening. Assuming the worst, he said, is like thinking “life is a sexually transmitted infection that leads to death.”

I know he was just regurgitating a quote that has been attributed to everyone from Margaret Atwood to the Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing—I’ve certainly seen it meme-ified—but it makes me think about how much fear I carry around all the time, and not just in my shoulders. I’ve been so focused on my physical ailments I’ve somehow not taken into consideration that my brain—a focus of this trip—might be contributing to the problem.

I spend the rest of the day thinking about what Jerome said, and talking to my shoulder. It clenches up dozens of times, and each time I soothe it like I would a baby bird. “You’re okay, I tell it, aloud. “We’re okay. We’re

safe.” Each time I feel it relax, as if part of a magic trick. After a couple of days of this, I wake up one day and the tingle is gone. Walking around London about four days in, I feel entirely at peace. This is not just because of the arm, or because I am more relaxed about the children, but also because I realize that the loss of my phone service has cut me loose from the internet and whatever that steady stream of information usually does to my brain. I really *am* alone with my thoughts, for the first time in maybe decades.

Those thoughts wander now to how I prickle when people call me “fearless,” which I find worse even than “badass” or “boss lady.” I’m not fearless *at all*. I’m riddled with fear. It’s the one constant of my life. I’m scared of everything, all the time. I’m scared about this presidency, I’m scared the sharp pain in my right arm is a frozen shoulder it will take me years to fix, if ever. I’m scared our house in LA will burn down, just as my family’s house in Kashmir did. Even outside of wildfires, I fear this just because there are so many wires in it. I’m scared of societal collapse. I’m scared of financial collapse. I’m scared of war (again). I’m scared AI will take our jobs. I’m infinitely scared for my children—a list of fears I can’t even bear to enumerate because just the thought makes me feel as if I’m tumbling into the abyss. I’m scared I will die every time I get into a car. I’m scared a loved one will be murdered (again), and on top of that I won’t be reachable.

I’m scared I will never leave Los Angeles, a city that has slowly driven me bananas. I’m scared I’m not spending enough time with my parents, and nobody’s getting any younger. I’m scared of rats, and snakes, and bedbugs, and dark rooms, and the niggling thought that there might be tiny pieces of broken glass on the floor. I’m scared of streets with no streetlights. I’m terrified of everything, all the time.

If all of the fears I’ve spelled out here are little flames that I’m trying to keep at bay, willy-nilly access to the internet fans them. The same internet that told me that I was experiencing irreversible nerve damage loves to tell me our houses are riddled with electrical risks, the country is dying, our jobs are obsolete, our kids are screwed, everyone else is doing better than us, and also, watch out for bedbugs.

It wasn’t always like this, was it? I wake up, halfway through my trip, to an eerie quiet. I open the blinds and it’s snowing. My heart leaps at the

sight. I don't think I've seen snow in London since I was in nursery school. It's heavy for a flurry, and I brew myself a cup of tea to watch the flakes collect, knowing they won't last as the day warms. As I see the parking lot just beyond gather a dusting, I remember enjoying what I called "catching up on internet." I'd grab my coffee and open my computer to visit my favorite sites, take in some well-written articles by some of my favorite writers, before reluctantly switching over to work. It was a fun distraction, the main source of my information and news, some laughs, some recipes. Over time, it became more and more of my life—where I found clients, friends, jokes, and support during the pandemic. Now all the sites I used to love have now been raided for parts, a minefield of pop-ups, slop, and listicles designed to follow me around the internet. Lately, opening my laptop for anything other than my job feels like a sensory assault, and sifting through search results to find any kind of work-related information is excruciating, like being elbows-deep in a picked-over bargain bin.

Instead of useful information, my browser froths with a churn of discourse that sprouts up around every new piece of culture—the takes on takes, the responses to takes, the tweets about takes, and the response pieces to the tweets about those takes . . . I don't know if it's a sensory thing or simply a preference, but I don't think I'm meant to take in information or entertainment at the pace it's being created right now. Not just because it's physically impossible, but also because it feels like I'm being beaten about the head with it, and made to feel foolish that I don't know about everything in the world exactly when it happens. Engaging in anything other than a quiet puzzle or some knitting with an herbal tea at my elbow sounds exhausting. No wonder people are always retreating and detoxing from it.

I'm still walking around London as I mull over all this. I notice that the snow has melted away, like it never happened, and I'm working myself into an unexpected emotional lather on Bethnal Green Road. I spontaneously tear up as I see an Asian mum and her kids at a cut-price fabric shop. It reminds me of following my own mum around, she in her sari and good coat, I bundled up with a book, keeping her company. I know I've had plenty of quality time with my own brain when I find myself crying at random aunties on the street. The pure tidal wave of emotion I'm feeling should be tiring, but it feels so good to be firmly rooted in an undiluted experience, one that I can't process through my phone.

I felt a persistent and amorphous disquiet when boarding my flight here. It was something I was praying I could shake off with a change of scenery. But my tears on this street are distinct and discrete.

Still in Bethnal Green, once I'm done crying about the aunties, I pop into E. Pellicci, a shoebox-size, classic Italian-British caff. I am seated between two sweaty city boys, both reading the paper. I order a classic set (sausage, egg, bacon, mushrooms, beans, tomatoes, toast) and guzzle down the strong cup of tea slung my way. I peek around at the wood-paneled walls. The locals are having far-too-loud conversations, far too close to me. But I enjoy the closeness. I note how long it's been since I have had a pleasant experience that I didn't text someone, or post online, or look up more details about. Without the digital world as a shield, I feel porous to the bone. I feel like my skin has been scrubbed off with pumice, and I'm sitting here exposed to the elements. It should be uncomfortable. Instead, I'm grateful for it. I want more of it.

The men flanking me get up and nod at each other. I notice they're wearing chinos and fleece vests, the currently preferred uniform of tech bros worldwide. I idly, maybe meanly, wonder what AI platform they'll be giving passionate, stilted speeches about later. "AI is inevitable," everyone around me has been saying when they see my sour face on the subject. I can sometimes modulate my face to neutral but it's definitely pinched right now, as I watch them leave. "Good information is easily available to you whenever you want it, and the information's only getting better," is another refrain AI enthusiasts like to make. It plays in my head now, against the clink and shuffle of plates and silverware. Setting aside the catastrophic environmental and intellectual price of these developments, I simply do not think that more tech is the answer for the problems that tech has created for me. I'm not going to start yelling about "sheeple," but I can't say I'm not sorely tempted. To think of them eating at E. Pellicci, I marvel. Do they not know their kind—tech-loving, private-equity types—will eventually dot this street with chain stores that will hasten this place's extinction?

I know about E. Pellicci because it's my friend Camilla's favorite breakfast place, and she's one of my favorite people. I could have Googled "best breakfast spot" and let the internet send me elsewhere, but we recently had a conversation about how much she loves this place, so here I am, prepared to love it, too. That's the thing, I think, as I meander through the

neighborhood, still grimacing about the guys I have decided were AI bros. I have never wanted a quest for information to be easy. For me, the quest is the best part. I do love the internet as a catalog and jumping-off point, like a digital train station, but I prickle when it becomes both station and destination. I'm reminded of a few months ago, in LA, when I needed to see an out-of-print Françoise Gilot monograph. so I looked up which libraries in the area had it. This is how I found out, in my twenty-first year of living in LA, that the Los Angeles County Museum of Art has an art library. Anyone who wants to research can make an appointment request to view a particular volume, and then *go to the galleries for free*!

I went on the afternoon of my birthday, where I was greeted by the wonderful librarian Pauline Wolstencroft—what a name—who was wearing terrific pants, which I also promised myself I would buy. While I pored over this book, and carefully handwrote notes, which I would later have to transcribe—none of it "easy"—I happened upon a useful footnote. It mentioned another monograph, at another library, for which I'd have to apply for another card, and where I'd be warmly welcomed by another eager librarian. This, to me, is the whole point of being able to unleash our curiosity in the world. The inconvenience, the textural detail, the speed bumps. The actual human contact. Information wants to be a superhighway, I get it. "News" wants to travel in a torrent, at a pace I can't yet comprehend, and never may. There's nothing I can do to control that, but I *can* choose to cap myself at five miles an hour.

By the time I'm on the plane home from London, I no longer feel chained to digital life. I've been in contact with my family via scheduled FaceTimes, and mentally drafted some resolutions about how I want to preserve this feeling, moving forward. I think about what Jerome told me—the loop of my body's responding to what my brain tells it to do. I consider when I was last grateful to be connected via the internet.

It would have been 1999. I was living in Italy, and had just gotten my first flip phone. I had to go to a computer lab to check email or look anything up. That seemed to me like a healthy amount of information and accessibility. While I don't think it's possible to go back to a landline and basic cable, at least not without a series of bribes to my family, I think it's time to train my brain to opt out of the information waterfall and into a consumption schedule that doesn't fill me with fear. When I get home, I

finally delete my Twitter account permanently, and commit to reading the news only once a day. No push alerts, no real-time updates. Still, there is sometimes the anxious voice in my head that I heard when the phone went dead: *What if I miss something important?* I remember that if something happens, it'll find me. Above all, I don't want to feel like I have to retreat, to leave my actual life to avoid the internet. I don't want to "detox." I simply feel an overwhelming desire to live in the world as it actually is, not as the internet is telling me it might become.

Every day we wring our hands about the state of our poor country, and its hundreds of millions of victims of a social violence that's just beginning. Everyone is terrified, and everyone should be. It may seem counterintuitive, but I want to tell everyone that fear is not the scary part. We can't make the fear evaporate, but we'll have to choose how we want to manage it. With most of my fears—the kids, my aches and pains—I simply refuse to be incapacitated. Of course, my fears sometimes freeze me in their grip. I sit in bed thinking, *Oh, no, they got me.* I feel like a melting candle. But the second I can muster a scrap of sense, I go immediately to battle. I meditate, I walk, I sing, I do what I need to do to keep them at bay. I'm not fearless, I'm stubborn. And if I'm doing all the things—so many things, I know—I can soothe the flutter that lives in my chest, and remind it that we're safe, for now.

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A Child-Free Guide to Parenting

I've been so much more chill lately with the kids that I'm almost feeling smug about it. They're playing independently for longer periods, consulting me for fewer tasks. We're all having such a nice, normal time together, at least until I see a math worksheet I don't like. My son has hastily filled it out in a dull brown pencil. The answers are technically correct, but the sight of the slapdash handiwork unleashes something long-dormant in me, and I can't modulate the stream of insanity that comes out of my mouth.

"Is this your best work?" I ask him, shaking the paper, my eyes on fire. "Are you really going to hand this in?"

He looks up from the TV, confused.

"I know you want to get to screen time, but we're not doing sloppy work in this house," I tell him. "I wish that schools and colleges could let you in based on your wonderful personality and beautiful brain, but that's not how it works. You have to write down things on paper and get graded on those pieces of paper."

By now he's started to understand that we are being visited by some kind of long-dormant demon. He looks at me, annoyed. "Fine! I'll do it again!"

I wish I could say I catch myself before I wail out, "That's not the point!" but I don't.

When the demon has passed, and my rational mind has once again taken hold, I wonder where that episode came from, and why. He's not yet eleven. He has time to figure out how to do his homework more neatly. I know this. So why did I choose that particular moment to erupt?

Luckily for me, my mother is visiting for a couple of weeks, so I get to talk to her about all of it. She floated out of the sky right as we were flailing, underwater with life and work. When she's here, she makes everyone's lives easier and infinitely more fun. She's an incredible resource as we raise our children, because she was so darn good at it. After school

drop-off one day, we go for a walk, and I ask her what my attitude toward homework was as a child. I wonder if it was ever the same as my son's.

Here's how I remember it: There was that period where I couldn't write by hand, so I avoided homework entirely. Then there was a time jump, where I became a middle-school girl who'd bring home a group project and finish the whole thing, or stay up until 3 a.m. to redo it so that "the handwriting all matched." This was the tween who cried for an entire day when she broke a serving dish, and walked the neighborhood for hours, kicking herself about getting an A-minus in gym. In gym!

Here's what Mum adds on: "Yes, there was a short wobble with the handwriting, but after that, if anything you did wasn't perfect, you'd rip up the paper and start again." Whew. There's something in the ghost of this aggressive perfectionist that sits uncomfortably. My current self is decidedly not that. In life and in work, I obviously strive, but when I get to about eighty percent completion of anything I'm doing—writing an essay, tidying the kitchen, executing my daughter's complicated hairstyles—there is a whispery little voice that kicks in and says, *This could be perfect.* I know to heed it as a warning, and immediately step back and relax. I'm not going back there. I remember how it felt to be that tween agonized over her gym record. I try not to think about her too much, but now she might be shouting at my son.

"When did I stop being a perfectionist?" I ask Mum. "Oh, in college, when you stopped caring about your grades," she says. I see in her face that she's still a little agitated about that, but I remember it as a happier development than she did.

I remember that shift, away from the thing I thought defined me entirely. I remember the breakdown I had freshman year, which kicked it off. I had arrived at college planning to attend medical school, and threw myself into the rigor this would require. The labs, the study groups, the piles of homework, the all-nighters, the clusters of kids obsessing about their grades. I was overwhelmed, and then mysteriously took to my bed, seemingly unable to get out. My coursework piled up, as did the mess on my side of the room. My grades from my second semester were dismal, after a lifetime of As, and I was put on probation for my full academic scholarship. I remember the relief and happiness of that first summer I decided I wasn't going to go to medical school and picked some classes for

the next semester that actually reflected what I wanted to do. I got my grades back up, now in classes that I actually enjoyed, and was pleasantly surprised to find that the world somehow ticked on.

I remember that when I let go of being a perfectionist, the energy I had poured into my perfectionism loosened and blossomed in other directions. The laser focus that I had applied to my studies didn't go away—mental energy is still mental energy—but it metamorphosed. It revealed an intensely affectionate friend, a party thrower, a generous cook, a dancing lunatic. I laughed so much more than I ever had before. I made other people laugh, something I legitimately didn't know I was able to do. I became more forgiving of other people's quirks and flaws, and more able to forgive and relish my own. I learned there were other traits that defined me, all of them easier and more enjoyable for me to cultivate and express. I discovered all of the things I like about myself now.

But can a lesson really stick if you've only learned it once? The perfectionism reared her sleepy head when I entered parenthood. I was once again thrown into an unfamiliar context with high stakes, and had unrealistic expectations for what I was meant to achieve. I made it through the chemical lows of postpartum, but for a decade, I've still been lost in a teetering pile of coursework and admin, not unlike my unfortunate stint as a pre-med student. The schedules, the toothbrushes, the reordering of things, the extracurriculars, the driving, the nightmares, the shoelaces, the clothes that just fit last week and are now too small. The kids' homework, the schoolwork, the teacher relationships, the friendships, the parent friendships, the many emotional lives to juggle. The hundreds, maybe thousands, of viruses to navigate. I obviously find it rewarding, but after spending all of my waking hours hacking away at this pile of tasks, only to stare down an energetic child as they try to elude a shower . . . well, my perfectionist takes me down some dark, lonely, rage-filled paths.

I hear her whispery voice a lot this winter, as everything in the world once again wants to swirl into chaos and pull me down with it. She wants me to respond by going to great lengths to maintain order in my immediate environment. She's with me as I walk around the house, noticing every worn linen, every crumb, every nick on the surface of a cupboard. Third-guessing the chapter I just finished for the book, and thought I liked. Crunching the numbers on everyone's nutritional intake this week. Feeling

bad about a hole in my son's pants. Feeling bad for not handwriting notes for the kids' lunch boxes. Just feeling bad in general, because I'll never get to it all. I also know that obsessive attention to detail is a dark, unforgiving tunnel for me. The miserable, old, paper-shredding version of myself is here, waving a math worksheet at my son, and if I don't learn to manage her, I know another breakdown is coming.

My sole parenting goal now is to wrench myself away from its grip, and relax once again into being that summer student. I start to notice how difficult it is to remain relaxed through all the messaging I get. School emails remind me there are a bunch of things I probably should cut out of work for early, if I want to be a good parent. Okay, the layer of guilt is all mine, but the emails sit in my inbox, watching me. A *good* parent would volunteer, they whisper. Or RSVP. Or add this handful of events to the family calendar. Sometimes I have to ignore them, and I hope that other terrible parents are doing the same.

I remember, when I was new to parenting, casting about for the perfect pieces of advice. The ones that would bend my children's behavior to my will and render the household orderly. I was convinced, like that stress-case tween self, that if I could perfectly control my surroundings, I would find a peace that eluded me. I was drawn, at first, to one immensely popular parenting guru who promised if you just followed her scripts, you'd get the results you wanted. I found the idea of this soothing: Do *x*, get *y* result.

But that was then. Now, ensconced in our much shaggier, completely unscripted home life, I watch the same parenting guru's videos, and her delivery stresses me out. Thrumming with an anxiety I never noticed before, she shares a script for a kid having a tantrum. "I can't let you do that, but I can let you XYZ," she says, in a stretched-thin voice that she still claims will be soothing. I bristle against her script, because I know, after a decade of parenting, that there are no magic words. Our children are people—even if they're not fully formed—and take their cues from us. This guru's anxiety-riddled face is not what I want them to see when they look at me. I regret the time I ever spent cluelessly listening to her, or people like her, because she made me believe that if I just did everything the way she said I should, I would get an A-plus in parenting.

And when the advice didn't work? I never blamed the advice, only myself.

I know enough now that there is no A-plus. There is no checklist of prewritten scripts that will make me a perfect parent. My kids' energy can only mirror mine. If I want them to be calm and reasonable, with some idea of my expectations, I have to be calm and reasonable and express those expectations. I know everything can be easier and more fun—I just need to figure out how to get away from the whispery voice, the one who's clutching a syllabus.

Which is why, lately, the only parenting advice I've been willing to imbibe comes from a young woman who has no children. Not one. But in my defense, she's adorable.

I first see Chelsea online, when she makes a video calling herself the "Michael Jordan of Babysitters." With her giant blue eyes and gentle voice, she walks through her approaches to every daily routine that gives me a headache. She describes pretending to be banned from Target to speed along an errand, the kids helping her "sneak" in and out undetected. She tells kids that sunscreen makes them invisible to adults for one whole minute, and gets them in the tub by letting them get as dirty as humanly possible just before. My kids would have loved her, too.

I think the reason Chelsea jumps out at me is that she's refreshingly removed from all of the standard internet-parenting noise: those therapists and counselors who grab our attention and leverage our insecurities and anxieties, promising us that if we just do and say their specific things in a specific way, we will unlock utter peace and calm at home. As my children grow older, I understand how hollow this promise is. We can only support them, and try to have a good time while we're doing it. That second part—the having a good time—is what I'm still missing, and I reach out to Chelsea to discuss over Zoom.

Chelsea lives near her family in Colorado. She's married and works in advertising, but she babysat through her teens and early twenties, and has pretty clear opinions on what parents are getting wrong. I ask her, for example, why so many parents get caught up in the endless parenting checklist, and she says she understands how the media that we make actually shapes culture—ads, movies, TV shows, books. "It's like, "'Oh, every kid that I've ever seen in a movie and a TV show . . . is sitting at the dinner table eating dinner. That must be what has to happen,'" she says. It's a picture we've been sold by people just like her, she laughs.

My mouth gapes. I've never really examined the bill of goods I've been sold, the picture-perfect family life I've created in my head. I think for a bit on all of the *should*s that drive my disquietude. The kids *should* eat at this time, and *should* behave in this way, and *should* be able to do XYZ by now. We *should* all sit down at this time for dinner, or *should* have picture-perfect homework, or we're not a happy family, and it's all a failure on my part? No wonder the perfectionist in me is in crisis. Who has been selling me those *should*s?

Like most working parents, I don't know if I've ever had the mental bandwidth to ask the questions Chelsea's bringing up, like, "Is that what has to happen? If my kid hates that, do I have to do that?" Chelsea mentions a trend she saw online, of all these parents saying things like, *I'm giving my kid dinner at four-thirty because that's when they're hungry.* "The rules are so made up," she says. Of course they can eat dinner at four-thirty, and then there's no snack battle, and they could have a snack later if they're hungry, if they're starving at seven o'clock.

She's making so much sense I don't even remember why I thought otherwise, and then I identify the culprit: the hundreds of parenting books I read when I first became a mom, when my perfectionist was desperately trying to find some sort of manual to sort out the chaos. I turned to them as textbooks, finding comfort in their banging on about how a tight schedule was the thing that was going to help me figure out parenting. These parenting books were passed out like the Bible when my kids were born, and, other than *The Sleepeasy Solution*—pure gold—they now sit in a dusty pile, because I know their contents to be mostly useless.

I find myself wishing that I had Chelsea's unflagging energy for gamifying kid routines, but while we're speaking, she points out that she babysat in only four-to-six-hour increments. She'd come in fresh to tap out harried parents, for whom the daily routines were more of a marathon, and make them more fresh with her young, well-rested brain. In those four to six hours, the next thirty years of those kids' lives didn't stretch ahead of her. It's impossible for me, when my kids forget to put their plates in the sink, to ignore the voice telling me that they never will, but that's one layer of raising a child. It's not just care and feeding; it's raising responsible, resourceful, resilient, empathetic adults. That starts with good habits, right?

Chelsea argues that parents become preoccupied with objective checklists for kids because our identity as "good parents" is so wrapped up in our kids being able to meet specific milestones. It starts with their holding their heads up, then walking, crawling, walking, potty training, reading. A parade of to-dos, until they leave the house. So it's not just about getting the thing done, but about self-defining as a good or bad parent.

"You're just so stressed that you're not maybe looking at the kid and being like, 'What do you need?'" she says. "You're thinking, 'How do I make sure I'm being a good mom?' And sometimes those things aren't the same."

I understand that I fall into this trap, but I'm not exactly sure how to escape it. I've seen a lapse in toothbrushing lead to cavities and a skipped shower turn into a rash. Chelsea is quick to point out that as a babysitter she rarely had to deal with outright resistance. Because she was a fun, occasional presence, when she showed up, kids *wanted* to do things for her.

It makes me wonder how much of the resistance in my own home is a rebellion against how much control I exert. That night, I talk to my son about it. "A lot of what we talk about is just you asking us to do stuff," he admits, and my brain turns this over for a while before deciding I'm going to take a break from nagging, and we'll see what happens.

The next day I pick him and his sister up from school. It's a Tuesday, the least exciting of all the days, in our collective opinion, and I take them by a diner on the way home. The after-school period that's usually filled with a rapid-fire barrage of requests is, instead, filled with us doing a book of Valentine's Day–themed *Mad Libs*, over French fries. My son spontaneously gives me a hug, and it's really sweet. "We don't do this stuff often," he says, and something inside me crumbles. I feel so bad I'm only just figuring this out now. Like magic, even with a dinner out, the quality time infuses us with enough momentum to get the homework done, and everyone gets showered and dressed for bed with a minimum of fuss. It's only one instance, and I can't make the immediate causal link between our fun hang and how much easier tonight's bedtime routine has been, but it's worth noting.

Later, I try to set aside all of these external *should*s and think about what my real expectations for family life are. I do think the kids should be able to have a relatively smooth morning, tidy up after themselves, sit down to

dinner and converse, say please and thank you, and be able to get off the TV and into the shower without a grumble. I don't expect them to execute these flawlessly yet, as they're still . . . *children,* but I want to establish the expectations we are working toward. These were the basics of my own childhood, and I don't remember pushing against them that hard.

"How did you get it all done?" I ask my mother, who is still with us on a visit. She says we were "different children." It's something I've heard her say before, but what I now understand is that she was also a different mother. I'm sure she had dark, painful moments, a few of which she has lately begun to share with me, but my overwhelming sense of her was absolutely as a fun, warm presence. She could also turn anything into a game. She'd keep me busy for hours, with anything—a little ball of dough and a rolling pin, once—and stepped easily into a world of fairy tales she had created about kids she had known, to keep me in line. I don't remember her bugging me, honestly, until my teen years. She was silly, and affectionate, and definitely firm when things needed to get done, but expectations weren't wielded by her following me around, checking things off on a mental clipboard. I remember she just sort of went about life, and our house, with a sense of humor, and we were also there, and expected to do our chores and study, but I can't say I ever remember feeling like she had some checklist of immediate expectations that hung over us.

Unfortunately, I don't think my kids can say the same about me. In fact, I know they can't. "I'm not a fun mom," I'll grumble at them when they ask me to play, or make a video, or listen to something while I'm in the middle of Getting Stuff Done. Not every time, but enough times that it makes me wince to think about how often they receive this message. *You need to play "Dancing Pizza Parlor"? You need to play "Orphan Pet Store"? You need to play whatever cockamamie game you came up with? Go find your dad. I'm here to make the sandwiches.*

I'm not sure why I have this aversion to lightness that my husband so easily embraces, but when I really parse it, it's that I feel I can't do even more on top of keeping the trains on the tracks. I'm overloaded with the household's administrative tasks, which drain me, leaving me with little energy to be fun. Enjoying things, even though it feels silly to type out, feels like an additional obligation. I'm not sure how I've made having fun into more work for myself, but brains are incredible in that way. I don't

know how to effect change yet, but I know it's an area worth rehauling—of course I want my relationship with the kids to be more fun and less grunt work. So, for the next few days, whenever I find myself annoyed with the children, I stop and step back, check my own behavior, and ask myself if it's actually *me* who's being annoying. The answer is almost always yes.

In ordering them around and repeating myself, my hysteria rising, I become a caricature of an overextended mom. Gone is any resemblance to the young woman who so easily kept groups of my younger cousins in thrall with a game, or gathered them all to sit at dinner time. Of course, now that I'm responsible for two children's entire lives, it's not as easy to summon that carefree girl whom Chelsea reminds me of. Still, it helps to talk to people like her, and our pediatrician, who also loves kids and doesn't have any. They provide a distance and perspective, and can gently remind us when we're trapped in a narrative that doesn't match reality. "Kids don't like being bossed around," is a Chelsea catchphrase. "They like a scenario."

No matter how cheerful my intentions start out, the constant friction of simply trying to get them to do what is good for them does wear on me. One night, I'm rushing through the bathtime routine when I notice my six-year-old's eyes are dreamy. "Remember when I had a quesadilla in the tub?" she says. She's referring to a day when we had run out of time after a playdate and it was the only way I could get her fed and in bed before she turned into a gremlin. "Could we ever do that again?" she asks. The response I instinctively want to give her is a droning lesson about why we shouldn't eat in the tub. Thankfully, I realize what a waste of everyone's energy it is. It would be boring, and ineffective, and annoy us both. I think back to our summer in Michigan, when I let go of all of my *should*s and all of my lightness poured out, without any extra effort from me. "Sure," I tell her. This seems like a good place to start again.

"Thanks for populating the earth," says a child-free friend when I talk to her after a tiring Mom Week. It's so sweet that she thinks of it in this way, because I did not have the human race in mind when I birthed my children. They were entirely selfish endeavors. First, I wanted to see what they would look like. I have always found the faces and proportions of children aesthetically delightful, and mine came out with rotund little baby bellies and cutie-pie features that reminded me of all of my most beloved people. Incredible result. Second, I wanted to experience what it was like to raise a

couple of kids. My parents were always forthcoming about having found great meaning and joy in parenthood, and I wanted to feel that for myself. Third, I think my husband is so funny, and I wanted to birth an in-house troupe of clowns for my amusement. Technically, my expectations have been surpassed on all fronts. I will never—and I don't want to—have kids who obediently do whatever I ask them to do. I want mine: questioners, bursting with life, who look at me askance when I'm being nuts and call me out on it. In pursuit of this greater, values-driven goal, I can try to retire my perfectionist entirely, or at least give her more frequent sabbaticals.

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Object Permanence

We are a few days into ringing in what's already looking to be a grim new year when my old friend Jeff is found dead by suicide. I learn about it from a text at 7 a.m. that says, *I'm sorry, Pri—this is so awful.* I call the sender in a panic, my brain a flip-book of calamities, and the circumstances are so much worse than anything I could have ever expected. I quickly hang up and call my friend Sarah, who originally introduced us. I'm relieved she picks up, because she's out of the country, and I need her to hear it from me.

Jeff was a brilliant filmmaker and beautiful weirdo. Many years after we stopped hanging out regularly, the mere mention of his name would make me smile and warm up to anyone who said they knew him. His head was always bursting with bananas ideas he delivered in a flat, rapid-fire monotone, always with a mischievous smirk and a great side-eye. The last time I saw him, we had lunch at a cafe on the east side of Los Angeles. After many years of reluctantly flogging his ideas in the creative desert of studio film, he had quietly begun to write, direct, and produce the iconoclastic kind of movies he wanted to make, with the people he wanted to make them with. He had spent a summer making a little film in Italy, with a bunch of friends, like we had always daydreamed about—we both had studied Italian in college, and were constantly cooking up ways to get back there. "You figured it out," I told him, openly awed. "You can do it, too," he said quickly. "Let's do it!" It was exactly like him to be inviting me into his joy. I left him with a bear hug and every intention to see him more. Then a year passed, and now he is gone.

I spend the few days after his death kicking myself. Los Angeles was such an asshole of a city when we first met, hostile to outsiders and reluctant to fully accept a transplant, even a decade in. We were grateful to have each other and our young crew of eager, creative friends. The comfort of being in the same boat got us through some dark days, got us eventually loving things about being here, even as we daydreamed about moving elsewhere—sometimes home, but usually Italy. "Anywhere but this crazy place," we said. "A magnet for flakes and lunatics." With him gone, I worry

I've become the kind of flake I hated. A miss-you-wish-we-could-see-each-other-but-too-busy-now kind of friend. The kind who never makes enough concrete plans. My punishment is losing one of the people who made me feel tethered to this place, who was always ready with a plan and a follow-up text and a spontaneous game night and movie invite and poker buddies and god knows what else.

I'm racked with the guilt of not having been around him enough over the last year, so when Sarah sends me her flight info for his funeral in Florida, where his parents live, I book a ticket. I briefly feel like it's not my place, that not seeing him for that long should wipe me off the tender-family-moment roster, but I understand that my reasoning is flawed. If I were gone, I think my family would want to be surrounded by anyone who's ever held a drop of love for me in their heart. I'm not going to stifle a loving impulse for a weird sense of propriety. I know Sarah's distraught, too, and I imagine his poor wife, all the other people who loved him. I want to be there for a friend I loved, no matter the timeline.

Then, the day before the flight, a wildfire sprouts a few miles from our house. I keep an eye on it like I've kept an eye on all the fires in my time in LA, and take some deep breaths to keep my fear at bay. By the time I've picked up the kids from school and started to drive them north on Lincoln Boulevard, we can see the crest, like a smoky river of lava tearing through a hillside in the distance, but not even that far. I make my face a calm mask and get the children safely home. As I make dinner and check in on their nighttime routines, I'm still gripped with unease. That night we lose power, the fire is spreading rapidly, and our son is terrified. We make the call to pack up our things to leave for somewhere that feels less apocalyptic. We think briefly about what things we'd want to take with us, and then immediately reject the idea. We have the kids, and our wallets, and savings to back up our wallets, and families in case all that goes to crap. We carry our sleeping daughter to the car late on Tuesday night, feeling confident that we have everything we need in the world.

After all, I haven't needed much, in general, since the time we lost our family home when I was little. My parents had bought a plot of land in my birthplace of Srinagar, Kashmir, and built our forever home on it. We filled it with objects from our travels all over, as we were stationed abroad through the eighties while my dad finished his medical training and

research. Once we were done with all that, we were going home to settle down so that Dad could build the hospital he'd always dreamed of building. In 1989, there was a sharp uptick of ethnic violence in the region, and my entire community fled over the course of a few months. My grandparents were living in the house at the time and escaped under cover of night. It was ultimately looted, and squatted in, and set on fire by militants. We never went back. There's not a day since that I don't miss that house—the only one I ever considered "home" when growing up—and wonder what it would have been like to be able to say goodbye.

Unsurprisingly, in the time since, I've enforced—some might say perfected—an aggressive detachment to things. There are only a couple of objects I remember holding on to for dear life as as I grew up. One, a tiny rubber pig Mum bought me from a vendor on London Bridge. I kept it for years and carried it around in my little pocket and used it to make my dreams come true. I believed if I made the wish one hundred times in my head, it would come true. In my memory, all of those wishes did. In my memory, they were also mostly for attainable things, like good grades. Then, when I was about eight, I lost the pig. I was distraught, but soon after, opening a bag of gummy bears, I found the strangest thing. It was a gummy man wearing a suit, with a jack-o'-lantern-shaped head. I kept it from my parents—too strange to share—shellacked it with a purloined bottle of clear nail polish, and tied it to a cord around my neck. It took over for the wishes until I became a tween and weaned myself off of my need for strange little transitional objects.

It's unsurprising that I've grown into an adult with an aversion to stuff. Clutter stresses me out, as does shopping. The idea of owning more than a few pairs of pants or T-shirts agitates me. My friends who are big-time shoppers laud this as a virtue, and I don't know how to tell them it's closer to a pathology. My husband doesn't mind much, but has expressed mild, periodic frustration that it took us something like twelve years of marriage before I would agree to hang anything on our walls. It's not because I'm now more secure that our house and its contents are permanent. It's because I've gradually made my peace with the constant feeling that it could all disappear.

The morning after we leave our home, we find out that many of our friends have lost theirs. A second fire sprouted up, then a third, a fourth. The

sky is a murky brown, and it stings our eyes to go outside. Everyone is coughing. We are eight days into a new year, and approximately two months into me having miraculously survived being T-boned in a police chase. I ask myself, as I usually do during a string of calamities, what the universe is trying to tell me. I'll be honest—she is not making a lot of sense. But as I sit in the purified air of the retirement condo my parents have recently, fortunately, bought in LA, hearing from friends who have lost all their stuff, I'm feeling grateful that I never developed an attachment to my own stuff. I think I'm being honest here—or at least, that I know myself fully as I say this. Even as we watch the fire spread over the next days, no end in sight, the city beaten down, I believe that my practiced detachment has inoculated me against the sense of loss.

A few days in, I make a run home to grab some medication we forgot, and I don't like how I feel at our house. I walk into our daughter's pink bedroom and wonder if I should bring her some more toys. I can't make up my mind about which ones, because she's so adorably attached to each little object. I check on my son's room, get a book he likes, and briefly fret about doing the laundry. Taking in all the stuff that accompanies our lives here, I feel a growing tightness in my chest.

My own stuff I absolutely do not care about. Once a year I share online a photo of my clothes—a few sparsely littered drawers—just to make myself giggle when people yell at me, but, honestly, why do I need more than a couple of jackets? Everything for my use is modular and easily replaceable. But the feeling of home we've spent almost two decades building? The space between the stuff, the stories of the procurement of the stuff, the way some stuff makes my kids smile, and feel safe? The time we spend together building up stuff on the table, or drawing with stuff, or snuggling under stuff? The memories trapped in the invisible love bubble around the stuff? I've spent a lifetime trying not to get attached to any object or place ever again, and despite my hypervigilance, a fondness has crept its way in. A fondness that is going to crush my spirit if the fire ever reaches our home. I rush out of there, bidding the house a little goodbye just in case, peeling myself away from its pull.

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As I drive away, my feeling about the house is pierced by a sharp reminder—the loss of Jeff. I have been so preoccupied with setting up a satellite life and getting the kids settled, I haven't been thinking about the funeral I was supposed to be at. I think again about how I wish I saw Jeff more frequently or, more recently, took him up on more invitations. Why did I ever think driving all the way across town was inconvenient when it was to see someone I now could no longer drive to see? As I mentally kick myself, I realize that I am attempting another foolish task, that of retroactively vaccinating myself against the pain of his loss. As all the regrets pile up uselessly in my mind, I understand that there's no avoiding the pain that comes with caring about someone; that, like my growing distress about the fate of the dumb objects that make up my home, and the irrational fear I have for the safety of my children, the pain of losing someone you love is simply the price of being alive.

My mother calls to check on us, and I tell her that a friend who has returned post-evacuation is haunted by the feeling that he won't ever be able to leave again, for an errand or a trip, without the fear of his house burning down. "Oh," my mom says. "He never thought that before." I can hear in her realization an echo of my own thoughts. Because the members of my family have always, always, since 1990, bid the house a quiet goodbye every time we left. It's a superstitious tic, to be sure, but also a request we make of the universe. *Please, God, do not let my heart be broken again*, we toss up there, as we murmur our prophylactic goodbyes.

It's a strange feeling to have an entire city catch up simultaneously to my extremely specific psychological baggage, even if the mechanics of our loss were nothing like this one. We didn't have to watch our home burn down. We were safely ensconced, far away. It was thirty-five years ago. Still, LA's changing relationship to home, and to fear, and despair, and hypervigilance, is all too familiar. The creeping horror of this January week is that people are starting to feel the things I've always felt but rarely shared until I wrote my memoir. I tell another friend that it's like quietly knowing I'm a vampire, and then an entire city gets bitten, and wants me to tell them how being a vampire works. As an old-timer, I wish I could help everyone go back to before—I want to show them the ropes, save them from pitfalls—but the fresh pain radiating off everyone else is overwhelming. I feel both helpless and like I'm the only one who *can* help, because I understand how these feelings are going to continue to unfold over years and decades.

Sometimes I wrestle with a sense of disgust—aimed at myself—because while I would never wish this fate on anyone, I also feel a microscopic twinge of relief at not being completely alone.

It's also difficult to watch everyone around me exhibit post-traumatic symptoms that I'm not sure they know are symptoms. Here's where I actually understand I could (and should) be *more* useful, because I know so much about the body keeping the score: "You can beat it," I start to tell my rattled friends, especially the ones who no longer have homes. "But instead of running away from the pain, you need to lean in and massage it out like you would a knot. You need to talk to your body and tend to it like you a wounded bird," I say, channeling Jerome the mystical osteopath, and remembering my walk around London, talking to my shoulder. "You will feel strange waves of fatigue and try to power through them, but do not power through." I encourage them to rest. "Your neck hurts? Shoulders, any other aches? Talk to them out loud, remind your brain you're safe. Your body can only do what your brain tells it to do."

It is a stroke of outsize fortune that we are able to come back to our house this time. I begrudgingly accept that I've become so attached to the life we've built here that I might have to start referring to it as "home." Previously, I always thought nothing would replace Kashmir as home for me. Now this structure, holding every memory of my young family, has wormed its place into my heart, even if its very existence can seen tenuous.

So many friends lose everything, and are shaking in their beds at the shock, hoping their children don't hear, wondering how they're going to rebuild. I wish I could tell them everything will be okay, but my own experience with loss tells me it won't. It's going to be awful, and their relationship to the world is fractured forever. Their relationship to objects and the feeling of home is forever changed. Echoing Jerome again, I tell them that tens of thousands of Angelenos have been on the receiving end of great social violence. Now is the time to cry and scream that life hasn't been fair, because it hasn't been. This fracture will always be a part of them, but it won't always be split wide open.

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The Eight-Year Option

My hyperrational dad used to say that marriage should be a series of eight-year options. Every eight years, he said, you decide if you're going to re-up or part ways, without any hard feelings, just a hug and a high-five for a job well done. Under his model, which would make an incredible TED Talk, you're still in it for a long haul, but frequently reassessing each party's desire to extend the contract. My parents have been married for forty-five years now, while Rodney and I are coming up on our fourteenth wedding anniversary. I think about my father's words often, especially now, as I lie on the freezing-cold floor, doing my stretches.

I'm trying to figure out my New Year's resolutions, which I usually relish, but they have been delayed a few months, thanks to the series of calamities. I think I already have one of them down, and it's the one to stretch more. Lying down on the floor to attend to the length of my muscles every day, I often feel like I'm signing up to be stabbed by knives. *Why does my hip even do that?* I silently scream, eyes welling up as I roll that wonky joint around on a lacrosse ball. While it took an injury and an accident to get me to take care of my body, doing so has kept most of my other aches and pains at bay. *I'd like to be able to touch my toes without too much discomfort,* I think idly. Maybe do a couple of impressive yoga poses. That seems like a manageable goal, one would that improve my quality of life. Ta-da! First resolution defined.

Next we return to my father's thoughts on marriage. Out of the rubble of the last months, during which I've sort of just started to learn how to be a distinct person again, I've also sprouted a sense that, now that the babies are no longer babies, I have some space to figure out what I want the next eight years of Rodney's and my marriage to look like. It feels like ages ago that I announced to my husband, with absolutely zero follow-up, that I wanted to be a baby bird, and I wanted him to take care of me. My vision for how we achieve this remains blurry. I still haven't figured it out, and exploring this seems like a worthy second resolution.

I have a memory of getting out of a taxi after a trip with Rodney once, when we were first dating. I hopped out and waited by the trunk as it popped. The cab driver reached in to grab my bag, and I cheerfully said, “Nah, I got it!” and rolled it away. Rodney just laughed and laughed at the driver’s puzzled face. “Good luck, man,” he said to him. “She doesn’t like help.” I was miffed at the time. “I love help,” I told him. “I just move fast.” I’ve been trying to square that comment from ages ago with my constant feeling that the burden of doing everything falls on me. The more I think about it, the more I see the pattern he’s been seeing. He’ll suggest we meet for lunch, and I’ll brush him off, grumbling about time management. He’ll offer to draw me a bath, and I reference the water bill. He’ll offer a lot of sweet things, in fact, and I’m so preoccupied with whatever the family machine needs for the next thirty-six hours that I hardly ever receive the gesture from him. I asked him to treat me like a baby bird, and I see him trying, but when he attempts to coddle me, I swat it away. We’re heading into our seventeenth year together—our third option, as defined by my dad—and I know a lesser man would have given up.

My own difficulty in the marriage lies in a complaint to which I’ve mostly reconciled myself: He works too much. For as long as we’ve known each other, he’s worked consistent ten- to-twelve-hour days, combined with long periods of film production, during which he’s away for months at a time. He was technically living in another state making a movie when we got married, was gone for months of my first pregnancy, and was deep into an insane production schedule—sometimes sixteen hours a day—when I was pregnant with our second child and home mostly alone with a preschooler.

This felt normal, because it’s what we’d both seen in our own homes, growing up. Rodney’s father worked busy hours in New York City, often not home until after dinner, and his mother worked, but was also the primary parent. While I’d never call my father a workaholic, the sheer number of hours would suggest otherwise, and his life has always been work-centric. My dad, though, has always had a healthy relationship with his job, and the ability to disengage and be present. Even as a child I could factor in that he had devoted his life to saving the lives of children, and it seemed a worthy enough cause to lose him to a telephone call every once in a while. I don’t remember ever feeling like I wished him around more—he

was always home for dinner, and always there, full of fun ideas, whenever I wanted him around on vacation.

I don't actually want to work much more than I already do, and I very much appreciate being available for the kids. Even at my most cantankerous, I feel my time with them flying by, and I want to be around for as much of it as I can. So the general understanding that we've arrived at in our own home is: Rodney's home around dinner time every night, and present for weekends and vacations, barring an emergency. It has been mostly manageable, but his workload has expanded over the last five years, spilling over into family time. It feels ungrateful to complain about this in a crumbling business where work can be so erratic, but the balance feels off, and we need to figure out a new one.

My mother learned how to do everything on her own, she says, as we moved continents and my father worked long hours to set us up financially. It wasn't exactly a lonely existence, she says, as she always had my brother and me, and she could make a crew of friends in an afternoon. It was, however, a divide-and-conquer one. She was firmly in charge of house and home, while Dad provided the means. Everyone did what they needed to do to protect his work. She's all business as she describes this, but I notice she speaks really sweetly about the odd day here and there where they spent unscheduled time together. Her face lights up as she recalls a happy day, when we had just moved to Michigan and the deck needed refinishing. He had a free weekend—a rarity—and they tackled the job together. "It was so fun," she says. "I think we did a pretty good job." I can imagine them laughing together and taking a number of snacky tea breaks. I remember what their glow looks like, when they lock in to it. She's still reminiscing as I think about all of the other household things I've seen her tackle on her own. Reupholstering the dining room chairs. Regrouting the bathroom. She's always enjoyed a DIY project, I think, and I can imagine the happiness she felt in sharing something like that with Dad. In having him enter her domain, and the two of them getting to enjoy it together.

I investigate the rhythms of my own marriage and, unsurprisingly, see so many parallels. My husband and I both work. The thing we cherish the most is unscheduled, relaxed time that we get to spend together, but we barely have any unscheduled, relaxed time. We constantly lament this and promise to do better. In less generous moments I complain, with increasing volume,

that he should maybe work less. He mutters that a certain level of overwork comes with the job, screenwriting careers don't last forever, and I'm being mean about this. I say I'd be fine if he never worked again—we could move somewhere cheap and figure it out. He's hurt by this dismissal of his career. I sort of get it, but not really. "That's not what I mean," I say. But I don't know yet what I mean, and this frustrates me.

Another thing my father used to say about marriage was "When women figure out how to have and raise children on their own, men will cease to exist." Like most things, he said this very matter-of-factly. I've thought of his take when my husband can't be around. What a bill of goods I was sold, to have made myself as available as I am. "Who needs you," I've growled, when he's in long periods of production. "I can do all of this myself." That's the least generous, most defensive part of me, the part that convinces myself, when I'm mad, that he is the *absolute worst.*

One night, when I'm staring at my tired face in the bathroom, mired in self-pity—when I feel like everyone's robot assistant, when I've been yelling about everyone just waltzing around at the end of the day, he responds, puzzled, "You don't have to do any of it." I snap back about the mountain of work it takes to maintain a house. He reminds me that we are both working, and we could probably hire some more help. "I don't want any help," I insist, which yanks me back to reality. My hobby, or one of my hobbies, is spotting people's mental prisons. It's taken all this time to realize what my own is—I'm a *total* martyr. I think I hold up everyone's sky with my trembling, exhausted arms. It's a self-imposed expectation, probably traced back to eldest-immigrant-daughter baggage. In consistently questioning why I feel so responsible for every second of everyone's happiness and well-being, my husband's been nudging me toward the door to my cell, which, to my surprise, has always been wide open. *I don't have to do any of it.*

Unlike the situation with the women of the generation before me, not one person in this house expects me to cook every meal, or keep the house pristine, or do everything with the kids. As I do, even though no one is asking for it, I realize I'm just trying to be my mother, whom I adore. She raised and fed and educated us, almost completely on her own. I never even had a babysitter. She tossed everything else aside to be there for us, any moment we needed her, especially as Dad worked long hours at the

hospital. I loved every moment of it. But I'm not her. "And I nearly went crazy doing it," she now tells me. She sometimes wishes she had been just a little less available, for her own mental health and ours. What point is progress, she asks, if I don't learn from her mistakes?

Also unlike my mother, I have felt free to express every other complaint about marriage, with the understanding that I'll be heard by my partner, and things will change. We talk all the time about how it's technically bizarre to strap yourself to someone forever and then just sort of run a small business —our family—with absolutely zero experience in said business. Raising people, and trying to balance work and home, without driving each other away with the exhaustion and rage that ensues. In our time together, I've fallen into pit after pit of rage and resentment: How dare he just . . . take a shower, while we have an infant, without asking permission? How did he just walk by that thing that clearly needs to be done *right now*? Why isn't he wired exactly like me?

My husband is objectively not the absolute worst, but we are two . . . not-uncomplicated people. We have waded through trenches of misery and pain, we've fought like you would not believe two people can fight. About things I can't even admit, except to say that most of them, in the rearview mirror, are very, very stupid,. We once had an eight-hour fight about how we got out of a taxi. The frequency of this nonsense has diminished, as has the amplitude, as we have figured out what our fights are actually about.

Now, this far in, there is not so much fighting, but there is this central tension, the work-too-much one, and I can't figure out the way through.

The story of my parents and the deck has a second chapter. Many years after the first project, the deck needed refinishing again. My mother remembering the joy of when they'd tackled it together, floated the idea of making it a project together. Dad was, at this point, surrounded by educational and clinical responsibilities, as well as overseeing various research projects funded by the NIH. Any open time was time he could (and should) have been working on something else. She remembers him looking up from his stack of papers and gently saying they didn't have to do it themselves, they could just hire someone. So this is what she did—but, as she tells me, it wasn't nearly as fun. She's laughing as she says this, but it squeezes my heart. I see all the ways in which my parents are an incredible model of a lasting relationship, but, per her instructions, I'm also learning

from a mistake, one I'm loath to point out: She's unknowingly expressed a desire to *me* that was never expressed to the person who could have done something about it.

I'm in our office nook, typing away, as Rodney approaches and sits outside in the hallway in a patch of sun. He's had a heavy workweek and starts to share. He sounds apologetic for not being around. He knows I've taken on more school drop-offs and bedtimes, and things in general, and he can see the strain. I feel bad. I know the kind of automaton I turn into when my workload is increased. My emotions tend to shut down, and I get on with it like my mother did. It's the only way I know: to be a good little soldier, to protect his work. I'm learning that it also represses something important, and that something is the thing I need to tell him right now, except I haven't been able to find the words. As I struggle to figure out what I want to say, other than a clipped "It's fine," a little pathway opens from my brain to my heart, and I start to understand something. He's felt a building narrative, for many years now, that he's not doing enough at home. That he's failing me, he's failing the kids, he's dropping the ball on duties. Then he comes home to see us having a grand old time without him, and me with the slightly removed, robo-mom demeanor I take on when I'm doing things alone. I can see how it would leave him feeling helpless and isolated from the family. I think of my parents, and the deck, and I'm not totally sure what to do, but I know I have to say something.

I tell him that I've always complained that he works too much, but I know the workload is something we both signed up for. When I met him I loved his passion for work, and it's unfair to be mad about it now. And I love what comes of it, having read every word he's ever written, and seen every inch of film he's produced or directed. I am as enamored of his brilliance, as always. At some point, however, it started taking him away from me more and more, and that's what I'm actually mad about. I've always felt churlish bringing any of it up, because by any measure we have the life we envisioned when we met. We knew immediately what it would look like—two kids, creative careers, a warm home with close friends and family. It's somehow even richer than we pictured, but I want to enjoy it *with* him. "I want you around more," I say. He seems startled. "Oh, that's so *nice*," he says. He's never heard it in that way. My feelings about his work have always landed like criticism, like he was always doing everything

wrong. “Well, I like you,” I mumble. “Our life is not as much fun without you around.” He smiles and says he finally believes me.

For Valentine’s Day, I rack my brain to think of something that would make both of us happy, so I make a lunch reservation and invite my husband out in the middle of the day. He’s surprised and touched that I’ve finally taken him up on the idea he’s been proposing for a decade. And I learn that he is absolutely correct. It feels like a fun, decadent, pleasurable choice. Something extraordinary to cut through the work-home-kids triathlon, which is still going to be around when lunch is done. “What else are you right about?” I joke with him, and he’s pleased. I wonder if he’s right about the *not having to do any of it*, too, but I don’t know yet what that looks like. We try not to talk about work or the kids, but that stuff always seeps in. “What are your hopes and dreams for the summer?” I say over tempura, to change the subject. It’s silly, but it is nice to be silly, when so much of our lives is decidedly not. We’d just like to be present, we decide. It’s not about doing more, or wanting more. It’s about trying to soak in the entirety of what we’ve already built, together.

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Cinderella Mode

I'm in Miami for a conference, a word that makes it sound boring. I'm in Miami for a *book festival*, and it's even more fun than I expected. There are cocktails right on the water to welcome us, a beautiful tote bag stuffed with goodies. The panelist greenroom has a chef cooking meals all day. This is the kind of event I barely let myself daydream about when I first started writing in earnest. Yes, obviously the writing is its own reward, but this platter of deviled eggs is not going to eat itself. More crucially, I did not have to make them.

When I get back to the hotel room at the end of day one, I throw myself right into the middle of the bed and fan my limbs out. I wave them around, savoring the cool, clean, freshly laundered sheets. I mosey over to the pristine bathroom, where everything is exactly where I left it, and use a fluffy washcloth to wipe the day off my face. I use another to remove my eye makeup.

I talk plenty about the many things I love when I'm traveling. The reprieve from duties, the quiet, the exercising of free will. I'm taking these first tentative steps toward examining my relationship to responsibility, and that load already feels lighter. Getting away feels like less urgent a need, but as newly relaxed as I am about spending so much time around my family, one area of dread remains. "I'm living in the before-times," I used to say when I called from far away. Trips like the ones to Rome and London, where I communed with the ghost of my former self and enjoyed it. At some point, that has turned into "I wish you guys could be here with me," and I mean it. Because the heavy load I'm anticipating isn't just about the mom stuff anymore. It's about the keeping of the house.

"It feels like you would exert yourself over rote domesticity," says my friend Youngna when I complain about housekeeping-type things. I chew on this for weeks before understanding that I might have kind of a tortured relationship with housekeeping. Sure, I love to cook, and I love a clean, organized, peaceful home, but the work involved in getting it there is not satisfying to me. I don't identify when my writer friends say they love to

procrastinate by getting the sink clean, or whatever. I would so much rather be daydreaming, or hanging out. I cleaned our family home for my allowance as a child, but my room was a mess, and organization of a living space is not my strong suit. During the pandemic lockdown, I was shocked to find that my husband, who had to work from home for the first time ever, actually loves to clean, and is great at it. He polished the kitchen to a sparkle, and happily wandered around with the vacuum. You should see him organize the fridge. It's a cosmic joke, then, that I should be the one mostly at home, staring at all the things that need to be done, absolutely allergic to doing any of it.

But in Miami, as I moisturize, with a big shiny grin on my face, I remember how I used to loathe hotels. The click-clacking across a giant, sterile lobby. The sameness of every room. The forced obsequiousness of hotel staff. It used to make me uncomfortable, but now I look around this room—nothing extraordinary, just a well-run Marriott—and I understand why it makes me feel at peace. It's the presence of clean, calm surroundings that I have to put absolutely no thought or effort into to keep clean or calm.

I think about something my friend Ira once said. She's an author and historian, and the mother of two young women. We met at a book festival, where she was impeccably dressed and coiffed. She was the kind of person so stylish and poised that I couldn't help but wonder out loud how she did it all. She laughed. "Well, it's back to Cinderella mode after this," she told me. "I'll just go home and put on my apron . . . you know how it is." I nodded, and we flung ourselves, once more, into the ball. Her phrasing echoes through my head as I swan around my entirely average hotel room in Miami, curling my eyelashes in preparation for the final ball, still grinning at the pristine room that requires no labor of me.

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My first morning back home is exactly as expected. The kids are up at their standard 5:50, one shining her unicorn nightlight in my face, the other with his e-reader turned all the way up, inspecting his dad's level of wakefulness (zero). The sun is still forty-eight minutes from rising. The six-year-old won't let me out of her sight, and the tween has colonized half of our room as his own. My husband observes that I don't seem exactly refreshed, and I laugh, because I'm just clocking back into The Being of Three People. It is

a job from which I might never retire, but its load feels much lighter, in no small part thanks to the breaks I'm able to take.

As Rodney and the kids leave to seize their days, I look around at what needs to be done before I approach mine. I remember when the mess used to be actual filth. The dishes, baby bottles, the food flung on the ground, endless piles of laundry, spills and stains. Since the kids were tiny, we've been hugely grateful to our cleaning lady, Nathaly. We tidy before she comes, because tidying up is our own responsibility. But even though the weekly deep clean is a lifesaver, it doesn't prevent stuff from moving mysteriously all around the house. The challenge is no longer crumbs or dust, more *Why is there a blank in the blank*, as I refer to it. I walk through the house with my morning coffee at 7:45, making a mental checklist: Hair ties in my shoes. Ribbons on the stairs. Books on the . . . everything. Uno in the fridge. A wand on the toilet. A bracelet on the shelf. Three stuffies having a tea party around my hairbrush, in the middle of my bedroom. And that's not all.

My programming, wherever it came from, would have me pick everything up and put it all back where it needs to go. Then it would have me do the dishes and run the dishwasher and make sure the house is straightened up before I sit down to work. I'd tell myself I need a clear field of vision to write, that I can't sit down and create anything until my surroundings have been dealt with. This urge acts in contrast with the truth, which is I need as many hours today as I can squeeze in before pickup. *Still, a good mom should* . . . And that's when I know to stop myself. There's that pesky *should* again. What do I *want*? I *want* to go straight to work. I consider the significant privilege of not even having to change my clothes or leave my house to do so. I take off my dishwashing gloves, walk past the mess, and march directly to my office nook, where I close the door.

And then I'm writing! It feels defiant, and I'm proud of myself. In this Cinderella analogy, I've ripped off my apron and run away to the . . . Well, the writing nook is not the ball. The writing nook is whatever Cinderella would do if she had time for activities that made her happy, and for which she could also invoice. There remain times that day when my heart races, and I feel a little ill at what lies in wait. I run downstairs to grab lunch and force myself to ignore how everything looks. A well-run Marriott, my house is not. I'm mad at myself for even being pulled toward the mess. I'm

additionally annoyed that I've allowed myself to fall into this role, that I spend so much time sighing about the drudgery of it all. I don't even have an evil stepmother to blame for my oppression. It's not Rodney or the kids. It's obviously me. The other people in my house are perfectly fine with a baseline level of disarray. I don't think it causes them this creeping unease.

Halfway through the morning, in a good groove with work, I sneak out to my bathroom and do my morning routine. I force myself to see through the hairbrush and stuffies that have moved, somehow, to the sink. I make my way past a row of tiny stones in the hallway, and do not stop before I get back to my office nook and close the door again. I recognize, each time I walk by the mess, that I'm fighting some kind of allergy to putting off tasks. I read about the scientific term for this, "precrastination." It involves undertaking a task immediately—the moment the task is revealed—instead of putting it off for later. Psychologists believe that chronic precrastinators want to get tasks crossed off their lists to decrease mental load and free up working memory. This also means that these tasks aren't thought through and are approached in a haphazard way, which causes more stress.

I bristle against this description for about thirty seconds—*I do a pretty good job!*—before remembering the one time my son watched me tidy up the living room in a huff.

"Mom, are you just going to pick up each thing at a time?" he said, hesitant. Watching me seemed to be causing him physical pain. "You've gone to, like, every place in the house. It's crazy."

"Yeah, well, this is how I keep from spiraling into chaos," I told him.

He calmly collected everything in the room and put it on the dining table. "You can sort it by room," he said. "And then you're just taking one trip to each room."

I was flabbergasted. Why had I never figured this out? More important, if he knew how to do it, why wasn't I asking him to? Obviously, I immediately shook that thought out of my head and forgot about it, which is why I'm still in this mess.

I'm wondering if maybe I should listen to him more often, because this reminds me of another conversation I recently had with him, in which I asked how he planned to prepare for an upcoming quiz. "That's a problem for next week," he said. I laughed at this, but now he inspires a change in how I evaluate my own workload. As emails hit my inbox, as problems pop

up outside of the work I should prioritize, I find this a useful binary. *Is this a problem for right now, or a problem for later?* I find, in most cases, that the answer is "later." I take this approach a step further by working the "laters" into my calendar. When I've identified a problem, I pick a time frame to solve it—a calendar entry that tells me specifically when I should deal with it. "Replenish sunscreen" I schedule for two weeks out, after a deadline. "Fill out school forms." Once they're scheduled, the weight lifts, and the space in my mind clears so that I can actually turn my full mind to work—well, the part that isn't preoccupied with the mess of the house. It's a small miracle.

And yet, the impulse for an immediate tidy still zaps me every time I walk downstairs. My son may have been the adorable, helpful mouse of my story, but I'm still going to have to rescue myself, because the man who usually plays my prince is at work for the next eight hours. As I refill a water bottle, I look around the house and pretend that I'm my husband. He's not a messy person, but a mess doesn't drive him to distraction the way it does me. "This'll take ten minutes," he says, looking around at the wreckage at the end of a long weekend with the kids. "No biggie—we'll do it later." I wish I could borrow an ounce of his chill. Then I'm reminded of the thing he says most often, the thing I have found it difficult to incorporate. "You don't have to do any of it," he says. "Just wait for me." He's puzzled, constantly trying to pull me out of the cinders by calmly asking why we can't just clean them all up together at the end of the day. Why haven't I really listened before? *I don't have to do any of it*, I repeat, and walk back upstairs.

I walk past the mess one final time to go pick up the kids. When I've brought them home, I switch into Mom mode, making dinner, conducting the domestic symphony. I notice that I'm unusually unperturbed by it. Unharried. I'm not thinking about the unfinished work I wish I had gotten to, because I got to all of it by limiting my household duties to this one hour today. Right now, after school, is an hour when I'm not alone, and the others can pitch in on upkeep. I can't believe it can be this simple. I put in my mental calendar, "5–6 p.m. house reset." Repeat daily. Send calendar invite. The kids put away their stuff, I put some dishes out, we eat, and then there's plenty of time and energy to hang out on the couch and snuggle. I'm not as mad, I'm not as tired, and I got a full workday in. I should channel my son's voice—*that's a problem for next week*—more often.

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I wish I could say I am able to maintain this serenity forever, but I slip all the time. There are days, usually when I'm stretched thin in too many areas, where I walk through the house screaming, "WHY CAN NOTHING STAY WHERE IT'S SUPPOSED TO STAY??"

"Don't crash out, Mom," says my wise little son. "We're children. We use stuff."

I catch myself, remembering with a laugh the time my mother tried to tidy up a puzzle while my daughter was doing it. "What a mess," she mumbled, and I stopped her. "It's a puzzle. She does actually have to take the pieces out to use it." She was startled and laughed at herself. It's obviously much easier for me to spot this tendency in others, and not so easy to get in front of it in myself.

My daughter agrees with my son. "We're in the middle of something fun," she says.

I think back to when I walked through the house during that eerie week with the fires, and appreciate the life that these kids breathe into this big wooden box. Letting them be in the middle of something fun is the whole point.

I sigh, disappointed in myself, and banish my inner Evil Stepmother. "Okay—thanks for reminding me," I say. "Can we do a ten-minute tidy later?" They scurry off to finish their Magna Tiles castle, their spa-hotel-fort, whatever mess is accumulating this time. *Don't crash out, Mom,* I repeat to myself. A mantra.

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Borne on the East Wind

I’m about to hop on a long-awaited work call one Monday after lunch—not that I’ve eaten lunch—when I see my phone light up, and I sigh. It’s the school. This deep into cold-and-flu season, I’ve been reading their emails with one eye closed: a case of strep in the kindergarten class, influenza in fifth. I knew it was only a matter of time, and I email to reschedule my call. “Kids! It’s always something!” is the general idea. I hurry to the car to pick up my ailing daughter, and decide I might as well grab both children, because he can’t be far behind.

As I drive there, frazzled, I wonder what went wrong. Not with our immune systems, but our systems in general. I left office work almost a decade ago because I wanted my schedule to be more flexible for the children. Everything worked pretty well when my son started preschool, which was basically a daycare. With its extended hours, and his desire to be the first kid dropped off and the last one picked up, I could easily slot an entire day’s work into his absence. Having two kids in real school, however, has proven challenging to my professional schedule. The second I get into a good routine with my writing, there seems to be a half-day, or a call from the nurse, or a special presentation, or a concert to attend to, and it chips away at the hours I might need to finish a project, not to mention maintain the household. Work moves slowly, and the house is sort of falling apart—half of the buttons on the stove don’t work, all of our cupboards are stuffed with junk, and for two weeks I’ve been staring at a drawer face that fell off when my son slammed it shut, so I have to pull a little wooden nub if I want to get to the car keys or the tangled pile of random cords they sit next to. I understand that the fundamental miscalculation I’ve made in designing our childcare system is that it depends entirely on the kids being in school all day, every weekday, because theoretically that gives me the whole day to work. Also theoretically, I could end the workday satisfied with my product and look forward to picking them up and hang out with them after school. I could ask how their days were, and serve them a homemade meal.

Now the systems I have put in place, starry-eyed with optimism, are breaking down, and I have to admit our lives have become unmanageable.

Our middle schooler has an increasing number of activities outside of school that require chaperoning and driving. The little one has a diametrically (and geographically) opposed desire to play with her friends after school. I look at our family calendar and wonder how I'm meant to be in multiple places on multiple days of the week. I'm stretched thin and mentally exhausted from juggling the logistics, and Rodney, whose workload has only grown and who has never been able to pop away from his desk like I can, has been begging me to consider finding hired help. I resist. "I don't want help!" I say. "I want *us* to be able to do it." He points at the immense pile of work he owes—because we are both freelance, we're not turning down any potential paychecks this year, still reeling from the pandemic and a Writers Guild strike. I see what he foresees: the thing where I insist on taking on way more than one person can handle, and then get mad at *him* about it when I fall apart. Add to this gathering storm the long shadow of the fires, the election, and my accident, and there's already no getting around my mood, which is consistently bad.

I get my babies home. The illness is, somehow, Covid and influenza B at the same time. Everyone else in the house tumbles into it—except for me, because I'm too stubborn. The kids lie on the couch, alternating *Bluey* (her) and *The Simpsons* (him), while Rodney coughs (and types) in our bed. I somehow manage to use this as further proof that "help" wouldn't actually help. "We can't have strangers around the kids when they're sick!" I say. "They want their parents." Even when they're not sick, where am I going to find some magical woman who could just take over with no training, and do things the way I like them done? Someone loving, and trustworthy enough to drive the kids to things? We've had a handful of sitters over the years, and that's always been the part that makes me nervous. "I don't have time for a whole search," I tell Rodney, and he sighs. "It's something we can figure out together," he says.

Somehow, two weeks go by before I'm caught up on work again, and I finally text some friends. *I am ready to accept that I need help,* I say. *What you got?* My friend Annie mentions that her sitter wants to pick up more hours and could help us out three afternoons a week. She does school pickups and errands, and she's a good cook, she says. She used to be a preschool teacher, and she's calm and reliable. I'm intrigued. *I don't need her to cook,* I say, dismissing the idea outright. I love to do all that. Other than our grilled-cheese-and-Popsicle summer, I've cooked almost every

meal for my family since I started one. It's what my mother did for me. But at least the pickups and errands will shave off some travel time that I could use to work.

Hannah shows up on a Monday afternoon, tall, fresh-faced, and quiet, with a sweet smile. Like always, I have a hard time explaining what I might need help with. Honestly, I just want someone to read my mind, because the idea of downloading the list of tasks is too daunting.

She is not intimidated by the overwhelmed look on my face, and starts with some gentle prompts. "Should I see what needs to be used up in the fridge and make a soup?" she asks. "Is there anything you want me to prep for dinner? I could pop in some laundry while I'm cooking." I notice with relief that she's rattling off the inner monologue that I try to ignore while tending to my work.

I want to tell her I don't need any cooking done, but catch myself. It's just like me to beg for help and then not accept any when it shows up. So I say yes to it all. "Do . . . anything you want," I tell her, retreating to the office, and I force myself not to check back in. At four o'clock, while she's out for school pickup, I go downstairs and peek. Dinner is ready—a gorgeous-looking shepherd's pie and green salad. Laundry is done and folded, the kitchen is clean, and she's off to get the kids. I almost can't process that it's all happened with absolutely no input from me. I feel terrible, but terrible like a bank robber. I've gotten away with something exciting and dangerous. The kids dig into dinner that night and pronounce it delicious. "Did you make all this?" asks Rodney. I tell them Hannah did, and everyone is suitably impressed.

I want to call Annie and compare this sitter to Mary Poppins, but the comparison makes me hesitate. As a kid, I loved Mary Poppins, both the book and the film. Who wouldn't? She showed up, strict and entertaining, to delight the Banks children. I'm briefly reminded of Paddington, and a little embarrassed by my devotion to strange creatures who upend comfortable British households.

Mary Poppins's eccentricity and her magical outings would enchant any kid. But her creator, the writer P. L.Travers, also meant her book to poke fun at the Banks family for being distracted and unavailable. The men who made the movie ran with this conceit: Mary Poppins showed up to a household in chaos, where the dad worked long hours at a bank, only to

come home and be stern with his children, and the mother was sort of a rich airhead who couldn't handle them, and would rather throw herself wholeheartedly into the suffragette movement than into motherhood.

As an adult, reexamining the foundational text, it strikes me that the message is that I belong at home with the children. This sends me spiraling. *Do* I take my work too seriously? Am I some out-of-touch lady, hiring someone more competent to take over for a job I should be doing myself, but can't? It all feels so indulgent and neglectful.

I know I'm being crazy, and I know whose fault this is. So I call my mother and tell her she's ruined me, that I'll never be able to accept help in my life. I ask her why she never hired anyone to help her out. I mention that I vaguely remember seeing a pile of résumés, maybe when I was in middle school, and things would have been pretty busy around the house, with Dad working long hours at the hospital and Mum teaching. It must have been a lot to handle, but no help ever came. Not for an afternoon, not for an hour. "I thought I'd just do it myself," she says. "The options were all too young and too pretty," my dad yells in the background, grinning at his own joke. My mother is unusually quiet.

The problem, unfortunately, is that I remember absolutely loving my mother's constant presence. We were so close that even now, when I find a sweater she's left behind on her last visit, I can smell her on it, and as I make a mental note to get it back to her, my eyes well up with tears, because a part of me is plagued by the distance. I don't tell her this. It feels a little weird, even for me. I rifle through childhood memories and watch her bustling around, hear her singing, smell her cooking. There's hardly a memory where she's not within a few feet of me, until I leave for college. Her constant nearness, her obvious and obsessive devotion to my well-being, has always been how I code motherly affection. There's a part of me that believes—even as I know rationally that it can't be true—that any time I outsource an act of caring, any meals fed my children that I haven't made, any boo-boos attended to that I haven't kissed, somehow dilute my own love.

There is a hesitant, patient look my husband gives me when I'm explaining something like this, like I'm suggesting we move to a meringue house above the clouds. He gently asks me, in his way, to join him in the life that we actually live. To acknowledge, finally, that we need help, and

that I need to accept it. Unlike me, he's not torn apart by the idea of delegating things when we're busy. His working parents commuted into New York City from the suburbs, and hired a wonderful woman named Geraldine to be with the kids after school. An extra pair of hands. While it meant they didn't spend every waking second together, they have a close, loving relationship. He was raised in a family model where arranging for help didn't connote parental failure. There's still no rational argument that can change my mind, or tune out the voice in my head that won't let me accept sharing my parenting duties with nonparents. In an attempt to isolate this madness, I ask myself what the naysaying voice is actually going on about. *Think about how much you and your mother love each other,* it's saying. *Don't you want that with your own kids? Well, she showed you how.* I realize that I have a fear, however ridiculous, of veering in any way from the road map she laid out, because our relationship is so precious to me that veering from her path makes me fearful that I'm putting my bond with the kids at risk.

I turn to a few friends to ask about their experiences with their own mothers, and get a slew of hilarious responses back. So many women tell me stories of how useless their mothers were in the kitchen, or around the house. A precious few tell me their mothers were terrible cooks, but they've never had the heart to tell them, so they suffer through their meals, still. I almost can't believe the sweetness of this. The charade! My mother was such a great cook that if anything didn't work out, we all discussed why, in detail. These women all describe loving, cheerful parents, who doused them with affection in ways not necessarily tied to food or the home. All are close to them. I'm dumbstruck that, at forty-five, I'm understanding for the first time that there are so many other ways for parents to love. I know it's because I adore my own mother so much that it's difficult for me to imagine anyone else doing it right. I see, though, that I will have to start imagining what my own road map looks like, and Hannah seems the ideal catalyst.

When Hannah's back, on Thursday, I still don't have any tasks for her. She looks at the mess of toys and asks if she should get them organized. She flips through a few recipe books I've bookmarked. "Anything you've had your eye on?" she asks, and I point at a couple of things I haven't had the chance to get to. Once again, her slow-moving, quiet presence calms me. Once again, a bunch of food just appears in my kitchen. The old toys are donated to Goodwill, the broken ones discarded. On Friday she cuts up all

the fruit and veggies in the fridge to make them easier for the kids to grab, and leaves us with some soup, salads, and chicken to last us the weekend.

At first, I am astonished at how much she can get done in so little time, and then realize that I have never once stopped to think about the mental and physical energy I put into cooking almost every meal for four people over the course of the week. The meal plan I make every Sunday during ballet, with the shopping list. The prep I would have to remember to do in the middle of the day. The cooking I would have to do before pickup. I start to do the math. It takes Hannah five hours each day to do the meal prep and errands and pickups and laundry. That's fifteen hours a week. If school is about 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., that gives me 8:30 to 3:30 to work. That's thirty-five hours. When I was doing what Hannah now does, I could manage only a twenty-hour workweek. It's not until I actually sit down to calculate this that I realize that what I've been trying to do is not actually feasible for one person, especially as I'm supposed to be working full-time.

And the things she concocts, with her well-rested, one-job brain. Chicken salad! Sriracha mayo! A chipotle-yogurt salad dressing I crave for days. Shrimp tacos! Muffins, even, which I have never once made. She blends a whole bunch of spinach into a loaf of banana bread, thinking the color might be a fun surprise. She briefly worries that the kids might not eat it, but they jump with delight before wolfing it down. "She's a great baker," my daughter says. "Way better than you." Her brother's eyes apologize for her, but he clearly agrees with her, and then some: "This is even better than the store," he says. I tell Hannah this, and she beams.

This is so different from what we experienced with the last sitter we had tried out, months ago now. She was a supremely lovely person, but she and the kids never fell into this kind of appreciative rhythm. She also (understandably) had aspirations for things other than childcare and housework, and the children picked up on this. Maybe it's how I thought it would always be, with someone who didn't have an emotional attachment to the children.

One time, Hannah forgets to say goodbye as she leaves for the day, and my daughter bursts into tears. She wanted a parting hug. I thought this would break me, her obvious affection for someone who isn't me, but it makes me so happy that when I can't be around, she's hanging out with someone she really likes.

I’ve changed, too. I’m no longer the harried lady who shows up at pickup and throws them whatever snack I can scrounge together from my trunk. I’m ready to receive them on Hannah days, laptop put away, arms ready with a hug, teeth ready with a smile. I have twice as much energy, now that I’m not constantly switching between the house and the meal and the food and the kids and the job and the self-upkeep. I finally realize that I’ve been so focused on someone who can take care of the children that I never understood that I needed someone to take care of me, too.

Just after spring break, Hannah tells me that she’s thinking about going back to school, to work with children again, maybe study psychology. This is absolutely her calling, and I can see her flourishing in the field already. Still, I can’t ignore a little flutter of panic. I was hoping she’d stay around forever, even though I know the same fortunate wind that bore her here would take her away eventually. I thank her profusely. “You’re such a miracle,” I tell her. I don’t know how she will ever be replaced. After decades of everyone around me begging me to let go, I’m grateful she’s shown me what help I need, and how to accept it, because I never would have known to ask.

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IV

SPRING

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Another Green World

The first week of April brings us a Mercury so retrograde that I've almost given up. Except, like a fool, I am determined to pick up a prescription that I know will evade me. *I'm going to force one thing to work today,* I tell the universe, and to no one's surprise, my medication is inexplicably out of stock. I haven't eaten, so from there, I head to a café to grab a quick bite and find that the line stretches around the block—also inexplicable, as it's not that kind of place. Parking takes forever and, thanks to a bike festival, traffic is too jam-packed for me to leave again, so I'm trapped. It's one of those days, but after I get my food (forty minutes later), I brighten, because I see someone whose profile reminds me of my friend Jeff, who lived nearby. My smile slowly falters as I acknowledge why I'm in the area at all. Jeff died in January. In a few hours, I will be going to a celebration of his life.

We all gather on a Silver Lake hilltop. It is a much hotter day than I anticipated, and there's no shade, but the friends who organized the event have thoughtfully provided buckets of parasols. I grab one, and take it all in, this tableau of his Los Angeles existence. The very first wave of friends and I hug each other—we met in our twenties, as recent transplants. In January I looked up the earliest email I could find that mentioned Jeff, and saw that he was invited to a party at the house I shared with friends, where I was adamant we hold on to the tap for the thirty-five-dollar keg we had picked up at a grocery store near USC. "Do not lose the tap!" I warned everyone way too many times. "It cost four dollars and I want that money back." That's how long we've known each other.

Then come a wave of people Jeff met in his thirties, folded into his weekly game nights and poker nights, right around when I had my kids, moved farther away, and could no longer keep his nocturnal hours. "Come after bedtime," he'd say, childless, not understanding I'd be asleep by eight. I laughed off his invites, and that's when our relationship shifted to seeing each other for lunch a few times a year. In the meantime, he collected all of these other, nighttime friends.

A long list of loved ones—he had so many—give speeches, which pierce holes in me and let the tears out. The news was so sudden back in January, and the grief was put on hold while we dealt with the fires and their aftermath. I didn't have a moment to absorb any of it then, but now I lean on a friend's shoulder, heavy with sadness. Someone gently asks me to put down my parasol so she can see the speakers. By now the sun is so high it burns my head, but a little pain feels right. Poker pals and family alike joke about Jeff's affinity for rules, his endless thirst for knowledge, his independent filmmaking spirit, the people he sought out, the love and care he poured into each of his friendships. His life looked nothing like the mental vision anyone might have of a person who died by suicide. We look around at one another in a daze, the hundreds of people who adored him, now at a party where its host has not shown up. "It makes no sense," said everyone afterward, drinks in hand.

Jeff was comically obsessed with rules—thus the poker and the game nights, and the rec-league basketball. One friend tells a story of a league that Jeff thought wasn't being well run. He took over the emails, ran comms for a while, and eventually decided who should stay and who should go. People were forever being banned from these leagues, or the games, for fouling too much, or violating one of the rules. You'd think this would be off-putting, but it wasn't—it was a strangely adorable piece of him. Also adorable is the way one friend says that spending the day with Jeff meant tagging along to whatever activities *he* wanted to do with you, having a perfect lunch, and seeing where he wanted to take the day. Everyone laughs in memory of this, calling him a consummate host, but I'm starting to make some connections with Jeff, ones I haven't thought about before.

My own son is prone to categorizing kid-type events as either "well organized" or "badly organized." If they're well organized, he next asks if I was in charge. Kids notice everything. Like the fact that I, too take irrational comfort in order and rules. I gather information and set up structures in my mind to inoculate me from any uncertainty. My friends and family also code as generous the way I'm always organizing a plan—or hijacking one I don't agree with—and inviting them along. My house is open to any and all guests—it's that kind of house—but underneath it is an ungenerous impulse: the desire to control the experience. If there aren't any variables left to chance—the food, the drink, the music, the location, the company—then I can't be disappointed. The fact that other people enjoy it

is a bonus. When everyone has a nice time, I can feel secure in the fact that they like me, and they'll want to come back. I can't ascribe this same intention to Jeff—that would be an overreach of projection—but I find myself wishing, not for the first or last time, that he were still here to ask about it.

Another friend, filled with wonder, tells us of a three-hour conversation he had with Jeff about the nature of quantum physics. This friend couldn't believe the level of detail Jeff was able to pull together about the nature of the cosmos. "He knew everything about everything," repeats friend after friend, and I sigh. Because I, too, am a know-it-all. The kind of kid who memorized the Trivial Pursuit cards in middle school and never lost a game again. Like Jeff, I loved facts, and found them comforting. Facts were real. Facts were impressive to adults. Kids didn't love them, but as I grew up, I could spin out a strand of surprising facts to delight my friends. I now wish I could discreetly elbow Jeff to ask if he is making half of it up, because when I'm speechifying, I am. Jeff had a cadence to his voice, a speed and self-assuredness, that made you feel like he was completely certain about what he was saying. This, too, I recognize in myself. "You sound so sure of yourself," says my husband sometimes, "that it takes me a while to understand you don't know what you're talking about." I say, "It's just my tone of voice." It was Jeff's, too, and it's something we giggled about: our shared habit of presenting conjecture as fact.

Why I do this, I don't know. Maybe there was a time before I felt like I had to know everything, but then I had an eventful childhood. It's not a surprise that I sought comfort in facts, because they were consistent. I started gathering information at an early age—reading encyclopedias, or those multipart series on how things worked—and sharing it with people around me. The self-assured tone came from having a little brother under my wing, one whom I felt I had to reassure and protect during difficult times. The tone my husband speaks of is a take-charge, big-sibling tone, which is maybe only detectable by other take-charge big siblings. It's the tone I use when everything around me is uncertain, and someone needs to take charge. It's the tone I use to make people trust me, to make them feel safe. As Jeff's younger brother and his mother speak, his mother mentions how self-sufficient he was, says, "He never wanted to be a burden on anyone." I know how that feels, and regret that I never got to tell him that. I imagine, briefly, a little boy, not unlike strange little me. A little boy who

was praised over and over again for being brilliant and capable, and so self-sufficient that, once he was an adult, to lean on anyone felt like a failure. Whether or not this was his experience—and I wish more than anything that I could find out—I suspect this is part of why we got along.

So many people that day refer to him hanging out in heaven with his beloved dog, getting the place ready for the rest of us. “It’s just like him to want to host,” jokes one of his friends, as the sun sets. I don’t believe in heaven, and I find no comfort in this, and feel a wave of anger. I know he must have been in unbearable pain, but I find it difficult not to be frustrated by what feels like the sheer . . . *petulance* of his act. Although I know “petulance” is far too harsh a word. As in his life, we still forgive him everything, because he was so radiant with love. The dissonance is almost too much to bear, as I look around at the grieving crowd. I don’t say this out loud, but I know what everyone is thinking: We wish Jeff were here so we could kill him.

I can’t guess what Jeff was thinking in his final days. I’m apprised of texts, and final conversations with his closest friends. “Why did he do it?” everyone asks. *To impose order on a situation he couldn’t control,* I want to guess. At any cost. Unfortunately, I’m pulling from my own brushes with suicidal ideation, at fourteen and eighteen. When I was that teenage girl sealed in a room, I felt like my sadness would suck me into chaos, and my lack of agency at that age destabilized me even further. I didn’t have the experience to understand that the pain would pass, that uncertainty was part of life, that I wouldn’t always feel this way. This is still something I’m actively learning and relearning. In the moment, I thought the only way to regain control—to stabilize the emotional chaos of my life—would be to opt out entirely. I don’t know why Jeff did what he did; he was dealing with a swirl of circumstances completely his own. But I hate to admit that I might understand the impulse.

In the days after, I can feel my brain seeking a hold. It’s already trying to make order of this, to avoid a chaos spiral. It already thinks there was something I could have done. *If only we had hung out more, and I had shared these feelings,* I think. *Would he have changed?* I’m immediately annoyed with myself. It’s just like me to think I could have controlled any of it, I think. It’s just like me to start analyzing the situation as if it were a test case, the idea that if I can just figure it out, I can avoid it happening to

my other friends. I've already started making a mental list of people I haven't seen in a while, and I realize that I'm trying to make sure they don't die. *Don't die,* I text my friend Andrea. *Not until I see you.* This soothes me somewhat, but my brain is not yet satisfied. Even if it can't make sense of what happened, it's hoping to turn it into a neat lesson moving forward. But not everything is a teachable moment. Some things are just sad. Most of what I can take away from this situation was learned when I gave birth to two creatures who yanked me into a sea of uncertainty. My entire parenting experience has been a journey in understanding that the facts don't matter, and I can't control anything.

I scribble my tumbling thoughts incoherently into my journal to try to make sense of them, and it doesn't help at all. "Just . . . don't DO that," I tell my husband, as I put the notebook away. My voice is laced with rage. "Don't you ever, ever do that. I don't care what happens. Don't leave me with that." He makes me promise the same. I go to bed so angry at Jeff, and so filled with regret, and, God, I wish he were here so I could yell at him. Later I have a dream that I'm at Jeff's house, poking through his bookshelves and trying to figure out what to take, to remember him by. I pull a slim volume out, poetry, I think, and slip it into my pocket. Jeff pops around the doorframe, pretending to be mad at me for stealing a book. I'm so relieved to see his face, even if it's scowling. He instantly switches to telling me he's just kidding—of course I can have it; he doesn't even need to know what it was. I give him a big hug and hold him for an uncomfortably long time. Even in my dream logic, I know that if I let go, I won't get him back.

In the days after, it's the friends thing that stays with me. I think of the tears and frustration reflected in the faces of all those who loved him. It's a shame he can't feel it, but it makes me wonder. Most notable was the fact that there were hundreds of people there, and they were all close, personal friends. Jeff had had deep conversations with them about life, and kept their friendships afloat with hangs and text and check-ins and phone calls. "Who does that?" laughed one of his friends. *I do*, I thought. I have an automated process in my brain that pops names up into my head, like little Post-it notes, when I haven't heard from them in a while. "Neha!" it will say. Or "Jen Z." Without thinking it through too much, I touch base with them. It's not something I even have to think about.

“He never asked for anything in return,” said one of Jeff’s friends, in a speech. “He gave and gave, and you gave back what you wanted to give.” This is so familiar to me, the obsessive nurturing of close friendships, with so little expected in return. For me, it came from the profound loneliness of moving so much. It’s a thirst that can never be quenched, the loneliness, because I feel like there’s no one who truly understands me. Now sometimes the checking in seems like a lot of work, and in my moments of self-pity it feels very one-sided. I start to wonder if the constant check-ins are an anxiety response that keeps my environment in order. Not only because I’m worried about anything happening to people—a fear that this incident with Jeff has exacerbated—but because, deep down, I’m worried that if I stop texting and checking in, my relationships will evaporate. I’m worried my friendships are kept afloat only through the constant work that I put in.

I think back to my fortieth birthday party, when people said so many nice things about me that I froze, and I willed it to end. I compared it to being alive at my own wake. It should have been enjoyable but I found it excruciating, and I thought I knew why. I looked around at this room of friends who were telling me they loved me, and I couldn’t accept or absorb that this might be true. My specific madness here is the voice that tells me that we are only friends because I tricked them into it. *Would anyone care if I stopped?* I ask myself idly, periodically. I wonder what would happen if I decide not to be the glue, if I let myself fall apart, if I ignore the impulse to touch base with everyone all the time. Will everyone leave me? Or will they surprise me? I haven’t been brave enough to find out.

Something feels different this week. I know, rationally, that I couldn’t have done anything to save Jeff, but I wish I had handled our friendship with more care. We were in frequent enough contact, but I would have loved for that contact to be more meaningful. Then I think about how many of my “friendships” are mostly conducted via reciprocal-text check-in, and it saddens me. I’ve been turning Jeff’s death over and over in my mind, with no better understanding of what just happened, and I realize I never will. I only have my own experiences with tumult and depression, and it’s irresponsible and, frankly, demented to try to lay it over anyone else’s experience. There is no order I can impose on the chaos of what’s just happened.

One morning, about a week after the event, I open up my journal to examine my scribble-scrabbled notes once again. My handwriting is still mostly illegible, but If I close my eyes I can come up with a sense memory of how it felt to be writing it. It felt like I was trying to sort out a geometric proof and was frustrated that it didn't yet make sense. And then I yelled at my husband. It was that action that makes me understand that I want to turn my energy to the present. I feel a new sense of clarity and urgency about what I want my friendships to feel like in the future. Who do I miss the most, how can I have real conversations with them, on the phone, in person? Who can I visit, to whose kids do I need to introduce my own kids? It's not the hundreds of people on iMessage. It's not acquaintances in my DMs. It's a short, short list of the people who love me most—the people in whose love I feel most secure. *They* understand me, and I haven't had nearly enough quality time with them to be reminded of how deeply. I want an opportunity to hold each one of them so tightly and for so long that it becomes a little weird. I can see their faces now, a little scared but also loving it, as they always have. "Fewer, deeper friendships in 2025," I tell some friends, later that day. "Expect more phone calls. You've all been warned."

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Delayed-Onset Muscle Soreness

When I see people on their morning jogs, hale and hearty and minding their own business, I violently curse them in my mind. *Who do they think they are* is the general idea, but sometimes I get more specific. I saw a man recently, galloping down the street with a big, easy grin on his face, head spinning hither and yon as he took in the neighborhood's fresh blooms. I grimaced, deciding he was running "too tall." I swear I'm not usually this mean, but runners in their element do something to me. The run club outside of the sneaker store? *They need real friends,* says a goblin in my head. The shirtless parade of men on the beach path? *Ughhhhh.* This is when I catch myself, for if I can't enjoy a shirtless parade of men cheerfully running alongside the Pacific Ocean, the compass of my humanity is broken.

It doesn't take long to figure out what is really going on, because an unkind thought doesn't stand up to the slightest scrutiny. Before I even finish asking myself why I'm so annoyed by runners, I know the answer: because I ran in high school. I actually loved running in high school. I stopped, in part, because from college on, my life became so much about my mind—my comfort zone—that I welcomed the opportunity to shed my body, this thing that teen me found so burdensome and complicated. Without anyone reminding me I should move, I could mostly ignore my corporeal form. In the years when I didn't run regularly, I dreamed all night that I was running for miles and miles, only to wake up sad that it was over. In the decades since, I have made so many excuses not to run. It might damage my knees, or I can't find the time. I can't say I ever thought of myself as a real runner. I discovered running because I needed a sport for my college application, and the one time I tried playing tennis, I tripped over the net and scraped my knees and elbows. I was that much of a hazard. Running had so few moving parts. It was so streamlined and simple, with no equipment other than my shoes. I found this elegant. Still, I just barely tolerated track season until I could get back to my real life. Bookish little weirdos should be allowed to live a life of the mind, I thought, back when I thought I knew everything.

Exercise, or even tending to the body in any consistent way, has never meshed with my sense of self, but now I'm middle-aged, and I groan at the doctor and my exercise-loving husband when they encourage me to leave my mind sometimes, if only to preserve the casing around it. "I'm not going to wear a special outfit to drive to a special room to pay someone to yell at me," I say, again (always?) a surly teenager. I cannot go for one more godforsaken hike. The walks around here are STILL BORING ME. I will not ride a stationary bicycle to nowhere. I will not train with a chipper "macro" enthusiast. I will not sweat onto a rubber mat in a stinky room.

While I'm troubled by my latent rage at the runners, I know it is pure jealousy. Unlike the hikes or the boring walks, I don't hate it. I *miss* it. I'd love to move like that again. The run club looks fun. I could even possibly learn to appreciate the shirtless men, although it might require consistent exposure. But, usually, when something annoys me, it's a signal that I should go get it for myself. I'm irritable after an acquaintance's work announcement? I should apply for something like that, too. Vacation photos making me mad? Time to plan my own trip. But my jealousy here hides a drop of frustration and despair, and as I walk around the neighborhood—still dissatisfied—I realize that I believe running is gone from my life forever.

I've never stopped to think how much fear I have around running. Part of it is a fear of my body, which has, as previously discussed, never really been my friend. When I watch my daughter walk through a crowd for her first day of gymnastics, head held high, ponytail bobbing, I notice that she's somehow entirely comfortable in a room packed with people doing flips and backbends. She's only just a cartwheel enthusiast for now, but I can tell she feels confident that she'll join the others soon. I am in awe. The relationship she has with her body, the confidence that it will do what she wants it to do, and she will enjoy the journey and the results, is one I never cultivated. I sorely regret that.

I have somehow convinced myself that it's too late for me to become more physically active. I've absorbed the constant media messaging that I'm atrophying. At forty-five, I click nervously past headlines saying my muscle is dissolving, my bones are turning to dust, my cartilage is going brittle or sticky—maybe both? I'm terrified that any activity I partake in is at least futile, and likely damaging. *How do you know?* says a newly

hopeful, nongoblin voice. It's the same voice that cheers me on when I take on a work or parenting task that seems impossible. I wonder why up till now she's been entirely silent on the physical-fitness front. Of course, I make plenty of professional leaps all the time, I tell myself, and even when they're hard, they pay off. Maybe this could be the same.

My brain—still a dear friend, unlike my body—is limber and flexible, and it didn't happen overnight. It was because I set goals, and started small, and worked at them. Now I'm going to try this approach on something that isn't a language or a job skill. I connect with a few friends who have casually integrated running into their exercise routines—they are former dorks and women of letters like myself, and are un-annoying, even to me. They all say the same thing: that their moods are so much better, their bodies so much stronger. They're also, crucially, in their forties. They say another thing, too: that they go slower than I could ever imagine. "Anything faster than walking is running," says one. Finally, my friend Anja posts a little something about her treadmill routine. It's imperfect, she says, but she gets on for twenty minutes whenever she can during the day, and she's noticeably happier, she says. This sounds like a manageable baby step, and I thank her for the nudge.

So I set my goal—I'd like to be able to run a few miles without being winded or sore, and see how it goes. I print out the now-ubiquitous Couch to 5k program, which starts almost laughably slow but promises to minimize injury in the on-ramp to proper running. The first day is a minute of running, followed by a minute and a half of walking. It feels absurd to do this for a twenty-minute cycle, but I also feel elated immediately after, and for most of the day. I'm not sure I've felt an endorphin in decades, to be honest, and I get what the fuss is about. I choose to call each workout a run, even though they're more run-walks. Over time, they do actually get more runlike, and I get giddier about it. My lungs and legs already feel stronger in week three. I'm amazed that my body can still do this, then read that the inventor, a runner, created the program for his mother, who was in her fifties, with the express idea of gradual growth and injury prevention. I kick myself for not having tried it before.

Then comes week four, when I wake up with an ache in my shins and a telltale twinge in my right hip. I developed sciatica when pregnant with my first child, twelve years ago now, and it still likes to act up. *That's it,* says

the goblin. *It's over for you—lie back down with a book.* But I don't entirely trust the goblin anymore. I do my stretches uneasily—this hurts, too, but they must be good for me, right? Or am I injuring myself somehow? How would I even know the difference? I remember my Achilles injury from last summer, which took me out for months. I rub my shoulder and my neck, still sore from my car accident almost six months ago. I despair that this is always going to be my relationship to my body—the second I try to enjoy exercising, the wax on my wings melts and I hurtle down to reality.

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Thankfully I'm getting awfully good at sorting through the voices in my head—there are so many, once I start noticing them—and I don't think the goblin wants the best for me. When I walk into the dentist's office later that day to deal with a sensitive tooth, he helps me understand something. Almost apologetically, he looks up from the tooth that's been hurting me after he bonded it. I can barely eat or drink anything that isn't the temperature of my body, without a shooting pain in my bicuspid, and he tells me nothing's actually wrong. "Some people just feel things more," he says. I don't totally understand what he's saying. I ask what I'm supposed to do about it, and he tells me Sensodyne and time. I ask him how long it will take, and he shrugs. "Everyone's relationship to pain is different," he tells me. Usually something like this hurts people for a day or two. For me, it's been three weeks.

I don't realize until that moment that I might have an unusual relationship to pain. I have had a normal pain history, I think—the odd sprained ankle here, the bout of excruciating stomach pain there—and I really didn't make too much of a fuss about it when it befell me. When I call my friend Amina —one of the bookish runners—about my shin pain, she stops me midsentence.

"Are you one of those immigrants who won't take an Advil when you have a headache?" she (an immigrant) asks.

I just deal, I tell her.

"Why?" she asks me impatiently. "What is your discomfort winning you? You don't have to tolerate discomfort. You can just . . . be comfortable."

This doesn’t exactly help my shins, but it makes me wonder when I was conditioned to believe that acknowledging my pain, or doing anything about it, was a character flaw.

Then I remember the summer I was nine. We were in India, and I had another incapacitating toothache. My great-aunt had died suddenly, tragically, and my mother—the eldest in our extended family—was dealing with the fallout, so I kept quiet about the pain. It had been a heavy year, with trouble in our homeland of Kashmir and our entire community scattering across the globe. I knew instinctively, even then, that I would just have to wait it out in silence. I think, also, of all of the women in my family, unstoppable until a *do’ed* took them to bed. Women simply isolated until it was over, and then went back to their business. So, like my foremothers, this is how I’ve dealt with pain, even if it’s excruciating. As something to tolerate alone, quietly, until it’s gone.

The more I read, and talk to therapist friends, the more I understand the loop I’m trapped in that’s holding me back from more physical activity. The reason I’ve had to learn the ins and outs of my brain so well is that I learned, in my time in therapy, that it’s often trying to trick me. It turns out my perception does not always match reality. One of the ways it tries to trick me, thanks to a history of adverse childhood experiences, is that it is on high alert for any and all stimuli, because it has conveniently wired itself to think I’m constantly in danger. I used to joke that I could hear my kids breathe from across the house, but that’s almost accurate. I can hear a sneeze through a closed door. A small change in temperature, and I’m freezing. Now I think about when my babies were small, and they’d stand on my feet, and I’d want to shriek in pain. You’d think they were stabbing me with hot pokers. I’m only realizing now that that probably wasn’t standard.

My thoughts turn to my stomach, which is finally feeling better, and the hypnotherapy app that taught me to dial down my pain. I can’t believe I never connected the dots. Have I always been like this? I’ve laughingly called them my princess-and-the-pea tendencies, but my pain response—it’s called hyperalgesia—is wildly disruptive, and only getting worse, as I attempt to build some strength and flexibility. A standard amount of exercise pain that would register as normal to anyone else sets off alarm bells in my brain, and I freeze, frightened and incapacitated. My worry

brain piles up worst-case scenarios. I speak to a therapist friend about this, and I can hear her nodding on the phone as she tells me that a hypervigilant brain can't tell what is a normal level of pain and what is danger pain, so it codes everything as a screaming alarm. This makes stress and anxiety levels go up and can impede progress in both fitness and healing.

Then I think about the Sensodyne, which definitely has been helping my sore tooth, and I start to wonder what the equivalent is for my hips and shins. What can I do to make myself more comfortable, instead of sitting here, scared, waiting for the pain to pass? I share this with my husband, who is thrilled I'm asking for help, and offers me some stretches for my wonky hip. I'm wary of the internet, but there are corners that I still find useful, and running enthusiasts have a robust presence on Reddit. They help me add a few more daily stretches and leg circles. I make sure I'm landing on the ball of my foot, taking short strides, and landing with my feet under, not in front of me. I call my doctor and ask what else I should do long-term. She says I can go to physical therapy for injury prevention. *Prevention!* The terrified nerd in me is delighted, and all I had to do was share my pain and ask for help. As I talk to more experts, and incorporate their tips, the pain starts to ease, and I gently enter week six really running, and almost pain-free.

Of course no physical conditioning will be entirely without pain, as my muscles microtear and build, so the real challenge is my overactive, ridiculous brain, which is still nervous during and after every run, coding any twinge as potential catastrophe. I think back to all the pain I've suffered this year. My foot, my neck, my back. My friend Bryna, who was a professional dancer with Alvin Ailey for many years and knows things about bodies, tells me that an injury likely wouldn't be eased by a simple stretch: "If it goes away, that's good." I repeat this like a mantra as I do my stretches, willing my brain to take note.

The goblin lingers, making me nervous, and I'm not sure how to drown her out. Then my friend Julia, another bookish runner, says she hates running but it makes her feel great, so she talks to herself the entire time she's running. She interviews herself in her head, sometimes getting agitated at her own questions, or her own answers. I love the idea of her tramping through Oakland fighting with herself. I'm not fluent enough of a runner yet to drift off into my own thoughts; I'm still working my way up to

comfortably getting a few miles in. I run at a glacial pace, just above a walk, as instructed. I think you can tell from my face that I'm not used to it, and that I'm worried about hurting myself. I probably look like I shouldn't be doing it at all, nothing like that too-tall man galloping through the flowers. But when I think about what I need to hear, I put on a strangely cheerful voice, which I realize drowns out the goblin of self-doubt. It sounds a lot like the pep talk I gave myself walking around London, with my injured, tingly arm. It sounds like what I might have wanted to hear if I had shared my toothache with anyone. *You're okay—we'll keep you safe,* I tell my knees when I start to tire. *You're doing great!* I tell my hip, adjusting my stride. *You got this—you're strong. I'll take care of you. Look what we can do.*

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Training Montage

I’m puttering around the kitchen, idly considering a shift to spring soups, when my mind lands on my fatal flaw. I’d like to say this is unusual, but ruminating while rummaging through the fridge (or showering, or running) might now be the most essential part of my writing process. This time, I’ve been thinking about the disconcerting year we’ve had so far in Los Angeles, with everyone’s lingering anxiety about the fires, and growing unease about a new administration. As always in times of uncertainty, our fridge has been bursting with hearty stews. One with kale and ham and potatoes was a big hit, if a little salty. (I should not have seasoned that broth; I should have trusted the cured meats to do that.) There was a shrimp and corn chowder I’m still thinking about. A classic broccoli and cheese. Or the turkey chili recipe I got from the supermarket deli counter. They were all making my mouth water a few weeks ago, but temperatures are starting to climb into the high sixties, and my body doesn’t want a dense bowl of meat at the end of a long, warm day.

Like most food cravings I have, though, this seasonal shift is annoyingly nonspecific. I know I want something brothy and spring-y. Something light and savory, but filling. I would never want to call a soup “hydrating,” or eat one that was described as such, but that’s kind of what I’m going for. I probably want some lemon in it, but only a little. Maybe some zest? No beans or lentils, light on the meat. I rifle through my produce, starting on a lemony chicken soup, trying to figure out how to conjure this.

The fatal flaw thing, though, was originally seeded by a phone call I got a couple of weeks prior to the soup situation. My mother called and told me I was on speaker. She had a smile in her voice, and I prepared myself to be entertained. She was in the car with her best friend, and she had a request on her friend’s behalf.

“Listen. Call Vikrom,” she said. Vikrom is her friend’s son.

“About what?” I asked, fully knowing what. He’d finished his surgery residency and had been dating a nice Indian girl in New York. They wanted me to fish around for when he was thinking about proposing. If he was not

thinking about proposing, I was to nudge him toward doing so. I had, without asking any follow-up questions, done this kind of thing a number of times before. I had had the same conversations with "kids" reluctant to go to grad school, or study something practical. I'm a Swiss Army knife of uncomfortable conversations.

Clearly I was feeling a shift in things before my soup-making experience, because I laughed at them outright. "I'm busy raising my own kids," I said. "But if you have something to say to your own, you should call them."

They were shocked into silence, and then sighed, instantly giving up. Bemused, they briefly talked about how stubborn I was, before hanging up on me in a fake huff. "*Yeh cheh varya badh, vaise*" were the last words I heard my mother say to her friend. "She's so obstinate, actually."

I could tell she was a little proud of me, though. The last time she was in my kitchen, back in January, we talked about a family issue, a cousin of hers in distress, and how she had made attempts to help. As the oldest of eleven cousins, most of their parents gone now, this has been her role for a long time. "But they're all adults now," I reminded her. Half of them are grandparents now. "It's hard not see them as babies," she said sadly, and I understand. It's hard not to want to fix it. I told her we were learning the same things at the same time. "Not helping . . . it feels like putting up a wall, doesn't it?" I said. It doesn't feel right or normal. When you've changed a diaper, or rocked a baby to sleep, or stayed up all night worried about a kid's toothache, or a partner's job woes, it feels like the only way you know to love. It's not easy to let people suffer, even if a part of you knows they can take care of themselves. When you've only known to bleed for your loved ones, it's hard to imagine doing it any other way. The way she worries about her cousins, all in their fifties and sixties now, is in the role of substitute matriarch, upgraded from everyone's big sister. I realize that if I don't pay close attention, I'll be cast along this path, too—not just with my cousins, but also with the extended Kashmiri community. Thus, the call about Vikrom.

I texted Vikrom immediately after the call, of course.

Our mothers called, I tell him. *One guess what they wanted me to talk to you about.*

You can tell them I had a revelation—now I see the light, he texted back.

We briefly discussed their fascinating belief that we were not currently thinking about our own lives.

Like, thanks for reminding me I have a life to live—otherwise I'm just eating snacks and waiting for direction, I texted him.

Mom 100% thinks I'm just eating snacks and waiting, wrote Vikrom, thirty-eight now. *And in fact, eating too many snacks.*

We laughed about this, and I took a small, big-sisterly delight in knowing that yeah, he was probably proposing soon, even if he didn't say as much. It also confirms, with extreme clarity, what my fatal flaw is, because we'd just been making fun of it: I love to take care of everything, and then get mad that no one else knows how to do anything. I've long suspected—at least since I started this journey—that I might be a significant contributor to my own problems, but now I see clearly that my prison is entirely of my own making.

In my defense, I do feel that I've made some progress on the household-tasks front, thanks to my Achilles injury over the summer. When I was immobile, I learned that the kids were immensely capable. Sure, sometimes they attempt a backslide. "Can you please get me some ice water?" they ask me, while I'm in the middle of cooking dinner. I feel my hands moving to wipe themselves on my apron, my autopilot going as I reach for a glass, and I stop myself, course-correct. I modulate my voice so that I'm not grumpy or critical. "I'm in the middle of something, but you've got this," I say. I'm only playacting for now, because I still feel the impulse to do it for them, and fear that if I don't, I'm being a mean mom. Every time I stand back a little, I see their confidence and pride grow. I see that I'm much less exhausted by day's end. I understand that it's good for all of us, and we stay the course.

If either of them is visibly upset, however, all my resolve crumbles, and this has been true ever since they were tiny. If their little lips wobble and their eyes well with tears, I come entirely undone. First, I worry that it's my fault. Then I'm also sad, then I'm upset that they're still sad, then I'm frazzled that nothing I'm doing is helping, then I'm mad at myself for never being able to handle a big feeling "correctly." We didn't *do* feelings, I tell my husband, panicked. No wonder I keep messing this up. These episodes create a tangled mess I haven't been able to figure our way through. This becomes a critical problem when, right before spring break, our tween son

becomes unusually glum for an extended period of time. My heart lives in my throat for weeks, seeing his slumped shoulders and teary eyes. We fight like we've never fought before, and I can't figure out how to get out of our endless, enervating dance. Finally, I recruit the help of a family therapist, who, over Zoom, wants to see how miserable he actually is. I sit next to him on our call as he talks through how awful he feels, about how I just don't understand. I'm trying not to react, but I'm sick to my stomach, my brain jumping around, wondering what I should do to make it stop.

I'm not looking forward to the follow-up call, and she shocks me.

"He'll be fine," she tells me. "But you need to work on your distress tolerance."

"Did you not see what I saw?" I ask. "He's in bad shape."

She pauses for a long time and then tells me, diplomatically, that I'm the problem. "None of this conflict will go away until you figure this out."

"I can't even begin to think of myself when he's this unhappy," I tell her. "I need to help him."

She tells me that I'm visibly depleted, and don't seem like myself. He's not going to feel safe and secure if I'm not a calm, steady presence, she emphasizes. I say I haven't been a calm or steady presence for weeks, because he's upset.

I ask her what the approach should be. "I think you should ignore it," she tells me, about his outbursts. He doesn't need further emotional validation, she continues. He gets plenty from me. He's supremely articulate about his feelings, and I'm supremely receptive and empathetic. "You're talking too much," she says, and he doesn't need that. He needs me to *be.* Be a grown-up, be calm, be there. I am trying to feel and process his feelings for him, and he'll bounce back faster if I don't treat him like a fragile object. "Once you're yourself again, something tells me it'll all balance out."

Ignoring his distress goes against every parenting instinct I have, but I try it. He launches into an impassioned fight with me one morning, something about the unfairness of who gets to choose the music in the car on the way to school. We have talked about this so much in the past that their chosen days are enshrined in a calendar on the fridge. Instead of walking him through it once again, validating the great unfairness of being a child, and slowly letting his big mood fill the house, taking over the morning and

leaching my spirit, I plaster a smile to my face. “We’re not going to get sucked into that,” I say cheerfully, and I start to unload the dishwasher. He shrugs and moves on, without escalating. He’s instantly fine, although my nerves jangle for a five-minute period. I feel the dawning realization, as I practice this a few more times over the next few days, that, once again, I have been doing my children a grave disservice.

“I was always told to meet them where they are, and empathize,” I say, confused, on a walk with my neighbor Caitlin. Then again, I guess being articulate about their feelings is not a problem my kids have. The problem they have sometimes is understanding that their feelings don’t take up the whole room, or that the feelings will end, or they can pull themselves through, or feelings can pass like the weather. These lessons—the ones they most need—aren’t the ones I’ve been reinforcing for them. In sitting with them, nodding along with their gloom and doom and constant sense of unfairness, have I helped create this cloud that never lifts? It might be time for a new approach.

I’m reminded of the time when the kids asked for their school drop-off song to be “Eye of the Tiger,” so I played it every day as we pulled up to the gates.

“I like this song because a tiger sings it,” said my daughter, then four. She bopped her head, staring out the window. Powering up for the day ahead.

“Should I tell her?” asked my son, then eight, trying hard not to blurt it out. I shook my head in warning and he nodded, as she continued: “It’s a girl tiger.”

Humming along to the song now, and similarly amped, I collate my thoughts into a file called “Family Happiness Binder,” because I am a dork. I think hard about the major areas of conflict in our house, and what I’ve been doing to feed into them. First off is the fact that I have been meting out screen-time privileges according to my convenience and, frankly, level of tiredness. Now I set up a simple expectations-and-rewards system, detailing the handful of things they need to check off to unlock a little screen time in the evening. They greet this with a strange amount of joy and stop asking for screens at weird times of the day, because they know a little bit is coming later. Arguments evaporate by half, almost immediately, and the expectations—morning and evening routines, hampers, piano, homework,

dishes in sink—are met mostly without complaint. When they do complain, I refer to the chart. It speaks for me. Win one.

Second, I notice how often they worry about little things, and how often I parrot, “Oh, yes, that’s very scary,” as I was taught to when they were toddlers. I don’t remember why I ever thought this was a good idea. I wonder if this keeps them frozen in their fears, which I should really be simply acknowledging and then coaching them through. My son, who’s been scared to go into the converted garage to get his blanket or a book at night, asks me to go grab something. “You’ve got this,” I tell him. “You’re scared of it, and you’re going to power through it, because you’re so brave. I’ll be right here.” He takes a breath and goes and gets it, and he’s never scared of that room again.

Then the last big area—boredom. Like many parents, I spend too many days playing cruise director, lining up a series of fun activities, both outside and at home, because if I don’t, we’re not doing “family” right. This doesn’t exactly mesh with the fact that I simply do not have as much energy at 3 p.m. as two children, and sometimes I just want to sit around. I’m envious of those parents who seem to have figured out how to do this, so I decide to try something. They’re starting up some nonsense bickering in the living room when I plunk down some building tiles and announce I’m taking a nap. “I’ll be available in forty-five minutes,” I tell them, acting casual but with heart thumping. They’re a little confused, but don’t seem like they’ll fight me—the fun of the fight has mostly evaporated since I’ve stopped getting sucked into them. “Good night, Mother,” they say, a bit chilly, but already building a “prison for dinosaurs.” And it works. I cannot believe it works.

It works so well I can’t help but share the results immediately with a friend who’s wired just like me. She tells me that a close friend, one she loves dearly, has asked her for a favor, which she has granted. Now she’s asking for a lot more than the favor, and my friend has established a limit, which is scary for people like us. Her friend’s distress is intolerable to her, but she knows she has to endure it, even if, as she says, she’s “in the fetal position, trying to hold a limit.” I tell her to stay strong. That, for now, it feels so uncomfortable, but it will save their relationship in the long term. “If you give her everything, you’ll get mad,” I say. “There’s a reason we find people exhausting. It’s because we don’t know when to stop.” This is

one thing that I might never excise from my big-sister playbook—learning something and then foisting my recent expertise on everyone around me.

I come back down after that nap, refreshed and ready for that change of soup. The Japanese magnolia in our yard has just shed the last of its petals, and the bright-green leaves are filling in, which gives me an idea. Over the course of this year, I've been delighted to reconnect with the part of me that's excited to cook again. All it took was realizing that I don't *have* to cook every single meal. For the six-year-old, who's asked for pasta, I blend a sauce of my own making that was originally invented out of odds and ends in the fridge, and I call it pesto. Steamed broccoli, steamed peas, garlic, parmesan, pistachios, and an unholy amount of olive oil that I buy in five-liter cans online from Liguria. "*Unti saluti*," is the grove's email sign-off—"Oily greetings." I can't get enough. I make her this pasta, which she can eat by the pound, and stir a dollop of the pesto into my lemony chicken soup, which turns it a vibrant green, like I'm preparing a watercolor of fresh-cut grass. It's bright and rich, without being heavy. Vegetal and savory, and refreshing in the way I wanted. It tastes like new beginnings.

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Perfectly Sufficient

I am earnestly coaching a total stranger through their polycule breakup when I realize this can't go on. Not the polycule, which seems healthy, although some members are happier than others, according to this long series of direct messages. But why am I: (1) coaching a stranger through a breakup; (2) in the middle of a busy workweek; when (3) I haven't had the time or energy to sit down with my actual friends in ages? Something feels off. And it's not just because I have never been in a polycule in my life.

My problem has an obvious solution to anyone who isn't me, and it's one I should have learned when I briefly left social media: Stop engaging with total strangers on the internet, and definitely stop trying to help every single human who asks for it. However, the dorky little girl who loved to be useful is not easily stifled. Even after almost a year of actively trying to pull back, I still love a pat on the head. I know extending a hand to everyone all the time isn't great for me, but knowing that doesn't get rid of my itch. As I fumble my way through all of this artist-mom-partner stuff, sometimes a quick, grateful thanks from a total stranger is an easy high. Lately, the high seems cut with something else, something that makes me irritable, as the general shape of communication changes.

I've always gone out of my way to keep in touch. Even as a tween, even with not that many friends, I had a ragged little clothbound address book that I kept in my backpack. The cover was yellow and black, the pages curled, and in it, I saved my classmates' addresses and home numbers. A decade before we had email, fifteen years before social media, my little book allowed me to write a letter to almost everyone I'd ever befriended.

When I was nineteen, I got my first cell phone. I was studying in Italy, and the head of our program introduced these cheap little flip phones, pay-as-you-go *telefonini*, They didn't do much other than allow us to call home without lining up at the one pay phone nearby. We were enchanted. Not just by the sudden ability to reach one another and meet up whenever we wanted, at an age when doing everything together had such a sense of urgency. They also allowed us to text one another in an emergency, or share

something that no one wanted to say out loud. If we were stranded at a train station, or just bored, we could (and did) play spin the *telefonino*, which is a self-explanatory game for giddy teenagers. We loved those phones.

Texts were short then, not only because you had to tap each key a million times to spell anything out—this was way before predictive text and QWERTY keyboards—but also because they couldn't be more than 160 characters—something about size limits on the GSM network. We never needed more than that. I tried to explain, in long, rambling letters to my friends back in Ann Arbor, how useful these little machines were. "You'll just have to see it. Come visit," I pleaded. And they did. Of course, eventually texts became iMessages, and then messaging jumped over to Twitter, and Instagram, and their DMs, which felt like even more exciting ways to connect with people not in my immediate vicinity. Online rapport was formed with likeminded women, and converted into real-life friendships. There were so many avenues to connect, and, until recently, I loved them all.

The real burden of being disgruntled by the slightest things is that I then have to hunt for the reason, like an agitated truffle pig. Here, my issue starts with a broad realization: I hate words on screens. This year, in a quest I thought unrelated, I've slowly phased out all reading on screens, and returned to good old paper. Since the new year, and the death of Jeff, I've been calling my friends more, for that depth of conversation I've been craving, one that's impossible to plumb over text. I'm also paying attention to how each incoming text makes me feel, and it's "irritated." I think back to the dawn of SMS, when each infrequent text was a delight. Now, every time a notification pops up, thirty-five more do, in rapid succession. My inbox quickly snowballs into some unruly combination of voice notes and catch-ups, and if I leave my phone to do a few hours of uninterrupted work, I come back to two hundred messages across platforms, all of which I'm meant to be caught up on.

It is somehow agreed that if I want to be a good friend in 2025, responding to each one of those messages is required. I skim through the threads, quickly adding a heart, or a thumbs-down, or whatever an appropriate acknowledgment is, but I don't enjoy any of it. I already spend my entire day staring at a screen and typing. I'm not so interested, now, in conducting my friendships in the same way, via an endless barrage of words

that make my eyes swim. On top of hearing from the people I actually know, receiving a DM from any human on the internet who wants to Google me, with my boundaries still mushy, it's no wonder I find myself in this quicksand of digital intimacy. I politely wish this polycule member luck, and back out, as I should have in the first place.

I'm not sure how to change this, but first I examine my text inbox. There's a core group, five to ten people I'm in touch with almost every day. Then there's the masses upon masses of people whom I'm friends with simply because we . . . have one another's numbers and check in sometimes. I think, irritably, of the old friend from college who texts chirpily once a year, just before the holidays. *Hey! Doing anything for the holidays?* she asks, before sending me her own family plans. I don't entirely understand the point of this exercise. Does she have a spreadsheet of what everyone she's ever known is doing, specifically for the holidays? What does she do with it? Does she consider this an actual conversation?

This is the continuation of the series of thoughts that was nagging me in London, that being constantly connected felt comforting until the volume of required responses became overwhelming. *We've diluted communication,* I keep thinking every time I get a text. I threaten, on one chain, that I plan to get rid of my smartphone and only communicate via snail mail. *That's so 'grumpy Gen X man with a typewriter',* says my friend Reilly. Fair point, but so is writing for a living these days. Maybe it's not possible to opt out of modern communication entirely, but I need to find a way that works for me.

Out of the blue, my friends Anton and Melissa tell me they'll be in town with their rowdy brood, and we'll be able to get the kids together. I'm delighted. Anton and I met during my year abroad in Italy. He was a chain-smoking skater kid in a duct-taped puffy coat, and I was . . . not. I was the resident scold, a self-imposed RA type, rolling my eyes at the kind of Americans who would show up just to drink wine and kiss Italians. I wasn't my most fun. I was proficient in Italian, which is why he stayed anywhere near me, because he was brilliant with languages and knew I could help him soak it up.

Now, twenty-five years later, he's an ENT surgeon in San Diego, and his work schedule means we don't get to see each other very often. The second he is in the door, I grab his face and squeeze it. This is the opposite of how I feel when I get a text. I give him a too-tight hug. It's so meaningful to see

him in person. We order pizza, and the kids run off to watch a movie so that we adults can get caught up on our hopes and dreams. He talks about trying to grab time to paint, and shows me his latest portraits of the children. Their pit stop is a highlight of my week. He briefly apologizes for being "shit on text," but I don't need him to be good on text. I need to figure out how we are all going to see each other more. Who needs to text when we can have this experience in person? Melissa texts me the next day: *It was so good to see each other. Anton was painting in the studio until 1 a.m.* I tell her I'm thinking about them, too.

I remember when we were babies, right after we got those first cell phones, actually, and Anton would come by to hang in my room after dinner with his half-finished coffee. Once, he sat down with his own tattered notebook and asked me how to say "carpenter" in Italian (*carpentiere*). He wrote it down and scurried away, leaving his dirty coffee mug behind. He'd done this a few times before, and instead of sighing and taking it to the kitchen, I walked by his room and tucked the mug under his pillow. I fell into bed late the next night to find the same old mug, under my sheets. I thought, hard, about the next step in our escalation. I wanted to end it—the mug was begging to be cleaned—but I also wanted to have fun. So I wrapped the mug in sparkly paper and put it in a giant box, which I filled with balloons. I wrapped the box like an opulent gift and left it outside his door. He came running to my room, laughing hysterically, delight on his face, and carried that balloon box around for days, explaining to people what had happened. Now, as I recall that week, I think that's how I want all contact with my friends to feel.

Texting is the opposite of opening a box full of balloons. I think back to our dinky texts on our dinky *telefonini,* and why they felt like so much fun. In looking up Friedhelm Hillebrand, inventor of the SMS, I find out that he worked at the German post office, which also included responsibility for developing the country's telecom system. In designing the service, they had to think about the size of a message that could slip by on secondary radio channels, but also what the ideal length of a standard, quick message would be. They inspected postcards, the original short-message service, and noticed that they were about 150 characters in length. Telex transmissions were just about the same. "This is perfectly sufficient," said the communications researcher in 1985, and that's why texts were more fun then.

In mulling this over, I have an idea. My six-year-old daughter wants to do some art over the weekend, and we have a pile of old magazines we can turn into collages. I grab our industrial-strength glue sticks, scissors, and some blank postcards, and we get to cutting. She makes an incredible still life for her friend Lyndon: a sad-faced bowl of salad, in which each element —from little gems to radishes, to . . . is that a salt shaker?—beams a happy face. I cut up a picture of a polar bear to create a snowy landscape, above which an owl is being abducted by aliens. Another is a fish eating food falling from the sky. A third is a landscape made of broccoli. Last is a volcano against a tissue-paper sunset, belching out pieces of plastic. We stick them in envelopes and address them to some of my dearest friends, sending the broccoli one to Anton. He told me that by the end of a surgery day his brain was dry of ideas. “I’ll send you ideas,” I told him, and I do. Before I seal up my letters, I insert a sheaf of new writing, unproofed and raw. The subject matter is a little intense, but so am I. And so was that box of balloons, but I miss the girl who pulled it together, and I don’t want to water down my acts of friendship anymore. My daughter and I walk the letters to the mailbox. Who knows if they’ll ever get where they’re supposed to go, but I already feel that I’m tending to my faraway loved ones in the way that I actually want.

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God’s Waiting Room

I hate living in Los Angeles again, and this time it feels terminal. Yes, I’ve had friction with the city before, notably every time we burst into flame. This usually passes once the smoke has cleared, and the weather gets nice, once we tune up the bikes and ride to the beach, once the denim cutoffs come out for six straight months. Life here can be so easy, so alluring and photogenic, that even the memory of a hillside aflame can be wiped out with a long enough string of clear days. It’s so strange how that works. This year feels different. On top of that, it was only a few months ago that a series of fourteen fires tore across southern California, razing more than sixteen thousand homes and structures, forcing the evacuation of some two hundred thousand people. Even though the rhythms of daily life are back to normal, there’s no ignoring the huge shift that’s taken place: people cobbling together new lives here, others moving back to wherever they’re from, their goodbye posts. *I loved you, but I can’t take it anymore,* they say. *Take me with you,* I want to chime in, eating my farmers’ market berries in my coziest chair, in the oblique, dappled light of our front window, on a seventy-three-degree spring day. *I don’t want to be here, either.*

I came to California for certain reasons. Space, distance from my parents, and a chance to carve out a career for myself that was riskier and weirder than they’d find comfortable. Romance outside of a shrinking pool of college friends. The weather, obviously, after so many years of mood-killing Michigan winters. Technically I have relished all these things, building a career and a family here, but it still hasn’t stuck, somehow. Never would I say I’m *from* here. I still pause before calling it “home,” even though I’ve lived here for more than two decades, and even after I discovered during the last round of fires that I’m quite attached to our house, and the lives we lead within. I understand how absurd it sounds, considering the picture-perfect life I seem to be living. Why wouldn’t I want to claim ownership of it? My friends in New York, or Michigan, or anywhere else, envy our sunshine, our suburban pace, our tacos, our proximity to the beach. Yes, it’s all incredible, I tell them. LA’s a wonderful

city, and I really do love so many things about it, but it doesn't feel like it's *mine.*

The rift, this time, started a few years ago. I was pretty happy here for a long stretch, and then my brother, who was also in LA, decided to move five thousand miles away for an exciting work opportunity. "Oh, it's so fun that you'll have more reasons to go to London," said all my friends, not understanding the prolonged emotional crisis this would kick off. I put on a happy face. "I'm so proud of him," I said. And I am. He and his sweet partner, Janie, are going to build a beautiful life there. I spent some of my happiest years there, as a small child, and one of them was the year he was born. I love London so much, and I am looking forward to him sharing that love, even if it's a little funny that we'll have come about it asynchronously. I've maintained a pretty brave face, I think. Only my friend Ali, whose kids have been taking turns leaving for college, understands my heartbreak.

When my brother lived near me, staying in Los Angeles made sense. Sure, maybe our hearts weren't permanently invested in Southern California after spending our childhoods wandering the planet with our parents, but we were together. My heart seeks out stability above all, and as I built out my own family, I felt like we all created this emotional center of gravity that served as a solid foundation here. But the second my brother was gone, my connection to LA felt as stable as a three-legged table.

I need to figure out how to rebuild my precious sense of stability, so I turn, as my father has taught me, to academia. A 2003 article from the philosophy journal *Synthese* provides a framework I find strangely soothing. "What Is Stability?" by the Swedish professors Sven Ove Hansson and Gert Helgesson, attempts to codify a framework for the term "stability" across the natural and social sciences. They find, in their research, that "stability" can be broken down into the elements of constancy and resilience. "Constancy" refers to something that doesn't change over time, or changes only to a limited degree. This is a practice I engage in to a potentially unusual degree. It might be the only way I know to achieve a measure of stability. Where I fall apart is the area of "resilience," which refers to "the tendency of a system to recover or return to (or close to) its initial state after perturbation." Given the manner and frequency with which I stomp around the house muttering I can't take Los Angeles anymore, I don't think I've attained this goal—or even if it's attainable for me at all.

What exactly is the alternative to practicing resilience? Picking up and moving closer to my brother in London? I'm a forty-five-year-old woman with a husband and children, and a mortgage, and he's a fully grown man, embarking on newlywed life. I understand how weird it would be for me to show up in the middle of this. And it's totally normal, as everyone points out, for siblings to live in different cities.

Then I'm organizing a cupboard in my almost-eleven-year-old's room when I find Little Doggy, my son's favorite lovey from babyhood. I remember when we transitioned my son to sleeping in his crib, and I prepared for the change by sleeping through a few nights with Little Doggy tucked into my shirt, so that my son would sense my presence in his new room. As he grew into toddlerhood, and then school, he took Little Doggy everywhere with him. In his backpack for nighttime, on vacations, and even hidden away on school trips when he was a little older, just for the comfort of knowing he was there. Little Doggy is chewed up and well loved. And though my son gives him a big hug and kiss every time he happens upon him, he's grown past the need for his company.

It's funny that anyone has ever thought my younger brother needed me, as though I am the Little Doggy in our scenario. Maybe he did when we were tiny, because I showed him the ropes and attended to his basic needs when he couldn't. Now that we're adults, though, the need seems entirely mine. My mother worries about him being able to take care of himself so far away, without me. I talk her down. "He's fine," I tell her. He is, for the record, a hyper-competent, high-level executive at a multinational corporation. "No one's more capable," I remind her. "And I think we've all been in denial: I'm the fragile one." With my brother far away, I've been flailing around for my own Little Doggy, and I'm not sure how to replace the sense of peace he provided me just by being nearby. We manage to simulate it every once in a while when I go to London and stay near his flat, or he comes here for work and stays in his corporate hotel. Even if he's busy with meetings the entire time, and we manage to grab one family dinner at mine, I feel more at ease knowing he's in town.

I'm not sure where I'm supposed to go from here. If I'm meant to learn to survive without him—which my rational mind knows is the answer—is it really in Los Angeles? My sudden instability here bleeds into all of my decision-making, and it has me questioning all of my choices.

My husband and I both stuck it out here for entertainment jobs, at a time when things were still written and produced mostly in-person, and mostly in Los Angeles. And maybe that's when I felt most rooted here—when I was a mid-level executive in a company town. With the advent of Zoom rooms and production seemingly everywhere, the mechanics of our jobs have changed, and our geography has gotten stifling. It would be so nice to get Rodney out of this place, I think, and into somewhere that didn't revolve around the entertainment industry. It would be good to be closer to our families. It would be incredible to get the kids to a neighborhood where they could walk to school, maybe take public transportation, and casually hang out with other kids in the area. Pre-pandemic, we knew all of our neighbors and were in and out of one another's houses. Then lockdowns came, and now everyone we used to hang out with has moved away. There's one boy about my son's age a few blocks away, and we somehow can't get their schedules aligned. I wonder if every American parent has this problem, or if it's geographically specific. *Should it be this hard to love a place?* I often wonder.

The most reasonable option for a move, everyone around me agrees, is Michigan. It is Michigan, after all. Everybody loves Michigan, and everyone knows how much I love Michigan, for reasons I have already shared: It's the well-run, lefty part of the Midwest. Great schools, reasonable real estate, a balm to my nervous system, and my parents live there. A few of my dearest friends have also moved back after lives in more glamorous places, and now that I've gotten everything I wanted in LA, Michigan's a place I can easily imagine spending the next stretch of my life. Even my New Yorker husband lived a summer in Ann Arbor and loved it. We got married there, and he enjoys our frequent visits. My kids go to summer camp in Michigan every year, and they would also welcome a move. "It's so peaceful there, and nobody's trying too hard," says my son, already convinced. It's certainly a place where I tap into an effortless calm and happiness I can't achieve here. Though LA may be relatively quiet, it's anxiety-inducing for me in a way Michigan isn't. But the fact is that my husband is in the middle of funding a startup, an entertainment business based in Los Angeles. He's hired employees and is building out an office and a production slate. Is it fair to stamp my foot and topple the entire ecosystem because I sometimes feel—rationally or not—that a few more years here might kill me? Every week I run these scenarios, and every week

I decide I can't force a move, because it would be too disruptive to the family as a whole. This leaves tolerating Los Angeles, which I mostly do. I keep myself busy, I keep my head down, I enjoy the food, the weather, the beach, the tacos. Repeat.

Sometimes we let ourselves daydream big about places we might want to live. Portugal, Rodney says—not that we've been there together. San Sebastián, in Spain, which we enjoyed as a family. Why be here, in the crumbling seat of show business, when we could be animation pioneers in the Basque region? Maybe. Probably not. Our goal is to be closer to family, not an even longer flight away from them. And we don't talk about it much, but my husband's company could, technically, be headquartered in New York. My in-laws and their extended family live there, and we have so many friends in the area. In May, I fly to New York for work, and I notice how many people I meet who were born and raised there and never plan to leave. "I can't imagine living anywhere else," says one man, who lives a few blocks from where he grew up. I mask my horror. I can imagine living in a thousand places. "I've tried living other places, but I don't *work* anywhere else," says another woman. I'm having a great deal of difficulty maintaining a neutral expression, especially a drink and a half in. I'm irritated, and it's unfair to them, because I'm always irritated at people with deep roots in a place. *How dare they,* I think, as my ire builds. *How limited, how provincial, to think the sun rises and sets on this specific patch that sprouted you.* We, the displaced, don't have such a luxury. We've been forced to imagine lives outside the ones we were supposed to live. I'm startled when my friend Amina also says there is no other city for her. She, like me, has been forced to wander the globe. I am confused by this betrayal.

And I'm confused by my confusion, but as soon as I recognize this, I also understand why I'm so agitated. Something terrible has recently happened back home, in Kashmir. Twenty-six Hindu tourists were killed by militants in the holiday resort village of Pahalgam, just before my trip. It's the site of some of my fondest childhood memories, and the childhood photos I revisit most often. Here I am, rotund and skeptical, while my dad holds me just above the rushing water of a Himalayan stream. Here I am, dipping my toes in the cold water, loving it. Here I sit on a horse at the age of eight, terrified and proud. Here I roll down a hill after a family picnic, on the same trip.

Kashmir was home, and my happiest place. It's been almost five years since the last major incident, and just like then, I'm thrown into a blender, a mess.

"It's not about Los Angeles," I tell a friend on the phone. "It's the question of where I belong." My voice cracks as I share this. Where exactly am I supposed to be? I feel like I'm constantly seeking the answer to something that has no answer—*wherever you go, there you are* and all. I turn this over and over as I continue to go through the motions of my lovely life here in LA, which I refer to, only half-jokingly, as "God's waiting room"—things here can be so blissful it feels the only way forward is heaven. The incidents in Kashmir remind me that no matter how badly I want to decide that I belong to another place, I never will. And while I've made a tenuous peace with being here in LA, the rootlessness, the work I put into keeping myself upright, is wearing on me. "You have a specific capacity to recognize that the idea of stability is an illusion," Jami says. Normally this is the kind of thing I'd dole out as advice. "Everyone's making everything up as they go along," I'd say, in soothing, big-sister mode. We live life a day at a time. That sort of pep talk. Now in May, as the incident in Kashmir whips Pakistan and India into a lather, one where they're petulantly bombing each other's airports, I don't find it comforting at all. I find it's breaking my heart.

I think about all the progress I've made this year in extricating myself from the role of everyone's permanent fixer. I've learned how to step back and let everyone else fill the space. "I'm right here," I've been telling my loved ones, "and I'm rooting for you." I've been so proud and surprised to see what they're all capable of. I also recognize now that my brother has been my security blanket, my superstitious ritual, the person who infuses my surroundings with a sense of belonging, as I struggle through the fundamental disconnect of my life here. In providing the illusion of continuity and stability. As I read further into Hansson and Helgesson's paper about stability—my new blankie—they bring up a surprising point, and one that gives me a little hope for my future in LA. "There is a close connection between stability and equilibrium," they assert, in the plot-twist portion of their research. And I take this to mean that something, or someone, can be completely destabilized and unable to return to an original form, but may be able to find a new homeostasis through "a state of intellectual or emotional balance," or "a state of adjustment between opposing forces or actions." Maybe my mistake has been trying to recapture

the feeling of having my brother here. It’s looking likely that I’ll never feel that way again, but maybe I’ll figure out how to achieve a new balance.

In late May, I’m walking my kids through our plans for the upcoming summer. We’re going to see our whole family, both sides, for my brother’s wedding in London, and then spend a nice chunk of time in Michigan again. After last year’s experiment, when I learned to relax back into summer vacation, I feel no heaviness or dread, no anxiety about creating the perfect set of memories, or getting the shopping list right. I’m just overcome with a head-over-heels glee at spending time with my family in a couple of places we all love. We’re going to have a million Popsicles, and take long walks, and bathe erratically, and eat whatever is convenient. My son jumps in to ask what plays we might be able to see, but the six-year-old stops us, taking an appraising look outside the window. “It’s a beautiful day for a swim,” she says, Angeleno through and through. It’s a balmy seventy-four, and we haven’t seen a cloud in days. We press pause on our getaway planning and start packing a bag for the pool.

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Good Housekeeping

Rodney and I have been married for almost exactly fourteen years when I notice that every item we've lovingly brought into our home is looking a little busted, all at the same time. The toaster oven conks out. A handle falls off a knife. The bedsheets have little holes in them. Our ceramic snack bowls, once eight in number, have become two—the rest broken or misplaced through three moves and two children. The place mats are fraying. The Magic Bullet has blended its last smoothie. Then one morning in May I'm putting away the dishes and I notice a chip in one of the four matching blue ramekins, the nice French ones. For a second, I feel bad. Would a better housekeeper, especially one who hasn't spent the last year of her life gleefully checking out of domestic duties, be more on top of this stuff? Do other people have more than six forks, and where did all of our forks go, anyway? Actually, should I have bought the forks that I wanted to get when we got married, the Italian ones with the birds and bamboo on them, even though Rodney wasn't that enthusiastic? This side quest, about the birds, leads me back to an understanding: Everything is falling apart because they were all wedding registry items, and we're nearing the end of their lifespan.

I remember picking out all of the things, giddy with our scanning gun at Bloomingdale's. We pointed it at towering piles of Egyptian cotton. At a full set of blue-and-white porcelain china we've used maybe twice, but still take in with a loving gaze, for what it was supposed to represent. I wonder why we never opened the silverware—and then how many people would be offended if they knew. I wonder how many of the wedding gifts we've given other couples are sitting in a high cupboard somewhere while a long-married couple chases their kids around. And then I make a list of all the things we have to replace, which I will have to order one by one, a method slightly less exciting than building that registry. I wish, not for the first time, that Rodney had the bandwidth to replace them with me, but he's painted into a corner at work. Between his producing and writing, he's executing something like five jobs at once. He's always worked a lot, and while that's sometimes been a strain, it's also true that I'm pretty

independent. I see him head into the scrum every day and think back to that day I told him, as he sat in a sunny spot in our hallway, that I wanted him around more.

I wish that feeling had changed, but it's only grown. I wish, sometimes, when he's got another deadline, that I could be more like my mother, and neatly tuck away my sadness. I've made certain pretty old-fashioned choices about how I want my life to look, The children are the center of my plate, and everything else is a side dish. This is a choice I've made. While I make a decent living, there's no question that his work supports this choice. Rodney's job simply takes up much more of his plate than mine does. And I'm constantly trying to rearrange this plate for him, even though I don't know if I'd like him fiddling with mine. The last year has been such a learning experience in how I want to inhabit the home, and our life together. I'm so enjoying each day with our kids, and even though I'm trying to be present in every moment, I don't manage to slow down its passing. I look at both of them in the thick of the scramble at the end of the school year, and I count how many more concerts and open houses we have left together. How many spring breaks. How many summers. I wonder for how much longer they're going to let me greet them with a million kisses pressed into the squishy parts of their necks. How long they'll let me grab their hands and pretend to chew on each finger as we talk through their days. I know it's not long, and I want him here with us before it all runs out. I know he wants the same, too, but I wonder when that's going to happen.

• • •

I have to admit that while my awakenings this year have been so good for my relationships, and my energy, and the way I move through the world, they don't seem to be so great for my husband. I have decided to make myself less useful at exactly the time he wants me to be *more* useful. He's overwhelmed at work and asks for my aid sometimes, and I'm unusually resistant. What I want to say is something calm and reasonable, like: *Work has been taking up a lot of our lives lately, and my plate is pretty full with handling the house, the kids, and my job—I don't really have the bandwidth to help you right now.*

What I say instead is: "I DON'T WANT TO DO THAT."

He is hurt and annoyed. “What if you called me about something with the kids, and I told you to figure it out on your own,” he says.

I see this as vastly different situations. “The kids are the small business we co-own,” I tell him.

“I’m in the process of hiring the support I need,” he says. “So if I ask you for help in the meantime, can you?”

I dig in my heels. “I know it’s all super hard,” I say, “but I really don’t want to.” With no exclamation point. I don’t think I would have said this a year ago. I just know that I’m overextended myself, and newly aware of the limit I need to hold before I tip into exhaustion or anger.

And he’s disgruntled, but he loves me. And I love him. “We’ll figure it out,” we say. And we punt it.

He’s away on a work trip when I make the mistake of dipping into watching something romantic. I’ve been avoiding the TV adaptation of David Nicholls’s book *One Day.* Partly because the novel about two best friends who can’t seem to figure it out romantically is one of my favorite books of all time. To admit how many times I’ve read it would reveal me as a lunatic. But also because the main character, Emma, has been cast as a young Indian woman in the show, and I don’t know if my heart can handle an Indian Emma Morley. I already identified so closely with the character in the book that to have her look anything like me might feel too painfully real. Ambika Mod, who is playing her, is astonishingly talented, and from the first scene, I’m in love. Here is a know-it-all Indian woman who ruins a budding romance with a sweet young man by shouting at him, and she only grows more recognizable to me with each episode. By episode three, she hangs out with her best friend, Dex, in a park after work, grumpily moaning about her potential. I send it to a college friend, also a tall, blond, and cheerful man. *Have you seen this show about me?* I ask. He laughs at the image, an exact re-creation of his nineteenth birthday celebration, on an unseasonably sunny patch of grass in Ann Arbor.

More than the discomfort of seeing a younger version of myself reflected in the show, I’m wracked with a longing I haven’t felt in decades. I never want to be young again, but there’s one scene in episode four that utterly destroys me: Clever, overthinky Emma has just taken a shower and walks out onto the balcony to meet Dex, whom she’s madly (and secretly) in love with, before they go out to dinner on some tiny Greek island. It’s shot

through a gauze curtain, from behind the actors. The moment she walks out onto the balcony to look over the ocean, the tilt of his head tells you he can't take his eyes off her. He could stay seated, but he's compelled to join her as she gazes across the water. The gravity of their connection is too strong. And this is what I miss the most: the constant awareness of a lover's location in space. The feeling that no one and nothing exists other than two people, sharing the same air. Rodney and I certainly don't move through the house (or our lives) like that now, and I can only vaguely remember a time when we did. The only people who seem to know or care where I am all the time are the children, and they mostly use their attunement to come find me on the toilet. How rarely do my husband and I check in with the spark that brought us together.

I talk to a friend who's going through a divorce, after decades together. Her partner came home from work one day, sat her down, and gently said that she wanted a chance at a romantic life, and she didn't think they were going to find it together. She's devastated. *I'm* devastated. They seemed so good together. Over the course of a few post-pandemic years, so many marriages in our orbit unraveled, and never due to anything dramatic. Rodney and I talked it through every time we heard of another one. "Gosh, it really could happen to anyone," we say. "I still really like you, though," we decide, and press on.

We remain wholly invested in our little unit, enthusiastically re-upping every so often, per my father's marriage-option model, even if the last few years have presented us with some choppy waters. Starting up a company requires an unholy amount of time and energy. And the thing about being our own bosses, which we both are, means that every moment we're not working is a moment we could be. "I'm the toughest boss I've ever worked for," says Rodney, and I get it. My friend Tahmima—whose novel *The Startup Wife* was loosely inspired by her own experience starting a company with her husband—nods serenely when I tell her about our predicament. She's seen this before. "You're a startup widow," she says, and I startle. In show business we call ourselves "production widows" (or "widowers," I guess), because of the round-the-clock, often out-of-town duties that a partner on a film or TV show takes on. It's part of the package, but at least a production has a definite end. From what I can tell, startup culture does not, especially if things are going fairly well. While we're excited about what he's building, Rodney and I daydream sometimes about

the things we'll do when it gets easier. "Maybe in the fall," he says, and we hold on to that like a worry stone. "In the fall," I repeat to myself and the kids, when he's busy.

We just need to get through the summer, then. Late in May, we have a big fight. My feeling is I've been tolerating his heavy workload for as long as I can, knowing that I have to support this beautiful dream he's building. And it really is beautiful. Expansive and optimistic, good for art. And yet the months of being inconvenienced, and lonely, and overclocked at home, pile up. The workload he brings home with him isn't one that can be easily left at the door, and it all starts to feel suffocating. One night, in the precious hour before my own bedtime, when the kids are asleep and I'm peacefully reading, he needs to talk to me about something that happened at work, and I'm instantly annoyed. I know that this is unfair, but the job already influences so much of my life, that I can't sit here in the peaceful bubble of our house and not be mad when it tries to pop its way in. He protests that he's just trying to share things about his day. I'm not sure how I'm meant to react, but it's probably not with the waves of quiet anger that I send his way. This many years in, we don't have too many big fights. But there is one suitcase of baggage we've never figured out how to unpack, and it sits firmly at the friction-filled intersection of work and home life.

The next day, he's out of town, and our feelings are still sore. I did manage not to yell, because after seventeen years, what I have learned is that it never pays to open my mouth when I'm actually inside a wave of rage. I go for a walk in the morning and think, with a quiet mind, about what I want to say. I think about all my friends who have decided to split up over the last decade, most in cases where their feelings for each other dissipated or metamorphosed, and I don't see that here.

When we finally get on the phone, both calm, I try to make this point.

"I love you so much," he says, frustrated. "I hate this."

"The unfortunate thing here," I tell him, "is that I've never loved you more."

And I mean it. When I married Rodney I knew we could have a nice life together. I honestly had no idea how nice. I was just taking a chance on a guy I had known for only a few years. I didn't know yet how big his heart was, or how much he'd make me laugh, or the breadth of joy our growing family would bring me. My rage toward him the previous night was pure,

and it was driven, like I've told him before, by not knowing if or when I would fully have him back again, and getting madder and madder about it. I share with him the thing I've realized: I love him as a person, and nothing will ever change that, but the marriage is its own precious entity. Like the chipped bowls, the busted toaster oven, it could use a little more care and attention.

A date night creeps up on us. One that we put in the calendar ages ago, but are surprised by when it arrives. I think of that scene in *One Day*, the one in Greece, with the gauzy dress and the soft waves in her hair, and try to elevate my look above my usual school-run attire. I open up my drawers and groan at a packed row of too-sensible underwear. Full coverage, tummy panel, utilitarian panties. Mega-supportive, back-fat-smoothing bras, in various shades of taupe. I want to burn them all. I let my mind rest briefly on the fact that I am a middle-aged woman who watched one sexy show and is now Googling lingerie, but release all judgment because everyone wins when I'm having a good time.

We walk to a new place in the neighborhood that we didn't exactly realize is a hot spot, and we wait, bewildered, for a table. We are surrounded by exciting young people.

"We haven't done this in a while," he says.

"It's so loud," say I.

He's worn out from a long day of work, and I am annoyed that there have been so many long days at work, but we try.

"What are your New Year's resolutions?" I ask. I guess it's a strange thing to bring up as summer approaches, but better late than never. And his tired eyes widen. He doesn't think he's ready to answer that question. "It's spring," I say, laughing. I can see his neurons scramble, and I let him off the hook.

"What are yours?" he asks. More quality time with family, I say. And romance, big-time. *One Day* has reopened a wormhole to a former version of our relationship, and I want to go through it. He nods.

We walk home, stuffed and happy to be together, and halfway down the street, talk turns to work. They're hiring an assistant for the office, and he wants to walk through the pros and cons of a few candidates. I weigh in on one, and then give up.

“I don’t want to deal with work stuff,” I say, and he’s displeased.

“I can’t do everything on my own,” he says. “I need you to help me.”

“I don’t want to,” I say, and a frosty silence descends.

It’s the same fight we’ve been fighting, and it’s gotten worse over the past months. I’ve fought so hard for my boundaries that I protect them with my teeth bared, furious that he’s even asking me to cross them. Here I am, trying to be less useful in general, and he’s trying to pull me backward, instead of finding a way to free himself from overextension. I can see that he’s objectively drowning, but I don’t want to be yanked over there. I want him to swim out, toward me.

We are sheepish the next day. “Well, that was dumb,” we say. “We finished real strong,” he says. Later, as a gesture of apology, I help him organize his week in a way that works for our family, like he’s been asking. The task is nothing like I was expecting. He just needs to talk through the calendar so he can plan out how to organize and prioritize some things. I realize how often I teleport back to being the little girl in me who finished everyone’s group projects, and is still mad about it. He says, “Help me,” and I hear it as “Do it for me.” This might also explain why I’ve found it so immensely difficult to accept help myself. I talk slowly, in a strange voice, as all of this dawns on me.

“You don’t want me to organize your calendar for you,” I say, starting to understand what he expects my role to be here. “You just wanted a big-picture planning session.”

“Yeah,” he says, impatient. And yet, somehow, the most patient.

A few days later, he wants to walk me through a dashboard he’s made for our finances on his computer. Honestly, I deal with most of our finances, in a bare-bones way, and this is not the kind of thing I would ever do in a million years. The hyper-organized, intensely detailed model he’s created shows him aiming to work in a measured and predictable way over the next few years. He presents this vision in our bedroom on Sunday morning as though he’s giving a keynote. We are both still in our robes, and I smile into my coffee.

“This is so romantic,” I say.

He’s surprised, but I also see relief in his gentle smile.

“This is what I was saying the other night,” I say. “About prioritizing romance. I want to feel like we’re working toward the same vision of what our life could look like.”

He nods, serious but pleased, and we dive back into the report. It’s all laid out here, in facts and business terms, how much he also wants to be with me, and the steps he wants to take to get us there. The entire experience couldn’t be further away from being freshly showered on a balcony in Greece. Something about it warms me up, all the same.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Diana Miller, my trusty editor at Knopf. Your knack for knowing where I'm aiming, even before I've worked it out, is somehow both spooky and comforting. Also at Knopf: Jordan Pavlin, Morgan Hamilton, Emily Reardon, Christopher Metts, Pei Loi Koay, Kathleen Cook, and Hilary DiLoreto. Thank you for your care and support of this book. And Linda Huang, for my breathtaking jacket; I'm still not over the last one.

Erin Malone, Fiona Baird, Laura Bonner, and Alexxandra Tanner at WME.

Tahmima Anam, Jami Attenberg, Emma Straub, Youngna Park, Annie Miyao, and Anja Tyson, my cheer-readers. Carrie Frye, whose eyes are so valuable they should be insured. Thea Smolinski for our deep Gilot dive.

Jenny Odell, whom I don't know, but whose *How to Do Nothing* fundamentally changed my relationship to time and rest. I still hand out this book like the Bible.

Dr. Anjali Alimchandani, gifted architect of my mental health. Transcendental Meditation, for whatever it's done to my brain over the last eight years.

Mum and Dad: Everything I am is your fault, in a good way. My other parents—"in-laws" is never enough—Joan and Howard Rothman, introduced me to their son at a party, setting the events of this book in motion.

My brother Punit, for being so utterly loveable.

And finally, but most of all, my sweetheart, Rodney, for his gentle bullying, big dreams, twinkly-eyed smile, and devoted partnership. I never believed in soulmates, and now I do. Coincidence?

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A NOTE ON THE TYPE

This book was set in Hoefler Text, a family of fonts designed by Jonathan Hoefler, who was born in 1970. First designed in 1991, Hoefler Text was intended as an advancement on existing desktop computer typography, including as it does an exponentially larger number of glyphs than previous fonts. In form, Hoefler Text looks to the old-style fonts of the seventeenth century, but it is wholly of its time, employing a precision and sophistication only available to the late twentieth century.

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