
Ours or the Other Place

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New York is like a guy who doesn't like you as much as you like him. You know it's time to let this crush go. It's been too long with no phone calls, nothing. And still, you arrange your days and evenings so you'll be there for his call if it ever comes. The phone rings differently when it's him. It's a better ring.

One day, you admit to yourself that this romance lives nowhere but in your own head. You admit to the hard work of keeping it alive. You ask yourself, finally, Why am I doing this?

Because there was that one heightened bit of time when he made you feel like someone grander than yourself, some better version of yourself—freer, happier, funnier, smarter, more beautiful, wiser, more worldly, kinder, braver.

Only a passing glance can have this intensity, this jumped-up pulse. Afterward, you are addicted—not to him, but to the enhanced vision of yourself. It's like crack, a fast and solid addiction. You need this person so you can feel that way again. Nothing matters but to feel that way again. Your whole being is in need of this person. Your bones feel the need for him and the absence of him.

New York is like that.



It was 1977 and I was twenty-one years old. I thanked God when I arrived in New York. I had flown just one hour from Pittsburgh, but I was as grateful as an immigrant, as relieved as a refugee who has finally escaped. I don't mean to equate the enormity of exile with the comparative ease of my departure from suburbia, but I can't lie about this: landing in New York felt as lucky to me and as monumental as it must have felt for anyone who ever sailed into Ellis Island. In leaving my family's home, I was an anarchist.

Our women had never lived in this place I was going to. For my Italian grandmothers, my mother, my aunts, a life between the home of the father and the home of the husband had never existed.

But now it did exist. At last, I was in the right place.

The city was completely new to me but felt completely known. I can put it no other way but to say that I was happy in my skin. A few years later, working a book-publishing job, I glanced through the glass wall of an office and got a glimpse, two rooms down, of a man—tall and large, dark-haired, in a heavy overcoat. I did a double take. He was stunning in a roughed-up sort of way I had never known I was attracted to. But now I was. He startled me. Who is that? I'd never seen him before but I felt that premonition of familiarity, the beginning of loyalty. I just knew that this man and I would have some kind of business together. (Eventually, of course, we did. It was with him, one of my first close friends in the city, that I learned about the particular sexiness of talking late into the night, in the booth of a bar or at the tiny table of a coffee house, working your way toward the possibility of lovemaking. Then veering right past it, just so you can keep on talking. Here's the magic trick: If you keep talking past sex, the possibility of it stays there between you, around you, like the aroma of a meal that is almost ready to be served, but not quite. Our times together were delicious because we never did become lovers, which was of course what I'd had in mind the first time I saw him through the glass and my breath caught.) Flying into New York in September of '77 I looked through the double-paned window of the USAir jet, down into a misty Friday morning, and I felt that same astonishing tug.

I had just left my family and my college boyfriend, who, the day before, had sent me roses, and my mother, in a last-ditch plea to keep me home, had said, "But how can you leave? What about your roses?" I later learned that after I left, my mother cried in the kitchen to my boyfriend, and that this scene took place at just the same time I was looking from the plane down onto the apartment complexes of Queens, the willowy grasses along the shores that hug the runway at LaGuardia, and, enchanted by this harsh beauty, I was thinking, "I like this." And I was praying, Please God, let there be a place for me down there.

And there was.

In New York when I was twenty-one I felt sure I could not die. I'd been a cautious girl going to college in the Midwest, but I knew that wasn't my real life. I'd kept myself safe, not wanting to squander my luck there.

Now, rushing through Central Park after midnight, on work nights, in cabs driven by drivers who were sometimes stoned, some who spoke to me with the accents of the faraway places they had run from, speeding to the uptown bad neighborhood where my new boyfriend lived, I had a sense of mission. Destiny had meant for me to live these days. These nights.

And because these nights were about art as much as they were about love, there was in my canvas bag, along with my work clothes for the next day, some manuscript or other to show him. (*Him!* A few years older than I was and an experienced writer; for a young woman who wants to write, this is a dangerous combination in a first city boyfriend.)

When I was finally in the vestibule of his building, my heart galloped. With trembly hand ringing the buzzer for apartment 5F once, then again, caught for a moment in the tight space between the outer door that opened freely to the dark street and the locked inner door that led up to the dubious safety of this man's home, I felt the solitariness you feel in the confessional.

When you're alone like that, it's just you there, with your limited strength, with all your sins (like abandonment of loved ones, or greedy grabbing for too much in life), sins that will someday demand a price.

But not yet. There's the click, the door unlocked, then that rush of relief, almost as good as salvation. Spasm of adrenaline, just what's needed to be able to run up the five flights.

And I did run, fast enough to ignore the choking knowledge that most likely this man would one day break my heart.

But not yet. Tonight he's coming down the steps to meet me, all sweet words and smiling. Tonight we are happy. New York is still doling out only generous, good love. Hadn't the bountiful heavens given me everything I had just to risk it for this?

Risk. How we love our brave selves.

And just as gorgeous were the moments, middle of the night, when I'd leave 5F in a fit (Just who does he think he is?). I'd run down the flights of steps for one more last time, run the half-block past the dark garage, past the hoods' hangout, the soles of my boots crunching broken-bottle shards all the way to the avenue, where I raised my arm, defiant, to four angry lanes of traffic coming toward me while now and then a drunk approached from behind, but I'm saved by the yellow of a taxi, and I slam the door shut and ask the driver to take me home. Please.

In moments like these, New York City gives birth to us, as if the city were some savvy mother who knows that the best thing she can do is toughen us up.

That is Year One. The next year, Ed Koch becomes mayor. Even after moving into Gracie Mansion, he won't give up his downtown apartment. By now I've moved from West 72nd to West 82nd to West 102nd, so I don't blame Koch one bit for holding on. His place is rent-controlled and has a terrace. If I were him I'd sooner give up the mayor's mansion, which is basically a sublet with an extension clause, than give up that apartment in the Village. One year follows another, Koch is still mayor, my real-estate odyssey continues (to East 80th Street to West End Avenue to Brooklyn and back). Each spring, wherever I'm living, I clean my closet(s) out thoroughly, telling myself I will leave the city by September. And each September I clean again and tell myself, By spring I'll be gone—there've got to be easier places to live. One spring, during a subway strike, women begin carrying their good shoes in their briefcases and wearing sneakers to work. This practice continues after the strike, but I refuse to do it. I've been in New York 2¹/₂ years and am working now at a magazine, and every morning, wearing thick-heeled boots, I walk the long walk to the Helmsley Building and indulge in long noisy fantasies about becoming a rock star. I'll call myself Infanta and sing scathing hard-rock versions of Motown hits like "Get out of my life, why don't you, babe." By now my first city boyfriend is sleeping with a former friend of mine. By now the city is changing.

My first apartment had been a gigantic prewar, shared with roommates, across the street from the Dakota, dirt-cheap. In those early days, if I wanted to visit my friend who lived on 79th Street at night, I ran up Columbus because there were long dark stretches of the avenue where the storefronts were empty. Then real estate went up, disco went out, business picked up. Danger shifted to safety. Enter: The '80s. People walk in the evening from shop to shop. My favorite Italian restaurant on Columbus, a tiny place with pipes low and dusty on the ceiling, and sawdust on the floors, now has a glassed-in sidewalk café; a line has formed at the door. Mrs. Fields cookies bake on every other corner of the Upper West Side. One bright expansive afternoon, walking up Central Park West, I see skywriting over the park: *Happy Birthday, Yoko. Love, John and Sean.*

By Year Four, I am a graduate student in creative writing, walking everywhere (but rarely venturing below 96th Street, hardly ever below 72nd Street). Wandering up and down Broadway, to and from Columbia, I am constantly trying to figure out how to make a story of the series of events that led to the marriage of my first city boyfriend and my former friend. That night at the Mudd Club when he told me, "You have no *joie de vivre*"—is that the ending of the story or where it begins? What is the connection

between what you live and what you write and what people want to read? What, exactly, is *story*?

Then one Friday afternoon the news on NPR is all about a recent Brinks truck robbery in which cops were killed. The suspects have just been identified as former members of the radical anti-establishment protest group the Weather Underground, men and women who have been living in the city under aliases for years, since they blew up a brownstone in the Village in March 1970 and got away. For ten years, they've been holding down jobs, taking care of their children, going about their business, the whole time pretending they were people different from who they really are. Just a few blocks north of where I live, there have been people waking every morning and stepping into a solid fiction. Meanwhile, I've been pacing the paths of Columbia's campus, worrying, wondering, practically memorizing the cobblestones, as if story could be revealed in the pattern of stones.

By now John Lennon has been killed. There is that cold cold winter when everyone begins wearing puffed-up coats stuffed with down feathers, and in the Korean delis loaves of bread and boxes of doughnuts are always being knocked off the shelves. People have to make lots of room for each other. The headlines are all about disease. You can no longer stand on line and socialize in front of the Thalia and the Regency because those theaters are closed. There is a period of eight months when, early in the morning several times a week, I go to a church on Amsterdam to light candles, but still my grandmother dies. And then there is a spectacular September Friday when my niece is born at Mt. Sinai Hospital, and every fall after that, whenever a certain quality of pink light washes over the pediments of brownstones or the facades of high-rises, I will think *Clare*. The Berlin Wall falls.

I start going downtown once in a while. At a party at Westbeth I meet a musician who visits me one afternoon and brings his bass viol because, he says, he wants to play music for me. When he does, all the apartments on my floor tremble and someone complains to the doorman. Another afternoon there's a different musician—subtler, a jazz guitarist. His side line is selling clothes to vintage dress shops, and one day he arrives at my apartment with two hockey-equipment bags full of never-worn shoes from the '40s, '50s, '60s. He bought the shoes from a man emptying inventory from an old store in Jersey, and I'm very lucky to have first pick at this stash. We spend a couple of hours talking while I try on shoes: open-toed pumps, slingbacks, tassel loafers, bowling shoes; he's brought more than forty pairs. Some are still in the original boxes. I like this musician. He's funny in a quiet

way, and kind, and I buy four pairs of terrific shoes, hugely discounted. Thereafter, my friends refer to the musician as "your dealer."

One night the dealer and I walk out of a bar onto Christopher Street after listening to Mike Stern play guitar, and a street guy approaches us. "Spare some loose change?"

You can tell a lot about people by the way they handle panhandlers. My dealer is too savvy to dole out money, but he can't bear to leave anyone empty-handed. "What size shoes do you wear?" he asks, as he leads the guy over to his vintage Volvo, parked nearby, opens the trunk and begins looking through boxes of sneakers. When we find his size, the street man is very happy.

The clothes dealer and I don't become intimates, nor do we fall in love (though I think we'd both like to), but after that night, I will think of him and his sweet funny ways every time I walk through that intersection by the Christopher Street subway station, usually on my way farther west, to Elephant & Castle or to the Paris Commune, to eat omelets with a handsome vegetarian who likes to smoke. There's another smoker, someone I sit in Caffè Vivaldi with a lot, and we talk about how we're wasting our time—we really should be sitting in coffee shops in Rome. There's one evening when a seriously contemporary architect surprises me with a no-nonsense kiss outside of Time Cafe, but the whole night has been very hip, very downtown, and I don't have the right clothes for this particular nightlife. In my heart of hearts, I love the Old New York places (just as I love the old shoes), and a three-year relationship with a journalist begins with a first date at Sevilla, where we drink a lot of Sangria, and before we've even finished ordering I have a premonition: I see the two of us sitting in a café in the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, someplace hot. So three months later, in January, I'm not surprised when the journalist and I are spending a week in Puerto Rico, sitting on a sunny patio together eating paella again.

There's an enthusiastic long walk one spring Sunday with an old friend who takes me for a great hamburger on the lower deck of the Water Club. For a nice long time we just watch the water, then we watch Geraldine Ferraro and her friends arriving for her birthday party. He's a great listener, this guy, and we talk aimlessly all afternoon, but it will make me sad years later when I find out that that spring, my friend was working hard to get over a significant cocaine habit, which I wasn't sharp enough to guess, let alone give him a chance to talk about; I thought we were just eating hamburgers and getting some sun.

In my work life around this time I'm part of a neurotic group of friends playing out an assortment of half-baked romances at the Old Town Bar just up from Union Square. There are all kinds of Saturday nights—early ones, late ones, uptown, downtown, expensive ones that involve taxis, cheaper ones riding the subway or bus—but they all end the same way: at the H & H Bagels counter, where I get a sesame bagel for Sunday breakfast and one of whatever's just out of the oven, which I eat warm from the white bag while I walk the rest of the way home.

The dilapidated facade of an SRO hotel is what my bedroom window faces in one apartment I live in for a while. One night the old building across the street lights up in flames. No one dies in the fire, but that last-chance home for so many old or sick or poor people burns down to a charred haunting frame that looks like the ruins of Rome. Months later, when the building is restored, it is a high-priced condo. New stores and chains of stores have come to the neighborhood. Nightly, homeless people break into vans on Riverside Drive so they have somewhere to sleep. Years earlier, on my way to one of my first jobs, I used to see a homeless woman every morning pushing her junk-loaded shopping cart up Broadway, moving against the crowd headed for the subway, and she'd sing at the top of her lungs, "Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to work we go," and everyone around her smiled. I remember a bedraggled old man crossing Fifth Avenue, dodging noontime traffic while the horrified crowd on the corner of 79th Street watched him, and when he arrived safely at the corner, he gave us an elegant bow and said, "Time is money, time is money!"

There aren't so many jolly moments on the street anymore. One afternoon as I am walking the aisles of a new Food Emporium, a news broadcast comes on over the store's PA system and I hear George Bush's voice, and I think, I'm bored with all this.

So in 1993, after seventeen years in the city, when I get a call telling me about a job opening in the Pacific Northwest, I'm ready for it. I know this means it's time to leave, at least try something else for a while. I know I'm lucky to have the chance for this. What I don't know, have no way of knowing, is that within six months my life will be something I can't even imagine while I'm sitting on a subway or riding the cross-town bus. I will be living in a place where the skies are porcelain. The Inland Empire of Washington State, just east of the desert. The air will be dry and polite, not humid, not pushing up against me in any way that feels like unwanted seduction or malicious intent. It was the genius of glaciers that shaped this

land into moonscapes of wheat fields called the Palouse, and just down the street from my apartment and as beautiful as ancient tragedy, there will be volcanic rock. The light will be an army of angels blessing me as they march through my large rooms. I will have many rooms, including a separate room to write in, and when I lie on my office floor, on the sun-warmed, honey-colored floorboards, look out the five windows, each one will be a canvas of perfect blue.

So what.

I still won't be able to let go of some jazzed-up version of my life. I'll still want to walk on streets that spark fire under my feet, send me walking faster. During my early days in the West, my first drive through the eternally rolling hills of the Palouse, I will cry. The land there is uninhabited and there is no horizon. Remember those childhood dreams of being in a crowd, safe with your mother holding tight to your wrist, until some force of the crowd breaks the lock of your mother's hand and suddenly you're worse than dead? You're lost, not able to get to anyone who would care who you are. How I will miss the hug of skyscrapers around me.



From a distance, New York is a trompe l'oeil, a trick. You don't remember the boring fear of taking the subway home to Brooklyn at night when you lived in Brooklyn, the bad smell on the street during summers on the Upper West Side. The howl of the insane so close it seems they're living in your apartment, or closer. The exhaustion, too, is boring after a while. Too many too-odd jobs. The sterile loneliness of days at the desk. The tedious heft of grocery bags. The dilemma of dirty laundry and kitchen trash and running out of shampoo. You forget that life in New York is lived like life anywhere, day by day.

A crush is a shattered attraction, made up of fragments. What got you was how the guy looked in the midst of a certain gesture, some one beautiful moment. There is the way the sky turns lilac at the foot of West 72nd Street at the end of the day. City sunset filtered through chemical sky, it just gets you, the way a cigarette voice late at night seems to be talking to some neglected part of your soul. The rarefied beauty that aberration brings.

Of course, this kind of beauty has so much to do with sex. Some cities are female, some are male. New York is the world's most provocative, sexual, bisexual, transsexual, extra-sexual monster creature, daily swallowing virgin offerings of every type. New York City will love you in any way you ever imagined yourself being loved.

New York will have you, but you can never have New York. It is always slipping away from you, always with a wandering eye, always threatening to love someone else better than it ever loved you.

Your friends tell you this love affair is not healthy. You know it yourself.

You have heard there is a kind of love that grows in absence. Some men will fall in love with you while they are away from you. The friends say, Go ahead. Try it. Leave town. Now he'll see, they say. Everything you ever said to him will resonate. He'll walk the streets, eyeing the crowds, hungry for a glimpse of you. On the serene raft of his therapist's couch he'll have that moment of clarity (provoked by the intelligent questions of the therapist, who realized from just the few details he told her that you are this man's one best chance for happiness in this life, and she'll use all her skills to help him see that). It's only a matter of time, your friends say. He will run into people who know you and they will tell him the name of the place you moved to. Your new phone number is listed. He will call.

Okay, so he doesn't call. But after a few seasons in this new place (after the pine straw jamming up your windshield in autumn, after the yellow blanket of pollen over everything in spring), you decide it's time to plan a visit back home. For the first time in years you are living by the calendar, like a child waiting for Christmas. Your days are lived simply to get to that date when you will leave for your trip to New York. You're getting closer, crossing off each day with a big red marker, moving deeper into the hot heart of summer. It really is dry here. Suddenly, the day before you are to leave, there are fires in the forests, the landscape is aflame. The fires get bigger. The radio news reports that the fires have jumped the river.

Something has happened. It's evening in the neighborhood, everyone is out, and you don't feel like going inside to pack your suitcase. You want to stay to watch the last bit of sunlight, which goes on and on. Suddenly you realize that your eyes will miss what they're seeing—the unfailing blueness of this endless Western sky. The green over green all around your white house. Your ears will miss the mysteriously sweet sound of these summer nights (big mystery—it's really just the absence of subways and sirens). You are happy and you realize that you have been for quite a while. Happy in the most unobtrusive way, a pleasure you weren't aware of because it just kept happening. It didn't end and come back and end and leave you needing more. You have never felt this way before. What is this?

It can't be love because there's no pain in it. Is this what they call contentment? Peace? Is this peace? The night before you are to leave, you lie in bed, eyes open, listening, wanting to touch every corner of this life. You are

stunned by it. It is as upsetting as finding that you are in love with someone you weren't supposed to love. Someone else's husband, someone who speaks nothing but a foreign language, someone who is a Republican. You never expected it. The fire has jumped the river.



Two characters in a Chekhov story, a young man named Savka and an older man, are sitting in the forest when suddenly they hear "a hollow sound of timid footsteps in the dark, and from the spinney emerged the silhouette of a woman." The apprehensive woman approaching them is Agafya, the signalman's young wife. Agafya is also Savka's lover. Just before she appeared, the two men had been discussing bird migration, the older man asking Savka, "And what place do the birds like best? . . . Ours or the other one?"

Talking about the difficulty of maintaining allegiance to one love at the exclusion of other attractions, a psychiatrist once told you, "We all had a mother and a father, didn't we?" How different the atmosphere of the mother from that of the father. A friend called recently with this story: Her small son had asked her, "Is it okay if you love one of your parents more than the other one?" At that moment this woman knew herself to be the less-loved parent. She is the familiar terrain, with no sunrise or sunset. Home with the child day in and day out. She doesn't thrill the boy the way his father does, with his disappearances and appearances each day when he goes to work and comes back. The little boy was so upset he was crying when he asked, "Is it okay?"

There is that point at the beginning of every love affair when all you feel is sadness for the last love, no matter how long ago it ended. You know that feeling? And for a day or two you can't make love with your new lover because if you do you will cry and cry? After that spell of grief, you can admit, with joy, that this new love is happening. You can let go of the old life. You can let your allegiance shift.

By the time you begin to think this place you've come to may be your new home, it has already happened. When you get to that bend in the road your heart leaps a bit for the muscular shoulder of mountain that you know is just about to appear. There's that elbow of rolling river out your kitchen window every morning while you make your coffee. On your way home from work, at sunset, the hills are a net gathering gold light. You hardly recognize your days now that they are lived against this grandiose backdrop. Is this your life? Is this you? Maybe you really have been transformed.

With time, if your imagination becomes engaged, the landscape becomes more than beautiful, it gains power. It's a little like writing fiction, when you

move to a new place. You have to take the details and juice them up a bit. Some stories are a circle. Some are a straight line into the future. Without a willingness to work your details, though, you won't be able to push your story into that all-important free fall, a sinking into unexpected depths.



I was very much in love with a man once, and we had a game we played, mostly in bed, of making up stories together, different epics set in different times in history and on different continents—a dacha in pre-Revolution Russia, a port city in Brazil, Trieste during World War II. Each story involved lovers who met, underwent enormous turmoil, withstood heart-breaking separation and were miraculously reunited. The lovers' names were always our names. It was always us, coming together despite huge obstacles, living over and over again the incredible joy we had felt when we found each other.

We were so happy, except that after a while, sometimes we weren't. It took us a long time to decide whether to get married or separate. Now, looking back from several years' distance, I see the decision was made long before we decided. Our dis-engagement began when we stopped making up stories together. I remember one of the last times. We were sitting on a beach. There was a sailboat offshore. I tried to begin, "See that boat, there's a man out there . . ." but it was forced. We couldn't breathe life into the man or build the boat or navigate the sea he traveled over on his way to find his lover. The details took us nowhere. Our imaginations were no longer engaged with each other.



Psychology tells us that the way we experience love as adults is largely determined by what happens in our childhood. There is, in the earliest years, days, hours, the danger of a faulty bond being set, a pattern established that we will, wittingly or unwittingly, pace out for the rest of our days. (Are there actually people who were received into the world in such a perfect way that love for them is painless, unambivalent? Have you ever met these people?)

Is it because I am the daughter of immigrants that I have, all my life, invested geography with the allure and the dangers and the voluptuous attractions of romantic love? That ineffable longing to get closer to some perfect happiness that almost but never quite was? That constant yearning to be someplace else, with some one perfect beloved? Call it what you want.

In my family, we called it Italy. Childhood, I know, was the beginning for me of the ground/figure conundrum of place and love.

But maybe geography, with its wordlessness and bulk, is a natural way to talk about love. So much happens in the body.

What if it's just lust?

And what if it is lust? Is it possible to call it love if you're not feeling lust, that glorious painful state of unsatisfied desire? Lust, with its compelling incompleteness.

It's not that the West isn't sexy—it is—but the thing about it is that it happens in the eyes. Only in the eyes. Why is it that sometimes the vistas leave me feeling hollow? Inherent in the glorious escape of this place is the loneliness of this place, the complete absence of everything I knew before.

I want depth. I want what Leonardo da Vinci wanted—the sense of skin over muscle and bone. That's why he did autopsies. So he could draw the human form with a more knowing hand. He wanted his figures on the page to have blood and marrow and a pulse.



Let's say that by now it's your second year in the West. As you're getting ready for another of your pilgrimages back to New York, you're invited to stop in the Ozarks for a visit. A new man. He'd been passing through the Northwest when you met him in April. He hung around. For two months you were friends. In June, lovers. A few weeks later, when he had to go back home to Arkansas (Arkansas? You had to look it up on a map), he said, "Will we see each other again?"

"We'll do what we do." So, you have learned something out West. You've learned not to talk everything to death. You've learned to rely on the weather, the silences, the bulk of the body.

When you arrive in Arkansas with your small suitcase and a few books and a laptop computer, it's the season of the cicadas. There is nothing but the puffed-up humid heat and the insects' trilling, which is as constant as unanswerable questions, and familiar to you for some reason you haven't figured out yet. Once or twice you wonder, Am I in love with this man? Rather than try to answer the question you notice you have no desire to leave. You figure out that the cicadas' buzz reminds you of the constant hum of traffic in New York—irritating only if you stop and pay attention to it; otherwise, it provides a pulse for your days, an energy in the air every morning. You just have to get up and latch on.

The landscape in Northwestern Arkansas is lower than what you're used to. From here you see that Manhattan and the Rockies are similar in many ways. Both places are magnificent, pushing the outer limits of what they are. Both are among the most impressive examples of their type. In contrast, the Ozark Mountains are slow-rising slopes, comforting as warm bread. Nothing towers over you here. This terrain doesn't do that Alice-in-Wonderland number of aggrandizing you and dwarfing you at the same time. From the start you found it very easy to talk to this new man. Now he shows you his unadorned patio and his untended lawn (he hasn't lived here long; divorce, etc.) and says, "It's all yours. Do what you want."

"Anything I want?"

"Anything you do is fine."

That's in July.

August is a string of nights warm as a bath, and the low ride of his car, and jazz on the car radio, and the fast pictures your eyes snatch from the side of the road. Low stone houses and old stone walls. A flash of tile roof, clay pot. Broken cement column climbed over with ivy, the base of a fence buried in moss. Solid stone structures aged and vintaged and worn. Color muted within stone. These rushing-by scenes have the quality of fresco, and for that reason they are provocative to you, forcing your eyes off the road, as if you've caught a glimpse of someone you know.

Dance teachers talk to their students about the phenomenon of muscle memory. If you perform a movement enough times, your muscles will incorporate the movement and memorize it forever (hence the importance of doing the movement correctly from the start). The thing about these Arkansas nights is that as you drive through them they feel old the way Europe does. Italy, let's say. You are the daughter of immigrants, and your body remembers—and is loyal to—what it has known: the spiraling roads into the Calabrian hills you and your family visited when you were a baby, a little girl, a teenager. The dry stone of the fountain in the village in the summer. The clay-pipe roofs spread out before you when you opened the shutters over the windows in your grandmother's house, when the house was full of everyone, when everyone was together and your father was alive. The lost empire of your family. Stone. Hills. Clay. The scenes go by so quickly that while you are seeing, you are also remembering and hoping to see more. Wishing. The present is layered with the future and past, the living and dead. Under the skin of these summer nights, there is muscle and bone.

When the eye sees what the heart desires, the body immediately knows what to do. Lust, that gap, pocket of open air where flint makes spark and combusts.

In September you marry the man in Arkansas. You don't know exactly when this new loyalty began or how. You remember a moment of noticing his hands on the steering wheel and thinking, Beautiful hands. By now there are plants in the back of the house and the front of the house, voices inside and outside, the man, his young sons, the cat, you. A civilization. Empire restored. At night the backyard is filled up with stars.



The problem with the empire restored is that it is entirely restored, with all its imperfections. Never as highly polished as you remember, always as faulty as it really was.

When you neglect the plants they die. The cat becomes burdensome and is given away. You keep the sons, of course. They are wonderful. But there is the constant complicated question of whether or not to bring another child into this mix. Sometimes the house shudders with arguments. Arguments that haunt you with familiarity. The heart remembers and repeats the words it has known. At other times the rooms are silent, thick, impassable.

It is impossible to know the rooms of marriage until you are actually living within them. The rooms of your marriage are full of the man's good looks and the delicious way his body moves around within the space. You're living with his jokes and his intelligence and the information stored in his head. You're living with his scents and his habits and books and the phone calls that come for him. You're living with his junk mail, his magazines. And you're living most profoundly with his problems. As he lives with yours. His temperament, confusions, frustrations. As he lives with yours. The walls that mark the place where your wisdom has reached its limit have been adjoined to the walls that mark where his wisdom ends. This is your new home—side by side, the two of you living in a hut, surrounded by the wilderness of your mutual ignorance about everything you haven't managed to figure out yet.



Within the first six months of marriage, I had two miscarriages. After the second, I had to go to the hospital for a same-day surgical procedure. They told me to arrive at the outpatient station very early in the morning. It went smoothly, an assembly line. Check clothes into a locker, sign forms, lie

down on the bed in the assigned cubicle. One doctor, another doctor, a couple of very nice nurses. Some were dressed in whites, some in surgical greens, several in brightly illustrated smocks that made them look like large children wearing pajamas. I wasn't allowed to eat or drink anything, but they gave me a shot of tranquilizer, and before long I was in a good mood again for the first time in weeks. My husband was relieved. Eventually they made me scoot over onto a stretcher and they wheeled me somewhere else.

There was another injection. Then grogginess. Time passed.

I remember an anesthesiologist leaning over me, his cap as tight as a bandage around his forehead, making him look like someone with a very bad headache. He turned my face toward him with a soft fatty hand. "Can you hear me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Is your blood pressure usually low?"

"Yes."

"Good. For a minute there we were afraid you were dead."

Later, I felt the faraway pressure of a man's fingers on my thigh and I opened my eyes. "Do you feel that?" It was a different anesthesiologist. "Do you feel me pinching you?"

I felt the lightest indentation, vague as a dream memory, but there was something. It was so nondescript, though, and moved me so little. "No," I said, "I don't feel anything."

"Okay," the doctor told the nurse, "we're ready."

All day long, at every stage of these quickie surgeries, they check in with you. A capped or masked or unmasked or smiling or worried face suddenly hovers above the patient and asks, "Do you know what procedure you're having done today? Do you know your doctor's name?" These questions are asked at least a dozen times.

And in the same way, during the days following, I regularly asked myself, Do you know who you are? Do you feel anything? Do you know why you're here? I was living in a place I didn't know at all yet, it was February and seemed to me that the weather was strange—too mild for what was supposed to be going on in winter, unsettling, unnatural. The day after the day at the hospital, I walked down our country road. When I got to the narrow overpass that bridges the skinny creek, I stopped and kicked stones into the tiny bit of water below. I was crying, and in that spot—that overpass, that creek—that was where my imagination chose to bury the babies, my invisible babies. I had to rest them somewhere. In this huge wide world they, too, needed their place.

I remember that day. It was warm, but I was wearing my husband's big old sweater, just for the feel of arms around me. This detail strikes me now—the sweater instead of the man. Had I gone for a walk without telling him? Was he not home? What we didn't know then and wouldn't know for a long time was that my short walk down that road was the beginning of the distance between our life together and seven months lived apart.

He stayed in Arkansas. I went back to New York.



Being in New York when you're married but "single" is, in some ways, better than being in New York when you're utterly single. There's an edginess that's gone, but when you walk the streets you're relieved of the feeling that you're missing out on something that everyone else knows about. Now you know. You don't hate the streets for their refusal to offer up *him*. In short, you don't take the city's rebuffs so personally. You're just grateful for your old work contacts that make it possible for you to pay the rent. Mostly, you're glad that a few years ago when you left the city you held on to your apartment, and when you returned, your subletter was ready to move out.

You are now a ghost wandering around in your past life.



During those months back in New York, sitting with friends in Starbucks and Vietnamese restaurants and a Cuban-Chinese place on the Upper West Side, I told no one the full story. Maybe because I sensed the story was not finished yet, mostly because it's one we'd all heard too many times. There's a man, there's a woman. They recognize something in each other—an aura of sadness surrounded by a halo of hope. Middle-aged but ignorant as teenagers in the way they know nothing about each other but are convinced they've found that one someone who will know their wish before it is even wished, some god of a lover, fairy godmother, both god and mother, some perfection. They marry.

Always, the story goes the same way: Eventually, the tulle that swathes this marriage will unwrap, a Christo sculpture in reverse. And after the sheets of illusion are taken away, if the couple are lucky—and my husband and I were lucky—a bridge will be standing, a stretch of solid framework that fighting hasn't corroded completely and that a long separation hasn't flooded away.

"What happened?" we ask each other, surprised not by our separation—we were clearly headed there from the very first day—but shocked that we

managed to find each other again. We retrace often. First we met, lust origami-ed into love, love into loss, and then it was Easter weekend and he came to visit me in New York. We were eating piroshki at Veselka on Second Avenue, and I remember those piroshki as the first joyful meal we had together after more than a year of mute grief. Earlier, we'd gone into a church and lit candles for the memory of our babies. Now he was saying, "If you're leaving—" He put down his fork. "If you're leaving, take me with you."



Looking over our journey and its wild terrain, we're awed, a bit reverent, the way we used to be when we watched those trains out West. They traveled along tracks cut way up into the hills. A string of freight cars so long they wrapped an entire mountaintop, so far away and slow that in the first moment our eyes believed those trains were moving landscape, big beautiful chunks of it being loosened and pulled along.



You and your husband are together again? You're leaving the city again? Now what are you going to do?

All I know is this, a feeling that happens when I am flying down into New York: before the active seduction begins, when I am as full of expectation and hope as I am wise to the inevitable disappointments, the jagged skyline of high-rises is as familiar to my eyes as the feel of my tongue along the edges of my teeth. Inevitable.

Loyalty is what we're talking about here. That locked-in Calabrian-brand of loyalty. When a person has in some way become yours, when you belong to a place, when you find work you love, questions of right or wrong are beside the point.

Three years I lived out West. People were always pointing to the clock in my car and saying, "That's wrong. You should fix it."

"It's not wrong. That's what time it is in New York." 